



LENT | 2025

A PRAYER GROUP STUDY GUIDE

Once upon a time, Kathryn, my then school aged daughter, was trying to make a sentence with one of her spelling words. She asked me to help. “What was the word?” I asked. “Geotropism,” she replied. Pause. The “geo” prefix meant “earth.” I knew that. But no such luck with “tropism.” I had to confess my ignorance and suggested we look up the word (in an actual dictionary). Geotropism (we discovered) is a form of the biological term, *tropism* (from the Greek, trope, meaning “turning”). The term *geotropism* relates to plants and refers to the tendency for the roots of a seed to turn downward, toward the earth, regardless of the way in which the seed is planted. This phenomenon, known technically as positive geotropism, is what enables a plant to anchor itself in the soil and grow. Conversely, when the plant shoots emerge and turn upward, out of the soil and away from the earth, they are said to be negatively geotropic. In short, if it weren’t for geotropism, I’d eat a lot less tomatoes.

The word *geotropism* is not a bad word for the season of Lent. We are, I think, supposed to be much like plant seeds in our spiritual lives. So in a way, you could say we should operate by the principles of what might be called, “theotropism.” That is, a natural bending toward God. Our spiritual roots should bend toward the Source that will nourish our souls so that our stems branch out bearing the fruits of love and mercy and kindness. The challenge for us, though, is that unlike a seed or a bulb, we do not automatically bend toward God without generating some of our own sources of stimuli. Let me suggest some stimuli for the weeks ahead.

First, make time to PRAY, remembering that consciously breathing, “Lord have mercy,” counts as praying. LISTEN. A breeze; a stream; a storm; a crackling fire; a melody. Since most of us generally talk too much, lose your microphone for a few weeks. READ. Read the Bible, of course—the weekly readings in this guide, or those in one of the daily devotionals, are the place to start. But also: read a poem, or the words of a favorite writer, or something a loved one wrote to you long ago. LOOK. Concentrate your gaze on something not on television. A piece of art. An object like a stone or a thorn. Or a cross. A candle flame. A face.

It is the purpose of this prayer guide to help you—and those you gather with—to bend toward God in the coming weeks. May God’s presence draw you closer.

Mark Price

COVER ART: *The Empty Tomb / He Qi*

GENERAL SESSION GUIDE

Think guide, rather than script. If you find something doesn't work, do something else. Generally speaking, you want to spend most of your time (1) attending to the Scripture passages, (2) sharing insights, and (3) spending time in prayer.

THE PROCESS | HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

WELCOME

Take what time you need to welcome participants, make introductions as needed, and provide what orientation to the hour as you see fit.

PSALM PRAYER

A psalm is provided for your use as a gathering prayer. Feel free to use your own. Or pray in other ways.

ATTENDING TO THE WORD

Approach the week's Gospel passages meditatively. This *lectio divina* approach invites us into God's presence as we pay attention to the texts read aloud. The process: Hear the selected Bible passage(s) read aloud **three times** (preferably by a different reader).

Consider this pattern for sharing responses:

- After 1st reading: What word or phrase did the passage bring to mind?
- After 2nd reading: What question did the passage raise for you?
- After 3rd reading: What particular invitation did you hear?

This should be a prayerful reading—so take your time. Allow a minute or so of silence between each of the three readings. Then invite persons to share their responses, as they feel comfortable.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

A brief reading accompanies the Scripture passage. You may choose to read the selection aloud or have the group read it silently. Since the reading provides a brief gloss or comment on the week's Scripture, invite the group to talk together about what new or fresh insight the reading offered. The reading may invite a return to the Scripture and more discussion about its meaning—hopefully so. Feel free to supply your own guided discussion prompt as well.

AN IMAGE | VISIO DIVINA

Prayerful reflection of Scripture can take many forms. *Visio divina* (divine seeing) offers a way to view art as a spiritual practice. This practice is similar to the tradition of praying with icons. For each week, an art image (see the last pages of the booklet) accompanies the reading. Consider taking a few minutes to invite prayerful viewing of each week's art selection, using this method:

- View the whole art image, stopping on whatever first catches your eye. Consider what the artist might have been trying to convey through perspective, color or form.
- Let your viewing be more like waiting—waiting to be addressed, to be surprised, to be drawn in, to be moved by what you see.
- Hear persons share responses as they feel comfortable.

A POEM

The poems in this section are intended to be a kind of pause before closing. They all come from Mary Oliver. The intent is not to engage in literary analysis but to disengage the mind long enough to stir the imagination. The poems are only lightly tethered to the week's Scriptures; so hopefully they will invite a new avenue of exploration of faith in the season of Lent. Keep in mind that the meaning of a poem is not to be wrestled away or teased out. Let the poem be. Let the poem sound. That is sufficient. Feel free to talk about it together—or not.

CLOSING

In our worship during this season of Lent, one of our themes is belonging—the idea that by God calling of us, we receive a place (that is, a relationship) in which to belong. We belong to God and we belong to each other in community. The verse printed here is from a beautiful passage from Isaiah 43. In it, God promises the exiled people of Israel that God is and always will be their saving God. Read it aloud in unison as a reminder that God's promise extends to us as well. Then close your time together in whatever way feels most appropriate: consider using the prayer list in the weekly worship bulletin as a guide (also available online in the church newsletter) or perhaps end with the Lord's Prayer.

TO THE HOST HOME:

- Do what you can to lessen distractions. Ask folks to silence phones. Light a candle. Put up the dog.
- Refreshments are optional. If you offer them, be simple, not stressful.
- If your group will use music as part of its study and prayer time, have each week's music ready to play. Note the suggested playlist. But feel free to choose and play some of your own.
- Trust your time to God's keeping.

SUGGESTED PLAYLIST (SPOTIFY)

- Abide with Me, Sara Groves
- Give Me Jesus, Fernando Ortega
- O the Deep, Deep Love, Audrey Assad
- O Lord Hear My Prayer, Taizé'
- Gloria II: The Prayer, Karl Jenkins
- My Heart Is Steadfast, Ellie Holcomb
- The Lord Bless You, John Rutter
- Blessing, Paul Mealor/ Voce
- Precious Lord, Thomas Dorsey
- The Lord Is My Shepherd, Paul Zach
- The 23rd Psalm, Bobby McFerrin

WEEK ONE | LETTING STONES BE STONES

WELCOME

Welcome each other in the peace of Christ and introduce yourselves if you are not already acquainted.

PSALM PRAYER | Psalm 9:1-2

ATTENDING TO THE WORD | LUKE 4:1-13

- After 1st reading: What word or phrase did the passage bring to mind?
- After 2nd reading: What question did the passage raise for you?
- After 3rd reading: What particular invitation did you hear?

Following each reading, share responses as people are comfortable.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

Psst! Hey . . . you! How long have you been out here anyway? Nearly forty days, eh? That's quite a while. Who's bright idea was it to come out here anyway? Oh, right—God. So all this is some kind of spiritual discipline for you isn't it? Impressive. Bet you're hungry. And thirsty. You look pale. Imagine what a nice hot loaf of bread would taste like right about now? It would melt in your mouth. Why not fix yourself a little something to eat? You've carried this spiritual discipline thing way too far. Come on . . . do yourself a favor. Look around at your feet; stones are everywhere, and if you squint your eyes, why, they could be loaves of bread. Surely if God brought you out here, God wouldn't want you to starve to death. Come on . . . pick up one of those stones. Make it bread and eat. Eat! You're the Son of God, aren't you?

And at that, Jesus picked up a stone and hurled it into the blazing sun, shouting: “One does not to live by bread alone!” Jesus was as good at wielding scripture as he was at throwing rocks. Not only that, Jesus was the Son of God and he knew it. Dripping with the Jordan, he had heard the Voice tell him that already. Jesus knew exactly who he was. So Jesus had to know that he could have fed himself at any moment. But he chose not to.

Funny thing about temptation: it is rarely an invitation to do what we cannot do, but what is well within our power to do. In the desert, with nothing to depend on but God, Jesus chose to let stones be stones.

After the group has read or heard this reading, share insights as people are comfortable.

❖ *What stones might you need to let be stones?*

AN IMAGE (see below)

A POEM

Mary Oliver | from “One or Two Things”

For years and years I struggled
just to love my life. And then
the butterfly
rose, weightless, in the wind.
“Don’t love your life
too much,” it said,
and vanished
into the world.

CLOSING | Isaiah 43:1-3, 19

**Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I am about to do a new thing...**

WEEK 2 | ON FOXES AND HENS

WELCOME

Take time to welcome each other in the peace of Christ and introduce yourselves if you are not already acquainted.

PSALM PRAYER | Psalm 17:7-8

ATTENDING TO THE WORD | LUKE 13:31-35

- After 1st reading: What word or phrase did the passage bring to mind?
- After 2nd reading: What question did the passage raise for you?
- After 3rd reading: What particular invitation did you hear?

Following each reading, share responses as people are comfortable.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

The tension in the passage is symbolized in Jesus' references to two animals. On the one hand is the fox. This cunning little sneak thief of a predator prowls about threatening death. On the other hand is the hen, a feathery mother gathering chicks under her wings, the epitome of care and security. Herod is the fox and Jesus is the hen. The two are not so much enemies as foils to each other's purposes. Power relentlessly stalks what is weak and powerless, seeking to win and control. Love tenderly draws to it what is weak and vulnerable, seeking to provide shelter and security. Jesus thumbs his nose to the agent of power as defined by Herod/the fox and positions himself as the agent of God's redeeming grace, the hen with wings outstretched.

Lent is the appropriate season to call attention (as Jesus did) to the dangers that lurk too near us, clever and insidious and designed to devour; we overlook them at our peril. But we also concede to them too much influence. Consider the world's Herods—those people or practices that undermine, dismiss, or kill our spiritual impulses for bringing hope, offering healing, extending hospitality, and working for peace and justice. At the same time, we must look to Jesus as our model for staying the course: “Look, I’m throwing out demons and healing people and on the third day I will complete my work.” Jesus remained unwavering in his work of making the blind see and the lame walk—proclaiming the kingdom of God—right in the face of imminent danger; what he

understood was that no risk, however powerful, could ultimately defeat God's purpose of redemption. His lament over Jerusalem should be seen as much as anything as call to repentance. If we find our gaze turned more toward Herod, we need to turn back. In short, are we with Jesus or not?

After the group has read or heard this reading, share insights as people are comfortable.

❖ *Who are your Herods you could stop paying so much attention to?*

AN IMAGE (see below)

A POEM

Mary Oliver | from "A Summer Day"

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
 I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
 into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
 how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
 which is what I have been doing all day.
 Tell me, what else should I have done?
 Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
 Tell me, what is it you plan to do
 with your one wild and precious life?

CLOSING | Isaiah 43:1-3, 19

**Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
 I have called you by name; you are mine.
 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,
 and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
 when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
 and the flame shall not consume you.
 For I am the Lord your God,
 the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
 I am about to do a new thing...**

WEEK 3 | WAITING ON GRACE

WELCOME

Take time to welcome each other in the peace of Christ and introduce yourselves if you are not already acquainted.

PSALM PRAYER | Psalm 51:11-13

ATTENDING TO THE WORD | LUKE 13:1-9

- After 1st reading: What word or phrase did the passage bring to mind?
- After 2nd reading: What question did the passage raise for you?
- After 3rd reading: What particular invitation did you hear?

Following each reading, share responses as people are comfortable.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

Couple ways to respond to this parable. One way is to focus on the righteousness of God and the inevitable judgment that goes along with it. In the verses in Luke 12 that immediately precede the parable of the unproductive fig tree, Jesus has already told a story of some managers whose sorry behavior is discovered by their master who returns home unexpectedly; they are punished accordingly. And recall that troubling comment Jesus made right after telling that story: “Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth?” Well, in truth, the angels at Jesus’ birth did say something about peace on earth . . . What happened to that? Evidently, Jesus is not about to sugar-coat God’s purpose in sending him to herald the coming of the kingdom. The redemption of the world cannot happen without some fallout; because some simply will not stand for it. There is a price to pay for an unrepentant heart. Schedule an EKG now.

Another way to respond to this parable is to focus on the unmerited mercy of God and the patience God shows in extending it to us. In the first place, the very presence of a fig tree in a vineyard tells me about the nature of the owner. While it was not particularly unusual to have fig trees in a vineyard rather than in a fig tree orchard, a fig tree would grow large and apparently pull a good portion of nutrients from out of the surrounding soil. To plant a fig tree where grapes are grown seems to me an intentional act of generosity. Then there is the time frame. The parable describes the fig tree having been barren for at least three years. Surely that means that the tree is a mature tree, one that has been planted for quite a while, perhaps even longer than three years. In any case, the

parable's point is that the tree has been around long enough to bear some fruit, which is what the tree was meant to do. How long should it take a thing to do what it was created to do? The acceptance by the owner of the gardener's offer to care for the tree another full growing season virtually shouts overabundant generosity. Moreover, fig trees are not known to be high-maintenance trees. The gardener's willingness to provide the fig tree an extra measure of care, to "dig around it and put manure on it," is a further signal of the grace being extended to one unproductive inhabitant of an otherwise thriving vineyard. Just like the grace God extends to us. The kind that waits way past a reasonable amount of time and makes the effort to dig in deep with soiled fingers, pressing, prodding, pleading for us to be what we are created to be.

Grace is the word. It is there to be received. Jesus recommends it to us with obvious urgency, but we must not miss the incredible gift it is.

After the group has read or heard this reading, share insights as people are comfortable.

❖ *Where in your life might God be waiting way past a reasonable time for you to receive a measure of grace?*

AN IMAGE (see below)

A POEM

Mary Oliver | "Wild Geese"

You do not have to be good.
 You do not have to walk on your knees
 for a hundred miles through the desert,
 repenting.
 You only have to let the soft animal of
 your body
 love what it loves.
 Tell me about despair, yours, and I will
 tell you mine.
 Meanwhile the world goes on.
 Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles
 of the rain
 are moving across the landscapes,

over the prairies and the deep trees,
 the mountains and the rivers.
 Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the
 clean blue air,
 are heading home again.
 Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
 the world offers itself to your
 imagination,
 calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and
 exciting—
 over and over announcing your place
 in the family of things.

CLOSING | Isaiah 43:1-3, 19

(see previous week for the text)

WEEK 4 | SPIRITUAL HOMECOMINGS

WELCOME

Take time to welcome each other in the peace of Christ and introduce yourselves if you are not already acquainted.

PSALM PRAYER | Psalm 61:1-4

ATTENDING TO THE WORD | LUKE 15:11-32

- After 1st reading: What word or phrase did the passage bring to mind?
- After 2nd reading: What question did the passage raise for you?
- After 3rd reading: What particular invitation did you hear?

Following each reading, share responses as people are comfortable.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

In the summer of 1986, the writer, Henri J. M. Nouwen, had an opportunity for a private, unhurried viewing of Rembrandt's famous painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, on display since the late 1700s, at The Hermitage in St. Petersburg. The canvas is enormous—eight feet by six feet in size—and Nouwen was able to spend about four hours over a period of two days in the presence of this masterpiece. Out of his experience, he wrote a remarkable book of his own spiritual journey, expressed through his deeply personal and profound reflections on the painting and the parable. Among his learnings, he came to understand this: that Jesus' parable of the loving father does not leave us with a neat moral to remember and to include in the nice package of morals we already live by. Rather, we are dealing with a calling—a calling to assess our own spiritual journeys at this particular moment.

Are we at home with the father? If not, then how do we get there? If we are, then how do we become more like the loving father (or parent) to others? At issue in each of these questions is our personal spirituality as well as our communal expressions of faithfulness. We must make the effort to evaluate honestly where we are, even if it means admitting we've nothing left but to slop the pigs. We must be willing to risk our very lives on God's forgiving, graceful love. And we must seek our spiritual home in a place other than in a world alien to the things of God.

The world offers us abundant means and methods by which to squander our “living.” The world would have us all request and spend our inheritances as soon as possible. Likewise, the church can offer a deceptively comfortable place to be a devoted elder brother. But it can also be the place to be the loving, inviting parent.

After the group has read or heard this reading, share insights as people are comfortable.

❖ *Where do you find yourself, these days, seeking your spiritual home?*

AN IMAGE (see below)

A POEM

Mary Oliver | from “When Death Comes”

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

CLOSING | Isaiah 43:1-3, 19

**Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I am about to do a new thing...**

WEEK 5 | ON THE SUBJECT OF FEET

WELCOME

Take time to welcome each other in the peace of Christ and introduce yourselves if you are not already acquainted.

PSALM PRAYER | Psalm 86:11-12

ATTENDING TO THE WORD | John 12:1-8

- After 1st reading: What word or phrase did the passage bring to mind?
- After 2nd reading: What question did the passage raise for you?
- After 3rd reading: What particular invitation did you hear?

Following each reading, share responses as people are comfortable.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

On the subject of Jesus' feet: Jesus walked from Galilee to Jerusalem and all points in between. And despite the fact that he likely wore some kind of sandal, his feet most certainly displayed the marks of his travels. Those were the feet that extended out from the table at the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Those were the vulnerable, road weary feet that Mary took into her hands to cover with twelve ounces of soothing, aromatic ointment. Those were the feet soon to be spiked to a wooden beam for the salvation of the world. Mary's extravagant hospitality was a sacrament, an offering of herself to God; it was an enormous sacrifice of money and a risk of her standing in the community (letting her hair down and touching a man's feet!); and it was a sign, a clear confirmation of the purpose to which Jesus had committed himself. Though only Jesus' friend, she had done what any good mother would do. And when she finished her anointing, she must have smelled the powerful scent of the nard still in her hair.

Which bring us to the subject of the disciples' feet. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem and all points in between. They had to be a road worn as Jesus' feet. Very soon, those pairs of feet would be extending around a table in an upper room, no less a sacred space than the home of Mary and Martha. These feet Jesus would soon stoop to touch with dripping hands, rough carpenter hands that removed the grime from between the toes and in the lines around the heel. These feet would soon be dried with a towel so that they could slip back into sandals and soon flee from his side in fear and confusion.

The stories of these twin footbaths in John's Gospel speak of the profound vulnerability required to be a disciple of Jesus. There can be no stooping that is too low for a disciple of Jesus. There can be no foot so filthy as to be untouchable for a disciple of Jesus. There can be no sacrifice too great for a disciple of Jesus to make. During this Lenten season, we would do well to look for opportunities to make ourselves vulnerable, to make the costly sacrifice, to spill out the nard in an extravagant gesture of gratitude for who Jesus is.

After the group has read or heard this reading, share insights as people are comfortable.

❖ *Who do you know needs you to take their feet in our hands and anoint them with the fragrance of God's grace and lovingkindness? Who do you know needs you to take hold of their world-weariness and self-doubt and bath them in the love and mercy offered by Christ?*

AN IMAGE (see below)

A POEM

Mary Oliver | "Three Things to Remember"

As long as you're dancing, you can
break the rules.
Sometimes breaking the rules is just
extending the rules.

Sometimes there are no rules.

CLOSING | Isaiah 43:1-3, 19

**Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I am about to do a new thing...**

WEEK 6 | IN PRAISE OF CHRIST

WELCOME

Take time to welcome each other in the peace of Christ and introduce yourselves if you are not already acquainted.

PSALM PRAYER | Psalm 130

ATTENDING TO THE WORD | John 12:12-26

- After 1st reading: What word or phrase did the passage bring to mind?
- After 2nd reading: What question did the passage raise for you?
- After 3rd reading: What particular invitation did you hear?

Following each reading, share responses as people are comfortable.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

The Roman centurion who stands at the foot of the cross appears in the Passion narratives of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In all three accounts, the centurion utters a response to seeing Jesus take his last breath. Matthew and Mark both record his words as: “Truly this man was God’s Son!” Luke, however, is the only Gospel writer to record the centurion saying this: “Certainly this man was innocent” (Luke 23:47). Innocent? Why innocent? What could that mean?

Throughout Luke’s Gospel, Jesus seems always to be on the side of those on the outside, the poor, the sick, the lame, the hated, the captive, and those who were excluded because they were considered guilty of something—guilty in the eyes of those who wielded religious and political power like a club. Jesus was innocent. Jesus was innocent of guile, of greed, of spiritual snobbery, of political posturing, of cultural status-seeking. Jesus was innocent of sin and of succumbing to the temptations of pride and power. Jesus was innocent of violence, of vice, and of all things evil in the world. So in that sense, he was falsely condemned and falsely executed. The centurion was exactly right: Jesus was innocent. What is unique about his statement is that it is uttered as an expression of praise—Luke even says that before he spoke aloud, the centurion “praised God.”

Jesus died as One who lived and breathed and walked throughout our world, yet remaining unsullied by its darkness and sin. In fact, Jesus’ innocent death highlights the weight of

guilt that humankind bears—a weight that humankind can never take away on its own, a weight that implicates us all in Jesus’ death. There’s something to contemplate this Lent. And something to praise God for. Jesus lived exactly like he died: innocent, righteous. We live like we will die: sinful, unrighteous. In spite of the many ways we seek to justify ourselves, to undo our own wrongdoing and self-centeredness, to merit God’s love, we will always fail because our efforts have no power. The power to justify us, to forgive us, to love us belongs to God; and according to Luke, that power was made manifest through the death of an innocent Savior, a death that, once and for all, bridged the huge chasm between humankind’s unrighteousness and God’s holiness. Praise God.

By the way, the centurion said that first.

After the group has read or heard this reading, share insights as people are comfortable.

❖ *What words will you use this season to praise God?*

AN IMAGE (see below)

A POEM

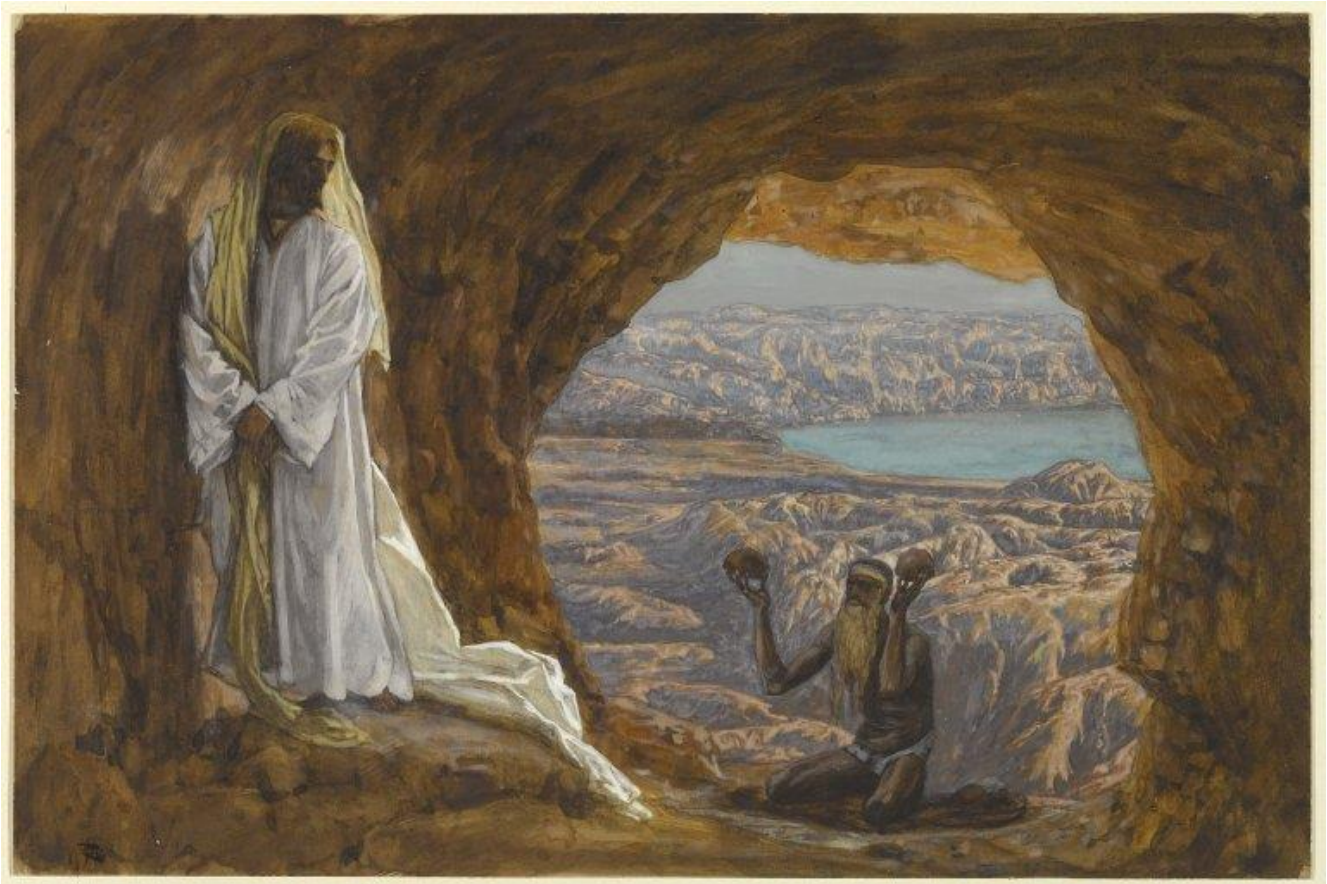
Mary Oliver | from “Daisies”

What do I know?
But this: it is heaven itself to take what is given,
to see what is plain; what the sun lights up willingly;
for example — I think this
as I reach down, not to pick but merely to touch —
the suitability of the field for the daisies, and the
daisies for the field.

CLOSING | Isaiah 43:1-3, 19

**Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I am about to do a new thing...**

WEEK ONE | LETTING STONES BE STONES



Jesus Tempted in the Wilderness | James J. Tissot

WEEK 2 | ON FOXES AND HENS



Altar mosaic, The Church of Dominus Flevit (Matt 23:37)

WEEK 3 | WAITING ON GRACE



Olive Trees with Yellow Sky and Sun | Vincent van Gogh

WEEK 4 | SPIRITUAL HOMECOMINGS



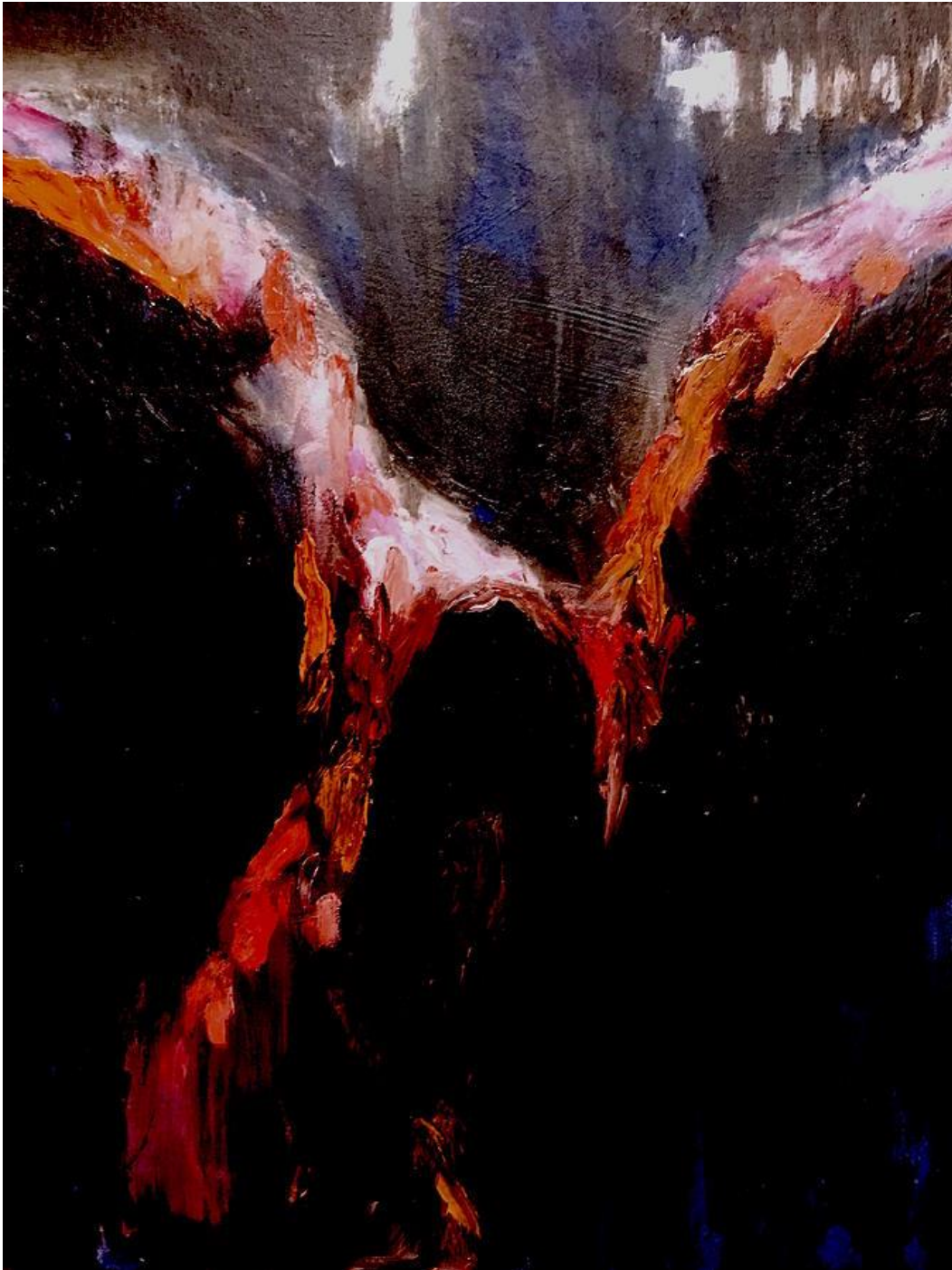
The Return of the Prodigal Son | Rembrandt

WEEK 5 | ON THE SUBJECT OF FEET



The Anointing of Christ | Julia Stankava

WEEK 6 | IN PRAISE OF CHRIST



Spotless Crucifixion | Daniel Bonnell

