

**UNBOUND**



**MORE LIGHT**  
PRESBYTERIANS

# ASHES TO **RAINBOWS**

A QUEER LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

# ASH WEDNESDAY

BY ALEX MCNEILL

## PSALM 51:1-17

As a queer person reading Psalm 51:1-17, it can feel triggering to encounter so much language about sin and being “born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me,” particularly because the Psalmist isn’t speaking about one specific sin; but, rather, identifying that they are in essence, a sinner. Those of us who are LGBTQIA+ are likely all too familiar with what someone usually means when they want us to confess or repent of the “sin” of being ourselves.

Before my gender transition, I was one of the most visibly queer-identified people on my college campus. Whether it was my lesbian rock band t-shirt, my shaved head, my androgynous appearance, or holding hands with a woman, I was often the target of comments, stares and, sometimes, overly eager Campus Crusaders. I always knew when one of the evangelical campus groups was finished with their meeting because someone full of the Lord would march right up to me and ask, skeptically, if I knew Jesus. The assumption they made, of course, was that as a queer-looking and identified person, I couldn’t possibly have a relationship with God. It was as if my repentance would be worth double coupons to God if I would only give up myself.

While I could generally brush off those encounters because I was a life-long Christian, a Religious Studies major, and a self-confident queer person, the idea that whole faith communities assumed my sinfulness was because of my sexuality broke my heart. My heart broke not just for myself, but for all the LGBTQIA+ folks who were told by more than just strangers on the campus quad that their ultimate sin was their sexuality or gender identity. Too many friends had been made to feel ashamed because of who they were in God’s eyes by their families and churches. My heart also broke for those in the evangelical campus clubs. The rules they lived by weren’t built to experience the fullness of the diverse, beautiful community that surrounded us.

Reading Psalm 51, you can almost hear the Psalmist crying out in pain. The Temple has been destroyed, and with it, the sanctioned method for finding absolution from God by providing a burnt sacrifice is no longer possible. At the beginning of the text, the Psalmist is crying out for mercy and to be cleansed of their sins, while also wrestling with how they might appease God enough to receive an expression of God’s love if they cannot offer a sacrifice.

As LGBTQIA+ people, we also know the depths of this pain in a world that has us feel ashamed for who we love or how we yearn to be seen. So many of us have cried out to God to change hearts, minds, and sometimes even ourselves. The deepest pain comes from thinking that we are the ones who need to change, rather than the very system that would deny the fullest expression of ourselves as not beloved or created by God. Too many of us have been made to believe that we must make ourselves into a burnt offering to please God — to burn away the very truths of how God created us.

Thankfully, the Psalmist realizes that God has “no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased” (Psalm 51:16). What then is a more acceptable sacrifice? The Psalmist offers us an interesting clue, “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart” (Psalm 51:17). On Ash Wednesday, as we receive a mark of the cross on our forehead made of ash, we are reminded that we have come from dust, and to dust we shall return (Gen 3:19). As we bear the ashen cross, we are confronted with a reminder of our mortality and asked to recognize and confess the ways we have fallen short of the vision God has for us.



To me, Ash Wednesday is ultimately a reminder that we are alive, we only have a limited time on this earth, and that we are human, and to be human is to get it wrong sometimes. I don't know if you're like me, but when I realize I've caused someone harm with my words or actions, my heart breaks for the pain I've caused. As I witness systems causing pain and oppression to myself or others, my heart breaks for the broken premise and promise of what those systems were built to do and the lives they claim along the way.

With the amount of trauma, pain, and injustice in the world, it would be easy to spiral inwards with our broken hearts, to seal off the places where our hearts have broken so that we don't have to feel that tender pain anymore. Unfortunately, sealing off that brokenness can lead to a numbness that blocks the more positive emotions in our lives. I don't believe this is what God wants for us. The Psalmist shares, "You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart" (Psalm 51:6). Reading this Psalm, I wonder, what if Ash Wednesday is also about looking directly at the places where our heart has broken, not from a place of fear or judgment about that brokenness, but with a curiosity for the truths and wisdom we have gleaned through those experiences?

The last years before I began my gender transition were some of the most painful in my life. I wrestled with shame, internalized transphobia, fears of being vulnerable enough to come out, and the grief of what I might lose by doing so. I now know that along the way God was teaching me wisdom in my secret heart about my own inner-strength, the depth of trust I could have with my partner, my family, and my community as I came out, and relationships I would develop as a result of my vulnerability about my journey. My broken heart led to a more authentic me and gave me a deep well of empathy for others facing their own obstacles to a leap of faith. My broken heart over the experience I had in college being a visibly queer person on that campus taught me empathy for people struggling to figure out who they were and how to live that out in community.

The Psalmist proclaims that with the wisdom of their secret heart, and a renewed spirit they will "teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you" (Psalm 51:13). I believe the Psalmist is saying, we do not have to confront our sins and our broken hearts from a place of fear of God's rejection because God already loves us enough to forgive and heal them. Furthermore, from that place of healing, we can reach outward to help others who might be drowning in their own brokenness.

In the song, "The Things I Regret" by one of my favorite musicians, Brandi Carlile, she sings:

*With the weight of the world resting on my back,  
And the road on which I've traveled is as long as it is cracked  
But I keep pressing forward with my feet to the ground,*

**For a heart that is broken makes a beautiful sound**

The beautiful sound we can make when we face our broken hearts is a siren song to others who thought the pain of their broken heart was the end of the story, that death is all there is. We wear the sign of the cross on Ash Wednesday as a reminder that we bear witness to resurrection all the time in ourselves and in others. This Lent, my practice is to notice the places where and for what I feel my heart breaking; and, rather than shutting off that feeling, to confront the whisper I hear in the cracks for how I am called to act.

**Listen, can you hear the song your heart makes?**



# 1ST SUNDAY OF LENT

BY SLATS TOOLE

## MATTHEW 4:1-11

*Prove it.*

*If you are who you say you are, prove it.*

I have always loved Lent. I was a child who took everything far too seriously; there are more pictures of young Slat's staring intently at something than pictures of me laughing or smiling. My mother called me her "serious one", and while I reveled in the joys of Christmas and Easter, as soon as I started to understand what Lent was, I loved it. I loved it for its intensity. I loved it for its gravity. I loved it for the opportunity to prove myself. The spiritual disciplines of Lent allowed me to prove to myself and others that I was worthy of calling myself a Christian. It was my way of earning God's love.

And as an intense child, I was equally intense with my Lenten disciplines. I started, as many of us do, by giving up things like chocolate and soda. I beamed with pride as I lasted the full 40+ days (including the Sundays) giving up the things I loved as a show of piety. One year, my pastor offered us a list of possible disciplines that went beyond "giving up something for Lent", and I quickly homed in on the one I thought was the hardest: fasting from sundown on Good Friday to sunrise on Easter Sunday. "I'm going to be so good at this," I thought. But I was in middle school and didn't know too much about healthy fasting and I didn't drink any water. I spent that Easter Sunday morning at home, away from church, throwing up whatever I tried to eat, nursing myself back to health.

But at least I'd proven it, right?

At least I'd proven I deserved to be here.

*If you are who you say you are...*

If I am honest, I subscribe to the common-but-often-unspoken theology: "God loves everyone except me."

"God's mercy is poured out for everyone except me."

"God's love is unconditional for everyone in the world, except for me, who has to earn it."

**It's much easier to tell others that God loves them, that they are created in the image of God, that they are beloved, than it is to believe it for yourself.** For as long as I can remember, I have believed that any value I have is only the value that I have earned. If a partner told me they loved me, my honest question was, "Why?" Because of course, I never believed I was doing enough. I could be at church three times a week, singing in the choir, attending every worship service, volunteering my time, and it wouldn't be enough. I could make strides in my career and win awards at school, and it wouldn't be enough. It would never be enough for me, I thought. For my loved ones, I feared. For God, I believed.

*"I'm bisexual."*

*"How do you know?"*

My doubt of my own worth was not entirely about my queerness. I'm sure if I was straight and cisgender I would have these thoughts, too, but my queerness running into my religion exacerbated it.

I was very lucky in my upbringing as a queer person in the church. I grew up in a congregation where I knew not everyone was on board with fully accepting me, but they cared about me and were open enough to let that care and love take precedent over judgment. But even a positive church environment didn't stop me from picking up the messages that told me I didn't belong in a church. But I loved the church. I didn't want to leave the church. So I set out to prove that I did belong. By the time I was in fifth grade, I had memorized more verses of Leviticus than most Christians will read in their lifetimes. I'd started looking up words in Greek. I learned about ancient Jewish and Roman customs, all to prove that I did belong. I read studies about "the causes of homosexuality" to prove that I was part of God's creation, too. When I came out as non-binary much later, I had to have information about the ambiguity of biological sex, the historical validity of the singular "they", and gender identity throughout history and cultures, all waiting in my back pocket for when someone said "that's not real" and asked me to prove it.

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*

One of the assumptions I held onto from my childhood about this scripture was that Jesus was going into the wilderness to prove himself. To prove that he was ready to start this ministry. After he passed the test, it would be clear he was ready to begin the work he was born among us to do. This was an example to all of us, I thought, to prove our validity as Christians.

But it is not God who asks for proof. It is the devil.

It is not God who asks Jesus to prove who he is. It is not God who asks Jesus to show who he is in a way that would be clear and obvious and understandable to anyone witnessing. It is not God who tests Jesus' fortitude in the face of temptation. It is the devil.

**God doesn't need proof. God knows.** Every inch of our identities, every misguided belief of not being enough, God knows already. Right before this season in the wilderness, Jesus has been baptized and claimed as beloved (just as God claims all of us as beloved—even me, apparently). God didn't need proof to do that.

"How do you know?"

"Well, how do you know you're straight?"

So here we are at the beginning of the season of Lent. Here we are in the days when we determine what these 40 days should hold for us, how they can be a meaningful time of preparation and remembrance.

Here is what I am trying to give up:

- I am trying to give up the idea that my worth is bound to my productivity.
- I am trying to give up the burden of proving my belovedness does not come with a caveat.
- I am trying to give up the comfort of all the ways I prove to the world and the church that I belong, and instead, sit in the wilderness of what I too-often struggle to believe: that I am known, that I am loved, that I am saved by none of my own actions, but by the unconditional love of the God who created me in Their image. It feels empty and vulnerable to not be surrounded by the walls I've built through my accomplishments and commitments and relationships.

But I believe it might indeed be holy work.

As you move through this week, take some time to write out those things that you would never let your friends say to themselves, but you say to yourself all the time — the negative thoughts that creep in when you're stressed, the frustration when something doesn't go as planned. Then, practice crafting the opposites of those sentences that show grace which is how God treats you. Consider treating yourself that way, as well.



# 2ND SUNDAY OF LENT

BY OPHELIA HU KINNEY

## GENESIS 12: 1-3; ROMANS 4:1-14

My mother told me that she came to the United States with only two suitcases. We stood in her closet, and she put her hands on the thin, long dresses she kept for thirty years, better suited for southern China summers than Chicago winters.

She came in the 1980s following my father, who responded like 300,000 other Chinese emigrants to a new political reality: though the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943, few mainland Chinese could immigrate then due to other restrictions placed on non-European immigration. In 1965, the amended U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act removed those restrictions, and in the late 1980s, China and the U.S. established formal diplomatic relations, allowing freer mainland Chinese immigration to the U.S.

My parents came with the most basic English skills and no family but one another, trusting in a land they had never seen. Along with two suitcases, my mother also brought to this country the ways she said “I love you” without having to speak: feeding us, teaching us, giving generously of her time and resources, even when we had little.

My parents’ journey to the United States was still easier and kinder than that of the 85,000 individuals who sought asylum in the United States in 2016 or the 54,000 who did so in 2017, almost half of which were children -- all of them trusting in a land they had never seen. **The story of so many immigrants is the story of mobilized faith.**

This was the way of Abram, too, who went in the direction of God’s call. God directed Abram: “Leave your land, your family, and your father’s household for the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, those who curse you I will curse; all the families of the earth will be blessed because of you” (Genesis 12:1-3 CEB). And so Abram and his family left Ur for Canaan -- a journey of 600 miles to a land that God would show them.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul draws the early Christians’ attention to their spiritual lineage: “Are we going to find that Abraham is our ancestor on the basis of genealogy? Because if Abraham was made righteous because of his actions, he would have had a reason to brag, but not in front of God. What does the scripture say? Abraham had faith in God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Workers’ salaries aren’t credited to them on the basis of an employer’s grace but rather on the basis of what they deserve. But faith is credited as righteousness to those who don’t work, because they have faith in God who makes the ungodly righteous” (Romans 4:1-5 CEB).

But Abram did not live a spotless record of piety. He lived 75 years before he made the spectacular journey that cemented his position as a paragon of faithfulness. His record of faith was secured by neither doubtlessness nor the utterance of the right prayer. He did not have a singular moment of conversion, the Scriptures lead us to believe. Whereas we can mistake faithfulness for the substance of our inner lives divorced from our actions, Abram demonstrates that our faith and actions are inextricable: that faithfulness is our reflex toward the irresistible call of God. Abram demonstrated faith by setting out, inclining his heart for 600 miles toward God’s voice.

I followed in my parents’ footsteps of setting into the unknown by coming out to them when I was a teenager. After

many years of conflict, my mother learned to say “I love you” without words again, this time by showing up in my life, giving herself to relationship with my wife and with me. And I learned to lean into the direction of God’s voice: **a voice that called me out of the closet and into a life of greater authenticity.**

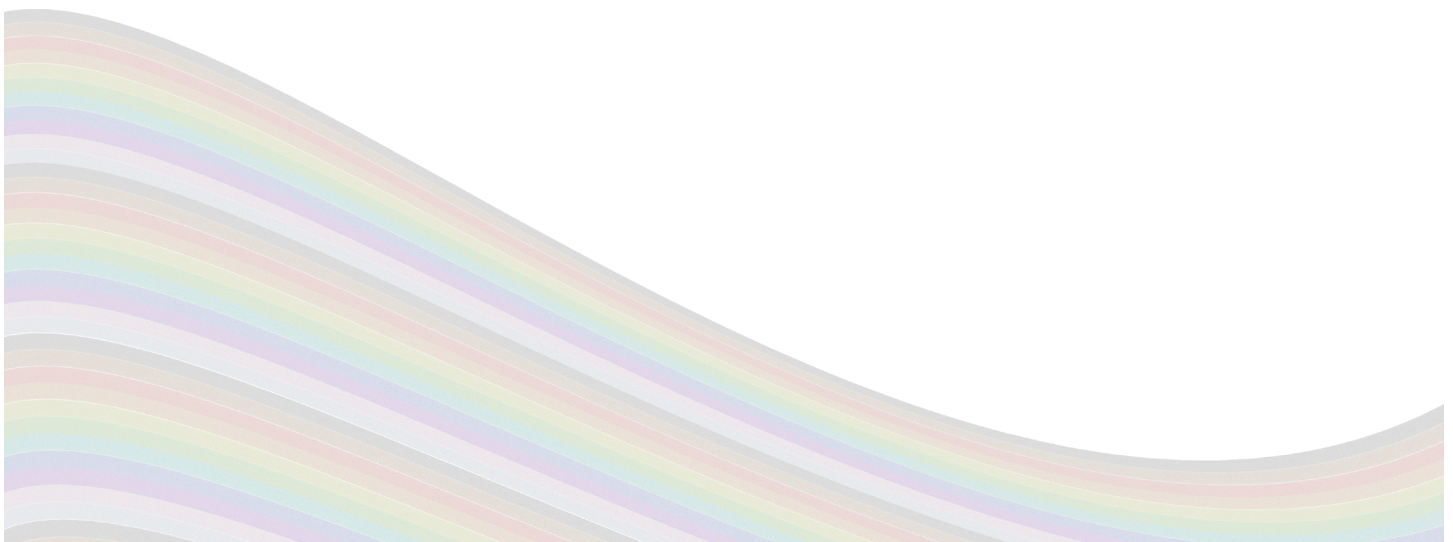
Like Abraham’s agreement to leave Ur for Canaan, **the queer sacrament of coming out is a co-mingling of faith and action:** faith in God’s promises that we will be blessed, that our names will be respected, that we will be a blessing, and that all the families of the earth will be blessed because of us. Because coming out requires us to move into the unknown, it is a materialization of faith in whatever land may follow.

Not long after the start of his public ministry, Jesus demonstrated a sort of coming-out to his disciples. Matthew’s Gospel told us of the Transfiguration, in which the very human Jesus -- who ate and laughed and wept with his friends -- also revealed to them his divinity. Jesus then underscored his identity through his communion with the spirits of Moses and Elijah, two spiritual forebears who, like Abraham, demonstrated their faith through their actions. Jesus’ coming-out, like theirs, is an active manifestation of faith. His devotion to God’s call was far more than declaratory; it required a life and death of guided devotion.

Abraham demonstrated his relationship with God not through the sterile utterance of the right words or the mere acceptance of God into his heart. “The promise to Abraham and to his descendants, that he would inherit the world, didn’t come through the Law but through the righteousness that comes from faith” (Romans 4:13-14 CEB). Abraham proved the mettle of his faith by posturing himself in the direction of the Spirit. His journey was his declaration.

With the growth of nimble, far-reaching efforts for social change, and with increasing ways for justice-minded Christians to find one another, loud voices against progress have attempted to pit social justice advocacy against faithfulness to the Gospel, as though following Christ could not possibly result in our prayerful efforts to dismantle colonialism and its resulting sins.

But what we learn from Jesus’ example, from the demonstration of asylum speakers and other immigrants, and what we claim as our spiritual inheritance reflected in Abraham, is that faith is not a recitation. Nor is it the right prayer. **Faith means committing to the journey. It means coming out, setting out, to a land that God will show you.**



# 3RD SUNDAY OF LENT

BY ASHLEY DETAR BIRT

## JOHN 4: 5-42

“I have a question about storytelling,” I said while preparing for a big meeting later in the week. I was at a workshop to help me focus for a presentation I had to give. As the leader nodded, I continued, “I know that storytelling is a compelling way to help people connect, and I have a really good story about a young, queer black student I worked with this summer. Do you think that’d be good one to tell?” The leader paused, her brow furrowed.

“I’d stay away from LGBTQ stuff,” she said. “We don’t want to pigeonhole you.”

“Okay,” I replied. “Should I avoid racial stuff, too?”

“No, that’s okay. They can see that you’re black. They can’t see that you’re queer.”

### **They can’t see that you’re queer.**

As a queer black person, I often have to consider my existence in the world. How do people see me? What about me is immediately known? What about me is invisible unless I say something? What about me goes without saying? It is difficult to find answers to all these questions, especially when said answers change depending on circumstances. I may or may not look queer in a plain black t-shirt, but when I wear a rainbow button down, perhaps folks know. When I walk down the street with my wife, some folks think we’re best friends, some think we’re together, and some even guess that we’re queer but get our identities wrong (we’re both bisexual). Some people can pick me out without any clues whatsoever, while others make the wrong assumptions even when I’m walking around with “LGBTQ” on my shirt. And none of this even begins to touch what happens when people start making assumptions about my race.

This is part of what it means to be a queer person. So many people navigate both their sexual orientation and the ways that the world sees them through the lens of that sexual orientation. Do we play into the stereotypes of “what people like us” are supposed to look like? Do we have the right signifiers so that other queer people can spot us? Are people of our age/race/ability/background/etc. even seen as part of the community? Do we blend in (in any direction) enough to keep us safe in certain circumstances? Do we even want to blend in at all? These are just some of the questions we consider as we exist as queer people in the world (these are also some of the questions that trans people consider but, as I am not trans, I won’t speak for that part of the LGBTQ community).

### **What would it be like not to ask questions like these but rather to be seen fully, seen as we are without judgment?**

The Samaritan woman helps us answer this in her encounter with Jesus. There are a few things known about each of them at the beginning of the passage. Jesus is Jewish and the woman is Samaritan. Jesus would like some water, and the woman knows this is a strange request. Jesus knows he has living water, and the woman knows he has no bucket. As their conversation continues, more information comes to light. This living water isn’t the kind that comes from a well, but the kind that becomes a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. It is the kind of water the woman would very much like to try. Jesus acknowledges that the woman has had five husbands in her life and



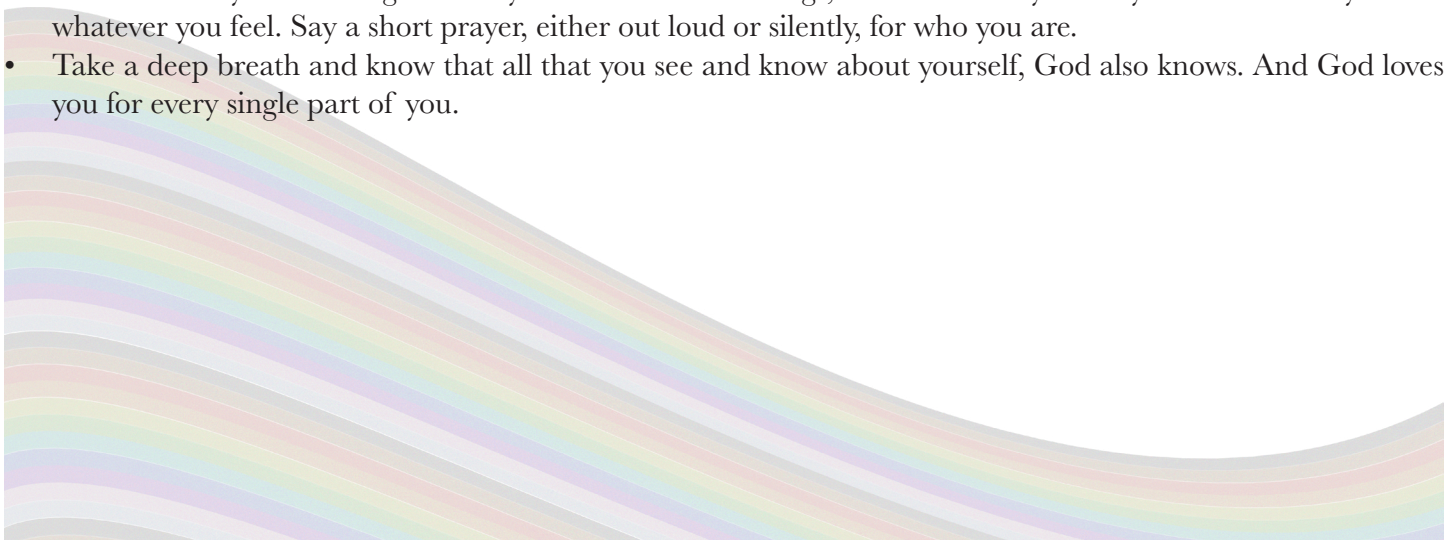
is currently with someone who is not her husband. The woman acknowledges that Jesus is, at the very least, a prophet. She knows that the Messiah is coming. Jesus knows that it is him.

When the disciples, who were out buying food, show up to this scene, they are amazed at the conversation Jesus is having with this woman, but they don't stop it. Instead, what we are left with is two people who see each other as they are, across questions and differences, without judging each other. Things that are obvious and things that may not be so obvious are known and appreciated by them both. When they part, there is transformation. The woman goes on to tell people about this amazing man she has met who has truly seen her, inside and out, while Jesus tells the disciples that there is more work to do and that he is ready for it. Energy. Enthusiasm. Joy. This is what can happen when people are truly seen.

Throughout Lent, we are asked to take time to reflect on God, on Jesus, on our faith, and on ourselves. For many queer and trans people, reflection isn't a new exercise; it's something that we do all the time to help us navigate who we are and how the world does/should see us. What's important to remember, however, is that God knows who we are. As we ask questions, as we seek answers, as we change into the newest and best versions of ourselves, God is there. God has always been there, looking at us and seeing us for the people we have been, we are, we are becoming. Some may speak of a judgmental God, much like one would expect a Jewish man to judge a Samaritan woman somehow. They may speak of a God who desires secrecy, the kind of God that might shame a woman with five husbands. This is not the God we know. The God we know is the God who reminds us that we are beautifully and wonderfully made. The God we know is the one who breathed the breath of life into us and knows the hairs on our heads. The God we know is the God who meets us at the well, knowing what is obvious and not so obvious about us, and accepting all of it.

As we continue our Lenten journeys, let us take a moment to reflect with this God, the God whose reflection is all of us:

- Take a look into a mirror or other reflective surface. Notice what you see. What does your face look like? Your head? Your body? Take all of it into consideration. If that's overwhelming for any reason, close your eyes and instead notice how your body is working (your breath, your heartbeat, etc.). Say a short prayer, either out loud or silently, for your body.
- Notice how you feel physically in your body. What feels tight? What feels relaxed? Don't pressure yourself into liking or disliking any particular part of your body; instead, focus on how you feel inside. Whether it's good or bad or neutral, all your feelings are valid. Say a short prayer, either out loud or silently, for your feelings.
- Think about who you are. Who do you love? What do you like or dislike? What things about you make you proud or frustrated? What parts of your life hold special meaning to you? What hopes do you have for yourself? How do you wish to grow? As you consider these things, notice how they make you feel. It's okay to feel whatever you feel. Say a short prayer, either out loud or silently, for who you are.
- Take a deep breath and know that all that you see and know about yourself, God also knows. And God loves you for every single part of you.



# 4TH SUNDAY OF LENT

BY BERTRAM JOHNSON

## JOHN 9:1-41

The ninth chapter of John's Gospel is centered entirely on the story of Jesus healing a man born without the ability to see. The passage begins with the disciples asking Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" He responded, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Although the Sabbath was to be a day of rest, Jesus told them that they must do the work of God while there was still time. After that, he spat upon the ground, put mud on the man's eyes, and sent him away to the pool at Siloam to cleanse himself.

Upon his return, the man was not met by Jesus, but by the neighbors and community that had known him and seen him from birth. Throughout his life, they saw the man and the impact that his lack of sight had upon his well-being and sense of belonging. Living with an impairment in that day positioned him securely on the outskirts of social and religious life. He had no means of working and got what little he had by begging. His lack of sight relegated him to poverty and life without care, compassion, or support.

When the people witnessed the man seeing the world for the first time, they were shocked. Those who knew him as a beggar could not believe their eyes and some even said he was not the same person. How could it be that one who had been born blind now had sight? The man stood strong and told his neighbors and the religious leaders that he was indeed the same man. Some protested and said it was impossible, but the man would not deny the truth of his story. He had spent a lifetime not being able to see or share fully in the life of his community. He had been at the edges of society, but now, Jesus had changed his position. He became the center of everyone's attention. **The man had vision and a voice that could not be taken away.**

**What is your story of transformation?** It might not have been something as miraculous as gaining sight, but each of us has a story of how and when we were changed from one way of being to another.

For me, coming of age in a religiously conservative town in rural Florida, it was very clear from my family, the larger community, and church what was considered an acceptable way of being for a young man. Knowing that I was physically attracted to people of my same sex was a secret shame that I carried deep within me. Although I worked hard to keep my truth hidden, not feeling free to express my heart made me feel like an outsider, never fully capable of sharing in the life that my peers did. It also caused me to hate my sexuality and my body - to view myself as unclean and unworthy of God's love.

It took years, but in time, I came to believe and accept that God fully loves and embraces me as a same-gender loving person. It wasn't as simple as getting mud rubbed in my eyes. But there was a point or, to be more accurate, a series of points when I began to see God's grace and see myself in a different, clearer light.

Along the journey, there were definitely people who told me that the growing sense of love and acceptance I had for myself was wrong. Even now, there are people around me - religious voices and political leaders - who say it is impossible to be queer and beloved by God. But like the man who was given sight, I know the truth of my identity and how my life has been transformed by the love and power of Jesus.

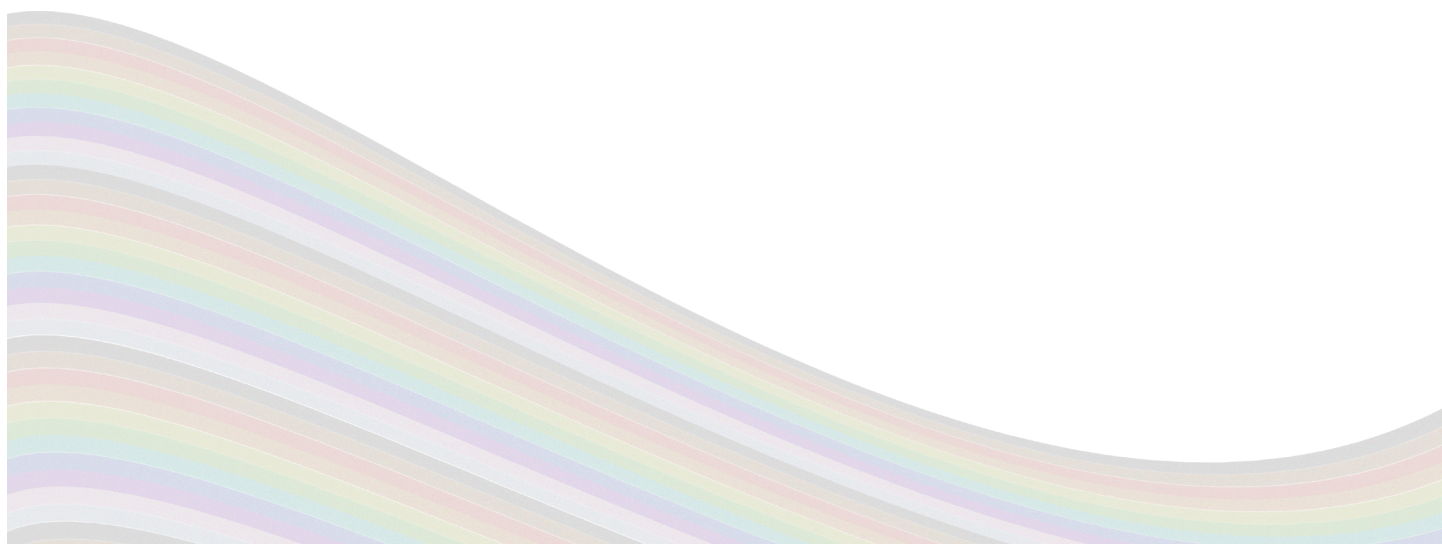
Jesus' disciples asked who sinned for the man was blind. According to Jesus, sin was not the issue. Lacking sight did not distance him from God or limit how Jesus saw him. What if 'blind' was simply a modifier used to describe one aspect of who he was? What if Jesus was really saying that this man, this person, this child of God was born so that God's work might be revealed in him?

The experience of the man who was given sight is representative of the experiences shared by oppressed peoples in every time and land. Whether it is physical abilities, sexual or gender identity, skin color, country of origin or social standing at birth, there are always systems and structures working to limit and control a person's place and potential. And even when one is blessed to discover a means for liberation, these same systems conspire to deny agency over the gifts, wisdom, and blessings that God has given.

Regardless of the labels we use to separate us from each other or the perceived imperfections of our bodies, each one of us, like the man, was born so that God's love, God's grace, and God's justice might be revealed in us.

During your Lenten journey, I invite you, this week, to take some time to consider the ways you have changed and are changing. **Think of the ways you used to know yourself, but now see that you are someone different than before.** Reflect on the labels you used to accept, the ways people used to regard you, or you used to regard yourself, that no longer fit with how you have grown. Remember the changes in body, mind, or spirit that have led you to an ever-evolving knowledge of the mystery and grace of God. And even in this new place, know that as we look toward Jesus' betrayal, arrest, his cross, and the empty tomb, God is still inviting us to let some old part of us be washed away so that something new might be born in us this day.

Amen.





# 5TH SUNDAY OF LENT

BY FLO BARBEE-WATKINS

## JOHN 11:1-45

For many LGBTQ Presbyterians, the process of coming out, “coming to” (which many racialized communities prefer), recognizing, affirming, or revealing one’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity is a holy process that involves prayer, reflection, and spiritual conversations with others. **During this Season of Lent, remembering the process often brings the person into a closer and deeper relationship with God.**

I remember when I was in the military, and President Clinton announced “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue.” This order was Clinton’s way of neutralizing the military’s stance on LGBTQ siblings. This action did more harm than good, and many men and women were discharged from the military while others lied to stay.

When President Obama executed the order to allow LGBTQ siblings to serve freely, there was no backlash, and those who were currently serving felt a sense of freedom and validation. **But why did it take so long?**

In many ways, LGBTQ siblings have felt dead to the Church, waiting for acceptance, respect, and inclusion.

But what about the background of the story in the gospel of John? Mary and Martha, two women, were living with their brother Lazarus —three unmarried people living together in one house. What we easily overlook in the twenty-first century is how odd, or perhaps even transgressive, this would have been to the Jews of Jesus’ day.

There was pressure on all, women and men alike, to marry and have children. For women, there was no choice in the matter: their men governed their lives even before marriage (either fathers or brothers), and their husbands after. It is true that after a man’s death, his brother was expected to take over the care and control of his widow(s), but this scarcely seems to fit what we know of this household.

Lazarus is not married either, and there is nothing anywhere in the text to suggest that he is in command of the household – quite the opposite. **In this household, it is the women who run things.**

Despite the awkwardness in reading the text, we hear the similarities of pressure on LGBTQ siblings. Many hide their sexualities, gender identities, and bury their authenticity to fit into societal norms. Today, many Trans-siblings are being murdered. According to the HRC, in the reporting of anti-transgender violence, many of these victims are misgendered in local police statements and media reports, which can delay our awareness of deadly incidents. Death continues to occur.

*So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick. (v.3)*

It is easy to forget that in this passage, Jesus was not merely returning to the friends he had left behind. This encounter occurs just a short while before the Passion. As the disciples knew, by going back to Judea, Jesus was returning to the place where people wanted him out of the way. This is risky business.

As queer folks who believe in Jesus Christ, we are often persecuted, left dead, by those in control of the churches, but this is not a reason for us to stay away or be silent.

## **The Church cannot be a place where don't ask, don't tell, don't pursue is the norm.**

Because the Church has been silent, not speaking out for justice and equity for all, some of its members, namely LGBTQ folks, have experienced death. It is incumbent upon us and LGBTQ Christians to stay the course and use our hands and feet to bring about resurrection.

*Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die." (v 25, 26)*

When Jesus says I am the resurrection and the life, it is a promise of everlasting life and abundant life here on earth. By resurrection, we are referring not just to the soul or spirit, but specifically to the physical body in some way. The Greek word for resurrection, *anastasis*, comes from the verb *anistēmi*, "to raise, arise." The other verb used occasionally is *egeirō*, "to awaken, rise." The conquering of death by Jesus Christ means going to the depths of the earth to destroy the implications of the closeted, relegated, marginalized, people of the Church.

In the Old Testament, we also find the Hebrew word *she'ol*, the place of the dead, both good and bad. Some translations refer to this place as "hell," but more recent translations render it "the grave or the realm of the death" or leave it untranslated and present it as "Sheol".

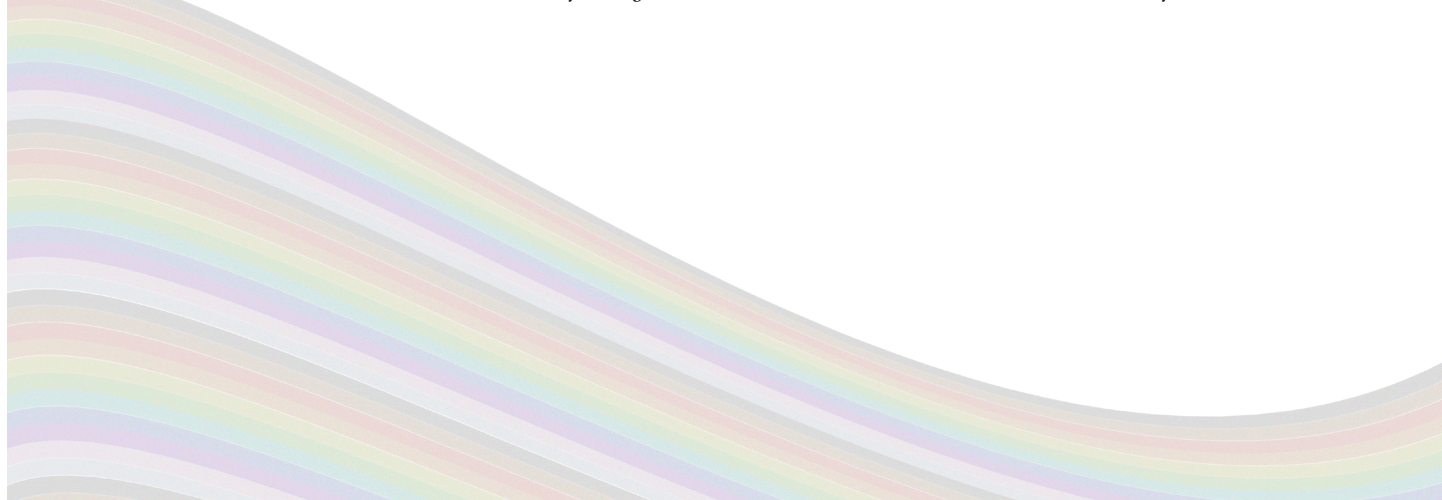
*Sheol* seems to refer to the dark, deep regions, the land of forgetfulness ... a place of gloom and despair, a place where one can no longer enjoy life. Yet Psalm 139:8 reminds us: "If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there." So when Jesus defines himself as the resurrection, assurance is given to us all.

Jesus says to Lazarus, "COME OUT!"

The modern sense of coming out publicly in open acknowledgment of our sexual orientation is not what Jesus' words meant. However, there is a powerful image that we must apply to our own lives. In coming out of the tomb, Lazarus is emerging from darkness and death to light and life. **The resurrection experience offers insight into what it feels like to come out and be one's authentic self.**

As an African American Clergy woman and military officer for 20 years, I was not allowed to come out. Even once the ban was lifted in the military and the affirming stance of the PCUSA in 2012, walking in the power of the resurrection took practice.

Throughout this Lenten season, I invite you to practice. Practice coming to yourself knowing that Jesus Christ is the resurrection. Practice using your gifts for the work of the kin-dom of God, knowing that your gifts are needed and valuable. Practice incarnational ministry, for just as Christ died for all, Christ died for you.





# PALM SUNDAY

BY JOHN RUSSELL STANGER

## MATTHEW 21:1-11

Jesus is the grand marshal of today's parade. He's the celebrity, the big draw. The crowds come en masse. As he enters Jerusalem, people can't help but notice others swarming around him. As they see him riding through, they're so taken with the whole thing they're ripping branches off of trees to throw on the road. They take the clothes from their backs and toss them onto his path. **It gets a little wild as they shout, "Hosanna!"**

This is peak fame.

This is peak Jesus hysteria.

And yet, it's a parade of one. It's a parade of a poor carpenter from a rural village. It's a parade of a man on a donkey. Surely some of them laughed. A man riding a donkey as he enters the city, and people are praising him.

I'm someone who struggles with second-hand embarrassment. By that, I mean, it's really difficult for me to see another person be humiliated. It feels like I'm being humiliated. I cannot stand it. This text affects me on that level—this is embarrassing! The man looks like a fool. Is it a joke?!

Well, it kind of was. **It's a joke that made a point and a joke that got him killed.** There was more than one gate into the great city of Jerusalem. And when important people, like Roman Governors, arrived through one of these gates, it was customary that the people would come out to greet them, throwing branches. Throwing flowers at their rulers. It was more than customary though. It was required if the people wanted any hope of respect from their Roman overlords.

Roman governors came through the Damascus gate. They passed through the gate atop great warhorses, with a legion of soldiers protecting them. As they entered the city they conquered, with the colonized peoples worshipping them, their message was clear. They had the power. They were in control. And the people's only option was to greet them at the Damascus gate and cheer.

But Jesus didn't enter through the Damascus gate. And he didn't arrive on a warhorse, but as we hear, he entered very intentionally upon the back of the donkey. He didn't arrive with a military legion, but with a rowdy band of followers who blended into the cheering crowd.

At the time that Jesus made his way through the Beautiful Gate. Scholars believe it's very likely that Pontius Pilate was entering Jerusalem through the Damascus Gate with all the displays of Roman power and might. Jesus, defenseless atop a donkey, was mocking Pilate's show of force. **Jesus, in his humility, humiliates Pilate's over-the-top entrance into a city that didn't want him.**

As I've revisited this text and the context, I'm conscious that, as queer people, **we are experts in humiliation.** We could teach seminars on humiliation. We know its contours better than we would have ever liked. For better or worse, we know what it feels like to walk through a crowd of people and have their eyes on us. We also know what it's like to endure slurs and be physically assaulted for transgressing gender norms. We know what it's like to be fodder for public political and religious arguments. It seems to be that humiliation is something we can't escape.



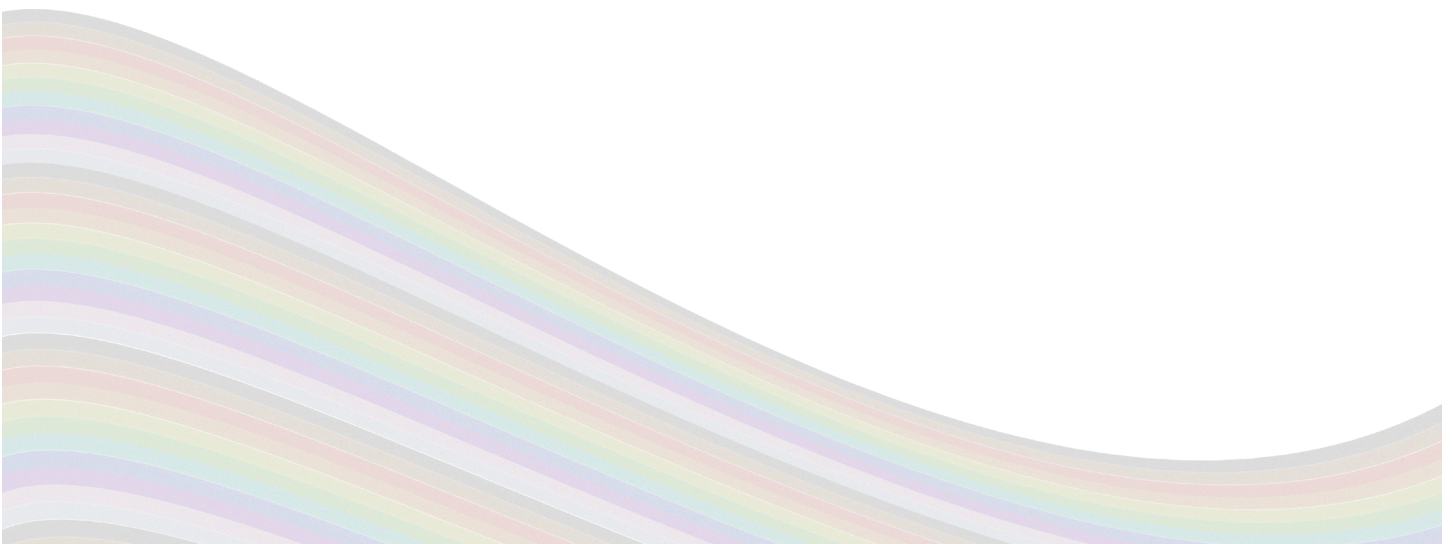
I remember how worried my mom was about this when I came out to her and my dad. I had driven down from seminary to their ranch in Southeast Texas. Having endured humiliation in elementary school for being an effeminate boy, I was ready to share that I was, in fact, gay. My mom cried, saying that she feared for what I would endure by being a gay man in this world. I surprised myself by saying something like, “No, you don’t understand. I’m now proud of what I feared. I can’t be shamed for something I’m proud of.”

There was a lot of truth in that moment of confidence. Even if it was a little overly optimistic. But just as queer people know humiliation, we know what it means to disempower that humiliation. **Every queer person who has reappropriated a stinging slur into a vessel of power, knows what I’m talking about. Even the word “queer” is an example of this!**

I see some of the wisdom we carry in what Jesus does here. There is some kind of mysterious power in his public display of self-humiliation. Just like any gay man who has ever thought, “You want to call me a “faggot,” well I will serve you faggotry!” Jesus says, “Oh, you think I’m weak? I’m not the military revolutionary you were hoping for? You’re disappointed I don’t have a warhorse at my disposal? Then how do you like this fabulous donkey , hmmm?!”

Jesus embraces what makes him the messiah that he is, disarming his haters along the way. He secures his power on his own terms, which is only amplified by a community that celebrates him for all his subversive antics. Inspired by his queer entrance through the Beautiful Gate, they join in his pride parade by flailing palm branches. (Another thing queer folx are great at—making the most out of what’s available to us.)

This Lent, reflect on the places you’ve internalized shame because other people have feared all that you’re bringing to the parade of life. And then ask yourself, what if I was proud of what others would seek to humiliate me for?



# HOLY MONDAY

BY JOY BRONSON

## ISAIAH 42:1-9

As we enter into Holy Week, we enter into what mystics refer to as “the dark night of the soul.” (see: The Cloud of Unknowing, or Teresa of Avila’s The Interior Castle). This is the space of life in which it seems that we are turning towards seemingly endless struggle, difficulty, or complexity, no known sight in end. When harm or suffering are brought into our lives, the Holy Spirit invites us to overcome them by engaging the cover of darkness to refocus and reengage our spirits and imaginations towards healing and transformation.

We shift from Christ’s celebratory entry into Jerusalem at Sunday worship to what we know is impending towards the end of Holy Week, to what took Christ to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray for release of how his society would turn on and persecute him.

We currently live in a historical moment in which we have the gift of better knowing, becoming, and living our full, God-gifted selves. Even 20, 15, 10 years ago, it would be considered absurd to have openly LGBTQIA clergy. The congregants, parishioners, and choir directors who hold any of these identities were still quietly tolerated and “allowed” into the fellowship, so long as we didn’t lift up our voices or lives to claim who we are. This is the joy that was celebrate at Easter—being openly and fully risen in who we are created to be.

And yet, there are these spaces of the dark night of the soul, far more than we would/should have to experience and live through, in which we are challenged again and again to claim who we are in the face of others’ insistence that we are wrong because their whiteness-centered, heterosexist theology claims such. We are compelled, time and again, to simply live our lives, to dodge, duck, dip, or dive around those who believe that faith is about forcing their beliefs on one another. We are each to faithfully live what it is we claim first and foremost from our own lives.

**It is a dark night, indeed, when one child is told that they are too young to know that they are transgender, while seemingly cishetero children are encouraged in their sexuality to freely date—somehow their understanding of their sexuality at their age is clear and “true.”**

It is a dark night, indeed, when children are threatened with being left out in the literal cold by the families to whom God gave them to raise them up and nature them in birthright being and gifts (hey, Parker Palmer). The unfortunate and often believed insistence of these families is that LGBTQIA children are violating a human-created religion in their journey of desiring to know and live who God created them to be.

It is a dark night, indeed, when we spend more time explaining and defending who we are, than celebrating together as one another the diverse gift that God created us to be together.

It is a dark night, indeed, when we are told that we are wrong according to human beings for seeking to live fully and faithfully as God made us.

As womanist poet and activist June Jordan affirmed of herself and one another in her “Poem About My Rights”:

*My name is not wrong*

*Wrong is not my name*

*My name is*  
*My own, my own, my own*

The Easter vision beyond these dark nights are like Christ's vision in the Garden of Gethsemane: To remember and hold that, despite what we may know is coming and arising, we are not only not wrong, but leaning fully into the gift of our whole and holy selves. Because we are also those in whom God's soul delights, and our claiming and living our whole created beings is itself an act which will bring justice forth to the nations (Isa. 42:1). Liberation—Easter—is not acts of defiance against a power dynamic that is false, even when it has real impacts. Easter freedom and resurrection means living towards discovering and celebrating the whole of whom each of us is beautifully and belovedly created to be in God.

So as and when dark nights loom and hover, may we know, may we believe, may we live that, though God doesn't desire that we make one another suffer, the Holy Spirit is deboing that suffering, and inviting us to a greater place beyond it. To a place where we will not become what we seek to overcome, nor stay ensnared by injustice. May we agree, go, and live.

## Spiritual Practice

Place yourself in a relaxed position. You may sit, lie down, or walk gently; cross legs or keep heels firmly on the floor. Do what calls for you.

**Engage a gentle body scan.** As able, comfortable, and desirable: Roll your neck side to side. Back and forth. Shoulders—front and around, back and around, shrug up and down. Lean torso side to side, and front to back. Left legs gently at the knee and return to floor—right leg, and then left leg; left leg, and then right leg. Swirl the ankle of each foot around, and then up and down. Wiggle your toes. Jelly your arms and fingers.

Notice any place that feels tight or shrugged up, and work them gently as you breathe gently in. And out. And in. And out.

With your eyes closed, still breathing gently, notice the darkness behind your lids. There are likely streaks of light, remnants from when the light was permitted more fully in. There may be a glow of light beyond your lids, from the light in the room.

Acknowledge that the light is there, but focus with the darkness.

In the darkness: **What vibrancy, opportunities, creativity is possible? What can we vision and imagine here that is not possible in light and "seeing?"**

Who are we, who can we become? What can we receive in the space, this space where, because we see nothing definitive, all things are possible to vision?

Continue to breathe.  
Continue to notice.  
Continue to imagine.

Who is here with you, sharing in love and support with one another? What does it look, feel, taste like? How would you like to continue to cultivate that love and support beyond here?

Who is here struggling and even failing to love? Envision yourself enshrouded in a cocoon of glowing warmth and energy. You may not want to or be in a place to invite them in; hold yourself in the cocoon so that you are protected, and also so you don't lash out.

Continue to breathe.  
Continue to notice.  
Continue to imagine.

Imagine yourself shifting to where you are beyond the reach of harm. Imagine yourself where you are beyond seeking to return it to a person, or turning it upon someone else.

Imagine your cocoon growing not to defend or to protect you, but to expand your being, your healing and thriving energy, across the room. The world. The universe.

Continue to breathe.  
Continue to notice.  
Continue to imagine.

**What might you take with you from this space of imagining, that you would like to make real in the conscious and in today?**

Continue to breathe.  
Continue to notice.  
Continue to imagine.

As you continue to breathe, gently, slowly drift back across the universe. Into this world. Into your body. Return to your body.

When you are ready, and on your final exhale, open your eyes.

You are blessed to become and live as you have received your self.

Amen and axé.



# HOLY TUESDAY

BY DANIEL MORALES

## ISAIAH 42:1-7, 49:1-7, 50:4-9, AND 52:13-53:12

This text from the prophet Isaiah comes to us from a portion of the book biblical scholars have coined as Servant Songs. It comprises several passages from Isaiah 42:1-7, 49:1-7, 50:4-9, and 52:13-53:12. These passages describe God's servant. Called to be a light to the nations.

### **Wheww, that's quite a monumental task!!**

Not one nation. Not a specific nation. *THE* Nations .... As in, *ALL* the nations.

Truly a monumental task. A task that perhaps more often than not seems exhausting, unfulfilling, or perhaps even unrealistic. Especially when things don't pan out the way we had hoped.

And then there are those moments where we feel inadequate to God's call. Times when we might feel our lives aren't worthy enough to be called a servant of God. Maybe we even ask, "God, why me?" Why not look at so and so instead ...

When God calls, we tend to be our worst critics. More often than not, we don't fulfill God's call in our lives, not because of external factors, or time constraints or limitations, but sometimes, we don't fulfill God's call in our lives because of ourselves. We discourage ourselves and sometimes we even discourage others along the way, too.

But here's the deal, God never takes no for an answer. **God never accepts any of our excuses. God never accepts the limitations we've placed on ourselves.** God could care less of our petty comparisons to others, and you know why? Because God called you. God chose you. God claimed you.

Your unique self.

Your intricate self.

Your complicated self.

God called all of who you are to be a light to *ALL* the nations.

You think you're not good enough? You think you don't have what it takes to be a witness to the life-giving, life-empowering gospel of the risen Christ? "That's fine," says God, "I'm calling you to something bigger – I'm calling you to be a light to the nations."

*"... because of the LORD, who is faithful,  
the Holy One of Israel, has chosen you."*

God with us. God before us. The Holy One of Israel ... chooses you ... and you.

God chooses me.

God chooses you.

God chooses *ALL* of us ... to be a light to *ALL* the nations!

**Being a light to the nations means you cast out, call out and bring out of the shadows injustice and oppression.** Being a light to the nations means you cast out the shadows of all that is broken in the world.

Being the light means we work towards a common call and purpose. Not for our own benefit or ego, but because God appoints us as light to the nations so that salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

We're not called to be a light to the nations for the purposes of filling the pews.  
We're not called to be a light to the nations in order to perpetuate the status quo.

To be the light means you tackle injustice with the assurance that God is faithful and God has claimed you. As the light of the world, we bring out the injustices of the world for all to see, so that as salt and zest for the earth we can stir movement into action.

As light of the world, we are called to shine in those places of the world that have been overtaken by brokenness. As light of the world we are called to heal, so that as salt and zest of the earth we might awaken those who sit in loneliness. As light of the world, we are called to shine in places that are desperately in need of justice and equity. And most importantly, as light of the world, we are not called to keep this life and light, salt and zest to ourselves.  
**We are called to shine to the communities around us.**

Often churches ask themselves why are the pews no longer filled? I wrestle with that same question, too. And I wonder if perhaps we might not be shining our light strong enough? The song does say "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine," but are we though?

**Are we shining our light bright enough for the neighbors across to street to see it shine strong enough that they might be compelled to be witnesses to that same light?**

Jesus calls us to be the light of the world because Jesus' own light and life ought to be shining deep within our souls.

Songwriter David Haas wrote the song titled "We are Called". The song invites us to:

*Come! live in the light!  
Shine with the joy and the love of the Lord!  
We are called to be light for the kingdom,  
to live in the freedom of the city of God!*

Similarly, Frederick Buechener wrote that "Jesus calls us to show this truth forth, live this truth forth. Be the light of the world, he says. Where there are dark places, be the light especially there. Be truly alive. Be life-givers to others. That is what Jesus tells the disciples to be. That is what Jesus tells his church, tells us, to be and do."

*You are a light on the hill, O people:  
Light for the City of God!  
Shine so holy and bright, O people:  
Shine for the Kingdom of God!*

What are you doing with God's call on your life? In spite of your perceived limitations, God is still calling *ALL* of us to be a light to the nations. This light of yours ... are you really going to let it shine? Are you? AMEN.

# HOLY WEDNESDAY

BY PEPA PANIAGUA

## ISAIAH 50: 4-9A; HEBREWS 12:1-3

Do you ever read scripture and say to yourself or out loud, “YES!” ? When you see words that feel true, or resonate with you in a new and different way? That is how I felt when I read the passages from Isaiah and Hebrews that we are spending time with today. Weariness is something that I been struggling with a lot lately. Maybe it’s the current political climate, the state of the world, or the weariness that comes with Holy Week, but I find myself yearning to be on the other side of Easter. Sometimes I really do wish that we could just skip the hard stuff and go right to the celebrating. But that isn’t the way it goes, and after reading these passages again, I saw a new hope emerging.

**As we find ourselves in the middle of Holy Week, we are nearing the end of the journey, and we have reached the point where the true weight of the cross comes to bear in ways that are tangible, visceral and painful.** And for many of us, this adds to the weight of the world that, on a lot of days, feels heavier than needed. But as we sit in this place, days before Good Friday, and days before ultimate death and darkness set in, I find solace in the idea that Christ could see the joy set out before him — even in the midst of carrying the burdens of the cross and the sins of humanity — Christ saw the joy ahead, and even in weariness, pain, fear, sorrow and ridicule, Jesus kept going. Hear me, I am not saying Christ was happy about it, or that he didn’t hate what was happening to Him, but regardless of how He felt, Christ chose to keep going for the sake of joy, joy that was ahead of Him, and would extended to each of us.

I think that is important to remember, not in a way that diminishes the weariness, pain, sorrow and ridicule we may face, but as a reminder that Jesus has also endured so much of what the human experience brings. He had been betrayed, ridiculed, shamed, misunderstood, mis-named, disregarded, and unfairly condemned. I don’t know about you, but the fact that Christ experienced so much of the hardness of humanity, and chose to keep going, gives me great hope. **Christ knows our pain. Christ knows our suffering. Christ knows what we carry and invites us to lay it down.** Jesus invites us to look at him and recognize that the joy that was laid out before Him was also meant for each of us. Yes, you and me.

The author of Hebrews wrote this as a word meant to sustain the weary, and I want to echo that today. Lent is a season where darkness can seem to be darker, where the quiet of reverence and preparation can feel like we will never rejoice again. But in the midst of Holy Week, be sustained knowing that we journey together, and that we have a cloud of witnesses to sustain and protect us, and to help us continue when the weight of the journey becomes too much.

There is joy laid out in front of us. It is ours to receive, for our race is not yet done, and “The Lord God has given (each of us) the tongue...to know how to sustain with a word (they) who (are) weary” (Isaiah 50:4). God has given us what we need to endure this journey, and to help others endure along the way.

So as we journey closer and closer to the Cross, what weighs you down, what clouds you from seeing the joy laid out before you? Or what keeps you from receiving the joy that is meant for you? As we approach the cross, we are given the opportunity to lay that down, and to walk away changed, to walk away living fully into our identity of beloved children of God. As my friend Bruce Reyes-Chow says, it is just that easy, and just that hard.



I struggle with the Cross, and all that it embodies, and I struggle more so with what the cross says about our collective humanity and propensity to hurt one another. But I am encouraged to read again that even in the midst of His death and dying, even on the Cross, Christ modeled a different way for us. A way that looked beyond the cross, beyond the shame and ridicule, and offered grace in the face of the worst of ourselves.

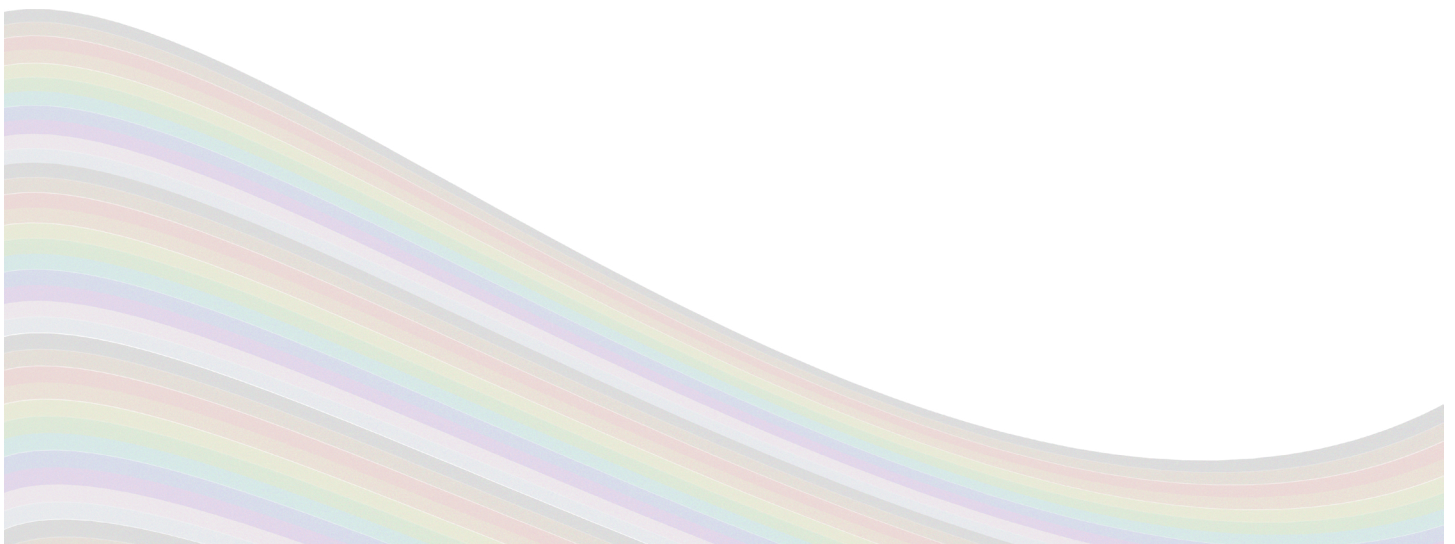
And I am reminded that we are offered this new way, not for us to journey alone, but so that we might find ourselves in the midst of community. Be it a cloud of witnesses protecting and sustaining us, or a call to be with those who are weary and in need of a word of hope and grace, the words of Isaiah echo in my mind and heart with the call, “Let us stand up together.”

This is our rallying call, and what helps us to reclaim the hope that is bubbling up to the surface, in spite of our baggage, and all that we carry in this season of Lent. We are called in the face of darkness, pain, injustice, and weariness to claim the space that Christ created for each of us, and to embrace the joy that is surely on the way.

So in these final days of Lent, as we journey closer to the cross, I encourage you to be in community with one another. Find a way to gather, to eat together, to laugh together, to pray together, find a way to do the hard work of waiting and preparing in community. And if that isn’t possible, let this devotional be your community, and may it be your reminder that you are not alone, and that you are beloved.

**Let us stand up together, and as we arise, may we see, receive and experience the deep and abiding joy that Christ saw ahead of Him, and in turn, offered to each of us.**

You are loved, Peace be with you.



# MAUNDY THURSDAY

BY CHRIS GLASER

**EXODUS 12:1-4; PSALM 116:1-2; 1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-26; JOHN 13:1-17, 31-35**

These passages from the Gospel of John and Paul's epistle to the Corinthians privilege us with two of the most intimate moments Jesus shared with his disciples.

When the Last Supper is commemorated, we usually begin with "On the night that he was betrayed," but in my own observance, I have taken to describing the more devastating reality, "On the night that he was betrayed, denied and abandoned by his disciples..."

More recently, I have thought that the Last Supper is not so much about Jesus as it is about the disciples, their memory of their mentor, the tender times they enjoyed together even as they proclaimed the Good News of the inbreaking commonwealth of God:

Jesus washing their feet; Jesus cuddling with the Beloved Disciple (which I believe could be each of us); Jesus expecting so much of Peter, the inconstant Rock on which the disciples would lean when Jesus was no longer with them; Jesus offering his own body and blood in the bread and wine of the meals they took together...

Communion, the Eucharist, would become their reunion with him and one another, the remembrance of their deliverance, in the Psalmist's words:

*I love the Lord, because God has heard my voice and my supplications.  
Because God inclined an ear to me, therefore I will call on God as long as I live.*

**They witnessed in their salvation a very personal and communal echo of the liberation remembered in Passover.**

"Once we were not a people" became "once I was not a person" and "once we were not a community." "Now we are a people" became "now I am a beloved child of God" and "now we are the beloved community." "The chosen people" segues to "the called-out ones," *ecclesia*.

Now that I am three-score and ten years of age, I take special comfort in the words of John 13:3: "Jesus, knowing...that he had come from God and was going to God." It has taken a lifetime for me to comprehend that I—and each one of us—have come from God, a reflection of God's image. As a queer child, youth, and adult, I endured repeated denials of this truth, leading to multiple betrayals and abandonments.

But now, with greater ease, I look forward to "going to God." Our euphemism for death, "passing away" means I am passing on to God, something that surely will help me "rest in peace."

As today I read, "Jesus, knowing...that he had come from God and was going to God," I realize his overflowing joy and resulting generosity of spirit that inspired his whole ministry and teaching and acts of compassion. No wonder he rose to wash the disciples' feet! No wonder he offered his body and blood in sacrificial love! No wonder he healed so many with his mere touch! No wonder he inspired so many with mere words! His grace was the

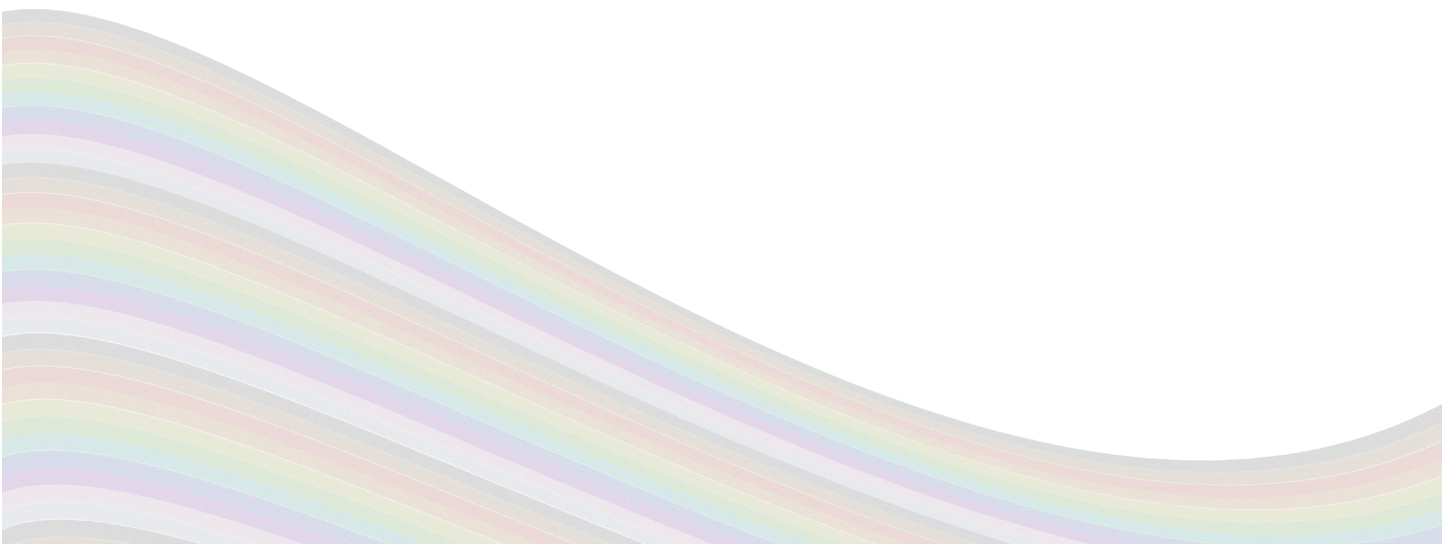
overflowing grace of God that he enjoyed so intimately and shared so intimately.

Peter resisting the baptism Jesus offered his feet was as fruitless and pointless as resisting a wave lapping one's feet on the shore. Paul's "aha" in First Corinthians 11 is that "all who eat and drink without discerning the body" risk judgment because they resist the grace that creates the beloved community and flows through it. What immediately follows from Paul's letter to the church at Corinth are the variety of gifts the beloved community offers one another, the greatest of these being love.

**The beloved community is that body of Christ we are to discern, we are to see, we are to feed and nurture and love.** When we decide another is not worthy, we risk judgment on ourselves, because belonging to that body as children of God is always a gift of God's grace.

So look around your congregation, your spiritual communities, your circles of friends and families, your neighborhoods, your workplace, your campus, your social network, and notice who's missing, who is excluded, who is forgotten, who is ignored, who is denied a voice or vote or vocation.

"Oh God, we believe, help our unbelief!"





A decorative graphic at the top of the page features a series of overlapping, curved lines in a rainbow color palette (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple) that create a sense of movement and depth.

# GOOD FRIDAY

BY SHANEA LEONARD

## PSALM 22

One of the most marginalized, hated, ignored, and yet wonderful, powerful, and vibrant group of people within our society are Black Trans people, in particular, Black Trans women. Despite their gift of Blackness and the authenticity of trans identity, Black trans people often live in a reality that does not champion their existence nor defend their personhood. To be queer in some places is hard enough. **To be queer and be a person of color brings an added level of scrutiny; thus, to be Black and queer and trans is a triple blessing that can bring as much joy as it can sorrow.**

Each year, our community of LGBTQIA folks and allies come together on November 20th for Trans Day of Remembrance. For many years, without fail, I was the main pastor in Pittsburgh who led this community in anything spiritual on this deeply emotional day. Often, we not only remembered and spoke the names of victims from around the nation and the world, but some years it was our own friends, and lovers, and relatives, and siblings when the trauma hit too close to home. I know what it was like to try to stand in a place that both holds the grief and pain of the community while I try to find a message of hope and solidarity. I must admit, sometimes I did not make it.

I can only imagine what the friends, comrades, followers and disciples of Jesus felt that Friday morning as they watched the murder of their loved one. I can imagine it was a pain that was both loud and piercing while silent and deadly all at the same time. **An execution so powerful that it literally takes all the air out of a place and can only leave a hollow shell of a broken heart and defeated spirit.** Our very savior was a victim of a violent death because of living in his authentic truth. **Jesus knew what it was like to meet the fate of execution all because he dared to live.**

The good thing in this is that as people of faith, we know that the story doesn't end on Friday. Jesus' murder always stands in the shadow of his resurrection and for that reason, we have hope. But I know there are so many individuals who face the execution and murder of loved ones based on who they are and how they show up in the world, who find it difficult and triggering on deaths' Remembrance Day...Good Friday. And as a pastor, I am annually reminded of this dichotomy and struggle that is ever present in our queer community. My prayer is always:

**DIVINE GOD HELP ME TO HELP YOUR PEOPLE TO MAKE SENSE OUT OF CHAOS AND FIND PEACE IN THE MIDST OF DISORDER.**

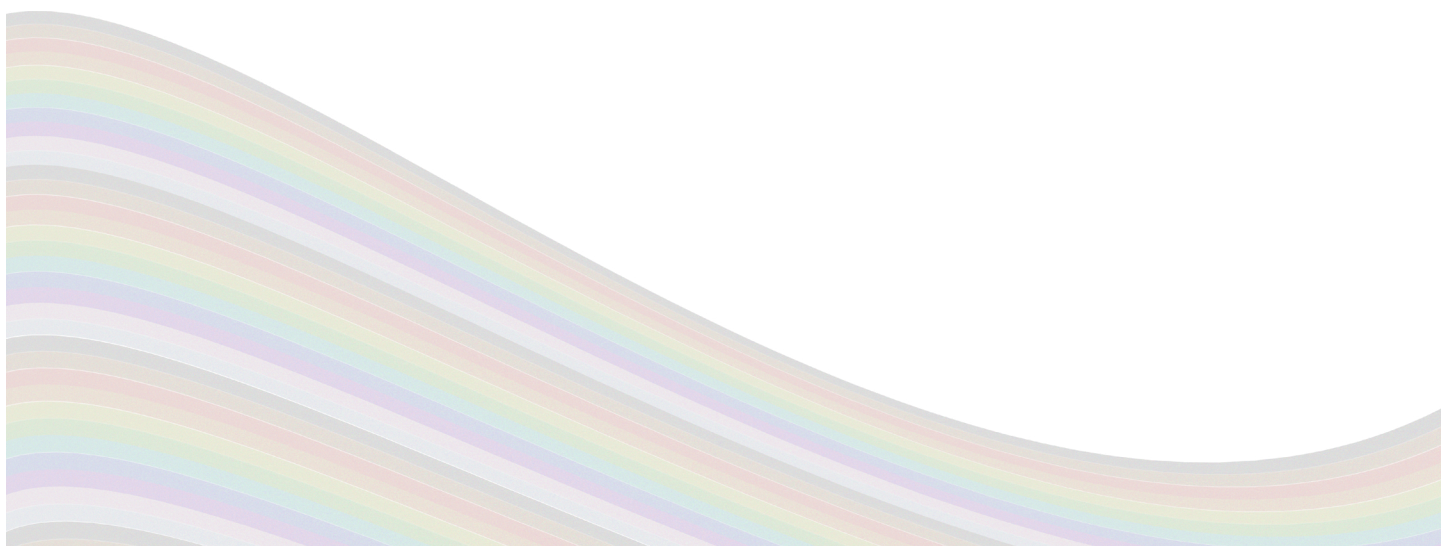
After about fifteen years of being an out queer person of faith, what I can settle in my spirit is what is uplifted by the downtrodden soul of Psalm 22. It's the hope that says, yes, there is ugliness in this world, and yes, it often finds itself even on our own doorsteps. But we are assured in knowing that God is alive and well and shall always bring vindication to those in despair. We are uplifted by the Psalm writer who reminds us that those who suffer do not suffer in vain. We have faith in the One who is the God of the oppressed, that the evils of bigotry, transphobia, homophobia, patriarchy, and ignorance shall be brought down and put asunder.

**God has never left us even when the world has forsaken us.** And it is our duty as people of faith to continue to do the work and will of Jesus in being advocates and breach menders for the most oppressed, marginal-

ized, and disbarred in our society. For this is the will of the Lord and this is the underlying message of Good Friday.

Darkness is shamefully inevitable. However, we are connected to a tangible and unwavering God who shall never forget our struggle, ignore our tears, and disregard our sacred existence.

Ashe.



# HOLY SATURDAY

BY JESS COOK

*\*Content Warning: Suicide*

A few weeks after I started my job with More Light, I had a troubling realization. It had been about 3 weeks since I'd left my job working as a Youth Programs Director with LGBTQIA+ youth, and I paused in the midst of my workday, looked up and said out loud: "Whoa. I haven't talked about suicide in like a month." It wasn't until that moment that I realized how commonplace it had become for me to sit with people who were seriously considering ending their own lives. For some, there was a struggle with how to come out, or an ongoing fear that their identity predetermined them for hell. Others were living through their own hell, whether it came in the form of an unsafe household, school, or church.

Since becoming ordained last summer, the question I am still asked most frequently by young LGBTQIA+ people is whether they are going to hell. There is a particular kind of fear a person carries when the weight of their very existence is the thing they cannot outrun, a particular kind of shame they are forced to wear when they are told they are evidence of God's mistakes.

**During my time in seminary, I struggled with my feelings around the cross.** I took two classes on the meaning of the death of Christ, one on God and evil, and a number of other courses looking at the parts of our Christian narrative that are often side-stepped, due to the sheer discomfort they can bring up for people. If you'd asked me at that time, I would've said I hated the cross. I hated the way it was so often used as a bludgeon, and how often it was those already weary from the weight of the world's evils who were told to "carry their cross."

I've said frequently that my job at Side by Side afforded me the rare privilege of being able to see resurrection every day. I feel that way often about my job at More Light though I see it less often. The flip side of this recognition also brings with the realization that the awesomeness of resurrection was never further from the human imagination on that first Holy Saturday. **Time and again, I met young people who were little more than shadows of themselves, living in a seemingly unending Holy Saturday.**

Through a number of trainings on suicide prevention, I learned that one of the things that can be most helpful, yet often ignored when talking to people who are suicidal, is to ask them what's happening in their life that has led them to this point. Before learning this, my tendency was often to get someone to safety, or to work on a plan of action to try and remind them why their life was worth living. Yet, by not only sitting with people in the midst of their despair, but asking them to talk about it, I found that the weight of the things they were holding became lighter. I had to put aside my anxiety around trying to make things right to see that what most people needed in the midst of their despair wasn't a cure, but to be seen, to have their pain validated.

**So often it seems we are only able to see Holy Saturday through the lens of Easter. Yet, it is only in sitting through the despair of Holy Saturday that we truly understand the miracle of Easter.** I can say with absolute certainty that the people who've taught me the most about Easter are the ones who've lived through their own Holy Saturdays. The funny thing is that so often these folks don't say much - they never tell me God won't give me more than I can handle, or remind me of how good things in my life are otherwise, or say anything about a window opening up after a door has been slammed in my face. More often than not, I've found my way forward through their sheer presence and validation of my pain. It's not about having the perfect words

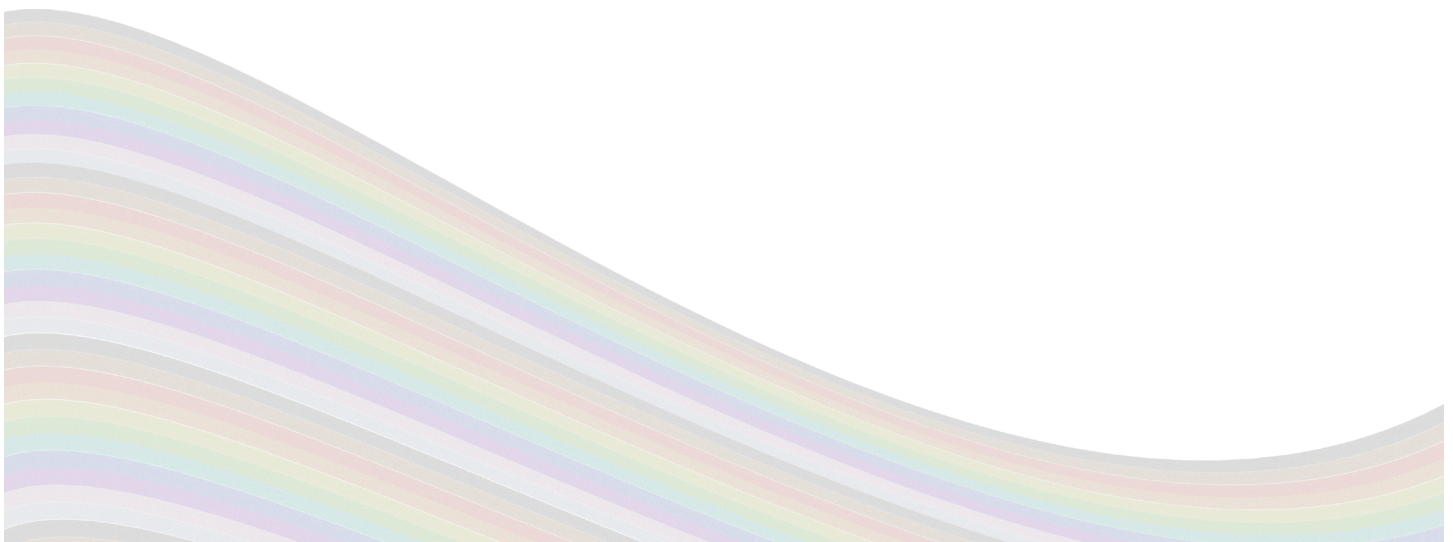


or a solution, it's about the willingness to see me in my suffering and to honor that by simply being with me as I move through it.

**I still hate the cross, just like I hate the senseless violence committed in the name of the man who was hung on it.** I think we are supposed to hate the cross, to see it as a symbol of systemic oppression committed and maintained by the social and religious elite. But I have also come to terms with it because I believe down to my bones that God is with us even in the depth of our suffering. Holy Saturday offers us the opportunity to hold in tension both the awfulness of the terrible things that happen, and the trust that God is with us even through those things. It shows me that I don't need to make sense of the suffering, or try to put an Easter bow on someone's pain in order for God to be present through it.

The world is a mess right now, and so often we tend to try and fix things in a manner similar to jumping from Good Friday right to Easter (or even Christmas to Easter). **Holy Saturday offers us the opportunity to dig into the discomfort - to avoid the temptation to fix it without fully understanding it.** It is a difficult thing to do; and, in my experience, it cannot be done alone - we need people to remind us that we don't have to be stuck in our despair. Even more, we get to learn through people the gift of God's presence that doesn't balk at the heavy stuff, or try to make it right.

**May we give ourselves permission to sit in the heaviness of the day, and may we trust in the Spirit's presence, blowing in with sighs too deep for words, a holy presence with us always.**





# EASTER

## BY LEE CATOE

### JOHN 20: 1-18

*“Run, run faster than him,” says the one whom Jesus loved. “I must get there to see if this is true...that the one who loved me is risen from the dead.”*

The gospel of John depicts a version of the resurrection that begins with a race. Mary Magdalene approaches the tomb and Jesus' body is gone. In her shock and sadness, she runs to Simon Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved. She tells them that the body is gone, and they are off. John tells us that they are running together in an almost sports broadcaster type way and then tells us that the one whom Jesus loved ran in front of Peter...he had to get there first to see. But he could not go in. Peter went inside and saw the clothes folded up and it was then the other disciple could go in and see. **He saw and he believed instantly.**

Trite as it may be, the relationship between this disciple and Jesus depicted by the gospel of John used to make me so jealous. I used to secretly imagine “the one whom Jesus loved” standing by Jesus' side, holding hands, smiling at one another. I used to imagine that the one person that John tells us Jesus loved cried so hard as he and Jesus' mother stood to watch him die. He cried as Jesus told him to take care of Mary, to take her into his household. He and Mary held one another as they watched Jesus' last breath and stood there as long as they could. I saw them walking hand in hand, grieving this man whom they both adored.

I saw at the resurrection, this disciple run as fast as he could to get to the place where the person he loved so much was laid to rest with the hopes that he had risen. He outruns the others but when he gets there, he cannot go in because of his grief. But when Peter goes in and sees these clothes folded up, this disciple goes in and he believes that his beloved Jesus is alive.

**I so wanted that...I wanted that kind of love.** And I wanted to see who I was in this resurrection story. And yet, I suppressed my biblically inspired, queer love story whom others would deem heretical. I tucked it in my back pocket secretly lined with rainbow hues and went about my tired existence, continued to be secretly jealous of biblical characters, and ran...ran...ran away from it.

I have been running all of my life. Running from home. Running away from problems. Sprinting to the next exit to get out of situations that were out of the periphery of my controlling nature. Panting and gasping for breath from the mere exhaustion of running 7 days a week, 5 miles a day in order to lose weight ... to be thin, to be what I thought men wanted me to be. **These mental and physical marathons, toxic masculine 5ks, and internalized homophobic dashes culminated into one long, winding, death dealing run...the one away from myself.**

Exhaustion from running away led to absolute numbness which resulted in a breakdown of identity. The running had to stop and I had no choice but to stand still and claim that, yes, in fact, I was queer which was painful, beautiful, life-giving and life-crushing, family-breaking and family-building, and newness-filling and oldness-dissolving. As I developed into my own queerness, this story of the resurrection of Jesus became my resurrection story — my queer resurrection story that I need not be jealous of anymore because we can see ourselves within God and these stories.

As scripture is viewed, we often limit it to print on a page, but in the times of Christ and before, these stories and experiences of the prophets, disciples, and onlookers were often acted out or told *to* people. They were expressed through a specific person and a specific context. These stories were performed, possibly in different ways with different people acting out the parts. It is storytelling as its best. The text becomes scripts that are brought to life by the human experience. And when we miss this aspect of our Christian tradition, we limit the living Word of God and ultimately create a dead word that will and has killed.

**Queerness within its definition is going against the limits, the whiteness, the heteronormativeness, the print on the page that seems permanent, the straight and masculine Christ, the running away.** Queerness brings into light the context, the performance, the filters of who we are, the authentic self that God created us to be. In the light of the resurrection, the one whom Jesus loved ran to the empty tomb and ran to the man whom he loved. He ran to the space where life over comes death:

Death that tells us we are limited.

Death that tells us that we have to conform.

Death that tells us that scripture cannot be queer.

Death that tells us to run away.

This queer resurrection creates a glaring light of reds, oranges, yellows, greens, blues, purples, blacks, browns, and pinks that unleashes the urge to run *to* and not away *from*. **This queer resurrection is a divine extravaganza that provides us with an authentic path where we can dance the dance of liberation, sing the songs of love, sashay down the catwalks of dragged up grace, and embrace God's beloved creations – us.**

So, to the ones whom Jesus loves:

Run to new life,

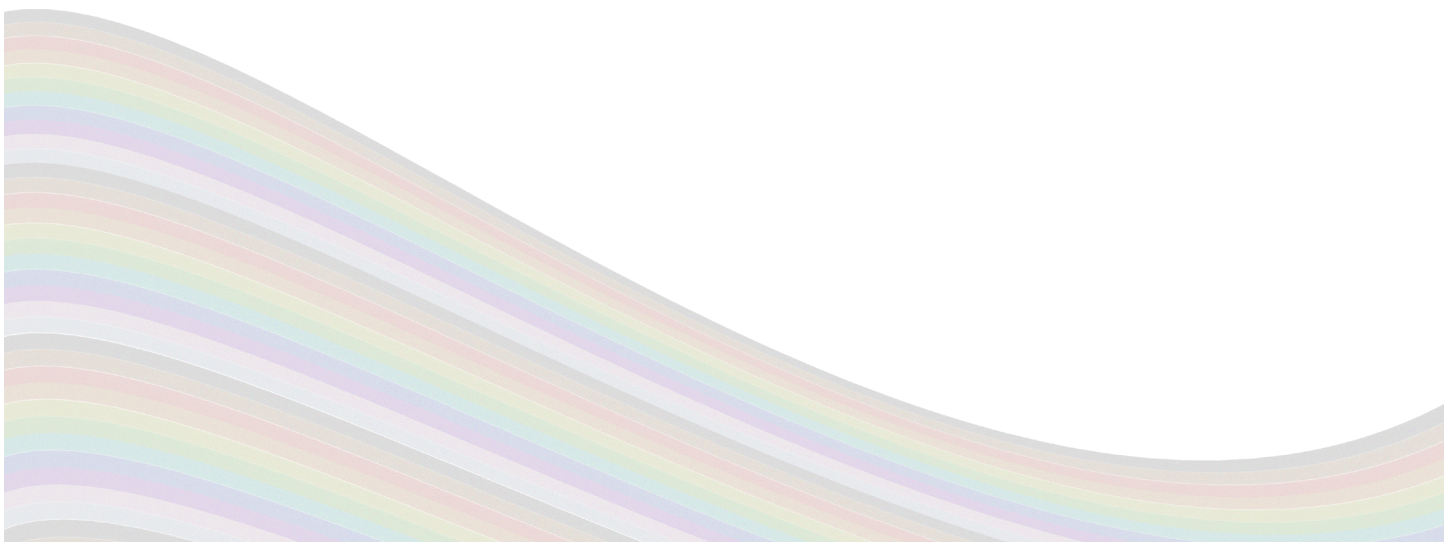
Run to who you are,

Run to your resurrection,

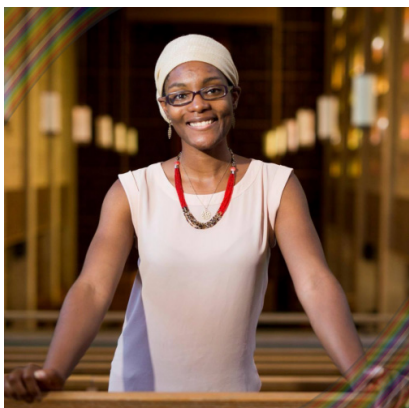
Run to the ones you love,

For it is there that we find new life.

**Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Halleluiah!**







A demisexual, **Joy Bronson (she/her/hers)** is a deacon-in-residency in the United Methodist Church. She received her M.Div. from Vanderbilt Divinity School in 2018. Her vocation and ministries are as a calling and vocation coach: helping one another to discern, form, and meaningfully live who God has created and named us to be, in justice, love, and beloved community. She currently serves as the Lilly Grant Coordinator at American Baptist College (TN), and as a strategic planning associate with CauseImpact, LLC (OH).



**Lee Catoe (he/him/his)** is the Managing Editor of *Unbound* and the Associate for Young Adult Social Witness for the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy for the Presbyterian Church USA. A native of Jefferson, South Carolina, he grew up in the Presbyterian church and developed a passion for rural ministries. He is a graduate of Presbyterian College (B.S.) and Vanderbilt Divinity School (M.Div.) where he focused on queer theology and embodiment. Lee is also a musician and runs a freelance graphic design business.



**Jess Cook (they/them/theirs)** is a native of East Texas and lifelong Presbyterian. Jess holds a Master of Divinity from Union Presbyterian Seminary, a Master of Fine Arts in Photography from the University of North Texas, and a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Art from Baylor. Jess was the first openly non-binary person to be ordained as a Minister of The Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (USA).



**Ashley DeTar Birt (she/her/hers)** is the Pastoral Fellow for Youth and Families at Rutgers Presbyterian Church in New York, NY. A native Pittsburgher, she received her Masters of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary, an MA in Theater Arts from the University of Pittsburgh, and a BA in Creative Writing from Carnegie Mellon University. She has worked with youth groups in several Presbyterian Churches in Pennsylvania and New York, and also brings a background in music, theater, and LGBTQ advocacy. She also serves on the board of More Light Presbyterians.



**Rev. Chris Glaser (he/ him/ his)** was denied ordination by the Presbyterian Church in 1978 because he was openly gay, though he served on its task force on homosexuality which recommended ordination of gays and lesbians and was serving as founding director of the Lazarus Project, a first-of-its-kind ministry of reconciliation between the church and the LGBTQ community. He is an author of a dozen books, a lifelong activist, and a blogger of Progressive Christian Reflections since 2011.



**Ophelia Hu Kinney (she/her/hers)** is the wife of a fearless reformer, the daughter of two circumstantial pragmatists, and the sister of a hopeful romantic. She is the Communications Specialist at Reconciling Ministries Network, an organization advancing LGBTQ justice and inclusion in The United Methodist Church, and the Worship Coordinator at HopeGateWay (a United Methodist community of faith). She's a garden-variety queer woman who lives with her wife at the edge of the woods in Maine. Her writing has appeared in Inheritance Magazine and The Common, and she blogs at [QueeringTheKindom.com](http://QueeringTheKindom.com).



In 2014 **Rev. Bertram Johnson (he/him/his)** became the first out African American ordained by the PC(USA). For over two decades he has worked for churches, non-profits, or faith-based organizations dedicated to social justice, spiritual care, and public health. He is a member of the NEXT Church Strategy Team and was a contributor to The Sarasota Statement. He currently serves as Interfaith Campus Minister at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Married in 2019, he loves exploring the world with his husband, Jason.



**Rev. Shanea D. Leonard, B.A., M.Div. (they/them/theirs)** is a faith leader, teacher, consultant, community activist, and justice warrior. They currently serve the church as the Associate for Gender & Racial Justice for PC (USA). Having been ordained for over twelve years, Shanea has been serving communities and congregations in various capacities for over fifteen years. Rev. Leonard has done extensive work within urban areas to eradicate systemic oppression in the areas of race, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic despair. Shanea believes that God has given them a burden for people whom others have disregarded, oppressed, forgotten, or simply don't even see. They believe that it is a mandate for every believer to DO justice, LOVE mercy, & WALK humbly with your God.





**Rev. Alex Patchin McNeill (he/him/his)** has served as the Executive Director of More Light Presbyterians since 2013. Under his leadership, More Light serves as a capacity-building organization, equipping congregations to work intersectionally on justice issues. As a trained professional coach through the International Coaching Federation, Alex brings a coaching approach to his work with church leaders and congregations seeking to follow God's call to widen their welcome, increase church vitality, or develop and implement new programs. In addition, he coaches leaders taking a leap of faith to launch a new project, stepping into a leadership role, or discerning a new calling. Alex is the first openly transgender man ordained as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church, (U.S.A.).



**Rev. Daniel Morales (he/him/his)** is the pastor of New Covenant Presbyterian Church, the first racially integrated congregation of the Presbyterian Church in the south. He's a Miami native, born to first generation Cuban immigrants. A musician, amateur photographer and avid weight-lifter, Danny enjoys physical fitness as much as he enjoys Miami's beaches along with its active and vibrant outdoor life, as well as exploring all the foodie experiences popping up throughout the metropolitan Miami area. Married to an exceptionally talented violinist, Danny also enjoys performing musical duets with his husband Ebert. Danny and Ebert live in the Kendall area, a suburban community west of Miami.



**Rev. Pepa Paniagua (she/her/hers)** is an ordained pastor serving in North Texas, and a MoreLight Ambassador. Pepa is currently the Executive for Outreach and Education at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Dallas, and the founding pastor of kin•dom community- a multi-denominational/ecumenical new worshipping community dedicated to radical inclusion and welcome. A native Californian, Pepa is learning to enjoy life in Texas, but she misses the mountains and the sea every day. Pepa and her wife, Kelli, have three dogs who keep them on their toes, and constantly remind them why they can't have nice things.



**The Rev. John Russell Stanger (he/him/his)** is a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the PC(USA) and a psychotherapist in private practice, specializing in working with LGBTQ clients. He is featured in *Out of Order*, a documentary that tells the story of LGBTQ people fighting for justice in the PC(U.S.A.). He lives in Louisville, KY with his husband.





**Slats Toole (they/ them/ theirs)** is a writer, musician, preacher and theater professional currently based in New Jersey. Slats' Lenten poetry series has been compiled in the collection *Queering Lent*, and their work has also been published in places like *Call to Worship*, *The Presbyterian Outlook* and *Sacramental Life*. Slats has led workshops on expansive language and queer theology (with a particular emphasis on gender identity) throughout the United States and Canada. They serve on the Advisory Team for NEXT Church, and are the resident sound designer for the In[heir]itance Project.



**The Reverend Floretta L. Barbee-Watkins (she/ her/ hers)** was born to the late Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Flossie E. Watkins in Atlanta, GA. She graduated from Walker High School and then matriculated to Mercer University in Macon GA where she earned a BA degree in Communications. In 1993, she graduated from Johnson C. Smith Seminary of the Interdenominational Theological Seminary with an emphasis in Homiletics and Christian Education. In 2002 Reverend Watkins began her service at well-known Seigle Avenue Presbyterian Church, now known as "The Avenue". She also proudly served as the first African American Clergy woman Moderator of the Presbytery of Charlotte in 2013. Reverend Barbee-Watkins was nominated to serve on the Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns and now serves as a co-moderator. She also serves on the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board.

