

Walking with Jesus  
through the  
Old Testament

*Devotions for Lent*

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## Introduction

“Then [Jesus] said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:25–27).

This passage has always intrigued me. It’s from the story of the walk to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–49), where the unrecognized, risen Christ appears to two friends, Cleopas and his unnamed companion. They recount to him their disappointment and grief concerning the fate of Jesus, and their confusion about reports of his missing body. Jesus responds with the words of this passage. Once they arrive at Emmaus, the friends invite him to stay. Finally they recognize him as he breaks the bread, but he vanishes. “Were not our hearts burning within us,” they remark, “while he was opening the scriptures to us?” They ran all the way back to Jerusalem and told the disciples. Soon Jesus appeared to all of them, bid them peace, and explained to the whole group how the laws of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms were fulfilled in Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection.

Clearly it was important for Jesus to explain the continuity of the Scriptures with himself. But what Scriptures did Jesus open for them? That is what captures my imagination.

I love the Old Testament and love to study it. I know that many Christians do not. They want to get right to the message of Jesus contained in the New Testament, and I certainly understand that. We also gravitate right away to the Psalms, and perhaps the Proverbs and a few other books. But other sections of the Old Testament—with its ancient laws, some violent history, and seemingly disjointed content of the prophetic books—seem difficult to connect to the concerns of one's faith and everyday life. We'd rather focus on the parts that have to do more clearly with Christian experience.

The sad thing is that the Old Testament, while open to different interpretations and areas of study, is indeed filled with amazing teachings that connect richly to Christian life and experience. The foundational ideas of the Old Testament are foundational for the New Testament, too: the oneness of God, creation, covenant, the kingdom of God, atonement, redemption, the Hebrew people, holiness, ethics, and others. We can discover many areas of continuity between the two testaments. But, like Jesus' friends, we need time to deepen our understanding.

Emmaus was about seven miles from Jerusalem, and assuming a typical walking pace, Jesus might have talked for two or three hours. How wonderful if we knew what passages Jesus explained to his friends! While not presuming to know, I've built this Lenten study around the Old Testament texts that Jesus and the New Testament writers used to show how he fulfilled the Scriptures. We'll see how Jesus' experiences and teachings create links and connections among passages from different parts of the Old Testament, illustrating God's faithfulness across generations.

For each of these forty days of Lent, we'll study passages together and pray over them. We'll think about how to apply them to our lives as we devote Lenten time to the Lord. We'll learn more about Jesus, his days on earth, his death and resurrection, and all his blessings and works that he gives to us freely. We'll use the Lenten season to gain a deeper sense of Christ's presence in our lives, for the sake of spiritual growth. Let us join together and allow the Lord to teach us as we proceed toward Jerusalem and Easter!

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# Ash Wednesday

## Ashes to Ashes

Genesis 3:15–19

My personal faith received a strange boost when I was in eighth and ninth grades and four close relatives died within a fourteen-month time period. They were members of the older generation, family members who had been influential to my life and faith.

Tragedy and distress can be impediments and even destroyers of faith, but they can be spurs to faith as well. Those successive funerals taught me at an impressionable age that we never know what's ahead in life. Within a few years, this insight became fundamental to my growing faith. I knew firsthand that we aren't necessarily protected from unexpected losses and different kinds of trouble, so if I wanted to live a faithful, meaningful life, I'd better not delay.

On Ash Wednesday, we intentionally focus upon our mortality. Several Bible verses poetically refer to us as dust and ashes. Genesis 3:19, part of our Scripture for today, reads, “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” In Genesis 18:27, Abraham refers to himself as “I who am but dust and ashes,” an image also used in Job 30:19. Thus, many of us spend part of the day with black smudges of ash on our foreheads. We remind other people of their mortality too.

The Hebrew word *adam* means human being, while the word *adama* means earth. (Similarly, the English word “human” is

related to the Latin word *humus*, also meaning earth.) We are paradoxical: although dirt, dust, and ashes, we are made in God's image (Gen. 1:26–27) and blessed by God with many gifts and with dominion over the earth. "What a piece of work is a man," declares Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, giving us the phrase that we use to describe someone who is odd or difficult. "How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form, in moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! . . . And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?"

It's good to be reminded of who we are, of our dual nature. Often we go through life making ourselves the heroes of our own stories; we subconsciously think (to paraphrase Oswald Chambers) that God can hardly function without our involvement in God's plans. Ash Wednesday is a solemn but potentially freeing time, when we're reminded of our mortality and humbleness and—ideally—let it humble our attitudes with how we approach the world and make us grow in love for God and one another, because we don't have unlimited time to show love and care for one another.

A wonderful thing about God's grace is that there is Good News within the sobering news and the soul-searching. Verse 15 is also a traditional messianic text, the earliest passage in the Bible that, according to many interpreters, points to Christ: "I will put enmity between you [the serpent] and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel." The offspring is any human being, but in a messianic interpretation, the offspring referred to is Christ himself and the serpent is Satan. As John Wesley, for instance, discusses in his notes on the Bible, Christ suffers and dies as a result of his human nature—the curse of human beings to endure these things—which is Satan "bruising his heel." But Christ's sufferings are, in turn, his "striking the head" of Satan, that is, a lethal blow against Satan's power to defeat human beings with sin and death.

Here is a great promise embedded within the curse of human beings: suffering and death have no ultimate power for us, thanks

to Christ. He redeems us from our sins, comforts us in our pain, and saves us to eternal life when we die.

Our Lenten journey begins on Ash Wednesday and, in some ways, our whole journey echoes the season's first day. We recognize our frailty, our wrongdoing, our mortality, and our need for grace. We know that at the end of the journey is Christ's glorious resurrection, which gives us hope and grace for all our lives.

### *Prayer*

Dear Lord, in whose image we are created: today, help me realize that I am ashes and dust and yet richly loved and blessed by you, because Christ himself became ashes and dust on our behalf. Amen.

### *Digging Deeper*

- Attend an Ash Wednesday service today if you are able, and write down your feelings about it. Imagine that Christ is telling you today, "I died, too, even though I wanted to live, just like you want to. But because I died and rose, your physical death is not the end for you, either!" Think about what eternal life means for you.
- In Romans 5:12–21, the apostle Paul writes about how the grace of Christ overcomes the sin introduced by Adam. Think about how that is true. Since sin is so strong in the world, why does Paul affirm that grace is stronger?

# Thursday

## God with Us

Isaiah 7:14–16; Matthew 1:18–25

As we move into the Lenten season, we think about the ways that we're growing and struggling in our faith. We sometimes ask God for help in the way of signs that God hears and cares. "Give me a sign!" is the way many of us have related to God at one time or another.

God has given me many "signs." Some were like Gideon's, assurances (if not so miraculous as his in Judg. 6:36–40) for my struggling faith. But I never asked for most of the signs. I recall getting a piece of distressing mail, some business matters I needed to attend to for my ailing mother. At that moment, one of my best friends called to say hello. In the early days in our marriage when money was tight, sometimes unexpected cash came in, such as a dividend check from the insurance company.

Our lesson today is a famous one for the Advent and Christmas seasons. It's a story of a divine sign that, in time, was fulfilled. In Isaiah's time, the kingdom of Judah was under threat from surrounding kingdoms. God sent Isaiah to Judah's king Ahaz, and through Isaiah, the Lord encouraged Ahaz to seek any sign he wanted. But Ahaz would not do so. His refusal, though humble sounding, indicated his struggling faith. Isaiah announced that the Lord would provide a sign anyway:

Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. (Isa. 7:14–16)

In the original context, the young woman is not identified. Nor

does the original Hebrew word specify whether or not she was a virgin. At this stage, the verse's main focus is that God exists and is present among his people. The young woman and her son Immanuel constituted a sign for the king, that God is doing new and amazing things for his kingdom and city (Jerusalem) that is for the time being under threat.

As time moved on, the Old Testament was translated into Greek, and the Greek word for "virgin" was used in translating the Hebrew word for "young woman," narrowing its meaning somewhat. As time moved further on, this passage was connected to Mary: a young woman who had never slept with a man, who became pregnant with Jesus by the power of God's Spirit. Isaiah's text became endowed with new and amazing meaning beyond its original context.

Remember that the young woman of Isaiah's prophecy is now, in the Lenten story, the middle aged woman who stands sorrowfully as her son slowly dies. Although we Protestants tend to recall Mary mostly at Christmastime, keep in mind that Isaiah's prophecy also connects us to the sorrowful, horrified Mary of Good Friday. She is a powerful pioneer of faith amid our own sorrows.

Imagine that Jesus selected this Isaiah passage for explanation to his friends en route to Emmaus. He would have talked about what it means for God to be with us. He might have said how God was present in him (Jesus) and how, very soon, God's Spirit would make Jesus more available than he had ever been in his time on earth. The faith of the young virgin woman and the power of her son were soon to bless people throughout the Roman Empire and, eventually, the whole world. All this came to pass after that special sign, given to a fearful king centuries ago.

### *Prayer*

Holy Immanuel, you who are Lord of Life, your virgin mother bore you in a stable so that we might share your glory. Help me have a strong sense that you are truly with me. Have patience with my struggles and fill me with your grace. In Christ's name. Amen.

*Digging Deeper*

Think about “signs” from God. Have you had any? If so, what were they like? How did they bolster your faith? If you asked for a sign, did it come to pass right away, after a while, or not at all? What are other ways you gain confidence for your faith?

# Friday

## You, O Bethlehem

Micah 5:2; Luke 2:4–7

If we were on the Emmaus Road with Jesus, he might begin talking about how the Messiah must come from Bethlehem, the city of David. You might say, “Wait a minute. Bethlehem is near Jerusalem, but I thought Jesus came from Nazareth up north in Galilee.” Then Jesus would explain that special circumstances forced Mary and Joseph to journey down to Bethlehem. He would explain how God’s providence works in mysterious ways so that ancient and contemporary plans might be fulfilled.

Micah lived in the 700s BCE. There were other towns named Bethlehem, so he singled out Bethlehem of the region of Ephrathah as the significant place. It is the area of Rachel’s tomb (Gen. 35:18–20), the village of Ruth (Ruth 4:11), and especially the birthplace of Ruth’s great-grandson, King David.

The Israelite monarchy had a difficult time getting started. If you read the stories of Samuel, Saul, and David in 1 Samuel, you’ll see that not everyone, including Samuel, thought a king was a good idea, since the Lord is Israel’s true king. The first king, Saul, fared less well than his successor, David, who caught the imagination of Israel. David became the standard that no other king would meet, although his son Solomon was widely known and honored for his wisdom, wealth, and reign.

With the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem (told at the end of 2 Kings), over four hundred years after David’s time, the monarchy ended. But the hope of a king like David remained very strong. Isaiah 11:1 refers to a “shoot . . . from the stump of Jesse”: like a new plant will grow from a tree stump, a new king will grow from David’s family line (in this case, poetically rendered with reference to David’s father). Other Scriptures, like our Micah passage, look with hope to a king in the lineage of David, who would even emerge from David’s own home village!

I visited Bethlehem in 1983. The Church of the Nativity is a famous Bethlehem shrine. The opening of the door is fairly short, so nearly everyone who enters must bow. The original church was commissioned in the fourth century to stand on the site of the cave where, according to ancient traditions, Jesus was born. Although beneath the basilica, the place no longer looks like a cave. The marble floor beneath one altar has a fourteen-pointed star that is lit with silver lamps. Another altar in the church marks the traditional site where Mary placed Jesus in a manger.

Even if we've never visited Bethlehem, most of us probably have formed a sense of the town in our imaginations because of years of holiday carols. But the town doesn't have to remain a solely Christmas association; think about how timely this hymn verse is for any time of the year.

How silently, how silently  
The wondrous gift is given!  
So God imparts to human hearts  
The blessings of His heaven.  
No ear may hear His coming,  
But in this world of sin,  
Where meek souls will receive him still,  
The dear Christ enters in.

Just as we look to Bethlehem during Advent and Christmas, we look there now, during Lent. That's because Jesus' "coronation" as a king in David's line took place on the cross! The cross, but also the subsequent resurrection, are the ways we know that Jesus is king. Thus Bethlehem, the birthplace of two kings, is a Lent and Easter town for us, too.

### *Prayer*

Holy God, may the fact that you laid a foundation for Christ in centuries of ancient Scriptures be a source of confidence for my faith and a blessing to me. Bless us, and all our families, bless our friends and neighbors, and increase in us your mercy and compassion. In Jesus' name. Amen.

*Digging Deeper*

- List five places that are important to you. They may be associated with family, or they may be places you love because of their beauty or because you “recharge” there. If you can, visit one or more of those places as soon as you’re able and spend time there praying and reflecting upon your Lenten journey.
- The Gospels include genealogies of Jesus (Matt. 1:1–17; Luke 3:23–38). Consider looking up some of Jesus’ ancestors in a Bible dictionary. Think about what kinds of people comprise his family, both notable and notorious.

# Saturday

## A Child Is Born

Isaiah 9:1–7; Isaiah 11:1–9; Jeremiah 23:5–6

Among my childhood keepsakes is my collection of political pin-back buttons. Slogans like “I Like Ike” and “LBJ for the USA” and “Nixon’s the One” remind me of the hopes that we have whenever we vote for our leaders.

Our Scriptures for today are filled with hope and promise for the future. To me, these passages are among the most beautiful in the Bible.

For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace . . .  
(Isa. 9:6–7)

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.  
The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.  
His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.  
(Isa. 11:1–3)

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king

and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. (Jer. 23:5)

David is significant in several ways. He was successful militarily and politically. He captured the Jebusite city of Jerusalem, made it the center of the kingdom, and brought the Ark of the Covenant there. He was faithful to the Lord and sought divine guidance, making him a person “after God’s own heart.” When he realized he had failed and sinned, he admitted his sin and sought God’s pardon. He was compassionate and sought opportunities for kindness. He sang praises and prayers to God, and some of these traditionally attributed to David are found in the book of Psalms. When we get to our Holy Week Scriptures, we’ll see how images from David’s psalms, centuries before Jesus, virtually describe Jesus’ experiences of suffering.

Solomon succeeded David. After Solomon’s death, the kingdom split into the northern and southern (Israel, also called Ephraim, and Judah) kingdoms. All of the northern kings did evil in God’s sight. This faithlessness led to the fall of the northern kingdom in 722 BCE. Other than Hezekiah and Josiah, the several kings of both kingdoms were mediocre to very bad. The leadership of God’s people let them down, to say the least.

But David remained a symbol of Israel’s future hope and a foreshadowing of God’s promises. Passages of post-exilic hope include beautiful passages about a righteous king who would rule the people with justice, who would bring peace and well-being.

It’s human nature to have high expectations for our leaders, and often enough, we’re disappointed. We know that Jesus was acclaimed on Palm Sunday and in a few days was on trial. But what are our own expectations for Jesus? Ask yourself: How is Jesus your “wonderful counselor”? How is Jesus your faithful and just monarch, your guarantee of peace (Isa. 9:6–7)? How does Jesus provide well-being to you, which you can even perceive in the world around you (Isa. 11:6–9)?

For being royalty, Jesus seems so low-key, even from his birth. My family and I have visited homes of royal families, like

Buckingham Palace in London and the Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna. God's own Son had no such luxury. There is a paradox at work here, a mystery: God is fulfilling a centuries-old hope, but in a lowly, even obscure way. Will God work in our own lives in bold, clear ways, or in quiet ways, through scarcely a hush?

### *Prayer*

King Jesus, we struggle with leadership. We complain about the leaders we elect. We do understand the idea of a monarch, and yet the kind of monarch you are is confusing. Grant us clarity about who you are, our Ruler and Counselor. Amen.

### *Digging Deeper*

- Are you “star struck” by monarchs? What is it about royalty that fascinates? What is it about leadership that raises our expectations?
- Have you ever felt disappointed in your faith? What happened? How did you solve the problem (or did you put it on hold for a while)? What would you tell someone else if they felt let down by God?

# First Sunday Reflection

When I was a little boy, I thought it strange that we celebrated Jesus' birth at Christmas and then, just a few weeks later, we began to think about his death and resurrection. Jesus sure grew up fast.

I knew little about the liturgical calendar or the way the church commemorates different aspects of Jesus' life at different times of year. But now, I think my childhood wonder and confusion wasn't completely off target. We celebrate the whole of Jesus' life within the span of a year: from his birth through his relatively unknown younger years, to his ministry, and then his passion, death, and resurrection (not to mention his ascension and the subsequent Pentecost gift of the Holy Spirit). Everything about Jesus is important for our lives, and one part of his life connects with another part.

Another thing that I thought was strange when I was a little boy: Jesus was Jewish. I'm from a small Midwestern town and knew only a few Jewish people as a child. Now I understand that one of the beautiful things about Jesus' life and experience is his deep rootedness in the Jewish tradition and Scriptures.

This week's Scriptures have seemed awkward to study, because we normally associate them with Advent and Christmas. But this is the whole experience of Jesus. Even as we reflect on him during Lent, we meditate upon his roots in the scriptural hope for a great king like David. We think about the aspects of the future king's birth within the ancient prophecies. We even go all the way back to the beginning of Genesis, when human sin began, to see the beginning of God's mighty acts of blessing and salvation throughout the Jewish Scriptures. We not only study Jesus' life but also the way his coming was rooted in God's plans across the centuries.

*Prayer*

Dear Lord, I become stuck in my small plans and affairs. Then I realize that your plans are vast and deep and they span eons of history, light years of space, and bless billions of people. Help me join my little experiences, hopes, and dreams to the wonders of your grace. In Jesus' name. Amen.

*Digging Deeper*

What aspects of the Christmas season are things you'd rather not think about the rest of the year? (Frantic shopping may be one; Christmas carols sound strange any time besides December.) What aspects of the season are good to keep in your heart all year? Make a "Christmas list" of wonderful things about that season that can help your faith year-round, and in particular during this Lenten journey.