

A crown of thorns and a gear are placed on a surface of light-colored gravel. The crown of thorns is on the left, and the gear is on the right, partially overlapping the crown. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

# **Surprised by Love Part 2**

**An exploration of Mark's Gospel  
February 17 - March 31**

**Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

## Week 1: On the Mountaintop (Mark 9:2-13)

1. What associations do you have with the season of Lent? Have you traditionally observed Lent, and if so, how?
2. Was there anything in the message for this first week of Lent that resonated with you or that seemed timely? What did you find surprising or uncomfortable? Was there anything you disagreed with?
3. The story for this week is set on a mountain. Mountains in ancient Jewish thought were considered places where heaven was closer to earth and experiences of God were much more likely. Celtic people termed these “thin” places. Is there anywhere that represents a “thin” place for you?
4. Read Mark 9:2-13.
  - What do you think the author of Mark’s Gospel wants us to understand about Jesus’ identity from this story?
  - What do you think the disciples might have thought when they saw Moses and Elijah? Use your imagination—there are no “correct” answers!
  - What impact do you think the Transfiguration had on how they saw Jesus?
  - How does this story color your view of Jesus?
5. In parts of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the transfiguration is what happens to the disciples: they are changed to see Jesus as he always was. In what ways can thinking about the story in this way be helpful?
6. What can you do this Lent to make time and space to “see” and know more of Jesus? Are there particular activities that help you to connect to God? If you are reflecting in a group, break into smaller groups to share your responses and to pray for one another as we travel this Lenten road together.

### Practice for the week: Sacred pathways

Different people find it easier to connect with God through various pathways. Some examples identified by author Gary Thomas are as follows:

- *Nature*: Appreciating the beauty of God’s creation
- *Enthusiastic worship*: Celebrating God’s goodness with thanks and praise
- *Learning*: Gaining insights about God and life with him
- *Tradition*: Following time-honored spiritual traditions and practices
- *Asceticism*: Abstaining from comforts to make more space for God
- *Sensation*: Experiencing God with your physical senses or imagination
- *Caregiving*: Offering God’s compassion to those the hurting or struggling
- *Social justice*: Actively engaging with others to serve the poor and needy
- *Quiet prayer*: Being absorbed with God in quiet solitude (contemplation)

Take time to consider your preferred pathway and identify time in your weekly schedule to practice it. If you are unsure of your preferred pathway(s), you might like to take a survey here:

[www.soulshpherd.org/sacred-pathways-survey](http://www.soulshpherd.org/sacred-pathways-survey)

## Week 2: Down to Earth (Mark 9:14-10:52)

*Sometime before the discussion, take a moment to read through this week's passage: Mark 9:14-10:52.*

1. Was there anything in the message for this second week of Lent that resonated with you or that seemed timely? What did you find surprising or uncomfortable? Was there anything you disagreed with?
2. Read Mark 9:30-37. Why do you think the disciples didn't understand Jesus, and why would they be afraid to ask him about it? What does welcoming "little children" mean to you, and what does it look like in your own life?
3. Read Mark 9:38-41 and compare it to the story in Mark 9:14-29. What irony do you see here? Can you share an instance when you have perhaps behaved a little like the disciples in this situation? How could we guard against this?
4. In Mark 9:42-50 what do you think Jesus means by "salted with fire" (v 49) and how could this help bring about peace among humanity (v 50)?
5. Read Mark 10:1-12. Why do you think Jesus gives one response to the Pharisees in public and another one to the disciples in private? The speaker on Sunday suggested that Jesus might be using hyperbole in vs 10-12. What are your own thoughts about this saying of Jesus? Given how inclusive and accepting Jesus is (especially in this week's passage as a whole) how would you seek to support, encourage, and affirm someone who has been through or who is going through a divorce?
6. What are the similarities and differences between the stories in Mark 10:13-16 and Mark 10:17-30? What emotions do you see in Jesus here? Have there ever been times when you have felt those emotions and acted on them? Have there ever been times when you have suppressed those emotions and remained passive and/or silent?
7. Break into groups of 2 or 3 and read Mark 10:35-45. Share situations where you are feeling challenged to "drink the cup" at the moment, and then spend some time praying for one another.

### **Practice for the week: The Examen**

Take some time this week to reflect on your day through the lens of power and control. Center yourself and be consciously aware of God's presence with you. Sit quietly in a comfortable position, close your eyes, and center yourself by focusing on your breathing. As you breathe in, allow God's love to fill you and as you breathe out, let go of guilt and fear. In this non-judgmental posture, reflect back on your day looking for moments of power and control. These could be moments of conflict, opportunities to speak or act on behalf of others, or times when you could empower others. For each situation contemplate the following questions:

- Did you allow fear of consequences (such as loss of popularity, credibility, or power) to prevent you from speaking out or taking action on behalf of someone with less power?
- Did you use power for your own gain or protection rather than for the interests of others?

End this time by prayerfully asking God to help you see the root causes of the ways you behaved and let them go. Invite the Spirit of Christ to empower you to walk the pathway of servanthood and justice tomorrow.

## Week 3: In Jerusalem (Mark 11:1-12-44)

1. Was there anything in the message on Sunday that stood out to you? What was most helpful for you? In what ways did it stretch your thinking?
2. In the message, the speaker read a quote from John Lewis that said, "Speak up, speak out, get in the way. Get in good trouble, necessary trouble." Read Mark 11:15-19
  - In what ways did Jesus get in trouble? Was it good trouble? Why or why not?
  - Where do you think Jesus found the spiritual strength and mental fortitude to *speak up* in a way that was so costly? What spiritual practices do you think were essential to public actions?
  - In what ways are Jesus' actions in Mark 11:15-19 a model for us?
3. Read Mark 12:28-34 (The Greatest Commandment)
  - What is the difference between "love" as a noun and "love" as a verb? While we often talk about love, do you think the world is good at actually loving people? How about loving God? Why or why not?
  - Cornell West said, "Justice is what love looks like in public." In what ways is Jesus' love on public display when he stages a protest in the temple (Mark 11:15-19)
  - Loving God completely is radical and costly. Can you think of some examples of the costliness of love in your life?
  - What do you think it actually means to love God with all your *heart, soul, mind, and strength*?
4. Read Mark 12:41-44 (The Widow's Offering)
  - Why do you think Jesus said the widow's gift is greater than the other gifts that were given? What principle is Jesus teaching in this passage?
  - How do we avoid being like the teachers of the law who prioritized looking good (Mark 12:38-40) above loving God and those in need?
  - It's been said, "You can give without loving, but you can't love without giving." Do you think this is true? What can we do to make sure our giving comes from a place of love?
  - What is one way you can show your love for God more clearly this week? What is one way you can love your neighbor (i.e., someone in need) more this week?

### Practice for the week: Sacred reading of Scripture – Mark 12:28-34

This is a way of praying with Scripture that has been used for centuries by followers of Jesus and is often called *Lectio Divina*, which is Latin for sacred or divine reading. 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 in quiet 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. (If you prefer to listen to the Scripture rather than read it, there are some great apps and websites for that, such as [www.biblegateway.com](http://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 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, and 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 allow the light and love of God to stream into your heart and spirit.

## Week 4: On the Horizon (Mark 13:1-37)

Take some time before you meet to read through Mark chapter 13.

1. Mark 13 is a tough chapter! What was helpful to you in the message on Sunday? What did you find surprising or uncomfortable? What did you disagree with?
2. Read Mark 13:1-2. The disciples were clearly impressed by the temple, despite Jesus' description of it as a "den of robbers" (Mark 11:17). Do you see any similarities between the popular view of the temple in the first century, and people's opinions of the church today?
3. Read Mark 13:3-13. It is believed that Mark's readers were experiencing persecution for their faith. In addition, Israel was probably about to enter into, or was already in the midst of a violent uprising against Rome. How does this context influence how you read this passage? How do you understand the statement in verse 13: "the one who stands firm to the end will be saved"?
4. Read Mark 13:14-27.
  - In this passage, Jesus draws on well-known Jewish apocryphal literature, which provided cryptic revelations about sudden and dramatic interventions of God in history. Why do you think Jesus does this instead of giving an unambiguous answer to the disciples' questions?
  - Read Isaiah 13:10 and Isaiah 34:4—Isaiah's prophecies concerning the downfall of the ancient kingdoms of Babylon and Edom. What might be indicated by the fact that the language in Mark 13 is not unique, but has been used of past "disasters"?
  - In verse 26, Jesus references Daniel 7:13-14, where one like the son of man comes with the clouds of heaven into the presence of the Ancient of Days (God). This implies Jesus is talking about going *into* heaven, rather than coming down *from* heaven. How does this understanding impact how you read the passage?
5. Read Mark 13:30-33. What does Jesus say in response to the disciples' questions about *when* these things will happen? What can we learn from this?
6. How does this chapter make you feel? The speaker on Sunday said Mark was writing to comfort his readers, rather than to frighten or disturb them. What comfort can you take from this chapter?
7. Are there aspects of the future about which you feel anxious? If you are reflecting in a group, break into smaller groups to share your response and to pray for one another. If you are reflecting alone, talk to God about your fears. Trust in Jesus' words: "don't be afraid," "this is not the end" (verse 7).

### Practice for the week: A review of life

Take some time this week to think about how God has been present in your life over the years. Break it down into manageable time periods:

- childhood (1-12 years)
- adolescence (13-18 years)
- young adulthood (19-35 years)
- midlife (36-65 years)
- senior (>65 years)

What major events come to mind? Where was God in these events? Were there any times that seemed like “the end”? How do you feel as you look back on them now? What insights did you gain?

As you reflect back, talk to God about your sense of God’s presence and absence in your life. Ask God to increasingly open your mind and heart to God’s loving, calming presence with you.

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If you are interested in learning more about the temple structure in the time of Jesus, check out <https://tinyurl.com/yc3n96wk> for a 20-minute tour with Rabbi Dr. David Moster, director of the Institute of Biblical Culture and an Adjunct Assistant Professor of Hebrew Bible at the Jewish Theological Seminary.



## Week 5: In the Company of Friends

Sometime before the discussion, take a moment to read through this week's passage: Mark 14:1-52

1. Was there anything in the message for this second week of Lent that resonated with you or that seemed timely? What did you find surprising or uncomfortable? Was there anything you disagreed with?
2. Read Mark 14:1-2. Why are the religious authorities having to be secretive about their pursuit of Jesus? What does this say about the level of control they have over the situation?
3. Read Mark 14:3-11. Why do you think the woman goes unnamed in this passage when the author also says the memory of her will endure for ages? What do the woman's actions reveal about how she views Jesus and what he has been teaching? What does the disciples' reaction reveal about their view of the same things?
4. Why do you think Judas goes to the authorities in the reading above? How do you relate to Judas in this whole chapter? What is Jesus' reaction to him in Mark's account? Why do you think the other gospels say more about Judas?
5. Read Mark 14:12-15. Why do you think Jesus has such intricate instructions for the disciples about finding a location to celebrate the Passover meal? How do these passages in Isaiah 25:6-8 and Jeremiah 31:31-34 relate to what Jesus is saying and doing during the meal?
6. Read Mark 14:26-62. What echoes of Jesus' previous teaching in Mark do you see here? In vs. 35-36 how is Jesus challenged personally by the same things he has previously taught? What is his response?
7. The author of the Gospel of Mark uses irony for dramatic effect throughout and in this week's section especially. Read the following quote from Frederick Douglass' "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" speech on July 5, 1852:

*At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! had I the ability, and could reach the nation's ear, I would, today, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced.*

How do these words and context relate to how the author writes the Gospel of Mark? How are they relevant to our present-day situation?

8. Break into groups of 2 or 3 and discuss the theme of fear in this week's passage as a whole. How do you see fear playing out in the religious authorities, in the disciples, and in Jesus? For each group discuss why they are afraid and how they respond to that fear. Then share about fearful situations you are each currently going through and spend some time praying for one another.

## **Practice for the week: Imaginative reading of scripture**

Set aside some time this week to read the story in Mark 14:3-11 using your imagination. This is a modified form of an ancient method of reading scripture developed by Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century.

Read the scripture 3 times. Don't try to analyze its meaning but just try to feel it. In the first reading let yourself sink into the story. Creatively imagine the scene and immerse yourself in it. 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.

## Week 6: Beyond the wall (Mark 11:1-11)

*Sometime before the discussion, take a moment to read through this week's passage: Mark 11:1-11*

1. Was there anything in this week's message that resonated with you or challenged your thinking? Was anything surprising or uncomfortable? Did you disagree with anything?
2. Read Mark 11:1-11. How do you think it felt to be a part of Jesus' procession into Jerusalem? What emotions do you think Jesus' disciples experienced? Why?
3. In many churches, the message on Palm Sunday is based on the story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a colt while people shouted, "Hosanna." Have you heard a message based on this passage before? If so, how have you heard it explained?
4. Read Mark 11:1-7. On Sunday, the speaker said that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem appeared to be an intentionally orchestrated demonstration. What evidence is there in these verses that Jesus planned this event? What point do you think Jesus was trying to make?
5. Merriam-Webster.com defines a demonstration as "a public display of group feelings toward a person or cause." Today, demonstrations are often used to display one's objection to injustice. How have you seen demonstrations used in response to injustice? Have you participated in a demonstration? Why or why not?
6. Demonstrations are often designed to speak truth to power. What message did Jesus' demonstration on the Palm Sunday communicate to the powerful Roman Empire? (See Mark 11:8-10 and Matt. 21:1-5)
7. Break into groups of 2 or 3 and consider the story in Mark 11:1-11. Share situations where you feel challenged to demonstrate against unjust power in our world today, and then spend some time praying for one another.

### **Practice for the week: Journey with Jesus to the Crucifixion**

Journey with Jesus this week through the events leading up to the crucifixion. You can do this by reading through the stories of Jesus' last week before the crucifixion in each of the four gospels (Matthew 21-27, Mark 11-15, Luke 19-23, John 12-19). Take time to notice how Jesus interacted with people and how people interacted with him. Imagine how you would feel if you were on this journey with Jesus. As you read through the story in each of the four gospels, jot down anything that stands out to you. Then, spend time praying about the notes you took and the feelings they elicited.