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Lenten Prayer (2012)

Ashes to Ashes (2019)

Seeking Stability in Lent (2019)

Loving Hard-Edged People in Lent (2020)

Palms for the King (2020)

Lord of Washed Feet (2012)

Even the Betrayer's Feet (2020)

Not So Heavy (2020)

At the Foot of the Cross (2018)

Lord of the Empty Tomb (2012)

Yearning for Easter Cleansing (2012)

Easter's Transforming Love (2018)

Easter Joy (2019)

Easter Mercy (2020)

Lenten Prayer

Lord, help us to live lightly on the land.
It is not ours, we know; it is only on generous
loan from You. Help us to treasure the
sacredness of all creation, guiding our feet
so they caress the earth, rather than tromping
heavily, for under our footfalls is living,
breathing soil. Help us to care for all Your
creatures of fur, feathers, fins and scales,
remembering always that this is their home, too.
Lord, help us to live lightly on the land.
Help us to use Your resources sparingly,
mindful always that others need pure water
to drink, grain for bread to eat and smog-free
air to breathe. Help us to honor daily simplicity,
discarding with gladness all those gratuitous
encumbrances that distract us from You.
Help us to recognize and shun every single
seductive artifice and artificiality.
Lord, help us to live lightly on the land.
Please keep our hands from grabbing
what should be shared, not hoarded.
Help us to know when having enough
is enough, so we may ever distinguish
coveting from needing. Most of all,
keep us reverent, Lord; sustain in us
a sense of awe that we can live in so
glorious a dwelling place until
we come at last to dwell in You.
Lord, help us to live lightly on the land.

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Ashes to Ashes

Burdened by our mortality,
we Your unworthy creatures
kneel before You, Lord, offering up
our unruly hearts. Far from constant
are they in love of You, much as
we would wish them to be. But we
have nothing else to offer.

Ashes to ashes.

Mark us, Lord, and let this ashen cross
be a sign of all You would burn out
of us, all that mars, sullies and stains.
What is ash but fire's grave?
How our transgressions have grieved You
we know too well; consign them to
the grave, Lord, we pray.

Ashes to ashes.

Like frail reeds that sway with
every wayward wind, we have not
stood firmly before You; we beg Your
gracious clemency. We have not been
good and faithful servants; we have
neglected Your vineyard and its vines
are sickly and deformed. Help us hold
to Your will and ever do what
will be pleasing in Your sight.

Ashes to ashes.

Let all who see these ashes bear witness
to our deep desire for pardon long after
the ashen mark has left our faces. Let us
remember how we knelt in penitence
before You, longing to begin the inward
labor of prayer and denial of self
that would draw us closer to You.
Let us remember how we shouldered
the burden of our mortality anew,
seeking courage to live as people
wholly secure in Your succor.

Ashes to ashes, grave to new life.

Seeking Stability in Lent

Sometimes we feel like airborne twirling seedlings, Lord, spinning and spinning and wondering when and where we will alight, if we will alight. Well do You know that this world You created from formless void has become fast-paced and rushed and restless, ever moving, ever jostling, ever offering yet another tempting distraction: iphone, Internet, television, radio, e-mail, texting, social media, doorbell, sales flyers, robocalls, postal mail...With what insidious insistence they all barrage us: Look at me, listen to me, open me, take action now. We have but two eyes and two ears and one mouth. We cannot hope to respond to all these competing stimuli at once with concentration, patience and goodwill.

Our minds are cluttered, our souls bruised. caught in this whipped-up whirlwind, we desperately seek some sense of stability, something to center us. It is You we seek, Lord, only You. We long to hear Your voice above the din, to rest in Your presence. Please, Lord, can't you turn it off, all that is not of You, for just awhile? With the psalmist we plead, 'Hear my cry, O God; attend unto my prayer. From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed...'

When we can find a space of stillness, when we can think without bombardment, we reaffirm that all we want is You, Lord, our only stability in a time of tumult. We spinning seedlings must alight and put down roots to grow and flourish. Whatever rootedness we find in this world will surely come only from You, Lord, our loving master Planter. Settle us, we humbly pray.

Loving Hard-Edged People in Lent***You cannot serve God and mammon. -Luke 16:13***

Lord God, our world is full of hard-edged people, and sometimes we are among them. There is no 'us' and 'them' - we are all part of Your family. Bumping up against these edges, they hurt. How can we soften hard edges? Does loving kindness work? Mammon is a hard-edged god; see how it causes its followers to dash after it. Money, power, possessions, more possessions and still more...see how mammon flashes its deceptive lure. Mammon is a jealous god, collecting its own like schools of fish. Lord God, if we are honest, we know that we have sometimes yielded to mammon's many temptations. Wayward as we are, we have sometimes sought what glitters, succumbing to the seductive marketplace of consumer culture. Those who serve mammon are not happy; that we know. Please banish mammon from our sight and our thoughts. Mammon consumes but never satisfies. When we serve mammon we can never serve You. We can never know the blessings of Your saving grace. Lord God, please soften our own hard edges and help us to love hard-edged people well and truly, so that by our example they will turn from their love of mammon and love You. Please help us to love You with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength and with all our might. Let us love ourselves and others in Your holy name, and let the power of our love soften the hard edges of all Your people for good, we earnestly pray.

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Palms for the King

How brittle they were underfoot
despite being freshly cut, those
palm branches. How hollow they sounded,
those hosannas, how bogus those voices crying
"Blessed is the kingdom of our father David,
that comes in the name of the Lord."

Assuredly it was a triumphal entry of sorts,
riding into Jerusalem amidst reaching hands,
waving fronds and cheering voices.
Except that the triumph was not to be
the one the crowd desired.

A clue should have been the rider's steed.
Would King David have ridden on the back
of a donkey? Tossing his glossy mane,
David's mount would have arched his neck,
reared and pawed the ground with agile hooves
used to pivoting and sidestepping enemies.

This rider's steed plodded stolidly, head down.
Surely the temple cleansing was another clue.
Hardly designed to keep the peace or win
the popular vote, the shock of it sent coins
clinking and scattering, overturned stools
thudding and clattering, caused doves to startle
with whooshing wings and saw money changers
scrambling on hands and knees, shouting curses.

How quickly those hosannas turned to jeers
and shouts of "Crucify Him!" when Pilate
asked the multitude its wishes. This imposter
must be purged, so discordant was He with
their expectations for King David's heir.
And so most missed His finest hour, His Father's
will fulfilled, the day-sky plunged into night,
the stunned centurion's impassioned witness.
In the streets of Jerusalem a few discarded palms
scuttled before the wind like many-legged creatures,
and in their dry murmuring was a kind of refrain:
"Son of God, Son of God, Son of God."
Only the street sweeper heard it, but he understood.

Lord of Washed Feet

Lord Jesus, with what gentle hands
You washed Your disciples' weary feet,
letting the caked grime of all those
wayfaring miles run off in gray-brown rivulets.
With what tenderness You dried those
callused feet, feet that had faithfully
followed You from lake shore to village
to hillside in battered sandals. Once again Peter,
Your rock, was slow to comprehend. Still he
could not accept your servanthood, and so shrank
back, aghast at the thought of this perceived role
reversal. He would not have You wash his soiled feet.
Once again, You set him on Your Christ-path:
"If I do not wash you, you have no part in me."
Ah, what a hard lesson awaited Peter, Your rock,
as You hung on Your cross of shame,
as You hung on Your cross of glory.
Help us, Lord, to accept Your servant kingship,
as You did for Peter. Be with us, Lord, as we
wash each other's feet. Lord Jesus, help us always
to be loving servants, one to another.

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Even the Betrayer's Feet

What must it have cost You, Lord,
to bend down and tenderly wash the feet
of the one who would use those feet
to send You to Your death? Did he,
the betrayer, sense Your sorrow through
Your fingertips even as Your hands lightly
massaged his skin? Did he look away so he
would not have to meet Your compassionate gaze?

Did he feel remorse even as he felt Your gentle
hands? Or was that false disciple so intent upon
his coming act of treachery that he missed the pain
You masked as You performed this intimate
act of mercy with bowl and towel? Lord, You said
that he who ate Your bread had raised his heel
against you. But how lovingly You washed
that heel, the heel of the betrayer's foot.

How could that false one have missed Your
message so completely? Did he not hear
Your teaching about loving one's enemies?
Did he not witness your healing works? Was
he not there at the feeding of the five thousand?
Was he so full of scorn or so indifferent that he
roughly cast aside Your mandate to love others
as You had loved them? What inner weakness
led him to succumb to Satan's siren songs?
Still You washed even the betrayer's feet.

Lord, we cannot hope to fathom the depth
of Your loving mercy. But through Your example
we hope to learn what it truly costs to forgive
our enemies. Please help us to become instruments
of kindness and mercy to those who wish us ill,
we earnestly pray. It is only through Your
redemptive love that we can hope to succeed.

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Not So Heavy

I lift it to my shoulders,
to let them feel its weight,
expecting my knees to buckle,
my heart to pound in fear.
Will I faint?
But...it's not so heavy after all.
Where is that crushing gravity
so devoutly to be dreaded?
Where is that draining pain,
where is that ponderous mass,
where is that stoop of deformation?
It's not so heavy after all.
What alchemic change
has wrought this transformation,
turning this load into one
I know I can bear?
It's not so heavy after all.
Would that I could tarry,
would that I could share
this secret just discovered
this news that begs to be uncovered:
He who shouldered the heaviest burden
ever borne stooped to make mine
light enough to carry.
It's not so heavy after all.

At the Foot of the Cross

We lay them down at the foot of Your cross, Lord,
all those burdens that slump our shoulders
and slow our steps. How they weighed us down,
like an unwanted backpack of bricks we could
never shrug off. You know what they are,
those brick burdens, Lord:

Insults from the mouths of co-workers;
Betrayals by friends;
Hurtful actions by those closest to us;
False accusations based on lies;
Rejection of our innovative ideas;
Eyes that would not meet ours;
Backs turned to ignore us;

Hands that would not reach out to help us.
The servant is never higher than the Master.
All those burdens You bore for us, Lord,
and so much worse we cannot fathom it.
You invite us to lay our burdens at Your feet.
Pummeled and weary, we finally shrug off
that heavy load we have been carrying.
We kneel before You, overwhelmed with
awe and gratitude. How light we feel, suddenly.
Our shoulders straighten, our step quickens.
What relief, what joy. We breathe deeply,
lift our arms skyward. We could do neither,
weighed down as we were. Lord, by Your mercy
You have accepted our soul-crushing burdens.
By Your cross You have set us free.

Lord of the Empty Tomb

On our own flagging merits, Lord, we could never stand. None of our makeshift props could hold us upright. Only the promise of Your empty tomb allows us to stand before God. When the great stone was rolled away, dawn light-shafts stole in to reveal the crumpled burial clothes tossed aside when You no longer needed them. Where you had lain in Your linen shroud, two white-garbed angels lingered, as if in wondrous witness. The tight shroud could not hold You; the sealed tomb could not contain You. We now place You, Lord of the empty tomb, between our God and our sins. On this new Easter day, we straighten our spines, lift up our eyes and stand tall, in the certain hope that Your resurrection promise will bring us light and life abundant. We need no other props but You, no other grace but Yours. For You are Lord of the empty tomb.

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Yearning for Easter Cleansing

On our knees we come before You, Lord,
offering our smudged selves.
Our soul-stains grieve us, but not nearly
as much as they must grieve You.
No power is in us to wash our souls ourselves;
this corporeal soil's fingerprint is too deep.
We kneel to beg Your cleansing.
Inwardly begrimed, we turn our faces
to the ground. Prostrate and stained
as we are, we yet dare to seek Your solace.
In your timeless mercy, deal gently
with us, Lord. Surely this soul-staining
is not irreparable; surely You will remove it.
We beg You: wash our souls as You washed
Your disciples' feet on that holy Thursday.
Then bid us rise from our knees
and turn our faces toward the coming dawn
that will reveal an empty, transformed cross.
Newly washed and made whole, we rise to
serve You: retrieved, renewed, restored, redeemed.

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Easter's Transforming Love

What must Barabbas have thought, Lord,
that convicted criminal whose place You took
on the hard wood of the cross? Did he ponder?
Did he wonder? Did he feel unworthy? Was
his life changed by Your sacrifice? Could it
have been transformed? Did he rejoice?
What an exorbitant price you paid for Barabbas,
Lord; what an extravagant price you paid for us all.
How can we turn our faces away from that?
Surely not even Barabbas the thief could remain
unaffected by innocence put to death and evil freed.
Not an option is repayment, Lord; it can't be done.
Priceless is salvation, timeless Your gift to us.
And yet...in gratitude we can give you all of ourselves,
not half, not three-quarters, but every single bit of
ourselves, from the hairs on our head to the skin
on our toes. Committing ourselves anew to Your
service, we can bless those who curse us, pray
for those who abuse us, offer a coat to one who steals
our jacket, give to everyone who comes to us begging
and make no attempt to recover goods stolen from us.
A hard life is this, Lord; the human desire for revenge
is strong in us. And yet...Your gift of salvation is
happening now. Not a one-time event, Your gift
calls us to serve You continually with love and humility.
As You were dying on the cross, Lord, You gave us
the perfect example of submission to Your Father's
will. Death itself was put to death; life triumphed.
In Your glorious resurrection, You showed us
the immeasurable power of Your Father's love.
We are all Barabbas, Lord, saved by grace.
We cannot think we are deserving of Your love.
And yet... if You thought we were worth dying for,
who are we to say it is not so?

Easter Joy

Lord, You know how unworthy we sometimes feel;
are we not our own harshest judges? We know how
we fall short in Your sight, sinners all. And yet...

How can we feel so unworthy when You died for us?

What joy, what relief, what overwhelming generosity.
Just as we are, faults and all, You accepted us.
You saw our persistent self-absorption with its
'me' focused blinders; our hurry-up impatience;
our smoldering desire for power over others; our
eager pursuit of baubles and creature comforts...
and loved us anyway. To stray from Your ways
is our capricious propensity; You even accepted
this. Along with our final betrayal, which sent You
to the cross. Even this You accepted and forgave.

How can we feel so unworthy when You died for us?

What joy, what relief, what overwhelming generosity.
Why can't we see ourselves as You see us, Lord?

In Your eyes:

We are worthy

We are loved

We are forgiven

We are Your sons and daughters

We are heirs of Your kingdom

We have gifts and talents

We are needed

We can serve others

We can share in Your plan for our world

Earnestly do we pray, Lord, to accept our own
worthiness in Your eyes, to love ourselves as our
neighbors, to live joyfully in Your all-encompassing love.

We cannot feel unworthy when You died for us.

Lord, we should not doubt our worth if You do not.

Who are we to second-guess the greatest sacrifice ever
made?

Easter Mercy

Something merciful is making its way
across the face of the land,
permeating crannies and turning
corners. Can't you feel it?
*It settles into human hearts
as gently as a wavelet
lapping sun-warmed sand.*

Something gentle is making its way
across the face of the land,
cracking winter's pond ice
and unsheathing bunched buds
on winter's bare branches.

*It settles into human hearts
as softly as a child's sigh.*

Something beautiful is making its way
across the face of the land,
boarding buses and subways
and blurring the harsh angles
of city skyscrapers and city faces.

*It settles into human hearts
as quietly as a wren's feather
floating to earth.*

Something loving is making its way
across the face of the land,
transforming businesses into
harmonious families and governments
into committed agents of peace.

*It settles into human hearts
as tenderly as a caress on a baby's cheek.*

Something merciful is making its way
across the face of the land:
Christ is risen.