



# LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

2019



HE

EMPTIED

HIMSELF,

TAKING ON

THE FORM

OF A SERVANT

# INTRODUCTION

## THE HISTORY OF LENT

Lent has long been celebrated in the Church as a fast leading up to the commemoration of Jesus' death and celebration of his resurrection. It is a time when we prepare ourselves for this commemoration and celebration, often through some combination of fasting, increased attention to devotional practices, and acts of kindness or charity. The celebration of Lent goes back to ancient times, beginning in the first few centuries after Jesus's life, but the first "Lent" (though it pre-dates the term) is actually Jesus's own preparation of the disciples for his rejection and execution found in the gospel of Mark as they walk the 100 miles from Galilee to Jerusalem.

## THE WAY

This middle portion of Mark, often called "the Way section," differs thematically from what comes before and after it. Whereas Jesus' teaching is directed primarily at the crowds in the first part of Mark, most of Jesus' teaching in the Way section is done in private with his disciples. The mighty deeds that were so prevalent early in Jesus' ministry are less frequent here too. The lesson for the disciples in the Way section is about how Jesus' greatness will ultimately be expressed through self-sacrifice, since they have already recognized Jesus' greatness through his teaching and deeds. As a result, Jesus teaches them that being his disciple also means self-sacrifice and an inversion of all the hierarchies by which they have made sense of the world up to this point. Once they arrive in Jerusalem, the themes shift again. Now the focus is on Jesus's confrontation with the religious leaders. Upon his arrival, he finds that the temple and its leaders are like a tree that has borne no fruit; they have failed to lead God's people faithfully. As a result, Jesus pronounces judgment on Israel's leaders and the city—the leaders respond by having him executed.

## OUR DEVOTIONAL

This year in our Lent devotional at Bethany, we will walk with Jesus and his disciples from Galilee to Jerusalem. We will enter into the narrative to learn with the disciples what it means to follow a crucified Messiah and, as they later realized, a crucified God. We will continue with them through their time in Jerusalem, watching as Jesus confronts the religious leaders for their irresponsible stewardship of God's people. We will mourn Jesus's death with his followers and celebrate his resurrection on Easter.

Because Mark spends so much more time narrating the events of Holy Week (Palm Sunday through Easter), our devotional will have weekly reflections leading up to Holy Week and daily from Palm Sunday through Easter. It is important to read the entire portion of scripture that goes with each devotion. This is really the heart of our devotional. All of the contributors have sought to draw out the significance of each passage and help you reflect on it, but it is Mark's words, not ours, that are most important for us as we walk with Jesus to the cross.

## THE ART

When we experience an artist's work, we are being given a unique glimpse into how they see and feel in the world. A depiction of the mundane is no longer just a picture, but the artist has given their experience of that ordinary part of life, and transformed it into something beautiful, disturbing, comical, thoughtful, or perhaps even sacred. Whether a picture of a the artist's foot or a grand landscape, whether representational or abstract, artwork can expand our experience and understanding of our world, and bring us closer to seeing the creativity of our Creator.

The artwork in this booklet has been carefully selected to pair with the text. You are invited to decide why you think each piece may have been chosen.

May this devotional prove fruitful for you as you prepare yourself to remember Jesus's death and resurrection this year.

## WEEK ONE: EYES TO SEE

### Read Mark 8:22–8:38

When Jesus heals the blind man in this passage, at first it seems unremarkable, one more in a series of healings and exorcisms. Notice, however, how this healing sheds light on what comes before and after it. Prior to healing the blind man, Jesus and his disciples were in a boat. The disciples had forgotten bread. Jesus warned them to “beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod” (8:15). Although Jesus was speaking against the ways Herod and the Pharisees resist Jesus, the disciples, in their embarrassment, took it as a rebuke for forgetting bread (8:16). Ironically, only four verses earlier, Jesus had fed 4,000 people with seven loaves. Food is not an issue for Jesus. Exasperated at his disciples’ density, Jesus asks if they are blind (8:18)—not literally, but metaphorically, signifying their lack of understanding (8:21).

Immediately after calling his disciples blind, Jesus heals the blind man. He then asks his disciples who they think he is. Peter, in a rare moment of insight, identifies Jesus as the Christ, God’s anointed one whom Israel hoped would deliver them from their enemies. It seems that his blind disciples can now see!

As we read on, though, we see that Peter’s insight is not so keen after all. He sees people, but they look like trees. Jesus tells his disciples that he “must suffer many things and be rejected... and killed, and after three days rise again” (8:31). Upon hearing this, Peter concludes that he should teach Jesus what it means to be the Christ. Peter’s hubris is remarkable, but it also reveals that he misunderstands who the Christ is to be and what the Christ is to do. Jesus tells Peter that he’s still not synched up with God’s agenda (8:33), and he begins to teach the disciples that following him is counterintuitive. It’s not about revolution, or improving Israel’s lot with respect to Rome, or enjoying the perks of being close to a significant religious and political figure. Just as Jesus’s task as the Christ is actually to die, not exalt himself, so following him means taking up one’s cross: the shameful instrument of death for a criminal or a failed revolutionary

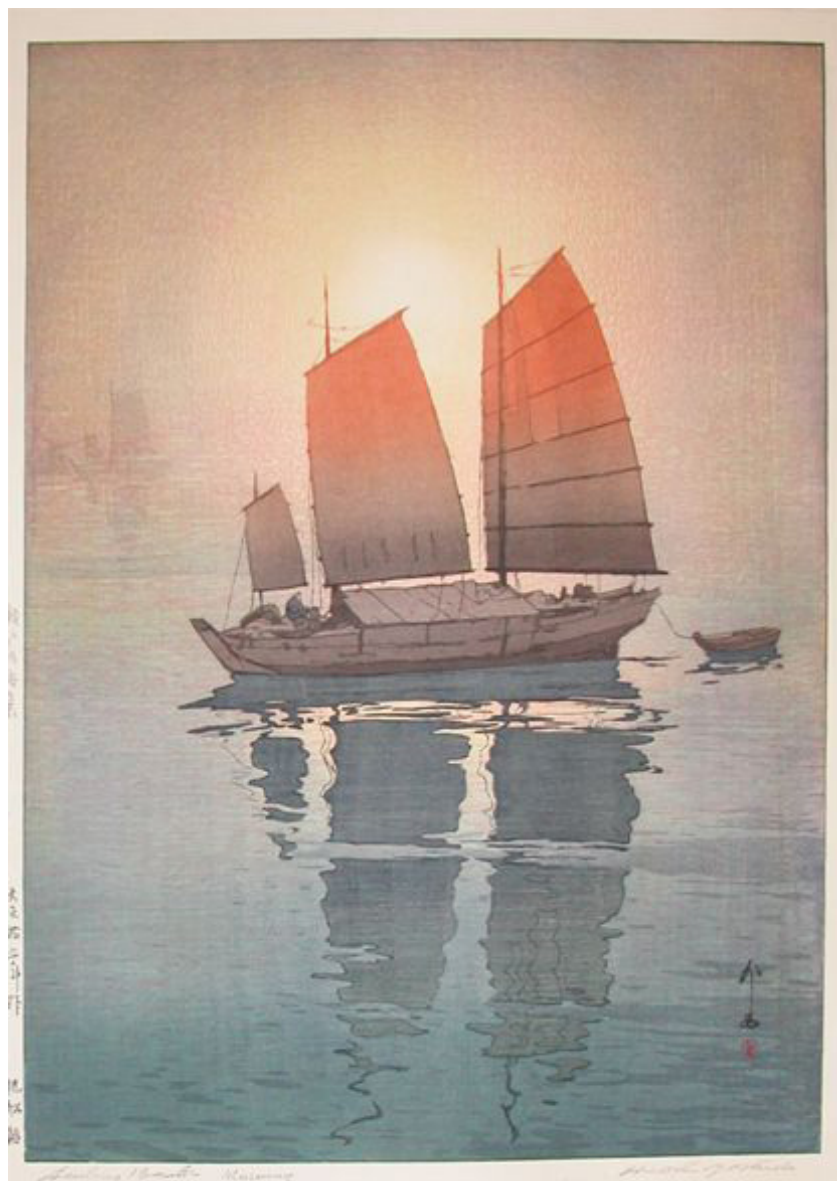
This made little sense to the disciples, but Jesus is adamant: somehow, the way to life is through death, the way up is to go down. The Kingdom of God is upside down, inverted, when viewed from the perspective of the kingdom of the world. The disciples still see trees walking.

The disciples saw Jesus and his kingdom through the lens of their culture's narrative: they were God's people, wrongfully oppressed, awaiting victory over their enemies. Our own sight is not always clearer than that of the disciples; we sometimes see Jesus and his kingdom through the lens of our own culture's narrative too. Maybe we struggle with the desire for greatness in the eyes of our peers, or assume we deserve a house with a two car garage. Maybe we slip from self-care into self-centeredness or equate the gospel with just being "nice." As we journey with Jesus this Lenten season, let's take the time to stop, listen to the story God is telling us in Mark, and allow it to change us, to shape us so that we fit God's kingdom rather than making his kingdom fit us. Let's allow Jesus to lay his hands on our eyes a second time so that we see people, not as trees walking around, but as people made in the image of God.

#### RESPONSE PRAYER:

*Lord Jesus Christ, who heals the blind, give us eyes to see as you see; turn us upside down so that we can see right side up. Teach us to take up our crosses, laying aside aspirations of earthly power and comfort, and following you in humble service. Make us into a people that clearly bears your image in the world.*





Hiroshi Yoshida, *Sailing boats in the morning*, 1926  
Woodblock Print



## RESPONSE QUESTIONS:

1. Compare our culture's answer and Jesus's answer to the following questions: Who are we? What sort of world do we live in? What is wrong with the world? What is the solution to the problem?

2. Each day this week, reflect on the passage. How do you respond emotionally? What does it make you think about?

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## WEEK TWO: GLORY IN SUFFERING

### Read Mark 9:1–29

After teaching his disciples about the inverted hierarchy of the Kingdom of God, Jesus assures them that this does not mean his kingdom is weak or ineffective, nor is he—he promises that some of them will see God’s kingdom “come with power” (9:1). Shortly thereafter, three of his disciples do see his kingdom come with power (or at least see a foretaste of it) in Jesus’ transfiguration. Though his road as the Christ leads through humiliation and death, though the path of discipleship follows Jesus in self-sacrifice, Jesus’ transfiguration reveals that humiliation and death are not the end. Jesus’ glory will be revealed and his kingdom will “come in power.”

Echoes of Moses’s encounter with God on Sinai in this story amplify its significance. Jesus, like Moses, goes up on a mountain; God speaks from a cloud; Moses is there; Jesus’ clothes shine like Moses’s face (Exod 34:29); Jesus and Moses each bring three named companions (Exod 24:1, 9); and a period of six days precedes both events (Exod 24:16). It is in the differences, however, that the significance of these echoes is found.

On Sinai, God gave Moses the law, Torah, which guided all of Israel’s life. Here, God simply says “This is my beloved Son; listen to him” (9:7). Whereas in the old covenant, Torah was God’s authoritative word to Israel, in the new covenant, God’s authority rests in Jesus. A more shocking revelation for a first century Jew is difficult to imagine! Yet this story goes further. Both Moses and Elijah (1 Kings 19:13) ascend a mountain and speak with God. Here both Moses and Elijah are on top of a mountain again, but with whom do they speak? Jesus. What could be more preposterous to a first century Jew? Mark implies that Jesus can do what only God has done. Mark doesn’t say it directly, but he implies for those with eyes to see that, somehow, this man from Galilee is also God himself. This truth is so commonplace to us that it has lost its force, but imagine how mind-blowing it must have been!

But Jesus, as before, swears his disciples to secrecy. If revealing that he is the Christ would give people the wrong idea

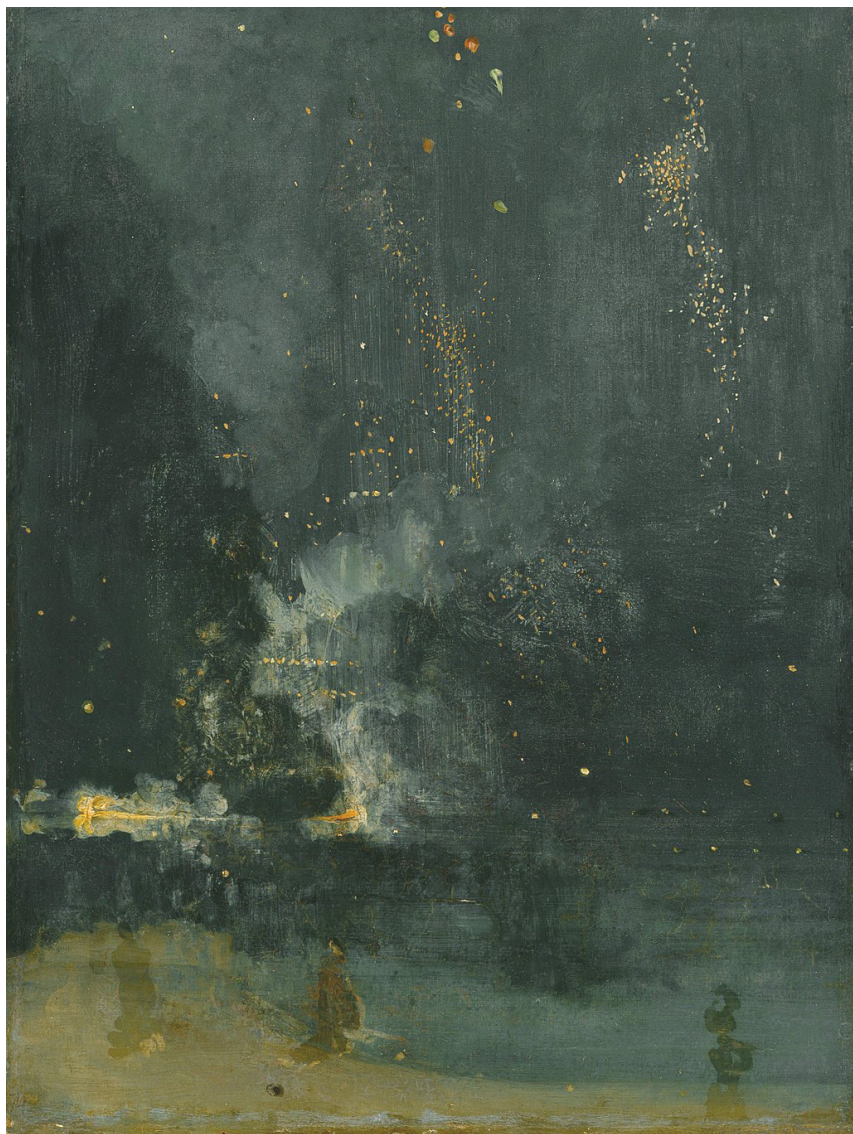
about what he has to do, talking about the transfiguration certainly would too! Glory and triumph are coming, but not yet. First come death and humiliation.

After descending the mountain, Jesus finds his disciples failing to grasp his inverted hierarchy yet again. This time, they have failed to cast out a demon. Because Jesus responds by lamenting the faithlessness of that generation and later explains that that sort of demon can only come out by prayer, the implication seems to be that the disciples have started to think they are important and powerful enough to cast out demons on their own. They aren't. It is only through prayer, through faith that depends on Jesus' power, which is so clearly shown in the transfiguration, that the disciples are able to cast out demons. Power in Jesus' kingdom comes through humility.

This week, as we continue our journey with Jesus to Jerusalem and the cross, Mark invites us to participate in an important aspect of discipleship: marveling at the glory of Jesus. He is the one invested with God's authority, the new Torah, God's beloved son, and even, mysteriously, God himself. Seeing Jesus' glory, we marvel again that he accepts the role of the suffering Messiah on our behalf. If Jesus, transfigured before our eyes in this passage, takes on this humble, sacrificial role for our sakes, how can we do otherwise?

RESPONSE PRAYER:

***Jesus, we marvel at your glory revealed in your transfiguration. We marvel also that you would chose to lay that glory aside to suffer for and serve us. May we have the humility to live in dependence on you and to follow you in the way of humble service.***



James Whistler, *Nocturne in Black and Gold- The Falling Rocket*, 1875  
Oil Paint on Canvas

## RESPONSE QUESTIONS:

1. The father's cry in this story is captivating, "I believe, help my unbelief!" How do you relate to this exclamation?

2. Each day this week, reflect on the passage. How do you respond emotionally? What does it make you think about?

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## WEEK THREE: NO HIERARCHY

Read Mark 9:30–50

As Jesus and his disciples continue their journey, Jesus again brings up the subject of his coming death and resurrection. Last time Jesus tried to make the disciples understand that he had to die and rise again, Peter pulled him aside and rebuked him, highlighting his own incomprehension. This time, the disciples do no better. Mark tells us explicitly that the disciples didn't understand what Jesus meant when he said he was to die and rise again. This in itself is disappointing. Worse, rather than consider what Jesus might have meant, they fall to arguing about who is greatest, exhibiting exactly the sort of attitude Jesus wants them to relinquish.

Jesus patiently begins to teach them again, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (9:35). Down is up. The hierarchy is inverted. Jesus goes on to illustrate what it means to be "servant of all." He picks up a child and hugs her close. Children were on the bottom rung of the social ladder. One gained no status by doting on children. Jesus however, claims the opposite for his kingdom. He says that humbling oneself and caring for a child, someone "beneath" oneself, is counted as doing the same to Jesus, and even God himself. To extend hospitality to God is indeed an honor! Things are upside down in Jesus' kingdom.

Still the disciples fail to see. John, with abysmal timing, states proudly that he and his fellow disciples stopped someone from casting out demons in Jesus's name "because he was not following us" (9:38). John betrays that he thinks only those in his clique, the twelve, ought to cast out demons in Jesus' name. Additionally, his use of "us" rather than "you" shows that he thinks of himself as nearly on the same level as Jesus. Those casting out demons ought to be following him and the disciples—as well as Jesus! With remarkable gentleness, Jesus puts John in his place. He states that the twelve are not an exclusive group. He welcomes all who do the work of his kingdom in his name. He then affirms that he values the twelve, saying that all who give them a cup of

water will be rewarded. In doing so, though, he reminds his disciples that they “belong” to him. He also refers to himself as the Christ. This is the only time Jesus uses the title of himself in Mark, which suggests that his use of the term is significant. Jesus wants to remind his disciples of their position. They are his disciples, not his peers. Jesus could hardly be gentler, and he could hardly be more clear. He inverts the hierarchy by serving them and giving himself for them, but it is still he who is the Christ, not they. The disciples have no business putting on airs.

It’s sad to read Mark’s gospel and see how dense and petty Jesus’ disciples were. But while studying this passage in which Jesus talks about receiving children, I got angry with two of my children for walking all over my papers. It was only after scolding the second one that I heard the cock crow, so to speak, and realized that I was being like the disciples, thinking that my task was more important than being patient with my kids. We can be like the disciples in many ways, measuring ourselves against our coworkers, looking down on those less “woke” than us, more greedy than us, or who have a larger carbon footprint. It’s different for each of us. As we walk with Jesus toward the cross, spend some time thinking this week about the ways in which you forget the inverted hierarchy of the Kingdom of God and instead think like the world.

#### RESPONSE PRAYER:

*Jesus, though having the same form as God, you did not cling to equality with God, but selflessly, became human like us for our sake and went so far as to die for us. Forgive us when we put ourselves first. Give us hearts that welcome those on the lowest rungs of our social hierarchies.*





Courtney Rutzer, *Shelter*, 2018  
Mixed Media

## RESPONSE QUESTIONS:

1. How do you interact with the hierarchies and social structures of the world? In what ways do you uphold them? In what ways do you invert them?

2. Each day this week, reflect on the passage. How do you respond emotionally? What does it make you think about?

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## WEEK FOUR: UPSIDEDOWN KINGDOM

### Read Mark 10:1–30

As Jesus and his disciples enter Judea, the theme of Jesus' teaching broadens when some Pharisees approach him to test him with a question about divorce. The Pharisees cling to what the law of Moses allowed: divorce is permitted as long as the husband writes a certificate of divorce. Jesus, however, pushes them to consider not what God permits, but what God wants. Jesus argues, quoting Genesis, that God created marriage to be forever. Sure, God permitted divorce with a certificate. He's not a fool. He knows that we're all broken and divorce is bound to happen from time to time. So he made a law to protect women so that they would have the legal freedom to marry again and thus have a livelihood. Since the beginning, though, the point was not to figure out how much selfishness we can legally get away with, but to think about God's desires and intentions for his creation. Again, Jesus' kingdom has a different way of looking at things than the world does. Disciples are not called to live legally, but to live in accordance with God's desires for his creation.

After this episode, Mark returns to a more familiar theme. When people bring children to Jesus, the disciples rebuke them, presumably because children aren't "important" enough to see Jesus. Jesus once again inverts the usual hierarchy. Not only does Jesus want the children to come to him, he even implies that the disciples ought to be more like the children! If the disciples want to be part of the Kingdom of God, they need to receive the kingdom like children, as a gift with no sense that they deserve it because of their own efforts or greatness.

Then a rich man comes to Jesus. Here is a man with status, one who is clearly blessed by God! To the first century Jew, wealth was a sure sign of God's favor, yet this man fares worse than the children did. When he asks what he ought to do beyond keeping the commandments in order to inherit eternal life, Jesus tells him to give away his possessions and "follow" (10:21). The man is unwilling to do so. Jesus then explains to his disciples what a serious barrier wealth is to participation in the Kingdom of God. It's impossible, he says, for

a rich man to get into heaven. But it's not impossible for those like children. Things are upside down in Jesus' kingdom.

At the heart of this week's passage is the question of whether our loyalties lie with Jesus or with ourselves. If we are married, how do we view our marriages? Are they primarily for our pleasure? Do we act like consumers, losing interest in our marriages when they fail to entertain or fulfill our perceived needs? Or do we see our marriages as truly making us one flesh with our spouses and therefore a relationship to be carefully tended, regardless of whether we currently find it to be pleasant?

What about our wealth? Could we give it all up to follow Jesus? How far are we willing to go for Jesus? Could we let go of our comfort, our status, our security, and receive the Kingdom of God like a child? I find these questions uncomfortably challenging. So did the disciples. But these are the ones Jesus asks in this passage as he journeys to the cross. As we consider these questions this week, may we be transformed more and more into true disciples.

RESPONSE PRAYER:

*Jesus, we confess that our loyalties often lie with ourselves and not with you. Have mercy on us please. Thank you for not giving up on us and for your undying loyalty to us and our transformation. Please continue to transform us into true disciples.*



Antonia Lopez Garcia, *Sink and Mirror*, 1967  
Oil Paint on Wood

## RESPONSE QUESTIONS:

1. How do you think about the Kingdom of God? Do you think more about the minimum requirement for entry, or do you think more about how to faithfully reflect God's character?
2. Each day this week, reflect on the passage. How do you respond emotionally? What does it make you think about?

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## WEEK FIVE: REWARD

### Read Mark 10:32–45

Jesus and the disciples are walking. Mark's distilled nature can give us the impression that Jesus' three years of ministry are nonstop parables and miracles. Yet here, in between two formative dialogues about the truth of following Christ, Mark gives us a bit of setting.

On the road to Jerusalem, walking as they must have so often, Jesus is leading the way, a few steps ahead of the rest. Behind him walk the disciples, amazed and afraid. Perhaps they suspect what awaits them in Jerusalem, picking up a sense of foreboding from Jesus' warnings about his coming betrayal. Or possibly they are still processing the last conversation, Jesus' warning that both riches and family connections could keep them out of the Kingdom of God if those pursuits take priority over following Christ. Either way, they hang back, literally following in Jesus' footsteps.

After a while, Jesus gives shape to their fears, warning them of the suffering that they're walking toward in Jerusalem, where "the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes; and they will condemn him to death" (10:33). He continues to elaborate on the torture and that will precede his execution, before promising the resurrection, three days later (10:34). If the disciples had been wondering if Jesus' predictions of his suffering, death and resurrection were metaphorical rather than literal, or in some distant future after decades of ruling Israel as the benevolent advocate that many had expected the Messiah to be, his ever more specific warnings are erasing that possibility. They are following Jesus, fearfully, into great suffering.

Knowing their time with Jesus is limited, the brothers James and John approach Jesus with a request for seats on his right and left "in your glory" (10:35-36). Their request reveals that their following has been a chore that they are doing to get a reward; not a relationship, but a transaction. Forgetting the disappointed rich man already, and seeming to ignore Jesus' warnings of the suffering that is coming, they cling to dreams of recognition and glory.

In response, Jesus reminds them what it means to follow him. Jesus just told them that he had to suffer before he would rise again, and he has asked them to follow him, saying "The cup that I



drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized” (10:39). The disciples will have to follow him not just in the glory that they anticipated as they accompanied the long-awaited Messiah, but in the humiliation and heartbreak that will come before their teacher rises again. Following me is costly, Jesus reminds them, requiring them to let go not only of riches or family, but also of the tempting notion that following the Messiah would lead to fame, recognition, and power.

In the Kingdom of God, that upside-down place, the way to greatness runs through service and humility, not authority or superiority over others (10:43). *Jesus’s* power comes from the magnitude of his sacrifice for others, rather than the authority he wields over the world. And in the end, Jesus says, sharing in his glory will be a hard road to walk, as he heads to Jerusalem to “give his life as a ransom for many” (10:45).

Following Jesus, now as then, upends our expectations, re-teaching us what it means to follow and to succeed. How often we want to barter our following for blessings, as if close adherence to a set of rules should get us some kind of extra credit. Like the disciples, it’s easy for us to slip back into the hopes and ambitions of the world around us, forgetting that truly following Christ, making our lives like his, will involve holding those loosely. Though our lives may be filled with the good gifts of relationship, vocation and material success, like Paul we must be prepared to “consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil 3:8). To truly follow Christ means hanging back a few steps, paying attention to the road he walked, and seeking to imitate that radical servanthood that makes him first of all.

#### RESPONSE PRAYER:

*Lord Jesus, we ask that you give us the courage to follow you fully, expecting no reward greater than the joy of knowing you and serving others. Teach us to love as you love, and walk as you walk, and guide us on this journey toward your Kingdom.*



Georges Braque, *Still life with a Violin*, 1911  
Oil Paint on Canvas

## RESPONSE QUESTIONS:

1. Are there ways that you expect to be rewarded or compensated for following Jesus?
2. Each day this week, reflect on the passage. How do you respond emotionally? What does it make you think about?

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## WEEK SIX: HEALING

### Read Mark 10:46–52

Several years ago, I was listening to an episode of *Invisibilia* called “How to Become Batman,” which documents the life of Daniel Kish – the founder & president of World Access for the Blind. When he was 13 months old, Daniel had to have his eyes removed due to an aggressive eye cancer that was threatening his life. However, as the podcast recounted some of the incredible things that Daniel has been able to accomplish in his life, the creators of the podcast aimed to help their listeners reimagine what it means to be truly blind. For instance, Daniel has mastered and taught others how to use clicking noises from his tongue to be able to navigate the world by means of echolocation. Just as boats or dolphins use sonar to be able to navigate in water, Daniel is so proficient in his ability that he can ride a bicycle and navigate his way around a city – all without being able to “see.” But his skills do not end there! In the last segment of the podcast, Daniel and the hosts reveal that throughout the episode, Daniel has been leading the hosts on a hike along a ridge line at night, which punctuates the point of the episode powerfully. In this situation, who is really able to see?

What do we do when people we think are blind are the exact people that God is using to reveal our own blindness? This is a question that the story of Bartimaeus is asking us this week. When we read this story, it is easy for us to focus exclusively on the healing of Bartimaeus’s eyes, but when read closely, this passage actually describes two healings: Jesus heals the blind, and Bartimaeus. First, notice that, while the crowd identifies Jesus as “Jesus of Nazareth,” Bartimaeus calls him “Jesus, Son of David” (10:47). The importance of this cannot be understated! Did you know that Bartimaeus is the first person outside the twelve (8:29) to recognize and utter this Davidic, Messianic claim about Jesus? At this point in Mark’s gospel, we are 10 chapters deep and in spite of all that has happened, Blind Bartimaeus is the only one besides Peter to identify Jesus for who he truly is: the Messianic King who will bring healing to the nations.

Next, consider why the crowd rebukes and attempts to silence Bartimaeus as he is crying out to Jesus. While a reason is not clearly given, it is fair to assume that some were attempting to silence

him because he was being disorderly. However, perhaps others in the crowd were trying to silence him because the way that this blind man was talking about Jesus seemed like nonsense to the sighted. Perhaps Bartimaeus's assertions about the Kingship of Jesus grated against the crowd's understanding of who Jesus was. Both sentiments seem to be at play here.

Now, notice how Jesus responds. His first miracle actually happens when he affirms Bartimaeus's humanity and invites the crowd to overcome the way they have been seeing Bartimaeus. Initially, the crowd alienates Bartimaeus, rebuking him and telling him to be silent (10:48). But when Jesus invites the crowd to participate in Bartimaeus's healing, telling them to bring Bartimaeus to him, the crowd's posture toward Bartimaeus changes from alienation to invitation: "Take heart. Get up; he is calling you" (10:49). Jesus's act, singling Bartimaeus out as a human who is worthy of his attention, functions as a prophetic critique of the way that the crowd has treated Bartimaeus. Their attitude shift makes Bartimaeus's physical healing possible.

Who can really see in this passage, and where do you see yourself in this passage? Who are the people in your life (whom you think are blind) that God is using to reveal your own blindness? As you've read this passage today, how has this passage been reading you? This week, as you reflect on Christ's journey towards the cross, ask God to reveal some of the ways that you have miss-seen people in your life. Perhaps it is a family member, a friend, a people group, or a public figure. Are you able to see them as God sees them? Continue to journey with Christ this week and start a new journey from blindness to sight.

RESPONSE PRAYER:

*Holy God, help us to recognize the ways that you are speaking to us through those that we deem to be other. May our eyes be opened to the Bartimaeuses we pass every day and give us the humility to recognize your voice in voices on the margins. Be near to us God, and empower us as we continue our Lenten journey. We pray this with Christ, by the power of the Spirit. Amen.*



Horace Pippin, *Country Doctor (Night Call)*, 1935  
Oil on Canvas

## RESPONSE QUESTIONS:

1. In what ways do you see like the crowd and in what ways do you see like Jesus?

2. Each day this week, reflect on the passage. How do you respond emotionally? What does it make you think about?

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# HOLY WEEK



# HOLY WEEK: PALM SUNDAY

Read Mark 11:1–25

Only a few miles now separate Jesus and his disciples from Jerusalem. Accordingly, Jesus' focus shifts from teaching his disciples in private to confronting Jerusalem's leaders. Jesus has two disciples bring him a colt—an odd choice for a “triumphal entry.” Jesus's choice to ride a colt is meant to remind people of Zechariah's words about Israel's coming deliverer, “See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” (Zech 9:9). The people understand. They form a procession, shouting bits of Ps 118, which also speaks of a coming deliverer. And they are right. Jesus has come to deliver them—but not from Rome.

Despite the jubilation of the crowd, Jesus's arrival in Jerusalem is anticlimactic. He goes to the temple, looks around, and leaves to spend the night in Bethany. Not exactly what one would expect when a king returns to his city, when God in Jesus returns to his temple.

The next day, as Jesus and his disciples head back to Jerusalem, Jesus curses a fig tree because it has no fruit. This is odd, but Mark doesn't explain. They go to the temple again and Jesus starts flipping tables and driving people and animals out of the court of the gentiles. Israel's leaders know God's declaration in Isaiah that, in the coming days, his house will be “a house of prayer for all the nations” (56:7). Yet they have turned the Gentiles' space in the temple into a market! So, quoting Jer 7:11, Jesus declares that they have made the temple a “den of robbers,” a place where they can sit smugly and safely between crimes like a bunch of crooks, and like Israel's leaders did before the exile.

Jesus and his disciples again leave Jerusalem for the night and, when they return the following day, they notice that the fig tree Jesus cursed is withered. Now Jesus' cursing of the fig tree makes more sense. He wasn't hangry; he was enacting a prophecy of judgment against Jerusalem and the temple, not unlike Ezekiel's enacted siege against model Jerusalem (Ezek 4). Faithless Israel has been described as a withered, fruitless fig tree before (Jer 8:13). God, in Jesus, has come to his people and found them fruitless, as they

were in the days before the exile, so he again pronounces judgment on his people. Jesus then begins to talk about prayer. Now that the temple, the “house of prayer,” has been judged, Jesus is showing his disciples that the temple will be replaced by the praying community of Jesus’ disciples.

Despite the excitement of Jesus’ approach to Jerusalem, his arrival in Jerusalem is tragic. Israel’s leaders have failed to be faithful, to welcome their king, to recognize the return of God to his temple. Jerusalem was thinking like the world: pursuing wealth, ethnocentricity, and power. Jesus’ kingdom, as we’ve seen, sees all those things upside-down. Because of Jerusalem’s unfaithfulness, Jesus, it turns out, had already been remaking the true Israel in the community of his disciples, teaching them the upside-down ways of his kingdom. We, the church, are the heirs of this remade Israel, the Kingdom of God. But Israel went through many cycles of sin, judgment, repentance, and restoration. Being the church does not make us immune to this. Jesus’ invitation to his disciples and to us is to be part of his kingdom, to live with an inverted hierarchy. If we claim to follow Jesus, but see things and act just as the world does, are we really part of that kingdom? Are we bearing fruit or are we a withered fig tree? It’s a hard question and an important one. Following Jesus isn’t a hobby or a form of self-care to be indulged in when in a particular mood. It’s a commitment to a new kind of life, one that sees things upside down, one that willingly enters into hardship and suffering for the sake of others. This week, as we progress to the cross, may we too take up our crosses and follow Jesus so that we might bear much fruit.

#### RESPONSE PRAYER:

*Lord, we confess that we still often see as the world sees and live as the world lives. Give us eyes and hearts to see things upside down, to take up our crosses and follow you in humble service. Forgive us for the times we fail. Thank you for your grace. Amen.*





Eyvinde Earle, *Ancient Tree*, 1992  
Screen Print

## RESPONSE QUESTIONS:

1. How is your fig tree? Is it withered, fruitless, budding, a few figs, full of figs?

DRAW YOUR TREE OR WRITE A POEM ABOUT IT:

# HOLY WEEK: MONDAY

Read Mark 11:27–12:44

Two days ago, Jesus entered Jerusalem in a great procession and was hailed as the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Yesterday, Jesus cleared the temple of those making it a “robber’s den” (11:17). The religious authorities are indignant at Jesus’ actions and demand to know what gives him the right to do such things. Who made him boss? (11:28). Jesus will answer on the condition that first they answer a question of his. Jesus’ counter question reveals two realities: 1) the religious authorities deny John and his acknowledgement of Jesus, 2) they fear the people. If they answer, they either must confess Jesus’s authority or risk the ire of the people. We observe them pleading ignorance.

In the parable of the vineyard, Jesus holds up a mirror to the authorities. The tenant farmers, like the authorities, seek to take control of that which was never theirs. Even the murder of the heir does not allow them possession. Jesus quotes Scripture (Ps 118:22, 23), declaring that God’s power and authority is such that what has been rejected is given primacy by God. Having been confronted with their pride, the authorities desire to seize Jesus and yet, fear keeps them from doing so.

Wanting to silence Jesus, religious and political authorities seek to trap him with a “gotcha” question. (12:15). They preface their question with a declaration of Jesus’ authority—he truly teaches God’s way. However, their words do not match their hearts, and Jesus avoids their trap. He recognizes the Romans’ authority and then goes beyond in calling them to recognize God’s authority. Take note of Jesus’ question—“Whose image?” The coin bore Caesar’s image and is instructed to be given to Caesar. We are made in the image of God and are to give ourselves to the one whose image we bear.

The questions continue. The Sadducees, not believing in a resurrection, ask a question that has no other purpose than provocation. Jesus knows this and bookends his answer with the facts of God’s power and the resurrection. A scribe steps forward with a question essentially asking which commandment has ultimate authority. (12:28). Jesus declares it is to love God with all of one’s being and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Like all faithful teachers,



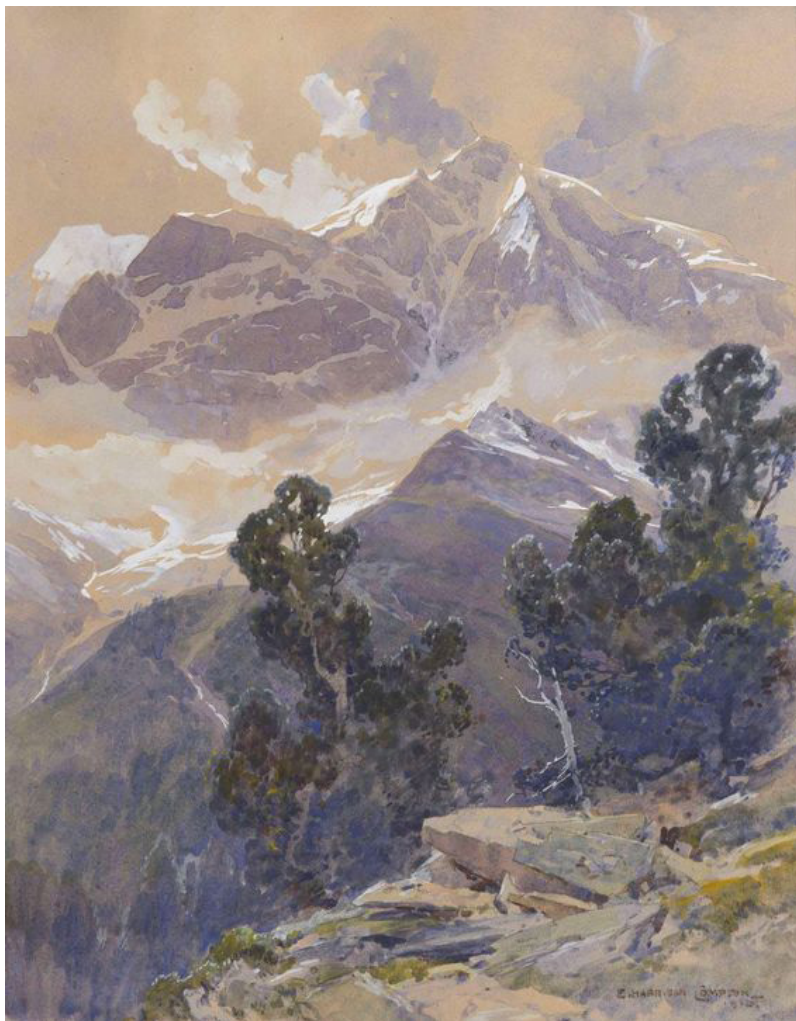
Jesus practices what he teaches. Loving God and loving neighbor are the guiding tenets of Jesus' life as he walks towards the cross.

Although scribes like those who had been questioning Jesus held an elevated place in Jewish culture, Jesus now warns against them. (12:38). He says that they love the praise of others while standing on top of widows. Then Jesus uses not a parable, but the everyday life before him. He observes giving at the treasury and calls our attention to a widow who puts in but a pittance. (12:43). It's not the amount, but what is behind the gift that Jesus calls our attention to. The widow trusts God.

While sitting in on the mental jousting in today's passage, our hearts are confronted with the question of authority. Who has authority? How do we respond to authority? What is authoritative in how we live our lives? Important questions. At the end of our passage, Jesus highlights the action of a woman with no social or cultural authority and yet is given to us as an example. Why? Because she trusted God, who has all authority. We have the privilege of knowing the one who had all authority and, in loving God and his neighbor, laid it aside. Such a one we can trust.

RESPONSE PRAYER:

*Jesus, my Lord and my God, who has all authority, I trust you.  
Help me to trust you more.*



Edward Compton, *The Ortler*, 1915  
Watercolor on Paper

## RESPONSE QUESTIONS:

1. What do you give authority, the power to determine how you live, in your life?

2. Think about an “authority figure” in your life. Write a prayer for them:

## HOLY WEEK: TUESDAY

### Read Mark 13:1–37

Sunday, Jesus enacted a prophecy of judgment on the temple. Yesterday, he pronounced judgment on Israel's leaders with a parable. Today he repeats his judgments in prophetic hyperbole, which speaks of a coming calamity in terms that evoke the horror of the calamity, but do not describe it literally. This way of speaking is strange to us, but our phrase "My world came crashing down around me" can help us understand the way Jesus and many prophets before him spoke. This phrase doesn't mean that the planet Earth collapsed. It means that something terrible happened: maybe I lost my job or a loved one. I just feel like Earth might as well have collapsed. Much of Jesus's language in today's passage functions like this.

Jesus has just criticized scribes for "devouring widows' houses" (12:40). Then he and his disciples observed a poor widow putting her last two coins in the temple offering box (12:43). The woman has exemplary trust in God, as we saw yesterday. But the temple, the heart of God's people, does not exist to take a widow's last coins, but to care for her needs. The temple is devouring widows' houses just like the scribes. As they leave the temple, the disciples admire the buildings, but don't notice that they have been built on the backs of widows. They see as the world sees; Jesus sees differently. Because of the faithlessness of Israel's leaders which rejects Jesus, excludes gentiles, and exploits widows, Jesus declares that the temple will be destroyed.

The disciples ask when this will happen. Jesus says that the temple will be destroyed before their generation passes away (13:30), but even Jesus doesn't know the exact date (13:32). Jesus is more concerned, though, with preparing the disciples for the trying time preceding the destruction of the temple. There will be false messiahs, wars, earthquakes, and famines. These are scary, but not the destruction he's talking about (13:5–8). The disciples will spread the gospel widely and will be persecuted as a result, but the Spirit will be with them (13:9–13).

The sign that the temple's destruction is here will be "the abomination of desolation standing where it ought not to be" (13:14). This phrase from Daniel (9:37; 11:31; 12:11) refers to the cessation of

temple sacrifices and another unspecified defiling act. When they see that sort of thing happening, the disciples should immediately flee Jerusalem. Jesus says the tribulation at that time will be terrible. And it was. Josephus (a first century Jewish Historian) tells of atrocities in Jerusalem and a forest of crucified victims outside the city. No wonder Jesus speaks of the time in hyperbolic terms: the sun and moon being darkened, stars falling, heavens shaken. Their world will come crashing down! But the Son of Man will come on the clouds (see Dan 7:13–14), to rule with God in heaven. His angels, or more likely messengers (the word is the same), will take the gospel across the earth, gathering Christians. These are the signs that the temple's destruction is near. For their own safety, the disciples must stay vigilant so they are not caught off guard.

Israel's leaders' failure to embody the Kingdom of God is tragic. But there is hope. Jesus has succeeded where Israel's leaders failed. He has established a new temple that cares for widows before it builds beautiful buildings, that gathers gentiles and Jews into one worshipping community, that recognizes Jesus as its cornerstone. The question for us is, will we live by the empowering presence of the Spirit and join Jesus in being this temple?

REPONSE PRAYER:

*Jesus, we welcome you as king! Thank you for inviting us to participate in your kingdom. Fill us with your Spirit and enable us to join you in living by the values of your kingdom. Amen.*



Alexander Calder, *Untitled*, 1942  
Sculpture

## RESPONSE QUESTIONS:

1. What does it mean to be a part of the temple Jesus is building?

DRAW WHAT YOU THINK THAT TEMPLE LOOKS LIKE:



## HOLY WEEK: WEDNESDAY

Read Mark 14:1–11

Jesus' departure from the temple after commenting on the widow's gift signals the end of his debates with Israel's leaders. He doesn't enter the temple again and doesn't speak with Israel's leaders until his arrest. Jesus has said his piece and Israel's leaders have made their choice. They will not repent. Instead, cementing the destiny Jesus has prophesied about them, they seek "to arrest him by stealth and kill him" (14:1). The Messiah has come to deliver his people, God has returned to his temple, and Israel's leaders put a contract out on his life.

Contrast this with how Jesus is received in Bethany, a few miles away. While Jerusalem has proved inhospitable, Jesus has found enough welcome in Bethany to have a place to stay for the last several nights (11:11, 19). While Jerusalem's leaders plot to kill Jesus, Simon the leper welcomes Jesus into his home for dinner (14:3). While Jerusalem's leaders reject Jesus as Messiah (the anointed one), a woman in Bethany anoints Jesus extravagantly.

Jesus is having dinner at Simon's house. An unnamed woman comes in to the room. We don't know who she is, but she wasn't invited to dinner. Even so, she has to see Jesus and is willing to commit this social faux pas to do so. She brings a bottle of perfume worth about \$100,000 in today's economy. Who knows how she got it, but this perfume makes Chanel No5 look like a bargain basement deal. She breaks the bottle open and pours all the perfume over Jesus's head. This act is almost ludicrous in its extravagance. All the perfume is poured out, the bottle is broken. No wonder some people at the dinner took offense at her act. Hasn't Jesus made it clear that giving to the poor is important? But Jesus rises to her defense. He tells the people to stop jumping down her throat and says that, in fact, she has done a beautiful thing for him. The poor will always be around and they can (and should) give to them whenever they please. But the woman has discerned correctly that an extravagant act for Jesus is

appropriate at this moment in time. Jesus has been rejected by Israel's leaders, but this woman gives him the love, honor, and gratitude he deserves. He is about to die. His disciples still seem not to understand this, but she has honored him by anointing him for his burial. Here, in a small town outside Jerusalem, a woman, not even invited to dinner, comes closest of anyone in the whole gospel of Mark to giving Jesus the love he deserves.

But Judas can't handle it. Something in this episode seems to be the last straw for him. Maybe it was Jesus's sanctioning such a waste of money or insisting that he was going to die. Whatever the case, he goes and offers to betray Jesus to the chief priests.

Once again, the hierarchy in Jesus' kingdom is inverted. Israel's central city fails to welcome Jesus, but a small town provides Jesus a place to stay. The leaders of Jerusalem are inhospitable to Jesus, but a leper (or former leper) welcomes Jesus to dinner. Jesus's own disciple betrays him to his enemies, but an unnamed woman extravagantly expresses her love for Jesus. How do we respond to Jesus? Do we, like Israel's leaders and Judas, resist his inversion of the world's ways of living and thinking? Do we welcome Jesus like Simon? Do we love him extravagantly like the woman? As we near the cross, may we be transformed increasingly into the sort of people that love and welcome Jesus.

RESPONSE PRAYER:

*Jesus, we thank you for the hospitality showed you by Simon and the love expressed for you by the woman in this story. Help us to always increase in love for and devotion to you. Amen.*



Mako Fujimura, *Charis Kairos (The Tears of Christ)*, 1942  
Fine Minerals on Paper

## RESPONSE QUESTIONS:

1. Do you resonate more with the woman or the other dinner guests in this passage? Why?

2. Mako Fujimura, who's artwork is seen on the page opposite, often relates his work to this particular passage of Scripture. He sees making his paintings as breaking perfume over the feet of Christ, as a beautiful offering of the best he has. What do you do best? Do you see it as a beautiful offering to Christ? Why or why not?

# HOLY WEEK: MAUNDY THURSDAY

Read Mark 14:12–72

Shortly after Jesus is anointed in Bethany, he and his disciples go to Jerusalem to eat the passover meal. During the meal, Jesus passes around bread and says “this is my body” (14:22). He passes a cup of wine around too and calls it “my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (14:24). Startlingly, Jesus has taken Israel’s central feast, the passover, which celebrated their deliverance from Egypt, and made it about himself. His death, not the exodus, is now the paradigmatic moment of deliverance. His words, “This is my blood of the covenant” refers back to the blood that Moses threw on the Israelites at Sinai to seal their covenant with God (Exod 24:8). Not only does Jesus’ death replace the exodus, but it creates a new covenant that supersedes the former covenant made at Sinai. A more significant act could hardly be imagined!

Jesus then predicts that all his disciples will abandon him. They insist they won’t. But as they move to the garden of Gethsemane, the disciples’ behavior is not promising. While Jesus prays agonizingly about the difficulty of his coming task, the disciples fall asleep. The rawness of Jesus’ prayer is heart-wrenching. He has been so firm in his purpose up to this point, but he quails as he nears his death. Significantly, though, Jesus demonstrates obedience to the Father even in the midst of his fear. The disciples only sleep.

Judas and a mob come to arrest Jesus. The disciples briefly resist and then flee, showing that they still have no idea what Jesus has to do. Jesus, by contrast, goes willingly. He is taken to the high priest’s house, Peter following behind. The trial is a debacle. The prosecution can’t keep its story straight. Finally, the high priest directly asks Jesus, “Are you the Christ, the son of the Blessed?” (14:61). Jesus answers, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (14:62). At this all present agree that Jesus has condemned himself. Jesus’s statement makes such an impression because it is a combination of two Old Testament texts. The first is Dan 7:13–14, “the Son of Man coming on the clouds.” In this passage, Daniel sees a vision of beasts terrorizing the world. Then God sits on his throne and judges the beasts. In their place, one like a Son of Man is given

dominion. By quoting this passage, Jesus claims to be the Son of Man, given dominion by God. This can only mean that the high priest and his retinue are one of the beasts who are judged. Similarly, “seated at the right hand of Power,” comes from Ps 110:1. In this psalm, a kingly figure is enthroned next to God, sharing God’s rule. This kingly figure is made a priest “after the order of Melchizedek” (Ps 110:4). By equating himself with the kingly figure in this psalm, Jesus claims to share God’s rule and that he has been made a priest by God in place of the current priesthood. These would indeed be a blasphemous claims if they weren’t true. The high priest, of course, doesn’t believe a word of it and condemns Jesus, ironically sealing his own and the temple’s fate in doing so.

Meanwhile, Peter has been asked three times whether he is a disciple of Jesus. While Jesus willingly walks to his own death, Peter cannot even admit he is a disciple.

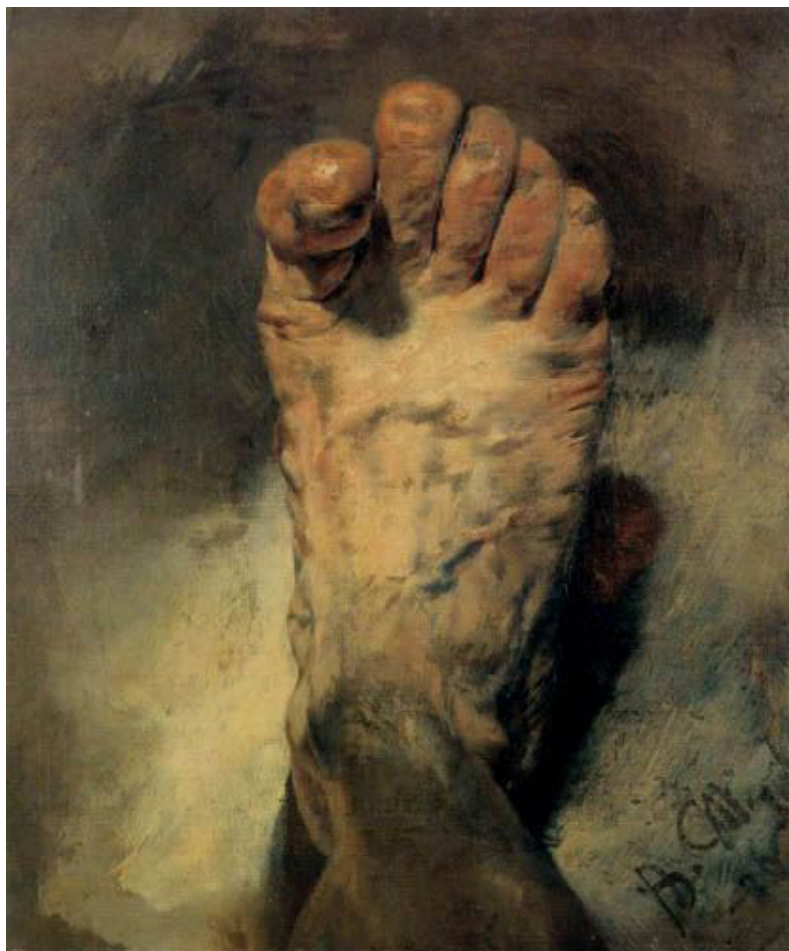
Jesus lives out what he has taught his disciples. He takes up his cross, he lives by the inverted hierarchy of his kingdom, he walks into death to gain victory. The cost to him is great, but he does it for love, to establish a new covenant, to save them and to save us. May we prove to be true disciples, not abandoning him at the last, but following him even when it costs us dearly.

#### RESPONSE PRAYER:

*Lord, we want to be faithful disciples, to follow you truly, but we know that we are more often like your disciples in this story, who abandoned you when the cost became too great. Fill us with your Spirit and make us in your image. Amen.*

#### WHY IS IT CALLED “MAUNDY THURSDAY?”

The word “Maundy” is an Anglo-French word that came from the Latin word “mandatum,” which means “commandment.” It refers to when Jesus, in the Upper Room, said to the disciples: “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.” (John 13:34).



Adolf von Menzel, *The Foot of the Artist*, 1876  
Oil Paint on Canvas



## RESPONSE QUESTIONS:

1. In what ways do you act like Jesus in this passage? In what ways do you act like Peter?

2. Think of a time when you had to follow someone. Was it comfortable or uncomfortable? Did you trust them to lead you in the right direction? Why or why not?

IF YOU HAD TO DRAW A MAP OF YOUR LIFE, WHAT WOULD IT LOOK LIKE? WHO OR WHAT ARE YOU FOLLOWING? SHOW THAT:

# HOLY WEEK: GOOD FRIDAY

Read Mark 15:1–39

We've traveled with Jesus over the 100 miles between Galilee and Jerusalem as he taught his disciples about the upside-down ways of his kingdom and prepared them for his death. We've listened as he confronted Israel's leaders and pronounced judgment on them and the temple for their failure to bear fruit. We've seen him establish a new covenant with his disciples, his arrest, and the sham of a trial in which he finally publicly acknowledges that he is the Messiah and the Son of God. Now we approach the cross; our Lenten journey is almost over.

After the trial before the high priest, the Jewish leaders take Jesus to Pilate. Accusations are leveled, but Jesus doesn't defend himself. Pilate makes a feeble attempt to release Jesus, but quickly capitulates to the demands of the Jewish leaders. Throughout, the sad irony continues: Jesus is executed for claiming to be what he is—the king of the Jews, the Messiah, the Son of God. Israel's leaders have effectively rejected their God. Jesus' judgment of the temple is just. A temple that rejects its God is no temple, only a shell of a building.

Jesus is cruelly mocked and abused by the guards. Then he is taken out and crucified. While he is on the cross, the guards divide his garments. This is an echo of Ps 22:18, the first of three references to Ps 22 in this passage. Ps 22 speaks of the terrible suffering of a righteous person. Jesus' experience certainly fits the bill. As if severe beating and crucifixion were not enough, passersby mock Jesus, "wagging their heads" as they do so (15:29). Here is a second allusion to Ps 22, this time v. 7. The gist of the mockery is that, if Jesus were really who he said he was, he could have saved himself. They, like the disciples, do not understand that, paradoxically, to be the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of Israel, actually means to stay on the cross and suffer their mockery for their sakes and for the sake of the world.

Darkness then falls over the land, signifying God's judgment on Israel for crucifying Jesus (see Exod 10:21–23; Deut 28:29; Amos 8:9, Jer 15:9). Then Jesus cries out "My God, my God, why have

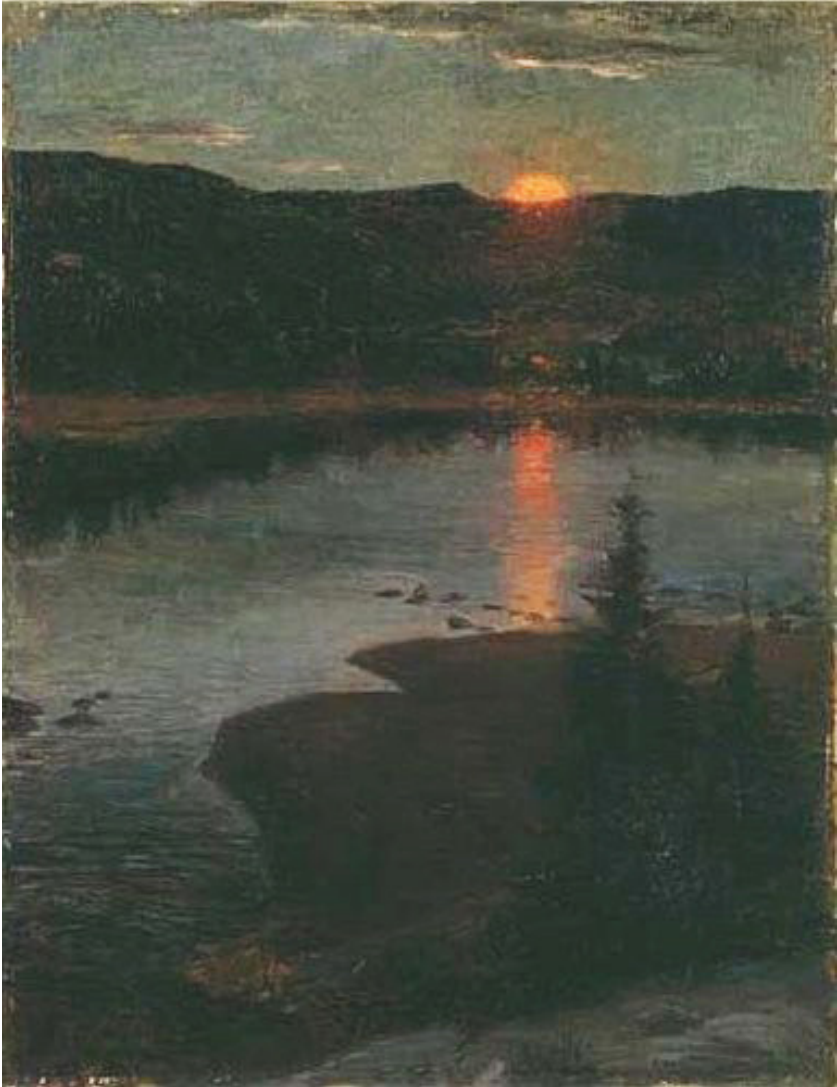
you forsaken me?” (15:34). This is the third reference to Ps 22, a quotation this time of Ps 22:1. This cry, though no doubt expressing real anguish, is also a hint of Jesus’ coming victory. Ps 22, which has now been alluded to three times in this scene, does not end with the suffering of a righteous person, but with God’s powerful deliverance of the sufferer. Mark and Jesus indicate that, even at the worst moment for Jesus, there is hope. This story does not end with the crucifixion. The second half of the psalm is yet to come; and it’s all about deliverance. But that part of the story comes on Sunday. Jesus knows it’s coming. But for now he remains on the cross. He’s drinking the cup, but has not quite drained it to the dregs yet.

Finally, Jesus dies. The temple curtain is torn, perhaps signifying once again God’s coming judgment of the temple. Then, surprisingly, the gentile centurion who was standing near Jesus says, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (15:39). Israel’s leaders have killed Jesus. The disciples have abandoned him. But a gentile, simply in seeing the manner of Jesus’s death, is the only one to speak truly of Jesus. Perhaps here, in Jesus’ death, we see him making his new temple truly a house of prayer for all nations.

Israel’s failure is now complete, but a new covenant is established, which incorporates all who want to be disciples of Jesus, whether Jew or gentile, and follow in his ways.

RESPONSE PRAYER:

*Take some time to meditate on the tragedy of Jesus’s death, but also the way in which it is a gift to us and the way that it is the ultimate example of the self-sacrificial ways of the Kingdom of God.*



Prince Eugen, Duke of Nark, *Månuppgång in Vandres*, 1890  
Oil Paint on Canvas

## RESPONSE QUESTIONS:

1. Imagine yourself at the scene of the crucifixion. Where would you stand? What would you say? What would you do? How would you feel?

2. This is an emotional section of the text. Respond in a way that feels most appropriate to you:

# HOLY WEEK: HOLY SATURDAY

Read Mark 15:40–47

Today is Saturday. Jesus is dead in the tomb. Yesterday we saw that, at the moment of his death, Jesus' disciples had all fled. As Mark's story continues, we find that Jesus is not totally abandoned. Several women, including two Marys and Salome, have been looking on from a distance during Jesus' crucifixion. This is the first Mark has told us of these women. As readers we may then be surprised when he explains that they had followed Jesus and taken care of him during his ministry in Galilee and on his journey to Jerusalem. It's been apparent at various points in the narrative that Jesus had more than twelve disciples. These women were among them; they "followed" Jesus—and more faithfully than the twelve in some ways. While the twelve argued about who was the greatest (9:34) and asked for seats at his right and left hands (10:37), these women "ministered to" or "cared for" Jesus (15:41). Is this not precisely what Jesus has been teaching his disciples: that following him is all about serving others? Further, while the twelve have abandoned Jesus, these women remain to and through the end. As a result we see a final, beautiful inversion of social structures in Jesus' kingdom. These women, by virtue of being women, lacked social status in the first century. They have not been mentioned in Mark up to this point. They quietly served Jesus in the background. Yet it is these quiet servants, not the twelve who cast out evil spirits and performed miraculous healings (6:13), who see Jesus die, see him buried, and, as we will read tomorrow, see the empty tomb. It is these women who are first entrusted with the task of spreading the "good news," the "gospel," that Jesus has been raised from the dead.

Once Jesus is dead, Joseph of Arimathea, who followed or at least sympathized with Jesus to some degree, requests Jesus's body and pays him the honor of burying him in an expensive rock tomb so that his body would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath. The tomb is sealed with a stone.

These events would be more properly included in Friday's devotion. But Mark says nothing about Saturday. Saturday is a dark day, an empty day. To borrow from John, night had fallen in which no one can work (John 9:4). The light had come into the world, but it had been extinguished. As it turned out, it was only a temporary darkness, like that moment after you blow out a trick birthday candle before it re-kindles itself. But no one understood that. What must it have been like to be one of the twelve, fearing for your life, knowing you'd betrayed the Messiah who was somehow more than the Messiah, wondering, since he was dead, if you'd been wrong and he hadn't really been the Messiah? What was to become of Israel? What was to become of you? Where was God in all of this? Had he spoken through Jesus or not? As we go through this empty day between Good Friday and Easter, take some time to think about what your life would have been like if the story ended here, with Jesus in the tomb. How might the world look different? How might you be different?

RESPONSE PRAYER:

*Jesus, on this dark day, we remember you in the tomb. We are grateful for the sacrifice you made for us. We look forward to celebrating your resurrection tomorrow.*





SPEND

A

FEW

MINUTES

IN

SILENCE.

# EASTER SUNDAY

Read Mark 16:1–8

As we celebrate Easter today, it is easy to focus on the redemptive power of the cross, and the promise of the Spirit – on what has happened in the past, and what will happen in the future. But as we look closely at our specific passage today, I want us to pay attention to the often overlooked witness of the tomb that sits in the liminal space between the cross and the upper room.

For the most part, we are not used to stories that end in the way that the earliest version of Mark ends. Most of our movies, shows, and books, reveal how our appetites crave resolution and happy endings. But in Mark's retelling of the resurrection, we don't get a happy ending—at least not in the way that we expect to experience happiness. The tension of what has happened at the cross is not resolved in Mark. There are no disciples running to the tomb. There is no dramatic reunion between Christ and his followers. There is no Emmaus Road experience. Instead, Mark ends with fear, trembling, and inaction in light of the audacious command that the women receive as they seek to anoint Christ's body. What are we supposed to make of this? What is Mark trying to provoke by leaving us waiting in unresolved tension?

Notice the nature of the command that the women receive (16:7) and step into their shoes. They have just heard that Christ is risen and has left the tomb bare (16:6). The women are then instructed to tell Jesus's closest friends that he will see them in Galilee. Talk about the potential for disaster. Instead of rubbing Christ's body with spices, the women might be about to rub salt in the disciples' very fresh wounds. Is it any wonder that the women were afraid?

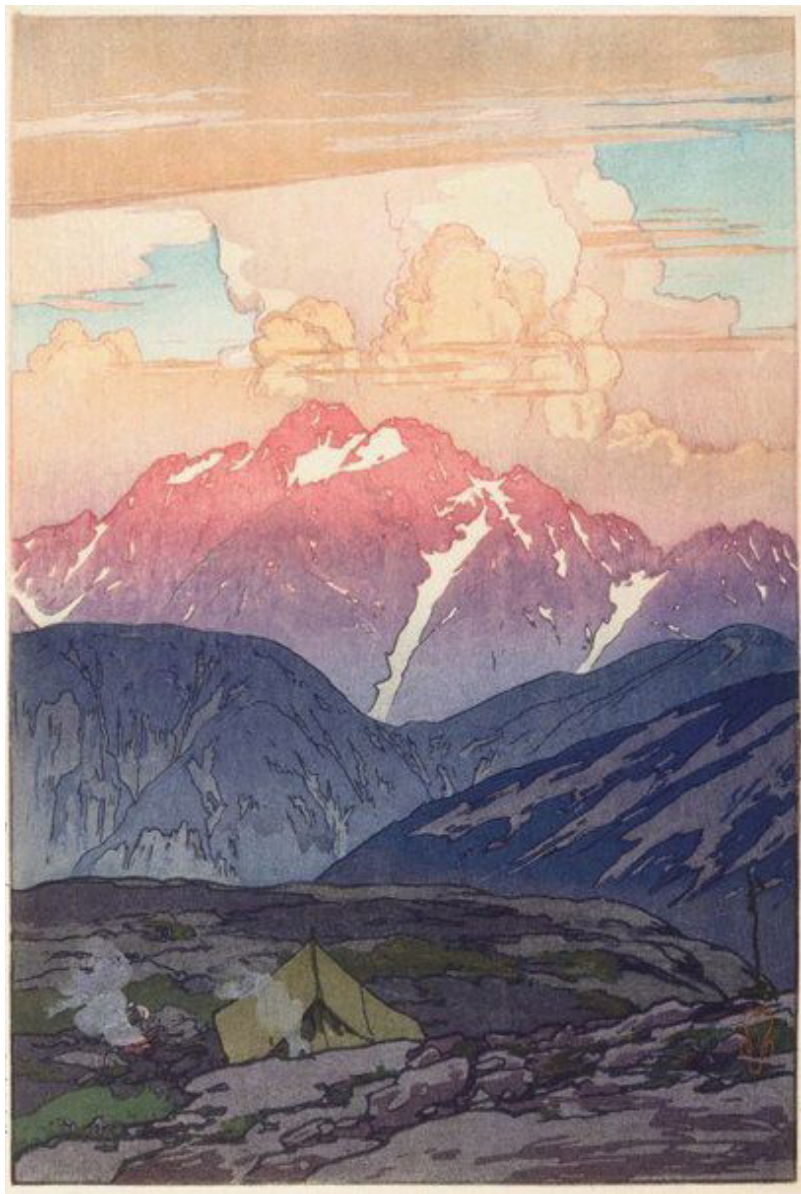
And yet, as we read about these women who flee from the tomb, I can't help but be reminded of Mary who went in haste from Nazareth to Judah (between 80-100 miles) to see her pregnant cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1). I think about Sarah who laughs upon hearing that she will have a son (Gen 18). All three of these women must believe in a promise that they cannot see yet. For Sarah, Mary,

and Elizabeth, the promise of children in light of barrenness and virginity is akin to the promise of a risen savior in light of an empty tomb. The end seems unthinkable given the evidence on hand. But perhaps this is why in all the gospel accounts, the women are the first witnesses and messengers of the resurrection. By virtue of their familiarity with childbirth, they are able to understand what the disciples would have misunderstood—that the witness of an empty tomb is like the promise of a child coming from a barren womb. The fulfillment of each promise might be hard to imagine at first, but in due time God will reveal Godself in the face of a child, and the face of the risen Christ.

As we've walked together on our Lenten journey over the last seven weeks, perhaps you have arrived today at Easter and find yourself feeling a little let down. The tensions in life that we face on a personal and communal level haven't been resolved yet. The promise of life on Earth as it is in heaven hasn't been fully realized yet. Take heart friend. It is in this dissatisfaction that Christ is inviting you to participate in his continued redemption of the world. Mark doesn't finish by resolving the tension in the story because he is trying to motivate his readers towards action. This Easter, how might you make the journey to Galilee and encounter the risen Christ in the world around you? How might you join his Body and live in the reality of the resurrection?

#### RESPONSE PRAYER

*Holy God, as we rest on the promise of the resurrection, help us to join you in your work. Renew our strength, and give us fresh hope to know that even in barrenness and emptiness, you are bringing the fullness of your Kingdom to Earth. Be near to us God, and empower us as we continue our journey into Pentecost. We pray this with Christ, by the power of the Spirit.*



Hiroshi Yoshida, *Morning on Tsurigisan*, 1926  
Woodblock Print

THANK YOU FOR CELEBRATING  
THE EASTER SEASON WITH US!

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