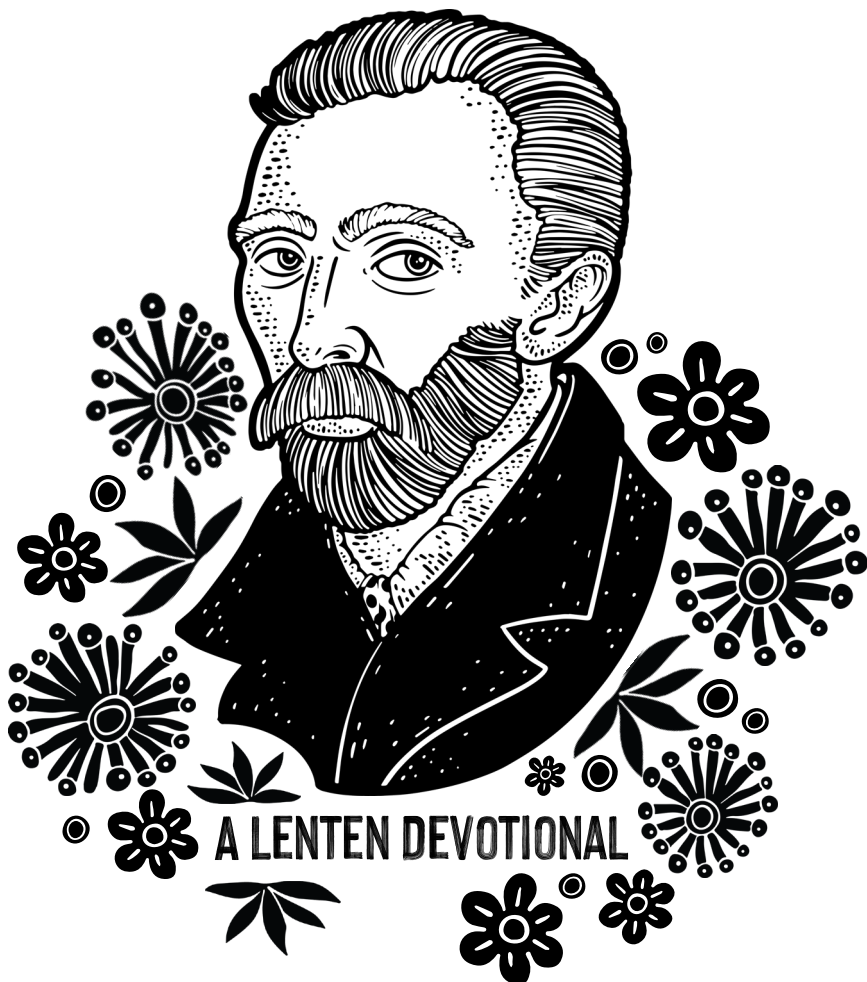


VINCENT VAN GOGH AND THE BEAUTY OF LENT





LET THERE BE LIGHT



Vincent van Gogh devoted his life to light. The light of creation, the light of painting, the light of God's grace – and the light in humanity, mind, body, and soul. The son of a Christian pastor, Vincent fervently set out to be a preacher and missionary himself, but his ministry eventually took the form of brush strokes and canvases: in just ten years of his short life, from age 27 to 37, he created more than 2000 luminous works of art – including nearly 900 paintings – shimmering with vitality, with passion, and above all, with light.

The word “Lent” refers to the “lengthening” light, the growing days that, in time, will coax the sunflowers to open, the wheat fields to rise again, and the irises to bloom. What better companion on this forty-day pilgrimage, then, than this apostle of light: an artist steeped in Christianity and yet open to learning from Buddhism, enamored with Jesus and at the same time adventurous enough to find God in mysteries, humility, and love, not certainties, arrogance, or privilege.

In this Lenten devotional, the words of Scripture and the paintings and letters of Vincent van Gogh will be our guides. Each week, biblical texts and Van Gogh's work throw light on each other, pointing toward simple, powerful practices you can try yourself, with your family or friends, or with your congregation.

So grab your favorite Bible and a decent internet connection (all the paintings referenced here can be found online; see the companion “Link Sheet” pdf for guidance). Week by week, we'll travel this Lenten journey together toward Easter morning – and thereby do our part to help lengthen the light, humble our hearts, and open our eyes to the beauty of God's springtime resurrection.

HOW DO YOU PRONOUNCE “VAN GOGH”?

There are at least four “correct” pronunciations of “Van Gogh,” each considered acceptable in its own context. In North American English, it's “Van Go.” In British English, it's “Van Goff.” In French, it's “Van Gog.” And in Dutch (that is, the way Vincent himself would have pronounced it), it's “Van Khokh” – with the guttural “kh” pronounced like the “ch” in “chuzpah.”



VAN GOGH'S LIFE: A SKETCH

Vincent van Gogh is born in the Netherlands in 1853, the eldest of six children. The son of a Christian pastor, he fervently pursues theological study and then missionary training, and is eventually appointed – in 1879, at the age of 26 – as an evangelist in the Belgian mining district. Just six months later, however, Vincent is dismissed by the Board of Evangelization for what they judge to be his lack of preaching ability. He decides to become an artist: to preach not with words but with color and light.

Vincent's younger brother, Theo, has become an art dealer, and so they devise an arrangement: Theo sends Vincent a modest monthly stipend, and Vincent sends Theo his drawings and paintings, so they might be sold (only a handful sell during his lifetime). The brothers maintain a lively, extensive written correspondence.

For the next five years, Vincent lives in several places (including spans living at home with his parents) as he studies and practices painting. In 1886, he moves to Paris to live with Theo, meets many of the most prominent Impressionist painters, and becomes an admirer of Japanese art. Finding city life stifling, however, in 1888 Vincent moves to Arles, in the south of France, a region he calls "beautiful as Japan."

The next two years – the final two of Vincent's life – are both tumultuous and prolific. He briefly lives with fellow-artist Paul Gauguin in Arles, but the two have a violent falling out, resulting in Vincent cutting off part of his own left ear (a few scholars have argued that perhaps it was Gauguin who wounded Vincent). Reeling from this episode, Vincent eventually checks himself into a nearby mental health asylum, where he stays for 12 months.

Throughout this difficult period, Vincent continues to paint (nearly a painting a day in 1890), including many masterpieces that will one day sell for tens of millions of dollars. In February of 1890, Theo sells Vincent's "The Red Vineyard" for 400 francs (about \$1000 today). Five months later, exhausted from his feverish pace, struggling with his mental health, and considering himself a failure, Vincent ventures out into a field and shoots himself in the chest (one scholar has recently argued that he was shot by a local youth, but most believe the death was suicide). Vincent dies two days later, with Theo by his side. He was 37 years old.

ASH WEDNESDAY

READ AND LOOK

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

PAINTING

“Still Life with Bible,”
by Vincent van Gogh

**FOR WHERE YOUR
TREASURE IS,
THERE YOUR HEART
WILL BE ALSO.
+ MATTHEW 6:21**



LETTERS

One of Van Gogh’s relatively early paintings is “Still Life with Bible,” an image some interpret as indicating a turn away from his Christian upbringing and toward modern literature – and in particular, toward “*Joie de Vivre*,” the enjoyment of life, the title of the novel by Emile Zola on the table beside Van Gogh’s father’s Bible.

But if we look closer, we can see that Van Gogh intended to evoke not a disjunction, but rather a deep kinship between Scripture and modern literature. The Bible in the painting is open to Isaiah 53 (“ISAIE LIII”), where the prophet declares how God’s salvation will take place through a “suffering servant,” a figure Christians traditionally identify with Jesus. And Zola’s novel, as Van Gogh knew well, is ironically titled: its heroine, Pauline Quenu, is an orphan who undergoes a life of adversity and harm – a modern icon, as Van Gogh saw it, of living as a “suffering servant.”

In a letter to his sister, Vincent put it this way: “I myself am always glad that I have read the Bible more thoroughly than many people nowadays, because it eases my mind somewhat to know that there were once such lofty ideas. But because of the very fact that I think the old things so beautiful, I must think the new things beautiful with all the more reason” (Letter to Willemien, #1). For Vincent, there are many ways to God: “one man wrote or told it in a book; another, in a picture” (Letter to Theo, #133). And for his part, Vincent wanted to live as a kind of suffering servant: “I tell you, I consciously choose the dog’s path through life; I will remain a dog, I shall be poor, I shall be a painter, I want to remain human – going into nature” (Letter to Theo, #347).





MEDITATE

As Ash Wednesday reminds us of our mortality and vulnerability, in this passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenges us to reflect on what we're living for, what's really driving our actions. As we pray, give, refrain, or consume – in other words, as we live our lives – are we trying to impress others, to store up “treasures on earth”? Or are we instead living with true humility and grace, putting our hearts in the right place?

Van Gogh's “Still Life” invites us to recognize that the way of humility includes suffering – not that we should in any way pursue suffering or seek to prolong it, but rather that we embrace the truth that following Jesus, the “suffering servant,” means encountering difficulties and losses. The Way of Love and Justice always does – even as it also includes plenty of blessings and “joie de vivre.” This wisdom is as ancient as the prophets of old, and as current as the best novelists and poets today. The Spirit is at work everywhere! All of which raises the questions: Where do you sense the Spirit in your life? As Lent begins, what new steps toward humility, love, and joy is God prompting you to take?

MORE LIGHT

Pair these meditations with Van Gogh's “The Good Samaritan,” “The Raising of Lazarus,” and “Pieta” – all interpretations of works by other painters Van Gogh admired. Note that he often used his own face as a model, including for Lazarus and Jesus.

PRACTICES

- + For the rest of this week, begin each day by lighting a candle of reflection, praying, “God of light and life, as this season begins, give us eyes to see and ears to hear. Help us to notice the changing light, and to sense your Spirit in all things, old and new, difficult and joyful. Help us put our hearts in the right place. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”
- + Make a special effort to notice the light and color in the world this week (or all Lent long); keep a “visual journal” as a tool for reflection. Try to see with a painter's eyes. Which colors feature in the world around you these days, indoors and out, and how do they change over the course of the season? And as this forty-day journey begins, what goals do you have? How do you hope to reorder your motives and priorities for how you pray, give, refrain, and consume?

- + If you were to depict the idea that the Holy Spirit moves through both Scripture and the arts, how would you compose the picture? To what page would the Bible be opened? And what work of art would you place beside it? Record your ideas in your journal – and share and discuss them with family or friends, over a meal or online.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

READ AND LOOK

SCRIPTURE

Luke 4:1-13

PAINTING

“The Potato Eaters,” by Vincent van Gogh

**JESUS ANSWERED HIM,
“IT IS WRITTEN, ‘ONE
DOES NOT LIVE BY
BREAD ALONE.’”
+ LUKE 4:4**



LETTERS

Another relatively early painting in Vincent’s work is “The Potato Eaters,” one of a set of portraits he made in Nuenen, the Netherlands, where he was living with his parents. A peasant family sitting down to dinner was a common subject for painters in those days, and by taking it up, Vincent hoped both to demonstrate his developing skills and to evoke specific ideas.

What ideas? Van Gogh thought rural farmers often possessed hard-won humility, honesty, and a profound connection with nature, virtues he believed many city-dwellers had lost or left behind. He used a color palette inspired by unpeeled potatoes to signify the family’s full communion with their labor and its fruit. His overall aim was to convey “that those people, eating their potatoes in the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish... that they have thus honestly earned their food.”

Moreover, Vincent believed paintings like this one could have beneficial effects on urbanites: “if a stable smells of dung – all right that belongs to a stable; if the field has an odor of ripe corn or potatoes or of guano or manure – that’s healthy, especially for city people. Such pictures may teach them something” (Letter to Theo, #404).



MEDITATE

In Luke's story of Jesus being tested in the wilderness, the devil attempts to lure him into taking actions – feeding himself, bowing to the devil in exchange for worldly power, and jumping from the pinnacle of the temple – that each imply either a lack of trust in God, a lack of respect for God, or both. Recognizing this, Jesus cites the story of the Israelites in the wilderness, the humbling forty-year journey in which God taught the people to trust, so they might learn that no-one lives “by bread alone,” but rather by the continual mercies of divine generosity (Deut 8:3).

In effect, through each of these temptations, the devil invites Jesus to abandon trust in God, and to imagine instead that he can trust in himself alone: for nourishment (“feed yourself!”), for power (“all this can be yours!”), and finally, for security, “testing” God by putting himself in danger, to see if God will rescue him. Three times, the devil tempts; three times, Jesus refuses, insisting that God is the true source of human well being – and humbly refusing to presume otherwise.

For Van Gogh, the values he held most dear – humility, honesty, connection with nature – were often most exemplified by rural farmers. Likewise, in his ministry as a missionary and, later, as a painter, Vincent lived a life of poverty himself. As an expression of Christian devotion, this form of life trusts in God for guidance, care, and security – and accordingly, finds human dignity not only in the wealthy palace, but also (even especially) in a farmer's humble home.

MORE LIGHT

For a companion to “The Potato Eaters,” see Van Gogh's “Peasant Woman Digging Up Potatoes.”

PRACTICES

- + This week begin each day by lighting a candle of humility, praying, “Faithful God, strengthen our trust in you, for you are the true source of our well being. Grant us eyes to see the dignity in all people, no matter their wealth or station. Give us this day our daily bread, as well as the insight to understand that we do not live by bread alone, but by your daily love and care. In Jesus' name, Amen.”

- + Find out more about where your food comes from (start with one or two of the meals you eat this week!), and research an advocacy organization fighting for farm and food workers (foodtank.com is one great place to start).
- + Do you know the color palette of your life? Which colors do you love – and which do you see on a daily basis? Is it more “unpeeled potatoes,” more “rainbow brilliant,” or somewhere in between? How would you like to adjust the palette? And here’s an idea: There are apps that take the photos in your Instagram grid and use them to generate a color palette unique to you.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

READ AND LOOK

SCRIPTURE

Luke 13:31-35

PAINTINGS

“Sunflowers” and “La Berceuse (‘The Lullaby,’ or ‘Woman Rocking a Cradle’),” by Vincent Van Gogh

“HOW OFTEN HAVE I DESIRED TO GATHER YOUR CHILDREN TOGETHER AS A HEN GATHERS HER BROOD UNDER HER WINGS, AND YOU WERE NOT WILLING!” + LUKE 13:34



LETTERS

By 1888, Van Gogh had entered his most intense, prolific chapter, the period when he would create many of the masterpieces for which he is best known today. Among these are his “Sunflowers” pictures - flowers which, for Van Gogh, symbolized “gratitude.” He envisioned a kind of triptych, with “Sunflowers” paintings flanking each side of a portrait of a woman holding a rope with which she rocks a cradle, “La Berceuse (The Lullaby)” – a threefold arrangement traditionally associated with an altarpiece.

Of that central panel, “La Berceuse,” Vincent wrote to Theo: “the idea came to me to paint a picture in such a way that sailors, who are at once children and martyrs, seeing it in the cabin of their Icelandic fishing boat, would feel the old sense of being rocked come over them and remember

their own lullabys” (Letter #743). With this nautical vision and the triptych arrangement in mind, we may interpret “La Berceuse” as nothing less than a divine portrait: the loving Mother who comforts and cares for us, an altarpiece for the ocean – and by extension, for all of creation.

MEDITATE

In this passage from Luke, Jesus strikingly figures himself as a mother hen, gathering together her chicks under her wings. He longs to care for Jerusalem, even as they reject him; he longs to gather them into God’s sheltering love. In the “La Berceuse” triptych, Van Gogh likewise envisions an overarching motherly love, gently rocking the cradle of humanity, singing a lullaby. And on each side, a vase of brilliant sunflowers symbolizing gratitude, evoking both the glories of the fields outside and the sweet serenity of a home: a simple arrangement of flowers, boldly, beautifully, impossibly yellow.

Accordingly, whenever we look at this painting – as countless thousands now have (it’s at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City) – we take up the position of a child in a cradle, rocking and listening and remembering home, like sailors out on the open, starlit sea.

MORE LIGHT

Complement these paintings with Van Gogh’s “Girl Kneeling in Front of a Cradle.” In a letter to Theo, Vincent wrote, “But if one feels the need of something grand, something infinite, something that makes one feel aware of God, one need not go far to find it. I think I see something deeper, more infinite, more eternal than the ocean in the expression of the eyes of a little baby when it wakes in the morning, and coos or laughs because it sees the sun shining on its cradle. If there is a ‘ray from on high,’ perhaps one can find it there” (Letter to Theo, #292).

PRACTICES



- + This week begin each day by lighting a candle of gratitude, praying, “God of grace, thank you for the cradle of the world, for the lullaby of your love, and for the brilliant colors of creation. Shelter us under your wings, Mother, and give us the strength to follow you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”
- + Make your own “lullaby triptych” this week, either with Van Gogh’s images of sunflowers and “La Berceuse” or with other paintings you

admire (or create!). Display it somewhere you'll see it every day: the corner of a mirror, up on the fridge, or on a bedside table.

- + In this week's passage, Jesus longs to gather in even those who reject him – a tender, maternal image of forgiving love, even in the midst of estrangement. Reach out this week to someone from whom you feel estranged or distant: a handwritten note, a call, or a text can help stitch the world back together, one relationship at a time.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

READ AND LOOK

SCRIPTURE

Luke 13:1-9

PAINTING

"Almond Blossom,"
by Vincent van Gogh

"HE REPLIED, 'SIR, LET IT ALONE FOR ONE MORE YEAR, UNTIL I DIG AROUND IT AND PUT MANURE ON IT. IF IT BEARS FRUIT NEXT YEAR, WELL AND GOOD; BUT IF NOT, YOU CAN CUT IT DOWN.'" + LUKE 13:8-9



LETTERS

Van Gogh was an avid admirer of Japanese art, and in particular, of the ways Japanese artists studied and depicted nature. "If we study Japanese art," he wrote, "we see a human being who is undoubtedly wise, philosophic and intelligent, who spends his time doing what? In studying the distance between the earth and the moon? No. In studying Bismark's policy? No. He studies a single blade of grass."

Indeed, for Vincent, the best Japanese artists "live in nature as though they themselves were flowers," and Western artists should follow their lead: "we must return to nature in spite of our education and our work in a world of convention." Accordingly, when he moved from Paris to Arles, in the South of France, Vincent declared, "Here my life will become more and more like a Japanese painter's, living close to nature..." Even during his stay in the Saint Rémy asylum, he wrote that the central, driving idea of his work was "to think that a field of wheat or a cypress is well worth the trouble of looking at close up" (Letters to Theo, #540, #543, and #596).



WHAT IS PAINTING FOR?

There are many answers to this question, of course, but Vincent had a particular one in mind. In 1889, just a year before his death, he wrote to a friend that his ambition was “to make of painting what the music of Berlioz and Wagner has been before us... a consolatory art for distressed hearts!”

In other words, for Vincent, a painting’s purpose is to console, to comfort, to encourage us when we are distressed or brokenhearted, just as certain pieces of music do. Understood this way, a painting is a kind of gospel, a visual declaration of “good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18).

MEDITATE

In his parables, Jesus often draws on imagery from nature and agriculture, worlds with which his listeners were intimately familiar. Human life, this week’s parable suggests, should be “fruitful” – and God expects the fruits of love and justice to abound in our lives and communities. Jesus compares the situation to a farmer who plants a fig tree, and then, when it fails to bear fruit, makes arrangements to cut it down. But the gardener compassionately intervenes, requesting one more year; with carefully applied fertilizer, the tree may bear fruit yet!

In “Almond Blossom,” we encounter not only the fruitfulness of nature, but also Vincent’s desire to learn from his Japanese counterparts, as well as his efforts to bear fruit as an artist himself. For him, painting wasn’t just a way of recording or depicting nature; it was a way of “living close to nature,” both for the painter and for the viewer. Learning from the almond blossom and the fig tree, we may ask: What “fruit” do we hope to bear in our lives this week, this year, this season of life? What “fertilizer,” what nourishment and support do we need – and how can we provide that support to others?

MORE LIGHT

For another close, careful study of a blossoming creature, see Van Gogh's "Blossoming Branches."

PRACTICES

- + This week begin each day by lighting a candle of creation, praying, "God of love, help us bear fruit today. Inspire us to live in ways that enliven the world, protect the vulnerable, and care for creation. In Jesus' name, Amen."
- + Take a "close up nature walk" this week, intentionally looking for small beauties we might otherwise overlook. Twigs, mosses, lichen, fungi, blossoms, buds, blades of grass – anything small is fair game. And if you're so inclined, start a sketchbook to remember your discoveries. As Vincent insists, such looking is "well worth the trouble"!
- + The point of the parable Jesus tells is to underscore how much God wants and expects us to bear fruit of love and justice in our lives, not at some point later on, but right here, right now. What sort of fruit do you think he has in mind? What concrete steps can we take this week? What "fertilizer" can we lay down for the sake of future fruit, for ourselves and for others? Discuss these questions with friends or family, over a meal or online.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

READ AND LOOK

SCRIPTURE

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

PAINTING

"The Sower" (November 1888), by Vincent van Gogh

"BUT WE HAD TO CELEBRATE AND REJOICE, BECAUSE THIS BROTHER OF YOURS WAS DEAD AND HAS COME TO LIFE; WAS LOST AND HAS BEEN FOUND."

+ LUKE 15:32





LETTERS

Inspired by the painter Jean-Francois Millet's painting of a sower, Vincent completed no less than 30 paintings or drawings on the theme. "I am working on another Sower," he wrote to Theo. "An immense citron-yellow disk for the sun. A green-yellow sky with pink clouds. The field violet, the sower and the tree Prussian blue..."

Many have pointed out how the central tree in this painting stylistically echoes the Japanese prints Vincent prized, as well as how the sun serves as a kind of halo, suggesting the sower is also a saint. Some have even discerned a cruciform shape in the tree's silhouette. And in the background of all this, of course, is Jesus' famous parable of the sower (Luke 8:4-8).

In a letter to fellow-painter Emile Benard, Vincent wrote that Jesus "lived serenely, as a greater artist than all other artists, despising marble and clay as well as color, working in living flesh." As Vincent saw it, Jesus unified image and word in his art of the parable: Jesus' "words...are one of the highest summits – the very highest summit – reached by art, which becomes a creative force there, a pure creative power" (Letter to Emile Benard, #8).

MEDITATE

A parable is a form of storytelling that invites the listener to imaginatively enter a scenario, a kind of space within which we can reflect on the ideas and challenges the parable poses. In this famous parable – often called "The Prodigal Son," though its real subject is the extravagant, transformative grace of God – the key question, and the cliffhanger with which the parable ends, is whether or not the elder son will celebrate his brother's return. Jesus tells this parable to the religious authorities around him, the "elder brothers," so to speak, who are looking down on the "younger" siblings with whom Jesus is sharing meals during his ministry.

Likewise, Van Gogh's paintings are intended to create experiences, little worlds we can imaginatively enter and explore. "The Sower" evokes Jesus' parable (Luke 8:4-8) – and the sower himself, with the sun's halo glowing behind him, may be seen as a kind of Christ figure, the Word of God sowing the words of God. With this in mind, the central tree suggests multiple things at once: the cross, the tree of life, and the growth to which every seed is called.



Reflecting on these two parables together, we may ask: How are we like the younger of the two siblings? What maturation, what new growth do we require? And how are we like the older sibling? What resentments, what bitterness is holding us back, inhibiting the seeds of forgiveness and joy in our hearts? What's keeping us from celebrating? If Jesus is an artist, as Vincent suggests, how might his teaching continue to shape and renew our lives?

MORE LIGHT

For the painting that inspired Vincent, see Jean-Francois Millet's "The Sower." And for another of Van Gogh's paintings on the same theme, see "The Sower" (June 1888).

PRACTICES

- + This week begin each day by lighting a candle of transformation, praying, "God who changes minds and changes lives, help us let go of what's holding us back, and to grow, and grow, and grow in communion with you. Inspire us to celebrate, today and every day. In Jesus' name, Amen."
- + The image of a sower is also an invitation to consider how many of our actions, too, are like scattering seed: outcomes are often out of our control, and sometimes out of our sight entirely. Intentionally take some actions this week in the spirit of the sower, planting seeds and letting go. Give an anonymous financial gift, for example; write a note of encouragement to someone; or plant a tree that will provide cool summer shade long after you're gone.
- + The sun's halo effect in "The Sower" could be understood to suggest that saints are all around us, out in the fields as much as in positions of power or prestige. Who are the "everyday saints" in your life who have given you gifts along the way? Take an inventory. Write down the names and gifts in a journal, and if you like, compare lists with a friend or family member. And then make a point to reach out to a few names on the list. It'll make their day – and yours!



FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

READ AND LOOK

SCRIPTURE

John 12:1-8

PAINTING

"Shoes," by Vincent van Gogh

LETTERS

Shoes were by no means a common subject for painters in Vincent's day. He bought this pair in a flea market, and then, after walking in them through the Parisian mud for some time, he decided to paint them – mud, scuffs, and all. Throughout his work, Vincent reveled in finding beauty and presence in ordinary places and things. "Poetry surrounds us everywhere," he wrote, "but putting it on paper is, alas, not so easy as looking at it" (Letter to Theo, #330).

For Vincent, this kind of looking is also a kind of love. He put it this way: "But I always think that the best way to know God is to love many things. Love a friend, a wife, something – whatever you like – you will be on the way to knowing more about God; that is what I say to myself. But one must love with a lofty and serious intimate sympathy, with strength, with intelligence; and one must always try to know deeper, better and more. That leads to God, that leads to unwavering faith" (Letter to Theo, #133).

MEDITATE

In this passage, we stand on the eve of Jesus' death – but only Lazarus' sister, Mary, seems to understand this. She anoints Jesus' feet with expensive and aromatic perfume, tenderly anointing his body for burial. Judas scolds her for not selling the perfume and donating the proceeds to the poor, but Jesus rebukes him, not only for his cynical attempt to use the cause of "helping the poor" to line his own pockets, but also for missing the point that only Mary has perceived: Jesus is about to die. The situation calls for tenderness and honor, not haughty pontificating – and Mary has risen to the occasion.

JESUS SAID, "LEAVE HER ALONE. SHE BOUGHT IT SO THAT SHE MIGHT KEEP IT FOR THE DAY OF MY BURIAL. YOU ALWAYS HAVE THE POOR WITH YOU, BUT YOU DO NOT ALWAYS HAVE ME."
+ JOHN 12:7-8



When Jesus says, “You always have the poor with you,” he isn’t endorsing inequality. Rather, he’s alluding to the Book of Deuteronomy’s exhortation to be “open handed” toward your neighbors in generosity and grace: “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor’” (Deut 15:11). Far from a statement of apathy or resignation with respect to neighbors in need, then, Jesus’ remark is a reminder of God’s command to be generous – another rebuke to Judas’ self-serving hypocrisy.

Throughout his life, Van Gogh was profoundly interested in the lives of impoverished communities and people. Like a kind of artistic friar, Vincent lived a life of poverty himself (friars were monks who voluntarily lived in poverty, residing not in monasteries but out and about in the world; St. Francis is a famous example). And in this painting of a pair of shoes, like Mary, Vincent turns his attention to the feet of a human being: his own, but also the feet of the anonymous former owner of these shoes, and by extension, the feet of ordinary working people everywhere. In a sense, Vincent anoints such people with his painting, lifting up these common objects – and the common lives they invoke – into the light of dignity and struggle, beauty and grace.

MORE LIGHT

For another of Vincent’s portraits of shoes, see the “Shoes” he painted in Arles, a picture now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.



PRACTICES

- + This week begin each day by lighting a candle of beauty, praying, “God of loveliness and light, give us eyes to see the beauty all around and within us, especially in common, ordinary places. Keep us mindful of the dignity of all your children. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”
- + One of the best ways to learn about those most in need in your community is to look through the lens of a local service organization. Pick one with a good reputation (ask around if you aren’t sure), and start with their website, and then their annual report. How is their ministry a kind of window through which we can see our neighborhood more clearly? And how can we help?

- + Try your hand at making a still life, with pencil or paint, crayons or markers, whatever you have on hand. As your subject, choose a common, everyday object: a pair of shoes, or a mug, or a chair, or a candle – the more ordinary and overlooked, the better. Use the process to discover the beauty and presence of the object, the sparkle of glory in a supposedly humdrum spot.
- + Mary’s tenderness is inspiring: simple, generous, tangible, and powerful. Look for opportunities this week to bring more tenderness into the world: a kind touch, a kind word, a moment of understanding. Throughout each day, countless occasions call for tenderness; follow Mary’s lead, and rise to the occasion.

PALM SUNDAY

READ AND LOOK

SCRIPTURE

Luke 19:28-40

PAINTING

“Starry Night,”

by Vincent van Gogh

**“JESUS ANSWERED, ‘I TELL YOU, IF THESE WERE SILENT, THE STONES WOULD SHOUT OUT.’”
+ LUKE 19:40**



LETTERS

“Starry Night,” one of Vincent’s most famous and beloved pictures, was painted during his yearlong stay in the asylum in Saint Rémy. It’s an imaginative composite, combining the view of the night sky out his window with other studies he’d done previously of the town and landscape.

He wrote to his sister, “It often seems to me that the night is even more richly colored than the day, colored in the most intense violets, blues, and greens. If you look carefully, you’ll see that some stars are lemony, others have a pink, green, forget-me-not blue glow... it’s clear that to paint a starry sky it’s not nearly enough to put white spots on blue-black” (Letter to Willemien, #678). In “Starry Night,” Vincent brings these ideas to life, combining close observation of nature with an exuberant, dynamic style.

Vincent considered the painting an example of “a more spontaneous drawing” as opposed to a more realistic, representational style, which he dismissed as “delusive precision.” Through such vibrant colors and spontaneity, Vincent believed, he could “express the purer nature of a countryside,” and perhaps thereby “to give consolation or to prepare the way for a painting that will give even greater consolation” (Letter to Theo, #595).

MEDITATE

Palm Sunday is a day of joy and raucous celebration: in a kind of street theater, Jesus enacts a passage from the ancient prophet Zechariah, in which a triumphant king, “humble and riding on a donkey,” arrives in the holy city (Zechariah 9:9). The sudden appearance of crowds, the waving palm branches, the ancient chant echoing through the scene – it all gives the impression of creation itself rising up to praise Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem. As Jesus puts it, even if the crowds were to keep silent, “the stones would shout out” (Luke 19:40).

In “Starry Night,” Vincent imbues creation with a similar sense of symphonic, spirited effervescence. The heavens radiate and swirl, and the landscape below, bathed in moonlight and starlight, mirrors this almost liquid quality of graceful movement. The land’s creatures - the cypress tree no less than the steeple – reach up to the sky. The joy and hope of Palm Sunday is a glimpse of this vibrant choreography, as the people of God sing what the stones would otherwise shout: Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven! Hosanna, hosanna in the highest!

PRACTICES

- + This week begin each day by lighting a candle of praise, praying, “God of peace and glory, help our lives become forms of praise – and give us eyes to see and ears to hear the doxology of creation, day and night. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”
- + A little bit of praise can go a long way. Look for opportunities to slip some words of praise into your conversations this week: compliments, encouragement, and appreciation. Write a handwritten note to a friend you admire – and tell them why you do! Post a positive review for a local business. And then, if you’re up for a challenge, find a way to praise someone with whom you’re experiencing tension or difficulty. Give it a shot – and watch what happens!



- + Each clear night this Holy Week, make some time to go outside and contemplate the stars. If you live in an area with lots of light pollution, find some dark skies nearby and look through Vincent's eyes, as the heavens swirl in praise and the earth responds in kind!

MAUNDY THURSDAY

READ AND LOOK

SCRIPTURE

John 13:1-35

PAINTING

"Café Terrace at Night,"

by Vincent van Gogh

THEN HE Poured WATER INTO A BASIN AND BEGAN TO WASH THE DISCIPLES' FEET AND TO WIPE THEM WITH THE TOWEL THAT WAS TIED AROUND HIM. + JOHN 13:5



LETTERS

This is one of three paintings in which Vincent sought to capture the beauty of the night sky (the other two are "Starry Night" and "Starry Night Over the Rhone"). And though he never explicitly said so, some scholars recently have wondered if there might be echoes of the Last Supper in "Café Terrace at Night": twelve diners surround a single long-haired figure standing in the middle; a shadow lurks in the doorway (a common trope in Last Supper paintings is to depict Judas leaving the scene); and three cruciform shapes are hidden in plain sight – one immediately above the standing figure, one on that figure's torso (you have to zoom way in to make it out), and one in the distance, above the approaching horse and carriage.

Whether or not Vincent consciously intended these references, "Café Terrace at Night" can help us reflect on the ways Communion not only happened long ago, but also happens again and again in our daily lives, sometimes hidden, sometimes plain. Vincent once wrote that his hope was that "wherever I go, I'll be preaching the gospel" – and this approach to life, after all, entails seeing and hearing the gospel everywhere, too (Letter to Theo, #96).

MEDITATE

As we saw two Sundays ago, Lazarus' sister, Mary, has just anointed Jesus' feet with perfume – and now Jesus turns to his disciples with a similar

gesture of intimate, loving service. Foot-washing tangibly illustrates his new commandment to “love one another, as I have loved you” (“Maundy” is from an old word for “mandate” or command). But this simple, surprising act also conjures up a vision of a new world where everyone serves one another, turning the old hierarchies upside down. More than a mere act of service, then, Jesus performs a visionary act of imagination, creating a portrait of the new world God is bringing into being.

If we view “Café Terrace at Night” as a modern version of the Last Supper, it can help us remember how ordinary love can be. Far from some out-of-reach feat of sacred excellence, the love to which Jesus calls us is as accessible as touch (the footwashing in John) and as everyday as a meal (the supper in Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Even an ordinary café, if we have eyes to see, can be a venue for love and forgiveness, a glimpse of the reign of heaven on earth beneath a splendid, starry sky.

PRACTICES

- + Today light a candle of love, praying, “God of love and grace, help us to love each other as you have loved us. Make our love more simple, more touchable, more visible, more real. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”
- + Reflect today on how every meal we eat is an opportunity for communion with God: it’s a gift of God, received in the presence of God. Let everything you eat today be imbued by this idea.
- + Wash the feet (or hands) of a family member or friend, noticing the gentleness, humility, attention, and practical grace this kind of love requires.

GOOD FRIDAY

READ AND LOOK

SCRIPTURE

John 18:1 – 19:42

PAINTING

“At Eternity’s Gate,” by
Vincent van Gogh

**WHEN JESUS HAD RECEIVED
THE WINE, HE SAID, “IT IS
FINISHED.” THEN HE BOWED
HIS HEAD AND GAVE UP HIS
SPIRIT. + JOHN 19:30**



LETTERS

Vincent painted "At Eternity's Gate" in 1890, the year of death, based on a lithograph he had made some years earlier, entitled, "Worn Out." Of that lithograph, he wrote, "I was trying to say this in this print – but I can't say it as beautifully, as strikingly as reality, of which this is only a dim reflection seen in a dark mirror – that it seems to me that one of the strongest pieces of evidence for the existence of 'something on high' in which [the painter] Millet believed, namely in the existence of a God and an eternity, is the unutterably moving quality that there can be in the expression of an old man like that, without his being aware of it perhaps, as he sits so quietly in the corner of his hearth. At the same time something precious, something noble, that can't be meant for the worms..."

"This is far from all theology," Vincent continued, "simply the fact that the poorest woodcutter, heath farmer or miner can have moments of emotion and mood that give him a sense of an eternal home that he is close to" (Letter to Theo, #288).

MEDITATE

Good Friday is a day of sorrow tinged with hope-against-hope – what many Eastern Orthodox Christians call "bright sadness." John evokes this idea by portraying Jesus as poised throughout his ordeal; by weaving scriptural references throughout the story; and by having Jesus say, on the edge of death, "It is finished" – implying that what looks like chaos and defeat is actually part of a larger, hidden victory.

"At Eternity's Gate" can help us catch sight another aspect of this "bright sadness" dimension of the crucifixion. Even in moments of great sorrow, when we are thoroughly "worn out," when we feel isolated and alone in the shadows – in just such moments, if we look deeply, we can indirectly sense the light that every shadow involves. A vision of a lonely, despairing old man can stir within us a recognition of his luminous dignity ("something precious, something noble," as Vincent put it) that points to the reality of "something on high." The despair is still real, of course, and nonetheless devastating – but it isn't the end of the story.

PRACTICES

- + Today light a candle of bright sadness, praying, "God of comfort, be with us. God of mercy, forgive us. God of hope, reawaken us. In Jesus' name, Amen."

- + Do you know anyone who is “worn out”? A health worker, perhaps, or a teacher, or farm worker, or someone who has lost a loved one? Find a way to reach out – not to fix anything, but simply to let them know that they’re on your mind, and that you’re there for them.
- + Do you agree with Vincent that images like “At Eternity’s Gate” can be occasions to glimpse a kind of “evidence” for “something on high”? Explore this question in a journal, or discuss it with family or friends over a meal or online.

HOLY SATURDAY

READ AND LOOK

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 27:57-66

PAINTING

“Wheatfield behind Saint Paul’s Hospital, Saint Rémy,” by Vincent van Gogh

**MARY MAGDALENE
AND THE OTHER MARY
WERE THERE, SITTING
OPPOSITE THE TOMB.
+ MATTHEW 27:61**



LETTER

Vincent’s room in the Saint Rémy asylum had one window: “Through the iron-barred window I see a square-field of wheat in an enclosure,” he wrote to Theo, “above which is the morning sun in all its glory” (Letter to Theo, #592). Imagining a wider view, Vincent painted “Wheatfield behind Saint Paul’s Hospital, Saint Rémy”: a vision of the world glimpsed through iron bars; a portrait of freedom that evokes the reaper of death; a wide open landscape painted from within a kind of tomb.

MEDITATE

Holy Saturday isn’t just a day to pass through, like a flyover between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. It’s a day for waiting, for reflecting, for dwelling in the ambiguity of faith and life, for “sitting opposite the tomb” with “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary”: grieving against grief, hoping against hope.

On one hand, all of us are in some version of Vincent's situation: trying to improve our health and our spirits; our vision limited by our point of view; and our lives limited by "iron bars" of one kind or another, holding us back. And yet, on the other hand, all of us can also take part in Vincent's life-giving imagination: picturing more than we can see; making beauty where we can; and dreaming of a new world to come. This is the on-the-one-hand-on-the-other-hand ambiguity of Holy Saturday, a day for silence and prayer, for feeling Christ's crucified absence so we can all the more joyfully celebrate Christ's resurrected presence to come.

PRACTICES

- + Today light no candles. Pray in silence.
- + Find an hour, or a larger portion of the day, for a silent retreat, at home or on a walk.

EASTER SUNDAY

READ AND LOOK

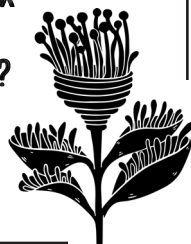
SCRIPTURE

Luke 24:1-12

PAINTING

"Wheatfields with Crows under a Stormy Sky," by Vincent van Gogh

**"WHY DO YOU LOOK
FOR THE LIVING
AMONG THE DEAD?
HE IS NOT HERE,
BUT HAS RISEN."
+ LUKE 24:5**



LETTERS

"Wheatfields with Crows under a Stormy Sky" is the last major work of Vincent's life (though it's not his last painting: at the time of his death, he was working on a study of some exposed tree roots). He described it to Theo this way: "They are vast fields of wheat under troubled skies, and I did not need to go out of my way to try to express sadness and extreme loneliness. I hope you will see them soon – for I hope to bring them to you in Paris as soon as possible, since I almost think that these canvases will tell you what I cannot say in words, the health and restorative forces that I see in the country" (Letter to Theo, #649).

This painting is often interpreted as a portrait of menace and madness, but Vincent's own description points in a different direction. The skies are "troubled," he says, evoking sadness and loneliness, but the overall effect is an example of nature's "health and restorative forces." Vincent once insisted to Theo that looking at a "wheatfield, even in the form of a picture," offered a great deal to suffering people, much more than abstract words or hollow assurances (Letter to Theo, #597). And the Japanese artists Vincent so admired often included humble, common birds (often black birds) in their compositions. The skies may indeed be stormy, but the regenerative powers of nature – both in the wheat and in the crows – rise to meet it.



MEDITATE

Jesus is risen – hallelujah! The beauty of the forty days of Lent draws to a close – and the beauty of Eastertide begins, a fifty-day festival of light and resurrection: a stone rolled away at dawn; a joyful, astonished community; and a promise of the Spirit, the deep, fiery reds of Pentecost to come.

But Easter is also a time of shadows. The savior is risen – but the wounds of crucifixion remain. The brutal empire, by all appearances, is still in power. The disciples have betrayed and abandoned Jesus, melting away when it mattered most. Their shame, their sorrow, their wounds remain as well.

Vincent's "Wheatfields with Crows under a Stormy Sky" can help us mediate on this mix of light and shadow. Easter is indeed a time for trumpets – but it's only the beginning. The skies are still troubled. Loneliness and heartache hang in the air. And yet, at the same time, the loving, liberating power of God is on the move, vibrantly clear if we have eyes to see: in the wheat rising, the crows rising, the wind rising, and our spirits rising as we behold this dynamic, healing scene, this visual parable of restoration, proclaiming good news in ways that reach beyond words.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!

