

My Song Is Love Unknown



"My Song Is Love Unknown" ELW 343

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| 1 | My song is love unknown,
my Savior's love to me,
love to the loveless shown
that they might lovely be.
Oh, who am I that for my sake
my Lord should take frail flesh and die? | 4 | We cry out; we will have
our dear Lord made away,
a murderer to save,
the prince of life to slay.
Yet cheerful he to suff'ring goes
that he his foes from thence might free. |
| 2 | He came from his blest throne
salvation to bestow;
the world that was his own
would not its Savior know.
But, oh, my friend, my friend indeed,
who at my need his life did spend! | 5 | In life no house, no home
my Lord on earth might have;
in death no friendly tomb
but what a stranger gave.
What may I say? Heav'n was his home
but mine the tomb wherein he lay. |
| 3 | Sometimes we strew his way
and his sweet praises sing;
resounding all the day
hosannas to our king.
Then "Crucify!" is all our breath,
and for his death we thirst and cry. | 6 | Here might I stay and sing—
no story so divine!
Never was love, dear King,
never was grief like thine.
This is my friend, in whose sweet praise
I all my days could gladly spend! |

Text: Samuel Crossman, 1624–83, alt.

Wednesday, March 2

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

On this Ash Wednesday, may God's gracious love guide us into Lent and deeper trust as we follow Jesus. Our faith practices are not about us or what others might think. Jesus commands us to practice our faith in ways that focus on God, not ourselves. Jesus calls us to share our practices with God.

The first year I imposed ashes in an Ash Wednesday service as a pastor, I marked the sign of the cross on the forehead of a favorite youth. The moment was jarring. Marking the newborn child of friends surprised me with a harsh law about life. Later, surprised with emotion, I struggled to say the words to someone living with a terminal illness, "Remember you are dust, and to dust, you shall return."

In all our brokenness and finitude we do have a prayer to speak.

Dear God, today we hear your command to repent and turn toward you. Empower us to intensify our struggle against communal and personal forms of sin. Deepen our trust in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Thursday, March 3

Romans 10:8b–13

Our lesson for today is full of commands and promises. Its commands are blunt: Confess and trust. The promises are sweet. You will be justified and saved.

We confess that we regularly get stuck following false gods and the gospels of this broken world. In these days of Lent, we are reminded, "Jesus is Lord!" This greater confession matters more than all our sins.

Confess and trust. We have a trustworthy God. Our trustworthy Lord Jesus' words and actions reveal the heart of our gracious God. In response to God's undeserved love, we sing out our lives as hymns of praise. We pray that our voices and our actions form a sweet doxology. We sing with joy, trusting and confessing that "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Dear Lord God, you are the "Lord of all and generous to all who call on you." Inspire us to trust and follow Jesus. Amen.

Friday, March 4

Luke 4:1–13

I struggle with many temptations. What are yours? Sometimes temptation attacks my trust in God. Sometimes temptation twists my needs and longings into idols that steal my love from God and neighbors.

The temptation of Christ makes me think of two petitions or requests in the Lord's Prayer: "Save us from the time of trial." Martin Luther explains in his Small Catechism: "We ask in this prayer that God would preserve and keep us, so that the devil, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins, and that, although we may be attacked by them, we may finally prevail and gain the victory."

Dear Lord, you faced temptations of many kinds. You know our lives. You see the temptations in our life and our life together. Some we know, and some we are not able to see. We trust that you will inspire, guide, and save us. Deliver us from evil. Amen.

Saturday, March 5

"My Song Is Love Unknown" (ELW 343)

Our theme hymn for Lent this year is "My Song Is Love Unknown."

This hymn tells two stories. The story of Jesus' ministry and passion intermingles with our story as humans.

The hymn lifts up the mystery of God's deep unknowable love that Jesus reveals. The hymn also shares the puzzling response of humans to the Good News of Jesus. How could Jesus love us so deeply and persistently when we are so messed up?

Humans never completely understand God. We trust that God continues to love, teach, heal, forgive, and work to transform our lives. Through Christ Jesus and the cross, we can comprehend what we need to know about God. Jesus takes our place even when we try to destroy him. Jesus loves us when we reject the Good News that God is for us.

Dear God, you know the ways we resist your will. We trust and praise you for your gracious love that we know most deeply in your Son, Jesus, and his cross. Amen.

Sunday, March 6

"My Song Is Love Unknown" (ELW 343)

Samuel Crossman's original hymn text included an additional verse between our third and fourth verse.

"Why, what hath my Lord done?
What makes this rage and spite?
He made the lame to run,
He gave the blind their sight,
Sweet injuries! Yet they at these
Themselves displease, and 'gainst Him rise."

The hymn author takes us into the story of Jesus. He points to the contrast between God's actions through Jesus and our actions in response.

We don't recognize our Savior. Jesus, God's Son, becomes human and is willing to die to save us.

Jesus, our King, leaves his powerful throne, but we can't see or comprehend what God is doing through him.

Fickle humans can praise God in one day and curse him the next. Christ's love is consistent and graceful.

Jesus heals people, yet the crowds then and we now respond to God's grace with rage, spite, or, maybe worst, indifference.

Dear God, transform our spite and rage. Inspire us to trust in wonder, gratitude, and praise for your Son's passionate and gracious love. Amen.

Monday, March 7

Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18

During the time I was writing these devotions, my 14-year-old nephew affirmed his faith through the rite of the Affirmation of Baptism. During the worship service, I was reminded that even though these young adults affirmed their faith by their own words and faith commitments, the affirmation of baptism is God at work.

Our reading today shows God at work in the life of Abram. God makes a covenant with Abram just as God made a covenant with my nephew. God forms a covenant with each one of us through the gift of the waters of baptism. As we trace the cross on our foreheads to remember this covenant, we are feeling the grooves of the mark already left there by God's promise to us.

God of creation and promise, thank you for claiming us as your children through the waters of baptism and promise. Amen.

Tuesday, March 8

Psalm 27

The beginning of this psalm may sound familiar. The words, “The Lord is my light and salvation; whom shall I fear?” are used by people of faith as a sign of confidence in God’s protection and care. In fact, some traditions refer to this psalm as “David’s Song of Confidence.”

However, there are times when we can’t genuinely speak these words, and our fear overtakes our confidence in God’s promises. At such moments, the stark reality is that confidence or certainty can feel like sand falling through our fingers.

We are now in the third Lenten season where we must continue to wrestle with a pandemic. We have learned that we cannot hold onto what we think to be true or what we predict may happen because tomorrow it may all change. This psalm gives us words by which we can anchor our hope in the shelter of the Lord. The fear we have, though real, is fleeting as we wait for the Lord and take courage, for the Lord is our light and salvation.

God of shelter and protection, though we may face many fears, your psalmist reminds us to take courage as we seek your refuge in the face of all that stands between us. Amen.

Wednesday, March 9

Philippians 3:17–4:1

As we journey in this second week of Lent, we are invited by Paul, through his letter to the Philippians, to reflect on the transformational power of Jesus Christ.

During my service in the Office of Admissions and now in the Office of Seminary Relations at Luther Seminary, I have had the honor of hearing about Christ’s everyday transformations in the lives of people of faith—people called to leadership in God’s church or to give of their resources for the sake of the gospel. In these shared stories, as Paul reminds us, we are the undeserving recipients of Christ’s action, citizens of heaven through the transforming power of Jesus Christ in our life.

During these days of Lent, I invite you to share your story of Christ’s transforming love and power with a friend, a neighbor, or someone open to listening. What is your story or stories of transformation through the power of Jesus Christ?

Christ our redeemer, you have gifted us with a story of transformation. Give us the courage to share our stories so others may hear of your love, grace, and transforming power. Amen.

Thursday, March 10

Luke 13:31–35

In our gospel reading for this week we see Jesus as a prophet who prepares us for his coming death in Jerusalem.

During these 40 days of Lent, we journey with Jesus to the cross with the privilege of knowing the ending. Let us imagine, if we are able, what it would be like for those journeying with Jesus without knowing the end. What would we make of these strange, cryptic messages? How long would we continue to follow Jesus as he heals, preaches, teaches, and communes with those on the fringes of society? At what point would we call to question his obsession with his impending death?

It may be impossible for us to fully imagine Jesus before his death and resurrection. However, in this season of reflection, let us take a few moments to be with Jesus, not of the gospels or of church tradition or doctrine. Let's be with the Jesus of Nazareth in all his divinity and all his humanness as he defies societal norms and loves unconditionally.

Jesus of Nazareth, you teach us to love unconditionally through your ministry and teaching. Forgive us when we fall short of service toward our neighbor. Amen.

Friday, March 11

Luke 13:31–35

We see a variety of emotions in Jesus in these few verses of this gospel reading. As he journeys to the cross, Jesus expresses his sadness at the betrayal of the city of Jerusalem and all that the city represents. Later, in Luke 19, Jesus reiterates his lament over a fallen city, just prior to his return to the temple where he turns over tables in anger and frustration.

The season of Lent is a journey through the life and emotions of Jesus. We are reminded that God, in the form of Jesus, makes this pilgrimage while facing and fully embodying all the emotions that we feel. As we continue to follow Jesus through the days of Lent, we are reminded of God's empathetic love. Our God chose to become human, and so we can know that our God knows and feels all of what it means to be human.

Jesus of all emotion, thank you for giving us the ability to feel. Help us to use our empathy to listen and love one another. Amen.

Saturday, March 12

"My Song Is Love Unknown" (ELW 343, Verse 1)

For the next few weeks, we have the opportunity to reflect on the words of Samuel Crossman's hymn, "My Song Is Love Unknown." Though I am not familiar with the music or history of this Lenten hymn, I am able to focus on its text.

I am immediately drawn to the message the author sounds through his linking use of the word "love." In the first four lines, we read the word "love" five times. Crossman sets up the overall message of the hymn by giving away the ending already at the beginning of his work.

Throughout the remaining weeks of Lent we will learn more about this love. As the writer goes on to reflect on love, we quickly learn, even at the end of this first verse, this is not the love of romantic comedies and Hollywood. This is a love that knows no bounds, a love that goes beyond feeling and sentiment. For this love is not something we can recreate, but it is given to us.

Holy Spirit and breath of life, you speak to us through your incomprehensible love. Give us the courage to listen for that voice of love that we may then love one another. Amen.

Sunday, March 13

"My Song Is Love Unknown" (ELW 343, Verse 1)

At Pilgrim Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, our children's sermon is fittingly called "Points for Pilgrims." At the end of each message, the preacher begins a call and response, "You are a dearly loved child of God," and the congregation (with the children) responds, "and so are you."

Whatever the origin of this tradition, these are powerful words, not to be disregarded.

Our Lenten hymn reflects on our deservedness of Christ's action on the cross for the sake of us and our broken world. It is a common sentiment of Lent to encourage us to ponder our shame and unworthiness of God's love and sacrifice. But even so, we can know that we are the dearly beloved children of God, and even in Lent feelings of unworthiness and shame must never get in the way of truly hearing this Good News. Christ's love is not a love of shame or guilt, but one of pure joy—freely given to all.

Triune God, thank you for calling us as dearly loved children of God. Let us hear those words as truth. Amen.

Monday, March 14

Isaiah 55:1–9

God is up to something, not just in our reading for today, but here in the present. The people of Israel are promised a new thing, a new beginning, a renewal of spirit. That promise still stands for us today. God is up to something right now.

As we enter this third season of Lent, still in the pandemic, I think we all are thirsting for something new. There is a calling to the water that is abundant. God is calling us to the water and will fulfill a new promise—one filled with hope and far greater than we could ever imagine. God's plans may not be our plans; God's thoughts are not our thoughts. God is up to something and that something is new and surprising. God is inviting us in. Will you join?

Holy God, invite us into your vision, and fill us with your promise. Bring your good news to us through word, song, and the actions of your people. In Christ, your Son, we pray. Amen.

Tuesday, March 15

Psalms 63:1–8

I think it is fair to say that at this point in a pandemic that has engulfed our world, our souls are longing for something more. When we look out into our communities there is an exhausted collective body looking back at us.

Our psalmist today is giving us a place to rest. Three different times in our text we hear from the depths of the soul. In verse 1, the psalmist cries, "My soul thirsts for you," and God is our sanctuary. In verse 5 we hear, "My soul is satisfied," and God's promise is abundant. In verse 8, "My soul clings to you," and God is our refuge. I know our souls are weary, but God is holding us up and piecing us together one day at a time. May today be a place of rest for your soul and tomorrow bring a new day of hope.

Holy God, be a refuge for our weary souls and bring us to the feast of your grace. Be our sanctuary in this storm and a place of rest for our souls. In Christ, your Son, we pray. Amen.

Wednesday, March 16

1 Corinthians 10:1–13

But what if I make a mistake? What if I fail? These are questions that we often ask ourselves, but they are also questions our seminary contextual learning office hears quite often from our students. Our response is often, "There is no failure, only failure to learn." Today's reading could be considered a cautionary tale of what happens when we fail to learn. We have learned of the mistakes of others throughout the Bible story and throughout history. We know of God's abundant grace and love and yet Paul's words seem to contradict it. Or do they?

What if God is giving us the courage and strength to face our mistakes and our failures? What if God is saying the way things are today is not how they will always be? What if we make a mistake and God's answer is, "I will catch you"?

God of grace and love, enfold us in your wisdom and point us in the pathway of truth and reconciliation. In our moments of uncertainty and in the times we feel we have failed, lift us up and guide our days. In Christ, your Son, we pray. Amen.

Thursday, March 17

Luke 13:1–9

The Greek word for repent, *metanoēō*, also means to change one's mind. In our reading today, we don't get the whole story of what happened. In fact, in life we often don't get the whole story of what happened. We know our side, our perspective, but it isn't always the whole picture. Our conversations and our experiences can often lead us to change our minds about something we thought we knew. When we engage in community, when we invite in other perspectives, it can change us—for the better.

Jesus is inviting us into a different perspective and to humbly open ourselves up to the opportunity of change. God is calling us into the world and out of our comfort zone.

God of change, direct us on a pathway of new possibilities; Christ Jesus, fill us with your compassion and healing presence; and Holy Spirit, embolden us to understand. Amen.

Friday, March 18

Luke 13:1-9

The man in our parable asks, "What is the good in a fig tree if it doesn't bear fruit?" Frustrated and out of ideas, he asks the gardener to cut it down. Responding with grace, the gardener asks for one more year in order to change the soil and provide more support for the tree's growth.

At times, we may all feel like this man as we reflect on our lives, our vocations, or our relationships. We may be asking ourselves, "What good is happening here?" Thank goodness it isn't just up to us! God responds with grace and love and asks for more time to tend the good soil and to provide more support along the way. The tough season we are in will not last forever; there is the promise of good here. God is tending us, and more support is on the way.

God of grace, enfold us in your love. Point us in the direction of good soil; nurture our spirits, and tend to our hearts. In Christ, your Son, we pray. Amen.

Saturday, March 19

"My Song Is Love Unknown" (ELW 343, Verse 2)

Of all the people in the world, God knows you. God knows your sorrows, your joys, your struggles, and your celebrations. If we think too hard about this, it can feel overwhelming. This hymn speaks to this overwhelming feeling.

Oh, who are any of us? In this Lenten season as we repent of our own transgressions, remember our own mortality, and reflect on the sacrifice of Christ, this question resonates in real-time. Yet, God responds and says, "You are worthy. I chose you for a reason, and you are just as important as the person sitting next to you." Of all the people in the world, God chooses you, every day.

God of love, thank you for choosing us. Thank you for sending your son, Jesus, full of grace to extend that love into our world. We thank you and we praise you. Amen.

Sunday, March 20

"My Song Is Love Unknown" (ELW 343, Verse 2)

There is tremendous power in God's love through Christ. The presence of God in the flesh on this earth is breathtaking.

Today, on the day of the spring equinox, we are reminded of the need for balance and the promise of life. The seeds we have planted need time to germinate in the dark, and it is the promise of light that pushes them into fruition. God sent Christ to the earth to create balance and promise life. My friend, this is good news for you, and it is good news for me. The seeds that have been planted were made possible through Christ. These seeds of hope, new life, grace, and love are abundant.

God our gardener, thank you for tending to the seeds of our souls. Thank you for sending your Son to walk this earth so that we may have new life. In Christ, your Son, we pray. Amen.

Monday, March 21

Joshua 5:9–12

In a time of journey, whether it be 40 years of journey through the wilderness, 40 days of journey through a crisis, or 40 hours of anxiety or despair, God's promise holds us.

God's promise is unconditional, which means it is always offered to us, no matter where we are, who we are, or in what situation we may be. God's promise rolls away all those things that burden us. God's promise is an open embrace, an invitation to a feast with a fatted calf, to which all are welcome. God's promise feeds us every day in unknown ways—like manna in the desert—and then, when we are again "at home," on the land, reconciled with one another, within ourselves, with creation, God's good intention is made visible. We eat together and all have enough. We celebrate together and no one is left out. God's promise sustains us and our neighbor.

God of promise, you carried your people through the wilderness; carry us now through the complexities of life, the anxieties and despair, that we may again rejoice in you and in one another. Amen.

Tuesday, March 22

Psalm 32

God's promise is a hiding place for us. God's promise holds us and preserves us. God's promise is simple: God's steadfast love surrounds us and nothing, nothing will ever separate us from that love. That is God's promise which sustains us in this life, on this journey of faith.

The journey may take unexpected turns, encounter unsettling events, sudden illness, or other challenges, but God does not abandon us. In fact, God's steadfast love shapes our way. God gives instruction, as the psalmist sings.

The way God teaches is also simple: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. And this instruction is laid out for us in the Ten Commandments that offer us a way to live on this earth and with one another in peace.

God of forgiveness, you shelter us in the midst of the storm. In times of distress, in these times of COVID-19 and all its repercussions, teach us to care for one another. Amen.

Wednesday, March 23

2 Corinthians 5:16–21

New creation. This phrase is perhaps familiar. We hear it when a child or an adult is baptized. Maybe we hear it occasionally in a sermon. We certainly hear it in Paul's letters. But what is it?

The last couple of days, God's promise has been the focal point of these devotions. God's promise opens up or introduces us into God's renewal of creation. Through the promise—God's steadfast love always offered—God invites us into new creation.

God invites us into God's ongoing activity, which is reconciling the world, reconciling all humanity, all creation to God's self. We are invited to participate in this work: to be ministers of reconciliation.

Don't hide behind the walls created by society, whether they be boundaries of race, gender, class, etc. Living in those categories is old creation. God always invites us into the new beginnings of freedom, love of neighbor, and care of creation.

God of disruption, you break down the barriers that divide; your promise reconciles all peoples. Dismantle within us all those barriers we build, so that your good intent, your new creation may be revealed. Amen.

Thursday, March 24

Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32

God's promise is the open arms of the father running towards his son. Who has not been moved by this parable? It is perhaps one of the best-known parables, to believers, to nonbelievers, to believers of other faiths, to many of our neighbors. God's arms are open in an embrace of joy, of pardon, of deliverance.

At the Joint Commemoration of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, a prayer was held presided over by leaders of the Lutheran World Federation and Pope Francis. There was an embrace, the sharing of the peace. Walls were broken down.

A cross was created for this Reformation anniversary, painted by a refugee from El Salvador. It depicts Christ at the table inviting all people to share. The table itself breaks down the barriers of separation we create. We are invited into this communion, the true significance of Holy Communion, as Martin Luther wrote.

God of embrace, you come running toward us in the manger and on the cross. Send us out towards our neighbor, familiar and unfamiliar, with the same love. Amen.

Friday, March 25

Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32

The older son could not understand the father's generosity. This situation is a present reality for many. We are suspicious. We prefer to remain in our own little world, thinking about ourselves rather than about serving the neighbor.

This type of suspicion and self-centeredness takes on many forms in our society. It manifests itself in the belief that "rights" are for me and not for my neighbor.

We quickly forget that rights are not claimed but offered, that freedom is really for service. Isn't that the heart of Martin Luther's message: "The Christian individual is a completely free lord of all, subject to none. The Christian individual is a completely dutiful servant of all, subject to all" (in "The Freedom of a Christian"). In other words, I don't make myself the center of the world. I make my sister or brother, my neighbor, the center, and I act accordingly.

God of embrace, you free us from ourselves. You open a path to celebration. Turn us always towards our neighbor in service. Amen.

Saturday, March 26

"My Song Is Love Unknown" (ELW 343, Verse 3)

A beautiful litany of the church, this hymn is in fact a dialogue or conversation that Christ has with the us, with the church. Christ asks us: What has he done that we would crucify him?

The first verse is as follows: "O my people, O my church, what have I done to you? How have I offended you? Answer me. I led you out of slavery into freedom, and delivered you through the waters of rebirth, but you have prepared a cross for your Savior."

We have been freed from all that separates us from God and from one another, but we look the other way. We prefer as Luther said the "ease and comfort" of our ways, the empty songs of praise, rather than the joy of entering into love unknown, beyond all expectations, in service of our neighbor.

Christ, even in death your arms are outstretched in an embrace of love. Turn our indifference into that same love for all our neighbors and for your creation. Amen.

Sunday, March 27

"My Song Is Love Unknown" (ELW 343, Verse 3)

Sometimes we scatter his path with sweet praises and hosannas, but we ignore Jesus, who stands among us in the suffering world. It is much easier to adore a cross affixed to the wall in our sanctuary than it is to step into the suffering of our neighbor.

Some might want to contemplate the cross but, as Martin Luther asks, what benefit do they gain from it? All they do is carry pictures and booklets, letters and crosses on their person. Christ's suffering becomes a mere token that effects in them a lack of suffering, a dissociation from the world.

Yet all the time, every day, and especially on this day, the first day of the week, the day of resurrection, we encounter Christ in worship, inviting us ever deeper into his goodness, into a journey of mercy that breaks down divisions, that heals our broken hearts, that forgives our cries of "crucify."

Praise be you, O God, for your love that burns away our resistance. Mold our hearts according to your love so that as your church we may cry "mercy" and "justice" rather than "crucify." Amen.

Monday, March 28

Isaiah 43:16–21

I enjoy writing cards, especially to my husband. However, I repeat myself, recalling the same stories and extolling the same qualities I love about him. I have come to realize that sometimes I need to let go of some cherished memories to create space for new memories. Do we sometimes do the same thing with God? Get so stuck on the big things God has already done for us—creation, the Exodus, baptism—that we forget to create space for the new story God is telling in our lives right now?

Eugene Peterson in *The Message* paraphrases Isaiah this way: "Forget about what's happened; don't keep going over old history. Be alert, be present. I'm about to do something brand-new." In this season of Lent, we are called not only to remember what God has done for us in baptism, but also to be attentive to the ways God is living out those baptismal promises in new ways right before our eyes.

Christ, even in death your arms are outstretched in an embrace of love. Turn our indifference into that same love for all our neighbors and for your creation. Amen.

Tuesday, March 29

Psalms 126

We can resonate with the psalmist's talk of those who are weeping. For so many, the last two years have occasioned times of weeping. We have grieved canceled plans, postponed celebrations, layoffs, positive test results, and, most of all, loss of loved ones, neighbors, and strangers around the world.

However, what I find so compelling is how in the vision of the psalmist these tears become like seeds being planted in the ground. From these very tears will sprout the "shouts of joy" with an abundant harvest. As joy grows out of the suffering, the story becomes one of death and resurrection.

One of my favorite poems by Mary Oliver, "Lead," ends with this line: "I tell you this / to break your heart, / by which I mean only / that it break open and never close again / to the rest of the world." Our suffering breaks us open—allowing us to experience the world, those around us, and God in new ways.

God of joy and tears, we know that we are never far from your presence. Hold our hands as we grieve, and fill our broken hearts with your love. Amen.

Wednesday, March 30

Philippians 3:4b–14

I've spent more than a decade studying and teaching about stewardship. When we think about stewardship, it's so easy to become self-focused on how we use our time, our money, our talents, that we forget the core tenet of stewardship: All that we have and all that we are belongs to God—our time, our talent, our treasure, our very selves.

In today's reading, Paul reminds the Philippians (and us) how easy it is to slide into the temptation to clothe ourselves in earthly glory. Yet our righteousness comes not from anything we have done, but from what God has done for us. I am reminded of Luther's reflection on the third article of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy, and kept me in true faith."

God of abiding love, we confess that we often seek to find righteousness on our own terms, forgetting that you have already called us and claimed us. Teach us to rest in your embrace as we live deeper into our identity as children of God. Amen.

Thursday, March 31

John 12:1–8

The scene is an uncomfortable one for all in attendance. In the middle of dinner, Mary gets up from the table, takes a pound of costly perfume, bends down, anoints Jesus' feet, and wipes them with her hair. Mary's actions and the powerful scent of the perfume would have been considered quite sensual by ancient cultural standards. Couple this with the realization that this perfume was meant to mark the anointing of Jesus for burial, and the extravagance and the foreshadowing of Jesus' death is enough to take even a modern day reader's breath away.

The Bible is filled with stories of people going over the top in their devotion to God—Abraham willing to sacrifice Isaac, David dancing before the Lord, or Mary consenting to bear the Son of God. While at times these stories may be uncomfortable, reckless, and even dangerous, they reveal a God who invites us to experience the depth and breadth of God's lavish love and grace. How can we help but respond with reckless abandon and extravagant generosity?

God of extravagant love, we are overwhelmed by the grace you have bestowed upon us. Grant us the courage to risk our own discomfort as we follow the Spirit's lead. Amen.

Friday, April 1

John 12:1-8

Living in downtown Minneapolis, not a day goes by in which I don't look out my window and see at least one person who is unhoused. Experiencing firsthand the enormity of the issue, it's easy to feel defeated and wonder if this is a community problem that will ever be solved. Is this what Jesus meant when he said, "You always have the poor with you"?

I don't believe that Jesus was inviting us to turn a blind eye to our neighbors in need. Throughout the gospels Jesus goes out of his way to advocate for the poor, the sick, and the neglected. Instead of putting himself ahead of the poor, I think Jesus is reminding us that there is space for a variety of different expressions of generosity. Whenever we lock ourselves into just one way of following God's call, we may succeed in following the rules but miss participating in the story of the new opportunities into which God is calling us.

Infinite God, we cannot wrap our finite minds around your extravagant love and grace. Teach us to live generously, following your Spirit's leading to join your mission in the world. Amen.

Saturday, April 2

"My Song Is Love Unknown" (ELW 343, Verse 4)

I don't want to admit that I, too, would have chosen Barabbas over Jesus. Certainly I would like to think that I would have been a Mary of Bethany wiping Jesus' feet with her hair, one of the women finding the empty tomb early on Easter morning, or even the Samaritan woman meeting the Messiah at the well.

And yet, as I take time during this Lenten season to reflect on what it means to be a baptized child of God, what it means to be both saint and sinner, as a lover of rules I know that I would have likely been in the temple devoutly following the Pharisees. I, too, like the Apostle Paul would have probably needed a flashing heavenly light to turn my life around. While I may not have yet experienced that flashing heavenly light, I'm grateful that despite my sinfulness God has found and continues to find me each time I go astray.

God of lost sheep, we are so grateful that you seek out and find us each time we go astray. Forgive us for turning in on ourselves and losing sight of your love and faithfulness. Amen.

Sunday, April 3

"My Song Is Love Unknown" (ELW 343, Verse 4)

Was Jesus cheerful as he went to the cross? The writer of our theme hymn for Lent seems to think so.

To me, cheerfulness conjures up the image of my two-year-old niece as she's playing with her dolls—full of smiles and giggles.

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines cheerful as "happy, and showing it by the way you behave." While I'm not sure any of the gospels depict Jesus as "happy" in the face of the cross, I think Jesus does show this emotion by the way he behaved. I do believe he knew how much all his suffering and death would mean for the world that he loved so much.

As Jesus reminds us in the Gospel of John during his conversation with Nicodemus, God sent God's only Son to the cross out of deep love, so that all who believe in him might have life.

Jesus, we are stunned by the brutal suffering and death that you endured for us. During this Lenten season, help us to see all the ways that you have come down to us in love, that we might share this abundant love with all those around us. Amen.

Monday, April 4

Psalm 118:1–2; 19–29

Familiar nuggets of scripture are found in Psalm 118: "O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!" (1, 29); "This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." (24); or "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone" (22).

But wait! Now in Mark's story Jesus quotes from the psalm when he tells the parable of wicked tenants. In the parable, the owner of the vineyard sends a slave to the tenants to collect his share of the produce. They beat the slave and send him home. This pattern of brutality is repeated over and over. Finally, the man sends his beloved son—whom they kill.

Jesus was forecasting how he, the One who deserves our devotion, would be rejected and killed. Remarkably, God did not call that "the last straw;" God made a home for sinners, built on Christ as the cornerstone. God is good. God's steadfast love endures forever.

Jesus, you are the cornerstone of a whole new world. May your steadfast love endure forever. Amen.

Tuesday, April 5

Luke 19:28–40

I remember that Palm Sunday! I was home from college. The pastor recruited me to play the part of Jesus. I was to ride a donkey—yes, an actual donkey!—through the church parking lot, surrounded by Sunday School children, waving palms and shouting “Hosanna!”

But the donkey wouldn’t budge; the kids wouldn’t shout; the drama didn’t happen that day.

We can only imagine Jesus’ entry into the Holy City. If someone had explained, “The Lord needs it,” would you have given your colt? If the multitudes sang and shouted their blessings, would you have joined in? Or would you have “shushed” like a Pharisee?

Good news! You haven’t missed your chance! Today is another opportunity to vigorously glorify the Lord, and to declare God’s blessing and peace to people in the city.

“Blessed are you, Jesus! Let your Spirit move me to praise you today, even on the streets of my city. Amen.

Wednesday, April 6

Isaiah 50:4–9a

The Servant is sent by God to the people in exile. God has given the Servant just what the people need: words “to sustain the weary;” a listening ear; perseverance; resilience in the face of insults, assault, and opposition, coming from the very people he came to serve.

Where does he get this strength? “The LORD God helps me,” the Servant confesses.

If it seems that the forces of darkness are always in your face, at least you know you’re going the right way. You know that the LORD God, who sent you, will never stop helping you. You may even learn that the angry ones are just weary to the bone. They might even hear the word you offer—and be sustained.

God, you have given me a mouth and ears, and people to serve. Help me to be faithful, knowing that you keep me safe, give me all your grace. Amen.

Thursday, April 7

Psalm 31:9–16

Have you ever watched an older person meet a little child? "Look at her perfect skin!" the elder says, as her wrinkled hand touches a flawless cheek or chubby little arm. The juxtaposition says it all.

By 50 or 60 years, those scars, spots, and wrinkles aren't the exception; they're the rule. They tell true stories of a life that knows sorrow and disappointment, dread, and terror, inside and out. We are broken, but that's only half the story. We are breakers, too. We have broken our promises and harmed those we ought to have loved. There's no hiding the truth. It is written all over our faces.

God has a face, too. It shines on yours. It shines with salvation, love, and mercy. For you.

Merciful God, let your face shine upon your servant. Lord, save me in your steadfast love. Amen.

Friday, April 8

Philippians 2:5–11

In our lives, you and I have emptied a lot of things: bowls and cups; garbage cans and wheelbarrows; refrigerators, wallets, calendars. It feels good to empty your plate; an emptied purse or gas tank is not so satisfying.

Paul's words to the Philippians are a hymn. They sing of how Christ "emptied himself." Himself! Jesus' life was not taken; it was given.

What does Paul mean, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus?" Having the same mind as Christ calls us to say the same yeses, the same nos. We can try. We could never be like him. But we can bend our knee at his Name—and join the whole church in heaven and earth in confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord. And we can keep in mind how God has already written the glorious end of the story.

Thanks be to you, Oh Jesus, my friend, my friend indeed, who at my need your life did spend! Amen.

Saturday, April 9

"My Song Is Love Unknown" (ELW 343, Verse 5)

Have you played the card game Skip-Bo? It's a simple game adults and kids can play together. The cards can be matched by number or color. There are some special cards in the deck: "Draw 4," "Skip the next player," "Trade hands" with another player. You win by emptying your hand.

We were playing, four parents and four kids. My youngest had tears in his little eyes, his small hands unable to hold all the cards he was stuck with. That's when the other dad, who held only two cards, played the "Trade hands" card. He announced he would swap hands with my son. He traded his two cards and took the boy's 20. Imagine his reaction. What a sweet exchange!

Christ emptied Himself, took your death, gave you life. You are free.

Oh, God, what may I say, indeed? Heav'n was his home, but mine the tomb wherein he lay. Amen.

Sunday, April 10

"My Song Is Love Unknown" (ELW 343, Verse 5)

Written by Samuel Crossman in 1683, our theme hymn for Lent is a Good Friday hymn. The British band, Coldplay, based their 2005 hit "A Message" on this hymn. Their message? "You don't have to be on your own." Yet when we feel crummy about ourselves, shame takes over and we go into hiding.

For us to be free again takes more than an explanation. It takes an exchange. That's what Martin Luther called Christ's self-emptying on the cross—"The Happy Exchange." As Luther writes in a prayer:

"Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what is mine and have given to me what is yours. You have taken upon yourself what you were not, and have given to me what I was not."

The hymn puts it this way:

"My song is love unknown, my Savior's love to me, Love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be."

Lord Jesus, help us to know that because of the depth of your love we don't ever have to be alone, or on our own. In love you have taken my shame and given me your own life and freedom. Amen.

Monday, April 11

Exodus 12:1–4 (5–10), 11–14

The theme for our reflections this week is the story of God's faithfulness.

Tradition ... tradition! Perhaps you can hear echoes of the rhythmic Broadway musical by simply seeing those two words standing side by side. In "Fiddler on the Roof" a favorite of mine over the years, we are reminded throughout how the deep connection of rituals and traditions from the past provide stability, meaning, and purpose for both the present and hoped for future. We also are reminded that the abundant power of love can inspire, transform, and sometimes lead us to new narratives and people that may not fit within the constructs of our defined religious communities—as was the case with Tevye's daughters.

As we follow Jesus in his journey to the cross this week, we step back to consider the new covenant that he will establish. Crossing boundaries, embodying radical hospitality, and redefining norms are a foreshadowing of the kingdom yet to come. As we follow, he invites each of us to consider how we might bring the stories and traditions of God's faithfulness in the past with us into a brave and faithful future.

Dear God, you continually seek to release your people from bondage to freedom, from oppression to liberation. So invite us deeper into your story, and remind us to look back in order to see your faithfulness today—and to look forward more faithfully still. Amen.

Tuesday, April 12

Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19

The story of God's faithfulness continues to unfold in the voice of the psalmist. From personal testimony in the opening verses, to the more public response of thankfulness in verses 12–19, we come to understand the deep well of gratitude exuding from the psalmist's heart. As often emphasized in Lutheran theology, the psalmist begins with God's gracious act and then ponders what an appropriate response of gratitude might be. It is not a great step to conclude that this poetic and beloved psalm—so inspiring to generations upon generations—can be a blueprint for our daily prayer life.

Many days I catch myself breathing shallowly as I seek to keep up with the wide array of emails and Zoom calls. But today, the psalmist reminds me to stand up, to take a deep breath, and to look around for signs of God's faithfulness that has led me through certain dangers and hardships.

Gracious Lord, we give thanks for your steadfast love and faithfulness. As we tune into the rhythms of Holy Week, we know that the days ahead hold heaviness and the very possibility of death. Today, we breathe deeply knowing and trusting that you walk with us every step of the way. Amen.

Wednesday, April 13

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

In our reading today the Apostle Paul writes to invite the Corinthians back into a deeper sense of Christian community. The preceding verses have shown how the people's social status of wealth and privilege was getting in the way of a faithful gathering around the Lord's table. One simple phrase—"Do this in remembrance of me"—reminds them that the Lord's Supper is not defined by "like people" with "like clothing" and elevated status. The Lord's Table is for all people.

Not a big country music fan, I once heard a song on Minnesota Public Radio called "Crowded Table" by The Highwomen. The chorus begins, "I want a house with a crowded table, and a place by the fire for everyone." In a compelling way it reminded me that Christ invites all people to his table—even those who would soon betray him. This carpenter's table and his story of faithfulness extends an invitation to the "saint and sinner" in all of us.

Loving God, your invitation to the table does not make distinctions. Help us to do the same as we seek to gather at the table in your name. May our breaking of bread and the drinking of the cup truly be in remembrance of you. Amen.

Thursday, April 14

Maundy Thursday

John 13:1–17, 31b–35

In the washing of his disciples' feet, Jesus takes an ancient household custom and teaches a profound lesson that would echo throughout the ages, summarized by his new commandment to love one another.

I am often simultaneously amazed and grateful for the hundreds of deacons, pastors, and Christian public leaders who dedicate their time and insights to seminary students. We often ask them to invite the interns they mentor into ministry with the following teaching philosophy and pattern: You watch me lead, and we discuss; we lead together, and then we discuss; I watch you lead, and then we discuss.

Time and time again in the gospels, the Rabbi Jesus would teach his disciples through similar rhythms and practices. Jesus' foot-washing is a seminal moment in his teaching that would serve both as an example (verse 15) and as an invitation into lives of dynamic discipleship and service.

Dear Lord, our culture is fixated on division and polar extremes. Open our ears to truly listen and seek to understand our neighbor. When challenges come our way, strengthen our hearts and minds to embrace this, your new commandment of love. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

Friday, April 15 Good Friday

John 18:1–19:42

The story of God's faithfulness takes a turn on this Good Friday. On this day, in this unfolding narrative of Jesus' trial, we are reminded of humanity's deepest sorrows. We are especially reminded of our own shortcomings in seeking to be faithful—to God, to friends, to family.

Both Judas and Peter stand out in today's verses. Peter's determined vow to lay down his life for Jesus quickly dissipates into three denials by firelight. If we are honest, we are often stuck with the conviction that our own words do not stand up to our promises or best intentions. Yet one thing does not change in this long narrative reading, something that might lead to us getting "unstuck"—that is the faithfulness of Christ.

Through endless questioning at the hands of Roman authorities, Jesus' singularity of mind on the things of God is central. It is the truly faithful One who then opens our eyes to the cross and the extravagant grace that will anchor our lives in God's faithfulness for eternity.

Dear Lord, we remember today that we too may deny Jesus and call out to "Crucify Him!" We are tempted daily to curve in on our own selves and our own selfish desires. Open us through your faithfulness and your peace. Draw us towards your healing love and light. Amen.

Saturday, April 16

**"My Song Is Love Unknown"
(ELW 343, Verse 6)**

My mother loved the hymn "My Song Is Love Unknown." If not the favorite, it is very close, as she has requested that it be included in her funeral one day. It is a powerful telling of the One she has followed through trial and tribulations, loss and grief, joys and deep sorrow. And it is Jesus' faithfulness ultimately that invites her to continue to find hope and consolation in this life. My mother never imagined losing three of her four adult children to heart complications prior to their reaching midlife. Yet this is our family story.

Easter Saturday means so much to us because we cannot deny the pain that is real. We also cannot fathom a life without hope. And so we wait and sing the songs that hold us close and continue to teach us the most about God's love and faithfulness.

"Never was love, dear King
Never was grief like thine
This is my friend, in whose sweet praise
I all my days could gladly spend."

Dear Lord, as we wait on this longest of days, center us in you. Amen.

(Further reflection for this day: Easter Saturday can be a heavy, often grief laden time. As we consider a prayer practice today, I offer theologian and educator Howard Thurman's beautiful poem "How Good to Center Down." May you find your center in Christ silently as we await his coming).

Sunday, April 17

Easter

John 20:1–18

Do you remember the first evangelist who shared the Good News of Jesus with you? Many of us came to the faith through the gift of a kind word, a loving gesture, or a message that brought about a "metanoia" (repentance) experience of change and new directions.

Mary Magdalene is one such evangelist. In the bookends of today's reading, we see her exuberant faithfulness as she brings the news of an empty tomb and her affirmation of the risen Christ. The urgency of Mary's message is a reminder that there is a joyful urgency to sharing the gospel with others today. Today, on this triumphant day of Easter, Mary is the first, but thankfully not the only one, to announce the King of Kings, the Prince of Peace. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

Gracious God, may your Good News of Easter meet us unexpectedly today! We join the heavenly chorus, those with us and those who we hold dear, as we sing your praises from a place of expectant hope. Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. Amen.

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