THE LIVING

LENT

A DEVOTIONAL GUIDE
April 3 - April 9

SEASON OF

Fifth Sunday in Lent

The Lenten season takes a decidedly dark turn in this week's Gospel text for Sunday in John 12:1-8. Jesus is at the home of Mary, Martha, and their brother, Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. Mary breaks a jar of very expensive perfume and anoints Jesus' feet. Judas pretends to be offended by the extravagance of the act, protesting that the money could have been spent on the poor. A textual note lets us know that Judas was really just a thief stealing from the money bag. Jesus tells the disciples that Mary's act of devotion symbolized a preparation for His burial.

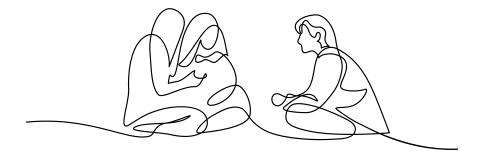
The topic of death stands in the way of next week's glorious cries of hosanna. Resurrection does not happen without crucifixion.

In the first half of this week's readings, Psalm 126 reminds us of the harsh reality that, in this life, fortunes are lost and tears are spent. We cry to the God who restores fortune and fills our mouths with laughter and songs of joy.

There are three readings from Isaiah 43 this week that remind us that when the waters, sweeping rivers, and fires threaten to consume us, we must not fear because the LORD is with us. Our God is doing a new thing, preparing a new act of salvation that we begin to glimpse this week in the announcement of the death of Jesus.

Our reading from Exodus 12:21-27 is a foreshadowing of the death of Christ. A sacrificed lamb will be killed and its blood painted on the family doorpost—a ritual that will remind the death angel to "pass over" the home and spare the family from death.

As you read the selections from Philippians 2-3 this week, notice the concern and risks made by Christian workers for the welfare of their churches. Paul reminds us that gaining Christ and knowing Christ is life's one real treasure. We must press on to lay hold of Christ regardless of what we lose or suffer.



As we shift on Sunday to the second half of the week, a more triumphant theme begins to emerge. Psalm 20 and Habakkuk 3:2-15 announce victory for God's anointed. The LORD will move heaven and earth to save His people.

Exodus 40 and Hebrews 10:19-25 join together to announce the establishment of a tabernacle and a priesthood to cleanse people from sin. It is only the blood of Jesus that has forever opened up the new way to the Most Holy Place!

Wedged into the last half of this week's readings is 1 John 2:18-28. It might be easy to walk away from a message full of so much death. It might be tempting to wonder if the work of Christ really is the work of God. This seems to be a challenge the writer was addressing. John writes that it is the spirit of the Antichrist that denies Jesus is God's anointed.

Glory doesn't come without suffering.
Resurrection cannot happen without crucifixion.
Heavenly coronation will not happen before Jesus
wears the crown of thorns.

Before we rush ahead to the glory of the Christian life, we must take some time to remember that suffering and death are very real. Jesus will experience both and, in so doing, will transform them into powerful gateways to life.

Allow the readings this week to begin to help you reflect on the painful reality of death that Christ experienced for our salvation.

FOR PRAYER & REFLECTION

The Gospel text for this fifth Sunday in Lent is a haunting story about an intimate act of worship. There's a lot here to reflect over, as it seems the full bandwidth of human desire is on display here.

Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead, as well as his two sisters, are present at a dinner given in Jesus' honor. Martha is serving as usual, and Mary pours herself out in a singular act of worship that stuns me every time I ponder it.

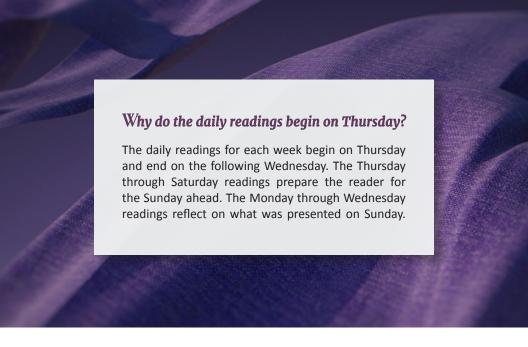
Mary's act of worship deeply inspires me, and yet, like Judas who is also in this story, a part of me recoils at Mary's extravagance. The nard she pours out on the feet of Jesus and tenderly wipes with her hair was worth a year's salary for a common laborer at the time. What about you? What comes up in your heart as you read and ponder this scene? Notice what you feel.

Judas raises a concern that many would likely agree with. Why wasn't the perfume sold and the money given to the poor? But we should be careful before agreeing with Judas' reasoning. A devil lies down that road.

Jesus defends Mary's act of pure worship. Jesus does indeed teach us to do justice and to care for the poor. This is part of the second great commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. But the first commandment is to love God with all of our heart.

Devoted disciples of Jesus through the ages have been rightly skeptical that we can fulfill the second commandment without following and being formed by the first commandment.

As you read, ask Jesus to help you worship like Mary, giving yourself fully and passionately to Him in intimate relationship.



SCRIPTURE

READINGS FOR THE WEEK

Thursday

Psalm 126; Isaiah 43:1-7; Philippians 2:19-24

Friday

Psalm 126; Isaiah 43:8-15; Philippians 2:25-3:1

Saturday

Psalm 126; Exodus 12:21-27; John 11:45-57

Sunday

Psalm 126; Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

Monday

Psalm 20; Exodus 40:1-15; Hebrews 10:19-25

Tuesday

Psalm 20; Judges 9:7-15; 1 John 2:18-28

Wednesday

Psalm 20; Habakkuk 3:2-15; Luke 18:31-34

