

WEEK 6

MONDAY, MARCH 23 - SATURDAY, MARCH 28

MONDAY, MARCH 23RD

Glorify God and Enjoy Him Forever

M J R O M A N O

I teach philosophy at the local junior college where we have a sizable population of international students. Every now and then, I get a student whose knowledge of the English language is like my knowledge of auto mechanics: minimal at best. They know how to say hello, like I know where to put my key in the ignition. They know what "test" means, like I know what it means when the light comes on next to my gas gauge. Beyond that? We're both lost. Finally, they type out what they're trying to say into Google Translate, hand me their phone, and even then sometimes I'm still lost. I don't know what they want from me. I worry sometimes that I have the same relationship with Jesus. What is Jesus trying to say to me?

When Jesus showed up on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, he beckoned Simon and Andrew, "And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people." (Mark 1:17). If only we got such clear instructions from Jesus. If only a holy to-do list would flutter out of the sky on the day of our baptisms instructing us what job to take, where to live, who to love, who not to love. Yes, sometimes, we will get clear indications. Every other job falls through except the one that moves us closer to home. Every other person turns down our date except the one who turns out to be The One. The church down the road is where we feel like the worship is aimed straight at our gut. Sometimes that happens, but rarely.

Most of the time, we have two or three or four good options, or no options at all. And we're left to wonder, "What does Jesus want from me?" It's not often that being Presbyterian comes in handy, certainly not when we're trying to spell it over the phone to an insurance agent, but this is one of those times. On any ordinary day, when we're wondering how to follow Jesus and what He wants of us, the first question of the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession of Faith lends a hand. Remember it? Q. 1. What is the chief end of man? A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever. I know, I know. We Presbyterians can overanalyze just about anything, but maybe this question's answer is a simple one. Among all the options with which God presents us, just choose one. Whatever it is, give glory to God and enjoy Him in it. That's all.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, You call me to follow You. Give me courage with every step, confidence in every decision, and hope in my future with You. In Your name, Amen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - MJ ROMANO



Rev. Dr. MJ Romano is Head Pastor at First Church of La Junta, Colorado, and previously served in Youth & Young Adult Ministries in St. Louis. She holds a DMin from McCormick Theological Seminary, teaches Philosophy and Ethics at Otero College, and serves as ECO's Director of Mentored Ministry. She and her husband, Chris Ludwig, have two adult children.

Strength to Say No

M J R O M A N O

Last summer, a dietitian recommended that I start on an anti-inflammatory diet. It prescribed blueberries, salmon, nuts, even honey. It was a diet I could get behind, until the bottom of the page stated a goal of eating less than 20 grams or less a day. I tried it, and I'm here to tell you, it's hard. The worst part of it? It worked! When I did stick to it, I actually felt better. I had more energy. My joints didn't hurt as much, and I even lost weight. You'd think I'd want to stay on it, right? But do I? No. Last week was Valentine's Day. My dear husband bought me candy, as requested, and I really meant to go easy on it, but the temptation was too much. The temptation to eat sugar is one thing. Temptation to sin is another, with consequences far greater than achy knees.

What's the apostle Paul's great line, "For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" (Romans 7:19)? Consider Jesus in his time of temptation. The tempter whispered to Jesus to exploit his power for no good reason by turning stone to bread, to turn his spiritual power to political power in exchange for worshiping a false god, and to prove himself and his immortality by testing God (**Matthew 4:1-11**).

These were real temptations, unique to Jesus and who he was. Each time, Jesus answered, and each time Jesus said no.

Our temptations are no less real and no less unique to who we are. Be they the urge to drink too much, eat too much, spend too much, talk too much, or control too much. Be they the fears that keep us from doing what needs to be done or the angers that keep us apart. Whatever they are and however the tempter whispers to us, we can and must answer, as Jesus did. We must say no. And, yes, it's hard. The call to obedience often is. There may be times when, by ourselves, we don't have this power to say no.

We are human, after all, and, if not totally depraved, at least weak and fragile. Fortunately, the lesson of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness tells us something else: we are not alone. Jesus is the Christ, Emmanuel; He is "God with us." God is with us. With such power as this, "no" might not be within our reach, but it is within His.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, You know what it means to be tempted. You understand my struggle. So give me Your strength to say no, to forgive myself when I fail, and the courage to persevere. In Your name, Amen.

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Great Commission, Great Compassion

JENNIFER HADDOX

The needs in the world are great, but Jesus' love for the world is even greater.

Jesus' call to love extends to the world through the church, as we are called to "love our neighbors as ourselves" (Matthew 22:39) and "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:20). Jesus calls us to live out the Great Commission and to respond with Great Compassion to the needs of the world. As we step out in faith to meet with people in their need and share the Good News, we ourselves grow as disciples.

As you look for ways to lead your church growing as disciples of Jesus Christ during the season of Lent and beyond, consider inviting them to a Great Commission & Great Compassion commitment. So often, we invite people to focus on inward spirituality alone during this season – with invitations to fasting and prayer. This is vital, of course! But Jesus' primary way of making disciples was to send people out to serve, heal, and proclaim. Discipleship during Lent should involve our people going to serve, heal and proclaim the Kingdom of God!

Great Commission; Great Compassion

I began to be formed by a Great Commission & Great Compassion Lenten discipleship as a child. I can remember gathering up loose change, depositing it into a cardboard fish bank, and carrying the jangling bank of coins to Sunday School each week during Lent. I learned the joy of making a difference in the world at a young age from my parents and Sunday School teachers. I never imagined my pennies could solve the world's problems, but I knew that in Jesus' hands they could make a life-transforming difference for someone. Through my giving I grew in awareness of the needs of others. In this weekly commitment, I was being shaped as a disciple of Jesus.

Sometimes children can lead the way in helping us live this out by their simple faith response and willingness to make a difference in the ways that they can. A special mission offering can be a simple tool to help children and adults alike learn to be disciples, giving for the sake of others instead of ourselves.

Congregational Engagement

Here are some suggestions for how you can engage your congregation in missional discipleship during this Lenten Season with a special mission offering.

- Collect special gifts for a selected mission partner that your congregation supports. This offering provides ways to help the congregation get to know and understand the people on mission they support.
- Set up a banquet table for display where people can leave non-perishable food items or financial gifts for a local food bank.
- Distribute M&Ms mini tubes to the children as gifts, and invite them to return it filled with quarters towards a specific mission cause, multiplying the blessing they have received.

While we encourage you to strengthen your own mission relationships through a special offering, our ECO Global Mission partners offer the following important ways you can get involved with your generous gifts. eco-pres.org/mission-partnerships

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - JENNIFER HADDOX



Mike and Jen Haddox began to serve as pastors of First Presbyterian Church in the Fall of 2021. They are a husband and wife team who share the lead pastor role. Based on their unique and complementary gifting, Mike takes the lead in family ministry, preaching, and pastoral care, and Jen takes the lead in directing the staff, session, and ministry teams. They share a deep commitment to equipping the church to grow as disciples who are engaged in mission locally and globally. They love spending time with their two boys and extended family in the region. In their free time, they enjoy movies, cooking and eating good food, and road-trip adventures.

The Church That Breathes

DANA ALLIN

I have been thinking about our calling as it relates to our *Cultivating Flourishing Churches* framework. Hopefully you are now familiar with this tool and approach through our webinars, articles, presbytery conversations, and breakout sessions at our National Gathering. This framework has been shaped by over a decade of learning from both the successes and challenges of church transformation. At its core, the framework compares a congregation to a tree, with various parts working together to produce fruit. Every aspect: roots, soil, trunk, branches, and leaves—needs to be healthy for the tree to thrive. You can explore the framework in detail [here](#).

One critical element of this framework, often overlooked in earlier conversations about transformation, is the importance of spiritual practices. These individual and corporate spiritual practices are represented by the leaves of a tree in our model. Leaves are the mechanism by which a tree engages in photosynthesis. This is the way the tree “breathes” to expel toxins and have what is needed to create energy. Without functioning leaves, the tree cannot thrive.

In the same way, spiritual practices are essential for our churches and individual lives. They are how we “breathe” spiritually, expelling what hinders us and taking in what sustains us. Lent is traditionally a season for intentional spiritual practices. Many of us take this time to give something up and replace it with practices that bring us closer to the Lord. It is a season of spiritual respiration: releasing the old and making space for the new.

Engaging in these practices is vital for our growth as individual disciples. But just as a single leaf cannot sustain an entire tree, our flourishing is magnified when we collectively engage in spiritual disciplines as the body of Christ. This corporate engagement allows the “tree” of our church to flourish in even greater ways. So, how might you—individually or collectively—use this Lenten season to embrace these practices? But Lent is not just about giving something up. It’s also about replacing distractions with practices that deepen our connection with God. These might include:

- **Reflection:** Setting aside intentional time to listen to the Lord.
- **Engagement with Scripture:** Reading and meditating on God’s Word with renewed focus.
- **Confession and Repentance:** Clearing out what hinders our growth.
- **Other Disciplines:** Incorporating fasting, prayer, or acts of service into your daily rhythm.

As we move through the Lenten season, I am reminded of our shared desire to see another great awakening in our country. But revival begins with the Church. It begins when we, as God’s people, are intentional about these foundational practices. Just as a tree thrives when all its parts are healthy, the Church flourishes when we lean into the disciplines that allow the Spirit to work in and through us.

May this Lenten season be a time of spiritual respiration for you and your congregation, expelling the old and taking in the life-giving breath of God.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - DANA ALLIN



Rev. Dr. Dana Allin is ECO’s Synod Executive. Dana formerly served as the President of the board of ECO, the pastor of Indian River Presbyterian Church in Fort Pierce, FL and the pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Lakewood, CA. Dana attended Fuller Seminary, where he received both an MDiv and a DMin. He also has a BS in Microbiology from University of California, Santa Barbara and is an Associate Certified Coach with the International Coach Federation. Dana’s passion to encourage and inspire leaders has led him to develop both the Missional Leader Training program and the Coach Certification Process. He lives in Santa Barbara with his wife, Beth and their three children – Micah, Peyton, and Piper.

The Calling and Promise of God

O Z Z I E M E N E Z E S

Questions about God's calling for my life always come for all true Christians, because deep in our soul and spirit there is a desire to please God, fulfill His purpose, and also respond to the salvation that was extended to us one day.

The Bible shows us many examples of people who were called by God: Abraham (**Genesis 12:1-4**) called to be the father of a great nation, Moses (Exodus 3:1-12) called to liberate the Hebrew people from slavery, Isaiah (**Isaiah 6:8**) called to be a prophet of God, Peter and other Apostles (Matthew 4:19) called to be disciples of Jesus and leaders of the Christian church. Based on all these examples and many others, God's calling is not a simple invitation, but a direction that brings meaning and purpose to the life of every Christian.

There are many things involved in God's calling: knowing the Scriptures, the work of the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts and abilities, circumstances and needs around us, our profession, guidance from church leaders or brothers and sisters in faith, but I would like to highlight trust and obedience to God even in the face of uncertainty.

Something that is always present in God's calling is uncertainty. Uncertainty will always lead us to the place God desires, at His feet, trusting and obeying only Him. Therefore, if you are facing a situation of uncertainty and you have an inclination to accept it, even knowing that humanly and rationally it would be an improbable choice, perhaps you are facing God's calling for your life.

In the Gospel of **Matthew 19:27-30**, Peter says something incredible: "We have left everything to follow you," and even more incredible is Jesus' response to Peter: "Truly I tell you, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, in the renewal of all things, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

There is a decision to be made, a calling to be answered, and something to be left behind for the love of Christ and His calling for your life. Are you willing to answer that calling and live under the promise of Christ Jesus?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, confirm your calling for my life, give me clarity about where and how you want to use me, may your will be done in my life. I leave behind everything that prevents me from living your calling and I respond to your voice today. In Jesus' name, amen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - OZZIE MENEZES



"Ozzie" Osnir Menezes, pastor, 38 years old, married to Luma Menezes, no children yet. ECO Church Planter of One Way Church in Austin-Texas, Degrees: Theology and Business Administration, Master in Leadership and Theology, Specialty courses: Church Planting and Missions.

When the Spirit Changes the Plan

JENNIFER HOLZ

Acts 16: 6-10; Philippians 2:14-16

Acts 16 is one of my favorite chapters in Scripture. Here we find the origin story of the church in Philippi. The story is full of surprises from start to finish, and it opens with Paul, Luke, Timothy and Silas experiencing obstacles and impediments in their planned route. They set out to visit and strengthen the churches they have helped launch, but for some reason they are unable to enter the places on their itinerary. The new call of the Holy Spirit comes at night in the form of Paul's vision of a "man of Macedonia" pleading for help in his city. Paul shares what he has seen with the others, and together they conclude that God has called them to a different plan. Immediately they respond to this new call.

Luke (the writer) indicates here that being in step with the Holy Spirit is about paying attention together to the movement of the Spirit within us and around us. To be clear, there is hostility in the story toward Paul and his team along with a brief stay in prison. So, it's not that following Jesus is pain-free. But the step-by-step obedience of this group produces the fruit of a new church in Philippi and joy in the believers. In reading Paul's letter to this church about a decade later, we see the Philippian church shining "like stars in the sky" (Philippians 2:15).

Recently, my husband and I stepped out of the general "life itinerary" we had put together for our family. Our new call as a family began in prayer with a sense from the Spirit that we were to "be open." I like to think that we have always cultivated a spirit of openness and listening to the Spirit. But looking back, we are amazed at how the Spirit gently led us from where we were then (Colorado Springs, Colorado) to where we now are (Carmel, California). Eventually, we experienced our own "man from Macedonia" relaying a need that we were unaware of in a place that was not on our road map. We committed to turning our hearts in this new direction and determined together (and with our close circle of friends and family) that if the doors kept opening, we would keep walking through them.

Our new call came after 24 years of ministry in the same city. We were embedded deeply in relationships, family friendships and our ministry work. But the Spirit of Jesus closes and opens doors for us as if the doors belong to Jesus himself. By God's grace we strive to work out the work of God in our lives day by day with joy and surrender. And we are grateful. *What does this day hold for you and how is Jesus leading you today?*

Prayer—*Spirit of Jesus, anchor my heart in You today that I might listen and respond to Your voice in the small decisions of this day and in the larger movements of this season where I am living. Give me ears to hear and eyes to see the way of Jesus unfolding before me. With grace and openness, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - JENNIFER HOLZ



Jennifer Holz is the Senior Pastor at Carmel Presbyterian Church in Carmel, CA. Her family recently relocated to Carmel after more than two decades of ministry at First Presbyterian Church, Colorado Springs. Her husband Adam is a free-lance writer and media specialist and they have two daughters at Carmel High School and a son studying music at Grand Canyon University.