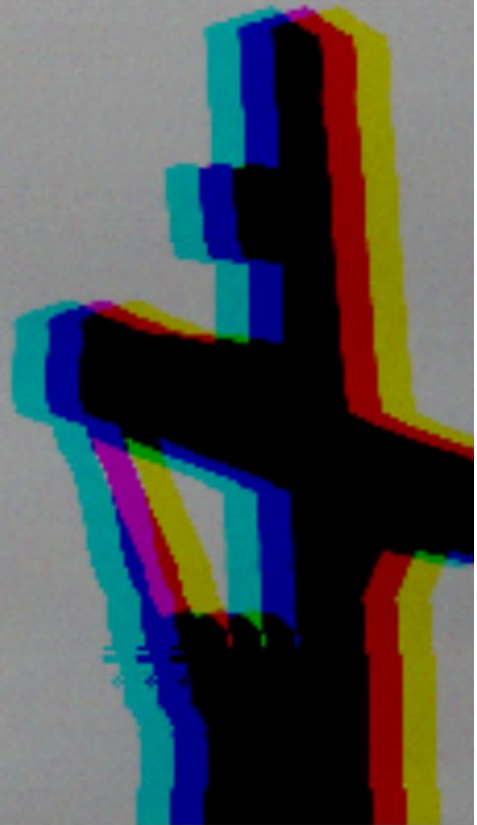


Heart Cries from the Cross

**A Lenten Series
Feb 26 - Apr 9**



Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Lent Week 1: The First Word of Forgiveness

1. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What did you find uncomfortable?
2. This Lent we are reflecting on Jesus' sayings from the cross. What we say and the words we use can often reveal something about who we really are. Can you share about a time when someone you thought you knew said something surprising to you (for good or for bad)? How did it make you feel? How did it change the way you see that person? Can you share about a time when unplanned and unexpected words came out of your own mouth (for good or for bad)? How did this change your understanding of self.
3. Read Luke 23:1-38. Listen with an open heart and with awareness of your emotions:
 - How does this passage make you feel; what emotions arise?
 - How do you think Jesus felt?
 - What does this show us about God?
 - When Jesus says "forgive them" who is he referring to?
4. Read 1 John 4:7-12. What does this passage say about love—being loved and loving others? How might this help us to live like Jesus?
5. Reflect and share about your own journey with forgiveness. Would you say you are a forgiving person? How have you struggled with the practice of giving and receiving forgiveness? Have you ever struggled to forgive yourself, and why do you think that is something many of us struggle with?
6. If you are discussing these questions as a group, break up into smaller groups of 2 or 3 and each share about one situation where you struggle with forgiveness. This could be a difficulty forgiving yourself or someone else, or you may feel someone else has not forgiven you. Just listen to one another with compassionate presence and hold the speaker in God's love rather than commenting. Take a moment of silence after each person shares. If you are doing these reflections alone, take this time to quietly open your heart to God.

Prayer Practice: The Welcoming Prayer

Gather again as a group and use this link (<https://youtu.be/BEbppIfloxA>) together to practice the welcoming prayer, which helps us let go of the root causes of negative emotions. Use this time to focus on any emotional struggle with forgiveness you shared in the smaller discussion (but you can also use this prayer for any other negative emotion you are experiencing currently). When you finish, have a brief time for anyone to share about the experience, and encourage one another to practice this prayer during the week.

Lent Week 2: The Second Word of Hope

1. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What did you find uncomfortable?
2. Read Luke 23:32-43. What are your own reactions to the words of the criminals on the cross and Jesus' response?
3. Some interpretations of the above passage suggest Jesus is talking about the afterlife when he uses the term "paradise." What are your own views about the afterlife? Share more about how you *feel* about the issue, rather than specific definitions. In what ways is reflecting about an afterlife helpful to you, and in what ways is it unsettling?
4. Read Revelation 21:1-5. If this is a visionary, dream-like, poetic depiction of the future, what does it say about the future of our earth? How does this make you feel? How much hope do you have that our human reality can be transformed in this way?
5. Read Luke 13:31-35 and Luke 19:41-44. What is Jesus expecting about the future? In light of this expectation, what do you think is driving Jesus' motivation to go to Jerusalem?
6. Now read John 15:9-17. How might Jesus' words here create a reason for hope with respect to the passages in question 5?
7. Take some extended time for an imaginative reading of Luke 23:1-43. This is a modified form of an ancient method of reading scripture developed by Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century. Have someone in the group read the passage three times, or you could use a Bible app to read it for you (here's an example: <https://www.biblegateway.com/audio/mclean/niv/Luke.23.1-Luke.23.43>). The goal is to immerse yourself emotionally and imaginatively in the story. Don't try to overthink it or analyze its meaning, but just try to feel it. Make plenty of time for this exercise. Read slowly, give space for the times of silence. Don't rush it.
 - In the first reading let yourself sink into the scene and become aware of what you see, hear, smell, taste and touch. Who is there, and what are they doing? How does the situation make you feel? Let the story wash over you and take some moments of silence afterwards. Let yourself become aware of who you identify with in the story. This could be one of the specific characters or someone just present and observing. Who are you drawn to?
 - Then read the story again. This time allow yourself to be that person with whom you identified. Experience the story from their perspective, through their eyes, and let your imagination engage with their thoughts and feelings. Again, take some moments of silence after this reading to reflect on the experience.
 - In the third and final reading imagine that Jesus is communicating with you in this scene. How does Jesus look at you, what does he say? What do you hear, and how does it make you feel? Sit in silence for a moment after the reading and invite God to speak to your heart.

If you are doing this exercise in a group, after the exercise take a few moments to allow each person to share their experience as they feel comfortable. Then spend some time praying for one another. Some might want to pray aloud; some may prefer to pray in silence. Either way, hold one another in God's love.

Prayer Practice: Kingdom Consciousness

"Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom."

This week, take some time each morning to use the above request (from the criminal on the cross) as a prayer. Recite it slowly, intentionally, and consciously seven times, meditating on its meaning and absorbing its reality. Jesus said: "... the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 5:17). He also said: "I am with you always..." (Matthew 28:20). So, his kingdom is already here, and we are already in his heart and mind. Take this truth with you into your day and internalize this acceptance. Let it be the lens through which you see the world, the people you interact with, and the circumstances of your day. Whenever you begin to lose hope about yourself, someone else or any situation, return to this prayer.

Lent Week 3: The Third Word of Belonging

1. What resonated with you from the message this past Sunday? Was there anything that seemed timely or relevant to something in your own life?
2. When you hear the word “belonging,” what do you think, and how do you feel? Why do you think and feel this way?
3. From the limited information we have in Scripture, what does it seem were the strengths and weaknesses of Jesus’ family?
4. Read the following short passages: Mark 3:31-33, Luke 12:51-52, and Mark 10:28-30. What do these passages reveal to us about Jesus’ views on family? In what ways is the believing community like a family? In what ways is it dissimilar?
5. Read John 19:25-27 slowly, three times through.
 - Imagine you are “the disciple Jesus loved.” What do you see, hear, smell, taste and touch as you stand with the women at the foot of the cross? How do you feel as you look at Jesus? As you look at Mary? What do you think as Jesus says, “Here is your mother”?
 - Now imagine you are Mary. What do you see, hear, smell, taste and touch? How do you feel as you look at Jesus? What is your response when you hear him say, “Woman, here is your son”?
6. As you reflect on the imaginative exercise in question 5, do any situations, relationships or issues come to mind that you would like to pray about? If you are reflecting on your own, talk to God about this, confident in the knowledge you are a beloved child of God. If you are doing this exercise in a group, take a few moments to allow each person to share as they feel comfortable. Then spend some time praying for one another. Hold one another in God’s love.

Prayer Practice: *Lectio Divina*

Lectio Divina—which is Latin for sacred or divine reading—is a way of praying with Scripture that has been used for centuries by followers of Jesus. A regular practice of *Lectio Divina* cultivates the ability to listen deeply to scripture and allow God’s presence to open our lives. It helps us listen for the still small voice of God speaking to us personally here and now, and to grow in awareness of God’s presence with us, in us, and around us. We interact with the text of Scripture, but unlike Bible study, we do not analyze or dissect it. We listen, and allow the words to settle into us as we quiet our thinking to receive them deeply into our hearts.

There are many ways to engage with *Lectio Divina*, but four steps are commonly used: read, meditate, respond, and rest. The scripture is printed below, and you might prefer to listen to it rather than read it (there are some great apps and websites for that such as www.biblegateway.com).

Read: Read the passage of scripture. This is best done slowly and intentionally with an awareness of God’s presence speaking through the text. Simply listen for God’s voice in this moment. Don’t search or seek out the meaning on your own, but rather wait, and listen for something to emerge. When a word or phrase seems to settle on you, take it in and just sit with it in the silence.

Meditate: Read the text again for the purpose of “hearing” or “seeing” God in it. This is a deep searching of the heart. Ponder it, reflect on it, ask how this is applicable to your own experience, your own life? How is God reaching you right now, speaking to you in the word or phrase?

Respond: The third reading is for the purpose of responding back to God, expressing honestly whatever is happening in your heart and spirit as a result of listening. There may be joy, tears, awe, reverence, even confusion—give any emotion or thought that arises freely to God at this time. And listen for how God might want you to turn, move or act because of what you’ve heard.

Rest: Finally, let your mind and emotions settle to rest in silence and simply seek to love and be loved by God. Anytime distracting thoughts arise, just return to the word that stood out in the reading, and repeat it, and allow other thoughts to fade. Allow this “sacred word” to symbolize all your love for God, and your willingness to give God all your attention. Sit in the presence of God and use the word as a window through which to gaze upon God and to allow the light and love of God to stream into your heart and spirit.

John 19:17-30 (NIV)

Carrying his own cross, Jesus went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). There they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle.

Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews. Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek.

The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, “Do not write ‘The King of the Jews,’ but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.” Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written.”

When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. “Let’s not tear it,” they said to one another. “Let’s decide by lot who will get it.”

This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled that said, “They divided my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.” So this is what the soldiers did.

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, “Woman, here is your son,” and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty.” A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Lent Week 4: The Fourth Word of Abandonment

1. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What did you find uncomfortable?
2. Read Mark 15:22-39. Read or listen with an open heart and with awareness of your own emotions. How does this passage make you feel; what emotions arise? What emotions do you see in Jesus? What does this reveal to us about God?
3. Now read Psalm 22:1-31. What similarities or connections do you see with the crucifixion account in Mark 15? Why do you think Jesus seems to quote the opening sentence of Psalm 22? What is the significance of the Hebrew tradition that this psalm was written by King David? Why do you think the author of Mark alludes to this psalm so frequently?
4. Read Mark 14:32-42. What do you think Jesus means by "this cup" and why does he not want to drink it? How does this passage connect back to the earlier passage in Mark 10:35-45? How does it connect forward to the crucifixion narrative in question 2? Why do you think Jesus seems to think suffering will be inevitable and what relevance does this have for our lives?
5. When Jesus says: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", what do you think he means? How do you identify with this meaning yourself?
6. Take some extended time as a group to meditate on possible interpretations of this week's "Heart Cry from the Cross," as we did on Sunday. Select someone in the group who will read each of the statements below twice, followed by 2 minutes of silence each time. Sit comfortably with your back straight and eyes closed. Relax and focus on your breathing, being conscious of each breath. Feel your feet on the floor and let them ground you. Be aware of any tension in your mind or body and release it with each out-breath. With each first reading try to absorb and sink into the meaning; try to feel it and empathize with Jesus. With each second reading, identify with Jesus and sink into its meaning for you personally.
 - My God, my God, I hang here under the crushing weight of human fear, hatred, and violence. My body, heart and mind are wracked by the tragedy of separation from you and your love.
 - My God, my God, I am nailed here to the cusp of subjectivity and objectivity. I feel so abandoned by you and I just cannot see through this darkness. And yet I know you are with me Abba, Father. I know I am your beloved child, and I will never let go because you never let go of me.
 - My God, my God, here I am naked and alone, lifted up and exposed as a symbol of shame and the futility of resistance to power. But I choose your way of love, your paths of righteousness. You desire mercy, not sacrifice, and your love will overcome all fear.
 - My God, my God, my broken body looks like judgement and failure, but it is a declaration of your love. May this word made flesh soften their hearts and open their eyes to their fear and isolation from you. May the love flowing from every nail, every thorn, every insult be a river of forgiveness and reconciliation.
 - My God my God, you have asked me to walk this path. I was born to love. I set myself apart for sacrifice and service. I am not a victim but choose my destiny and run gladly into your heart of infinite compassion.

7. After the above exercise, take a few moments to allow each person to share their experience of this heart cry and its meaning as they feel comfortable. Then spend some time praying for one another. Some might want to pray aloud; some may prefer to pray in silence. Either way, hold one another in God's love. If you are reflecting on these questions alone, take some further time to quietly open and share your heart with God.

Prayer Practice: Examen

We all experience moments where we feel isolated, alone, and abandoned. Sometimes even God can seem distant or absent. At times we may be acutely aware of this, while at other times we might not be conscious of it. This week take some time each evening to reflect on your day, seeking to be aware of times of divine presence and absence.

The ancient Ignatian practice of Examen is a helpful technique for this. Sit quietly alone and take a moment to center yourself. Then "re-live" your day in your imagination by allowing your thoughts to guide you through the day's events. As you do this, focus particularly on your interactions with others—in your family, at work or school, in your neighborhood or online. These "interactions" might be your internal thoughts or attitudes, or they could be actual conversations and encounters. Do this without judging yourself but simply notice and ask the following two questions:

At what times during your day were your thoughts and actions grounded in God's presence with you?

- What happened?
- How were you grounded, and what empowered you in this way?
- Were you aware of this grounding, or is it only now as you look back that you realize it?
- What was the outcome?

At what times during your day did you have a sense you were forsaken?

- What happened, and in what way were you ungrounded?
- Were you aware of this lack of grounding, or is it only now as you look back that you realize it?
- What were your feelings or beliefs about the situation and any person(s) involved, including yourself and God?
- Are there ways you could have been more consciously grounded in God's presence? How would this have made a difference for you?

When you have finished reflecting on your day, continue to sit quietly without self-judgment. Invite God's presence and allow yourself to sink deeply into God's total acceptance. If you struggle to sense this presence, allow yourself to feel the pain and loss. Let your own heart cry out with the lament "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Just be honest about your feelings and hold them openly without trying to force anything.

Try to do this exercise on each of the following days and notice whether you observe any changes or evolutions over the course of the week.

Lent Week 5: The Fifth Word of Distress

1. What resonated with you from the message this past Sunday? Was there anything that made you feel uncomfortable?
2. Read John 19:25-37. Consider Jesus' words: "I am thirsty." What does this say to you about the reality of Jesus' suffering? Why does it matter that Jesus suffered?
3. Caught up in the horrors of World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering: only the suffering God can help." Would you agree?
4. Read John 7:37-39. What light does this passage shed on the John 19:25-37 text? Given that Jesus is the source of living water, how do you think the author wants his readers to feel when Jesus cries out, "I am thirsty"?
5. Read the description of life in God's presence in Revelation 7:16-17. What added perspective does this bring to the John 19:25-37 passage?
6. If you are reflecting alone, take some time to talk to God about any distress you are currently experiencing, knowing that God understands and shares in our human pain. If you are meeting in a group, take some time sharing in twos or threes, and pray for one another.

Prayer Practice: Living Water

Throughout this week, pause when you drink water to reflect.

- Before you drink, consider your own thirst. Imagine that sensation intensified to the point of distress.
- As you take a sip of the water, savor the experience of being refreshed.
- Is there an area in your life where you thirst spiritually or emotionally?
- As you drink, welcome the presence of God's Living Water within you. Imagine God's love saturating any areas of longing or distress.