

Renewed in Mercy

A Journey Toward New Life

INTRODUCTION

The Lenten journey may seem overly familiar. Indeed, we have been here before. There is comfort in the familiar. Many of the rituals and practices of this season are comfortable. They give us a sense of place, like being home again. This can be a good starting place for the season, an invitation to walk the paths we have walked before. We encourage the community to gather once again.

Yet, the Lenten journey and our discipleship path encourage us to grow, to go deeper, to climb higher, to reach further than we may have before. Lent is a time of introspection, but also a call to action as we seek to be the pilgrim people of God, seeking God's kingdom and shaping God's kin-dom in worship and in service. This Lent, we invite you to experience the renewal that comes from God's never-ending mercy and then to walk with our Lord on a journey to new life.

Ash Wednesday - **A Clean Heart**

February 18, 2026

[Psalm 51:1-17, 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10](#)

Color – Purple

PLANNING NOTES

Recently, my family and I had to be away from home for an extended period. So, in the midst of packing, I was also cleaning, trying to make sure that we didn't come home to any unwelcome smells or visitors. The morning we left, I loaded the dishwasher with the last of the dishes in the sink, pressed start, and then loaded my family into the car. What I didn't know (but would soon learn) is that when you leave clean dishes in an unopened dishwasher for two weeks, you come back to dishes covered in mold. Lots of vinegar and hot water later, all was well, but I learned something about preparation for long journeys that I won't soon forget.

Though Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of our Lenten journey, we must remember that all long journeys begin not with the first step or rolling down the road, but with preparation. Even though we go on this journey year after year, grace persistently invites us to experience it anew, to learn new things about how we prepare and begin Lent. Our series for Lent this year is titled "Renewed in Mercy," and throughout the worship planning notes, we will focus on this concept of "re-new," of making new again or re-encountering something as new again. The Zen Buddhist tradition calls this beginner's mind, the practice of releasing expectations or preconceived notions and approaching both new and familiar people, events, and ideas with a fresh perspective. How might we imbue worship this Lenten season with a sense of a new encounter with God's mercy?

If your congregation is used to hearing or singing Psalm 51 a particular way every Ash Wednesday, consider changing it this year. Use a resource like Psalms for All Seasons to find a new setting of Psalm 51 that either your choir or your congregation can sing during the Proclamation of the Word. Invite those gathered into confession, emphasizing how divine mercy makes our confession possible. Remind them that, as Wesleyan Christians, we understand that to even recognize our need to confess is our response

to the persistent work of God's grace in our lives. As you send people forth from the space, invite them to engage a spiritual practice of noticing and paying attention to where grace and mercy are at work in their lives and the lives of their neighbors. Remember that as we dismiss from the Ash Wednesday worship service, we are just beginning the Lenten journey. Use this service, then, as a time to prepare and set the stage for a season of repentance that is not just turning away from sin but turning toward God's renewing working in the world.

PREACHING NOTES

Here we are again. We've managed to make it through another year. And while we come week after week for worship and transformation, on this day, it seems like our hearts are especially in need of cleansing—maybe not because of what we have done, but because we have lived in a messy time and feel as though we have been sullied by the brokenness of which we are a part. We come on this Ash Wednesday, seeking a fresh start or at least a reminder that fresh starts are possible.

There is a solemnity to Ash Wednesday; we cannot deny that. Being reminded of mortality and sinfulness is a heavy word to hear. But it is not given without hope, without a possibility of redemption. We hear the cry of the psalmist with every fiber of our being. "Have mercy on me, O God." Any person of faith has prayed that prayer more than once in their lives. We recognize the weight of our sin; we feel it; we see how it damages our relationships. Even though the psalm says, "Against you, you alone have I sinned" (51:4), we know it is more complex than that. When we say, "As long as no one gets hurt," we woefully misunderstand the interwoven nature of human community; what may seem only a personal sin does erode community in significant ways.

That is why we gather as a community on Ash Wednesday. We come together to acknowledge our humanness and to pledge to join in the Lenten journey of faith. It is a journey of self-examination and corporate commitment to building up the body. Emphasizing both elements is vital for this Lenten experience. Yes, there is the personal, individual commitment to new ways of living, claiming the gift of salvation, accepting the forgiveness of sins, and joining in fellowship with God and community. As a part of the fellowship, then, individuals see their response to God being worked out in the wider body of the church and the world beyond. "Create in me a clean heart," says the psalmist, and then I will teach transgressors your ways and invite sinners (all of us) to return to God. Our salvation, our covenant with God, is not just about the individual, but it ripples out to work with God's Spirit for the transformation of the world.

Paul points this out in the Epistle text. "Be reconciled to God," Paul pleads, but then describes this reconciliation impacting the world around us. Look at the list that begins in chapter 6, verse 4. It begins as another catalog of the suffering Paul has endured for the sake of the gospel, but then it turns into something else. It is an attitude check. The list serves as a measuring rod of faithfulness in a difficult world. Do you hear the invitation in his list? It is no longer about him, but a model for how the clean heart is lived out day by day.

While Paul would never suggest that suffering is a requirement for faith, he does seem to imply that it is a frequent result of this way of living. He talks about treatment and intentionality. He uses the pronoun "we." It's not a royal or editorial "we"; it includes all of us in this kind of life. It is the consequence, he

argues, of getting into “good trouble,” a consequence of loving those called enemies, a consequence of turning the priorities of the world upside down.

Ash Wednesday is also a call to action. We are invited to walk the road that leads to new life, not just for our own sake, but for the sake of the world. We need at least two things to live into this call. First is a sense of community. We need to know that we are in this together, that there is a community that surrounds us and walks with us, works alongside us. This is too much for any of us to shoulder alone. Second, Ash Wednesday reminds us that we need a clean heart, a new and right spirit within us. That is why we are here again.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Children of God, we gather to prepare for our journey through Lent, a journey of repentance and mercy.

We gather to be renewed in God’s mercy.

We gather to confess, to tell the truth about sin and our dependence on God’s grace.

We gather to call upon God’s mercy.

We gather to repent, to receive and cooperate with grace as we turn from sin and toward love of God and neighbor.

We gather to live in the promise of God’s mercy.

People of God, we gather to worship God, whose steadfast mercy and love never fail!

We gather to worship, trusting in God’s mercy as we follow Jesus on the road to new life.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2025.

Prayer for the Day

O God, who makes all things new,
new stars, new dust, new life;
take our hearts,
every hardened edge and measured beat,
and create something new in us.

We need your newness, God,
the rough parts of us made smooth;
the stagnant, stirred;
the stuck, freed;
the unkind, forgiven.

And then, by the power of your Spirit,
we need to be turned toward Love again. Amen.

Adapted from Pamela C. Hawkins, in The Awkward Season: Prayers for Lent (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2009), 30. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2019/03/lenten-prayer-prayer-for-new-life.html>.

Prayer of Confession

(inspired by Psalm 51)

On this first day of Lent
we pause,
look within,
and examine our consciousness.

**Have mercy on us, O God,
according to your steadfast love.**

Where we have neglected prayer,
been apathetic in worship,
found reasons to avoid generosity,
or lacked compassion:

**Have mercy on us, O God,
according to your steadfast love.**

Where we have colluded
in the oppression of those
who become invisible in their suffering,
and ignored on the streets:

**Have mercy on us, O God,
according to your steadfast love.**

Where worry has eroded the gift of Your peace,
and where we have cared too much about what others think:

**Have mercy on us, O God,
according to your steadfast love.**

Words of Assurance

As Lent begins,
know that God understands how we struggle
to stay open and compassionate.
The invitation is not to focus on our inadequacies,
but on God's gift of grace and love
which transforms our hearts and minds.
That gift is given to us again, here and now.

Be encouraged.

May the peace of God be with you

and also with you.

*Written by Ann Siddall and posted on the website of the Stillpoint Spirituality Centre,
<https://stillpointcentre.com.au/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2017/02/confession-psalm-51.html>.*

Invitation to the Observance of Lenten Discipline

Dear siblings in Christ:
the early Christians observed with great devotion
the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection,
and it became the custom of the Church that before the Easter celebration
there should be a forty-day season of spiritual preparation.

During this season, converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism.
It was also a time when persons who had committed serious sins
and had separated themselves from the community of faith
were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness,
and restored to participation in the life of the Church.

In this way, the whole congregation was reminded
of the grace and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ

and the need we all have to renew our faith,
to continually receive God's mercies anew.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church,
to observe a holy Lent:
by self-examination and repentance;
by prayer, fasting, and self-denial;
and by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word.

To make a right beginning of repentance,
and as a mark of our mortal nature,
let us now kneel (bow) before our Creator and Redeemer.

Thanksgiving over the Ashes

Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth.
Grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence,
so that we may remember that only by your gracious gift
are we given everlasting life;

only by your mercy are we made new;

only by your steadfast love can we live in the joy of your salvation now and forever;
through Jesus Christ our Savior. **Amen.**

*Adapted from "A Service of Worship for Ash Wednesday" Copyright © 1979, 1986 by Abingdon Press.
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Lenten Discipline," "Thanksgiving over the Ashes," and "Pardon" from The Book of Common Prayer (The
Episcopal Church, 1979), 264-269. Public Domain.*

Benediction

Beloved, as you go from this place, go in the blessing of God who forgives, cleanses, redeems, and
sustains us to observe a holy Lent, to cooperate with grace, and to encounter God's mercy anew each
day. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2025.

First Sunday in Lent - **Mercy on the Wilderness Road**

February 22, 2026

[Psalm 32](#), [Matthew 4:1-11](#)

Color – Purple

PLANNING NOTES

Where is mercy in the wilderness? This is a driving question behind the first Sunday in Lent. Every year, we begin Lent by joining Jesus in the wilderness, witnessing the temptation, and examining what Jesus' temptation means for us. This year, we come to the wilderness afresh, ready to pay attention and encounter mercy at work in the midst of temptation, distress, and the help that comes along the way. As worship planners, this requires a delicate balancing act. We need to resist the urge to allegorize Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. It is not a tale of morality disconnected from reality. At the same time, our goal is not to overwhelm congregants with reminders of hardships and shame about past failings. We must find a way to tell the truth about our wilderness experiences that emphasizes God's persistent mercy that does not leave us alone in our frailty.

We encourage you to incorporate a prayer of confession throughout the season of Lent, but perhaps especially this first Sunday. Consider how you might approach confession anew as an act of trust in God's mercy and grace. We can tell the truth and be honest about our struggles and failings because we know God—and through God, the body of Christ—empowers us to turn away from sin and toward life abundant.

This is also an excellent week to begin introducing a song to weave into worship throughout Lent. You might want to choose a Wesleyan standard like "Depth of Mercy" (*United Methodist Hymnal* 355) or "Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown" (*United Methodist Hymnal* 386). Or you might want to incorporate a more contemporary hymn like "Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)" [Worship & Song 3104] or "Have Mercy on Me" (Porter's Gate, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wMimZ_fU78). Consider how one of these hymns might be a musical companion through Lent by using it in different parts of worship or as a centering song before a regular part of worship, such as the prayer of confession, or as a response to the sermon.

The First Sunday in Lent invites us to consider how to set the space for the journey ahead. What natural elements represent wilderness in your context? What symbols draw your people into communal prayer and contemplation? What signs of mercy are meaningful in your community? Consider how these elements might make their way to the altar, the slides, the narthex or foyer, and throughout the worship space. Whether they set the space for this Sunday or for the whole season of Lent, these visual cues help prepare the congregation to enter into the journey ahead with intention and attention to mercy at work in your community.

PREACHING NOTES

And suddenly angels ... (Matthew 4:11 NRSV)

That's an odd phrase, don't you think? What an odd image. Angels beaming in like a Star Trek away team. I'm not sure what to do with this or what we're supposed to do with it. There don't seem to be a lot of throwaway lines in the Bible. So, we're supposed to hear something, or see something, or think something. Aren't we? But what?

Frankly, the whole temptation in the wilderness story is kind of "out there," maybe even a little surreal. Matthew says the tempter came to Jesus in the wilderness. But it was at the end of the forty days, so Jesus was weaker, hungrier, and worn out from all the fasting in the desert. Therefore, he was a prime target for this temptation. I don't know how you envision this encounter, or that it matters all that much. Did the questions come from inside Jesus' own head and heart? Or was there someone present, someone whispering in his ear? Was it a hallucination? Was it an in-the-flesh visitation? Can we be sure?

Does it matter? Well, maybe not. Most commentators focus on the nature of the temptations, and rightly so. There is some sermon fodder there. While these particular temptations are uniquely for Jesus alone, they can be broadened into ones we all face. None of us can turn stone into bread, but all of us can think of our own needs first. None of us can survive being flung from a high peak, but all of us can focus on the sensational to the detriment of the faithful. None of us can rule all the nations, no matter what we worship, but all of us can look for the power that comes from taking shortcuts or shady deals. Are these temptations his or ours? "Yes" is probably the best answer.

If we examine Psalm 32, we can see the connections more clearly. The psalmist's experience sounds like a wilderness wandering. The suffering and wasting away could depict what happened to Jesus in the time before his testing, but there is a curious thing. The source of the suffering is identified in verse four as the God of justice and judgment. The happy ones at the beginning of the psalm are those who are not deceitful, those with no iniquity, those who are forgiven. That is the source of happiness. The source of suffering is the hand of God laid upon the one who is wasting away. But this same God is the source of happiness and healing when confession is made. God is called a hiding place for the psalmist, the protector, and deliverer.

While not intended to be an explanation for all suffering, Psalm 32 lifts up right relationship with God as the source of joy in living. God is merciful. It is in God's mercy that reconciliation happens, that transparency is valued, that forgiveness is shared. This is the source of the celebration that the psalm presents.

God promises (notice the change of speaker, which is common in the psalms) to instruct, to exhort, to be a presence – "my eye upon you" (*Psalm 32:8 NRSV*). That's not a threat, though we sometimes receive it as such. It is, instead, a promise of companionship and support. God is with us in our struggle, in our wandering, in our suffering.

Maybe Matthew got it wrong. Maybe the angelic presence was not sudden. Perhaps it did not just appear after the temptation was defeated. Maybe it was there all along. But Jesus (and all of us, more often than he) was distracted by his ordeal and didn't notice or lean into the support that was beside him, even in the depths of the wilderness. We are surprised by God, not because God suddenly shows up, but because we finally take the time to notice and invite God into the conversation of our lives. We

sometimes are like a horse or mule without understanding, needing a bit or bridle to turn in God's direction. But we don't have to be. We can trust in that presence, rejoice in that support, and sing in that mercy, even in the wilderness.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Today, we follow Jesus into a wilderness full of isolation, fatigue, hunger, thirst, and temptation.

We follow, trusting in God's mercy.

We witness Jesus resist the siren calls of sensationalism, notoriety, and misuse of power for selfish gain.

We recognize God's mercy at work in the face of temptation.

We notice the angels who tend Jesus, messengers of care in a harsh and lonely place.

We pay attention to God's merciful presence that did not abandon Jesus and does not abandon us now.

We come to the wilderness together, clinging to the truth that we are not alone—God is with us.

We gather to worship God, whose unfailing mercy journeys with us into the wildernesses of our lives. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2025.

Prayer for the Day

Holy God, by the grace of Jesus Christ,
you know the tests and trials we face.
Journey with us through this wilderness.
Come to us with ministers of healing
and visit us with messengers of hope,
so that we may return to you in faith,
believing the good news of the gospel;
through Jesus Christ, our Savior.

*Adapted from the **Presbyterian Church USA** website, <http://www.pcusa.org/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/02/prayer-for-lent-1-b.html>.*

Prayer of Confession

Gracious and merciful God,

we confess to you our reluctance to enter the wilderness places

where we are confronted with our true selves.

The places where we are tempted to put worldly values

before our desire for you,

**and when our hunger for power and wealth is greater
than our hunger for seeking and doing your will:**

Forgive us, O God, and increase our trust in you.

When we are tempted to use the gifts you give us

to benefit ourselves at the expense of serving others:

Forgive us, O God, and increase our trust in you.

**When we are tempted to use sensational means to increase people's faith,
rather than being guided by the humility of Christ:**

Forgive us, O God, and increase our trust in you.

When we are tempted to use bribery to influence and control people:

Forgive us, O God, and increase our trust in you.

When we are tempted to manipulate you, O God, to satisfy our own needs:

Forgive us, O God, and increase our trust in you.

A time of silence for personal confession

Merciful God,

save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

Forgive us our sins and fill us with the joy and peace of your salvation.

**So strengthen us with your Spirit during this Lenten season
that we put our whole trust in you as confidently as Jesus did.**

This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen

Words of Forgiveness

As the apostle Paul wrote:

"...if you confess with your lips that Jesus Christ is Lord

and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead,

you will be saved." (Romans 10:9)

These words contain the good news

that in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.

Thanks be to God!

*Written by Moira Laidlaw and posted on **Liturgies Online**, <http://www.liturgiesonline.com.au/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/02/confession-wilderness-places.html>.*

Benediction

Go, now, in the comfort and blessing of God's mercy, trusting that wherever you go, God's steadfast love surrounds you, sustains you, and supports you for the journey ahead. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2025.

Second Sunday in Lent - **Guided by the Promise**

March 1, 2026

[Romans 4:1-5, 13-17](#), [John 3:1-17](#)

Color – Purple

PLANNING NOTES

Think about when you hop in the car and get ready to go to the grocery store or your favorite coffee shop that you've been to a thousand times before. Do you look up the address on the GPS to remind you how to get there, or do you just go, sometimes zoning out until you pull up and wonder how you got there? I'll admit, there are many times I fall into the latter category. But sometimes, when traffic is heavy, or I'm running behind, or I remember the construction I ran into the last time, I consult the GPS to see if there's a better route to take. Lent invites us to reassess our journey of faith in light of God's promise of life.

This Sunday, the gospel reading from John 3 is one that many people know by heart. Its familiarity is a comfort, yet we must not let comfort become complacency. As you plan worship this week, consider how to bring this text to life in new ways. Perhaps you could have a few children, or a child and an adult, act out the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. (And hey—what if the child played Jesus?) Perhaps you turn the pericope into a responsive reading where the congregation reads portions of the passage aloud together. You could also weave a song into the scripture reading, alternating portions of John 3 with a verse of a hymn like "Depth of Mercy" (United Methodist Hymnal 355) or "What Wondrous Love Is This" (United Methodist Hymnal 292).

Consider, too, how you might incorporate time for meditation and discernment as a response to the Proclamation of the Word. You might want to lead the community in a guided meditation centered around the Romans 4 reading for this week. What are the places you, as individuals and as a community, need to reorient to salvation as a gift of grace instead of a work? How might you sit with the blessedness of God's gift and recognize the work we do as the church as a response to the gift, not a means of earning what has already been given? You might want to pray a litany after the sermon, naming the gracious gifts of God all around you and seeking the Spirit's guidance in how to share the gift of grace in your neighborhood. Find ways that suit your congregation and context to renew your community's encounter with grace, to rest in and be inspired by mercy in this Lenten season.

PREACHING NOTES

What then are we to say about Abraham? That's probably not a question many preachers have wrestled with in the run-up to the sermon presentation. After all, if we didn't know what to say about Abraham, then we probably wouldn't say much of anything. We'd skip over to the gospel, a much more familiar text and one we have probably preached many times. Within that text is perhaps the most famous verse in the whole New Testament, if not the whole Bible. So, why should we have anything to say about Abraham? Because Nicodemus was asking about him.

Was he? No, surely not. There's no reference to Abraham in this conversation, is there? Well, we don't know what Nicodemus came to talk about because Jesus hijacked the dialogue before Nicodemus had a chance to say more than a few words. We don't know what was on the cheat sheet that Nicodemus had

tucked into his sleeve that night. We don't know the burning questions that brought the member of the Sanhedrin out in the dark of night to approach the surprisingly popular prophet from rural nowhere-ville. We don't know because Jesus set the agenda.

Nicodemus comes in schmoozing, as one does. He was trying to butter Jesus up, catch him off guard, drop his defenses—at least that is what it seems like. But Jesus jumps in with answers to questions that weren't asked. And Nicodemus is on his heels from that moment on. Does he not understand, or is he joking? Is he lost in the rhetoric or just confused by the approach? We can't know, and it might not be the most fruitful approach to try to discern what was going on in Nicodemus's mind in the dark of that night.

Instead, let's look at Jesus—always the better approach. Jesus offers a gift. I know it sounds like Jesus gets frustrated with Nicodemus. (Are you a teacher but you don't understand?) It sounds like a reprimand, and maybe it is. Maybe Jesus expects more from those who would be leaders of the people. Maybe Jesus wants a teacher to have some wisdom to share. However, even if there is a reprimand or disappointment, the gift is still offered. It is through the uncertainty of the questioner that we get the promise of hope and transformation. We get the most famous verse in the entire Bible: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). Scrawl it on cardboard and hold it up in the endzone. Wave it in the streets. Tattoo it in a prominent place. It is the essence of the gift, of the promise, of the gospel. God so loved.

But don't make believing a work. That's the struggle here. That's what couldn't get through the thick skull of the teacher who wanted to crawl into a womb and be born a second time. He wanted to order the Spirit. He wanted the formula for new life. He wanted the work that could be done. Jesus says, "I've done the work. You are now Abraham on the threshold of a new life."

He *could* have said that. Instead, Paul tells us what we can say about Abraham. It's the same argument: law and gospel, faith and works. We want to work our way into the kingdom; we want to earn our space in the kin-dom. Again and again, we have to be told that we're misunderstanding something significant. Abraham says Paul is the prime example of what it means to believe. It's not work, not an effort on his part. It's not something that is rewarded by pats on the head like an obedient hound. No, it is an orientation. It is a way of seeing the world. "Go," Abraham heard, "Go to a land that I will show you." Remember that? He did not hear, "Here's your destination; I've made all the reservations and gassed up the car." No, he was to go to someplace that would be revealed at some point. He was just told to go. And – this is the amazing part – he went.

In that going, Abraham became the ancestor of all of us. It is no longer the flesh that defines him or us, for that matter. It's the Spirit. We are joined in the Spirit, made one family, relatives in the Spirit. "We are not defined by flesh or by law," says Paul. We are defined by and given life by the God who brings the dead to life and calls into existence things that did not exist—like hope, faith, belonging, forgiveness, transformation, and life, abundant life.

We move forward in our life's journey, guided by this promise—the promise of presence, acceptance, and grace.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Children of God, in Lent we remember that our salvation is an unearned gift, that new life is a matter of faith, not of works.

We gather to lay down the burden of trying to earn our salvation.

Like Nicodemus, who met Jesus in the dark of night, we struggle to accept that new life is not just possible but given as a free gift of grace.

We gather to bring our struggles into the light and embrace God's grace with open arms.

Like Paul writing to the Romans, we remember God's promise of new life has always rested on grace.

We gather to receive the promise of salvation by grace through faith.

Like the many who have followed, questioned, and grown in the faith, we submit ourselves to be formed by grace as we work out our salvation day by day.

We gather as people guided by the promise of new life, a promise fulfilled by Christ, whose path we follow.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2025.

Prayer for the Day

Infinite Love, heart of all life,
you loved this word into being
with such love
as to birth yourself among us,
Love begotten as the Beloved.

Your presence does not separate but unites;
love does not push away, but embraces;
you do not condemn, but save.

Trusting this, we know
we are loved, never rejected.
Thanks be to God! Amen.

*Adapted from Steve Garnaas-Holmes and posted on **Unfolding Light**, <https://www.unfoldinglight.net/>.
Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2018/05/john-316-prayer-paraphrase.html>.*

Prayer of Confession

We live fractured lives, and God seeks not to punish us for those faults and fault lines, but to reconcile and restore us. Trusting in God's grace and mercy, let us then make our confession together, first in silent prayer.

Unison Prayer

Loving God, help us.

When we have run away, when we have turned our backs on love,
when we have sought immediate satisfaction and not long-term healing,
help us.

Merciful God, forgive us.

When we have been selfish, when we have been mean,
when we have neglected the cries of others,
forgive us.

Powerful God, heal us.

When we are so broken we cannot move,
when we don't know how to stem the bleeding of our wounds,
when we are too ashamed to seek community,
heal us.

Give us the courage, the strength, and the hope
to accept your grace and embrace your call in Christ.

Amen.

Adapted from Beth Merrill Neel on her blog, "Hold Fast to What Is Good,"
<https://holdfasttowhatisgood.com/>. Used with permission.

Benediction

Go now in the mercy of God, whose promises never fail, to live as people who have generously received and thus generously share God's gracious gift of new life with all we encounter. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2025.

Third Sunday in Lent - **Companion for the Journey**

March 8, 2026

[Psalm 95, Romans 5:1-11](#)

Color – Purple

PLANNING NOTES

One of our central texts today is Psalm 95, a hymn of praise for God's sustaining and a hymn of warning about what happens when we turn away from God's guidance and provision. When I come to psalms like Psalm 95, the worship planner in me starts itching to rearrange it a little. Doesn't the psalmist know that it's better to start joyful, bring the energy down a bit, and then have a crescendo of hope at the end? Why end the psalm with such a sobering warning and no resolution?

The psalms often provide us with an excellent map for planning worship. In a world where we struggle to acknowledge our emotions as individuals, much less as a community, the psalms are master classes in how to faithfully express our emotions and experiences to God as a gathered body. Often, the emotional movement of the psalms maps well onto a basic fourfold pattern of worship—Gathering, Proclamation, Response, and Sending. While not all services need to end with a high-energy sending forth, it is important, even in Lent, that we send people into the world with some level of hope and reassurance that they are not alone. To that end, consider how Psalm 95 might help you structure the Gathering and Proclamation—a move from praise of God, who gathers us, to proclamation of God's goodness and what happens when we turn away from God as our companion on the journey. But then, it is for us, the worship planners, and those gathered for worship to choose how we will respond and be sent out in light of Psalm 95. So, while you might want to sing a glorious setting of Psalm 95 as an opening hymn, such as "All People That on Earth Do Dwell" (United Methodist Hymnal 75) and unpack what the psalmist means about not hardening our hearts like those in Meribah during the sermon, how will you help your people respond, to choose God's companionship and our companionship as the body of Christ over the things that lead us astray in the world?

Perhaps Romans 5:1-11, our other focus reading for the day, can help shape those responses. As Derek Weber discusses in the preaching notes, Paul's notion of "boasting" can have many meanings. What are the ways your community might boast in hope of God's provision and guidance? How might we boast or rejoice in our reconciliation to God and one another? How do we express the joy of reconciliation in a world full of chaos and division? These are questions we can help those gathered ask and begin to answer as we continue on the Lenten journey of encountering mercy anew together.

PREACHING NOTES

Does Paul have a different understanding of "boast" than we do? He must, or else some of these words just don't make sense. "Boast in our sufferings." What is that about? Is he talking about those folks who insist on showing you their scars, even when it makes you a little queasy? "TMI," we claim, turning away from the exposed flesh. Is he asking us to make noise about the struggles we've had? No one likes that, do they? I know he goes on to talk about the value of suffering. Or maybe the result of suffering or the product of suffering. That's clear. But still, boasting about the suffering seems excessive.

Funnily enough, the Greek word here might offer some help. The word translated as *boast* in this text is *kauchaomai*, which has both negative and positive connotations. The bad sense is what we are most familiar with – self-glorifying or taking pride in oneself. That’s the kind of boasting we’re used to. We see it in front of us all too often. We live in a culture that often glorifies the self in various ways. It’s a temptation for many of us, if we’re honest. It grates against our understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ. Yet, here is Paul calling us to boast. What’s up with that?

Well, there is a positive side to *kauchaomai* that might fit us a little better here. The word calls us to have confidence in God; we might translate it as “rejoice in” or “glory in.” If you scroll through various English translations, you’ll find all sorts of manifestations of this word. So, we’re all a little uncomfortable with boasting, it seems.

But what is Paul asking of us? There are several ways to interpret this directive. However, he might be trying to remind us that we are not alone on this journey of faith or journey through life. We are not alone. It seems simple, yet it is terribly profound and frighteningly countercultural. We live in an individualizing and isolating culture. To emphasize companions on the journey is to stand against the push to focus on the individual. Our faith is a shared faith. It has been from the beginning. Paul asks us to acknowledge that partnership.

Even in our suffering. That feels like a stretch, I know. For one thing, we prefer to suffer in isolation. It is hard to imagine the results Paul describes by being alone. Endurance, perhaps, but character and hope are relational. Yes, there is an individual component, but the real test of character is how we interact with others. The real impact of hope is to build community, to deepen relationships.

Paul reminds us, above all, that God is present in our suffering. Hope, he argues, is the sign of God being poured into our hearts. All along the way, God is with us. Thus, the boasting, or the glorying in or rejoicing, is a result of that presence. That’s where the glory comes from—not from us, but from God poured into our hearts.

The writer of Psalm 95 calls us to know this same joy, this same glory. We sing and we rejoice because we know that God is present. God is seen in the world that surrounds us, claims the psalmist. And who would argue? The psalm concludes (except for the final warning) with a call to an intimate relationship with this God who permeates all of creation. We belong to this God; we are the people of the pasture, evoking images of security and restoration. We are the sheep of God’s hand. People in a pasture and sheep in the hand? Maybe it’s odd, but it speaks to the deepest longings of our hearts, to be loved and claimed and held and sustained.

Don’t harden your hearts, the psalmist pleads; don’t test God or you’ll be cut off. You’ll miss out on this blessing and a hope. Paul talks about this hardening in a different way. While we were enemies, we were reconciled. God reaches past the hardening of our hearts to gather us up and bring us back into right relationship with God. We were saved from being cut off, from the anger of God, by the redemption of Christ. That brings us back to boasting. We boast not in our accomplishments, but in this gift that came from the death and resurrection of Jesus. That is a boast, a rejoicing, worthy of each and all of us.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Come, let us worship God!

Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

Come, let us worship our Shepherd!

We are the sheep of God's pasture, and we follow where God leads us.

Come, let us open our hearts!

We receive God's love poured into our hearts through the Spirit.

Come, let us worship God, the rock of our salvation!

Let us worship God, whose mercy guides and sustains us on the path of new life!

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2025.

Prayer of Intercession

We thank you, O God, that you have given us an enduring hope—one which cannot disappoint us or mislead us. We thank you, that through our faith in you and in your Son Jesus Christ, you enter into every believing heart and make us new...

Lord, hear our prayer.....

We pray today, O God, that those believers who are asleep may awake and know that salvation is nearer now than when they first believed. Help them, and us, to lay aside the works of sin and to put on the armor of salvation that you bestow upon those who actively seek your grace. Grant that their faith and ours may be fully alive....

Lord, hear our prayer.....

We ask today, O God, for those who have lost hope and for those who have never had it. Grant to us and to those we lift before you in our hearts a new and abiding vision of what you have done, and what you are doing, and what you will do, to save and redeem your people and indeed creation itself. Grant, O God, that all might see and believe and discover their purpose and the purpose of all that is and all that is yet to be....

Lord, hear our prayer.....

We lift before you, O God, those persons and those places named in our sharing time (bidding prayer)....

Lord, hear our prayer.....

We ask all this of you, O God, knowing that you are our hope and our salvation, a very present help in times of trouble, and the One whose purpose is to grant new and abundant life to us and our world. Praise be to your name. Amen.

Adapted from Rev. Richard J. Fairchild and posted on Kir-shalom. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/10/prayers-of-people-enduring-hope.html>.

Prayer of Confession

Eternal God, from the beginning of time, you have called your children into communion with you. Yet we confess that like all the rest, we have turned to our own way and refused your love and grace. Restore us to the joy of knowing you and of recognizing your reign among us, through Jesus Christ, bringer of your good news. Amen.

Written by Ruth C. Duck, *Touch Holiness: Resources for Worship, Updated*, ed. Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirabassi (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2012), 60.

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Benediction

Go now in the blessing of God's mercy that companions us all on the journey, opening our hearts to receive and share God's steadfast love until all creation resonates with the joy of new life. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2025.

Fourth Sunday in Lent - **Journeying in Grace**

March 15, 2026

[Psalm 23, Ephesians 5:8-14](#)

Color – Purple

PLANNING NOTES

This year, the lectionary once again gives us a very familiar text. Whether read at a baptism, wedding, or funeral, Psalm 23 has accompanied many of us through important moments in our lives. The beauty of the lectionary, though, is that we regularly encounter these familiar texts during weekly worship and within the flow of our ordinary life together. This Sunday, we come to the still waters, the valley of the shadow of death, and the table surrounded by our enemies in the context of Lent and in juxtaposition with Paul's call to live as children of the light. What new insights might Psalm 23 offer us in this context?

One way to help our congregations experience Psalm 23 anew is to sing the psalm and/or experience multiple translations of the psalm within worship. Perhaps you begin your service by singing "Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us" (United Methodist Hymnal#381), followed by readings of Psalm 23 in two or three different translations. Or perhaps you read the same translation of Psalm 23 several times, inviting the congregation to engage in a communal practice of lectio divina. You could even weave a song into the reading of Psalm 23, alternating between the reading of the psalm and a sung verse of a hymn based on Psalm 23. The goal is for congregants to experience Psalm 23 in a new way, disrupting their assumptions about the text so they can encounter mercy anew.

Consider also how you might incorporate Ephesians 5 into the service. It is easy to emphasize the light versus darkness motif in Paul, but we must do so carefully. We want those gathered to recognize the nuance of darkness in reality versus Paul's metaphorical use of darkness and light to make his point. Ultimately, Paul calls us to prayers of confession, passing the peace, responses to the Word, and benedictions that bring all things into the light so that we may choose to follow God instead of being drawn away from God by the sins we keep hidden from ourselves and our neighbors. Thus, worship becomes a practice ground for the journey of grace, a place where we work together to bring what is hidden into the light, a gathering where we support one another through all the hills and valleys of life, and an encounter with grace that empowers us to live in God's goodness and mercy out in the world.

PREACHING NOTES

Psalm 23 is only six verses. That's kinda puny in biblical terms. But those six verses have captured the hearts and minds of folks all over the world. No less a theologian than Karl Barth called the 23rd Psalm the summation of the entire psalter. These six verses encompass everything that all 150 Psalms aim to convey.

Well, perhaps that is a bit of an exaggeration, since there are a lot of other emotions and ideas that are contained in the psalms that are absent from this one. However, as the context for the life of faith, it is hard to do better than these six simple verses.

You have experiences and impressions aplenty from this psalm, I am sure. We could probably start quite a dialogue if I were to simply stop at this point and ask, “Where have you heard this psalm read, or what does it mean to you? And if anyone would like to respond to the online community, feel free!

Let me point out a couple of things that I find interesting. The first three verses are third-person, descriptive. The Lord is.. He makes and leads and restores. Then in verse four, the psalm shifts to second person, “You are with me.” “You prepare a table... You anoint my head.”

That’s an interesting shift. It is as if the psalmist sets out to tell us about this Lord and all the things that this relationship affords, but halfway through, he has to break into praise and sing a song. He gets caught up in the moment and has let the relational dimension come to the fore. He has to converse directly with the one who is the source of all this protection and sustenance. It is hard, reflects the psalmist, to talk about God without talking with God. It is difficult to describe God without praising God.

I think Psalm 23 is less about the benefits and more about the relationship. Certainly, there is quite a catalog of what this relationship brings, and I’m not trying to diminish the results of a relationship with God. But I hear the call to engage, to connect with God, and see what God has in store for us. This is, on the one hand, a very personal accounting – *the Lord is MY shepherd, I shall not want. He makes ME, He leads ME, he restores ME*. On the other hand, the psalms are designed for corporate worship. What if, argues one biblical scholar, the “I” was the community as a whole, the body of Christ? That is the “I” that shall not be in want. We are not to seek personal gain, but to enter into relationships that share the blessings of belonging.

Second, did you notice the tense of the verbs in the first five verses? It is all present tense. The psalmist is saying that this relationship, this connection, is right now. *The Lord is ... He makes me ... He leads me ... He restores my soul*. This is not a psalm of hopefulness, but of a present-day connection, a sustaining relationship.

OK, you eagle-eyed readers noticed that “shall” there in verse one. Well, that’s a bit of a translation issue. The literal translation of the Hebrew is “the Lord shepherds me and does not bring me to lack,” which is a bit clumsy to read in English. But the tenses are the same. Maybe we should say, “The Lord is my Shepherd and I do not lack anything.” Present tense.

It isn’t until the final verse that we get a future tense. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.” That brings us back where we started. The Hebrew for the final phrase of the psalm reads, “the length of days”: “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for the length of days.”

How long are your days? Some go quickly, while others seem to drag on forever. Psalm 23 is the reminder that no matter the subjective experience of daily living, no matter if you are struggling or rejoicing, laboring or relaxing, suffering or growing, you are never alone. God is with us.

Paired with this overly familiar psalm is a somewhat more obscure Epistle passage. The assigned text is Ephesians 5:8-14. Like Psalm 23, it is a call to live in awareness of God's presence. But Paul takes a different approach from David. For Paul, it is about making choices in how we move forward. Faith is about seeking the things that represent the God who is present and avoiding the things that deny that presence. The metaphor he uses here is one of dark and light.

Paul loves his dualities: light/dark, spirit/flesh, heaven/world; these and many more represent the ordering of existence from Paul's perspective. But we need to take care not to go too far with any of them. They are metaphors. Paul never meant to imply that there is nothing good in darkness, that there is nothing good in the flesh, that there is nothing good in the world. He would be appalled to hear we took that so literally. He does, however, want us to know that there is good and not-good all around us. He wants us to understand that a choice is involved here, and he is asking us to choose good, to choose God, to discern what is pleasing to God, to determine what is of God in the world. God created the world and called it good. However, not everything is good, so we choose. The fruit of the light is that never-ending process of determining what is of God and what is not, what is pleasing to God and what is not, what will bring us peace and what will not, and what will make us love as Jesus told us to love and what will not.

We are invited to harvest the fruit of the light by living and choosing and being God-pleasers every single day, every single moment. We choose one over the other— light over darkness. But what about verse 11? It just muddies the water. It's much better to end with, "Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord." Now that is a mission statement we could get behind, don't you think? Well, no, not exactly. It wouldn't make a good mission statement. It would make half of a good mission statement. It's a background for a mission statement, the homework before going on the mission trip. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord; that could be an academic exercise. Try to find out.

But it's not yet a mission statement unless you follow. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord and then do it, for heaven's sake! It doesn't become a mission until there is action, until there is movement, until there is service. Why expose works of darkness? Are we being called to point fingers? Or worse, to wag fingers? Or to give the fin... never mind. Some metaphors get you into trouble. Perhaps verse eleven isn't an action verse but a result verse. Maybe it isn't so much about pointing fingers as it is bringing light. What happens to shadows when you turn on the light? What happens to darkness when the light is brought? We expose works of darkness by living the opposite. We expose works of darkness by being light. That's not a negative approach to the world, but a positive one. Not shaming, but glorifying. Not pushing down, but lifting up. Find out what is pleasing to the Lord and do it, be it, let it shine.

That is the grace by which we journey—a journey that leads to new life, a life pleasing to the Lord.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Beloved, the journey of grace takes us to still waters, the valley of the shadow of death, even to tables surrounded by our enemies.

We gather to worship God, our Shepherd, who guides us on the journey.

The journey of grace points us toward the Light so that we may bear the fruit of the Light in all that we do.

We gather to be formed by grace so that our lives may bear the fruit of all that is good and right and true.

The journey of grace calls us to pay attention, to discern what is pleasing to God.

We gather to listen to the Spirit, who empowers us to go from this place to work together to do what is pleasing to God.

Come, let us worship God who provides, inspires, and empowers us on the journey of grace.

Come, let us worship God as we journey in grace together! Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2025.

Opening Prayer

Loving Shepherd,
you know our names;
you care for us.
When we face darkness and death,
journey alongside us.
When we hunger for your love,
fill us with your presence.
When we are fearful,
feed us at your table.
May we dwell in the house of goodness and mercy
all the days of our lives. Amen.

*Written by Mary Petrina Boyd and posted on **Ministry Matters**. <http://www.ministrymatters.com/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2015/04/opening-prayer-psalm-23.html>.*

Prayer of Confession

O Lord, you are our shepherd,
And yet we want.

We lie down when we could act,
We stir the pot when we could offer peace,
We wander tempting paths instead of following you.
We seek courage and comfort in earthly things rather than in you.
We hate our enemies and refuse to break bread with them,
We see scarcity even when you offer us abundance.
We pray for forgiveness, for your goodness and mercy,
So that we might dwell in You, in your grace, forever. Amen.

Written by Beth Merrill Neel on her blog, "Hold Fast to What Is Good,"
<https://holdfasttowhatisgood.com/>. Used with permission.

Benediction

Beloved, may the blessing of God's mercy go before you, behind you, and all around you as we journey in grace, reflecting the Light of new life wherever we go. Amen.

Fifth Sunday in Lent - **Redemption Road**

March 22, 2026

[Ezekiel 37:1-14](#), [Psalm 130](#), [Romans 8:6-11](#), [John 11:1-45](#)

Color – Purple

PLANNING NOTES

On this last Sunday before Holy Week, we encounter a constellation of texts that, when put together, offer a description of the road we travel—the redemption road. We encourage you to find ways to incorporate each text into your service in some way. Perhaps you sing a version of Psalm 130 as a preparation for prayer. Examples include “Out of the Depths I Cry to You” (*United Methodist Hymnal* 515), “Out of the Depths” (*The Faith We Sing* #2136), or a setting by Thurlow Weed and Christopher Webber found here. You could also use a simple setting of Psalm 130, such as Ruth Duck’s in *The Faith We Sing*, to weave into the reading of the gospel lesson, juxtaposing the raising of Lazarus with our cries of lament and our hope for healing.

Romans 8:6-11 is, like many of Paul’s letters, quite dense. Yet, there are opportunities to pull prayer responses from the passage. During a prayer of confession, you might paraphrase verse six as a congregational response. Verse 11 would make a great start for a benediction. So, whether you read the whole passage or not, there are threads from this epistle that can be incorporated into worship.

Ezekiel 37:1-14 is often included in Easter Vigil services, and for good reason. The description of dry bones coming to life is a potent image of resurrection. Yet, in the context of Lent, the dry bones can also speak to us of the weariness of holding out hope and our need for the Spirit’s breath to keep hope alive, to inspire us to continue on the redemption road. If you read this passage in worship, I encourage you to recruit a couple of percussionists ahead of time to play underneath the scripture reading. As the passage begins, have them start quietly and grow in sound and intensity as the bones come together and receive the breath of life. You might even let just the percussion play for a bit after reading verse ten. Then, let the drums go silent as the reader finishes with verses eleven through fourteen.

However you approach this constellation of passages, pay attention to how they point your congregation toward the redemption road, the road that leads us toward the cross, resurrection, and into the whole world.

PREACHING NOTES

This is a transition Sunday. While not technically the end of the season of Lent, it has that feel. Next Sunday is Palm/Passion Sunday, which is followed by Holy Week and then Easter. All of that has its own momentum. So, we are concluding this worship series this week with a conversation about life out of death. A conversation? No, an experience or a faith claim. An exhortation or invitation, perhaps. We invite you to examine all four texts this week. Maybe preaching all four is a bit much for any of us. But at least look and see the resonances in each. There are familiar ones: Ezekiel’s vision in the valley of dry bones or John’s recounting of the raising of Lazarus. Then we have a part of Paul’s theological treatise, which we call the Letter to the Romans, about death and life and flesh and spirit. All of them are rich in meaning, experience, hope, and promise.

Let's start, though, with the psalm. Psalm 130 is a part of the Psalms of Ascent tucked away toward the end of the collection. They were thought to be pilgrim songs, sung by those traveling to Jerusalem for worship and sacrifice. Since Jerusalem sat on a hill, approaching from any direction meant going up. So, there is a geographical reference in the Psalms of Ascent, but there is also a theological reference. That is abundantly clear in Psalm 130. It begins in the lowest place. "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord." The Latin version is "*De profundis*," which has become the name of this psalm. The psalm climbs from these depths to the heights of faith and hope. What begins as a personal cry for help becomes a corporate call to hope in the Lord. The psalmist addresses the God of forgiveness and promises to wait for that redemption. Then he turns to the nation and invites the whole body to wait as well—to wait with hope, to wait for a transforming love, a redeeming love that can heal all brokenness, all sinfulness – individual and corporate.

This waiting, however, is not a passive, helpless, anxiety-riddled quiescence. Instead, there is an active anticipation, a leaning into the possibilities, a search for the signs of change and hope. "More than watchmen for the morning" (Psalm 130:6, ESV¹) implies that lives are at stake, the psalmist's life certainly, but the lives of the nation as well. This seeking, active looking, is the call to the church of today to identify that which brings life and redemption, that which makes new and lifts up in a world that tears down. This seeking is that which brings hope, rather than what stokes fear.

Out of the depths, whatever particular or corporate depths we find ourselves in, there is the possibility of life. That's the redemption road we travel as followers of Jesus the Christ. That is what the chosen people of God were chosen to do and be—to be the ones who sought this road, this redemption, not as an exclusive possession, but as a way of inviting and including the whole world, no matter how dim the possibilities seem to be. Just ask Ezekiel. Standing in the valley of dry bones, he didn't dare claim hope for himself. "Can these bones live?" was the question he heard from the Spirit who brought him there. And his answer? "You know, Lord." He hands it back to the questioner. He didn't dare, on his own, wouldn't dare bring himself to the place where he could say with any confidence that there was still possibility here. It was beyond him.

Yet that was why he was brought to that place of death and dryness: to be the one who could hold out hope; to be the one who would declare resurrection. It is a burden to carry hope in hopeless times. Everyone else was sure it was over. Everyone else was sure that this was the end of everything. Ezekiel was asked to stand against that certainty and declare life in the face of death and to call to that which gives life. Prophecy to the breath, to the wind, to the Spirit. Declare what is life-giving in the face of what is death-dealing. Invite that which is transforming and reconciling into the lifeless body that has forgotten how to hope in the kingdom of God. Bind the bones together into a kin-dom of caring and hospitality.

It's hard work. It's too hard for any of us to do on our own. Is this the source of Jesus' tears in John's gospel? This onerous task of carrying hope for a hopeless world that weighs so heavily upon even him that he weeps? Not simply for a friend who has died, or even for the slow to believe, but the sheer effort of prophesying to the spirit in a valley of dry bones. Carrying the weight of expectation, of disappointment, of misunderstanding, and mis-prioritizing, he weeps. We don't know, let's be honest.

¹ The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by [Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.](#)

But it gives us pause. We hold our breath in the face of his tears, just as much as we are in awe when he gets to his feet and raises Lazarus from the dead.

Take away the stone. That's his call to all of us who would hope with him. Take away the stone. That is his word to those of us who would lean into life with him and proclaim possibility, transformation, grace, and forgiveness with him. Take away the stone. What stones? What is blocking us today? What is keeping people from hearing the invitation to life? What is in the way of building community, loving our neighbor, serving the hurting, forgotten, ignored, and scapegoated masses of children of God who are the face of Christ for us? What are the stones that must be removed so that he can call life out of death?

Paul says flesh is that stone. He doesn't mean to imply that bodies are bad, but that appetite-driven decisions are often not the best ones. Paul says Christ calls us from the tombs of our narrow vision and self-centered living to step out into the light of the Spirit that redeems, unites, and builds up. We need to be unbound from traditions that no longer serve us and lean into traditions that enliven our spirits. We are called to be the sign that God is at work in the world, the evidence that redemption is possible. We are called to be life-givers in the best sense of the word. We are called to travel the redemption road.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Some of us come to worship today, weary and worn, heavy with all the circumstances that are too much to bear alone.

We gather to travel God's redemption road together.

Some of us come to worship today, dry and thirsty, longing for relief and peace from the troubles that surround us.

We gather to travel God's redemption road together.

Some of us come to worship today with stories to tell of little resurrections, moments of new life that sprang up when we least expected them.

We gather to travel God's redemption road together.

Beloved, whatever we bring with us to worship today, God welcomes us and calls us to work together as we travel God's redemption road together.

We gather to be truth-tellers and life-bringers as we travel God's redemption road together. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2025.

Prayer for the Day

God of mercy, we come to you dry and lifeless, seeking your breath of life. Lead us to the place where our hopes lie buried and call us out from the tombs of despair. Call forth our faith that, with Martha, we may know you to be the resurrection and the life, in this world and the world to come. Amen.

Written by Ruth C. Duck, Touch Holiness: Resources for Worship, Updated, ed. Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirabassi (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2012), 58.

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Prayer of Confession

Out of the depths of despair,
we cry to you, O God.
We are lost in a world
of pain and suffering.
When we put our trust in weapons of war,
we find no peace.
When we put our faith in our own resources,
we feel the ache of our true needs.
When we put our hope in the health of our bodies,
we suffer pain and find no healing.
Come to us, O God.
Forgive our doubts and fears.
Heal our brokenness,
that we may rejoice in your steadfast love. Amen.

Words of Assurance

There is forgiveness and healing with God.
God's steadfast love
has the power to redeem our brokenness
and make us whole.

In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

Glory to God! Amen.

*Adapted from The Abingdon Worship Annual 2009, © 2008 Abingdon Press. Posted on the **Ministry Matters** website, <http://www.ministrymatters.com/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/06/prayer-of-confession-proper-8-b_18.html.*

Benediction

Beloved, the journey does not end here. As you travel God's redemption road, go in the blessing of God who persistently breathes new life into dry and weary places, and watch for resurrection to happen when you least expect it. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2025.