

A decorative border of blue thistles and leaves surrounds the central white text area.

Have a Beautiful, Terrible Lent!

**A WEEKLY GROUP
DISCUSSION GUIDE**

FROM THE EVERYTHING HAPPENS PROJECT

An Invitation

Lent marks the forty days leading up to Jesus' execution and surprising return to life three days later. It is a practice that began during the fourth century as a way to prepare Christians for the holiest, hardest days of our story.

During Lent, we ask God to show us the world as it is. We begin on Ash Wednesday with the reality of our finitude rubbed on our foreheads—from dust we were made, to dust we shall return. Then, we walk through that reality in a kind of dress rehearsal. It is the downward slope of God—the Great Descent. The whole church must descend to the depths with their savior. Frankly, Lent is my favorite part of the church calendar. Suddenly, all of us are on the losing team. And we look at each other with well-earned wonder, horror, and awe. We begin to tell each other the truth again: life is so beautiful and life is so hard. For everyone.

Of course, the cross isn't the end of the story. But this season of grief is carved out to

acknowledge the reality of Jesus' sacrifice. Our savior knew pain and grief and despair, and so do we. Easter is coming, yes. But for now, we sit in the ashes of our broken dreams and broken hearts, knowing that God sits here with us.

Many people practice Lent by giving something up—alcohol, meat, chocolate, social media. Some take up something new—a new prayer practice or swearing profusely, like I did one year. (It's a ridiculous story about how when I thought I was going to die, I had a rather profane response to Lent. You are more than welcome to read about my tirades in my memoir *Everything Happens for a Reason (and Other Lies I've Loved)*). But perhaps your desire to try a new Lenten practice could simply be reading an entry from *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day!* every day.

If you'd like to use *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day!* as your daily practice, lovely! I have put blessings in an order that you might use in the



days leading up to Easter—those entries start on page 98. If you're not sure when to begin, you're not alone. The start date changes each year, so it's very confusing. In 2024, Lent begins on Wednesday, February 14.

One additional note: You get to take Sundays off. They're little breaks to remind you that you get to rest and celebrate a little even in the midst of suffering. In fact, that's usually when we need it most.

Lent is full of hard truths. And it is a perfect moment for the spiritual honesty we are practicing here. We can look on this tragicomedy with love and bemusement as we wait for the someday that is God's promised future. There, God's kingdom comes. God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. And in the meantime, there's this . . . our beautiful, terrible days.

If you would like to use this free guide as a group, great! You're in the right place. This discussion

guide is meant to be used by small groups, Sunday schools, book clubs, or informally among friends, neighbors, and family. Each week includes scripture to read, suggested discussion questions, and a prayer to close your time together.

This weekly small group guide is your invitation to join others in community and bless whatever this season is actually bringing you all. So let's stop waiting. This is the one we have. Let's bless it all—all of the beautiful and terrible parts.

Onward together,

Kate

How to Use This Group Discussion Guide:

HAVE A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIBLE DAY!

This Group Discussion Guide is designed to be used in conjunction with *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day! Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs & In-Betweens*. Each week's themes and questions reflect on the Lent section from my new book (beginning on p. 95). Of course, you can just use this guide by itself, but you will find the most richness and depth when they're used together. It can be used by churches, book clubs, small groups, or by individuals.

RECEIVE DAILY EMAIL PROMPTS

During the 40 days of Lent, we will be sending daily email prompts from *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day!* to help people reflect and pray together. You and your group members can [sign up for it here](#).¹ It's totally free.

FREE SERMON GUIDE

If you're a pastor or chaplain or just want to preach to yourself, we put together a 6-week *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Lent!* Sermon Guide with homily ideas based on the lectionary text. [Download it, here](#).²

1. https://katebowler.com/seasonal_devotional/have-a-beautiful-terrible-lent/#daily-email

2. https://katebowler.com/seasonal_devotional/have-a-beautiful-terrible-lent/#sermon-guide

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

In 2024, Lent begins on Ash Wednesday—February 14. So your first time meeting will be sometime after the first full week of Lent, so near February 24th, and you will discuss the group guide entry for the First Sunday of Lent, which includes reflecting on Ash Wednesday. A few weeks before Ash Wednesday, encourage participants to go buy their copy of *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day!* and start by reading the introduction to Lent on p. 96. Tell them that the individual devotionals start on p. 98. They should begin reading on Ash Wednesday—February 14, 2024.

Here is a sample email you can use:

Dear Friends,

I am excited to invite you to join us to reflect on Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day! during this season of Lent. This is a study offered by Kate Bowler and her team at Everything Happens and is an honest and real reflection on what it means to follow Jesus through the ups and downs of our days. It also allows for discussion about life as it really is—not just the Instagram-worthy parts but the difficult and the painful too. I hope you will join us.

Start by ordering Kate's new book (<https://katebowler.com/books/have-a-beautiful-terrible-day/>) and signing up for the daily Lent prompts (https://katebowler.com/seasonal_devotional/have-a-beautiful-terrible-lent/#daily-email). Once you get the book, I encourage you to start by reading Kate's introduction to Lent on pages 96 and 97. Then, we will start the daily devotionals beginning on Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2024.

Our first gathering will be on (DATE) at (TIME) at (LOCATION). Holding each of you close to my heart and in my prayers as we begin this journey together.

What to Expect

We've designed each of the weeks in this group discussion guide to take around 45 minutes. Just pick the parts that fit whatever day you and your group are having. Sometimes that might mean more time in prayer, or that a single question takes up all the time because of the richness of discussion. There are no real rules to follow here, other than we recommend starting and finishing on the timeframe you and your group have agreed to. Consider this your official permission slip to adapt this content to your setting.

A SAMPLE SCHEDULE

- 2 min: Read scripture. Perhaps have someone different read it each time, allowing for people to reflect on everyone's different Bible translations.
- 4 min: Leader discusses the theme. When appropriate, draw connections to the sermon from the previous Sunday.
- 4 min: Discuss the *Opening Question*.
- 25 min: Time for discussion. Pick the *Discussion Questions* that interest you or your group. Don't feel like you have to get to them all.
- 5 min: Wrap up the discussion with a *Before We Go* question and/or a *Going Deeper* prompt when appropriate or when time allows. *Going Deeper* is an option to dig deeper into the discussion after the group meeting is over. You can send this portion out by text or email.
- 5 min: Close by sharing any prayer concerns and reading the blessing with one another. Before you leave, be sure to set a meeting time for the next gathering and remind people what pages to read the daily entries from *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day!* for that week.

Tips to Leading a Discussion Group:

Whether this is your first time leading a group or your 34th time, welcome! We're so grateful for you—for the ways you long for connection and community and the ways you're practicing it now. We've put together a few frequently asked questions when it comes to leading a group discussion:

HOW DO YOU STRUCTURE A MEANINGFUL CONVERSATION?

First, remember you are not alone. God is there with you. Group leadership is a practice in hospitality. As a leader, you are putting structures in place so people can come together and, sometimes, somehow, something magical takes place—people make deeper connections. They experience the presence of the Holy Spirit. They have an “aha!” moment. They are able to share openly and honestly for the first time about something hard they are experiencing.

While you can't control every outcome, here are some things you can control:

- Who to invite—Priya Parker is a facilitation expert who recommends groups of 6 or 12 for meaningful discussion. You might gather a group who have met for years, a group of new-to-one-another people, or a combination of both. Be intentional with your invitations, and don't be afraid to diversify the group's demographics for a more interesting conversation.
- How the room is set up—comfortable chairs might allow for a more relaxed environment. But if people like to take notes, they might want to sit around a table. Meeting in a coffee shop might be a great option but may make it more difficult to share comfortably.
- The timing of the gathering—how long will people mingle before and after and what time will you wrap up the discussion. Pro-tip: Try to have a clock in your sight line so you aren't checking your phone or watch which could signal disinterest to whoever is talking.

- The way things will flow—will you have people “popcorn” their answers or will you answer in a circle? How much silence will you allow for? Sometimes waiting a beat longer than feels comfortable will give someone the extra nudge to share.
- Consider serving snacks and drinks, as they help with fostering an environment of connection and communion. But don’t hesitate to invite other group members to help you with this part. Whether or not snacks and drinks are served—snacks and drinks make everything better.

Bonus: We are huge fans of Priya Parker’s book, *The Art of Gathering*. She has some practical tips and tricks for how to structure meaningful gatherings. As pre-homework for yourself, read her book or listen to [Kate’s conversation with Priya](#)¹ on the Everything Happens Podcast.

HOW CAN I MAKE SURE EVERYONE GETS A CHANCE TO SPEAK?

Set the tone at the beginning of the meetings by naming or restating guidelines and hopes for the group. As the leader, you can decide on these ahead of time or you can take some time in the first meeting to collaborate on them as a group. One way to go about this would be to ask everyone to share a hope they have for the group and a guideline that might help them feel more comfortable.

These guidelines help create space where everyone gets a chance to be heard. You might add:

- The desire to begin and end on time out of respect for everyone’s schedules.
- Encouragement to respond to what others have said without fixing or offering advice, sermonizing, or setting someone straight. It is useful to try re-stating what you heard them say.
- When someone elaborates or builds on what has been said, encourage them to do so out of what is happening within their experience and life, not how they are evaluating or guiding someone else.

1. <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/the-art-of-gathering/>

If you start to notice an imbalance in group responses, where some people seem to be taking up more space and others aren't given enough, consider shifting to a timed-circle format. Sit in a circle and after each question go around the circle giving each person an opportunity to either answer in an allotted amount of time or to pass. (Though it might seem alarming, literally, it's helpful to set a timer with a chime so that you, as the leader, aren't the one responsible for cutting people off.)

If you notice that some people are consistently passing, know that everyone processes very differently, and you may have more than one introvert in a group or someone who may not feel comfortable speaking aloud. It may not be helpful to address this in the group setting, so instead, speak to them privately. Ask if there is anything you can do to make the space more comfortable for them, and let them know that you are so glad they are part of the group regardless of how much they speak up.

WHAT SCRIPTURE TRANSLATION SHOULD WE USE?

Welcome group members to begin with the Bible translation in which they are most comfortable. Maybe everyone is used to the same translation, but it can also be refreshing to read different translations of the same passage (often new themes pop out that you wouldn't have noticed before). But when in doubt, we love the NRSV. It provides a good balance of accuracy to the text in easy-to-read language.

Acknowledgements

These are my favorite kinds of group projects. A huge thank you to our sponsors who make it possible to make resources free for you to use: The Duke Endowment and Lilly Endowment. And to my team who put this gorgeous guide together.

For more free resources like this, go to katebowler.com/resources.

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Have a Beautiful, Terrible Lent!

Use this reading guide to follow along during Lent 2024 as we read *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day!* together.

FEB 14 - DAY 1
for Ash Wednesday
PG 98 IN *HABTD!*

FEB 15 - DAY 2
to feel a little more grateful
PG 100 IN *HABTD!*

FEB 16 - DAY 3
for living without control
PG 102 IN *HABTD!*

FEB 17 - DAY 4
for that unsettled feeling
PG 104 IN *HABTD!*

SUNDAY, FEB 18
no readings

FEB 19 - DAY 5
to feel more love
PG 108 IN *HABTD!*

FEB 20 - DAY 6
when your family disappoints you
PG 110 IN *HABTD!*

FEB 21 - DAY 7
finding god's presence
PG 112 IN *HABTD!*

FEB 22 - DAY 8
to keep moving
PG 114 IN *HABTD!*

FEB 23 - DAY 9
for deep tiredness
PG 116 IN *HABTD!*

FEB 24 - DAY 10
God, lead me
PG 118 IN *HABTD!*

SUNDAY, FEB 25
no readings

FEB 26 - DAY 11
love, love, love
PG 122 IN *HABTD!*

FEB 27 - DAY 12
waiting for anything good to happen
PG 124 IN *HABTD!*

FEB 28 - DAY 13
seeing God everywhere
PG 126 IN *HABTD!*

FEB 29 - DAY 14
well, I'm not all that great sometimes
PG 128 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 1 - DAY 15
for making all things beautiful
PG 130 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 2 - DAY 16
overwhelmed, stressed
PG 132 IN *HABTD!*

SUNDAY, MARCH 3
no readings

MAR 4 - DAY 17
letting yourself be known
PG 136 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 5 - DAY 18
letting go is painful
PG 138 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 6 - DAY 19
regret
PG 140 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 7 - DAY 20
not knowing the next step
PG 142 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 8 - DAY 21
for trusting your own intuition
PG 144 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 9 - DAY 22
to see clearly
PG 146 IN *HABTD!*

SUNDAY, MARCH 10
no readings

MAR 11 - DAY 23
feeling anxious and criticized
PG 150 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 12 - DAY 24
feeling meh
PG 152 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 13 - DAY 25
for a very busy day
PG 154 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 14 - DAY 26
feeling God's love
PG 156 IN *HABTD!*

Have a Beautiful, Terrible Lent!

Use this reading guide to follow along during Lent 2024 as we read *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day!* together.

MAR 15 - DAY 27

for the pain that lingers

PG 158 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 16 - DAY 28

feeling too much, be back later

PG 160 IN *HABTD!*

SUNDAY, MARCH 17

No Readings*

MAR 18 - DAY 29

being so close to pain, too close

PG 82 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 19 - DAY 30

when you're awake in the night

PG 84 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 20 - DAY 31

when anxiety rises

PG 86 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 21 - DAY 32

honest faith

PG 88 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 22 - DAY 33

for a funeral

PG 90 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 23 - DAY 34

noticing beauty

PG 92 IN *HABTD!*

SUNDAY, MARCH 24

for Palm Sunday (beginning of Holy Week)

PG 162 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 25 - DAY 35

compassion, suffering alongside

PG 164 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 26 - DAY 36

you need help in real time

PG 166 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 27 - DAY 37

good news is hard to find

PG 168 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 28 - DAY 38

when we say no to God

PG 170 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 29 - DAY 39

for Good Friday

PG 172 IN *HABTD!*

MAR 30 - DAY 40

for Holy Saturday

PG 174 IN *HABTD!*

SUNDAY, MARCH 31

Easter Sunday

PG 176 IN *HABTD!*

* This week's readings are from earlier in the book. We've attached the readings to this PDF for ease.

LENT WEEK 01

Entering The Wilderness

Reflecting on Ash Wednesday and the First Week of Lent

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

—[MARK 1:9-15 \(NRSV\)](#)



THEME: ENTERING THE WILDERNESS

Lent is the season in the Christian calendar where we “prepare for the holiest and hardest days of our story” (*Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day!*) In Mark 1:9-15, we see that Jesus does this, too. Before beginning his ministry, he comes out of the waters of baptism and is immediately driven by the Spirit to the wilderness. He faces some of the worst human experiences—loneliness, physical suffering, temptation—yet he is nurtured by angels. This is not unlike our human reality. We have beautiful days. We have terrible days. We can be forced into the wilderness through any number of circumstances—maybe disease or an accident, divorce or estrangement, memory loss or death, financial insecurity or the loss of a community. The wilderness is a place of intensity, of deprivation, where some comforts are stripped away and yet other truths make themselves known, too. We learn (often the hard way) that we are limited and fragile. We discover that our lives are sacred. We grasp how much help we need from others. Sometimes, we find hard-earned wisdom. The wilderness is an uncharted territory where our awareness can shift or expand. It is a wild place where we meet ourselves as we really are and discover our fragility and dependence on God and others—with God’s Spirit right there at work within and around us.

OPENING QUESTION:

On Ash Wednesday, a priest or pastor may smear ashes on your forehead and say, “from dust you came and dust you will return.” Have you ever experienced an Ash Wednesday service? How did it make you feel? What does it make you think about? Even if you haven’t ever experienced an Ash Wednesday Service, what does this symbol evoke in you?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, where we are reminded of our finitude and fragility (from dust, to dust). As Jesus began his ministry, he started with baptism, a physical reminder of the death and new life that is offered to us as children of God. And then Jesus enters into the wilderness to meet face-to-face with his own fragility and dependence on God. Can you think of a moment (or symbol) where you recognized your fragility or dependence? Perhaps it was receiving ashes on Ash Wednesday, or being baptized, or

seeing the world and your body change as you've gotten older, or attending an AA meeting, or when you received the news from the doctor. How did you react to this awareness of your fragility or dependence?

1. Lent is a season of stripping away our usual comforts to see and hear more clearly. Often, we do this by giving something up or adding something that will help us feel more connected to God. Do you feel more connected to God when you strip things down or take on a new habit or practice? Why or why not?

*In Thursday's entry in *Have a Beautiful Terrible Day!*, Kate said that "gratitude is not a solution to suffering, but it sure does make the rest of existence more meaningful."*

2. Do you agree or disagree with Kate's statement above? Do you find gratitude easy or hard to find during seasons of wilderness? Do you ever feel the pressure or expectation to be grateful? Or does gratitude come naturally to you?

"The ability to live well is the ability to live without so many certainties."

—**STANLEY HAUERWAS**, Theologian and professor (*Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day!*)

3. When we enter the wilderness, we do not know what will happen. We have no control of what or who we might find there. We do not know what new truths we may have to face. How does this feel? How comfortable are you with uncertainty?

"Our feelings come and go but your stubborn love remains. Your hope stays. Your peace, when we reach for it, will be placed in our hands like a dove."

—**HAVE A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIBLE DAY!**

4. We can feel unsettled in the wilderness because some of our usual comforts are stripped away. Predictability. Reason. Solutions. Mark 1:9-15 says that when he was in the wilderness, Jesus was taken care of by angels. How easy or difficult do you find it to ask for the help of others? Why do you think that is? Are there ways your friends or family or perhaps this group might help now? When life feels uncertain, how do you practice holding on to the stubborn love of God?

BEFORE WE GO:

- Is there anything else that you want to share from this week of devotions that we did not already discuss today?
- Lent is a season of practicing wilderness together. Many people are already going through a lot in their personal lives and don't need to be reminded of how difficult life is. If life is feeling smoother right now, is there anything you can give up or add on to help you enter the wilderness during Lent? If life is feeling especially difficult already, is there any help you can ask for to make your burden lighter?

GOING DEEPER:

If you want to learn more about learning to pay attention to the wild world around you and finding holy and sacred moments, listen to this podcast conversation between Kate Bowler and Margaret Renkl: [The Art of Noticing¹](#).

DEPARTING THOUGHTS:

The wilderness might feel like a lonely place to be, but God is there with us. And this group can be a place of friendship and encouragement too. We can offer grace and humor when we break down and eat the chocolate or whatever thing we gave up for Lent. I am excited that God has called us to walk this Lenten journey together, so thank you for being here today and sharing. I look forward to next week and hearing more about your wilderness experiences throughout Lent.

A NOTE TO LEADERS:

Now is a good time to share additional prayer concerns, pray for one another, and set a time to meet for the next gathering.

A Lenten Blessing in the Wilderness

God, here we are starting down this Lenten path.
A path of promise, of hope, and of refreshment,
but we feel the pull of the mundane.

It's a kind of restlessness
Not some aberration, but the norm,
because we know we live inside in our own contingency,
scrunched into time and circumstance,
as if we have woken up in the middle of a play
that has already started,
a plot in motion.

But we have glimpsed its meaning, its end,
and it is glorious.

If only we could know the lines,
the entrances and exits,
The way to move through

with grace and beauty and patience.
Because it's your story, God,
and ours.

We live here, in the in-between,
bearing the weight of the paradox
that simultaneously,
we see ourselves from the inside,
in our fragility and dependence,
and at the same time from the outside,
in our heart-bursting possibility.

And honestly, it is miserable sometimes.

Unless, God, you walk us through this wilderness.
Step by step.
Because you know it from the inside out.

Amen.

1. https://katebowler.com/podcasts/margaret_renkl/

A NOTE TO LEADERS:

Here is a sample email or text you can send out after your meeting:



Dear (NAME),

Thank you so much for meeting with us to discuss the depths and realities of the wilderness.

I really enjoyed our discussion. *(Enter in some points of the discussion you want to highlight, in case anyone missed the gathering and to recap).*

Don't forget that Kate Bowler will be sharing these devotions online every day on social media and via a daily email reminder. You can sign up for free, [here](#).

(https://katebowler.com/seasonal_devotional/have-a-beautiful-terrible-lent/#individual)

Here are some things to think about for Week 2 of Lent:

Next week's theme will be on the Limitless Love of God. Love holds us together when we live in uncertainty. This week, look for acts of love that show up when you are falling apart or feeling lost.

Blessings,

(YOUR NAME)

LENT WEEK 02

The Limitless Love of God

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

—MARK 9:2-9 (NRSV)



THEME: THE LIMITLESS LOVE OF GOD

“It is good to be here.” That’s what Peter said to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, and that’s what we say when we are in the presence of the Holy. Up on that mountain, Peter, James, and John knew they were encountering divine love. It came to them in the form of dazzling light, a voice saying, “This is my beloved, listen to him.” Terrifying as it was to experience the transcendent, they wanted to build a shelter and stay there, for this was the place where they could fully experience God. God was on the move, bringing love into a hurting world. And it would be enough. Yet just as suddenly, the disciples looked around and saw only the guy they recognized—Jesus. And he wouldn’t let them stay there. Instead, Jesus led them back down the mountain, back into everyday life, back into all the familiar feelings of uncertainty and loss and limitation. But this is where we all live—in a world where there is love but it is not enough. Though we long for a place where we can say, “It is good to be here, let’s stay, and live here,” we trust that we are guided by the Beloved into life in all of its fragility, knowing that Love itself goes before us and is with us every step of the way.

OPENING QUESTION:

Think of an experience where you thought to yourself, “Yes! This is the best! I’d like to repeat this over and over again, to live here forever.” Describe that wonderful moment and if there was someone with you. What made it so special?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

“We might wonder if our awareness of our limitations is a sign of our failures. After all, we have failed to render ourselves invincible and carry our own weight. We stumbled and did not always recover; we took and could not always give.”

—HAVE A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIBLE DAY!

1. In Mark 9, Jesus’ friends experience a shocking revelation of God’s love and spiritual power. The passage says that Jesus was “transfigured,” a word which means a change of form or appearance, usually into something beautiful or elevated. As the three disciples look on in awe, they hear the voice of God declare, “This is my Son,

the Beloved!” How do you imagine it would feel to get a clear glimpse of such great glory AND such great love? Take a moment to hear these words proclaimed over you: “You are a child of God, God’s beloved.” How does it feel to hear those words?

2. Share about a time you experienced your belovedness.

“There’s something about love that makes us brave, isn’t there?”

—KATE BOWLER, in conversation with Jenna Bush Hager

3. Love is transformational. That might be why the greatest commandment is to love God and others (Matt 22:36-40). God knew that love could change the world. Whose love makes you feel brave? What is it about their love for you that gives you courage?

“We have too much to do, so give us enough silence to hear your voice. We have too much to worry about, so quiet us with a moment of your peace. We have too much to carry, so lighten our hearts with your love.”

—HAVE A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIBLE DAY!

4. The disciples had a mountaintop experience (literally) when they witnessed the miracle of the transfiguration. It must have been incredible to experience the presence of God and his declaration of who Jesus is...but then, they had to walk back down the mountain, back to their regular lives. Yet, God was with them there, too. Where do you feel God’s presence in your daily life?
5. Sometimes we are on the mountaintop with God: in the company of prophets, teachers, and friends, able to hear clearly God’s proclamations over our lives. These mountaintop experiences often happen within a community. When we have people in our lives who have faith and confidence in God’s love and goodness, it helps us to feel the presence of God. What have you learned from these kinds of people in your own life? And how can you be that person for others as you share God’s love for them?

BEFORE WE GO:

- Is there anything else that you want to share from this week of devotions that we did not discuss today?
- How can you practice loving your neighbor this week in small ways that make their world change for the better?

GOING DEEPER:

If you have extra time this week, dig into the account of how love made a transformative difference in the life of

Anthony Ray Hinton. Hinton was an innocent man imprisoned for nearly 30 years for a crime he didn't commit. But, even in the midst of the most profound kinds of unfairness, he never lost sight of something true about himself and other people. [Listen to Anthony Ray Hinton and Kate Bowler in conversation, here.](#)¹

DEPARTING THOUGHTS:

God's love makes us brave as we face our highs and our lows. Because the love of God never fails. What if we could extend that to ourselves? For others? I am looking forward to hearing next week about ways you find to encounter God's love and presence in your everyday life.

A NOTE TO LEADERS:

Now is a good time to share additional prayer concerns, pray for one another, and set a time to meet for the next gathering.

A Lenten Blessing for Coming Home to Love

Blessed are we who say,
God, if you are Love, then I want you.
I want love
and all that love can do.

God, I want to feel your love
for me in particular,
in the body I have now,
in the minutes and hours that mark my days,
among the people that are mine to love.

I want to feel in my bones
that you made me on purpose
in love, and for love,
to hold, and to give away.

I want love I can come home to,
love that shelters and sustains.
That is always ready and waiting
for the moment I walk in the door.
Love that with one glance speaks joy
just to be in each other's company,
and yields space for whatever may come.
Hard things. Real things.
All in good time.
The love that sees and knows and loves
to the end of days.

The kind of love I could never earn,
nor ever lose.

Amen.

1. <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/anthony-ray-hinton-the-sun-does-shine/>

A NOTE TO LEADERS:

Here is a sample email or text you can send out after your meeting:



Dear (NAME),

I really enjoyed our discussion this week. It is so good to know that God's love is limitless even as we face our own limitations of being human. *(Enter in some points of the discussion you want to highlight, in case anyone missed the gathering and to recap).* Thank you so much for being there and contributing.

Don't forget that Kate Bowler will be sharing these devotions online every day on social media and via a daily email reminder. You can sign up for free, [here](https://katebowler.com/seasonal_devotional/have-a-beautiful-terrible-lent/#individual).
(https://katebowler.com/seasonal_devotional/have-a-beautiful-terrible-lent/#individual)

Here are some things to think about for Week 3 of Lent:

Next week, we will discuss how God calls us to small acts of transformation but not perfection. As we continue to seek God's presence on this Lenten journey, be aware of how God nudges you.

Blessings,

(YOUR NAME)

LENT WEEK 03

Transformation (Not Perfection)

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

—[JOHN 2:13-22 \(NRSV\)](#)

THEME: TRANSFORMATION (NOT PERFECTION)

When Jesus entered the temple and turned it upside down, he was making a messy and radical statement about what was happening and who he was. By throwing coins on the ground, driving the animals out, and pushing over the moneylenders' tables, he was saying, "Folks, you've got this all wrong. It's completely backward. It should be God first, not your profit margin. This temple isn't for meeting customers, it's for meeting God." Jesus physically showed them what needed to go—all the trappings of commerce, the noise and the bustle, the junk and the clutter that had taken over the space meant to be dedicated to God. For when we make room in our hearts and minds for the presence of God, little by little God's love and goodness start to change us. Our bodies become temples for the Spirit, and, somehow, we are transformed—though we might not notice it happening all in an instant. We become a new creation, sharing love, hope, kindness, and goodness to the world.

When they asked Jesus why he thought he could just barge in and wreck the place, Jesus gave them a strange answer. He said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." He was talking about his own body, his rising from death to life after three days. And only God could do such a thing. This is the ultimate truth that shows us nothing is too far gone for God to transform. God's mighty victory over death was a gift to each of us, a sign that nothing can separate us from God's presence.

OPENING QUESTION:

Share about a time you felt ready for something new.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Kate told her son, "When you love people, it's like they move into your house. But your home mysteriously multiplies and makes more room to put everybody."

—**HAVE A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIBLE DAY!**

1. How have you been changed by this kind of love? Is there an area of your life that has become more saturated by love? Share an example if you have one.

“Everything shrinks down to this: Love has come.”

—HAVE A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIBLE DAY!

2. Have you ever wondered why the Israelites waited 40 years before entering the promised land or why Jesus waited three days before being raised from the dead? How is waiting sometimes an important part of our own transformation? How can we learn to be more patient in waiting?

“I look in the direction of transformation and declare it impossible, so I return home with the sins I brought with me... Demystifying our own faults is difficult without believing that we are loved, so let’s just say that too: We are often wrong and always loved.”

—HAVE A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIBLE DAY!

3. Jesus wasn’t seeking perfection, he was clearing the way for people to enter into God’s presence (without hindrances like money). Where in your life have you noticed a shift from perfectionism to presence?

“We are beautiful, all this effort, all this living...we are radiant somehow.”

—HAVE A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIBLE DAY!

4. When we keep our eyes open to people’s radiance, we can be nudged toward spreading God’s love to the lovely and unlovely. Think back on the past week, did you notice any surprising beauty in the people around you? How did it go? Was it easier to find beauty in the people you know or in the strangers you saw out-and-about? Does seeing people through God’s lens soften you toward others?

“But there is great power in small things, isn’t there? Transformation and change isn’t necessarily a huge thing. We’re not called to transform the world. That’s God’s job. But we are called to transform ourselves. And oftentimes transformation comes through these small gestures of hope that enable us to find belonging.”

—JOHN SWINTON, in conversation with Kate Bowler, [“The Art of Presence”](#)¹

5. We are built with the desire to love and be loved, even when we are stressed and overwhelmed. We can share God’s love and hope through little things like noticing, listening, and remembering people. These small gestures of hope and love can transform us. When have you experienced a small act of love from someone?

BEFORE WE GO:

- Is there anything else that you want to share from this week of devotions that we have not discussed today?
- How might you extend small gestures of hope or small acts of love this week?

1. <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/the-art-of-presence/>

GOING DEEPER:

Listen to Kate's podcast conversation with John Swinton called, "[The Speed of Love](#),"² where John and Kate discuss the power of presence and how there is great power in small gestures of hope and transformation.

DEPARTING THOUGHTS:

You might feel discouraged that things haven't changed as much as you had hoped—things within yourself or in others who are important people in your life. But remember, as writer Anne Lamott said: "That's transformation, in that, grace meets us exactly where we are. And it doesn't leave us where it found us." It's in the encounter with God where change begins, where grace begins to find its way into the depths of all that we are. Right where we are.

A NOTE TO LEADERS:

Now is a good time to share additional prayer concerns, pray for one another, and set a time to meet for the next gathering.

A Lenten Blessing for Transformation

Note: There is a beautiful poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins called "God's Grandeur" that you might love too. We were especially inspired after reading it, which you'll be able to see below. But check out the original too.

You got it right, as poets do
Mr. Gerard Manley Hopkins,
you with the whimsical name
and the solemn truth, that

"The world is charged with the grandeur of God,
It will flame out like shining from shook foil."

And that despite all that humans are and do
"There lives the dearest freshness deep down things."

And it calls to us.
It speaks a wisdom that shines through the cracks
of all that is broken, all that is incomplete,

a beauty so strong that it calls to us
saying, "Come!
All is prepared. The table is ready."

Here is the food that will sustain you,
the peace that will settle you and strengthen you
and make you able to do the next small
and loving thing.

We can't change the world.
But we can come near to you, O God,
and become those who are willing to receive,
and be changed.

Amen.

2. <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/john-swinton-the-speed-of-love/>

A NOTE TO LEADERS:

Here is a sample email or text you can send out after your meeting:



Dear (NAME),

Love is the one thing that leads to true transformation. It is easy to get lost in the expectations and demands of a busy life when we live in a culture that expects perfection. I hope that you seek ways to transform your life in order to make more room for love and God's presence this week.

I really enjoyed our discussion. *(Enter in some points of the discussion you want to highlight, in case anyone missed the gathering and to recap).*

Don't forget that Kate Bowler will be sharing these devotions online every day on social media and via a daily email reminder. You can sign up for free, [here](https://katebowler.com/seasonal_devotional/have-a-beautiful-terrible-lent/#individual).
(https://katebowler.com/seasonal_devotional/have-a-beautiful-terrible-lent/#individual)

Here are some things to think about for next week:

Renewal is the theme for next week. If you are longing for transformation and it seems long in coming, be encouraged. Renewal starts in the dark.

Blessings,

(YOUR NAME)

LENT WEEK 04

The Depths of Renewal

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

—[JOHN 3:14-21 \(NIV\)](#)

THEME: THE DEPTHS OF RENEWAL

Renewal often begins in the depths. A seed covered with soil waits for the warmth of spring to bring it to life. Then, shoots burst through the seed's hard shell and stretch up toward the sun, growing into something astonishingly huge, unrecognizable from a seedly point of view. The seed could never have imagined the plant it would become. And so too with us. We don't have the power of regeneration. But God does. Jesus came to reveal it through his last days on earth—his death on the cross, his burial, in the long, dark silence of the tomb, and then, the resurrection. As the shock of radical new life coursed through his body, Jesus stood and walked the earth, so his friends could see him and know that all he had told them was true. Yes, there was a cross and a death, and an unbearable waiting they endured in the depths of seeming defeat. But then, a raised-to-life, victorious Jesus just as he had promised. What kind of love is this? A love that is stronger than death. One that comes not to condemn, but to renew. A love that shines truth on what needs to change, both within us and around us, and invites us to move forward, arm-in-arm.

OPENING QUESTION:

Sometimes we are stuck in a waiting room for so long that even talking about change is hard. That is, until we look around and see the many others in that room, too. Locate yourself on the spectrum between feeling alone and in community. Between feeling stuck and open to change.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

"I work quietly, in secret, to repair all that is broken. This anxiety and that despair. (other problems I avoid altogether.)"

—HAVE A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIBLE DAY!

1. Jesus said, "I did not come to condemn the world but to save it" (John 12:47). Where have you seen this kind of radical love in spaces of normalized condemnation?

"Who am I? Well, probably 256 roles at the moment. But when we are attempting to let go of something painful, it is a question we return to again and again. Who I am now?"

—HAVE A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIBLE DAY!

2. As the seed enters the ground and starts to grow into a new life, it is no longer a seed. It becomes roots, a sprout, leaves, buds, blooms, and flowers (or vegetables if you like those kinds of things). That little seed sitting in the dark has the potential to grow into many beautiful, new things. Identify yourself in this process. Are you a seed, covered in the depths of the soil, unsure of what is next? Are you a flowering bud, blossoming in the fullness of life? Are you in the process of sprouting new leaves? Or perhaps are you being trimmed back by a Good Gardener?

“Since we can’t go back, Lord, pull me forward. Remind me of the surreal truth that you un-write any sin. I confess and you forgive.”

—HAVE A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIBLE DAY!

3. Sin can sometimes be a sticky word. How would you define sin? Has your definition changed overtime?

Referencing James Fowler’s definition on what it means to believe, Barbara Brown Taylor states, “In the sixteenth century, ‘to believe’ meant ‘to set the heart upon,’ or ‘to give the heart to,’ as in, ‘I believe in love.’ But in the centuries following the Enlightenment, secular use of the words ‘belief’ and ‘believe’ began to change until they said less about the disposition of one’s heart than about the furniture in one’s mind.”

—LEARNING TO WALK IN THE DARK, p. 143

4. What does “belief” mean to you? Has your definition changed overtime?

“Help us see the world as it is so we might be able to say: Ahhhh, I see it now.”

—HAVE A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIBLE DAY!

5. When we accept the love of God, we start to see the world differently. Believing God’s truth of love, grace, and compassion allows us to look around and see everything more clearly. How has the love of God changed the way you see the world and the people in it?

BEFORE WE GO:

- Is there anything else that you want to share from this week of devotions that we have not discussed today?
- In this discussion, we wrestled with big themes of belief and sin. If there is anything you want to continue working through or talking about, don’t hesitate to reach out.

GOING DEEPER:

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a wonderful book, *Learning to Walk in The Dark*, where she explores how we can

be curious and enlightened by our experiences in difficulty or doubt. Kate and Barbara have a great conversation about this topic in "[Life After Dark.](#)"¹

DEPARTING THOUGHTS:

If you are anything like me, there are moments when light pours in, and voilà, I get it! I can see a way forward, and life makes sense. But then there are times when the clouds settle in and the sky is low and heavy. Hope is hard to find. If this is where you are at, then let me say, *this is all of us*. We are in this together, in our beautiful, terrible lives. And Jesus walks with us too. On purpose (John 1:14; Heb 4:14-16). Take some time this week to sit with the good news that Jesus not only walked among us during his lifetime, experiencing the highs and lows of what it means to be human, but that God is still present with us today.

A Lenten Blessing for Remembering We Can Start Again

Blessed are we in the fog,
that first-thing-in-the-morning feeling
when we don't know what today is for.

Blessed are we not moving too soon,
lingering in the sense that yesterday's wisdom
seems long ago and far away.

Here in the not-knowing,
is where we remember
there is no formula we should have remembered,
for you, O God have made this day from scratch,
out of the abundance of your creativity and love.

And because of your forgiveness freely offered,
joyfully received,
we can begin again.

Renewal is the unendingly fresh spring
that is for this day, the one I'm living in.
And for this me, the one I'm becoming.

God, help me listen
With my whole self,
for what you can do with this whole day.
Help me listen deeply each moment
and start fresh over and over
in the light of your rejuvenating word.

Amen.

1. <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/barbara-brown-taylor-life-after-dark-s2e2/>

A NOTE TO LEADERS:

Here is a sample email or text you can send out after your meeting:

Dear (NAME),

Renewal often starts in the darkness. I hope this week you can embrace God's presence with you in the depths of whatever it is you are going through, or, if you need it, start to see a glimmer of light and live into the resurrected, new life that God wants for you.

I really enjoyed our discussion. *(Enter in some points of the discussion you want to highlight, in case anyone missed the gathering and to recap).*

Don't forget that Kate Bowler will be sharing these devotions online every day on social media and via a daily email reminder. You can sign up for free, [here](https://katebowler.com/seasonal_devotional/have-a-beautiful-terrible-lent/#individual).
(https://katebowler.com/seasonal_devotional/have-a-beautiful-terrible-lent/#individual)

Here are some things to think about for next week:

When we are suffering, in physical pain, or disheartened by horrible things happening in the world, we can start to feel alone. While these feelings are ours alone, we don't have to be alone in them. That is why Jesus came. For us. With us. Next week we will see how compassion defines the last week of Jesus' earthly life.

Blessings,

(YOUR NAME)



LENT WEEK 05

The Compassion of God

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say— 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

—[JOHN 12:20-33 \(NRSVUE\)](#)

THEME: THE COMPASSION OF GOD

Some people move toward suffering when they see it. That is the direction God chose when God decided to come to earth in human form. God with us, the Emmanuel. Jesus experienced what we do—all of our anger and fears, our joy and our sorrows, our pain and anguish. "It is for this reason I have come to this hour," Jesus said, speaking of the cross. He walked into the depths for our sake, to show us what love looks like, what love will do, and the lengths to which love will go. Jesus is the seed, giving his life so that we might also have life in the fullness of God's love. And now, that seed of love is planted in us. As we receive God's compassion for us through Jesus, we learn how to be the kind of people who move toward others' suffering with love too.

OPENING QUESTION:

"We want to see Jesus." That's what the curious people from Greece said when they came to Philip and Andrew in John 12. What sparked your interest in initially seeking Jesus? Did you witness or hear about an act of love or compassion connected to Jesus? Or was it something else?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

"I need a little love and compassion before I can begin to know what is true and what is not."

—HAVE A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIBLE DAY!

1. When has love helped you see things a little more clearly?

"If we forget what it feels like to be loved, we may not remember how to be loved by God too."

—HAVE A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIBLE DAY!

2. In John 12, we catch a glimpse at Jesus reflecting on the sacrifice he will soon make on the cross. It will be an incredible trial, yet Jesus is resolute: "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say: 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour." What does Jesus' willingness to face the cross communicate about how he feels about you? (Hint: Read Romans 5:8.) How does this reality sit with you as you look toward Holy Week?

“So remind me again, God, how the world spins and the winds change and the oceans churn and not a single fact tells a different story than your love for me.”

—HAVE A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIBLE DAY!

3. Where did you feel pain this week? Physically, mentally, or are you hurting because of something that happened to someone else? Did you feel God’s presence, love, or compassion this week in the midst of that pain? If not, how can you spend time in Scripture, in prayer, or in honest fellowship in order to open doors to experience how God cares for you?

“Sensitivity, however, is a two-sided coin. It connects us to all that is around us or could be. It makes us aware and awake to the beauty and tragedy of the human experience, but that awareness comes at a steep cost.”

—HAVE A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIBLE DAY!

4. In John 12:24-26, Jesus invites us to join him in choosing the life of a servant, noting that a single seed can bear much fruit. Who are some people in your daily life that you will choose to see through a lens of love and compassion, the same way Jesus views us?
5. It is not our job to save the whole world. Jesus is already at work redeeming the world, and invites us to participate with him. Do you ever feel overwhelmed with compassion for others? How can we learn to join in the work that Jesus is already doing, without taking on the full responsibilities of being God?

BEFORE WE GO:

- Is there anything else that you want to share from this week of devotions that we have not discussed today?

GOING DEEPER:

Some people’s lives exemplify hope beyond what we could ever imagine. Listen to Kate’s podcast with Father Greg Boyle called [“The Case for Hope.”](#)¹

DEPARTING THOUGHTS:

There is enough love, enough compassion, and enough Jesus to go around. Jesus came to be with us in our suffering and pain. Jesus came to show us what love and compassion look like. As we enter Holy Week, may we see the humanity, compassion, and love of Christ. May we offer that compassion to ourselves as well as to all we meet.

1. <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/greg-boyle-the-case-for-hope/>

A Lenten Blessing for More Compassion

This Lent, you have shown us more about who we really are. But because of who you are, what we've learned is not so much what has been but what will be.

And we have an inkling this is only the beginning, a mere taste of what is to come.

O God, would you make us able to live as if all this truth were really true? Remind us of your infinite grace, your infinite compassion. Give us the courage to live for others, as you have so courageously given your life for us.

Amen.

A NOTE TO LEADERS:

Here is a sample email or text you can send out after your meeting:

Dear (NAME),

Compassion is at the core of Christ's life and ministry, and was a driving motivation for his embrace of the way of the cross. May we take comfort in his great, sacrificial love for us.

I really enjoyed our discussion. *(Enter in some points of the discussion you want to highlight, in case anyone missed the gathering and to recap).*

Don't forget that Kate Bowler will be sharing these devotions online every day on social media and via a daily email reminder. You can sign up for free, [here](#).

(https://katebowler.com/seasonal_devotional/have-a-beautiful-terrible-lent/#individual)

Here are some things to think about for Holy Week of Lent:

Next week is Holy Week, where we lean even deeper into Jesus's journey not only to the cross but to the grave. And then we celebrate his revolutionary resurrection on Easter Sunday. To prepare for next week's discussion, take some time to reflect on the beautiful, but often heavy tension between life and death.

Blessings,

(YOUR NAME)

LENT WEEK 06

Truth and Trials

Reflecting on Holy Week

The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the king of Israel!" Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written: "Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt." At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him.

—[JOHN 12:12-16 \(NIV\)](#)



THEME: TRUTH AND TRIALS

All eyes are on Jesus as he walks toward Jerusalem—not to sit on the throne his followers expect, but to wear a crown of thorns. He was born a humble child and now rides a humble colt, ushering in a new kingdom available to all. We began the season of Lent by facing the truth of our finitude—“for dust you are and to dust you will return.”

The beginning of Holy Week starts the process of facing even more difficult truths: Jesus is not the king we had expected, Jesus spoke truths we could not yet understand, Jesus will suffer, Jesus will be murdered, and Jesus will be raised from the dead. If you or I had been there on Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, or Holy Saturday, we, too, may have misunderstood who Jesus was. It isn't until you have cried the tears over Jesus' death, witnessed the empty tomb, put your finger in the holes where the nails were, had breakfast on the beach, and watched him ascend into heaven that the pieces start to come together (and even then we still don't fully get it). We didn't know what kind of king we needed, until Jesus came into our helplessness and invited us all to partake in abundant life. May we all spend our lifetimes learning the truth of that kind of love.

OPENING QUESTION:

On Palm Sunday Jesus rode into Jerusalem saying, “Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!” (John 12:15) It is as if Jesus is humbly saying, “Don't worry, I've got this.” How does this statement touch on last week's theme of compassion? What hope do you see announced by his words?

PRACTICING PRESENCE THIS HOLY WEEK:

Throughout this study, we have talked about what it means to bear witness to the love, compassion, transformation, and presence of God that we find in the gospel story. As a group, make a plan to practice these things by attending a Holy Week service—Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, the Stations of the Cross, Easter Sunday, or even just coming together in a quiet, holy space on Holy Saturday. You could attend these services at your own church, or find any local church holding service this week. Or make your own by reading the story of Jesus' death and resurrection together.

Do your best to be present to the pain, the suffering, the loneliness, the humanness of Jesus, of the disciples, of the women at the tomb, and everyone involved. Where do you see love? Where do you see compassion? Where do you see suffering and pain?

Then, make a plan to meet with your group either right after the service or the next day for a meal, for coffee, or drinks, or even just your regular meeting room to discuss the following prompts.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How were you touched by the humanity of Jesus through the service or experiences you chose to participate in this week?
2. How did it feel to attend the service(s) you attended, or to reflect in private or with a group about Holy Week's events? What moved you? What surprised you?
3. What did you notice about the people around you?
4. How are we called to bear witness to our own humanity and the humanity of those around us? How can we take what we have learned from this study and share it with those around us?

BEFORE WE GO:

Is there anything else that you want to share from this week of individual devotionals that we did not already discuss today?

GOING DEEPER: Listen to Kate describe [“Living Into Easter Joy.”](#)¹

DEPARTING THOUGHTS:

Easter arrives on heights after a long descent of Lent and (especially) Holy Week. We have walked with Jesus through the valley of the shadow of death, and now the light of Easter blazes into all the dim corners, overcoming death and its sting. Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live” (John 11:25). Jesus has conquered the grave, yet what are we to do with this not-yet-ness of our current reality? When our hearts are still broken and heavy with grief? The historical truth of the resurrection and its incredible future promise doesn't negate our need to grieve nor hush our songs of lament. No. Jesus is with us here too, a man of sorrows, well-acquainted with grief, whose face, too, knew the sting of tears (Luke 19:41; John 11:35). May this Easter be a picture, a preview of the puzzling, dazzling, eruptive power of God's new creation. One that is already underway—though we glimpse it through tears. What if we could live as if the resurrection was a certainty we could live into? What choices would we make?

1. <https://katebowler.com/living-into-easter-joy/>

For Easter Sunday FROM HAVE A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIBLE DAY!

So, Jesus, wasn't that illegal
for you to break the seal
the Roman guards put there?
Bursting the bonds of death itself
to come again, larger than life?
And was it wise to present yourself
first to the women,
so lowly in social standing their word
meant nothing in court?
And why did you keep appearing suddenly
to the huddled believers
behind locked doors for
fear of their enemies,
scared out of their wits to hear you say,
"Peace be with you!"?

And isn't it the case that they were
never the same again,
these ordinary people
who had been so cowed,
receiving your Holy Spirit,

emboldened to begin the work you
set in motion,
speaking life and health and peace
to all who would listen?

This is what our newborn church
looks like: Blessed.
Blessed in our fear and inadequacy.
Blessed by your faith in us.
Blessed that we received,
by your own hand, the gift of hope—
the beginning of the end of sin
and of death.

We follow you as best we can
along that downward path
with all the humility we can manage.
You came back to us.
Alleluia.
Alleluia.
Alleluia.



A NOTE TO LEADERS:

Here is a sample email or text you can send out after your meeting:

Dear (NAME),

What a joy and a gift it has been to live and learn through this season of Lent with you.

(Include some specifics about discussions and lessons that have been meaningful to you.)

Here are some things to think about for Eastertide:

Easter morning brings on a new season for the church calendar called Eastertide. Eastertide lasts for 50 days, as we practice living into Easter hope and joy. I challenge you to consider how you might celebrate Eastertide. Kate Bowler has a free Eastertide resource called, [While It Was Yet Dark](#), that might be a good fit.

(<https://katebowler.com/life-together-apart/>)

A Note to Leaders: If your group would like to continue meeting together, this resource can be used as a group or an individual devotional.

Blessings,

(YOUR NAME)



Fifth Sunday of Lent



You're doing it! But simmer down and rest today.

being so close to pain, too close

Praise be to the . . . God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

—2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-4 (NIV)

If you are forever close to someone else's pain (or your own), first of all, I'm so sorry. You have suffered, and the aftermath of all suffering is a particular kind of grief and loneliness. When we draw near to pain (or pain draws near to us), we might begin to feel like we are losing any other way of being. Our personalities become less obvious to us. Our normal ways of operating seem strangely distant. Remember small talk? Barely. Remember feeling relaxed when someone said, "How are things?"

We are changed by the suffering we have known. But that doesn't mean that we have to be permanently altered for the worse. Yes, dear heart, you are different. Perhaps, though, we can practice looking at our transformation with so much compassion as we say, *God, I still want every possible good thing. Even now. Especially now.*

Blessed are you who find yourself
near to trauma,
perhaps even the one closest
to the one who has suffered so much.

For you too nothing is the same anymore.

The air has changed
the furniture of your life rearranged
and the cables that once anchored you
to what you knew
have come undone.

Yes, you are doing all you can,
embracing the gift of offering comfort.
Yes, you are doing all the things
you know to do
as the aftermath unfolds.

But, dear one,
let me gently take you aside to say,
this trauma has happened to you too
though you may not feel free to say it.

You too have pain
that may feel too raw and too deep
to excavate and examine just now.
There is so much else to do.

Yet it is there,
telling you in many ways
it will need attention too.
Perhaps even now.

Blessed are you,
gently beginning to name
your own felt needs
and look to the comforts
that will sustain you.

Blessed are you who have discovered
that in your humanity
you have been welcomed into the
community of the wounded.

May you feel all of your own woundedness,
and the tenderness of your own heart,
seen, loved, and held.

reflection prompt

What is the most comforting thing that you do for yourself? I have an overly elaborate face-washing bedtime routine that started when I was sick. I took a minute to say, "Oh, hey, the day was costly but here I am." Do you have a little habit that restores your soul? If you don't, see if you can invent one. (Beverages. Sitting in a certain place. Anything with water. Something can always do the trick.)

when you're awake in the night

**Peace I leave with you;
my peace I give you.**

—JOHN 14:27A (NIV)

If you see columnist David Brooks around somewhere, please let him know that I have spent the last few nights in a semisleep fugue state thinking about an article he wrote. And then combining his argument with an apocalyptic vision of zombies taking over an airport while I am waiting for a flight. It was terrifying and absurd, and utterly normal for me. I waste my sleeping hours with an exciting combination of self-sabotage, annoyance, embarrassment, and fear. Isn't the untethered mind wonderful?

Most of the loveliest ancient prayers for such occasions center on the image of the watchtower. A watchtower is a high place from which a guard can see for miles while everyone else can, as the saying goes, "let down their guard." An ancient prayer from Augustine asks God to "keep watch . . . with those who work, or watch, or weep this night." Beautiful. These invocations say, again and again, some version of *God, will you be appropriately alert because I am supposed to be unconscious*. This is exactly what we need God to do. We have come to the limits of our vigilance, our abilities, our emotional self-management, and our physical energy. Now, God, please keep watch over our humanity.

Oh, God, I long for sleep,
and the natural restoration it brings,
for body, mind, and soul.

But here I am, feeling ridiculous.
Aren't other people supposed to be
asleep at this hour,
not scrambling for solutions?

But this is another kind of normal,
the regular interruption that I keep
thinking won't happen again,
but it does, and it has. Again.

So I do all the things I know to do.
Yet here I am, still awake.

God, this is endless.
And I know I won't be functional.
Let's do something about this.
Tomorrow, after a nap.
Let's leave the problem-solving until then.
Right now, return me to myself.

Let me be legs that sink heavily
into this mattress,
and arms that fall loosely by my sides.

Let me be eyes that stop itching
for my phone
and are (soon to be) heavy and closed.

Let my heart slow into that soft
and even beat
that says, there is nothing, nothing,
nothing to do
but be.

reflection prompt

Take out a notepad and put it beside your bed. (Don't use your phone. Your phone is a tar pit of entertainment.) When you wake up, or can't sleep, scribble down any to-dos or especially buzzy thoughts. No judgment. Can you imagine leaving those worries on the table for another day?

when anxiety rises

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

—PHILIPPIANS 4:6 (NIV)

I hold my thoughts on a leash, dragging them around. Didn't I do something really stupid this morning? Probably. What did I say again? Oh, let me pull that around too. I revise and revise, stew and replay. I am fairly certain that somewhere out there people are probably pretty annoyed at me, at the very least.

Does your mind churn too? What category of thoughts take up too much space? Family, work, dating, love, kids? Or are your worries more diffuse, fogging up a clear mind for no particular reason? When I am trying to release these worries to God, I imagine that, instead of a leash, I am holding a series of helium balloons. Each carrying its own weight. And, oh look, I just let go. Now they can float around the ceiling at will. If I need one later, I can fish for it, but, truly, who needs another worry?

Let's bless our anxious hearts with a peace that God is particularly good at giving.

God, it doesn't seem possible
to align my anxious self to your word
that says to me:
"Don't be anxious about anything."
Because I'm already stewing.
I'm a worrier, and you already know that.
So here we are.
And here I am, being what I am.

God, open your heart to mine
and pour in your peace.
Let your mind flow into these
scattered thoughts
that seem to want to cling to worries
And coalesce like metal filings to a magnet.
I need your spirit to bless me
with a calm that isn't mine to create.

Bless all my stubbornness and
allow me to, wonderfully,
just give up for a moment.
To stop fighting my own needs
and concerns.

And if I can barely do it,
bless even the trying to try
(for that's roughly all I'm able to do,
and I smile to think that even this
pleases you).

Bless my will to will that anxiety
be lifted away,
that when worries arise,
I can say to them, "Go on,
keep rising all the way to God
who can handle this."
I'll pray them up, up, up, and away.

reflection prompt

Sit somewhere comfortable and let your body soften. Let the air comfortably expand the spaces that are easily fillable. Breathe out and mix the air with the thought that worries you, giving it to God to take for a minute. Let yourself pause and rest, with nothing to do. And in your own time, continue until you feel yourself sighhhhh. You'll hear it. That's when you're done, love.

honest faith

**Trust in the Lord with all
your heart and lean not on
your own understanding.**

—PROVERBS 3:5 (NIV)

Nowadays, with the triumph of gentle, therapeutic ways of speaking about prayer, we might entirely forget that our blessings and prayers can be completely offensive in the best way. I have a colleague here at my university with a reputation for being joyfully outrageous, and he makes me laugh so hard because I honestly cannot believe what he can get away with. His name is Stanley Hauerwas and, for instance, when he was asked to pray a nice, vague, feel-good prayer at a serious university luncheon to people in suits and ties, he prayed something like this instead: “God . . . we do not fear you, since we prefer to fear one another. . . . You have, of course, tried to scare the hell out of some of us through the creation of your people Israel and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But we are subtle, crafty, and stiff-necked people who prefer to be damned into vagueness.” Oh, I read the transcript of this later and *wept*. Hysterical. And, word has it, Stanley ruined public prayer for everyone else. Now the university holds a moment of silence instead.

That’s always the trickiest part of speaking spiritually: when do we call people out? And when do we change people with grace? Here’s a blessing for the need for that kind of honest faith and the right amount of love to accompany it.

God, I am disappointed and embarrassed
at what people get up to
in the name of religion.

My heart is thirsty for a faith I can trust.
And I mean that.
I don't trust the cultural scripts
that turn religion into any game
where somebody wins
and somebody loses,
and there is the strong scent
of the entrepreneur.
Somebody is selling something.

And from the recesses of my mind
from some very early encounter,
I think I must have met the real you, God.
That somehow I met goodness so pure
it settled my heart to understand
trustworthiness of a majesty and stature
that thereafter I could accept
no counterfeits.

God, come and show yourself again.
Show me faith that cannot be faked.

Let me see you in the loveliness of others
living out their faith so genuinely,
so honestly,
that you shine through.

And if I can't get all the theology right,
let me not worry too long.
I suspect you'd rather I live honestly
by the light of what I know to do
that looks most like you,
and keep quiet about the rest.

reflection prompt

Think of a person you know who is incredibly gracious about disagreement. What are some of their methods for cultivating grace?

for a funeral

**For with much wisdom
comes much sorrow;
the more knowledge,
the more grief.**

—ECCLESIASTES 1:18 (NIV)

When someone dies, we are thrown into emptiness and unreality. Those we love have grown like vines around our hearts. So when death comes, there is a wrenching, a tearing away at the root. People will try to say comforting things about our loved one's advanced age perhaps, or their having lived long or meaningful lives. Or maybe they can't say much at all because our person died early, suddenly, or with an incompleteness that looms over us.

But the truth is that we are not simply in mourning, we are lovesick. Death is an affront to love itself. I find this to be one of the greatest and worst of all of God's mysteries: how the more we do what God commanded—love and love and love—the worse this pain becomes. The more we love, the more we cannot imagine an end to it. There is a poem by Emily Dickinson that imagines God “in the fair schoolroom of the sky” explaining each separate anguish. But in the meantime, we are here. We are left with the weight of wondering why—why our love feels like a gift and a curse.

You know I don't believe that faith is a solution to the problem of pain. But I do believe that God guarantees us God's actual presence. So let's see where that takes us. And in the meantime, I am so sorry this has happened to you, to them, and to us all.

If there ever was such a thing
as normal life,
it has slowed to a stop now.
Lord, I have loved and lost.
The world is empty.

I am swimming in the unreality of this end,
this impossible ending,
for we are trying to live in both
the before and the after.

Carry me. Carry us.
Carry every stage of this moment
when we can shout and cry,
prepare food and file our paperwork,
and feel weary and sad and joyful
and numbness because
the totality of death will never, ever
feel final.

In our conversations there is a raw feeling
we are holding back,
drawing a gauzy veil over all the unease.
Will people feel honored, valued, needed?
Will there be awkwardness
among friends and family?
God, give us room to breathe and to mourn,
and perhaps even to laugh together.
Help us be our best selves.

Blessed are we, trying to manage
the unmanageable,
the fact that this is a final parting.
No, this is the *second last* parting.
But we will see them again, you promised.
One has gone from us down a path
we cannot see.
And we must stand and mourn,
at a distance.

God, make this a good funeral, somehow.
Let love live here.
Let it fill us, even in our loss,
that we might receive comfort
beyond the measure that we ourselves
can hold,
that there might be some—dear God,
let there be some—to share.

reflection prompt

Jesus says that blessed are those who mourn, which is precisely when we feel exiled from any sense of blessing. But I believe in those words is a promise: God draws near to the suffering. So that's it. Nothing to do except say, "God, you said you would be there. Be here now."

noticing beauty

Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither labor nor spin; but I tell you, not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these.

—LUKE 12:27 (NASB)

Are you a noticer? Litter on the side of the road. Dust on the windowsill. The placement of napkins on a well-laid table. Some people have an incredible eye for detail. They know where things go and if they should be there at all. I have a noticing mother-in-law who *delights* in highway landscaping. She will see pansies or a cluster of tall bushes and audibly gasp. She has found the ability to experience the world as a sensory buffet.

I, on the other hand, would probably have to be struck by lightning to notice these things. In fact, I worked in a restaurant that was struck by lightning and burned to the ground twice, so you'd think I would be more observant. But I have to remind myself not simply to look, but to *behold*. So let's bless the gift of cultivated attention. May it bring us endless *oooohs* and *aahhhhs*.

It's not every day that you see it,
but sometimes beauty sneaks up on you
with a tenderness, a sweetness, so lovely
it hurts.

It sings to the heart
and makes it glad
that ever a baby laughed
or a parent smiled
at the hilarious solemnity of play.

Beauty brings a kind of grief.
Because its perfection rings so true

it calls out everything else
that has ever fallen short.
In me. In us. In everything.

But that's the thing.
It's just the way of it:
that beauty will always be
crushingly lovely.
We are grass. We are fireflies.
We are the day that the Lord has made.

reflection prompt

*Today or tomorrow I want you to go find
something you are delighted by: birds,
macaroni and cheese, whatever. It's out there
somewhere.*