

**Bible Studies for Liberation, Volume 1**

# **MATTHEW ON THE MOVE**



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All Biblical passages from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

References from Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000) and NT Wright, *Matthew: NT Wright for Everyone Bible Study Guide* (IVP Connect, 2009).

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# OPENING NOTES

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This is designed as a Lenten Bible Study, in six parts. It follows the themes of pilgrimage and wandering, recovering from trauma, and encountering death and resurrection with Jesus. It is a way to explore our story in light of the gospel.

To use this resources in order, it would begin on Ash Wednesday with the liturgy, followed by the six part Bible study during Lent, and following the liturgy through Holy Week to Easter.

## **Bible Studies**

An Introduction to Matthew: Matthew 1:21-23

Death of the Innocents: Matthew 2:1-20

Searching for God: Matthew 4:1-17

The Transgressor God: Matthew 8:18-32

Prophets to the Poor: Matthew 11:2-18

Kingdom Discipleship: Matthew 19:16-30

You Have Done it to Me: Matthew 25:31-45

## **Liturgies**

Ash Wednesday

Liturgy of the Palms

Maundy Thursday: The Feet of the Walkers

Good Friday

Holy Saturday

An Easter Celebration

# BIBLE STUDIES

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## **An Introduction to Matthew**

*All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.'*

*Matthew 1:21-23*

Matthew is written the shadow of trauma to a community torn apart by empire. The readers are likely Jews living in exile, struggling to adapt to new cities and to define themselves. They are in a time of great upheaval. The temple and city of Jerusalem have been recently destroyed and the community still lives in the shadow of this collective trauma. It is unclear exactly what community to whom Matthew is writing. Scholars suggest that the audience of the gospel was somewhere in Syria, perhaps in Antioch, a center of Christian development.

The book was likely written in the decade or two following Titus' campaign in Palestine and the destruction of the Temple. The community, then, would have been deeply affected by the trauma and displacement of the destruction of Jerusalem. Some would likely have been witnesses of that destruction and some would have been displaced by it. While scholars emphasize the crisis of identity and the theological issues in the Jewish religious community, I wonder if we also remember that the readers are the survivors of actual trauma. They have seen war and destruction and looting. They have lost family and friends. They have lost their homeland. Families have been torn apart and whole communities displaced and enslaved. They are again an exiled people under the boot of empire. They are a community struggling to grieve and to

make meaning of this national and collective trauma; in the case of Matthew's community, they try to do so as followers of Jesus. They are social and economic refugees. They have fled or have seen their people flee utter destruction, they are now strangers in a strange land, and they are struggling to find identity and hope and meaning. Scholars are unsure about the social status of the Christian community of Matthew. Likely, they were from a cross section of society; a few higher status benefactors, artisans, merchants, slaves, and plebian workers. If indeed Matthew was writing to the community in Antioch, this city was one that Rodney Stark describes as "a city filled with misery, danger, fear, despair, and hatred. . . . A resident could expect literally to be homeless from time to time." So, Matthew writes to a community in exile, living in the borderlands, in the marginal spaces; to a community in the aftermath of trauma and on the edge of empire; to a community marginalized in a city already rife with tension, oppression, natural disaster, and homelessness.

It is to this community that Matthew's Jesus comes, comes to be "God with us," God with us in our suffering, in our trauma, in our grief, in our homelessness and exile. In the midst of this reality, Jesus comes, not as a God apart or a God in glory, but as an exiled, homeless, executed prophet who walks with outcast and poor and forgotten people.

Matthew is a text that mirrors the trauma he tries to process. It is a bipolar text—full of apocalypse and beatitudes—of pronouncements of judgment and visions of hope for the future. It is the story of the Galilean Jesus, a Jesus deeply troubled, a Jesus who sides with outcasts, a Jesus who pronounces judgment and who calls the poor to himself. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, in our suffering, in our pain, in our trauma. Jesus is the bordercrosser,

the binational, the exile, the wandering rabbi from Nazareth, the tortured criminal, the stranger.

**Opening Exercise:**

Before we begin our Bible study, I want to stop and close our eyes and imagine the people who first read this gospel. Who were they? What had they experienced? What might their lives have been like?

## Death of the Innocents

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." '*

*Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

*Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'*

*When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'*

*Matthew 2:1-20*

When Jesus is born, when God comes to be with us, he is born in a tiny town that has no power or influence. The wise men come to Jerusalem, where the king resides, thinking that someone so important will be born in a palace. But Jesus, instead, is born to poor parents in a small, insignificant town. No one seems to notice, except for this group of “wise men.” They were probably astrologers, wandering men clearly on a pilgrimage, searching for God. We do not know exactly where they came from, perhaps from Persia or some other part of the Roman Empire. East of Palestine, there were several great cities and a great deal of wilderness, both desert and mountains. These men were clearly wanderers, probably wandering from place to place, perhaps selling their knowledge. When they saw a “sign,” a star, they traveled to Palestine to find out more. It is these wandering men that first recognize who Jesus is and who worship him. To the rest of the world, Jesus’ birth is unimportant and insignificant. To these wandering astrologers on pilgrimage, Jesus’ birth represents “God with us.”

At the time of Jesus’ birth, most of what we now call southern Europe and the Middle East was controlled by the Romans and the Roman emperor. Judea and Galilee were conquered lands, ruled over by a foreign king who answered to Rome. Under Roman rule, the majority of people were poor, heavily taxed by Rome, and were not even considered citizens of the empire. They



had no rights. Herod was a local king who ruled on behalf of the Roman Empire, using his power and influence to oppress the people. When he hears about Jesus's birth, he is afraid. People in positions of great power and wealth are always afraid of losing it. In his wrath and fear, this king of the Empire sees Bethlehem, this tiny, insignificant town as a threat to his power. He orders all children under the age of two to be killed.

Jesus, before he is old enough to even understand what is happening, barely escapes a terrible death. We do not know how old Jesus would have been; perhaps a year or two old. Think of how terrifying it must have been to be rushed away from home, fleeing from such brutal attacks. Many of us have these little bits of memories about hard things that happened to us as a child. We can't always remember exactly what happened, but we experience the effect of it. Jesus had that experience. I wonder how it affected the rest of his life. Some of Jesus' little friends were probably killed. The story gives us a heartrending image of "Rachel weeping for her children." So many people, so many mothers all through the ages have wept for their children. And so many children have experienced terrible trauma.

So Jesus and his family became refugees, fleeing the wrath of the empire. One author\* puts it this way; "Before the Prince of Peace had learned to walk and talk, he was a homeless refugee with a price on his head." "God with us" had, like so many of us, become a wanderer, become a pilgrim, become a refugee. The powerful people of the day had driven them out and they fled from Bethlehem to Egypt, a distance of about 250 miles. That is a long way to walk! I wonder what they did, though all the years that Herod was king. Did they find a place to stay? Or did they move from place to place, looking for work or for shelter? The text does not tell us how long they travelled or how long it was until they

\* NT Wright

came back. Even when they did come back, they could not come back to Bethlehem. They settled instead north in Nazareth, in Galilee. We do know that Jesus did not have a stable childhood. His early years were spent running away from a cruel tyrant and wandering through cities.

**Questions:**

1. What signs are in the text? What kinds of “signs” have led us to God?
2. How are the times in which Jesus was born similar to our own?
3. Many of us also have difficult childhood memories. How do they affect us?
4. What does it mean—to us, to you—that Jesus started out in life as a homeless refugee? Why is it important?

## Searching for God

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." '*

*Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." ' Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." '*

*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." ' Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

*Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.' From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'*

*Matthew 4:1-17*

Jesus' life did not apparently get any easier as he grew up. Right after he began his ministry, he wrestles in the wilderness, wandering without food for forty days. The wilderness in Palestine is often a rugged place and, in the summer, it is unbearably hot. Jesus must have been desperately tired and hungry. The devil taunts him, mocking his hunger. How can "God with us" be hungry? Hunger and fatigue can do strange things to us. It seems like Jesus is starting to hallucinate. But Jesus is also finding out about his mission.

As he wrestles, the core of what Jesus must choose is who he is going to serve. The wise men at his birth imagined that he would be born in a palace. Now he must choose if he is going to serve the empire or if he is going to take the side of the poor and down-trodden that he grew up with. The devil promises that, if Jesus follows him, that the world could be laid at his feet. Jesus could gain power and influence. He could gain the favor of the empire's rulers. He could choose to take the side of the empire and of the powerful. Instead, Jesus retorts; "I will only worship God! I will not serve any other masters. I will not serve the powerful."

That choice came with a price. He hears, for example, that John, the fiery preacher who baptized him, has been arrested. The empire's rulers do not take kindly to those who preach this good news. It is a threat to their power. Jesus still continues on with his choice, however. He decides to continue his ministry in Galilee.

Galilee is north of Jerusalem and was a district of people that were considered "backward" and ignorant. They were the "country bumpkins" of the day. No one thought very highly of the Galileans. Most were poor farmers and artisans living in small towns and out of the way places. It is a fair distance away from Jerusalem, a large city dominated by the empire's rulers and the religious elite. This is where Jesus grew up and he decides to stay

there to begin his ministry, among the poor and forgotten, among his own people.

And he refuses to let them give in to despair. Even though everything seemed very dark, even though the empire taxed them and murdered them and forgot them and hated them, even though they struggled day in and day out to survive, Jesus brings them light and hope. Even though death seemed all around, Jesus preached that light was dawning. Morning was coming.

“The kingdom of heaven is near,” he said. This new kingdom was not going to be like the empire of Rome—death-dealing, cruel, harsh—it was going to be a new way of life and light and hope and resurrection. Jesus told them that they needed to “repent.” This word means to turn around, to change course. He was telling them that there was a better way to live. He was telling them that love and hope would win the day. They needed to turn toward it.

### **Questions:**

1. Have there been times in your life when you have been on “pilgrimage,” a time when you found God in unexpected places?
2. Do you think God is calling you to a particular mission?
3. Why do you think Jesus chose to continue his ministry in Galilee?
4. Where do you find “the kingdom of heaven”? Where can we find hope of a better world?

## The Transgressor God

*Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. A scribe then approached and said, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' ...*

*When he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demoniacs coming out of the tombs met him. They were so fierce that no one could pass that way. Suddenly they shouted, 'What have you to do with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?' Now a large herd of swine was feeding at some distance from them. The demons begged him, 'If you cast us out, send us into the herd of swine.' And he said to them, 'Go!' So they came out and entered the swine; and suddenly, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and perished in the water. The swineherds ran off, and on going into the town, they told the whole story about what had happened to the demoniacs. Then the whole town came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their neighbourhood. And after getting into a boat he crossed the water and came to his own town.*

*Matthew 8:18-32*

“God with us” has no place to lay his head. When a religious leader asks to follow him, Jesus asks him if he can leave everything and become homeless. Jesus was a wandering rabbi with no fixed place to sleep at night. He was homeless. “God with us” was a homeless prophet. Jesus speaks almost longingly, pointing out that foxes and other wild animals have holes in the ground under which to take shelter and birds have places to nest. Jesus experienced the hardship of not having enough shelter and of not having a place to “hang his hat” and call home. His ministry took him all over Galilee and eventually Judea. He would have some-

times stayed with people who let him use their floor for the night, but he would have also slept out in the open and on the road.

But Jesus continues on his way. The gospels record many times where Jesus heals people who come to him. In this story, Jesus had crossed the Jordan river and gone into the country we now call Jordan. He crossed a border into a different country, where people were from a different ethnic group and had different customs. As he was walking along, two men jumped out at him. The text tells us they were living in tombs. In the ancient world, people that no one wanted anything to do with would often live in caves and tombs outside the cities. Some of them would have been diseased, like those who had leprosy, and others would have been disabled, mentally or physically. Some would also have suffered from what we call mental illness, things like alcoholism or depression or schizophrenia. Instead of getting the help they needed, these men were cast out of town and left to wander around in the caves and tombs and fend for themselves the best they could. It is not much different today, when people who are ill often end up in jail or on the street.

Jesus refuses to leave them, alone and desperate. I imagine he might have been a little surprised to have them jump out at him, yelling and hollering. But he stayed with them and decided to heal them. In the text, he speaks directly to the demons within them. He does not get angry with the two men or abandon them, he instead focuses on their demons. In the ancient world, people often thought that mental or other illnesses were caused by demons possessing people.

Nearby, there was a herd of pigs. Pigs represented many things in Jesus's time and many times they represented Roman power and oppression. Jesus decides to cast the demons out of the two men

and send them into the herd of pigs, who then drown themselves in a nearby river.

Of course, Jesus makes the owners of the livestock quite angry, since he just destroyed their merchandise. It might be said that Jesus breaks the law here and destroys property. But Jesus is making a point. He cares more about the people that the city abandoned than he does about their profits. He cares more about these people than about possessions or money. He is also symbolizing the hope that, one day, Rome's power will be broken and people will be free from Roman oppression.

This story does not tell us what happens to the two men who Jesus sets free. But it does tell us what the city thinks of Jesus for taking their side. Jesus is a foreigner in the Gadarenes and they ask him to leave. They are afraid he might hurt more of their profits or disrupt their lives too much. Jesus is not welcome.

**Questions:**

1. What is important about the fact that Jesus was homeless?
2. What kind of demons do we struggle with in our own lives? How do people treat us because of it? What would happen if we were treated the way Jesus treats people?
3. Have we ever been a foreigner? How have we been treated?



## Prophets to the Poor

*When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'*

*As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. Let anyone with ears listen!*

*'But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn." For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon"; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.'*

*Matthew 11:2-18*

Jesus' best friend was in jail. John was nearing the end of his life, when he would be executed by Herod for speaking out against the Roman empire. Jesus tells John what his mission was all about.

Jesus, “God with us,” has come to heal and to be with the poor and the blind and the deaf and the lepers and the dying. All the people that were shoved off to the margins of society and who spent their lives begging or living on the streets or living in caves outside the city. These were the ones that Jesus came to be with.

Jesus admired John greatly. In Matthew, John’s story begins in chapter three, where John baptizes Jesus. John was a wild prophet. The story tells us that he wore camel’s hair and ate locust (grasshoppers) and wild honey. John lived on the edge and I’m sure some people thought he was completely crazy. Yet John was on a mission from God. God had called him to preach and to baptize. God didn’t need someone rich or powerful, someone highly educated or well mannered. God called John, the man many people thought was crazy, the man that broke all the rules, and the man who was facing prison and execution.

The rest of this passage is a little like Jesus’s memorial service for John as he gets ready to die. Jesus points out that John, even though he was a great prophet, did not live in a palace and wear fine clothes. He did not act like Herod, the king who is about to execute John. He did not adopt the lifestyle of the rich and famous. His work as a messenger for God was most important to him.

Jesus realizes that he is going to be rejected just like John was. People criticized John because he was too crazy and he lived in the desert and ate strange food. People criticized Jesus for a different reason. Jesus hung out with the wrong people. He went to the wrong parties and he ate dinner with the wrong people. Tax collectors worked for Rome and they often robbed and extorted from other people. They were hated by everyone. Yet, Jesus ate dinner with them and even called one of them to be his disciple. And Jesus ate and hung out with sinners too; that is, with people

not acceptable to the religious leaders. People that were prostitutes or who lived on the edge or who had made mistakes.

Jesus does not require people to change before he comes to be with them. He does not preach long sermons about how many mistakes people have made. He does not reject people who have made mistakes. Instead, he sits down to dinner with them. He asks them to come follow him and be his disciples. Because he does this, the religious leaders decide that he too is a sinner, a transgressor.

**Questions:**

1. Many of us have friends or family in jail. How do you think John and Jesus felt during this time?
2. God calls all kinds of people. What might God be calling you to?
3. Have you ever been rejected? What is that like? How did Jesus deal with it?
4. Jesus consistently chooses to take the side of people no one else likes. Why is this important? What does it mean for us, today?

## Kingdom Discipleship

*Then someone came to him and said, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?' And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.' He said to him, 'Which ones?' And Jesus said, 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' The young man said to him, 'I have kept all these; what do I still lack?' Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*

*Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, 'Then who can be saved?' But Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.'*

*Then Peter said in reply, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'*

*Matthew 19:16-30*

Matthew is full of Jesus' teaching. In this passage, Jesus has just decided to leave Galilee and journey toward Jerusalem. He has completed most of his ministry in Galilee, in small forgotten

towns and now he is journey toward the center of power. He knows that powerful people hate him and are plotting his downfall. But still he makes his way south, toward Jerusalem.

As he was traveling, a man approaches him and asks how he might get eternal life. He sounds a little bit like those wealthy Spanish explorers in the early years of American history who were always searching for the fountain of youth. He apparently has not been listening much to Jesus, who willingly accepts anyone, regardless of their background, into his group of disciples. This man, though, wants to be good enough. He wants to stand out to God. So Jesus plays along with him for a bit. Do you keep the commandments? Oh, yes, says the man, of course. Jesus, and probably everyone else, sees through this man's self-righteousness and arrogance. I can just see Jesus smiling a little bit.

So Jesus looks at his rich clothing. In Jesus' day, perhaps not much unlike our own, many people became wealthy by oppressing and exploiting other people. They had slaves to do the work for them, they robbed small farmers and laborers through heavy taxes, and they curried the favor of the powerful Roman officials, even though they were killing their own people. And Jesus smiles again. You want to be perfect? Jesus asks. Then give it all back. All that you have stolen from the people who have done all your work, all the money that you have taken from the poor farmer who couldn't afford food for his family or the mother who could not afford medicine for her child. Give it all back. Then come follow me.

This rich young man could not do what Jesus asked. He enjoyed his wealth and the privileges it gave him. He did not want to part with it, even if it was stolen. He had plenty of excuses why he should keep it—he thought he had earned it, it was his right by

law to keep it. Jesus shakes his head. “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.” That doesn’t mean that rich people cannot love Jesus, because Jesus goes on to say that anything is possible with God. But Jesus does mean that great possessions, especially when they are stolen from the poor, are a great hindrance.

Often, we believe that those who are wealthy are specially blessed by God. Jesus does not think so. He points out that “God with us” comes specially to be with the poor and the forsaken and the people who don’t feel like they belong. Those who are rich can indeed come and choose to join, but they must leave the love of their possessions and their wealth and the belief that they are special because of it behind.

The disciples feel encouraged by this. Peter says to Jesus; Well, we have left everything for you. We are poor. What do we get? Maybe Peter was starting to feel a little frustrated with this life of wandering and homelessness. I’m sure it was getting old. What do we get? Jesus must have smiled again. He tells his disciples that God will reward them, that it will be worth it. He tells them; those who think they are first and most important—people like the poor rich man in the story—they will be last. But those who have been last—who have been hungry and tired and homeless and sick—they will be first. God will tend to them and hold them close.

**Questions:**

1. Do you ever want to stand out to God and feel better than everyone else?
2. Over and over in the history of the world, people have become powerful and wealthy by stealing from other people. How does this happen in our own world?
3. How can the rich follow us into the kingdom?
4. Do you ever feel tired of the way things are and want them to change? How does Jesus' response speak to you?

## You Have Done it to Me

*‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’*

*Matthew 25:31-45*



Just before Jesus goes to die, he gives a final set of teachings. In these, he talks about the end of time. He uses a style of speaking that was common in his time, called apocalyptic. Things were hard in Jesus' day. The Jewish people, of which he was a part, were subjugated under Roman rule. They were exploited and oppressed. Every time someone tried to resist, even just by talking about how bad things were, they were executed, usually by crucifixion. Jesus knows it is just a matter of time before they do the same to him. It is also just a matter of time before Rome, only forty years later, sacks the city of Jerusalem and takes the Jewish people into slavery and exile.

When things get this bad in our lives and in our world, we start to think about the end of the world. We imagine what it might be like and if there is any hope in the future. It feels like everything around us is crumbling. In this situation, Jesus tries to give his poor, struggling disciples hope.

He tells a story, like he loves to do, and paints a picture of “the Son of Man”—Jesus himself—sitting in glory with all the angels of heaven around him. No longer facing a cross, Jesus sits in glory. All around him are the peoples of the world and Jesus sits in judgment over them all. He has divided the world in two groups and he talks to each of them in turn.

To the first group, he extends a hand of welcome and tells them that they will enter the kingdom. Indeed, they already have become part of the kingdom because of what they have done. They have taken care of the people Jesus cares most about—those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, in prison. Then he turns to the second group and sternly tells them they will enter into judgment because they have ignored those who are hungry and in need and sick and in prison.

Jesus reminds his disciples that the way things are will end. The poor will not always be ignored and forgotten and people will not always be oppressed. There will be justice in the end. The powerful will not win the day. Those who send people to jail, who mock them in their hour of need, who withhold the basics of life from those in need—they will be punished. God will see to that.

Jesus also reminds his disciples that when they do things for each other, when they care for each other, they are doing it to him. That is because, in each of us, we carry the image of God. We can find Jesus in each other and we are supposed to treat each other the way we would treat Jesus himself. Victor Hugo wrote once; “To love another person is to see the face of God.”

### **Questions:**

1. Do you ever feel like it's the end of the world? Do you ever imagine what that might be like?
2. What do you think about Jesus' prediction of judgment on those who have oppressed those who are needy and poor? Does it seem just or too harsh? Is there hope of mercy?
3. How can we and how do we live out Jesus' vision of the kingdom by caring for each other? How do we see the face of God in each other?

# LITURGIES

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## **Ash Wednesday**

*A service may begin with a short opening and the readings, followed by this service, or may begin with the following words;*

Ash Wednesday invites us to pilgrimage, invites us to begin the journey with Jesus to the cross and to resurrection. We are reminded of who we are. We are reminded of the shortness of our lives. We are reminded that we walk the same path that so many others have followed. We are not alone. We join the man from Galilee thrown out of the city and crucified outside the gates and we join the millions of others who have followed him.

And so you are invited this day to a Holy Lent. You are invited to remember Jesus, you are invited to study the Bible together, and you are invited to turn toward God and toward each other.

Lord God, we ask that these ashes may remind us that Jesus is walking with us on our journey, remind us that we walk together in love, and remind us that life is short. Amen.

*Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.*

### **Litany of Penitence**

And now we confess to you our sins and ask you to set us free.

You may pray silently or aloud, ending with the words “Healing Spirit, set us free.”

*The celebrant may make special mention of these sins:*

*For forgetting how much you love us.*

*For forgetting that Jesus walks with us, no matter how hard things get.*

*For believing the lie that we do not matter to God and for forgetting our worth.*

Holy and life-giving God, sustain us and all people we hold in prayer, by Christ's presence; help us to know the healing power of Christ's love. Empty us of all things that keep us from experiencing your healing. From pain and burdens too great to bear, from guilt and shame, from fearful memories and fear of the future, from addictions, from pride, greed, resentment, and bitterness, from lying and pretense, and from the depths of despair ... healing Spirit set us free. Amen.\*

- This final prayer is from the Eucharistic Prayer by Debbie Little first written for Ecclesia/common cathedral, Boston

# Liturgy of the Palms

*People should gather outside at a designated spot and palms (or other greenery native to the area) should be available for people to take.*

Opening call: Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord.

Response: Peace on earth and glory in the highest.

Let us pray.

Jesus, we come here to remember the day you rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey and were proclaimed the one who comes in the name of the Lord. You came to us from God. You came poor and despised. You came weak and insignificant. You came for us. Thank you. Amen.

Reading: Matthew 21:1-11

*Invite a member of the congregation to read.*

Jesus came to his people as a poor prophet from a small, forgotten town, riding into the great city of Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey. The poor and the despised rejoiced and cried “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” While the leaders of the city were afraid and angry, the poor rejoiced. Light was coming into their darkness, hope into their fear. The leaders who oppressed them would not be in control forever. God was on their side. The new Son of David, the new Messiah had come to deliver them and declare freedom. The city, full of people from all over the region, was alive with excitement. God had come to the people.

Let us say, with the people that day so long ago;

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest!

*At this point, begin a processing, walking around a block or park or other designated area, with the palms and singing songs that*

*are both known to the group and appropriate as songs of praise and celebration.*

At the end of the procession, a simple Eucharist can be held if desired.

# Maundy Thursday

*People who walk and who wander have bruised and broken feet. When Jesus knelt at the feet of his disciples, as working and wandering men and women, they would have had such feet, as would Jesus himself. This service is designed as a meal, shared after a footwashing.*

*The meal should be around a table (or multiple tables, with a person chosen at each table to lead the liturgy). Each table should have a bowl, a few jugs of warm water, and a few towels. Each table should also have a cup of wine/grape juice and bread. A full meal will follow.*

Opening: Have someone read John 13:1-5.

*After a moment of silence, people can take turns around the table washing each other's feet.*

*After the foot washing is over, and people are seated, the person leading the liturgy will say:*

“While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’”

*The bread will be passed around.*

“Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.’”

*The cup will then be passed.*

*At the close, all will be invited to eat!*

# Good Friday

## Opening Prayer

Reading: Matthew 27:1-50

Jesus, who has wandered as a poor rabbi and has angered those in power, now faces execution and death. He has been arrested by the authorities and betrayed by a friend. He has been treated badly. He has been put on trial and he has been tortured. He has been sentenced to be executed immediately. He has been mocked by his fellow prisoners and by the soldiers and by religious leaders. And, finally, he has died a terrible death. When have we experienced these things? Betrayal. Arrest. Trial. Prison or jail. Mockery. When Jesus experienced all these things, he felt our pain. He knows what it is like. He stands with us, in solidarity with us.

This is a time for us to reflect on what that means for us. How do we experience Good Friday?

Invite people to share.

## Stations of the Cross:

Ask people to design the stations themselves for use on Good Friday. There are several possibilities.

1. Through Lent, spend time creating stations of the cross. Each person could choose a station and create a piece of art. You could set each station up around the space and stop at each piece of art, having the artist explain, briefly, its meaning and significance for them.
2. You could, as a group, choose 14 places to stop around the city (in a reasonable space) to remember the way of the cross as experienced on the street. At each station, assign a person to reflect on that stage of Jesus' journey and what it means for them. Ideally, each person would know what station they would reflect on beforehand and have time to prepare.



The Fourteen Stations are...

1. Jesus is condemned to death
2. Jesus accepts his cross
3. Jesus falls for the first time
4. Jesus meets his grieving mother
5. Simon helps Jesus bear his cross
6. Veronica wipes Jesus' face
7. Jesus falls a second time
8. Jesus comforts the women
9. Jesus falls the third time
10. Jesus is stripped of his garments
11. Jesus is nailed to the cross
12. Jesus dies on the cross
13. Jesus is taken from the cross
14. Jesus is laid in a tomb
15. Resurrection

Closing Prayer

# **Holy Saturday**

*A service of remembrance and waiting...*

Opening Prayer

Reading: Matthew 27:57-66

Short Discussion:

What are the times when death seems to have won? Who have we mourned? When has it seemed like we are waiting forever for something?

Closing Prayer

# **An Easter Celebration**

## **Morning Service**

*Ideally, a service should be held early in the morning, outdoors if possible, as the sun rises. The service should be short to allow for a final study and reflection time.*

*If possible, a central candle or lantern should be lit at the center of the circle. Perhaps have the whole group have candles and light them around the circle.*

Opening: Alleluia! Christ the Lord is risen.

Response: He is risen indeed. Alleluia!!

Reading: Matthew 28:1-10

Jesus, when everything grew dark and hopeless, we waited for your coming. When you died a cruel death, we waited. And you have risen like the dawn, alive again. Just as the spring always follows winter, so new life rose with you from the grave. We join you in your resurrection, longing for new life, longing for hope, longing for freedom. Jesus, risen one, be with us now and always.

A Short Sermon

An Easter Eucharist

## **Final Bible Study**

*Following the service, gather for a final Bible study, reading again Matthew 28:1-10.*

Closing Questions

1. What does Jesus' resurrection mean for us, here and now?
2. How can we experience new life, even after all the trauma and pain that we have experienced?
3. Finally, what was this study like for you? What did you learn that was most important? What would you like to share?

