



On the Way With Jesus

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

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With Gratitude and Humility

ASH WEDNESDAY

READ: MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21

1. What three spiritual practices does Jesus address in Matthew 6:2-4, 5-6, and 16-18?
2. Note that each spiritual practice is introduced with “whenever you” (Matthew 6:2, 5, 16, NRSV), indicating that for Jesus and his followers, each was a common and expected expression of faithful living. What similarities do you notice in Jesus’ instructions for all three? Which of the three do you commonly practice, and why? Which are not as familiar to you, and why not?
3. From Matthew 6:1, 19-21, what basic principles apply to all three spiritual practices?
4. The opening of this sermon contrasts our carefully curated pictures on social media with the reality of daily life, and notes that “The technology to curate our lives online may be relatively new, but the impulse to re-arrange our lives and show them in the best possible light is an ancient one.” (page 10) Adam and Eve are given as one example. What other examples of this concern for appearances can you identify in Scripture, online, and in day-to-day living?
5. The sermon applies Jesus’ teaching in this portion of Matthew to Ash Wednesday:

Like any worship service or spiritual practice or good deed, Ash Wednesday might also become an occasion for pride and showing off. Just as we might give or pray or fast to impress others, we might come to Ash Wednesday with that same tendency to make ourselves look good and give ourselves a pat on the back for taking part. But that would miss the whole point of Ash Wednesday as a solemn remembrance of our human frailty and a time for confession and repentance. (page 13)

How will you live out this call for authenticity on Ash Wednesday, during this Lenten season, and throughout the year?

In the Wilderness

LENT 1

READ: MATTHEW 4:1-11

1. “In Hannah Hurnard’s classic allegory, *Hinds’ Feet on High Places*, little Much-Afraid leaves her home in the Valley to journey to the High Places at the invitation of the Great Shepherd.” (page 15)

In your own journey through life, what have been some of the high places? When have you been in the wilderness? Where has life taken an unexpected turn for you?

2. What event takes place in Matthew 3:13-17? Then instead of entering immediately into public ministry, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. In what way might this have been an unexpected turn?
3. This sermon ends with a prayer: “*Great shepherd and guardian, we give thanks for your example in the wilderness, meeting trial and temptation with faith, perseverance, Scripture, and wisdom.*” (page 19)

What three temptations did Jesus face in the wilderness, and how did he answer them? How might his example help you in dealing with the temptations you face?

4. What takes place in Matthew 4:12-17? How might Jesus’ time in the wilderness have prepared him for what would follow?
5. Jesus’ time in the wilderness was a time of solitude, a time to withdraw from the crowds and be alone with God. What role does solitude play in your spiritual life?

On the Mountaintop

LENT 2

READ: MATTHEW 17:1-9

1. For Peter, James, and John, the mountaintop became a place of spiritual significance as they saw Jesus transformed before them and in conversation with Moses and Elijah. What did they learn about Jesus? What did they learn about themselves?
2. What mountaintop experiences have you had in your journey through life, where you have encountered Jesus in a new way and/or when you learned something new about yourself?
3. When Jesus and his disciples came down the mountain, they rejoined the crowd, and Jesus healed a young boy (Matthew 17:14-18).

Who are the people and what are the concerns that God has placed in your path? Make a list to pray over at the end of this sermon's study.

4. "Mountaintop experiences and emotions don't last forever. A real world is waiting and clamoring for attention. Someone needs a touch of compassion. Someone needs a word of healing. . . . We can't stay on the mountaintop forever. Nor can we personally meet every need that's part of our clamoring world today. But we can listen to Jesus." (page 24)

How might listening to Jesus help us to discern among the different needs in our world today?

5. Listen to Jesus:
 - a. Re-read Matthew 17:1-9. What does Jesus say to the disciples and so to us?
 - b. Spend some moments in silence.
 - c. Pray over the list of people and concerns from question 3.
 - d. How else might you listen to Jesus?

Transformed

LENT 3

READ: JOHN 4:5-42

1. Why was Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well so surprising in his day?
2. Trace the changes in the woman's behavior and attitudes from the start of her story until the end. In what ways was she transformed? How did she transform her town?
3. In what ways has your life been transformed by Jesus?
4. "Like the woman at the well, we too can receive living water; we can learn to ask new questions, we can grow in faith. We might not evangelize our whole town or die a martyr's death, but we too can share what we know." (page 31)

How are you active in sharing your faith with others?

What stops you from being more active in sharing your faith with others?

6. In the six weeks before Easter, some observe Lent as a time of fasting by giving up certain foods like coffee or chocolate, or giving up a certain attitude or behavior like complaining or watching television. Even small practices such as these can serve as reminders of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

In addition to giving up something for Lent, some people also add something that's life-giving, like going for a walk every morning or reading a Psalm every evening. Small practices such as these can serve as reminders of Jesus' offer of life-giving water.

What have you given up during this time of Lent? What have you added? If you haven't yet started, it's not too late to choose something now.

Sent

LENT 4

READ: JOHN 9:1-41

1. In this encounter between Jesus and a man who had been blind from birth, trace the changes in the man's physical sight throughout John 9. How did his spiritual sight also change in this chapter?
2. How did the man's family respond to the changes they saw in him? What were they afraid of? How did the religious people respond? Why were they so angry at Jesus?
3. Consider how you respond to change. What changes in life have you experienced as healing and positive growth? What changes have made you feel fearful or angry?
4. This sermon refers to another story of healing in 2 Kings 5:1-14 in which a man with leprosy is told to wash in the Jordan seven times, and he will be healed. Read the story for yourself and compare and contrast it with this story in John 9.
5. Some speak of "the church gathered" and "the church scattered," meaning the church gathered for worship and the church scattered into the world during the week. Another way to describe the church in the world is "sent," for we are not only scattered in many different places but we are sent with a purpose.

Like the blind man in our text, we are meant to show the work of God in our lives. . . . Our more immediate tasks may seem laughably simple and small—go wash in the pool, go to school, get to work, do the next to-do on your too-long to-do list, or whatever else has been placed before you this week. But God works in such small things today just as he did for the man who washed in the pool and received his sight. Like him, we have a larger purpose and a longer journey of faith and healing. (page 36)

Think of your more immediate tasks this week. How do they relate to this larger purpose of showing the work of God in your life?

When the Way Means Staying Home

LENT 5

READ: JOHN 11:1-45

1. While some of Jesus' first disciples travelled with him around the countryside, others followed Jesus while remaining at home. In John 11:1-45, what evidence of faith and friendship can you identify between Lazarus, Martha, Mary, and Jesus?
2. How do Martha and Mary respond to Jesus' delay and eventual arrival? How do you respond when your prayers seem to go unanswered? What can you learn from their response?
3. "One family from our congregation relocated to another town to be part of a Bible study group that they pray will grow into a church. Another family spent some years in overseas ministry, and have now moved to a nearby community to take on pastoral responsibilities." (page 39) When has following Jesus meant travelling or moving for you? When has following Jesus meant staying home for you?
4. "The home of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary was a place of hospitality, rest, and friendship for Jesus and his disciples like no other place mentioned in the gospels. What a beautiful vision for home and family life! . . . Could our homes be places of hospitality and friendship, of preparation for ministry and rest for the weary?" (page 42)

What would it take for your home to become that? In what ways is this already happening in your home?

5. If you have given up or added something to your life for Lent, how has the practice been going for you? What are you learning?

When the Way is Hard

LITURGY OF THE PASSION/PALM SUNDAY

READ: MATTHEW 26:14-27:66

1. Palm Sunday is often a time of celebration as worshippers re-enact Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, with children waving palm branches and the congregation singing, "Hosanna!" But Passion Sunday is a more serious and somber time as Matthew's gospel recounts the final events of Jesus' life. How has Palm Sunday and/or Passion Sunday been part of your worship practice?
2. Notice the hints of resurrection throughout the gospel reading in Matthew 26:29, 32, 61, 64; 27:40, 62-66. Yet the disciples apparently missed or misunderstood these. Why?
3. "If you're facing down injustice, if you've been betrayed by someone close to you, if you feel deserted by your friends, know that Jesus has been there too, and is with you now. Hang on to hope. Be steadfast in your testimony. Even when the way is hard—especially when the way is hard—look for signs of resurrection to break out around you." (pages 48-49)

Reflect on a difficult situation in your own life or in the world. Hold it before God in a moment of silent prayer.

4. What helps you to hang on to hope in the midst of this difficult situation?
5. "Our God is the God of resurrection, and resurrection will break out even at the darkest and most unexpected times." (page 48) What signs of resurrection can you see?

The Way of the Lord

MAUNDY THURSDAY

READ: JOHN 13:1-17, 31B-35

1. Why did Jesus wash his disciples' feet? Notice especially John 13: 1, 3, 8, 14-17.
2. Jesus demonstrated that he is “not the one who lords it over his followers by trying to look and act superior. Instead, we might say that Jesus lords it under them.” (page 52)

What are some examples from daily life of “lording over” others and “lording under” them?

3. Have you washed someone else's feet as a sign of humility and service? Have you allowed someone else to wash your feet? If so, what impact has that had on you, both as the one washing and the one receiving?
4. Whether or not you practice a literal foot washing, how else might you express humility and service?
5. “We may or may not be quite as impetuous as Peter, but I wonder, do we sometimes protest as he did? Do we sometimes have things backward, where we want to tell God what to do and how to do it? Do we expect a celebrity Savior instead of a servant Lord?” (page 54-55)

What examples can you think of as evidence for or against each of these?

Facing Death

GOOD FRIDAY

READ: JOHN 18:1-19:42

1. Jesus was betrayed, denied, and deserted by his disciples. He was tortured and died in agony. Why then do we remember his suffering and death on Good Friday, and in what ways did Jesus die a “good” death? Notice Jesus’ unwavering commitment to follow God’s will, his consistent testimony throughout his ordeal, and the fulfillment of Scripture. How many times is the fulfillment of Scripture pointed out in this reading?
2. Compare and contrast Jesus and Pilate in John 18:28-19:16. How do they understand truth? What power do they each possess, and how do they use it? How does Pilate confront and challenge Jesus, and in what sense does Jesus also confront and challenge Pilate?
3. “In this story, I would be Peter—curious and concerned enough about Jesus to follow him after his arrest, but fearful enough to follow only at a distance. I would want to be faithful as Peter insisted he would be, but my resolve would quite likely dissolve at the first question as Peter lost his resolve. I too would fail Jesus miserably. And maybe you would too.” (page 60)

In what ways do you identify with this confession? In what ways have you failed Jesus? Offer a prayer of confession and receive God’s forgiveness.

4. “But for Peter and for all of us, Jesus’ death and resurrection mean forgiveness and new life. However miserably we might fail God, fail others, and fail ourselves, whatever sins we have committed, whatever failures, whatever regrets we may have about the past, Jesus’ sacrifice and God’s grace are greater.” (page 61)

Offer a prayer of thanks, or sing a song of praise!

5. In light of Jesus’ great suffering and death, giving up chocolate or nagging or anything else for Lent may seem laughably small. Yet even a small practice can serve as a reminder of Jesus’ sacrifice. If you gave up something for Lent, how has that affected you during these weeks? If you added something life-giving, what impact has that had on you?

Forgiven

EASTER SUNDAY/RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD

READ: MATTHEW 28:1-10

1. On the Sabbath, Mary Magdalene and another woman named Mary went to see the tomb where Jesus had been buried. What did they discover?
2. Compare and contrast what the angel says to the two women, and what Jesus later says to them. Notice Jesus' tenderness in referring to his disciples as "brothers" (Matthew 28:10, NRSV), even though they had fallen asleep when he asked them to stay awake with him on the night of his arrest, even though they had all deserted him (Matthew 26:36-56).
3. "Whatever our past failures, whatever our present situation, in Jesus there is forgiveness from sin as he reaches out to call us sisters and brothers. There is freedom from the past. There is power to live a new life. And as we are forgiven, we in turn are called to forgive others." (page 66)

Reflect on this movement of receiving God's forgiveness and extending forgiveness to others. What barriers stand in our way of receiving forgiveness? What barriers stand in our way of extending forgiveness to others? Pray for God to remove these just as the angel removed the stone from the tomb.

4. "Forgiveness doesn't mean condoning bad behavior or allowing it to continue. Forgiveness doesn't mean excusing or minimizing criminal or evil acts. But instead of holding the hurt inside where it can fester, forgiveness means we can channel our pain and anger into making things right. We can release those hard feelings, have compassion on ourselves, and begin to have compassion on others. Instead of looking for revenge we can reach toward justice and reconciliation." (page 67)

Understanding forgiveness in this way means that forgiveness is not a one-time act. Forgiveness is a process, a journey, a way of living into the freedom and new life that God has for us. In what ways will you practice forgiveness this week?

5. If you gave up something for Lent or added a life-giving practice, what will you do now that Lent is over?

With Peace for the Fearful

EASTER 2

READ: JOHN 20:19-31

1. Why did Jesus' disciples gather together behind locked doors?
2. Did they talk together about all that had happened, or were they mainly silent? Imagine their feelings and their conversation.
3. When Jesus appeared to the disciples in the locked room, he greeted them with a word of peace.

“No word of rebuke. No ‘don’t you remember what I told you earlier about my death and resurrection?’ ‘Peace be with you.’ Instead of being fearful the disciples could now be at peace because Jesus was with them once again.” (page 71)

Yet peace may not have been immediate even for the disciples. How did they respond when they first saw Jesus? How did Thomas respond when he heard that Jesus had appeared to the other disciples?

4. “Like Thomas and the other disciples, we each have our own fears—fears of what other people might do or say, fears for our safety or the safety of our family. We have our own doubts, our own insecurities that keep us locked behind closed doors. But just as he did so long ago, Jesus can enter our locked rooms with new life and a word of peace. He sets us free and sends us out in joy.” (page 73)

For us too, it may take some time to move beyond our fears and live into the joy and peace that God has for us. In what ways can we nurture peace in our personal lives and in the church as disciples of Jesus?

5. Just as we receive God's forgiveness and are then challenged to extend forgiveness to others, we receive the peace of Jesus and are then sent out. In what ways can you extend peace to others at work and school, in your community and world?

With Burning Hearts

EASTER 3

READ: LUKE 24:13-35

1. “This is one of my favorite Easter stories, in part because it’s about two relatively unknown disciples of Jesus. The name of Cleopas appears nowhere else in Scripture, and the other disciple remains unnamed in our text. Some have suggested that the unidentified disciple may have been the wife of Cleopas, that she and her husband actually lived in Emmaus, and it was into their own home that they invited Jesus.” (pages 78-79)

In what ways did Jesus change the lives of these two disciples? Note especially Luke 24:27, 31, 33.

2. Jesus taught the two disciples about himself from the Scriptures. What do you learn about Jesus from Psalm 22, Psalm 118, Isaiah 9:6; Isaiah 53:4-9, Zechariah 9:9?
3. What did the two disciples do once they knew that Jesus had been on the road with them, had been in their home, and broken bread with them?
4. The two disciples hurried back to Jerusalem even though they had just come from there. In what ways has Jesus changed the direction of your life?
5. “The good news of Jesus’ resurrection and living presence was not just a personal, inner belief. It was meant to be lived out. It was meant to be shared.” (page 78)

How can you share the good news of Jesus with others without being obnoxious?

With Challenge and Invitation

EASTER 4

READ: JOHN 10:1-10

1. In what ways is Jesus like a shepherd? In what ways is Jesus like a gate?
2. Jesus says that “the sheep follow him because they know his voice” (John 10:4, NRSV).

Do you know the voice of Jesus? In what ways does Jesus speak to you?

3. “To all of us as leaders—as parents, as church members, in our work life, wherever we exercise influence, wherever our actions impact other people—are we good shepherds or bandits? In other words, do we seek the health and well-being of those placed in our care, or do we do harm? Are we wise shepherds who seek God’s will and way, or are we stupid shepherds who act in our own self-interest?” (pages 84-85)

What does it mean for you to take up this challenge in your daily life?

4. “To all of us as sheep, Jesus invites us to enter by the gate and find abundant life. Do we hear and recognize his voice? Will we listen? The Good Shepherd is calling.” (page 85)

How do you recognize the voice of Jesus from the many other voices clamoring in our world today?

5. Spend a few moments prayerfully re-reading John 10:1-10 and listening for the voice of Jesus.

The Way for Troubled Hearts

EASTER 5

READ: JOHN 14:1-14

1. What reassurances does Jesus offer his disciples?
2. *On the Way With Jesus* lists a number of common anxieties. What worries you today? Consider Jesus' reassurances and how they might apply to your worries too.
3. "Trusting God does not mean that our troubles disappear. Trusting God does not mean that life will always be calm. We may well be in the midst of a storm of events that make us anxious. But trusting God means having courage for the great sorrows we face in living and in dying. Not because those things don't matter, but because no matter how heavy the burden, God is with us and at work." (page 89)

How do you define "trust"? Try completing this sentence: Trusting in God means _____.

4. "At the same time, trusting God does not absolve us of all responsibility. In fact when we're troubled about something, that may well point to where we need to work, where we need to pray. So if we're troubled about our children's school, trusting God may mean we need to volunteer. If we're troubled by safety issues in our community, trusting God may mean building community by welcoming newcomers, getting to know our neighbors, and building healthy relationships. If we're troubled by mental illness, trusting God may mean seeking counseling or taking medication and learning to rest." (page 90)

In what ways do the things you worry about fuel your actions?

5. Jesus addresses his disciples together as a group. How can other people help to carry your burdens and help you to trust God?

Framed by Love

EASTER 6

READ: JOHN 14:15-21

1. Jesus says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). What new old commandment does he give in John 13:34? What other commandments did Jesus give throughout his ministry? See for example Matthew 5:1-7:29, Mark 12:28-34.
2. Consider Jesus’ relationship with his disciples as described in the gospels. How did he show love to them? What does his example suggest for the kind of love we are to show others?
3. “Who among the disciples could love like Jesus? Who among us can love in that surprising, self-giving, and sacrificial way? If that’s the gold standard of love, we might as well cut our losses and give up now!” (page 95)

Instead of giving up, we have an Advocate sent by Jesus. How can this Advocate help us? See also John 14:26.

4. What does it mean to live a life “framed by love”? Review the examples listed in *On the Way With Jesus*, and come up with examples of your own.
5. “When love seems too demanding, when we struggle to live out our true identity as beloved by God and loving others, we have an Encourager and Helper. When we lose our way and need to find it again, we have an Advocate and Mediator to comfort us and bring us home.” (page 95)

Pray for the Advocate’s help as you seek to keep Jesus’ commandments this week.

Praying All the Way

EASTER 7

READ: JOHN 17:1-11

1. In this prayer, what does Jesus ask of God? For whom does he pray, and what does he ask for them?
2. Consider church history and the world around you today. In what ways do you see that Jesus' prayer has been answered? In what ways do you see that Jesus' prayer has yet to be fulfilled?
3. Consider your own prayer life. What do you regularly ask of God? In what ways have your prayers been answered? In what ways are you still waiting?
4. "Scripture tells us that when we don't know how to pray, God's Spirit prays on our behalf: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). At times we might well need those "sighs too deep for words." We may not know how to pray for the people and things that concern us. We may not even know what we need to pray for. But the Spirit knows and intercedes for us." (page 100)

Prayer is more than words, for our sighs, tears, and silent moments can also be forms of prayer. Consider your own prayer life: How much are your prayers filled with your own words? How much time do you spend in "sighs too deep for words"? How much time do you spend listening for God?

5. "As a church and as individuals and households, we're still on the way with Jesus. His prayer hasn't been fully answered yet, but God's not done with us yet either. So let us not grow weary and lose heart. Let's keep walking together and praying all the way." (page 103)

This concludes the study guide for *On the Way With Jesus*. Conclude this series with prayer for your on-going journey. Jesus leads the way and goes with you.

About the Author

April Yamasaki writes on spiritual growth and Christian living both online and in print publications. She is an ordained minister with twenty-five years of experience in pastoral ministry, and speaks widely in churches and other ministry settings.

Her books include *Sacred Pauses: Spiritual Practices for Personal Renewal* and *Four Gifts: Seeking Self-Care for Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength*.

She currently serves as Resident Author with Valley CrossWay Church, which is a liturgical worship community in Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada.

For more information, please visit her websites, apriyamasaki.com and WhenYouWorkfortheChurch.com.