

THE  
**LION'S TALE**

The Seasonal Magazine of St. Mark's Episcopal Church

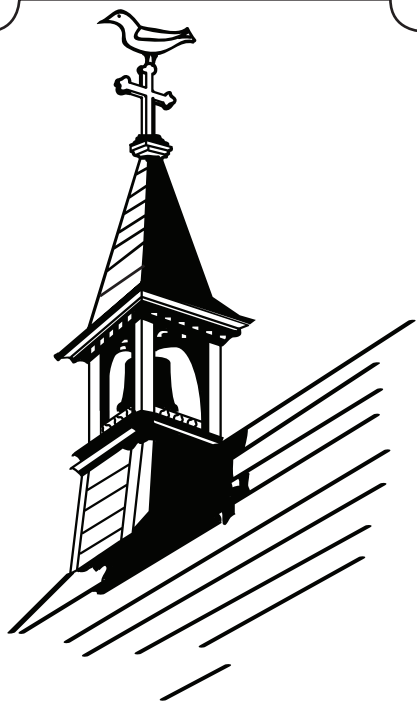
LENT  
2020

DAILY LENTEN  
MEDITATIONS

*A Lenten Alphabet*  
*The Sequel*



SAINT MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
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## SAINT MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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*David Tubbs, Music Director*  
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## INTRODUCTION

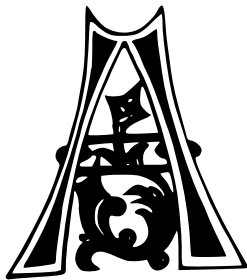
February 26, 2020

Welcome to the Lenten Meditations for St. Mark's in 2020. This year we are reprising a theme we used back in 2016, a Lenten Alphabet. Because of scheduling issues, we were not able to pull off the big project of having parishioners contribute to the Meditations this year, so all the writing is from Pastor Adam. Not to fret – we will do everything we can to return to our preferred method of shared writing in 2021.

As you move through the days of this alphabet, take some time to meditate on the words. How does their treatment here conform to or deviate from your understanding of their definitions? What surprises you about them? Also, after reading the day's word, see if you hear it or recognize its meaning sometime during that day. Take note of your awareness. This Lent, let's move A to Z with God, who is the Alpha and the Omega. (By the way, Omega is the last letter of the Greek alphabet.)

## "A" IS FOR ATONEMENT

February 27, 2020



*All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people's sins against them. He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:18-19)*

Atonement can be a scary word. It is often used in phrases such as "penal substitutionary atonement theory." Atonement theory covers all the different descriptions of how Jesus Christ's death on the cross affected creation. They run the gamut, as you might expect. The one I mentioned a few sentences ago says that Jesus suffered the penalty that God put on us for our sins, thereby making it so we didn't have to suffer it ourselves.

Atonement theories can really color our worldviews because they describe how we view the most important event in history. If someone subscribes to "penal substitutionary atonement theory" then that person is more likely to have an image of God as judge, who has pronounced a guilty verdict over the human race.

The problem with atonement theories is that they are really just simple descriptions or metaphors for what is, at its core, an unexplainable and grace-filled act. By subscribing to one theory, we can miss the fullness of the beauty of the act itself. Christ's act becomes part of a math equation.

Rather, at its heart, atonement is not about paying for sins. It is about renewing relationships. Whatever description we subscribe to about what happened on that cross and after, the relationship between God and God's creation was changed in Christ's act, was made closer somehow. For, in the end, "atonement" is a made up word. It's a stitched together word. Look at it: "At One"-ment.

That's what atonement is really about.



## “B” IS FOR BROKENNESS

February 28, 2020

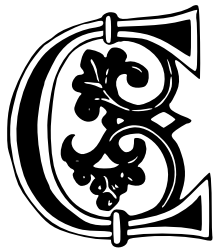
*The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Psalm 51:18)*

When I was a kid, I used to play this game that made the other three members of my family groan. I would take a cookie and break it in half. Then, I would stick the two halves together, hold them up, and ask, “Is it together or apart?” After a few years of this, my sister, mom, and dad made a pact with each other that they wouldn’t answer when I asked the question. Eventually I stopped. Then I became a priest, and now I spend my Sunday mornings tearing loaves of bread in half. And these loaves are most definitely “apart.” (Oh, God’s cosmic humor.)

When we break the bread during Holy Communion, we do so because there is no other way to share it. We break the bread in order that, over the course of a lifetime (and an after-lifetime), we may find wholeness in the God who dwells in that very bread. Church is for broken people. It would be for whole people, too, but there aren’t any of those. Every one of us is broken, and you might think this is bad news. But it’s not.

Broken things – like vases or radiators – have cracks in them. Broken people do, too. And it is through these cracks that God shines into and out from us. God is with us in our brokenness, repairing us so that we might one day participate with God in our rebuilding. As God remodels the cracks out of us, God leaves windows behind, through which to shine.

Know that God is with you in your brokenness. God loves you no matter how broken you may be. And like a bone that heals back stronger after a break, our brokenness gives God the opportunity to come in and make us better.



## “C” IS FOR CHARISMA

March 2, 2020

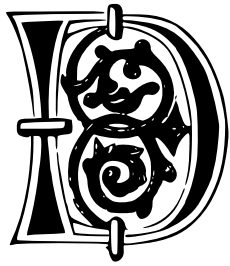
*As Jesus passed alongside the Galilee Sea, he saw two brothers, Simon and Andrew, throwing fishing nets into the sea, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” he said, “and I’ll show you how to fish for people.” Right away, they left their nets and followed him. (Mark 1:16-17)*

Today, “C” is for charisma. There are plenty of other good “C” words that I could have chosen; certainly, that are more “churchy” – well, “church,” for instance. Charisma isn’t really a word that’s used much when talking about following Jesus Christ. Perhaps, you’ve heard a preacher talk about Christ’s own charisma – how he attracted crowds, how people followed him seemingly on a whim.

However, you might see a problem with this use of “charisma.” Perhaps, you’ve heard talking heads on the news talk about the charisma of politicians – some just have it, others don’t. Often, politicians trade on this so-called charisma to make up for deficiencies in their political acumen or their knowledge of the world. In this sense “charisma” becomes the commodity they trade on to win office, and therefore it is seen as insubstantial, as part of a smoke and mirrors campaign to get elected. When we talk about Christ’s charisma winning the crowds, we are dangerously close to this kind of political showmanship.

But the word “charisma” is a really old word, and its longevity can save it from the political scene. “Charisma” comes from the Greek word *charis* (χαρις), which means “grace.” If we remember this root of our English word, then we remember the root of the “compelling attractiveness” that “charisma” has come to mean. The root is God’s grace – not smoke and mirrors, not showmanship, but the elegance and abundance of God’s freely given gifts stored inside a living being.

If Jesus had charisma, and I’m sure he did, then I bet it was this kind – the kind nourished by the grace of God.



## “D” IS FOR DESTINY

March 3, 2020

*The human mind plans the way, but the LORD directs the steps. (Proverbs 16:9)*

Destiny is an oft-misunderstood concept. Many would say that “destiny” is the final and ultimate way that your life will transpire no matter what you do to it: you can’t escape destiny, they say.

This is the “Darth Vader” understanding of the concept. He tells Luke Skywalker several times that it is Luke’s destiny to switch over to the Dark Side of the Force; seemingly, there’s nothing Luke can do about it.

The other side of the coin says that there’s no such thing as destiny. Instead, we all make our own way; we all have self-determination, which trumps destiny every time. This is the “Han Solo” understanding of the concept. He tells Luke that hokey religions and ancient weapons are no match for a good blaster at Luke’s side. His intent is clear: I make my own rules, and I’m not beholden to any particular path.

A proper understanding of destiny falls somewhere between these two extremes. It is true that we cannot escape our destinies. However, this inescapable nature does not mean that we haven’t a chance of influencing that destiny. God’s directing creativity stands as the framework in which all our destinies exist. And this directing creativity includes our self-determination. Therefore, we cannot escape destiny because we are always choosing it. So ask God in your prayers to help you make your choices, for each one will impact the person you are becoming.



## “E” IS FOR ENTHUSIASM

March 4, 2020

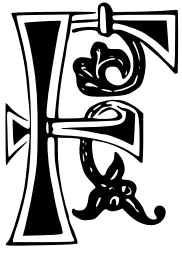
*... Whoever does the truth comes to the light so that it can be seen that their actions were done in God.”  
(John 3:21)*

You might be wondering why I chose this word since, at first glance, it doesn’t seem all that religion-y. You’re right – we don’t use this word too often in church. But we should. Do you see the “T-H-U-S” in the middle of the word? Good. If you follow these letters all the way back in time to ancient Greece, they would have looked like this “θεος” or in our alphabet, “theos.” Look familiar? I’ll give you a clue: we get the words “theology” and “atheism” from this same word.

Right! It means “God.” (Theology is the “study of God,” and atheism is “disbelief in God,” (the “a-” making the word negative).) So, let’s go back to our original word: enthusiasm. When we say we are enthusiastic about something, we usually mean that we are excited or passionate about that something. I am enthusiastic about playing guitar and watching Doctor Who, for example.

But if you look at that little Greek root and add the little Greek prefix (“-en” meaning “in”), you get a bit different definition. Etymologically, “enthusiasm” means “in God.” Therefore, when we talk about our passions and excitements, what we are really saying is “these are the ways that I most clearly notice that I am *in God*.” Pretty cool, huh?

So, what are your passions? What are you *enthusiastic* about? How do you meet your Creator when you get involved with them?



## “F” IS FOR FREEDOM

March 5, 2020

*You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love. (Galatians 5:13)*

When you first think about “freedom,” I would hazard to guess that you think about it in its patriotic habitat. We talk about the United States of America being “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” We see bumper stickers that read, “Freedom isn't free.” To Americans, “freedom” means something akin to “getting to do what I want.”

However, this definition is faulty. If everyone got to do what he or she wanted, we would reach a state of chaos pretty quickly. 17th century political scientist John Locke called this kind of absolute freedom the “state of nature”; in it, he argued, there really is no opportunity to exercise one's freedom because of the constant need to protect oneself from other people's exercise of their freedom. And so governments are instituted to protect rights. This paradoxically creates freedom by curtailing it.

In the same way, as followers of Christ, we are at our freest when we surrender our personal freedom to God, when we follow the path Christ walked, when we don't do what we want but what we discern God wants of us. At first blush, this sounds far from freedom. But the paradox holds – the more we turn away from God and follow our own desires, the more we enslave ourselves to them. The more we allow God to lead us, the more freedom we find.



## “G” IS FOR GRIEF

March 6, 2020

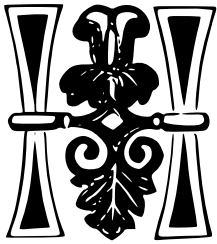
*When Mary arrived where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died.” When Jesus saw her crying and the Jews who had come with her crying also, he was deeply disturbed and troubled. He asked, “Where have you laid him?” They replied, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus began to cry. The Jews said, “See how much he loved him!” (John 11:32-35)*

First off, let me get this out there: no one *likes* grieving. Grieving is not something we choose to do. Grief happens whether we are ready for it or not, and there's really no way outside heavy prescription drugs to control it or take the edge off it.

That being said, Charlie Brown is on to something whenever he says his catchphrase: “Good grief.” Grief, in a sense, is good. Grief happens after loss – whether the loss of a loved one or the end of a relationship or a change in what you thought the future would hold. Grief is our body and our spirit's way of confirming to us that we, in the case of death, truly did love the person who is gone from our sight. Grief can sneak up behind us, catch us off guard, dissolve us into puddles of tears, and then give us the gift of knowing in the depths of our souls that the deceased really did matter to us.

Grief gives us a way to stay connected to the newly deceased while we move to the new normal that our lives will enter sometime after all the events surrounding the death. Grief is love's tether to the other person. But as grief fades, the tether remains because the relationship did not die with the person. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ points to this reality, the reality that relationships do not die; rather, through the love of God, they only change. Grief is the incubator for the change in relationships as people pass life through death to new life.

Grief is a gift. It may not seem so at the time of piercing, screaming, shattering loss, but in the end, as Charlie Brown says, grief is good.



## “H” IS FOR HARMONY

March 9, 2020

*God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:9)*

Let’s talk about God’s music. This music plays in each one of our hearts. Sometimes the music is soft: a half-whispered lullaby, barely discernible over the din of the world. Sometimes the notes crescendo to a deafening *fortissimo* that knocks us, weeping, to our knees. Most often, the music sounds as the percussive *TUB-thp* of our hearts — a rhythm that, if you listen closely, beats in time with the rest of the performing forces of creation (the “grace” we mentioned yesterday).

Each one of us has the music of God resounding within, but the symphony is incomplete until we have found each other, until we have joined together in fellowship as the orchestra of God. In Greek, this fellowship is called *koinonia*, but I’ve always thought that “fellowship” is a rather limp translation. For the sake of our metaphor, let’s translate *koinonia* as “harmony,” which lands much closer to the descriptive intent of the Greek word. Musical harmony is the collection of notes that adds structure, color, tone, depth, and meaning to the main tune. This tune, called the “melody” is the music of God within us. The combination of our own unique passions, trials, joys, griefs, and loves creates the harmony of the music of God.

As followers of God, we play together the *koinonia*, the harmony, of the music of God to a world so accustomed only to noise and clatter. The movements of our symphony resonate with the movement of God in this world. God provides the melody, and we harmonize with it together.



## “I” IS FOR INCARNATE

March 10, 2020

*The Word became flesh and made his home among us. We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)*

I should probably remind you where you hear this word most often. If you’ve ever recited the Nicene Creed, then you’ve said the word “incarnate.” The Creed states: “[B]y the power of the Holy Spirit [Jesus] became *incarnate* from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.” So how do we liberate the word for our use during the rest of the week? In fact, it’s easier than you might think; indeed, it is vital to remember the lesson of the Incarnation as we go about our daily lives. Do you see the “carn” in the middle of the word. Yes? Excellent. This is the same root that appears in the word “*carn-ivore*.” That’s right — “carn” means “flesh,” or more descriptively “meat.”

When we profess that the Son of God became incarnate, we are using polite language for something a little more down and dirty — the Son of God put on flesh and bones, muscle, sinew, blood, skin, hair. And with those he got all the stuff that goes with them: body odor, stubbed toes, sprained ankles, sore neck, thirst, exhaustion. (Not to mention the ability to embrace and shake hands and look you in the eye...and die on a cross.)

But if this incarnate thing stopped with Jesus we wouldn’t be telling the whole story. Paul reminds us that we are the Body of Christ and each individually members of it. Thus, when we leave the church on Sunday morning (filled once again with the Eucharistic Body and Blood of Jesus Christ) we have the opportunity to *embody* Christ in the lives of other people, to be the flesh and bones which Jesus uses to fulfill his continuing work today.



## “J” IS FOR JOY

March 11, 2020

*As the Father loved me, I too have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy will be in you and your joy will be complete. (John 15:9-11)*

Thanks to the thesaurus, “joy” is a misunderstood concept. If you go to *Roget's* searching for synonyms, you'll get “pleasure, gladness, glee, happiness,” and so on. While joy definitely encompasses these positive emotions, joy itself is much more expansive than any of these other words.

Rather than being simple pleasure or happiness, joy is the pervading sense of well-being that comes when the Creator and the creature delight in one another. The Creator is forever emanating this delight, and only the limited vision or attention of the creature keeps him or her from reciprocating. When we find joy, we access the sense of delight that God has in creation. But joy doesn't stop there.

As Thomas Merton writes, “God does not give His joy to us for ourselves alone, and if we could possess Himself for ourselves alone, we would not possess Him at all. Any joy that does not overflow from our souls and help other people to rejoice in God does not come to us from God.”

Accessing the joy of God in our lives finds completion only when we share that joy with others. This is true delight: to be a source of God's joy emanating throughout creation.



## “K” IS FOR KNEELING

March 12, 2020

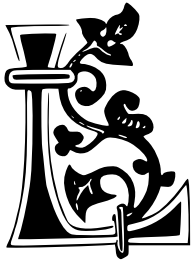
*Then he went a short distance farther and fell to the ground. He prayed that, if possible, he might be spared the time of suffering. He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible. Take this cup of suffering away from me. However—not what I want but what you want.” (Mark 14:35-36)*

Kneeling is something we do with our bodies. We bend the knee. We plant it on the ground. This is the position of the vassal before his lord. It is also the position of a parent tying a child's shoe. And it is a position we sometimes assume when we pray. Think about the first two images in light of prayer.

The first displays fealty, the loyalty of a less powerful person to a more powerful person. When we kneel in prayer, we use our bodies to show that we understand our proper relationship to God, who is our sovereign, the one to whom we owe our allegiance.

The second displays service, the loving act of one giving of oneself to another. When we kneel in prayer, we use our bodies to show that our prayer is one way in which we serve God. Our prayer opens us up to God working in our lives. The act of kneeling shows that we are willing to get down in the dirt for God's sake.

When we kneel, we show our loyalty and our willingness to serve. We don't kneel in order to show off, but in order to remind ourselves of our right relationship with God.



## “L” IS FOR LOSING

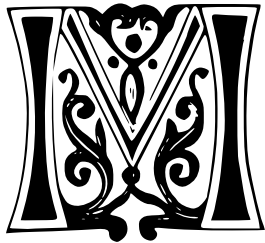
March 13, 2020

*Then Jesus said to his disciples, “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will find them. (Matthew 16:24-25)*

Losing is not fun. Think about those guys from the losing team in the Super Bowl. They don’t get a new hat or shirt and they don’t get to stand under confetti showers shouting, “I’m going to Disney World!” Losing Oscar hopefuls have to grit their teeth and tell the press that it was just an honor to be nominated. Losing candidates drift into obscurity or pundit-hood on cable news.

Society tells us that, if we want success, we must surround ourselves with winners, not losers. And yet, the Christian faith consciously and without reservation came together around a guy who purposefully lost. Jesus Christ could have run away from his fate. He could have fought the Empire with a small but heroic band of diehards. But he didn’t. He walked into the lion’s den. He walked up the hill with the cross on his shoulder. He walked to his death. He lost his life. He’s the world’s most famous loser.

Of course, that’s only the middle of the story. The triumph of the Resurrection cannot occur without the defeat, without the loss, of the Crucifixion. The author of our faith lost willingly. When we suffer losses, when we feel defeated, we can take comfort in knowing that our stories will never end there. Because of the triumph that followed on the heels of Christ’s defeat, we have the opportunity to participate in the triumphant final chapters of our own stories.



## “M” IS FOR MARTYR

March 16, 2020

*As they battered him with stones, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, accept my life!” Falling to his knees, he shouted, “Lord, don’t hold this sin against them!” Then he died. (Acts 7:59-60)*

This is by far the most misunderstood word in our whole Lenten alphabet this year. Sadly, in our modern context, the word “martyr” crops up most often in connection with two other words: “suicide bomber.” The twisted version of Islam that produces these murderers claims them as “martyrs,” and the media picks up the language. But this is far from what a martyr is.

“Martyr” comes from the Greek word for “witness” or “testimony.” Stephen, the first martyr of the nascent Christian religion, talks for the better part of two chapters of the book of Acts before he dies. He tells the religious authorities their own story, he witnesses to Jesus, and he does it all knowing that he would be stoned for it. His death or “martyrdom” was a byproduct and extension of his witness. He was willing to die for what he believed in. And then he did.

Because the linkage with death has been grafted into the word “martyr,” we often forget that the *witness* in the face of all odds is what makes the martyr truly great. The courage to tell the truth, the faith that God gives strength, the endurance to see things through to the end – these are the marks that make a martyr.

Even we who may not be called to give what Lincoln called “the last full measure of devotion,” we can learn from the example of the martyrs. In God, we can find the courage, the faith, and the endurance to see our trials through to the end.



## “N” IS FOR NOTHING

March 17, 2020

*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn’t extinguish the light. (John 1:5)*

Think of “nothing” as two words: *no-thing* and you’re close to the understanding of evil that I’ll go into in a moment. First, the Gospel according to John uses the imagery of darkness and light



to delineate between the creative force of God (the light) and the nebulous other that in some sense contests with God (darkness). God's creative force is the light that shines in the darkness. The darkness cannot comprehend or overcome or extinguish the light because the darkness has never been a part of creation. The darkness is just the absence of any created thing. This is a tricky concept, so let's get back to our word for today: no-thing.

The great German theologian Karl Barth posited that all this *stuff* outside of creation is where evil comes from. He said that Evil is everything that God *didn't* create, and all that uncreatedness is pushing on or sucking on creation. When I sin (seek my own will rather than God's will), I distort my relationship with God. This distortion is the pull that non-creation has on me. If you ever define a word as "the absence of" something else, then you are close to this idea. For example, despair is the absence of hope. Remember "The Nothing" in the movie *The NeverEnding Story*? That villain is as close to a visual example as I can come up with.

I know this is a zany understanding of evil, and we would need a whole lot more space to really talk about it, but I think it's worth a bit of thought. If you ever felt like something you were doing was "un-making you," then you were feeling the pull of non-creation, non-being, annihilation. The good news is this: while the "Nothing" of evil tries jealously to unmake created things, it will ultimately fail because God never stops creating or calling creation back to God.



## "O" IS FOR ORDO

March 18, 2020

*I received a tradition from the Lord, which I also handed on to you: on the night on which he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread. After giving thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this to remember me." (1 Corinthians 23-24)*

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that now I'm just making up words or that "Ordo" sounds like an alien from *Star Wars*. Rather, "ordo" roughly translates as structure or pattern. Think of the words "order" and "ordinary." Something that is "extraordinary" is outside the normal structure or pattern.

*Ordo* helps us make sense of our lives. Each and every one of us uses the concept of *ordo* whether we realize it or not. Our personal *ordo* tells us that it's time to watch the news or go to bed. It tells us that answering the phone call from mom is more important than finishing the YouTube video. It tells us that looking both ways before crossing the street is a good idea.

Following Jesus Christ adds another layer to our personal *ordo*, but it isn't a layer that goes on top of the ones we already had. It goes beneath them. Being disciples of Jesus Christ means structuring and patterning our lives with his path for us as our foundation. In the worship services of the church, we practice a certain kind of *ordo*, a pattern of worship that goes from greeting to reading to listening to praying to confessing to thanking to sharing to feasting to serving. By sticking with this basic structure, our participation in the worship of God in the church helps us build our own personal *ordo* in light of our worship.

How does following Jesus Christ influence your *ordo*? Is being a disciple part of your daily pattern? If not, how could you invite Christ to help you restructure your life with him as a foundation?



## "P" IS FOR PASSION

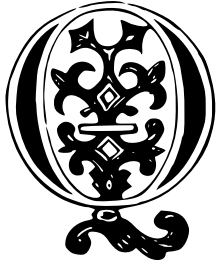
March 19, 2020

*Then Jesus began to teach his disciples: "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts, and be killed, and then, after three days, rise from the dead." (Mark 8:31)*

In secular society, this word is most often used in one of three contexts: (1) torrid celebrity love affairs that become tabloid-fodder; (2) the syllabi of motivational speakers; and (3) luxury car commercials. The word "passion" has come to mean a sort of heightened emotional state that drives the individual to do something.

Now, while this definition isn't a bad one, it often misses the connotation that the etymology of the word brings out. "Passion" comes from a Latin word that means "to suffer." In church, we tend to capitalize this word and use it when we talk about Jesus' final week leading up to and including his crucifixion. The Passion (capital-P) comprehends the days of Jesus' suffering at the hands of the chief priests and the scribes and the Romans and the crowds of people who just a few days before had welcomed him into Jerusalem as a hero.

But while Jesus certainly did suffer, we can also define his Passion with the more modern definition. He suffered out of love – not the torrid infatuation of the tabloids, but the self-sacrificial love of God. He suffered because it was his life's destiny – not the cheap, "5 steps to finding your passion" of the motivational speaker, but the deep, abiding sense of a call from God. He suffered because his sacrifice was worth it – not the worth of transient comforts like the luxury car, but the worthiness of redeeming the sins of the whole world.



## "Q" IS FOR Q

March 20, 2020

*Therefore, you should treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you; this is the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 7:12) (also Luke 6:31)*

I know, I know, I'm cheating again – but there aren't a lot of "Q" words that have to do with church or discipleship. So I thought I'd talk just a bit about an important theory of Biblical scholarship (called the "two source hypothesis"). This theory is cool because it gives us one way to organize some issues surrounding why the accounts of the Gospel say different things.

It's called (conveniently) "Q," which stands for "*Quelle*," the German word for "source." Simply put, the theory behind Q posits that there was a written source of certain things that Jesus said and did, and this source existed well before the accounts of the Gospel (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). Scholars call this document Q, and they think that only Matthew and Luke knew about it or used it. They think this because Matthew and Luke share details that do not appear in Mark. (John is usually left out of this discussion because it is so different from the others.) Matthew and Luke used Mark for the basic structure, but then added all sorts of other material that they presumably got from Q.

So why is this important for non-Bible scholars or seminary professors? Well, it isn't really. Except that Q helps show how the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection spread abroad after his ascension. We don't know for sure if Q existed, but it's a safe bet that it did. Reconstructed, Q shows what some very early witnesses wanted to remember most about Jesus. You can find what these early witnesses held on to by reading Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and then figuring out what only Matthew and Luke share in common. Sounds like fun, right?



## "R" IS FOR RITUAL

March 23, 2020

*After taking the bread and giving thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." (Luke 22:19)*

This word gets a bad rap. More often than not, the word "empty" precedes it, as in "such and such was just empty ritual." The connotation here is that ritual happens simply for show; there's no depth or meaning in it because rote repetition has ground these things out.

Thankfully, the United States has a national pastime called baseball. And baseball proves once and for all that ritual, no matter how repetitive, is most certainly not empty. Every ballplayer has his own personal ritual when he comes up to bat. So-and-so spits on his batting gloves and slaps his hands together between each pitch. That other guy unfastens and refastens his batting gloves half a dozen times before stepping to the plate. A certain hurler walks once around the pitching mound in a clockwise direction before every delivery.

There is nothing empty about these rituals. What seems to baseball outsiders as odd idiosyncrasies, are to purists the signs of the undiluted nuance of the game. The players' rituals help them focus on the incredibly difficult tasks of throwing a ball at nearly 100 mph to a spot about three inches square or hitting that same ball after tracking it through all four of the dimensions for about a tenth of a second.

Ritual in church is far from empty, as well. The repetitive action we take each time we enter the sanctuary helps us to focus on what is important in our lives, namely the ways God is moving in those lives and the mission God is calling us to engage. So, play ball. Er...I mean, thanks be to God!



## “S” IS FOR SYMBOL...OR SACRAMENT

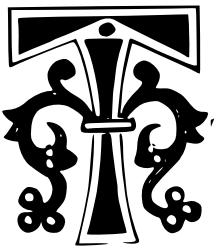
March 24, 2020

*In the same way, he took the cup after the meal and said, “This cup is the new covenant by my blood, which is poured out for you.” (Luke 22:20)*

We have a lot of symbols in church: the cross, the dove, the living water, the commandments, (fill in the blank here \_\_\_\_\_).

But before we go any further, I want to dispel from your mind any notion of the phrases “it’s *only* a symbol” or “it’s *merely* symbolic.” Symbols are woefully misunderstood things in American culture – like soccer and irony. *A symbol is an object that points beyond itself to a deeper truth.* Too often, “sign” and “symbol” are used interchangeably, but they are not synonymous. A stop sign lets you know you are supposed to brake at an intersection, but that’s all it tells you. The red octagon doesn’t compel you to ruminate on why you should stop. But a symbol – the cross, for instance – stirs within us all of the historical and theological and emotional resonances of the truth to which it points.

In church, we have a special sort of symbol called a “sacrament.” Take communion for instance. The bread we use is laughably ordinary, but the situation we put it in is not. The juxtaposition between the normal loaf of bread and the strange way it is being treated invest the ordinary with new meaning. The bread connotes the bounty of harvest, the fruits of the earth, the goodness of creation, the nourishment of our bodies. And when we put it on that table, and a priest in the presence of God’s people asks God to indwell that bread with the Spirit of Christ, the bread becomes a sacrament. The bread becomes one part of the Eucharistic meal, an outward and visible connection to our inward spiritual lives. Special sacramental symbols take ordinary things – bread, water, even our own actions and personhoods – and set them ablaze with physical and emotive evidence of the presence of God.



## “T” IS FOR TRINITY

March 25, 2020

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Corinthians 13:13)*

Folks in churches often shy away from discussing the “doctrine” of the Trinity. The old joke is that the head pastor of the church always gets the assistant to preach on Trinity Sunday. A lot of folks just don’t get what to do with the doctrine of the Trinity.

The funny thing is this: folks have a problem with the Trinity precisely because they use the word “doctrine” to describe it. Yes, the Trinity was a big part of the doctrinal disputes of the early church. Yes, contrary understandings of the Trinity were a contributing factor that led to the split between the Eastern and Western churches. This history notwithstanding, the Trinity is not a doctrine. It is a *relationship*. The moment I made this switch in my mind, the Trinity became a much more present reality in my life.

The relationship of the Trinity is the way our limited human minds can begin to grasp the edge of the corner of an understanding about God. We call God “Father,” but *father* is a relational word. There cannot be a parent without a child. So we call God “Son.” Thus, there is a relationship between God within God. This relationship is the “Spirit,” the love that the Father and Son have for one another. Of course, God is one, so all of this is God.

We don’t have to understand how the Trinity “works” to understand that the relational nature of God has always been. Never has there been a time when God was “alone” because God was with God before anything else was created. This gives me hope because God’s relationship with God tells me how God’s relationship with me happens. I am never alone because God is with me. Or to say it more precisely, I am with God.



## “U” IS FOR UNDERSTANDING

March 26, 2020

*The woman said to the snake, “We may eat the fruit of the garden’s trees but not the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. God said, ‘Don’t eat from it, and don’t touch it, or you will die.’” (Genesis 3:2-3)*

Usually, when we think of understanding we think of comprehension, of gaining knowledge that makes something clear. “She’s so understanding” means “She gets me, she knows what I’m going through.” “I don’t understand the math” means that some piece of knowledge or skill is eluding you.

These are perfectly good uses of the word “understanding.” But when we transport the word over to our talk about God, we can run into trouble. “I don’t understand God” clearly means that some piece of knowledge is eluding you. But unlike math, it’s not knowledge that you are likely to come by on this side of death. Lack of understanding is often cited as a reason people do not follow too far along the path of discipleship.

But there’s another way of looking at the word that turns things around. In fact, all you have to do is turn the word “understand” around. It becomes “stand under” in the sense of “these bridge supports stand under the bridge, holding it up and taking its weight.” Now the word applies not to our lack of understanding, but to God’s “standing under” us, supporting us, holding us up. We do not have to understand to believe. In fact, I’m pretty sure that God forbidding Adam and Eve from eating of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil is a fine indicator that we aren’t meant to understand everything. And that’s okay because no matter our limited understanding, God will always be standing under us.



## “V” IS FOR VEIL

March 27, 2020

*Now we see a reflection in a mirror; then we will see face-to-face. Now I know partially, but then I will know completely in the same way that I have been completely known. (1 Corinthians 13:12)*

Simply put, veils obscure vision. For example, a bride’s veil keeps the groom from seeing her clearly (which in turn leads to several of Shakespeare’s plots). For followers of Jesus Christ, the veil exists between our limited perception and God’s greater glory. We see a teeny tiny portion of the spectrum of light with our actual eyes, so it’s no wonder that our spiritual perception is similarly limited.

Our limited perception keeps us from seeing beyond the veil. There is some indefinable beauty on the other side, but we don’t really know what it is. The question then becomes: how do we know there is some indefinable beauty on the other side if we can’t see beyond the veil? Well, at some point or another, God pulled back the veil and gave us the gift of more expansive perception. Followers of Jesus believe this happened in the Incarnation, life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the “revelation” of God. In the person of Jesus, God pulled back the curtain.

The veil still hangs in front of our faces. But it is not opaque. It is porous because the glory of God can't help but penetrate it. This is why we have hope. The veil will be pulled back fully, and then we will know fully, even as we are fully known.



## “W” IS FOR WILL, WORD, AND WHY

March 30, 2020

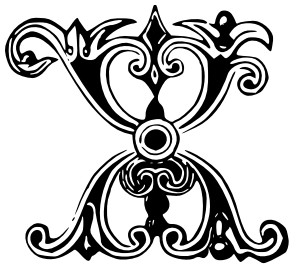
*Abraham remained standing in front of the LORD. Abraham approached and said, “Will you really sweep away the innocent with the guilty? What if there are fifty innocent people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not save the place for the sake of the fifty innocent people in it?”*

*It’s not like you to do this, killing the innocent with the guilty as if there were no difference. It’s not like you! Will the judge of all the earth not act justly?” (Genesis 18:22-25)*

Many of the characters in the Bible (like Abraham in the passage above) and many of us struggle with what might be termed “divine inscrutability”; that is, our inability to understand why God does what God does. Two approaches spring from this inability. One accepts the inscrutability, saying, “We’ll never know why God does what God does.” The other attempts to explain it, saying, “It’s God’s will.”

Of course, saying “It’s God’s will” is paradoxical – it claims knowledge of God while springing from an inability to explain God’s actions. The “It’s God’s will” approach can be very damaging to people asking the “why” question. Often it is used as a platitude or defense mechanism. Yes, the will of God certainly exists, but we neither know it nor is it the organizing principle by which we live.

The organizing principle is, instead, reserved for the “Word” of God. (“Everything came into being through the Word, and without the Word nothing came into being.” (John 1:3)) This Word is both the foundation of existence and the incarnate being of Jesus Christ. Affirming this premise does not answer the “why” question, but rather supersedes it with the person of Christ, who is present with us in our pain and suffering. The inscrutability of God is maintained because we can never fully know God, but our “why” questions are answered by a *relationship* with Jesus Christ (rather than an explanation).



## “X” IS FOR MARKING THE SPOT

March 31, 2020

*Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don’t eat them and where thieves don’t break in and steal them. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)*

Yes, yes, I’m cheating again. I hope you’re used to it by now. “X” is for marking the spot on a map containing the location of buried treasure. (*Ya savvy?*) How many of us have seen films where pirates race to unearth the cache of golden doubloons after a creased and burned map surfaces in a tavern or an attic (*Goonies*, anyone?). Indiana Jones himself once said that X “never, ever” marks the spot. Then he went to Venice and found the knight’s tomb buried right under a Roman numeral ten in an old library.

What’s interesting about all of the literary and pop cultural references to X marking the spot is that the treasure must necessarily be hidden. There’s no story otherwise. But Jesus sees this X differently. For Jesus, the heart marks the spot, for “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” There shouldn’t be anything hidden about this at all if we use Jesus’ map. Go to your heart’s desire and you’ll find your treasure.

Of course, it’s not that easy. We fallen humans rarely set our hearts on the right things. We choose to mark all the wrong things with the X of our hearts – wealth, fame, material comforts, you know the drill. Perhaps the real treasure

is hidden after all. Perhaps this is why our hearts are always restless. As Saint Augustine says, “My heart is restless until it finds rest in God.” In the end our true treasure is not hidden – a life lived by the riches of Christ’s grace. But the maps we choose to follow often lead us astray.



## “Y” IS FOR YEAST

April 1, 2020

*He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast, which a woman took and hid in a bushel of wheat flour until the yeast had worked its way through all the dough.” (Matthew 13:33)*

Yes, the end of the alphabet is tough, but at least I didn’t have to resort to a gimmick like I did yesterday. While you might use the word “yeast” mostly in your baking, the word comes up a surprising number of times in the Bible.

First, yeast plays a part in the escape of the Israelites from Egypt in the book of Exodus. Or perhaps I should say, yeast is conspicuously absent from the account of the Israelites flight. To show the urgency of their departure, the writer of Exodus keys in on this small detail. They didn’t have time to wait for the yeast to rise in their bread, so they resorted to unleavened bread for their journey. And to this day, unleavened bread is an important part of Jewish ritual.

Moving to the New Testament, Jesus speaks of yeast on at least two occasions. In possibly the greatest display of the disciples’ thickness, they don’t understand when Jesus says, “Watch out and be on your guard for the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” The disciples don’t have any bread themselves, so they at first think that Jesus is telling them to go borrow some yeast from the Pharisees. I imagine Jesus took several calming breaths at this. “Don’t you know that I wasn’t talking about bread?” he says, no doubt exasperated. Then they realize he is using “yeast” to mean teaching – as in, something that helps you grow.

Finally, Jesus uses yeast in one of his parables about the kingdom of heaven, which you can read above. Here Jesus emphasizes the hidden aspect of the kingdom. It is there, inside each of us, working, reacting with the spiritual chemicals within us to turn us into agents of the kingdom. In the Bible, yeast is slow, it works in secret, but its effects are visible, and it helps us rise.



## “Z” IS FOR ZOE

April 1, 2020

*So then let’s also run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Let’s throw off any extra baggage, get rid of the sin that trips us up, and fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. (Hebrews 12:1)*

“Zoe” (pronounced zo-AY) is the Greek word for “life.” We get the word “zoology” from it. For that matter, we get the word “zoo” from it. I remember visiting the zoo in Washington D.C. and feeling profoundly depressed as I left. The D.C. zoo is squashed into a tiny piece of the District, and the animals are squashed into tiny pieces of the zoo. The panda paddock was hardly bigger than the backyard I mowed every week when I was growing up. The elephants had no room to move. Everything was concrete and wrought iron. I couldn’t help but think what an inaccurate use of the word “zoo” I was witnessing.

“Zoe” means “life,” yes, but the connotation of the Greek doesn’t stop there. The word from which we get “zoo” means expansive life, life without bounds, the kind of life that the creature is *meant* to live. Jesus uses this word when he answers Thomas’s question (John 14): “Lord, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” *I Am the Life*. It is in Jesus’ life – his zoe – that we find the kind of life that we, as creatures of God’s own Creation, are meant to live.

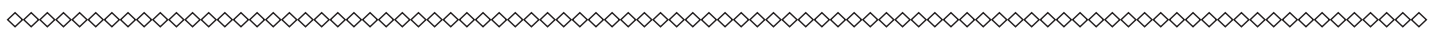
As the Way, the Truth, and the Life, Jesus Christ does not give us a rulebook or a series of tasks to accomplish in order to gain that zoe for ourselves. Rather, he gives us himself, he gives us his own footsteps, he gives us his own trail that he blazed through the hardships and joys of this life. And all he asks for in return is us.



## CONCLUSION

April 3, 2020

We pause at the end of the alphabet and take a breath before we come to Holy Week. As you reflect back on the 26 words we have examined over the course of this Lenten study, which one surprised you? What new understanding did you receive? Which word have you noticed popping up in your daily life that you never paid attention to before? And which word would you like to see addressed for a particular letter that wasn't used in this study?



## HOLY WEEK

With the alphabet finished, we invite you to take time each day during Holy Week and sit with the following verses from the Passion Gospel. Take a deep breath or two; read the verse a few times. Then sit for five minutes in silence, letting the words of the verse play through your mind and heart. Contemplate the depths of the love of God as revealed in the Passion of Jesus Christ.

### **Monday, April 6, 2020**

Then [Jesus] said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." (Matthew 26:38-39)

### **Tuesday, April 7, 2020**

Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword." (Matthew 26:51-52)

### **Wednesday, April 8, 2020**

So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him." (Matthew 27:17-19)

### **Thursday, April 9, 2020**

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:45-46)

### **Friday, April 10, 2020**

Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. (Matthew 27:55-56)

## HOLY WEEK SCHEDULE

### **Sunday, April 5th**

Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday  
*Services at 8am and 10am*

### **Wednesday, April 8th**

Living Stations of the Cross  
Presented by the Teens of the Church  
*Service at 6pm in the Undercroft*

### **Thursday, April 9th**

Maundy Thursday Dinner and Service  
*Beginning at 6pm with meal in the Undercroft*

Overnight Prayer Vigil in the Library  
*9pm Thursday to Noon Friday*  
Sign Up on the Undercroft Bulletin Board

### **Friday, April 10th**

Good Friday  
*Service at 12pm*

### **Saturday, April 11th**

The Great Vigil of Easter  
*Service at 6pm*

### **Sunday, April 12th**

The Feast of the Resurrection: Easter Day  
*Services at 8am and 10am*



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