

Easter Prayer Vigil 2016

OPENING

Welcome to this Easter Prayer Vigil of 2016, to spend one hour meditating on God's Word, and to help you in getting greater insight as to who Jesus is, while growing in your faith in our triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Let us begin with prayer in thankfulness to God for His grace to us to enable us to receive His Word, and for His work in our life.

PRAY:

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen*

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience, and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life.

We thank you for watching over us, for your ever-present help in times of trouble, for never leaving us nor forsaking us, for granting us the gift of faith and sending us the Holy Spirit to work faith in us,

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*for the peace that only You can give, and for loving us so much that You sent Your one and only Son, Jesus Christ, to die in our place on the cross so that our sins may be forgiven, and through Him we may be granted eternal life in heaven with You. For all this, we praise and thank You, through Jesus Christ Our Lord, who lives and reigns together with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen.*

THE CREATION, AND THE FALL INTO SIN

Before we get into the study of who Jesus is, it is important that we understand why Jesus came to this earth, and suffered and died on the cross. The story begins when the world was created, as is written in the Bible in Genesis 1, when God created the heavens and the earth, and spoke into being day and night, the sky and the seas, all types of vegetation including seed-bearing plants and fruit-bearing trees, the stars, sun and the moon, fish and birds of all kinds, and living creatures of many kinds to populate the earth.

After God had completed the heavens and the earth, and all in it, He created man to “rule over the fish of the sea, and the birds of

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the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground”.

READ: Psalm 8

God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden, which He had planted, to work it and take care of it. God told Adam that he could eat from any tree in the garden, but he must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because he will die if he does.. To help Adam in his work, God created a woman who would be named Eve, as she would become the mother of all the living. (Gen 3:20)

Now Satan, the devil, had been in heaven with God as one of God’s powerful angels, but because he wanted to be like God, a great battle ensued, and Satan and his followers were thrown out of heaven, and down to earth. This great deceiver disguised himself as a serpent, which originally was one of God’s good creatures, and deceived Eve into doubting God’s command about dying if Adam and she ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When God had talked about dying, He meant spiritual death, not physical death, and a break in the relationship between God and man.

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Eve, then Adam, ate the fruit. God came looking for them in the garden, but they hid. So God called out to Adam, “Where are you?” Adam responded that he heard God in the garden, and hid because he was naked. God knew that Adam and Eve had both eaten of the fruit. When He asked the question ‘Where are you?, it was a rhetorical question since God knew where Adam was, and what he had done. God had asked the question to see whether Adam understood the consequences his actions would have in his relationship with God. Adam’s response was to blame God for creating the woman who caused him to be disobedient, and in turn the woman blamed the serpent. Here we see where the blame game started.

Time for Self-reflection

- Have you ever blamed God or others for causing you to succumb to temptation?
- Do you find yourself doubting or disobeying God’s Word because it does not seem relevant in your life, or it goes against your own wisdom, or thoughts and desires?

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PRAY: For God's forgiveness for the times you have gone against His Word, or seek to absolve yourself of blame for your sins by blaming others. Also pray for God's guidance in your life, and in the lives of those around you, and for the strength to follow His direction.

READ OR SING: Hymn 663 – Rise, My Soul, to Watch and Pray

GOD'S PLAN OF REDEMPTION AND SALVATION

After hearing Adam's and Eve's excuses and their attempts to shift the blame for their actions to others, God judged the serpent, the woman, and the man. (*Genesis 3:14- 24*)

Then God made the first sacrifice for the sin of Adam and Eve by killing an animal and clothing them with the skin of the animal. In order to stop them from eating from the tree of life again, and entering into eternal life in their sinful state, God banished them from the Garden of Eden, and placed guards of cherubim, and a flaming sword which flashed back and forth, to keep them away from the tree of life. God then promised that an offspring of the woman would come one day to destroy the work of the devil. This offspring would be Jesus, the sinless Son of God.

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Because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, man's wickedness on the earth grew as man multiplied and began to increase in number. God saw that the inclination of the thoughts of man's heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was so grieved that He had made man on the earth, that He caused a great flood to envelop the earth, and through Noah and the ark God had commanded him to build, God saved mankind and all other creatures from total destruction and annihilation, and so man and all creatures on the ground, in the air and in the waters, have been in existence until today.

The flood did not end man's sinfulness, even though only eight members of Noah's family survived the flood. King David, in Psalm 51, tells us that we are all sinful at birth, sinful from the time we were conceived in our mother's womb. Hence we needed a Saviour, one who would pay the price for our sinfulness, and restore us to a righteous relationship with God.

READ: Romans 5: 12 – 19

Throughout the Old Testament, and into the New Testament, we read about man and his sinful nature, and his disobedience to God,

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causing judgments to be brought down on individual persons, and on entire nations. The Old Testament also contains many prophecies about God's grace and mercy in His plan to send us a Saviour and Redeemer, who would redeem us from all our sins.

READ OR SING: Hymn 801 – How Great Thou Art

PRAY: Thank God for loving us so much that He would send us a Saviour, His only Son Jesus, to be the One to redeem us from our sins, and restore us to a righteous relationship with Him.

JESUS, OUR SAVIOUR AND REDEEMER

Jesus in Prophecy

Because of man's fall into sin, as we read in Genesis, God had promised that He would send a Saviour to redeem man from his sins, and reconcile him to Himself (God). Jesus was that promised Saviour. In the book of Isaiah, we read that 'the virgin will be with child, and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel', meaning 'God with us' (Isaiah 7:14). He was prophesied to be born in Bethlehem, and that He will be ruler over Israel. We are also told that His 'origins are from of old, from ancient times. (Micah 5:2)

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This is a reference to His eternal nature, as we will see later in statements Jesus made about Himself.

In Isaiah 53, we read another prophecy about who the Messiah will be. We are told that He would be a suffering servant who will be despised and rejected by men, that He will be pierced for our transgressions, that all our sins would be laid upon Him, that He would be led to the slaughter silently like a lamb, and that He would be assigned a grave with the wicked, and buried with the rich in His death. All this would be done to Him although he had not been violent or deceitful in His life. We are also told that after the suffering of His soul, He will see the light of life, which is a reference to His resurrection, and that His reward would be great like that of a king sharing in the spoils after a great victory. (Isaiah 53: 1-12)

Jesus' birth occurred just as it had been foretold. The Virgin Mary conceived a child through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, and He was born in Bethlehem. He was given the name Jesus, which means 'He saves'. (Mathew 1: 18 – 2:6, and Luke 2: 1 – 20).

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Jesus' ministry did not really begin until He was about thirty years old. During his ministry, he frequently talked about having to suffer and die, and be raised from the grave on the third day.

READ: Mark 8: 31 – 33; Mark 10: 32 – 34

Jesus' life in human form here on earth ended on the cross, after about three and a half years in ministry. Despite all the miracles and wonders He had performed, and all the words He said and were said about Him, to show that He was indeed the Son of God and God Himself, He was tried by Pontius Pilate; false evidence was given against Him; His sentence was death; He was flogged and mocked; He was nailed to the cross, and was mocked again while He was on the cross. Before He died, He said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do"; and at the end, just before He gave up His Spirit, He said, "It is finished." His work of salvation had been completed.

We see, in the readings from Mark, that Jesus confirmed the prophecy in Isaiah 53. Also, the real events that occurred in the lead-up to His death, His death on the cross itself, and His resurrection after death are all evidence of the prophecy in Isaiah 53 being fulfilled.

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What Others Said About Jesus

At Jesus' birth, an angel of the Lord appeared to shepherds telling them that a Savior has been born, and that He is Christ the Lord. A company of heavenly host sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favour rests". When He was presented in the temple on the eighth day, as was the custom, Simeon said that Jesus was destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and He [Jesus] will be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. He also said that a sword will pierce Mary's soul too. In this statement, Simeon was prophesying that:

- Christ will raise those who believe in Him, but would be a stumbling block to those who do not believe.
- Christ points to the Father. Those who speak against Him also oppose the Father.
- Mary will suffer deep anguish, as Jesus does, as He nears crucifixion and then dies.

At Jesus' baptism by John in the river of Jordan, the Holy Spirit descended on Him in the bodily form of a dove, and a voice from heaven said, "You are My Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased." (Luke 3: 21- 22) Here God the Father identifies Jesus as His Son, and we get a picture of the Holy Trinity, our Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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The devil recognized Jesus as the Son of God, and tried to tempt Him to believe and obey him by using His powers as the Son of God for His own benefit. He, Satan, began his temptation by saying, “If you are the Son of God, then...” Satan was attempting to usurp God’s power and claim victory over God by having Jesus bow to his {Satan’s} command. (Luke 4: 1 – 13)

John the Baptist called Jesus the ‘Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world’, a reference to Jesus’ upcoming sacrifice on the cross to atone for the sins of the world. (John 1: 29 & 35)

As Jesus and His disciples were travelling around Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked the disciples who do people say He is. They replied that some say He is John the Baptist, others say He is Elijah, or one of the other prophets. Jesus directly asks them, “But what about you?” Peter answered, : “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” to which Jesus responded that this was revealed to Peter by God the Father. (Matthew 16: 13-17)

During Jesus’ ministry, many of the Jewish leaders and teachers of the law questioned who He was, and under whose authority he was preaching. They refused to believe that He was the promised Messiah. Their idea of the Messiah was that he would be a kingly leader who would come and deliver them from Roman rule. The suffering Messiah did not fit their mold of who the Messiah would

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be, so they called Jesus a fraud, since He was just the son of a carpenter, and they may also have known that His earthly mother had been an unwed teenage mother. They also called Him a blasphemer, because he pronounced to the paralytic that “his sins are forgiven”. The Jews understood that only God can forgive sins, so if Jesus is forgiving the sins of the paralytic, then He must be a blasphemer as He is claiming to have the same powers as God. They also said that He was possessed by Beelzebub, when He cast out demons from a man who had been possessed. Beelzebub is the prince of demons, whom we also know as Satan.

Jesus proved who He was by the many miracles He performed. When John the Baptist, who was in prison because of his dispute with Herod, inquired of Jesus if He was the one to come, Jesus responded by saying that the blind are receiving sight, the lame are walking, the deaf are hearing, the dead are being raised, and that the good news is being preached to the poor. (Matthew 11: 1-6)

For the Jews of the day, the Messiah had to perform four miracles before they would believe him. Two of the miracles must be only ones that could be performed by God Himself. These miracles were:

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1. Healing of a leper. (2 Kings 5: 1-14) The Pharisees felt this miracle could be done by someone empowered by God to do, as was the case when Elisha healed Naaman.
2. Casting out a mute demon. (Matthew 12: 22-23) The Pharisees also felt this miracle could be done by someone empowered by God to do. The rabbis were able to cast out demons, but not necessarily one that could not speak.)
3. Healing a man born blind. (John 9: 1-11) The Pharisees felt that only the Messiah could do this miracle. Jesus did.
4. Raising someone from the dead after four days. (The Pharisees felt that only the Messiah could do this miracle. Jesus did. (John 11: 1-43)

Although Jesus had performed the two miracles that only the Messiah from God could do, the Pharisees refused to believe that He was the Christ.

PRAY: For unbelievers, among those whom you know, that they may come to know Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God.

READ or SING: Hymn 430: My Song is Love Unknown

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JESUS' 'I AM' STATEMENTS

What Jesus said about Himself

Jesus was frequently challenged by the high priest and the leaders of the Jews to say who He is. In their questioning, they were just looking for an excuse to bring charges against Him so that they can justify putting Him on trial, and eventually killing Him. In one of the times when He was questioned, when He was brought before the Sanhedrin after He had been arrested, the high priest asked Him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?". Jesus responded, "I am". He then went on to say that they will see Him sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." Here we see Jesus referring to His position in heaven, and His return in the end times. (Mark 14: 55-62)

The Jews of the day claimed to be the children of Abraham, the father of many nations, but Jesus said that if they were, they would do what Abraham did as one who had great faith in God. Jesus told them they are more likely children of the devil, because they do not believe who Jesus is, and are unable to hear God since they do not belong to God. The Jews asked Jesus whether He was greater than Abraham, when He said that anyone who keeps His word will never taste death. Jesus also told them that their father Abraham rejoiced

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at the thought of seeing Jesus' day, to which they responded that Jesus was not yet fifty years old, but still claimed to have seen Abraham. Jesus then responded, "Before Abraham was born, **I am.**" (John 8:58)

This response of "I am" is the same response God gave to Moses when Moses asked God what name he should use for God when he went to deliver the Israelites out of Egypt. God had said, "*I AM WHO I AM. Tell them that I AM has sent you to them.*" (Exodus 3:14) This was a reference to His eternal nature.

Similar statements are found in other parts of the Old Testament regarding the eternal nature of God.

- Isaiah 43:10 – "You are my witnesses," declares the Lord, "and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe that I am he [God]. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me."
- Isaiah 44:6 – "This is what the LORD says – Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God."

Jesus made similar statements regarding His eternal nature. We see them in these verses.

- Revelation 1:17-18– When I [John] saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said,

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- "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold, I am alive for ever and ever!"
- Revelation 22:13 – "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End."

With these statements from the God of the Old Testament, and the New Testament, there can be no doubt as to who Jesus is – the Son of God and God himself.

Jesus made many other "I am" statements during His ministry. He used everyday things to get His message across as to who He is.

Jesus said, "I am the Bread of Life." (John 6: 25-59)

Jesus had just completed the feeding of the five thousand on the far shore of the Sea of Galilee. A great crowd had followed Him there because of miraculous signs He had performed on the sick. He performed another one of His miracles where He fed the five thousand, using five loaves of bread and two fish, and still had twelve baskets left over. In the evening after the feeding, Jesus and the disciples crossed over the lake to Capernaum, where the crowd again found them.

In His preaching to the crowd, Jesus said that they should not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life. This work that they are to do, is to believe in the One that God has sent.

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Jesus reiterated that He is the true Bread of Heaven, and whoever comes to Him will never go hungry. Jesus is not talking about physical hunger. Bread is a staple in the diet of most cultures in this world, and will satisfy physical hunger, but not spiritual hunger, a hunger for God and the blessings He bestows. Jesus goes on to promise that He is the living bread, and whoever eats of this bread will live forever, that even though we will physically die, our soul will live on until the day of resurrection when soul and body will be reunited in a resurrection body.

In this Bible reading, we also see a similarity in the words Jesus spoke at the Last Supper, on the night before His crucifixion, words which are also reflected in the Holy Communion we partake of in the Divine Services. Jesus broke bread and said, "This is my body, given for you.": He also took the cup of wine after supper, and said, "This is my blood, shed for you." He also said: "For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life. He remains in me, and I in him."

In Jesus' words spoken here, we see the importance of taking Holy Communion regularly, to build us up in faith, and to assure us of our salvation and everlasting life.

READ or SING: Hymn 625 – Lord Jesus Christ, Life-Giving Bread

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PRAY: That God will satisfy your spiritual hunger by helping you to spend more time in His Word, getting to know Jesus, and His life-saving sacrifice for you on the cross.

Jesus said, "I am the Light of the World" (John 8: 12-18) John 9:5

Jesus made this statement just after a woman, who had been accused of adultery, had been brought to Him. Jesus forgave her after her accusers left when Jesus said to them that anyone without sin can cast the first stone.

After this incident, Jesus said to those remaining, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life". In John 1, Jesus was also referred to as the light of men that shines in the darkness. Here the darkness is spiritual blindness, the inability or the refusal to acknowledge God as the creator of all, and the one who has control over our lives. It is also the denial of Jesus as God's Son, to refuse to believe that Jesus is the 'once and for all times' sacrifice for the sins of this world, and thus our Lord and Saviour.

King David, the psalmist (in Psalm 18:28) says that God turns his darkness into light. He had also said this in 2 Samuel 22:29, in his song of praise to the LORD, "You are my lamp, O LORD; the LORD turns my darkness into light." David said this as the LORD had

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delivered him from the hands of his enemies, and was causing his life to flourish.

St. Peter (in 1Peter 2:9) tell us that we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of God who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

READ or SING: Hymn 890 – O Blessed Light, O Trinity

PRAY: That God will give you the courage to let His light, through Jesus, shine through you so that others may come to faith in Jesus.

Jesus said, “I am the gate” (John 10: 1-10)

Jesus’ reference this time is to sheep which are being held in a pen. The shepherd enters only by the gate, but those who would steal or rob climb into the pen by another way. The sheep know the shepherd’s voice, and they follow where he leads. Sometimes several flocks of sheep are held in one pen. When a shepherd calls the sheep, only his sheep follow him. The rest remain behind as they do not know the voice of the shepherd who is calling.

In the same way, Jesus is referring to us as sheep, living among others who may be unbelievers, and if we know Him, we will listen only to His voice and follow Him. The devil is the thief or robber

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who would try to steal us away through temptation, and through false religions and preachers, but if we are sure of God’s Holy Word and know His truth, and His promises of salvation through Jesus, then we are not likely to follow the devil, and so lose our salvation.

READ or SING: Hymn 740 – I am Jesus’ Little Lamb

PRAY: That you will know when God is speaking to you, and that you will follow His guidance and direction for your life.

Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11-14)

When a good shepherd is taking care of his sheep, he will risk his life to fight off wolves or other predators. He may also risk his life to find a lost sheep, or help one that may be in some form of distress, and cannot find its way back to the flock. On the other hand, a hired hand would run away when danger presents itself, as he does not care for the sheep.

Jesus claims to be that good shepherd who knows His sheep, and that the sheep know Him, just as He knows the Father, and the Father knows Him. He will lay His life down for His sheep and take it up again, a reference to His crucifixion where He will die on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for all our sins, past, present and future, and be raised again on the third day. Jesus also said that no

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man has a greater friend than this, than one who would lay his life down for his friend.

READ: Psalm 23

PRAY: That God will keep you strong in your faith so that you may follow where Jesus leads.

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life"
(John 11: 17-27)

Jesus' good friend Lazarus had been dead for four days when Jesus arrived in Bethany. Martha, Lazarus' sister, said to Jesus that if He had been there, her brother would not have died. Jesus replied that Lazarus will rise again, to which Martha responded by saying that she knows that Lazarus will rise on the last day at the resurrection of all.

Jesus then said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die", Martha replies that she believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.

Jesus did raise Lazarus from the dead, though he had been dead four days, and his body would have started to decompose. The four

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days were important, as the Jews believed that it was possible to raise someone up to three days after death, as their spirit was still around. Jesus had said that Lazarus' sickness would not end in death, meaning that spiritually he would still be alive, and physically be raised from the dead. His sickness would be for God's glory, so that God's Son may be glorified through it. Jesus had waited the four days so that He could perform a miracle only God could do, and so glorify God.

As we know, man is once appointed to die physically, but Jesus is saying that even though we die physically, we will not die spiritually. Our souls will live, and will be reunited with our bodies on the last day when the resurrection occurs.

READ or SING: Hymn 744 – Amazing Grace

PRAY: For God's continued grace, and faith like Martha's, to believe in Jesus as our Messiah, and in His promises to grant us eternal life, and to raise us up on the last day.

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life: (John 14: 1-7)

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Jesus had been talking about his crucifixion and death to the disciples. He told them not to be troubled, but to trust in God and also in Him. He explained that there are many rooms in His Father's house, implying heaven, and that He was going there to prepare a place for them. Once the place is prepared, he will come back and take them to be with Him, so that they may be also where He is. Here Jesus is talking about His second coming when the dead will be raised up, and those who believe in Christ will be bodily resurrected and taken up into heaven to be with Him.

When Jesus says that He is the way, he means that He is the only way to God and heaven. Jesus is the truth, a reference to His Godly nature, and the fact, as Isaiah prophesied, that there was no deceit in His mouth throughout His life. When Jesus says that he is the life, He is saying that He came to give us life, and life more abundantly, and that through Him we have the gift of eternal life.

READ or SING: Hymn 526 – You are the Way, Through You Alone

PRAY: Thank God for His great love for us in sending Jesus to suffer the death and punishment that we should for the sin in us, and for showing us the way to salvation through Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Saviour.

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Jesus said, "I am the vine" (John 15: 1-17)

Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches". In Jesus' time, farming was one of the main occupations of people. In His preaching, Jesus uses these everyday life events to explain who He is. In saying that He is the vine, this is how the plant gathers its nutrients from the soil, and passes them on to the branches, where the fruit bears. If the branch is cut from the vine, it dies and would not bear any more fruit. In addition, when a plant is pruned, and dead or excess branches are cut away, the plant tends to bear much more fruit. In the same way, if we stay connected to Jesus, we will continue to receive life from Him, and bear much fruit. From time to time, God prunes us through His discipline so that we too may bear more fruit. The fruit referenced here is to do the work of God, reaching out to others with His Word, sharing the Good News and the love of Christ with them, and helping to provide for their needs. The fruits of the Spirit, which God bestows on us through the Holy Spirit, are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If we abide in Jesus, we will bear these fruits.

READ or SING: Hymn 894 – For the Fruits of His Creation

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PRAY: That you may abide in Jesus, and He in you, and that you may have the courage and strength of faith to reach out to those who do not know Jesus, or are in need of a helping hand.

CLOSING

Jesus came to this earth to connect us to the greatest source of love in the universe, our loving God. Jesus Himself is that expression of God's love for us in this life we live on the earth. He came as a ransom for us, not to be served, but to serve, to pay the penalty for our sin by dying on the cross, and so set us free from slavery to sin and grant us life in eternity. He came to seek us out and to save us, to reconcile us to God. All we need to do is to surrender ourselves in humbleness before God, and let God have His way with us.

The Bible says in John 3: 16-18, *"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."*

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With these verses in mind, we thank God for the gift of faith He has given us, a faith that will lead us to life eternal through His one and only Son Jesus Christ.

READ or SING: Hymn 570 – Just as I am, Without One Plea

PRAY: In thankfulness to God for this time you spent in quiet conversation with Him, in meditation on His Word, and in growing your faith in Him, through Jesus Christ our Lord and the Holy Spirit.

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make His face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you. May the Lord look upon you with His favour, and give you peace. Amen.

We, the Board of Elders, thank you for your participation in this 2016 Easter Prayer Vigil. May God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever, continually guard you, guide you, and bless you in and through the one and true faith.