

ABC Nebraska: 2025 Lenten Devotional Guide



"The hour has come for the
Son of Man to be glorified."

John 12:23



sniff* *sniff **Do you smell that?**

I imagine whispers like this swirling around the dinner party that night as that pungent aroma filled the entire house—heavy, unmistakable, almost suffocating.

In the middle of what was supposed to be a victory feast, the air shifted. The room no longer smelled like a celebration; it smelled more like a funeral. A woman named Mary slipped in, carrying a flask of rare and costly perfume—the kind kept for burial rites—and with all eyes glued on her, she broke it open and poured it over Jesus, the guest-of-honor. First on His feet, wiping them with her hair (cf. Jn 12:3), then over His head, letting the costly fragrance soak into His garments (cf. Matt 26:7; Mk 14:3, 8). Like the kings of old (cf. 1 Sam 10:1; 2 Kgs 9:3), she was anointing Him. In humility. In reverence. Without prompting. Embodying true discipleship—something Jesus would soon not only model but urge (cf. Jn 13:12-17).

Mary was not without her critics however...

The disciples—most notably Judas Iscariot—were appalled at the extravagance (cf. Matt 26:8; Mk 14:4; Jn 12:4-5). But Jesus broke His silence and came to her defense:

“Leave her alone... Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me... She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial” (Mk 14:6-8; cf. Matt 26:10-12; Jn 12:7-8).

Mary understood what no one else seemed to grasp: *Jesus was headed to confront death*. While others feasted, she mourned. While others celebrated, she prepared. In an act of bold, sacrificial love, she anointed Him for burial when no one else would. As scholar Rodney Reeves puts it, it must have smelled like a king was buried in Bethany that night. *And for Mary... it was...*

But for me? I think it smells exactly like Lent.

Lent is to Easter what Advent is to Christmas—a time of anticipation, reflection, and preparation for Calvary. Lent becomes this season designed and set aside to help us prepare for that moment and, like Mary, prepare Jesus for burial. Forty days set apart—for penance, rededication, meditation and reflection.

Compared to other times of the year, Lent invites us to simultaneously focus on Christ's Cross and our own: *contemplating and reflecting upon the crosses we are called to bear alongside Him* (cf. Matt 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23). Lent becomes a time then to confront any lingering battles with temptation. To repent of any strongholds of sin in our lives. To fast from certain distractions to our spiritual lives. To rehearse the story of Christ's passion. And also to bring any pain, heartache, or grief before our Lord. Lent is a season of honest reckoning—acknowledging that things are not right, that the world is broken, and in need of desperate renewal.

This devotional was born out of a desire to help guide you on this sacred journey of Lent. To help draw you closer to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (cf. Jn 1:29) and again, like Mary, help you prepare Jesus for burial.

My hope and prayer is that these devotionals **smell like Lent**. That they carry the unmistakable fragrance that smells like where Jesus is headed. That they serve as a means of grace to aid you in preparing your heart and mind for His burial—*while also pointing toward the signs of resurrection just around the corner.*

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to all those who contributed to this year's collection of Lenten devotions:

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Rev. Taylor Shippy
Gibbon Baptist Church, Gibbon, NE

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

March 9, 2025

Turning Water Into Wine: John 2:1-12

John 2:1-12 narrates the miracle of Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana, symbolizing His power to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary, foreshadowing the transformative power of His resurrection.

In today's world, influencers hold great power over people's choices and beliefs. The first person to influence Jesus was Mary Jesus' mother. This influence displayed the power, glory and identity of Christ. Imagine if Jesus lived in our time—he wouldn't just post beautiful images; rather, he'd share messages of love, sin, sacrifice, and hope. His influence has changed so many lives with hope. There are many signs in the gospel of John, this is the first sign. We notice three crucial aspects of resurrection in this sign. First, the glory and identity of Christ was seen. Second, it was not just transforming water into wine, but disappointment into joy, hopelessness into hopefulness. Third, the pathway to experiencing Jesus's miraculous work today.

Glory and identity of Christ: Weddings are fun and a time of celebration. No-one would like their wedding celebration to turn into a disaster. In the discussion between Jesus and his mother verse (3-4), Mary saw the urgency, running out of the wine supply as an acute embarrassment to the hosts. She knew she has savior was with her, so she approached Jesus for rescue (Luke 1:46-47). But, Jesus was focused on his mission. He says, "My hour/time has not yet come." Why did Jesus say that?

I still remember my first request to pray in front of the church as a new believer. I did not have enough words to say or was prepared for it. I was filled with nervousness and blank face were all I had. Remember, Jesus was fully God and fully human. He knew he can do the request so easily, but he says "hour has not yet come." The theme of hour is crucial throughout the gospel of John (see ref 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1). Jesus was looking beyond the present wedding to the coming Messianic feast. This also demonstrates the distinction between human concerns and divine purpose, with Jesus indicating that his true mission transcends immediate needs. Remember God fulfills the needs in his perfect timing. Our prayers are answered in God's perfect hour, and timing, such that God's glory is revealed.

Witnessing transformation: Jesus is the source of transformation. I do not know if I would use a bathtub to fill drinking water and then drink from it. Jesus's instructions to the servants is to fill six stone jars with water which was meant for ceremonial washing. According to Mosaic law and Jewish tradition, ceremonial washing (verse 6) is meant for religious purification ritual. Intended to restore cleanness. The change is not water to wine, but also for unclean jars to clean. The text does not give much details of the jar. We can tell out of the context what it is used for. Obedience plays a key role in seeing God's glory. Mary says to servants (verse 5), "do whatever he tells." Remember, Mary's words must always ring in our ears. God often does not give us a clear direction for us. He does not tell us how He will answer our prayers. He simply calls us to obey the commands, to obey his revealed Word. We can only see his glory on a

deeper level when we obey. I believe that the servants had faith in Jesus. The water turning into wine gave value to the jars; gave hope to the hosts; gave satisfaction and joy to all the guests. Are you obedient to the commands of Christ? I encourage you to obey and wait to experience the wonders that God would do this season. Also share the sign of change with others. Share the sign of resurrection. Share the wine Jesus offered to you. Share the New covenant which is poured out for you.

Experiencing Jesus's miraculous work today: Note in this story most of the crowd had no idea where the wine came from. But, they noticed the change in the taste of wine. The fine wine becomes high quality. Notice the author never tells us exactly when the water turns to wine. The servants pour water into the jars. The master of the banquet discovers it. Only mother, his disciples, host, and the servants knew where it came from. Think about the time in your life when you experienced the mighty power of Jesus. How did you respond to God's invitation? Maybe you have waited for a long time and lost hope. Remember when God does a miraculous work, praise Him and give glory to him. In the story, watching all of this strengthened the faith of the disciples. Reading, hearing, and obeying God's Word strengthens our faith. Think about all the wonders, miracles, answered prayers, baptism, and renewed heart you experienced in the past year. Praise God for all of it and share it with someone.

May this sign remind you of God's redemption on the cross. May this sign remind you of how God transformed your life from hopelessness to hopefulness. You are the vessel, God gave value to you by his sacrifice on the cross. Keep obeying, keep sharing and keep pouring the word and wine. Have this hope in this season of LENT. AMEN

Rev. TN Praveen Kumar
Benson Baptist Church, Omaha, NE



FIRST WEEK OF LENT

Signs of Living Water

The Gospel of John is fascinating to me. While I love the “action” contained in the Gospel of Mark where everything happens “immediately” as a response to God’s consistent prompting of individuals, the imagery and depth of meaning in the Gospel of John is captivating.

As others have identified, John combines his telling of the extraordinary miracles of God with a teaching component. Thus, the miracles described in the Gospel of John are often called “signs” as an indicator to the reader that there is a hidden meaning in these miracles. The “water changed into wine” is a sign that Jesus is better than the current system of how the Torah (old laws) is being interpreted. Healing the man at the Pool of Bethesda is a sign that we must want to get well and seek the kind of healing and wholeness that God provides. The healing of the blind man is a sign that we must abandon some of our old perspectives that serve as blinders to understanding the abundant life available from God. The raising of Lazarus is a sign that we are a resurrected people.

John indeed writes for the perspicacious reader. I also love the progression of the stories of water in the Gospel of John. We first see how water serves as a cleansing sign of baptism. In John 2, we see that God’s water is the “best.” In John 3 we learn that God controls water and even wind. In John 4, we learn that this water from God is “living water” and different from any other type of water. In John 5, we learn that the power of Jesus is not tied to water, but that the spirit of Jesus is beyond water. In John 6, we learn that Jesus has no fear of water and can actually stroll on the most treacherous waters in the world. Finally, in John 7, we learn that this living water is offered to each of us as individuals. God gives a personal invitation to each of us to accept this living water. Each subsequent mentioning and portrayal of water takes us deeper into the Logos and deeper into understanding the presence and grace of God.

I believe that God still gives us “signs” today. I firmly believe that God is still active in our world, that God did not just create us and leave us to be. I have experienced God speaking to me through daily devotions, through sermons, through other people, and in group settings with nudges, behaviors, or questions from the group. I believe that these are signs from God directing us toward a pathway that will advance God’s work in the world.

In my role as Associate General Secretary for Regional Ministries, and with a background in organizational development, I regularly lead staff and board retreats for our American Baptist regions and churches. My favorite moments in these retreats are the times for Q&A, exploration, and envisioning. These are the spaces in which I believe that God resurrects us and puts us onto new and better roads leading to God’s grace and will.

My personal mission statement is, “To find creative ways of accomplishing God’s age-old tasks.” This helps me discern whether or not to say yes or no when someone approaches me about an optional project, such as an invitation to serve on a research team. If the invitational project

allows for creativity and has space built in for God to work, I am inclined to say “yes” to the invitation. When the project is too far down a path with guardrails in place or only calls for implementation, I am less inclined to add that project to my plate that is usually already quite full of tasks that form the core of my job description which includes staffing regional search committees, orienting new Executives, conducting regional board training, and supporting our regions and congregations in a variety of other ways.

This year, we all have an opportunity to experience God’s living water together at the upcoming 2025 Biennial Mission Summit. Please register today so that we can all experience God’s abundance as we “Seek Living Water.” Learn more and register now at www.americanbaptists2025.com.

Dr. C. Jeff Woods
Associate General Secretary for Regional Ministries



SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

March 16, 2025

Healing the Nobleman's Son: John 4:46-54

The first time I read this passage in John's gospel, I focused on Jesus' miracle of healing the Official's son. The second time I read this passage I saw the Royal Official. Who is he and what does he do?

He could be a Jew, but we are not told that. We have only been told that he is a Royal Official. That means he works for the governor who is Herod. He was governor over Pera and this section of Judea from 4 BC to 39 AD.

Another item to note is that he is in Capernaum while Jesus is in Cana, about twenty miles apart. Somehow, he knows that Jesus is in Cana, maybe a two-day journey by foot. He is motivated to see Jesus because he has a little son who is dying, and he believes Jesus can help him. He has the means to send slaves to request Jesus to come and heal his son, but he goes personally. You or I would probably do the same for a child at the point of death. We may recall making such a request if we have experienced the loss of a loved one. Do we know of anyone else who can perform miracles or who has the power to save those who are dying? There are doctors who can help us, but not like Jesus can. A doctor told me that his patients would like him to "fix" things, but he said, "To be honest we cannot fix anything, we just tinker with the body and it does the rest. That's why we call it a practice."

This Royal Official gets to Jesus and begs him to come and heal his son. Jesus does something unique when he says to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." The uniqueness is in the Greek word for "you." It is plural. He invites the father to join in the miracle of healing. He says, "Go, your son will live." "Go" means you participate in this, "You go, your son will live."

We are told that the father believed the word Jesus had spoken to him, and he started back home. The next day he meets two of his slaves who tell him that his son is alive, he is doing okay. When he asks when he started being okay, they tell him, and he realizes it is the same time Jesus told him that his son would live. The story concludes with the words, "So he himself believed, along with his whole household." His "household," family and servants, saw the miracle, the father believed it from twenty miles away. I suspect he could hardly wait to get home and see what his family had already seen.

What a story this father had to tell his son when he grew to the point he could understand and believe. Belief changed this father, his servants and family forever. I can only imagine how he might have written this story. If you were the father, how would you write it?

I find myself not only believing, but invited to participate in Jesus' mission and ministry.

Rev. Bob Molby
Retired ABC NE Minister

SECOND WEEK OF LENT

“You’re dehydrated,” said the lab technician, as she was trying to find a vein in my arm for the third time. “You need to drink more water, especially the day before your appointment.” This lab procedure is always painful for me and is probably why I hate having blood drawn. This happens to me all the time. My doctors tell me I need to drink more water for many reasons. My skin and hair are dry. My mouth is often dry. My eyes are dry. You’d think I would listen to my doctors but I don’t. I don’t carry around a gallon-sized water bottle like some people do. Actually, I don’t carry around a water bottle of any size.

I have never been a great fan of water. Sometimes it tastes like nothing, sometimes it tastes like you’re sucking on iron nails and it always feels heavy in my stomach. I’d rather drink other things like Cola or Coffee or Tea or just about anything but water. But I know that for my body to be healthy and to function the way it should, I need to drink more water. Just plain, unadulterated water. Blah! The only time water tastes good to me is on a hot Nebraska summer day.

In the book of John, Jesus is experiencing a hot day in Samaria and asks a woman for some water. A perfectly logical request on a hot dusty afternoon and a good conversation starter with a stranger. But Jesus has an ulterior motive. He is working up to telling her about a very different kind of water from the water she is drawing from the well.

In John 4:10-11, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that he has special water to offer her. She doesn’t understand but she is curious. She wants to know where she can get this Living Water. We need to ask that question, too. Where can we get this water?

If we don’t take His offer of this special water, we will not be able to live the life God has planned for us. Without it, we are dehydrated spiritually. We are spiritually dry. Our view of life will be dry. Our view of others will be dry.

To be filled with joy and love, to see the beauty in God’s creation, to experience the grace of God, we need to be hydrated with Living Water. All we have to do is accept the Living Water he offers and submit our lives to Him. We need to ask Him into our hearts and lives and receive the spiritual nourishment only He can provide. And this water tastes sweet and feels wonderful in your body.

American Baptist

Women’s
MINISTRIES

Susan Howell
President, ABWM

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

March 23, 2025

Healing the Man at the Pool: John 5:1-11

Just like so many of you, swimming was a part of my summers growing up. There was nothing better than beating the heat of a hot summer's day by tagging along with some of your friends at the local pool. The only sources of frustration on those days was having to wait 30 minutes to get back into the pool after you ate or the five whole minutes you had to wait at the end of every hour as they called you out of the pool to "rest" while they changed lifeguards. When those five minutes finally ended I can remember that feeling of joy running to the pool shouting cannonball and jumping in with all of the other kids who were there and the cool refreshing feeling as I jumped into the pool.

In this passage of scripture we meet an invalid man who for 38 years hoped he could be healed. For some time he thought that the answer to being healed was to get himself into this pool called Bethesda. Only when Jesus comes along does he really find what he is looking for. But before he receives his healing Jesus asks him what only can be considered an odd question. "Do you want to be healed?" For anyone in this invalid's position the answer would obviously be yes. So why does Jesus even ask the question? The reason for the question is clarity, not only for the man but for us as readers. Yes the man wanted to be well but he clearly didn't have the ability to make himself well. For readers it clearly reminds us that in a spiritual sense we are in the same place. A desire to be healed, a desire to be forgiven and a desire for a new life but left with no ability to make that come about.

Jesus doesn't leave this man at the side of the pool. Jesus doesn't even make this man get into this pool. With eight simple words this man is healed. "Get up, take up your mat and walk." By doing this we are reminded that Christ alone has the power to heal. Christ alone is the living water that can bring us out of the depths of despair to a newness of life. As we continue through this Lenten journey let us be reminded of the living water that was poured upon our souls when Christ welcomed us into His presence. Let us remember the grace that was poured over us when Jesus made us well. Let us be people that point others to those fountains of living water, so they too can experience a full life with Christ.

Rev. Aaron Sprock
First Baptist Church of Chadron, Chadron, NE



THIRD WEEK OF LENT

When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. — Genesis 1:1-2, NRSVue

Water is elemental. It is powerful in its potential to sustain life—and in its power to destroy. No wonder its use in Scripture is so pervasive and varied. It provides metaphors for a wide range of human emotions and experiences, from the generative chaos of Creation in Genesis 1 to the destructive force of the Flood in Genesis 7 and 9; from the life-giving wells of the patriarchs and matriarchs in Genesis to the waters of crossing led by Moses and then Joshua in the wilderness journeys of Exodus and Joshua. The biblical poets describe their suffering with watery analogs, describing the water of their tears (Psalm 56:8), the floods of persecution that threaten to drown them (Psalm 69:1), and their agonized groanings poured out like water (Job 3:24).

I've long resonated with water as a profoundly spiritual symbol. When I seek spaces of renewal and refreshment, I have always preferred proximity to living water—the ocean, a lake, a river, a waterfall. I will even find meditative space in the chlorinated waters of a swimming pool or hot tub! During a prolonged season of family crisis, I even created a rule of life for myself that centered on a spiritual understanding of joy as a liquid, capable of saturating even the rockiest of life's terrains. Water in every form I encountered became a reminder of God's presence and my own creative capacity to find joy.

But the metaphor took a turn I never anticipated. Because five years ago, I discovered that the biblical authors got the other side of the watery analogs right too. Grief, too, is liquid.

Five years ago, my youngest son died suddenly at age 17. The news of his death on that rainy winter night struck me with the force of a tsunami. It dragged me under, and for months, I thought I might never breathe normally again. I did, of course. Breath by agonizing breath, I've learned to swim in these waters of grief. But that loss has changed forever how I live and move and have my being in this world, which God created out of the chaos of dark waters.

So, I continue to resonate strongly with liquid metaphors—including the invitation to “Come, seek living water.” Because we all need the water that gives and sustains life.

But I am also grateful for liturgical seasons such as Lent, that acknowledge the important role of lament and the value of intentional engagement with the more painful aspects of life as equally important in our spiritual journeys.

That's why I began this reflection with the waters of chaotic creation, and why I conclude now with the prophetic reminder that God's presence over and through such waters persists to this day. “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you” (Isaiah 43:2, NRSVue). When we seek living waters, we expect to

encounter the God who gives us life, whose ruach is the very that breath sustains us. We expect this God to be present with us in the seeking of the waters as well as in the finding of the life those waters promise.

Rev. Dr. Rebecca Irwin-Dieh
Director of ABHMS Center for Continuous Learning
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American Baptist Home Mission Societies

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

March 30, 2025

Feeding the 5000: John 6:1-15

John 6 is a revealing chapter. It reveals truths about the nature of Jesus and truths about the nature of our motives when presented with opportunity for solutions. In John 6:1-15, We see Jesus manifest the powers of YHWH, the God of Israel, by providing bread and meat in the middle of a place without food. This directly calls back to the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness following their Exodus from Egypt, when they desperately need food (Exodus 16). Jesus shows that He can provide food anywhere, thus showing that life flows from presence. He then displays his power over nature by walking on water, showing us that he fits the image of God that Job 9:8 speaks of, "He alone stretches out the heavens, and treads on the waves of the sea." He displays divinity. No one matches His power!

The crowd wants to make Him king in John 6:15, making some big assumptions about the next steps that God desires. Jesus rejects their will. They thought about short-term needs rather than eternal designs. This is a common problem in life. The things we want today versus the will God has for infinite tomorrows. Jesus clarifies the contrast in John 6:29 – the work of God is to believe in the one He has sent. The rest of the chapter explains that this means ingesting the one God sent.

Many in this world only want to be fed, they do not want to be changed. We are tempted to think the work of God is God making our lives better. That is not the teaching of Christ.

God offers eternal life. He offers life at His side with all the joy and peace that comes with it. However, oftentimes we can be tempted to think of heaven in terms of what we want rather than approaching it with the sense that really heaven is the place we get to enjoy the fullest relationship with God. The people in John 6 idolized the ready supply of food that Jesus could supply. All nations rise and fall off of adequate food supply. All great powers of the world grew out of great periods of food security. Pharaonic Egypt, Napoleonic France, Rome, etc. Jesus knows this. He meets the needs of people in John 6 because God actually cares about our physical needs. However, Jesus tries to get them to see beyond their immediate needs. In the same way, we have a tendency to make heaven about us. We make it more about our need to see certain people again than to be near to the source of life. We make it more about a place of eternal pleasure than about a place of fulfilling God's will. We make it more about avoiding pain than being the light of God's presence. This is a great danger that reaches to the very foundations of our motives with God.

I have walked with people who desire things to get better in their lives. Something is broken that they want fixed. Sometimes it is a marriage on the brink of divorce or a sinful habit that threatens to destroy their lives. Sometimes it is a lie that they have wrapped their entire identity around. Whatever the issue, they seek a solution. If we are to take John 6 and apply it today, then we must face some hard truths toward these kinds of problems. The real, deeper solution is not to simply seek to get rid of the problem. Jesus did not feed the 5,000 with an

infinitely re-filling bread machine that turns air into food. He could have done that. Sometimes we think that the remedy to our relational issues is simply changing a bad habit. Maybe you have an anger issue that leads you to violently threaten your spouse. Maybe you have a pornography addiction that leads you to invite others into the marriage bed of your mind and numbs you toward the beauty of your spouse. Maybe you chronically gossip about others to keep people from focusing on your own faults. Whatever it is, getting rid of that sin is a great good relationally. However, it will not fix the deeper problem. If we follow Jesus just to get an easier life, we will stop obeying Him when our immediate desires are threatened. This applies to the current wars over gender identity, sexual identity, political identity, or racial identity that wage in the 2020's Western world. In attempting to solve individual problems by making those problems seem like they are the singular threat to a good life, they become what we worship. They go by lies like, "When people are sexually satisfied then they will have real joy." In that scenario, sex becomes the greatest good. I think John 6 responds to these ideologies by saying, "Do not work for the food that spoils."

Jesus wants to go deeper than making you a better person. He wants you to become whole. He wants you to become committed to the will of God for the good of God. It is a subtle change in our point of view towards sin that makes a massive difference in how we approach our relationship with God or each other. May our prayers be full of selfless pursuit of the God who can grow our desires toward His goodness.

Rev. Sean Dougherty
First Baptist Church, Kearney, NE



FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

I'm Not Afraid of Water: Mark 1:9-11

Back in his days serving on a church staff, my husband often visited senior adults living in a retirement community. One of his favorite seniors was Pauline Jimerson. He had grown up going to school with her grandchildren and had known her most all his life. One day after a nice conversation with Mrs. Jimerson, he got up to leave, and she walked with him to the door, intending to take a stroll around the retirement center's grounds. When they got to the door, Keith turned and said, "Oh Mrs. Jimerson, it's raining. You're not going to be able to walk." And without slowing down, Mrs. Jimerson said, "It's okay. I'm a Baptist. I'm not afraid of water."

As Baptists, we aren't afraid of water. In fact, we are people of the water—people joined by our watery experience of baptism. Since 1609, Baptists have been joined by their intense and passionate conviction that believer's baptism matters, that stirring the baptismal waters and going under those waters is a profound experience—that our baptism speaks to our fearless confession of faith in Christ and through it we courageously join with others who also follow in the Jesus way.

Yet earliest Baptists—John Smyth and Thomas Helwys—did not participate in what we have come to know as the Baptist expression of baptism. They were not immersed. Instead John Smyth poured water over his own head and then poured water over the heads of other believers. Not until the 1640s did Baptists take up the practice of full immersion of new Christians.

For the last 380 years, Baptists have been a people unafraid of water. Our baptism experience mirrors that of Jesus. In Mark's gospel, we are offered a brief whirlwind description of Jesus's baptism: "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

Mark's description of Jesus' baptism differs from those found in the gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John. The other writers offered snippets of the conversation that took place there on banks of the Jordan, Mark simply wrote that John baptized Jesus. While I don't want to read into Mark's presentation of Jesus' baptism, I find myself pondering the brevity of his account and wondering if it is possible that Mark meant to draw our attention to the action rather than the words. Perhaps Mark was giving us a snapshot of Jesus—Jesus who freely sought John out, gladly entered the Jordan River, wordlessly announced to those with him and those who would hear of this baptism that he was joining in the work God was already doing, or perhaps Mark was making the point that Jesus joyfully entered into partnership any and all who were already busy doing the work of the Spirit.

Throughout most of our history, we Baptists have talked much about baptism as a powerful symbol of God's good work in the individual life. Our shared values throughout the last four

hundred years have centered on conversion as an individual act, a personal declaration. But perhaps we as Baptists have not talked enough about baptism as a powerful symbol of our commitment to join in the work God is doing in the world, our willingness to partner with those involved in the work of the Spirit.

Mark's description of Jesus' baptism next tells us that just as he came up out of the water, Jesus saw the heavens torn apart. A dove, representing God's spirit, broke through the clouds, drawing attention to this watery event. The final verse in Mark's baptism narrative is my favorite. We read of the voice from heaven, directed at Jesus: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." You are MINE. You are LOVED. You are doing GOOD WORK.

From the outset of Jesus' earthly ministry, God offered to him the gift of blessing. God provided Jesus with assurance—letting Jesus know that he belongs to God, that he is loved beyond measure. In that moment, God also affirmed Jesus' work and empowered him with the Spirit so that he could fulfill the hard mission ahead of him—a mission that included confronting and overcoming evil, being rejected and eventually executed.

In true Markan fashion, the gospel writer compressed time and experiences into a few words—and invited us into the story. Calling us to live unafraid—unafraid of the water; unafraid of all who we will meet in that water; unafraid to be open to those already busy doing kingdom work; and unafraid to hear and accept the powerful words of blessing and affirmation spoken by God to us, assuring us a place in the family and empowering us to live fully into the good news.

Rev. Dr. Pamela R. Durso
President, Central Seminary



FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

April 6, 2025

Walking on Water: John 6:16-21

Boat life, it's amazing right? It doesn't matter what kind of boat you are in (canoe, motor boat, sail boat, and even a cruise liner), life is great. You got the water, waves, and sun. What could go wrong? But then it happens: it gets dark and a squall of wind/storm comes up? What quickly turns into an enjoyable time on the water, quickly turns to fear as the boat begins to rock heavily back and forth.

This is where we find the disciples. In a panic of fear. They having been rowing for three miles in rough waters. They are tired, afraid, wondering what's going to happen to them. Then all of sudden, they see this thing out in the distance. What is it? Is it a ghost? It's something or someone. Finally, the object comes into focus. It's a person!! Row! Row! Row! Let's get away from it! It's coming closer! Ugh! Hurry! This passage leads the disciples and us to the test of faith. Jesus took some time to be in solitude and prayer while the boat traveled some distance. You see, this is where we find Jesus testing the faith of his disciples. Jesus knew the wind and waves were going to rock the boat and make it travel. He was just hoping that his disciples had faith in him, and not be afraid.

However, what Jesus found was just the opposite. As soon as Jesus became visible in the distance, the disciples became afraid. They began to cry out in fear. You see, the disciples were more caught up in fear than faith. Their faith had been absolutely washed away when seeing Jesus on the water in the distance. Yet, in the midst of all this, Jesus comes and calms their fear. He says, "It is I; don't be afraid."

As we look into our own lives, I think we find the same thing here. Most of us are calm, faithful, and even obedient inside our comfort zones or "boats". Life is great! We got everything we need. We acknowledge and even trust Jesus that he is with us and working, but as soon as things get "rocky", "unstable", or "we see things that we haven't seen before", we cry out in fear. Our fear overtakes us.

Just think about our world today. We live in a divided, hostile, and uneasy world. All the time in the news you hear about some kind of local, national, or worldly violence. You hear about people, politicians, national & worldly leaders making threats to each other. You hear about schools being placed in lockdown, and students being afraid to attend school and other events. You hear about national disasters (wildfires, hurricanes, tornados) destroying people's lives and displacing them. You hear about the cost of living increasing, where inflation is taking over, and prices are unbearable. You hear about viruses and sickness spreading, which could lead to more health complications. And on and on.... It doesn't stop; the world we live in. The boat we live in. Sounds fun and exciting, right?

Yet, in the midst of all these things going on, we still have a savior who is here, in control, working, and walking on water to our "boats". God doesn't stop working or ignore the things

going on. No, he is alive and gets in the middle of all the mess, unsettledness, hurt, etc. We just need to put our faith in him, and cry out. He will come and calm our fear, just like he did to his disciples. We will hear the words, *“Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”*

May God bless you this Lenten season!

Rev. Scott Jones
United Faith Community Church, Valley, NE



SIXTH SUNDAY OF LENT – PALM SUNDAY

April 13, 2025

The Triumphal Entry: Luke 19:35-40

Jesus enters the great city of Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover with his disciples. Luke's gospel gives us an account of the Triumphal Entry also called Palm Sunday rooted in Lukan themes. Jesus knows the trip will end in his death and ultimately resurrection. He has predicted such to his followers and weeps over the city saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!" Making his way up the incline into the city the disciples place their cloaks on the road. Something done for kings and military leaders returning triumphal from war. This entrance is politically charged. This is not just some normal pilgrim arriving in the Holy City but maybe a king. *Wait, is he on a colt?* The imagery compounds as cloaks and branches are placed on the road indicating royalty and celebration. If that's not enough, "the whole multitude of disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen..." The people that have been joining Jesus' caravan of rejected and healed praise him. The people of Jerusalem seemed to be intrigued by the events, but had they seen it before? Roman's power was known by their hallmark relentless and ruthless military violence. The disciples say, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven." Biblical commentators point us to Psalm 118:26 which was used to welcome pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for the pilgrimage festivals. Luke has added the royal title "king." A political slogan if you will. The Roman Empire's "peace" was achieved through bloodshed, imperialism, war, insurrection, fear, and puppet governments. Jesus' political statement is not one he makes himself or to usher in an Israel first agenda once he crosses city borders. It was to establish his Kingdom as one of true peace. Peace that means wholeness, justice, and salvation for all people. A peace we seem to forget about in our contexts.

The prophet Jeremiah said something that has been plaguing me recently.

- 13 *Greed has corrupted this culture, from the least to the greatest:
all are tainted with this lust for what they don't deserve.
The prophets and priests are no better.
Their lives reek with deceit.*
- 14 *To heal the brokenness of My people,
they offer superficial words.
They say, "Peace, peace," as if all is well.
But there is no peace. - Jeremiah 6:13-14 (The Voice)*

We claim to be peaceable people but give into name-calling, arguing online, inflammatory actions, and derogatory systems. *I don't have enough to share. WHAT ABOUT ME? I don't like them. They get everything for free. It's my church. Store up. Hoard. Hold on to,* whispers in your ear and tugs at your sleeve. We get on high horses when we should be laying down our cloaks for the least of these. We cling to holy huddles and judge our neighbor without ever trying to meet their needs or hearing their stories. But the Kingdom of God asks us to be different than the world. Jesus's Kingdom models is about humility, mercy, peace, and praise. In the brokenness of

the world, our churches say “peace, peace... but there is no peace.” There is no peace when we place our hope in political parties, church-fads, and money. All of Lent, we have sought to turn from the ways of the world to embrace God’s unmerited grace. In our cleansing and pruning, peace has broken through with reminders that our wholeness is found in Jesus. Our peace and security rest in Jesus’ transformational love and invitation to be agents called peacemakers. Together, we strive to love God and love neighbor in a Kingdom that is already but not yet. Rome and empires like it peddle peace at the expense of the poor and marginalized. Instead, the Kingdom of God invites us to sing like the angels that appeared to the shepherds, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” God favors all humanity and offers new life to repentant hearts. God asks us to throw down our cloaks and stop acting like we are people of peace while sowing destruction and unbiblical narratives. Greed has engulfed us, and power has intoxicated us.

And yet, in God’s mercies, God invites us back to the parade to find an everlasting peace in relationship with the Prince of Peace. Let us return and give our allegiance to the Kingdom of God. Our loyalties are with the Christ that is enthroned on the cross and resurrected when we had thought all way lost. Holy Week is here demanding us to see Jesus’s peace and live like it even when it steps on our political preferences. We begin with a parade knowing it will end in tears. A celebration that foreshadows and foretells of the pain to come. Death might think it won, but it will not and will never have the last word. Bring your cloaks to lay down for Jesus no matter what condition they are in, he is merciful. Don’t let the temptation of power, greed, and judgement drag you into Pharisaic proportions. Cry if you must for the world but work for peace now and until Christ returns. This week may you embrace God’s abundant peace that never comes by way of empires but by way of Jesus Christ. May you work towards peace by acting justly towards your neighbor. May you pray “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as *it is* in heaven.” May the peace of the Lord Jesus that surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds and enable you to embrace and extend peace. Christ is in Jerusalem, and the scene is set.

Rev. Joy Martinez-Marshall
First Baptist Church of Lincoln, Lincoln, NE



HOLY WEEK: MONDAY

April 14, 2025

Healing a Man Born Blind: John 9:1-12

In the gospel of John, we find the story of Jesus encountering a man who was blind from birth. Imagine never seeing the light of day, never experiencing the beauty of a sunset, not being able to categorize the colors of the rainbow. Imagine living in total darkness, unable to distinguish shapes and forms, to experience what it means to squint in the daylight. Jesus' disciples pose a pertinent question upon encountering this man. They must have known him, and wondered for a long time why someone would have the misfortune of being born blind. Was it his parents' fault? Could it have been his fault? Surely suffering is brought on to those who are sinners, failures of some moral code.

Jesus responds with clarity. No, it was not the sin of his parents or the blind man causing his blindness. Instead, Jesus tells his disciples no personal sin was involved. Instead, it was the fault of a fallen world. Jesus is now able to use this misfortune to display the great grace of God. He is able to put on display the powerful love and compassion God has for his creation.

He bent down, grabbed a handful of dirt, moistened it with his spit and rubbed it into the man's eyes. I cannot imagine the thoughts of this man who could not see what Jesus was doing, and did not have any idea he would end that day with full vision. Jesus instructed him to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam and he obediently followed Jesus' command.

The man's neighbors could not believe what they were seeing. The man could see, full vision, twenty-twenty! He had been begging for help to survive one minute and in the next he could see. There were no special incantations, no magic wand, only simple obedience in following Jesus' instructions.

The religious leaders were not impressed. They believed the healing was at best a ruse and at worst in conflict with the laws of God. Their blindness moved them further and further away from the truth of who Jesus was. They knew the Scriptures, they expected a messiah to come but were unable to see Jesus because of their own blindness to God's grace, mercy and love.

All kinds of things block our vision in the course of our everyday lives. We may be able to "see" what is around us but at the same time, unable to envision the work of God in the routine of life. Who around us could use a helping hand, encouraging words, an embrace of unconditional love? When we follow closely the story of Jesus our vision can be improved. The journey can remove obstacles blocking us from seeing His call to us to follow Him. We can forgive, restore and walk alongside others we would otherwise ignore or forget. Like the man born blind we no longer have any blockage to keep us from being obedient and faithful to the One who has redeemed us.

Prayer: Almighty God, thank you for your hand on our lives as we follow your Son. Give us your eyes to see the world as you see it, your hands to do good work, your heart to love as you have loved your creation. Give us wisdom and strength to obediently honor your Kingdom as we look forward with hope for your return. We love you, in the name of Jesus, AMEN.

Rev. Dr. Robin Stoops
Mission Resource Coordinator, ABC USA
Burma Refugee Commission Coordinator, ABC USA



AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES USA

Serving as the hands and feet of Christ

HOLY WEEK: TUESDAY

April 15, 2025

Resurrecting Lazarus: John 11:1-44

I Am the Resurrection and the Life

Introduction

Resurrection, your soul, and life—what do these mean to you? Do you consider them in your daily walk? What difference do they make in your faith? As we journey through Lent, a season of reflection and renewal, we turn to John 11 and Jesus' profound statement: "I am the Resurrection and the Life." This passage invites us to examine our faith, our trust in God's timing, and our response to trials. Let's explore this together.

Take a moment and read John 11:1-44

Lazarus, a close friend of Jesus, was sick. His sisters, Mary and Martha, sent word to Jesus, hoping He would heal him. Yet, Jesus delayed two days, allowing Lazarus to die. When He finally arrived in Bethany, Martha met Him, declaring, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus responded, "Your brother will rise again... I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live." Then, Jesus called Lazarus from the grave, displaying the power of faith and the glory of God.

Trusting in God's Timing

One of the hardest lessons of faith is trusting God's timing. When Jesus delayed, it wasn't out of neglect but purpose. His delay magnified God's glory, teaching the disciples and us a crucial truth: God's love is not about removing suffering but about refining our faith. Lent calls us to wait on God, trust in His process, and surrender our need for immediate answers.

Reflection Question: When have you struggled to trust God's timing? How can you surrender your impatience to Him during this Lenten season?

Faith in the Midst of Grief

Both Mary and Martha believed in Jesus but struggled with their grief. Martha had faith in the future resurrection but missed the reality that Jesus offers life now. Often, we look ahead to heaven but forget that Christ brings transformation today. Lent is a time to recognize His presence in our everyday lives.

Application Question: Do you see Jesus as your source of life today, or only in the future? How can you invite Him into your daily struggles?

Jesus Wept

In the shortest yet powerful verse, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35), we see the heart of our Savior. He grieves with us. He is not indifferent to our pain. This moment reminds us that Lent is not just about sacrifice but about drawing near to a God who understands our suffering.

Reflection Question: Have you brought your sorrow to Jesus? How does knowing that He weeps with you change your perspective on suffering?

The Power of Resurrection

Lazarus' resurrection foreshadowed Jesus' own victory over death. It is a call for us to step out of our own tombs—whether of fear, sin, or doubt—and live in the freedom Christ offers. This Lenten season, we are invited to examine our hearts and remove the grave clothes that hold us back.

Application Question: What in your life needs to be unbound so you can walk in the new life Christ offers?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you are the Resurrection and the Life. Help me trust in your timing, rest in your presence, and walk in the fullness of life you offer. As I journey through Lent, may I draw closer to you, surrendering my doubts, fears, and burdens at your feet. Amen.

Rev. Blake Wilkes
Arthur Baptist Church, Arthur, NE



HOLY WEEK: WEDNESDAY

April 16, 2025

Jesus Anointed at Bethany: John 12:1-11

Apparently Judas was very interested in the value of money and things. He said that this perfume was worth 300 hundred days wages. That is more than a year's pay for an ordinary worker. How can we understand this story? What could you buy for a year's salary to use up in a single act of worship? Maybe you could hire some big star to sing on Easter morning. Who would that be? ----- How would we react? What would we say if one of our members sold their house and gave it all to hire -- who was it? -- to sing one Easter Sunday morning? Think of what that money could do for building maintenance. Think of what it could do supporting a missionary. Think of what it could pay for at camp. Think of how many people it could feed in Africa. How could you just blow it all in -- one -- single -- act -- of worship?

Mary was not listening to Judas. When the urge to great generosity is generated by profound love and gratitude, the quibbling of the penny-pinchers does not even register. Jesus had loved her family for some time. Jesus had raised her brother back to life from the tomb. Jesus, the living presence of God, was sitting in her house – at her table. She was kneeling– touching her Lord and Savior. How could any gesture of love and worship be too much?

Let's confess that we live in a society that worships the Dollar-almighty. Even for confessing Christians, it is hard to spend money as if it were not sacred. But if the living, resurrected Lord is present with us, how can anything else seem important?

Great generosity as an act of worship seems to me to be one of the most compelling evidences of the real presence of our Resurrected Lord. When I have had the awesome privilege to be present when someone is overwhelmed toward generosity, I could tell that they could see Him.

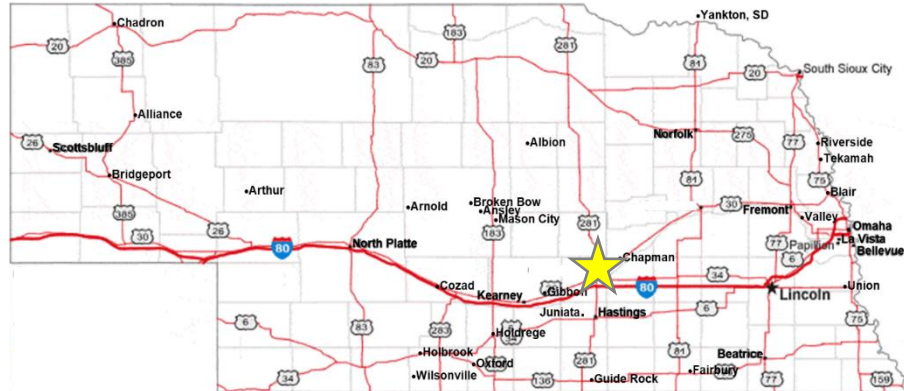
We are told that Moses' face was shining when he came from the presence of God. Do you know what that means? Have you seen it? I think many of you have seen the face of someone who has been in the presence of God, perhaps not as blinding as it was with Moses. I have seen that glow. I have seen that light most often in the faces of parents and grandparents whose child has come to Christ. Paul says, "All of us, then, reflect the Glory of the Lord with uncovered faces..." God uses human hands, human faces, human voices to touch, to appear, to speak to us. You may be the touch, or voice, or face of God to someone today. Someone near you, someone you least expect, may be the face or voice of God to you today, if you are willing to see and hear.

One of the reasons I am confident of the saving power of God is that I have seen the shining faces of dear ones who had been in his presence.

Often we ignore the fact that we are seeing the power of God at work. When we see justice and fairness, we may forget that these are always the power of God at work. Wherever there is forgiveness and love, the Holy Spirit of God is working there. We have not all seen or felt

the presence of God in the way that some have. Some have seen visions, some have heard a clear voice, some have felt a physical touch. Still, we have all experienced the real presence of God, if we will only confess it. Wherever love has been true and active, Our Resurrected Lord Jesus Christ is there.

Rev. Charles D. Gregory
CHI Health Chaplin, St. Francis, Grand Island, NE



HOLY WEEK: MAUNDY THURSDAY

April 17, 2025

Jesus Washing the Disciples' Feet: John 13:1-17

In John 13:1-17, we encounter a profoundly transformative episode in which Jesus embodies the true essence of service and humility through the significant act of washing His disciples' feet. This notable gesture occurs just prior to the Passover, a period rich in significance that foreshadows His imminent sacrifice on the cross. This passage serves as a foundational text for understanding Christian leadership, which is fundamentally based on love, humility, and selfless service. During this Lenten season 2025, the relevance of this scripture is amplified, particularly in light of the numerous challenges presently faced in both American society and globally.

This scripture challenges us, as followers of Christ, to engage in profound reflection on core values such as humanity, humility, and service—especially during a season when societal divisions often surface and hardships can threaten communal ties. Jesus' act of washing the feet of His disciples stands as a poignant reminder that authentic leadership transcends notions of power and prestige; it is forged through selfless service and an unwavering commitment to unconditional love for one another.

As we continue on this sacred journey through Lent, we are called to transform these teachings into practical actions within our daily lives. We are invited not only to extend assistance to those in need but also to embody compassion, empathy, and understanding as we navigate the complex societal challenges that surround us. In an era characterized by conflict, social injustice, and considerable hardship, embracing the transformative power of humility becomes essential in our interactions with others.

Let us draw significant inspiration from Jesus' example and actively work towards fostering a more just, loving, and supportive environment for those around us. This endeavor requires the recognition of the inherent dignity of each individual and actively dismantling the barriers that divide us. By embodying these principles of service and humility, we honor the true spirit of Lent and contribute to a broader climate of healing and unity within our communities and beyond. In doing so, we reflect the heart of humanity exemplified by Jesus, illuminating pathways towards a more compassionate world even in the face of adversity. Together, let us embrace this call to action, allowing our lives to serve as a testament to the love and grace that Jesus demonstrated in His ministry.

- Reflecting on Jesus' sacrifice and his ultimate act of service.
- Practice humility in daily life, understanding that no task is too menial if done from love.
- Serve others selflessly, following Jesus' example.

By fully embracing these foundational principles, Christians can significantly enhance their spiritual journey during the Lenten season. This transformative period invites individuals to engage in profound reflection on their faith, promoting practices such as prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Active participation in these disciplines allows believers to cultivate a closer

communion with God and achieve a deeper comprehension of the teachings of Jesus. Moreover, embodying these values personalizes the faith experience and empowers individuals to serve and uplift their communities, thereby reflecting Christ's message of love, compassion, and service to others. This comprehensive approach to Lent not only fosters personal growth but also reinforces communal solidarity, enabling Christians to manifest their convictions in meaningful and impactful ways.

Rev. Marlesh Mboru
Livingstone Christian Church, Lincoln, NE



HOLY WEEK: GOOD FRIDAY

April 18, 2025

I Thirst: John 19:28

Introduction

Throughout this Lenten series, we have focused on the Gospel of John and considered the signs that illuminate the identity and mission of Jesus Christ. Among these, the scene at the cross in John 19 provides one of the most poignant images: water and blood flowing from Jesus' pierced side. While this moment is not considered one of the recognized signs from the Gospel, it remains decisive, linking the signs and images of living water. This moment captures the heart of His sacrifice and the fulfillment of messianic prophecies, offering living water to a thirsty world.

The Water and Blood: A Sign of Hope and Fulfillment

Jesus hangs on the cross and announces he is thirsty. Upon being provided with a sponge-soaked sour mixture of wine and vinegar pierced to the end of a spear, Jesus announces, "It is completed/finished," and gives up his spirit. The good shepherd door is closed. The light of the world is extinguished. The bread of life is broken. The way, the truth, and life is dead.

As Jesus hung lifeless on the cross, He had one more gift to give before being placed in a tomb. To prove his death and prevent the work of breaking legs, a Roman soldier pierced His side, and immediately blood and water flowed out (John 19:34). This moment, often overlooked, is deeply symbolic and aligns with John's recurring theme of "living water." Throughout his Gospel, John presents Jesus as the source of life and purity—living water that quenches humanity's deepest thirst. "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water... but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (John 4:10, 14)

This flow from Jesus' side represents more than the physiological realities of His human form; it symbolizes the outpouring of Himself—His very embodiment as the Living Water—offered freely for the salvation of the world. Blood signifies the atonement of sins, fulfilling sacrificial systems established since ancient times, while water signifies purification, new and unending life.

Together, they affirm Jesus as the Messianic hope for Israel and the entire cosmos. N.T. Wright comments, "In John, Jesus' death is the moment when the living water, the new life of the Spirit, flows out to refresh the world" (*John for Everyone*, Part 2).

The Eight Signs Summary: See the Lenten Series for deeper insights to each sign.

John's Gospel uniquely categorizes various miracles as "signs" each pointing to Jesus' divine nature and His mission on earth. These signs culminate in the crucifixion—where the ultimate

price is paid—and are followed by the resurrection, which John frames as the eighth sign, the initiation of a new creation.

1. Turning water into wine (John 2:1-11) - Jesus' first miracle showcases His glory and foreshadows the transformation He brings into the lives of believers.
2. Healing the royal official's son (John 4:46-54) - Jesus speaks, and a child is healed, illustrating His authority over distance and disease. Just as in the creation, Jesus' words bring order to chaos.
3. Healing the paralytic at Bethesda (John 5:1-15) - A sign of Jesus' power over infirmity, emphasizing the coming wholeness of the Kingdom.
4. Feeding the 5,000 (John 6:5-14) - A sign of God's provision, pointing back to manna in the wilderness and forward to the true Bread of Life, Jesus Himself.
5. Walking on water (John 6:16-24) - A display of His mastery over creation, affirming His divinity and supremacy over things humans cannot control.
6. Healing the man born blind (John 9:1-7) - A sign that Jesus is the light of the world, bringing sight to the spiritually blind.
7. Raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-45) - A powerful testament to His victory over death, previewing His resurrection and a foretaste to our own resurrection into the New Heaven and New Earth.
8. The Resurrection (John 20:1-29) - Jesus' victory over death, a sign of new beginnings and eternal life, inaugurates the new creation. The signs in John's Gospel are not just acts of power. They are profound revelations of the new creation breaking into the old, inaugurating a transformative era in human history. These signs, culminating in the resurrection, demonstrate Jesus' mission to redeem and restore the entire universe. They reveal His glory and prepare us for the ultimate revelation of resurrection as the dawn of God's new creation.

Living Water and New Creation

Jesus' sacrificial death and the flow of water and blood from His side is the manifestation of Him being the source of living water. In this way, Jesus offers himself as the sacrifice for the sins of the world, fulfilling the prophecies and expectations of a Messiah, bringing salvation to all.

When we come to the cross, believers are invited to drink deeply from the living water pouring from Jesus. Jesus' sacrifice calls us into a new life characterized by the living water that only He can provide. This living water empowers us to extend Christ's love, hope, and compassion to others.

The resurrection of Jesus as the eighth sign in John's Gospel marks the beginning of a new creation. Just as God's spirit hovered over the waters in Genesis, initiating the first creation, Jesus' resurrection breaks forth as the first day of the new creation. In His rising, we find our hope, our proof that death does not have the final say, and our assurance that we too will be raised to new life in Him. As we drink from this well of living water, let us live transformed, embodying the love, sacrifice, and renewal that Jesus Himself demonstrated.

“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You

did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.” (John 15:12-17)

Rev. Dr. Greg Mamula
Region Executive Minister, ABC NE



HOLY WEEK: SATURDAY

April 19, 2025

The Burial of Jesus: John 19:38-42

In her book *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (2014), Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor recounts her experience descending into a 'wild' cave—a cave not typically accessible to the general public, devoid of artificial light or modern amenities. She recounts moving deeper inside the cave, taking mental notes while simultaneously slowly being enveloped by pitch-black darkness. Over time, she said she started to become attuned to the cave's distinct smells, the cool dampness of the air, and the profound stillness that permeated the space. And what initially seemed foreboding slowly transformed into something intimate, something to be befriended rather than feared. And in this deep solitude surrounded by darkness, she makes this striking observation:

“Jesus was born in a cave and rose from the dead in a cave.”

Most of us, she says, tend to think of the manger scene in Bethlehem as a wooden lean-to stable filled with straw (cf. Lk 2:6-7). But in reality, caves made the best stables in Jesus' day—no self-assembly required, no wind whistling through the boards, no predators sneaking up on you from behind. More than likely, she argues, Jesus was born in a cave on Christmas.

And the same goes for Easter. Jesus' tomb was a cave. And His resurrection was not out in the open; it was in secret, inside that cave, sealed behind a large stone (cf. Matt 27:59-66; Mk 15:46; Lk 23:53). No one knows for sure what happened in that cave, she says. Everyone who saw the risen Jesus saw him *after*. Whatever happened on Easter inside the cave happened unseen in the darkness, shrouded in holy mystery. All we know is that on Easter morning, the cave was empty.

“As many years as I have been listening to Easter sermons,” Taylor remarks, “I have never heard anyone talk about that part. Resurrection is always announced with Easter lilies, the sound of trumpets, bright streaming light. But it did not happen that way. If it happened in a cave, it happened in complete silence, in absolute darkness, with the smell of damp stone and dug earth in the air.”

And with these thoughts swimming around in her mind—*sitting deep in the heart of that totally dark cave*—she makes another profound observation:

“New life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark.”

Holy Saturday is a day of waiting in the dark, of sitting in darkness as the lights go out on Good Friday and we anxiously await the dawn of Easter Sunday. We are forced to sit in what feels like this awkward intermission, stuck in a space that may make us feel uncomfortable and restless.

We find ourselves caught between the words of the Psalmist: “Weeping may last through the night...” and “[J]oy comes with the morning” (Ps 30:5). In-between Jesus’ own words: “In a little while you won’t see me anymore...” and “But a little while after that, you will see me again” (Jn 16:16). Holy Saturday hits us like a ton of bricks and leaves us in the lurch, sitting in the darkness with perhaps a variety of emotions: doubt, regret, pain, hurt, confusion, grief, anger. And because of this, most of us anxiously just want to skip Holy Saturday! We’re eager to get it over with, to move past it and get on to Easter! *After all, what could possibly be useful here?*

But if we rush through, we may well miss the genesis of new life...

There is a promise on Holy Saturday: *new life has already begun, even if we cannot yet see it.* Even in the darkness, God is stirring. Even “while the world rejoices” (Jn 16:20), God is working! God is still active! God is on the move! Resurrection is already unfolding!

Somehow, new life starts in the dark.

Today I invite you to not shy away from but enter into the darkness of Holy Saturday. To step into and dwell in this liminal space as an opportunity to commune with the crucified Jesus unlike any other day of the year. To allow yourself to become attuned to its stillness, its weight, and even its mystery. And though at first it may seem off-putting and foreboding—*perhaps even frightening*—invite the LORD to transform it into something intimate, heightening your awareness of the subtle, quiet, unseen, mysterious yet real signs of new life already taking place.

Somehow in the darkness of Holy Saturday, we are invited to experience the beginnings of new life, the first signs of resurrection. And my prayer is that you will. Don’t rush through it, waiting only for Sunday. There are signs of resurrection, *even on Holy Saturday...*

“So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again; then you will rejoice, and no one can rob you of that joy” (Jn 16:22).

Rev. Taylor Shippy
Gibbon Baptist Church, Gibbon, NE



EASTER SUNDAY

April 20, 2025

Jesus' Resurrection: John 20:1-18

Reflections from a Cemetery

Four years ago, I found myself in a strange place. Just a few weeks before Easter, cities and nations across the globe found themselves in a pandemic that touched all dimensions of society – including the church. Whole cities and states went into lockdown mode. What was typically a week of special services: Maundy Thursday communion, Good Friday remembrance, Sunrise service and Easter worship – became a week of isolation and reflection. Frankly, I LOVED IT! I didn't love the idea of a pandemic, but personally, it slowed my life down to a crawling pace where I could truly reflect on the resurrection.

On that Easter morning, I found myself – of all places – at Wyuka Cemetery in Lincoln. It is a historical cemetery near my home that was established 160 years ago and is filled with many historically significant graves from local merchants to Gordon McRae “Curly” from the musical *Oklahoma*. Long before the Pandemic, it had become a place where I would go to walk for exercise on its winding roads. I would frequently stop to read inscriptions on the tombstones, which would often reflect the history of our city and state.

That morning was different. It was Easter, and I was wearing jeans and a light jacket – not my normal Easter attire. No crowds were gathering at the church. No resounding choruses of “Christ Arose” or “He Lives”. Just the sound of an occasional passing car and the songbirds singing their own refrain. It was a time of solitude and reflection on the high holy day of the church, in a cemetery among the tombstones. Then it dawned on me – that it wasn't unlike the women who went to the tomb of their master. Like the endless sea of tombstones before me marking the reality of death, it was apparent to those women that they would find his corpse and they would ritually apply the spices and would tearfully grieve his death. Yet what they found, not only changed their perspective, but it did mine as well. At first it was a surprise, then the surprise turned to horror and an even deeper grief as they cried, “They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him.” Slowly, they became convinced of the reality of the resurrection as Mary heard the voice of Jesus when he called her name.

As I reflected on these events, I tried to understand what the characters in the resurrection narrative might have been thinking. Clearly, a cemetery is an odd place to find surprise and indescribable joy. Rather, it is a place of finality, a place of great sorrow, and inconsolable grief. For each of us, it is a place of inevitability. Each one of us will either be grieving the loss of the dearest people in our lives, or we will be the subject of grief as our bodies are laid to rest. It is inescapable. Unavoidable.

Strangely, a cemetery is also a place of HOPE. I doubt I have ever stood at a graveside, officiating at the service of a member, where I did not read Jesus words Jesus spoke to Mary and Martha: “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even

Mission Summit Invitation

Dear Beloved Siblings in Christ,

We are excited to invite you to the 2025 American Baptist Churches USA Biennial Mission Summit, “Come Seek Living Water,” in Omaha, Nebraska. This vibrant family reunion and spiritual celebration will be held from July 3 to July 6, 2025. We have a fantastic lineup of events and activities planned just for you. Together, we will gather for heartfelt worship, inspiring keynote sessions, and meaningful fellowship that reflects our long and cherished heritage in ministry.

You won't want to miss this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to fellowship, worship, and connect with fellow American Baptists in Omaha, Nebraska. This is only the second time in our 200+-year history that the national gathering of all American Baptists has been held in Nebraska. We are celebrating the Jubilee 50th anniversary of this Biennial Mission Summit format. Our beloved retired Executive Minister and lifelong Nebraska Baptist, Susan Gillies, will receive the prestigious Cora and John Sparrowk President's Award! Two of the four keynote speakers are Nebraska pastors. Current and former Nebraska pastors and church leaders will lead several breakout sessions. Our Moses Merrill Camp and Conference Center summer camping staff and other regional volunteers are leading the youth and children's programming.

Come and support your fellow Nebraska Baptists. Strengthen and forge new relationships with American Baptists from all over the country and around the world. This is the largest and most significant American Baptist event, and it is happening right here in Nebraska.

We will kick off the Summit on Thursday, July 3, with an innovative exhibit hall filled with ministry partners from across our ABCUSA family. There will also be a Theologians' Conference, a Ministers Council gathering, meet-and-greets with ABCUSA Seminary presidents and faculty, and several caucuses.

On Friday, July 4, we will celebrate our nation by honoring our diverse American and American Baptist heritage as the National Black Caucus, Alliance of Asian American Caucus, AB Hispanic Caucus, and AB Indian Caucus come together for fellowship and worship. The American Baptist Women's Ministries will focus on Building God's Community for Women and Girls Day, tackling new challenges, rebuilding after hardships, and restoring hope within our faith communities. We invite you to attend the opening worship on Friday afternoon, led by ABCUSA General Secretary Rev. Dr. Gina Jacobs-Strain. This worship will include interactive elements along with congregational singing. Afterward, enjoy a family picnic before heading to the newly renovated Riverfront for a free live concert by the Omaha Symphony and a fireworks display to light up the Omaha sky.

On Saturday, July 5, attendees will start the day with an exciting “Family Feud” style game designed to review and highlight fun moments from previous sessions. Participants can choose from twelve workshops led by engaging nationally recognized speakers, offering insights,

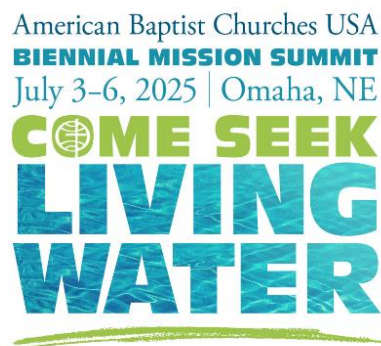
strategies, and support focused on improving the well-being of ministry leaders and church members. Meals, sponsored by ABCUSA ministry partners, colleges, seminaries, and the AB Historical Society, will be available throughout the day. The Saturday evening worship will feature lively worship, informative presentations and awards, celebrating God's work among His American Baptist people. Rev. Dr. Tanikka Shephard will deliver the keynote address for the evening.

On Sunday, July 6, attendees can enjoy various pre-worship meals and activities, such as a bike ride or walk across the Bob Kerry Bridge. Worship on Sunday morning will be open and free to everyone. We encourage all churches in Nebraska to join this unique worship experience with a thousand of your favorite American Baptist families instead of their regular Sunday service. Our Executive Minister, Rev. Dr. Greg Mamula, will deliver the sermon for this exhilarating day of collective worship.

On Sunday afternoon, attendees will have one last chance to engage with renowned speakers and leaders through various workshops and a special "Taste of Nebraska" dinner. The summit will culminate in an impactful worship experience, celebration, and keynote address by Rev. Dr. Zau Sam Lahtaw, pastor of First Kachin Baptist Church of America, from ABC Nebraska.

We invite you to register now at www.americanbaptists2025.com and to join us for this transformative encounter. Let's unite to "Come Seek Living Water" and celebrate our shared mission as American Baptists. We look forward to welcoming you to Omaha for a weekend of inspiration, connection, and renewal!

Blessings,
Rev. Dr. Greg Mamula
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