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PITTSBURGH  
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# LENTEN REFLECTIONS

2019



For those engaged in theologically reflective ministry

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From Lent through Easter is both an important and an especially busy time for pastors and Christian leaders. In these pages, some of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's faculty and program directors offer fresh insights and practical ideas to foster the spiritual nourishment of your congregation—and yourself. The informal remarks of these pastor-theologians have been excerpted from "Conversations with the Dean" on a variety of topics relevant to Christian ministry and witness at this reflective and celebratory time in the church year. May they enrich your ministry and your soul.

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# ON LENTEN PRACTICES





# Helen Blier

## Director of Continuing Education

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**A**s we approach Lent, it is important to remember that we are not the ones who do Spiritual formation and discipling—the Holy Spirit does. And at the end of the day, whatever activity we do for Lent, we should do so with that end game in mind. When we create the space for formation, the Holy Spirit will do the work. So if creating the space means doing less, do less. Pay attention to your own spiritual practices while being at rest for discernment.

Church programming for Lent might mean thinking less in terms of content and more in terms of practices. At Pittsburgh Seminary, we talk about being rooted in our own tradition and in relationship with others. We are rooted in the Reformed tradition and seek to be in relationship across Christian traditions throughout the world.

For example, I refer to myself as a Roaming Catholic because of my interest in ecumenism. I say that a little tongue-in-cheek, but it really is the place from which I'm working right now. I'm rooted in my own tradition, but I'm primarily outward facing in that I'm in relationship with an institution rooted in an expressed theological difference from my own Christian roots.

On the one hand, we can look at denominational difference as a sign of our brokenness because of the sometimes violent origins of the schisms that caused the rifts. But this difference can also offer a place where we can experience unity in diversity. Certainly, being in diverse contexts has helped me learn about myself and my own tradition, instead of going into autopilot on the assumption that everybody loves a good world in the same way that I do. This theological diversity prompts me to ask questions: What does this mean? Why do I do things this way? Why are my thoughts directed in this way? It's been a tremendous gift to be in such a context.

I grew up Catholic, and we always had to give up something during Lent. I remember going through a phase in which religious practice took on the sheen of extreme sport. People would engage in an insidious competition: Who would give up the most stuff? Who would be the most perfect in his or her self-abnegation by the time Lent was over? And then they went through the backlash: Why do we deny ourselves, anyway?

I've landed at a different place. A quotation from Thomas Berg puts me in the location I want to respond from: "If you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair. But ask me what I'm living for in detail, and ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for."

So I think of Lenten practices as opportunities to reset an inner clock, to peel away some of the distractions that keep us from living into that for which we think we are living. For me, the insidious pervasiveness of consumerism and "stuff" is something that weighs on my heart and also eats up a lot of my time. Taking care of stuff,



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managing stuff, buying stuff. So I don't do any shopping off line during Lent. What that forces me to do is be a lot more creative in terms of how I engage the world around me and how I spend my time.

For example, when I go out running, at the start of Lent I see a number of people I've probably passed before. They've clearly been to church, because they have ashes marked on their foreheads. For me, that's a really nice way to think about how various practices sustain people in life. These people I pass could look just like people heading to work. And they probably are going to work—even hurrying urgently to work. But they are also people who have started the day grounded in a practice.

The Gospel of Mark is a stark, stripped down, urgent book for people in urgent times—in many ways, a good text for us to be living right now. Mark begins with the baptism narrative—there are no infancy narratives at all. Jesus' baptism by John is the first affirmation God makes of Jesus' incarnation and call. And it occurs in the wilderness. The heavens are ripped open—the language sounds really violent around the event. And then Jesus' first reaction is to go off into the desert.

Plus there's this interesting phrase . . . . When the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus at the moment of his baptism, the voice of God does not say, "This is my beloved son," as though announcing him to the surrounding people; God says, instead, "You are my beloved son." I find that really interesting. It is personal, resulting in a personal sense of calm in this Gospel account characterized by urgency. So I would use this passage in giving people an opportunity to reflect on what difference baptism really makes and encourage them to engage some practices that help remind them of how their post-baptismal identity is different.



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WHO DO SPIRITUAL  
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SPIRIT DOES.**



# ON LENT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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# Jerome Creach

Robert C. Holland Professor of  
Old Testament

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I often tell students that the parts of the Old Testament that are most important for the early church and therefore for the New Testament are the books of Genesis, the prophet Isaiah, and the Psalms. Jeremiah 31 and 34 are also important, because there Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant. In Lent, what we experience in Jesus Christ is a fulfillment of that passage, which emphasizes God's action on our behalf.

Jeremiah says the new covenant is going to be one God writes on our hearts. God is going to do all the work, and we are to respond—similarly as with the first covenant, which God initiated as well. But the focus in Jeremiah is really on God's writing this new covenant on our hearts. So that passage plays profoundly in Lent.

As for the Psalms, they are all over the Lenten season. We begin Lent on Ash Wednesday, usually by reading Psalm 51—a prayer of confession that is attributed to David and set in the time when Nathan the prophet confronts him over his affair with Bathsheba. So that prayer sets a tone of repentance and confession for Lent. But then other psalms, such as Psalm 22 at its end, highlight hope: despite difficulties, God is going to hold the psalmist in life. There will be a future, and the psalmist is going to give testimony to that fact.



But Psalm 22, of course, begins with the great cry of dereliction that is quoted by Jesus in Matthew and Mark: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” In a way, Psalm 22 frames the Passion narratives of Mark and Matthew—Jesus is not coming up with these words just out of his own head. He’s read the words and knows them, because they’re part of the sojourn—a Passion that involves violence.

A lot of people, when they encounter violence in Scripture, think such passages cause problems. But I think, overall, these passages in the Bible point to God as having absorbed human violence into God’s own self in the Passion of Jesus. So God through Jesus is the one who suffers human violence, and that note gives us a take on how we’re to read such passages. The church, then, can read those passages that seem to approve violence as something else, namely, as insights into God’s dealing with evil on our behalf. That’s the theological direction we get from Jesus’ Passion.

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The church fathers even thought about a passage such as Psalm 137, for example, as a prayer of Jesus—a prayer dealing not with real historical enemies but with the powers of evil in our lives. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reiterates that point and brings it to the fore in his writing on the Psalms as a resource for our prayers. He highlights that God has taken on this violence, this vengeance. It’s never meted out to the sinners—to those who deserve it, if you will. God takes it on God’s self.

My interest in the Old Testament started with a fascination with these texts—with psalms, prophets, and great narratives of the Old Testament. But what really hooked me as a Christian, a minister, and a theologian was realizing that the New Testament is grounded in the Old Testament. So when I hear someone say, “I’m a New Testament Christian,” or, “We’re a New Testament Church,” I want to respond, “What you’re saying is sort of heretical. We don’t even know what that means, because the New



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SELF.**

Testament, in almost every line, in one way or another is alluding to or even quoting from an Old Testament text.”

Christians today need to recognize that the early church and the New Testament authors expressed their understanding of Jesus Christ and their experience with Jesus by grounding them in the Old Testament—all its promises, judgments, teachings on reconciliation, and more. Jesus is understood as the fulfillment and end of all those Old Testament texts, and the New Testament authors and the early church are simply trying to show how that’s the case. So we can’t do without the Old Testament—it’s really the foundation of our Christian faith.

To that point, Martin Luther drew his idea of salvation by faith mainly from the Psalms. He spent his first two years teaching the Psalms, which he had memorized. So he recognized all these references to Psalms and other Old Testament texts when he read Romans, for example. He recognized that Paul was starting with an Old Testament text.

Another of those texts we can learn from in Lent is Genesis 17, the passage in which God makes a promise to Abraham that he will be the ancestor of a multitude of nations—a promise made to an uncircumcised pagan from Iraq, as a seminary professor of mine once put it. What a great way to cast Abraham! It reminds us that Abraham was chosen not because of his faithfulness, but simply because of God’s grace. When you’re reading that passage, you can’t help but be struck by the fact that Abraham is chosen out of all the people in the world. Everything is at God’s initiative, God’s action. God is the subject of almost every verb in the passage. The land that is promised is something God is going to give. It is God who is establishing the covenant. It is God who has named Abraham. Later in the passage, God



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changes Sarah's name and promises her she would be the mother of this nation of which Abraham is to be the father.

God chooses these unlikely people, and we ourselves are among the unlikely people God chooses. What God does in that story and in our lives is to reach out to us when we're not able to reach out first. That is really the crux of the story about Abraham—and this person who was a sojourner, an outsider, is also who we are and what our identity is to be as God's people: not those who rule the world, but those who come as servants of God.

For me, a particularly meaningful Lenten tradition is the Maundy Thursday service. It rehearses something that Jesus and his disciples did, so it's not a practice we have laid over the biblical text. In that service, we are recalling what happened in the Passion story, and I always think about one experience in a church in Virginia when I think about Maundy Thursday. In the church's Lenten drama, the "actors" would sit at a table recalling the Last Supper. Jesus would say the words, "One of you will betray me," and each disciple would give a little speech. Of course, Judas would be there, and he was played by a man in the congregation who took great pride in that role. He had a beard he would put on—a little devilish-looking, pointed beard—and a money sack. Judas would give his speech and then leave, while the rest of the disciples stayed around the table. And after the man playing Judas would give his speech, pick up his money sack, and leave, he would take a seat in the front row of the sanctuary. The elders would then serve communion to the rest of us at the "Last Supper" table. And when the congregation got up for communion, Judas got up and took communion with everybody else. And I think that is a great symbol of the sort of radical forgiveness we celebrate during Lent and Holy Week—a great symbol of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.



**GOD CHOOSES THESE  
UNLIKELY PEOPLE, AND WE  
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THE UNLIKELY PEOPLE GOD  
CHOOSES.**

# ON LENT AND SELF-CARE

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# Carolyn Cranston

## Director of Alumnae/i and Church Relations

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**D**uring Lent, most pastors are extra busy. But amid all the busyness, take time to do what Jesus did: Get away by yourself to pray, meditate for a while, and relax. Absorb the season so that you enjoy it more than being frustrated by it. A bit of added structure to your routine can help you find those moments.

In my own ministries—at the church where I co-pastor, the Seminary, and the Presbytery—my greatest joy is in relationships. I love building relationships. I love walking with people on their journey toward ordination through the Presbytery. I love working with people on stewardship and connecting with all the alums at PTS. And at the church, I love doing the pastoral care, the weddings, funerals, and baptisms that bring you closer into people's lives.

Holy Week has been one of my favorite weeks of the entire year since, at my home church, we started scheduling times of continual prayer that week. From 7:00 in the morning until 7:00 in the evening, there would be someone in the church praying all the time. Just to go in quietly, read Scripture, read some devotionals, and simply sit and pray was a great way to observe Holy Week.

What I love most about Holy Week is the fact that we take time “at” the cross. Too often we want to get from Holy Thursday right to celebrating on Easter Sunday.



But taking the time really to think about what it meant for Jesus to have to go to the cross—the pain he endured so we could have eternal life and our sins could be forgiven—is a really wonderfully meaningful practice.

First Corinthians 1:24 talks about God's foolishness as being wiser than human wisdom. There are a lot of ways to approach that text, but what I love is all the irony in it. Paul is talking to wise people—who are not unified: unhappy Greek scholars and philosophers, as well as wise Jewish leaders. To talk to them, Paul is using the cross as Christ crucified. They look at the cross as a horrible symbol signifying a horrid person—a member of an insurrection, for example, deserving of humiliating capital punishment. So the fact that God, in his divine wisdom, uses such a symbol to show his power is truly amazing. And I think it points out that God is in control, no matter how brilliant we think we may become, how many degrees we may get, and how much we may study.

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God's wisdom is always going to surpass ours, and there's nothing we can do that will outshine anything God can do for us. We are not God, and I'm grateful for that every single day. Lent brings that truth to the fore. Thanks be to God.



**GOD'S WISDOM IS ALWAYS  
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## ON LENT AND BOOSTING CREATIVITY

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# Shan Overton

## Director of the Center for Writing and Learning Support

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One of the things I remind people who want to keep improving their writing skills is that we're all beginning writers. Any time you start a new writing program, a writing project, a writing process, you're always new. I like to think of it as solving a new math problem you've never seen before. It's always a new situation that you're trying to figure out. And if you see it that way, the opportunity for growth, for investigation, for learning something you didn't know about what you think is embedded in the process. It becomes a transformative process rather than simply a box to check off your list.

That approach can apply even to what seems like the most perfunctory of tasks—writing a church newsletter, or a letter to your executive presbyter or bishop, for example. What you're writing may not be the most exciting thing—you may not even want to do it—but if you can see it as a challenge, an opportunity to grow and change, it actually refreshes the whole process in a way that is helpful.

I like to remember Thomas Merton's reflection in *The Sign of Jonas*, in which he discusses the difficulty for him of writing theology. Thomas Merton! He says writing is a way of figuring out his theology as he goes along. And, essentially, that's what we are all doing—trying to learn through engagement with language and our own inner voice, trying to figure out what we want to communicate with others about God, our community, the ministry, and more.



To foster imagination in my own work, I take writing classes—even some that are out of my “wheelhouse,” such as the flash fiction class I took last year. I was a newbie, and the class forced me to “get my chops back up” as a writer. Taking such classes puts me in a place of vulnerability so that I’m having to meet the challenge before me, just as my students are.

I also do contemplative prayer and meditation. Every morning I get up at about 4:30 for at least an hour of those practices—kind of insane, as I’m not a morning person! But I find that doing so helps me “clean the clocks”—clear out all the things that get gummed up in my mind so I have space to be creative, space for my imagination to engage. If I can clear all my lists and worries of the day out before it really gets going, I find that I have an enhanced ability to be creative and responsive in my writing, my work with students, my participation in meetings, etc.

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To boost your creativity during a busy season like Lent, one of the best things you can do is take care of your body. When you get really busy, you can forget that your spiritual life is an embodied life—that you actually are this thing that you’re sitting in. It’s always with you. And you need to care for it, because it helps you achieve whatever it is you’re doing, helps you be in relation to other people. So for myself, I do things like go for a walk every day. I recommend that everybody at least get outside or out of “the office” and walk somewhere different. Go look at some flowers, get out of your usual environment. Even if it’s a lovely place, you need a change of pace.

I also think eating well during Lent and cutting back on things that actually drain you are important. I can drink way too much coffee, and by the end of the day I’m kind of stuck to the ceiling. So I try to be mindful about drinking more water instead of coffee and eating more vegetables and fruits. Good nutrition is key to being able to sustain intense times in your call and also rejuvenate after you’ve been through a draining time. So my recipe for boosting your creativity is actually pretty simple and



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... TAKE CARE OF YOUR  
BODY.**

not really rule-based: eat your vegetables, get some sleep, go for a walk, get some fresh air, look at nature—those kinds of things.

A Holy Week practice I've developed for myself is a kind of stepping back. I don't think of it as giving something up, rather, as making time for things I don't do enough of or pay enough attention to. I'm a very social person, and I tend to keep my schedule very busy. So when I try to pull some of that back, I do it in some interesting ways. One is trying to stay off of Facebook—a Facebook fast. I also give up alcohol during Lent. I like to go out and have a glass of wine with friends, and I think it is good to refrain from what for me is that socially connected practice. I also say no to a lot of social engagements during the Lenten season. Limiting those engagements makes time for me to hear the still small voice of God and to remember what I'm called to do.

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The Book of Numbers relates that when the Hebrews were wandering in the wilderness, they really got impatient. They complained a lot and started to think, "Maybe God's not really going to deliver us. We got out of Egypt, but we had it pretty good there, because at least we had food, water, and shelter. Now look at us!" God responds to their situation, but they keep complaining. So God sends snakes, which bite people, who die. The survivors wonder, "What have we done?" They begin to think about the way they are doubting God—about their own inner rebellion, their lack of trust, and their relationship with God from the vantage point of what they're doing to foster that relationship. So they ask Moses to intercede for them. And when Moses talks to God, God says, "Make a serpent and put it on a pole. And anybody who looks at it will be healed" (my paraphrase, of course). When I recall this story, it's at first hard for me to think about serpents in a healing way, because we have a very negative view of them both in the here and now and in relation to the Garden of Eden story. But in the ancient world, serpents actually had positive symbolic value in terms of healing, not always negative value as destructive. So in Numbers God is inviting the Hebrews to heal in relation to God. When I read the associated New Testament passage about Jesus' coming crucifixion—John 3:14-21—in relation to that story, I am reminded to look to the Son of Man for healing, as the Israelites were invited to look to the serpent.

Lent gives us an opportunity to take stock, because this is a penitential season. It invites us to look at what we've done, by commission and omission, that may not be in right relationship with God and then seek ways to look up, look past, look beyond, toward healing, so that we might then move forward in right relationship. That is how I see John 3:14—at first glance uncomfortable, but in reality extremely hopeful.

## ON LENT AND WORLD MISSION

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# Bala Khyllep

## Associate Director of the World Mission Initiative

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**W**orld mission in general is a ministry I felt called to from the start. During my college days, when I was involved in student ministry, I learned a lot about world mission and missionaries, and I was fascinated and inspired by their work—especially their courage to go out to do ministry in different parts of the world. But during those days my understanding of mission was more about evangelism only. Through my education and also through engagement with people from different backgrounds, I’ve learned that mission is much more. It is holistic in nature, and we participate in mission not just for the sake of growing our church or just to make us feel good, but to participate in God’s mission.

We are all called to be a living witness of what God has continued to do in our world today. So we do mission mainly to worship God by continuing to proclaim God’s mission to release the captives. In my ministry in the U.S., I’ve learned that some churches look at mission as something extra, not part of the regular curriculum of the church. But we all need to understand that we worship a God on a mission—a God who’s not willing to sit still while people are suffering. And each and every one of us is to participate in God’s ongoing mission in this world.

Having been a pastor in a small rural church, I understand the difficulty of turning outward toward mission when, as a church, you’re trying just to get by, to survive. But we need to realize that the church, even though decreasing in numbers and financial giving, still has a vital voice to offer and role to play in the community. So I see mission as the lifeblood of the church—without mission, there is no church.



Many churches today are involved in short-term mission because it's easier, and through it we think we can offer a quick fix to some of the problems we see in our world. But we need to also realize that the God we worship is a God who doesn't want to have a short-term relationship with us, rather, a deep relationship with each and every one of us for the long term—a God who is willing and patient enough to walk alongside us, even though sometimes it takes us a long time to realize God's love for us. So what the World Mission Initiative at PTS is trying to do is engage churches in building long-term relationships with global partners. Our seminary students are able to learn and engage in world mission before they even go out to pastor churches; thus they already have that mission experience in their mind and heart.

My wife and I have both served in mission and as clergy, and during a busy season such as Lent, the ministry can demand a lot of time from both of us. Sometimes as clergy we are constantly looking for this mystical thing called balance—balance between church/mission work and family life. And seeking that balance can be an oppressive force. So my advice is, give yourself grace. This is a hectic time in the church year, and sometimes we get frustrated that we are not able to connect as a couple or a family or keep practices we've committed ourselves to for our Lenten journey. Let's give ourselves a break, because this is just a season. It will eventually end. So let's not beat ourselves up. Secondly, realize that people's gifts and interests change over time. Clergy couples, especially, need to be willing to evaluate those changes and be open to being flexible in our work, so that we complement one another in ministry and are able to grow in other areas.

Psalms 51—"Create in me a clean heart, O God. Put a new and right spirit in me"—is a very common text preached during Lent. It can easily prompt us to dwell on feeling guilty and confronting our sins. It can make us feel that God is distant



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from us, maybe even doesn't love us. But to me this psalm isn't just about feeling guilty and asking for God's forgiveness. Through this Psalm, we also affirm that we worship a God who is steadfast and unfailing in love, who is full of compassion and abundant in mercy. That realization gives a way for us to understand that, even though we are unworthy, God can still change our heart, turn our life upside down, and redeem and accept us.

Traditionally, Lent is a season for repentance. But for some people repentance can be difficult, especially if they think God has cast them away and looks only at their shortcomings and sins. So I think it is important to preach Psalm 51 with cautious care for those people who suffer from trauma with shame, guilt, and a sense of worthlessness. It's important to preach in such a way that the step of repentance is affirming—that, no matter how sinful you are, no matter how unworthy you are, God is able to create a clean heart in you.



**WE WORSHIP A GOD  
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IS FULL OF COMPASSION &  
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# ON LENT AND PRAYER

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# Ron Cole-Turner

## H. Parker Sharp Professor of Theology and Ethics

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Within my field of study, I have developed a particular interest in the relationship between science and theology. That interest was sparked many years ago by my realization that we live in an unusual time in terms of human discovery of the world through the natural sciences—the world that Christians call Creation. In fact, it's not just science that's exploding all around us and everywhere we look—it's also technology. Media such as Facebook, smart phones, all the technological "stuff" we carry in our pockets far exceeds the hardware that filled up huge rooms 40 or 50 years ago in terms of computing power. And it's not just IT—it's virtually every area of technology, from synthetic biology to gene editing and right on through.

As I thought about this special moment in which we live, I became a bit anxious. How could we recover, restate, and renew our understanding of the ancient message of the Bible in contemporary culture—an ancient message formed in a world so different from the world we live in today? Interestingly, that world didn't change much until the 1700s and 1800s with rise of modern science and the subsequent explosion of technology, which really took off with accelerating speed in the last 30 or 40 years. What a wonderful time to be alive, but what a challenging time in which to live as a Christian.

I think we can take this message to today's world, but it requires some work. And somebody needs to do it. Fortunately, I have many partners in the challenge of engaging in this conversation, in spending the hard time addressing the difficult challenge of reading the natural sciences, of taking them seriously, of following trends in technology and looking at how they transform the very meaning of our humanity



and then saying, “All right, God has come among us in Jesus Christ, become one with us in our humanity. Which humanity are we talking about—the humanity we now understand through the natural sciences as evolved over millions of years and now able to use technology to change our very nature? Is the Incarnation still a valid way of looking at the world?” Again, I think it is. I am now, deep down, more dedicated to the core beliefs of Christianity than I have ever been in my life. I think we Christians need to recognize the challenges of science, but recognize that challenges present an opportunity for us to go back and rediscover in a richer, deeper way what we have affirmed right from the very beginning.

One age-old question Christians have attempted to address consists in the so-called “problem of suffering”: If God exists, and God is good, why is there suffering? as though suffering should not exist. Certainly Jesus devoted a lot of his ministry to healing people who were suffering. And now comes medical research that seems to be on the verge not just of dealing with suffering in many ways but also dealing with aging and other human limitations. Should we push through those limitations of our evolved biology so that not only do we deal with disease and its attendant suffering, but also push through the very limitations that define human life itself, so that, for example, we can know more and live with good health longer than has been humanly possible up to this point? These are the ethical questions we’re working on in a class right now here in the Seminary.

And then there is the question of prayer, and how prayer relates to suffering and to reaching for these to-date humanly impossible abilities. We all have lots of reasons for not praying: too busy, too many things going on, too many distractions, just too spiritually lazy. And if you take Christianity seriously, you may conclude that prayer is an impossibility—you’re supposed to sit there and speak with enough spiritual energy that an ineffable, incomprehensible mystery we call God, the sovereign creator of the entire universe, is going to hear what you have to say? How do your prayers actually get through? How do they register, as at it were, in the courts of heaven? Well, Christianity says prayer is impossible, but then immediately also says, what is impossible for human beings is possible with God.

The early Christians were very mindful that Jesus prayed. And here’s the tie-in with Lent: in the entire Lenten period, but particularly during Holy Week, you see again and again in Scripture examples of Jesus praying. If Jesus is divine, why does Jesus need to pray? To me that question is fascinating. I think the answer is, to reveal to us that the three persons of the Trinity are distinct enough in their personal identity that there’s communication among them—and that in the Incarnation, during the days of his earthly ministry, the second person of the Trinity maintained that Trinitarian communication

actively, but in human form. So we see Jesus again and again slipping away at night or getting up in the morning to pray, till we get to Thursday evening and his prayer in Gethsemane—one of the most passionate prayers in any religious tradition. If Jesus is God, what is Jesus doing speaking that way to God? If Jesus is God, what is happening on the cross when he sets aside the intimacy of the address “Abba” (“Father”) and switches to a more generic word, Eli (“My God”), to ask “Why have you forsaken me?”

As I began to wrestle with that change, I began to see it as an opening on the world of prayer for the Christian. It’s a window on the communication within the Trinity and on the now-incarnate Christ’s offering prayer on our behalf. So how can I myself get my prayer to reach to God? Why should God care about me? Because I have an incarnate high priest who is deeply enmeshed in my humanity, in the suffering of the entirety of human experience. I have a high priest who opens up a channel of prayer, as it were, from the human to the divine. So the impossibility of my communicating with a holy God has now been made possible because of the self-humiliation of God in Christ. Jesus is now praying not for himself but interceding for me and for all humanity—and my prayers can kind of “hitch a ride.” Because Jesus is praying, I too can pray, and so can you.



BECAUSE JESUS IS PRAYING,  
I TOO CAN PRAY, AND SO  
CAN YOU.

## ON LENT, PASTORS, AND SABBATH

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# Christine Chakoian

## Vice President for Seminary Advancement

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**W**hat a privilege it is for pastors, in the midst all of the busyness of the Lenten season and Easter and the constant to-do list, to hold sacred the story of Christ and its continuing impact on our lives and our world. The extent to which pastors can enter into the worship of this season, even as they're leading, is refreshing to the spirit. And it is also important for them to create a sabbath after Easter—close the church office the day after Easter, because everybody, from the pastors to the custodians to the church secretary, and all the others who have worked extra hard, is exhausted. A sabbath rest day gives everyone time to look back, revisit, and re-participate in Holy Week. Doing so helps not to let the brightness of Easter fade too quickly as you move on to other things. And it gives you time to attend to yourself and your loved ones.

It's common for pastors to do self-criticism after big weeks such as Holy Week: What did I do wrong? What could have happened better? What could we have done differently? If only I had preached such-and-such . . . There's room for that reflection, and we need to be honest with ourselves. But we also need to celebrate those places in which, through us, God has touched someone's life.

The very earliest Christians, as a group, called themselves not a "church" but people of "the way." And as with many other faith traditions of that time, the learner, the disciple, followed the teacher, and the teacher led you on a path that gave life. Our Teacher, Jesus, gives life not only to us but also to the entire world, which got so lost.



The way that Jesus Christ is leading us is the way of compassion, humility, courage, and faithfulness—first to God, not to self.

The faith community at Pittsburgh Seminary is seeking to grow in Spiritual formation in this way and to model it for that larger world. Ministry in the way of Jesus is our sacred calling. It's very easy for people to get caught up in particular ways of doing things, so I love that proverb "Never confuse the finger pointing to the moon with the moon." If we keep looking to Jesus, who shows us the way, then we'll more likely stay on track, but the moment we move toward ourselves and the idolatry of our traditions, the farther away we'll go.

When I served as pastor of a church, during Lent one of the most important worship services was the Tenebrae service, in part because there was no preaching, and the words of Scripture stood for themselves. As a person of the Reformed tradition, I see Scripture as very much a living word, and it has given me life over many years. So to have the combination of Scripture and music invite me into the last days of Christ before his crucifixion was—and still is—very powerful.

But God is in the business of resurrection, and we see throughout sacred history that Christ's rising from the grave is the culmination of the many times God has remembered his people and liberated us from our own bonds. For me, the business of resurrection that I need to hear is that the chaos of our world is not the last word, that God brings new life. The new life that Christ brings us cannot be conquered. There is nothing that separates us from the love of God in Jesus, the Risen Christ.



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# LEARN MORE ABOUT PITTSBURGH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Rooted in the Reformed tradition and in relationship with Christ-followers from other traditions, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary forms and equips people for ministries familiar and yet to unfold and communities present and yet to be gathered.

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- Doctor of Ministry

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