

INTRODUCTION

God walks with us. This is a compelling mystery: that our Creator desires to participate in creation. God originally makes us in the divine image, then remakes divinity into the shape and limitations of a person. How can this be? Why does Eternity choose mortality, and Infinity take on the aching confines of time and place?

Only love would make this devastating choice. Only love has the courage to embrace the beloved's suffering—and make it personal.

God enters the human story. This is good news! Gospels may seem to be accounts of the life of Jesus, though a large portion of each one concerns the death of Jesus. One-fourth to one-third of each gospel is consumed by the Passion. Yet this fact doesn't make the gospel a tale of tragedy. Rather, the Passion focuses us on a wonderful truth: that God is one with us *all the way*. Misunderstanding, jealousy, and betrayal, after all, are part of our story too. Weakness, suffering, and death are inescapable burdens we face. If God lives in flesh, really and truly, then God must endure what we endure. This is what love does. So God walks with us. All the way.

We walk the way of the cross knowing that Jesus takes up our cross first. Jesus takes up our pain, however the misery manifests in us. Don't be afraid. We're never alone on the way of suffering.

THE FIRST STATION

Jesus Is Condemned to Die

We endure the judgment of others

LEADER We begin our humble imitation of the way of Christ's cross—
✠ *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

ALL Amen.

LEADER The First Station: Jesus is condemned by those who seek his life.

Jesus is accused, judged, and found guilty by those who have the motivation and the authority to crush him.

—*We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you.*

ALL Because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world.

LEADER How often do you and I find ourselves before the court of public opinion, being declared misguided—or malicious? Even more often, we place ourselves in judgment over others, criticizing and condemning them in our private thoughts. We may spread our judgment of others in careless asides and gossip, or more ruinously on social media.

The accused Christ beckons us to think before we speak. What motivates us to accuse another person? Are we so spotless that we can afford to cast a stone in someone else's di-

rection? Jesus has mercy on the sinner, for which each of us must be grateful. As we measure, so will the measure be used in assessing us.

READER We contemplate God's word together: [*pause briefly between passages*]

“Stop judging, that you may not be judged. For as you judge, so will you be judged, and the measure with which you measure will be measured out to you. Why do you notice the splinter in your brother's [or sister's] eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own eye?” *Matthew 7:1-3*

The tongue is a small member and yet has great pretensions. Consider how small a fire can set a huge forest ablaze. The tongue is also a fire. *James 3:5-6*

[*silent prayer*]

LEADER Let us pray.

ALL God of boundless compassion, judgment belongs to you alone. Keep me from spreading what I do not know, or sowing death with words that scar, label, and harm.

THE SECOND STATION

Jesus Carries His Cross

We each carry a silent suffering

LEADER The Second Station: Jesus embraces the cross he bears for the sake of the world.

With firm conviction and purpose, Jesus lifts the cross onto his shoulders.

—*We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you.*

ALL Because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world.

LEADER Jesus doesn't deserve the cross he's chosen to carry. Nor did he earn the rough path he walks toward suffering and dying. Our sacred story reminds us that you and I are not so innocent. We have more reason to anticipate the death that belongs to us—in some near or distant future.

Still, it remains a great challenge to bear the weight of the suffering that is ours. Physical pain is inescapable in bodies of flesh, blood, and bone. We're vulnerable to illness and infirmity, aging and disability. Anxiety may crush us. Grief and loss pierce our hearts. Broken relationships and financial hardship are cruel reminders of our fragile posture on this earth. If not for God's eye on us, who would endure?

READER We contemplate God's word together:

“Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.”

Matthew 11:28–30

[silent prayer]

LEADER Let us pray.

ALL Lord, you know the burdens on my heart. You know my secret failures and my deepest fears. Keep me as the apple of your eye, for I place my trust in you.

THE THIRD STATION

Jesus Falls the First Time

We're not superheroes

LEADER The Third Station: Jesus falls—the first time.

Weakness is a familiar and inescapable part of the life that is given to us.

—*We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you.*

ALL Because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world.

LEADER Jesus is the divine Son. But he's also the son of Mary of Nazareth. A firm purpose drove him from his home by the sea and bore him into a world that needed him. And needs him still.

Yet now Jesus stumbles and falls to the ground. A long night of interrogation and beatings has brought him to the edge of his strength. Still he rises, as you and I rise: though time and time again, life brings us to our knees. We falter. And we rise. We lose. And we try again.

Superheroes and celebrities—whose stories are fed to us daily—seem impenetrable to defeat. We may experience our own fragility as a form of failure. Shouldn't we be able to stand on our own feet and brave life's storms? Our national myth of rugged individualism isn't the same as our story of sacred union. God is with us. Who can be against us?

READER We contemplate God's word together:

What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? ... No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. *Romans 8:35, 37*

[silent prayer]

LEADER Let us pray.

ALL God of power and might, you alone are my rock and my strength. When I fall and fail, send me the grace and courage to continue on the path you open for me.