

A Forty-Day Journey through Lent – but Never Alone

Our own Thorny Circle of Suffering and Christ's Breakthrough
Lent's 40 days through the Prism of Siegfried Reinhardt's Art
by Edward H. Schroeder

Siegfried Reinhardt - "Christ's Seven Last Words from the Cross
and His Resurrection" 1952.

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[Reinhardt lived from 1925 – 1983. This original pen and ink

artwork was one of the illustrations Reinhardt did for THE SEMINARIAN, a theological journal published by the students of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. In the 1951-52 school year Martin E. Marty was the editor and Ed Schroeder the managing editor. Reinhardt illustrated every issue of that entire year—ten in all. This one appeared in the Easter issue, April 1952. Reinhardt gave all the originals to magazine staff members. The managing editor received this one. It now hangs in the Schroeder home.]

Lent's 40 days through the Prism of Reinhardt's Art

The First Word: Father forgive...

[the thorn: our need for forgiveness]

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[the thorn: guilt]

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[the thorn: God's own self]

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[the thorn: handing over our lives]

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Out by Easter, Out for Easter –

Encountering Our Last Enemy

Easter Sunday

An Easter meditation – if the Creative piece for Lent allows for one – on the Risen Christ in Reinhardt's picture. Text: I Cor. 15, "last enemy."

Christ's breaking the thorn line wide open, almost jumping right out of the picture (=our "old" creation), and not merely out of the grave, the "last enemy," the last thorn in the circle of suffering to be conquered. And he does—for us. Our Lenten 40 day circle is complete, the circle of death is broken wide open.

The First Word from the Cross

Ash Wednesday

Our Thorns and Christ's Breakthrough

Reading: Mark 15:16-20

*"After twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. .
. Then they led him out to crucify him." (Mark 15:17,20)*



Artist Siegfried Reinhardt is our guide for our 40-day journey through Lent. He bids us to use our eyes for reading images, not just words for the journey. Let your eyes play with his masterpiece. One long thorn bramble links Jesus' seven last words. At Easter he explodes from the tomb. The thorn barrier is broken. It's all for us. Lent is about our thorns and Christ's breakthrough.

Lent is finally "Good News" and nothing morbid at all. It is the story of a cosmic change of subjects. See how Siegfried predicates our thorns of suffering to Jesus. His seven words of pain are the thorns of our daily lives. He is the subject undergoing them all.

The other side of the drama is that Christ's Easter life gets predicated to us. Jesus vaulting from the tomb is heading straight toward us who are viewing the picture. When Lent is over our thorn-encircled lives have open spaces for new futures.

Our Lenten journey is not really us accompanying Jesus on his way of sorrows. It's the other way around: He walks the brambled path of our way of sorrows—so that we might get to Easter. We accompany him in faith these 40 days so that it can happen to

us—again.

Prayer: Energize us, LORD, for our 40 days—and 40 nights—through Lent. Since we know how the story ends, encourage us from Easter to face up to the thorns in our own lives and those we inflict on others. Amen

Thursday After Ash Wednesday

Forgiveness Is What It's All About.

Reading: Luke 23:32-38

"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." Luke 23:34.

Forgiveness is what it's all about. It's what Jesus is all about. It finally is what life—real life—is all about. But we'd never know that if we took our signals from the messages of daily life that surround us.

The recurring theme in daily life is something else. It's just the opposite: recompense. "There is no free lunch." "You get what you've got coming to you." Granted, that doesn't always work either. Some get cheated out of their fair shake. Some seem never to get a fair shake at all. Some get much more than their share—and even do so legally!

Nevertheless—recompense, fairness, debit-credit equity, is the melody of life's daily transactions. Suppose that recompense were God's only melody. What would happen? "The soul that sinneth it shall die." "The wages of sin is death." There would be no life that lasts.

But recompense is not God's last word. Jesus' first word from the cross is God's last word for sinners: forgiveness. Reinhardt's masterpiece shows us God working out the logistics

of forgiveness. It doesn't come cheap. Yet when Christ reappears at Easter, forgiveness is a fact. We can count on it, live on it—in our transactions with God, and with one another.

Prayer: Forgive us our sins, Lord, as we forgive those who sin against us. In our life too, we often know not what we do. Sing into our ears the melody of your mercy. Tune our voices to sing the same song to those we know who seldom ever hear it. Amen.

Friday After Ash Wednesday

The Thorn of Our Own Enemies

Reading: Matthew 5:43-48

“But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Matthew 5:44

That's what Jesus says. Our knee-jerk reaction is: “Jesus, you've got to be kidding. Look at those enemies in Siegfried's first vignette. Look at their faces, especially their eyes, and those hands. How on earth can anyone, even you, love those guys?”

Don't we have enemies just like that? Take the soldier in armor, the guy with the sword. He's just doing his job, but he is out to kill me. Or the next guy, face half-covered yet full of hate, with hand reaching down to do me in.

Or the one next to him — he must be a professional burglar, eyes on the lookout, hammer ready for the next break-in, sack full of loot from his last job. Or the fourth one, yelling some obscenity at us. The finger, the face, the teeth, those eyes. Our enemies are just like that; how can we love them?

Love has become an emotion in our culture, warm fuzzies in the heart. Not so in the language of Jesus. When he says “love,” it

is a concrete act of help for someone who needs it, regardless of emotions.

Do these guys—our enemies too—need help? Absolutely. And especially at the deepest level, their relation to God. That's the concrete help Jesus invokes for them—for us too. Not because they and we are so lovable, but because we need it. So Jesus' word for enemies is: "Help 'em. I gave you concrete help (and how!) here on the cross. Trust me for that and then go and do likewise."

Prayer: Forgive us, Lord, when our hands did harm instead of help, when fear choked out our faith and trust in you. Lord, increase our faith in the crucified and risen Jesus, and unclench our hands to give concrete help—even to our enemies. Amen.

Saturday After Ash Wednesday

Prayer When The Thorns Dig In

Reading: Matthew 7:7-11

"How much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" Matthew 7:11

"When all else fails, try prayer." That notion may be common in our day, but it's not Christian. Jesus' first word "Father, forgive..." signals that. It's first of all personal and relational. In his own native tongue his word was "Abba." That's children's language—like daddy or papa in English. "Daddy" designates someone you know and trust, someone who knows you and already has a track-record of caring for you.

The "when all else fails" folk ignore that. For them God is not any sort of Abba at all, but the doctor in the heavenly emergency room—if they can only get there in time! That's not

praying “in faith.” Jesus doesn’t pray that way. Fact is, his first prayer from the cross isn’t about himself at all. He asks Abba to become Abba, the forgiving Father, of those who put him there. That finally includes us.

The cross is God at work in his beloved Son to become our Abba again, to restore us to a relationship of trusting child and loving parent. “Giving good things to those who ask,” the text says. Loving parent is a pretty good thing! Christians pray in faith, trusting that Christ has hooked us orphans back to Abba. The cross affirms: Abba is for us, not against us. So it’s not God’s providence, but God’s promise that is the grounding for our praying. Lord, teach us to pray—this way!

Prayer: Our prayer life, Abba, needs help. We too confine you to emergency room status and chase after “all else” as grounds for living. Focus our hearts on Jesus’ prayer for us, so that our prayers to you may proceed in faith, trusting you in Jesus’ name. Amen

First Sunday in Lent

Lent’s Forty Days and Christ’s Forty Days of Temptation

Reading: Luke 4:1-13

Jesus...was led by Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. Luke 4:1-2.

If you’ve ever counted, you will have discovered that the 6 Sundays during Lent are not part of “forty days.” Lent’s forty days are all weekdays. The 6 Sundays are extras—Sundays in Lent, but not part of the sacred number.

The Bible has a “thing” about the number 40. Dozens of times that number occurs to designate the time it takes God (or God’s

agents) to get a job done. For each of Lent's 6 Sundays in this devotion series we listen in on one of the stories about 40 in the Bible—first of all Jesus.

Jesus' forty days in the wilderness signal the depth dimension of his work of salvation. The prince of the powers of destruction strives to co-opt Jesus and undermine God's rescue operation right from the word go. Each of the tempter's three alternatives seeks to deflect Jesus from the way of the cross. Yet Jesus hangs on to the word of God that sent him on this assignment. The tempter's demolition schemes fail. These forty days are a preview for us that Jesus will get the job done—for us and for our salvation—but it won't be easy.

On this first of the Lenten Sundays Christians do a "spell-check," examining the wilderness voices that have us spellbound, that coax us to opt out of the way of the cross. Reflect for yourself on the tempting voices that come to your ears—those within your own heart and those from the outside bombarding us in daily life from our secular culture.

Coping with temptation is not just saying "no" to the voices that co-opt us. It is re-tuning our receiving sets to the voice of Christ. He stayed tuned to God's own voice as the tempter went after him. His staying power is God's word to empower us to do the same in our own lives.

For these forty days, O Christ, accompany us on our testing. Walk with us through Lent to Easter. Walk beside us in our wildernesses. Mute the voices that distract us from your way of the cross. Retune us to your wave length, your words that give life and that will never pass away. Amen.

Monday, the First Week of Lent

The Second Word From the Cross Paradise Comes To Earth

Reading: Luke 23:39-43

"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Luke 23:43.



Our devotion this week focuses on Siegfried's picture for the second word from the cross. The angel coming to the dying criminal makes a powerful statement. If we are ever to get to Paradise, Paradise must come to us. And in Jesus—precisely as he goes to the cross—this is what is happening. The heavenly messenger with wide-open hands lets us “see” Paradise coming to a sinner. It's all because of the Man in the Middle.

The believing criminal acknowledges that what's happening to him is justice. Yet he asks Jesus to remember him in his kingdom. That request is a plea for mercy, since the kingdom Jesus brings is sheer mercy. And the request is granted—now, “today,” even as justice is being carried out.

In our own daily crucifixions, we too hang helpless, like the criminal in the picture. Seldom are we perfectly innocent

either. Precisely then—not when we’re innocent, but when we’re guilty— Christ’s affirming word is also good for us. His Kingdom runs on mercy. His open-handed angel is there for us too. Even when all we can blurt out is: “Jesus, remember me,” his response is constant: “Yes. Today. With me.” And that is Paradise.

Prayer: Jesus, remember us, as we call to you from our own crosses. Give us eyes to see what Siegfried saw: your cross giving us access to Paradise, where mercy trumps everything—even the things that give us our just deserts. Then strengthen our faith, dear Lord, to trust you for it. Amen.

Tuesday, the First Week of Lent

Two Equal Sinners – But Different as Day and Night

Reading: Luke 12:4-5.

One of the criminals...kept deriding him...but the other rebuked him, saying: “Do you not fear God?” Luke 23:39-40.

Two equally guilty criminals, but different as day and night. What’s the difference? The believing criminal says it’s “fearing God.” One does, one doesn’t. But what does that mean?

The un-fearing thief thinks his big problem is with the authorities who caught him and the justice system now executing him. All he really needs is to get off that cross. Perhaps he doubts that there is a God at all, or that God knows he’s innocent. Either way: with God there’s nothing to fear. No problem.

“Not so,” cries the believing thief. The “big” courtroom where nobody ever stands 100% innocent is God’s courtroom. To “fear God” is to fess up to the truth of our own lives. We do not fear, love and trust in God above all things.

Yet fearing God is not the last word. The believing thief follows his fear word with a plea for mercy to the innocent one on the middle cross. To this guilty God-fearer, now a Christ-truster, Jesus offers acceptance. Remarkable!

When we are linked to the Man in the Middle, our case in God's court is already decided. Not that we're declared innocent. No, we're guilty as charged, and nevertheless forgiven. How so? Jesus enters our case, stands in for us before The Judge. He takes our sentence too, our place on the cross. In Christ our court date with God – that's judgment day – is already behind us. Call it Paradise. Today already! Incredible? No. It's worth believing. He said so.

Prayer: Renew our hearts, God, to redeem our fears. Nothing in the world is worth fearing, you say, but You alone. Then in your Son you surprise us with his cheering words "Fear not." Let faith in this surprise replace our fear of anything—even you. Amen.

Wednesday, the First Week of Lent

The Thorn of Justice

Reading: Romans 6:20-23

"And we indeed have been condemned justly; for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds." Luke 23:41.

"The young demand justice. The old will settle for mercy." Someone coined that saying in the sixties. Of course, everyone wants justice, wants a fair shake. But there are premises in that demand— that the demanders are innocent, are being gypped out of their due reward, a reward that's good.

The old will settle for mercy. The more experience we have, the more we know how flimsy those premises are. No one of us is all

that innocent.

In Arthur Miller's play "After the Fall," we see a group of characters typical of our society. All are demanding justice in their own lives. Yet no one is innocent. They all live "after the fall," the fall into sin. In the difficulties they face they are getting what they deserve. But it is not very pleasant.

The believing criminal in our text does not demand justice. Instead he acknowledges that it is already happening to him. But then he has the chutzpah to ask for mercy from the Man in the Middle. Apparently he knows something, trusts something, that the other criminal doesn't. He clearly trusts that mercy is happening on the middle cross. So he goes for it. "Jesus, remember me—dirty hands and all." He'll settle for that. So can we.

Prayer: Strengthen our hold on your mercy, O Lord, to take our due rewards in faith. When justice awards us good things, ignite our thankful response. When its rewards bring pain, empower us to take them too in faith. Banish our pretended innocence. Keep us settling for mercy—with you and with each other. Amen.

Thursday, the First Week of Lent

Saving Yourself

Reading: Luke 23:35-38

"If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" Luke 23:37

From the days of Israel's first great monarch, King David, the rule for the ruler – God's rule for the ruler – was not to save yourself. The assignment was just the opposite. Remember how David got into royalty?

He was last in line in Jesse's big family. When none of his big

brothers passed the test, the prophet asked if there were any more boys. "Oh, yes, there's the youngster out with the sheep. But he's no palace material." Well, it turned out he was. His fieldwork had prepared him to be King of Jews.

Here's how. When the wolf, the lion, the rustler zero in on the flock, it's the shepherd's job to see to it that the sheep stay alive, even if it should mean that he does not. Jesus' own words in John's gospel have always been the job description: "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." David was never quite that good. But Jesus is.

Since he really is the last in David's line, the words "save yourself" are a temptation. He must say No. The truth is that because he is this King of the Jews, he cannot save himself. Saving us is his calling. He cannot save himself and still be King of the Jews.

Pilate doubtless wrote "King of the Jews" and put it over him for ridicule. But he wrote the truth. He saves others, that's why he cannot save himself.

Prayer: Thank you, Jesus, for saving us by sacrificing yourself. Put your shepherding spirit into us to be your sub-shepherds with those who surround us in daily life. Nourish us by your self-giving to lose ourselves for the welfare of others. Amen.

Friday, the First Week of Lent

Remembering How God Remembers Us

Reading: Psalm 25:1-7

According to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O Lord! Psalm 25:7

In the old church calendar the second Sunday of Lent had a Latin

name, Reminiscere. On that Sunday the liturgy called on God to reminisce, that is, to remember his people the way the psalmist prays. It's not that God might forget his mercy and loving-kindness toward us. Isn't the trouble rather our own amnesia, our forgetting how God remembers us?

We so easily get the wrong "mindset," as St. Paul likes to call it, not just when we think about others, but when we think about ourselves. It regularly slips our mind just how God keeps us in mind.

For one thing, God remembers that we are marked with the cross of Holy Baptism – even when we forget. God is mindful that his own Son Jesus now calls us his own brothers and sisters – even when we forget. God remembers Jesus going around that full circle of thorns—for us.

It is not God's memory, but our own, that needs regular prompting. "Keep in mind," the canticle sings, "that Jesus Christ has died for us." Artist Siegfried does it visually in his second word. How does he see God remembering us? With angelic mercy, an open hand, an open door to God's own paradise.

Prayer: Remember us, LORD, the way Jesus remembers us. When the hustle and bustle of daily life feed our amnesia, remember us as Jesus remembers us—together with him, in his kingdom. Amen.

Saturday, the First Week of Lent

Living Today in Paradise

Reading: Luke 23:39-43

Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Matthew 18:20

"To be with me," Jesus says, "is to be in Paradise." That's the

punch line of the second word from the cross. "Two or three gathered in his name," is the same thing. He's "among them." That's Paradise.

In his book-length parable, *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis tells the story of people on a bus trip. They are travelling from a dull grey city where the sun never shines to a bright multi-colored land where the sun never sets. We soon learn that the bus route goes from hell to heaven, from a land of mere shadows to a land where everything is bright and solid.

As they cross the border, each one meets someone previously dear to them in life—spouse, business partner, school chum, family member. Eavesdropping their conversations we hear the bright spirit persons urging their shadow partners not to dwell on greyness, but to move toward the source of light in this bright country. We soon catch on: the Light is Christ.

Before long another "aha" dawns on us: all this is really taking place before these folks ever died. On earth they were already in heaven or hell. Some had Jesus "among them" in their lives. Others had their own selves at the center. One equals heaven, one hell. The same is true for us. In whose name is our life "gathered?" Only one equals Paradise. We have Jesus' invitation: "Be with me today," and that makes today Paradise.

Prayer: Gather us, Lord Christ, around your name. Unbend the direction of our daily lives from always curving back into ourselves. Help us live today as your Bright Spirits, moving out toward others still stuck, or stuck again, in the grey towns of our world. Amen.

Second Sunday in Lent

Testing. Testing. One, Two, Three. Testing.

Reading: Deuteronomy 8:1-3

"Remember [O, Israel,] the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart." Deuteronomy 8:2.

This Sunday's forty days have God (not the Tempter) doing the testing. What's God testing for? To know what's in his people's heart, the text says. But doesn't God already know that apart from giving us an exam? The answer, of course, is yes. So why the testing? Answer: for the same reason that schoolteachers give tests: so that students will know the truth about themselves. God tests Israel for forty years so that (finally!) God's people will know what's in their own hearts, and that it is at best a mixed bag. Learning that is indeed humbling. But not to know is even worse. Human hearts are unknown territory, not to God, but to humans themselves. We need God's X-rays to show us our own pictures. To be humbled thus is not to be put down, but to be confronted with the truth, typically unknown, so that we might be healed. Such tests, however, are only half of God's testing program.

Another kind of testing God does in the Scriptures is called "testing our faith." Here too the test is not for God's benefit, for God to see how strong or weak our faith is. God knows that without tests. The beneficiary of faith-testing is the one being tested. God tests our faith so that we can see what faith can do when we trust God's promise. God's faith-tests increase our faith.

As Christ's disciples we benefit when we "take the tests" God gives us. That's true of both kinds: the ones that expose the defects in our own hearts and the ones that show God's power and

call us to trust it. During Israel's forty years these two were most often one and the same exam. For Lenten disciples the same is true.

Lord, increase our faith. Encourage us to take the tests you place before us. Dislodge the prideful ego that occupies our hearts. Replace it with your words of forgiveness and mercy. Nudge us to shift our allegiances from our agendas to yours, from our self-made achievements to the good news you offer. Let Lent's forty days be "time enough" to get the job done in us—again. Amen.

Monday, The Second Week of Lent

The Third Word from the Cross Life in Relationships

Reading: John 19:25-27

*"When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved . . .
." John 19:26*



Human life is life-in-relationship. That's a piece of the Creator's blueprint for people: "It is not good for the human being to be alone." Here in the third word from the cross two primary human relationships are before us: mother/son and

master/disciple.

A 20th century Spanish Christian writer, Ortega, put it this way: "I am me and my relationships." Our connection with particular people is the fabric of who we are, why our life story is different from anybody else's ever.

For Jesus it was no different. For him too, mother and disciple are "significant others" who shaped his life. And here at the very end he continues to practice God's mandate for life-in-relationship: faithfulness. In this third word Jesus is doing just that for one last time.

You and I know that faithfulness in relationships is hard work. We need all the help we can get. Is it just an accident that Siegfried put his third word picture at the very feet of the rising Christ? Hardly. He is our source for keeping faith in our own relationships. Even as our own relationships bob and weave, he calls us "disciples whom he loves." We can trust him to keep faith with us. That empowers us to do the same in our relationships as well.

Prayer: Faithfulness is not easy, Lord, given the people whom you've put around us, and given the persons we ourselves are. At best all of us are sinners and saints at the same time. Increase our faith in you so that faithfulness may flourish in our life together with others. Amen.

Tuesday, the Second Week of Lent

The Thorn of Childhood: The Child's Side

Reading: Ephesians 6:1-4

"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right."
Ephesians 6:1

The first people we all relate to are our parents. Even if we are orphaned at an early age, or, worse still, abandoned, parents (or their substitutes) shape us at the deepest level as we grow into becoming human. No wonder the Bible gives them near-divine status. Not because they're perfect, but because they do the work whereby God creates us to be who we finally are.

The Biblical word for faithful response to parents is "Obey." That word's not fashionable nowadays. It signals the servile, the oppressive. Not so the Bible's perspective. Obedience is "right", says our text. The root meaning of obedience signals the rightness. It's "ob-audience," with the root word "audio," listening, in it. Ob-audience is "listening in the right direction."

The "right" way to obey parents is to affirm their role as God's agents for creating and nurturing us. That's faithfulness in this primary relationship. But, of course, this relationship has its thorns. Ask any parent; ask any child.

Not until parent-child connections are "in the Lord" are they finally really "right." For his own mother, here paradoxically "orphaned" by her son's death, Jesus cares. For us in our fractured parent-child roles with thorns that pierce and scratch, the same is true: he cares. Faith in him grounds faithfulness in all our relationships with significant others.

Prayer: Lord, increase our faith that we may be "right" in what we hear and "right" in how we listen to the primary persons you've placed around us to carry out your work on us. Open our eyes to behold our parents as Jesus does his mother in his last words to her. Amen

Wednesday, the Second Week of Lent

The Thorn of Parenthood: The Parent's Side

Reading: Colossians 3:20-21

"Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart."
Colossians 3:21

The fourth commandment is a one-way street for children: "Honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12). No word there for parents. Not so the New Testament. Here parents get a mandate too—on how to use their authority.

To be sure, parents are bigger than their kids—for a while, at least. But that's not what gives them their authority. Biblically viewed, all authority is an assignment from God for a specific purpose: to help some other specific person(s). God authorizes parents be God's sort of father/mother to these specific children so that they do not "lose heart."

Authority is not tyranny. It's the requisite "clout" to carry out a task. Jesus even jolts his disciples with his words in Matthew 20. Authority, he says, does not put us over, but under others, to support, nurture, care for them. To do that you've got to be under those over whom you have authority!

Parental authority is God's authorization to shape the next generation to be God's kind of grown-ups. "Bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" was how yesterday's reading put it. The fallen world equates authority with privilege. No wonder there's a crisis of authority. But authority as authorized service, as God's tender loving care, is God's calling for parents, and our calling as well in any authority role we have.

Prayer: Your own exercise of authority, Jesus, brought you to

the cross. And there you execute that authority in coming all the way down to suffer our death, suffering it out of existence. Inform our authority roles with that same lordly lowliness to be unto others as you have been to us. Amen.

Thursday, the Second Week of Lent

Christ Amid the Thorns of Our Relationships

Reading: Psalm 23

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me. Psalm 23:4

Humans are created to live in relationships. Relationship to other people is basic, but Biblically it is third in a sequence. Our relational world is a threesome: outside, inside, God-side. We see it here in Psalm 23.

The Psalmist is in serious difficulty “on the outside.” “The valley of the shadow of death” confronts him. Whatever all that might be, it includes the enemies mentioned next. Personal relations with these folks are not good.

But of “the inside” what do we hear? “I fear no evil.” His self-perception is OK. He copes with the bad news on the outside by means of a fearless heart on the inside. And what’s the source for that? His God-side relationship: “for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.”

None of us have permanent “green pastures.” We have thorns on all three of these turfs snarling our lives like the bramble that encircles Siegfried’s work. On the cross Christ addresses the deep one first, our root relationship with God. As those thorn-tangles break, he re-roots us in the living God.

With that new root in place, new shoots grow, new perceptions of

who we are and of our worth in the world. And from those shoots come new fruits, life-bestowing transactions with those on the outside. By the time Jesus breaks out full-blown at Easter, there is health and healing for the whole trio.

Prayer: Heal us, Lord, in our relationships – root, shoots, and fruits. Break open the thorns that strangle our own growth – in trusting you, in being pleased with who we are, and in keeping faith with those you’ve given to surround our lives. Amen.

Friday, the Second Week of Lent

Christ Amid the Thorns of Our Relationships With Ourselves

Readings: Luke 6:43-45

“The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil.”
Luke 6:45

Our behaviors grow out of our attitudes. That’s our contemporary way of saying what Jesus says here in Luke. So to change behaviors, we say, change your attitudes, the stuff on the “inside,” what the Bible calls “the heart.” True enough, but just saying it doesn’t make it so.

When Luther explains the first commandment in his Small Catechism, he uses verbs of the heart: “fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” What we fear, love and trust defines who we think (fear, love, and trust) we are. And from the treasure of this heart we live out our roles in daily life.

Over and over again in his earthly ministry Jesus speaks to that agenda. “Do not let your hearts be troubled,” he says (John 14:1). Does his saying it make it so? Jesus addresses these words to his anxious disciples. We too are not trouble-free in

the heart. From our troubled hearts come our troubled behaviors. Like all troublesome people we need new hearts – healed hearts, untroubled ones.

Jesus follows up his word about heart-trouble with three little words: “Believe in me.” You can indeed trust someone who’ll go to the cross for you. Such trust does indeed produce a good heart on the inside with its “good treasure” for producing good in our relations on the outside.

Prayer: (from Psalm 51) Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take away your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. Amen.

Saturday, the Second Week of Lent

Christ Amid the Thorns of Our Relationship With God

Reading: Psalm 95:1-7

We are the people of his pasture, the sheep of his hand. Psalm 95:7

Before we move to Siegfried’s portrait for next week’s Fourth Word from the cross, we pause for one more look at this week’s third one. Pierced by grief, Mary can no longer watch. Behind closed eyes and tight lips she might even be praying the words we will soon hear from Jesus: “My God, my God, why?”

Death always raises the God question, and not just for Jesus as he dies, but for Mary too. Is God for her or against her? Is the Lord’s hand open or closing for her as Jesus dies? Answer: Yes. God’s hand opens for her as it closes around Jesus in the marvelous exchange that makes Good Friday good.

Doesn't Siegfried proclaim that to us in John's compassionate face and that big hand as he cradles his new mother? Note the faint cross where the fingers touch the headscarf. Whose hand is that really? John's? God's? Jesus' own? Yes to all of the above.

John's own name is a clue. In its Hebrew form, Johanan, it means: "The Lord is showing favor." Jesus' pierced hand just above John's own is just that: the Lord showing us favor. And where do we land from Jesus' scarred hand? Right in the hand of his heavenly Father. And what does that make us? "The sheep of his hand." Talk about having connections! They couldn't be better.

Prayer: We need, O Lord, your open hand. Your son's passion puts us there. As the resurrected Christ he continues coming toward us to keep us there. Help us live today as the people of your pasture, the sheep of your hand. Amen

Third Sunday in Lent

Strength Enough to Get to God's Hideout

Reading: I Kings 19:1-8

And Elijah got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. I Kings 19:8

Elijah is ready to throw in the towel. He can stand up to King Ahab, but Queen Jezebel is just too much. When she swears to have his scalp, he responds with fear, and he flees for his life. He even tells God that he's quitting. Who needs that kind of hassle? Prophet, shmophet! And if God wants to zap him for giving up, so be it.

But God does not zap Elijah. Instead God nourishes him. Elijah's own name could have told us (and him too) that God would react this way. The word "Eli-jah" is a full Hebrew sentence: "My God is Jahweh," the covenant God of Israel. Other gods may zap their agents who quit on the job, but not Jahweh. This God majors in rehabbing the losers, restoring the fallen, forgiving sinners, re-filling the empties. So Elijah gets food and drink to keep on going.

With that nourishment he has strength (forty days worth = just enough) to get to God's own hideout in the Sinai desert. Here Jezebel can't get him, and God can thus get on with the rehab project. If you read on beyond the suggested verses above, you see that it takes more work to get Elijah on track again. But those forty days were just enough to get Elijah to God's own hideout, the safe space for Elijah to be restored.

Lent's 40 days are safe space for us to get our second wind, to get relief from the Jezebels that are out to get us, to get the big picture. The Passiontide of Christ is just that: just enough space for us to see that Elijah's name is our name too. Our God is Jahweh, and Jahweh's beloved son is our brother Jesus. So what does that make us? God's own beloved kids as well. That's a big "Four -0" to live on forever.

You brought Elijah through his wilderness, O God, and refilled him when his own emptiness brought him to despair. Do for us what you did for him. We have even better grounds to trust you for it. He too had your Word for it, but we also have your Word in the Flesh, Our Lord Jesus Christ. Refuel us from his fullness. Amen.

Monday, The Third Week of Lent

The Fourth Word from the Cross Why, God, Why?

Reading: Mark 15:33-39

At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Mark 15:34



Saint Mark records one and only one word from the cross: "My God, my God, why?" Mark seems to be in a hurry. He leaves only 15 verses for the entire crucifixion narrative and Jesus speaks only once, this cry of despair. Does that one cry make the whole story "good news"? Mark seems to say so.

Notice how he reports an answer to this cry. It does not come from the one Jesus calls "my God." It is instead the centurion carrying out the death sentence who tells us why. Why was Jesus God-forsaken? Why, because "truly this man was God's Son!" God's true Son joins sinners all the way down to God-forsakenness, down to cries of despair, even despair of God.

Earlier the bystanders had taunted Jesus: "If you are God's son, come down from the cross." But since Jesus really is God's son, he stays there. Phoney messiahs, pseudo-sons of God, don't do it this way. They avoid the cross at all costs. They leave their fans to do the crying, the despairing, the dying .

Not so this Son of God. He goes to the very pits, so that we will be rescued when we hit the pits. When we ourselves cry out: "My God, why?" the one who truly is God's Son speaks to us: "I've been there myself—in the Big Pit. And since I have been there, you will not stay there." We have his word for it and that gets us out. Truly!

Prayer: (from Isaiah 53) In your suffering, Lord Jesus, you were wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon you was the punishment that makes us whole, and by your bruises we are healed. Truly you are your Father's Son, and we are truly grateful. Amen.

Tuesday, the Third Week of Lent

Why Call God "My" God?

Reading: Matthew 27:45-54.

About three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice. . . "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?". Matthew 27:46.

Even in the depths of being forsaken by God, Jesus addresses God as "my" God. Given the circumstances, how can he do that? What's behind this pronoun "my"?

In the Christian story, my God is the one who possesses me, who claims me as his own. In Jesus' case it first happened at his baptism as the heavenly voice announced: "This is my beloved son." Jesus has been living from that word ever since, and his "my" from the cross signals his continuing faith in it.

Our own baptism repeats that for us. But in our case, Jesus is also present as God says to us: "You are my beloved son, my beloved daughter." In his own Son at his moment of anguish, God was reclaiming, re-possessing lost sons and daughters. Since God claims me with a "my" of his own, I can claim God with the same

little word—even when my God is forsaking me.

Siegfried's rendering of Jesus in the Fourth Word, his head sinking between his shoulders, calls us when we are sinking to hear our God inviting us: "Call on me in the day of trouble (even trouble that I bring to you); I will deliver you." Jesus banks on that promise, crying to "my" God as he hits bottom. Because he did, the same holds true for us.

Prayer: When we hit bottom, God, remind us whose we are, that you are our God. Jesus was there and you remained his God. On his recommendation we call on you "out of the depths." Amen.

Wednesday, the Third Week of Lent

The Thorn of Our Own Forsakenness

Reading: Psalm 22:1-5

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. Psalm 22:2

The fourth word from the cross is the opening verse of Psalm 22. Jesus may have been praying the entire Psalm aloud. Psalm 22 is a strange mixture of despair and trust all the way through its 31 verses.

Last week's meditations highlighted our three fundamental relationships –with others, with myself, with God. Psalm 22 locates forsakenness at the same three points. To the outside: "they" scorn, despise, mock me (v. 6&7). To the inside: "my mouth is dried up like a potsherd." To the God-side: "why have you forsaken me?"

Yet the Psalmist trusts that he'll survive. Why does he think so? Because of God's own track record with his ancestors, he says. They trusted and were delivered; cried to God and were

saved. Doubtless Jesus too is building on God's past track record as he prays this ancient prayer.

On our Lenten journey Jesus himself is now the center of God's track-record. In raising him at Easter, God answers his Psalm 22 prayer on the cross. His Easter replaces our forsakenness with fullness in our relationship with God. With that emptiness healed, a new self comes to life on the inside. From such a new interior self, Easter-relationships with others do happen—even with others who once forsook us. Hard to believe? Check God's track-record.

Prayer: (from Psalm 22:11) Do not be far from us, Lord, when trouble is near and there is no one to help. When forsakenness withers our spirits, focus our eye on that great cloud of witnesses — your own beloved Son included — who trusted you and were delivered. Amen.

Thursday, the Third Week of Lent

The Thorn of Meaningless Suffering

Reading: Hebrews 11:32-40

"All these [who suffered] though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised." Hebrews 11:39

If there is some sense to our suffering, its thorns diminish. The pain of childbirth takes on meaning in the new life that is born. The agony of chemotherapy makes sense as the tumor shrivels. But we also know the sort of suffering that today's reading describes—senseless suffering—mad, insane pain and cruelty.

The Word from God for such suffering is no slick answer. It is rather a person, God's son, and his promise. Jesus participated so totally in our thorn brambles that he too cried for some

sense to it all. For him the sense came not by looking back to figure out how it all happened, but rather looking forward to God's untangling it all. (His last word from the cross says just that: "Father, into your hands....")

Reinhardt helps us by placing his fourth word vignette, the God-forsaken one, in closest (almost touch-) contact with the emptying tomb. The meaning of Jesus' suffering comes clear as Easter touches it.

For us too it is the future God holds for us, not our past (however it unfolded), that makes sense of our entire life, suffering included. Examining our life from its end in Easter, we can see the meaning of all the rest of it. That's what put sense into Jesus' senseless suffering. He puts the same sense into ours. Thus even now we can start viewing our own suffering in the light of Easter.

Prayer: Suffering confuses us, Lord, about the story of our own lives. Flash before our eyes our story's Easter-ending, that last chapter already written in our book by your beloved Son. So often we forget how our story really ends. Keep us reading from the end. Amen.

Friday, the Third Week of Lent

The Thorn of God's Own Suffering

Reading: John 3:14-18

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him...may have eternal life." John 3:16.

You and I would be arrested if we gave away our children. Worse yet, if we sacrificed their lives for the sake of someone else.

How can God get away with that? It's all wrapped up in the word "so" used twice in this famous Bible passage.

The first "so" is often misunderstood to mean "so much." God loved the world so much that he would go to such desperate lengths to get us back. St. John's own Greek word is not this kind of "so." It's a "how so?" word. How so did God love the world? "Just so, in just this way" by carrying out a radical exchange program. He traded the dearest Son, so that the renegade children, dear to God, but not very endearing on their own, might get God's own life back into them.

The second "so" is "so that." So that by trusting this give-away Son the worldlings might have God's own life again. This second "so" is as marvelous as the first. The father-son project is a give-away action to get back all the lost kids. God took the risk of losing the Last One in the family to get all of us kids back home. And we are home when we trust the give-away Son. Now isn't that something! Yes, indeed. On the cross it happened just so.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for sending your give-away Son to bring us home from our wanderings. Things that perish still tug at us to find our life in what they offer. Bend us back to hang our hearts on Christ for the life that lasts. Amen.

Saturday, the Third Week of Lent

Why Jesus At All?

Reading: Acts 13:13-16, 36-39.

"By this Jesus everyone who believes is set free from all those sins from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses."
Acts 13:39.

Our western world is hardly "Christian" any longer—if it ever

really was. People from other religions, or no religion at all, interact with us daily. They seem just as nice or un-nice as Christians are. So why Jesus? What's unique about him?

When Paul spoke at the synagogue in Pisidia, someone must have raised the same question. Note that Paul does not claim superior morals for the Jesus-believers. Instead he says that their God-relationship is better, better even than what Moses provided, which was the very best that had ever been.

Jesus offers a freedom that you can't get elsewhere, Paul says. It's freedom in our relationship with God. Alternative religions, especially today's secular ones, don't think our God-relationship needs fixing at all. Bad behavior, bad attitudes, are seen as the problem. Fix them, and everything's fixed.

Paul diagnoses differently. The root malady is unfaith, our chronic distrust of God. That's what sin, capital S, is. On the cross Jesus "fixes" that—in two ways. He trades places with sinners for the payoff of their unfaith, and thereby shows us a really different kind of God, one whom sinners can trust.

Take one more look at Siegfried's portrait for this week. How bad is your unfaith, your pit with God? Christ's agonized cry: "My God, my God, why?" is simultaneously his pledge to us: "I've been there. I'll trade you. Trust me."

Prayer: My God, my God, why did you send Jesus? We know why. It was your love for sinners and we are elated. By this Jesus we live in freedom in our ongoing life with you, and that sets us free for everything in the world. Thanks for this incredible freedom. Amen.

Fourth Sunday in Lent

The Mystery of Rain—And The Rainbow

Reading: Genesis 7:1-16

I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground. Genesis 7:4

Rain is both a wonder and a terror. Without rain everything dies. When it rains for forty days and forty nights every living thing is blotted out—not just in Noah's day but ours as well. Rain is a mystery, a power for life or death. Human beings surely do not control the rain. Does anyone? Or is rain a divine power all by itself? Many ancient peoples thought so. Not so the Holy Scriptures. Beginning already in Genesis 2 rain is a creature of God. God manages the rain business. So rain is God's agent, does God's work both as blessing and as judgment.

Rain for forty days and forty nights is judgment, no question. However it lasts "only" forty days and forty nights. Here too the Biblical forty signals time needed to get a task done, and then it's over. God's judgment is not everlasting even though human wickedness seems to be. God's judgment has a time limit.

But God has something else going in our wicked world that has no time limit. It came after the flood was over. The rainbow after the rain, such a marvel in its own right, signals "the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth" (Genesis 9). That is as marvelous in human history as the rainbow is in natural history. That's where Lent fits in.

Lent calls us to join God in his analysis and judgment of our own lives with no holds barred—and forty days yet! But then to look up after the rain to God's rainbow, the everlasting covenant that God has signed with us. Jesus the Christ is that

signature. Noah's ark was good enough for the forty-day flood. God's rainbow arc (Christ) is even better. It lasts forever.

When the rain of pain and floods of all sorts break into our lives, O God, remind us of your servant Noah. For the repentance that such waters urge upon us, move us to do just that. And as we do repent, set before our eyes your Rainbow, your promise of faithfulness to us and your whole creation in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Monday, the Fourth Week of Lent

The Fifth Word from the Cross He's Thirsty Just Like Us.

Reading: John 19:28f.

He said, "I am thirsty." John 19:28



He's thirsty. Just like us. But thirsts are dangerous. Look at that sponge on the spearpoint in Siegfried's picture. How could you sip and not get cut by the blade? We have to blink to get the perspective. We see the soldier from the point of view of

the one on the cross. How it looked from top down.

Thirsts are always danger points. If you are human, you have them. Not just for water, but for affection, for security, for self-respect, for rest, and more. Medieval Christians counted seven such human thirsts, seven drives. They also saw the seven deadly sins (the spearpoints) in the middle of them.

Our thirsts demand our attention. Not to do so hurts, really hurts. But that is not the spearpoint. Something else makes them lethal. When a thirst takes over, becomes all-consuming, our trust in God gets consumed too. Satisfy it at any cost, and it will indeed destroy us—and often others as well.

What all don't we thirst for—especially when we're on our own crosses! How readily don't we tend to them and evict God from our center. Jesus thirsts, yet keeps the faith. He copes with it, swordpoint and all. Finally even his thirst just to live goes unquenched. He does it all in our place in his body on the tree. Jesus, the thirsty one, joins us on our Lenten journey, in the midst of the thorns of our own thirsts to bring us finally to the open tomb.

Prayer: At root it is life, Lord, that we are thirsting for. Thirst-quenchers offered by our world all have the spearpoint that wounds when we sip. Bring Christ to us again for the life we long for and open our eyes to parched people all around us. Amen

Tuesday, the Fourth Week of Lent
Water, Water, Everywhere / Nor Any Drop to Drink.

Reading: John 4:7-15

"Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never

be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” John 4:14.

The woman at the well conversing with Jesus is a Biblical version of the Ancient Mariner’s lament in Coleridge’s poem: “Water, water, everywhere/ Nor any drop to drink.” Readers of the poem recall that it was not potable water, but forgiveness, that the mariner thirsted for and could not find.

The conversation at Jacob’s well unfolds in the same metaphor. The woman’s many husbands parallel her coming again and again to the famous well, patriarch Jacob’s gift for slaking thirst. But it takes more than Jacob’s bequest to do that job. Here, finally, is someone greater than Jacob.

Needed is someone to choke off the death-message, like Siegfried’s blade-point, implicit in all our thirsts. On the cross Jesus fulfills his promise to the woman. He takes into himself the death- point in all her thirsts (ours too), and offers instead God’s kind of life where thirsts no longer tyrannize. Thus death threats too are gone. With mouth and lips thus moistened, we become gushers, he says, for others. “The water that I will give them will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life [for others].”

“Gusher” is not a word Christians normally use for themselves. But if our Lord says it, then it must be so. For us today that says: Go, gush. Not that we’ve got to, but that we get to, gush living water to a thirsty world.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for taking the cup of death from our lips and giving us your cup of living water in its place. Let the life that we draw from this drink flow from us into the life streams of those we meet this day. Amen

Wednesday, the Fourth Week of Lent

And God Sent Dryness

Reading: Matthew 4:1-11

He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Matthew 4:2-3

Jesus is led, St. Matthew tells us, by God's own Spirit into the wilderness, the dry God-empty desert. Why does God send dryness to his No.1 beloved Son? Why does God send us daughters and sons into deserts? If we are God's children, why those wildernesses, those parched deserts? It doesn't compute.

The tempter makes a very plausible proposal: If you are God's Son—better still, since you are God's son—why should there be any dry periods in your life at all? And if they do arise, then shouldn't your status give you privilege for getting rid of them? It all seems so sensible.

But the One whose Son he is is not a God who flees the wilderness. Instead he enters our wilderness-world. And once there he empties himself of all divine privilege, the divine perks. Why? So that he may pour them into us, the real empties. His words: "I thirst" signal the last chapter of his total emptying—for us, into us. Finally on the cross he is the fullness of God filling us empties.

Not surprisingly, this Son of God does not exempt his disciples either from going back into the world's wildernesses. Nourished by him, we get wilderness assignments, for and with others who know only dryness and are dying in their deserts. He is the Word that comes from the mouth of God, a promise to live on, no matter how deadly, how demonic, our desert.

Prayer: Nourish us, God, in our deserts today. Open our eyes to see your Son joining us in our dry places. Feed us with his Word so that as we flourish, the desert, too, blossoms where you have sent us to serve. Amen.

Thursday, the Fourth Week of Lent

Thirst-thorns That Never Go Away

Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 (Begin at “Therefore...”)

“A thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to...keep me from being too elated.” 2 Corinthians 12:7.

Saint Paul had a thorn that he could never get rid of. Since he links it with the word “flesh,” his favorite word for sinners walking away from God, it must have been something more than a physical disability.

His own Greek term for it portrays not a thorn sticking into him, but a thorn sticking out from him. It was some place in his life where his own sinner-self was all too visible. What was it really? He never says. So let’s imagine.

Let’s imagine that it was one of the seven thirsts, the primal drives that characterize us all. One of Paul’s thirsts he could never quench. It always managed to take control of him instead of vice versa.

When he begged God for its removal, God always said: “You are going to be stuck with it. But don’t worry. My grace will cover you. My power will fill the bill as I continue to cover your weakness.” Upon hearing this he then pivots and starts boasting of his weakness. If it’s Christ- covered, it’s a plus.

The thorns of our poorly-managed thirsts need not terrorize us

either. We too cannot keep our sinner-selves from showing. How drastic is that? Depends on what we do when it happens. Cope with it on our own and we're guaranteed losers. Link it to the power of the crucified and it's taken care of. A done deal. Like Paul, we too are authorized to link our weaknesses to Christ and join in Paul's feisty boast: "When I am weak, then I am strong!"

Prayer: Thorns not only hurt, dear God, they choke out our lives as they entwine us. Enliven us with your grace to counteract the thorns that never seem to go away. Your grace is sufficient, and covered with it, we are sufficient too for whatever is at hand. Amen.

Friday, the Fourth Week of Lent

The Vinegar of Daily Life

Reading: John 19:28-29

When Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." John 19:28.

This text includes two qualifiers as Jesus asks for a drink: knowing that all was finished and to fulfill the scriptures. We meditate on the second qualifier today, the other one tomorrow.

With the words "I am thirsty" Jesus is fulfilling the scriptures. Which ones? In Psalm 69:21, King David bemoans to God that his adversaries "gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." As Jesus walks the circle of thorns, he replicates David's life, and ours as well, taking into himself all the vinegar that adversaries pour into our lives.

Yet the greater adversary that sinners confront is not just mean people, as bitter as that cup indeed can be. There is, as the OT prophets say, a more deadly cup confronting all the children of

Adam and Eve. It is the “cup” of God’s own rebuke. Divine vinegar, you might say.

Before we can ever drink the “cup of salvation,” someone has to take that other cup. On the cross, Jesus is taking it, taking it willingly. He drinks our vinegar, and in its place puts into our hand the cup of salvation. That cup, by contrast, is sweet – like fresh water after vinegar, or like honey, the Bible’s sweetest metaphor. He invites us to “taste and see how gracious the Lord is.”

Prayer: Lord, the vinegars of daily experience have not left our lives. Pour into our cup the sweetness of your salvation, that cup of gladness, the cup of Christ’s new covenant with us. Amen

Saturday, the Fourth Week of Lent

Christ The Thirst-Quencher

Reading: Psalm 42:1-11

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), “I am thirsty.” John 19:28

St. John’s second qualifier to “I am thirsty” is that Jesus knew that all was now finished. Jesus’ request for drink, as the crucifixion draws to a close, carries the overtones of yet another prayer from the Psalms, a homecoming prayer: “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” (Psalm 42:1)

The psalmist offers God’s own self as drink to quench what we thirst for—recognition, love, approval, a thousand things. But a better answer, says our culture, is to “get what you’re thirsty for and drink it.” Yet just to satiate ourselves with whatever “works,” does not really work.

Recall Jesus' own words at Jacob's well (John 4). To quench life's thirsts in that way is always to be thirsty. For our daily thirsts are symptoms of a primal thirst, our "thirst for the living God." Not until that thirst is quenched can the other ones be satisfied.

As he thirsts and drinks at the cross Jesus opens God's thirst-quencher for us. The thirst-quencher that suffices for him on the cross now works for us as well. What we need he supplies - nothing less than the living God. Once more: "O, taste and see..."

Prayer: Lord, we too, it seems, are always thirsty. Your Son's cross uncapped the fountain of life for parched people. Inundate us in that liquid refreshment of the living God. Liquify us to be your bubbling brook for others, all others. Amen.

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Forty Days for Nineveh

Reading: Jonah 3:1-10

Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown."
Jonah 3:4

Jonah's own track record is not exactly a model to follow. When called by God to "go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it," Jonah boards a ship headed in the other direction. He flees not only his job assignment, but also to get "away from the presence of the Lord." But God manages the oceans too and Jonah is beat before he even gets on board. It just takes him a little longer to get his directions straight.

So he arrives in Nineveh and proclaims its doom. But not right away. There is a forty day grace period. Forty days to get a particular job done. That is, "to turn from their evil ways and

from the violence that is in their hands.” And much to Jonah’s own surprise, and later dismay, they actually do it and “God relent[s] and change[s] his mind.” Jonah wanted them wiped from the face of the earth. So did every Israelite of his day, given what Nineveh had done to them and to most of the rest of the world.

After a few more episodes between the pouting prophet and his gracious God, Jonah finally catches on. If God can be merciful to one rebellious prophet, why not to Nineveh with its megapopulace of equally “dumb” citizens. In our fits of (pseudo-) righteousness, we wish all real sinners to get the ax right now, apart from any forty-day waiting period. Not so God. He offers us “time enough.”

St. Paul picks up this Jonah accent in Romans 2: “Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” When such repentance happens, we are told, there is joy in heaven. For that too, Jesus says, we are to pray that God’s will be done on earth as it [already] is in heaven. Christ’s way of the cross is about that too. Joy about repentance? Why not? For Jonah, for Nineveh, for us, it is a turn from death to life. If that’s not grounds for joy, what is?

Restore unto us the joy of our salvation, dear God, beginning with our joy in repentance. First of all, our own repentance, then also that of others. You have joy in heaven about our turnaround and return to you. Overjoy us in the same way in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Monday, The Fifth Week in Lent
The Sixth Word from the Cross “It is

Finished.” Is He Finished?

Reading: Isaiah 53:3-9.

Jesus said, “It is finished.” John 19:30.



For the sixth word from the cross, Jesus in Reinhardt's portrait is really "finished." We see his head sunk between his shoulders, eyes closed, lips blackened, muscles stretched. He's just moments away from death.

There is no break in death's crown around his head, no last minute escape. Even though our thorny ring of death gets broken apart by His Easter, his circle remains intact. He finishes the work of dying, but is he thereby "finished," ruined, relegated to the scrap heap? Not really.

He is on assignment. A tough one. In Isaiah's words, it was to be crushed for our iniquities, to take the part of straying sheep, not in spite of being the divine Shepherd, but exactly because he is that Good Shepherd. It's his job.

When danger threatens, good shepherds don't run hoping that the sheep will somehow make it. Instead, knowing that all we like

sheep are sure losers if we have to cope with death on our own, he steps into our spot. And by his bruises we get healed. By going the entire route of death, he completes our chance for life that lasts. "It is finished," is not necessarily a cry of exhaustion. It also announces a job is done. Straying sheep are home free.

Prayer: You carry through, Good Shepherd, on your promises—all the way to the end. We ground our lives on that goodness, are given courage by its never-flagging power, and look toward the day when you bring us finally across the finish line. Amen

Tuesday, the Fifth Week of Lent

"Case Closed" Against Jesus

Reading: John 19:8-12

When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. John 19:30.

What did Jesus mean with the words: "It is finished"? The Greek word St. John uses is a courtroom term. It means "Case closed." Whose case? The case against Jesus? Yes, but there's more. Take another look at the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate.

As John reports it, we soon see that Pilate himself is on trial. When Pilate tries to enmesh Jesus in his own power game, Jesus reminds Pilate of the "game" being played on him. (John 19:11) He's accountable to God for his political office. What he does with Jesus will bounce back in God's verdict on him. Pilate thinks he's in charge, and only Jesus is on trial. From one angle that's true, but the roles are also reversed: Pilate on trial, Jesus the judge.

So it should not really surprise us that it is Jesus, not Pilate, who pronounces the "case closed." Only the one on the

bench, the judge, can close cases. Well then, is Jesus the one in charge or the one being charged—and executed? Answer: Yes. Both are true.

The charge against Jesus was: He says he's King of the Jews. How do you test that? Jewish kings are shepherd-kings. Not until such a king dies so that the sheep may live, do we have the evidence to close the case. Jesus dies so that others may live. He truly is the King as charged. Case closed. Pilate, and all of us, need just such a king—for dear life. Thereby our case is closed.

Prayer: You are guilty as charged, Lord Jesus, guilty of being our king. Anyone associating with sorry-looking sheep like us has to reckon with the consequences, and you did. Not just once on Good Friday as our Good Shepherd, but today and tomorrow as well. Our life depends on that. Amen.

Wednesday, the Fifth Week of Lent

Case Closed Against Us

Reading: Romans 8:1-4

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Romans 8:1.

With no condemnation against those who are “in” Christ Jesus, the case against Christians is closed too. One axiom of the Christian gospel is that what is now true of Jesus the Christ is also true of his believers. Paul's little word “in” is the key. When you are “in” him, it's “case closed.”

How do people get in on what happens to Jesus? Paul has only one word for that: faith. And faith means trust. Trust Christ when his “case-closed” happens, and it's true for you. It's yours. Trust him not, and it's not yours.

In today's reading Paul describes how it all came about. God sent his Son into our sinners' network. Once there, and willingly there, he also became enmeshed in the lock-step sequence of "the law of sin and death:" if sin, then death. And thus he died.

But once the law carries out its sentence on an offender, it can no longer touch him. Jesus is the one flashpoint in our world where the "law of sin and death" is past history. To be in on that is heaven on earth. It's ours for the trusting. Trust him, and it's yours.

Not only does such trusting get us "out" of the law's jaws, but we get "in" on the Spirit of life, the death-proof life, in Christ Jesus. "Case closed" on the law of sin and death is freedom. And freedom is an entirely different case. By faith it's ours.

Prayer: We still argue our own righteousness, Lord God, falling away from the "in" that erases all condemnation. Bring us back "in" to faith in Christ, trusting that our case is indeed closed, so we can tend to the other business that you put before us. Amen.

Thursday, the Fifth Week of Lent

Are You Running With Me, Jesus?

Reading: 2 Timothy 4:6-8

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 2 Timothy 4:7

To finish his life in faith—that's Paul's own personal goal about the finish line up ahead of him. He uses two conflict words—a fight and a race—to reflect on it. His grounds for confidence that it was a good fight and a finished race are his

faith.

Some years ago a popular book carried the title: Are You Running With Me, Jesus? That title is Paul's perspective. To finish or to fail our life's calling is based not on our list of achievements, but by who accompanied us on the racetrack and in the ring.

Who you are running with? That is what makes for a good or bad race. Run with Jesus, the "Author and Finisher" of the Christian gospel, and we're running a good race. No matter if everybody else gets to the finish line before us.

And the same is true of life as a fight. Hooked to Christ, Paul says in Second Corinthians 6, he was most often on the losing end of conflicts and still a winner; "dying and yet alive; punished, but not yet killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

In our own life assignment, our callings, we finish well when we are partnered with the Christ who did finish first. He promises never to break the partnership. Trusting his promise, we finish right alongside the winner.

Prayer: We too, dear Jesus, want to finish our race and keep the faith. When our track record looks bad—and also when it looks good—keep us running with you. Give us your Second Wind, your Spirit, to fight our own good fight, to finish our race. Amen.

Friday, the Fifth Week of Lent
Reopening Closed Cases

Reading: Revelation 12:7-12

The accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. Revelation 12:10

Jesus announces his own “case closed” with his next-to-last breath. If the case against him is closed, then the same is true for all who trust him. Still, it seems our cases get re-opened daily here on earth. Some charge, challenge, accusation, some re-indictment coming from other people calls us to respond.

In today’s reading St. John traces this fact of life to the work of Christ’s arch-enemy Satan. The job of accuser is his standard role. When he brings charges against Christians (whose cases Christ has closed), he becomes a new nemesis. He’s the Grand Deceiver, out to con us into defending ourselves.

You know how it happens. When accused, we knee-jerk our own self-defense; or counter-accuse; or pass the buck; or deny; or just run. But in all of these “normal” human responses we are deserting Christ our Public Defender. Abandoning his defense, we re-open our case to sure defeat.

Today’s reading gives heaven’s counsel for such situations: “Conquer the accuser by the blood of the Lamb, by making the Lamb’s Word your own testimony.” Christ authorizes us to use his verdict on us for our own testimony when accused in daily life. Doing so we conquer. Re-indictment fails. It’s “case closed” again. What a Public Defender to have on your side!

Prayer: We make so little use of your defense in our daily lives, Lord. Worse still, but we often work for the accuser. Unbind us from being his “angels.” Open our ears to your word about us to use in the courtrooms of our daily life. Put us to work closing, not re-opening the cases of our fellow sinners. Amen.

Saturday, the Fifth Week of Lent

Some Stories Seem Never to Finish

Reading: Psalm 107:4-9.

Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town. Psalm 107:4

Garrison Keillor, America's master radio story-teller, once ended a story before it came to any conclusion. His fans complained. So the next week he asked his audience whether that wasn't really true—so many lives never getting anywhere, just running on and on and finally run out.

The Psalm reading today takes note of the same thing. People wander all their lives, and never find their way to the town, to any goal or conclusion. T. S. Eliot said something similar about modern western culture in his famous line: This is the way the world ends, not with a bang, but a whimper.

The Psalmist knows the secret about finishing our life. It is not an achievement, but a gift. The gift-giver is God. Unless the Lord takes us in hand, we wander, never getting to the town. Finishing a life is never a chance accident. Only someone who got there before can show us the way.

When Jesus finished his course, he put his life back in the hands of his Father. His life came to closure, not with a whimper, but with the bang of Easter. For us whimperers who never get anywhere, he offers to take us along to his own Big Bang. Not only will he show us the way, he is the Way. Lives linked to him attain closure, the same resurrection high that overjoys every whimper.

Prayer: Bring our lives to Christ's Easter closure, dear God, so that our wanderings may cease. Today's world offers us a myriad

of places to go, but they all end with a whimper. Bring us to your town by the Way that works for everyone, your beloved Son, our brother Jesus. Amen.

Palm Sunday, Passion Sunday

Jewish Kings and Jewish Royal Authority

Reading: 2 Samuel 5:1-5

David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years. 2 Samuel 5:4

David had forty years on the throne, the right amount of time to get God's job done. And what was that? According to the divine job description "you shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you shall be ruler over Israel" (v.2). Jewish kings are called to be "rulers over" by being "shepherds under." How so "under?" It's all in the word shepherd, and whose shepherd David is. The sheep are not David's; they belong to God. What then is his link with the sheep? Simple, to keep them alive and well for the One they belong to. When danger threatens, the shepherd dies (if necessary) so that the sheep survive. He is there to preserve them, not vice versa.

The pattern of oriental kings in David's time was the exact opposite. The people were the king's property, finally at his disposal. Which is exactly what such kings did—often by the thousands. At one crucial time (and a few more besides) David switched from the Jewish to the oriental model for his royal office. Clearest of all is his interaction with Bathsheba and her husband Uriah. He acts as though he's their owner, and since that contradicts the contract he has with God, the consequences are deadly for all concerned.

Good as David was, God needed a better shepherd for God's people. On this Sunday before Easter we celebrate just such a

genuine descendant of David, an authentic Jewish king, the final Good Shepherd. We follow him this week on the last mile of the way to the cross. Here he gives his life for the sheep, and in that very act gives his life to the sheep. When later this week he's called "King of the Jews," that's what it's all about. Keep this "Jewishness" in mind as Holy Week unfolds.

You sent us Jesus, dear God, by the way of the cross. That marks him indelibly as your final Good Shepherd for us. In his Easter victory you called him from death to extend his commission to us as sub-shepherds, his and yours, to rescue the lost, to heal the injured, to lay down our own lives for one another. Empower us to do what you've commissioned us to be. Amen.

Monday of Holy Week

The Final Word from the Cross

Handing Over Our Lives

Reading: Luke 23:44-49

"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last. Luke 23:46.



Siegfried's image for the final word is deceptively simple: Jesus hands over the flame of his life into the hand of his

Father. But look again.

Look again at image #4 and its proximity to #7. Before Jesus handed over his life, he had cried out the opposite: “My God, my God, why?” Notice that in between #4 and #7 Siegfried puts the hand and spearpoint breaking the frame of #5 to serve a second purpose as visual connectors for #4 and #7.

On the one hand death is that spearpoint and God’s hand is in it. Grim as that may sound, we have Jesus’ word for it: in human death God is forsaking sinners. The wages of sin is death. That is not good news.

That word, though true, is not God’s last word. The extended hand right smack in between #4 and #7 signals the full truth about death. The full truth is God’s own offer for sinners to live. But that means God, not the sinner, has to cope with sin’s “wages.” Hence Good Friday. Here God’s Son positions himself to reposition sinners so that they may hear God’s own last word about death: “Call me Father, and hand your death over to me.”

When they die, God’s children do indeed lose their lives. But because of Jesus, God’s second word, it’s death with a difference. His Father is now “Our Father” too. Things commended to him are finally never lost. The hand into which we commend our death is a hand that hangs on to us—for dear life.

Prayer: (from the Collect for Passion Sunday) Almighty God, you sent your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to take our flesh upon him and to suffer death on the cross. Grant that we may share in his obedience, trusting you as he did, and thereby share the glorious victory of his resurrection. Amen.

Tuesday of Holy Week

Dying as Stewardship

Reading: Psalm 31:14-16

"My times are in your hand." Psalm 31:15

In handing over his life to his Father Jesus shows that human life is stewardship. Life is not something we own, but a gift entrusted to us. And when the life is lived in stewardship (as caretaker of someone else's property), then death is but the last event in this life-long transaction.

Even our secular world can say life is a gift. But if that is true, then there is a Giver, some "big" hand from whom we received our lives. Our chronic sin is to deny our life as gift, to declare ourselves the owner, and then to "do what I want" with my own life. But we are not our own. No one is.

Christians are not their own twice over. As creature, our life itself is a gift of the creator. There is a second sense in which we are not our own. We "were bought with a price," the price portrayed in Reinhardt's long thorn-bramble and the scenes it connects. That is indeed "costly grace." That makes us Christ's own." Owing up to whose we are is the deep secret of who we are.

Jesus lived his life as his Father's Son. That is who he was because that is whose he was. In dying he handed it all back to the original owner. That's dying in faith. That makes his a "blessed" death. So is ours when we do our dying just like that. And by virtue of our second owner, we can.

Prayer: (from Luther's Small Catechism) I believe that Jesus Christ –true God and true man – is the one to whom I belong. That he has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from death and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood, and

his innocent suffering and death, that I may be his own and live under him and his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness. This is most certainly true. Amen.

Wednesday of Holy Week

There are Other Ways to Die

Reading: Psalm 90

*So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.
Psalm 90:12*

The Hebrew metaphor “counting our days” means there is a guaranteed end to our days. It is a must, not a maybe. And the pathos in the “must” of death is God’s voice saying: “Back to dust, sinner.”

Two other death views dominate today, both wrong. One goes all the way back to Socrates. For Socrates death was no big deal. Unjustly accused and sentenced, he still drank his poison with ease. Death was OK, even natural.

Sharply opposite is the second view expressed in Dylan Thomas’ famous line: “Do not go gentle into that dark night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.” This sounds closer to Psalm 90, but is finally just as wrong as Socrates was. Socrates didn’t see God at all in his dying. He died with both eyes shut.

Dylan Thomas has at least half an eye open, but that’s still poor vision. “Gentle” may not be the way to cope, but “rage” is blind too. Thomas’ half-open eye doesn’t see God in the dark night. In death it is God we must confront.

His other eye is fully closed to God’s second word about death. That second word is celebrated in the last five verses (13-17)

of Psalm 90: God's favor, compassion, and steadfast love—even for those whom he visits in death.

Repentance, not rage—with both eyes open—is how to cope with God's first word in death. The eye of faith then trusts God's second word about death, Jesus, the Word made flesh. His cross and resurrection make it work for us.

Prayer: (from the Collect for Wednesday of Holy Week) Almighty God, your Son our Saviour suffered at the hands of men and endured the shame of the cross. Grant that we may walk in the way of his cross and find it the way of life and peace; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Maundy Thursday

Handouts in The Lord's Supper

Reading: Jeremiah 31:31-34

"Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Matthew 26:27-28.

On Thursday evening of Holy Week Jesus eats his last meal with the disciples. In the middle of the traditional Passover meal Jesus institutes his own meal, the Lord's Supper. The words he speaks are a flashback to our reading from Jeremiah.

What the old covenant, good and God-given as it was, could not do for God's people, this one can and does. The old one couldn't guarantee that it got to people's hearts. By virtue of its focus on performance, God kept track of commandment-breakers. Sin got remembered. Sin ruined the whole thing.

Via Jeremiah God proposes a new covenant not like the old one. It will get to people's hearts. It's for everyone no matter who

they are. It centers in God “forgiving iniquity, remembering sin no more.” In his last meal before death Jesus announces: “The new covenant. It’s me.” He makes that covenant with sinners in the bread, wine and words he offers his disciples.

At this meal Jesus is handing out—in advance—the results of what will happen on the next day. It’s actually a preview encounter with the Easter Lord. In this Supper Jesus already distributes the benefits of his cross. So also for us. Christ hands us those Easter benefits. He designates it the forgiveness of sins. No more fracture exists between God and us. Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life, new meaning, new healing. Jesus is our new covenant with God. In his Supper he hands it to us—again and again.

Prayer: We remember you, Lord Jesus, when we join in your Holy Supper. Not just recalling the events of your dying, we remember how you remember us in your self-offering for our forgiveness, in your Eastering us back to our own new covenant with God, your Father and now also ours. Amen

Good Friday

Our Lifelines Written in Our Hands

Reading: Luke 23:44-49

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Luke 23:46

Siegfried liked to draw hands. Look again at all the hands in the pictures we’ve been following around the thorn bramble. Look especially at the hands of the risen Christ.

Though death is clearly behind him, the scars on his hands (and the other scars too) remain. They do not disappear at Easter. Why not? Because they now are the marks of victory, not defeat. Though once dead (the scars verify that) he now lives. That

highpoint of his life and work is forever imprinted in his hands.

Pause now for a moment to look at your own hands. How much of your own life's history can you read there? What stories are written on your hands—the scars, the callouses (or their absence), the bent fingers, the fingernails (chewed or blackened), the hangnails, the rings on the fingers (or their absence), the finger-joints, the wrinkles, the moles, the visible veins.

When Jesus puts his life into his Father's hand, it is a prelude to his offering that life to us, handing it over to us. When he offers us his hand, encouraging us to clasp his in ours, the two whole lives written in those two hands are joined, and even better, exchanged. His scars for ours – but with one significant difference. Our scars signal the mortality still ahead of us. His scars have death already behind them. Can that really be swapped when he offers his scarred hand to us? He says so. What a swell swap!

Prayer: (from the Collect for Good Friday) Lord Jesus, you carried our sins in your own body on the tree so that we might have life. May we and all whom we remember this day find new life in you now and in the world to come, where you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen

Holy Saturday

Sabbath Rest

Reading: Hebrews 4:8-11,14-16

A sabbath rest still remains for the People of God. Hebrews 4:9.

On this Saturday-in-between, Jesus lies entombed. For him too it's Sabbath.

In today's reading from Hebrews the apostle notes that even in the Old Testament the really big Sabbath rest that God intended for the chosen people never happened.

The commandment for full rest on the seventh day of every week was their routine reminder of God's long range blueprint, namely rest from the hard work of being right with God. Yet they never got there because of their "hardness of heart," says the writer. They never came to the place where they could relax, trusting that their transactions with God were also at rest.

Good Friday brings the big sabbath rest for folks harried by hustling their own righteousness. Jesus dies as the high priest who puts himself on the altar of atonement. Such never-before temple action breaks open the barricades to the temple's inner sanctum, the mercy-seat of God. The hard work to get sinners righteous is done. It's time to rest. If there is any action at all, it is to enter God's inner sanctum "with boldness," as the Hebrews-writer says, and enjoy it.

So on this Saturday-in-between God counsels us to take a deep breath, to sit down, and not do anything. We too can "cease from our labors as God did from his." So did Jesus. That's what makes this day Holy Saturday.

Prayer: (from Matthew 11:28-29) You invite us, Lord Jesus, to come to you when we labor and are heavy laden and you will give us rest. As we take your yoke upon us, we learn from you; for you are gentle and humble in heart, and we do find rest for our souls. Amen.

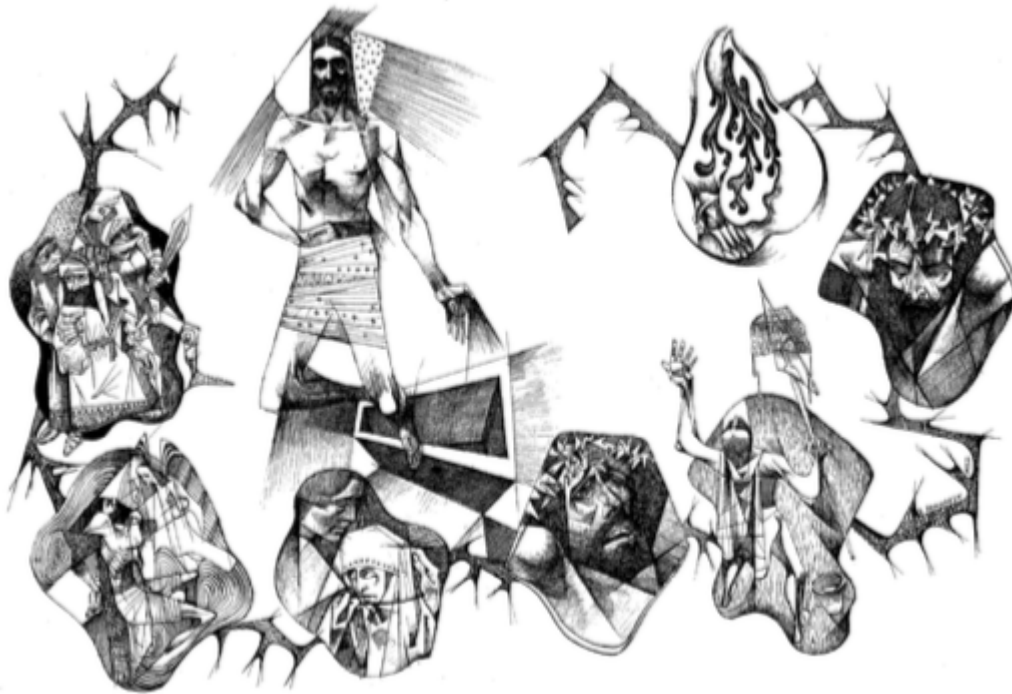
Easter Sunday

Out By Easter, Out For Easter—Encountering

Our Last Enemy

Reading: I Corinthians 15:20-26

The last enemy to be destroyed is death. I Corinthians 15:26.



“He is risen. He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!” That early morning shout from antiquity is our doxology today. But.... But.... Then why is death still around, still our enemy, still spooking us?

Siegfried gives us a powerful answer. Exiting the tomb, Jesus breaks open the ring of death’s encircling thorns. Though still present in our lives, their stranglehold is shattered. Observe the angle of ascent taken by Jesus. Instead of rocketing back to heaven, he heads straight toward us, scarred hands flashing, to hand on to us what just happened to him.

Paul uses the Old Testament image of “first fruits” in Corinthians to convey what’s going on at Easter. God’s project is to create out of death-infected people a new human race in

Christ. The first produce of that new crop is already ripe as Jesus exits the tomb. But “first fruits” carry the notice that more is coming, namely, all “those who belong to Christ.”

Another Easter image is the new body of humanity. At Easter the head has destroyed the last enemy and is alive out of the tomb. It is now just a matter of time till that head pulls us body members out of our tombs. Christ zooms toward us to busy himself with our Easter. It is already underway. Our own dying cannot undo it. His scarred hands are the ones to trust.

Prayer: Almighty God, your only Son overcame death and opened for us the gate to life that lasts. Hold before us his scarred hands when we meet the last enemy—both in life’s little deaths and in the final one at the end—so that we may indeed follow him to our own Easter. Amen.

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