A Sanctified Art LLC is a collective of artists in ministry who create resources for worshiping communities. The Sanctified Art team works collaboratively to bring scripture and theological themes to life through film, visual art, curriculum, coloring pages, liturgy, graphic designs, and more. Their mission is to empower churches with resources to inspire creativity in worship and beyond. Driven by the connective and prophetic power of art, they believe that art helps us connect our hearts with our hands, our faith with our lives, and our mess with our God.

Learn more about their work at ***sanctifiedart.org****.*

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A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

AGAIN & AGAIN A LENTEN REFRAIN



Art, reflections, & poetry for the season of Lent

a Sanctified Art
sanctifiedart.org

ABOUT THE CREATORS

REV. LISLE GWYNN GARRITY

Founder | Creative Director of SA

Lisle Gwynn Garrity (she/her) is a Pastorist (pastor + artist), retreat leader, and creative entrepreneur seeking to fill the church with more color, paint, mystery, and creativity. She founded A Sanctified Art with the conviction that, in order to thrive, the church needs more creative expression and art-filled freedom.

REV. LAUREN WRIGHT PITTMAN

Director of Branding | Founding Creative Partner of SA

Lauren (she/her) is an artist, graphic designer, and theologian. She uses paint, metallic inks, and Apple pencil to image the layered complexity she experiences in scripture texts. She also helps faith communities share their vibrant stories through branding & design services.

HANNAH GARRITY **Founding Creative Partner of SA**

Hannah (she/her) is an artist and an athlete, a daughter and a mother, a facilitator and a producer, a leader and a teammate. She is an art teacher at a middle school in Richmond, VA, a Sunday school visual choir facilitator at Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond, VA, an art in worship workshop leader wherever she is called, and a liturgical installation artist at the Montreat Conference Center, Montreat, NC.

REV. SARAH ARE **Founding Creative Partner of SA**

Sarah Are (she/her) is the Associate Pastor for Youth and Young Adults at Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church, Dallas, Texas. She believes that the Church has a responsibility to open every door to God, so that those of us who are visual, kinesthetic, or relational learners all have equal opportunity to engage God to the fullest of our abilities.

REV. T. DENISE ANDERSON **Guest Contributor**

T. Denise Anderson (she/her) is a minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and coordinator for racial and intercultural justice with the Presbyterian Mission Agency, working in connection with the agency's Compassion, Peace & Justice and Racial Equity & Women's Intercultural Ministries. A graduate of Howard University School of Divinity, she is the former Co-Moderator of the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (USA). A nationally-recognized writer and blogger, Denise's work has appeared in *The Christian Century, The Huffington Post, These Days*, and on her own blog, *SOULa Scriptura: To Be Young, Gifted, and Reformed*: soulascriptura.com. Denise writes, preaches, and engages on issues of social justice, diversity, and reconciliation. As a painter and visual artist, she creates art that explores themes of spirituality, history, religion, and race: tdandersonart.com.

BREAD CRUMBS

I used to make decisions with a
flip of a coin,
Or, "Eeny, meeny, miny, moe,
My mother told me so."

That was when the stakes
were small,
When I was small,
When the world was small;
Back when we thought
We knew it all.

But you grow up quickly
When you start to see
That not all have the freedom
To love equally,
Or to breathe freely,
Or to protest peacefully.

And you grow up quickly
When you start to see
That the Church is shrinking
And the world is sick,
And people are lonely,
And the news won't quit.
And no amount of
guessing games
Can right these wrongs.

So today I am going
To do my best
To tuck my ego
In the pocket of my chest.
Today I will listen
Louder than I speak,
And look for the tables
That Jesus is flipping.
For our God carved
Words into stone.
Our God led the people
In a pillar of smoke.
Our God was present
In the still, small voice,
In the middle of the storm,
And where people rejoice.
And if God was showing them
the way,
Then I am confident,
God is here today—
Dropping bread crumbs
And leaving signs,
Flipping tables
Where oppression dines.

So yes, I admit,
This is harder than before.
I cannot use games
To decide or keep score.
I have to use faith; I have
to believe
That even today, God is leading.

My mother told me so.

Poem by Sarah Are

In the season of Lent, we're reminded that, again and again, suffering and brokenness find us. We doubt again, we lament again, we mess up again. Again and again, the story of Jesus on the cross repeats—every time lives are taken unjustly, every time the powerful choose corruption and violence, every time individuals forget how to love. With exacerbation we exclaim, "Again?! How long, O God?" And yet, in the midst of the motion blur chaos of our lives, God offers a sacred refrain: "I choose you, I love you, I will lead you to repair." Again and again, God breaks the cycle and offers us a new way forward.

In this season, we need rituals—both old and new—to remember and be transformed. Embodied practice builds muscle memory. Repetition helps retrain our neural pathways. We encourage you to walk through these weekly readings and prompts at your own pace throughout the season, following the rhythm that works best for you. May the art, reflections, and poetry strengthen and stretch you, shaping you into a more faithful disciple.

This Lent, may God's steadfast love cradle our laments. May God's grace wash over our weariness. And may we bring all of who we are to God—trusting that God will meet us, time and again, along the way.

Artfully yours,

The Sanctified Art Creative Team

Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Sarah Are
Hannah Garrity
Lauren Wright Pittman

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READ Mark 16:1-8

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

Just after sunrise, they come to the tomb. They come to do what far too many cannot do in the wake of COVID's rage—to touch and anoint the body of their loved one, to provide a proper burial, to honor the life lost with a memorial. However, the women at the empty tomb are left with what many who are grieving today are experiencing—dread and terror. Mark's gospel originally ends this way (we believe verses 9-19 were added later). Not with Mary running to tell the disciples, not with exuberance and joy, but with fear and silence. The women are numb.

How could it be this way? Who stole the body? Did we come to the wrong tomb? Jesus is going where? Galilee? How?

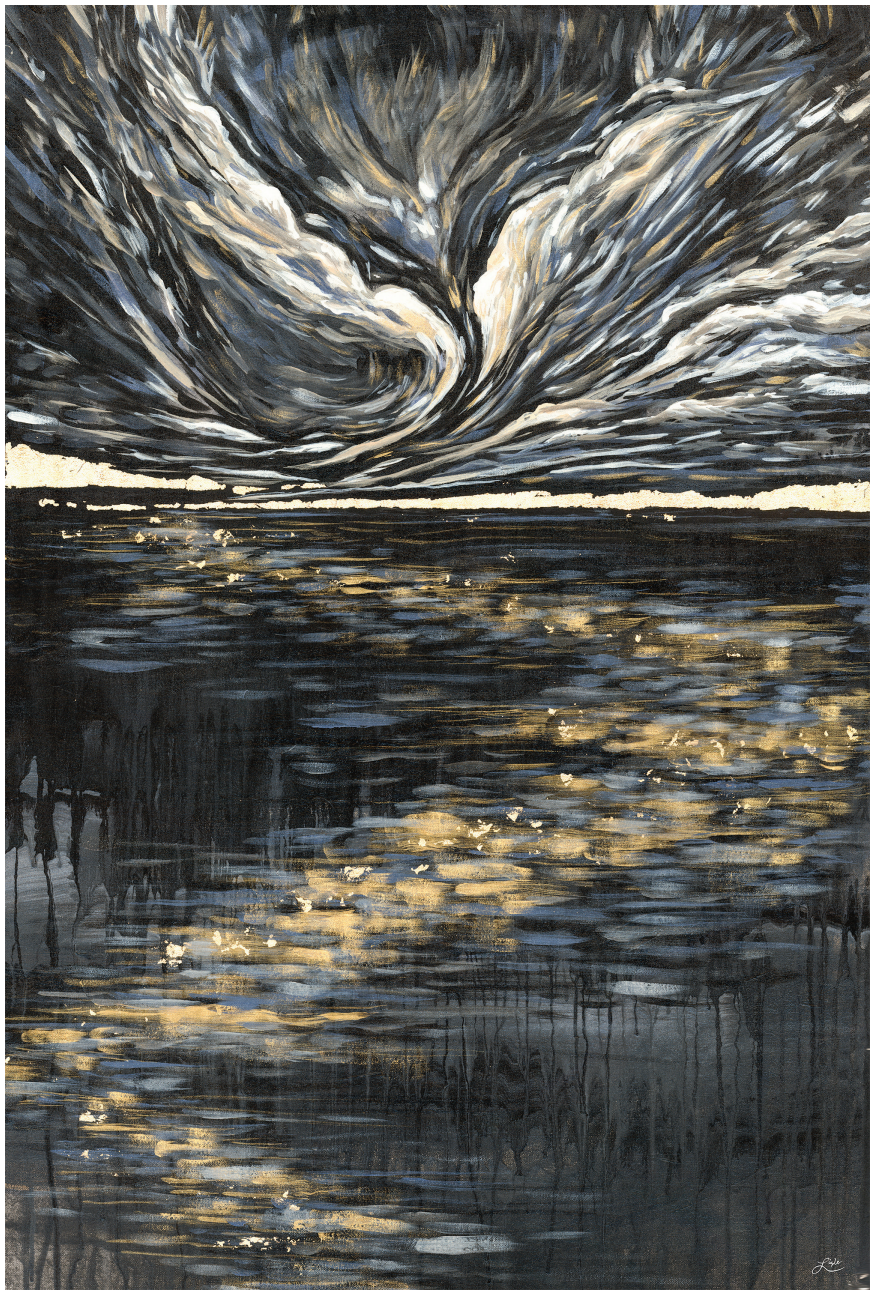
The young robed man's words probably feel like a mirage induced by their grief or lack of sleep—or both.

In this painting, I imagine what the women see in the moment before they turn to flee from the tomb. Instead of the dry, cracked desert, I imagine instead that they see the story of creation happening again before them. As the horizon breaks open, I imagine light and wind sweeping over a deep sea, giving shape to what was once a formless void. I imagine the heavens blooming like an iris, giving birth to glimmers of radiance. I imagine darkness that still lingers—for in these shadows, there is sacredness too. I imagine the winding path they followed to get to the tomb, previously lit only by starlight, now illuminated with promise.

They may be overridden with fear and trembling, but their story does not end here. There is a way forward. In this liminal space, once again, God proclaims that their fear—this new, uncertain way—is still held within the promise of resurrection. For this, I believe, is the promise of this life: that the story of creation happens again and again.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



The Promise | Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Acrylic and gold leaf on canvas

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INVITED

I like to imagine that each year,
God invites me to a party.
God drops me a note that says,
"No gifts, casual dress. Come just as you are."

I like to imagine that I am brave enough to go.
I like to imagine that I decide that I am worth it.
This was no pity invite,
There is no obligatory postage.
God wants me there.

So I get myself together,
Smudged glasses, sensitive ego, wrinkled shirt, and all.
I ring the doorbell a few minutes late on account of the fact that
I lost my keys twice trying to get out the door,
And I almost turn back to hide in my car,
Afraid that I might embarrass myself over appetizers or small talk.
But then God answers the door,
And God says, "You're here!"
And I smile, because I am.

And with every step past that threshold,
I know that God is cheering me on.
It's the pride of a parent watching their child take their first step.
If I freeze, God is not disappointed.
If I fall, God is not mad.
But if I trust the invitation,
If I move closer,
I know, God celebrates.

Friends, you've got mail.
It's an invitation to dust off your shoes,
To go deeper,
To trust that you're worth it,
To lose your keys and your faith,
And then to find them both, along with your worth.
You are invited.
We are invited.
Again and again and again.
This invitation is for you.

Poem by Rev. Sarah Are

READ **Mark 16:1-8**

COMMENTARY | **Rev. T. Denise Anderson**

Do we ever consider the mechanics of a sunrise? The earth spinning at 1000 mph, traveling an orbit of 584 million miles around a star that's about 1 million times the size of our planet is dizzying. But because we've come to expect sunrises every day, we're not always impressed by them. Often we sleep right through them. That doesn't make them any less awesome or miraculous.

Easter is as familiar to Christians as a sunrise. We know the story—at least one variation—and we likely expect to greet the day the same way every year. But if we've been sitting in the tension of last week, we may be able to experience this day differently.

Mark's gospel is, again, straightforward. There are no frills in this resurrection account. There's not much joy in it, either. Sunday morning was a time of profound grief for those closest to Jesus. Consider those first few days after you've lost someone and the liminality between their death and funeral. There's no closure yet, and mornings are reminders that the nightmare is real. It's hard to imagine how you'll face the day.

Friday's terror gives way to new terror as the women arrive to find the stone removed and a strange young man with an outlandish story. Remember that nothing about this sight is recognizable to them. This isn't comforting. They run away terrified, unable to even speak of what they saw!

But resurrection still came, even if they weren't yet able to receive it. Things can be scary and okay at the same time.

Again and again, the sun rises on a new day, often without embrace or acknowledgment. The same is true of resurrection. Whether or not we discern what's happening, God is literally and figuratively turning the world around!

LIGHT

In Italian, the phrase, "to give birth"
Literally means, "to bring into the light."
A mother will labor for hours and days,
Breaking herself for you,
Whispering between fractured breaths,
"This is my body, broken for you."

A mother will do this as long as it takes
So that you, her beloved,
Have a chance at life.
So that you, her beloved,
Can feel the warmth of the light.

And after all that pain,
The sun will rise.
The doctor will put a baby on her chest.
The mother will hold her child as if
Letting go is indeed physically impossible.
She will breathe easy,
And then she will whisper softly,
"All this time,
All these deep breaths...
It was love, again and again and again."

It is childbirth,
But it is also resurrection.
A body broken.
Breath fractured.
A long night.
A sunrise.
Breath returned.
New life,
And a love that won't let go.

Friends, maybe Easter is just God whispering,
"All this time,
All these deep breaths...
It's been love, again and again and again."
I think we've been standing in the light all this time.
Now that I think of it, isn't it warm?

Poem by Rev. Sarah Are

READ **Matthew 6:1-21**

COMMENTARY | **Rev. T. Denise Anderson**

As I write this, millions have been affected by a disease that was unknown to humans just a year ago. It has stolen loved ones and changed us in ways we are still discovering. On Ash Wednesday 2020, it hadn't yet had the global impact it eventually achieved. You probably marked the occasion by having ashes imposed on your forehead as a sign of lament and repentance, showing you intend to turn things around in your living.

That was when we could touch, hug, or just be with each other without face masks and an imaginary tape measure.

I'm sure lament is easy to find today. There is also much we still need to turn around.

Collectively known as the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew's anthology of Jesus' teachings begins with the Beatitudes, a litany pronouncing blessings upon the unsung folks. The poor in spirit, the meek, the mourners, the peacemakers—these are called "blessed." Jesus shows himself here to be countercultural. The kind of religion he promoted wasn't performative, as so much of religious life can be. We give because it is necessary. Prayer prioritizes God's will, not our words. Fasting produces spiritual, not physical evidence. What we value is different.

There's something poignant about this in a time when we cannot rely on most of the social norms we've used our whole lives. Even facial cues fail us because of the masks we must wear! Performative interactions with God and others will similarly fail us in these times. They simply won't be enough. We must go deeper.

Again and again, God invites us into fuller ways of being. There is no better time to accept that invitation than now, when so much is different. Maybe no ashes mark our foreheads today, but they can still mark our hearts.



Invited In | Lauren Wright Pittman
Hand-carved block printed with oil-based ink on paper

READ John 19:1-30

FROM THE ARTIST | Hannah Garrity

Pitiful, sad, scary. The continuous repetition of history is so poignant with our yearly reading of this text. As I drew and cut the layers of this work, I contemplated the ways in which I play the role of Pontius Pilate or the crowd in my daily life. Where do I perpetuate hate? Where do I forward injustice? Where do I join the voice of the wayward crowd?

Pontius Pilate depicts the weakness of the status quo. Structures—what holds them up? What makes them fall? Windows are the lenses through which we see the world. In this image, we look through the window of my favorite architectural style, Arts and Crafts, to the cathedral window style. I portrayed layers of architecture and symbol. The cross is a contentious symbol. I repeat it again and again. The cross is the instrument that murders God incarnate. The crown of thorns shames Jesus. I have placed the Alpha and Omega within the crown of thorns on the cross, reminding us that the crowd put God to death and shamed God. The cross I drew was modeled after Celtic crosses made of nails.

Again and again, we meet Pontius Pilate, knowing Jesus to be innocent, refusing to protect him from the hate of the masses, refusing to do the right thing. As I look around me now, I see the same things happening in our daily lives, in the life of our nation, in the life of the world. How can I pivot those places in my life where I resemble the crowd and crucify the righteous, or where I resemble Pontius Pilate and perpetuate the injustice of the status quo?

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Status Quo | Hannah Garrity
Paper lace

READ Matthew 6:1-21

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

Again and again, we are invited inward. The common thread here is the focus on expressing love for God in secret, not for the recognition of others, but as an outpouring of devotion for God alone. I think the references to spiritual disciplines are less about the particular acts themselves and more about the intention fueling the action. The intention affects the quality of the action itself. Does your outward action align with what's going on inside of you?

There are times when I've been with friends and I've felt this tug to document the event and share it on social media. This impulse yanks me out of the present moment, away from my friends, and I find myself focused on how the event might be perceived by others. Ultimately, it's as though the moment isn't actually happening. I'm not present in mind, body, or spirit; I am elsewhere, fixated on my phone. Have you heard this before: "If you didn't post it, did it even happen?" I think that is a great question to consider. Are we so caught up in the amplification of our actions and how they are widely perceived, that the actions themselves are void? If we are more concerned with how our public prayers and acts of allyship are received, are we actually praying? Are we actually being an ally?

God invites us into thorough self-examination and authentic relationship. In this image, a person kneels with arms extended, basking in the glow of God's all-encompassing love. It is in the true pursuit of God, this intimate, inward turning, that God sees you. It is in our full, embodied intentionality that we find deep connection with God and ourselves. This is the reward.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Dawn | Hannah Garrity
Paper lace over watercolor

READ John 19:1-30

COMMENTARY | Rev. T. Denise Anderson

"A MAN WAS LYNCHED YESTERDAY"

These words were stitched onto a flag that flew outside the Manhattan headquarters of the NAACP between 1920 and 1938. When a Black person was lynched, the flag was raised the following day. This began after the 1916 lynching of Jesse Washington. The NAACP distributed the grotesque photos of Washington's lynching to raise awareness and rally support to fight racial terror.

Thirty-nine years after Washington's lynching, Emmett Till met a similar end. His mother insisted on an open-casket funeral. Photos of the 14-year-old's mutilated body were published widely, catalyzing a movement.

In 2018, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice opened in Montgomery, Alabama. Eight hundred markers carry the names of thousands of victims of racial terror (including a relative of mine). Their "offenses" included protesting low wages, refusing to be undercut in a business deal, and "standing around."

You should understand that what happened to Jesus was a lynching.

I don't say this to shock. The late Dr. James Cone deftly made the connection in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree.*[3] While the word is a Revolutionary War relic, the practice of publicly punishing dissidents to discourage and terrorize their community is much older. Lynching can be state-sanctioned or extrajudicial. For Palestinian Jews under Roman occupation, the cross was a tool of repression and terror. Know your place, or you're next!

Today a mob handed over an innocent man to be tortured and killed. Members of his own community chose Empire, while Empire feigned innocence. His mother, like Sybrina Fulton, Lesley McSpadden, and Mamie Till-Mobley after her, witnesses. Behold your son… brutalized.

Do not look away and do not rush to redeem this violence.
A MAN WAS LYNCHED TODAY.

Again and again we find ourselves… here, where even Jesus is groping for God.

---

3 Cone, James H. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree.* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY, 2011).

HERE

There are places that our bodies know—
The curve of the couch, the creak of the porch swing,
The number of steps to our love's front door.

There are places that our bodies know,
And then there are places our souls know—
  Waiting rooms and sanctuaries,
  Nurseries and bedrooms,
  Open roads and dinner tables.
These are the travel routes,
The many destinations of a well-lived soul.

And while my soul would always prefer
To stay in the sun, living on the
Front porch swings where life is easy,
From time to time,
We all find ourselves at grief's front door,
In love's waiting room,
Or on the long and treacherous road to justice's house.
So when you do,
Remember:
Your body can be in a familiar space
While your soul can feel a long way from home.
Go easy on her.
She is traveling.
Being here has never been easy.

Poem by Rev. Sarah Are

READ **Isaiah 58:1-12**

FROM THE ARTIST | **Hannah Garrity**

In this image, I am mesmerized by the lines, the way that even in the two-dimensional, this dancer is in perpetual motion. Even in a whirlpool, threatening to suck away her life, this dancer is rising—effortlessly. It is magical.

But fighting oppression in real life is a constant exercise in finding the magic in a moment. Fighting oppression in real life is the antithesis of effortlessness. As I look around our world, I see people doubling down to forward oppression. As I look around our world, I see so many amazing embodiments of our Holy Spirit, pushing back, spinning out, rising up. It is magical. I am amazed.

In this image, I have represented a woman spinning up out of a whirlpool, her face shining up at the sun. She rises above the ruins of ancient cities. Background motion spins up with the energy of the woman who represents the Holy Spirit, who represents the oppressed breaking free from the yoke, breaking "forth like the dawn" (Isaiah 58:8).

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

REMEMBER WHEN?

God never begins letters with the words,
"I hope this finds you well,"
For those words imply distance.

Instead, God begins God's letters to you with the words,
"Remember when?"

Beloved child,
Remember when we dipped our toes into the water?
Remember when we dove right in?
Remember when the ice cream dripped down our hands
And the cicadas sang their song,
And the seasons changed,
And the days were long?
Remember when we fell in love and the world was new?
Remember when our heart was broken?
Remember the tears?
Remember the long nights?
Remember when we laughed again and the sound surprised us?
Remember when we marched in the street?
Remember when we cast our vote?
Remember when we believed in hope?
Remember when?
I do.

That's what God's letters say.
So on this day, and every day to come,
Remember: God is meeting you.
If you look back, you might remember when.

Poem by Rev. Sarah Are

READ John 13:1-17, 31b-35

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

"'You will never wash my feet.'
'If I don't wash your feet, what share will you have with me?'"
(John 13:8)

The first time my dad took me to visit her in the hospital, I walked in to find a slouched figure sunken below a bundle of blankets. Short brown hairs collected in clumps along her shoulders and pillowcase. A cotton beanie grasped the edges of her yellowing, swollen face. I averted my eyes at the sight, tricked by cancer's devouring disguise. Pale walls drained the room of energy; even the blue curtains in the window drooped lethargically against the wall. As we came close, my mother's shrunken torso grew, her familiar, honey-rich voice filled like liquid in my ears.

"Take off your shoes. Let me rub your feet."
I paused. Death pressed in on us like an unrelenting fog. I was scared, unsure of how to play daughter to a mother whose life was slowly slipping away.

"Let me rub your feet."
Reluctantly, I climbed up onto the hospital bed. Reaching through the blanketed layers, she removed my shoes, the sweat from my middle school basketball practice still lingering on my skin. Without hesitation, she peeled off my socks and gently massaged away the anxieties building within the room.

In the face of the cancer that would soon take her, my mother was determined to hold us close. In the fading and fullness of life, she savored moments of service to others. Her gentleness continues to startle and soothe me.

"You, too, must wash each other's feet."
(John 13:14)

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



You, Too, Must | Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Digital painting with collage

READ **Mark 1:9-15**

COMMENTARY | **Rev. T. Denise Anderson**

My personal story is, though my family wasn't very "churchy," I somehow came to religion in my teens. I came to my denomination in seminary after learning more about the Reformed tradition. Reformed theology emphasizes God's initiative, which is consistent with my own experience. I can't tell you that I ever really found God. It was God who found me, and kept finding me throughout my life. Whether I was observant or indifferent about my faith, God was always close by.

Mark's gospel serves as source material for both Matthew and Luke's gospels. It's the shortest and most perfunctory of all four gospels. In just seven verses, we learn of three significant events in the life of Jesus as he began his ministry. The first is his baptism, where God claims him as God's own beloved son. The second is his experience in the wilderness, where God sends angels to attend to him as he faces the Accuser. Lastly, after John the Baptist's arrest, Jesus begins proclaiming God's proximity and reign while calling for repentance.

The common thread in each account is God's closeness. In pivotal moments, God is extraordinarily present with Jesus and those around him, and for good reason. In the Black church we sing of how God picks us up, turns us around, and places our feet "on solid ground." God's proximity informs our trajectory. God approaches us to claim, equip, and send us to do God's will.

Again and again, God meets us where we are, but doesn't leave us there. We shift from sinking sand to solid ground, navel-gazing to community, personal pietism to justice for all, and away from behaviors, both personal and systemic, that frustrate God's vision for the world.



I Delight in You | Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Digital painting with collage

READ John 13:1-17, 31b-35

COMMENTARY | Rev. T. Denise Anderson

One of the holiest duties of pastoring is coming alongside families at the end of a life. No two experiences are identical, and a few are exceptionally difficult. Some people are the glue of the family and act as a linchpin for their relatives. When they go, the family scatters. That can be due to bad blood, or it can simply be that Aunt Mae was the one who always called everyone together. It's harder now without her initiative and good cooking.

In the best cases, people prepare their folks for their departure. It doesn't stop grief, but hopefully preparation makes grief manageable. This is Jesus' work on this day.

Mandatum, the origin of "Maundy," is Latin for "commandment." As crucifixion nears, Jesus gives his remaining disciples a commandment related to the time they've spent together. They're to love one another as Jesus has loved them. Not dissimilar from the *Shema Yisrael*[2] from which the greatest commandment comes, it points to Jesus' divinity and engages his disciples' memory.

How did Jesus love them? They'll have to draw from their encounters. The acts of love and healing, the teaching, the signs and wonders—all of it needs to be recalled. Throughout John, the disciples are said to have remembered certain events after Jesus' resurrection. John's gospel emphasizes memory and its role in belief, and we see Jesus constantly preparing them for this time. They could keep each other close by emulating the one who kept them close.

Additionally, Jesus has already promised to leave them with the Advocate who'd step in when memory and faculties fail. Yes, he'd have to leave them, but they wouldn't be alone.

Again and again, we are held together, even in our deepest grief and greatest danger. Remember that, and believe.

2 As the centerpiece for Jewish prayer services, the *Shema Yisrael* opens with the verse, "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one."

UNTIL THAT DAY *(Written in December, 2020)*

We cannot shake hands right now.
We cannot hug or kiss cheeks.
We cannot lean in to tell stories
Or draw close to pray.
We cannot pass the peace
Or even pass the time in each other's homes.
We cannot eat together,
Because the world is sick.

So instead of holding each other,
We hold distance.
We hold masks.
We hold statistics on the tips of our tongues.
We hold fear,
We hold space,
We hold tense conversations.

Maybe by the time you're reading this,
The day will have come
For all God's people to be gathered at Table.
Maybe by the time you're reading this,
We will be eating together.
Maybe we'll be hugging.
Hopefully there will be dancing
And laughing and kissing
And leaning in to tell stories,
And throwing our heads back to laugh.

But until that day,
I will wiggle my toes,
And think of footwashing.
I will eat sweet bread,
Ravenously,
And remember Communion.
I will close my eyes,
And picture your face.
I will clasp my hands
And know—
As sure as one palm knows the other—
That we are being held.
We are being held together.

Poem by Rev. Sarah Are

READ Mark 1:9-15

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

During Advent, we learn that the good news begins with John the Baptist shouting in the wilderness and "everyone in Judea and *all* the people of Jerusalem" following him out of the city to the Jordan river to be baptized, to repent, to change their hearts and, consequently, their lives (Mark 1:5). This is a moment of mainstream conversion, of widespread openness to truly hear the cries of one shouting out, to leave what they had known behind to follow a new path. This, Mark tells us, is when Jesus' ministry begins—with a community earnest and eager for change.

Mark tells us nothing about Jesus' life prior to this moment, omitting any details of his miraculous birth or the years of his youth. Instead, Mark notes that Jesus comes from Nazareth of Galilee (over 100 km north of Jerusalem) to join John the Baptist's movement. We might expect the long-awaited Messiah to greet his new followers like the kings before him have—with a pompous coronation, with hunger to exert power and control over his populus. Instead, Jesus steps in line along the river's edge, blending in with the crowds, joining in solidarity with those around him. Jesus doesn't demand any attention, but as soon as the water washes over him, creation is summoned to celebrate. I imagine him wading into the waters and leaning back to receive the blessing that falls upon him like rain: *You are my beloved. I delight in you.*

In this moment, God-in-flesh joins alongside those he will heal, beckon, teach, challenge, and comfort. Simultaneously, God-in-Spirit meets Christ at the water's edge, at the threshold of his ministry. Before Jesus faces the pain, betrayal, and challenges of what will come, before he does anything to prove himself, God grants him unconditional belovedness as his essence. From this, all his subsequent teachings and actions flow.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



In Our Hands | Lauren Wright Pittman
Hand-carved block printed with oil-based ink on paper

READ John 12:1-19

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

Jesus lies down on the donkey's back, steeling himself before his journey through the palms. He has a target on his back—he's a disruption to the status quo upheld by the Pharisees and Chief Priests, and a threat to the power of the empire. His friend Lazarus is caught up in it all too. I imagine as he closes his eyes and strokes the donkey's hair, he hears the anguish in Mary and Martha's voices as they cried out to him, wondering why he took so long. I imagine he smells the pungent fragrance of the burial perfume poured on his feet, bringing into clarity the reality of his impending death. I imagine he sees the judgment on Judas' face as he was scrutinized for wasting perfume and neglecting those in desperate need.

Jesus plans to enter the city in a way that symbolically subverts power, taking a route opposite of the military leaders who oversee the festival celebrations. His entry would make a definitive statement, imaging an alternative kind of power, a servant leader riding an humble donkey. He knew this act would inch him closer to state-sanctioned torture and death.

We are in a time when we need to draw on courage to call into question the structures that uphold systems of oppression. We are in a time when we need to subvert the powerful and protect the vulnerable. The crowds close in on Jesus. Some lift their hands in praise, others point accusingly. I hope this image serves as a reminder to call upon God for the courage you need, to rest and recharge for the work ahead. But I hope it also heartens you to move forward in courage, even in the midst of great resistance, toward the work God is calling you into.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Through the Palms | Lauren Wright Pittman
Hand-carved block printed with oil-based ink on paper

READ Genesis 9:8-17

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

In the beginning God filled the formless void with color, texture, light, flavor, time, and life. God scooped the clay and carefully molded it, breathing life into the nostrils of humanity. These are the images of a tender, imaginative God who loves Creation limitlessly.

Following the Creation narrative, humanity quickly spirals into violence, corruption, and power-hunger toward the total destruction of Creation. God becomes deeply aggrieved and even regrets creating humanity (Gen 6:6). God decides it best to return all of Creation to the chaotic void, though God finds hope in Noah's family. I've struggled with this narrative, but I find myself feeling a tremendous amount of compassion. I can only imagine how painful it is to watch the work of your hands devolve into brutality.

God offers Noah, his descendants, and every living creature an all-encompassing promise, vowing never to flood the earth again. Despite humanity's destructive role, God limits God's self and alone is held accountable in this covenant. God requires nothing of humanity or the entirety of Creation in return. God gives humanity a chance to start fresh, and the opportunity to choose a different path. If we model our actions after God's, then we would humble and limit ourselves in order to better love God and care for Creation. Sacrifice and selflessness pave the new way.

In this image, God's hands hold various animals and plant life, and are surrounded by the bands of the rainbow, shielding Creation from the swirling waters of chaotic destruction. I chose not to image humanity because the hands are at once God's and ours. We must respond to God's covenant by protecting and keeping the earth. It is our responsibility; it is our calling. God meets us where we are—utterly dependent and bound toward self-destruction—with a promise sealed with a bow bursting with the endless spectrum of colors light holds.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

TRUTH THAT RICOCHETS

I went to a lecture once—
An interfaith conversation with
interfaith leaders.
Whispers bounced off the
church's tile floors
As people shuffled into place,
Carrying hope alongside
assumptions—
Mixed into pockets like loose change.

About halfway through the evening,
A young woman in a blue hijab
began speaking.
She was the youngest person on
the panel,
Seated far to the left. You might
almost miss her
If you weren't paying attention;
But not here, not when she spoke.

In quiet determination she told us of
fear and persecution.
She told us of hatred and racial slurs,
Thrown at her people from car
windows like bombs.
It was a truth I did not know,
And that truth ricocheted like sunlight
through the cathedral windows,
Touching almost everyone that day.

Then a man in the back, who could
have been me—
Who has been me—
Approached the microphone and said,
"Your people are persecuted. You
live in fear. You are battered
by hate.
If that is true, then why am I just
now hearing about it?
Why is your story not on the news?
Why have you not spoken up
about it?"

And the air was still, partly because
we held our breath in anticipation,
And partly because the Spirit slows
her dance when we stand at the
edge of truth.
The woman in the blue hijab leaned
into the microphone
And whispered with a quiet strength
that can only come from years
of practice:
"We are screaming."

If there is one truth in my life
That unfolds again and again,
It is the need to listen.

For again and again, I will try,
with good intentions,
To act and walk with love.
But again and again, I will
make mistakes.
Again and again, I will say the
wrong thing.
Again and again, they will call
me Peter,
And again and again, they will
be right.

So again and again,
I will pray for a truth that ricochets,
For ears that will listen,
And for space to hold truth.

If people are screaming,
And to be clear—
people *are* screaming—
I do not want to miss it.

Poem by Rev. Sarah Are

READ **John 12:1-19**

COMMENTARY | **Rev. T. Denise Anderson**

Lights. Camera. Action!

We begin the high drama of Holy Week with a reading in three parts.

Lights: In John's gospel, the role of the sometimes mysterious woman who anoints Jesus before his death belongs to Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, whom Jesus resurrected from death. Judas objects to the act's expense, but Jesus points out there are still opportunities to address poverty, if that's Judas' desire (it's not). The spotlight is on someone we now understand as a scoundrel and who'd later play a major role in the crucifixion plot. Everyone's motivations are exposed and the week's events foreshadowed.

Camera: The word "photography" comes from the Greek words for "light" and "writing." Essentially, photography "draws the light," and cameras are modeled after the construction of the human eye. All eyes right now are on Jesus. That's a problem for the chief priests, who then set their eyes on Lazarus to undermine Jesus. We witness what is both secret and open.

Action: Everything is now set in motion. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is a spectacle. It's a protest, a counternarrative to the Empire's extravagance and repression. It happens opposite the Roman governor's own parade into Jerusalem for the Passover. It's the people's declaration of a different reign. The use of a donkey is Messianic imagery. This is political theater, and it would ramp up the plots against Jesus' life.

"Courage" derives from Latin word "cor," which means "heart." When we consider the full Palm Sunday picture, these are frightful times. So much is happening that is both hopeful and terrifying. Tensions and tears are plentiful. But the Word will remind us to "take heart."

Again and again, we take heart amid the drama. The script is unsettling, but we have not yet reached "The End."

PEACEFUL PROTEST

I wonder if Jesus could feel his heartbeat
In his throat, the way I do when I'm afraid.
I wonder if he had to take deep breaths,
In through his nose, out through his mouth,
Tricking his body into a state of calm.
I wonder if he was nauseous, like I am
When I'm headed into a hard conversation.
I wonder if he had to summon his courage,
Tucking fear away so that he could hold onto
What mattered most with both hands.

I wonder, because time has taught us
That it is not uncommon
For a peaceful protest
To start or end
With an unjust death.

So I wonder,
Did he know?
Was he afraid?
Did anyone see it?

I want to hold what matters most with both hands.

Poem by Rev. Sarah Are

READ **Mark 8:31-9:8**

COMMENTARY | **Rev. T. Denise Anderson**

I'm a Black woman who does antiracism education and advocacy in a very white denomination. I do that work often in the face of fierce opposition from fellow Christians, but it's not hard to understand why. Think of the times we've tried to quiet a friend who was going through a tough time, or averted our eyes away from someone asking for money at a street corner. Approximately 75% of sexual assaults in the U.S. go unreported for a reason. We don't exactly incentivize the telling of hard truths.

Hard truths trouble the waters of our understanding and challenge notions of what is real. For Peter, hearing Jesus foretell his agonizing death and resurrection must have made no sense. Just before this, he had named Jesus "Messiah" (and, according to other gospels, Jesus in turn named him "Peter"). How could the Christ talk like this? Peter wants to quiet Jesus. Jesus would instead quiet him.

At Jesus' transfiguration, a sight that may have been more in line with Peter's Messianic imagination, he wants to build altars to mark the event. But again, Peter is quieted. He is told to listen.

The Lenten journey calls us to examine the things in which our hearts are invested. How important is comfort to us? Would we be willing to listen to hard truths and be changed by them even if it proved to be difficult? Or are we committed to the status quo because, though it may be imperfect, it's at least familiar?

Again and again, we are implored to listen, especially when what we hear is unsettling. Repentance means changing direction. Like a heavenly GPS, Spirit is highlighting a new path. May we tune our sensors heaven-ward, despite the difficulties along the way.



Transfiguration | Lauren Wright Pittman
Hand-carved block printed with oil-based ink on paper

READ Jeremiah 31:31-34

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

The events of 2020 have made me keenly aware of the brokenness of humanity. We can't seem to see past ourselves, neglecting our neighbor and undoing creation. We repeat past patterns, and the low moments of history keep echoing again and again. We point fingers, shrug responsibility, and we turn our back on God, widening the chasm between this world and the coming Kin-dom. God's frustration and disappointment are palpable in this text: "a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband" (v.32). I think it's important to sit with that for a bit. God has gifted us everything—our lives, this wonderful world—and we can be so forgetful and ungrateful.

Despite humanity's constant breaking of covenants, God continues to seek reconciliation and pours out grace upon grace. Why not let this grace transform us? It is in receiving God's grace, responding in gratitude, and offering grace to others that God forms us into who we were made to be. God saves us from ourselves, writing the way on our hearts, and gives us unlimited chances to get it right. It's clear we can't keep the covenant on our own, so God steps in, offering and fulfilling the covenant at once. What a gift!

In this image, I drew an anatomical heart with the words, "I will be their God, and they shall be my people." The heart is surrounded by covenantal imagery—including the stars imaging the vastness of Abraham's descendants, the parted seas on the journey to the land flowing with milk and honey, and the rainbow signaling God's promise to all of creation. It creates a beautiful kaleidoscope of stories that define our pilgrimage with God. The common thread throughout these narratives is that when we mess up, God is ready with a promise, again and again.

PRAY

In quiet contemplation, color in the page on the left, reflecting on how the imagery illuminates what you find in the scripture and artist's statement. Conclude with a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Written on our Hearts | Lauren Wright Pittman
Digital drawing

READ Mark 8:31-9:8

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

I'm not a good listener. In the midst of our national reckoning around structural racism and white supremacy in the U.S., I've found that I've done a terrible job listening to my Black and Brown siblings. I constantly have to resist the urge to explain myself, to be seen as good and antiracist. I try saying all the right things, I do performative acts of allyship, and quite honestly, I need to be quiet and listen. I need to be ready to accept criticism, and instead of trying to prove anything, I need to gain awareness of my internalized biases and learned racist tendencies and do the difficult work of unlearning them in every moment. "Get behind me, Satan" (Mark 8:33).

Here we find Peter stepping in and saying all the right things, rejecting the notion that Christ must suffer and die; but in the end, he's not listening to Jesus. It seems Peter's rejection of this narrative reflects his fear of the suffering he also might face in following Christ. "Let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34).

Six days later, the disciples are called to listen once again. In this image, I zoomed out to focus on the moment of Transfiguration. Jesus shines like a beacon atop the high mountain while former prophets appear. The disciples are terrified, but also want to live this moment forever, making the glory-filled rock face their home. At once a cloud descends, obscuring things further, and God's voice echoes down, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!" (Mark 9:7). It's almost as though Jesus had exhausted all efforts to get the disciples to listen, and God had to spectacularly reiterate the importance of listening. I think it's important to note that following God's words, all the disciples could see was Jesus.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Sleep Unborn | Hannah Garrity
Paper lace

READ John 12:20-33

FROM THE ARTIST | Hannah Garrity

I love borders. I place them in my artwork so that I can break them. They set up a reiteration of balance; they allow for a secondary or tertiary focal point. They introduce a conversation. In this image, the border allows for variation in the foreground and separation in the sky. The wheat breaks through the border. The horizon continues past the border. What are the metaphors within this imagery?

People are drawn to Jesus, drawn to love. I portray God's voice with cumulonimbus clouds, the clouds of thunderstorms. As they move upward toward the heavens, they become wheat and doves. The image incorporates a border representing the loving constraints that Jesus' ministry places on our lives and choices. What would Jesus do? Jesus would love.

The wheat grows beyond the border of life; the wheat brings forth a standard of daring love. "Those who love their life lose it" (John 12:25). The wheat breaks the border, it dances with the voice of God, it is not cautious, it is not scarce. It is love.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Drawn to Love | Hannah Garrity
Paper lace

READ Psalm 22:23-31

FROM THE ARTIST | Hannah Garrity

"To God, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him."
(Psalm 22:29)

As I contemplate the idea of people beneath the earth and people in the womb, I feel a sense of beautiful protection. In particular, I feel a deep connection to our minuteness in contrast to the greatness of God. Each time I meet this text, I find myself taken by the repetitious time spent in joyous and abundant praise of God. God, we love you. God, we are amazed by you. God, you are everywhere, you are everything. God, we praise you!

In this piece, I depict a sense of covering—covering in the womb, "people yet unborn" (v. 28); covering in the soil, "sleep in the earth" (v. 31). A spiral radiates outward representing praise. The pattern depicts people in various poses of prayer and praise.

As I cut tiny stencils of prayer poses, I abstracted them to depict the shrouded minuteness of our being in God's presence. As we became a beautiful and intricate pattern of prayer and praise, I began to see other images in the patterns—masks, faces, flowers—as though all states of being are present in that constancy of appreciation for God.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

FLIPPING TABLES

I woke up and realized I was sitting at a table that oppression built.
The patriarchy made the food.
Cheap labor sewed the table cloth.
The guest list was exclusive.
Fear was the host.

And the people seemed happy,
But the food tasted awful.
Because milk and honey
Are reserved for God's promised day.

So hold onto your silverware,
Because now that I see it,
I can't unsee.

This table is about to be flipped.

Poem by Rev. Sarah Are

READ **John 12:20-33**

COMMENTARY | **Rev. T. Denise Anderson**

The year 2020 will be remembered as one of pestilence, pressure, and protest. Even as a global pandemic disproportionately affected marginalized people, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and others joined the already-long litany of Black lives lost to police violence and the imaginations of armed civilians. Everything was changing, but too much remained the same. The unrest was almost constant.

Consider then what must have been brewing in Jerusalem the week Jesus was crucified.

Our reading jumps ahead to that week and the moments after Jesus' protest march into Jerusalem (more on that next week). Imagine that the air is charged as an occupied people remember God's liberation of their ancestors from another empire. They're aware of Jesus' wonders and are anxious for restoration.

As his lore grows and visiting Jews from the diaspora seek him out, Jesus telegraphs the vision. In order for the seed to bear fruit, it must die. Those who follow him must go where he goes. Whoever tries to retain their life will ultimately lose it. This is troubling because the Messiah was expected to live forever. Jesus is again defying expectations. But for those who were worried, a voice from heaven confirms Jesus' identity.

Change, even when welcomed, means death. I once had the unenviable task of pastoring a church through dissolution. We realized that change would happen either with us or to us. We could die to some things so that we could live to others, or we could hold onto what is and die with it. Only one of these is a faithful way forward.

Again and again, we are being reformed. The process is uncomfortable, but the status quo is untenable. When change happens *with* us, what could possibly take root and flourish?

KEEP DIGGING

I can feel change inside of me.
It's a slow burn.
Change usually starts out hot—
Defensive and angry,
A self-righteous blanket
Of, "I am right and here's why . . ."
I wrap it around my shoulders
Like a barricade.
I fight the temptation to lean forward,
To play the challenger,
To argue with confidence.

But in time,
Almost always,
The heat fades.
The air leaves the balloon.
The audacity of it all
Starts to wear off.
And eventually,
What I am left with
Is myself
And a big, open sky.
It's colder here.
It's quieter.
I can hear my thoughts.

And in this big, wide openness
I am able to say out loud,
"Maybe I wasn't right.
Maybe I need to learn.
Maybe it's time for change.
Maybe that's okay."

And if I'm quiet, and if I'm paying attention,
I can usually hear God whisper inside of me,
"Good work, my child. Now keep digging."

Poem by Rev. Sarah Are

READ **John 2:13-22**

COMMENTARY | **Rev. T. Denise Anderson**

What does it take to believe?

Even as the gospels attempt to tell the same story, each has its own motivations. John's gospel is invested in Jesus' divine authority and kinship with God. The cleansing of the temple is only the second vignette in John's narrative and shows Jesus disruptively asserting authority over temple activities. He upends the business of the sellers and money changers, objecting to these things happening in the temple (or perhaps at all). He's effectively inciting a riot, and the religious leaders demand of him a sign to prove that he has any standing to do this. In John's gospel, Jesus is divine and powerful, but doesn't have to prove anything to anyone, particularly those who insist on being intransigent. He often rebuffs calls for signs and answers, choosing instead to turn the proverbial tables on the inquirer. We'll see this happen again in the coming weeks' readings as we stay in John.

Remember, John identifies Jesus as the Word that has always been and through which all things were made. Since the Word has always been with us, it shouldn't need to prove itself. It should already be familiar to us. We've been taught righteousness for generations. Failure to respond probably won't be corrected by a sign.

The Akan principle of Sankofa[1] holds that it's not wrong to go back to get what you need to move forward. Taking inventory of our life, where have we let other values encroach upon our spiritual identity? What everyday miracles and lessons do we need to revisit before we ask for new ones? Do we welcome the Savior's authority, even if it upends everything around us?

Again and again, we are shown the way. May we fearlessly and with gratitude receive what we've already been given.

1 The Sankofa is a symbol, often depicting a mythical bird reaching back to retrieve an egg from its back, used by the Akan people of Ghana. It represents how the Akans seek to carry wisdom gleaned from the past into the future.



Overturn | Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Digital painting with collage

READ Ephesians 2:1-10

FROM THE ARTIST | Hannah Garrity

In our group study of the lectionary scriptures for Lent, Lisle was quick to tell me that this text matters a lot to Reformed theologians. I needed that theological and historical context. My first reading had brought nothing deep or important. I had completely missed what our Reformed thinkers had contemplated for centuries. Here are my notes from our conversation:

"This Ephesians text is really important to Reformed theologians. The idea in Paul's words is all about God's grace, not works. Prevenient grace—we are given grace and we live our lives in response to that grace. This makes me think of the Paul Simon lines,
'And as I watch the drops of rain
Weave their weary paths and die
I know that I am like the rain
There but for the grace of you go I.' [2]
I imagine a flow of water; it speaks of baptism. The ripple represents the expansive effect of God's prevenient grace."

Repetition in art is important. When I first created this piece, it appeared to me to be three different images. The sky, the distant water, and the ripple in the foreground. As I stared at the three patterns, I desired unification. Perhaps I'd repeat the ripple in the sky, or maybe add thin lines in the foreground to tie it in. But maybe, metaphorically, this separation can represent the idea of prevenient grace. The sky and the distance appear separated from the present. God's grace—represented in the water ripple in the foreground—will eventually connect us to it all.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

2 This is the last stanza of "Kathy's Song" by Simon and Garfunkel. © 1965 words and music by Paul Simon.



Prevenient | Hannah Garrity
Paper lace

READ John 2:13-22

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

In 1965, my grandfather moved his family of six to Birmingham, AL, to become the new senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church. Situated downtown, First Pres sits only a few blocks away from 16th Street Baptist Church, the site of the 1963 bombing attack by white supremacists who killed four young girls. Earlier that same year, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed eight prominent white clergy in his now famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail." My grandfather's predecessor was one of those clergy. They prompted King's famous letter by requesting he appeal to law and order. In essence they said to him: *"We agree with your movement, but your methods are too harsh. The demonstrations are destructive and causing too much backlash. You're bringing agitators into our city. Wait for a better time and negotiate gently."*

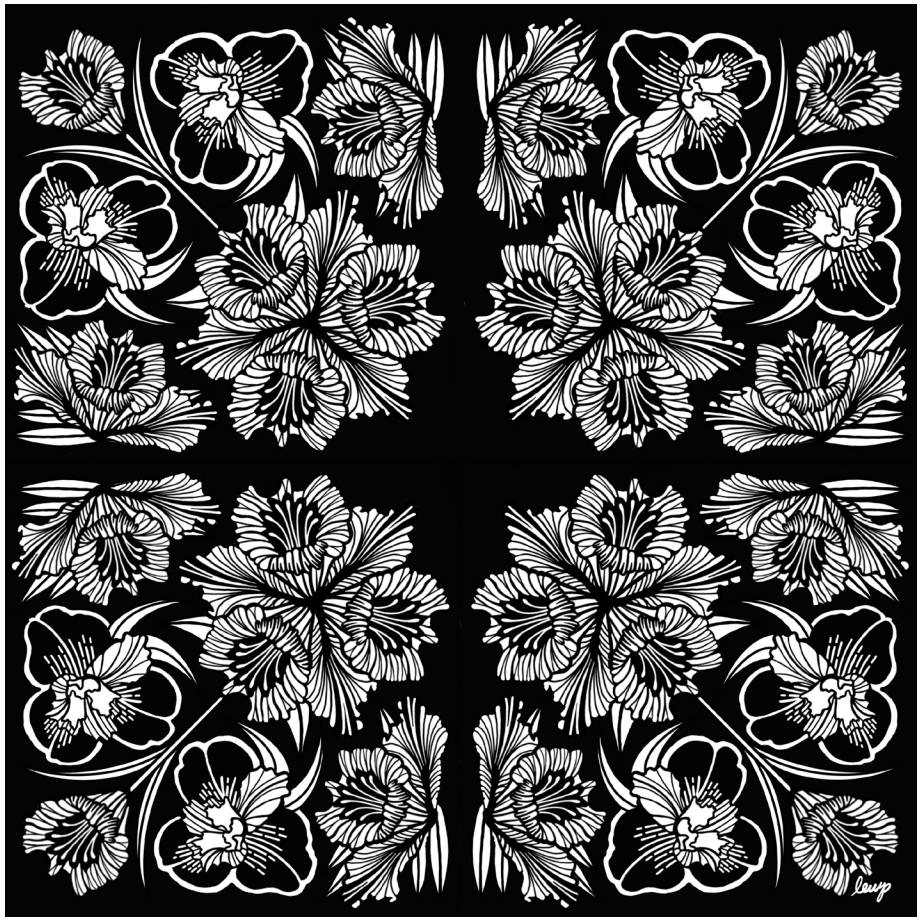
This is the context in which my grandfather began his ministry with First Pres. While he helped the church change their policy to become open to worshipers of all races (a process that undoubtedly required much moral fortitude), I wonder how often he, too, felt the urge of his predecessor and the other white clergy who had written to Dr. King. I wonder how often he preferred for justice to happen slowly, gently, and in an orderly manner. I think often about how that urge lives in me too.

In this image, I wanted to freeze-frame the destruction Jesus ignites, forcing us as viewers to focus on the process of dismantling and destroying an oppressive system. For those who willingly or unwillingly benefit from systems of oppression, it may feel threatening and terrifying to see them all come tumbling down. But for those held within the unrelenting grip of injustice, it must be completely and utterly liberating.

Again and again, Jesus shows us that his movement is about overturning systems of oppression to bring forth God's beloved community on earth. Again and again, liberation movements throughout history pursue this same goal. Will we join Jesus in the overturning, or like the disciples, question his methods?

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



The Cross Remains | Lauren Wright Pittman
Digital drawing

READ John 3:14-21

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

My first memory of this passage is from writing "John 3:16" on my basketball shoes when I was in seventh grade, joining many of my teammates in blending our sport with our faith. I don't remember knowing what the verse really meant, but my display of it was to make a statement about who I was—or at least who I desperately wanted to be. Like the branded clothes I wore, or the way I styled my hair, this was just another way to curate my middle school self-image. I wanted to show that I was good, that I fit in, that I believed in God. Later that basketball season, I added another Sharpie pen tattoo to my basketball shoes: my mother's initials and the dates of her birth and death, marking the 44 years she lived. After her funeral, my teammates added her initials and the dates of her life to their sneakers in solidarity.

Now I know that Jesus originally spoke these famous words to Nicodemus, perhaps whispering them amidst the hushed noises of the night. I wonder why Nicodemus came to Jesus in the first place? Had Jesus' teachings uprooted his religious self-image, one carefully curated to project propriety and adherence to the law? Or had death recently left a sharp sting, unraveling his tidy beliefs, creating in him a well of desperate questions about eternal life?

Jesus speaks to him with poetry of promise: God didn't send his son to judge the world, but so the world might be restored through him. For God so loved. For God so loves, that like light, God keeps traveling to reach us with that redeeming love. In this abstract painting, the gold leaf marks become like a wave gliding through the cosmos, moving endlessly until it reaches everything.

As I think back to those Sharpie pen inscriptions on my basketball shoes, perhaps "For God so loved… so that everyone… will have eternal life" was the perfect companion to my mom's initials.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Light Wave | Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Acrylic painting with gold leaf on canvas

READ 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

Confession: I have a problem with the image of the cross. Early Christians expressed their identity subversively with a fish or an anchor, but once Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the cross emerged as the predominant Christian symbol. My struggle with the cross is connected to my rejection of state-sanctioned violence. It is after all an empirical torture device. In my desire to reject the empire's visual identification of the movement of Jesus, a symbol that has also been co-opted for questionable purposes in American culture, I have denied the cross as a marker of my identity with Christ.

As I have spent more time in reflection, however, I think this rejection could be an indication of my privilege. It is convenient for me to identify with more comfortable, rosy images of Christianity while turning away from the anguish Christ suffered at the hands of earthly power. It's easier for me to protest the cross than it is to try and more fully understand the ugliness of the oppression he endured. For those who know injustice intimately, the cross can be an image of profound identification with Jesus, the one who endured unspeakable agony and rose again.

On the wall next to my front door hangs a resurrection cross created by a Mexican artisan. I love it so much because you almost can't see the cross for the flowers. It serves as a reminder to me that death does not have the final word. I drew this image as I attempted to obscure the cross with blooming irises, a flower that represents wisdom and strength. Ultimately, in the negative space, the cross remains.

PRAY

In quiet contemplation, color in the page on the left, reflecting on how the imagery illuminates what you find in the scripture and artist's statement. Conclude with a silent or spoken prayer to God.

HOLD

If you hold a newborn in your arms,
All at once you will understand
The crook of your elbow
And the cup of your palm
As never before—
Ordinary curves of the body
Transformed into a resting space.
You were designed for love.

And if you're lucky enough
To hold a newborn in your arms,
And that newborn curls
Its tiny fingers around yours,
Making your hands look
Like the hands of a giant—
Then time might stand still,
And those around you might point and say,
"Look! That little one is holding you back."

And in that moment,
If you pay attention,
You will catch a glimpse
Of the circle that love was meant to be.
God is love,
Our resting place.
With small hands,
We hold back.

Poem by Rev. Sarah Are

READ **John 3:14-21**

COMMENTARY | **Rev. T. Denise Anderson**

John 3:16 is arguably the most recognizable verse in the New Testament. It's a full and true statement by itself. But, like all verses in Scripture, we miss so much without the context around it.

The passage is part of Jesus' discourse with Nicodemus, a religious leader who visits him at night for a conversation. Jesus speaks of being born from above, but Nicodemus is confused. Jesus breaks it down this way: I know what I'm talking about because I came from heaven, and I came so that the world might be saved from condemnation, though there are many who prefer to remain hidden because "their deeds were evil."

John's gospel doesn't intimate this, but it's speculated that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night to keep this conversation a secret. Jesus wasn't exactly popular among Nicodemus' set because he challenged them. If this is true, I wonder if Nicodemus saw himself in Jesus' comment about those who love to remain hidden (Note: While light [*phos*] and pigment [*chroma*] are different, I choose not to use "darkness" here because there's an historical practice of distorting scripture's light/dark dichotomy to reinforce colorism and anti-Blackness around the world).

What about us? Do we identify with those who avoid being exposed? Systemically, we remain invested in collective narratives that valorize our past and gloss over (or completely ignore) our ugliness. But I also don't like this kind of scrutiny for myself. There is vulnerability in being fully seen. We risk being defined by our blemishes. I trust few people with that picture, and only because I know they love me.

And there it is: love.

Again and again, God's love calls us into its redeeming *phos*.
Can we trust this love enough to draw the drapes of our souls?