



Mount Calvary Connected

March 2, 2023

Mount Calvary Connected is a weekly newsletter sent out at the end of each week. Our goal is to keep you connected to your church and your faith with messages from our pastors, information about upcoming activities at Mt. Calvary and more!

Pastor Jonathan Adams

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LIVE STREAMING WORSHIP SERVICE INFORMATION

Mt. Calvary hosts live broadcasts of the liturgy at 8:45 AM Sunday mornings. The broadcast can be heard by tuning your radio to 88.3 FM if you are near the church. We also stream these services live over the internet. Simply visit www.mt-calvarylutheran.org and click "Live Radio Broadcast" from the home page on Sunday mornings.

Weekly worship bulletins can be found at: www.mt-calvarylutheran.org/bulletins/

Readings & Sermon from the Past Sunday

Listen to the readings and the sermon from this past Sunday on our website: <https://www.mt-calvarylutheran.org/sermons/>

A Message from Pastor Jonathan Adams

Dear Brothers & Sisters in Christ,

This past weekend, we made a shift in our worship services that we will continue with through the season of Lent. The service now most closely follows what's known as "setting four" in our current hymnals, which actually dates back to the green "Lutheran Book of Worship" first published in 1978. This effects things like the kyrie and hymn of praise as well as the liturgical music surrounding Holy Communion. We'll be sticking with this until Holy Week, and then likely shifting toward something different for Easter and beyond.

To be honest, you may not actually notice that much of a difference, but please believe me when I tell you that this change will make things easier for me as I seek to lead both Mount Calvary and Benscreek, as well as making things easier for any visiting pastors that may come in during my absence.

For as much as my goal during this transitional period is to help maintain a sense of status quo, part of my work is also aimed at creating somewhat of a blank canvas for another pastor to be able to come in and use their particular gifts to lead the congregation in the directions that they sense God is calling us toward. When I'm making these sorts of shifts to worship or other ministries, please know that's what I have in

mind: not just what's best for the here and now, but also helping to open doors for whoever serves here in the future.

Thank you all for your continued partnership in these days.

Yours in Christ,
Pastor Jonathan

Events & Meetings

Evangelism Committee - Thurs., March 2nd at 6:30 pm
Stewardship/Administration Committee - Thurs., March 2nd at 6:30 pm
Coffee Social - Sun., March 5th at 8 am
Ask – A Lenten Series (Mt. Calvary) - Wed., March 8th at 7 pm
Property Committee - Mon., March 13th at 6 pm
Ask – A Lenten Series (Benscreek) - Wed., March 15th at 7 pm
Social Ministry Meeting - Thurs., March 16th at 6:30 pm
WELCA - Mon., March 20th at 6 pm
Church Council - Tues., March 21st at 6:30 pm
Ask – A Lenten Series (Mt. Calvary) - Wed., March 22nd at 7 pm
Ask – A Lenten Series (Benscreek) - Wed., March 29th at 7 pm
ALPHA - Every Tuesday in March

Donate your gently worn, used and new shoes!

From March 1st - May 1st, Mt. Calvary is partnering with the Greater Johnstown YWCA to raise funds for a new lunch/storage counter for their daycare. The more shoes collected, the more money we raise! A list of participating drop off locations and more information can be found [here!](#)

The Giving Tree

Contributions will coincide with the shoe collection drive to raise money for the YWCA. Proceeds will help the Y buy a new lunch counter for their day care.

Furry Friends

During March, you'll notice a marked bin in the Narthex for donations for the Cambria County Humane Society and Second Chance Stray Cat Rescue. The list of on-going needs is quite large and includes just about anything imaginable for puppies, dogs, kittens and cats. More information is available on the bin, on our website, or contact Erin Powell 814-244-0221 or erin.powell03@gmail.com.

The Annual Flea Market

Please keep Mt. Calvary in mind during your Spring Cleaning!

We will begin collecting donations in April. Stay tuned for additional information and ways you can help or contribute!

Ask – A Lenten Series

In partnership with Benscreek Lutheran Church, our 2023 Lenten midweek offering is entitled “Ask,” a series that will encourage us all to remember that having faith and having questions are not mutually exclusive.

We’ll gather at 7pm for the five Wednesdays in March, alternating between the two congregations for a worship service that feels a bit more like a bible study. Or maybe it’s a bible study that feels a bit more like a worship service? We’ll figure it out as we go along.

Join us for one or two, or for the whole series!

March 8th – 7pm @ Mt. Calvary

March 15th – 7pm @ Benscreek

March 22nd – 7pm @ Mt. Calvary

March 29th – 7pm @ Benscreek

Benscreek Lutheran Church is located at 4459 Somerset Pike, Hollsopple, PA, one mile north of the Thomas Feed Mill, less than 20 minutes from Mount Calvary.

Special Fundraising Campaign

We have officially launched our fundraising campaign to build a new monument sign along Scalp Ave. The new sign will replace the existing one and will include a new electronic message board. A few of us just finished picking up the remnants of our old white message board, so this comes just in time.

The final cost of the sign is \$50,000 of which approximately 1/3 of that has already been raised. We would consider this a “special appeal campaign”. So if you feel that you would like to support this project, please put your extra offering in a separate envelope and mark it “Sign Project”. The garage sale/basket party committee has generously donated \$1,000 to kick off this campaign. Thank you very much.

Our goal is to have the new sign installed by late summer. There is a conceptual drawing on the table in the narthex. Thank you for your consideration!

Readers/Communion Assistants:

March 4 – Volunteers Needed

March 5 – Rebecca Daly

March 11 – Jack Weisbrodt & Marsha Pauley

March 12 – Todd Moss

March 18 – Cindy Buday

March 19 – Mike Kozak

March 25 – Kevin Oleksa

March 26 – Ray Leverknight

Those interested in volunteering may contact Pastor Jonathan to sign up.

Thank you!

We would like to extend our appreciation to Charlie Nemeth for building our new wooden cross in the church circle. The craftsmanship is second to none. The reclaimed wood for the cross came from an old barn in Bedford County. Charlie put a clear coat on it so that the beauty of the wood would shine through.

If you see Charlie take a moment to thank him for sharing his woodworking skills with our church family.

Faith comes by hand

by Sarah Hinlicky Wilson

Throughout scripture, human bodies are not an obstacle to righteousness; they are its location.

Lately I've been thinking about hands. It started last summer, when I realized I was shaking someone's hand for the first time in two years. Even before COVID, hand shaking was dropping out of my repertoire. I moved to Japan in 2018, and they bow here instead of shaking hands. Nothing tells you you're a Westerner like the compulsion to shove your sweaty palm into a stranger's.

Cultural cluelessness is one thing. Pandemic germs are another. But hands-off has increasingly been the norm in polite society—including in the church. Hands are essential to God's work in scripture. Yet, other than the once-in-a-lifetime ordination rite for a very small subset of Christians, you'd never know it from going to church.

This is not without reason. Too many ministers have taken advantage of their position and mishandled those in their care. Better to rule out any risk of unholy hands at all, the reasoning goes. I sympathize with this concern. But I suspect the ease with which hands have been eliminated from ministry also reveals a practical gnosticism at work: the unexamined notion that bodies are obstacles to righteousness rather than its location.

Hands need to be disciplined, to be sure—but not deleted. Faith comes by hearing, and the things worth hearing about come by hand. To put it another way: the ministry of God's gracious reign is handed down and handed off, one generation to the next, by the laying on of hands.

Hands enact the priestly ministry in Leviticus, that encoding of God's grace for the people of Israel. This much despised and poorly understood book speaks its own symbolic language, one which Christians can't usually be bothered to decode. But many obscure mysteries of Jesus-centered faith are illuminated in its light.

Sacrifice, for instance. Leviticus begins with sacrifice, just as the Gospels end with sacrifice. It is not an inexplicably bloody demand on God's part but an invitation and a concession: come into my home, says the Lord, and let us make things right between us.

Levitical sacrifice is a strictly demarcated business. The overwhelming majority of animals are off-limits (a better translation than "unclean") to Israel. In fact, you could consider Leviticus to be a conservation policy that any 21st-century ecologist would envy. Only a very narrow selection of herd animals may be handed over to pay the real cost of real sin in the world. Their blood is shed but not consumed by either God or the

penitent. Blood is life, so it goes back into the ground to sustain life. The Lord takes only the aroma. A few items are set aside—fat, kidneys, a lobe of the liver—and the rest of the meat goes to feed the family and the priesthood.

But here's the key: what transforms a bull from secular to sacred use is the laying on of hands. The Lord instructs Levitical priests, "He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him" (1:4). This point appears early in the book, in the very first set of instructions, and recurs again and again (3:2, 8, 13; 4:4, 15, 24, 29, 33; 8:14, 18).

The famous scapegoat of Leviticus 16 receives the same laying on of hands, this time to bear the sins of Israel and take them away, out of the camp, to dissolve in the chaos of the wilderness and trouble God's people no more.

Hands are also central to the action when Moses consecrates Aaron and his sons to the priestly work of sacrifice. Over the course of seven days, Moses bathes, clothes, crowns, and anoints them by hand. The incipient priests lay hands on the bull of the sin offering. The ram of the sin offering is set apart by their hands, and the ram of ordination as well. Moses uses the blood of the latter to anoint "the lobe of Aaron's right ear and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot" (Lev. 8:23), and he does the same for Aaron's sons. Then their hands are ready to receive fat and meat, the wafer and unleavened bread, to present to the Lord as wave offerings. When the consecration draws to its close, "Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them" (Lev. 9:22).

Similarly, in Numbers, the whole people of Israel lay hands on the Levites when they are presented to the Lord as a wave offering—rather suggesting the ancient equivalent of a mosh pit—and the Levites in turn lay hands on the bulls to prepare them for sacrifice (Num. 8:10–12). And Moses lays hands directly upon his successor, Joshua, to invest in the younger man some of the elder's authority (Num. 27:23, recalled in Deut. 34:9).

In short, it's the priests and the sacrificial animals who receive the laying on of hands. That twinning is as good a foreshadowing as any of what ministers of the gospel should expect: "As for yourselves, beware, for they will hand you over to councils" (Mark 13:9).

The laying on of hands is as well attested in the New Testament as baptism or communion, possibly even more so than the latter.

The book of Acts, which is particularly concerned with the dissemination of the Good News in Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, abounds in hands. Stephen and the other six deacons are the first ones to be set apart for service by the apostles, who pray and lay hands on them (6:5–6).

The laying on of hands by Peter and John summons the delayed Holy Spirit upon two Samaritan believers (Acts 8:14–19). It's the one such case of delay, probably because the first baptism of not-quite-Jews required broad apostolic endorsement. Simon Magus, unfortunately, draws the wrong conclusion from this, offering the apostles money in exchange for the power to do the holy hands trick himself, thereby giving us the name of a uniquely ecclesiastical sin: simony.

Paul, for his part, humbled by an intervention of the risen Jesus, receives the hands of former enemy Ananias in order to gain the Holy Spirit and regain his sight (Acts 9:12, 17). He receives hands again under less humbling circumstances when he and Barnabas are set apart for their mission labors by the church of

Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:1–3). Later Paul passes the favor along, laying hands on the Ephesian disciples, whose inadequate baptism by John the Baptist could not deliver the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:6).

The seeds of Christian ordination practice are plainly there, and the practice may already have been in effect. Another commissioning story reports how, “when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:23). The English translation conceals more than it reveals: that word “appointed” (in Greek *cheirotónésante*) contains the word for “hand,” *cheír* (hence *chiropractor*).

Paul uses the same word with reference to his coworker Titus, who “has been appointed”—or perhaps we should say, picked by hand—“by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us” (2 Cor. 8:19).

And again, consecration for ministry by hand is assumed in the pastoral epistles. Timothy is told not to neglect the gift given to him “when the council of elders laid their hands on you” (1 Tim. 4:14), or maybe Paul himself (2 Tim. 1:6). He is also warned not to be hasty in laying hands on others who are not yet ready for either the burden or the privilege of being set apart in that way (1 Tim. 5:22). Hebrews ranks knowledge concerning the laying on of hands as part of the “elementary doctrine of Christ” along with repentance, faith, washings, resurrection, and eternal judgment (6:1–2). No hands, no ministry, no church, no gospel.

Exhaustive and attested though it is, this work of priestly and apostolic hands is not the whole story. There is a parallel story running underground beneath this one, another form of consecration and commissioning, just as deeply rooted in Levitical grace: Levitical grace for lepers, to be exact.

First things first: Levitical leprosy is not modern leprosy, also known as Hansen’s disease. As a matter of fact, what we call leprosy may not have even existed in the Middle East and points west until well into the Christian era.

Biblical leprosy is also a skin condition, but its significance is not infection per se. The issue is the issue: a seepage that indicates a breach in the tabernacle of skin that holds a human being in place. For analogous reasons, breaches in garments and homes are similar cause for concern. It’s not as strange as it sounds: you approve of the holes in your home in the form of doors and windows, but not in the form of holes in your roof.

For Leviticus, intact skin is a metonymy for every kind of integrity that maintains life. Live a lie or sneak a sin and it will catch up with you, sapping away the life God gave you—just like a hole in your skin where there isn’t supposed to be one will drain your health away.

That is why, in Leviticus 14, the restoration of sufferers of leprosy is dealt with at such great length, even though by any medical standard the condition is not that serious. The integrity of the physical and spiritual whole that is a human being is so significant that the rite of healing rhymes and resonates with another in the code.

The requirements for healing from leprosy include bathing, a seven-day wait, burnt offerings, and anointing of a very specific kind: “The priest shall take some of the blood of the guilt offering, and the priest shall put it on the lobe of the right ear of him who is to be cleansed and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot” (Lev. 14:14). Later, oil is applied to all the same anatomical locations.

Hear the rhyme? The healing ritual is a consecration, a commissioning, an alternate ordination. To be healed of disease and restored to integrity is, in effect, a summons into service. A healed person becomes inherently priestly.

When Jesus heals his first leper, he stretches out his hand and touches him. Although he sternly charges the man to “say nothing to anyone” but only to follow the appropriate rite of restoration with a priest, the healed man cannot keep silent (Mark 1:44). He talks freely, spreads the news, and declares the mercy of God in priestly fashion to the point that Jesus can no longer move about openly—and this already in the first chapter of the Gospel.

Soon after, though, following another remarkable healing, the Gerasene demoniac receives the exact opposite instructions. Jesus commands him, “Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you” (Mark 5:19). Evidently the rules are different for a non-Israelite living on the far side of the lake. At any rate, this healed and restored gentile is commissioned to go forth and labor as a preacher, evangelist, and apostle—well in advance of the Twelve, and despite any supposed messianic secret in Mark.

Jesus continues to heal by laying his hand on sufferers throughout Mark’s Gospel (1:33, 5:41, 6:5, 7:32, 8:23, 9:27), thereby setting the precedent for the healing ministry of his apostles: “And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them” (6:13). Much later, an about-to-ascend Jesus promises that his disciples “will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover” (16:18). Jesus also applies his hands to bless children, anticipatorily healing them of the wounds life holds in store for them, while also commending to them their own ministry of sharing the Good News of one who values children in his kingdom (10:16).

Twice the hands that reach for healing and blessing move not from Jesus but toward him, and both times by women.

A woman who has bled for 12 years reaches out her fingers to touch Jesus’ garment (Mark 5:21–34). It is a touch of such electric charge that Jesus distinguishes it from the press of the crowd all around him. Jesus approves her faith and confirms her healing.

The other woman to reach for Jesus turns up in the home of Simon the leper. She breaks “an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly” (Mark 14:3). For those who don’t keep nard in their medicine chests, it’s a fragrant oil. Certain shortsighted and moralistic dinner guests object to the waste. What they fail to notice is that, up to this point in time, the one acclaimed as Christ, the Anointed One, has not yet been anointed.

In fact, there is nothing in any of the Gospels that qualifies recognizably as an anointing in any of its traditional formats. Metaphorically, yes—Peter declares to Cornelius that “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Acts 10:38), and the epistles speak of believers being anointed in the same way.

But this episode at Simon the leper’s house is the closest we get to the literal, physical action. The nard-bearing woman assumes the prophetic role of anointing God’s chosen priest and king, little realizing that

she is also preparing him to die. Jesus approves the presumption, declaring that “wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her” (Mark 14:9).

If anything, literal anointing in the New Testament is more aligned with healing than with qualifying as the Christ. Recall that Jesus sent out his disciples to anoint for healing. James, the brother of the Lord, exhorts the same care for the ailing: “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven” (James 5:14–15).

Unsurprisingly in a midrashic meditation principally concerned with integrity—just like Leviticus, in fact—James sees no contradiction in asking for both physical healing and forgiveness of sins, but he also doesn’t assume the one is causally related to the other. Healing is holistic, and an all-hands-on-deck ecclesial emergency.

Hands for consecrating, hands for healing, hands for blessing, hands for anointing: an up close and personal ministry to counteract the practical gnosticism of ages past and present.

Like much of the world church, in 2020 my congregation found ourselves impounded for Lent, Holy Week, and Easter. No ashes traced on the forehead by a sooty pastoral finger; no communion placed in cross-shaped hands. We reverted to the tiniest of house churches for our days of penitence and festival alike.

But as so often happens, new connections come to light in extremis. We had no palm branches to serve as our wave offering before the Lord on his way into Jerusalem. But we had our own palms. We lifted them up in praise. The image has stayed with me ever since.

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson is associate pastor at Tokyo Lutheran Church and author of *To Baptize or Not to Baptize: A Practical Guide for Clergy*.

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Birthdays & Anniversaries March 5 – March 11, 2023

Birthdays

Mar. 6 - Malia Decker

Mar. 7 - Keli Koop-Williams & William Wolfe

Mar. 9 - Ashley Kozak & Gabriel Kozak

Mar. 11 - Alexander Brehm, Joyce Gindlesperger, Melissa Hutzal, & Hunter Molchany

Prayer Requests

Kim; Devin; Laura & Family; Dorothy; Jo Ann; John Alt; Jan Mertz; Denny; Jill Lisson; Jaci Hauger; Sharon; Barbara; Dennis; Mary M.; Joel Penrod; Tim Miller; Cathy T.; Paul Brodt; Kim Stayrook; Alan; Pastor David Louder; Frank Robison; Sandy; Louise; Brooke & Bill; Chuck; Dawn; Cherie; Sandy; Lorrie; & Bill; Jamie Bloom; Nancy Moore; Wilma Hiltz; Johnny Nerone; Cheryl & Roger; pray for the Alpha Course participants that they may receive the holy spirit; James; Denny & Ellen; Bill; Ann McKee Everett; Sue; Stan McQuaide; El Warshel.

Condensed Worship

Saturday, February 25, 2023 & Sunday, February 26, 2023

Questions that Divide, Questions that Bond

Prayer of the Day

P: Lord God, our strength, the struggle between good and evil rages within and around us, and the devil and all the forces that defy you tempt us with empty promises.

P: Keep us steadfast in your word, and when we fall, raise us again and restore us through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

A: Amen.

First Reading: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in

the day that you eat of it you shall die." Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden;

but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

"So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

The word of the Lord, **A: Thanks be to God.**

Psalmody: Psalm 32

L: Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away!

A: Happy are they to whom the Lord imputes no guilt, and in whose spirit there is no guile!

L: While I held my tongue, my bones withered away, because of my groaning all day long.

A: For your hand was heavy upon me day and night; my moisture was dried up as in the heat of summer.

L: Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and did not conceal my guilt. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.” Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin.

A: Therefore all the faithful will make their prayers to you in time of trouble; when the great waters overflow, they shall not reach them.

L: You are my hiding-place; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance.

A: “I will instruct you and teach you in the way that you should go; I will guide you with my eye.

L: Do not be like horse or mule, which have no understanding; who must be fitted with bit and bridle, or else they will not stay near you.”

A: Great are the tribulations of the wicked; but mercy embraces those who trust in the Lord.

L: Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the Lord; shout for joy, all who are true of heart.

Second Reading: Romans 5:12-19

Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law.

Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come. But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God

and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification.

If, because of the one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. The word of the Lord, **A: Thanks be to God.**

Gospel: Matthew 4:1-11

P: The holy gospel according to Matthew.

A: Glory to you, O Lord.

Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted 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 splendor; 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.

The gospel of the Lord,

A: Praise to you, O Christ!

Sermon

Lent 1A – February 26, 2023

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from Christ Jesus our Lord who endured the tempter’s questions because of his love for us. Amen.

When was a time that someone asked a question that hurt your feelings? Or maybe a question that caused you to doubt yourself?

Maybe it was something like, “Why are you so stupid?” or “Didn’t anyone ever tell you how bad you are at that?” or maybe something like, “Can’t you do ANYTHING right?”

I won’t go on, even though I could, because even just saying those words in this space feels uncomfortable. I know what I’m saying is not good, or holy.

And yet, some people might hear that kind of language on a constant, daily basis. And even if it’s not that direct, you’re probably still constantly being asked questions that make you doubt yourself or your own beliefs. The sorts of questions that pop up in political ads, like “Does this politician really care about you?” or ads in general, “Do you really have your life together if you don’t own the latest and greatest thingamabob?”

Even if they don’t word it as a question, the question itself is still there. It’s insidious. Trying to make YOU question everything.

Those are the sorts of questions that are intended to divide us rather than build us up. And some of them are downright evil...

There are a handful of questions that appear in today’s scripture readings that I’d characterize that way. As questions that divide rather than bond.

And it all begins where life itself began, in the Garden of Eden. The serpent approaches Eve and asks a question he already knows the answer to, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'"

We can assume the serpent knew the ground rules. That he asked this sow a bit of division in the relationship between Eve and God, and maybe even between Eve and Adam. It's not a question that builds a relationship, it's not a question that bonds, it's a question that divides. And the actions of Adam and Eve that result divide history, *before the fall*, and *after the fall*.

The serpent's questions are evil.

And there's a reason that story gets paired in our lectionary with today's Gospel. As Jesus is led into the wilderness Holy Spirit, he is tested by the devil, the evil one, the serpent in a new form. And those questions that are raised, they aren't ones that build up a relationship, it's more of the same, more tearing down and dividing.

The tempter challenges Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." And it may not seem like a question, but it is, in fact it's almost the same question the serpent asked Eve. "Did God say you couldn't eat?"

And it goes on and on, "Don't you believe that God will protect you?"

"Wouldn't you rather have the power that I can give you instead?"

These challenges, these questions, they're not so much attacking Jesus, as much as attacking his relationship with God. Trying to sow doubt into the relationship. Fortunately, Jesus sees right through it. But Eve wasn't so lucky.

...And often times we aren't so lucky either.

We fail to see the ways that people might be using their questions with evil intention. The ways that evil might be trying to sow doubt in our relationships, create distance between us and the people we love and respect.

Asking questions is a good and holy thing. But questions that are intended to hurt another person are not.

In the days between now and Holy Week, we'll be focusing quite a bit on questions, and how they can truly be holy, and how they can build up our faith rather than undermine it. You'll hear me lifting up some of those questions on Saturdays and Sundays, and if you choose to join me on Wednesday evenings, you'll hear a bit of it there as well.

And other than tonight/today, we'll focus on the healthy questions, the questions that help us build relationships and deepen our faith.

Questions like, "What can we agree on here?"

"What do we have in common?"

"How can we help one another?"

Or, "How does that make *you* feel?"

God tells us it's okay to have questions. It's okay to ASK questions. And so that's what we'll do. Not mean, nasty questions that divide, but questions bond, and maybe help us know we're not ever nearly as alone as we might feel.

Because God is with us, even when we feel like we're surrounded by questions. Amen.

Prayers Of Intercession

L: Sustained by God's abundant mercy, let us pray for the church, the world, and all of creation.

L: You alone are God. Sustain your church in times of wilderness. Give vision and wisdom to bishops, their staff, and all entrusted with the ministry of administration. Counsel all who faithfully lead your people into the future. Merciful God,

A: receive our prayer.

L: You create verdant gardens and expansive deserts. Tend to the needs of every living creature. Bless those who work in fields and orchards, that the world is nourished by the fruits of their labor. Merciful God,

A: receive our prayer.

L: You know our temptations. Sustain those who govern and legislate. Instill in them a sense of your justice and righteousness, that equity and peace would pervade all the regions and nations of the world. Merciful God,

A: receive our prayer.

L: You are a hiding place for all in distress. Draw near to exiles, and accompany all refugees and immigrants, especially children who travel alone. In times of trouble, trauma, or illness, surround your people with your steadfast love. Merciful God,

A: receive our prayer.

L: You offer abundance to all. Bless the ministries of hospitality in this place. Care for those who tend to the needs of others, especially worship greeters, coffee hour hosts, and nursery attendants. Merciful God,

A: receive our prayer.

L: You alone are God. We praise you for the faithful departed in every age. Unite our prayers with theirs, until our wilderness journey is complete, and we rest in you. Merciful God,

A: receive our prayer.

L: We lift our prayers to you, O God, trusting in your steadfast love and your promise to renew your whole creation; through Jesus Christ our Savior.

A: Amen.

Blessing

P: May God who has called us forth from the dust of the earth, and claimed us as children of the light, strengthen you on your journey into life renewed. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord's face shine upon you with grace and mercy. The Lord look upon you with favor and give you ☩ peace. **A: Amen.**