



# Holy Wednesday

CONTEMPLATIVE WORSHIP

March 27, 2024  
11:30 AM—1:00 PM



*The soul is like a wild animal—tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, self-sufficient. It knows how to survive in hard places. But it is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently by the base of the tree, and fade into our surroundings, the wild animal we seek might put in an appearance.”*

—Parker Palmer

This is an opportunity to be in touch with what is most real within us, that which is more solid and enduring than what defines us externally. It's our soul—that place at the very center of our being that is known by God, that is grounded in God, and is one with God. But it's tricky to get the soul to come out, as Parker Palmer so eloquently describes. A lot of our activities are very noisy. We live as people crashing through the woods, making so much noise that there's not a soul in sight. There are very few places where the soul is truly safe, where the knowing, the questions, the longings of the soul are welcomed, received and listened to rather than evaluated, judged, or even beaten out of us.

**LET THIS BE AN OPPORTUNITY TO ENTER INTO STILLNESS,  
SO THAT YOUR SOUL FEELS SAFE TO COME OUT. SIMPLY STAY PRESENT WITH GOD.  
LET HIM BE YOUR ONLY COMPANION THROUGHOUT THIS TIME OF CONTEMPLATION.**

Today, as we journey with Jesus to the cross, our focus is on the theme of love. When God makes a covenant with us, God says: “I will love you with an everlasting love. I will be faithful to you, even when you run away from me, reject me, or betray me.” In our society we don't speak much about covenants; we speak about contracts. When we make a contract with a person, we say: “I will fulfill my part as long as you fulfill yours. When you don't live up to your promises, I no longer have to live up to mine.” Contracts are often broken because the partners are unwilling or unable to be faithful to their terms.

But God didn't make a contract with us; God made a covenant with us, and God wants our relationships with Him and one another to reflect that covenant. God loved you before you were born, and God will love you after you die. "I have loved you with an everlasting love" (Jer. 31:3). This is a very fundamental truth of your identity. This is who you are, whether you feel it or not. You belong to God from eternity to eternity. Life is just a little opportunity for you during a few years to experience that love and hear Him say, "I love you, too."

**SPEND SOME TIME IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD  
AND THANK HIM FOR THIS COVENANT OF LOVE.  
THIS IS ALSO AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXPRESS YOUR LOVE FOR HIM.**

When God sent Jesus to die on the cross, He wanted to make free persons of us. He has chosen compassion as the way to freedom. That is a great deal more radical than you might at first imagine. It means that God wanted to liberate us, not by removing suffering from us, but by sharing it with us. Jesus is God-who-suffers-with-us. Over time, the word *sympathizing* has become a somewhat feeble way of expressing the reality of "suffering with" someone. Nowadays, when someone says: "I have sympathy for you," it might have a rather distant ring about it. Sometimes there's a feeling of someone looking down from above. The word's original meaning of "suffering together with someone" has been partly lost. The word compassion is warmer, more intimate, and closer. It involves taking part in the suffering of the other.

**ARE THERE SUFFERINGS IN YOUR LIFE  
OR IN THE LIVES OF LOVED ONES AT THIS MOMENT?  
KNOWING THAT JESUS SUFFERS WITH YOU,  
BE ENCOURAGED TO BRING THEM TO GOD IN PRAYER,  
EVERYTHING THAT JESUS HAS DONE, SAID, AND UNDERGONE IS MEANT TO SHOW YOU THAT THE  
LOVE YOU MOST LONG FOR IS GIVEN TO YOU BY GOD.**

Perhaps there are days when you don't often "feel" like a beloved child of God. That, however, is your most primal identity and it's important to choose it above and beyond any hesitations. Strong emotions, self-rejection, and even self-hatred can justifiably toss you about, but you are free to respond as you will. You are not what others, or even you, think about yourself.

Many voices ask for our attention. There is a voice that says, "Prove that you are a good person." Another voice says, "You'd better be ashamed of yourself." There is also a voice that says, "Nobody really cares about you," and one that says, "Be sure to become successful, popular, and powerful."

You are not what you do. You are not what you have. You are not what you have collected in terms of friendships and connections. You are not the popularity that you have received. You are not the success of your work. You are not what people say about you, whether they speak well or whether they speak poorly about you. All these things that keep you quite busy, quite occupied, and often quite preoccupied are not telling the truth about who you are.

You are a full member of the human family, having been known before you were conceived and molded in your mother's womb. In times when you feel bad about yourself, try to choose to remain true to the truth of who you really are.

**IN QUIETNESS, LISTEN TO GOD'S STILL, SMALL VOICE THAT SAYS,  
"YOU ARE MY BELOVED, MY FAVOR RESTS ON YOU."  
THAT'S THE VOICE YOU NEED MOST OF ALL TO HEAR TO CLAIM AND RECLAIM  
YOUR PRIMAL IDENTITY AS A BELOVED CHILD OF A PERSONAL GOD.  
HE SAYS TO YOU, "I HAVE CALLED YOU FROM ALL ETERNITY  
AND YOU ARE ENGRAVED FROM ALL ETERNITY IN THE PALMS OF MY HANDS.  
YOU ARE MINE. YOU BELONG TO ME."  
ALLOW YOUR HEART TO BE TOUCHED BY THIS TRUTH.**


What can we say about God's love? We can say that God's love is unconditional. God does not say, "I love you, if ...". There are no "ifs" in God's heart. God's love for us does not depend on what we do or say, on our looks or intelligence, on our success or popularity. God's love for us existed before we were born and will exist after we have died. God's love is from eternity to eternity and is not bound to any time-related events or circumstances. Does that mean that God does not care what we do or say? No, it's because God's love wouldn't be real if God didn't care.

We often confuse unconditional love with unconditional approval. God loves us without conditions but does not approve of every human behavior. God doesn't approve of betrayal, violence, hatred, suspicion, and all other expressions of evil, because they all contradict the love God wants to instill in the human heart.

God's unconditional love means that God continues to love you even when you say or think evil things. God continues to wait for you as a loving parent waits for the return of a lost child. It is important for you to hold on to the truth that God never gives up loving you even when God is saddened by what you do. That truth will help you to return to God's ever-present love. With Paul, we must be certain that "neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nothing already in existence and nothing still to come, nor any power, nor the heights nor the depths, nor any created thing whatever, will be able to come between us and the love of God, known to us in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

**NOW ALLOW GOD TO BRING TO MIND  
SOME OF THE MANY WAYS HE HAS SHOWN HIS LOVE FOR YOU.  
FINALLY, CLOSE THIS TIME WITH A PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING FOR HIS LOVE.**

Today's reflections are based on writings by Henri Nouwen.



# Holy Tuesday

CONTEMPLATIVE WORSHIP

March 26, 2024  
11:30 AM—1:00 PM



In these opening moments of quietness, it's good if you take a deep breath and let it out slowly. It helps you relax your body and prepare for this time with God.

**NOW ALLOW GOD TO BRING TO MIND  
SOME OF THE MANY WAYS HE HAS BEEN GOOD TO YOU.  
AND AS HE DOES, GIVE HIM THANKS.**



Today, as we journey with Jesus to the cross, our focus is on the theme of *forgiveness*. As we think about your relationship with God, forgiveness—Christ's gift to us—means that we can stand before Him in all of our neediness, weakness, and moral failure and yet be utterly unafraid. To help in today's reflection, please read Luke 15:11-32.

In the parable of the Return of the Prodigal Son, Jesus conveys the truth of God's forgiving, unrelenting, and loving pursuit of His lost children. The story shows that both sons are lost. The younger son, looking for love, respect, independence, and the satisfaction of all his desires collects all his inheritance and leaves. The older son stays put. Less adventurous and much more dutiful, he is sober, respectable, self-righteous, and self-centered. Neither son sees his loving, forgiving, compassionate father as a "papa." Yet, he pursues them both, running out to meet the wayward one and leaving the party to plead with the offended one.

Henri Nouwen has written a powerful book on this parable, illustrated by Rembrandt's painting of the same name, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Let's take a meditative look at the painting.

Look specifically at the young son who has just returned home. His head is shaved like that of a prisoner. Does he have lice? Is this penance? His clothes are tattered and torn, his feet are calloused, one bare foot, shoes split by the long walk home. Unlike the father and brother, this broken man has no red robe of wealth and authority. All this repentant sinner seems attentive to at the moment is leaning into his father's arms. It gives the impression that he is pausing to listen to his dad's heartbeat, just as he had when he was a child. The father does not require any higher motivation. His love is so total and unconditional that he simply welcomes his son home.

This is a story about returning. It's our story. All of us drift away from God. We have to return. Our hearts move away from our first love. We have to return. Our minds wander to strange images. We have to return. Returning is a lifelong challenge.

Are there any areas of your life where you are drifting away from God the Father? You might go to church and "check all the boxes," but deep within your soul, you might be distant from God. What alarms are ringing in your life (but you keep snoozing them)? Alarm bells must have been ringing as the young son continued to snooze them until he ended up in a pigpen.

**IN PRAYER, PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR NEED FOR GOD.  
BE HONEST WITH GOD ABOUT YOUR POVERTY, FAILURES,  
SINS, ADDICTIONS AND NEEDS.  
ACCEPT THAT GOD HAS NO EXPECTATIONS OF YOU,  
EXCEPT THAT YOU COME TO HIM, WANT TO STAY WITH HIM,  
AND TO SURRENDER TO HIS LOVE.  
LET GOD WELCOME YOU INTO HIS FORGIVING EMBRACE.**

Now let's shift our attention to the older son. He is richly dressed and stands taller and straighter than everyone else. His hands are crossed, his face stern, distant and disapproving. The elder brother represents the Pharisees—those who are self-sufficient and pretty sure they've got it right. No one is exempt from being tempted to be a Pharisee, especially after the glow of "first love" gratitude to Jesus for salvation has decreased over time.

All of us can be like that brother. We let self-righteousness take over to the point of producing an attitude of moral superiority, a lack of mercy, and a joyless servitude. If we don't pay attention, we can easily miss the sense of jealousy and insecurity and the desire to be noticed and embraced within ourselves. The problem is not that the Lord has not done anything for us but our lack of faith in recognizing and seeing those things. And for that, we need His forgiveness.

**STOP FOR A MOMENT AND PONDER THESE QUESTIONS:  
TO WHOM DO I COMPARE MYSELF TO MAKE MYSELF FEEL BETTER?  
OF WHOM AM I JEALOUS OR RESENTFUL?  
WHO AM I COMPETING WITH AS IF A SCARCITY OF LOVE EXISTED?  
AGAIN, BE HONEST ABOUT THE CONDITION OF YOUR HEART  
AND ASK FOR FORGIVENESS.**

Finally, look at the father. He is bent far over to comfort and welcome his repentant son. His right hand is soft, gentle and tender, caressing and comforting his son as a mother would. His left hand is strong and sure, placed on his son's shoulder protectively, firmly, and reassuringly like a father would. The dad's eyes are turned completely towards his son. His entire posture shouts, "Welcome! Come into my arms! Come home to me."

The word “prodigal” means “wasteful.” Yet, the most wasteful figure in the story is the father. Timothy Keller calls our God *The Prodigal God*. This dad wastes his wealth on the younger son. He wastes his love lavishly on both selfish sons, without expecting anything in return.

All of us need to become more and more like the Father—welcoming and forgiving others, even those who have harmed us. For each of us, it’s important to think about what forgiveness needs to look like in our day-to-day lives.

**PAUSE ONCE AGAIN AND ASK GOD TO MAKE YOUR HEART  
MORE WELCOMING AND FORGIVING.  
EXPRESS YOUR NEED TO BECOME MORE LIKE CHRIST—WHO LOVED SINNERS  
(INCLUDING THOSE WHO ARE FAILURES, DIRTY, HOPELESS, OR “LOUSY”).**

*Every time you ask for forgiveness,  
you get it right.*

*Every time you ask for forgiveness,  
you step out of your little kingdom and into His.*

*Every time you ask for forgiveness,  
you say that the Bible’s description of you and everyone around you is accurate.*

*Every time you ask for forgiveness,  
you declare that our life does not belong to you, but has been created for the purpose of Another.*

*Every time you ask for forgiveness,  
you say that selfishness is your biggest sin and that grace is your only hope.*

*Every time you ask for forgiveness,  
you are reminding yourself who you are and what you truly need.*

*Every time you ask for forgiveness,  
you refuse to be comfortable with your rebellion.*

*Every time you ask for forgiveness,  
you recognize that the biggest problems you face in life exist inside of you, not outside of you.*

*Every time you ask for forgiveness,  
you are praying that God’s kingdom would come and His will would be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Every time you ask for forgiveness,  
you make the kingdom of God visible for others to see.*

*Every time you ask for forgiveness,  
you are worshiping the King of forgiveness and encouraging others to do the same.*


*Every time you ask for forgiveness,  
your sight is accurate, your head is clear, and your heart is in the right place.*

*Every time you ask for forgiveness,  
you cry out for an eternity when forgiveness has finished its work once and for all.*

*Every time you ask for forgiveness,  
you tell yourself that for all the good you have experienced in God’s kingdom,  
there is still more that is needed and more to come.*

*A lifestyle of seeking forgiveness  
expands everything you are touching to the size of God’s kingdom.”*

—Paul David Tripp, *A Quest For More: Living For Something Bigger Than You*  
(Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2008), 161-162



# Holy Monday

CONTEMPLATIVE WORSHIP

*March 25, 2024  
11:30 AM—1:00 PM*



These opening moments of preparation are helpful as we open our whole being to God. Our goal is to leave behind thoughts and preoccupations that might hinder our connection with Him. It is common to have thoughts of various kinds during this time. They might involve your plans for the day, or give you some psychological insight into your behavior, or be about the nature of the Lord. You may find yourself with pleasant thoughts or feelings of disappointment and frustration. No matter the type or nature of thoughts and feelings, our intention is to consent to the presence and action of God within.

## **IN SILENCE CONSIDER TAKING THE FOLLOWING STEPS:**

- Sit in a way that allows you to be relaxed in body and alert in mind. Gently close your eyes and allow your heart to open toward God.
- Whenever you become aware of a thought, no matter what its nature, let it go. Do not analyze, label, or judge your thoughts and feelings. Simply, gently, let them go. Keep doing this over and over as thoughts come.

## **BEFORE MOVING ON, TAKE TIME TO PREPARE YOUR HEART.**

Today, as we journey with Jesus to the cross, we are going to focus on the theme of *redemption*. What do we mean when we say *redemption*, what does it mean to have Jesus as our Redeemer, and what does it mean to be redeemed? This is theological vocabulary that borrows a concept from the marketplace. It means, to deliver from harm or evil, but it's conceived in terms of buying something back or purchasing something from the marketplace. The root of the word "redeem" is the word for the marketplace—*agora*. It carries the idea of deliverance through a purchase.

This concept of redemption finds its background in the Old Testament, especially when God set His people free and delivered them from slavery in Egypt. It was through the sacrifice of the Passover lamb, a substitutionary lamb, where blood was shed, and God said, "When I see the blood, I will pass over them. I'll pass over their sins." And God brought them out of Egypt, set them free, and delivered them from their slavery.



The application of this idea of buying back to purchase freedom to Christ's death on the cross is quite telling. If we are *redeemed*, then our prior condition was one of slavery. God has purchased our freedom, and we are no longer in bondage to sin or to the Old Testament law. Therefore, related to the Christian concept of redemption is the word *ransom*. Jesus paid the price for our release from sin and its punishment. His death was in exchange for our life. In fact, Scripture is quite clear that redemption is only possible "through His blood," that is, by His death.

You are encouraged to open the Bible to read some of the benefits of redemption presented below:

- Eternal life (Revelation 5:9-10)
- Forgiveness of sins (Ephesians 1:7)
- Righteousness (Romans 5:17)
- Freedom from the law's curse (Galatians 3:13)
- Adoption into God's family (Galatians 4:5)
- Deliverance from sin's bondage (Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 1:14-18)
- Peace with God (Colossians 1:18-20)

**THANK GOD FOR YOUR REDEMPTION IN CHRIST;  
THAT THROUGH HIS SACRIFICE ON THE CROSS YOU ARE FORGIVEN, HOLY,  
JUSTIFIED, FREE, ADOPTED, AND RECONCILED.**

However, the biblical truth of *redemption* extends even beyond the matter of individual salvation. During His lifetime, Jesus provided abundant proof of His power to completely restore a fallen world. He demonstrated his lordship...

... over heaven when he calmed the storms on the sea;  
... over hell when he exorcised demons from a troubled man;  
... over life when he healed a woman of her incurable disease;  
... and over death when he raised a young girl from the dead.

With His countless miracles, Jesus provided ample reason for us to learn that this troubled world is not our home. He Himself—the One who's able to make all things new—is our home.

No matter how dark some moments of your life have been, no matter what you have done in the past, nothing can hold you back from a joyful life on earth. Maybe you've lived through child abuse, a car accident, a traumatic childbirth, been the victim of violent crime, had an abortion, or served in the armed forces—the list is endless. Such events can stay lodged in your head and play within your memories for a very long time. They can be triggered by the slightest thing.

Living with traumatic memories can drive anyone into a dark place of despair and hopelessness. Maybe that's you. You know the truths of the Bible, but you remember your past, and it haunts you like a horror movie within your own mind. At times it seems easier to block them out, rather than wade through the waters of painful memories. Memories, even painful ones, can be a blessing when seen them as an invitation to claim Jesus' redemption. He bore our sin and broke its ties to us.

**DO YOU HAVE MEMORIES THAT HAUNT YOU TO THIS DAY?  
ARE YOU IN BONDAGE TO PAINFUL EVENTS OF YOUR LIFE?  
BRING THEM TO THE PRESENCE OF GOD NOW.**

Don't let the enemy deceive you into thinking that your past is too dark, too horrible to be forgiven and covered by God's grace. Regret is bondage. It's not a way to make amends for your past, it's not a way to redeem yourself in God's eyes. By holding on to your regret, you are allowing the enemy to wrap you in chains that Jesus already broke for you on the cross. You are only holding yourself back from being the person you were created to be.



Sometimes the invisible scars we bear lead us to letting a strive for self-atonement run deeply in us all. Grace by faith alone is hard to accept, especially when we're continually confronted by the sin that so easily entangles. And for those whose invisible scars are so often blinding, we are left asking, "Is it enough? I know You paid for it, Lord, but do You see these scars? Don't I need to pay for it too?" We might not realize that such questions dominate our hearts, but we live as if God's grace is not enough. As a result, we look to our performance to prove our worth and find acceptance. We are all desperate sinners standing before a holy God, and we are painfully aware that we do not measure up. But we stand confidently before God because of Jesus, our great High Priest, who "entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:11-12). The precious blood of Christ has purchased our acceptance and approval. It is enough! Nothing—nothing!—can separate us from the love of God. Regardless of the scars of our past, there is no condemnation for us in Christ Jesus.

It's not that the blood of Jesus will give you amnesia, but it gives you life beyond your past. Through Jesus, you have freedom from every pain and healing for every hurt. In other words, He does not undo the past or ignore it, but He redeems. In turning our lives over to Him, we need to give Him our past with all its losses and shame. We must hand over to the Lord every moment of disgrace, every word we wish we could take back, all the broken promises, the loneliness, the dreams that died, the dashed hopes, the broken relationships, our successes and failures, and all the scars of yesterday. The Lord gives us peace with the past and leads us forward into a better future. Therefore, don't ignore the harsh parts of the past, they are part of your story, but don't dwell on them, either.

**HAND YOUR WOUNDS OVER TO GOD.  
NO HARD WORK IS ENOUGH TO MAKE YOUR SCARS DISAPPEAR,  
BUT YOU CAN REST FROM ALL YOUR STRIVING AND REMEMBER:  
BY HIS WOUNDS YOU ARE HEALED.**

How important it is to live in light of redemption! We were created for good works! We aren't a failure and most certainly aren't worthless. It's never too late to get back on the right path. God's grace is always ready for any of us to receive it.

Living in a fallen world as Christians means we will experience trials and tribulations and will continue to struggle with our own temptations. We are forgiven, but God is not finished with us yet. Consequently, longing for a better world, even a perfect world, is not a form of escapism. Rather, it is the Christian's rightful anticipation of a promise made by the One who justly pronounced a curse on this world and then lovingly took that curse upon Himself in order to redeem people for His glory.

**BEFORE CLOSING THIS TIME OF PRAYER, READ REVELATION 22:1-5.  
RECEIVE THE WORDS OF THE END TO THE STORY OF THE FALL  
AS A TRIUMPHANT DECLARATION OF FULL REDEMPTION.**

"Then he showed me the river of living water, sparkling like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the broad street of the city. The tree of life was on both sides of the river, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit every month. The leaves of the trees are for healing the nations, and there will no longer be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and His slaves will serve Him. They will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. Night will no longer exist, and people will not need lamplight or sunlight, because the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign forever and ever" (Revelation 22:1-5).