

THE WORK OF THE PEOPLE
Forty Days
A Journey Through the Desert of Lent

SESSION ONE // Remember That You Are Dust
(Ash Wednesday Video)

Watch the Film *Remember That You Are Dust*

<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/remember-that-you-are-dust>

Sometimes only song can speak of the depths of our hearts.

Like these psalms, are ancient songs,

sung with string instrument

these songs are our songs

In this Psalm, we sense a pain

and ache that calls out to all

Deep cries to deep,

In a dark and familiar place,

where few of us care to linger,

that place of loneliness

and sorrow

and emptiness

without geography

or landscape

a place tuned in a minor key.

tone dark and somber.

dissonance, spaces between beats,

measures are strung out and notes hang their heads

David dwelt here, accompanied only by guilt

His hands stained in blood and treachery

He reached for what was not his to take

Adam taking from the fruit

Tasting the sweetness of knowing good and evil

Tasting the bitterness of lost innocence

And he saw his nakedness

Lovers who are now ashamed to see each other

As they truly are
And Adam came to realize that he was only man made from dust
And David came to know that he was only a shepherd boy made a king
They are made creatures
Adam from *adama*
Humans from dust
To have a breath of life
poured into this fragile container

But there is one who knew
The frailty of existence like no other
The one who was God in flesh and bones
There was no place he could retreat, when pain pursued
He could no longer be everywhere, and do anything
Now he was one of us,
touching what we touch
feeling what we feel
being no where else but with us
Immanuel

Last Thursday the dead palms in our front yard
Were taken down
They had died in our summer draught
What were tall and noble
Were shedding their dead palm branches
And were easily fell¹
I picked up their leaves to make ashes
and placed them on top of a brass bowl
and lit them
a pyre for the remnants of palms

And looking into the fire
That embraced the leaves
I see myself
Getting older and envying youth
And as each year slips my grasp
I ask myself what have I done in this world
What difference I have made
Tracing the boundaries of my soul

¹ Augustine writes in his exposition of the Psalms: “For this it was set forth, for this [it] was written, for this in the Church often read and chanted: let them hear that have not fallen, lest they fall; let them hear that have fallen, that they may rise.”

A black silhouette
That looks back at me

And I slowly realize
My existence,
my being
my very breath
is held together by hands and heart
greater than what I can understand
or imagine
or hope for

Like David
I wait for deliverance
The longing for heaven²
Like Adam
I wait for another chance to take,
a stroll with God through the garden
the breaking dawn in a new day

Going Deeper

1. Adam's name is derived from the word *adama*, meaning dirt. This speaks of where he came from and to where he will return. How are our lives like this?
2. In what ways do we often come to encounter our sin and shame like David and Adam? How do these times remind us of our dependence on God?
3. What things in our lives do we need to lay down into the "pyre"? What things have "fallen" in our lives that we need to put away?
4. How can you answer the question "What difference I have made?"

Reflection

The above piece was written for an Ash Wednesday service several years ago for a community that I pastored. It was part of a liturgy for Ash Wednesday and there are references to my own personal story strewn throughout the poem. My intent was to tell a

² Cardinal Pierre d'Ailly (1351-1420) in the high Middle Ages places this psalm among the seven Penitential Psalms in the Bible. He describes this Psalm as a "longing for heaven."

piece of my story through the greater narrative of the story of shame, guilt, loss, redemption, and hope. If we look closely, we will see these stories in our everyday experience. There have been no “burning bush” encounters in my life (and there may never be), but in the every day of life there are encounters that try to call my attention that I am part of a greater narrative.

The liturgical season of Lent was created to mark Jesus’s journey into the wilderness and to prepare us for Holy Week. It starts with Ash Wednesday, when many Christians are marked with the sign of the cross on their foreheads in order to remember their mortality. On this day, the celebrant recites the words: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Lent is more than a period of self-denial and the giving up of indulgences. We are reminded that we are fragile, temporary, and dependent creatures. Adam’s story is that he was made of the dirt (*adama*) and to it he would return. He was a person who was made to live forever with God, but his disobedience caused his expulsion from the garden, where he would never again eat from the tree of life.

For many of us, we are attempting to return to this paradise, to commune with God in the way Adam and Eve did. Our attempts at eternal youth and beauty are all but a longing to “eat from the tree of life and live forever.”³ But more often than not, we return to the shame and guilt of paradise. Many of us see our reaching for the fruit as a slap to the hand. We cannot achieve what we seek, in our relationships, our careers, our projects. Even our greatest successes start to fade and sometimes we are left wondering about the worth of our accomplishments. What is truly meaningful? What is worth doing?

To enter into these questions is not to enter into despair, but to enter into longing. It is to yearn for a time and place where the things we do had meaning and purpose. It is an invitation to strip away all that might encumber our lives and live in *centered-ness* and freedom. How might you take a first step in this season of lent?

Further Reading

Greg Pennoyer (editor), Lauren F. Winner, Kathleen Norris, Richard Rohr, and Scott Cairns, *God for Us: Rediscovering the Meaning of Lent and Easter* (Paraclete Press, 2013).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God Is on the Cross: Reflections on Lent and Easter*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012).

³ Genesis 3:22

SESSION TWO // Never Alone
(Lent One Video)

Watch the Film *Never Alone*

<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/never-alone>

In the beginning, our beginning, we were only dust
Knowing nothing of good and evil
Only the pure innocence of God,
 In the garden
 Alongside Creator
 The Birth-giver
 Witness to Live begetting life.

We were shameless—
 Known in our nakedness
 freely creating,
 work was being human.

Standing at the edge of Eden,
 things were not the same,
Fragile, we needed protection
 and so we hid—
 behind trees
 behind one another
 behind our lives,
 work was no longer about creating, but surviving.

Individuated from God
 We sought shelter from the pain
 of the memory of what we lost.

But at the edge we stood, never alone
 wrapped in a pale reflection of our former selves
 Would we know how to be man and woman again?
 Would we remember how to walk together
 with clear vision of each other—
 as more than self-made image
 but souls sheltered in the divine
 looking for the one who created and loved?

From the garden I entered the wilderness of my striving
where I encountered demons,
my demons,
in the shifting sands,
dirt between my toes,
as a reminder of my mortality
to seek to fill the hunger
to remember who I was,
but really always forgetting
caught up in work
or in another
or in distractions.

There were days when dreams became fantasy,
painting my self into corners
to connect with all those I loved
including a life, that I left behind—
stretching myself across a canvas of memories
the walking across a painted dessert
to look down from the highest cliff
to hold kingdoms in my palm—
temptation before me.

What they were for me they were for the Son of Man,
A deep growl in a hungry soul.

Jesus came to face himself, and his frailty.
He feasted on food made of words
baked in the mouth of God.
Words of life that promised another way
back to lush lands,
a place where we could hold hands
and be together, with the One who never left us alone.

Going Deeper

1. What would it be like to be “shameless” and “known in our nakedness”?
2. In what ways have we abandoned creativity for survival? How do we “hide behind one another/behind our lives”?
3. How has God not abandoned us, even when some of us have abandoned God?

4. What are the demons we might encounter in the wilderness? What painful things might we confront about ourselves?
5. In what ways were Jesus's temptations very much like our own? In what ways were they different?

How did Jesus feast "on food made of words/baked in the mouth of God"?

6. What kind of life does God promise for us? How can we come to a place where we can once again "hold hands" with God?

Reflection

One interpretation, a primarily Jewish interpretation, is that because there is no mention of the word sin (*chata*) in the third chapter of Genesis, the story of "the fall" of Adam and Eve is not about sin, but lost innocence. The couple was no longer ignorant to "good and evil" and "the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked."⁴ The intimacy they had with the LORD God was no more. They had abandoned it for what they thought would be sweeter fruit.

Many of our pursuits, projects, and relationships are simply a hope to return to the innocence of the garden. There, work was meaningful, food was plentiful, and relationships were satisfying. What we often experience now are only shadows and glimpses of what was abandoned. In this way, our longing is good. It makes us search for that place we left, the place we know as home. But at times, this longing is numbed by things that are unhealthy or even self-destructive. Some of us therefore abandon our search for home, abandon the hope to find our Creator.

Sometimes, we abandon our pursuit because we have felt abandoned. The proverbial fruit seems beyond our reach. It can be argued that the LORD God did not drive them out of the garden, but they themselves forsake it. Nevertheless, even before the couple's expulsion from the Garden, their Creator was always with them, providing them protection and presence. Soon, the LORD would speak to the children of the man and woman, in the same way God spoke to them. God's absence is a *perceived* absence. It is the sense of abandonment that we experience when we turn away from the Creator. However this is not the reality. God's presence is and was always expressed in the Hebrew world, *chesed* or "tenacious love."

⁴ Genesis 3:7

How has God shown you God's tenacious love? What about God's presence and peace that has remained with you despite times when you might have turned away from God? How can the season of lent remind you that even in the desert there is provision and shelter?

**SESSION THREE // Away From Home
(Lent Two Video)**

Watch the Film *Away From Home*

<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/away-from-home>

God sent us away from home,
dressed with instruction
clothed and turned toward a future
that cannot be seen
with frightening anticipation
and the promise of blessing.

Just one step outside of Eden,
the air was different, so was breathing
and our legs and our stride
and then came quickly the question:
“From where will my help come?”

We depended on the One who would hold our feet steady,
trying step through the terrain, sometimes climbing ever upward
Did we stop to just gaze at sun or moon?
Did we notice the stars or sand on shore?
Not like we did before—
now only points on the path, directional
pointing clearly to something more—
someone who made the universe
and its sandy beaches
and sky and moving earth beneath our feet.

Bombs dropped on my homeland many years ago.
Their explosions like fireworks to my young ears,
move across the ocean of my soul
and meet me here, a place of new sights of sounds,
new wounds and healing and still—
“Where will my help come?”

Coming to trust again,

prayers are simply the cries of a baby
connected as in the womb
to the One whose arms are of embrace
the love of a mother for her child
to accept as a gift,
we breathe in and work
to make easy, what was once effortless

Jesus went up the hill and was changed
To see the law and the prophets
Moses and Elijah
His face as the burning bush
His feet as the hallowed ground
The disciples saw him as the Son of Man
The one who was fully who he was,
and meant to be,
One who completely trusted
Beloved Son
And they were to see themselves in him
Loved daughters and sons.

And we make our way on this mountainside
Ascending and descending with our belief
Not to find ourselves, but to enter into the life of the beloved
Our final resting place
Where what was lost is found
Another new way of walking, making way
To the place of our new birth
where the miles we have traversed
will be mapped upon the heart
of the One who calls us to remember,
to believe we will one day feel at home again.

Going Deeper

1. The edenic couple head to a future that they face with uncertainty. They could not depend on the same things outside of the garden that they did inside the garden. How does the uncertainty of the future affect your life? What ways does this shape your faith?

2. Even though we don't always see God's presence directly, in what ways is the presence of God still seen in the "the universe/and its sandy beaches/and sky and moving earth beneath our feet"?
3. In the verse, "Bombs dropped on my homeland many years ago" I am describing a personal childhood experience from the war torn country of Vietnam. How have difficult and traumatic experiences shaped your journey?
4. Sometimes it is difficult to pray because of our disconnection from God. How can we see our prayers as "simply the cries of a baby"? How can we come back to a simpler form of longing and dependence on the source of life?
5. In following Jesus through His journey we are also changed. How do we find our identities in the life of Jesus so we might be like the disciples who "were to see themselves in Him"?

Reflection

The verse, "Jesus went up the hill and was changed" is a reference to the mount of transfiguration where He was with Moses and Elijah, who represented the Law and the Prophets. On the mountain, the disciples saw Jesus as He truly was, the Son of Man. The eyes of the disciples were opened; this was a holy place. However, the "hill" is also a foreshowing of another hill, Golgotha, the hill of the Skull. It is interesting to note that most of the male disciples fled from the crucifixion. The women were left to be with Jesus in His pain and death. It seemed not to be a place of God's presence, but God's absence.

In our journeys, we often move up and down these different "hills." Some places are ones of triumph and others of great loss. Some times we feel God's immediate presence and other times we feel the painful absence. However, each place is a place of change and transformation. What the disciples did not often realize, was that the journey of their Master was also their own journey. To follow Jesus is not the same as following a cult leader whose ambition is for the sake of his or her own ego. Jesus's journey is our own journey, and we find ourselves through Jesus's story and identity. Because Jesus was fully human, we might be able to recapture what it means to be fully human through a life of walking through places both triumphant and difficult. This is why He would often refer to Himself as the "Son of Man;" He was humanity reborn.

How might you journey with Jesus during this time of Lent? How might you track your story within Jesus's story? Perhaps it can start by reflecting on some of your past experiences that have brought you to the place you are now. For some people, capturing this story through journaling or poetry can be healing experiences. For others, it might be sharing your story with a friend or listening to others tell their own stories. Whatever way

you might do this, I hope you will see your life shaped by the love of the One who has lead you here.

SESSION FOUR // Oasis (lent three video)

Watch the Film *Oasis*

<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/oasis>

“Why do you test the LORD?”

Moses asks the unsatisfied,
people who left slavery
feverish work, the burden of taskmasters
who forced them to make bricks without straw
to build empires from the sweat of their brows.

Wandering loose in the desert,
they were still slaves of their hearts
un-liberated in their minds and souls.

Unaware of God’s presence with them,
manna in the morning
life from hard and difficult places
water from rock—
tasting salvation upon their lips,
Deep calls to deep
as our souls cry to you, Oh Lord

Asleep to the One who made earth and its seas
Not being able to see the glory in the suffering
The hope in the pain
We strive to make sense of our turmoil and toil
And often miss waters poured out,
around us and into us
to drink in the presence of God.

As we encounter the waters of Jacob’s well
Deep echoes back
but we continue to thirst
for waters not dug from the work of our hands
to not drink from empty wells
and broken cisterns,
that carry nothingness.

Opening my eyes above these waters

I see myself
in a pool of memories
committed to filling my own cup
and sustaining my own thirst
 trying to quench a parched soul
 with one person or another
 with one thing or another
 coming back to the void and seeing myself looking back.

I have eaten bread from the labors of my hand
 threshed through fields,
 Cut my hands on thorns and thistles
 land lashing back at me
 exchanging one job for another
 labor without end
 Only to find eternal retirement
 in the same dirt that I have tilled.

The waters that call us to this place
 come from eternal springs
 flowing forth from a distant garden
 to feed fertile grounds
 that yield a harvest of plenty
 to fill desert lands
 to spring forth from the heart
 so we might do the work of the one who sent us
 work full and filling
 that sends us forward to our awaited future.

Going Deeper

1. In the Exodus story, even though the Hebrews had been freed from Egypt “they were still slaves of their hearts.” The time in the desert was to liberate them and show them how to live as free people. How are ‘desert’ experiences times when we can be taught how to be free?
2. As Walter Brueggemann often says, Pharaoh’s empire was one of scarcity. The Hebrews had to learn how to trust in the abundance of God’s provision. Even the

manna that God provided could not be stored and saved.⁵ How can we learn to live trusting in God's provision?

3. Often, the longings of our hearts turn into complaining. In what ways do we miss seeing God's provision and presence around us?
4. How do we often "drink from empty wells/ and broken cisterns, /that carry nothingness"? What practices, habits, and patterns in our lives do we often return to, but do not yield what we want?
5. The verses that say, "I have eaten bread from the labors of my hand/ threshed through fields, /Cut my hands on thorns and thistles". Recall the curse in the Garden of Eden. How do we often make our work a difficult labor, instead of a fulfilling vocation?
6. The poem ends by inviting us to drink from waters that "come from eternal springs." How might we quench our thirst from these waters, even in desert places?

Reflection

We create patterns in our lives. Sometimes these are good patterns that become traditions, rituals and habits and help deepen the flow and rhythm of our lives. At other times, these patterns are unhealthy ways of relating and being. They could be in the form of addiction to substances or they could be relationships that we often return to or abandon. Whatever these bad patterns are, creating them does not get us what we need (although we often we insist that they do). That is why we consistently return to them.

The prophet Jeremiah criticizes his own people, the Kingdom of Judah, for their unhealthy patterns of being:

*for my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves,
cracked cisterns
that can hold no water.⁶*

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, "The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity," (<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=533>)

⁶ Jeremiah 2:13, NRSV

However, many of us return to these drinking vessels to find that they do not satisfy our thirst. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous often define insanity as “doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” However, many times this insanity is so deeply ingrained in us that we don’t realize it. We see ourselves as victims of bad luck. To fully comprehend our patterns of behavior is to have a level of self-awareness that some of us might not be willing to attempt to grasp.

The good news is not that we can achieve a complete level of self-enlightenment. Rather, the hope is that God continues give us opportunities to drink deeply of the source of life. Every day, we are given the chance to engage with the divine, to experience wholeness and healing, so that we could choose to stop seeking things that will not satisfy our deep longing. How might you make space for this divine encounter to happen? What ways can you become more open to God’s provision and presence? Who might be the people who can help you come to realization of your patterns of behavior? Who could lovingly call you on what might be self-destructive? May you come to drink from the fountain of life.

**SESSION Five //Leaving Ourselves at the Altar
(Lent Four Video)**

Watch the Film *Leaving Ourselves at the Altar*

<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/leaving-ourselves-at-the-altar>

There is heartbreak in the letting go
Turning our face from the place of our birth
But not wanting to forsake life in Eden
For a land stained with blood
Haunted by the cries from a field
Where we've done violence to ourselves and to another
We wandered so far from that country of origin
Marking ourselves with a burden
Yet protected and provided
Repeating in a mantra:
*Even though I walk through the deepest, darkest valley,
I fear no evil*

When we cannot look any deeper
When there is none who can peer into the inner parts
The depths where we dare not go
Our hearts are anointed,
And preserved
To not be of want
To eat from the fruit of light
And not from darkness
But to walk again on paths of righteousness

I have brought sacrifices to the altar
And often I have held on to the very things I desired to give up
Clutching even to pain
Because I have nothing else to hold
Giving up is a giving up of my image
Something too great to ask
Keeping my feet stuck to this ground
Blinding me from what is ahead

When I thought my eyes were opened

Claiming to see
My blindness returned
Another taste of the fruit of good and evil—
a veil of darkness fell over me

But there is an invitation to receive vision
From the dirt and mud,
the blind eyes made open
The pools of Siloam wash over us
Allowing us to move forward
from the ashes of the altar
to the place of our promise
seeing ourselves for the first time
learning our own faces
in the waters that saved us
as though we were remade in another's image

When we run away
goodness and mercy pursue us
with tenacious love
the kind that travels across distant lands
over the entire length of our lives
to be where we sit now
piecing together the shards of life
making it again,
to be one.

Going Deeper

1. The poem starts by talking about the “heartbreak in the letting go.” What are some things that we must give up in order to receive something better? Why might these things be painful to us?
2. Reflect on the verses that say, “I have held on to the very things I desired to give up/Clutching even to pain.” How have you held on to those things that might even be painful for you?
3. How does “giving up” sometimes feel like a sacrifice of who we are and “something too great to ask”?
4. We often think that we are seeing world with our “eyes opened,” but we were actually in the dark. How have you mistaken nearsightedness for clarity of vision?
5. The last stanza is to illustrate God’s tenacious love that is always pursuing us, despite and even through our mistakes and actions. How is God piecing the parts of our lives together? How is God restoring your broken identity?

Reflection

Who am I? More and more, people are coming to question their identity. At one time identity was defined through family, church, country, and tribe, but as those ties have slowly dissolved, many people face a world without knowledge of who they are. Recently, the 2014 Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to the French novelist, Jean Patrick Modiano. His book, *Missing Person*, tells a story of a detective who suffers from amnesia and is on a path to solve the mystery of his own identity. Highly appropriate for our time, this book reflects our perpetual search for who we are.

This quest, like many, can become an all-consuming pursuit for some people. It is to reclaim the core of who we are as daughters and sons of the Creator. This is played out in a child's rebellion against their parents. They don't want to be like their parents, but without their parents they have no one to shape who they are *not* to be like. In the same way, the search for identity is the search to come back into community with the One who made us in that One's same image and likeness. Whether we realize it or not, our identities are deeply tied to our community, families, and Creator. Our quest is often a quest to return home.

Paradoxically, to lose ourselves is to gain ourselves. When we place ourselves on the altar, we are not making the ultimate sacrifice, but only making room to receive fully who we are created to become. What experiences of the past might you need to place on the altar? Who might you need to forgive? What things might you need to let go of? What might it mean to be settled in our own skin, to fully accept who you are? For many people, this might require help from another: a counselor, spiritual mentor, or just a friend who can be patient and listen. In Christ, we see the vision of one who was fully human, and in pursuit of this image, we come to pursue ourselves.

Further Reading

Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self* (Jossey-Bass, 2013).

**SESSION SIX // Watering Dry Bones
(Lent Five Video)**

Watch the Film *Watering Dry Bones*

<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/watering-dry-bones>

I was brought to the foot of the dry, dry valley—
A parched soul.

Looking up at me were the desolation of bodies
Poured out before me
I looked down to see myself in their fallen flesh
And I was asked to speak truth to power
Against death and disease
Against my anxieties and vexations
 Pulling my body apart
 To keep from dragging me into the grave
Again, I was asked to speak against all that brings me to decay
 Wrapped in lifeless pursuits and projects
 So I am built up from bones to flesh,
 As the Son of Man
 And flesh to breath
 And from breath to life
 God's life
 The Spirit drenching my thirst

And in looking down,
 I found myself looking back up
From the depths
 The familiar dark places
 Where I find myself
Over and over again
 Drinking from the fountain of darkness
 Hoping for the light of morning
 To open my eyes to something more than darkness
 Invisible Spirit,
 Life waking in me
 So to breathe
At times I attempt to take in the air

And at times it hurts to just hope
For my fallen dreams
Do not rise easily
Disappointment trembling in a pile of feathers
Trying to find a pulse

Lazarus knew death
The intimacy of separation
Of losing parts of one's self
Living in the land, alone to our devices
Watering the cracked clay
with tears mixed with longing
He heard a voice calling
To the tomb and the shroud
A voice pulled his heart
Waking him from his desolate dreams
A voice yet to know the depths of this pain
This experience still foreign to him
But the Master still calls,
And Lazarus still hears

Outside the grave
Jesus was weeping,
Not for Lazarus
But for our not being able to see
The place outside the grave
Unable to know the love that is present
The life that is before us,
In flesh and blood
Our eyes, unwrapped.

Going Deeper

1. What would it be like to be given life to our “dry bones”?
2. What are the things in your life that are pulling you apart or under “decay”?
3. What “fallen dreams” might you have that do not “rise easily”? In this poem, death is described as “The intimacy of separation/Of losing parts of one's self”? What might this mean? How is death more than just the end of physical life?
4. How might Jesus call us from our “desolate dreams”? What might this voice sound like for you?

5. The last stanza is a retelling of the raising of Lazarus in the Gospel of John. What might it mean to say, “Jesus was weeping,/Not for Lazarus/But for our not being able to see”?

How might our eyes still be “wrapped” in burial cloth and not see “the life that is before us”?

Reflection

Death does not only come at the end of our lives, it eats away at us each day. Paul would write, “For the wages of sin is death...”⁷ In a time of day-worker economics, Paul describes death as something that is paid out daily. It did not only come when our physical bodies died. We experience death each day when we move out of relationship with others and with God. However, the other part of that verse is “but the gift of God is life eternal, in Christ Jesus our Lord.” If death is paid each day for sin, then life is given freely each day by God. The word “eternal life” is a unique word in Greek because joined with the word “life” the adjective “eternal” does not mean “everlasting” as in a quantity of life, but it describes a quality of life. Eternal life is not duration of life. In horror fiction, vampires have “eternal” life, but they are actually dead. Eternal life is about a kind of life that is lived in the present, not after someone dies.

The Bible describes the Spirit of God as life, wind, and breath. The Spirit breathes into the dead bones. It is what provides the animating principle to our lives. Life lived connected to the Spirit of God is a life that is always drawing on the Source of life. In Greek, the word for life (*zoe*) is distinguished by physical breath (*psuche*).⁸ In other words, in our modern world, breathing is an indicator of life. However, this is not what it means to live. Living is more than respiration. It is a connection to the Source of all living things, the Spirit of God.

To continue my horror movie theme, the idea of the zombie was actually a commentary on modern American life. A zombie is an animated, “undead” thing. It moves around, feet shuffling, hands flailing, constantly hungry, but it is not alive. Many of us live as “zombies,” with little purpose in life but to consume things. How might we live fully as the people in whom we were made to be? Perhaps a place to start is to realize places in our lives that reek of death and allow God’s Spirit to breathe life back to those places. However, this is a messy process in which some of us would rather not engage. Even for

⁷ Romans 6:23.

⁸ *Psyche* also has the sense of “human soul”; however, the sense is of human animating principle. Despite some recent views of Greek philosophy, not all Greek thought sought to divide body from soul.

Lazarus, being raised from the dead also meant having his family and friends unbind him from his burial wrappings. We may need to also need the help of others, so we might enter back into “the land of the living.”

SESSION SEVEN // Scattered Palms
(Palm Sunday Video)

Watch the Film *Scattered Palms*

<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/scattered-palms>

The crowd swelled with excitement
Waiting for their newly anointed one
Who enters into the Temple of the heart
 We opened the gates
 For our victor to enter
 To welcome this the Savior-soldier
 The warrior-king
 The one who will liberate us from oppression and cruelty
They yelled from the top of their lungs
“Hosanna – Save Us!”
From the enemies that threaten to devour us
 “Save Us!”
 From ourselves
Lifting our palms to the air in celebration

I cried out from the crowds that day,
 One voice in a sea of people
 One among many who carpeted the ground
 With coats and palms
 With hopes and dreams
 For something better in this world
 To make of it what I will
I placed a my passions
Upon this teacher,
 The Master
 Of bread and fishes
 Of the deaf and blind
 Of miracles and spectacles
But he was on a donkey
Not a noble steed
Who was brought down low
 Self-giving
 Seeking to rescue the outsider

To save us from our sins
“Who is this?” we questioned
“Then who are we?” we replied
Were we disciples following him
On this inglorious, triumphal road

They did not turn an ear to him
But made of their hearts a stone
And rejected him
 Broke him over the rock
 Of all their hopes and fears
 Trampled palms
 Scattered ashes

Going Deeper

1. Putting yourself as a spectator to Jesus’s triumphal entry, from what would you seek liberation? What might be your expectation from this mighty “warrior-king”?
2. How have we “carpeted the ground” with our expectations of God and what God would do for us?
3. What might it mean for this warrior to ride on a donkey instead of a “noble steed”?
4. How have we, as humanity, broken Jesus “over the rock?” In what ways have we rejected Jesus’s true identity?
5. The last two verses reflect on how the “trampled palms” turned into the “ashes” of “Ash Wednesday.” What might this mean?

Reflection

The “Triumphal Entry” was Jesus’s entrance into Jerusalem and into the Temple. The kings of Israel, such as David, rode into town this way, especially after a successful war campaign. However, Jesus transforms this image and rides in on a donkey, a beast of burden. He is not “king” and “warrior” in the ways that they expected him to be. He would not lead a rebellion to overthrow the Roman Empire, as the Maccabees did against the Greeks. He would not rule on a kingly throne with scepter and sword. Instead he sought to conquer and rule the hearts of his people. This was the mission of Jesus’s new Kingdom.

However, the crowds could not comprehend this. They prayed for a Messiah like David and they received a teacher of non-violence. Instead of “strike down your enemies,” Jesus

preached to “love our enemies.” The view of the “Kingdom of God” was not as many people expected it. Jesus had trampled on their dreams of political liberation and violent rebellion. Soon the cheer of “save us” would turn to shouts of “crucify him.” This was not the hope they were after and a price had to be paid for their disappointment.

What form would God’s deliverance and justice take? Like the time of wilderness wandering after their exodus from Egypt, God sought to conquer and rule the hearts of God’s people. The forty years in the dessert was to show them how to live in community with each other and with God. The Hebrew people were taught how to live in a world of abundance and flourishing. However, many years later, the Roman Empire reversed this training. Again, people sought their own kind of rule, their own source of provision. Many of them sought a king, a messiah, who would save them from oppression. Others, like the Sadducees, sought to maintain the power of the status quo. Still others, like the Essenes, retreated from the world to hope for their own “Teacher of Righteousness.” It seems like today, Christians are left with those same options: to rebel against the world, to retreat from the world, to adopt the world’s system. Is there another option for the church? How might we respond to a Jesus who failed to live up to our expectations? On what are we placing our hopes and dreams? What “palms” do we need to lay down at Jesus’s feet? How can we allow Jesus to be the kind of king he came to be?

As Lent comes to a close, we have made it from the desert to Jerusalem, the great city of David. Here is where Jesus will face his worst trials. The wilderness was only a foretaste of what is to come. The shadow of the cross looms in the distance and on that hill is where this journey will take him. This is where God’s own dream is taken to be shattered on the hard hearts of humanity. May we be able to meet Jesus there.

**SESSION EIGHT // Where the Light Ends
(Good Friday Video)**

Watch the Film *Where the Light Ends*

<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/where-the-light-ends>

Clouds collide
To come together
Turning soft white into a dingy black
To walk up the hill to the place of the skull
Following soldiers
And mockers
And someone who carried a cross
 For one unable to carry his own

He was left to our own devices
To do with him as we wished
 To tear him apart
 Clothes of a king
 Scraps of humanity scattered to the wind
 Bits of flesh off the back
 On this dark and dirty day
 Painted in bruised purple

Surely God had forsaken him
 Left him here
 Cast out of the womb
 From the warm garden of birth
 Taken from the mother's breast
 And given to this humanity

He no longer belonged to us, and we are no longer his
 To a mother he said, "this is your son"
 And to a son, "this is your mother"
 At this point, each had went their own way

In this place I stood up
 In the shadow of these figures
 Pressed against the sky
 Paper men cut out by scissors
 I saw myself as them

In all the moments of rejection
As stones thrown out from the quarry
Polished in the pain and suffering
Where my own cross was too heavy to carry
And the weight of my regret and loss pressed heavy on my chest
The anxiety of wanting to make something more of myself
Was almost too much to bear
 All my work was of waste
 All my dreams nailed up on a tree

But it was too much for this crucified king
 Who was made a victim for all our crimes
 A voice for a suffering
 We emptied our guilt upon him
 We made him a burden for our shame
 Because we could not bare to take the blame
Because we rejected God's gift of goodness

Looking up, Jesus cried out to God
 To hear only deafening silence
 Bashed and bloodied
 But bones not broken
 He spoke his final words
 "It is finished,"
 completed
 It was all he could do for us
 To pour out himself for people who made a mockery of his life
 He hung his head

...

Entering into the tomb
 Where the light ends and the nothingness begins
 No longer in the land of the living
 But another entrance
 To be sealed shut,
 East of the Eden
 Dissolving life

Going Deeper

1. What might it mean that Jesus was “one unable to carry his own [cross]”? What does this say about who he was?
2. How is tearing Jesus apart actually tearing humanity apart as in the verse, “Scraps of humanity scattered to the wind”?
3. “Each had went their own way” is a reference to the disciples (mainly male disciples) leaving Jesus to die at the cross. In what ways have we abandoned God and sought our own way?
4. Experiences of death and suffering often *appear* to be experiences of God’s abandonment. Often the biblical writers would describe the crucifixion in the language of forsakenness. In what way did God “abandon” Jesus? In what way did God not abandon Jesus?
5. Jesus was the rejected stone, “thrown out from the quarry.” How might we identify with this experience of rejection?
6. How might “this crucified king” be “made a victim for all our crimes”? How was Jesus made a scapegoat, someone to blame for the problems of his society?
7. In the last stanza, “east of Eden” is a reference to the Garden and the lost of home. How is death a “lost of home”? Who “drove” Jesus out of the garden?

Reflection

“Good Friday” is not described as “good” because the world put an innocent person to death, nor is it good because God’s beautiful gift of life was violently beaten and crucified. It was “good” because out of the wreckage that was the crucifixion, God was able to bring life. Good Friday was not good because of the death of God. Nietzsche announced that “God is dead” as an accusation of the modern world. Good Friday was good that in this death, God could show us God’s love. This is the humble and solemn celebration of Good Friday.

Sometimes Christians are too quick to say something to the effect “God can make something good out of evil.” This is true, but it should not be a justification of the evil that many people do in this world. The cross was not to condone evil and injustice; it was to condemn them. The year 2015 marks the seventieth year after the victims of the Holocaust were free from the death camps at Auschwitz. This violent part of our human

history is not something that we celebrate but memorialize. It is a reminder never to be a part of this kind of violence, no matter how often history seems to repeat itself. In the same way we are reminded not to kill those who God has sent to us. God's only Son was the victim of the violence of humanity, but God's love was triumphant even in our hatred.

In what ways have we rejected God's love? In what ways have we abandoned the one who always pursued us, who never left us? The world killed its Savior because it feared what this love might do. Great love has a way of disrupting the status quo, throwing off the balance of power, persuading the hearts and minds of people. Great love is always a threat to those frightened and insecure. It is a threat because of the fear that it might change the world, or more importantly, it might change them. How might we embrace this beautiful gift that is making its way into our lives?

**SESSION NINE //Setting Out Once Again
(Easter, Resurrection Sunday Video)**

Watch the Film *Setting out Once Again*

<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/setting-out-once-again>

From the stale darkness,
he rises into the light,
bright rays of sun split the tops of trees,
 and clouds depart
 and blue fills sky
 the smell of angels lingers in the air—
his hair feels the cool breeze again

This was not the garden,
but a new world
 made from the eruption of hope
 and a life that could not be held down.

We were witnesses to the life
that rose from the dead
 God's relentless love,
 who comes close to us
moving stones from tombs
opening the heart to another possibility
death no longer stands

My heart races in my chest
as I step forward to face the future
my future
 that I grasp with open hands
 with new naïveté
 a child toward a mother
 to be held and lifted up,
 and cradled with care.

At times I hesitate
and I grasp onto memories of what once was
but I know that I am not alone in my apprehension
I feel the hands of others holding me.
These are my sisters, my brother

who are not strangers to my fears and frailties
who have also confronted a hope that frightens them
 who can feel their own scars, both fresh and old
they step in pace with me
 the weeping women at the gravesite
 the scared disciples waiting in the upper room.

This is our future
 where we walk together
 toward our new home
 built by the hands of a wounded king
the new Zion
 forsaking the kingdoms marked by borders and divides
 where all our settlements are only temporary shelters
 sanctuaries of rest for the wounded and weary

Then the Christ returns to visit us,
 as Galilee's boats pull to shore
 these places seem familiar—
 the lapping water and the sand
 but we are not to return to these lands
 nor those dreams
 but become pilgrims
 to set our belongings in another home
 to wash our sandy feet in some other place,
to lay down our tired souls
 on a distant promise,
 quilted from both the today and the tomorrow.

And we dine as a day sees another setting sun
 sitting across from each other once again
 seeing each sweet face
 laughing deeply
 feeling whole once more

And we see the Savior's smile,
 he knows our journey's end
 and pours us another cup
 full of his own love
 and this time,
 our eyes tell him that we understand.

Going Deeper

1. New life does not mean a return to the Garden, but entering a new world. How is this world a different world than before the resurrection? Do you see glimpses of this in your life?
2. “At times I hesitate/and I grasp onto memories of what once was”...speak of the apprehension of moving toward a new future. What might make you hesitant in taking a step toward a new beginning? How might your community help you make this step?
3. How are the places of this world only “temporary shelters” compared to what God is building as God’s Kingdom?
4. Christ returned to the same fishermen who abandoned him, people like Peter who denied him. However, Christ’s return was not so that they could return to their former vocations, but that they could continue to journey with him. How is Christ calling you “not to return to these lands/nor those dreams”?
5. The last two stanzas are an invitation to the Eucharist, i.e. an invitation into communion with Christ, to sit at his table and dine with him. How does the event of the resurrection help us see Christ differently? How does it change our understanding of the one in whom we have been following?

Reflection

The word “resurrection” is a Latin derivative from the Greek word, *anastasis*, which means “to stand again.” The resurrection is God getting up, standing again even after the tragic event of the cross. Death is not the final word in God’s story, but life and hope are. We are joined with Christ in the experience of the resurrection. Our failures and losses are not the last word, but God’s power can lift us out of the pit of death and into new life.

In this way, the Christian life is the resurrected life. We, like newborn infants, are learning to walk in this new kind of life. It is a life that does not fear the finality of death. It does not seek to amass fame or fortune so to keep death from knocking at the door. Christians are called to learn to live the Kingdom of the Resurrected Christ. This means living in a world of hope that pushes away the skepticism of this world. It means building on a faith that God is restoring all things new, and making a place for all of humanity. It means trusting that deep and lasting relationships will exist to push back broken commitments and lost trust.

Resurrection means a “standing up” for all humanity, not just in the next life, but in this world. This is the difference that Christ’s victory has made in this world. If the resurrection had never happen, the violence, death, and hatred would have continued many times over. This world would be a much darker place. Because of the resurrection, people like Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Teresa,

and many others had the courage to stand up to oppression and injustice to create, with Jesus, a world of peace.

The first stanza, “bright rays of sun split the tops of trees,/and clouds depart/and blue fills sky,” was written before the filming of the video. The director, Josh Spires, told me that the day of filming started off cloudy, but when the scene was shot the sun pushed back the clouds in its bright splendor. None of the footage was stock or CGI; it was all done on sight. This is not to say that every moment of a person’s life is this kind of “resurrection” moment, but God showed us in the resurrection that life could not be swallowed up in the tomb. It presses forward, into our lives. How can you live in this kind of new world, in the Kingdom of the Resurrected Christ? There is still plenty to be done in this world, but Christ invites us to join in this work of recreating God’s new dream.

*Alleluia. Christ is risen.
He is risen indeed. Alleluia*

Further Reading

Malcolm Guite, *Word in the Wilderness: A Poem a Day for Lent and Easter* (Canterbury Press Norwich, 2014).

Henri J. M. Nouwen, Judy Bauer ed., *Lent and Easter Wisdom from Henri J. M. Nouwen*, (Liguori, 2005), Daily Scripture and prayers together with Nouwen's own words.