



Seven Signs

A LENTEN BIBLE STUDY

A Journey to Easter

Sermons

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About the Author

Pastor Burt is a Master of Divinity graduate from Bangor Theological Seminary and ordained in the United Church of Christ. Beginning as a youth minister and later serving as a licensed pastor in Maine, he brings over 30 years of ministry experience. He blends thoughtful leadership with a personable approach, focusing on hope, healing, and community. As a husband and father of four, he nurtures his congregations like family—creating spaces where all are embraced, grow together, and encounter God. He hopes to leave a legacy of fostering welcoming places where people walk in faith together.

Note from the Author

Friends,

I invite you to use as much of what follows as you would like. Please though, give credit to me for what you do use. I am giving this away as a resource and have put a great deal of time and thought into all of what follows and would appreciate your kindness in this.

Thanks!

Pastor Burt

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Marked for Grace
Ash Wednesday
2 Corinthians 5:17 | Psalm 51:1–12

There is something disarming about ashes.

They are soft.
They are weightless.
They leave a mark, but they do not wound.

Tonight we come forward and allow a smudge of ash to be traced across our foreheads. A cross—drawn in dust. Words spoken over us: *“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”*

There is no pretending here.

Ash Wednesday tells the truth about us.
We are finite.
We are fragile.
We are not in control.

And yet—that is not the only truth spoken tonight.

Because the same hands that trace the ash also trace a cross.

And the same words that remind us of dust are spoken within the promise of Christ.

Paul says, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being.”

Dust—and new creation.
Mortality—and mercy.
Ashes—and grace.

A Lesson from the Ashes

When I was a young boy, there was a forest fire on my grandparents’ homestead.

It was caught early — only about an acre burned — but to a child, it felt immense.

I remember how hot it was. The heat wasn’t something you simply saw; it pressed against your skin. It wrapped around you. The roar of the blaze wasn’t just noise — it moved through the air like a force. The wind carried the sound and drove it across the land so that even standing far back, I could feel it pounding against my whole body.

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It was as though the wind itself had found a voice.

And the fire — the fire had a presence.

I remember standing there in awe. A place where we had played — where imagination ran freely — was being leveled before my eyes. Beautiful woods reduced to flame and smoke.

As a child, I did not have language for it.

But looking back now, I recognize something holy in that moment.

The wind moved with a voice that could not be ignored.
The fire burned with a power that demanded respect.
The heat was overwhelming — not gentle, not tame.

Scripture tells us that the Spirit of God is like wind — moving where it will. And like fire — refining, purifying, transforming.

That day, I felt something of that mystery.

Not destruction for destruction's sake.
But power.
Presence.
A force beyond my control.

After the fire was out and the smoldering stopped, I remember walking through that area.

There were jagged stumps. Blackened trunks. And a thick layer of ash covering the ground.

It looked like loss.

But here is what I learned.

Ash does not tell the whole story of fire.

Over time, the ash was absorbed into the soil — quietly, invisibly.

And then something began to happen.

Small green shoots pushed through the earth.
Bushes returned.
Blackberry and raspberry patches spread.
New trees began to take root.

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What had felt like devastation became nourishment.

The same fire that leveled also prepared.

The same ash that marked loss became the soil of new growth.

Forty years later, you cannot tell the fire ever happened. The woods are beautiful — in some ways more beautiful than before.

But I remember.

I remember the voice in the wind.

I remember the heat of that fire.

And I remember the life that followed.

And I cannot help but see in that memory a glimpse of resurrection.

The Honesty of Psalm 51

Ash Wednesday does not pretend there has been no fire in our lives.

We know the wind that has howled through us.

We know the heat of loss, regret, fear, and failure.

We know what it feels like when something beautiful is reduced to ash.

Psalm 51 does not deny that reality. It names it.

“Have mercy on me, O God.”

“Wash me.”

“Blot out my transgressions.”

“Create in me a clean heart.”

This is not performance spirituality.

It is honest prayer after the fire.

But here is the promise: God does not waste ashes.

The same God who moves like wind still speaks.

The same Spirit who burns like fire still refines.

The same grace that absorbs ash into the soil still brings forth new life.

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Marked—Not for Shame, but for Grace

When you come forward tonight, you are not being marked as ruined ground.

You are being marked as soil that God is not finished with.

The ash will fade.
By morning it will smudge.
By tomorrow it may be gone.

But what God does beneath the surface — that endures.

Paul says, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.”

Not because the fire never happened.
Not because the damage wasn’t real.
But because God’s renewing work is deeper than destruction.

The ash on your forehead tonight is not a symbol of shame.

It is a sign that what has burned can still bear life.

It is a mark of grace.

The Invitation of Lent

So we begin Lent not as people condemned, but as people being cultivated.

We let Psalm 51 become our prayer:

“Create in me a clean heart.”
“Put a new and right spirit within me.”
“Restore to me the joy of your salvation.”

Restore.

The woods did not recreate themselves by effort.
The soil simply received what it was given.

Perhaps that is our work this Lent.

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Not striving.
Not proving.
But receiving.

Letting even the ash be absorbed into God's mercy.

Trusting that beneath what feels barren, something is already stirring.

Because this is what God does.

God takes what has been burned and breathes into it again.
God takes what feels finished and says, "Not yet."
God takes what is bound in death — and calls it toward life.

Tonight we are marked with ash.

But we are not marked for ending.

We are marked for grace.
Marked for renewal.
Marked for a journey that does not end in dust, but in life.

There will come a morning when the stone is rolled away.
There will come a voice that calls a name.
There will come a moment when what was wrapped in death is unbound and set free.

But tonight, we begin here.

With honesty.
With humility.
With ash.

And with the quiet confidence that the God who formed us from dust is not finished with us yet.

Amen.

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When Ordinary Becomes Holy
First Sunday of Lent
John 2:1–11 | Isaiah 62:1–5

Lent begins with ashes.

With honesty.

With truth.

With the quiet acknowledgment that we are dust, unfinished, and in need of grace.

And then, almost unexpectedly, Lent begins again—this time not with scarcity, but with abundance. Not with confession, but with celebration. Not with silence, but with a wedding.

That may feel strange. If we're honest, Cana doesn't *sound* like a Lenten story. There's joy here. Community. Laughter. Wine poured freely. It doesn't seem to match the tone we often expect this season to carry.

And yet, this is exactly where John begins.

John does not start with repentance. He does not begin with warning or demand. He begins with a sign. A sign that tells us something about who Jesus is—and about what God is up to in the middle of ordinary life.

The story itself is simple. Jesus is at a wedding. The wine runs out. A problem that may sound small to us, but would have meant deep embarrassment and shame for the family hosting the celebration. Mary notices. She brings the concern to Jesus. Jesus hesitates—"My hour has not yet come." And still, something happens.

Stone jars meant for purification are filled with water. And that water becomes wine. Not just enough wine. Not barely acceptable wine. But *good* wine. Abundant wine. The kind saved for later.

John tells us this is the first of Jesus' signs. Not a miracle meant to impress, but a sign meant to reveal. And what it reveals is this: when Jesus shows up, ordinary things begin to carry more than they were meant to hold.

Notice what Jesus does not do. He does not scold anyone for running out of wine. He does not lecture the hosts about better planning. He does not explain himself. He simply responds—with generosity.

That matters. Because Lent is not a season where God waits for us to get our act together before offering grace. Lent is the season where God meets us exactly where things feel thin, incomplete, or quietly falling short.

We come to Lent carrying honesty from Ash Wednesday. We come knowing our limits. We come aware that some things in our lives have run dry—energy, patience, clarity, hope. And the good news of Cana is that Jesus does not wait until we have more to offer. He works with what is already there.

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Water.
Stone jars.
Ordinary space.
Ordinary people.

This is not a story about transformation achieved through effort. It is a story about transformation received.

Mary's words linger quietly in the background of the story: "Do whatever he tells you." She doesn't explain. She doesn't manage the outcome. She simply trusts that Jesus can do something meaningful even when the moment feels awkward or incomplete.

That posture matters for Lent.

Because Lent is not about proving our devotion. It is about learning how to trust. Trust that God is at work even when we don't fully understand what that work looks like. Trust that Jesus meets us in the ordinary moments we might otherwise overlook.

The sign at Cana does not draw attention to itself. In fact, most of the guests never even realize what has happened. Only the servants see it clearly. Only a few notice the quiet shift.

That's often how transformation happens. Not in dramatic gestures, but in subtle changes. Not all at once, but slowly. Not loudly, but faithfully.

Isaiah speaks into that same truth when he says that God does not give up on what seems forgotten. "You shall be called by a new name." Not because the past is erased, but because God is still at work shaping the future.

This is how Lent unfolds. We begin with dust. And then, step by step, we learn to notice where grace is already moving. Where the ordinary is becoming holy. Where God is quietly doing more than we expected.

Cana does not end the journey. It begins it.

Over the weeks ahead, we will follow more signs—signs of healing, provision, courage, and sight. But today, we start here. At a table. In community. With a reminder that grace does not wait for perfection.

It meets us in the middle of the celebration.
In the middle of the shortage.
In the middle of ordinary life.

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This is the first sign.

And it tells us this: the journey we are on is not about scarcity, but about trust. Not about proving ourselves, but about receiving what God is already offering.

Lent begins with ashes.

And then it continues with grace.

Amen.

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Trusting the Word on the Way Home
Second Sunday of Lent
John 4:46–54 | Proverbs 3:5–6

Last week, we stood at a wedding in Cana and watched water become wine.

It was a sign of abundance. A sign that grace shows up quietly in ordinary places. A reminder that God does not wait for perfection before offering generosity.

Today, we return to Cana—but the story feels different.

There is no celebration this time. No gathered crowd. No laughter spilling out of a feast. Instead, there is urgency. Fear. A parent who is running out of time.

A royal official comes to Jesus because his son is dying.

John tells us his title, but the story strips that title of any real power almost immediately. Whatever authority he holds, whatever influence he has, none of it can change what is happening in his home. When it comes to the life of his child, he is simply a parent who is afraid.

He comes to Jesus with one clear request: *Come down. Be present. Fix this.*

It's a reasonable request. It's the kind of prayer most of us would pray. If we're honest, it's the prayer we often *do* pray:

"Come here. Show up. Make this better."

And Jesus responds in a way that can feel almost jarring.

"Go. Your son will live."

No journey.

No laying on of hands.

No visible sign.

Just a word.

John doesn't soften this moment. He doesn't explain Jesus' reasoning. He lets the tension sit there. Because this is the moment where the sign really happens—not in the healing itself, but in what the father does next.

The official stands at a crossroads. He can push back. He can insist that Jesus come with him. He can wait until he sees something concrete. Or he can trust the word he has been given.

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John tells us, simply and quietly: “*The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way.*”

That sentence deserves to be slowed down.

He believed the word.

And he started on his way.

The situation has not changed yet. His son is still sick. The distance between Cana and home is still long. The risk is still real. All that has changed is that he has been given a word—and he chooses to walk with it.

The journey home is not dramatic. John gives us no description of the road. No insight into the father’s thoughts. No account of whether his confidence wavers or his fear returns. Just movement. Step after step. Trust unfolding slowly.

And I linger with this part of the story because I recognize myself there.

There are times when I sense a word from God—a promise, a direction, a quiet assurance—and yet nothing around me changes right away. The questions remain. The concern doesn’t lift. The outcome is still unknown. And I notice how tempting it is, in those moments, to want something more solid to hold onto.

I know what it is to keep moving forward while still wondering how things will turn out. To keep trusting without feeling particularly confident. To walk with a word that feels both hopeful and fragile at the same time.

This story reminds me that faith isn’t about having certainty in hand. Sometimes it’s simply about continuing to walk with what we’ve been given, trusting that God is present and at work even when the evidence comes later—or differently—than we expected.

That kind of faith doesn’t erase fear. It doesn’t silence questions. It doesn’t rush us to resolution. It just keeps us moving.

This is where Lent presses in gently.

Ash Wednesday invited us to tell the truth about our limits. Cana reminded us that grace meets us in ordinary places. Now this sign asks something more demanding: *Can you trust God without seeing the outcome yet?*

That question meets us in very real places.

Some of us are waiting for news we can’t control.

Some of us are living with prayers that feel suspended in midair.

Some of us are trying to trust God in relationships, in health concerns, in decisions that still feel unresolved.

We know this road. We’ve walked it before.

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And then—only later—only after the walking, only after the waiting—the servants meet the official. They tell him his son is alive. The healing came at the moment Jesus spoke, not at the moment the father understood.

Only then does everything click into place. Only then does the sign become clear. The word was enough.

This sign isn't only about healing. It's about the formation of trust. About learning that faith often grows not by controlling outcomes, but by releasing them. Not by demanding clarity, but by trusting God's presence in the absence of it.

Proverbs says it plainly: *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight."* That's not a call to stop thinking. It's a call to admit that our understanding is often partial—and that God's work doesn't depend on our certainty.

This is what Lent looks like as it deepens.

Not dramatic sacrifice.

Not spiritual heroics.

But the daily choice to keep walking with the word we've been given.

Some days that word feels strong. Some days it feels fragile. But it is enough to take the next step.

The sign at Cana showed us that grace is abundant.

This sign shows us that grace is trustworthy.

Jesus does not promise a life without fear. He promises a word we can lean on. A presence that holds us even when outcomes are still unfolding.

The official's faith grows not because he demanded proof, but because he trusted before he had it. And that trust rippled outward—into his household, into his life, into the story John tells us still.

Lent invites us onto that same road.

We walk with honesty.

We walk with trust.

We walk with a word that may be all we have—and yet is enough.

And somewhere along the way—often when we least expect it—we discover that God has been at work all along.

Not just at the destination,
but in every step taken in faith.

Amen.

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Do You Want to Be Made Well?
Third Sunday of Lent
John 5:1–15 | Isaiah 43:18–19

By the third week of Lent, the questions begin to change.

We started with ashes—telling the truth about who we are.
We moved to Cana—trusting that grace meets us in ordinary places.
We walked the road home—learning how to trust a word before we see the outcome.

And now, we arrive at a pool.

Not a place of celebration.
Not a place of movement.
But a place of waiting.

John tells us that around the pool of Bethesda lie people who have been there a long time. People who are sick. People who are blind or lame. People who are stuck. They are not waiting casually. They are waiting desperately—for a moment, for a chance, for the water to move.

And then Jesus shows up.

This is important: Jesus does not come because the man has called for him. He does not arrive because of a bold act of faith. He comes because he sees him. John tells us that Jesus knows the man has been there a long time.

Long waiting matters in this story.

Because long waiting shapes us.

After enough time, waiting can begin to define us. We adjust our expectations. We learn how to survive. We develop routines. We figure out how to get through the day without hoping too much.

And then Jesus asks a question that sounds almost cruel at first:

“Do you want to be made well?”

Of course he does. Why else would he be there?

But Jesus is not asking a medical question. He is asking a deeper one. A question that goes beneath symptoms and routines and survival strategies.

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Because after long waiting, healing is not only about change—it's about disruption. Being made well means something would have to shift. Patterns would break. The familiar would be left behind. The identity built around waiting might no longer hold.

And the man's response tells us something important.

He does not say yes.

Instead, he explains. He tells Jesus why healing hasn't happened. Why he hasn't made it into the water. Why someone else always gets there first. He answers the question with a story he has told many times.

It's the story of why things are the way they are.

And if we're honest, we recognize that story.

There are places in our lives where we have been waiting a long time. Where disappointment has taught us how to lower our expectations. Where we've learned to live with what hurts rather than risk hoping again.

Sometimes, when Jesus asks, "Do you want to be made well?" what we hear is, "Are you ready for things to be different?"

And that's not always an easy yes.

Because wellness isn't only about relief. It's about responsibility. It's about stepping into a future we haven't rehearsed yet. It's about leaving behind even familiar pain.

Jesus doesn't argue with the man's explanation. He doesn't correct him. He simply speaks:

"Stand up. Take your mat. Walk."

No water.

No stirring.

No competition.

Just a word that interrupts a long season of waiting.

And the man stands.

This sign is not about the pool. It's about Jesus refusing to let waiting have the final word.

Isaiah echoes that refusal when God says, "Do not remember the former things... I am about to do a new thing." Not because the past didn't matter, but because it no longer gets to define the future.

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This is a hard moment in Lent. Because this sign presses us with honesty.

Where have we settled into patterns that keep us from naming what we truly want?
Where have we learned to explain our pain rather than risk transformation?
Where has waiting quietly become our identity?

Jesus' question is not an accusation. It is an invitation.

And like all invitations, it requires courage.

Healing here is not dramatic. It is immediate, but not flashy. The man doesn't give a speech. He doesn't even fully understand who Jesus is yet. He simply responds to the word that meets him.

And that matters.

Because Lent is not about getting everything right before we move. It's about responding when grace shows up and asks us to imagine more than survival.

Ash Wednesday told us the truth about who we are.
Cana showed us that grace is abundant.
The road home taught us to trust before we see.

Now Bethesda asks something quieter—and harder:

Are we willing to name our desire?
Are we willing to let go of the explanations that have kept us stuck?
Are we willing to believe that God's work might not come the way we've been waiting for it?

Jesus does not promise ease.
He promises movement.

And sometimes, movement is the miracle.

Lent does not rush us. But it does invite us to notice where God is standing right in front of us—asking a question we may not be ready to answer quickly.

“Do you want to be made well?”

Not tomorrow.
Not someday.
But now.

Amen.

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Guided Meditation: “Do You Want to Be Made Well?”

I invite you, if you are comfortable,
to let your feet rest on the floor,
to loosen your shoulders,
and to take a slow breath in...
and a slow breath out.

Pause.

There is no need to rush.
There is nothing you need to solve right now.
Simply allow yourself to be present.

Pause.

Imagine yourself sitting by the pool at Bethesda.
Not as an observer,
but as someone who has been there a long time.

You know this place.
You know its routines.
You know what it feels like to wait
and to watch others move ahead of you.

Notice where you are sitting.
Notice what you are carrying.
Notice what feels tired.

Pause.

Now imagine Jesus standing near you.
Not hurried.
Not impatient.
Simply present.

Jesus looks at you
with the kind of attention that knows your story
without asking you to explain it.

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And Jesus asks, gently and honestly:
“Do you want to be made well?”

Do not answer too quickly.
Do not answer with what you think you *should* say.

Just notice what stirs inside you.

Pause.

Perhaps you feel a clear desire.
Perhaps you feel hesitation.
Perhaps you feel fear, or uncertainty, or exhaustion.

Whatever arises is welcome here.
You do not need to correct it.

Pause.

If you find yourself explaining—
naming obstacles,
naming reasons,
naming what hasn’t worked—
simply notice that, too.

Jesus listens.

Pause.

Now imagine Jesus speaking again.
Not with pressure.
Not with judgment.
But with invitation.

“Stand up.
Take what has been holding you.
And walk.”

Notice what that invitation touches in you.
Notice what it asks you to imagine differently.

Pause.

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Take one more slow breath in...
and a slow breath out.

When you are ready,
bring your attention back to this room,
to this moment,
to the God who is present here.

You do not need to carry answers with you.
Only honesty.
Only openness.

God is already at work
in the places where you have been waiting the longest.

Amen.

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Enough in God's Hands
Fourth Sunday of Lent
John 6:1–14 | Psalm 23

By the fourth week of Lent, we are no longer standing still.

Ash Wednesday asked us to tell the truth about who we are.
Cana showed us that grace meets us in ordinary places.
The road home taught us how to trust before we see.
Bethesda asked us whether we were willing to name our desire after long waiting.

Now, in this story, we find ourselves in motion—following Jesus into a crowded place filled with people who are hungry.

Not just spiritually hungry.
Physically hungry.
Tired.
Unprepared.

John tells us that a large crowd follows Jesus because they have seen the signs he has been doing. They are drawn by hope. By curiosity. By the sense that something is happening here that they don't want to miss.

And then evening comes.

That detail matters. Evening always matters in Scripture. Evening is when needs become more urgent. When energy runs low. When what we've been carrying starts to feel heavier.

Jesus looks out at the crowd and asks Philip a question:
“Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?”

John tells us Jesus already knows what he is going to do. The question is not for Jesus' information. It's for Philip's formation.

Philip does the math. He calculates the cost. He names the scarcity. Even six months' wages wouldn't be enough. In other words: what we have is not sufficient.

That answer makes sense. It's practical. It's realistic. It's the kind of answer most of us would give.

Then Andrew speaks up. Not confidently. Not triumphantly. Almost apologetically.

“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?”

That question hangs in the air.

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What are they among so many?

It's the question we ask whenever need feels overwhelming.

What is my effort among so much suffering?

What is our generosity among so many demands?

What is this small offering in the face of real hunger?

And Jesus does not answer the question directly.

Instead, he says, "Have the people sit down."

That instruction slows everything down. Before bread is multiplied, people are seated. Before abundance is revealed, there is order. Space. Trust.

Then Jesus takes what is offered. Not what is ideal. Not what is sufficient by human standards. Just what is available.

And he gives thanks.

This is important. Jesus does not apologize for the smallness of the offering. He does not criticize it. He blesses it.

And then it is shared.

Everyone eats.

Everyone is satisfied.

And there is more left over than when they began.

This is not a story about Jesus shaming scarcity. It is a story about Jesus transforming it.

The miracle is not that bread appears out of nowhere. The miracle is that what is placed in Jesus' hands becomes more than enough.

That matters for Lent.

Because by now, we are aware of our limits. We know what we lack. We've named what feels unfinished and what feels heavy. And the temptation at this point in the journey is to believe that because what we have is small, it must not matter.

But this sign tells us otherwise.

God does not wait for us to bring abundance.

God asks us to bring honesty.

God asks us to bring what we have.

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Five loaves.
Two fish.
A willingness to let go.

Psalm 23 echoes this same truth in a different register. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” Not because we never experience need, but because God’s presence changes what need means. Even in the valley. Even at the table prepared in the presence of fear.

This sign invites us to ask a different question than Philip’s.

Not, “Is this enough?”
But, “What happens when this is placed in God’s hands?”

Lent is not about learning to do more. It’s about learning to trust what God can do with what we offer.

Sometimes that offering is energy.
Sometimes it’s generosity.
Sometimes it’s attention.
Sometimes it’s compassion we didn’t think we had left.

Jesus does not demand abundance from us.
He creates abundance among us.

And notice this: the miracle is not performed in isolation. It happens in community. People share. People receive. People are fed together.

This is not a story about individual spiritual heroics. It’s a story about shared grace.

And that prepares us for what comes next.

Because in the weeks ahead, the signs will ask us to face fear, uncertainty, and blindness. But today, we pause here and remember this truth:

What feels small in your hands
can become enough in God’s.

Lent does not deny hunger.
It trusts that God meets it.

Not always the way we expect.
But always with more grace than we imagine.

Amen.

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It Is I. Do Not Be Afraid.
Fifth Sunday of Lent
John 6:16–21 | Psalm 107:28–30

By the fifth week of Lent, the crowd has been fed.

Hunger has been met.
Enough has been shared.
Leftovers have been gathered.

And then evening comes again.

John is careful with this detail. Evening keeps returning in these stories. Evening is when clarity fades. When the road gets harder to see. When what felt solid during the day begins to feel uncertain.

The disciples get into a boat.

Jesus does not go with them.

That matters.

They are doing what they know to do. Following the plan. Continuing the journey. And yet they find themselves alone on the water, far from shore, with the wind against them.

This is not a mistake.
This is not punishment.
This is not a failure of faith.

This is simply where the story goes next.

The storm rises. The sea grows rough. And John tells us that the disciples are frightened.

Not surprised.
Not inconvenienced.
Afraid.

That honesty matters. Faith does not eliminate fear. Faith often reveals it.

Then they see Jesus.

But they do not recognize him.

They see a figure coming toward them on the water, and their fear deepens. Because when we are already afraid, even grace can look threatening. Even help can feel unfamiliar. Even God's presence can be hard to recognize.

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A Journey to Easter Through the Gospel of John

And then Jesus speaks.

“It is I. Do not be afraid.”

In Greek, the words are even more striking — “I am.”

The same words spoken to Moses.

The same words that echo God’s presence throughout Scripture.

Jesus does not calm the storm first.

He does not explain the situation.

He does not correct their fear.

He names himself.

And that is enough.

This sign is not about Jesus showing power over nature. It is about presence. About reassurance. About learning that God does not wait for calm conditions before drawing near.

The disciples do not suddenly become brave.

They do not give a speech about trust.

They simply receive Jesus into the boat.

And John tells us, almost in passing, that the boat reaches the shore.

Not because the storm instantly stops.

But because Jesus is with them.

This is a word we need by the fifth week of Lent.

Because by now, many of us are tired.

We have been honest.

We have trusted.

We have waited.

We have shared.

And still, some storms remain.

There are moments when faith feels less like confidence and more like persistence. When fear rises not because we lack belief, but because we are human. Because we are navigating things we cannot control.

This story tells us something crucial: fear does not disqualify us from God’s presence.

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The disciples are afraid — and Jesus comes anyway.
They are struggling — and Jesus draws near anyway.
They do not recognize him immediately — and he speaks anyway.

“It is I. Do not be afraid.”

Not because the storm is gone.
But because you are not alone in it.

Psalm 107 tells a similar story — stormy seas, cries for help, and eventual calm. But notice the order. The people cry out in the storm, not after it passes.

Faith is not waiting for fear to end before we pray.
Faith is trusting that God hears us while the waves are still rising.

This sign does not promise smooth sailing.
It promises presence.

And that changes how we move forward.

Lent does not prepare us for a life without storms.
It prepares us to recognize Jesus when fear makes everything unfamiliar.

To listen for the voice that says, “I am here.”
To receive presence before understanding.
To keep moving toward shore even when the water is rough.

Next week, we will encounter blindness — not just of the eyes, but of perception. But before that, we pause here.

In the boat.
In the wind.
In the fear.

And we hear the same words spoken to us:

“It is I.
Do not be afraid.”

Not because everything is resolved.
But because God is with us — even here.

Amen.

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GUIDED PRAYER: “DO NOT BE AFRAID”

Let us pray.

Take a moment to settle where you are.
Feel your feet on the floor.
Notice your breath —
not changing it,
just noticing it.

Pause.

Picture yourself in the boat with the disciples.
The water is rough.
The wind is strong.
You are moving forward,
but not easily.

Notice what you are carrying in this moment.
The concerns that feel heavy.
The fears that rise when the future feels uncertain.

You do not need to push them away.
Simply notice them.

Pause.

Now hear Jesus speak into that place.

“It is I.”

Not an explanation.
Not a solution.
Just presence.

“It is I.
Do not be afraid.”

Let those words settle.
Not because the storm has stopped,
but because you are not alone in it.

Pause.

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If there is something you are holding tightly —
a worry,
a decision,
a fear you've been carrying quietly —
imagine placing it gently into God's care.

You do not have to let go of everything.
Just enough to breathe.

Pause.

Hear the words again:

"It is I.
Do not be afraid."

And trust that even now,
even here,
God is bringing you toward shore.

We pray in the presence of the One who comes to us on the water.
Amen.

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Seeing Clearly, Following Honestly
Palm Sunday / Sixth Sunday of Lent
John 9:1–41 | John 12:12–16 | Psalm 27:1

Today, the church does more than one thing at once.

We wave palms.
We remember a road into Jerusalem.
We celebrate new beginnings.
And we continue a Lenten journey that has been teaching us how to see.

That overlap matters.

Because Palm Sunday has always been a day of mixed vision.

The crowd sees Jesus—but not clearly.
They celebrate—but misunderstand.
They shout “Hosanna,” hoping for deliverance, but not yet knowing what kind.

Palm Sunday is joyful, yes. But it is not simple. It is a day full of expectation, assumption, and partial sight.

Which makes it a fitting day to hear the story of the man born blind.

In John’s Gospel, this sign is not just about healing. It’s about what happens after sight comes. About how seeing can clarify—and complicate—everything at once.

The disciples begin with a question that sounds reasonable:
“Who sinned?”

They want a cause. A reason. A way to make suffering make sense. Jesus refuses that framework completely.

“This happened so that God’s works might be revealed.”

Not blame.
Not punishment.
But revelation.

Then Jesus heals the man in a way that is physical and awkward. Mud. Spit. Touch. This is not a quiet miracle. It’s public. Disruptive. The man has to participate. He has to go and wash and come back changed.

And when he does, his life becomes harder—not easier.

Neighbors argue about whether he’s even the same person. Religious leaders interrogate him. His parents grow afraid. The miracle sets off conflict.

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This is where the Palm Sunday connection sharpens.

Because once people begin to see, systems built on blindness feel threatened.

The crowd on Palm Sunday sees Jesus—but they see him through their hopes, their expectations, their assumptions. They celebrate what they think he will do. And when Jesus does something different, the celebration falters.

The man born blind doesn't offer explanations. He doesn't argue theology. He simply tells the truth as he knows it:

“I was blind, and now I see.”

That confession is both simple and costly.

The more honest he is, the more pressure he faces. The leaders insist they can see clearly already—and John's irony is sharp here. The ones who claim certainty are the ones who refuse transformation.

This is a hard truth, especially on a day of celebration.

Seeing is not always comfortable.

Clarity does not always bring approval.

Following Jesus does not always mean being understood.

And yet—this is also a day of welcome.

Today, we receive new members into the life of this congregation. People who are not claiming perfect sight. People who are not pretending to have all the answers. People who are choosing to walk this journey with others, trusting that faith is something we grow into, not something we finish.

That matters.

Because the church is not a gathering of people who see perfectly.
It is a community learning how to see together.

Palm Sunday reminds us that discipleship often begins in celebration—but deepens into understanding. The man born blind reminds us that seeing clearly may come with resistance—but also with truth.

And here is the promise that holds both stories together:

When the man is cast out, Jesus finds him.

Jesus does not heal and disappear.

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Jesus does not abandon those whose honesty becomes costly.
Jesus stays.

Psalm 27 names that promise plainly: “The Lord is my light and my salvation.” Light does not just comfort—it guides. It reveals the path when things are no longer simple.

Today, we wave palms knowing the road ahead leads to the cross.
Today, we welcome new members knowing faith will ask more of us than celebration alone.
Today, we confess that we do not see everything clearly—but we are willing to follow honestly.

“I was blind, and now I see.”

That may be the most faithful confession we can offer—not as a declaration of certainty, but as a testimony of trust.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
And blessed are those who follow—
with open eyes,
open hearts,
and the courage to keep walking.

Amen.