

QUESTIONS TO GOD

Preaching Resources

Ash Wednesday Preaching Resources: Living with Questions & Doubts



Scripture Passage: Isaiah 6:1-8; Matthew 6:1-6

Focus Statement: Doubts about faith and life are normal. Unfortunately, Christians are often taught to view doubts as failing God. Isaiah teaches us that by bringing our doubts into the open we allow God's grace to fill us with peace and strength.

ME: Tell of a doubt concerning your faith that you struggled with in the past. Talk about how facing your doubt and questions helped God led you to peace concerning the issue. Don't share an issue with which you are currently struggling.

WE: Unfortunately, Christians are often taught that having doubts should cause us to be ashamed. Doubts are normal and every person of faith deals with doubts and struggles with difficult questions. It is important to remember that theology means "God talk" and it would be impossible for any human being to talk about God and get every detail right or to be able to answer every question. No one has all the answers... not even your pastor. Sometimes, simply asking the question allows us to better understand how to live a faithful life in a world full of doubt.

GOD: Isaiah had real doubts about if he could truly speak for God. Instead of hiding his doubt he shared it with God. God did not shame Isaiah but gave him the grace to answer his need and gave him the courage and strength to follow and live out his calling. God made the doubt-filled Isaiah into the greatest of all the prophets. A prophet whose words would give hope to a people in exile and foreshadow the coming of the Messiah.

Important figures in Scripture like Moses, David, Sarah, Peter, Paul, and Mary all struggled with doubts and questions. Those who doubt are in great company.

God makes room for our doubts. One powerful example is in the book of Psalms. Biblical scholars tend to divide the book of psalms into different types or categories. The category with the largest number of psalms are called the psalms of laments. These psalms are songs of pain and doubt. Many of the psalms of laments were most likely written during the conflicts and exile Isaiah and other prophets faced and wrote about. The Jewish and Christian tradition has always believed God wants us to be honest in sharing our hope, joy, fear, or doubts.

YOU: What doubts and questions do you have? Give your congregation slips of paper and time to write out some of their doubts. Ash Wednesday is a time in which we are called to face our limits, weaknesses, and mortality. As mortals we will always have more questions than answers.

WE: By facing our questions and doubts and bringing them to God we are freed from the power they can have over us. We are reminded God's love and grace is bigger than our doubts. If you are partaking in Holy Communion, ask the congregation to bring their slips of paper up and place them symbolically at the foot of the cross. Take time to make the connection between the burning coal that cleansed Isaiah's lips and partaking in the Body and Blood of Christ that cleanses us.

If you are comfortable end the service outside and burn the slips of paper creating ash which symbolizes the beginning of our journey with Christ to the Cross.



Week 1 Preaching Resources: Who is God?

Scripture Passage: 1 John 4:7-19

Focus Statement: People often wonder who God is or if God even exists. Each time we give, receive, or witness love, we get closer and closer to our answer.

ME: If you are prepared to be vulnerable, consider sharing about a time when you questioned God's existence or who God is. Was there something (an experience, person, etc.) that helped clarify or assure you about God? If this is something you are currently dealing with, use your discernment about sharing. You might instead choose to share about a time when you experienced love in a powerful way that made you feel connected to something divine and transcendent.

WE: Assure the congregation that it is normal and natural to have periods of questioning or doubt about who God is or if God even exists. You might describe some different situations where or reasons why people might have these kinds of questions. Over the millennia, people have attempted to answer them in many ways across cultures, places, and disciplines. You might choose to share one or two different approaches to this question with your congregation. If you do, keep it brief and be careful about overloading them with information that could be distracting.

If there was one clear answer, we would probably all believe the same thing! And we would no longer need the kind of faith that belief requires. Today's passage offers one helpful way to think about God's existence and character (nature).

GOD:

The passage names the obvious: "No one has ever seen God," (v. 12a). Yet it makes a connection between knowing and experiencing love and knowing God. It goes so far as to say, "God is love," and therefore the fact that we love means we are "born of God and know God" (v. 7).

But how do we know love is of God and not just a human emotion? How does our experience of love connect us to a transcendent, divine source of love? In verses 9-10, the passage points to the existence and life of Jesus as the way that God's love is revealed (made known). Of course, it is possible to love without believing in Jesus or even ever hearing the message that Jesus is God's son. But with Jesus, something completely new and transformative happened – the creation of a new way of being human and a new community characterized by love – something much deeper than an emotion.

The writer of 1 John links their experience of love to their experience of Jesus as God's Son and "Savior of the world" (v. 14). Just like we cannot *prove* God's existence, we cannot *prove* Jesus is God's son. However, biblical scholar Luke Timothy Johnson discusses that after Jesus' death on the cross, *something happened*. It is historical fact that a new community of people started who lived differently (Acts 4:32-36) and claimed to experience release from repressive powers, systems of law, lack of fear of death, freedom, peace, etc.¹ In short, they were a community born of love and characterized by love. And the community itself (the early church) described the *something* that happened as the

¹ Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Writings of the New Testament*. Third Edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press (2010), pp. 89-93.



resurrection of Jesus, God's Son, from the dead. This new community and new way of being human points to the reality and character of a loving God as revealed in Jesus.

That community (the church) and way of being human continues to this day. The church's continued existence and our participation in it, most especially our loving and being loved, are evidence of God's existence. God, who was revealed in Jesus, is now present with us by the Spirit (v. 13) to continue this transformation in and by love. This does not mean the church always gets it right. There are lots of people who like Jesus but do not like the church because they have been hurt by people in it or have experienced the hypocrisy of people who claim to be Christian. They have a sense that if there is a God, God probably looks more like the love Jesus stood for than what they see happening in churches at times.

As people who claim to be followers of Jesus, we have a responsibility to be the evidence of God's existence for others by loving them. We are to be "as he [Jesus] is ... in this world," as we are shaped and perfected by the love that we receive from God in Jesus (v. 17). The passage describes what this looks like in verse 18: "perfect love casts out fear..."

YOU: You might invite individuals in the congregation to reflect on times they've experienced love and if/how that has made them feel connected to God. How might they share and show that love to others? Encourage concrete actions. There is so much in the world that can make us feel jaded, depressed, cynical, angry, etc. – what does it look like to instead "abide in love," to choose love as our dwelling place and home?

WE: It is okay to have questions about who God is and if God exists. God is big enough to handle our doubts and questions. What would it look like if we let our wondering drive us into deeper experiences and expressions of love and looked for God there?



Week 2 Preaching Resources: Is the Bible Reliable?

Scripture Passage: Hebrews 4:12-14

Focus Statement: As Christians, we must always remember the purpose of the Bible is to call us back to God by retelling the story of salvation that culminates in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We cheapen the Bible when we use it to promote our own agendas.

ME: Briefly tell your faith story or how you were called into ministry. Focus your story on how a scripture passage or narrative has played a central role in your journey. How has God used that scripture to call and redeem you?

WE: Many people, Christians included, are intimidated by the Bible. The text can be confusing and even shocking. Remind your congregation it is normal to struggle with scripture. In fact, we are called to struggle together so that we might better understand its wisdom. The Jewish tradition of reading scripture (the tradition that shaped Jesus, the disciples, and Paul) promotes active and lively debate so that all community members might better understand each other and the Bible. We need not fear or avoid disagreements about how best to understand a passage of scripture. Instead, we can choose to embrace our roots and view disagreements as a healthy process God uses to develop unity and consensus in communities of faith over time.

GOD: You might choose to acknowledge that questions about the reliability of Scripture come from different angles (e.g., “Is it historically accurate?” “Is it consistent with itself or are there contradictions in it?” “Does/how does the history of translation affect the meaning?”) Whenever we address the reliability of Scripture it is important to start by remembering what the Bible is reliable *for*. The Bible is reliable because it rests upon and points us toward the Logos (Word) of God, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh. Even though we often refer to the Bible as God’s word, it is important not to lose sight of how our tradition speaks about Jesus. Understanding Jesus as God’s Word also helps us better understand how the writer of Hebrews uses the term “word of God.”

The writer uses the Hebrew Scriptures to illuminate what God is doing in the writer’s time and place. The persecution the writer’s community is facing from the Roman empire is being used by God to reveal the evil of human sin and the community’s faith in Jesus. Ultimately, our high priest (Jesus), who was also tested, will pour out grace and mercy to help those who trust in him. The writer compares what is happening in their own time and place to what happened in the Hebrew Scriptures, so that the audience can “see themselves” in the Scripture. At the same time, the writer continually reminds them that Jesus is the one to whom all Scripture points – the ultimate “Word” of God for and about humanity. You might share an example or two of how the writer does this (e.g., in chapter 3 or chapter 11-12:2)

The Methodist Articles of Religion speak of Scripture as “containing all things necessary to salvation,” (*Book of Discipline*, ¶1104). As the writer of Hebrews states it “exposes us.” God, through scripture, can help us to see who we really are. Scripture leads us to repent and turn to Jesus. The writer reminds the reader that when we hold on to our confession and trust in the Word of God made flesh, we can draw near to God in confidence. (Hebrews 4:14-16)



YOU: Do you tend to use Scripture to prove a point or promote your own agenda? Are you using it to help you clearly see who you are and your need for God's grace? When we use the Bible for our own ends, we keep it from challenging us and drawing us into a deeper relationship with Jesus. When we make the Bible about us and not God, we also often drive others away from engaging with it. The existence of the Christian community 2,000 years after the death of Jesus speaks to the power of the stories and wisdom contained in the Bible. Your changed life is the greatest proof of the reliability of the Bible.

WE: Think about creating a new Disciple Bible Study small group available for people who are new to studying the Bible. Explore the Cokesbury resources here: <https://www.cokesbury.com/disciple-bible-studies>. If that is not possible, encourage the creation of a small group to study one of the gospels using a good study resource or a group that regularly practices *lectio divina* together. The internet contains lots of great resources on *lectio divina* if you want to learn more about it. You might also close your sermon by inviting people to join a current Bible study small group or to have open conversation with you and each other about scripture.



Week 3 Preaching Resources: Why Should I Go to Church?

Scripture Passage: Psalm 100

Focus Statement: We might be able to believe in God, pray, and even worship alone, but in a community of faith, despite all its imperfections, we can connect, grow, and experience God's love for us in ways we never could on our own.

ME: Share a story about how a community of faith has blessed you. If the church you serve has a matriarch or a patriarch, this might be a wonderful moment to highlight what they have meant to the church family. If you are comfortable, ask two leaders to share brief reflections (no more than 2 or 3 minutes each) about how this church has positively impacted their lives. Go over their reflection/story with them ahead of time.

WE: The COVID-19 pandemic both isolated us from community and clearly showed us the negative effects of not having regular moments of connection. We have seen a rise in depression and feelings of isolation. Acknowledge it is perfectly normal to be struggling with depression. Remind your congregation you are willing to talk with anyone struggling and help them find support and counseling. COVID-19 has reminded us that we were created to be social beings. Community with God and with others is hardwired in our DNA.

GOD: Psalm 100 was originally written as a hymn to be sung by the people of Israel as they entered the temple in Jerusalem. Imagine traveling for miles on foot and standing at the bottom of the Temple Mount waiting to climb the stairs leading to the only place you believed God's presence was revealed on earth. How excited would you be? This hymn was the means by which the people expressed their joy and excitement as they climbed to the temple.

Psalm 100 is filled with imperative verbs: Shout! Worship! Enter! Praise! Bless! The people were commanded to express all of this passion together. In verse three the word know is even imperative. Together the people will intimately know God. This passionate life-changing event doesn't and can't happen individually, it happens together. God's people will also experience God's goodness together (v.5). We see the importance of community in the New Testament as well. Paul's use of the terms "the body of Christ" and "the temple of the Holy Spirit" are rooted in the idea of the importance of community we find in Psalm 100. You or I are not the temple of the Holy Spirit, we are the temple of the Holy Spirit. We experience God in and through each other (the Church community).

YOU: Has the community of God been a blessing for you? Has a church community hurt you or made you feel like an outsider? Psalm 100 proclaims that we are called to enter this place together with joy and passion. You have been called to this place to experience God with each other; we can't do this alone. Look around you (ask them to look around the room); because of your fellow siblings, you can experience the powerful presence of God today. If you are angry with someone in this community, make peace with them. If you need to ask forgiveness, do it today. Our worship and our experience of God is inhibited when we distance ourselves from each other.



WE: Challenge each member of your congregation to invite at least one person to Easter Sunday service. Talk about the faith sharing acronym FRAN (Friend, Relative, Acquaintance, and Neighbor). Ask the congregation to take a few minutes and pray that God will bring to mind a person or persons in one or more of those categories. If possible, have a song playing in the background during this time. Encourage them to trust in the Holy Spirit's leading and ask this individual or individuals to join them on Easter Sunday for the celebration of Jesus' resurrection.



Week 4 Preaching Resources: Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?

Scripture Passage: Psalm 137:1-6 (secondary:
John 11:23-35)

Focus Statement: It is difficult to understand how God could allow the pain and suffering we see in the world and in our own lives. Jesus is Emmanuel "God with Us." Jesus reminds us that a better question to ask ourselves is, "What can I do to help those who are suffering and in pain?"

ME: Share about a time when you have wondered, "How could God let this happen?" Be cautious in what you choose to share, making sure it is something where you have found some healing. A current tragedy, or one you're actively processing, is most often not a wise choice. If you are uncomfortable sharing or unable to share, you might choose to simply name or list some of the realities in the world that lead people to ask the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

WE: We have probably all heard different answers to the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" – some from a faith perspective and some not. You may choose to share some of the common (especially pat, cliché) responses (e.g., "to teach a lesson," "it was punishment," "as an example to others," "heaven needed another angel," or "because God doesn't exist," "there is no rhyme or reason to what happens in the world," etc.). Yet, all these answers come up unsatisfactory in the face of human suffering, especially if we want to maintain belief in a good, all-knowing, and all-powerful God. Some of them can cause more harm than good when people are hurting. Scripture does not give us easy answers, but it may direct us to ask different, more helpful questions and provide comfort along the way.

GOD: Psalm 137 is a psalm of lament, as are approximately one third of all the psalms. The Israelites have been sent out of their homeland (Jerusalem) after the ruin of their temple by the Babylonians. They are living under enemy rule. Describe some of the pain they're experiencing (far from home, not knowing when they'll return, their captors taunt them asking them to sing songs). Make connections to the kinds of pain/suffering people in your congregation might be experiencing.

Perhaps they feel abandoned by God. How could God let this happen to them when they are supposed to be God's chosen people?

- 1) People may have learned it is wrong to question or complain to God. The presence of this psalm and others like it in scripture show that lament is a valid and expected response to suffering. It is not explained away or edited out of the story. God can handle our anger and sorrow. (Note: You may choose to include that towards the end of the psalm [v.8-9], the writer asks for horrific revenge against their enemies. This shows the depth and brutal honesty of the pain being expressed. The inclusion of this graphic verse does not mean God will answer this prayer for revenge or that God condones the attitude of vengeance. But God is able to bear even our most difficult emotions.)



- 2) Notice the psalm does not even attempt to answer the question of why God's chosen people are experiencing exile and oppression. God is not depicted as a puppet master who pulls the strings to make good and bad things happen to people. So, what does God do and what is God's role in relation to human suffering? We have to zoom out from this passage to see the bigger picture. As God's people face oppression and different challenges through their history, God is always there and faithful to them. God cares when people suffer. And God responds (though, not always in the way or on the timeline people might want).



We see an example of this pattern in the New Testament in John 11:23-44. Mary and Martha are grieving their brother Lazarus' death and tell Jesus if he had been there, Lazarus would not have died. Jesus does not rebuke them for their sadness or for blaming him. He joins them in their grief (see vs. 33-35). Jesus, God with us, feels our pain with and alongside us.

- 3) God responds to people's suffering. In the case of Lazarus, Jesus raises him from the dead. For the people of Israel in Babylonian captivity, they were eventually allowed to return to Jerusalem. Eventually, the temple that had been destroyed was rebuilt (then, eventually, destroyed again). The point is not that "everything will turn out well in the end," or that God will step in and reverse our pain and suffering. Rather, God comes into our suffering brings redemption and goodness out of the midst of it – moments of love, meaning, hope, and so on. Again, this doesn't make it any less difficult or painful, but God is there in it with us doing what only God can do amid tragedy.

YOU: Encourage people in the congregation to reflect on where they stand with respect to God and their own or others' suffering. Do they believe they're not supposed to be angry or question God? Are they currently upset or doubting God's goodness? Help them find the space and permission to lament and grieve. Instead of turning away from God in our suffering, how can people in your congregation let God into it? Further, describe some ways that they can, in turn, be the heart, voice, hands, and feet of God as others experience suffering.

WE: What would it look like if we all spent less energy trying to answer the "why" or the "how could God" of what we're going through and put that energy into compassion (towards others and self) and opening ourselves to the compassion that God wants to offer us amidst our suffering? What would it look like for your church to be the proof for people in your community that God cares when people suffer?

Week 5 Preaching Resources: How and Why Do I Forgive?

Scripture Passage: Matthew 6:9-15

Focus Statement: Forgiveness frees us from resentment and turmoil. God, who knows us inside out, sees where our mistakes and failings come from. God loves us through it all, offers forgiveness as a gift, and shows us how to extend it to others.

ME: Tell a story about a time you were upset or hurt by someone, but your perspective changed when you learned more about what the person was going through (or when you upset or hurt someone else, and they showed kindness/compassion when they learned what you were going through). Or tell a story of extraordinary forgiveness from the news or history. For example, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2016/10/01/10-years-ago-her-son-killed-amish-children-their-families-immediately-accepted-her-into-their-lives/>. In Korean communities the film *Secret Sunshine (Miryang)* is a familiar story of how God offers forgiveness to our enemies.

WE: At one time or another, we have all found ourselves in need of forgiveness or hurt by someone and in the position to offer forgiveness. It can be an incredibly difficult thing to do. Sometimes, it may be easier to stay angry, cut off the relationship, or ignore the wrongdoing (our own or others') and hope it goes away. Why should we bother with forgiveness? And how do we do it?

GOD: In this passage, Jesus is teaching his followers how to pray what we now call, "The Lord's Prayer." This is part of a bigger teaching (Matt 6:1-18) on how to live out faith (piety). In both the Lord's Prayer (v. 12) and the verses immediately following (v. 14-15), Jesus talks about being forgiven and forgiving others together – never one without the other. Forgiveness is meant to bring healing and reconciliation to a relationship. That is a gift God gives to us by forgiving us. And it is also a gift we give ourselves "as we forgive those who trespass against us." While forgiving someone *can* lead to reconciliation in our relationships, sometimes it does/will not. (You might give some examples such as the person doesn't want forgiveness, won't speak to you, has already passed away.) Forgiveness is really about freeing ourselves from the resentment, hatred, anger, that hurts and harms our own souls. Medgar Evers, a civil rights activist who was assassinated by a white supremacist said, "When you hate, the only person that suffers is you because most of the people you hate don't know it and the rest don't care." As we forgive, we play a part in our own healing. If we do not forgive others (v. 14), holding that hatred, resentment, and anger, can make it difficult to fully receive the forgiveness that God wants to offer to us.

Forgiveness can be incredibly difficult. The surrounding conversation in Matthew 6 can help us better understand Jesus' teaching on forgiveness. We often read parts of Matthew 6 on Ash Wednesday. (If you used the Ash Wednesday resource from this series, you probably did too!) In these verses, Jesus teaches that living a life of faith is not about putting our religion on display (giving alms, praying, fasting) to impress others. God sees what we do privately/quietly and knows what is in our hearts and our motivations. God knows every detail of our lives (the challenges and struggles we face, what we have overcome, our backstory), not just the face we put on for the world. In knowing all of this about us, God has compassion for us and chooses to forgive us. What if we, like God, had a window into what was happening in the minds and hearts of others – especially those who have hurt us? If we could know and understand where hurtful



words and actions came from, might we find compassion that leads to a healing forgiveness? This is not to say that knowing someone's backstory excuses harm or wrong, but it may help us find our way to forgiveness.

The Lord's Prayer is not meant to be prayed once and then left behind. It is how Jesus teaches his followers to pray. In it, the one praying asks for "daily bread" for today. Tomorrow, we will ask for daily bread for tomorrow. Just like daily bread, receiving forgiveness from God and forgiving others is something we need over and over again. It is a process, not a magic moment. It requires practice. (There is a form of meditation called meta meditation you might explore as one way to do this.)

YOU: This can be a time to invite people to reflect on an area where they need forgiveness or something they need to forgive someone else for. People may not be ready to fully forgive today but you may share small steps they can take towards forgiveness depending on where they are with it (e.g., apologizing/asking for forgiveness, meditating on how *not* forgiving is affecting their own emotions and wellbeing, committing to praying for the person who has wronged them, reaching out to that person for a conversation).

WE: None of us are perfect. We all require forgiveness, and we will all find ourselves in a position to forgive at one time or another. Describe how your community and the world might be different if we were all able to both receive and extend the kind of forgiveness that Jesus extends to us. What would it be like if we all knew each other's backstory and were able to treat each other with compassion?



Week 6 (Palm/Passion Sunday) Preaching Resources: Why is Jesus Special?

Scripture Passage: Mark 11:1-11

Focus Statement: The world gives us a certain idea of what it means to be strong and powerful. Those same traits can so easily be - and often are - used to do evil. Jesus turns them upside down and shows how real strength and power lie in loving and serving each other.

ME: Share the story of a parody that revealed/reveals a deeper or profound truth about humanity. Or tell a story about a time you experienced or witnessed a leader (e.g., faith community leader, employer, CEO) doing something unexpectedly humble or kind and what kind of effect that had.

WE: There is something exciting and important about belonging to a group. It is a necessary part of human life for our survival. The groups we belong to are all shaped by stories about who the members are, what unites them, and what differentiates them from others. What kind of stories draw us in and make us want to be a part of a group? What stories do we tell and believe about the groups we belong to? Part of what makes Jesus special is the story he tells and the story of which he is a part. This story shapes a group that is meant to be different from so many that the world would have us join.

GOD: Background information: In their book, *The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan talk about the two parades that were occurring in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday: the peasant parade where Jesus came riding in on a donkey, and the imperial parade where Pontius Pilate entered the city with a full military procession.² It was standard for Roman governors of Judea (like Pilate) to process to Jerusalem for high Jewish holidays in case any trouble broke out and needed to be quashed. The two parades had some things in common – they both had certain beliefs/theologies around them. The Roman emperor was thought to be the “Son of God,” “Lord,” and “Savior” within Roman imperial religion. These divine claims were reinforced by a show of power (weaponry, soldiers, displays of wealth). Jesus’s followers and sympathizers had religious beliefs about who he was too (from teacher, to prophet, to Messiah). Borg and Crossan suggest that Jesus deliberately planned a “counter-procession,” as shown by him arranging for his disciples to go ahead of him to bring him a colt on which to ride into Jerusalem. It is essentially a parody of the Roman imperial parade that Jesus uses to make a point.

The Roman parade put their full power on display with the strength and might of military force. Jesus rode in on a humble colt who had never been ridden before. Discuss how we, as Christians, are called to model Jesus’ humble way in the face of how the world still operates according to strength and might.

Jesus’s choice of an unridden colt is an allusion to the kind of king Zechariah predicted would save Zion/Jerusalem in Zech. 9:9-10. In that passage, the prophet says, the king “will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from



² For the full chapter, see Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’s Final Days in Jerusalem*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006, pp. 1-30.

Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations...". Jesus does not achieve peace through war, like the Romans did, but points to a different way of humility, non-violence, giving of oneself, and trusting in God's direction. How can we follow Jesus in this way?

Christianity understands Jesus to be special because he is the only person to be both fully divine and fully human, truly God's Son in a different sense than the rest of us are God's children. While those who ascribed to Roman imperial religion at the time also believed Roman emperors were divine, what does Jesus' way versus Pilate's way tell us about the God/God who they claimed to be serving? (Note: Pilate was a governor, not the emperor, but he still represented the Roman empire and its religion).

In exploring this, you could look ahead to what Holy Week will bring. The Roman empire used force to brutally end Jesus' life. In the end, God was victorious but not through a show of force, by raising Jesus from the dead, bringing life from death. When we follow Jesus, we are saying we trust the God who has power over life and death. This frees us to live life differently than how the world would have us live (fighting, harming, competing for power).

YOU: Ask your congregation which parade they want to be a part of? In what ways do they currently live like Pilate and his followers (e.g., upholding oppressive systems, using violence to make a point, needing to prove themselves to be better than others). In what ways do they currently live like Jesus and his followers (e.g., on the side of those who have the least, committed to making peace, serving, and loving others, humility). What is one step they can take to become less Pilate-like and more Christ-like?

WE: Unfortunately, sometimes the church claims to follow Jesus but acts more like Pilate. How can we make sure we are not doing that?



Maundy Thursday Preaching Resources: Are You Scared of the Future?

Scripture Passage: John 13:1-7, 31b-35

Focus Statement: The disciples were afraid of losing their positions of power in Jesus' coming kingdom. So, Jesus beautifully teaches them the power of loving and serving others. Loving and serving others can free us from a life of fear.

ME: Tell a story about a time you had to face a fear. Did you overcome it and confront your fear? Did you avoid dealing with your fear? How did this situation and how you dealt with it make you feel? What did you learn about yourself? What would you do differently? The disciples were uncertain and afraid of what was going to happen next. What are the emotions you think the disciples were struggling with during that meal?

WE: Fear is a normal and a necessary part of life. Fear can protect and motivate us to take needed action. For example, the fear of failing a class often motivates us to study for our test. However, misplaced fear can drive us to hurt and misuse other people. For example, many white Americans were driven by fear of African Americans to use violence to try to stop the justice called for by the civil rights movement. Who are the people in our community who face hatred because of the misplaced fear our neighbors and we ourselves struggle to overcome?

GOD: According to the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) this meal was a Passover meal. Passover was one of the Jewish feasts each year that required travel to the temple in Jerusalem to offer sacrifices. So, the population of Jerusalem would grow around 10 times its normal size. The Jews who came to celebrate Passover not only celebrated freedom from slavery in Egypt but looked forward to God freeing God's people from the rule of the Romans. The Romans would send extra troops because they had dealt with uprisings during past Passovers. So, it is easy to assume there was a great deal of anticipation and fear through Jerusalem.

The disciples had also just seen earlier in the week (on Palm Sunday) Jesus choosing to enter the city in a parade through the "Golden Gate," by which tradition believed the Messiah would come in to establish the eternal kingdom of God. So, it is easy to imagine the disciples were planning for their role in Jesus' coming kingdom. (Matthew 20:20-28 and Mark 10:35-45 both show the disciples doing just this as they approach Jerusalem for the Passover).

The custom at the time called for people to wash their feet and hands before dinner. It is very likely that the disciples had not washed their feet that evening. According to the custom of the time, the feet of individuals of higher social rank were to be washed by those of lower social rank. The disciples may have chosen to skip washing their feet so they would not be compelled to wash the feet of another disciple, thereby revealing their lower status.

Jesus, of course, beautifully reveals that his kingdom will be defined by service and love. Jesus, by washing his own disciples' feet, reveals that status doesn't define a follower of Jesus, love and service does. (This reiterates the lesson that Jesus teaches the disciples in Matthew 20:20-28 and Mark 10:35-45 after they vie for status in the future kingdom).



YOU: What are you defined by? How do you struggle with status? We all live in a culture that pushes us to view each other as competitors. Climbing the social ladder can feel like the duty of an American citizen. Good news! As a citizen of the kingdom of God you have been set free from those goals and demands. Maundy Thursday is the Church's gift to remind us we have a new commandment, "to love one another."

WE: Consider having the congregation bring up slips of paper you gave them at the beginning of worship when they come up for Communion. Ask them to share an idea about how the congregation could lovingly serve members of the community. Share these ideas in the church's newsletter, next council meeting, and/or at a worship service bulletin after Easter.

Another idea would be to give everyone a "Thinking of You" card and ask people to write a note and send it to someone in their life that needs to know they are loved.



Good Friday Preaching Resources: Why Did Jesus Have to Die?

Scripture Passage: Colossians 2:13-14

Focus Statement: Christians have always proclaimed Jesus as our savior but have disagreed about how he saves us. Exploring some of the different ways people have described Jesus' saving work reveals the depth of God's loving desire to redeem and heal all of what it means to be human.

ME: What part of the Good Friday story moves you the most? What emotions or thoughts come to mind when you think about that part of the story? Read that part of the passage at the beginning of your sermon. Do this yourself in addition to the reading or readings for this evening. Do this even if the passage has already been read before. After you read the passage that moves you the most, speak about what emotions and thoughts come to your mind. It might help to place yourself in the scene. Where are you in the scene? What are you doing? How do you feel?

WE: All Christian communities proclaim that Jesus is our savior. However, Christian communities have often disagreed about exactly how it is that Jesus saves us. Scripture uses powerful and different images to help us to understand the amazingly large scope of God's love and power revealed in the story of salvation. What draws you to the story of salvation? What about the story do you struggle to understand?

GOD: Christians have developed many different ways of understanding how Jesus' life, death, and resurrection saves us. These different understandings are called atonement theories. Four of the most prominent ones are the recapitulation (sometimes called ontological), Christus Victor, penal substitutionary, and moral atonement theories.

All of these theories draw their foundations from passages of scripture. These theories separately show us part of God's story of salvation, but when we allow them to blend together (as the scripture passages that undergird them are held together in the Bible), they show us a tapestry of God's amazing grace.

For example, the recapitulation theory reminds us that the redeeming and reconciling work of Jesus restores and renews not only humanity, but all of creation (e.g., Ephesians 1:10). The Christus Victor theory holds up the victory of Jesus over sin, death, and the powers of evil (e.g., 1 John 5:4-5). Penal substitutionary theory demands we take seriously the damage our sin does and the need for that cost to be paid (e.g., Galatians 3:13). Finally, moral atonement theory shows us how love is the key to true freedom even in the face of violence and evil (e.g., John 3:16).

None of these theories are perfect because they are human attempts to explain the heart and mind of God. In the end, Scripture and tradition tell us clearly that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection renews, redeems, and restores all of creation from the damage caused by human sin. Jesus brings all of existence into a right relationship with God. God fixes a problem we created by taking all of what it means to be human into the healing embrace of God's love. God's answer to sin, death, fear, and hate was unstoppable love.



YOU: God chose to be reunited and reconnected to us by becoming a human being and confronting, embracing, and healing the wounds from which we suffered. Bring the sermon full circle by encouraging your congregation members to imagine themselves in the story of Good Friday. How do they feel? Why has this story changed the lives of so many over 2,000 years? How has it changed your life?

WE: Give those attending a thank you card as they walk into the service. While a song is played or an anthem sung after your sermon, ask them to write a thank you note to Jesus. If your sanctuary has a large cross, ask them to bring the card up during the last hymn and place it in a basket at the foot of the cross. If you don't have a large cross put the basket at the foot of the altar rail or on the communion table. Let them know you will not share the cards with anyone, but you will pray through the cards during the Easter season.



Week 7 (Easter Sunday) Preaching Resources: Why Be a Christian?

Scripture Passage: Mark 16:1-8. Galatians
5:22-26 (Secondary)

Focus Statement: The original ending of the Gospel of Mark has the women, because of fear, not share the good news of the resurrection. Mark's first readers knew the women ultimately told the story, but Mark's ending reminded them and reminds us that the resurrection story changes the world when we choose to let it change us.

ME: What does be a Christian mean to you? How would you define a Christian? Reflect on Paul's list of the fruits of the Spirit. Point out to your congregation that in describing a Christian, Paul doesn't focus on beliefs or theologies but lived out character traits. What we do as Christians is more important than what we say or believe. Talk about an individual that helped draw you to Jesus. What about their life and character spoke to you?

WE: Often people have great anxiety and fear about witnessing to their faith because they feel they "don't know the Bible" or they "won't have the right answer" to a question someone has. Theology and biblical knowledge are very important because being grounded in Scripture and tradition helps root a faith that could produce fruit. However, people are drawn to Jesus through the grace they see in our lives more than the amount of facts we can share. Ask the congregation to think about what fruit of the Spirit people would most see in them?

GOD: The earliest copies of the Gospel of Mark end at Mark 16:8: "Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid." Mark's original ending has always been a puzzle. Why end a gospel with fear and silence? The first readers of his gospel knew that the women ultimately did tell the resurrection story. They did not live in fear but allowed the power of the resurrection to change them.

Paul in his letter to the Galatians states the same belief. Dying and rising with Christ changes us. The resurrection has changed everything. Paul believes we now have the Holy Spirit within us and through the Spirit's power, the fruits of the Spirit can be the reality of our lives. The only thing that can stop it is us. In chapter five of Galatians there are clear echoes of Deuteronomy 30:19: "I have set life and death, blessing and curse before you. Now choose life...". Moses reminds the people of Israel of their choice before they enter the Promised Land. Mark and Paul seem to believe the same choice has been given to the believer. Are you going to embrace the resurrection and die and be raised with Jesus? Are you willing to really change at every level? Or are you going to keep living in fear?

YOU: Living in the power of the resurrection is a daily choice. God wants partners not slaves. The power of the Spirit is in us, but we have to allow the power to change us. The Wesleyan tradition understands the power of the Spirit to work in us, change us through various ["means of grace."](#) Examples of means of grace are Holy Communion, reading the Bible, daily prayer, and serving those in need. What are the means of grace that you embrace throughout your week? What are the means of grace this community of faith provides each week?



WE: This Resurrection Sunday let us stop living in fear! Talk with your leadership well before Easter. Set a bold goal or goals for the coming year. Make them SMART goals. Here is a link to an article about SMART goals: <https://www.smartsheet.com/blog/essential-guide-writing-smart-goals>

We recommend you don't set more than two congregational goals unless you are working through the Pathways process. Strongly encourage your congregation members to develop spiritual goals for themselves and have the congregation make a commitment to this bold congregational goal(s) as part of your Easter service. Consider developing a SMART goal sheet your members can use to develop their own personal goals at home. The resurrection is not just a moment in history, it is a living existence we are called to be a part of and be transformed by into the very image of the risen Christ. Alleluia!

