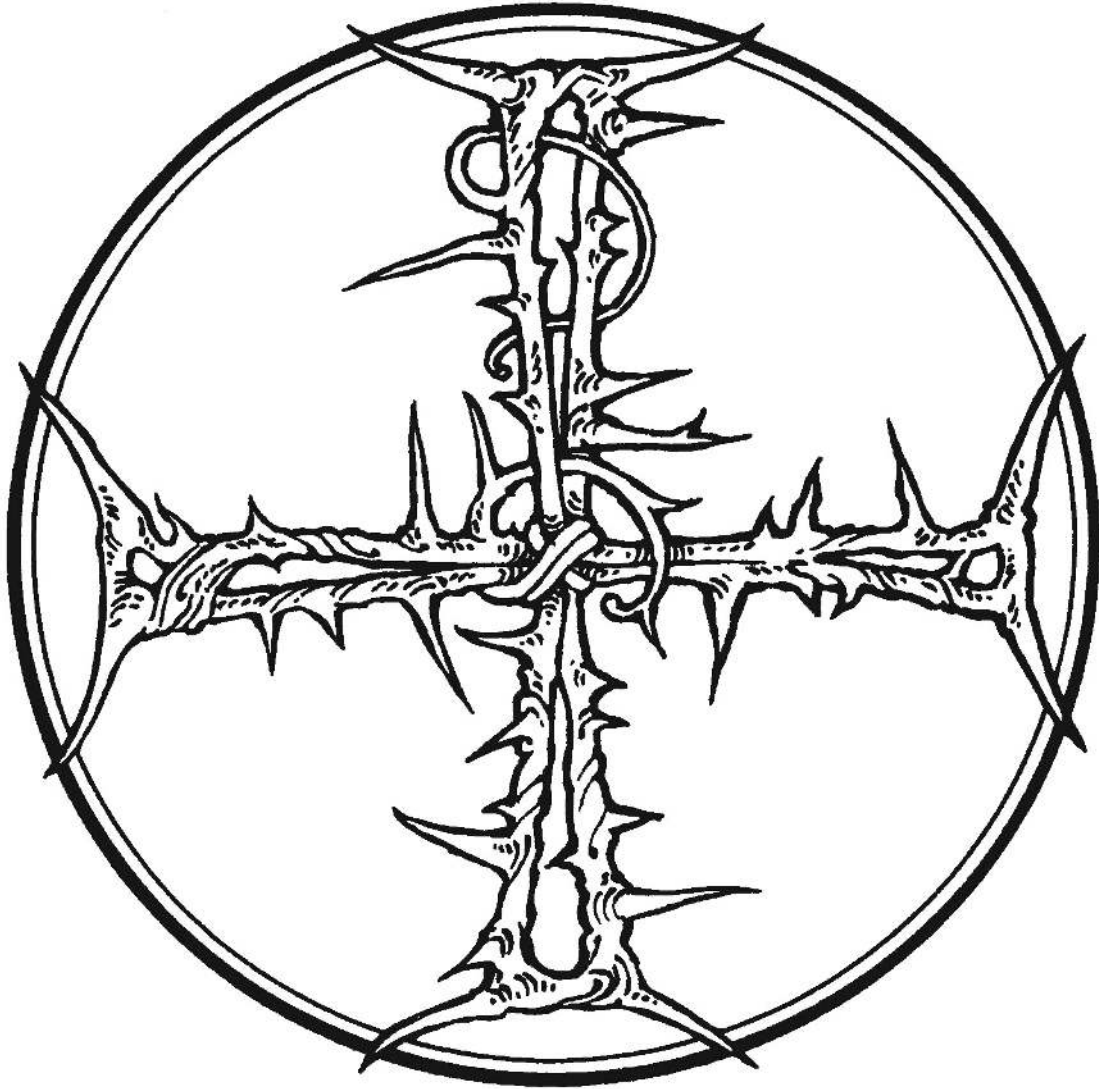


LENT PLANNING GUIDE

2025



Pastor Mark Anderson



GOD'S WORD IS LIFE

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INTRODUCTION

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”

Psalm 51

Ash Wednesday is adamant. We do not have life in ourselves. The confident summer days of living will succumb to the ashen landscape of death’s winter. Lent is any and every time we must come to terms with guilt, shame, loss, limitations, sorrow, grief, dying, and death. Lent abolishes our identity in the law, our self-justifying delusions. The wages of sin will be paid.

Lent points to baptism. In baptism, God promises to take us more seriously than we are willing to take ourselves. To be baptized is to be drawn into Christ’s life and ministry unto death. Lent impresses upon us the truth of our baptism: every day is dying time; every day is living time in Christ. He is the vine; we are the branches. We do not have life in ourselves. Apart from Him, we can do nothing.

Lent reminds us that life is a path through shadowed woods. Which is to say, God is determined to keep us grounded in this world and His Word. Dying and rising with Christ find their corollaries in the real world of our vocations as people of the Cross, people of sorrow acquainted with grief. For vocation is the cross we bear.

In faith’s assurance, like the psalmist, we embrace the honesty of lament. We bring our brokenness to the Savior we so deeply need. When the burdens of life leave us weary—of ourselves, others, and the world—Christ is there, carrying our sins and forgiving them. He keeps us grounded in the baptismal promise, shaping our repentance through His life-giving Word. For Christians, Lent declares that all of life is lived at the foot of the Cross, illuminated by Easter’s victory. The radiant light of Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, and Pentecost shines into the shadows of Lenten sorrow, bringing mercy that renews our hearts with the healing flame of forgiveness. And the prayer of Lent is simply this: “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Baptism flows through these weeks like Jordan’s steady stream. Luther’s Small Catechism teaches us that baptism is not just water—but water together with the Word. It “works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation.” Lent is baptism lived out as we remember that we are joined to Christ’s death and resurrection. Through Him, we are forgiven, restored, and made new day by day.

Hymn suggestions join hearts and voices to the themes of each week. Greek word studies peel back layers of meaning, unfolding the richness of God’s Word. Words like “repentance,” “grace,” and “righteousness” draw us into the story of a God who meets us in our brokenness and carries us in His mercy and wholeness.

Each week's reflections bridge the gap between heaven and earth, weaving theology together with the everyday struggles of life. These are words for the weary and wandering who know the weight of the world and long to hear that Christ has already borne it. The sermons, word studies, and commentaries guide preachers and teachers to proclaim the Gospel with clarity and hope, showing how God's strength is hidden in suffering and His glory in the cross.

Think of these resources as seeds meant to nourish creative ideas, not to fence you in. Let them grow, twist, and bloom as freely as they will in your hands. They are offered as tools to help congregations focus their hearts on Christ. They are meant to remind the Christian that Lent is every burden, every hard climb, every weary step. Lent is the season of the long road, dusty, winding, and steep. It invites us to pause, to look, and to listen. Here, the promise of God's mercy greets us, not as a distant whisper but as a very present voice calling in the wilderness: "Come, lay down your burdens. Receive the life I've won for you." Each step leads us deeper into the mystery of Christ's redeeming love, His death and resurrection, and the new life that blooms from the barren soil of the Cross.

Pastor Mark Anderson

THE FOOLISH WORD IS ENOUGH

"For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the foolishness of what we preach to save those who believe."

1 Corinthians 1:21

Introduction

Over the years, I had the privilege of preaching to a wide variety of people in remarkably diverse contexts: from rural farmers in Minnesota to suburban congregations in bustling Orange County, from the ranks of the Air National Guard to a Montana church attended by cattle ranchers and bankers. In these diverse contexts, one unchanging truth became increasingly clear: the power of preaching lies not in the preacher but in God's Word.

The temptation in preaching is the same temptation sinners always face: to make it about ourselves—our insights, cleverness, or ability to connect. This lesson didn't strike like a lightning bolt; it emerged in the crucible of weakness. I have felt my carefully crafted words fall like dry bones rattling in the wind, and I have also been deceived by my competence when I thought I had "nailed it."

Preaching is God speaking His Word into the chaos of human lives, killing the sinner and raising her to new life in the power of the gospel. As Isaiah assures us, **"So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose"** (Isaiah 55:11). This truth cuts deeply because it confronts the preacher's pride and illusion of control. But it also sets us free. The burden of effectiveness does not rest on us; it belongs to the Word. That is the freedom of the pulpit: to step aside and let the Word do its work.

Rendering Our Relevancies Irrelevant

The Lenten homilies presented here deliberately omit illustrations. Why? First, because illustrations often depend on the local context in which they are preached. But more importantly, they are unnecessary. Preaching is proclamation—God's Word addressed to sinners—and this is serious business. It is not a lecture, a motivational speech, or a storytelling exercise. It is the living and active Word that comes to kill and make alive, stripping away every illusion of self-righteousness and delivering sinners into the mercy of Christ crucified and risen.

A particularly dangerous move is to begin a sermon with what we might call a "relevant" illustration. This risks setting the stage with human concerns rather than God's address. When we use illustrations to establish the relevance of the Word, we subtly subordinate its authority to the

hearers' judgment. But **“the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18)**. God's Word doesn't need to appeal to our experiences to be true or effective. The Living Word of God creates its own relevance. Why? Because the Word doesn't settle for the masks we wear; it sees us, knows us, and takes us seriously in ways we never could or would. As the writer of Hebrews declares, **“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword... discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12)**.

While illustrations can inform or entertain, only the Word transforms. The sermon isn't meant to give people something to "take away"—a task to complete or a principle to apply. Christ has already given everything in His Word: the living promise of forgiveness, grace, and new life. This promise comes not because we feel it or even understand it, but because God is faithful in bestowing it.

Windows into God's Action

This does not mean that preaching ignores the lived realities of the hearers. Preaching meets people where they are—not by conforming to their expectations but by addressing their true human condition. A well-chosen illustration, grounded in Scripture or shared experience, may help clarify the law's confrontation or illuminate the gospel's comfort. For example, a story that exposes the futility of self-justification or highlights the sheer unexpectedness of grace can draw hearers into the drama of God's action.

The best illustrations are already in the Bible: the Good Shepherd searching for lost sheep, the prodigal son welcomed home, the vine and branches. These images don't just paint a picture; they place us in God's story and point us to Christ. Preaching isn't about softening the gospel or sugarcoating the law but delivering the authentic, living Word of God. The law exposes our condition, and the gospel proclaims in the here and now, **“It is finished” (John 19:30)**.

Life Stories from the Pulpit?

Self-referencing illustrations—stories about the preacher's own life—present unique challenges. While they might initially seem relatable, they risk displacing the Word of God as the centerpiece of the sermon. When the congregation hears the sermon filtered through the preacher's experience, the focus subtly shifts from God's action to the preacher's personality.

This can blur the line between law and gospel, leaving hearers with an implicit message of moral striving: *If only I could be more like the pastor...* But reconciliation with God is entirely His work in Christ—not the result of following any human example. Instead, the preacher might draw on scriptural images or frame personal illustrations, if necessary, in the second person, keeping the focus on God's action.

Trusting the Word to Do the Work

Marshall McLuhan's now famous axiom, "*The medium is the message*," reminds us that how we communicate shapes the content itself. Preaching, as proclamation, carries a profound message: God speaks directly to His people, addressing them in the present through a preacher. When the preacher steps into the background—becoming the mouthpiece of God's address—the medium reinforces the message. Conversely, when the preacher's charisma or storytelling overshadows the Word, the medium distracts from God's action.

A theologian of the Cross knows that stumbles and imperfections in preaching do not negate the power of the Word. As Paul writes, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9)**. The effectiveness of the Word lies in God's hands, not ours. Yet preachers are called to steward this gift carefully, delivering the Word with clarity, focus, and the proper distinction between law and gospel.

Conclusion

Could there be a greater mystery than this—that the foolishness of what we preach reveals the power and wisdom of God? Preaching isn't about putting on a show, giving advice, or entertaining with clever words. It's about proclaiming the foolishness of the Cross—God's upside-down power, where sin is forgiven, brokenness healed, and the lost are found. As Paul boldly declares, **"I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16)**. In the foolishness of Christ crucified (and the often foolish ways in which we preach it!) God reveals His power, His wisdom, and His unstoppable grace in Jesus Christ our Lord.

WEEKLY PLANNING GUIDE

ASH WEDNESDAY

SERMON FOCUS: Ashes remind us that we are sinners, bound by death, and unable to save ourselves. Yet the cross-shaped mark upon our foreheads proclaims Christ crucified for sinners and calls to mind our baptism. In baptism, we were joined to Christ's death and resurrection. Lent is not a season for us to prove our faithfulness but a time for God to shatter our illusions of control and meet us in our brokenness. Here, God does the work—putting us to death and raising us to new life through His Word, just as He promised in the waters of baptism. The ashes and the cross point us to the truth: our hope lies not in ourselves but in the crucified and risen Christ, who has claimed us as His own.

Texts:

- **Old Testament Reading:** Joel 2:1–2, 12–17
- **Psalm:** Psalm 51:1–17
- **Epistle:** 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10
- **Gospel:** Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Hymn Suggestions

- **LBW:** "Chief of Sinners Though I Be" (LBW 306)
- **ELW:** "There in God's Garden" (ELW 342)
- **ReClaim:** "Come to Calvary's Holy Mountain" (ReClaim 145)
- **LHS:** "Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness" (LHS 145)

GREEK WORD STUDIES: Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

1. μετάνοια (metanoia) – "Repentance" A change of mind, turning away from sin, and turning toward God.

Repentance is God's holy undoing, where He tears us from the mirage of self-reliance and plunges us headlong into the depths of His mercy. It feels like unraveling because it is—the old self must die, its illusions shattered and its pride laid bare. Yet in this death, a miracle unfolds: we are raised with Christ, finding life precisely where we expected none. Repentance is not our work but God's relentless grace, breaking into the stronghold of our sin with the sharp edge of His forgiveness. He claims us, again and again, as His own, reshaping our hearts in the image of His Son. In this daily rhythm of dying and rising, we are drawn ever deeper into the life of Christ, no longer our own, but wholly His—redeemed, remade, and alive in His endless mercy.

2. ἐλεημοσύνη (eleēmosynē) – "Almsgiving" Mercy or charity expressed in acts of kindness, especially to the poor."

Almsgiving flows from the abundance of God's mercy, a mercy that has already claimed us in Christ. This mercy spills out, like water overflowing from a cup, in acts of love for our neighbor. We don't give out of our goodness but from the goodness we've received—bread shared because Christ is the Bread of Life, care given because God cares for us. Everything we have received—our time, possessions, the great opportunity of living—is a gift from God to be shared, not hoarded.

3. δικαιοσύνη (dikaiosynē) – "Righteousness" The quality of being right or just, often understood as living in a way that is pleasing to God."

True righteousness is no trophy to win, no summit to climb. In the flesh, we stumble and fail, incapable of pleasing God. But righteousness is not forged by human will or effort. It is the work of Christ, speaking to us from the cross, wrapped in the victory of His resurrection. This "alien righteousness, so foreign to us, is not ours to claim but His to give—an unearned gift, as wild and undeserved as grace itself. This righteousness does more than reconcile us to God; it sets us free—free to serve our neighbors, not with trembling fear but with unrestrained joy. For through the cross, we are already made right, already whole, already His.

4. θησαυρός (thēsauros) – "Treasure" A storehouse or a great wealth, often of spiritual significance."

Our treasure lies in the pierced hands of the Crucified, who poured out His life to redeem the unworthy. His wounds bestow a wealth the world cannot fathom—love that bleeds, mercy that dies, and grace that rises again. The cross, rugged and blood-stained, is our treasure vault; the resurrection, its unshakable seal. The riches of this world corrode and crumble, their glitter dimming with time. But the treasure of Christ is eternal, untouched by moth or decay, enduring beyond all reckoning. The Gospel proclamation scatters it freely, for in Christ, the riches of grace only multiply as they are shared, abundant as the love that gave all for our redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

5. καρδιά (kardia) – "Heart" The center of physical and spiritual life; the seat of thoughts, emotions, and will."

The heart, twisted and bound by sin, curls inward like a dying vine, feeding on desire and rebellion. Left alone, it clutches fiercely to self, a fortress of stubborn pride and fleeting

pleasures. Yet God does not abandon us to the prison of our own making. His Word of Law strikes like a hammer against stone, splintering the hardness and revealing the void within—an empty void only He can fill. And then comes the Gospel, the Word that breathes where life was lost. Through His promise, God does what we cannot: He takes our hearts of stone and breathes into them the pulse of grace. These hearts, no longer beating to the rhythm of self, are swept into the cadence of His mercy, beating now for Him and for the world He loves.

COMMENTARY

Old Testament: Joel 2:1–2, 12–17

The prophet Joel sounds an alarm, a call to awaken from complacency. “The day of the Lord” looms like a storm cloud, dark and foreboding, exposing the false securities we cling to. Yet, amid the thunder of judgment comes the tender plea: “Return to Me with all your heart.” God does not delight in destruction but longs for restoration.

Repentance here is not a transaction. It is a turning, a tearing of the heart rather than the garment. The call to communal lament—priests and people alike—reminds us that sin is not merely individual; it infects the whole body. But so, too, forgiveness is shared. Lent begins with this collective cry: Spare Your people, O Lord! The ashes on our foreheads testify not only to our need for mercy but also to God’s abundant grace, which repents us back from the brink.

Psalm 51:1–17

David’s confession is not an attempt to justify himself. It is a surrender to God’s mercy. The psalm captures the heart of repentance: “Against You, You only, have I sinned.” Sin is a rupture of relationship with the One who formed us. Every sin of thought, word, and deed is a sin against God.

The psalm does not leave us in despair. It holds forth the hope of cleansing, renewal, and joy. “Create in me a clean heart, O God,” is not a plea to be made better but to be made new—a work only God can accomplish. Lent, then, is not self-improvement but surrender, a cry for God’s Spirit to repent us in the wilderness and restore the joy of salvation.

Epistle: 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

Paul’s words cut through the pretense of religion: “Be reconciled to God.” The invitation is urgent, because God has already reconciled the world to Himself in Christ. The kingdom of God has come near! The taste of ashes reminds us of our sin, but the Gospel proclaims the sweet righteousness of Christ given to us.

Paul's litany of sufferings—beatings, imprisonments, hunger—exposes the paradox of Lent. To bear the mark of the cross is to walk in weakness. Yet, in that weakness, God's power is made perfect. As “ambassadors for Christ,” we carry the message of reconciliation into a broken world, embodying the same paradox: dying yet alive, sorrowful yet rejoicing, having nothing yet possessing everything. God's Word shapes us to live in this tension, where the Gospel transforms our suffering into a testimony of God's grace.

Gospel: Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Jesus speaks against a piety that hungers for applause, for the ashes of Ash Wednesday are not trophies but the smudge of mortality—a sign of humility, a reminder of death. Fasting, prayer, and almsgiving are not stages for performance but quiet acts of faith, known only to the Father who sees what is hidden.

The Gospel glimmers like a radiant beam piercing the shadows, its brilliance far outshining the dull glint of the world's treasures that rust and crumble. No decay can touch, and no thief can steal the eternal riches found in Christ alone. “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Lent is the season of being turned, of letting go. The idols we clutch so tightly are unmasked, and the heart finds its way home through the repenting power of the One who gave His life to make us His own.

SERMON

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

As you received the ashes, these stark words were spoken over you: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust, you shall return.” These words remind us of our mortality and they expose the depth of our predicament. We are not just finite; we are fallen. We are not merely fragile; we are bound by sin, and the wages of sin is death. Lent begins with this brutal honesty: you are not enough.

This honesty is the mercy of God. Why? Because God does not deal in illusions. Lent is not a spiritual improvement program or a chance to prove your worth through fasting, prayer, or almsgiving. It is a season of reckoning, where God dismantles every false foundation on which we have built our lives—our achievements, our piety, our control. The ashes, shaped into a cross, declare the truth: your life, your story, your salvation—are not in your hands. You are God's to redeem. And he has.

In the book of Joel, the call to “rend your hearts, not your garments” pierces through our religious pretense. God is not interested in outward displays of piety or acts of penitence performed to impress others—or ourselves. God is after the truth, the raw, unvarnished reality of your helplessness before Him. You cannot mend your relationship with God or claw your way out of sin's grip. You cannot cheat the grave. But the Lord is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and

abounding in steadfast love.” His mercy does not wait for you to ascend to Him. His mercy has descended to you on the Cross.

Psalm 51 reveals the true nature of repentance: it is not something we initiate or accomplish. Repentance is not a negotiation with God or a promise to do better. It is the work of God breaking through our defenses, exposing the truth of our sin, and turning us back to Himself. The cry, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me,” is not our doing—it is God’s Spirit at work in us, calling us to the end of ourselves. Repentance is God’s action, His mercy in motion. Through the Cross, God does what we cannot: He takes our sin, death, and rebellion and creates something entirely new. Where sin had brought only death, Christ brings life, a new creation. God does not wait for us to repent; He repents us—turning us from death to life, from sin to grace, from ourselves to Him.

In the Gospel reading, the Lord Jesus unmasks the futility of self-made righteousness. He warns against fasting, praying, or giving in ways that draw attention to yourself. Why? Because a righteousness that centers on you is no righteousness at all. True righteousness is a gift, not an achievement. It is God’s righteousness, delivered to you in Christ, who took your sin and shame upon Himself, suffered the death you deserved, and in exchange, gave you His forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Dearly Beloved, Ash Wednesday is not about what you bring to God. It is about what He has brought to you: His Son, given for you, His Cross planted firmly in the middle of your dust and ashes. Lent is a stripping—a stripping away of all the things we cling to so that we might cling to Christ alone. His Cross is your hope. His Word is your promise. His grace is your life.

And so, you wear the ashes not as a mark of your effort but as a proclamation of His mercy. You bear the sign of the Cross, the sign given to you in your baptism—the unchanging declaration that even in your dust, you belong to Christ. You are not your own, and thanks be to God for that. For in Him, you are forgiven, made new, and set free to live in His grace. This Lent, remember that your repentance is not your work but His, your hope is not in what you can offer, but in what He has already accomplished. Baptism is the daily return to the Word of promise, where God’s mercy and faithfulness meet you anew, turning you from death to life for the sake of Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Amen.

LENTEN BIBLE STUDY
ASH WEDNESDAY
WITH ADULTS

“MORTAL FRAILTY AND DIVINE VICTORY”

FOCUS: Lent is the time of God’s repenting work. Just as He promised in the waters of baptism, the Word that kills and makes alive comes upon us with all its force and comfort. The ashes and the cross point us to the truth: our hope lies not in ourselves but in the crucified and risen Christ, who has claimed us as His own.

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

- **Old Testament Reading:** Joel 2:1–2, 12–17
- **Psalm:** Psalm 51:1–17
- **Epistle:** 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10
- **Gospel:** Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

KEY THEME

Ash Wednesday plunges us into the reality of sin and death but does not leave us there. God’s mercy in Christ meets us in our helplessness, clothing us in His righteousness and raising us to new life through His Word of promise.

CATECHISM CONNECTIONS

1. The Call to Repentance (Joel 2:1–2, 12–17)

- “The life of a Christian is nothing other than a daily baptism, once begun and ever to be continued.”¹
- Baptism signifies daily dying to sin and rising to new life, mirroring Joel’s call to “return to the Lord with all your heart” (Joel 2:12).
- “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”²

Discussion Questions:

1. Luther states, “True repentance is a complete change of heart and mind, wrought by the Holy Spirit.”³ How do Luther’s words challenge the notion of repentance as a one-time event rather than a daily practice?

2. What does it mean to “rend your heart and not your garments” (Joel 2:13) in light of Luther’s understanding that repentance is an inward transformation?

2. A Broken and Contrite Heart (Psalm 51:1–17)

- "Forgiveness of sin is something freely given, without any work or law on our part, but it must be seized and accepted through faith."⁴
- "Therefore, when I urge you to go to confession, I am simply urging you to be a Christian."⁵
- Psalm 51 reminds us that God’s mercy comes not by our merit but through humble confession and faith in His promise of absolution.

Discussion Questions:

1. Luther writes, "God does not desire the sacrifice of works but the sacrifice of a broken heart."⁶ How does this insight shape our understanding of worship and humility?
2. How does David’s plea, “Create in me a clean heart” (Psalm 51:10), reflect Luther’s teaching that our hearts must be reformed by God’s Spirit rather than our efforts?
3. Luther emphasizes that absolution is not based on human worthiness. How does this teaching provide assurance when confessing sins?

3. Ambassadors of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10)

- "We are all priests before God; if we are Christians, we are all called to proclaim the Word and show forth God’s grace."⁷
- "This is the chief article from which all other doctrines have flowed... that we are justified and saved by faith alone."⁸
- God’s righteousness is ours to receive, not achieve, as Christ reconciles us to Himself through His blood.

Discussion Questions:

1. Luther says, "*The office of the ministry is to preach the reconciliation won by Christ, not human wisdom.*"⁹ How does this shape our understanding of what it means to be ambassadors of Christ?
2. What does Paul mean when he says, “Behold, now is the favorable time” (2 Corinthians 6:2)? How does this urgency align with Luther’s emphasis on trusting God’s promises today?
3. How does Luther’s insistence that justification is received by faith alone challenge self-reliance in our daily lives.

4. True Righteousness (Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21)

- "The greatest idolatry is not to worship wood or stone but to rely on self-righteousness."¹⁰
- Christ exposes the emptiness of outward piety and redirects us to the righteousness freely given in His death and resurrection.
- "Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that a man could stake his life on it a thousand times."¹¹

Discussion Questions:

1. Luther teaches, "Good works are not the cause of righteousness but the fruit of faith."¹² How does this teaching reflect Jesus' critique of outward religious displays in Matthew 6?
2. Jesus says, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth" (Matthew 6:19). How does Luther's commentary on the First Commandment¹³ deepen our understanding of this warning?
3. Luther describes faith as a "daring confidence." How does this confidence challenge the fear and uncertainty that often accompany self-made righteousness?

Closing Prayer

Merciful God, You meet us in our sin and mortality with the life-giving power of the Cross. Strip us of every illusion of self-righteousness and repent our hearts to trust in Your mercy alone, confident in the promises of Christ, who is our life and salvation. Amen.

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1. Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, Part IV: Baptism.
 2. Martin Luther, *Ninety-Five Theses*, Thesis 1.
 3. Martin Luther, *Commentary on Joel 2*.
 4. Martin Luther, *Freedom of a Christian*.
 5. Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, Preface to Confession.
 6. Martin Luther, *Commentary on Psalm 51*.
 7. Martin Luther, *Address to the Nobility of the German Nation*.
 8. Martin Luther, *Smalcald Articles*, Part II, Article I.
 9. Martin Luther, *Commentary on 2 Corinthians 5*.
 10. Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, Part I: The First Commandment.
 11. Martin Luther, Preface to Romans.
 12. Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*.
 13. Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, First Commandment Commentary.

WITH TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS

UNFILTERED FAITH: BIBLE STUDIES FOR MESSY PEOPLE

Feeling overwhelmed or imperfect? These Bible studies are for you. Faith isn't about having it all together—it's about showing up as you are and encountering God's grace. Come explore God's Word honestly, wrestle with big questions, and discover grace that meets you right where you are.

CLOUT AND THE KINGDOM (MATTHEW 6:1–6, 19–21)

INTRODUCTION

Whether it's getting likes, retweets, or that perfect aesthetic post, we crave recognition. It feels good when people notice us, when our hard work is appreciated. But what about when our spiritual growth gets acknowledged? Jesus flips the script.

He warns against doing good things for the wrong reasons—turning faith into performance, worship into entertainment, and generosity into virtue-signaling. He's obviously not against doing good things; He's against doing them for the applause.

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

- **Gospel:** Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

KEY IDEA

God doesn't ask us to build a brand—He brings us into a hidden, unshakable life in Him.

1. FAITH OR FLEX? (MATTHEW 6:1–6)

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them...” (v.1)

We've all seen it—people making their faith a performance. Whether it's the perfect “quiet time” post, a well-crafted prayer on social media, or giving just so others will notice, Jesus calls it out.

Examples: Posting about generosity but hoping for likes. Praying in public to impress. Making sure people *know* about your sacrifice.

2. WHERE'S YOUR TREASURE? (MATTHEW 6:19–21)

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” (v.19–20)

Let's talk about what we chase.

- **Money. Success. Recognition. Clout.**
- **The dream life. The perfect image.**

The world screams: **Secure the bag! Build the brand! Make a name!**
Jesus says: **Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**

The problem isn't having stuff. It's **what owns you**. Is your heart **anchored in Christ** or in **chasing the next big thing?**

Examples:

- Checking **views, likes, and engagement** like it determines your worth.
- Prioritizing **image over integrity**, success over faithfulness.
- Measuring **blessings** by what you own instead of who you belong to.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever felt pressure to *prove* your faith—whether online or in person? What did that look like?
2. Social media gives us the ability to share our lives instantly. When does sharing about faith cross the line into showing off?
3. What are some ways we can keep our faith authentic instead of performative?
4. Jesus says God rewards what's done in secret. What does a “hidden” faith look like, and why does it matter?
5. How can we encourage each other in faith *without* making it about public recognition?
6. Jesus says, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” How does God's Word turn our hearts toward storing up *heavenly* treasure?

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, help us stop chasing validation. Remind us that we don't need to prove anything—Thank you for making us yours in baptism and calling us worthy because of what Jesus did for us. Amen.

WITH CHILDREN

"FAITH LIKE A TREE, FRUIT LIKE LOVE"

Introduction

Bible Verse:

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit." (John 15:5)

Opening Reflection

Let's think about trees. Do they worry about making fruit? No. They stay planted in the ground, drink water, and soak in the sunshine. And what happens? They grow, and their fruit comes naturally. That's what happens when we're planted in Jesus—His love grows good things in us. Faith. Kindness. Love. Patience. Hope. Sharing. Joy.

The Story: The Apple Tree's Secret

Once there was a little apple tree. It wasn't very tall, and its branches were very small. The other trees teased it. 'Where's your fruit?' they'd say. The apple tree felt embarrassed. Then the farmer came. He whispered, 'Little tree, don't worry. Stay planted in the soil right where you are, drink the water I give you, and feel the sunshine I pour over you.' The apple tree did just that. And guess what? One day, tiny blossoms appeared. Then apples! The apple tree wasn't trying to make fruit; it just stayed in the care of the farmer. In the same way, we don't try to make God love us by doing good things. Instead, we are planted in His love, and His goodness grows in us.

Teaching Moment

"God doesn't love us because we do good things. He loves us first, and His love does good things through us, just like a tree grows fruit when it's cared for."

Ask the children:

- What makes a tree grow good fruit? (Roots in the soil, water, sunshine.)
- How does God grow good things in our lives? (prayer, God's Word, worship, etc.)

Explain:

“Good works are like apples on the tree. They don’t make the tree alive. They show the tree is alive! Jesus’ love works in us, and good things grow.”

Questions for Wondering Together

1. What do you think it means to “stay rooted in Jesus”?
2. What kind of “fruit” does Jesus help us grow in our lives? (Kindness, forgiveness, love.)
3. Can we make God love us more by doing good things? (No, He loves us because of Jesus.)
4. Where do we share the fruit of Jesus’ love with others? (family, friends, etc.)

Activity: The Faith Tree

What You Need:

- Big pieces of paper
- Markers, crayons, or paint
- Green and red construction paper
- Scissors and glue

How to Make It:

1. Draw a tree trunk with branches on a big piece of paper. Label the trunk: **“Faith in Jesus.”**
2. Cut out leaves (green) and fruit shapes (red).
3. On each fruit, write a way Jesus helps us do good: “Be kind,” “Share,” “Forgive.”
4. Glue the fruit and leaves onto the tree.
5. Add the words: *“Faith Bears Fruit!”*

Movement Game: Fruit Search

1. Hide paper “fruit” with words like “Kindness,” “Love,” and “Patience” around the room.
2. Tell the children, “The fruit comes from Jesus’ love. Let’s find it and bring it back to the tree!”
3. When all the fruit is found, place it on the Faith Tree poster.

Read the poem:

BAPTISM'S GIFT

Pastor Mark Anderson

Oh, little child, your life He knows, Within His heart, it deeply grows.
The font, a well of life begun, A gateway opened by God's Son.

Your roots sink deep, like ancient trees, Anchored firm beneath the seas.
Through storms that rage, you'll stand so tall, For Christ will never let you fall.

Jesus says, "You're mine, you're free, No fear shall bind, no chain shall be.
In Jesus' name, you're loved, restored, A child of God forevermore."

So splash and play, rejoice and sing, This is the gift the waters bring.
A promise bright, a word so true—Baptism's gift, made just for you.

Closing Prayer

"Jesus, You are our vine, and we are Your branches. Thank You for loving us and giving us faith to grow strong. Help us share Your love through kindness, joy, and forgiveness. Keep us rooted in You so our lives bear Your fruit. Amen."

WEEK 1: A WORD FOR WANDERERS

SERMON FOCUS

A wandering people, rescued from slavery, brought into a land flowing with milk and honey (Deuteronomy 26). They didn't earn it; they were carried. Their response? To lay it all before the Lord, hands and hearts open in thanksgiving. The psalmist sings the reason why—because God is our refuge, our shelter, our strength (Psalm 91). All things flow from His hand, even the breath to sing our thanks.

But here's the heart of it: the Word isn't far off, locked away in heaven or buried in the earth. It's as close as your lips, as near as your heart (Romans 10). That Word is Jesus—God's yes to sinners—who speaks forgiveness, life, and hope to all who hear His voice.

And in the wilderness, when the tempter hisses, "Are you sure? Did God really say?" (Luke 4), Jesus speaks louder. He endures the hunger, the doubt, the lies—for you. He holds fast to the promise you couldn't. And now, the promise is yours. God is your refuge. Jesus is your Good Shepherd. And His Word? It's closer than you think. It's for you. Always for you.

TEXTS:

- **Old Testament:** Deuteronomy 26:1–11
- **Psalms:** Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16
- **Epistle:** Romans 10:8b–13
- **Gospel:** Luke 4:1–13

HYMN SUGGESTIONS:

- **LBW:** "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" (LBW 229)
- **ELW:** "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word" (ELW 517)
- **ReClaim:** "The Glory of These Forty Days" (ReClaim 69)
- **LHS:** "On My Heart Imprint Your Image" (LHS 114)

KEY GREEK WORD STUDIES: Luke 4:1–13

1. **ἀΓΑΠΗ (AGAPĒ) – "LOVE"**
 - Agapē, the self-giving love of God, is central to the Christian understanding of the gospel. This love is not based on emotion or something lovely in the object of love but on God's initiative to love the unlovable. This is the love displayed on the cross, where Christ gave Himself for sinners. Agapē is a love that seeks the good of others even at great personal cost, embodying the theology of the cross: God's love shown in weakness and sacrifice.

2. **ΧΑΡΙΣ (CHARIS) – "GRACE"**
 - Charis, or grace, is the unearned favor of God toward sinners. It upends human notions of earning and deserving, highlighting that salvation is a gift entirely dependent on God's mercy. The theology of the cross reveals *charis* most clearly in Christ's crucifixion, where God reconciles the world to Himself, not counting our trespasses against us. Grace is both the foundation and the continual sustenance of the believer's life in Christ.
3. **ΠΙΣΤΟΣ (PISTOS) – "FAITHFUL" OR "BELIEVING"**
 - Pistos reflects both God's faithfulness to His promises and the response of faith from the believer. In the theology of the cross, faith is not a human achievement but God's work in us, a gift that clings to Christ despite suffering, weakness, and the hiddenness of God's work. Faithful discipleship involves trust in God's promises even when they appear contrary to worldly wisdom.
4. **ΣΩΤΗΡΙΑ (SŌTĒRIA) – "SALVATION"**
 - Sōtēria encompasses deliverance, rescue, and restoration, brought about by God through Christ's work on the cross. It is both a future promise and a present participation in the new life secured by Jesus' death and resurrection. The theology of the cross emphasizes that salvation comes through what appears as defeat: the death of Christ, which brings life to the world.
5. **ΔΙΚΑΙΟΣΥΝΗ (DIKAIOSYNĒ) – "RIGHTEOUSNESS"**
 - Dikaiosynē, or righteousness, is not achieved by human effort but is bestowed as a gift by grace through faith in Christ. The theology of the cross reveals that God's righteousness is demonstrated in justifying the ungodly through the sacrificial death of Jesus. This righteousness brings reconciliation and peace, overturning the human understanding of righteousness as merit-based.
6. **ἔλεος (ELEOS) – "MERCY"**
 - Eleos, God's compassionate mercy, is extended to the weak, the broken, and the undeserving. The theology of the cross proclaims that God's mercy is not earned but freely given, on the cross where Jesus bears the sin and shame of humanity. This mercy calls believers to show the same compassion to others, reflecting the heart of God in the world.

COMMENTARY

The season of Lent calls us into the wilderness—not a place we would choose, but one that chooses us. It's a land where shadows stretch long, where our fears are amplified in silence, where there is only the voice of the accuser. The mirage of self-sufficiency fades under the relentless light of God's truth. Lent strips us down to what we'd rather not see: a people lost and restless, choking on the dust of our failures, stumbling under the weight of our pride, and aching with hunger for something this world cannot give.

But this wilderness, barren as it seems, is not void of hope. God speaks here. His Word pierces the silence not with condemnation but with grace. Where our hands grasp at control and come up empty, His hands reach out, pierced for us, offering forgiveness. The law has its moment, showing us the depth of our need, but the Gospel has the last word: “You are mine, and I am yours.” The wilderness doesn’t end in despair; it is where love finds us, unworthy and unprepared, and declares us beloved.

Lent is the season for the baptized. Marked with the cross, we enter this wilderness with the One who has already walked the path for us. Jesus faced the tempter, bore the burden, and triumphed where we never could. And now, He walks with us. The wilderness becomes holy ground—not because of us, but because of Him. It is a place where seeds of faith are sown in our barren hearts, where mercy waters the soil, and where the faint glow of dawn points us to Easter’s light, the light that no darkness can overcome.

This Lent, as you feel the shadows press in, hear the voice that calls you by name. In the wilderness, He is with you. In the struggle, He strengthens you. And in the ashes, He promises life. This is not the end; it is the beginning of a new creation, and it is for you.

SERMON

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today, the church calendar leads us into the wilderness. We might picture a dry, barren wasteland, but this wilderness is not just a geographic setting or a literary metaphor. Lent doesn’t ask us to go looking for the wilderness. It’s the space where the false securities of our lives are stripped away. It’s where our carefully constructed identities crumble, leaving us exposed. And that’s uncomfortable, isn’t it? We’d rather avoid the wilderness if we could. Lent meets us right where we are, in the raw edges of daily life, where fear, brokenness, loss, and loneliness are already pressing in.

The wilderness exposes the truth of our insufficiency. The Law speaks this hard word, confronting us with the reality that no effort or striving can make us whole. And yet, Lent offers a deeper, more beautiful truth. Unlike the stern, unblinking world, God doesn’t meet us with demands for self-improvement. He meets us with His unshakable promises amid our insufficiency. Lent is not about what we do for God but what He does for us. It’s not a test of our faithfulness but a journey into the heart of God’s faithfulness.

In our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy, the Israelites confess, “A wandering Aramean was my father.” It’s a strange phrase but a powerful one. They are reminding themselves that their story is not about their strength, wisdom, or righteousness. Their story begins in wilderness wandering, in need, in utter dependence. Their offering of first fruits is not a token of their

faithfulness but a confession of God's faithfulness, of the One who truly provides. Lent starts here, too: with the reminder that God—not us—is the central actor in this story.

Psalm 91 calls God our refuge and fortress, a declaration that echoes Martin Luther's powerful words in *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. But notice—this fortress is not a place where storms never come. It's the shelter that stands firm when the storms rage. The wilderness, with all its trials, dismantles the illusion of control we cling to, much like Luther's hymn reminds us of the relentless assaults of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature. Yet, the word of promise in Psalm 91 is unshakable.

Faith is not the absence of struggle but trust that clings to this unmovable fortress, the God who holds us even when all else crumbles. This faith trusts not in what we can secure for ourselves but in the One who has already secured everything for us in Christ Jesus. And so, we rest—not in ease but in the mighty refuge of His promise, knowing that our Good Lord will carry us through.

Paul, in Romans, makes it plain: salvation is not a reward for our efforts but a gift of grace. "The word is near you," he writes—"on your lips and in your heart." Salvation is not about the strength of our faith or the fervor of our confession. It's about the reliability of God's promise. Lent dismantles our striving and points us to Christ, who has already done everything necessary for us.

And then there's the Gospel—the wilderness scene we all know so well. Jesus, alone and hungry, faces the devil's temptations. Turn stones into bread. Seize worldly power. Put God to the test. Each temptation summons Jesus to avoid the Cross, to rely on Himself rather than His Father. And isn't that the same trap set for us? To trust in our own strength, to seek control, to grasp at power, to doubt God's benevolence?

But Jesus stands firm. He doesn't defeat the devil with displays of might but with the Word of God. And His victory here is not just an example for us; it's a triumph for us. Where Israel failed in the wilderness and where we fail daily, Jesus is victorious. His obedience, His faithfulness, His suffering even to death—it's all for us.

Beloved in Christ, we don't enter the season of Lent to prove ourselves to God. We enter it to be met by Him where we are. The wilderness is no barren wasteland but holy ground. It's the crucible where God's Word breaks apart our self-reliance and makes an end of us so that he may be life for us. The Cross stands before us not as a burden we must carry but as the sign of victory that carries us.

For now, we are wilderness wanderers, yet we do not journey alone. God does not leave us to wander aimlessly; He comes to us with gifts, not demands. His Word, bestowed in your baptism, shelters you in the storm, speaking promises that hold you in forgiveness, calms your fears, and reminds you, "You are mine." In the Sacrament of the Altar, He strengthens us when we falter,

nourishing us with the very body and blood of the One who leads us hand in hand, guiding us ever closer to the Land of Promise, where His victory will be our eternal rest.

Amen.

LENTEN BIBLE STUDIES

WEEK ONE

WITH ADULTS

Introduction

The first Sunday in Lent reminds us of God's life-giving provision, which sustains us even in the wilderness of temptation and trial. This week's readings emphasize God's grace and faithfulness in the face of human vulnerability, calling us to trust in His Word and rely on His promises. Luther's Catechisms provide insights into the sustaining power of God's Word and Sacraments, reminding us of the promises received in baptism and the gift of faith that defeats the enemy's schemes.

Scripture Focus

- **Old Testament Reading:** Deuteronomy 26:1–11
- **Psalms:** Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16
- **Epistle:** Romans 10:8b–13
- **Gospel:** Luke 4:1–13

Key Theme

God is faithful in providing for His people, sustaining us in the wilderness of sin and temptation. Through His Word and Sacraments, He delivers faith and draws us into the righteousness that comes by grace alone through Christ Jesus alone.

CATECHISM CONNECTIONS

1. Rejoicing in God's Provision (Deuteronomy 26:1–11)

Moses' instructions to Israel are a vivid invitation to rejoice in God's faithfulness. As the Israelites bring the first fruits of their harvest, they are reminded that all they possess is a gift from God, rooted not in their efforts but in His abundant mercy. Luther captures this beautifully in his explanation of the First Article of the Creed:

“God provides me with food and clothing, home and family, daily work, and all I need from day to day. Everything that I need comes to me because of God's goodness and mercy, not because I have earned it or deserved it.”

The act of giving first fruits is not transactional. In giving, we acknowledge Him as the source of all things. It points forward to the ultimate first fruit—Jesus Christ, who, through His death and

resurrection, has secured our place in the eternal kingdom. Christ's work transforms every gift into an occasion for thanksgiving, reminding us that our lives, sustained by His mercy, are to be lived in worshipful gratitude.

2. Trusting in God's Protection (Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16)

The psalmist's words call us into the shelter of God's presence, where He is not merely a distant protector but a refuge and fortress. This trust in God's protection finds its echo in Luther's explanation of the First Commandment:

“We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.”

Trusting God as our refuge means surrendering the illusion of control and resting in His power to deliver us from evil. The imagery of God shielding His people—like a fortress standing firm in battle—invites us to abandon self-reliance and lean wholly on His care.

But this trust is not a guarantee of earthly ease. God's protection is most profoundly seen in Christ, who bore evil's full assault on our behalf. He is our fortress, not by keeping us from all suffering but by delivering us through it. In His victory, we find a refuge.

If God is our refuge, then it follows that we must indeed need one. A refuge is not sought by those who feel secure, comfortable, or unassailable. The desperate, the weary, the helpless, and the broken seek shelter. This simple truth reveals much about the human condition. To claim that God is our refuge is to admit, first and foremost, that we are not sufficient in ourselves. But what do we need refuge from?

a. The Unrelenting Storm of Sin

We need refuge from ourselves—from the sin that clings so tightly to us, twisting our desires, distorting our thoughts, and leading us into rebellion against God. Sin is not a mere inconvenience or mistake; it is a consuming force, a terminal disease driving a wedge between us and our Creator, between us and others, and even between us and our hearts. We are willing wanderers in a wilderness of our own making.

b. The Accusations of the Law

The Law of God, good and holy as it is, becomes, for sinners, a terror. It exposes us, revealing every failure, every falsehood, every unclean motive. The Law accuses, and its verdict is true: guilty. Who can stand before its weight? Without a refuge, the Law's demands and judgments would crush us.

c. The Powers of Evil

We also need refuge from the powers of evil—the devil and his lies, the allure of the world, and the chaos of a creation groaning under the weight of sin. These forces conspire to deceive, distract, and destroy. The devil, prowling like a lion, seeks to devour, whispering accusations and half-truths meant to undermine our trust in God. The world, glittering with false promises, tempts us to place our hope in its fleeting treasures. And even creation itself reminds us of our fragility as it groans under the curse, bringing calamity and decay.

d. The Certainty of Death

We need refuge from death, the great enemy that casts its shadow over every human life. Death is the final proof of our helplessness, the culmination of sin's wages. It is the wilderness into which all humanity is driven, where no strength or wisdom can prevail. Without a refuge, death is an impenetrable barrier, a void that mocks all our striving.

e. Our Refuge in God

To say that God is our refuge is to confess that none of these enemies will be overcome by our power. It is to admit our need and to acknowledge that the shelter we seek must come from outside ourselves. God, in His mercy, provides that shelter. In Christ, we are given a refuge that stands against every storm.

In the wilderness of sin, Christ is the stream of living water. Before the accusations of the Law, He is the righteousness that silences the accusing voice. Against the devil's lies and schemes, He is the truth that sets us free. In the face of death, He is the resurrection and the life. He is the fortress that will not fall, the rock that will not be moved, and the Savior who will not abandon His people. In Him, we find not only refuge but life itself.

8. Relying on God's Righteousness (Romans 10:8b–13)

Paul's words to the Romans dismantle any notion of self-made salvation, declaring that righteousness comes not from human effort but by faith in the Word of Christ. Luther captures this truth in his explanation of the Second Article of the Creed:

“Jesus Christ has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins...not with gold or silver but with His holy, precious blood.”

To confess Christ as Lord is to acknowledge that our righteousness is not our own but is freely given through His life, death, and resurrection. It is God's Word that creates faith in our hearts, and this faith connects us to Christ's righteousness. Paul's declaration that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord WILL be saved” is not an empty promise but the assurance that salvation is entirely God's doing. Luther made it clear: “He HAS redeemed me,..”.

9. Overcoming Temptation Through the Word (Luke 4:1–13)

Jesus' encounter with Satan in the wilderness is not the clash of titans we might expect. It is a quiet, deliberate victory achieved through the Word of God. Each of Satan's temptations is met, not with displays of might, but with God's Word—simple, unyielding truth spoken into the face of falsehood. Here, we see the nature of spiritual warfare laid bare: the Word is our sword, our shield, and our strongest defense.

Luther's words in the *Small Catechism* draw this into focus:

“God indeed tempts no one, but we pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us.”

Jesus' victory in the wilderness is no model for moral resolve. The wilderness of sin is more than a match for us. It is His triumph that is decisive, a cosmic undoing of what was lost in Eden. Where Adam grasped and fell, Christ held fast. Where Eve wavered and succumbed, Christ stood firm. The tempter's accusations, once effectively whispered into the ears of humanity, now fall powerless before the One who is Truth incarnate.

And here lies the wonder: through baptism, we are joined to this victory. We are clothed in Christ's righteousness, shielded by His strength, and given the power to resist—not by our might but by clinging to His Word.

And what does that mean, but to rest in God's promises? Baptism declares us His children, a status no temptation or accusation can undo. When the devil prowls with his lies, Christ fights for us. His Word, steady and unchanging, anchors us amidst the storms of deceit which buffet us from within and without. In this truth, we stand—not alone but upheld by the One who overcame on our behalf.

Conclusion

From Moses' call to thanksgiving to Jesus' victory in the wilderness, these texts remind us that the Christian faith and life are not a matter of what we achieve but of what God gives. His provision, protection, righteousness, and deliverance are all undeserved gifts, freely given in Christ. Luther's *Small Catechism* helps us see these truths not as abstract doctrines but as the very fabric of our daily lives—gifts that sustain us in the wilderness and bring us into the joy of His eternal kingdom. Whether we're offering thanks, trusting His care, confessing His righteousness, or standing firm against temptation, we know that every good thing comes from His relentless grace.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does Deuteronomy 26 teach us about responding to God's provision with gratitude and worship?
2. How does the imagery in Psalm 91 encourage you to trust in God's protection during times of trial?
3. What does Paul's teaching in Romans 10 reveal about the centrality of faith in Christ for salvation?
4. What does Jesus' response to temptation in the wilderness reveal about our capacity to rely solely on God's Word?
5. How does our baptism strengthen us when we fail to meet our daily temptations and challenges?
6. Reflect on a time when God's Word provided you with strength or guidance in a moment of weakness.

Closing Prayer

Faithful God, You sustain us in the wilderness of this life and provide for us through Your Word and Sacraments. Help us to trust in Your promises, resist temptation, and rejoice in the righteousness that comes by faith in Jesus Christ. Strengthen us by Your Spirit to live as Your redeemed children. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Small Catechism, Explanation of the First Article of the Creed¹
Small Catechism, Explanation of the First Commandment²
Small Catechism, Explanation of the Second Article of the Creed³
Small Catechism, Explanation of the Sixth Petition of the Lord's Prayer⁴

WITH TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS

UNFILTERED FAITH: BIBLE STUDIES FOR MESSY PEOPLE

Feeling overwhelmed or imperfect? These Bible studies are for you. Faith isn't about having it all together—it's about showing up as you are and encountering God's grace. Come explore God's Word honestly, wrestle with big questions, and discover grace that meets you right where you are.

Grace in the Wilderness

Introduction

Let's be honest: life can feel like a never-ending episode of "Survivor." You're in the wilderness, dodging temptations, questioning your choices, and wondering if you're about to get voted off the island! The good news? This week's readings show us that when we're overwhelmed, God provides. When we feel exposed, God protects us. And when we inevitably mess up, He saves.

Lent isn't your season to shine. It's not a time for polishing halos or flexing spiritual muscles. Lent is the wilderness, where your illusions of control are stripped away. Here, you don't find yourself—you lose yourself. And that's exactly where God steps in.

The wilderness doesn't need conquering; it exposes what you'd rather keep hidden—your limits, your fears, your need. But God doesn't leave you there. He meets you in the dust. He gives not what you earn but what you need: grace upon grace.

Lent is His work, not yours. It's the crucified Christ breaking into your failures, declaring, "I am enough for you."

Scripture Focus

- **Old Testament:** Deuteronomy 26:1–11
- **Psalms:** Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16
- **Epistle:** Romans 10:8b–13
- **Gospel:** Luke 4:1–13

Key Idea

God doesn't ask us to "win" in the wilderness. He meets us there, forgiving, providing, protecting, and saving through His unshakable grace.

1. Rejoicing in God's Provision (Deuteronomy 26:1–11)

Picture this: You've just landed a new job, moved into a new apartment, or finally achieved something you've worked toward for years. Your instinct? Maybe to post it on Instagram with a humblebrag about #blessed. That's not too far off from what God tells the Israelites here—except instead of a post, they bring their first fruits and say, “Thanks, God.”

This isn't about paying God back or proving your worth. It's about remembering that everything—your health, your friends, your daily oat milk latte—is a gift. It's about recognizing that you're not self-made. You don't need to be.

Question:

- What's one “first fruit” in your life that you can thank God for this week?

2. Trusting in God's Protection (Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16)

Let's talk about control. We love it. We crave it. We pretend we have it. But do we? Psalm 91 tells a different story: life is chaotic, out of control, and we need protection.

The psalmist calls God a refuge, a fortress. This doesn't mean life will suddenly turn into a stress-free picnic. Instead, it means that when the chaos comes (and it will), God will hold you together.

Question:

- What does it mean for you to trust God as your “refuge” when life feels out of control?

3. Relying on God's Righteousness (Romans 10:8b–13)

Paul blows up every self-help narrative we love. Salvation isn't something you achieve, earn, or unlock after completing Level 10 of "Life Goals." It's a gift. God's grace through Jesus Christ does the heavy lifting, not your performance. Paul says righteousness isn't about effort; it's about faith in Jesus. That's wildly good news for those of us who are exhausted from trying to measure up. It's not about what you bring to the table—it's about what Jesus already did – for you.

Question:

- How does knowing that your salvation is already secured change how you view your daily struggles?

4. Overcoming Temptation Through the Word (Luke 4:1–13)

Imagine this: Jesus in the wilderness, hungry, tired, and facing down the ultimate tempter. Satan dangles everything in front of Him: power, control, recognition. Sound familiar? Maybe not with the same intensity, but those temptations hit close to home.

But Jesus doesn't fight back with superpowers or epic comebacks. He uses God's Word. Simple, steady truth. And the best part? He's not just showing us a strategy—He's winning the battle for us. Where we fall, He stands firm.

Question:

- How can God's Word be an anchor for you?

Takeaway

God doesn't ask us to 'crush' the wilderness. He asks us to let Him meet us there. In His provision, protection, and saving grace, we find everything we need—even when life feels like it's falling apart. Lent is the perfect time to stop striving and start resting in the God who's already done it all.

Closing Prayer

God, thank You for providing when we're in need, protecting us when we're afraid, and saving us when we're lost. Help us to trust You more, rest in Your grace, and walk in the freedom You've already won for us. Amen

WITH CHILDREN: "JESUS WALKS WITH ME"

This activity is a simple way for children to learn what it means to have Jesus close. Each step they take is a reminder of what God promised in their baptism: they never walk alone. Jesus always walks with them.

Supplies: Paper, markers, scissors, tape.

Preparation:

1. Cut out paper footprints.
 2. On each footprint, write or draw a word, a picture, or a symbol of how Jesus helps us:
 - A heart for His love.
 - Praying hands for His listening ear.
 - A cross for His promise never to leave us.
 - A sunbeam for His light in our dark days.
 3. Scatter the footprints on the floor in a winding path. Some close together, some far apart, just like our steps in life.
-

The Journey:

1. Start at the Beginning

Gather the children at the start of the path. Say:

“These are Jesus’ footprints. When you were baptized, Jesus promised to walk with you. He knows the way when we don’t. Let’s walk with Him!”

2. Take Each Step Slowly

As you step onto each footprint, pause and speak about the words or symbols written there.

Say:

- “This one says, ‘Jesus loves me.’ Do you know how much He loves you? It’s bigger than the biggest hug!”
- “This one says, ‘Jesus hears me.’ Even the smallest whispers of your heart, He hears them all.”
- “This one has a cross. What does the cross mean? It means Jesus gave everything so you can walk in His love forever.”

3. Stop and Wonder

Midway through the path, pause and sit together. Say:

“Sometimes we get tired or scared. Sometimes the path feels long or hard. But Jesus is with us always.

4. Finish the Journey with Joy

As you reach the end, celebrate! Clap, sing, or say:

“Thank You, Jesus, for walking with us every day. Thank You for Your love that never ends!”

Read This Poem To The Children As A Closing.

GOD'S PROMISE SPEAKS

Pastor Mark Anderson

When water splashes and songs are sung,
God's promise speaks to everyone.
A quiet voice, so kind and clear,
"I'm always with you, don't you fear."

When the rain fell hard and the sky was gray,
God spoke to Noah to light the way:
"You're safe with me; I'll hold you tight,
My love will shine through darkest night."

In baptism's water, God says to you,
"You're my dear child; I'm making you new!"
Through every drop, His love is shown,
"You're never alone—I've made you my own."

So when you're sad or feel afraid,
Remember the promise God has made.
He speaks in water, soft and true,
"I'll always love you, and care for you too."

Optional Closing Song:

As you end the walk, use the tune of "This Little Light of Mine", and sing:
"Every step I take, Jesus walks with me,
Every step I take, Jesus walks with me,
Every step I take, Jesus walks with me,
Jesus is the way!"

WEEK 2: MERCY FOR THE WAYWARD

SERMON FOCUS The readings for the Second Sunday in Lent draw us into the raw, unrelenting truth of faith—God does not ask politely but takes hold of us, wrenching us from sin and death to life, again and again. Baptism plunges us into this paradox, where the promise of life comes only through the dying of all we cling to. Marked with the sign of the cross, we are bound to Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection.

Faith cries out in the bitter stillness, trembling with fear, reaching into the unknown, and finds its rest in wild, uncontainable mercy. This God—untamed as the sea, fierce as the wind—chooses to have mercy not because of our worthiness but because He wills it. His salvation cannot be earned or controlled; it comes like a wild storm, breaking through our defenses and carrying us where only His grace can sustain us.

Lent strips away the masks and reveals the true face of our Savior—not a distant teacher or gentle guide, but the Crucified and Risen Lord. He does not wait at the end of the road for us to stumble toward Him. No, He comes to us, wings outstretched like a hen sheltering her brood, holding us close even as we resist Him.

His mercy is fierce, unyielding, and alive, piercing the darkest night and shattering the power of the grave. This is no easy road, but neither is it a road we walk alone. Christ walks before us, beside us, behind us—always pulling us from the death of our striving into the life of His grace. He does not ask for strength or success but for trust, holding us in the promise that even the longest shadows will break under the light of resurrection dawn.

TEXTS

- **Old Testament: Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18**
- **Psalms: Psalm 27**
- **Epistle: Philippians 3:17–4:1**
- **Gospel: Luke 13:31–35**

HYMN SUGGESTIONS

- **LBW:** "O God, My Faithful God" (LBW 504)
- **ELW:** "My Faith Looks Up to Thee" (ELW 759)
- **ReClaim:** "If You But Trust in God to Guide You" (ReClaim 63)
- **LHS:** "Take My Life, That I May Be" (LHS 406)

KEY GREEK WORD STUDIES: Luke 13:31–35

1. **ἹΕΡΟΥΣΑΛΗΜ (IEROUSALĒM) – "JERUSALEM"** (LUKE 13:34)
 - Ierusalēm represents more than a geographic location; it symbolizes the center of God's covenant with His people and their history of rejecting His prophets. In **Luke 13:31–35**, Jerusalem stands as a paradoxical image: the city chosen by God yet resistant to His messengers. The theology of the cross reveals God's relentless pursuit of Jerusalem despite its rebellion, culminating in Christ's lament and ultimate sacrifice for its redemption.
2. **ἈΠΟΣΤΕΛΛΩ (APOSTELLŌ) – "SEND"** (LUKE 13:34)
 - Apostellō emphasizes God's initiative in sending prophets and messengers, including His Son. The theology of the cross underscores that those sent by God are often rejected, culminating in Christ's own rejection and crucifixion. Yet, it is through this rejection that God accomplishes His redemptive purposes, revealing His mercy and faithfulness to a wayward people.
3. **ὄρνις (ORNIS) – "HEN"** (LUKE 13:34)
 - Ornis, a rare metaphor, vividly portrays Christ's tender and protective love for Jerusalem. Like a hen gathering her chicks, Jesus longs to shield His people under His care. The theology of the cross deepens this image: Christ's wings of protection are outstretched on the cross, offering refuge to those who come to Him. This maternal imagery contrasts sharply with the hardness of those who refuse His embrace.
4. **Θέλω (THELŌ) – "WILL" OR "DESIRE"** (LUKE 13:34)
 - Thelō, used for both Jesus' desire to gather His people and Jerusalem's refusal to accept Him, highlights the tension between divine will and human resistance. The theology of the cross illuminates this paradox: God's will is ultimately accomplished not by force but through the self-giving love of the crucified Christ, who overcomes human rebellion with mercy and grace.
5. **ἐγκαταλείπω (EGKATALEIPŌ) – "ABANDON" OR "LEAVE BEHIND"** (LUKE 13:35)
 - Egkatalēipō, used in reference to the desolation of Jerusalem, points to the consequence of rejecting God's messengers. Yet, the theology of the cross reminds us that God's abandonment is never final; even in judgment, His mercy is at work. The cross, where Christ Himself is forsaken, becomes the means by which God reconciles and restores the abandoned to Himself.

6. **Εὐλογημένος (EULOGĒMENOS) – "BLESSED"** (LUKE 13:35)

- Eulogēmenos is the cry of welcome reserved for the Messiah: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” This word points to the paradox of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem. The theology of the cross reveals that Jesus’ messianic blessing is fulfilled not in worldly triumph but in the humiliation of the cross, where true glory and kingship are displayed. When this cry is heard again at Christ’s return, it will confirm the victory accomplished through His suffering.

COMMENTARY

Old Testament: Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18

Abram’s fears and doubts are laid bare before God. “Fear not,” the Lord says, “I am your shield.” The promise hangs in the night like those countless stars—vast, impossible to fathom, seemingly out of reach, yet spoken by the One who cannot lie. Abram believes not because he is strong but because the Word is.

Then comes the fire, the smoke, the terrifying darkness. God walks the path of the covenant alone, sealing a promise and opening a way that Abram cannot secure but can only trust. Lent places us here, too, in the dark, where God acts for the helpless. Salvation is His doing, His gift, His promise to keep.

Psalms: Psalm 27

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?” the psalmist cries. Bold words, but they carry the weight of desperation. As the psalm unfolds, we hear the ache of a heart of faith longing for God’s face, pleading, Do not hide from me!

This is faith’s paradox: confidence and yearning, trust and trembling. Lent walks us into this tension, where our cries meet the Cross. Jesus, who knows forsakenness, also knows trust. His faithfulness holds us even when our fists and voices shake. Faith is not the absence of fear; it is the power of the promise in the storm.

Epistle: Philippians 3:17—4:1

Paul’s call to follow is no call to self-reliance or the vain pursuit of glory. It is a summons to the foot of the Cross, where all that the world esteems, pride, power, and achievement is laid low, and where the shame of the condemned is mysteriously, wondrously transformed into the salvation of the redeemed. He warns of those whose hearts are tethered to the transient, whose gods are their appetites and desires, consuming as life the dust of this present age. But we are called to something higher—a citizenship in heaven.

Yes, we are citizens of heaven, but not in a way that escapes this world or transcends it by our own efforts. Our heavenly citizenship is a gift secured by Christ’s descent into the very muck of human

existence—His cross, His death, His resurrection. It is a citizenship lived here and now, in the mess and the mundane, as God brings His kingdom into our midst.

We must be cautious, then, not to turn this "higher calling" into yet another work of self-improvement or an escape from the fleshly reality of our lives.

Lent is no season of personal triumph. It is a season of unveiling, where the futility of our striving is exposed, and the shadow of the Cross reveals the staggering truth: it is not what we offer to God that saves, but what He has already given to us. Here, ambition is stilled, and hope is rekindled—not in ourselves, but in Him.

We stand beneath the Cross, waiting. And in that waiting, we learn to see. We see the Savior, not demanding but giving, bearing resurrection life in His hands. It is no work of ours that raises the dead or mends the broken; it is His gift, freely given, received by empty hands. In this is our glory, that we are found not clothed in our striving but in His mercy.

Gospel: Luke 13:31–35 or Luke 9:28–36

Luke 13:31–35

Jesus stands, unshaken, as Herod's threats loom. His path is set. The goal? Jerusalem, the city that kills prophets. Yet his lament breaks through: How often I would have gathered you like a hen gathers her chicks. He knows their rejection, yet his mercy persists.

Lent brings us to this paradox. God's love, vulnerable and tender, walks straight into hostility. The Cross is no accident; it is the mission, where mercy meets rejection and triumphs through it.

Luke 9:28–36

On the mountain, light bursts from Jesus. Glory, dazzling and mysterious, reveals what has been hidden. The disciples fumble for words, but a voice cuts through: This is my Son; listen to Him. This glimpse of glory is no escape from the cross. It points to it, preparing the disciples—and us—for the road ahead. The brightness fades, but the Word remains. Lent reminds us that the path to redemption leads through suffering, where Christ's glory shines most clearly, and his love claims us forever.

SERMON

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Childless, vulnerable, and unsure of his future, Abram stood under the stars, empty-handed, his heart full of questions. Then God spoke: “Fear not, Abram. I am your shield. I am your reward.” God didn’t ask for a plan or even a word of thanks. God gave the stars to Abram—uncountable, dazzling, burning promises. Abram’s heart believed, and God counted it as righteousness.

But belief was not Abram’s work. The covenant was not a deal sealed with a handshake. It was God walking alone through the dark, through the smoke, through the fire. Abram watched. God promised. God held the promise in His hands, and Abram could only trust. This is how it always is with God: He walks the path alone because He knows we cannot.

Lent takes us into this kind of darkness, this kind of promise. It is not a season of spiritual ladders or self-made holiness. It is the season when we see that God does the walking, and we are carried.

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?” sings the psalmist. But later, the cry changes: “Hide not your face from me!” That’s the sound of a heart stretched between fear and trust, caught in the tension of trusting and doubting. It’s the sound of a child crying out in the night, and it’s the sound of Jesus on the cross.

“My God, why have you forsaken me?” He cried. And yet, even there, He trusted His Father. Faith isn’t about chasing away fear; it’s about holding tight to the One who holds us even when we lose our grip. In the tension of Lent, we don’t climb toward God. We fall into His promises.

Paul tells us that our citizenship is in heaven. But this isn’t about escaping the earth or pretending we’re above it all. Heaven has already come down to us, in Christ, in your baptism. His cross planted heaven in the middle of the world’s chaos. His resurrection promises to transform our lowly bodies, our fearful hearts, into something glorious. Lent is not a race to the top but a waiting place—a wilderness where God meets us with the manna of His mercy.

And then there is Jesus, weeping over Jerusalem. “How often I would have gathered you as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.” A hen doesn’t fight like a lion or strike like an eagle. She opens her wings and waits, vulnerable, for the storm. That’s what Jesus does. He opens His arms, stretched wide on the cross, to gather the world. Even when we turn away. Even when we resist Him. Even when we nail Him to the wood. He doesn’t stop. His love doesn’t stop.

The theology of the cross shows us a Savior who loses to win, who dies to give life, who carries the weight of the world’s bondage to sin and death so that we might be free. This is a Savior who walks into the darkness for us, so that the light of Easter may dawn for us.

And so, we walk not with confidence in ourselves but with eyes fixed on Him. Like Abram and Sarah, we stand under the stars and trust the promise. Like the psalmist, we cry out in fear even as we rest in God's salvation. Like Paul, we look to the Savior who will come again to make all things new. We look to the Cross, knowing it is the place where mercy meets the world's deepest need.

Take heart, dear friends. The journey does not end in shadow. It ends in the endless morning of Easter, where the promise holds for you, and our Savior reigns. Amen.

BIBLE STUDIES WITH ADULTS

INTRODUCTION This study explores God's faithfulness and protection as He calls us to trust in His promises in the face of trials and temptations. The readings emphasize the faithfulness of God, our calling to walk in faith, and the assurance of His presence. Luther's Catechisms provide insights into our reliance on God's Word and Sacraments, strengthening us to live as His redeemed children.

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

- **Old Testament Reading:** Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18
- **Psalm:** Psalm 27
- **Epistle:** Philippians 3:17—4:1
- **Gospel:** Luke 13:31–35

KEY THEME God's faithfulness calls us to trust in His promises, relying on His Word and grace to sustain us as His children.

CATECHISM CONNECTIONS

1. Trusting God's Promises (Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18)

God's promise to Abram assures him of a promised inheritance despite his doubts and fears. Luther's explanation of the Second Article of the Creed reminds us of God's faithfulness: "Jesus Christ... has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person... not with gold or silver but with His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death." Just as Abram trusted God to fulfill His promises, we are called to trust in the redemptive work of Christ, knowing that His promises are certain and eternal.

2. Seeking God's Presence (Psalm 27)

The psalmist expresses confidence in God as his light, salvation, and stronghold, even amidst adversity. This aligns with Luther's teaching on the First Commandment: "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." God's presence provides courage in fear and hope in despair. Baptism assures us that we belong to God and are never abandoned in life's trials.

3. Living as Citizens of Heaven (Philippians 3:17—4:1)

Paul urges believers to follow his example, keeping their eyes on their heavenly citizenship. Luther's teaching on the Lord's Prayer reminds us to pray for God's kingdom:

"The kingdom of God comes indeed without our prayer... but we ask that it may come to us also." Through Christ's resurrection, we are given the hope of transformation and the strength to stand firm in faith and hope, awaiting His glorious return.

4. Jesus' Compassion and Lament (Luke 13:31–35)

Jesus laments over Jerusalem, longing to gather His people as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. This imagery reflects God's promise to protect and care for us, a promise sealed in baptism. Luther's explanation of the Lord's Prayer calls us to trust in God's deliverance:

"God indeed tempts no one, but we pray... that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive or mislead us."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does God's covenant with Abram in Genesis 15 encourage you to trust in His promises, even when they seem delayed?
2. What images or phrases in Psalm 27 give you hope and courage during challenging times?
3. How does Paul's reminder of our citizenship in heaven shape the way we live our daily lives?
4. In what ways does Jesus' lament over Jerusalem in Luke 13 show His love and compassion for us?
5. How does your baptism assure you of God's faithfulness and presence when facing life's trials?
6. Reflect on a time when God's Word or promises gave you peace or guidance during a difficult moment.

CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious God, You have made us Your children through baptism and called us to trust in Your promises. Thank You for being our light and salvation, guiding us through life's challenges. Strengthen us by Your Spirit to stand firm in faith, live as citizens of heaven, and share Your life-giving Word with others. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

FOOTNOTES

1. Luther's Small Catechism, Second Article of the Creed,
2. Luther's Small Catechism, Explanation of the First Commandment
3. Luther's Small Catechism, Second Petition of the Lord's Prayer
4. Luther's Small Catechism, Sixth Petition of the Lord's Prayer

WITH TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS

UNFILTERED FAITH: BIBLE STUDIES FOR MESSY PEOPLE

Feeling overwhelmed or imperfect? These bible studies are for you. Faith isn't about having it all together—it's about showing up as you are and encountering God's grace. Come explore God's Word honestly, wrestle with big questions, and discover grace that meets you right where you are.

Introduction

Life can feel like a race where everyone else seems ahead, leaving us questioning if we'll ever catch up. In Philippians 3:17—4:1, Paul reminds us that our identity and worth aren't defined by what we achieve but by the grace of God. We're called to focus on the ultimate goal, our final destination. This study explores what it means to live as citizens of heaven in a world that pulls us in a thousand different directions.

Scripture Focus

Philippians 3:17—4:1

Key Idea

Pressing on is not an uphill climb. It means keeping our eyes on Christ alone and living in the freedom of our heavenly citizenship.

Study Outline

1. Follow the Right Example (Philippians 3:17)

Reflection:

Paul encourages us to imitate his example and keep our eyes on others who live faithfully. This isn't about perfection—it's about learning from those who, in faith, know they are held in Jesus' grip – no matter what.

Discussion Questions:

- Who in your life is an example of faith that inspires you?
- Who are your role models, and what are they leading you toward?
- How can you be intentional about following Jesus-centered examples?

- What might change in your life if you focused less on comparison and more on faithful role models?

2. Recognize the Distractions (Philippians 3:18–19)

Reflection:

Paul warns of those who live as “enemies of the cross,” focused only on earthly things. In today’s world, it’s easy to get distracted by chasing likes, success, or comfort. But these things can’t satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts. True fulfillment comes when we set our minds on Christ and His promises.

Discussion Questions:

- What “earthly things” tend to distract you from focusing on God?
- How do you feel when you try to find your worth in achievements, appearances, or social approval?
- How can your baptism help you refocus on Christ?

3. Live as Citizens of Heaven (Philippians 3:20–21)

Reflection:

Paul shifts our focus to our true home: heaven. As citizens of heaven, we don’t have to live enslaved to the pressures and values of the world. Instead, we can trust in Jesus, who has the power to transform our lives now and forever.

Discussion Questions:

- What does it mean to you that your “citizenship is in heaven”?
- How does knowing your true identity as a child of God change the way you live?
- What hope do you find in Paul’s promise that Christ will one day transform our bodies to be like His?

4. Stand Firm in the Lord (Philippians 4:1)

Reflection:

Paul’s final encouragement is simple but powerful: stand firm. This doesn’t mean standing still—it means being rooted in Christ even when life gets shaky. Standing firm is about relying on God’s strength, not our own, and remembering that grace is what keeps us steady.

WITH CHILDREN

Objective: To teach children about God's faithfulness, focusing on His promise to Abram, the gift of faith, and Jesus' love, using interactive storytelling, discussion, and a craft activity.

INTRODUCTION

1. Gather & Set the Tone:

- Gather the children in a cozy circle and welcome them warmly.
- Say: “Today we’re going to learn about a big promise God made a long time ago. It’s a promise that started with Abram, was fulfilled in Jesus, and is still for us today! Let’s see how God always keeps His promises!”

2. Opening Question:

- “What’s a promise? Can you think of a time someone made a promise to you?”
- (Encourage a few quick answers.)

PART 1: ABRAM’S PROMISE (GENESIS 15:1–12, 17–18)

1. Tell the Story:

- Use simple, engaging language and gestures:
“A long time ago, God told Abram to look up at the stars. ‘Your family will be as many as the stars in the sky,’ He promised. But Abram and Sarah didn’t even have one child! Still, Abram trusted God. And guess what? God kept His promise!”

2. Discuss:

- “How do you think Abram felt when God made that promise?”
- “Have you ever trusted someone even when you didn’t know what would happen?”

3. Key Takeaway:

- “Just like God kept His promise to Abram, He keeps His promises to us too. We can always trust Him!”

PART 2: WHAT IS FAITH? (PHILIPPIANS 3:17—4:1)

1. Explain Faith:

- Use relatable examples:
“Faith is like when you trust someone you love, even if you don’t see them right now. It’s a gift from God. Faith comes through hearing God’s promises, just like when you were baptized. God said, ‘You are mine!’ That’s a promise filled with love and power just for you!”

2. Discuss:

- “How does it feel to get a gift?”

- “Why is God’s promise the best gift ever?”

3. Key Takeaway:

- “Faith isn’t something we have to earn or make—it’s a gift from God! And He keeps His promises to us every day.”

PART 3: JESUS’ LOVE FOR US (LUKE 13:31–35)

1. Tell the Story:

- Use expressive storytelling:
“Jesus loved His people so much, but not everyone listened. He said, ‘I want to gather you like a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings.’ Even when people didn’t understand or listen, Jesus never stopped loving them. And He loves us the same way!”

2. Discuss:

- “Why do you think Jesus wanted to gather His people like a hen gathers her chicks?”
- “What does it mean to know Jesus loves and protects us?”

3. Key Takeaway:

- “Jesus’ love never ends. No matter what, He is always ready to gather and protect us like a mother hen.”

ACTIVITY: GOD’S PROMISE STAR CRAFT

1. Purpose:

- To create a tangible reminder of God’s promise and faithfulness.

2. Materials:

- Paper, markers, scissors, glue, star-shaped cutouts, stickers, glitter.

3. Instructions:

- “Take a star and write, ‘God keeps His promises!’ on it.”
- Decorate the star with colors, drawings, or stickers.
- “When you take this home, hang it somewhere to remind you that God always keeps His promises.”

CLOSING POEM & PRAYER

GATHERED LIKE CHICKS

Pastor Mark Anderson

With a tender voice, so soft, so kind,
The Savior called, "Come children, be mine!"
Yet many hearts turned cold, unhearing,
Still, His love drew close, unfearing.

"I long to gather you," Jesus sighed,
"Like a mother hen, her wings stretched wide.
Come, find rest, no need to roam,
Within my heart, you'll find your home."

Rejected by many, His love endured,
A steadfast promise, sure and pure.
And still, He whispers, soft and true,
"My arms are open wide for you."

Beneath His wings, our safety lies,
Away from storms and darkened skies.
Chicks cradled in God's love divine,
God says, "Dear child, you are forever mine."

- Emphasize the tender imagery of Jesus' love and protection.

Closing Prayer:

Dear God, thank You for keeping Your promises, just like You did with Abram and Sarah. Thank You for the gift of faith and for loving and protecting us like a mother hen. Help us trust You every day. Amen.

WEEK 3: THE GOD WHO PROVIDES, RENEWS, AND WAITS

SERMON FOCUS The readings for the Third Sunday in Lent draw us toward a God whose ways stretch far beyond our grasp, whose love clings to us, and whose mercy holds us fast under the crushing weight of our sin. Isaiah cries out to the parched and weary, “Come, drink deeply,” while Jesus pleads, “Repent, turn back, and live.” These voices converge at the Cross, where sin is forgiven, hearts are reborn, and broken lives are restored.

Lent is not a season to tidy ourselves up or polish the image of who we think we should be. Who are we, anyway? It is a season of surrender—a time to bring our barrenness, our thirst, and our failures to the One who repents us, and speaks life into dust. Isaiah calls, and Jesus echoes: *Come, be turned, rest*. Here, we are invited to cease our striving and rest not in what we can achieve but in the power of the One who prays for us still. His mercy is as vast as the heavens and as near as His Word and Spirit. It is in this grace that we are made whole.

The theology of the cross resonates here. God’s patience is no passive waiting; it is the fierce, tender work of Christ, coaxing life from dead wood and dry branches. The barren tree remains not because it deserves to, but because the gardener kneels beside it, digging, pruning, and pouring His care into its roots. In this image, see the shadow of the Cross stretched wide. Christ Himself intercedes, making the fruitless fruitful, drawing life from death by His grace. This is the God we meet in Lent—the God who will not give up, whose mercy never fails, and whose love brings life out of even the driest, most barren soil.

TEXTS

- **First Reading: Isaiah 55:1–9**
- **Psalm: Psalm 63:1–8**
- **Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 10:1–13**
- **Gospel: Luke 13:1–9**

HYMN SUGGESTIONS

- **LBW: "Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me" (LBW 327)**
- **ELW: "Guide Me Ever, Great Redeemer" (ELW 618)**
- **ReClaim: "Lord Jesus, Think on Me" (ReClaim 87)**
- **LHS: "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say" (LHS 304)**

KEY GREEK WORD STUDIES: Luke 13:1–9

1. **ἁΜΑΡΤΩΛΟΣ (HAMARTŌLOS) – "SINNER"** (LUKE 13:2)
 - *Hamartōlos* refers to those who fall short of God's righteousness, often perceived by society as morally or spiritually inferior. In **Luke 13:1–9**, Jesus challenges the assumption that suffering is a direct result of sin. The theology of the cross reveals that all are sinners in need of repentance and that Christ bears the weight of sin for all. This term underscores the universal need for grace, dismantling the human tendency to judge others' worthiness.
2. **ΜΕΤΑΝΟΕΩ (METANOEŌ) – "REPENT"** (LUKE 13:3, 5)
 - *Metanoēō* signifies a turning away from sin and toward God. Jesus' call to repentance in this passage is urgent and universal, extending beyond the visible tragedies of the day. The theology of the cross frames repentance not as a work to earn favor but as the work of God's grace, initiated by the Spirit and rooted in the recognition of Christ's atoning sacrifice.
3. **ΚΑΡΙΤΟΣ (KARPOS) – "FRUIT"** (LUKE 13:6–9)
 - *Karpos* represents the visible fruit of faith, linked to a life transformed by God's grace. In the parable of the fig tree, the absence of fruit symbolizes spiritual stagnation. The theology of the cross highlights that fruitfulness is not self-produced but is a result of the abiding word of Christ, who nourishes His people through Word and Sacrament.
4. **ἄΝΟΧΗ (ANOCĒ) – "PATIENCE" OR "FORBEARANCE"** (LUKE 13:8)
 - *Anochē*, seen in the landowner's willingness to delay judgment on the fig tree, reflects God's long-suffering patience with His people. The theology of the cross shows this patience fully in Christ, who delays ultimate judgment to bestow forgiveness and reconciliation. God's *anochē* underscores His mercy even in the face of persistent unfaithfulness.
5. **ἐΚΚΟΠΤΩ (EKKOPTŌ) – "CUT DOWN"** (LUKE 13:7, 9)
 - *Ekkoptō*, used in the threat of the unfruitful tree being cut down, carries the weight of judgment for spiritual barrenness. The theology of the cross reframes this as both a warning and a promise: Christ Himself is "cut down" on the cross, bearing the judgment for the unfruitful, so that through His sacrifice, believers may bear fruit in Him.
6. **ΧΡΟΝΟΣ (CHRONOS) – "TIME"** (LUKE 13:8)
 - In this context, *chronos* refers to the measured, sequential passage of time—the ticking clock that marks the days and years granted for repentance and fruitfulness. It is finite, relentless, and ever-moving. Yet, the theology of the cross shifts our focus from *chronos* to *kairos*—God's appointed time, the decisive moment when grace breaks into history. The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ are the ultimate *kairos*, the moment in which time itself is redeemed. While *chronos* reminds us of the urgency of responding before opportunities slip away, *kairos* declares that in Christ, the fullness of time has come in Christ Jesus.

COMMENTARY

Old Testament: Isaiah 55:1–9

“Come, everyone who thirsts,” Isaiah calls, and the invitation spills over like water from an overflowing jug. There are no tickets to buy, no conditions to meet. The table is set for the hungry, the weary, the ones who have nothing to bring but their emptiness. God’s grace doesn’t wait for us to measure up; it meets us in our need.

While we calculate and ration, God lavishes. His ways tower above ours like the heavens over the earth. He doesn’t barter or bargain; He gives freely, abundantly, extravagantly. The theology of the cross turns this generosity upside-down—God’s mercy comes not in power but through the suffering of the Crucified One.

Lent invites us to drop our striving, our endless need to earn. The table is ready. The invitation is for you: “Come, eat and drink without price.” God has already paid in full, giving everything we need through His Son. Grace flows freely to those who come with nothing but thirst.

Psalm: Psalm 63:1–8

The psalmist’s words rise like a song from a desert: “My soul thirsts for You; my flesh faints for You.” God’s steadfast love is better than life itself, an oasis of mercy in a weary world.

Lent is the season of thirst. It strips away distractions, leaving us face-to-face with our need. But in Christ, this thirst meets its answer. He is the living water that quenches the deepest longing, even in the wilderness of sin and sorrow. Faith trusts the hand that holds us, the God who sustains us with steadfast love.

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 10:1–13

Paul leads us through Israel’s wilderness story, a mirror for our own struggles. They saw God’s wonders, yet they stumbled—just like we do. The golden calf, the grumbling, the testing—it’s all too familiar. But Paul doesn’t leave us in our failure. He reminds us of this unshakable truth: “God is faithful.”

Lent reveals our weakness, but it also points to Christ’s strength. God doesn’t ask us to prove our worth; He provides the way of escape. The theology of the cross shows us that God meets us in our failures and carries us through temptation—not by our strength, but through Jesus’ victory. We stand, not on our footing, but on His faithfulness.

Gospel: Luke 13:1–9

Two tragedies, two warnings, and one urgent call: “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” Jesus doesn’t explain the “why” of suffering but shifts the focus to repentance, to being turned back to God.

Then comes the parable of the fig tree. The gardener pleads: *One more year. Let me dig around it, tend it,*

give it what it needs. The tree stands not because of its fruitfulness but because of the gardener's mercy. Lent reminds us that we are the barren tree, spared by grace. God is patient, and His call is clear: be turned to Him. Repentance isn't a demand but the power of the One who brings life where there is none. The Cross stands as both condemnation and promise: God's law is relentless, and His grace is sufficient.

SERMON

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters!” God's voice echoes through the centuries, calling to people who are parched with longing, fear, and their own striving. “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” The prophet Isaiah invites us to a feast, but it's not a feast we earn or deserve. It is a gift, free to take. God provides a table full of life and grace, not because we are worthy but because He is merciful.

This is Lent's whisper – and roar: Stop striving. Stop spending yourself on what cannot save. Hear the Word of the God who calls you to His table to fill you with His promise.

“O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you,” cries the psalmist. “My soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you.” Have you been there? Have you felt the ache in your soul when life strips you bare? The psalmist knows what it means to long for God—not as an idea or a distant force, but as the very air he breathes. He knows the dryness of the wilderness but also the satisfaction of drinking deeply from God's presence: “My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips.”

Lent reminds us that our wildernesses are often self-made. Like the people of Israel in the desert, we grumble, we turn away, and we test the patience of the God who delivers us. Paul's letter to the Corinthians warns us: Don't think you are standing firm. The moment you trust in your own strength is the moment you fall. And yet—even here—grace breaks through.

“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man,” Paul says. “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation, he will also provide the way of escape.” Here is a promise we can rest in. God does not abandon His people to their struggles. He doesn't leave us to drown in our sins or wither in our temptations. Instead, He walks with us through the wilderness, guiding us to the living water.

The Gospel is a story of urgency, of repentance, of a gardener who refuses to give up on a stubborn fig tree. The crowd asks Jesus about tragedy—about Galileans whose blood was mingled with their sacrifices, about those crushed by the tower in Siloam. Were these people worse sinners? Did they

deserve what they got? Jesus' answer turns the question on its head: "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

It's not a comfortable answer. But Lent is not a comfortable season. Jesus doesn't come to soothe us with half-truths or pat us on the back for our efforts. He comes to speak the truth, expose the rotting roots of our lives, and repent us into new life, real life.

There is mercy in this story. The gardener doesn't cut the tree down. He pleads for one more year. He promises to dig around it, to feed it, to give it every chance to bear fruit. This is our God—a God who doesn't give up on us, who doesn't walk away from barren trees or dry souls. Instead, He pours out His mercy, waters us with His Word, and waits patiently for the fruit He will produce.

So here we are, thirsty souls in a dry land, standing before a God who calls us to His table. The invitation is clear: Come, drink deeply, and live. Come, be repented of your striving, your grumbling, your self-made paths. Come, receive the mercy of the Gardener who cares for you, refuses to give up on you. And as you come, remember this: The God who calls you to the waters is the same God who walked through the wilderness for you, went to the Cross for you, and met you in the waters of your baptism.

In baptism, God's mercy poured over you like a flood, washing away the striving, the grumbling, the sin, and the shame. In baptism, you were not just invited to the feast; you are made part of God's family, His beloved, rooted in His promise. The Gardener's hands have already dug around you, watered you, and planted you in the soil of His grace.

Come to the waters, not just once but always, returning to the promise sealed in those waters. Not because of what you've done, but because of what Christ has done, is doing, and will do for you.

Take heart, beloved ones. The Gardener will never give up on you. His Word sustains you. His table nourishes you. His baptismal promise holds you. And His mercy will never fail. Amen.

BIBLE STUDIES

WITH ADULTS

Introduction God spreads the table, pours the wine, and hands over the bread, not because you've earned a spot but because He delights in giving. The psalmist knows what we so often forget: nothing else will satisfy. Only God quenches the thirst that drives us to the world's empty wells. Paul cuts to the heart of it: your self-reliance won't save you. In trials, God's faithfulness holds you steady, not your grit. And then there's Jesus, telling the story of the fig tree. He doesn't snap it off at the roots; He waits. For His mercy, like His love, is steadfast and patient.

These texts don't tell you to try harder or do better—they graciously and firmly uncover the truth we all wrestle with: we can't make it on our own. And it's in that moment of honesty, in the rawness of our need, that God shows up. He comes with life to lift you with hope. His grace is the bedrock beneath your feet.

Scripture Focus

Old Testament: Isaiah 55:1–9,

Psalms 63:1–8,

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 10:1–13,

Gospel: Luke 13:1–9

KEY THEME God's call repents us that we may know hope in His grace rather than our efforts. Through the theology of the cross, we see how God meets us in our need, bringing life and hope where we expect judgment or despair, even as we wrestle with the weight of our self-judgment.

God's Invitation to Abundance (Isaiah 55:1–9)

God's call to "come, buy, and eat" without cost highlights the abundance of His grace. In a "by your own bootstraps" world obsessed with earning and striving, this gift reminds us that salvation and true satisfaction come from God's provision, not our efforts. The theology of the cross reveals that God meets us in our hunger and need, bestowing life through His mercy.

God's Faithfulness in Temptation (1 Corinthians 10:1–13)

Israel's story is our story, too—a warning against chasing the mirage of self-reliance. But Paul's words don't leave us in despair. No, they tell of a faithful God who meets us in our trials, not with escape routes of our own making, but with the crucified Christ. At the cross, power and weakness trade places, and God does what we cannot. In our faltering, we are caught by a hope that isn't ours

to muster, but a gift poured out, sustaining us in the shadow of the cross. Here, weakness isn't the end—it's where God begins.

God's Patience and Mercy (Luke 13:1–9)

Jesus' parable of the fig tree, like all the parables, turns everything on its head. God has every right to swing the axe. But He doesn't. Instead, He digs into the hard soil of our lives, hauling the manure of His Word and Spirit to do what we can't—repent us. The theology of the cross blows apart any notion of self-salvation. God doesn't wait for us to get our act together. He steps in and brings life where there was none, a renewal born out of death itself. This isn't patience for patience's sake. This is the holy, blessed work of fierce, unrelenting grace.

CATECHISM CONNECTIONS

God's Grace That Satisfies (Isaiah 55:1–9)

In Isaiah's invitation to "come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (v. 1), we see a picture of God's grace given freely and abundantly. This aligns with Luther's teaching in the Small Catechism that all blessings, including salvation, come from God's goodness:

"God provides me with food and clothing, home and family, daily work, and all I need from day to day. Everything that I need comes to me because of God's goodness and mercy, not because I have earned it or deserved it." 1

God's Word nourishes and sustains us, echoing Luther's explanation:

"It is not the water that does these things, but the Word of God with the water and our trust in this Word." 2

Longing for God's Presence (Psalm 63:1–8)

The psalmist's thirst for God, expressed as a deep longing for His presence, reminds us of our dependence on Him. Luther reflects this longing in the Small Catechism, where he urges us to pray for "daily bread," recognizing that God alone satisfies every need:

"Daily bread includes everything needed for this life, such as food and clothing, home and property, work and income, a devoted family, an orderly community, good government, favorable weather, peace and health, a good name, and true friends and neighbors." 3

Warnings and Grace in the Wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:1–13)

Paul's reminder to the Corinthians to learn from Israel's failures underscores the need for daily repentance and trust in God's grace. Luther describes this continual renewal in the Large Catechism:

"It indicates that the Old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever." 4

God's faithfulness assures us that He provides a way through every trial, not by our strength but through His mercy.

God's Patience and Redemption (Luke 13:1–9)

In the parable of the fig tree, Jesus reveals God's patient and persistent work to bring life and fruitfulness even in barren places. Luther explains that baptism continually calls us back to God, keeping His promise alive in us:

“Even if a person were baptized a hundred times, it would still only be one baptism, and the effect and significance of baptism would remain.”⁵

Discussion Questions

1. How does God's invitation in Isaiah 55 reveal His desire to bless us freely?
2. In what ways does the psalmist's longing for God reflect your own spiritual hunger?
3. How does God's presence sustain you in times of spiritual dryness or difficulty?
4. What do Israel's failures in Scripture teach us about the depth of sin and our reliance on God's mercy?
5. How does Paul's reminder of God's faithfulness help you trust His promises instead of your own strength?
6. What does the parable of the fig tree teach us about God's patience and His ongoing work to bring life and renewal?
7. How does baptism, as God's ongoing work, call us daily to repentance and new life in Christ?

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, You call us to come to You and receive Your gifts of grace freely. Turn our hearts to repentance, strengthen our trust in Your promises, and renew us each day through Your Word and Spirit. Satisfy us with Your presence and make us fruitful in faith. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Footnotes

¹ Small Catechism, Explanation of the First Article of the Creed.

² Small Catechism, Explanation of Baptism, Question: "How can water do such great things?"

³ Small Catechism, Explanation of the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer.

⁴ Small Catechism, Explanation of Baptism, Question: "What does such baptizing with water signify?"

⁵ Large Catechism, Part 4: Baptism

WITH TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS

UNFILTERED FAITH: BIBLE STUDIES FOR MESSY PEOPLE

Feeling overwhelmed or imperfect? These Bible studies are for you. Faith isn't about having it all together—it's about showing up as you are and encountering God's grace. Come explore God's Word honestly, wrestle with big questions, and discover grace that meets you right where you are.

Scripture Focus

Luke 13:1–9

Key Idea

God doesn't cancel the fig tree—He cultivates it.

Introduction

Life can feel like a series of judgment calls—on yourself, from others, and sometimes even God. Messed up? You're done. Made a mistake? You're out. But Jesus flips the script. In Luke 13, He shows us that God isn't about snapping His fingers and canceling us when we fall short. Instead, He digs into our messy lives, waters the dry places, and gives us room to grow in faith.

1. Breaking the Blame Game

- **Verses 1–5:** Jesus calls out a toxic mindset: if bad things happen to you, you must have done something to deserve it. Sound familiar?
- In a world obsessed with pointing fingers, Jesus challenges us to look inward instead of blaming outward.
- Repentance isn't about guilt-tripping yourself; it's about the God who's ready to meet you in your mess, who repents us into trust.

Question:

What's one way you've seen the blame game play out in your life—either in how you see yourself or others?

2. Second Chances... in the Dirt

- **Verses 6–9:** Picture a fig tree taking up space but not producing anything. The logical solution? Cut it down. But the gardener says, "Wait, let me work on it." That's grace.
- God's not quick to cut us off when we feel fruitless, worthless. Instead, He digs deeper, waters our roots, and gives us time to grow.
- This is the opposite of a world that cancels people when they don't measure up.

Question:

Where in your life do you feel like a “fig tree in need of fertilizer”? Discuss how God’s Word might God be cultivating growth in you, even if it’s slow?

3. Grace Isn’t Transactional

- The gardener’s patience shows us a radical truth: God doesn’t measure our worth by what we produce.
- We’re loved because of who He is, not what we bring to the table. That’s freeing, but it’s also humbling.

Question:

How does it feel to know that God’s love for you isn’t based on your performance?

4. Grace in Our Messy Vocations

- The fig tree doesn’t need to stress about producing fruit—it stays planted and the gardener does the work. The same is true for us in our daily lives.
- Whether it’s school, work, family drama, or just trying to get through the day, God uses our messy, ordinary vocations to bring about good fruit. The best part? We don’t always need to see it. God’s working behind the scenes, through our struggles, failures, and even our mundane tasks.
- Your impact isn’t measured by likes or instant results—God’s fruit often grows quietly and unexpectedly.

Question:

How can you see your daily life, even in its messiness, as a place where God is working?

Closing Thought

God isn’t standing over you with a stopwatch, waiting to call you a failure. He’s digging into the dirt of your life, pulling out the weeds, and helping you grow. Grace doesn’t cancel you—it cultivates you. God brings His gifts of faith, hope, and love, to you...and through you.

Prayer

God, thank You for meeting us in the dirt of our lives. When we fall short, You don’t give up on us. Help us to trust Your grace, turn us toward You, and work in our lives. Give us patience as You cultivate faith in us. Amen.

WITH CHILDREN

GOD'S PROMISES ARE FOR YOU

Opening

Gather the children in a circle and say:

“Did you know God is always calling to us? Like the sound of the wind, like a bird’s song in the morning, God says, ‘Come to Me.’ Today, we’ll hear stories about how much God loves us and keeps His promises—always, forever, no matter what!”

Story Time: God’s Invitation to the Feast (Isaiah 55:1–9)

Tell the story as though painting a picture:

Imagine this: You’re so thirsty and you can’t wait for a drink of water. Suddenly, you find yourself in a beautiful garden. There’s a table right in front of you, but it’s not just any table. This table is made of wood, and it looks like it’s been through a lot—scratches, dents, and marks all over it. But on the table, there are big pitchers of fresh, cool water. There’s bread that’s already broken into pieces, and colorful fruit just waiting to be eaten.

Then you hear God’s voice:

“Come! It’s all for you. You don’t need to pay for it. You don’t need to bring anything. Just come and take what you need.”

This table isn’t a reward for being good. It’s about what God has done for us through Jesus. Jesus came to make sure we would always be welcome at His table. He didn’t ask us to pay anything because He already gave everything for us.

Ask:

1. Why do you think God doesn’t ask us to bring anything or pay to sit at His table?
2. What does this story tell us about how much God loves us through Jesus?
3. How do you feel knowing God invites you to His table, no matter what?

Let’s Wonder: Walking Through Hard Times (1 Corinthians 10:1–13)

Hold up a pebble or a small stone:

“Sometimes, life feels like walking on a rocky path. Our feet hurt. We get tired. But Paul reminds us

that God is like a friend who walks with us. He holds our hand, lifts us when we stumble and promises to help us keep going.”

Invite their thoughts:

- “Have you ever had a hard day but someone helped you through it?”

Jesus’ Love for All People (Luke 13:1–9)

Tell the story:

“Once, Jesus told a story about a fig tree. It wasn’t growing fruit. The gardener said, ‘Let’s give it some love—some water, some sunshine, and time. Let’s give it another chance.’ That’s what Jesus does for us. He waters. He waits. He shines His love. And He helps us grow.”

Ask:

- “Why do you think Jesus wants to take care of us, even when we don’t ‘grow fruit’ right away?”
- “What does it feel like to know Jesus will never give up on you?”

Activity: God's Promise Relay

Purpose: To show how we can pass God’s promises are passed on to others.

Materials: A ball or small object to pass.

Instructions:

1. Have the children form a line or circle.
2. Start by saying a promise from God (e.g., “God loves you”) and pass the ball to the next person.
3. Each child repeats the promise as they pass the ball along.
4. Keep passing until all children have heard and shared the promise.

Read This Poem

COME TO THE TABLE

Pastor Mark Anderson

Come to the table, the feast has begun,
Bread for the hungry, love for everyone.
Water flows freely, cool and clear,
Whispers of God saying, “*You’re welcome here.*”

Come to the water, splashing with grace,
Baptism's promise, God's warm embrace.
No need to bring treasures, no need to pay,
God's gift is forever, starting today!

When the road feels rocky, the path unclear,
God walks beside you, holding you near.
Like sunshine and rain on the fig tree's leaves,
His love never stops; it waits and it breathes.

So come to the table, come, take your place,
Know His forgiveness, drink in His grace.
God's promises hold us, steady and true,
Forever and always—for me and for you.

Closing Prayer

Dear God, thank You for Your endless love and promises, and for inviting us to Your table and making us Your own through baptism. In Jesus name, Amen.

WEEK 4: "THE FATHER'S LOVE RESTORES AND RECONCILES"

SERMON FOCUS The readings for this Fourth Sunday in Lent sing of a God who makes all things new. In Joshua, the shame of the past is rolled away like a heavy stone. In Psalm 32, forgiveness lifts the burden of sin, leaving joy in its place. In 2 Corinthians, the old creation crumbles like winter's grip, giving way to the green shoots of a new beginning. And in Luke, the Father's love stretches wide, gathering the wretched, wayward son from the far country and the bitter brother who lingers on the porch, arms crossed, and heart closed.

The elder son's grumbling voice whispers a danger that lurks close to home—a spirit of entitlement that dresses itself as faithfulness. Like him, we may stay near the house, ticking off the boxes of duty, yet grow bitter when grace spills over onto others. We act as if God's mercy is measured in slices, not realizing it thunders and rolls like a mighty river, without end.

Lent is not a time for earning a seat at the table. The table is already set, the feast already waiting. The Cross shuts the door on our broken, self-made stories, our pride and arrogance. And the empty tomb throws open the gates of the New Creation.

The Father's voice, the steady and sure Word of God, echoes through the waters of baptism and into the corners of our lives: *"You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."* Christ Jesus brings us home to the Father's heart, where grace overflows, joy abounds, and no one is left outside the celebration.

TEXTS

- **First Reading: Joshua 5:9–12**
- **Psalm: Psalm 32**
- **Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:16–21**
- **Gospel: Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32**

HYMN SUGGESTIONS: Fourth Sunday in Lent

- **LBW: "God Loved the World So That He Gave" (LBW 292)**
- **ELW: "Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound" (ELW 779)**
- **ReClaim: "Jesus, Priceless Treasure" (ReClaim 86)**
- **LHS: "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" (LHS 315)**

KEY GREEK WORD STUDIES: Luke 15:1–3, 11b–31.

1. ἁμαρτωλός (HAMARTŌLOS) – "SINNER" (LUKE 15:2, 7, 10)
 - *Hamartolos* is used to describe those who are morally or spiritually estranged from God,

often marginalized by society. In the parable, the "sinners" are represented by the younger son who squanders his inheritance (**Luke 15:13**). The theology of the cross emphasizes that God's love reaches the *hamartōlos* through Christ's self-giving on the cross, demonstrating that no one is beyond the reach of His grace.

2. **ΜΕΤΑΝΟΕΩ (METANOEOŌ) – "REPENT"** (LUKE 15:7, 10)
 - *Metanoēō* reflects the turning of the younger son from his life of rebellion back to his father (**Luke 15:17–20**). True repentance is not merely regret but a return to the relationship that was broken. We are repented by God's initiative. The father's embrace illustrates the overwhelming grace that draws sinners back as restored children.
3. **ΣΠΛΑΓΧΝΙΖΟΜΑΙ (SPLAGCHNIZOMAI) – "COMPASSION"** (LUKE 15:20)
 - *Splagchnizomai* describes the deep, visceral compassion of the father as he runs to welcome the returning son (**Luke 15:20**). This word encapsulates the heart of God, who seeks and saves the lost. The theology of the cross reveals this compassion most vividly in Christ's suffering and death, where God's mercy triumphs over judgment to restore sinners to Himself.
4. **ἈΝΑΣΤΡΕΦΩ (ANASTREPHŌ) – "RETURN" OR "TURN BACK"** (LUKE 15:18, 20)
 - *Anastrephō* describes the action of the younger son as he resolves to return to his father (**Luke 15:18, 20**). It signifies a physical and spiritual turning point, a movement from alienation to restoration. In the theology of the cross, this return mirrors humanity's journey back to God, enabled by Christ's work on the cross, where the broken relationship between God and humanity is mended.
5. **ΧΑΡΙΣ (CHARIS) – "GRACE"** (IMPLIED THROUGHOUT, ESP. LUKE 15:22–24)
 - *Charis*, though not directly mentioned, permeates the parable in the father's lavish forgiveness and restoration of his son (**Luke 15:22–24**). The unmerited love and celebration shown to the prodigal highlight the radical nature of God's grace. The theology of the cross underscores that this grace is costly, purchased by Christ's sacrifice, and freely given.
6. **ΕὐΦΡΑΙΝΩ (EUPHRAINŌ) – "REJOICE"** (LUKE 15:23–24, 32)
 - *Euphrainō* describes the father's joyful celebration upon the return of the lost son (**Luke 15:23–24, 32**). This rejoicing reflects the heart of God, who delights in the repentance and restoration of sinners. The theology of the cross deepens this joy, showing that it is rooted in the victory of Christ over sin and death, a triumph that makes the reconciliation of all who are lost possible.

COMMENTARY

Old Testament Reading: Joshua 5:9–12

Their wilderness wandering is behind them. At the edge of the Promised Land, the voice of God breaks through: "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." No longer slaves, no longer

wanderers—today, they are free. The manna, so faithful in its daily rhythm, ceases, and their hands gather the fruit of the land, tasting the fullness of God’s promises.

We, too, stand on the edge of what God has done, watching the old burdens crumble and the new creation unfold. The theology of the cross reminds us: this is not our doing. The journey through the wilderness, the promise fulfilled—it is all gift, all grace. And like the Israelites, we are invited to the feast, to the bread of life that satisfies every hunger and whispers, *You are b*

Psalm: Psalm 32

This is a psalm of shadows and light. In the silence of guilt, the psalmist feels the weight of the world pressing down, drying up joy, stealing breath. But then the psalmist is repented, the confession comes, and with it, a flood of mercy: *“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.”* The shadows lift, the light pours in, and the psalm becomes a song of joy.

Lent is the season where shadows are unmasked, where the deep corners of our hearts, long cloaked in darkness, are brought into the searching light of God’s truth. It is not a time for lofty words or perfect gestures, for God is no distant arbiter, tallying merits and faults. He is a tender Father, leaning toward us, His delight is kindled in the turning of our hearts, however faltering, back toward Him.

The theology of the cross speaks plainly: forgiveness is not a prize to be earned through toil or tears. It is a gift—a flood of mercy flowing inexhaustibly from the wounds of Christ, crashing through the barricades of our guilt and shame. This forgiveness does not weigh us down with new obligations or call us to achieve a purer form of righteousness. Instead, it lifts us, freeing us to live as we were always meant to—unburdened, unchained, free and wholly His.

In this season, as the shadows scatter and the light breaks in, we are beckoned to walk freely in the grace that holds us. We are invited to sing, in the winning and losing, the triumphant song of the redeemed. The Cross stands as the great bridge from death to life, from striving to rest, from darkness to light eternal. In that truth, we find not only our freedom but our song echoing into eternity.

Epistle: 2 Corinthians 5:16–21

“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” Paul’s words shake the dust of the old world and proclaim the dawn of something entirely new. Lent brings us face to face with this reality—the old self clings tightly, but God is already at work, breaking it apart and making all things new.

This is the scandal and the glory of the Cross: that God does what we cannot. In Christ, the old world is crucified, and with it, all our striving and pretense. Lent is not a season of half-measures or

self-made transformation but of surrender. We are repented by God's Word into the death that brings life. Here, beneath the shadow of the Cross, we hear it clearly—God's work is finished. Reconciliation is not a process but a proclamation: "It is finished." And in that Word, the new creation begins—not by our hands, but by His. We are brought forth as what we truly are in Him: redeemed, renewed, and made alive.

Gospel: Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32

The parable of the prodigal son is a story that sings and sighs. It tells of a younger son, willful, restless, and reckless, who takes his inheritance and wastes it all in the far country, among the indifference of strangers. But it also tells of a father who watches the horizon, heart breaking open with love, who runs to meet him and calls for a feast: *"For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."*

And then there is the older son, arms crossed, heart clenched, refusing to enter his father's joy. He cannot see that the same love poured out for his brother is already his. Lent invites us to see ourselves in both sons—running far or standing near, both lost in our own way, both in need of the Father's mercy.

This gracious love—extravagant, undeserved—points us to the Cross, where Christ dies for the lost and the proud, the wayward and the bitter. Word and sacrament call us home to the table where grace overflows, where the feast never ends, and where every lost child is found.

SERMON

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's readings take us on a journey—from the parched wilderness of shame to the sumptuous feast of reconciliation. Lent brings us to the heart of God's work, not in the places of our strength but in the wreckage of our sin, the broken corners of our lives where grace plants its flag and declares, "Here, in this mess, I make all things new."

We begin with Joshua and the Israelites standing on the edge of fulfillment. After forty years of wandering, the shame of Egypt is finally washed away. Manna ceases. The people eat from the land they had only dreamed of, a land God swore to give them. But this is not a story of the triumph of human strength and endurance. The Israelites didn't earn their way to the promised land. They wandered, they grumbled, they failed—yet God remained faithful.

Psalm 32 takes us deeper. "Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." The psalmist knows what it means to carry guilt, to feel its weight pressing down like a heavy hand.

But the psalmist also sings of release, of a God who doesn't leave us in our sin but lifts us from it. "I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the guilt of my sin."

This is how God works. He doesn't wait for us to clean ourselves up or prove ourselves worthy. He meets us in His grace and mercy, takes the weight of our shame, and gives us the joy of forgiveness.

In the Epistle, Paul sharpens this reality with the bold claim that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." Let's pause here, because this is not just a comforting sentiment or a religious slogan—it's an earth-shaking proclamation of what God does in Christ. God's work isn't about propping up the old self or giving the old creation a fresh coat of paint. The life of faith is not a rehabilitation project. It's not about tweaking, improving, or managing what was already there. No, Paul declares something far more radical: the old has *passed away*, and the new has *come*.

What does this mean? It means that God's work in Christ is nothing less than a death and resurrection. The old creation—that is, the sinner in us—doesn't get reformed; it gets crucified. All our efforts to make ourselves presentable to God, all our attempts to justify ourselves through good works or moral striving, are exposed as futile. The law, which we so often misuse to measure our worthiness, doesn't help us climb higher—it kills us. It shows us that we cannot save ourselves, and that's precisely the point.

The gospel is not an add-on to the law, a gentle boost to help us finish what we've started. The gospel declares that God has already done everything for us in Christ. Reconciliation isn't a process we participate in—it's a finished work that God accomplishes unilaterally. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." The Cross is where the old creation dies. It's not about our improvement; it's about God's new creation breaking into the world through Jesus' death and resurrection.

This is what makes faith so radical. Faith clings to Christ alone. Faith trusts that God's new creation has broken through for me in baptism's word of promise. We can dare to trust in the promise that God has already reconciled us, and that there is nothing left for us to do. To be "in Christ" is to be freed from the endless striving to justify ourselves, to be freed from the anxiety of never measuring up. It is to live as new creations, not by our power but by God's promise.

And this new creation is not just a private, inward change. It reshapes how we live in the world. Paul says we no longer regard anyone from a human point of view. Why? Because the old categories of worthiness and unworthiness, success and failure, have been obliterated. The cross levels the playing field, killing the sinner in all of us and raising us to new life as God's beloved.

So, the life of faith is not about fixing the old; it's about dying and rising. It's about letting go of all that we cling to for our identity and security and trusting that God has already made us new in Christ. The old is gone—not rehabilitated, not managed, but gone. This is the freedom of the gospel: the freedom to live as people who are fully reconciled, fully loved, fully new.

In Christ, you are forgiven. You are a new creation. The old is dead. The new is alive. And this, dear friends, is the work of God.

Paul reminds us that reconciliation is not our doing. That means there's no room for boasting, no room for self-congratulation. The Cross stands at the center, declaring, "This is God's work, and it is finished."

Then we come to the Gospel, the story we call "The Prodigal Son." But really, it's the story of a prodigal God—lavish in mercy, extravagant in grace, relentless in love.

The younger son takes his inheritance and wastes it in reckless living. When the money runs out, so does his dignity. He's hungry, humiliated, lost. He plans a speech, rehearses his confession, and heads home, expecting rejection or, at best, a cold welcome.

But the father is waiting. Watching. Running. Before the son can even finish his apology, the father throws his arms around him and restores him to the family. The robe, the ring, the feast—all signs that this lost son is found, this dead son is alive.

And then there's the older son, standing outside the party, arms crossed, heart hard. He's done everything right—worked hard, stayed home, followed the rules. But he's bitter, angry. Grace seems so unfair. Which, of course, it is. Grace has nothing to do with fairness. The father pleads with him, too, saying, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."

This story of the two brothers is our story. We are both the reckless younger son and the resentful older son. We run from God, embracing our sin, and we resent His mercy when it's given to others. But God is the Father—loving, patient, full of grace.

God's Word declares that we cannot earn our way back to the Father's house. Nor do we earn our place by what we do. Whether we've squandered our lives in sin or buried ourselves in self-righteousness, the Father comes to us. He runs to meet us, pleads with us, and invites us to the feast.

So here we are, standing in the shadow of the Cross, where God's mercy shines brightest. Here, we see the reconciliation Paul wrote about—God refusing to count our sins against us, instead laying them on Christ.

Friends in Christ, you don't have to clean yourself up to come home. You don't have to make excuses or prove your worth. In your baptism, the Father has already run toward you, arms open, and robed you in the joy of His forgiveness.

Amen.

LENTEN BIBLE STUDIES

WITH ADULTS

INTRODUCTION The Israelites stumble into the Promised Land, the Psalmist sings of sins forgiven, Paul pleads for reconciliation, and the prodigal son drags himself home. Every story, every line, pulls back the curtain on God’s relentless mission: to restore what has been broken. It’s not about our efforts—it never was. Luther’s Catechisms nail it down: your baptism wasn’t a one-time event; it’s God’s daily declaration over you. The Gospel grabs you by the heart, repenting and renewing you, dragging you from death to life. Over and over again, God shows up—not to demand, but to save.

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

- **Old Testament Reading:** Joshua 5:9–12
- **Psalm:** Psalm 32
- **Epistle:** 2 Corinthians 5:16–21
- **Gospel:** Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32

KEY THEME God’s grace, bestowed in baptism’s promise, does not merely call us from sin but puts an end to it, killing the old self so that a new creation might rise.

CATECHISM CONNECTIONS

Rejoicing in New Beginnings (Joshua 5:9–12)

As the Israelites celebrate their first Passover in the Promised Land and eat from the land God provided, they mark the end of the miraculous manna that sustained them in the wilderness. This moment is a testament to God’s unwavering faithfulness and His provision, symbolizing a new chapter in their journey. In the theology of the cross, this event points us to the God who provides not only for our physical needs but also for our spiritual hunger, ultimately fulfilled in Christ’s body given for us.

Luther’s explanation of the Fourth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer emphasizes God’s ongoing provision:

“God gives daily bread, even without our prayer, to all people. But we ask in this prayer that God would help us realize this and receive our daily bread with thanksgiving.”¹

Luther won't let us get cozy with the idea that we've earned anything. The gifts we hold aren't trophies for good behavior—they're the wild, undeserved grace of God poured out. The Israelites biting into the fruit of the land? It's a preview, a whisper of the feast to come. At the Lord's Supper, we're given Christ Himself—our true and ultimate “daily bread.” This isn't a meal for the worthy; it's for the famished, the undeserving, the lost.

Knowing Joy in Forgiveness (Psalm 32)

David's psalm sings of something he knew all about: the profound joy that comes from the forgiveness of sins and the relief found in confession. This psalm speaks to the heart of the theology of the cross, where our sins are not ignored but laid bare at the foot of the cross and met with God's mercy. Through confession, the believer encounters the reality of their sin but also the greater reality of God's grace. Luther teaches in the Small Catechism:

“Confession has two parts. First, that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself.”²

God works in us through His Word. Forgiveness is no transaction—it's a gift given freely because of Christ's sacrifice. David's joy in the lifting of his guilt is ours, too, not because we've managed to fix ourselves but because absolution hits us like a thunderclap: *You are forgiven for Christ's sake*. This word frees us to live in a peace the world can't understand, much less provide. It's all God, from start to finish.

Becoming New Creations (2 Corinthians 5:16–21)

Paul's declaration that we are made new in Christ highlights God's power to reconcile. Through the cross, God does not simply repair what is broken but makes us entirely new creations, clothing us in Christ's righteousness. The theology of the cross reveals that this transformation is not achieved by human effort but is the work of God through Christ's death and resurrection. Luther captures this mystery in his explanation of baptism:

“Baptism works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe.”³

In baptism, we are united with Christ's death and resurrection, dying to sin and rising to new life. This new creation is not a matter of external change but of being reconciled to God, being brought from death to life, and living in the assurance that we are His children, forever claimed by His grace.

Rejoicing in the Father's Forgiveness (Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32)

The parable of the prodigal son is a profound expression of God's mercy, revealing the heart of the Father who welcomes sinners home. The theology of the cross teaches us that this forgiveness is not

a mere overlooking of sin but a costly act of grace, borne by Christ on the cross. The father's open arms reflect God's love that reaches us in the depths of our brokenness and restores us as His beloved children. Luther, in his explanation of the introduction to the Lord's Prayer, beautifully captures this:

“God tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children.”⁴

In this parable, we see that God's forgiveness is not dependent on our worthiness but flows from His nature as a merciful, loving Father. On the cross, Christ bore our sins so that we might be reconciled and rejoice in the promise that God will never abandon us, no matter how far we stray.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does the celebration in Joshua 5 teach us about recognizing God's provision in our lives?
2. How does Psalm 32 encourage us to view confession and forgiveness?
3. What does Paul mean by calling us “ambassadors for Christ” in 2 Corinthians 5? How does this shape our daily lives?
4. In Luke 15, how does the father's response to the prodigal son reflect God's grace? How does this impact your understanding of repentance?
5. How does baptism assure us of God's forgiveness and renewal, even when we struggle with sin?

Closing Prayer

Gracious Father, We give thanks that Your mercy knows no bounds. Through Christ, You have reconciled us to Yourself and given us the gift of forgiveness and new life. Strengthen us to live as ambassadors of Your grace, extending Your love to those around us. Guide us to trust in Your promises and rejoice in the joy of salvation. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

¹ Small Catechism, Explanation of the Lord's Prayer, Fourth Petition.

² Small Catechism, Confession.

³ Small Catechism, Explanation of Baptism, Question: “What benefits does Baptism give?”

⁴ Small Catechism, Explanation of the Lord's Prayer, Introduction

WITH TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS

UNFILTERED FAITH: BIBLE STUDIES FOR MESSY PEOPLE

Feeling overwhelmed or imperfect? These Bible studies are for you. Faith isn't about having it all together—it's about showing up as you are and encountering God's grace. Come explore God's Word honestly, wrestle with big questions, and discover grace that meets you right where you are.

MADE NEW: LIFE GIVEN, NOT EARNED

Scripture Focus 2 Corinthians 5:16–21

Key Idea: God doesn't improve us; He declares us new in Christ and gives us life where there was none.

Introduction

Being “new” isn't something you achieve. It's not about leveling up or reaching some spiritual milestone. God steps into the reality of your brokenness and does what you can't—reconciles you to Himself, not because you deserve it, but because of Christ. This is not a self-help plan. It's death and resurrection. God puts your old self to death and brings you into new life through His Word of promise.

1. Seeing Others Through the Cross

- **Verse 16:** “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view.”
- In Christ, the world gets flipped upside down. Instead of judging others by what they've done or failed to do, we see them as people for whom Christ died.
- This isn't about looking for potential or imagining what someone could become. It's about seeing the truth: we're all sinners in need of God's grace, and in Christ, that grace is given fully and freely.

Question

How might seeing yourself and others as forgiven sinners change the way you view relationships?

2. New Creation: A Word Spoken Over You

- **Verse 17:** “If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.”
- This isn't about self-improvement or trying harder. You don't *become* new by your own effort. God declares you new.

- The “old you” is dead—crucified with Christ. The new creation is life given to you by grace alone, a reality you live in because God has spoken it.

Question

What does it mean to you that God calls you a new creation, even when you don’t feel new?

3. Reconciliation: God’s Work, Not Yours

- **Verses 18–19:** “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.”
- Reconciliation isn’t something you bring to the table. God does it all. In Christ, He bridges the gap between His holiness and your sin. You are not the one who closes the distance—God comes to you. It’s a gift we receive and share, not a project we complete.

Question

How does knowing reconciliation is God’s work free you from trying to earn or prove your relationship with Him?

4. The Great Exchange

- **Verse 21:** “For our sake, He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”
- Here’s the scandal of the cross: Jesus takes your sin and gives you His righteousness in return. No negotiation. No “what can you offer?” Just His life for yours.
- This exchange doesn’t make you a “better” version of yourself—it declares you righteous before God. Period.

Question

What does it mean to trust that Jesus’ righteousness is yours, even when you still see sin in your life

5. Living as a New Creation: Daily Dying and Rising

- Being a new creation is a daily reality of dying to sin and rising to life in Christ.
- This doesn’t mean you’ll see instant transformation or constant success. It means living in the promise that God’s Word is true, even when your experience tells you otherwise.

Question

How can you embrace the daily rhythm of dying to your old self and living in the freedom of Christ’s promise?

Closing Thought

God doesn't wait for you to get it together or try harder. In Christ, He has already reconciled you to Himself. He has spoken a Word over you: new, forgiven, righteous. This is the heart of the gospel—not our striving but God's gift.

THE FATHER RUNS

Pastor Mark Anderson

The road was long, his steps were slow, His heart was heavy, full of woe.
His pockets bare, his soul unclean, A beggar where a prince had been.

Yet mercy watched with steadfast eyes, And love stood waiting, strong and wise.
No wrath, no scorn, no bitter shame, But only joy—He called his name.

The son rehearsed his weary plea, But grace had answered, full and free.
No price to pay, no debt to clear, Only the Father's voice: *Come near!*

A robe, a ring, a feast begun, For he was lost but is now a son.
The music swells, the dancers spin, The dead now live, the lost brought in.

O sinner, hear! The call is true: The Father runs—to welcome you!

PRAYER

Gracious God, thank You for doing what we could never do—reconciling us to Yourself through Christ. Help us to trust Your promise, to live by faith as the new creations You have made us, and to share Your Word of reconciliation with others. Amen.

WITH CHILDREN

“WALKING IN GRACE”

Supplies

Paper hearts, markers, tape.

Preparation

1. Write “Baptized and Forgiven” on each paper heart.
2. Set up a simple cross on a table.

The Journey

1. Gather the children at the start. Say: “These hearts remind us of God’s forgiveness. That means God loves and forgives you.” Have the children write their names on the heart and place them at the foot of the Cross.
2. Say: “This cross reminds us of Jesus, who takes all our sins away. Because of Him, we are always forgiven!”

Let’s Wonder Together

1. What does it mean to be forgiven by God? How does that make you feel?
2. Why is the cross so special? What did Jesus do for us on the cross?
3. Can you think of a time when you said, "I’m sorry," and someone forgave you? How did that feel?

Celebrate Forgiveness by Reading this Poem.

WALKING IN GRACE

Pastor Mark Anderson

Hearts on the table, soft as a feather,
Names written down, we’re thankful together.
The cross stands tall, it sings out your name,
“Baptized and loved, you’ll never be the same.”

The cross is the place where Jesus once died,
Where mercy poured out, love opened wide.
He took all our sins and washed them away,
With arms stretched to hold us, He is our way.

Hearts on the table, a gift to be shared,
God’s grace in Jesus shows us He cares.
Step into His love, live in His light,
Forever forgiven, He makes everything right.

Song

Sing to the tune of *If You're Happy and You Know It*:

“If you’re thankful for God’s grace, clap your hands! (Clap, clap!)

If you’re thankful for God’s grace, clap your hands! (Clap, clap!)

God forgives us every day,

He takes all our sins away,

If you’re thankful for God’s grace, clap your hands! (Clap, clap!)”

Closing Prayer

Dear Jesus, Thank you for your love that never ends.

Thank you for your forgiveness that makes our hearts new.

Thank you for holding us close, forever forgiven, forever loved.

Amen.

WEEK 5: "POURED OUT FOR US: THE EXTRAVAGANCE OF DIVINE MERCY"

SERMON FOCUS: The Fifth Sunday in Lent reveals a God who works not in half-measures but through the fullness of His promises. His law reveals the wilderness of our hearts, barren and dry, unable to save ourselves. But His Gospel speaks life into those very wastelands, where baptism delivers the word of promise that transforms us. In the water and the Word, God does what we cannot: He binds us to Christ, uniting us with His death and resurrection. This is no mere ritual; it is for the sinner the great reversal of the law's judgment through the gift of life and grace.

The God we meet in these readings is always doing more than we expect. His law shows us the path from which we have strayed in our willful wandering. His Gospel makes a new path apart from law. He rolls away the reproach of the past, brings streams of mercy into the desert, and makes us new creations in Christ. Baptism is the seal of this promise, declaring: *You are mine. You are made new. You are free to walk in the life only I can give.*

As we approach Holy Week, these texts remind us that the law exposes the weight we carry, but the Gospel invites us to let it go. The Cross declares that God's relentless love has done the work, breaking the power of the sin and death. The empty tomb proclaims the new creation breaking forth even now

TEXTS

- **Old Testament: ISAIAH 43:16–21**
- **Psalm 126**
- **Epistle: PHILIPPIANS 3:4B–14**
- **Gospel: JOHN 12:1–8**

HYMN SUGGESTIONS

- **LBW: "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" (LBW 482)**
- **ELW: "Beneath the Cross of Jesus" (ELW 338)**
- **ReClaim: "Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted" (ReClaim 96)**
- **LHS: "In the Cross of Christ I Glory" (LHS 104)**

KEY GREEK WORD STUDIES: John 12:1–8

1. ΧΡΙΩ (CHRIO̅) – "ANOINT" (JOHN 12:3, 7)

When Mary anoints Jesus' feet, the world sees a sentimental gesture, but Jesus sees preparation for death. This isn't the triumphant anointing of a worldly king—it's the

anointing of one who will reign from a cross. Here, the theology of the cross lays bare what kingship really is: not power and might, but suffering and self-giving love. Jesus is marked for burial because His kingdom is not of this world—it is given in death, for sinners, without their permission or contribution.

2. **ΜΥΡΟΝ (MYRON) – "OINTMENT" (JOHN 12:3)**

Mary's extravagant gift isn't about piety or personal devotion—it's about the cost of what's coming. Myron, poured out in excess, mirrors the very nature of grace: wasteful, scandalous, and completely beyond calculation. The theology of the cross teaches us that Christ's own sacrifice is not measured or earned—it is freely given, as recklessly as perfume spilled onto the floor. Grace and mercy will not be retrieved or repurposed for something else.

3. **ΠΤΩΧΟΣ (PTŌCHOS) – "POOR" (JOHN 12:5, 8)**

Jesus' response to Judas isn't a dismissal of the poor—it's a reordering of how we understand poverty. The theology of the cross shows us that Jesus does not merely care for the poor; He becomes poor. He enters the depths of human need, not to solve the world's economic problems, but to take on sin, death, and the devil in the most real way possible. The poor will always be with you, because the world remains captive to sin. But Christ alone does what charity and reform never can: He takes the full weight of poverty upon Himself and gives away His riches—the forgiveness of sins—without charge.

4. **ΤΑΦῆ (ΤΑΡΗΕ) – "BURIAL" (JOHN 12:7)**

Burial, for the world, is the end. For Jesus, it is the means. The theology of the cross does not look away from death; it looks right at it and proclaims: "Here is where victory is won." Mary anoints Jesus for burial because that is where His work will be completed. The grave is not a mistake or a defeat—it is where the old Adam is put down for good. And if Christ's burial is our burial in baptism, then resurrection is no longer a vague hope. It is certain. Because He was buried, we will rise.

COMMENTARY

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 43:16–21

Isaiah's words tell of a God who surprises us again and again: *"Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"* The law shows us, without mercy, the bleak wilderness in which we

wander, the dryness and deadness of our sin. But the Gospel speaks into that wilderness, where God declares He is doing something new.

Isaiah points back to the Red Sea, where God's law confronted Pharaoh and parted the waters of death and life. But now, God turns our eyes forward to the streams He brings into the desert. His Gospel whispers of the living water that quenches not just our thirst but creates life where none could grow. Lent carries us into this holy tension: the law convicts us of the wasteland within, but the Gospel calls us to trust the One who brings life and hope where we least expect it.

Psalm: Psalm 126

Psalm 126 is a psalm of contrasts—tears and joy, sorrow and restoration. The law cuts deeply, showing us the weight of our sin, drying up the false joys we thought would bring us life. But the Gospel floods that dry ground with mercy: *“Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy.”*

The psalmist remembers the sweetness of God's restoration, how sorrow gave way to gladness and laughter spilled out like water over parched land. But this is more than remembering; it is a plea for God to act again: *“Restore our fortunes, O Lord.”* Lent invites us into this tension. The law reveals our brokenness, but the Gospel proclaims that God gathers every tear at the foot of the Cross, transforming sorrow into joy. The suffering of Christ is not wasted; it is the soil where forgiveness and resurrection grow, and the promise of restoration becomes the present hope that carries us.

Epistle: Philippians 3:4b–14

Paul's words strip away any illusion of self-reliance: *“I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”* Yes, “everything. The law shrouds us in the futility of our striving, revealing that even our best accomplishments are as nothing before God. But the Gospel declares that what we cannot, will not do, Christ has already done. His life of righteousness, innocence, and blessedness is accounted to us as a gift.

Paul leans into the future, not driven by fear or obligation, but by the freedom of the grace that's already his in Christ. *“Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,”* he says. That's the heart of faith—not climbing the ladder, not proving yourself, but trusting that the promises are yours.

When the law has done its job, showing you the dead ends and stripping away your illusions of self-sufficiency, the Gospel breaks in and sets you free. You're not pressing forward to earn anything—the gift of grace, wrapped up in Christ and handed to you, compels you and propels you.

You press on, not with the desperation of one chasing an uncertain hope, but with the quiet confidence of one whose victory has already been won. The promise is yours, sealed and secured by the One who spoke your name before the foundations of the world. He calls you His own, and in

that call lies all the strength and courage you need to journey forward. The road may twist through shadowed valleys and unseen perils, but the outcome is certain—He who claims you will never let you go.

Gospel: John 12:1–8

Mary kneels before Jesus, pouring out expensive perfume in an act so extravagant it shocks those around her. The law, voiced through Judas, questions her devotion: *“Why wasn’t this sold and given to the poor?”* His words reveal a heart bound by selfish priorities, masking greed with false piety. So does the law expose the smallness of our hearts.

But Jesus points to the Gospel in Mary’s act: *“She has kept it for the day of my burial.”* Her extravagant gesture is not a transaction or a calculated move; it is a response to the grace already poured out for her. In this moment, we see the truth that shatters human wisdom—grace does not measure, does not barter, does not make demands. It is given freely, just as God’s love will be poured out in Christ’s death, a love that upends every expectation and redeems the world through the foolishness of the Cross.

Lent places us at Mary’s feet, where the fragrance of Christ’s grace fills the air. But the fragrant ointment carries the scent of death. The Cross that looms will make a shrouded corpse of all our striving, exposing the futility of what we bring, the unacceptable limits of our love, and the depth of our sin. Yet it is there, at the Cross, that the Gospel has spoken its final word: God, in His mercy, has acted for you. And in the fragrance of that mercy, God’s decision for you stands firm: *You are mine, and nothing will change that.*

SERMON

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

God asks a question through the prophet Isaiah this morning. “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19). God is not just patching up the old ruins of our lives. He is creating something entirely new: rivers flowing where there was once only dry sand, pathways cutting through the chaos of the wilderness. This is the same God who split the Red Sea wide open, who made a way where there was no way. And now, He promises something even greater, not just out there for the world but for the wilderness of your heart. Can you see it? It’s already begun.

The "new thing" doesn't announce itself with fanfare or flashing lights. It often looks small, even foolish, at first. In John's Gospel, the "new thing" unfolds in a moment that's as quiet as it is unsettling—Mary of Bethany kneeling at Jesus' feet, breaking open a jar of pure nard worth a year's wages, and pouring it out without hesitation. What a waste, Judas grumbles, and let's be honest, maybe he's not the only one thinking that. Extravagance doesn't compute when you're busy keeping score.

But Mary has seen it—she has perceived what Isaiah proclaimed so many centuries before: God is doing something new in Jesus. Her act of worship, wild and uncalculated as it is, becomes a living parable of the Cross. Just as Mary pours out the costly perfume, Jesus will pour out His very life for the world—not sparing a drop, not holding anything back. Extravagant? Absolutely. Reckless? Maybe, at least to human eyes. But this is how the "new thing" of God works. It looks like waste to the world, but to those with eyes to see, it's the only thing that truly matters.

Paul echoes this radical shift in Philippians. Paul could boast of a résumé packed with credentials: a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee with zeal, blameless under the Law. But now? None of it matters. None of it even compares. "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:8). The word he uses for "loss" is startling—it's not just neutral, it's rubbish, refuse. What Paul once treasured, he now considers worthless in the light of Christ.

Being known by Christ Jesus changes everything. It's being found in Him, wrapped up in His righteousness, forgiven by His mercy, and raised to new life by His victory over death. This reorders everything. The old markers of success, the measuring sticks of human achievement and status, no longer hold weight. Paul's life is no longer about climbing ladders; it's about pressing forward toward a higher calling—not one he's earned but one given freely in Jesus.

This isn't a passive acceptance either. Paul runs the race with purpose, leaving behind what's dead and done. But notice, he's not running to earn God's favor; he's running because he already has it! He lives in the new life Jesus brings, not looking back at what he's lost but straining forward to what lies ahead. For Paul, everything is reordered around this singular truth: knowing Christ is worth everything. And when you know Him, nothing else compares.

And then there's the psalm—Psalm 126—a song so overflowing with joy that you can almost hear the laughter echoing through its words. This isn't quiet, polite happiness; it's the kind of joy that bubbles up uncontrollably when hope is real. The psalmist looks back on how God restored Zion, recounting a deliverance so astounding it felt like a dream. And yet, this isn't just nostalgia. It's a confident hope that the same God who brought restoration then will do it again. "Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy" (Psalm 126:5). That's not just a poetic flourish—it's a promise. And it's for you.

In baptism, this promise takes on flesh and becomes personal. God doesn't just restore "Zion" in some distant, abstract way. He restores *you*. In those waters, the old is drowned, and the new is raised. The tears of repentance, of brokenness, are met with the joy of forgiveness, the joy of being repented and named a child of God. Baptism isn't just a symbol; it's a declaration—God's declaration—that He has acted decisively for you. It's the gospel poured out over your head, washing away the old and raising you to walk in the newness of life.

So, here we are, standing as always on the edge of the "new thing" God is doing. Lent repents the eyes of our hearts to see it. Christ is making all things new—not by demanding more from you, but by giving Himself for you. After all, Lent does not summon us to trudge uphill toward the Cross and the empty tomb. Lent proclaims that we live freely in the promise of baptism, the finished work of Christ for us. The rivers in the wilderness are not a new life we make, but God breaking into our lives with overflowing grace and making us new in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

BIBLE STUDIES

WITH ADULTS

INTRODUCTION

God does not wait for us to find a perfect path. He meets us in the wilderness, the hard places we wish we could avoid. Through the raw and uncompromising power of His grace, God breaks into your reality—into your sin, your failure, your death. Through His Word, water, bread, and wine, He delivers what no effort of yours could ever achieve: the very power of God unto salvation given *for you*.

When everything you've built collapses and when the world crumbles around you, it is not your strength or resolve that will save you. It is His mercy alone that holds you, sustains you, and declares you righteous. God does not wait for you to reach out—He comes to you, digging through the rubble of sin, forgiving and binding you to the death and resurrection of Christ, and raising you to new life.

Scripture Focus

- **Old Testament:** Isaiah 43:16–21
- **Psalms:** Psalm 126
- **Epistle:** Philippians 3:4b–14
- **Gospel:** John 12:1–8

Key Theme

God's renewal comes through the paradox of the cross, where death gives way to life, and weakness reveals God's power. In Christ, we are called to let go of our striving and trust in His promises.

Catechism Connections

God's New Way in the Wilderness (Isaiah 43:16–21)

1. Daily Bread (The Fourth Petition)

Isaiah's declaration that God is "making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland" reveals how God works precisely amid human desolation and need. Rather than meeting us in strength or success, God's creative and redemptive work comes to life where human effort fails

completely. Luther's *Small Catechism* helps illuminate these truths, showing us how God faithfully meets us in the wilderness with His grace and provision.

Isaiah's vision of streams in the wasteland reminds us of God's provision, even in the most barren and lifeless places. Luther captures this in his explanation of the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer:

"Daily bread includes everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, a devout spouse, devout children, devout workers, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, self-control, good reputation, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like."

God's way in the wilderness is about His gracious provision for every part of our lives. Whether it's food on the table, a roof over our heads, or the peace that sustains us through hardship, these "streams" are God's gifts, freely given. They are signs of His faithfulness, even when we can't see a way forward.

2. God the Creator (The First Article of the Creed)

Isaiah's words speak of God's ongoing work of creation and renewal. Luther helps us see that God's creative power is not just a one-time event but an everyday reality: "I believe that God has created me and all that exists... He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life."

In the wilderness, God provides, just as He provided manna and water for the Israelites. Isaiah's imagery of streams in the wasteland points to the God who continues to bring life and renewal, even in the places where we least expect it.

3. Baptism: The Waters of New Creation

The streams Isaiah describes provide the living water of Christ that cleanses, renews, and gives life. Luther connects this directly to baptism: "Baptism signifies that the old creature in us... is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance, and on the other hand, that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."

In baptism, God brings His new way to us personally. It's where He meets us in our wilderness of sin and death, drowning the old and raising us as His redeemed children. These streams of living water are not just symbolic; they are the real, life-giving work of Christ poured out for us.

4. Redemption in Christ (The Second Article of the Creed)

Isaiah's promise of a new way finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Luther reminds us of the depth of Christ's redeeming work: "[Jesus] has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil."

The theology of the cross reminds us that God's new way is entirely His—alien to our understanding and contrary to our expectations. Christ Jesus entered the wilderness of our brokenness, took upon Himself the weight of our sin, and, in exchange, clothed us in His righteousness. The streams in the wasteland are not mere symbols of relief. The Holy Spirit, through Word and sacrament, freely pours out the lifeblood of Christ's death and resurrection. In this way God sustains us precisely where we are most lost and barren. This is no human achievement; it is God's relentless grace bringing life out of death.

Conclusion

Isaiah's proclamation paints a rich and haunting image of how God moves through the wilderness of our lives. In the stark barrenness where all seems lost, His grace breaks in—not as a thunderous conquest but as an alien word, an inexorable stream carving life from the wasteland. Whether in the daily bread that nourishes our frailty, the sustaining hand of the Creator who holds all things together, or the renewing waters of baptism that raise us from death, God's new way is a holy invasion of His mercy into our sinful desolation. Luther's *Small Catechism* invites us to see these promises as God's very present gifts, restoring life and hope in the here and now.

Sowing in Tears, Reaping in Joy (Psalm 126)

Psalm 126 is one of those beautiful texts that cuts right to the heart. It's a song for anyone who's ever known what it's like to feel the ache of exile, the weight of the world pressing down, and then—like a sunrise breaking through the clouds—felt the sheer, overwhelming joy of God's restoration. The psalmist doesn't sugarcoat the journey. There are tears. There's pain. But there's also hope because joy doesn't come by sidestepping suffering—it comes by God doing His best work right in the middle of it. And if you think that sounds like the theology of the cross, you're absolutely right.

Luther's *Small Catechism* gives us a front-row seat to how God shows up in this psalm, not as some far-off cheerleader but as the One who walks with us, who provides for us, and who turns tears into laughter.

1. “Deliver us from evil” (The Seventh Petition)

Here’s where we find the psalm’s raw honesty. Sowing in tears isn’t just a poetic image—it’s real life in this broken world. Luther nails it when he describes life as a “vale of tears.” But he doesn’t leave us there: “We pray... that our Father in heaven would deliver us from every evil of body and soul... and graciously take us from this vale of tears to Himself in heaven.”

That’s the promise. The tears of exile don’t have the last word. God does. And He’s not just about pulling us out of trouble someday; He’s in the business of meeting us in the middle of it and leading us to joy.

2. “I believe in the Holy Spirit” (The Third Article)

Ever tried to pull yourself out of a funk by sheer willpower? It doesn’t really work. The psalmist knows that restoration isn’t something we manufacture. It’s something God does through His Spirit. Luther puts it perfectly: “I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ... but the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel...”

Sowing in tears means you’re trusting God to bring the harvest. It’s not about your strength; it’s about His faithfulness. The Holy Spirit takes the mess of our lives and turns it into something we couldn’t imagine—a harvest of joy.

3. Baptism: Dying and Rising

The psalm’s journey from tears to joy is baptism in a nutshell. It’s dying to the old, rising to the new, every single day. Luther describes it like this: “The old creature in us... is to be drowned and die... and on the other hand, a new person is to come forth and rise up.”

God’s restoration is more than a fresh start—it’s a new creation. The exile ends not because we figure things out, but because God brings us home, washes us clean, and makes us new in Christ.

4. “He has redeemed me” (The Second Article)

If you’re looking for the ultimate picture of sowing in tears and reaping in joy, look no further than the cross. Christ bore the weight of the world’s sin, sowing His tears in the soil of suffering and death. But then came the harvest—His resurrection—and with it, our redemption. Luther sums it up: “[Jesus] has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person... from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil.”

This isn’t just ancient history. It’s happening right now. The same God who restored Israel is restoring you, turning your tears into joy through the power of the cross and resurrection.

5. Daily Bread (The Fourth Petition)

Even in exile, God provided for His people. The psalmist celebrates that provision, and Luther reminds us that God's care touches every part of our lives: "Daily bread includes everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body."

In the middle of tears, God shows up with daily bread—sometimes in ways we don't notice at first. It's the food on the table, the friend who checks in, the sunrise after a long night. These little moments of grace are signs of the bigger restoration He's working.

Conclusion

Psalm 126 is the story of every Christian: exile and homecoming, tears and joy, struggle and restoration. Luther's *Small Catechism* pulls it into focus, showing us that God isn't far off—He's here, in the details of your life, providing, renewing, and redeeming. And through the theology of the cross, we see that the tears you're sowing today aren't wasted. God is at work, bringing about a harvest of joy that only He can give. Trust Him. The joy is coming.

Losing to Gain (Philippians 3:4b–14)

Paul declares that all his achievements are loss compared to knowing Christ. This resonates deeply with the theology of the cross, where human strength, status, and efforts are stripped away, revealing our utter dependence on God's grace.

Luther's teaching on the Second Article of the Creed reminds us that Christ's work, not ours, is our salvation:

"Jesus Christ... has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins... with His holy, precious blood."

Pressing forward means clinging to Christ's cross as our only source of life and hope.

Extravagant Love and the Cross (John 12:1–8)

Mary's act of anointing Jesus foreshadows His burial, revealing the costly and sacrificial love that the cross embodies. In the theology of the cross, true devotion comes not from what we give but from recognizing the depth of Christ's gift to us.

Luther's explanation of the Lord's Prayer reminds us:

"God indeed tempts no one, but we pray... that we may overcome and win the victory."

Mary's faith looks to Christ, who takes her sin and ours to the cross, the place where His extravagant love is poured out for the world.

Discussion Questions

1. In Isaiah 43, God promises to make a way in the wilderness. How does this reflect God's work through the cross?
2. Psalm 126 speaks of joy after sorrow. How has God met you in times of difficulty and brought renewal?
3. In Philippians 3, Paul counts his achievements as loss. How does the theology of the cross challenge us to let go of our self-reliance?
4. Mary's anointing of Jesus in John 12 points to His death. How does her act of devotion mirror the costly grace of the cross?
5. How does the promise of your baptism assure you of God's faithfulness, even when life feels like a wilderness?
6. Reflect on a time when God's Word sustained you in a moment of weakness or trial.

Closing Prayer

Lord of the cross, You meet us in the wilderness of our sin and weakness. In Christ, You bring life through death, hope through despair, and strength through weakness. Teach us to trust in Your promises, to let go of our striving, and to live as Your redeemed children. Strengthen us through Your Word and Sacraments, that we may cling to the cross and rejoice in the new life You give. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

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1. Martin Luther, Small Catechism, Explanation of the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer.
 2. Martin Luther, Small Catechism, Explanation of the First Article of the Apostles' Creed.
 3. Martin Luther, Small Catechism, Explanation of Baptism, Part Four.
 4. Martin Luther, Small Catechism, Explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed.
 5. Martin Luther, Small Catechism, Explanation of the Seventh Petition of the Lord's Prayer.
 6. Martin Luther, Small Catechism, Explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed.
 7. Martin Luther, Small Catechism, Explanation of Baptism, Part Four.
 8. Martin Luther, Small Catechism, Explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed.
 9. Martin Luther, Small Catechism, Explanation of the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer.
 10. Martin Luther, Small Catechism, Explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed.
 11. Martin Luther, Small Catechism, Explanation of the Sixth Petition of the Lord's Prayer

WITH TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS

UNFILTERED FAITH: BIBLE STUDIES FOR MESSY PEOPLE

Faith is not about getting it right; it's about Christ coming to you in the middle of your mess. If you're tired of striving, and worn out by trying to measure up, this is the place for you. Come as you are. Meet the One who has already done it all—for you.

THE SCANDAL OF JESUS' WASTEFUL GRACE

Scripture Focus: John 12:1–8

Key Idea: The grace of Jesus is extravagant, wasteful, and absolutely for you.

Introduction

We live in a world obsessed with value. Time, money, relationships—it's all measured, weighed, and calculated. But in John 12, Mary throws that logic out the window. She takes a jar of ridiculously expensive perfume, dumps it on Jesus' feet, and wipes them with her hair. Judas calls it wasteful. But Jesus? He calls it beautiful.

Grace is scandalous and it will not be tamed. It doesn't make sense. It doesn't follow the rules. And it doesn't care about your spreadsheets or judgments. It's poured out—fully, recklessly—for sinners like you.

1. DINING WITH THE DEAD

- **Verse 2:** “They gave a dinner for Him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with Him at the table.”
- Lazarus was dead just a few days ago. Now he's eating dinner with Jesus. This is what Jesus does: He brings life out of death.
- The scene is already upside-down. Jesus isn't here to reward the “worthy.” He's here to feast with the once-dead Lazarus.

QUESTION:

How does this image of Jesus dining with Lazarus change the way you think about who belongs at His table?

2. Extravagant, Scandalous Grace

- **Verse 3:** Mary takes perfume worth a year's wages and pours it on Jesus' feet. She doesn't hold back.
- Judas calls it wasteful. And he's not wrong—it *is* wasteful. But grace always looks wasteful to the world. Grace doesn't calculate value. Grace doesn't conserve. Grace pours itself out entirely.
- Jesus sees in her act of gratitude a proclamation of His death. Mary anoints Him for burial, pointing to the cross, where God's grace will be poured out in full measure, overflowing.

Question:

Where in your life do you struggle with the idea of grace being “wasteful”?

3. Judas and the Trap of Self-Justification

- **Verse 6:** Judas complains about the money being wasted, claiming it could've helped the poor. But John calls him out—Judas isn't worried about the poor. He's worried about himself.
- This is the heart of self-justification: pointing out others' faults to hide your own. Judas' logic sounds good, but it's a cover.
- Grace exposes this. It doesn't let us stand on a pedestal. It pulls us down, levels the field, and says, “You're just as broken as the next person—and just as loved.”

Question:

How can you recognize and let go of the ways you try to justify yourself?

4. The Cross: The Ultimate Waste

- **Verse 7:** “Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial.”
- Jesus knows where He's headed: the cross. From a worldly perspective, His death will look like the ultimate waste—God dying for sinners who don't deserve it.
- But this is the heart of the gospel. Grace doesn't calculate return on investment. It gives itself completely, even for those who reject it. That's what grace is: love of the unlovable.

Question:

How does the “wastefulness” of the cross change how you see God's love for you?

5. Living in Wasteful Grace

- Grace doesn't make sense, and it doesn't ask you to make sense of it. It simply comes to you—fully, freely, and without calculation.

- Like Mary, you're invited to respond, not by trying to "measure up," but by living in the freedom of what's already been done for you.

Question

What would it look like to live in the freedom of grace that doesn't ask for anything in return?

Closing Thought

God's grace is poured out for you—recklessly, extravagantly, and without limit. It doesn't measure your worthiness. It doesn't hold back. It simply gives. The cross is the ultimate picture of this wasteful love and mercy—Jesus was not ashamed to look foolish, because he did it for you.

Read the poem and discuss how the promise of baptism means God's mercy and forgiveness accompany us throughout life.

THE NAME WE WEAR

Pastor Mark Anderson

We did not ask, yet here it stays,
A name that will not wash away.
It met us first in water bright,
And bound us fast in love and light.

No road we took, no work we tried,
Could earn the gift He would provide.
He spoke it once, so firm, so true,
"You are My child—I've chosen you."

And when the wind turns cold with doubt,
And the fire of life is burning out,
we trace the steps back to the stream,
Where mercy flows and grace redeems.

Prayer

Lord, Your grace doesn't make sense to us. It feels like too much, it's too wasteful, too free. But it's what we need. Thank You for pouring Yourself out for us, even when we don't deserve it. Teach us to live in the freedom of Your reckless, gracious forgiveness and love. Amen.

WITH CHILDREN

"I BELONG TO JESUS"

Supplies:

- Paper shapes (circles, stars, hearts, etc.)
- Markers or crayons
- Scissors
- String or tape

1. Introduction

Begin by sitting with the children in a circle. Ask:

- “Do you have something at home with your name on it? Maybe a book, a backpack, or even a special toy?”
- “Why do you think we put names on things? Is it because they’re special to us?”

Explain:

“When we are baptized, it’s like God puts His name on us and says, ‘You belong to Me forever.’ God loves us so much that He makes us His children in baptism. Today, we’re going to learn what it means to belong to Jesus.”

2. The Activity: The Name Tag

Part 1: Create a Name Tag

Give each child a paper shape and markers. Encourage them to write their name on the shape and decorate it. Say: “This is your name tag! When you were baptized, God gave you an invisible name tag that says, ‘You belong to Jesus.’ Nothing can ever take that name tag away!”

Part 2: Illustrating the Theme

Create a fun, interactive illustration: **The Lost and Found Box.**

1. Place a small box or basket labeled “Lost and Found” in the center of the room.
2. One by one, ask the children to put their decorated name tags into the box.

Say: “Sometimes, we feel like we don’t belong. Maybe we feel left out or we make a mistake and wonder if God still loves us. But Jesus never loses what belongs to Him.”

Pull the name tags out of the box one by one. Hold each up and say, “[Child’s Name], you belong to Jesus. He has written your name in His book of life, and He will never forget you.” Repeat for each child.

3. Teaching Moments: What Does It Mean to Belong to Jesus?

Pause to talk about three important symbols of baptism, using visual aids or simple drawings:

- **Water:**
“The water in baptism washes away all our sins. Jesus makes us clean and new. When we feel bad about something we’ve done, we can remember that Jesus has already forgiven us.”
Ask: “What does it feel like to know Jesus forgives you?”
- **The Cross:**
“The cross reminds us that Jesus loves us so much that He gave His life for us. Because of the cross, we belong to Him forever.”
Ask: “How does it feel to know you are Jesus’ forever?”
- **The Name:**
“In baptism, God puts His name on you and says, ‘I baptize you my name - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You are mine!’ Just like you wrote your name on your tag, Jesus wrote your name on His heart.”
Ask: “What does it mean to you to belong to Jesus?”

4. We Are God’s Family

Gather the children in a circle and say:

“Because we belong to Jesus, we are part of God’s big family. And in God’s family, we are all forgiven and we share God’s gifts of faith, hope, and love.”

5. Closing Prayer

Dear Jesus,

You placed Your name on us. We are Yours forever. When we feel lost, remind us that we belong to You. When we are sad, hold us close. Help us to tell others of Your love so they will belong to You, too. Amen.