

# RETURN *to the* LORD

Daily Devotions for Lent and Easter

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## The Force of a Command

Read Luke 13:1–5

Return to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments. Joel 2:12–13a

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the British Royal Navy was at the height of its power, superior officers customarily spoke to their subordinates with great courtesies. An admiral might send the message, “My compliments to the captain. If he finds it convenient, would he please join me for dinner?” However, the invitation carried the force of a command; no captain in his right mind would ignore the admiral’s invitation! It was *always* convenient to obey. Great regret would come upon the captain who refused!

So it also is with the Word of the Lord. Pastors and theologians sometimes speak about God’s invitations to us. For example, Luther wrote in his Small Catechism, “God tenderly invites us to believe” (Introduction to the Lord’s Prayer). However, the courteous and gracious invitations of our Divine Admiral should never be ignored, no matter how gentle or optional they might sound!

Speaking through Joel, God invited His people, “Return to Me.” Like the invitation of a British admiral, God’s invitation carries the force of a command. Do not ignore God’s invitation to repent of sin, thus continually returning to the Christ to be saved! The call to repentance must be obeyed. Great regret will come upon those who refuse.

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Help me, Lord, to return, according to Your command. Amen.

## The Wisdom of the Cross

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18–25

Behold, My servant shall act wisely; He shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. Isaiah 52:13

When Isaiah said, “high and lifted up, and . . . exalted,” he was speaking about our Lord’s crucifixion. Jesus Himself spoke about His cross in that same manner, saying, “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself” (John 12:32; Jesus said this “to show what kind of death He was going to die,” v. 33). Speaking about the crucifixion, Isaiah wanted us to know that our Lord acted wisely when He voluntarily died for us: “Behold, My servant shall act wisely.”

Death is a strange sort of wisdom, especially the terrible death of crucifixion. But the wisdom of this particular death is made clear by the resurrection. The world wants nothing to do with the resurrection. When the Word and Wisdom of the Cross is preached, the world calls it “foolishness”; the Scriptures call it “the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Because Jesus acted wisely on the cross, His wisdom is now ours. Our Lord’s wisdom comes to us through preaching, Baptism, and the Sacrament of the Altar. Thus, we become wise; thus, even the youngest, most infantile, and most freshly baptized Christian possesses more wisdom than all the philosophers in the world put together.

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Give me Your Spirit, Lord, that I may remain “wise for salvation” (2 Timothy 3:15). Amen.

## Marred beyond Human Semblance

Read John 19:1–11

Many were astonished at You—His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and His form beyond that of the children of mankind. Isaiah 52:14

“Behold the man!” (John 19:5). That is what Pontius Pilate said to the chief priests and others who had brought Jesus to Pilate. Hoping to satisfy their thirst for blood, Pilate had previously turned Jesus over to his men, who flogged and tortured our Lord. Once the torture was complete, Pilate presented Jesus to His accusers, saying, “Behold the man!”

Why did Pilate say, “Behold the man”? It might have been necessary. None of our Lord’s accusers—having stood face-to-face with Him—might have been able to recognize Him any longer. “Many were astonished at You.” It must have been terribly difficult to look at Jesus in that moment, just prior to His final torment on the cross. “Marred, beyond human semblance, and His form beyond that of the children of mankind.” Jesus was not even recognizable as a human being. “I am a worm, and not a man” (Psalm 22:6).

Being reduced to nothing, Jesus suffered to make us into something. As a result of His marred semblance of a man, He gave us the semblance of God, righteous and pure forever.

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Dearest Jesus, by the power of Your marred human semblance, crucified and lifted up, give me the semblance of God, both Your Father and mine. Amen.

## Startled

Read Matthew 27:45–54

So shall He sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths because of Him, for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand. Isaiah 52:15

In a footnote, the English Standard Version of the Bible offers the word *startle* as an alternative for *sprinkle* in this verse: “He [Jesus] shall *startle* many nations; Kings shall shut their mouths because of Him.” The “shut mouths” refers not to silence but to the appalling nature of our Lord’s death that it would make even powerful men cover their mouths with their hands. Powerful men would stand in awe because the death of Jesus delivered a startling revelation: “that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand.”

A Roman centurion (“ruler of one hundred”) stood at the cross while Jesus died. Our Lord’s suffering—together with the sign over His head, the jeers of His enemies, and the sorrow of His friends—“startled” the centurion’s confession of Christ. The centurion was awed and appalled by his own work that day; “kings shall shut their mouths because of Him.” However, the centurion could not remain silent. Our Lord opened the centurion’s lips so that his mouth might speak praise: “Truly this was the Son of God!”

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“O LORD, open my lips, and my mouth will declare Your praise” (Psalm 51:15). Amen.

## Lent Week One

# God's Holy Arm

Read Psalm 98

Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? Isaiah 53:1

Jesus is the arm of the Lord and the right hand of God. The heavenly Father gave all authority to Jesus (Matthew 28:18); "in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Colossians 2:9).

"To whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?" Isaiah earlier answered his own question: "The LORD has bared His holy arm before the eyes of all the nations" (Isaiah 52:10). Thus, Isaiah prophesied not only that many international visitors in Jerusalem would see the death of Jesus (John 19:20; Acts 2:5) but also that the preached message of forgiveness would fill the entire creation. "Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world" (Psalm 19:4; Romans 10:18).

Isaiah's first question is more sober than the second: "Who has believed what he has heard from us?" Only those to whom the miracle of faith has been given, for "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

Lent is a time of returning. It should also be a time of thanks. We can return only because the arm of the Lord has grasped us and turned us back toward Himself.

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As You call me to return, dear heavenly Father, make my returning possible by Your powerful arm, even Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.

## Hidden Majesty

Read Matthew 17:1–8

For He grew up before Him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him. Isaiah 53:2

When John the Baptist looked at those who had come to be baptized, he knew that the Promised Christ stood somewhere there in the midst of the crowd. John simply did not know which person was the Christ. “Among you stands one you do not know. . . . I myself did not know Him (John 1:26, 31).

Our Lord’s body bore no indication of His divinity. His frame was not that of an Adonis. His eyes betrayed no divine spark. His skin did not glow. The divinity of Jesus could only be detected when Jesus revealed it and only to those whom He desired to see it.

“He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him.” What, therefore, has attracted us to Him who was crucified for us and for our salvation? Only the power of His Word. Only the miracle of His self-revelation. Only the testimony of His Holy Spirit, “who spoke by the prophets” (Nicene Creed).

We have been saved by the pure miracle of God; we also believe by the pure miracle of God.

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O Holy Spirit, keep my eyes open to the Christ, my Lord and my God.  
Amen.



## Cover Your Face, Not Your Ears

Read Isaiah 49:1–7

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not. Isaiah 53:3

Has an accident scene ever made you cover your child's eyes? Has the sight of illness or disease made you nauseous? Are there movie scenes you cannot bear to watch? Such experiences compare to the reactions created by the suffering of Jesus, "from whom men hid their faces." Our Lord had become repulsive.

The sight of our Lord's suffering was absolutely terrible, but Isaiah did not spell out all the gory details. The four Gospel writers followed suit, describing our Lord's indescribable suffering only in simple, clinical terms: "Pilate took Jesus and flogged Him" (John 19:1); "they led Him out to crucify Him" (Mark 15:20). Not atrocious details but only unadorned statements.

Isaiah might scratch his head at our Passion plays, movie portrayals, and other forms of art that attempt to depict the crucifixion of Jesus in all its horror. Why should we want to see things that others could not bear to see? Perhaps we, too, should avert our eyes from the graphic images and focus instead upon what we hear. "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

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Help me to return, O Lord, on the basis of what I hear and not what I see.  
Amen.

## He Carried It All

Read John 11:32–37

Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows;  
yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and  
afflicted. Isaiah 53:4

John the Baptist called Jesus “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Isaiah wanted us to know that Jesus did not merely take our sins upon Himself but that He also shouldered the entire load of all sin’s effects and consequences: “He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.”

- **Sorrows:** If you have ever experienced bad feelings because of what you have done or failed to do, or if you have had reason to regret the sins of others, then you have sorrowed. Jesus carried that sorrow.
- **Griefs:** Isaiah’s word for “griefs” could also be translated as “sicknesses.” To be sure, sin itself causes us much grief, which is the heartache we feel as the result of a terrible loss. However, sin has also caused us all sorts of illness and disease that wreck the body, rob happiness from our lives, and lead to death—both for ourselves and for those whom we love.

Jesus carried the entire load, not merely the sin but also all of sin’s consequences. Thus, we shall at last be set free from the entire load: sins forgiven, sicknesses healed, and grief consoled.

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Thank You, Lord, that You bore my entire burden of sin, sorrow, and grief so that I may return unencumbered. Amen.

# Maternal Repetition

Read Hebrews 5:1–10

“But he was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed. Isaiah 53:5

When a mother holds and consoles her distraught baby, she will often repeat herself, gently dandling the child and saying, “There, there. Momma’s got you. You’re okay now. It’s all right. You are safe and sound. Hush, baby, hush.”

God spoke to us through Isaiah with the same sort of maternal repetitions. On the surface, God’s prophet Isaiah seems to have stated three different things, but all three are essentially the same. “You’re okay now. It’s all right: Jesus was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. We now have peace with God because our Lord was chastised for us. Therefore, you are safe and sound: with His wounds—that is, the stroke of the whip upon our Lord’s back—we are healed.”

What does the child eventually do while his mother consoles him? The child becomes calm; he stops fretting and squalling; he rests peacefully in the arms of his beloved protector.

What should we do while the Lord our God speaks through Isaiah, consoling us with His maternal repetitions? The same thing: rest in peace.

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For Your wounds, I thank You; for Your crushed body, I thank You; for Your wounds, I thank You, my precious Lord! Amen.

## Desire to Sin

Read Romans 1:28–2:5

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—  
every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on  
Him the iniquity of us all. Isaiah 53:6

On the surface, some people are clearly more sinful than others. Other people break more laws than I break, act more selfishly than I act, and do more harmful things than I do. I'm not that bad.

Despite the appearance of things, Isaiah's words hold each person guilty of sin—including the people who do not look very sinful. No matter how we act (or fail to act), we all possess the same, universal desire to sin. Isaiah's words, "every one," indict all people everywhere, including me and you. Isaiah's words, "to his [or her!] own way" indicate that our chief sin is idolatry. We each want to be our own god. We each want to choose our own path. Even after God gives us His miracle of faith in Christ, there remains something inside each of us that continually desires to reject Christ, His commands, and His promises.

When the Lutheran forefathers described our universal desire to sin, they used the Latin word *concupiscence* (Augsburg Confession II). Isaiah called that desire "iniquity." Our Lord Jesus called it His own personal burden and responsibility: "the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."

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Create in me a clean heart, O Lord. Amen.

## Silence Indicates Contentment

Read Hebrews 10:1–10

He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth. Isaiah 53:7

Why does an infant or a toddler cry? Babies do not cry when they are content. They cry when they need something. While Christ Jesus our Lord was “oppressed, and . . . afflicted,” He needed nothing.

Why does the dog bark? She barks because she is discontent; perhaps she wants to come into the house, perhaps she sees something that alarms or excites her, perhaps a distant noise is annoying her. When Jesus was led like a lamb to the slaughter, He felt no discontent and there was nothing to alarm Him.

Why do people complain? People complain because they are not happy with their situation; they want something to change. “Like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He [Jesus] opened not His mouth.” Why was it that Jesus “opened not His mouth”? He had nothing to complain about. Nothing needed to change. There was no place else Jesus wished to be. Jesus was exactly where He wanted to be, doing exactly what He wanted to do, suffering exactly what He wanted to suffer for us and for our salvation. He was content with His situation.

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By Your oppression and affliction, make me content, O Lord! Amen.