

THE
LIGHT
Shines
IN THE
DARKNESS

Continuing the authorship and style of Lutheran Hour Ministries' 2010 Advent devotions are those for Lent 2011. Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Pastor and LHM's Theological Editor Wayne Palmer has written *The Light Shines in the Darkness*. This thoughtful meditation on Christ's life and passion as presented in the Gospel of John illuminates this beloved book with insight and clarity. Written in a fresh but familiar style, *The Light Shines in the Darkness* is a captivating portrait of Jesus' battle against the darkness of unbelief, prejudice and blind, murderous hatred as He fought for us all the way to the cross and back from the empty tomb.

The universal message of hope in John's Gospel is powerful and written with one purpose in mind: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His Name" (John 20:30-31).



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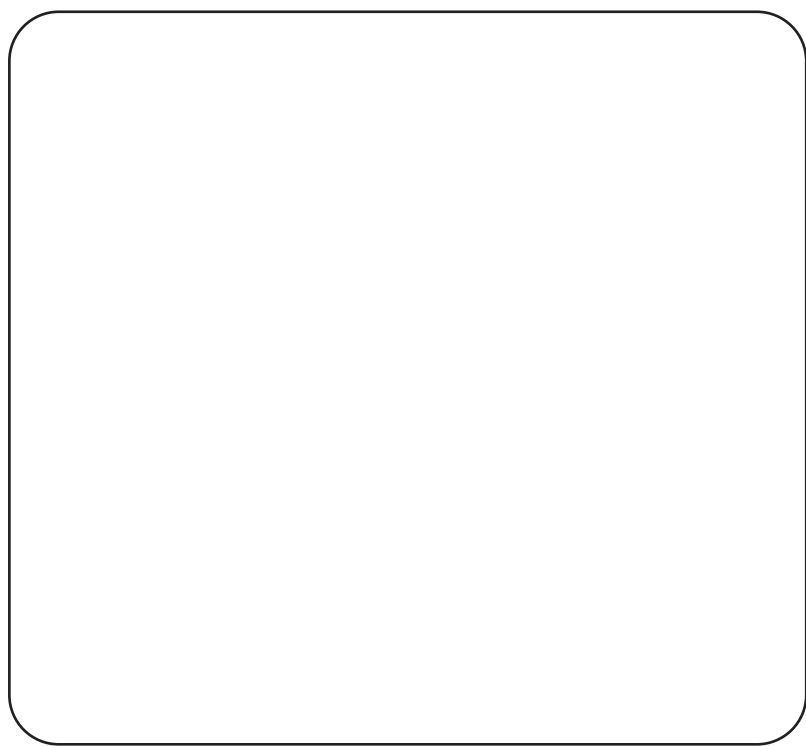
2011 Lenten Devotions

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwell in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined” (Isaiah 9:2).

In John 9:5b Jesus declared, “... I am the Light of the world.” That will be the theme of our Lenten journey as we follow Jesus of Nazareth to His cross and empty tomb. From the very beginning of His Gospel to the end, John follows the tremendous struggle between Jesus Christ and the forces of darkness gathered together against Him.

We will see Jesus wrestle with the darkness all around Him—the darkness of Satan and his demons, the Jewish crowds and religious authorities who made themselves His enemies and even those who called themselves His friends and followers. But Jesus Christ will also wrestle with the darkness that still hides in the corners of our hearts, our families, our churches and our world.

Each day we will read portions of John’s Gospel, but we encourage you to read the verses in between as well. May our Lord richly bless your Lenten journey. Along the way expect to see a few surprises; you may see a side of Jesus Christ you never saw before and a side of yourself too.



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WOUNDS RUN DEEP
Easter Monday, April 25, 2011

Read John 21:1-19.

TEXT: “When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these? ...’ (John 21:15a).

We are often cut to the core by our own sins, by the hasty words and hurtful things we have done and by our failure to do the good things God put it in our power to do. The scar of our personal failings can run very deep in us, just as the scar of Peter’s three denials ran deep.

After His resurrection our Lord went to work right away healing that wound. Luke tells us that Jesus made an appearance to Peter on the afternoon of His resurrection (Luke 24:34). And in today’s reading John records another special conversation between Jesus and Peter.

On that dark night in Jerusalem Simon denied His Savior three times. Now, on this bright morning at the Sea of Tiberius, Jesus leads Peter to confess his devotion to His Savior three times. Then Jesus gives Peter a glorious promise. In the future, when Peter’s life is in danger for Jesus’ sake, he will not weaken in denial. Simon Peter will remain faithful in his confession and die as a martyr of Jesus Christ.

Jesus died and rose again for your sins—each and every one of them. They are all forgiven. This is something He constantly reminds you through His Word, through the waters of your Baptism and by the body and blood He gives you in worship—the price He willingly paid for your eternal salvation. His Holy Spirit will keep you strong in the confession of His Name, until our Lord welcomes you into paradise.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, let Your light continue to shine in this dark world, that with boldness and confidence I may live for You, until You come again and scatter the darkness forever. I pray in Your holy Name. Amen.

SHINING IN THE DARKNESS
Ash Wednesday, March 9, 2011

Read John 1:1-18.

TEXT: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5).

Our Lenten season begins in the darkness of winter and by the end of our nearly seven week journey the darkness will have given way to the light of spring. This battle between darkness and light is the theme of the Gospel of John, and it will be the theme of these Lenten devotions.

Chapter 1 begins with the Christmas story; John tells us the Word of God became human and entered our world. But immediately John hints at the struggles our Savior will face: “The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” In the coming weeks we will see Satan, the prince of darkness, use many instruments in his efforts to snuff out the Light: fanatical crowds, treacherous enemies, a disciple’s kiss, a high priest’s oath, a Roman official’s fear, a whip, thorns, nails, a dead tree and a huge stone.

All of us struggle with the power of darkness in our lives, the darkness of fear, doubt, dread and anxiety. We see it in our health problems, financial struggles and our strained relationships. We see it in the darkness of our own struggles within.

On this Ash Wednesday the Holy Spirit calls you to gather with His people in church where He will shine His glorious light into the darkest corners of our sin-filled hearts and minds. The ashes of Ash Wednesday remind us of the death that darkness has brought to all. But it also reminds us our Savior took our death upon Himself, giving us His life and forgiveness.

Join us as we journey through the Gospel of John, watching the Light battle and overcome the darkness for us.

THE PRAYER: Light of the world, shine in my heart and bring me peace. Amen.

HE TAKES AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD Thursday, March 10, 2011

Read John 1:19-34.

TEXT: “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’” (John 1:29).

The teacher walks into the classroom and finds a broken vase. She’s not sure who broke it, but she has a pretty good idea. She singles out the one child who *always* gets into trouble—the scapegoat—and though it’s completely unfair, off he goes to face the principal in place of the child who is truly guilty.

The word “scapegoat” comes to us from the Old Testament Day of Atonement, the day God forgave the nation’s sins. God commanded His people to bring a goat to His altar. The priest laid his hand on its head confessing the sins of the people of Israel. The scapegoat took the punishment for their sins as it was led out into the wilderness.

Here in the middle of John’s first chapter, the Baptist points at Jesus and calls out, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” John looks past Jesus’ Baptism to Good Friday when He will suffer the full wrath and punishment for our sins. When we receive the assurance of God’s forgiveness in Jesus’ body and blood in Holy Communion, we repeat John’s words, “Lamb of God, You take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us; grant us peace.”

As we follow Jesus through this season of Lent, we will see how brightly God’s Light shines in our dark world.

THE PRAYER: Lord God, turn my eyes to my Savior this Lenten season that I may say with John the Baptist, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”—and my sins. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

THE LIGHT SHINES The Resurrection of our Lord—Sunday, April 24, 2011

Read John 20:1-18.

TEXT: “Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’ ...” (John 20:16a).

After the long, dark weekend, Mary Magdalene left early Sunday morning to go out to Jesus’ tomb. Already filled with grief and sorrow she saw the tomb broken open and Jesus’ body missing.

She ran to tell the disciples someone had stolen His body. Peter and John ran out to investigate, then went back into hiding to consider what they had seen. Mary stayed behind at the tomb, overwhelmed with sorrow.

Have you ever stood at a graveside totally lost and immersed in unspeakable grief? Imagine Mary’s pain, totally shattered by the brutal murder of her Lord.

But Jesus had already told His disciples how the story would end. This was a day of joy and victory; it was not a day of grief and loss. And so Jesus came up to her and at the sound of her name on His lips, the light burst forth and scattered the darkness of Mary’s grief.

When we stand by a loved one’s grave, this is a moment to remember. On the Last Day our loved ones who are now separated from us, hidden in the darkness of the grave will stand before us shining. Their voices that are now still in death will be music in our ears once again when the Light comes to raise the dead and vanquish the darkness forever.

We will see Jesus with our own eyes just as Mary did on that great day of resurrection. And we will shine in that glorious light forever and ever.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for bursting out of the tomb on this glorious day, revealing our future and that of our loved ones who have died in faith. Give us joy, courage and hope as we await that glorious day of Your return, and help us share it with all. We pray in Your holy Name. Amen.

OUT FROM THE DARKNESS Holy Saturday, April 23, 2011

Read John 19:31-42.

TEXT: “So they (Joseph and Nicodemus) took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews” (John 19:40).

Good Friday is drawing to its close. With the Passover quickly approaching, Pilate orders the legs of the crucified men to be broken so they will die quickly. The legs of the two criminals hanging at Jesus’ side are broken. But since Jesus is already dead His side is pierced with a spear instead and out flows blood and water—proof that the King of the Jews is truly dead.

That’s when a secret disciple of Jesus steps forward. Joseph of Arimathea is a prominent member of the Jewish high court who did not agree with their decision to put Jesus to death. He boldly steps out of the darkness and asks Pilate for permission to bury Jesus’ body. Pilate grants it.

Another secret disciple joins him. The Pharisee Nicodemus who had snuck through the darkness of night to talk to Jesus now steps into the light and helps Joseph lay our Lord’s body to rest in Joseph’s new tomb.

But it is only a rest. Death has no hold over Jesus’ body. It cannot even touch His body with the stain of decay. On the third day He will rise to life and live forever.

One day you and I will be laid in our own graves. But for all of us who trust in Jesus Christ as our Savior, our future will be the same as His. Our bodies will rest in the grave until He returns; then Jesus will raise us to share paradise with Him forever.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for hallowing our graves through Your rest in the grave. Fill us with joy and confidence—even in the face of death—so that we will see You with our own eyes when You come to wake our bodies from death. Amen.

THE DARKNESS OF RASH JUDGMENT Friday, March 11, 2011

Read John 1:43-51.

TEXT: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth? ...” (John 1:46a).

As we near the end of John’s first chapter, Jesus is gathering His twelve disciples. Even here we see the battle rage between light and darkness—in this case it’s the darkness of a preconceived notion. Before he ever met Jesus, Nathanael arrogantly asks, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

That’s what the darkness in us does. We sit as judge of everyone and everything around us, jumping to conclusions about people without knowing their whole story. And it’s just too bad for the person who doesn’t fit into our nice neat categories—whether it’s that nerdy kid at school who doesn’t dress like we do or that estranged family member, quirky neighbor or congregation full of hypocrites. We even do the same with God. We judge His holiness and faithfulness by the circumstances of our lives. We don’t give God the right to be God.

Philip is wise. He doesn’t try to argue away Nathanael’s prejudice. He gives his friend a simple invitation: “Come and see.” He is confident Jesus will shatter Nathanael’s false judgment, and Jesus doesn’t disappoint him.

Lent is the time to humble ourselves and to come to Jesus and admit our rash judgments. Jesus does something we would never expect: He shines His grace, power and love as He suffers from the darkness of human rejection, flogging and a cross. Yet in that brutality, suffering and death Jesus won our salvation. He gathers us together in congregations around His Word and Sacraments to shatter our preconceived notions and empower us to accept one another and work together to show His love to all those around us.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, forgive me for judging by appearances. Open my heart to see You as You are and to share Your Name everywhere I go. Amen.

THE LIGHT BLAZES IN FURY
Saturday, March 12, 2011

Read John 2:13-22.

TEXT: “Making a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen ...” (John 2:15a).

If you picture Jesus as a meek, gentle man you might be surprised at what He does here in the temple. But you shouldn't be—the thicker the darkness, the brighter the Light must shine. Our Savior knows animals must be sold for sacrifice, and foreign currency needs to be exchanged for temple currency. But His problem is where this is all taking place.

This trading is being done in the Court of the Gentiles, i.e. *in the back of the church*. The Jewish worshipers aren't bothered, they can move up front closer to the temple. But what infuriates Jesus is the way the Gentile believers are being forced to worship and pray in all this noise and commotion.

When Jesus shouts “Take these things away; do not make My Father's house a house of trade,” the Jewish authorities are filled with a dark rage of their own. The darkness tries to overcome the Light as they demand Jesus perform a miracle proving His authority to cleanse the temple.

Jesus will provide that sign in His coming death and resurrection. On the cross His enemies will destroy His body—the true temple and dwelling place of God. But on the third day Jesus will raise it to life again.

Today the darkness still challenges Jesus. When we gather at the Lord's house to worship, pray and receive Christ's gifts in Word and Sacrament, the darkness fills our minds with all sorts of trade and business concerns, as well as other worries, fears and distractions. But the light shines in the darkness and draws our thoughts back to our Savior.

THE PRAYER: Lord, cleanse my heart and mind that I may hear Your words of grace and forgiveness. Amen.

PAID IN FULL
Good Friday, April 22, 2011

Read John 19:16-30.

TEXT: “So he delivered Him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus, and He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha” (John 19:16-17).

Jesus shows remarkable strength in His first three hours on the cross. Even while He is suffering for our sins, His focus is not on Himself, but on the people around Him. Seeing His enemies He pleads, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34a). He promises the repentant criminal at His side, “Today You will be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:43b). He provides a disciple to care for His mother after He is gone “Woman, behold, your son!” and to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” (John 19:26b, 27b).

Then at noon comes the darkness. Luke tells us the sun stopped shining. Jesus hangs alone in the darkness silently suffering God's wrath at the sins of the world. Finally, after three hours He cries out in agony, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46b).

By three in the afternoon, it is over. God the Father has unleashed His full wrath—not a single one of our sins has gone unpunished. John tells us, “Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said, (to fulfill the Scripture) ‘I thirst’” (John 19:28). And “When Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, ‘It is finished,’ and He bowed His head and gave up His spirit” (John 19:30). There is nothing left for us to pay. We are free, and the doors of heaven are open wide to us through Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Jesus offers His last confident prayer: “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit” (Luke 23:46b).

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, on the cross You suffered the wrath of God for all of our sins, and paid the price in full. Receive our thanks and gratitude for Your amazing sacrifice and the life that is ours because of Your death. Amen.

ONE LAST CARD TO PLAY
Maundy Thursday, April 21, 2011

Read John 19:1-16.

TEXT: “Pilate went out again and said to them, ‘See, I am bringing Him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in Him.’ So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, ‘Behold the man!’” (John 19:4-5).

Pilate has one last, desperate trick up his sleeve. It’s a long shot, but it’s his last chance to set Jesus free. He orders our Lord to be flogged. Many died from such a cruel scourging; others died later from the complications of those severe injuries. Pilate thought the scourging might just satisfy the blood lust of the Jewish authorities.

As Pilate had Jesus brought forward it was a pitiful sight to behold. Jesus had been beaten severely. A crown of bloody thorns was on His head and a blood-soaked, purple robe was draped around His shoulders. Clearly, the Jewish authorities could not consider Him a threat now.

But once they had gotten a taste of Jesus’ blood, the authorities had only one thing to say, “Crucify Him, Crucify Him!”

Tonight we gather in church to celebrate the Lord’s Supper and receive His true body and blood. We remember Pilate pointing and saying, “Behold the man!” We remember John the Baptist pointing and saying, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” We remember this body was beaten and nailed to the cross for us. This blood was shed by the scourge and nails for us. And because Jesus offered His body and poured out His blood in our place—as our Substitute—we are forgiven and free.

“Do this in remembrance of Me” (Luke 22:19b).

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You freely offered Your body and blood for our salvation. Move me to receive it in gratitude and joy, and to serve You throughout my days. Amen.

A VISIT IN THE DARK
1st Sunday in Lent, March 13, 2011

Read John 3:1-8.

TEXT: “Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’” (John 3:9).

Jesus made powerful enemies when He cleansed the temple. But He also impressed some leaders with His boldness and His miracles. In chapter three a prominent leader comes to the Light, but fear of his colleagues leads him to come to Jesus under the cover of darkness.

Being a Pharisee, Nicodemus thinks his good life will win him heaven. Jesus immediately challenges this false hope. “Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God.” Answering Nicodemus’ confused reply Jesus explains He is talking about baptism. But Nicodemus still finds it difficult to accept these words.

You and I might find it difficult also. Like Nicodemus we have so many good qualities going for us, especially when compared to others we can point out. We work hard to provide for our families. We try to be good citizens. We try to treat our neighbors well.

But Jesus is clear and unbending, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh.” It can never be anything but flesh. You and I can try as hard as we want, but we are and always will be sinners. And saying, “I’m only human” is no excuse either. Jesus was truly human, yet He was without sin.

That is why our Lord commanded His Church to baptize sinners. Through the power of God’s Word in that water Jesus takes our sins and guilt upon Himself and suffers and dies in our place. He fills us with His Holy Spirit and makes us children of God. Just as Jesus rose again on the third day, He will raise us to live with Him in paradise forever.

THE PRAYER: Jesus, bring me out of the darkness of my self-righteousness to the light of Your forgiveness and peace. Amen.

LIFTED TO SAVE
Monday, March 14, 2011

Read John 3:9-18.

TEXT: “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up” (John 3:14).

Nicodemus is just not getting it. He’s not a bad guy; why can’t he earn his way to heaven? Patiently, Jesus reminds the teacher of a time when Israel grumbled in the wilderness and God sent poisonous serpents. After thousands died, the survivors begged Moses to ask God to remove the serpents. Surprisingly, God answered *No!* The serpents would stay, and they would keep biting people. But Moses was to lift a bronze serpent on a pole.

Imagine you were bitten. All you had to do was look at the bronze serpent on the pole, trust God’s promise and you would live. Jesus told Nicodemus, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.”

Just like Nicodemus, you and I are infected with the deadly poison of the serpent who bit our first parents in the Garden of Eden. There is no way to save ourselves from our poisonous sinful nature. So God sent His only-begotten Son to save us.

When Jesus was lifted up on the cross He paid for our sins by being punished in our place. Only when we look at Jesus and trust the Father’s promise to forgive us for Jesus’ sake can we be saved from the venom of death within us.

Nicodemus had a clear choice! Just like the ancient Israelites bitten by the serpents and just like you and me today, he could look to Jesus the Light of the world in faith and live or walk away into the darkness and die.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, turn my eyes to Your cross, that I may believe and live. Amen.

PILATE’S GAMBLE
Holy Wednesday, April 20, 2011

Read John 18:38-40.

TEXT: “But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?” (John 18:39).

Pilate won’t listen to Jesus; he is too busy trying to work this out himself. How can he force the Jewish authorities to accept his decision to set Jesus free? Maybe one of the local customs might do the trick. It was implemented to improve Roman-Jewish relations. At the Passover feast, the Roman governors released a prisoner the Jewish crowds requested. Normally it was a popular person who had been imprisoned for speaking against the Roman government. This time Pilate would offer the choice between Jesus and the most dangerous criminal in the prison: Barabbas.

This was a stroke of genius! Jesus offered no true threat to public safety and clearly Barabbas was as dangerous to the Jewish leaders as he was to the Romans. But Pilate misjudges the Jewish leaders, who are convinced Jesus is a much greater threat to them and to the Jewish nation than Barabbas.

When the leaders convince the crowd to demand Barabbas’ release and crucify Jesus, Pilate finds himself in a far worse position than if he had simply set Jesus free and lived with the consequences.

Whenever we shun the responsibilities God gives us—to speak up for those who are defenseless, to bring up our children in the fear and knowledge of God or those in any other area of life—we are just like Pontius Pilate.

Jesus didn’t step away from His responsibility but freely took the punishment of our sins upon Himself.

THE PRAYER: Lord, thank You for paying the price for all the times I walk away from the responsibilities You give me. Give me courage and commitment to step forward and do what You want me to do. Amen.

JESUS' WITNESS TO PILATE
Holy Tuesday, April 19, 2011

Read John 18:33-38a.

TEXT: "... (Jesus said) 'Everyone who is of the truth listens to My voice'" (John 18:37b).

The true significance of Christ's comments to Pilate is simply lost on Pilate. He has other things on his mind. They are things he thinks are far more important like saving his career. His attention is squarely on himself and what impact this trial will make on his future.

But God does two things to turn Pilate's attention to the innocent man standing before him. First, Pilate's wife sends him a message, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of Him today in a dream" (Matthew 27:19). Second, God sends His Son to speak to Pilate directly.

Jesus says, "Everyone who is of the truth listens to My voice." This is a challenge to Pilate: is truth important to him? Obviously, he is taking great risks to set an innocent man free, but does he want to hear the truth Jesus came to bring?

Many times in our lives Jesus' still, small voice speaks to us through the clamor and clatter of our daily lives. Are we willing to put it all aside to listen to the One who offers us eternal life?

Pilate gives his famous reply, "What is truth?" Sadly, he isn't interested in what Jesus has to say, he just wants to end the discussion.

Jesus offers you and me words of truth and eternal life. But how often do we dismiss Him and cut Him off like Pilate did? How often are we distracted by earthly things we think are more important?

THE PRAYER: Lord, thank You for speaking words of truth to me. Forgive me for cutting You short. Please speak, for Your servant is now listening. Amen.

DARKNESS OR LIGHT?
Tuesday, March 15, 2011

Read John 3:19-21.

TEXT: "This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19).

Before Jesus sends Nicodemus on his way, He leaves him one last warning. "This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed."

Will Nicodemus admit he is drowning in his sins and only Jesus can set him free? He came to Jesus at night under the cover of darkness so no one could see. Is he willing and ready to step out into the light and receive the forgiveness Jesus came to bring?

Coming to Christ isn't easy for us either. We want to impress each other. Why would any of us want to open up and let our brothers and sisters in faith see the dark secrets we keep hidden away inside? Like Nicodemus there is a Pharisee hidden deep inside every one of us too.

We take pride in going to church regularly, putting our money in the offering plate and holding offices in our local congregation. But Christ knows us inside and out. He knows our pride, our stubbornness and our judgmental heart. Jesus' call to Nicodemus goes out to each of us—no matter *who* we are. Are you willing to come to Christ Jesus in His Church? Are you willing to look to the crucified and risen Savior, to confess your need and follow Him?

THE PRAYER: "Just as I am, without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me, And that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!" Amen.

PROVE IT
Wednesday, March 16, 2011

Read John 4:46-54.

TEXT: (Jesus said) “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe” (John 4:48).

When Jesus’ enemies in Jerusalem learned He was becoming more popular than John the Baptist, He left and returned to Galilee in the north. Huge crowds gather, but Jesus knows their faith is shallow and superficial. When an important official comes to ask the Lord to heal his dying son, Jesus challenges the entire crowd: “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.”

How deep is your faith? Can you take Him at His word, or do you insist on more? If you listen closely you almost pick up a tone of defiance in Jesus’ voice ... or is it sorrow? He wants them to believe, but they must believe on His terms, not theirs.

The official knew only one thing really mattered: his son was dying and only Jesus could save him. So he begged Jesus to come down and heal him. But Jesus didn’t go. Instead, He sent the father away with a promise: “Go; your son will live.” Would you be able to trust Jesus and go?

The official did. He accepted Jesus’ words and on the way home he learned his faith had been well founded: his son was healed.

We don’t need to see miraculous signs to believe in Jesus as our Savior. God uses old familiar words to give us faith; He uses water and His Word to wash away our sins, and He joins His body and blood to simple bread and wine to forgive us all our sins.

Don’t stay on the outside waiting to see some miracle in your life before you’ll follow Jesus. Learn a lesson from the official above: the stakes are life and death, heaven and hell.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, give me faith to trust Your words and promises through every circumstance in my life. Amen.

POWER STRUGGLE
Holy Monday, April 18, 2011

Read John 18:28-32.

TEXT: “Pilate said to them, ‘Take Him yourselves and judge Him by your own law.’ ...” (John 18:31a).

Only John’s Gospel shows us Jesus’ trial before Annas the former high priest. Then John leaves out Jesus’ official trial before Caiaphas the high priest. Instead, he jumps straight to Jesus’ trial before Pontius Pilate.

This trial is very strange. Jesus is brought into the official residence of the Roman military governor, but the Jewish authorities refuse to enter. Though they have no problem railroading the innocent Son of God to His death, they are careful not to defile themselves by entering the home of a Gentile. So Pilate is forced to go back and forth between Jesus and them.

The trial is a bitter power struggle between Pilate and the Jewish authorities. Pilate quickly concludes Jesus is innocent and wants to set Him free. But finding himself in a very precarious position with the emperor, Pilate must handle this case very delicately; he especially cannot afford to lose control and see a riot start.

On the other side, the Jewish authorities are desperate to have Jesus executed, but they are not in the position where they can do it themselves. Years before the Roman governor had removed the right for the Jewish authorities to inflict capital punishment. So if they want Jesus dead, they have to convince Pilate one way or another. So we see the battle begin—with Jesus’ life hanging in the balance.

The truth is that God is in control of what He is doing for each of us by Christ’s crucifixion, as we shall see in the coming days.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, all around us people are plotting and scheming for control. Many times we too want to find some way to control events happening in our own lives. Remind us that You are firmly in control so we may rest in Your hands and watch You work for our good. Amen.

BEFORE THE HIGH PRIEST **Palm Sunday, April 17, 2011**

Read John 18:13-14, 19-24.

TEXT: “When He had said these things, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, ‘Is that how you answer the high priest?’” (John 18:22).

After His arrest, the guards bring Jesus to Annas. This former Jewish high priest had been deposed by the Roman governor in AD 15. His five sons had each taken a turn succeeding him and now his son-in-law Caiaphas is high priest.

Annas questions Jesus about His disciples and His teaching, but Jesus’ silence protects them. So Annas turns to Jesus’ teachings. The high priest hopes he can trip up the Son of God and find a basis for a charge against Him.

Jesus will have nothing to do with this. He has always been honest with the Jewish authorities, never saying anything in private He didn’t say in public. He tells the high priest, “Ask those who have heard Me.” That leads an officer of the high priest to strike Him with his hand.

At this point you might expect Jesus to meekly take the abuse, but He doesn’t. He turns to the officer and confronts him, “Why did you strike Me?” Again, we see Jesus completely in control. He stops the proceedings to call the officer to explain why he struck Him.

Annas showed he was willing to ignore the truth and twist it against Jesus. Is integrity and truth important to you like it was to Jesus? Or are we willing to distort the truth if it goes to our advantage?

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You humbled Yourself to be struck by an officer when You had only told the truth. Forgive us for setting aside Your truth when we don’t think it is convenient. Give us faith, courage and trust to do what is right in Your eyes. Amen.

JUST ASKING FOR A FIGHT **Thursday, March 17, 2011**

Read John 5:1-24.

TEXT: “This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because not only was He breaking the Sabbath, but He was even calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God” (John 5:18).

Jesus left Jerusalem when things got pretty tense, but now with a Jewish festival at hand, He heads right back down toward the temple again. And He turns the heat back up by healing an invalid on the Sabbath.

Jesus’ enemies protest to this breaking of their Sabbath rules. His perfectly natural answer totally enrages them. He says, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.” Instead of seeing the Light, they stand in the darkness protesting that Jesus is making Himself equal to God. But protest as loud as they will, Jesus knows who He is and refuses to back down.

The darkness of their thinking is amazing. They would have kept a man trapped in his paralyzed body to keep their Sabbath rules. Thankfully, Jesus saw it differently. And He sees it differently for you and me too. He sees us trapped and helpless in our sins. And just as Jesus stood up for a paralyzed man and set him free on the Sabbath, so will He stand up to any and all opposition to set us free—even though it cost Him His life on the cross.

In the coming days we will see Jesus turn up the noise even louder and see His enemies respond with more hatred. But we will also see Him sacrifice Himself for them. Hanging from the cross He will answer their taunts with a plea: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. ...” (Luke 23:34a).

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You suffered and died to set me free. Fill me and all Your children with joy and courage to share Your great story of sacrifice and dedication to everyone. Amen.

SHORT SIGHTED
Friday, March 18, 2011

Read John 6:22-27.

TEXT: “Jesus answered them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves’” (John 6:26).

After the festival Jesus returned north to Galilee. He spent a whole day preaching and then fed the huge crowd with five loaves and two fish. That night after He sent them away, He walked across the Sea of Galilee. Gathering again the next day, the crowds walked around the lake to find Him.

At first those people sound like genuine followers of Jesus. But our Lord knows better. They aren’t really there for Him; they are there for themselves. They want Jesus to be their king—but only on their terms. They aren’t concerned with their deep eternal needs like He is; they only want what Jesus can give them in the present.

We can be just as near-sighted as they. We are consumed with today’s needs and desires, but we don’t see the more significant eternal gifts Christ comes to bring. So we ask Him to help us through our needs and problems, but we don’t give a single thought to His Kingdom and the part He would have us play in that Kingdom.

That is why coming to Christ in worship is so vital. Each week in church He shows us the bigger picture—the unending punishment we deserve for our selfish, disobedient lives, as well as the forgiveness and eternal future He gives us through His life, death and resurrection. Yes, He knows and cares about all our earthly needs and will provide for each of them just as He has provided for our eternal needs.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, when I get too wrapped up in this life and my daily needs, lift my eyes to see the glorious future You have won for all of us by Your life, death and resurrection. Amen.

PETER’S DENIAL
Saturday, April 16, 2011

Read John 18:15-18, 25-27.

TEXT: “The servant girl at the door said to Peter, ‘You also are not one of this Man’s disciples, are you? ...’” (John 18:17a).

Peter has no reason to be in the high priest’s courtyard. Jesus already told the disciples what the outcome of His trials would be. But Peter wants to see for himself, so he enters the courtyard and waits with the guards in the darkness to learn the outcome of the trial.

But Peter can’t hide. He is recognized at the door by a servant girl, near the fire started by the guards to warm themselves, and finally by a relative of the soldier whose ear Peter had cut off. With his life in peril and no way of escape, Peter’s courage melts away and he swears oaths and calls down curses on himself as he tries to distance himself from Jesus of Nazareth.

How often are we guilty of Peter’s sin? One moment we profess our loyalty to Jesus, the next we deny Him by what we say and do. We forget the price He paid to set us free.

The crow of the rooster brought Peter back to Jesus’ words. With shame and pain he recalled the prophecy Jesus had made, “The rooster will not crow till you have denied Me three times.” He went out and wept bitterly.

We share Peter’s weakness. We are so confident in our strength, yet we stumble for the least reason into fear, unbelief and self-preservation. But Jesus paid the full price for our sins of denial, and for His sake we are free.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, with shame I admit the countless times I have denied You. Forgive my sin and strengthen me in true faith, that rejoicing in Your salvation, I may fearlessly tell others of Your great salvation. Amen.

JESUS' ARREST

Friday, April 15, 2011

Read John 18:1-12.

TEXT: “Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to Him, came forward and said to them, ‘Whom do you seek?’” (John 18:4).

Jesus has led His disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane. Out of the darkness we see lanterns and torches winding their way across the Mount of Olives toward the Garden. Judas leads Roman soldiers and Jewish officers. Jesus knows what is about to happen. But He doesn't cower in the corner; He goes out to them and asks whom they are seeking. They reply, “Jesus of Nazareth.”

Jesus answers with three short words, “*I am He,*” and the power of His words knock Judas, the soldiers and the officers backward. Firmly in control of the situation, Jesus orders the guards to let His disciples go. The soldiers obey, and they flee away into the dark.

Not only did Jesus protect His disciples, He also made one last attempt to reach Judas. In the dark hour to come, when Judas would be overwhelmed with guilt, Jesus wanted him to remember this moment. Jesus was not a helpless victim swept away by Judas' kiss. Jesus was in complete control. He permitted Himself to be arrested, tried, condemned and crucified. He could have stopped it at any time. But because of His love for the Father and for each of us, He will not end it but carry it through to its completion—and our ultimate salvation.

Because He loves us so much when those powers of darkness were trying their worst, so He also loves us when those powers of darkness come after you in your life.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for stepping forward to suffer death for our sins, even death by crucifixion. Give us courage and confidence in the dark hours of our lives to remember that You are still completely in control. Amen.

HIS TERMS OR OURS?

Saturday, March 19, 2011

Read John 6:35-44, 51-66.

TEXT: “After this many of His disciples turned back and no longer walked with Him” (John 6:66).

The crowds want Jesus to be their King so He can provide for their daily lives. Jesus has so much more He wants to give them. He shows this by talking about the manna God gave the Israelites in the wilderness. Sure, the manna sustained them day by day. However, it eventually failed them, and every one of them finally died. Jesus wants to give something far greater than manna. He wants to give us Himself—the true Bread from heaven that allows a person to eat and live forever.

That was more than the crowds were willing to accept. They were offended when He said His flesh was that bread. Jesus knew they were upset. Yet rather than backing off, He turned up the heat and pushed even harder, “Truly, truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.” Many in the crowds rejected His terms, turned away and stopped following Him.

What do you think Jesus did? Do you picture Him running after them, calling them back? Not the King of Israel, He stands firm as the multitudes walk away into the darkness. In time even more will abandon Him. Soon He will hang alone on the cross in the darkness, but He will stand firm to the end to save us.

Every human who encounters the King of kings through the Gospel reaches this fork in the road. Repent and believe in Jesus and you will live with Him in heaven forever. Turn away in unbelief and you will die forever.

THE PRAYER: Holy Lord, empower me to set aside my hesitation and follow You in faith. Amen.

HIDDEN DARKNESS
2nd Sunday in Lent, March 20, 2011

Read John 6:66-71.

TEXT: “Jesus answered them, ‘Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil’” (John 6:70).

In sadness Jesus watched the crowds turn and walk away. Now He turns to His twelve chosen disciples and asks if they want to leave too. The Lord won’t force them to stay at His side; He won’t force you and me to stay either.

Peter answers, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that You are the Holy One of God.” The Holy Spirit led Peter to this great confession.

But Jesus knew Peter wasn’t speaking for every one of the disciples. He knew all too well that one of them had turned away, even though he was still standing by Jesus’ side. None of the other disciples was aware, but Judas had secretly rejected Jesus’ Kingdom of light and allied himself with the prince of darkness. The darkness had so deceived Judas he thought Jesus would never know what was in his heart.

Judas’ darkness is in each of us too and can deceive us as thoroughly as it deceived him. On the outside we can be active in our churches. Yet deep in our hearts we may have grown cold to Jesus. It’s so easy to go through the motions of faith, while our hearts turn away to the darkness like Judas.

Jesus calls us to stop and examine the depths of our soul. Are we sincere in our faith, or are we servants of darkness going through the motions? It’s a matter of life and death and heaven and hell for us just as it was for Judas.

THE PRAYER: Holy Spirit, remove all that is false and impure from my heart, and fill me with the fire of faith in Jesus Christ my Savior. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

THE HIGH PRIESTLY PRAYER
Thursday, April 14, 2011

Read John 17.

TEXT: “When Jesus had spoken these words, He lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son that the Son may glorify You’” (John 17:1).

Jesus has finished His Last Supper and offers a special prayer before leading His disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane. We call it the High Priestly Prayer because Jesus our great High Priest offers prayers for Himself, His apostles, and all who believe in Him.

Jesus first prays that God the Father would glorify Himself through Jesus’ coming death. The Roman cross was never connected with glory; it was a symbol of shame and dishonor. St. Paul would call it a “stumbling block to the Jews” and “foolishness to the Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:22). The Jews stumbled over the idea that God would let His own Son suffer and die on a cross, rather than sit in glory on a throne. The Gentiles thought it foolishness that you could receive salvation through someone else’s execution.

Jesus prays to His Father to keep His eleven disciples in His Name. He is about to leave this world, so He asks the Father to keep them in faith, that believing they may share the one true Gospel, which brings salvation by God’s grace through faith for Jesus’ sake.

The final part of Jesus’ prayer touches us, and all who have heard and believed the words of the apostles. May we glorify Him by trusting in Jesus as our only Savior from our sin and death, and tell others of His great and incomparable love.

THE PRAYER: Lord God, as You glorified Your Son Jesus Christ through His death and resurrection, keep us in Your Name through this true faith, and bless us to share it with all those around us. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL
Wednesday, April 13, 2011

Read John 16:16-24.

TEXT: (Jesus said) "... 'You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy'" (John 16:20b).

The disciples' heads are spinning at everything Jesus has said to them at His Last Supper. Now He tells them, "A little while, and you will see Me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see Me." They want to know what He means, but are afraid to ask; maybe they're more afraid to hear the answer He would give.

But it shouldn't be a mystery. For months Jesus has told them what will happen in Jerusalem. He warned them He would be handed over, beaten, scourged and crucified. He told them He would die and on the third day rise again. Now all His predictions are about to come true. They will be sorrowful, but their sorrow will turn to joy.

The disciples aren't all that different from us. All of us would prefer to see joy and happiness all through our earthly lives, and none of us is too happy when sorrow, grief, weeping and lamenting come around. We try so hard to deny those things will happen to us, that we miss the tremendous comfort in Jesus' promise of the resurrection.

Jesus has died and risen again. He promises to come again to restore this fallen creation, and to change our mortal bodies so they will be glorious, immortal and eternally perfect. That fact of Jesus' resurrection coupled with His promise to give us new eternal life at His return can give us a lasting joy that no one can take away—no matter what sorrow and loss we suffer in this our earthly life.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for Your victory over our sin, death and hell. Thank You for the promise Your resurrection brings—eternal life with You. Amen.

SILENT FEAR
Monday, March 21, 2011

Read John 7:1-13.

TEXT: "After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He would not go about in Judea, because the Jews were seeking to kill Him" (John 7:1).

Even though the crowds thin around Jesus, He won't stop preaching and sharing the Gospel. He remains in the north in Galilee, avoiding the southern region and Jerusalem where the Jewish leaders are waiting to kill Him.

But His brothers notice this and think He is being unwise. If He wants to make a name for Himself He needs to go to Jerusalem where He will actually have an audience. At first glance it sounds like they are really interested in His ministry and want Him to succeed. But then we read John's comment, "Not even His brothers believed in Him."

Jesus remains behind when they leave for the festival. It must be surprising to the crowds when Jesus doesn't show up at the Feast of Tabernacles. Each day they come to the temple expecting Him, but He is nowhere to be seen. The people wonder and whisper about Him. Some say He is a good man; others think He is misleading the people. But no one speaks openly for fear of the Jewish religious authorities.

Do you have the courage to speak of Jesus in your family and among your friends and coworkers? As we will see, many of the people who saw Jesus' great miracles and heard His powerful words were more afraid of losing their place in society than of displeasing the God who will be their Judge on the Last Day. For this sin, too, Jesus is on His way to the cross for our salvation.

THE PRAYER: Lord, help me to see You with new eyes this Lent so that Your light may shine through the darkness of my mind. Give me courage to speak of Your great salvation with boldness, joy and confidence. Amen.

JUDGING BY APPEARANCE **Tuesday, March 22, 2011**

Read John 7:14-24.

TEXT: (Jesus said) "... 'Why do you seek to kill Me?'" (John 7:19b).

The darkness of unbelief hangs like a thick blanket over the temple grounds. For the first half of the festival it looks as though the darkness has driven away the Light—Jesus is nowhere to be seen. But midway through the festival He steps into the temple courts and begins shining His light for all to see. Jesus immediately addresses the reason He stayed away for the first half of the festival. He asks the religious leaders why they want to kill Him for doing a good deed.

Unaware that Jesus is talking to the Jewish leaders, the crowd thinks He is talking to them. Since they aren't seeking His death and are unaware of their leaders' thoughts, they reach a false conclusion: they accuse Him of being demon possessed!

When He hangs from the cross they will reach another false conclusion: Jesus was a fake and God is using the cross to show the world Jesus of Nazareth is not His Son. They will have no idea God is giving His only-begotten Son to die for the sins of the whole world.

Judging by appearances and jumping to conclusions is something we often do too. We are offended by our neighbor, so we condemn him before we even learn his reasons. Jesus warns, "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment."

Stop a moment and reconsider Jesus Christ. Did you start this Lenten season thinking of Jesus as only being meek and humble? Have you begun to see His strength, commitment and courage? Stick around, because as Jesus once told Nathanael, "... You will see greater things than these" (John 1:50b).

THE PRAYER: Father, forgive me for judging by appearances. Open my eyes to see Your Son as He is—my powerful Lord and Savior. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

TROUBLED HEARTS **Tuesday, April 12, 2011**

Read John 13:36-14:7.

TEXT: (Jesus said) "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in Me" (John 14:1).

What a confusing, depressing night! Their Lord and Master washes their feet like a slave; He tells them the unthinkable that one of them will betray Him. Then Jesus tells Peter, the boldest of the Twelve, that this very night, before the rooster crows at sunrise, Peter will deny knowing Him. What a confusing, depressing night! Looking around at His disciples, Jesus knows just how troubled and shaken they are.

He knows how we get shaken up too. He knows the circumstances that crush us, problems that confound us, and the pressures that weigh on us. Yet through it all He is always at our side. Jesus tells us to turn our eyes away from our problems and focus our attention on Him. Believe in God the Father and believe also in Jesus. He assures us that we will not always live in this world of hurt, pain and sorrow, but He is preparing a safe, joyous and wonderful place for us to live with Him forever.

We know where we are going because Jesus is the Way to heaven. He came to this earth not to be our example to guide us to heaven by our good living, but to earn heaven for us by His perfect life, innocent death and glorious resurrection. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Perhaps these devotions find you or someone you love drawing near to death. In the midst of our sorrows, fears and anxieties when we focus on Jesus His mighty word calms our fears and stills our hearts.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, bring peace to my troubled heart and mind, and give me the Spirit that I may believe in You always. Amen.

THE BETRAYER

Monday, April 11, 2011

Read John 13:21-30.

TEXT: (Jesus said) "... Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me" (John 13:21b).

"One of you will betray Me." Judas must be totally shocked by Jesus' words. One by one the disciples ask a question that floats around the table. With rising suspense Judas watches the question work its way around the table to him—and he even joins his voice to theirs: "Is it I, Lord?"

If Judas' voice didn't give him away, what Jesus does next will make it crystal clear. He dips the morsel of bread and hands it directly to Judas.

Have you ever stopped to think about how Jesus turned the tables on Judas? At this moment the betrayer is at the mercy of the One he was going to betray. Jesus holds Judas in the palm of His hand. With a word Jesus can betray Judas to the other disciples, who are armed with a not a few swords. Jesus is in complete control; He can betray Judas. Instead, our Lord sends His betrayer on his way: "What you are going to do, do quickly." As Judas rushes out from the danger, the other disciples have no idea what Jesus means.

Which one of us hasn't betrayed another—gossiping secrets that should never have been shared or exposing another's shame just to flatter our own self-righteous pride? How often have we in effect handed Jesus' over to His enemies by our sinful actions or our silence?

Judas walked out into the darkness. But in this same darkness Jesus will still reach out to him one last time when Judas leads the soldiers into the Garden of Gethsemane to arrest Him. Jesus still reaches out to you and me with hands that bear the mark of the nails.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, Your steadfast love is amazing to me. Keep reaching out to bring me back from my sins. Amen.

A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE

Wednesday, March 23, 2011

Read John 7:25-32.

TEXT: "... When the Christ appears, no one will know where He comes from" (John 7:27b).

Some of the Jerusalem folks think Jesus is paranoid. Others won't even consider whether He might be the promised Messiah. Why? Because He is from Nazareth, and no one is supposed to know where the Messiah comes from. The funny thing is this: they *don't* know. Jesus only grew up in Nazareth; He was born in Bethlehem. But Jesus is the eternal Son of God who came down from heaven and was born in Bethlehem to save us. Using their little knowledge, they are content to write Jesus off and live in the darkness of their thinking.

Being content with a little knowledge is dangerous. Consider those who are content to know Jesus was born at Christmas and died on a cross, but that's all they care to know. They don't know that He lived and died to save them from God's wrath and rose again to give them eternal life.

We live in a time where people believe—and try hard to persuade *us* to believe—that reality is what we think it is. And what may be true for you isn't necessarily true for me. Once I am satisfied with my sense of reality I don't have to dig any deeper.

Being content with a little knowledge is not just a dangerous thing—it's deadly! Each of us is a sinner who needs God's salvation through Jesus Christ. He is the only Savior, the only way we can escape God's eternal wrath and live forever in heaven. This Lent God calls us to keep digging deeper and see the whole story of Jesus' suffering and death for our salvation.

THE PRAYER: Lord, forgive my being content with a shallow knowledge of My Savior. Open my mind to want to learn more. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

TIME IS RUNNING OUT
Thursday, March 24, 2011

Read John 7:33-44.

TEXT: “Jesus said, ‘I will be with you a little longer. ...’” (John 7:33a).

People are divided over Jesus. Some believe in Him. Others don't. Many are undecided. Jesus warns them to make up their mind: “I will be with you a little longer.”

I learned that lesson the hard way when I was 19. One Friday afternoon my boss handed me my paycheck on the way home. A couple hours later he collapsed at his bowling alley and died. My chance to talk to him, learn from him, and reach out to him was gone forever.

Soon Jesus will be gone. He will die on a cross and be buried. After three days He will rise again, but the vast majority will never see Him again—only a few select believers God will choose to be witnesses of His resurrection to the world.

The clock is ticking for us too. Each of us has only a limited amount of time before we die and our chance to find salvation through faith in Jesus Christ ends forever. But often we are content with the way life is going. Or we think it doesn't matter what you believe, God will be satisfied if you just try to live a good life.

But that is a false hope and a false comfort. God has provided only one way to save us, and that is through His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus satisfied God's holiness and justice by taking our sins on Himself and suffering and dying in our place on the cross. No one else could do it. Now is the time to come to Him and walk in His light.

THE PRAYER: Lord, draw me to You while there is still time. Shine in my life that others may turn to the Light of the world, while they still have time. Amen.

WASHING AN UNCLEAN DISCIPLE
5th Sunday in Lent, April 10, 2011

Read John 13:1-20.

TEXT: “... (Jesus said) ‘You are clean, but not every one of you.’ ...” (John 13:10b).

Jesus has preached His last message to the crowds. Now He spends one final night before His suffering and death with His disciples in the upper room, preparing them for what is about to happen.

In the middle of supper Jesus does something totally unexpected. Taking off His outer garments He goes around the table washing the disciples' feet one by one, the way the lowliest slave in the household would. It is a demonstration of His absolute humility, love and care—a demonstration He will repeat for the whole world the next day on the cross.

For Peter it is too much. He objects and receives a firm correction from Jesus: “If I do not wash you, you have no share with Me.” Then Peter goes to the other extreme asking Jesus to wash all of him. Jesus points out that the one who has had a bath does not need to bathe again, only to wash the part of him that is unclean.

Jesus is pointing to Judas, the one who has abandoned his Lord and become unclean and is even now awaiting the chance to betray Him. The other eleven are forgiven, cleansed of their sins because they still walk in the light by faith; Judas has rejected that light and walks in darkness. Very gently Jesus reaches out to His lost disciple in an unforgettable demonstration of His love, forgiveness and acceptance. It's a demonstration He wants Judas to remember when he is gripped by guilt and remorse for what he is about to do.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, forgive my wandering heart. Help me to see Your great love for me and remember what You have done to save me. Amen.

HOW CAN THE CHRIST BE LIFTED UP? Saturday, April 9, 2011

Read John 12:33-50.

TEXT: (Jesus said) “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself” (John 12:32).

The crowds are confused. Jesus has told them He will be “lifted up,” and they know exactly what He means. Being “lifted up from the earth” was a familiar phrase describing death on a cross. But they all know the Christ remains forever, so how can Jesus be the Christ if He will die on a cross?

It’s easy for us to share that confusion too. God’s light doesn’t always make sense to our sin-darkened minds. Jesus simply tells them, “The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you.” Satan is always trying to overtake us, trying to snatch away the light from us.

One of the tools he uses is the confusing things that happen in this life, things that don’t always make sense to us. Often our search for answers leads us to question God and doubt His love. Jesus just encourages us to walk in Him. He invites us to lay those questions at the foot of His cross, to focus instead on the extent of His love for us. It’s a love that moved Him to lay down His life in terrible suffering that we might be forgiven.

We don’t understand every reason for everything that happens to us. And we won’t always find all the answers to all our questions, but we don’t have to. We only need to walk in Christ’s light and keep looking to Him. At the right time He will make everything clear.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, I don’t always understand the things I see around me. Help me to come to Your Son’s cross, that there I may know Your love and receive Your strength. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

CAN’T TAKE A HINT Friday, March 25, 2011

Read John 7:32, 45-52.

TEXT: “They (the Pharisees) replied, ‘Are You from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee’” (John 7:52).

The Jewish leaders hear the crowds wondering if Jesus might be the Messiah. They decide it’s time to act. So they send the temple guards to arrest Him. But it isn’t Jesus’ time yet. Impressed by the authority of Jesus’ words the guards return empty handed. The Light will keep shining a little while longer in the darkness.

Jesus is trying to break through the darkness of the Jewish authorities through their temple guard. If these men are willing to listen to Jesus, perhaps the chief priests and Pharisees will follow their example. But the leaders harden their hearts and accuse the guard of being deceived like the crowds who must be under a curse.

If they won’t listen to the guards, perhaps they will listen to one of their own. Nicodemus speaks up. He suggests they give Jesus a fair hearing rather than blindly condemning Him. Instead, they turn on him with two exaggerations. First, they claim none of the authorities believe in Him—though at least Nicodemus does. Second, they claim no prophet ever came from Galilee, but they overlook Jonah who was from Galilee. They attempt to close ranks against Jesus through intimidation and lies.

We often plant our heels in the sand and refuse to budge no matter what anyone might say, no matter what the church might say, no matter what God’s Word might say. But Jesus suffered and died for our stubbornness just as He did for all our other sins.

God continues to work through His Word and Sacrament to break through our persistent unbelief and move us to understand and accept the truth.

THE PRAYER: Lord, forgive my stubborn pride, and move me to true, sincere faith. Amen.

CAUGHT IN THE ACT
Saturday, March 26, 2011

Read John 8:1-11.

TEXT: "... 'Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do You say?'" (John 8:4b-5).

Unable to arrest Jesus in front of the crowds, His enemies look for a chance to turn those crowds against Him. They bring a woman caught in adultery and set their trap, "Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do You say?" Certainly the crowd is ready for a stoning. Jesus will lose popularity if He stands in the way.

Jesus answers them. "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." He was the only one qualified to be her Judge, the only one who has the right to throw that first stone. One by one they drop their stones and walk away.

Jesus tells her, "Go and from now on sin no more." She can walk away unpunished because He has taken her guilt and sin upon Himself, along with the punishment she deserves from God for that sin. She goes away free while He prepares to suffer in her place on the cross.

We don't like to admit it, but each of us is a sinner like that woman. God catches us in every single one of our sins, and we deserve something far worse than being stoned to death. We deserve the fires of hell under the wrath of God.

But Jesus Christ steps forward to take our condemnation on Himself and pay the full price for our sins as He suffers and dies on the cross. On Judgment Day we will walk away free. He will not condemn us either.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You set me free by being condemned in my place. Help me show true gratitude by forgiving others and sharing Your salvation with them. Amen.

MY SOUL IS TROUBLED
Friday, April 8, 2011

Read John 12:27-33.

TEXT: (Jesus said) "'Now is My soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour'" (John 12:27).

Jesus has just told His disciples why He has come to Jerusalem: He is to suffer and die for the world. But the thought is not easy for Jesus to face. He says, "Now is My soul troubled." We see that turmoil again when He falls on His face in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (see Luke 22).

Here He prays, "Father, glorify Your Name." He doesn't ask the Father to save Him from the cross but to use His suffering and death on the cross to glorify His Name. He wants people to look at the cross and believe that "God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son." In Gethsemane God will send an angel to strengthen His Son, but here He speaks to Jesus. "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."

We all come face to face with overwhelming situations and struggles in life—heartbreak and loss, grief beyond telling, the shadow of death—whether our own or that of a loved one.

Jesus has come to this hour in His life to be the answer to the overwhelming situations in each of our lives. He will be raised up to draw all men to Himself. This was done so that in Jesus Christ each of us might find the answer to our problems, the courage for the trials we face and the victory over Satan who brought all these situations upon us through his temptation.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, You glorified Your Name in the sufferings of Your beloved Son Jesus Christ. Glorify Your Name through me as You give me strength and courage to face the difficult times in my life. I pray in Jesus' Name. Amen.

KEEP THIS LIFE OR LOSE IT?

Thursday, April 7, 2011

Read John 12:20-26.

TEXT: “And Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit’” (John 12:23-24).

Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph. The disciples were convinced He was about to establish His throne in Jerusalem, so Jesus had to teach them a tough lesson.

Christ Jesus stood alone, the only man whose life on this earth was perfect and worthy of earning heaven. But unless He died on the cross in our place He would remain alone, and we would all perish eternally in hell. By dying in our place, taking our sins on Himself and paying the full price God’s justice demanded, Jesus would save us all, and open wide the gates of heaven.

Our earthly life is similar in many ways. If we wish to selfishly save our earthly life, we will lose it. But if we hate our earthly life in comparison, longing for that better, heavenly life, we will keep it for eternity. Thankfully, Jesus leads the way for us. He did not love His earthly life so much that He was not willing to lay it down on the cross. No, He was looking forward to a better, eternal life with us—a life made possible only through His suffering, death and resurrection.

It’s a good time for us as individuals to stop and examine our attitudes toward our lives, as well as our willingness to leave them all behind for Jesus and the eternal life He gives.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, thank You for offering us eternal life through Your Son Jesus Christ. Help us all to hate this life in this dark, sinful world that we may keep our lives eternally in Your light. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

DIE IN YOUR SINS

3rd Sunday in Lent, March 27, 2011

Read John 8:12-30.

TEXT: “Again Jesus spoke to them saying, ‘I am the Light of the world.’ ...” (John 8:12a).

Jesus’ enemies want Him dead. Has He pressed too hard? Is it time to lighten up or compromise to find common ground? No! Jesus knows there is only one way for them to be saved. So He presses even harder. He declares, “I am the Light of the world.”

Instead of backing down Jesus draws a line in the sand and says, “Whoever follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” But to those who reject Him, He says, “I am going away, and you will seek Me, and you will die in your sin.”

Their hearts should be stirred, but instead they stubbornly refuse to listen. In idle curiosity they ask each other if Jesus’ talk of “going away” means He will kill Himself. Jesus answers, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, you will know that I am He.”

When they lift Him up and nail Him to the cross, they will know who He is. The miraculous signs at His death: the darkness, the earthquake, the torn curtain in the temple and His glorious resurrection will make it clear to them that Jesus is the mighty Son of God, the promised Messiah.

Which side of the line are you walking on? Are you truly walking in the light of Christ or the darkness of this unbelieving world? Jesus warns all of us that our time is short. Don’t wait for tomorrow. Today is the day to live in Christ through faith, rather than die in your sins.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, bring me out of the darkness of my sin to the light of Your Son Jesus Christ. I pray in His Name. Amen.

TIGHTENING THE SCREWS

Monday, March 28, 2011

Read John 8:31-45.

TEXT: (Jesus said) “You are of your father the devil.’ ...” (John 8:44a).

Jesus stands firm. But His enemies are standing firm too. The only way He can save them is by bringing them out of their darkness into His light. So Jesus first offers a promise, then He tightens the screws.

He begins with the promise, “If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” But in pride and arrogance they claim they are already free. So Jesus explains their true condition, “Everyone who sins is a slave to sin.” They just aren’t getting it. So, slowly, Jesus knocks each prop of self-righteousness out from under them.

They claim to be Abraham’s children, but they are not because Abraham would have welcomed Him, not seek to kill Him as they are.

They claim God is their father, but if they were God’s children they would love Him and receive Him as God’s Son.

There is only one reason why they cannot stomach what Jesus is saying: their father isn’t God; their father is the devil! Just as he murdered Adam and Eve by his lies, and brought darkness and death on all God’s good creation, so are they now seeking to murder Jesus— God’s only begotten Son.

How could Jesus have been any more clear and to the point? Their thoughts and desires, their words and their deeds were making that very clear. And what about us? Jesus asks you and me to examine our thoughts, attitudes, words and actions. Do they look more like God or like Satan? Who is your father?

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, I was born a child of Satan through my sinful nature, but You gave me new birth as Your child in Baptism. By Your Spirit empower me to live as Your child and love what You command. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

OUT OF CONTROL

Wednesday, April 6, 2011

Read John 12:12-19.

TEXT: “So the Pharisees said to one another, ‘You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the whole world has gone after Him” (John 12:19).

The great Festival of Passover is near. Huge crowds make their way across the countryside toward Jerusalem, and our Lord Jesus enters Jerusalem in triumph, riding on a donkey.

The Pharisees throw up their hands in fear and frustration. They say to each other “You see that you are gaining nothing.” The situation is totally out of control. But again they will not stop to consider Jesus’ claims. They only react in frustration and fear of what Jesus might do with the huge Passover crowds gathering around Him in Jerusalem.

It is fascinating to compare their reaction to that of the crowds. The crowds cry out to Jesus, “Hosanna,” which means “help” or “save.” And they are right. The Lord Jesus is the mighty Son of God, who has come to battle Satan, sin, death and hell. He alone can save us from our bitter enemies.

As we begin this week of Jesus’ suffering and death for our sins, we notice He is completely in control. We will notice He is in control through this entire week—clear up to and including His arrest, trials and crucifixion.

That’s important to remember when we look at our own lives. Often we are as fearful and frustrated as the Pharisees, realizing situations in our lives are totally out of control. We can throw up our hands like the Pharisees, or call upon Jesus as the crowds do, remembering that Jesus is still in control, sitting at the right hand of the Father and guiding all things for our good.

THE PRAYER: Lord, please help and save us, especially when circumstances are at their worst and totally out of our control. Remind us that they are never beyond Your control. Amen.

ANOINTED FOR BURIAL
Tuesday, April 5, 2011

Read John 12:1-8.

TEXT: “Jesus said, ‘Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have Me’” (John 12:7-8).

Mary is very grateful to Jesus. She has heard His wonderful words and received her brother Lazarus back from death. As her family gathers around the table with Jesus and His disciples for dinner, she pours an expensive ointment over Jesus’ feet and wipes it with her hair.

Her generosity should be an inspiration for Jesus’ disciples. But it only stirs the darkness in Judas. He complains how the ointment was worth nearly a year’s wages and that the money should have gone to the poor instead. But Jesus stands up in her defense. He boldly commands Judas to leave her alone. She has done this to honor Him, and the scent of that perfume will linger on His body throughout His trials, crucifixion and burial in the coming days.

Do we have Mary’s tremendous sense of gratitude and love for our Lord? Do we really appreciate what He has done for us, what He has given to us, and the promise of a glorious future because of Him?

How striking to compare Mary’s devotion with that of Judas—who has replaced his devotion to Jesus with a love for money. For, as John tells us, Judas had no intention of helping the poor with that money. He only wanted to get his hands on it—as he had stolen money from the disciples’ moneybag many times before. Sadly, in the next few days he will do far worse for a much smaller amount of money.

THE PRAYER: Holy Spirit, stir up in my heart true love, gratitude and appreciation for all Jesus has done for me. I pray in Jesus’ Name. Amen.

WHOSE CHILDREN ARE WE?
Tuesday, March 29, 2011

Read John 8:45-59.

TEXT: “So they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple” (John 8:59).

Now the crowd could prove whether they were truly children of God as they claimed, or children of the devil as Jesus had said. Would they come running to the Savior for forgiveness and life, or cling to the dark lies of Satan? John tells us their grim decision: “they picked up stones to throw at Him.”

You and I go to church and in Baptism God made us His very own children. But how often do we live as if we weren’t? How attentive are we when we hear or read Jesus’ words? How closely do we follow Him in our words and actions? Are we willing to pray “Your will be done?” or do we only want to accept Jesus on our own terms? Are we as quick to turn on Him as the crowds were?

Jesus miraculously hides Himself and leaves the temple grounds. The time for His death is drawing near, but He will not die at the hands of an angry mob under a pile of rocks at the temple. He will be dragged outside of the city at the hands of the Roman soldiers and nailed to a cross.

Even today Jesus’ words often bring a violent reaction. If we are walking in darkness we are not always excited to hear the truth. But Christ promises to wash away our sins and restore us in faith. He will guard and protect us and finally bring us to our eternal home where we will always walk in His light.

THE PRAYER: Lord, give courage to all Your faithful people who bring Your light into our dark world. Empower me to turn from the darkness and share my faith as You guide and protect me. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

DIVIDED
Wednesday, March 30, 2011

Read John 9:1-16.

TEXT: “Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for He does not keep the Sabbath.’ But others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner do such things?’ And there was a division among them” (John 9:16).

Leaving the temple grounds Jesus passes through Jerusalem. Along the way His disciples point out a man born blind. They ask if his blindness is a result of his parents’ sin or his own. Jesus rejects both claims, and says this man was born blind so the works of God may be displayed in him. Then Jesus gave the man sight.

When word reaches the Pharisees there is a sharp division among them. Some immediately reject Jesus because He healed on the Sabbath day. Blinded by their tradition they are unable to see God’s great purpose for the Sabbath—to let people rest from their labors and let God work in their lives. Others realize the magnitude of the work Jesus has done. Like Nicodemus before (see John 3), they know no sinful man could perform such a mighty miracle. So a division arises among the Pharisees.

Jesus continues to divide people today. Some listen to His words, consider His miracles and are led by the Holy Spirit to the certain faith that He is God’s Son, the Savior of the world. Others ignore the plain truth and take issue with the way Jesus taught and the demands they think He makes on their lives. They doubt His relevance and prefer to live their lives their own way.

God grant us His Holy Spirit to know Jesus as God’s Son, our only Savior and Lord, and to follow Him through all.

THE PRAYER: Spirit of God, strengthen my faith in Jesus Christ my Lord, and give me firm confidence when others are divided over Him. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

ONE MAN MUST DIE
Monday, April 4, 2011

Read John 11:45-57.

TEXT: “But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.’ ... So from that day on they made plans to put Him to death” (John 11:49-50, 53).

In Lazarus’ resurrection on the fourth day, Jesus performed an undeniable miracle greater and more widely known than healing a man born blind. Since this miracle took place near Jerusalem word spread quickly, which the Jewish leaders found to be particularly troubling. But they never stopped to ask if they might be wrong, if Jesus might possibly be the Christ.

They only knew many people were seeing Lazarus and believing in Jesus. Gathering their Council together, they searched for some kind of answer—something they could do to stop the madness.

Finally, the high priest broke through it all. He alone seemed to realize there was only one solution: Jesus must die. If Jesus continued living, the entire nation would be destroyed. And from that moment on, the Jewish leaders sought Jesus’ death.

But God had long ago reached that same decision. In fact, John tells us that Caiaphas did not say this on his own, but the Holy Spirit inspired him to say it. It was the truth. If Jesus would not die on the cross for the sins of the world, then the entire Jewish nation would be destroyed, and with it you and me and all people. If this one man died, then all of us could live.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, what amazing humility You showed in being willing to be put to death to save me and all people. Give Your Church true faith and gratitude that we may tell Your story to all people. Amen.

OUR RESURRECTION AND LIFE
4th Sunday in Lent, April 3, 2011

Read John 11:1-44.

TEXT: “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?’” (John 11:25-26).

Jesus is about to do one of His greatest miraculous signs. He receives a frantic message to come to Lazarus who is gravely ill. But Jesus remains where He is. His disciples think Jesus is avoiding Jerusalem where the crowds had tried to stone Him a short time ago. But Jesus waits two days before finally heading out for Bethany, a small village near Jerusalem. Thomas tells his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with Him.”

Jesus finally arrives after Lazarus has been dead four days. Martha says, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.” But Jesus had a reason for His delay. Jewish rabbis believed a person’s soul hovered over the body for three days, and then finally departed when decomposition set in. By waiting for the fourth day, Jesus would be performing a miracle none of the Jewish leaders could deny.

Sometimes we get confused by the struggles in our life. Like Martha we plead with the Lord to help, but when we need Him most He seems to delay, or not to hear. But Jesus has a purpose and a plan for everything He does for us.

Jesus told Martha “I am the resurrection and the life.” Jesus proved that by raising Lazarus from the dead—and by His own resurrection on the third day. When we are discouraged, beaten down and depressed, we can look to Jesus and know our future is secure.

THE PRAYER: Lord, give me confidence in Your victory during the dark days when I need You the most. Amen.

RELUCTANT WITNESSES
Thursday, March 31, 2011

Read John 9:13, 18-23.

TEXT: “... For the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue” (John 9:22b).

“We don’t know!” What a puzzling response! Have these parents forgotten their disappointment when they first learned their son could not see? Now he stands before them seeing perfectly! But when they are asked to testify they refuse. It seems they would have preferred for their son to have remained blind than for Jesus to have given him sight.

What caused this silence? Mom and dad felt more fear of the threats of the Jewish leaders than gratitude for what Jesus had given their son. They wanted to keep their place in the synagogue and knew they risked being thrown out if they spoke up about Jesus. So they pushed their son back into the witness stand and refused to speak up.

How often are we ruled by fear—fear of the condemnation of our enemies, of the judgment of acquaintances, of the rejection of our friends or family members? How often do we fear being excluded, ridiculed or worse?

How can we stand up to those fears? It is possible only by the power of the Holy Spirit strengthening us and shoring us up against these pressures. That is why God has given you a church family, to encourage and strengthen you, to build you up in His Word and Sacrament.

The opposition we face is just as real as that which they faced. Jesus would continue to stand up to that opposition and hatred—all the way to the cross and the empty tomb. He suffered and died at the hands of His enemies and rose again in victory that we might live with Him forever.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, give me courage and strength to stand up against Your enemies and boldly declare my faith in a hostile world. Amen.

**AM I BLIND?
Friday, April 1, 2011**

Read John 9:24-41.

TEXT: “Jesus said, ‘For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind’” (John 9:39).

Over and over again Jesus’ light shone over the people around Him through His words and His countless miracles. But the Jewish leaders refused to see. Despite a thorough investigation into Jesus’ healing of the man born blind, they can find no way to disprove the miracle. Still, they refuse to believe the evidence right before them.

But Jesus isn’t ready to give up on them yet. If they won’t accept the evidence, maybe they will listen to the man who had been healed. In eloquent testimony the man told them, “If this man were not from God, He could do nothing.” But again, they stubbornly refuse to see the light and answer, “You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?” Then they threw out the man born blind.

Hearing that he had been thrown out, Jesus found him and revealed Himself to him. Jesus told those around Him that He came to give sight to the blind, and blindness to those who see. Some Pharisees heard Him say this and asked if they were blind. Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains.”

That is a terrifying thought. These Jewish leaders had seen overwhelming evidence time and again that Jesus is the promised Savior, God’s Son, yet they refused to believe. How much evidence have we seen? How many Bible readings have we heard in services? How many times have we received Holy Communion? Do we believe?

THE PRAYER: Lord, You know the darkness within each of us, take away my blindness and help me see Jesus clearly through the eyes of faith. Amen.

**DON’T CALL ME A SHEEP!
Saturday, April 2, 2011**

Read John 10:11-39.

TEXT: (Jesus said) “I am the Good Shepherd. I know My own and My own know Me.” ... “and I lay down My life for the sheep” (John 10:14, 15b).

In today’s reading Jesus identifies Himself as our Good Shepherd. This, of course, means that we are like sheep. That automatically says two things about us: we are helpless creatures, and we have powerful enemies against which we are defenseless. But are the crowds willing to admit this—that they need Jesus to be their shepherd?

Jesus tells them He will freely lay down His life to save them from their enemies. He will lay it down on Good Friday when He is nailed to the cross and gives up His life for the sins of the world. But He will take it up again on the third day when He rises in glorious victory.

The crowds hear this great news, and find themselves divided yet again! Some say He has a demon, or He is insane. But others, thinking how Jesus healed the man born blind, ask, “Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”

Jesus made some very bold statements about Himself and the work He came to do. Few are as powerful or as comforting as these words. Jesus Christ has been pleased to take us as His very own sheep, and will guard us, protect us, lead us to good pasture, care for us in body and soul and finally lead us through death to life everlasting.

Jesus stretches out His hand to you today. If you are His sheep, listen to His voice, He will protect you from all enemies and guide you safely home to paradise. He promises that nothing can snatch you out of His hands.

THE PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for offering to hold me firmly and safely in Your hands. Let me never wander away in unbelief. Amen.