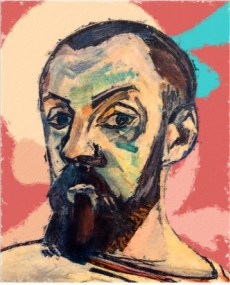


HENRI MATISSE
AND THE
COLORS OF LENT

A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

MATISSE'S LIFE: A SKETCH



Henri Matisse was born in 1869 in a small town in northern France, the eldest son of a successful grain merchant in a Roman Catholic household. He initially studies law in Paris – but at age 19, convalescing at home after an illness, he receives a box of paints from his mother, to help him pass the time. Henri never looks back. He returns to Paris, but this time – much to his father's chagrin – his aim is to study art.

After seven years of study and practice, Matisse visits John Russell, an Australian painter living on an island off the coast of France. Russell introduces him to Impressionism, color theory, and the work of Russell's old friend, Vincent Van Gogh. Enthralled, Matisse overhauls his style, including a striking move toward bright, dazzling colors.

Other young artists have similar ideas, and a short-lived but influential avant-garde movement is born, for which Matisse soon became the (in)famous icon. One critic dubs them "fauves" ("fauve" rhymes with "stove"; it's French for "wild beast"), so lurid does the critic find the colors in their work: fuschia shadows, turquoise trees, orange mountains, and so on. But for Matisse and his colleagues, the point of painting isn't merely to reproduce what we see with our eyes, but also to express and evoke emotions, ideas, and interactions with what we see.

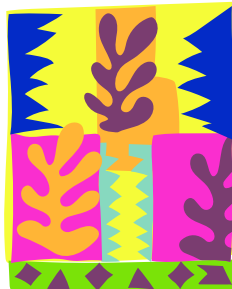
Matisse spends a lifetime exploring these possibilities through painting, sculpture, and paper collage, living through two world wars, reinventing his style multiple times – but always returning to vivid color and line, boldness and simplicity, pattern and emotion.

In the 1940s, after major surgery leaves him unable to paint, he begins "painting with scissors," as he puts it, cutting exuberant shapes out of paper. In *Jazz*, a book of these paper cut-outs, he proclaims that "love sustains the artist," defining "love" theologically. And finally, Matisse undertakes the major work he eventually calls his culminating "masterpiece": the Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, for which he designs the wall art, stained glass windows, furnishings, flooring, lighting, and liturgical vestments. The Chapel opens in 1951, just three years before the artist's death at the age of 84.

MATISSE AND FAITH

Some say Matisse was an atheist, and others say, since he didn't attend church regularly, he wasn't a person of faith. As we'll see, however, Matisse's own words and actions suggest otherwise – and in any case, it's helpful to keep in mind the bigger picture.

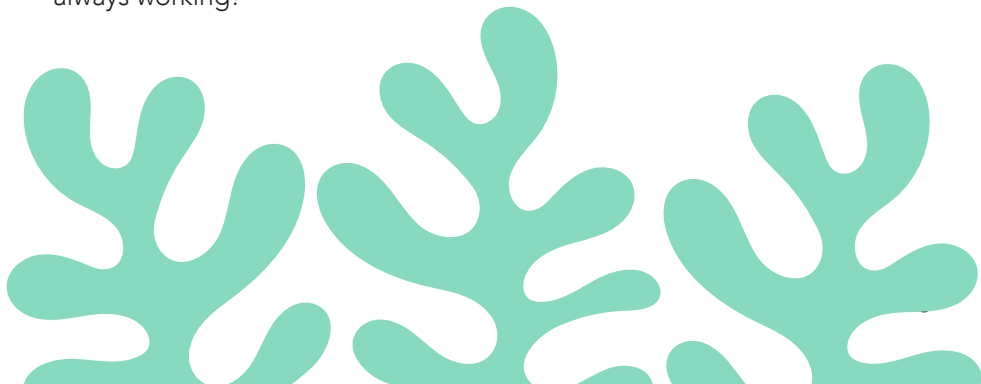
First, Matisse grew up in a Roman Catholic household in the largely Christian culture of late-nineteenth-century northern France. He was baptized as an infant (and confirmed as an adolescent), and insisted on baptism for his own children. Second, Matisse strikingly described his artistic work in theological terms, comparing it to prayer and Communion.



"In my own way,
I have always sung
the glory of God
and creation."
+ Henri Matisse

Third, he sometimes explored spiritual themes implicitly; his monumental painting, [*Bathers by a River \(1916\)*](#) is a prominent example. And fourth, in the celebrated latter chapters of his career, Matisse turned explicitly to theological subjects: from describing art in terms of "love" as defined in Thomas a Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* (a book Matisse is said to have kept close to his bedside) to the Chapel of the Rosary in Vence.

In short, like many people today, Matisse had a complex relationship with faith. No doubt it evolved over time; no doubt it ebbed and flowed as his life unfolded. We should all hesitate, of course, before speculating about another person's convictions. But Matisse himself described his art this way: "In my own way, I have always sung the glory of God and creation." He also wrote: "Do I believe in God? Yes, when I work." And Matisse was always working!





YEA, THOUGH I WALK
THROUGH THE VALLEY
OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH,
I WILL FEAR NO EVIL:
FOR THOU ART WITH ME.
+ PSALM 23:4



INTRODUCTION

The 40-day Season of Lent is a journey through color: from ashen gray to glorious purple, charcoal shadow to dazzling silver, deep crimson to the rainbow of petals in a springtime garden. The word “Lent” refers to the “lengthening” sunlight each day (in the Northern Hemisphere), shining down and drawing out the colors from the earth: the immersive, annual Easter poetry of creation.

What better guide, then, to this colorful pageant than the artist Henri Matisse, one of the most innovative, influential, and beloved artists in modern history, celebrated above all as a master colorist. From his childhood growing up Roman Catholic in a small town in France, to the major work at the end of his life he declared to be his masterpiece, the Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, Matisse explored spiritual and theological themes throughout his life, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly.

He once said he liked to pray with a pencil: “At the moment I go every morning to say my prayers, pencil in hand; I stand in front of a pomegranate tree covered in blossom, each flower at a different stage, and I watch their transformation... filled with admiration for the work of God. Is this not a way of praying?”

So grab a pencil (or a paintbrush!), 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, with the words of Scripture and the art of Henri Matisse as our guides, we’ll travel through the colors of Lent – all the way to the vibrant, joyful dawn of Easter morning.



ASH WEDNESDAY

READ

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

THINK

Jesus often spoke of the “Kingdom of Heaven” as something already close at hand, so close that we can experience it here and now. And at the same time, he also spoke of it as something still to come, not yet here in all its glory.

And this “already/not yet” reality is true not only of the world around us, but also of each one of our hearts. *Something great has begun*: we already treasure great things, like love and kindness, fairness and joy. *And better things are on the way*: our hearts are still growing stronger as we learn (and relearn) to treasure what’s truly important, and to let go of what’s petty, excessive, or holding us back.

The season of Lent, the 40 days leading up to Easter, is a time to focus on this learning and growing, this strengthening and opening up of our hearts. When done well, the journey is a pilgrimage: both an adventure and a challenge. Good things have already begun, but they’re not yet complete – and in many respects, there’s still a long way to go. And so we need each other’s help, and God’s help, along the way.

Here at the journey’s outset, Jesus calls us to take stock, for what we treasure – what we truly value, long for, pursue, and “store up” – will

make all the difference as we travel. We've already begun; and we're not yet there. Our hearts and our communities are masterpieces in the making!

LOOK

While Henri Matisse was recovering from appendicitis at age 19, his mother gave him a set of paints to help pass the time. For Henri, it was a revelation. He went to Paris to study art, copying great paintings in museums, apprenticing under accomplished teachers. Some of his early paintings glimmer with signs of his signature style, but he wasn't there yet. His lifelong pilgrimage had begun!

For some examples of Matisse's earliest still life paintings, check out [Still Life with Books and Candle \(1890\)](#), [Blue Pot and Lemon \(1897\)](#), and [Still Life with Compote, Apples and Oranges \(1899\)](#).

PRACTICE

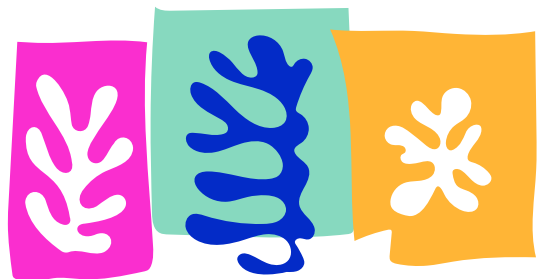
- + For the rest of this week, begin each day by lighting a candle of reflection, praying, "God of color and light, guide of pilgrims everywhere, help us to begin. Give us eyes to see the changing colors of this season, from the humbling gray of Ash Wednesday to the dazzling dawn of Easter Sunday. Help us appreciate the beauty that's already here, and create the beauty that's still to come. Strengthen and open and humble our hearts. In Jesus' name, Amen."

The phrase, "Kingdom of Heaven," can be translated in many ways, each one like a little colorful painting of God's "already/not yet" world:

The Reign of Heaven
The Realm of Heaven
The Community of Heaven
The Dream of Heaven
The Revolution of Heaven
The Celebration of Heaven
The Dance of Heaven



- + This week's color is gray: the gray of ashes, of late winter, of mortality, of dust. Try keeping a "visual journal" for Lent, a place to write down thoughts and observations, and to sketch (or paint) what you see. Where are the grays in your life these days? What beauty do you find in them? Which grays (actual or figurative) do you hope will soon bloom with other colors?
- + Discussion starter (over a meal, a cup of tea, a walk, or a call): In your opinion, which of life's treasures are most worth treasuring? When Jesus suggests that some treasures never "rust," and can never be "stolen," what do you think he's getting at? As you see it, in what ways is the "kingdom of heaven" already coming into the world – and in what ways is it not yet here?
- + Inspired by Matisse, try drawing or painting a still life using a few ordinary objects (the more ordinary, the better!). Or pick one of your favorite paintings and copy it as best you can, learning from the original artist as you go. Try to match it – or give it your own special twist! Bonus question: If Jesus' stories were paintings, which one would you copy, and why?
- + The essence of Jesus' challenge in this passage is to take stock of what we are treasuring – not just what we theoretically value, but what we actually value with our time and effort and other resources. So: take an inventory. How are you investing the gifts you've received? What change is God calling you to make?



The title is centered and flanked by decorative stars. On the left, there are three stars: a large blue one at the top, a smaller blue one below it, and a yellow one to the right of the smaller blue one. On the right, there are three stars: a large blue one at the top, a smaller blue one below it, and a yellow one to the left of the smaller blue one.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

READ

Exodus 3:1-2,4, 7-8a

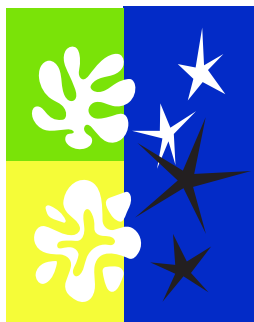
Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."

...Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey..."

Mark 1:9-12

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.



THINK

During the 40 days of Lent, we, too, are invited by the Spirit into the “wilderness,” a place where we can clear our heads, challenge ourselves, and reflect on how we want to continue to grow. But make no mistake, any wilderness journey requires some boldness, ferocity, and creativity. Just ask the animals, the “wild beasts” who call the wilderness home!

LOOK

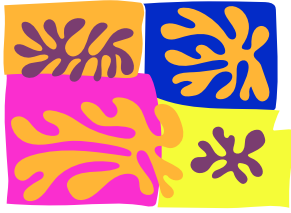
Henri Matisse is considered one of the founders of fauvism (pronounced “FO-vizum”). He was called a fauve (French for “wild beast”) because of his use of bold, bright colors and fierce brushwork. The Australian painter, John Russell, had introduced Matisse to the Impressionists, color theory, and the work of Russell’s friend, Vincent Van Gogh – and Matisse took away a new sense of liberty to experiment with color and composition.

The driving idea was to move away from the longstanding convention of mimicking or reproducing the colors and forms of the world as they appear to the eye alone (after all, the new technology of photography was doing that quite well). And instead, the “fauves” sought to create paintings pervaded by the painter’s emotional response to the world. This wasn’t so much a shift away from “realism” as a shift in what the painter was being “realistic” about: the fauvists sought to present not merely a realistic image of a given scene, but rather a realistic image of the painter’s emotional interaction with that scene. In other words, for Matisse, a work of art is an act of communication, at once expressing and evoking an emotional, thoughtful reaction.

For examples of fauvism, check out [Woman with a Hat \(1905\)](#) and [The Roofs of Collioure \(1905\)](#).

PRACTICE

- + This week, begin each day by lighting a candle of reflection, praying, “God of the wilderness, help us to learn and grow, always trusting in you for nourishment and care. Give us the bright boldness of ‘wild beasts,’ the courage to move in new directions, and the insight to attend to the emotional dimensions of life. Strengthen and open and humble our hearts. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”



“From the moment I held the box of colors in my hands, I knew this was my life. I threw myself into it like a beast that plunges towards the thing it loves.”
+ Henri Matisse

- + This week’s color is bright green: the green of wilderness, of growth, of new leaves, of new life. Where are the greens in your life these days? Where do you find them most beautiful, most promising? Which greens (actual or figurative) do you hope will soon come into being?
- + Discussion starter (over a meal, a cup of tea, a walk, or a call): Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness strengthened and by their 40 years in the wilderness. Where in your life do you need to become more humble? And where do you go when you need some time in the wilderness?
- + Inspired by Matisse, try drawing or painting in the fauvist style: fierce, free strokes, and bold, bright colors. Try to express (and for your viewers, evoke) feelings about the subject, whether a person or a landscape. Create like a “wild beast”!
- + Spend some time in the wild this week – a nature preserve, your backyard, or a local park. How do you feel here? What do you notice?
- + Try a “tech fast” this week, refraining from screens for a portion of each day (or choose one or two evenings for starters). Be bold enough to take in God’s beauty and color all around: read a book, make a meal together, check out the stars, play an instrument – in short, plunge toward the things you love!
- + Take an inventory: What fears have you in their grips today? What temptations, what distrust do they provoke? And how might living with bigger, bolder strokes and brighter colors help us learn to trust, take courage, and express our emotions?

WHAT IS ART FOR?

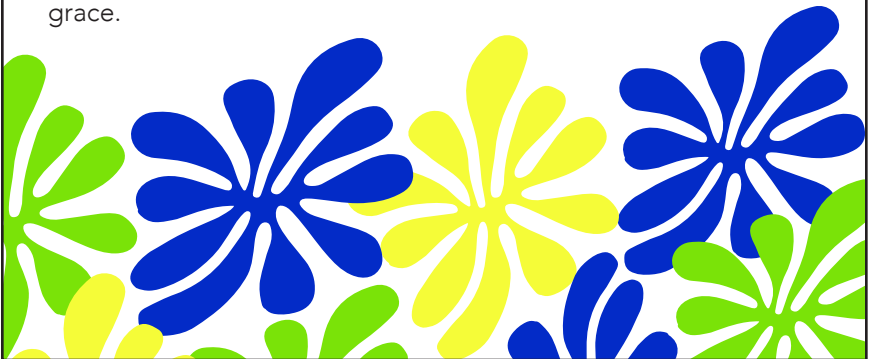
"What I dream of," Matisse wrote, "is an art of balance, of purity and serenity... a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue." Matisse's critics sometimes ridiculed this comparison to "a good armchair," but it's worth thinking about.

First, the phrase vividly evokes how, for Matisse, at its best art is eminently practical, restorative, and humane. The artist himself was given to spells of anxiety, overwork, and exhaustion, and he endured two shattering world wars, including being forced to leave his home in Nice because of relentless Nazi bombings. Partly for these reasons, no doubt, Henri longed for an art of "serenity" for the worried and weary.

Second, the reference to "physical fatigue" suggests that for Matisse, art isn't only for the privileged; art is for everyone. Matisse grew up in a town dominated by textile mills and beet farms (for beet sugar), where migrants worked long, backbreaking hours – and he may well have had such people in mind.

And third, the actual experience of a good armchair is comfortable, beautiful, and immersive. In a sense, it both "surrounds" the sitter and enables her to rest, to reflect, and to interact with the world.

In sum, for Matisse, art should immersively soothe and restore, support and sustain. It may also challenge and surprise, of course, but always in the service of this larger purpose. It's a ministry of beauty, we might say, a mission of serenity, balance, color, and grace.



SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT



READ

Exodus 3:21-22

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land, and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

Mark 4:35-40

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion, and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" And waking up, he rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Be silent! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"



THINK:

Many of the stories in the Bible teach us that God often looks at the world and sees possibilities that we can't yet perceive. When we see a dead end--an impossible wall of water, or a mighty impassible storm--God sees a way through. Jesus tells us that he is the light of the world. By learning from him and being in relationship with him, we can see the world more clearly in all its colors, beauties, and challenges.

This also means that Jesus is everywhere, just as light is everywhere – even and especially as we journey through the wilderness. Jesus is in our hearts and in our neighborhoods, as distant as the farthest star and as near as our own breath.

And so we don't "follow" Jesus as though he's over there, and we're over here, and we're trying to walk in his footsteps. Rather, it's more like a fish swimming in water: Jesus is all around us and within us, lighting up the world so we can see, and live, and help each other whenever we can.

LOOK

One of Matisse's central ideas was that painting should be "decorative," a word that comes from the Latin words *decorare* ("to make beautiful") and *decor* ("beauty, grace"). Rather than create realistic paintings, Matisse instead made paintings that are iconic, distilled versions of reality, like visual poems. These images are strikingly flat, with obvious brush strokes, surprising colors, unusual arrangements, and a dreamlike atmosphere. And for Matisse, the purpose of these paintings is to beautify, to "decorate" the spaces we live in, and so to bring some grace into our everyday lives.

Matisse and other modern artists didn't invent these ideas; they were inspired by art from other cultures and time periods. Think of Byzantine art, or Eastern Orthodox iconography, or Islamic geometric designs, or Moroccan textiles, or Persian rugs.

Here are three Matisse masterpieces along these lines. First, [*The Red Studio* \(1911\)](#), which includes many of Matisse's paintings, sculptures, and ceramics. Notice how the red color helps create a flat, dreamlike, poetic sense of space. Second, [*Red Room \(Harmony in Red\)* \(1908\)](#), in which a wall and a table seem to blend into each other. And third, [*Woman in a Purple Coat* \(1937\)](#), featuring a woman immersed in decorative patterns. All three of these paintings portray the world as drenched in beauty – suggesting that we are surrounded by art, the light of the world, if we have eyes to see!



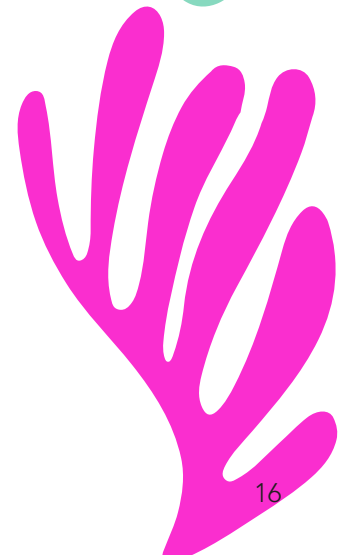
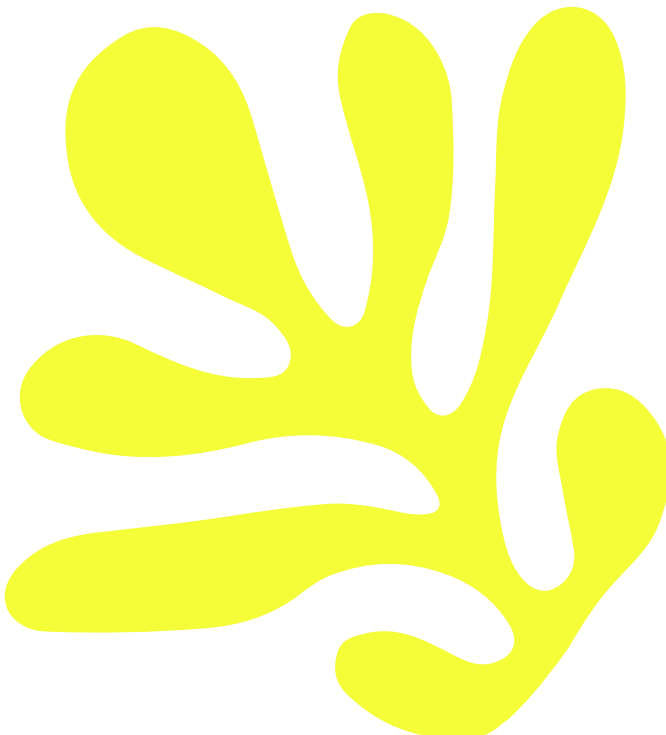
“The role of painting,
I think, the role of all
decorative painting, is to
enlarge surfaces, to work so
that one no longer feels the
dimensions of the wall.”

+ Henri Matisse

PRACTICE

- + This week, begin each day by lighting a candle of reflection, praying, “God of light and life, help us to see. Open our eyes to your decor of beauty, the patterns of grace in creation. And send us out into deep water, knowing we never journey alone. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”
- + This week’s color is yellow: the yellow of lamplight, of the afternoon Sun, of a spring flower, of a lemon on a lemon tree. Where are the bright yellows in your life these days? Where do you find them most beautiful? Where do you long for them? Where is the light of the world most needed now?

- + Discussion starter (over a meal, a cup of tea, a walk, or a call): What's something about Jesus, or about one of his teachings, that helps us to see or notice something we might otherwise overlook? Jesus says both "I am the light of the world" (John 9:6) and "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). How do you connect or fit those two ideas together?
- + Inspired by Matisse, draw or paint a picture of a room in your home, emphasizing all the decorative patterns. Like the "woman in the purple coat," we're surrounded by beauty, if we have eyes to see. And if you can, try doing a little research into those patterns (on rugs, plates, pillows, floors, walls, curtains, tablecloths, bedspreads, towels, clothes, and so on) and see if you can discover or recall from what part of the world they originate.
- + With family or friends, choose a single neighbor, a nearby household, or an organization you'd like to help on their journey through the wilderness. Come up with a plan: What's the best way to be helpful? Baking them something delicious? Shoveling snow or doing some yard work? Publicly highlighting an organization's good work in a conversation or on social media? Giving some money? Signing up to volunteer? All (or many) of the above?





THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

READ

Exodus 24:12, 16-18

The Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and wait there; I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the Israelites. Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain.

Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Mark 9:2-13

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling bright, such as no one on earth could brighten them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us set up three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

THINK

In the wilderness, colors can appear richer, light can seem brighter, and shadows can feel more velvety. Our attention can shift; our senses heightened.

When Jesus invites Peter, James, and John to come with him on a hike up a high mountain, what they see is a dazzling, immersive mystery: Jesus shines with light as bright as the sun, and a divine voice says, "This is my child, the beloved – listen to him!" For the disciples and for us, the whole experience is like a brilliant, fauvist portrait of Jesus, a picture boiled down to the essence of who he is: God's child, our teacher.



"Most painters... look for an exterior light to illuminate them internally, whereas the artist or the poet possesses an interior light which transforms objects to make a new world of them – sensitive, organized, a living world which is in itself an infallible sign of divinity, a reflection of divinity."

+ Henri Matisse



“A painting in a room spreads joy around it by the colors... A painting on a wall should be like a bouquet of flowers in the room.”

+ Henri Matisse

LOOK

Like many artists, Henri Matisse was fascinated by art that boiled subjects down to an essence – not just the essence of what they *look* like, but also the essence of what they *feel* like, the emotions they create in us. He once explained that his goal wasn't to paint a table, but rather to paint the emotions that the table made him feel. He put it this way to American painter Clara Taggart MacChesney: “An artist ... should not copy the walls, or objects on the table, but he should, above all, express a vision of color, the harmony of which corresponds to his feeling.”

As he sought to create this “vision of color,” he sometimes used bright colors straight from the paint tube, rather than mixing paints together into softer tones. In effect, Matisse was taking the figures common in art (objects, people, and landscapes) and *transfiguring* them, infusing them with bright, bold, brilliant emotion.

For example, check out [Open Window, Collioure \(1905\)](#). Matisse chooses colors that are by no means “naturalistic” to the scene as witnessed by the eye alone, but rather that help transfigure the scene, expressing and evoking the vibrant beauty, joy, and elation he feels as he contemplates it.

PRACTICE

- + This week, begin each day by lighting a candle of reflection, praying, “God of beauty and joy, help us to catch sight of the ways you are transfiguring the world every day, and above all, how Jesus – your child, our teacher – is transfiguring our hearts. Open our eyes to your vision of color. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”
- + This week’s colors are blue and white: the sea outside a window, the sky on a mountaintop, the light on a blue jay’s wing. Where are the blues in your life these days? Where do you find them most beautiful and transfiguring? Where do you feel “the blues” of sorrow, or the “dazzling white” of transfiguration?

- + Discussion starter (over a meal, a cup of tea, a walk, or a call): Which of Jesus' teachings do you find most meaningful these days? Most puzzling? Most haunting? Most dazzling?
- + Inspired by Matisse, draw or paint a window, including the emotions it makes you feel. Does it "feel" different than it "looks"? Now try this: With a partner or group, trade these Matisse-inspired pictures, and try to guess the emotions the artists had in their hearts and minds.
- + Get somewhere "high up" this week: a rooftop, a mountaintop, a hilltop – anywhere with a view. Contemplate your Lenten journey thus far and what's up ahead; reflect on which of Jesus' teachings you want to live into this Lent; and check in on your emotions.
- + In Mark's story, the disciples feel a mix of emotions on that mountaintop: fear, excitement, wonder, confusion. So, take an inventory: What emotions are coloring your days recently? Which would you like to cultivate more of? Less of?

GETTING IN TOUCH WITH YOUR EMOTIONS

Where do you feel your emotions?

Inside your belly? Close to your heart?
Heavy on your shoulders or back?

How do your emotions look?

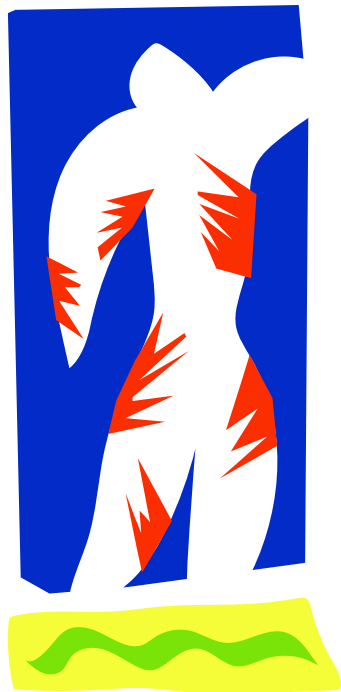
Big? Small? Shiny? Shadowy?
Colorful? No color at all?

How do your emotions sound?

Are they loud or soft? Like the growl of a cougar or the whisper of the wind?

How do your emotions feel?

Heavy or light? Soft, hard, fuzzy, cold, hot, sharp, smooth, or something else?



THE BARE ESSENTIALS

Step One: What key words and phrases would you use to describe the core (or the “essence”) of who you are? Write them down.

Step Two: Ask two or three people who know you well how they’d answer that same question about you, and write down what they say.

Step Three: Look for common ground between your list and the other lists, and boil them down to the top two or three words or phrases.

Step Four: Draw or paint those key words/ phrases with bright colors, and post them somewhere you and others will see them everyday (say, a mirror or the fridge).

Step Five: Challenge yourself – what’s a concrete step (or two!) you can take this week to embody the best of who you are? How can you “transfigure” yourself just a bit, little by little, to let your dazzling light and colors shine through?

Step Six: Look at the other lists in your family or friend group, and when you see their light shine, cheer them on!





FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT



READ

Exodus 32:1-4

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters and bring them to me." So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. He took these from them, formed them in a mold, and cast an image of a calf

Mark 10:17-22

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not defraud. Honor your father and mother.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

THINK

When wandering through the wilderness, we can become keenly aware of our needs and limitations. In a place with so much uncertainty and danger, it can be tempting to hold on tightly to what little power we have. In our readings, the rich man and the Israelites are invited to be part of what God is doing in their world, but they can't seem to let go of their own ideas of what will make them safe, happy, or powerful.

But God challenges us to live with radical trust in God's abundance. We are most alive when we are part of the flow of relationship--giving and receiving in community. The Bible reminds us that, ultimately, this is what is truly important.



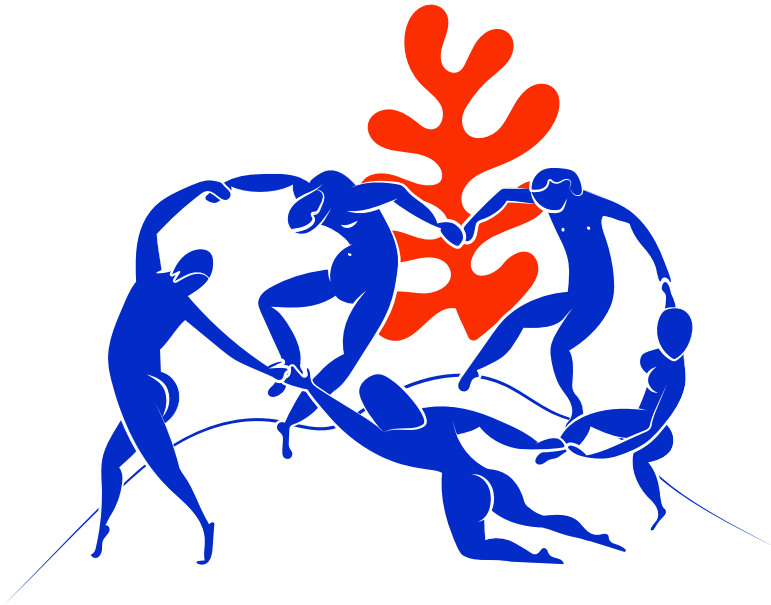
"These drawings spring up in one piece... I am absolutely convinced that they represent the goal of my curiosity."

+ Henri Matisse

LOOK

One of Matisse's strategies was to simplify the people and things in his paintings to their most basic shapes, using clear, strong lines. Along with his use of vivid colors, these simple lines helped him boil things down to their essence.

It's like taking a long, complex story and summarizing it into brief, simple language, such as a fable or a poem. This can help the basic ideas and feelings in the story (or the painting) shine through – and so help us focus on what's most important, most essential, most beautiful. Getting back to basics can help us to see.



"Love sustains the artist... 'Nothing is more gentle than love, nothing stronger, nothing higher, nothing wider, nothing more pleasant, nothing more complete, nothing better in heaven or on earth, because love is born of God and cannot rest other than in God.'" + Henri Matisse, quoting Thomas a Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*

For example, check out Matisse's four line-drawn [self-portraits](#), as well as his [Marguerite Reading \(c. 1906\)](#) and [Large Face \(Mask\) \(1952\)](#). In a sense, biblical stories use a similar "back to basics" strategy, painting pictures with simple, bold, graceful strokes, and not cluttering things up with too many details.

PRACTICE

- + This week, begin each day by lighting a candle of reflection, praying, "God of simplicity and grace, help us get back to basics: loving you and our neighbors, building up the Beloved Community, and keeping things simple, essential, beautiful. In Jesus' name, Amen."
- + This week's color is black: the line in a simple drawing, the deep canvas of a night sky, the richness of topsoil, the play of shadows in

living water. What are some rules that you try to live by? What do these values add to your life? How are they limiting? How are they freeing? What is one believe that you once had that you no longer hold?

- + Discussion starter (over a meal, a cup of tea, a walk, or a call): What are the most important things in your life? What factors make it hard to prioritize them sometimes? How might you make it easier? Are there things that God is calling you to let go of?
- + Inspired by Matisse, take a photo of someone you love (a family member, friend, or someone you admire), and make a very simple drawing of their face – the simpler the better! Can you capture a glimpse of their personality with a few simple lines?





FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT



READ

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley

I fear no evil, for you are with me;

your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

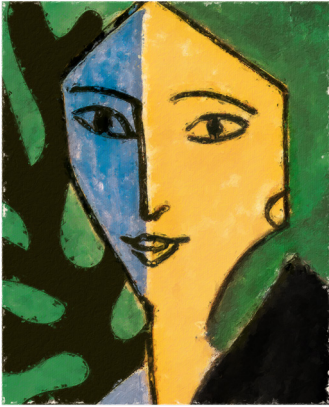
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus's feet, and wiped them with her hair.

The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

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."



"[Creating art,] I act in such a way (although basically I do nothing myself as it is God who guides my hand) as to make the tenderness of my heart accessible to others."

+ Henri Matisse

THINK

As we near Holy Week, we know that the story will only get more difficult from here. Soon, Jesus will be captured and killed. There is a lot of uncertainty and suffering

ahead. As we walk this difficult road, we take a moment to notice the people who travel alongside us. The ones who make us lie down in green pastures. The ones who anoint our heads with oil and our feet with perfume. Even on difficult journeys, God has given us traveling companions, and dotted the path with beauty and goodness. The roads we walk, we never have to walk alone.

LOOK

Henri Matisse did not create in easy times. He lived through two world wars. He was displaced from his home by the threat of bombs falling out of the sky. And his beloved daughter was tortured and taken by the Gestapo, the Nazi secret police (thankfully, she escaped when the train stalled on the way to a German prison camp). Matisse also struggled with poor health, especially later in life. How does someone create so much beauty in the midst of so much pain?

Many of Matisse's paintings are full of vivid color, beauty, and joy. But he was also moved by other emotions in his work. For example, check out [French Window at Collioure \(1914\)](#) and [View of Notre Dame \(1914\)](#), both painted during the year the so-called "Great War" began (later known as World War I).

[Bathers by a River \(1916\)](#) is perhaps the most famous example: originally commissioned as an idyllic scene of leisure, Matisse reworked it during the war into a drastically different picture. What once was a blue river

he distills down to a stark, vertical band of black; the lush greenery on the left gives way progressively to a kind of wasteland as the eye moves across the painting from left to right; and in the center, the form of a serpent rises from below – all clear signs that Matisse, in the midst of the war's desolations, was creatively meditating on the ancient biblical story of sin and estrangement. Even as the shadows of violence closed in, Matisse continued to create art that expressed and evoked the emotions that deeply moved him.

PRACTICE

- + This week, begin each day by lighting a candle of reflection, praying, "God of weeping and resurrection, give us the strength to mourn, and the courage to hope. Fill us with your Spirit of life, so that we might be deeply moved toward peace, creativity, and love. In Jesus' name, Amen."
- + This week's color is purple: the purple of crocuses, of grapes, of penitence, twilight, and the sorrows of loss. Where are the shades of purple in your life these days? Where do you find them most beautiful? Which shades – lavender, violet, amethyst, burgundy – evoke which emotions?
- + Discussion starter (over a meal, a cup of tea, a walk, or a call): When in your life have you felt the most sadness, loss, or grief? What color did it feel like? What helped you feel better – and what didn't help? What are some of the best things we can do for someone who's feeling sorrow or grief?
- + Compare Matisse's [*French Window at Collioure \(1914\)*](#) his earlier [*Open Window, Collioure \(1905\)*](#). And then compare [*View of Notre Dame \(1914\)*](#) with his earlier [*A Glimpse of Notre Dame in the Late Afternoon \(1902\)*](#), painted from the same spot (his studio on the fifth floor of a house). What differences and similarities do you notice? What emotions do you think Matisse was feeling in each case?
- + Inspired by Matisse, draw or paint a simple still life twice: in a different light, at a different time of day, or in a different mood. Let your emotions shape your color choices, and your approach to the composition.





PALM SUNDAY

READ

Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at Jesus's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks, so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her, then, to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

John 12:12-16

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—
the King of Israel!"

Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written: "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey's colt!"

His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

THINK

Why did the crowds lay down coats and branches? Laying down coats for someone to walk on is an ancient tradition for welcoming royalty, and the branches are an echo of the ancient Israelites' journey out of Egyptian enslavement and into the wilderness, where they built simple shelters out of branches as they traveled. These actions are the crowd's way of saying: *Just as in the days of old, when God led us out of bondage and into freedom, so today, God is leading us to freedom again!*

This seems like a joyful celebration – and it is! But it's also taking place in a time of wilderness, simmering conflict, and intense hope for a better life. In those days, Jerusalem was under military occupation by the Roman Empire, and so the freedom many people were dreaming of was a freedom from oppression, and from the hard life of being exploited by the empire. Palm Sunday's "Hosanna!" is a shout of joy in the midst of pain and struggle, a refusal to give up hope for the future.

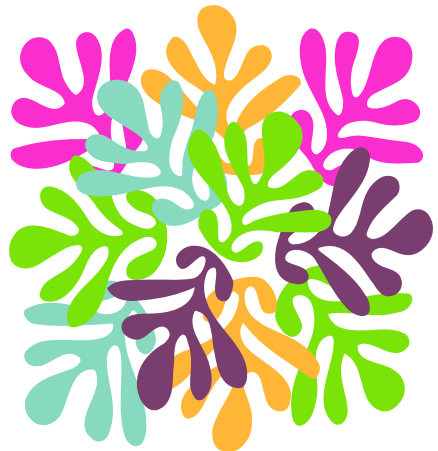
LOOK

Toward the end of his life, Matisse's health didn't allow him to paint as he had before. He was forced to spend most of his time in a wheelchair or in bed. But Matisse refused to stop making art. Instead, he began "painting with scissors," as he put it, cutting paper into fantastic, beautiful shapes. The same bright colors and joyful style – now on an even bigger scale, including murals that covered entire walls.

These cut-outs turned out to be the last major chapter of Matisse's career as an artist – and it was also one of the most creative, productive chapters of them all. He called this period his "second life." In the midst of a wilderness of illness, pain, and confinement, Matisse found a new way to experience freedom, refusing to give up hope for the future. For example, check out *Icarus* (1947), *Snow Flowers* (1951), *Christmas Eve* (1952), and (with Palm Sunday's donkey in mind) *The Horse, the Rider and the Clown* (1947).

PRACTICE

- + This week, begin each day by lighting a candle of reflection, praying, “God of gladness and hope against hope, give us the strength to celebrate, and the courage to look ahead with joyful anticipation. Fill us with your Spirit of trust, so that we might believe in the good news of tomorrow, even as our eyes are open to the struggles of today. Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest! In Jesus’ name, Amen.”
- + This week’s color is red: the red of joyful, hopeful excitement, flushed cheeks, spring tulips – and at the same time, the red of suffering to come. Where are the shades of red in your life these days? Where do you find them most beautiful, most joyful, most vital, most hopeful? And as we approach the end of this Holy Week, which of the world’s reds do you pray will one day be transformed?
- + Matisse is a master of bringing together different layers of emotion and meaning in his art. Take his well-known cut-out, Icarus (1947). Viewed without its title, it can be seen as a vibrant portrait of joy, a celebration among the stars. Even with its title in mind, we can take it as an exultant moment of Icarus’ sunward flight. And at the same time, we can take it as a moment of disaster, part of Icarus’ fall to earth after the sun melts his wings away. Moreover, Matisse once remarked that he also had in mind the horrors of war: the figure can be seen as a soldier who has been shot in the heart, surrounded not by stars but by exploding shells. And with all this in view, contemplating this cut-out during Holy Week adds yet another layer, as the central figure embodies a cruciform shape, besieged by violence.



- + Discussion starter (over a meal, a cup of tea, a walk, or a call): As important and consequential as emotions are, and as emotional as Holy Week can be, it's sometimes difficult to talk about how we feel. Try some of these simple-yet-revelatory sentence starters to get the conversation rolling this week:
 I feel most worried about...
 I feel most loved when...
 I feel most hopeful about...
 If I could change one thing about the world, it would be...
- + Inspired by Matisse, cut some palm fronds out of bright colored paper. Don't draw the shape, just see what your scissors and hands create. (And if you want to take it further, you can paint the paper in bright colors first, like Matisse and his assistants did!)
- + Take a walk on the wild side (a nature preserve, your backyard, a park, or even your town or city center) and look for colorful signs of spring – green buds, purple crocuses, yellow daffodils – creation's annual "second life," a divine poem of encouragement we can walk through. Which colors stand out? How many can you find?



MAUNDY THURSDAY

READ

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Then Jesus 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

THINK

In Jesus' time and place, most people wore sandals, and so their feet would often be dusty and dirty. Washing another person's feet, then, was



"I started with the secular
and now in the evening
of my life, I naturally end
with the divine."
+ Henri Matisse

typically perceived as a helpful act of service. Accordingly, as the disciples' saw it, the proper order of things was that, if anything, they would wash Jesus' feet, since he was their teacher.

But astoundingly, Jesus did the opposite: he insisted on washing their feet instead. It was as if he was saying, "If you want to follow me, do what I do. Don't look to be served; rather, look to serve. And while you're at it, look to serve anyone and everyone, no matter how 'important' or 'unimportant' they may seem." This is what Jesus meant when he then said, just a few verses later, "Love one another as I have loved you." His surprising act of foot-washing, acting like a servant instead of like the

person in charge, made his message of love memorable and inspiring – even scandalous and subversive, since it so tangibly turned convention on its head.

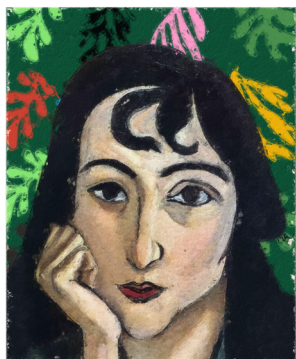
LOOK

As Henri Matisse got older and more limited in his abilities to move, many might have expected him to produce less art, or smaller works of art, or perhaps even stop making art altogether. But surprisingly, Matisse did the opposite. In fact, he created his largest-scale work of art at the end of his life, completing it at the age of 81. This one was larger than a painting, larger than a wall-sized mural. This work of art was an entire building: The Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, France.

Encouraged by his friend and former nurse (a Dominican nun), Matisse designed everything in the chapel, from the stained glass to the wall drawings to the liturgical vestments. His bright colors, clear lines, and cut-out shapes fill the chapel with a luminous, serene joy. He considered the chapel to be the culmination of "a lifetime of work."

Remember when we learned about Matisse's dream of "an art of balance, of purity and serenity... a soothing, calming influence on





"In art... you must come forward with the greatest humility... with a vacant mind and in a state not unlike that of a worshiper about to receive Holy Communion."
+ Henri Matisse

the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue," and also about his conviction that "a painting in a room spreads joy around it by the colors"? The Chapel of the Rosary is a kind of pinnacle for both of these ideas. If a good armchair is an immersive experience, a good chapel is even more so: it's a work of art we enter and explore; it surrounds us on every side, and in worship, we become part of it. And likewise, if Matisse's art was often designed to "spread joy" around a room, the chapel is an effervescent case in point, as the light from the stained glass falls across the white tile walls and their simple, evocative black line drawings.

For Matisse, the Chapel of the Rosary is indeed a culmination of a life's work. Right up until the end, he did his best to create and to serve.

Check out the [Chapel of the Rosary in Venice](#). And see this devotional's Link Sheet for a link [to a nice collection of photos](#) related to the chapel (scroll down for the photos).



READ

Psalm 22

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? + Psalm 22:1

THINK

Whenever we struggle in life, whenever we feel lost or alone, it can feel as if God has turned away or forgotten us completely. One of the ancient songs in the Bible, Psalm 22, provides a powerful example of this despair: the singer boldly asks God, "Why have you forsaken me?"

One of the most astonishing, mind-bending things about the story of Jesus' suffering and death is that Jesus – God in human form – asks God this same question, "Why have you forsaken me?" This is a great mystery, of course, but among its many meanings is the extraordinary news that whenever we suffer and struggle, whenever we feel that God has left us alone, Jesus is there with us, feeling what we feel, and whispering to us that this feeling, real as it is, will not have the final word. Remember: one of Jesus' names is "Emmanuel," which means, "God with Us."

LOOK

Matisse struggled during many parts of his life: at times, his work was ridiculed because it was so different, and at other times, it was dismissed because it seemed old fashioned (it is said that the artist Pablo Picasso once used a Matisse painting as a dart board!). His family endured disgrace and ruin; he lived through two grueling world wars; and the last years of his life included serious health challenges.

Matisse brought all of these experiences to his "Stations of the Cross" on the back wall of the Chapel of the Rosary: fourteen scenes along the way of Jesus' Passion, his journey of suffering and death. Matisse drew these scenes in an extremely rough, simple style, both because he wanted to capture the chaotic, devastating essence of each scene, and because, as he later put it in an interview, he did not want the drawings to be beautiful: "I have not painted beauty. I have painted the truth. The truth of the Passion is not, and has never been beautiful!"



Rather than conventionally placing these fourteen drawings in different locations around the chapel, Matisse put them all together in a serpentine S-curve from the lower left to the upper right – perhaps a reference to the story of Adam, Eve, and the serpent (a story he also referenced in [Bathers by a River \(1916\)](#)). And by placing this ensemble on the chapel’s back wall opposite the altar, Matisse creates a clear choreography: when we turn toward God’s table and the glorious [Tree of Life](#) window behind it, we turn our backs on the way of scapegoating and violence, suffering and death.

Check out Matisse’s [Stations of the Cross](#).



READ

Jeremiah 31:1-6

The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, God appeared to them from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers! + Jeremiah 31:2-4

THINK AND LOOK

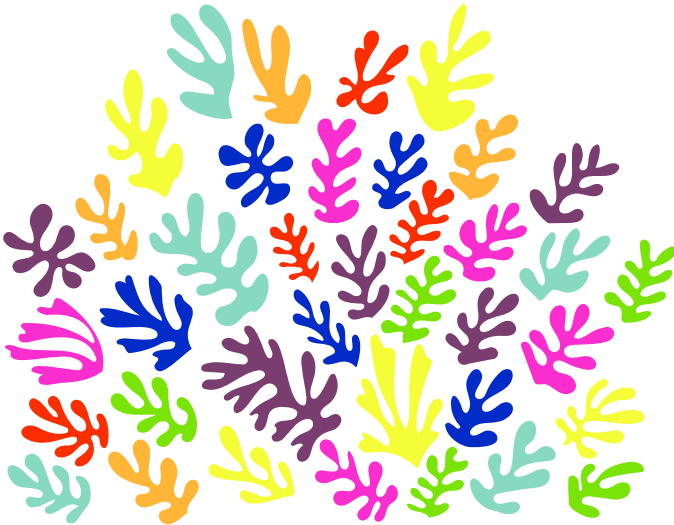
We have traveled a long way, through the many colors of the Lenten rainbow – all the way to the bright shadows of the empty tomb! Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed!

The struggles and suffering of life, the cruelty of violence and injustice, the pain of loneliness and sorrow – all these things are overcome, and will be overcome, by the luminous love of God, the colorful grace of God, the vibrant, wild new life of resurrection.

The 40 days of Lent are over, and now the 50 days of Easter begin. A season of dancing, of tambourines and merrymaking – not because everything is fixed and fine, but because Jesus’ resurrection is an “already/not yet” glimpse of beauty, peace, and justice. A new day that has already begun to dawn, and is still yet to come.

So put on your dancing shoes and shake your tambourines – for we have found grace in the wilderness! God is transforming even the sorrow and death of the cross into a beautiful, colorful Tree of Life! Hallelujah! Amen!

Check out Matisse’s [*Tree of Life*](#) (a stained glass window in the Chapel of the Rosary).



“THERE ARE ALWAYS
FLOWERS FOR
THOSE WHO WANT
TO SEE THEM.”
+ HENRI MATISSE