

Come, Follow Me

A Disciple's Journey Through Lent



Sermon Series

Come, Follow Me:

A Disciple's Journey Through Lent

Introduction to the Sermon Series

Several years ago, a group of clergy in the South Carolina Annual Conference attended a continuing education event at Lake Junaluska. They came away with one question: How can we help people begin to move from thinking of themselves as church members and to identifying themselves as disciples of Christ? That question became the basis for "Come, Follow Me," a sermon and study series published by the South Carolina Conference in 2018. That study followed discipleship growth in the apostle Peter. Now comes another series for use during the season of Lent.

Before looking at the series, I invite you to consider the foundational question concerning the movement from membership to discipleship. The question raised at Lake Junaluska was not a solitary one. Other church leaders have wrestled with similar questions and written books concerning the movement from member to disciple. Some examples:

- "Deepening Your Effectiveness," by Dan Glover and Claudia Lavy
- "Twelve Dynamic Shifts for Transforming Your Church," by Stanley Ott
- "Shift," by Mark Tidsworth

What is the concern and why? At its simplest, if we identify ourselves as members of the church, we are free to come and go at will – the condition of many contemporary civic and service organizations. If we identify ourselves as Christian disciples, everything we do falls under the authority and power of Christ. We live our commitment to Christ through the church and through all our actions. Our lives are less about going to church and more about being the church. Our commitment to Christ becomes our commission to follow Jesus and to serve in the work of Jesus.

"Come, Follow Me: A Disciple's Journey Through Lent" looks at defining moments in Jesus' ministry as presented in the Gospel of Matthew. The five sermons are:

Sermon 1: The Baptism of Jesus ([Matthew 3:13-17](#)) – Jesus sought baptism from John. What does it mean for us to be baptized into Christ?

Sermon 2: Wilderness and Temptations of Jesus ([Matthew 4:1-11](#)) – Following the baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness. There he experienced severe temptation concerning his identity. What are the challenges to our identity as Christian followers? How do we face such temptation?

Sermon 3: The Beatitudes, Salt and Light ([Matthew 5:1-16](#)) – A crowd gathered to hear Jesus, who gave them a basic understanding of life within God's kingdom. How are we embracing and living these values of God's kingdom?

Sermon 4: Prayer and Attitude ([Matthew 6:1-18](#)) – Jesus continues to teach about the Kingdom of God and different facets of discipleship. How are we engaged in the work of introspection, prayer, and fasting?

Sermon 5: Healing, Exorcism, Service, Following ([Matthew 8:14-27](#)) – Jesus and his disciples engage in hands-on ministry. What is our ministry? How are we following Christ in ministry and mission?

We did not include a sermon for Palm/Passion Sunday, the sixth Sunday in Lent, because of the many different congregational traditions on this day. Know that your church's traditions will also guide the formation of disciples.

Each chapter of this series includes these features (and a few more):

Note to the Pastor – Some pastoral background

Exegesis – A light introduction (you will do more digging)

Sermon Outline – The big ideas of the sermon

Sermon – That which was preached

Other Illustrations – For use within contemporary and traditional setting

Hymn and Song Suggestions – Traditional and contemporary suggestions

Bibliography – A working list of resources

In addition to the Sermon Series, a separate Leader's Guide is available with suggestions for small groups. Each session in the Leader's Guide include recommendations to help group participants or the entire congregation grow spiritually through different spiritual disciplines.

We hope that the conversation about discipleship will guide all as we partner with God for the transformation of the world.

For the working group,

The Rev. George Donigian

*Rev. Donigian is an ordained elder in the South Carolina Conference.
He is the pastor of Shiloh United Methodist Church in Piedmont.*

Sermon 1: The Baptism of Jesus

Writer: Rev. Dr. Laura Canine

Scripture: [Matthew 3:13-17](#)

Note to the Pastor:

We will join with Christ in his baptism in the Jordan River – an event so significant that it finds its way into all four gospels.¹ We will see and hear the presence of the Holy Spirit and God’s declaration that he is well pleased with his son. A common question that generally comes along with this Scripture: “Why was Jesus baptized if he was without sin?” Jesus explains that he needs to “fulfill all righteousness”² and does so in complete obedience to God’s plan. In doing so, Jesus simultaneously affirms John’s ministry and is able to identify with the people that he came to save.

John baptized as part of a call to repentance and to encourage a complacent and even defiant nation to turn back to the God they had abandoned – but he also told his followers that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit, enlivening God’s power within them. In the Great Commission that he offers his disciples just before he ascends to heaven, Jesus again makes baptism an integral part of the mission to make disciples, telling them (and us) to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”³

Having just walked through the penitential nature of Ash Wednesday, this is a most appropriate season to consider that our baptism (and baptismal remembrance) is an intentional dying to sin. To consider that out of that death comes new life and a new identity as those saved by an overflowing measure of God’s grace. We will take time to reflect on our own baptisms as a pivotal point in our journey of salvation.

As we know, the sacrament of baptism occupies a distinctive place in our faith and plays a vital role in the life of the church. This visible sign of an invisible working of grace brings us to salvation and launches us on the road of holiness – both personal and social. So, what exactly does it mean for us to be baptized into Christ? Because God works in and through baptism to connect us to the beauty of his transforming love in Jesus Christ, how does our day-to-day living change as a result?

Exegesis: [Matthew 3:13-17](#)

The name “Matthew” in Greek (*Maththaios* or *Matthaios*) is abbreviated from the Aramaic word meaning “gift of Yahweh” and occurs in the four lists of the Apostles ([Matthew 10:3](#); [Mark 3:18](#); [Luke 6:15](#); [Acts 1:13](#)).⁴ The author of this Gospel traditionally has been accepted as Levi, the tax collector of Capernaum, who was called by Jesus to follow him ([Matthew 9:9](#); [10:3](#)).⁵ Some commentators note

¹ Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:1-13, Luke 3:21-22, John 1:29-32.

² Matthew 3:16

³ Matthew 28:19

⁴ Clifton J. Allen, ed., *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 72.

⁵ W. Sunderland Lewis and Henry M. Booth, *The Preacher’s Homiletic Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), 1.

that while Mark and Luke seem to distinguish between Matthew and Levi as two separate individuals, the Gospel of Matthew seems to present them as the same figure.⁶ The Church Fathers grant that his status as a disciple of Christ would have allowed him direct knowledge as an eyewitness to most of the events of Jesus' earthly ministry. Regardless of the speculation of the author's identity, "Matthew is more than a historian, more than a writer, more than an author, more than an editor or a scribe. Matthew can be more accurately described as an evangelist."⁷ As one who has been through a transformational conversion and received a new identity, he writes to all who will listen/read about serving the one who rescued him.

Matthew's audience seems to comprise Jewish Christians who would undoubtedly be familiar with Matthew's explicit connections to Old Testament prophecy. They also would have knowledge of covenant language since God already had constituted a servant community of the people of Israel – promising to be their God and giving them the Law to make clear how they were to live. Matthew builds on that prior knowledge to offer that ultimately, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God fulfilled the prophecy of a new covenant (the sign of which is baptism rather than circumcision)⁸ and called forth the church as a servant community.⁹ Such a covenant is sealed with those who believe in the saving work of Jesus Christ and declared in baptism with a corresponding commitment of faith.¹⁰ Baptism in itself would not have been a foreign concept as it is similar to purification rituals of Judaism, but Matthew will portray throughout his Gospel that the Christian's baptism represents the spiritually invisible sign of cleansing and forgiveness while analogous to Christ's death, burial and resurrection.¹¹

While not a formal biography or historiography, Matthew has painstakingly organized a recollection of familiar accounts based on first-hand knowledge or the careful transmission of such knowledge. Because Matthew's purpose is to familiarize readers with Jesus as the prophesied Messiah, the author includes records of Jesus' teaching and healing, as well as genealogy, as evidence. The Jewish Christians to whom Matthew writes may be characterized heavily by their faithfulness to Scriptural law and their general familiarity with the Scriptures themselves. By accepting the Good News of Jesus Christ, this community would embrace Jesus to be God's promise to Israel as the fulfillment of the law of the prophets.

Central themes prevalent in Matthew include:

- The fulfillment of the prophets' words involving Jesus as God's promise of salvation.
- The identity of Jesus as servant/Messiah/Lord.
- The inclusion of Gentiles in God's kingdom.
- A historical understanding of salvation in which the Scriptural story of Israel as the people of God becomes that of the church.
- God's final victory evident in the establishment of God's kingdom on earth.

⁶ Allen, 72.

⁷ Grace Imathiu, *Matthew's Message*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 1.

⁸ Genesis 17:1-14; Exodus 24:1-12

⁹ Jeremiah 31:31-34; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

¹⁰ Hoyt L. Hickman, ed., *The Worship Resources of the United Methodist Church*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 86.

¹¹ Leviticus 13-17; Numbers 19; 1 Peter 3:21; Romans 6:3-5; Colossians 3:12

- A responsibility-based discipleship realized in obedience, righteousness and evangelism.

One of Matthew's unique traits is that it is the only Gospel in which the actual word "church" (*ecclesia*) is used, signifying Matthew's intent to organize an authoritative record for new converts and older believers to put their faith into daily practice.¹²

The Sermon Outline

This sermon is intentionally short to allow space for a response with a Baptismal Remembrance. It begins with an attempt to have the congregation put themselves on the banks of the Jordan River to identify with Jesus in the moment of his baptism. What must it have been like? The sights, smells, sounds and emotions are hard to imagine, but try to encourage the congregation to take a minute to put themselves in that place.

I use a personal illustration next to share my experience with baptism and the covenant that was made on my behalf, since it happened when I was an infant. Your congregation will want to hear about your baptism story. I have heard some poignant ones and some that are just downright humorous! This is also done to plant some seeds as we begin to think about what it is that we remember (or what we have been told) for our service of remembrance following the sermon.

Next, I include space for teaching opportunities about the sacrament of baptism. If your congregation is like mine, you will have people covering the spectrum from mature saints baptized 90 years ago, to children who were baptized just a couple of months ago, to those who are vessels of God's prevenient grace and have yet to experience the sacrament. I believe it is important to speak to the congregation's corporate responsibility as part of the baptismal covenant. I use a humorous example (other examples are listed at the end of the sermon if you prefer to use one of them) to remind us how baptism changes our identity and, as a result, substantially should change our witness in the world.

Lastly, as we transition into the time of Baptismal Remembrance, I conclude this final section with a reminder to the congregation and a word of hope. As we have just started the season of Lent and are being encouraged to examine our spiritual well-being, we are reminded that Christ was baptized so that he would know what it would be for us to navigate our journey of salvation as his disciples. I intend to leave the congregation with a feeling of hope (and also a bit of conviction and challenge!) in recapping that our ultimate goal in being faithful disciples of Jesus Christ is hearing the same words spoken to Jesus on the day of his baptism: We are those in whom our Father is pleased.

The Sermon

"Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.' Then John consented. As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw

¹² John Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986), 191.

the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'" – [Matthew 3:13-17 \(NIV\)](#)

I imagined what this moment must have looked like when I stood on the banks of the Jordan River a handful of years ago. I put my hands in the muddy water that is only a few yards wide and barely waist-deep. And I envisioned what it must have been like for John the Baptist to proclaim the words, "One who's more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to carry his sandals." ([Matthew 3:11](#))

I picture this eccentric man dressed in camel hair and eating locusts and honey, and people coming from all over the entire Judean countryside and all of Jerusalem to meet him there at the river to be baptized and to confess their sins. Crowds of pilgrims would travel way out to the sticks – to the edge of the border that crosses into the same land that God had promised to Abraham centuries before. It was a nearly 75-mile journey, and walking through the vast hills and desert terrain, you really had to want to get there. A simple glance at a map shows that there are also plenty of bodies of water closer to Jerusalem, but John was intentional about choosing to do his baptizing in the Jordan River because it symbolized the crossing from the old into the new and living into the promised covenant of God.

There would have been a long line of people stretching down the riverbank and then all of a sudden when John looks up at the next person wading toward him, he notices that it is Jesus, standing there, waist-deep in the water. At this point, John cannot contain himself. He starts pointing at Jesus, as if to say, "This is the one; the one who takes away the sins of the world!" And he humbly tells Jesus that it is he who should be baptized instead of the other way around. Then suddenly, above Jesus' head is the Holy Spirit, as a dove, descending. At that moment, the clouds part and the heavenly voice of God proclaims, "You are my Son. My beloved. In you I am well pleased." What an experience this must have been for those who were there to take it all in! Even for those of us who were not there, we can still imagine what that must have been like. Father, Son and Spirit – joined together in this moment of sheer glory!

Do you remember your baptism? If you were baptized as a baby, I am guessing probably not. But I bet that even if you were baptized as an infant, you probably still have some pretty early memories that have something to do with your baptism. You may remember entering the church that your parents took you to on Sundays and some other days during the week. Maybe you remember glimpses of the faces of people who smiled at you and made you feel loved and important. You might remember your Sunday school teachers who taught you about the Bible. There may even be some snippets from a handful of sermons you might remember.

As an infant, my parents presented me before the church to be baptized. During that service, they made a promise to God that they kept. While I do not remember my actual baptism (it was in a Presbyterian church in Irmo, South Carolina, in 1982), I do know that my parents and the congregation of that church proclaimed the Good News and promised to live according to the example of Christ. Twelve years later, there came a day when I reaffirmed my baptism and accepted God's free gift of salvation for myself during confirmation. I am so grateful that my life has never been the same! And I

cannot wait to share with some of our young people as they choose to receive that gift and promise to live out that journey of faith here in another few months when they are confirmed.

Now, if you were baptized as a youth or an adult, your baptism was an outward sign of the conversion you experienced. You might remember that moment and what it felt like better than some of the rest of us. In fact, you still might be able to recall the exhilarating feeling of the water rushing over you, cleansing away your old self and your past sins and that warmth of God's Spirit flooding over you.

No matter our age or where we are on our faith journeys, as members of this congregation, we have all taken part in the baptismal covenant at some time or another. Whether we have really paid attention to the words of the liturgy in the hymnal or we have just spoken them out of rote habit, we have all pledged to be an example to those who are baptized in this house of God. We have made a promise to the children and adults who have been up here that we will reject sin in our lives and reaffirm our commitment to Christ so that we can live as Christian examples to those new believers in our midst. And we have promised to surround our brothers and sisters in Christ with a community of love and forgiveness so they can grow in their faith and be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life.

Here at First Church, we celebrate the baptism of people of all ages and all walks of life because we trust that God's grace is working in our lives – from before the time we're born – to bring us to that point in our lives where we accept God's gift of salvation through faith in Christ. God claims us as his own, which is why we Methodists do not believe in re-baptism. We are only baptized once because God's grace is always sufficient. God never makes mistakes. God does not need a "re-do." In that moment when the water cleanses us, we claim God and God claims us. God puts his seal on our lives and we enter into a covenant to love and follow God. We promise to die to self and strive to put God and God's kingdom first. The reality though, is that because we are human, we need *lots* of "re-dos." You and I have to constantly reaffirm and recommit ourselves to God if we are to live faithful, intentional lives in service to God.

After the baptism of his baby brother in church, young Jason sobbed uncontrollably all the way home in the back seat of the car. His parents asked him three times what was wrong. Finally, the little boy managed to give a pitiful sounding reply. "That pastor said he wanted us brought up in a Christian home, but I want to stay with you guys!" Our baptisms should change us from the inside out and people (even our children) should be able see that!

This morning, we are using this sacred time to be more intentional about claiming the promise made at our baptism when we vowed to live as God's children – not only inside these walls, but with our families, friends, co-workers, neighbors and anyone who needs to see and know the love, forgiveness and grace of Jesus. Today, we celebrate that crossing over from the old into the new and living into the promised covenant of God.

God was "well pleased" with his son on the day of Jesus' baptism. Today, as we begin this Lenten journey together, we remember what our baptism has meant to us. And for those of us who cannot remember our actual baptisms, we can celebrate the covenant that was made on our behalf and our

faith journey that has followed as a result. You and I have the opportunity to renew our faith and dedicate our lives to God's glory so that one day when we see God face to face, God will say to us, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You are my child, whom I love, and with you I am well pleased." Let today be an epiphany for us and may it mark the beginning of an amazing journey between God, one another and ourselves. Amen.

As the sermon concludes, it leads into reaffirming our baptismal covenant together using the [Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant](#) (*United Methodist Hymnal 50*).

Note: After participating in the reaffirmation, you might wish to invite the congregation to the altar area for a time of prayer and thanksgiving. You might want to use the baptismal font or a large bowl of water. I like to put seashells or river rocks in the water so that as people dip their hands into the water, they also may take with them these symbols of remembrance while embracing their identity as those who are baptized in Christ. For those who have not yet been baptized, I also use this time to invite them to participate as a means of God's grace beginning to work through them.

Another Illustration

- Johnny's mother looked out the window and noticed him "playing church" with their cat. The cat was sitting quietly and Johnny was preaching to it. His mother smiled and went about her work. Later, she heard loud meowing and hissing and she ran back to the window to see Johnny baptizing the cat in a tub of water. She called out, "Johnny, stop that! The cat's afraid of water!" Johnny looked up at her and said, "He should've thought about that before he joined my church."

Hymn and Song Suggestions

- "[I Surrender All](#)" (*UMH 354*) – A classic hymn recounting the journey of salvation that purposefully repeats the theme of complete submission and surrender, so much so that if the entire hymn is sung, the singer will give voice to the word "surrender" 30 times and "all" will be sung 43 times.
- "[Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days](#)" (*UMH 269*) – This Lenten hymn recounts Christ's earthly journey on our behalf, including the depths of his fasting, praying and battling Satan's temptations on the way to the victory of Easter.
- "[Nothing But The Blood](#)" (*UMH 362*) – This hymn recalls the cleansing action within the grace of baptism through Christ's atonement by asking the question: "What can wash away my sin?" And the emphatic response is "nothing but the blood of Jesus."

Come, Follow Me

- "[Spirit Song](#)" (*UMH 347*) – "Spirit Song" celebrates the work of the Holy Spirit, which also gives voice to the imagery of God's Spirit, like a dove, descending on us just as he did with his son in the moment of his baptism.
- "[Wash, O God, Our Sons and Daughters](#)" (*UMH 605*) – A more modern hymn with beautiful imagery asking God to continue His baptismal work, such as: "We your people stand before you, Water-washed and Spirit-born. By your grace, our lives we offer. Re-create us; God, transform!"
- "[When Jesus Came to Jordan](#)" (*UMH 252*) – In this hymn, Fred Pratt Green traces the account of Matthew 3:13-17 and offers theological implications for what is to come.
- "[At the Font We Start Our Journey](#)" (*The Faith We Sing 2114*) – Using baptism as the starting place, this hymn seeks to connect Christ's road to the cross and victory over death to our journey of salvation.
- "[Grace Like Rain](#)" (*Todd Agnew*) – This is a more contemporary take on "Amazing Grace," which incorporates the water symbolism of baptism in God's grace, like rain, falling down on us.
- "[Washed By The Water](#)" (*Needtobreathe*) – Written and performed by a local band from South Carolina, this folksy song tells the story of a pastor/evangelist's son who shares that his father was, at one time, the subject of rumors and accusations. He recounts how it made the singer and his mother feel and that all the while, whatever they were made to endure during this point in their ministry, he was able to hold onto the promise that "even when the rain falls, even when the flood starts rising, even when the storm comes, I am washed by the water."

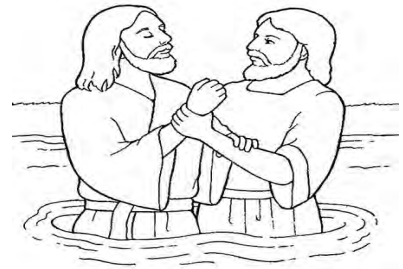
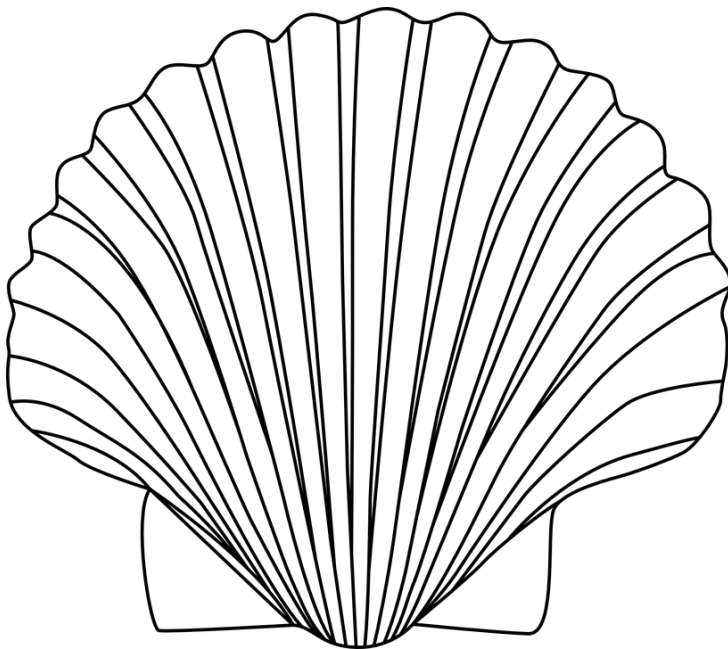
Video Suggestions

- "[O Brother, Where Art Thou?](#)" (2000) – Three prisoners have escaped from a chain gang. In their journey to freedom and what they believe to be buried treasure, they come across lines of people all dressed in white as they process through the woods and down toward the riverbank. The men are mesmerized by what they see and the beautiful music they hear being sung in the baptismal procession, so they join the line and make their way to the river. Two of the men rush down into the water to be baptized by the pastor. After he emerges from the water, the first convict says that the pastor told him that all of his sins have now been washed away in baptism! Even, he says, when he stole that pig, which is why he had been convicted. "But you said you were innocent of that," his friend declared. "I lied," he said, "and that's been washed away, too!"
- "[Jesus of Nazareth](#)" (1977) – John the Baptist passionately calls the crowds to consider their sins and repent. Afterward, there is a poignant depiction of Jesus' baptism.

- YouTube clip of 6-year-old boy's baptism (bit.ly/boybaptized) – One of several clips available on YouTube showing children who are so excited to be baptized that they take matters into their own hands. Oh, that we all might share in that enthusiasm and joy for the opportunity at new life in Christ!

Idea for Children

Since our church is near the beach, we have access to a variety of different seashells. For a fun object lesson, you may wish to take a shell (large scallop or clam shells would be ideal) and attach colored pictures of a dove and John baptizing Jesus inside the shell as a reminder of the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry. You also might wish to use hot glue to attach a piece of string to use as a hanger. If you do not have access to actual shells, you might print these images:



Prayer Resources

- "[An Invitation to Christ](#)" (UMH 466)
- "[Baptism of the Lord](#)" (UMH 253)
- "[Prayer for a New Heart](#)" (UMH 392)

Further Reading

- "[Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition](#)," by Kenneth Collins and John Tyson (Abingdon Press, 2001) – This collection of essays explores the biblical, historical, theological, and practical implications of conversion within the Wesleyan tradition.

- [“Faith Forming Faith: Bringing New Christians to Baptism and Beyond,”](#) by Paul Hoffman, with foreword by Diana Butler Bass (*Cascade Books, 2012*) – Using a Lutheran congregation in Seattle as a model, Hoffman describes that church’s intentional year-long ministry (of which baptism is a central part) rooted in mentoring by more seasoned believers, which is designed to propel new believers into mission and service.
- [“Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation,”](#) by M. Robert Mulholland Jr. (*IVP Books, 2016*) – This book speaks to Christians in all places on their faith journeys and encourages believers to engage in purposeful spiritual formation as “the process of being formed in the image of Christ for the sake of others.” This call to introspective work and faith commitment for the sake of others also incorporates baptism as a covenant made as part of a corporate journey on which we all embark together.
- [“The Holy Spirit in the Life of Jesus: The Mystery of Christ’s Baptism,”](#) by Raniero Cantalamessa (*Liturgical Press, 1994*) – Written by a Catholic priest, this work focuses on the role of the Holy Spirit in Christ’s life at the time of his baptism and throughout his earthly ministry through the time of his ascension, when he instructs his disciples to wait for that same spirit.
- [“United Methodists and the Sacraments,”](#) by Gayle Felton (*Abingdon Press, 2007*) – A practical guide for those looking to know more about baptism as a sacrament within the United Methodist Church. “By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism,” also by Felton (*Discipleship Resources, 2003*), is an excellent denominational resource.

Bibliography

- Allen, Clifton J., ed. The Broadman Bible Commentary: Matthew-Mark (Vol. 8). Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969.
- Drane, John. Introducing the New Testament. San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986.
- Hickman, Hoyt L., ed. The Worship Resources of the United Methodist Church: Introduction to the General Services, Psalter, and Other Acts of Worship. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989.
- Imathiu, Grace. Matthew's Message: Good News for the New Millennium. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.
- Lewis, W. Sunderland and Henry M. Booth. The Preacher's Homiletic Commentary: Matthew. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974.
-



*The Rev. Dr. Laura Canine is an ordained elder in the South Carolina Conference.
She serves as the pastor of [First United Methodist Church-Isle of Palms](#).*

Sermon 2: Wilderness Temptations

Writer: Rev. Erik Grayson

Scripture: [Matthew 4:1-11](#)

Note to the Pastor:

Nestled between the baptism of Jesus and the start to his public ministry, this sermon on the temptations Jesus experienced in the wilderness can serve as a reminder that we have to own our Christian identity in the midst of temptation.

Jesus demonstrates that he understands the role of the Son of God to be about fidelity and faithfulness to God. The three temptations ultimately revolve around the question of who the Son of God is going to be.

The first temptation has to do with Jesus' affiliation with humanity and how the Incarnate One will use divine authority. The second temptation questions whether Jesus will take control of his own destiny or leave that to God. The third temptation offers a short cut to obtaining worldly peace and power – albeit a sham version – in exchange for worshipping Satan. Each of these temptations offers a unique challenge to Jesus. In the end, however, they all relate to how Jesus will embody the role of the Son of God.

Not only does this topic allow us to reflect on Jesus' identity, the sermon invites us to consider how we withstand temptation. Temptation is a common reality for all disciples. As a preacher, you might want to lean into different types of temptations related to the three temptations faced by Jesus; however, all temptations ultimately concern our identity in Christ.

Jesus rejects each of the three temptations by quoting scripture. In general, begin to talk about the importance of being a people shaped by the word of God. Let this sermon invite church members to memorize and learn scripture. Embed scripture memorization into the Lenten disciplines of this season. Make a very specific challenge to the church. Consider selecting a verse each week through the remainder of Lent. Print it in the bulletin. Recite it in worship. Involve Sunday school and small group leaders. Make time to invite the church to learn key verses of God's word. I include some suggestions for verses to memorize in the last section.

As you prepare the worship service and space, consider how you will connect with the liturgical season and the setting of the wilderness. Lent can be emphasized with simple musical arrangements, by replacing bright paraments with muted ones, and by replacing colorful floral arrangements with simple ones. Allow the space to contribute to a larger environment of barrenness and simplicity.

As you preach this sermon, you are continuing on the Lenten journey with Jesus. May you be blessed to withstand temptation as you preach this word, and may your congregation be encouraged and strengthened for the journey ahead.

Exegesis: Matthew 4:1-11

The temptation passage takes place immediately after the baptism of Jesus. "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased," were the words spoken from the heavens over Jesus ([Matthew 3:17](#)). Yet confirmation of his identity isn't enough. Jesus must embody his identity before he can begin his public ministry.

The wilderness into which Jesus is driven is not specified, yet scripture has a word of caution about the wilderness. It was in the wilderness that Moses sojourned 40 days and 40 nights on Mount Sinai ([Exodus 34:28](#)), where Israel rebelled against God and Moses struck the rock at Meribah ([Exodus 17:1-7](#)), and where the Israelites accepted the negative report of the 10 spies and died off before they could enter the Promised Land ([Numbers 13, 14](#)).

When Jesus enters the wilderness, we see a paradigm shift. The people of Israel often proved in their wilderness experiences to be unfaithful. Can Jesus, as the harbinger of the new covenant people, prove to be more faithful than the people of God?

The Spirit of God leads Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days of fasting. The temptations will include various specific details, but Matthew's primary objective is to illustrate that Jesus' identity as the Son of God is marked by fidelity to God. Taken together, Jesus' rejections of the devil's temptations further illuminate how Jesus' baptized identity will be embodied.

The first temptation is, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." ([Matthew 4:3](#)) The craftiness of the devil is not to deny Jesus' unique identity, but to challenge what that identity permits. To turn stones into bread by divine power would be to use his divine identity to serve his own purposes, rather than those of God. By choosing to remain in the fast, Jesus is refusing to exempt himself from the demands of being human. He will live fully human rather than rely on his divine nature.

Note that the devil's first temptation to Jesus is through food, as it was also to Adam and Eve with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Eve's response to the serpent's temptation was to try to argue with Satan, reasoning what she felt was the true intent behind God's commandment. Jesus doesn't engage in argument with the devil, but instead quotes scripture. As Stanley Hauerwas notes:

The trick, of course, that Eve did not recognize is to try to answer the devil on the devil's own terms. Bonhoeffer observes that Eve's disobedience began as soon as she assumed that she could answer the serpent's question on God's behalf, for the question was designed to suggest that she and Adam could go behind the word of God and establish for themselves what the word entailed. In short, the devil's question invited them to assume that they were equal with God.¹³

Jesus models standing firm against temptation through a faithful reading and living of scripture.

In the second temptation, the devil tries to entice Jesus to throw himself off the top of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," the devil quips, then why not control your own future? After all, the devil

¹³ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 52.

reasons, God already has promised that angels will lift you up in their wings and that you will not strike your foot against a stone. The reference is [Psalm 91](#). While this temptation may sound odd to modern ears, the devil is trying to tempt Jesus to take hold of his own destiny. *Can Jesus decide when and how he lives? Can he manipulate God, even through God's own promises?*

The same temptation to control his own destiny will reappear at the crucifixion when the religious leaders will taunt Jesus, saying, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." ([Matthew 27:40](#)) The implication is that the devil is continuing to work behind the scenes to thwart Jesus' ministry. Christians should be mindful of the devil's efforts to twist our convictions and to distort the meaning of scripture. Jesus responds by quoting [Deuteronomy 6:16](#).

The devil's third temptation is the offer of all the world's splendor and glory in exchange for worship. On the one hand, the devil is asserting that he rules over the world and can grant kingdoms to whomever he chooses. On the other hand, Jesus is well aware that God is the Alpha and Omega, the One True Ruler, and that the devil would not have any power were it not granted to him. As the Son of God, Jesus is already in a position to reign as king. Psalm 91 asserts the Messiah's role as the one who would reign over all creation. The reign and rule of Jesus is present, but also not yet fully realized. The temptation of the devil is, in some ways, a temptation toward impatience. We want bread, control and security now. But the offer of God is for a better version of these things, though with the invitation to wait. Jesus once more responds to the devil with scripture. There can be no worship other than the worship of the One True God.

The devil departs until an opportune time. Jesus has proven that he is faithful. He can now begin his public ministry.

Sermon Outline

I begin the sermon by reflecting on one of my favorite outdoor activities: backpacking. This literal wilderness experience disconnects a person from the distractions of modern life, such as schedules, frequent communication and the demands of community. In the wilderness I often find myself reflecting on deeper life questions, most of which go back to the simple question: "Who am I?" This question guides the sermon. Jesus' wilderness experience ultimately challenges him to hold fast to the scriptural and God-given definition of what Son of God means.

The second section of the sermon includes an overview of why the wilderness is important. Though we don't have a literal wilderness location, we've been given a long history of Israel's wilderness experiences. These experiences often involve trials that cut to the heart of what it means to be God's people.

The third section presents Jesus in the wilderness. This is a divinely inspired stop between baptism and public ministry. The 40 days of fasting are followed by three temptations. Much ink has been spilled on understanding each temptation. I offer one brief interpretation in each section connecting with a challenge to Jesus' identity. In the temptation to turn stones to bread, Jesus is tempted to disaffiliate himself from the trials of being human. The Son of God has the power to perform this miracle, but ultimately refuses to do so. The temptation to jump from the pinnacle of the temple is a temptation to

take his destiny in his own hands. The devil wants Jesus to manipulate God. The final temptation is an offer of the world's power, authority – even peace. The devil can offer this, but the offer is a sham.

Jesus does not succumb to temptations to exemption, self-determination or short cuts. The wilderness confirms that Jesus really is the Son of God on God's terms.

The fourth section of the sermon places the congregation in the Lenten wilderness. Lent challenges us to simplify our lives and, in this process, we often face major life questions. Some temptations we must work through involve the same kinds of categories Jesus endured, yet in the end these are ultimately questions about who we are in Jesus Christ.

The fifth section highlights the role of scripture. Jesus knew and used scripture in his rebuke of the devil's temptations. As Christians, we also should know scripture. Invite the congregation to consider adopting a Lenten scripture memorization practice.

Next, I tell about taking a backpacking class, going on a trip, encountering a major storm and having to use my wilderness training. Being trained before our trials is an important key to withstanding whatever testing may come our way.

The sermon concludes with an exhortation to remain steeped in scripture and to remember that the word of God enables us to be faithful.

The Sermon

One of my favorite escapes is backpacking. Every year a couple of friends and I make a nearly weeklong trek to some remote part of the U.S. We're cut off from cell phones, emails and work schedules. It's just three friends, the mountains and God. I love it. Yet in the midst of leaving the world behind for just a few days, the cares of the world never leave you. You're tempted to worry about the big questions: *Where is my life going? Who are the people who really matter? Does my life honor God?* It's amazing what you think about while hiking across the mountains. The wilderness is a place where doubts, temptations and questions abound. At the heart of all our temptations is the question, "Who am I in Christ?"

The wilderness just might reveal who you really are.

In today's scripture Jesus ventures into the wilderness. Wilderness is a common theme this time of year. It characterizes the spiritual Lenten journey. It's a place of testing in scripture. We've already encountered our fair share of wilderness in scripture. It was in the wilderness that Moses sojourned 40 days and 40 nights on Mount Sinai to receive the Law. It was in the wilderness that Israel rebelled against God and an embittered Moses struck the rock at Meribah. It was in the wilderness that God fed the people manna from heaven – the one-of-a-kind "what is it?" meal meant to teach dependence on God and the word of God. The wilderness was where Israel learned what it meant to be the people of God, through failure and second chances. The wilderness exposes who we are in light of who God has called us to be.

Come, Follow Me

The wilderness is where Jesus is sent. We may wonder why this is necessary. He's just been baptized. The heavens were opened and the voice of God proclaimed the Messiah's identity. We yearn to see what Jesus will do next, where he will go, what his ministry will entail. Despite our eagerness, the next step is a private one. Jesus must go to a solitary place, far from the support of community, companionship and basic human comforts. Will the Son of Man be the kind of Messiah God has called him to be? The wilderness will make that known.

It's an uncomfortable 40 days and 40 nights without food. Alone and with an empty stomach, Jesus now must endure three trials from the Evil One. "If you are the Son of God," the tempter suggests, "turn these stones into bread." Use your divine authority to overcome your human need. You don't need to endure this most basic of desires, to fill your belly – if you so choose. The first temptation is to remove himself from identifying with the ordinary needs of average people. Can the devil convince Jesus to distance himself from the purpose of the incarnation? "One does not live by bread alone." Jesus resists.

The tempter, already prepared with a second approach, takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he dares, "throw yourself down." I'll confess as one who doesn't care much for heights, this temptation has never made much sense to me. Yet the temptation isn't about self-harm or thrill seeking. The devil quotes the Psalms that promise God's protection for the Lord's anointed, "so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." The temptation is to test God. We can hear the temptation taking shape: "God promised to protect you. You can do as you wish. Be reckless. Be unpredictable. Force God to act. Take your future into your own hands." The tempter is inviting Jesus to take charge of his own life and his own death. Will Jesus reject God's purpose and live on his own terms? "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Jesus is unmoved.

The tempter, not yet ready to admit defeat, makes one final attempt. Atop a high mountain, he shows Jesus the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you." Imagine seeing laid out before you the wealth of the most powerful nations, the strength of the world's greatest armies and the wisdom of the most learned individuals. This is an offer of power, control and even peace. All of it available now. God sent Jesus on a mission of suffering and humility to inaugurate a kingdom that would grow like a mustard seed, slowly and unpredictably. The devil offers power immediately – "if you will bow down and worship me." Will the Son of God take the easy way out in exchange for his relationship with the Father? "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him." Jesus remains steadfast.

With that, the devil departed.

The wilderness exposes who Jesus really is. He's not here for selfish gain, to manipulate God or to take the easy way. Being the Son of God is about more than a title. Jesus chooses to remain faithful to the identity God has given. Faithfulness and fidelity to God are his identity. Through the wilderness, we see the validation of the words spoken at his baptism. Jesus is the one in whom God is well-pleased.

Jesus' story reminds us that we are in the wilderness, too. This Lenten journey may very well refine, reinforce or expose who we are. Like the wilderness of the mountains or the barren places, Lent is a

time of simplicity. We're invited to remove distractions. We renew our spiritual disciplines. We refocus on our identity as Christians. Yet in the midst of this wilderness season, we may find ourselves struggling with doubts and temptations. You never know what you'll encounter out there.

Some of our temptations may focus on our relationships. Will we remain faithful to our vows and our covenants? Or will we try to exempt ourselves from the shared bonds of community and relationship? Other temptations may center on selfishness. Will we remember that our resources belong to God and should be shared with others? Or will we give into the lie that we are at the center of our lives? Still other temptations may deal with accomplishment. What are we willing to trade to get the job, the pay-out or the accolade? Are we willing to compromise our values to take the easy way out? There are so many temptations. At the end of the day, they all come down to one question: *Who am I in Christ?*

I wonder what temptations you're struggling with today. What keeps going through your mind? What keeps you from sleeping at night? What are you wrestling with? Temptation is very real for any follower of Jesus. In the wilderness, as we seek to be faithful, it's as if we can almost hear the Evil One whisper before every temptation, "If you are a Christian..." – and we know fidelity to our Christian identity is at stake.

As difficult as the trials may be, there is good news. We don't have to make this wilderness journey alone. Jesus is our guide. He models a simple yet powerful path to stand against temptation. How does he do this? He knew Scripture. In each of his responses to temptation, Jesus quoted the word of God. With each scripture, you can almost hear the larger story coming to life. In the word, we're reminded that we don't live on bread alone. God provides sustenance for hungry Israel. In the word, we are reminded that God protects the Anointed. And the Anointed is faithful and steadfast. In the Bible, worship of God and God alone is the first and greatest commandment. It's what it means to be God's covenant people. Jesus isn't standing alone in his encounter with the devil. He's standing within the promises of a powerful God who through generations has stood steadfast with people.

Jesus endures through God's word. The Word of God knows the words of God.

In this Lenten season we are taking a journey: to simplify, to listen and to renew. Yet on any journey we take, we must be prepared. This Lenten season, I invite you to consider memorizing and learning scripture. Often we may be inclined to think of scripture memorization as too simple or for children. It wasn't too simple for Jesus. After all, Lent returns us to the basics of discipleship. Knowing scripture is part of our identity. We shouldn't content ourselves with a vague familiarity with the Bible or having read it once or twice. God's people should know God's word. We should know the stories, memorize key verses and allow it to shape our understanding of the world. At all times immerse yourself in the world of scripture, and you just may discover that the world of scripture is just what you need when you're immersed in a world of temptation. How do we prepare for the wilderness? We learn the word.

When I was in college, I took a Phys Ed class on backpacking. The course covered best camping practices, basic wilderness survival and emergency preparedness. The final exam for the course was a backpacking trip to Linville Gorge, North Carolina. While we were hiking, the sky started turning black and the temperature began to drop rapidly. We quickly learned by weather radio that a massive storm

system was pushing in and was producing tornadoes in the region. We hurried to get out of the gorge, but it was too late. The storm was upon us. The final exam wasn't supposed to include an actual test of our extreme weather lessons, but we suddenly found ourselves huddling under a narrow rock outcropping, squatting to keep a low center of gravity, while our backs were getting pelted by heavy rains and hail. It was a difficult experience, but the wilderness proved we knew what to do.

Brothers and sisters, may your wilderness moments prove that you know what to do. Steep yourselves in God's word. Let it seep into your heart and fill your imaginations so that through the toughest of trials and temptations you may know what to do. Stand strong and firm in your identity in Christ – not wavering in faith or taking the easy way out. And, as you walk this wilderness way, may you not only be equipped with the word of God, but know that you are traveling toward the Word of God who is the Son of God. May his faithfulness inspire and guard you along your way, so that the wilderness may prove you to be a faithful child of God.

Other Illustrations

- Ask people to think about what they do when preparing to go to the gym. You pack a gym bag with workout clothes and shoes. You possibly prepare to take a shower, so you bring a spare change of clothes, a towel, soap, shampoo and deodorant. You throw in an energy bar and a water bottle. I usually double-check to make sure I have my sunglasses. We put all this effort into preparing for our workouts. We know it will be difficult, but we want to be ready to challenge ourselves and to clean up afterward. Think about the level of effort we put into one visit to the gym. Do we put that much intentionality into our preparation and ongoing spiritual training in Lent?
- Whenever a couple approaches me wanting to get married, I require them to attend several sessions of premarital counseling. I order for them a copy of a Christian book on marriage, they take a relationship inventory and personality assessment online, and we spend several sessions talking about their relationship. Through our discussions, we reflect on areas of their lives where they might be in close agreement, as well as those areas where they may be very different. We want to head off potential challenges and set the couple on a path toward growing toward Christ together. Yet talking about their similarities and differences is not enough. We also spend a lot of time talking about who they are together in Christ. We review the wedding vows and the promises. When their wedding comes, I want them to know that the commitment they're making goes deeper than feelings. It's based on promises to each other and to God. They can face any challenge that comes their way because they know the promises made, promises received – and they know who they are. May we likewise know who we are in Christ.

Hymn and Song Suggestions

- "[Stand By Me](#)" (*United Methodist Hymnal* 512)
- "[Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days](#)" (*UMH* 269)
- "[Stay With Me](#)" (*The Faith We Sing* 2198)
- "Way Maker," performed by [Sinach](#) or [Leeland](#).

Video Suggestion

- Scene from "Deliverance" – A useful video clip for this sermon would be an excerpt from the movie "Deliverance". Include a clip from the opening scenes in which the travelers are clean and well-prepared for the journey ahead. Use the clip as a lead-in to ask, "What would you do to prepare for an important journey? We do a lot to prepare for an outdoor adventure. Do we give as much attention to our spiritual journeys, which are of greater importance?"
- "[Man Versus Wild](#)," starring Bear Grylls – Find an image or clip from the television show depicting him surviving any extreme circumstance. Make the point that survival is influenced by having prior knowledge and experience. Our perseverance through trials and temptations will be strengthened by already having God's word hidden in our hearts and minds.

Further Reading

- "[A World Worth Saving](#)," by George Hovaness Donigian (*Upper Room Books, 2013*) – Donigian looks at spiritual practices for the season of Lent and invites readers to "fast from apathy." Guidance for use in small groups.
- "[The Gospel According to St. Matthew](#)," by Floyd Filson (*Harper, 1960*) – Filson's commentary offers a brief introduction for those looking for further reading. Learn about place names, additional scriptural references and major themes and motifs of the passage.
- "[Celebration of Discipline](#)," by Richard Foster (*HarperSanFrancisco, 1978*) – Foster offers insight into why spiritual practices are significant and practical tips for incorporating them into our lives. This book is helpful for personal reflection and practice.
- "[Matthew](#)," by Stanley Hauerwas (*Brazos Press, 2006*) – Hauerwas' commentary is not technical in nature, but rather conversational. He offers accessible theological reflection on the purpose of Jesus' temptations, Satan and the importance of reliance on God's word rather than our own interpretations.
- "[The Gospel of Matthew](#)," by Donald Senior (*Abingdon Press, 1997*) – Commentary offering a basic overview of the passage, key terms and related scriptures.

- "[Leading a Life with God](#)," by Daniel Wolpert (*Upper Room Books, 2006*) – An excellent book to explore various spiritual disciplines with practical guides for personal and group use.

Suggestions for Scripture Memorization

- 2 Corinthians 5:21: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."
- 2 Timothy 1:7: "For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline."
- Ephesians 4:32: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."
- Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"
- Proverbs 3:5: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding."
- Psalm 119:105: "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path."
- Psalm 56:3: "When I am afraid, I put my trust in you."
- John 1:14: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."



*The Rev. Erik Grayson is an ordained elder in the South Carolina Conference.
He serves as the pastor of [Aldersgate United Methodist Church](#) in North Charleston.*

Sermon 3: Beatitudes

Writer: Rev. Zachary Dillard

Scripture: [Matthew 5:1-16](#)

Note to the Pastor:

As we continue in our Lenten journey, the Beatitudes are our focus. [Matthew 5:1-16](#) is a perfect follow-up to Jesus' experience in the wilderness. When he is tempted, Jesus responds with scripture. He knows scripture and stands firm as God in the flesh. Now, in the Beatitudes, Jesus calls us to embody what it means to be a Christ follower.

If we hope to follow Christ, this means there is to be a shift in our minds. No longer do we think the same way. No longer do we view what takes place in the world the same way. Jesus calls us to embody his teachings in such a way that we are transformed.

Therefore, if we are poor in spirit, we will be blessed. If we mourn, we will be comforted. If we are peacemakers, we will inherit the earth. If we hunger and thirst for righteousness, ours is the kingdom of heaven. These things are calling us to live very differently from the world. These things call us to an attitude of humility.

In today's society, being humble is often a trait that people neglect. Yet, as a pastor, it is a trait I am reminded of every year come Annual Conference – and I realize that my appointment is final, and I am able to remain in ministry at the same place for another year. It is humbling to think that I could be moved. It is humbling to wonder whether what I have worked for, what our church has worked for, will continue once I move on. The itinerant ministry has a strange way of humbling those of us within the system. Yet, I affirm every day that God is ever-present in and through our lives.

During this season, let us remember that ministry must continue and that Jesus has a purpose for all of his followers. We cannot choose what we believe and embrace, but God does have expectations of those who choose to follow the way of Christ. Finally, let us embrace spiritual disciplines and not shy away from those in need. Let us go and show the love of Christ to a world in need!

Exegesis: [Matthew 5:1-16](#)

Matthew's gospel is written with a Jewish flavor.¹⁴ Whereas Mark refers to the Kingdom of God, Matthew refers to the Kingdom of Heaven – regularly highlighting a well-known Jewish formula of writing. He writes in such a way that teaches the readers and hearers what it means to follow Christ both here and now, as well as what life may look like when we enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Matthew composes the Beatitudes in a way that would be familiar to his audience. Author and theological scholar Mark Powell believes there are three stanzas or sections within the Beatitudes. In the first two divisions ([Matthew 5:3-6](#) and [Matthew 5:7-10](#)) there are 36 words. The final section

¹⁴ Craig S. Keener and John H. Walton, eds., *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*.

([Matthew 5:11-12](#)) has 35 words.¹⁵ Dividing this passage in this way gives the reader the ability to take it section by section and explore the intention of each.

The first section highlights both the nature of God as well as what the Kingdom of God looks like. The second section encourages continued behaviors that will be rewarded when God's reign is fulfilled – either in this life or in that to come. While Powell calls the final section the “Concluding Comment,” it also serves as a divine reminder that Jesus has experienced what his followers will go through. Christians will be persecuted like Christ, rejected like Christ, and perhaps insulted, just like Jesus. Yet, this passage reminds us that even when we are frustrated, downtrodden, discouraged, and flat feel like giving up (blessed are the poor in spirit), if we endure for just a while, we too will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.

Finally, Jesus calls the crowd to be salt and light. This is not an option, but rather a statement. “You are the salt of the earth. ...You are the light of the world.” ([Matthew 5:13-14](#)). Christians are called to live differently from the world. Believers are called to mourn not as the world mourns, but to mourn a sense of spiritual brokenness, or spiritual bankruptcy. Through the Beatitudes, the faithful reap the reward if they are able to wait on the Lord. The way a believer lives his or her life should reflect that of Christ – a holy life that shines for all to see. A righteous life acts like salt to a world that needs to be preserved from a broken society. Without salt, and without the example of Jesus, the world would be a dark place.

Sermon Outline

Introduction – People-watching helps us to see the good and the bad in society

- A. Have you ever people watched?
- B. See the best in people
- C. See the worst in people
- D. Teaches us the need for Jesus

Point 1 – IDENTIFY with those who are broken

- A. Blessings in midst of struggle
 - a. In your life and life of others
 - i. Homeless
 - ii. Immigrants
 - iii. African Americans and police brutality
- B. Who will rise up and when will someone say enough is enough?

Point 2 – INHERIT what God has for us

- A. Lack of humility and meekness in society
- B. Martin Luther King Jr. and what he teaches us

¹⁵ Glenn L. Monson, “Two Kinds of Blessedness”, *Law and Gospel Everywhere*, gluthermonson.blogspot.com/2017/01/two-kinds-of-blessedness.html.

Point 3 – Christians are called to have an IMPACT

- A. We are the salt and light
 - a. Not an option but a mandate
- B. Greens need salt!
 - a. Without salt, something is off. They just don't taste right.
- C. The world without Christians
 - a. A little off
 - i. Without our proclaiming the gospel, the world is off.
 - ii. Without our preserving Christ's vision, it's a little off.
- D. During Lent – Be a reflection of Christ

The Sermon

Have you ever been in a place where you simply sat and watched people as they go about their daily activities? Sounds a little creepy if you think about it, but I'm confident all of us at some point have participated in what society calls "people-watching." Depending on your view, you may see all sorts of things.

There may be a couple holding hands. I confess that my favorite is seeing an elderly couple walking hand-in-hand. It makes me think of a life full of love and the memories they created together.

Then you may witness a mother with a young child, which reminds me of my two babies.

Perhaps you see someone in your favorite team's colors, which reminds you of your alma mater, and those who have impacted your life in a positive way.

Or maybe you see a person doing Bible study at a table in the local coffee shop, and you are impressed by the way that person practices his or her faith. We are able to witness many positive things in the world time and time again if we simply sit back and watch.

Yet, in the watching we may witness things that remind us that all is not well in the world. There may be moments and things that come into view that make us wonder, "*Where is God?*" "*Why is there so much brokenness?*" We may think, "*Why does the world seem so far from God?*" You may see someone who struggles with alcohol walk out of a liquor store. Despite their problems, they constantly seem to have that little brown bag in hand. There may be another person dressed in clothing that makes you think, "*Girl, if your momma knew what you had on!*" You may see a child throwing a fit because he or she wants that toy that their father will not purchase. Not only will the daddy not purchase the toy, but his rebuttal to the child sounds like, "You already have so many toys that your toy box is overflowing!" Or maybe you witness two people who used to be madly in love now entering a courtroom with their lawyers. Where they once walked hand-in-hand, they are now separated by their legal representatives.

Come, Follow Me

As we move about this world, it is easy to see a certain level of brokenness. This manifests in consumerism, in ended relationships, in physical harm, in people who always seem to seek their best interest rather than loving neighbors and seeking to identify with those on the margins.

When we look to this passage, we see Jesus meeting with his disciples, and perhaps those within earshot hear this message anew of what the Kingdom of Heaven will look like. Jesus has just finished healing the sick, casting out demons and making those who are broken whole. ([Matthew 4:23-25](#)) Where he previously has shown what the kingdom *looks like*, he now teaches what the kingdom *will look like*.

Jesus first calls us to identify with those who are broken. Jesus begins by not ridiculing those who are struggling, those who are hurting, but he sees their pain and announces that they will be blessed even in the midst of their struggle. Imagine being poor in spirit. Have you ever been so down that you don't know which way is up? Have you ever been in a place where your spirit feels broken due to the broken situation you are in? If not, perhaps you can look to someone in your life.

If not in your life, maybe you know someone in the community who seems to be without hope. A homeless person might be poor in spirit, without hope, when all the shelters are closed and she is sitting there looking at her children on the park bench, with nowhere to turn. Perhaps the children felt poor in spirit, broken, when they got off the bus and made it home only to discover that their parents were one of the nearly 700 individuals seized by federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents. Poor in spirit, not knowing where their next meal would come from. Poor in spirit not knowing who would care for them.

Or, perhaps, a whole group of people like African Americans who feel poor in spirit when yet another senseless murder is added to the number of those slayed by police officers. I think of an aunt, a daughter, a sister, and a caregiver to her mother, a woman who just moments before her death, was playing video games with her 8-year-old nephew. Atatiana Jefferson was simply shot while being black, and in her mother's home, while looking through a window at a police officer who seemed to shoot first and ask questions later.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. When will someone rise up and simply say enough is enough? Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. It's good to know that – even in the midst of the brokenness of this world, even when evil shows its face, even when sorrow creeps in and calamity strikes again and again and again – Jesus proclaims that brokenness won't last always. Jesus announces that trouble won't last always. If eternal life begins for us here and now, if the Beatitudes impact the world we live in right now, then how will we seek to bring about a little glimpse of heaven for those who are struggling, hurting and feel hopeless? How will we identify?

We are not only called to identify with those who experience the brokenness of this world, we are called to inherit what God has for us. Once we identify with the hurting, the lost, the least and the few, we see that God has a promise. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the Earth. When I think of meek, I think of someone who is a leader, but someone who has a great understanding of humility and concern for others.

In the world we live in, and our political climate, meekness does not seem to be high on the radar of some leaders. Those in power often look for ways to remain in power. Being in power is fine and the holding of a high office is admirable, yet to do it without meekness, without humility, and without a sense of obligation for all people is dangerous. When I think of meekness, I look at a man named Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King was at a mass meeting when he saw people scrambling and whispering around him. Pastors dashed in and out of the church doors. Finally, he asked three of his closest associates what was going on, only to discover that his home had been bombed. Upon arriving home, he found throngs of people in the street and police using force in hopes of dispersing those gathered.

The situation was tense. Here is the action of meekness and leadership: Rev. Dr. King runs into his home and ensures that his wife and baby girl are unharmed. Next, he looks at the police commissioner and the mayor, and King remembers the mayor stating his "regret that this unfortunate incident has taken place in our city." One of the church trustees responds by saying, "You may express your regrets, but you must face the fact that your public statements created the atmosphere for this bombing. This is the end result of your 'get-tough' policy."¹⁶ While all this is taking place, King walks onto his front porch to address the crowd. When he begins to speak, a sudden hush comes over them. King encourages the people not to respond to violence with violence. He implores them to love their enemies, to do good to them, and not to live by the sword. Finally, he states that he did not intend to be the leader of the bus boycott in Montgomery, but that he was asked by the people. King says he believes that if he had not been born, this movement still would take place. It would still take place because they are doing what is "right, what is just, and God is with us."

Dr. King in that moment models for us what meekness looks like. He models for us what humility looks like. He models for us what a peacemaker looks like, for theirs will be the Kingdom of God. It takes a big person to say that this movement, this ministry, this vision, is not about me. If it is not about me, then the work will continue if I am removed from this place. The movement must carry on! Dr. King embodies what Jesus calls us to. When we can embody what the Beatitudes call us to, we will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.

The final point I desire to make is that Christians are called to have an impact. This is not an option; it is a mandate. If we identify with those who are hurting, we will have an impact. If we seek to inherit what God has for us in the life to come, we will have an impact.

Lastly, we are called to be salt and light in the world. If we are salt and light, the impact we have in the world will be undeniable. In biblical days, as well as now, salt was used as a preserving agent. In hopes that things wouldn't spoil, they used salt in large quantities to preserve the food they had.

Jesus does not say, "If you want to be the salt of the earth, then go be it. But if not, no worries!" Jesus does not say, "Hey, if you feel like it, go be the light in the world." Jesus simply says his followers are the salt and light. You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

¹⁶ Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*, (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1998) 78-79.

There is a preservative component that we are called to have when we proclaim the gospel of Jesus. The world desires to do what it does, but to be salt means that we seek to preserve Jesus' ministry and teachings regardless of where the world goes. When we encounter situations that go against the teachings of Jesus, we must preserve his teachings by proclaiming the word of God. If we encounter someone struggling with sin, we must proclaim that the gospel can transform his or her life if only they repent and believe. There will be times when we fall short. There will be times when we struggle to be holy. In our moments of weakness, we must pray that God make us the salt once again. We need to ask that Jesus would preserve our relationship with him.

During this season of Lent, what is it that Jesus is calling us to? What in our lives might spoil our relationship with him? Part of the reality is this: With a lack of salt, not only do things spoil, but I believe things don't taste as good. For example, I am a big fan of greens. Growing up, I thought kale was simply a garnish on the plate. Have you ever been to a restaurant where they put a piece of kale down and slap an orange on it for a little color on the plate? That was my knowledge of kale. I remember tasting it once as a kid and thinking, "This is some horrible stuff!" Of course, uncooked kale doesn't taste that great!

It was in college when I met my future mother-in-law. Now, this woman knows her way around some greens. Turnip greens and kale greens are a staple in her home during the holiday season and throughout the year. I didn't know people cooked kale until I met her and, man, she can make some good kale greens! I watched her so I could learn how to make the perfect pot of greens. There are two essential ingredients: olive oil and salt. You can add too much salt, so you have to start with a reasonable portion. However, as you add kale, and the greens cook down, you have to add some salt along the way. Without the salt, the greens don't taste right. They are still greens, but they are a little bit off. With the right amount of salt, they are spot-on every time. They are delicious!

Our Christian journeys can be like that from time to time. When we don't do what's right, it is like we throw something in the pot without adding enough salt. If the world fails to speak up or speak out against unrighteousness, we need to speak up and be the salt. If the world fails to humble, we need to be the salt and show what humility looks like. Eventually, all you can taste is the kale with little to no saltiness. Believe me, greens need salt! What would the world look like if we failed to proclaim the peace of Christ in the midst of turmoil? What would our communities look like if we failed to feed the hungry and cloth the naked?

Every time we feed the hungry, we are the salt of the earth. Every time we cloth the naked, we are the salt of the earth. Each time we speak out for justice in the midst of an unjust situation, we are the salt of the earth. If salt loses its saltiness, what is it good for? If a Christian is silent when we need to speak, or if we fail to seek to bring a little glimpse of God's kingdom to those in need, what good are we?

People of God, as we continue on our journey through Lent, let us reflect on how Jesus calls us to live. Let us be salt and light. Let us embrace the Beatitudes. If we can do these things, then ours is the Kingdom of Heaven. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Other Illustrations

- "[A Life of Purity](#)," by Philip Lawler – Highlights the life and ministry of Mother Teresa. When I think of examples of meekness, Mother Teresa (now officially known as St. Teresa of Calcutta) instantly comes to mind. Lawler states, "She was a virgin, yet millions called her 'Mother'. She disdained the limelight, yet people all over the world knew her by a single name."
- "[Mother Teresa Biographical](#)" – Mother Teresa was a Nobel Peace Prize winner. You can read her biography and discover more about her life story at the Nobel website. She is someone who embodied many of the Beatitudes.

Spiritual Discipline

- "[Works of Mercy](#)" – Part of our task is to embody spiritual disciplines. Lent is a season in which we are able to focus with intensity on the disciplines. John Wesley has laid them out for us in several sections. During this sermon, I would suggest looking closely at Works of Mercy.

Hymn and Song Suggestions

- "[Lord, Be Glorified](#)" (*The Faith We Sing* 2150) – This hymn simply invites the Lord to be glorified in our lives, in our hearts, and in God's church.
- "[Where He Leads Me](#)" (*United Methodist Hymnal* 338) – This hymn calls us to discipleship in Christ.
- "[Jesus to the World](#)" (*NewSong*) – This song encourages believers to be lambs that roar, eagles that soar. It calls us to be salt and light. It ends by saying that we simply need to be Jesus to the world.
- "[Bless the Broken Road](#)" (*Selah*) – This song highlights the fact that the journey will be rough (broken road) but that, ultimately, God will lead us where God desires us to be.
- "[Trouble Don't Last Always](#)" (*Rev. Timothy Wright*) – This song reminds us that – even if it's hard right now – trouble won't last forever. If we believe in God, our future is secure.

Video Suggestion

- "[The Lion King](#)" (1994 and 2019) In a scene in one of my favorite movies, Mufasa takes his son, Simba, to Pride Rock early in the morning. Mufasa says, "Look Simba, everything the light touches is our kingdom." As the sun rises, the light spreads and increases the area of Mufasa's reign. As believers, we are called to be like that rising sun. Wherever the light touches, God can claim as God's kingdom as we proclaim that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.
-



The Rev. Zachary Dillard is an ordained elder in the South Carolina Conference. He serves as the pastor of [St. John United Methodist Church](#) and [Wesley Chapel United Methodist Church](#), both in Darlington.

Sermon 4: Prayer and Attitude

Writer: Rev. Emily Sutton

Scripture: [Matthew 6:1-18](#)

Note to the Pastor:

This week, we are halfway through the season of Lent. As we turn our eyes toward the cross, we return to a passage of scripture some may have preached or read on Ash Wednesday – a time when we remembered our mortality and sinfulness. In this series, we make an intentional turn on this fourth week as a reminder that during this season of fasting, prayer and giving, we do not lose focus on why we do what we do. We are seeking to put our faith in practice. Lent is not about our words or actions for others to see, it is about growing as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Jesus in this passage invites us to “beware of practicing our piety before others in order to be seen by them.” As disciples, our goal is grow closer to Jesus. But as human beings, we have the propensity to turn pious acts into a performance. Jesus warns us that a performance is not what he is seeking; instead, Jesus desires that we increase our faith through prayer, fasting and giving in a quiet and subtle way that points to God and not ourselves.

As we discuss putting our faith into practice there are two things we must be careful to note and be aware as we prepare:

1. Works Righteousness – We cannot earn salvation. Discipleship is the decision to follow Christ and live out our faith daily. As we live out our faith, we must be clear that we cannot earn our salvation but receive our faith only by the grace of God. Yet, we practice our faith because we follow the one who called us to live our faith daily in order to transform the world – quite literally to bring heaven on earth.
2. Motives and Faith – As we discuss an authentic faith, we must be careful of our own motives and our authenticity. During this season of Lent, we preachers and teachers of the gospel are called to examine ourselves and ask, “How does this speak into my life?” How is my practice of faith one of authenticity versus one that is being used to increase attendance, encourage others to give or to show others how great a pastor one may be. As we prepare this week, we are invited to truly examine our own motives and authenticity of practicing our own faith prior to preaching and delivering a sermon on authenticity.

Lastly, dear friends, in this week's passage we hear the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. Take time to pray this prayer this week as you prepare for Sunday. Make time to fully take note of the words and their meaning. This prayer often has become something we do – almost a performance or an expected practice. Take some intentional time with the prayer Jesus teaches us to pray this week. May it open our eyes to how God is calling us to practice our faith authentically in God's world.

Exegesis: Matthew 6:1-18

The Book of Matthew seeks to establish Jesus' role as the culmination of God's plan for salvation of all humanity. It was written by a Jewish follower of Christ specifically to convince Jews in the time of Jesus to proclaim that Jesus Christ is the Messiah. Therefore, the book starts with the genealogy of Jesus, connecting the Hebrew Scriptures with the Greek Scriptures. The genealogy of Jesus records that he is the ancestor of David and Abraham, and then 16 times in the book of Matthew you will find the phrase, "All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying..." Jesus is the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures, fulfillment of all that had been prophesied, and Jesus fulfilled God's will by daily living as God in human flesh. The Gospel of Matthew clearly desired Jews to believe in Jesus, but we also receive the commandment in [Matthew 28](#) to, "Go ye therefore into all the nations..." The gospel was not limited to the Jews, but it was written so that *everyone* can hear Jesus' words and actions and come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The gospel writer seeks to prove Jesus is the Messiah through giving us Jesus' teachings found in five long sermons delivered by Jesus ([Matthew 5-7](#), [Matthew 10](#), [Matthew 13](#), [Matthew 18](#) and [Matthew 24-25](#)). These five sermons shape the structure of the gospel and allow for the gospel – during a time when many could not read – to be easily memorized and retold. After coming to belief, new disciples could share this gospel with others as the teachings were organized in groupings of threes and sevens.

Our scripture focus is located within the middle of the first long sermon found in [Matthew 5-7](#). Jesus ascends a hill as a crowd has begun to follow him. He uses the acoustics of an outdoor amphitheater to preach and teach what is known as The Sermon on the Mount. This sermon includes the Beatitudes, the relationship of the disciples to the world, the new law that will not abolish the old law, a contrast of the old law and the new, a contrast of old and new practices and other teachings on the religious life. What we begin to see here is what we will see throughout the book of Matthew: Jesus is the interpreter of Jewish customs and practices.

In [Matthew 6:1-18](#), Jesus describes the practices of the Jewish faith in threes: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. These three practices are fundamental to the Jewish faith, and Jesus proclaimed that they should be continued in the Christian community. After all, a few verses earlier in [Matthew 5:17](#), Jesus proclaimed that he did not come to abolish the law or the prophets but to fulfill them. The point of [Matthew 6:1-18](#) is that "when we give alms," "when we pray," and "when we fast," we are not to create a performance out of our practice, but the practice seeks to draw us closer to God and one another.

The words, "Beware of practicing your piety before others" are not intended to frighten us but to warn us of the temptations that Christian disciples will have as they practice their faith. "The danger is turning the sanctuary of one's devotion to God into a theater, with alms, prayer and fasting going on stage for applause. The text is laced with language of public show: trumpets, masked faces, acting (hypocrisy), and an applauding audience. Perhaps nothing is so attractive, so tempting as public praise. It is meat and bread to the human ego, but it can erode the fundamental posture of the Christian life – before God."¹⁷

¹⁷ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching Through The Christian Year: Year A*, (Trinity Press International, 1992),. 146.

This passage invites God's people to ask the question: Have we fallen into the snare of turning God's sanctuary into a theater and our practice of faith into a way to win favor? This text invites us, as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, to consider how we practice our faith and to examine our motives behind our practice.

Sermon Outline

1. Introduction
 - a. Why do we do what we do?
 - b. "Come Follow Me: A Disciple's Journey Through Lent" series introduction
 - c. Looking at ourselves in the mirror
 - d. A holy Lent includes self-examination as a spiritual discipline
2. What is discipleship?
 - a. Jesus' disciples practice faith – faith in action
3. Illustration from Ash Wednesday
4. Discipleship becoming self-promotion
 - a. Due to sin and human nature discipleship easily becomes self-promotion as individuals and corporately
 - b. Example from Bethel and how churches can move from discipleship to self-promotion
5. Jesus' instructions: find a quiet and secluded place to shift focus from us to God.
6. Closing Questions
 - a. What motivates us?
 - b. Are we living an authentic faith?

The Sermon

Why do we do what we do?

Why do we serve? Why do we give? Why do we pray? Why are we fasting from chocolate or whatever it may have been that you gave up for Lent?

Why do we do what we do?

This week, we continue in our sermon series "Come Follow Me: A Disciple's Journey Through Lent." As we continue to discover what it means to be a disciple today, I invite you to take a close look at what motivates you to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Every morning before you leave your house, you look in the mirror, right? You make sure your tie is straight, shirt is not wrinkled. You ensure your makeup is on – no smudges on the eyeshadow or eyeliner – and each hair is in place or close to it.

Every year we make an annual visit to the doctor for a physical and another to the eye doctor for an eye exam. For most of us, we go to the dentist at least twice a year. All three of these appointments

are for what? Preventive care. To prevent or at the least to catch something before it becomes a major issue.

Well friends, we are in the season of Lent, and Lent is a time in which we are invited to look at ourselves in the mirror and ask, "How are we doing spiritually?" This is the time in which we ask ourselves, "What do I need to work on? How am I faithfully living out God's call on my life?" And, it leads again to that question I started with: Why are we doing what we are doing?

Today, we are at the halfway point in Lent. To maintain or regain our focus, we turn back to a passage from Matthew 6 many of you heard on Ash Wednesday. In this passage, we are reminded that an authentic faith is one that puts faith into practice through words and deeds as we seek to experience the presence of Christ daily. Lent is a season of repentance, but I remind us today that it is also a season in which we are invited into a time of personal and corporate self-reflection and examination. To really look at ourselves in the mirror.

On Ash Wednesday, I invited us "in the name of the Church, to observe a holy Lent by self-examination and repentance, by prayer and fasting and self-denial, and by reading and meditating on God's holy word." These are all spiritual practices that allow us to be faithful disciples, but today at the halfway point in Lent, I invite us truly to take seriously the call to self-examination.

Discipleship is not once and done; it is a daily decision to follow Jesus. A daily decision to seek after Christ as we shift our focus from ourself to God. Whether you have been a disciple of Jesus for years, or you have recently decided to follow Jesus, or you are still thinking about it, Jesus clearly tells us in Matthew 6 that we are to practice our faith and to make sure we have the right motivation.

Jesus says in the first verse: "Beware of practicing *your* piety before others."

Jesus expects that we practice our faith. It is expected that we have faith that is alive and growing. It is expected that we know or at least be reminded that disciples of Jesus Christ practice their piety or faith through prayer, fasting and alms giving. Today, many follow that same paradigm of prayer, fasting and giving daily in order to experience Christ. Unfortunately, we are human, and our human condition gets in the way of our discipleship. Far too often, what began as a true and meaningful way to practice our faith easily can turn into a performance: an act for others or a way of demonstrating we are good Christians.

On Ash Wednesday a few years ago, I went out to dinner following our worship service. I had completely forgotten that I had a black cross smudged across my forehead. As I went into the restaurant, I received several stares, but no comments until I sat down. My waiter proceeded to let me know that I had a big smudge of black stuff on my forehead. I explained what the ashes stood for and how they marked the beginning of the season of Lent. After my explanation, I felt a truly humble desire to share the good news that we have hope because of Jesus. I proceed not to wipe off my ashes, wearing them around the rest of the night. The attention got to my head, and I proceeded to both the grocery store and Target with my black smudge on my forehead. I walked proudly around those stores, as if to say to people, "Look at me."

The next day the thought hit me: *What was I doing?* Initially, it was innocent and truly allowed me to share my faith. Later that night, though, I became like those performing on the streets – proud of ashes and seeking to put my good Christian faith on display. My motives changed. It happened without my recognizing what happened at first. Upon examination, I realized that my human nature had taken over and led to something that did not bring glory to God; instead, it puffed up my ego and pride.

Do you see the difference? It is not that the private/public act of receiving ashes on Ash Wednesday is inauthentic to my faith. Nor is it inauthentic to wear ashes for the remainder of Ash Wednesday. Instead, the authenticity of an act of faith or piety is determined by the motivation behind the action. Authenticity is not something one can judge externally, but only you as an individual can determine your own motivation with self-reflection and examination.

When I examined myself the next morning, I realized that I had lost sight of the goal. I missed the mark. Unfortunately, we are human, and our human condition gets in the way of our discipleship. We move from discipleship to self-promotion so easily. We post pictures of our Sunday school class serving at the soup kitchen. We create a video of the youth group's worship service. We retweet the pastor's lines from the sermon. Each of these actions were done with the best intentions – especially the desire to put our faith into practice. However, with a slight change of motivation and focus, we move from God to ourselves. Our motivation changes these actions from authentic practices of faith to self-promotion or maybe promotion for the church.

It goes back to the question of why we are doing what we are doing. And this question is not just for individuals, but I believe it is a question we must ask corporately as a church. To really look at ourselves in a mirror and ask, "Why are we doing what we are doing? Is it to expand the gospel or promote one's self or church?"

Bethel, one of the churches I serve, has one of the most visible ministries in our community. We offer shelter to homeless men year-round. It is a vital ministry and one of the ways we as a church are living out Jesus' command to love God and neighbor and to fulfill Jesus' command in [Matthew 25](#) to feed, give drink and welcome the stranger. But our ability to serve homeless men year-round can easily become a way of saying, "Hey look at us and what we are doing! Aren't we great?"

It's a slippery slope. Daily we need to examine our motives and ask ourselves why we do what we are doing – and truthfully ask ourselves whether the focus is on us or God. What is our motivation?

Jesus gives us clear direction for determining our motivation when he says:

"Here's what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace." (Matthew 6:6 The Message)

I believe that by the power of the Holy Spirit, God helps us discern our motivation. In order to discern our motivation, however, we must be willing to be quiet and go to a secluded place long enough to

listen to God's call through intentional self-examination and reflection. Believe me, we are human, and we will fail, but each time God calls us back.

Friends, this I believe:

Lent is a time of self-examination, a time of having our hearts converted and opened for more spacious love. We ponder our habits, fears, anxieties and actions (and inaction). We reflect on all that distances us from the community of faith, from our families, from our loves, from those yearning for connection, from those lost and wandering. Self-examination does not mean to be harsh and self-critical; it is a willingness to understand our woundedness. Self-examination leads us into the way of making room to love more fully, more deeply and more honestly. Self-examination helps us repent and turn toward love.¹⁸

Self-examination called me to repentance and love on that Thursday morning several years back, still with smudges of ashes on my forehead. My ego and pride had gotten the best of me the night before, as it often does, but God called me back and I chose to turn toward God in an act of repentance. As disciples, we are invited to turn back to God by the power of the Holy Spirit. Through intentional self-examination and reflection this Lent, we can begin to allow the Holy Spirit to point out where we have strayed, where we need to grow, and where we can make room to love God and God's people more fully, deeply and honestly.

Today, on this Fourth Sunday of Lent, we are reminded that self-reflection and examination of our lives is a part of what makes a holy Lent. Today, you are invited to examine what your true motives are when it comes to your life in faith. What motivates you to serve? What motivates you to give? What motivates you to pray? Is it to show that you are a good Christian, or is it to love God more fully, deeply and honestly?

This week, as a part of your Lenten discipline, I want you to take a close look at what motivates you: Are you living your faith authentically?

Or are there aspects that were once meaningful but have now become a performance for others?

Spiritual Discipline

To end the sermon, I would use an insert in the Sunday bulletin or send out an e-blast explanation of Richard Foster's "Prayer of Examen." I would invite folks to incorporate this as a spiritual discipline for the remainder of Lent – or at least this week – as a spiritual discipline of self-examination.

I suggest the following wording for the bulletin insert or email:

¹⁸ Susan Henry-Crowe, "Turning: An Ash Wednesday reflection", February 14, 2018, umcjustice.org/news-and-stories/turning-an-ash-wednesday-reflection-623.

The practice of Examen is a spiritual practice of introspection. The Examen gives us daily opportunity to uncover true motivations and desires and discover where God has been at work in and around us.

In his book "Prayer," Richard Foster explains that the Prayer of Examen "has two basic aspects, like two sides of a door. The first is an examen of consciousness through which we discover how God has been present to us throughout the day and how we have responded to his loving presence. The second aspect is an examen of conscience in which we uncover those areas that need cleansing, purifying and healing."¹⁹

This week set aside 20 minutes daily to practice the discipline of the Prayer of Examen:

1. Find a quiet and secluded space without interruptions.
2. Begin by reading Psalm 139:1-5:

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

3. Then begin the Prayer of Examen:

- a. Examen of Consciousness:

"Take time prayerfully to reflect on the thoughts, feelings and actions of our days to see how God has been at work among us and how we responded...the examen of the consciousness is the means God uses to make us more aware of our surroundings" and how God is at work in and around us.

Questions may include:

- Where have I experienced you in life today?
- When was I fully present with you and others?
- What was my high/low of the day?
- When did I feel most alive, most hopeful, most energized?
- When did I feel most drained, most discouraged, most indifferent?

This may naturally flow into the second portion, and back and forth.

¹⁹ Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home (10th Anniversary Edition)*, (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2002).

b. Examen of the Conscience:

Invite God to search our hearts to the depths. Without apology and without defense, we ask to see what is truly in us. It is for our own sake that we ask these things. It is for our good, for our healing, for our happiness.

This is a joint search of our heart; God goes with us to keep us honest, to keep us from calling evil good and good evil, and from calling ourselves unredeemable.

Questions may include:

- When did I feel farthest from you?
- Why did I intentionally or unintentionally turn away from you today?
- Confess sins committed and be specific

4. Reread [Matthew 6:1-18](#), and close with the Lord's Prayer.

The point of the Prayer of Examen is self-knowledge. Knowing who we are and whose we are so we can more fully know, love and serve God. St. John Chrysostom said:

"Find the door of your heart, you will discover it is the door of the Kingdom of God."²⁰

Another Illustration

- I considered using an example from the commentary "Feasting on the Word." In the theological section, Lori Brandt Hale suggested the illustration of a portion of a story from the children's book "[The Frog and Toad Treasury](#)," by Arnold Lobel. One chapter titled "The Surprise" tells the story of the friendship between Frog and Toad. Frog decides to clean up Toad's yard after the leaves have fallen. He secretly goes to Toad's home and says, "I will rake all the leaves that have fallen on his lawn. Toad will be surprised."²¹ At the same time, Toad has the same idea. "Both manage to arrive at the home of the other unseen, ascertain that no one is home, rake the leaves, and return to their own houses unnoticed. On their respective ways home, however, a wind comes. The wind blows and blows. The piles of leaves do too, so that the leaves are scattered everywhere. At the end of the day, neither Frog nor Toad realizes what the other has done, because both return home to leaves strewn across their yards. Both pledge to rake their own leaves the next day. 'When Frog got home, he said, 'I will clean up the leaves that are all over my own lawn. How surprised Toad must be!' Toad echoed Frog. 'That night Frog and Toad were both happy when they each turned out the light and went to bed.'"²²

²⁰ Foster, *Prayer*

²¹ Arnold Lobel, *The Frog and Toad Treasury*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1970). 42.

²² David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Bartlett, *Feasting on The Word: Year C, Volume 2: Lent Through Eastertide*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010)

Hymn and Song Suggestions

- "[Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days](#)" (*United Methodist Hymnal* 269)
- "[Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling](#)" (*UMH* 348)
- "[Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior](#)" (*UMH* 351)
- "[I Surrender All](#)" (*UMH* 354)
- "[Take Time to Be Holy](#)" (*UMH* 395)
- "[Lord, I Want to Be a Christian](#)" (*UMH* 402)
- "[Near to the Heart of God](#)" (*UMH* 472)
- "[Come and Find the Quiet Center](#)" (*The Faith We Sing* 2128)
- "[Come Away with Me](#)" (*TFWS* 2202)
- "[Lead Me to the Cross](#)" (*Hillsong United*)
- "[Amazing Grace \(My Chains are Gone\)](#)" (*Chris Tomlin*)
- "[In Christ Alone](#)" (*Stuart Townend*)
- "[O Come to the Altar](#)" (*Elevation Worship*)

Video Suggestion

- "[Dust](#)," by Rob Bell – The eighth video in his Nooma series. Consider using the first 1:24 as an introduction to this sermon. The main content of the video does not fit into the message, but the first 1:24 of the video sets the tone for this sermon.

Bibliography

- "[Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide](#)," edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (*Westminster/John Knox*, 2009)
- "[Preaching through the Christian Year: Year A: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Lectionary](#)," by Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hays, Carl R. Holladay and Gene M. Tucker (*Trinity Press*, 1992)
- "[The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1](#)," edited by William Barclay (*WJK*, 2017)
- "[The CEB Study Bible](#)," edited by Joel B. Green (*Common English Bible*, 2017)
- "[The Interpreter's Bible, Volume VII](#)," edited by George A. Buttrick (*Abingdon Press*, 1951)

Online Resources

- UMC Discipleship Ministries Worship Planning – umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning
 - Working Preacher – workingpreacher.org
 - The Text This Week – textweek.com
-



*The Rev. Emily Scales Sutton is an ordained elder in the South Carolina Conference.
She serves as the pastor of [Bethel United Methodist Church](#) in Rock Hill
and [Philadelphia United Methodist Church](#) in York.*

Sermon 5: Commitment to Discipleship

Writer: Rev. Dr. Robin Dease

Scripture: [Matthew 8:14-27](#)

Note to the Pastor:

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' ministry is described as a ministry of teaching, preaching and healing. Jesus healed many. Through his compassion, Jesus touched and healed persons who were infirmed, broken, lame and ostracized. Jesus met people where they were most vulnerable.

The work and ministry of the pastor, preacher and teacher is to model Jesus in everything we do and say. A significant role of the pastor is helping to alleviate the hurt and pain of those we encounter.

Preachers carry out the holy function of preaching. People are longing for answers. Google is their go-to place for some answers. They desire and need solutions to the frustration, uncertainty and chaos in their lives. It is through the preached word that we have an opportunity to invite and draw persons back to God through the biblical texts and there find the answers they need for their lives, families, communities and society. Preaching is integral to making disciples of Jesus Christ. In other words, discipleship begins with a commitment from the pastor.

As teacher, Jesus used parables as strong examples to teach the young, simple and uneducated. Teachers and scholars of the first century saw Jesus' ability to teach, as one with authority.

Matthew makes clear that teaching is to be an integral part of the work of Jesus' followers. Teaching is the most important act of the post-Easter mission, for teaching is the means by which the baptized are "made disciples" and the Great Commission comes to fruition.²³

As healers, we imitate Jesus by having compassion for others, demonstrating that the Kingdom of God is near and destroying the works of evil. We must get personally involved and remember the power of touch. Jesus touched people. He laid hands on them and prayed for them. Today, healing can come by way of health and welfare ministries. A committed church could reduce the amount of medicines, doctor visits and surgeries one may incur. There are many ways to leading people to wholeness. We must care enough.

Preach the word, my friends!

Exegesis: [Matthew 8:14-27](#)

When studying the Gospel of Matthew, it is helpful to know this gospel is a discipleship manual because Jesus' mighty acts generate a community of disciples.²⁴ Matthew is the gospel of the church. It is the only gospel to use the Greek word for church: *ecclesia* ([Matthew 16:18](#) and [Matthew 18:17](#)).

²³ Mark Allen Powell, *God With Us: A Pastoral Theology of Matthew's Gospel*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 62.

²⁴ M. Eugene Boring, 1995. "Matthew", *Matthew and Mark: Vol. 8 of The New Interpreter's Bible*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 228.

The Gospel of Matthew is widely used in worship by the church²⁵ because Jesus is teaching in both word and deed. Matthew stresses three main facets of Jesus' ministry: preaching, teaching and healing.

We read tangible evidence of the power of our Lord to create followers because we get to see Jesus in action, hear his voice, and watch what his disciples are learning. Matthew combines the themes of miracles and discipleship prior to Jesus' commissioning of the disciples in [Matthew 9:36-11:1](#).²⁶ Although Matthew wrote primarily to the Jews, we see the stories he recorded are not exclusive to the Jews. Matthew recognized the Gentiles' receiving the blessing of God because of their faith. God's grace extended beyond Matthew's community.

We read of two healing miracles ([Matthew 8:14-16](#)): that of Peter's mother-in-law and the many others not named. Matthew has painted a picture of a compassionate Savior who graciously heals those who are sick.

The healing ministry of Jesus appealed to many people, including those of other faiths and traditions. In [Matthew 8:14-27](#), we see that all lives matter to God. Jesus' arms of love extend to those who dwell on the margins, the unchurched and outcast, and Jesus extends an invitation to all to forsake a life of comfort for a life of challenge, risk and fulfillment.²⁷

In [Matthew 8](#), we find Matthew demonstrating Jesus' authority over disease, nature, the supernatural, sin – even death itself. Each of these are things only God has authority over, and so each backs up Jesus' claim to be God in human flesh. And if Jesus is God, then he has authority. When Jesus says something, we should obey.

In [Matthew 8:14](#), Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law. It appears Peter never mentioned the illness of his mother-in-law. Jesus takes initiative. He sees her sick with fever and his touch brings healing to her. Matthew mentions the response of the woman, which was that she began to serve Jesus. I assume she did some work in the home that day. Matthew highlights that she served Jesus, whereas other accounts say she served Jesus and his disciples.

Why did Matthew write in such a way? The likely answer: Peter's mother-in-law did what everyone whom Jesus helps should do. She becomes a model disciple. She is a contrast to the two "would-be" disciples mentioned later.

In [Matthew 8:17](#), the healing ministry of Christ was not an attempt to draw crowds or impress people. Christ healed people to "fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet." According to Isaiah 53:4, Christ was obedient to God. Jesus would bear our burdens and take on our infirmities. Jesus bears the ultimate cause of sickness, the sin of the whole world.

²⁵ Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation, Revised Edition*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1999), 187.

²⁶ Reginald H. Fuller, "Matthew", *Harper's Bible Commentary*, The Society of Biblical Literature. General Editor, James L. Mays, (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1988), 961-962.

²⁷ Carol Meyers, *Women in Scripture*, Toni Craven and Ross S. Kraemer, eds, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 408.

[Matthew 8:18](#): "When Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to depart to the other side." It was a command his followers would obey. He is not gently asking us if we want to get in the boat with him. He is telling the disciples, "Get in the boat. You say that you are my disciple. Then get in the boat." Jesus may take leave from the crowds, but he does not abandon them. I understand that Jesus did not want the crowds to exhaust him so that he would not continue to teach the disciples. Perhaps this simple activity tested the people to see whether they would continue to follow Jesus.

In [Matthew 8:19-22](#), Matthew records the responses of two individuals who were not altogether convinced that following Jesus was the lasting way to joy and peace. The time of Jesus' ministry was short and demanded full attention and commitment.

The first response comes from a scribe who stated that he would follow Jesus everywhere. What did Jesus have to say to him? "Foxes have holes, and birds have nests; but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." ([Matthew 8:20](#)) We are not to imagine that Jesus did not have places to stay at times. When he went to Jerusalem, he often stayed with his friends in Bethany. Jesus knew his mother had a room for him. The family home was in Capernaum. What we hear Jesus telling this man is that a disciple of Jesus should not expect too much from this world and be prepared to wait until the next for the rewards of serving Jesus.

Jesus wants the scribe to appreciate who he truly is. According to the scriptures, God gives Jesus ultimate power and authority. As the Son of Man, Jesus is the King of Kings because of his saving work on the cross. A disciple has a true understanding of who Jesus is. The scribe had no conception of the greatness of Jesus. We have no idea whether this scribe became a disciple of Jesus.

The second would-be disciple had to learn about priorities. His family came first. Maybe his father had just died, because if he had, his son would be with the family mourning. Maybe the father is still alive, but aging, ill and nearing the end of life. The son wanted to fulfill family responsibilities before following Jesus. He was putting cultural expectations above the requirements of Jesus.

This young man was actually using legitimate concerns as a reason not to become a fully committed follower of Jesus. Nevertheless, Jesus has the authority to claim first place in our lives. He says, "Let the dead bury the dead." This statement stresses the radical demands of Jesus' discipleship, especially because Jewish culture placed great importance on the duty of children to bury their parents.

Jesus' disciples have to serve the Kingdom of God immediately. Jesus does not want his disciples to ignore family responsibilities. After all, he had just healed Peter's mother-in-law. The difference was that Peter and his family were putting Jesus first. True discipleship means relinquishing all the ordinary things of life – home, family, job and money – because what is given in exchange is priceless. Christ was calling us into the ministry, challenging us to "follow me...go and preach the Kingdom of God."

In [Matthew 8:23-27](#), the disciples follow Jesus into the boat. A storm rises on the sea and the disciples become terrified and afraid. As they are trying to keep from drowning, Jesus is asleep. Because they are experienced fishermen and know the ways of the sea, their fear causes them to waken Jesus and alert him to the danger.

The disciples' action reminds us that – even though we claim to follow Jesus, believe in his power to heal and hear his messages – we still find it difficult to be faith-filled all the time. When we become uncertain and unsure of what is happening around us, we become afraid. Fear can freeze people. In that way, the disciples reveal our own fearful reactions. Faith may seem harder to have in the storms of life. Then we also need to waken Jesus, who will give us what we need.

Sermon Outline

1. The Difficulty of Commitment in the 21st Century
 - a. Maintaining committed relationships, we have become self-absorbed.
 - b. Meaning of committed relationships
 - i. If we are really committed to God, it will show.
2. The Value of Commitment
 - a. Relationships require dedication
 - b. A spiritual relationship to Jesus can help.
 - i. If we believe that there is no other name under heaven whereby we are saved, then why are we not sharing the message of Jesus' saving grace?
 - ii. I will tell you why: There is a lack of commitment!
3. What Commitment to Jesus Means for Our Lives
 - a. Hesitancy to follow Jesus – a strong profession of faith does not mean commitment.
 - b. Commitment to church is more than attendance
 - i. It is more than tithing, working or supporting the church.
 - ii. Christ desires our love, our prayers, our time, our availability and our faith.
4. Commitment to Becoming a Faithful Disciple
 - a. Discipleship is not obedience.
 - b. Discipleship is a daily commitment.
 - c. Reaching out to others to share the love of Christ.
 - i. Others will see the fruits of your commitment.

The Sermon

There is one thing we do not see much of anymore: commitment. I have done many weddings in my 25 years of ministry. Through counseling, every couple was convinced they were destined to be together forever. Their families were committed to supporting them. Yet, their marriages did not survive the vicissitudes of life.

The only form of commitment really being upheld today by society is a deep commitment to oneself. No wonder this generation has been labeled the "Me Generation" and the emerging generation is focused on acceptance of everything. They go through the acts of commitment but are not committed. They want benefits but no responsibility. The first little wind, storm or problem they encounter, they give up.

Customer service representatives are no longer committed to making the consumer experience pleasant. They see you coming and they try to avoid you at all costs. We are not committed to jobs and colleagues. The first sign of criticism, we quit. In our churches, we encounter conflict. It is either fight or flight because we are not committed to working through the conflict and bringing peace.

It is so easy to forsake responsibility and walk away because commitment is hard. Commitment means dedication, devotion and allegiance. Commitment even involves a change of will and opinions. Commitment fails because of the lack of responsibility to a relationship.

Relationships require give and take. Commitment means two people make concessions and compromises in order to have a balanced relationship. Give-and-take is *an attitude and approach to creating and maintaining a healthy relationship*. Perhaps our lack of commitment to relationships is a direct correlation to our lack of commitment to the high and holy things of God.

I wonder how far Christians have strayed from the path of total commitment to Jesus. Somewhere along the cultural and societal shifts, it seems we have minimized Jesus' call to total abandonment. Churches are full of people who are content with a causal relationship without considering what a deep relationship with Christ entails. One writer stated it this way:

We are afraid that if we ask too much, people will stop coming to our churches. Our operating assumption is that people will flee to the nearby entertainment church if we ask them to give too much of themselves. So, we start with a low bar and try to entice people by increments of commitment, hoping that we can raise the bar imperceptibly to the ultimate destination of discipleship.²⁸

Discipleship is much more than church membership, joining a committee, backing a building project or chairing a committee. Authentic discipleship requires examining our relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Our Christianity is not what we do; it is why we do it. Regular church attendance, supporting the church yard sale or singing in the choir makes discipleship an activity instead of an identity.

In this passage of scripture, Jesus had several encounters with persons. Each response to Jesus is different. How many of us will follow when we feel that God is getting too close? When God is demanding too much? When God is getting all in our business? Some will say, "I do not want a God like this in my life. I just need a God who will give me fire insurance when I need it most."

Many will claim to follow Jesus. What they really are, are fans of Jesus. They like the idea of Jesus. They cheer him on, like the triumphal entry. Fans holler "Jesus," but true followers develop a relationship with him.

Peter's mother-in-law gave a natural and joyful response to the compassionate and healing touch of Jesus. She took the strength and energy Jesus freely and lovingly restored to her and immediately began to use it in his service. Her commitment to serve did not waver. She did not look back.

²⁸ Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time*, (Downers Grove, Intervarsity Press, 2003), 50.

Come, Follow Me

Something about this man made her want to follow and give her all to him. No questions to ask, no negotiation or ultimatums to make. By faith, she served Jesus.

Let us look at the scribe. This scribe thought he was doing Jesus a favor instead of seeing that he actually owed Jesus his very life and allegiance as his master and Lord. He was a fan of Jesus. The scribe believed Jesus would accept whoever signed up. You see, he was “offering” to sign up instead of responding to the sovereign call of Jesus upon his life. The Lord could see his heart. It was not actually committed to following Jesus. The scribe gravitates toward Jesus’ popularity. When the rubber meets the road and things get tough, he will have to suffer hardship, ridicule and persecution; he will immediately fall away.

Because making a commitment to be a disciple of Christ is not conditional, it is a wholehearted response to God’s call to us. You cannot play with this thing. Just like this young man who wanted to take care of his father first before following Christ, Jesus says, you are not committed to the kingdom. There can only be one master and his name is Jesus. You have to follow Jesus through the hardships, leave everything including your family, embrace a cross and press on to Jerusalem, and do as the Holy Spirit leads – even if you will never be recognized for it.

The disciples got into the boat with Jesus. They had heard his convincing sermons and witnessed his miracles. Yet, they were afraid. They were so fortunate to live with Jesus, eat with him, sleep in the same room, look in his face, touch his hand. These 12 men who we all envy were lacking in faith and commitment. Jesus wants us to come to a place in our lives where we put our trust and faith in him in all situations.

When the sea is calm and the weather is nice, we tend to trust in our resources and ourselves. When those things are threatened, we run to Jesus asking him if he cares. Just like the disciples: They followed Jesus, but they struggled with total commitment.

You might ask what commitment looks like for me. *Pastor, you keep saying that coming to church and giving an offering are not true discipleship. Please tell me, what does commitment to follow Christ look like? Give me some tangibles. Make it plain.*

I am so glad you asked. Your discipleship goes beyond your obedience. You are committed to being obedient, but that is not discipleship. Discipleship is more demanding. It requires constant examination of your motives. Moreover, while you are examining your ways, you never think about breaking your commitment to Jesus.

Commitment is:

- Consistently responding to Christ with a yes. Every day we must encounter Christ anew. Every day you live into a newness of life. Every day you die to the old life.
- Seeking Christ in new ways, with eyes to see and ears to hear, asking God to reveal God’s self more deeply and fully to you.

- Reading, studying and praying with scripture – both alone and in community. Committing to time with the word of God so that as you are reading God's word, it also begins to read you! It is about ordering your life around the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- Meditating and praising God as a response to God's love.
- Allowing the message of Christ to come alive within you so you can reach out to those around you – encouraging and helping others, always seeking to do good.
- Loving others. Loving God and loving others is the passion behind discipleship.

Christ is calling you to follow him. Make a commitment. Commit to attending Bible study, fasting, reflecting and praying. Commit to reaching out to all people – especially those who are in need. Commit to sharing the love of God because God loves all humanity. The adventure begins when we you say yes – yes to his will and yes to his way.

Other Illustrations

- **Call To Worship**

Leader: For this hour...

People: We want to follow you, Lord.

Leader: We listen to your word...

People: We want to follow you, Lord.

Leader: We ask for the Spirit's help...

People: To leave our own ways and follow you

- **A Prayer for Discipleship**

Holy God, you are full of mercy and compassion. Help us to see your vision for the world, a world full of justice and compassion that will transform our lives. Create in us clean hearts and anoint us with your spirit of love. A love that will free us for joyful obedience to love our neighbor, serve the least and welcome the lost. Give us a renewed commitment to help those who are sick, alone, hurting and in need of hope. Help us to love the enemy and those who are oppressed. Fill us with your grace and strengthen us for your service. Lord, strengthen us so that we might forsake the things of this world and follow you; to deny ourselves, pick up your cross, and follow you. Make us your disciples, we pray. Amen.

Hymn and Song Suggestions

- "[I Am Thine, O Lord](#)" (*United Methodist Hymnal* 419)
- "[Trust and Obey](#)" (*UMH* 467)
- "[We Give Thee But Thine Own](#)" (*various hymnals*)
- "[I Have Decided to Follow Jesus](#)" (*The Faith We Sing* 2129)
- "[O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee](#)" (*UMH* 430)
- "[In Christ Alone](#)," by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend

Video Suggestion

- "[How Commitment Shapes Our Lives](#)" (*TEDx Talks*) – Dr. Heidi Reeder, author of "[Commit To Win](#)" (*Hudson Street Press/Penguin, 2014*) and a professor at Boise State University.

Closing Thoughts on Discipleship

The Lenten season is not only a time to remember sin and repentance. It is also a time to consider the people in scripture who were committed followers while re-examining our own commitment to Christ.

The ministry of Jesus involved work that required a response from those who encountered him. Jesus drew crowds because of his passion toward the poor, oppressed and outcast. His sermons, especially the Sermon on the Mount, catapulted him into notoriety. People from all over began to follow Jesus because his entire emphasis was on meeting needs and healing hurts.

Today, we are visual learners. Quincy Jones, an iconic recording artist in America, opened up about his life in a documentary. Quincy recalled growing up on the south side of Chicago. At 11 years of age, Quincy got involved in gangs. He said the reason he got involved in gangs was that was all he saw. He said, "What you see, you want to be."²⁹

For years, college enrollment and the disciplines (or majors) offered were based upon what happened to be popular on television. We live in a society of visual learners. If you traced back to why you majored in your degree, it is likely due to television programs that shaped your life. I am certain I went into ministry because of my favorite shows: "Picket Fences," "Highway to Heaven," "Father Dowling," "Touched by An Angel," "Amen" and "7th Heaven". Today, for the first time in history, culinary school enrollment is at an all-time high because of The Food Network. It is true: "What you see, you want to be."

Jesus never did ministry in isolation. He and his disciples always showed up where people were in need. Jesus' life and ministry are on display in the crowds of sinners who gather to see and hear what

²⁹ *Quincy*, directed by Rashida Jones and Alan Hicks, Tribeca Productions, 2018.

he has to say. His baptism is a physical metaphor for the many who need the tangible to believe in the intangible. His wilderness experience symbolizes the need to move from multitude to solitude to commune with the holy and reconcile with the very crowd he needed to depart from. His speech in the synagogue ([Luke 4:16-30](#)) transfigured the old Isaiah text so much that those in attendance heard a boldness that stunned the Pharisees, excited the women and won the hearts of the poor.

Jesus is a disciple who teaches disciples. Through prayer, Jesus reminds his followers in all generations of our weakness and God's power to give us all the necessities of life. Our true greatness as human beings lies in our victory through Christ over evil, which is an inner struggle to free ourselves. We have to commune with the one who can supply all our needs, according to his riches in glory.

Jesus' voice of authority was so powerful that, at his command, 12 men spontaneously dropped everything they were doing to follow a man who did not promise them money or possessions – only love and treasure in heaven. Jesus would "set people free" with the hope that faith in God would transform their lives for the better.

The Bible is meant to be studied in a group so that our understanding is challenged and broadened.³⁰ Discipleship is lived out in community. Growth happens in small groups. Growth of discipleship in small groups can easily translate to exponential growth.

Dr. Phil Maynard, director of Excellence in Ministry Coaching, believes there is a link between relationships and learning.³¹ John Wesley began the Methodist movement through small groups of faithful persons who lived out their faith through the means of grace – especially scripture reading, prayer, frequent participation in the sacrament of Holy Communion, worship and service. Disciples grew in a variety of ways and venues. They held one another accountable in covenant relationship to inspire one another in Christian living. Their lives were transformed and transformed others.

The life of Peter – whose blunt honesty and deep contrition constantly requires forgiveness – reminds us of our own brokenness and need for forgiveness. Peter, the rock, at least on the outside, demonstrates to us that we are a work in progress and that God's grace has yet to be made perfect in us. Peter tries and fails. He tries again and fails. At some point Jesus even calls him Satan because Jesus knew Peter better than he knew himself.

Peter relies on Jesus and the other disciples to hold him accountable and help him not to lose sight of who he is and his faith in God. We all need people around us who can hold us accountable so our relationship with God and with others can flourish.

It is through much trial and error that Peter finds himself. He finds himself because his relationship with Christ introduced him to a God he could have never known apart from Jesus.

³⁰ Robby Gallaty, *Rediscovering Discipleship: Making Jesus' Final Words our First Work*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2015), 147.

³¹ Phil Maynard, *Membership to Discipleship: Growing Mature Disciples Who Make Disciples*, (Nashville, EMC3coaching, 2015), 114.

The goal of discipleship is transformation of self. Transformation requires knowing yourself and knowing God.³² Discipleship is not instantaneous. It is a long, intimate relationship requiring deep commitment to getting to know God and who God is calling you to be.

In the Lenten season, we engage in the spiritual disciplines of our faith, recognizing one's wrongdoing while acknowledging that in this life, like Peter, we will mess up. Remember, this season requires an open and vulnerable heart, spending time alone, with Jesus and with others in earnest prayer, devotion and study. Allow the Spirit of God to help you be present in those moments so that you might experience Christ anew.

We are disciples-in-progress who participate in a school from which no one graduates. Each new spiritual discovery leads to another discovery.³³ It is what makes the Lenten season hopeful as Christ ushers us into a new beginning. All Jesus asks is that we accept his invitation to join him on this radical journey.

Bibliography

Benner, David G. *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery*. Illinois, Intervarsity Press, 2004.

Boring, Eugene M. "Matthew." In *Matthew and Mark*. Vol. 8 of *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Tennessee, Abingdon Press, 1995.

Fuller, Reginald H. "Matthew" *Harper's Bible Commentary*. The Society of Biblical Literature. California, Harper & Row, 1988.

Gallaty, Robby. *Rediscovering Discipleship: Making Jesus' Final Words Our First Work*. Michigan, Zondervan, 2015.

Johnson, Luke T., *The Writings of the New Testament, An Interpretation*. rev. ed. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1999.

Maynard, Phil. *Membership To Discipleship: Growing Mature Disciples Who Make Disciples*. Tennessee, EMC3Coaching, 2015.

Meyers, Carol. *Women in Scripture*. Ed. Toni Craven, Ross S. Kraemer, eds. Michigan, Eerdmans Publishing, 2000.

Newsome, Carol A., Sharon H. Ringe, *The Women's Bible Commentary*, Kentucky, John Knox Press, 1992.

³² Doug G. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call of Self-Discovery*, (Downers Grove, 2004), 99.

³³ Claude E. Payne and Hamilton Beazley, *Reclaiming the Great Commission: A Practical Model for Transforming Denominations and Congregations*, (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2001), 125.

Ogden, Greg. *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time*. Illinois, Intervarsity Press, 2003.

Payne, Claude E. Bishop, Hamilton Beazley. *Reclaiming the Great Commission: A Practical Model for Transforming Denominations and Congregations*. California, Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Powell, Mark A. *God With Us: A Pastoral Theology of Matthew's Gospel*. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995.

Quincy. Directed by Rashid Jones and Alan Hicks. Tribeca Productions. (Netflix), 2018.



The Rev. Dr. Robin Dease is an ordained elder in the South Carolina Conference. She serves as the superintendent of the [Hartsville District](#).



This "Come, Follow Me: A Disciple's Journey Through Lent" Sermon Series was developed and written by a team from the South Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church.

It is intended for use with the "Come, Follow Me: A Disciple's Journey Through Lent" Adult Discussion Guide, also produced by the South Carolina Conference.

The five main contributors offer many different gifts and they come from different traditions. Rather than editing their work to fit a common style (as is done with curriculum resources written by multiple authors), the editors retained their different writing styles as a witness to their different experiences and understandings.

We extend our appreciation to all involved for their work.

Both the sermon series and the adult discussion guide can be downloaded at

umcsc.org/comefollowme.