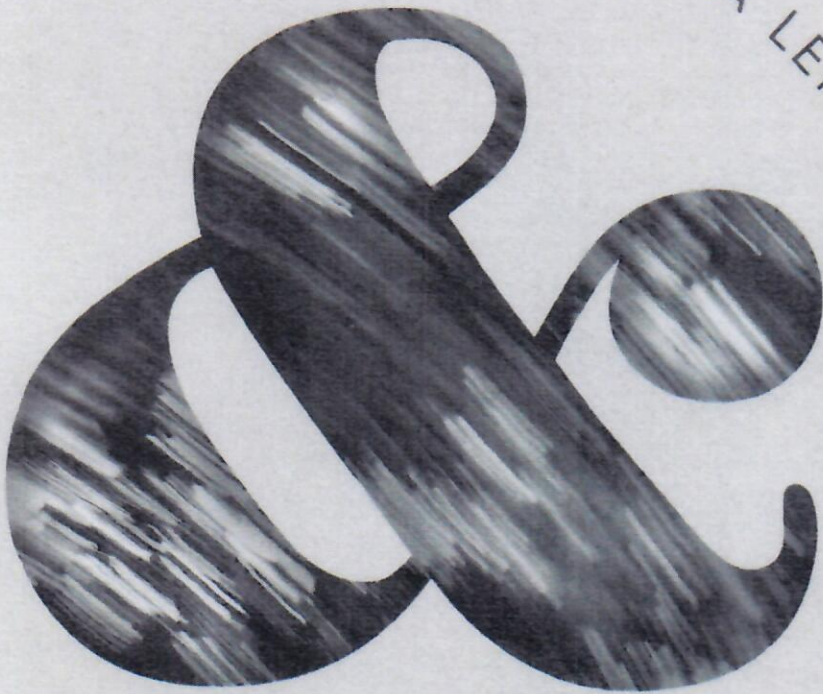



A LENTEN  
DEVOTIONAL

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AGAIN & AGAIN A LENTEN REFRAIN



Art, reflections, &  
poetry for the  
season of Lent

 Sanctified Art  
sanctifiedart.org



In the season of Lent, we're reminded that, again and again, suffering and brokenness find us. We doubt again, we lament again, we mess up again. Again and again, the story of Jesus on the cross repeats—every time lives are taken unjustly, every time the powerful choose corruption and violence, every time individuals forget how to love. With exacerbation we exclaim, "Again?! How long, O God?" And yet, in the midst of the motion blur chaos of our lives, God offers a sacred refrain: "I choose you, I love you, I will lead you to repair." Again and again, God breaks the cycle and offers us a new way forward.

In this season, we need rituals—both old and new—to remember and be transformed. Embodied practice builds muscle memory. Repetition helps retrain our neural pathways. We encourage you to walk through these weekly readings and prompts at your own pace throughout the season, following the rhythm that works best for you. May the art, reflections, and poetry strengthen and stretch you, shaping you into a more faithful disciple.

This Lent, may God's steadfast love cradle our laments. May God's grace wash over our weariness. And may we bring all of who we are to God—trusting that God will meet us, time and again, along the way.

*Artfully yours,*

**The Sanctified Art Creative Team**

Lisle Gwynn Garrity

Sarah Are

Hannah Garrity

Lauren Wright Pittman



# ABOUT THE CREATORS



## REV. LISLE GWYNN GARRITY

Founder | Creative Director of SA

Lisle Gwynn Garrity (she/her) is a Pastorist (pastor + artist), retreat leader, and creative entrepreneur seeking to fill the church with more color, paint, mystery, and creativity. She founded A Sanctified Art with the conviction that, in order to thrive, the church needs more creative expression and art-filled freedom.

## REV. LAUREN WRIGHT PITTMAN

Director of Branding | Founding Creative Partner of SA

Lauren (she/her) is an artist, graphic designer, and theologian. She uses paint, metallic inks, and Apple pencil to image the layered complexity she experiences in scripture texts. She also helps faith communities share their vibrant stories through branding & design services.

## HANNAH GARRITY Founding Creative Partner of SA

Hannah (she/her) is an artist and an athlete, a daughter and a mother, a facilitator and a producer, a leader and a teammate. She is an art teacher at a middle school in Richmond, VA, a Sunday school visual choir facilitator at Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond, VA, an art in worship workshop leader wherever she is called, and a liturgical installation artist at the Montreat Conference Center, Montreat, NC.

## REV. SARAH ARE Founding Creative Partner of SA

Sarah Are (she/her) is the Associate Pastor for Youth and Young Adults at Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church, Dallas, Texas. She believes that the Church has a responsibility to open every door to God, so that those of us who are visual, kinesthetic, or relational learners all have equal opportunity to engage God to the fullest of our abilities.

## REV. T. DENISE ANDERSON Guest Contributor

T. Denise Anderson (she/her) is a minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and coordinator for racial and intercultural justice with the Presbyterian Mission Agency, working in connection with the agency's Compassion, Peace & Justice and Racial Equity & Women's Intercultural Ministries. A graduate of Howard University School of Divinity, she is the former Co-Moderator of the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (USA). A nationally-recognized writer and blogger, Denise's work has appeared in *The Christian Century*, *The Huffington Post*, *These Days*, and on her own blog, *SOULa Scriptura: To Be Young, Gifted, and Reformed*: [soulascriptura.com](http://soulascriptura.com). Denise writes, preaches, and engages on issues of social justice, diversity, and reconciliation. As a painter and visual artist, she creates art that explores themes of spirituality, history, religion, and race: [tdandersonart.com](http://tdandersonart.com).

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WEEK OF ASH WEDNESDAY  
AGAIN & AGAIN, WE'RE INVITED IN

## INVITED

I like to imagine that each year,  
God invites me to a party.  
God drops me a note that says,  
"No gifts, casual dress. Come just as you are."

I like to imagine that I am brave enough to go.  
I like to imagine that I decide that I am worth it.  
This was no pity invite,  
There is no obligatory postage.  
God wants me there.

So I get myself together,  
Smudged glasses, sensitive ego, wrinkled shirt, and all.  
I ring the doorbell a few minutes late on account of the fact that  
I lost my keys twice trying to get out the door,  
And I almost turn back to hide in my car,  
Afraid that I might embarrass myself over appetizers or small talk.  
But then God answers the door,  
And God says, "You're here!"  
And I smile, because I am.

And with every step past that threshold,  
I know that God is cheering me on.  
It's the pride of a parent watching their child take their first step.  
If I freeze, God is not disappointed.  
If I fall, God is not mad.  
But if I trust the invitation,  
If I move closer,  
I know, God celebrates.

Friends, you've got mail.  
It's an invitation to dust off your shoes,  
To go deeper,  
To trust that you're worth it,  
To lose your keys and your faith,  
And then to find them both, along with your worth.  
You are invited.

We are invited.  
Again and again and again.  
This invitation is for you.

*Poem by Rev. Sarah Are*

**READ** Matthew 6:1-21

**COMMENTARY** | Rev. T. Denise Anderson

As I write this, millions have been affected by a disease that was unknown to humans just a year ago. It has stolen loved ones and changed us in ways we are still discovering. On Ash Wednesday 2020, it hadn't yet had the global impact it eventually achieved. You probably marked the occasion by having ashes imposed on your forehead as a sign of lament and repentance, showing you intend to turn things around in your living.

That was when we could touch, hug, or just be with each other without face masks and an imaginary tape measure.

I'm sure lament is easy to find today. There is also much we still need to turn around.

Collectively known as the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew's anthology of Jesus' teachings begins with the Beatitudes, a litany pronouncing blessings upon the unsung folks. The poor in spirit, the meek, the mourners, the peacemakers—these are called “blessed.” Jesus shows himself here to be countercultural. The kind of religion he promoted wasn't performative, as so much of religious life can be. We give because it is necessary. Prayer prioritizes God's will, not our words. Fasting produces spiritual, not physical evidence. What we value is different.

There's something poignant about this in a time when we cannot rely on most of the social norms we've used our whole lives. Even facial cues fail us because of the masks we must wear! Performative interactions with God and others will similarly fail us in these times. They simply won't be enough. We must go deeper.

Again and again, God invites us into fuller ways of being. There is no better time to accept that invitation than now, when so much is different. Maybe no ashes mark our foreheads today, but they can still mark our hearts.





Invited In | Lauren Wright Pittman  
*Hand-carved block printed with oil-based ink on paper*

**READ** Matthew 6:1-21

**FROM THE ARTIST** | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

Again and again, we are invited inward. The common thread here is the focus on expressing love for God in secret, not for the recognition of others, but as an outpouring of devotion for God alone. I think the references to spiritual disciplines are less about the particular acts themselves and more about the intention fueling the action. The intention affects the quality of the action itself. Does your outward action align with what's going on inside of you?

There are times when I've been with friends and I've felt this tug to document the event and share it on social media. This impulse yanks me out of the present moment, away from my friends, and I find myself focused on how the event might be perceived by others. Ultimately, it's as though the moment isn't actually happening. I'm not present in mind, body, or spirit; I am elsewhere, fixated on my phone. Have you heard this before: "If you didn't post it, did it even happen?" I think that is a great question to consider. Are we so caught up in the amplification of our actions and how they are widely perceived, that the actions themselves are void? If we are more concerned with how our public prayers and acts of allyship are received, are we actually praying? Are we actually being an ally?

God invites us into thorough self-examination and authentic relationship. In this image, a person kneels with arms extended, basking in the glow of God's all-encompassing love. It is in the true pursuit of God, this intimate, inward turning, that God sees you. It is in our full, embodied intentionality that we find deep connection with God and ourselves. This is the reward.

## PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.





Dawn | Hannah Garrity  
*Paper lace over watercolor*



**READ** Isaiah 58:1-12

**FROM THE ARTIST** | Hannah Garrity

In this image, I am mesmerized by the lines, the way that even in the two-dimensional, this dancer is in perpetual motion. Even in a whirlpool, threatening to suck away her life, this dancer is rising—effortlessly. It is magical.

But fighting oppression in real life is a constant exercise in finding the magic in a moment. Fighting oppression in real life is the antithesis of effortlessness. As I look around our world, I see people doubling down to forward oppression. As I look around our world, I see so many amazing embodiments of our Holy Spirit, pushing back, spinning out, rising up. It is magical. I am amazed.

In this image, I have represented a woman spinning up out of a whirlpool, her face shining up at the sun. She rises above the ruins of ancient cities. Background motion spins up with the energy of the woman who represents the Holy Spirit, who represents the oppressed breaking free from the yoke, breaking “forth like the dawn” (Isaiah 58:8).

## PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT  
AGAIN & AGAIN, GOD MEETS US

**REMEMBER WHEN?**

God never begins letters with the words,  
"I hope this finds you well,"  
For those words imply distance.

Instead, God begins God's letters to you with the words,  
"Remember when?"

Beloved child,  
Remember when we dipped our toes into the water?  
Remember when we dove right in?  
Remember when the ice cream dripped down our hands  
And the cicadas sang their song,  
And the seasons changed,  
And the days were long?  
Remember when we fell in love and the world was new?  
Remember when our heart was broken?  
Remember the tears?  
Remember the long nights?  
Remember when we laughed again and the sound surprised us?  
Remember when we marched in the street?  
Remember when we cast our vote?  
Remember when we believed in hope?  
Remember when?  
I do.

That's what God's letters say.  
So on this day, and every day to come,  
Remember: God is meeting you.  
If you look back, you might remember when.

*Poem by Rev. Sarah Are*

READ Mark 1:9-15

COMMENTARY | Rev. T. Denise Anderson

My personal story is, though my family wasn't very "churchy," I somehow came to religion in my teens. I came to my denomination in seminary after learning more about the Reformed tradition. Reformed theology emphasizes God's initiative, which is consistent with my own experience. I can't tell you that I ever really found God. It was God who found me, and kept finding me throughout my life. Whether I was observant or indifferent about my faith, God was always close by.

Mark's gospel serves as source material for both Matthew and Luke's gospels. It's the shortest and most perfunctory of all four gospels. In just seven verses, we learn of three significant events in the life of Jesus as he began his ministry. The first is his baptism, where God claims him as God's own beloved son. The second is his experience in the wilderness, where God sends angels to attend to him as he faces the Accuser. Lastly, after John the Baptist's arrest, Jesus begins proclaiming God's proximity and reign while calling for repentance.

The common thread in each account is God's closeness. In pivotal moments, God is extraordinarily present with Jesus and those around him, and for good reason. In the Black church we sing of how God picks us up, turns us around, and places our feet "on solid ground." God's proximity informs our trajectory. God approaches us to claim, equip, and send us to do God's will.

Again and again, God meets us where we are, but doesn't leave us there. We shift from sinking sand to solid ground, navel-gazing to community, personal pietism to justice for all, and away from behaviors, both personal and systemic, that frustrate God's vision for the world.





I Delight in You | Lisle Gwynn Garrity  
*Digital painting with collage*

READ Mark 1:9-15

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

During Advent, we learn that the good news begins with John the Baptist shouting in the wilderness and “everyone in Judea and *all* the people of Jerusalem” following him out of the city to the Jordan river to be baptized, to repent, to change their hearts and, consequently, their lives (Mark 1:5). This is a moment of mainstream conversion, of widespread openness to truly hear the cries of one shouting out, to leave what they had known behind to follow a new path. This, Mark tells us, is when Jesus’ ministry begins—with a community earnest and eager for change.

Mark tells us nothing about Jesus’ life prior to this moment, omitting any details of his miraculous birth or the years of his youth. Instead, Mark notes that Jesus comes from Nazareth of Galilee (over 100 km north of Jerusalem) to join John the Baptist’s movement. We might expect the long-awaited Messiah to greet his new followers like the kings before him have—with a pompous coronation, with hunger to exert power and control over his populus. Instead, Jesus steps in line along the river’s edge, blending in with the crowds, joining in solidarity with those around him. Jesus doesn’t demand any attention, but as soon as the water washes over him, creation is summoned to celebrate. I imagine him wading into the waters and leaning back to receive the blessing that falls upon him like rain: *You are my beloved. I delight in you.*

In this moment, God-in-flesh joins alongside those he will heal, beckon, teach, challenge, and comfort. Simultaneously, God-in-Spirit meets Christ at the water’s edge, at the threshold of his ministry. Before Jesus faces the pain, betrayal, and challenges of what will come, before he does anything to prove himself, God grants him unconditional belovedness as his essence. From this, all his subsequent teachings and actions flow.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.





In Our Hands | Lauren Wright Pittman  
*Hand-carved block printed with oil-based ink on paper*



**READ** Genesis 9:8-17

**FROM THE ARTIST** | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

In the beginning God filled the formless void with color, texture, light, flavor, time, and life. God scooped the clay and carefully molded it, breathing life into the nostrils of humanity. These are the images of a tender, imaginative God who loves Creation limitlessly.

Following the Creation narrative, humanity quickly spirals into violence, corruption, and power-hunger toward the total destruction of Creation. God becomes deeply aggrieved and even regrets creating humanity (Gen 6:6). God decides it best to return all of Creation to the chaotic void, though God finds hope in Noah's family. I've struggled with this narrative, but I find myself feeling a tremendous amount of compassion. I can only imagine how painful it is to watch the work of your hands devolve into brutality.

God offers Noah, his descendants, and every living creature an all-encompassing promise, vowing never to flood the earth again. Despite humanity's destructive role, God limits God's self and alone is held accountable in this covenant. God requires nothing of humanity or the entirety of Creation in return. God gives humanity a chance to start fresh, and the opportunity to choose a different path. If we model our actions after God's, then we would humble and limit ourselves in order to better love God and care for Creation. Sacrifice and selflessness pave the new way.

In this image, God's hands hold various animals and plant life, and are surrounded by the bands of the rainbow, shielding Creation from the swirling waters of chaotic destruction. I chose not to image humanity because the hands are at once God's and ours. We must respond to God's covenant by protecting and keeping the earth. It is our responsibility; it is our calling. God meets us where we are—utterly dependent and bound toward self-destruction—with a promise sealed with a bow bursting with the endless spectrum of colors light holds.

**PRAY**

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT  
AGAIN & AGAIN, WE ARE CALLED TO LISTEN

TRUTH THAT RICOCHETS

I went to a lecture once—  
An interfaith conversation with  
interfaith leaders.  
Whispers bounced off the  
church's tile floors  
As people shuffled into place,  
Carrying hope alongside  
assumptions—  
Mixed into pockets like loose change.  
About halfway through the evening,  
A young woman in a blue hijab  
began speaking.  
She was the youngest person on  
the panel,  
Seated far to the left. You might  
almost miss her  
If you weren't paying attention;  
But not here, not when she spoke.  
In quiet determination she told us of  
fear and persecution.  
She told us of hatred and racial slurs,  
Thrown at her people from car  
windows like bombs.  
It was a truth I did not know,  
And that truth ricocheted like sunlight  
through the cathedral windows,  
Touching almost everyone that day.  
Then a man in the back, who could  
have been me—  
*Who has been me—*  
Approached the microphone and said,  
"Your people are persecuted. You  
live in fear. You are battered  
by hate.  
If that is true, then why am I just  
now hearing about it?  
Why is your story not on the news?  
Why have you not spoken up  
about it?"

And the air was still, partly because  
we held our breath in anticipation,  
And partly because the Spirit slows  
her dance when we stand at the  
edge of truth.  
The woman in the blue hijab leaned  
into the microphone  
And whispered with a quiet strength  
that can only come from years  
of practice:  
"We are screaming."  
If there is one truth in my life  
That unfolds again and again,  
It is the need to listen.  
For again and again, I will try,  
with good intentions,  
To act and walk with love.  
But again and again, I will  
make mistakes.  
Again and again, I will say the  
wrong thing.  
Again and again, they will call  
me Peter,  
And again and again, they will  
be right.  
So again and again,  
I will pray for a truth that ricochets,  
For ears that will listen,  
And for space to hold truth.  
If people are screaming,  
And to be clear—  
people *are* screaming—  
I do not want to miss it.

*Poem by Rev. Sarah Are*



READ Mark 8:31-9:8

COMMENTARY | Rev. T. Denise Anderson

I'm a Black woman who does antiracism education and advocacy in a very white denomination. I do that work often in the face of fierce opposition from fellow Christians, but it's not hard to understand why. Think of the times we've tried to quiet a friend who was going through a tough time, or averted our eyes away from someone asking for money at a street corner. Approximately 75% of sexual assaults in the U.S. go unreported for a reason. We don't exactly incentivize the telling of hard truths.

Hard truths trouble the waters of our understanding and challenge notions of what is real. For Peter, hearing Jesus foretell his agonizing death and resurrection must have made no sense. Just before this, he had named Jesus "Messiah" (and, according to other gospels, Jesus in turn named him "Peter"). How could the Christ talk like this? Peter wants to quiet Jesus. Jesus would instead quiet him.

At Jesus' transfiguration, a sight that may have been more in line with Peter's Messianic imagination, he wants to build altars to mark the event. But again, Peter is quieted. He is told to listen.

The Lenten journey calls us to examine the things in which our hearts are invested. How important is comfort to us? Would we be willing to listen to hard truths and be changed by them even if it proved to be difficult? Or are we committed to the status quo because, though it may be imperfect, it's at least familiar?

Again and again, we are implored to listen, especially when what we hear is unsettling. Repentance means changing direction. Like a heavenly GPS, Spirit is highlighting a new path. May we tune our sensors heaven-ward, despite the difficulties along the way.



Transfiguration | Lauren Wright Pittman  
*Hand-carved block printed with oil-based ink on paper*



READ Mark 8:31-9:8

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

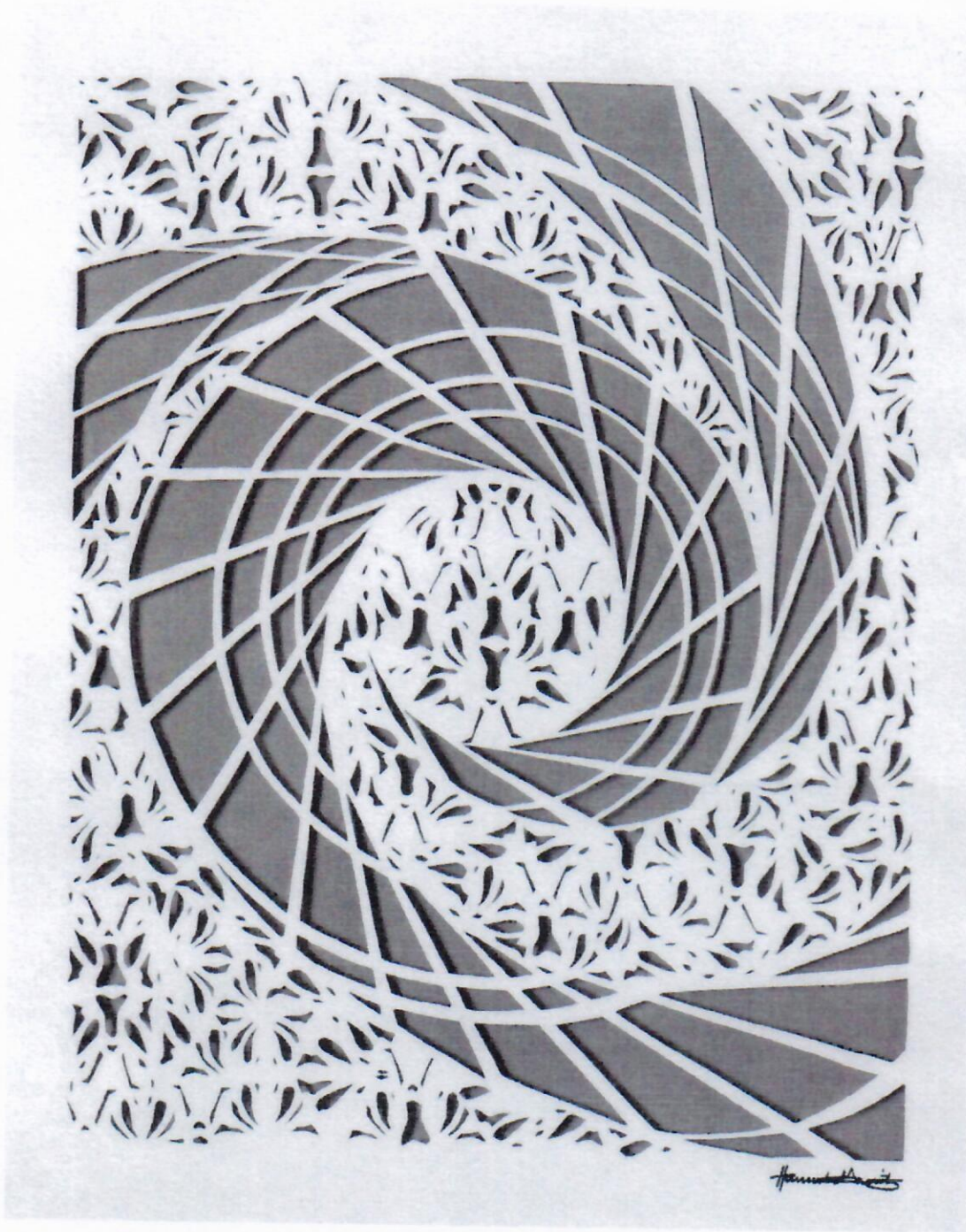
I'm not a good listener. In the midst of our national reckoning around structural racism and white supremacy in the U.S., I've found that I've done a terrible job listening to my Black and Brown siblings. I constantly have to resist the urge to explain myself, to be seen as good and antiracist. I try saying all the right things, I do performative acts of allyship, and quite honestly, I need to be quiet and listen. I need to be ready to accept criticism, and instead of trying to prove anything, I need to gain awareness of my internalized biases and learned racist tendencies and do the difficult work of unlearning them in every moment. "Get behind me, Satan" (Mark 8:33).

Here we find Peter stepping in and saying all the right things, rejecting the notion that Christ must suffer and die; but in the end, he's not listening to Jesus. It seems Peter's rejection of this narrative reflects his fear of the suffering he also might face in following Christ. "Let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34).

Six days later, the disciples are called to listen once again. In this image, I zoomed out to focus on the moment of Transfiguration. Jesus shines like a beacon atop the high mountain while former prophets appear. The disciples are terrified, but also want to live this moment forever, making the glory-filled rock face their home. At once a cloud descends, obscuring things further, and God's voice echoes down, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!" (Mark 9:7). It's almost as though Jesus had exhausted all efforts to get the disciples to listen, and God had to spectacularly reiterate the importance of listening. I think it's important to note that following God's words, all the disciples could see was Jesus.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.



Sleep Unborn | Hannah Garrity  
*Paper lace*



**READ** Psalm 22:23-31

**FROM THE ARTIST** | Hannah Garrity

*"To God, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;  
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him."  
(Psalm 22:29)*

As I contemplate the idea of people beneath the earth and people in the womb, I feel a sense of beautiful protection. In particular, I feel a deep connection to our minuteness in contrast to the greatness of God. Each time I meet this text, I find myself taken by the repetitious time spent in joyous and abundant praise of God. God, we love you. God, we are amazed by you. God, you are everywhere, you are everything. God, we praise you!

In this piece, I depict a sense of covering—covering in the womb, “people yet unborn” (v. 28); covering in the soil, “sleep in the earth” (v. 31). A spiral radiates outward representing praise. The pattern depicts people in various poses of prayer and praise.

As I cut tiny stencils of prayer poses, I abstracted them to depict the shrouded minuteness of our being in God’s presence. As we became a beautiful and intricate pattern of prayer and praise, I began to see other images in the patterns—masks, faces, flowers—as though all states of being are present in that constancy of appreciation for God.

## **PRAY**

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

## FLIPPING TABLES

I woke up and realized I was sitting at a table that oppression built.

The patriarchy made the food.

Cheap labor sewed the table cloth.

The guest list was exclusive.

Fear was the host.

And the people seemed happy,

But the food tasted awful.

Because milk and honey

Are reserved for God's promised day.

So hold onto your silverware,

Because now that I see it,

I can't unsee.

This table is about to be flipped.

*Poem by Rev. Sarah Are*



READ John 2:13-22

COMMENTARY | Rev. T. Denise Anderson

What does it take to believe?

Even as the gospels attempt to tell the same story, each has its own motivations. John's gospel is invested in Jesus' divine authority and kinship with God. The cleansing of the temple is only the second vignette in John's narrative and shows Jesus disruptively asserting authority over temple activities. He upends the business of the sellers and money changers, objecting to these things happening in the temple (or perhaps at all). He's effectively inciting a riot, and the religious leaders demand of him a sign to prove that he has any standing to do this. In John's gospel, Jesus is divine and powerful, but doesn't have to prove anything to anyone, particularly those who insist on being intransigent. He often rebuffs calls for signs and answers, choosing instead to turn the proverbial tables on the inquirer. We'll see this happen again in the coming weeks' readings as we stay in John.

Remember, John identifies Jesus as the Word that has always been and through which all things were made. Since the Word has always been with us, it shouldn't need to prove itself. It should already be familiar to us. We've been taught righteousness for generations. Failure to respond probably won't be corrected by a sign.

The Akan principle of Sankofa<sup>1</sup> holds that it's not wrong to go back to get what you need to move forward. Taking inventory of our life, where have we let other values encroach upon our spiritual identity? What everyday miracles and lessons do we need to revisit before we ask for new ones? Do we welcome the Savior's authority, even if it upends everything around us?

Again and again, we are shown the way. May we fearlessly and with gratitude receive what we've already been given.

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<sup>1</sup> The Sankofa is a symbol, often depicting a mythical bird reaching back to retrieve an egg from its back, used by the Akan people of Ghana. It represents how the Akans seek to carry wisdom gleaned from the past into the future.



Overturn | Lisle Gwynn Garrity  
*Digital painting with collage*



READ John 2:13-22

FROM THE ARTIST | Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

In 1965, my grandfather moved his family of six to Birmingham, AL, to become the new senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church. Situated downtown, First Pres sits only a few blocks away from 16th Street Baptist Church, the site of the 1963 bombing attack by white supremacists who killed four young girls. Earlier that same year, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed eight prominent white clergy in his now famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail." My grandfather's predecessor was one of those clergy. They prompted King's famous letter by requesting he appeal to law and order. In essence they said to him: *"We agree with your movement, but your methods are too harsh. The demonstrations are destructive and causing too much backlash. You're bringing agitators into our city. Wait for a better time and negotiate gently."*

This is the context in which my grandfather began his ministry with First Pres. While he helped the church change their policy to become open to worshipers of all races (a process that undoubtedly required much moral fortitude), I wonder how often he, too, felt the urge of his predecessor and the other white clergy who had written to Dr. King. I wonder how often he preferred for justice to happen slowly, gently, and in an orderly manner. I think often about how that urge lives in me too.

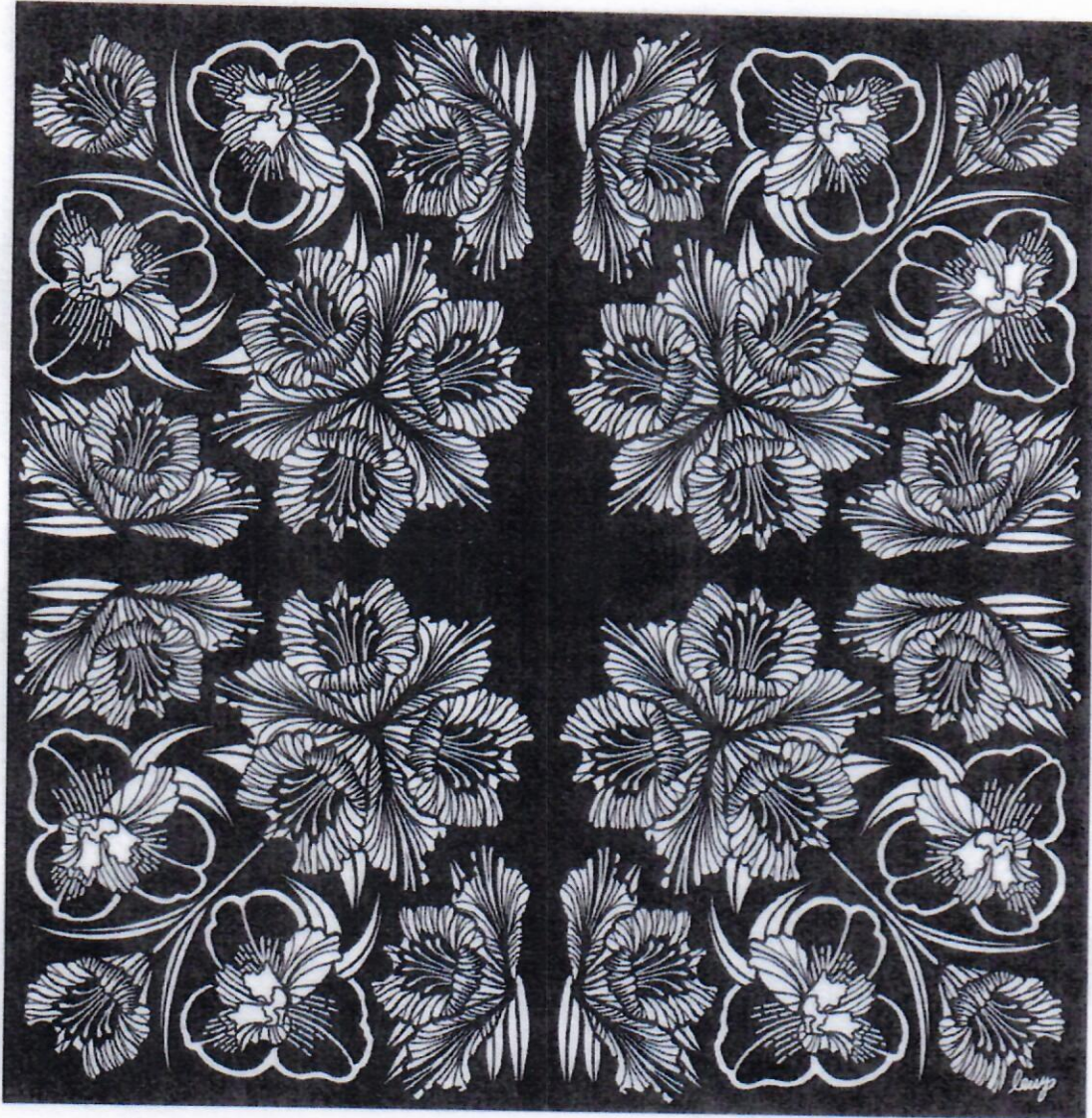
In this image, I wanted to freeze-frame the destruction Jesus ignites, forcing us as viewers to focus on the process of dismantling and destroying an oppressive system. For those who willingly or unwillingly benefit from systems of oppression, it may feel threatening and terrifying to see them all come tumbling down. But for those held within the unrelenting grip of injustice, it must be completely and utterly liberating.

Again and again, Jesus shows us that his movement is about overturning systems of oppression to bring forth God's beloved community on earth. Again and again, liberation movements throughout history pursue this same goal. Will we join Jesus in the overturning, or like the disciples, question his methods?

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.





The Cross Remains | Lauren Wright Pittman  
*Digital drawing*



**READ** 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

**FROM THE ARTIST** | Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman

Confession: I have a problem with the image of the cross. Early Christians expressed their identity subversively with a fish or an anchor, but once Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the cross emerged as the predominant Christian symbol. My struggle with the cross is connected to my rejection of state-sanctioned violence. It is after all an empirical torture device. In my desire to reject the empire's visual identification of the movement of Jesus, a symbol that has also been co-opted for questionable purposes in American culture, I have denied the cross as a marker of my identity with Christ.

As I have spent more time in reflection, however, I think this rejection could be an indication of my privilege. It is convenient for me to identify with more comfortable, rosy images of Christianity while turning away from the anguish Christ suffered at the hands of earthly power. It's easier for me to protest the cross than it is to try and more fully understand the ugliness of the oppression he endured. For those who know injustice intimately, the cross can be an image of profound identification with Jesus, the one who endured unspeakable agony and rose again.

On the wall next to my front door hangs a resurrection cross created by a Mexican artisan. I love it so much because you almost can't see the cross for the flowers. It serves as a reminder to me that death does not have the final word. I drew this image as I attempted to obscure the cross with blooming irises, a flower that represents wisdom and strength. Ultimately, in the negative space, the cross remains.

## PRAY

In quiet contemplation, color in the page on the left, reflecting on how the imagery illuminates what you find in the scripture and artist's statement. Conclude with a silent or spoken prayer to God.



THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT  
AGAIN & AGAIN, GOD LOVES FIRST

**HOLD**

If you hold a newborn in your arms,  
All at once you will understand  
The crook of your elbow  
And the cup of your palm  
As never before—  
Ordinary curves of the body  
Transformed into a resting space.  
You were designed for love.

And if you're lucky enough  
To hold a newborn in your arms,  
And that newborn curls  
Its tiny fingers around yours,  
Making your hands look  
Like the hands of a giant—  
Then time might stand still,  
And those around you might point and say,  
“Look! That little one is holding you back.”

And in that moment,  
If you pay attention,  
You will catch a glimpse  
Of the circle that love was meant to be.  
God is love,  
Our resting place.  
With small hands,  
We hold back.

*Poem by Rev. Sarah Are*

READ John 3:14-21

COMMENTARY | Rev. T. Denise Anderson

John 3:16 is arguably the most recognizable verse in the New Testament. It's a full and true statement by itself. But, like all verses in Scripture, we miss so much without the context around it.

The passage is part of Jesus' discourse with Nicodemus, a religious leader who visits him at night for a conversation. Jesus speaks of being born from above, but Nicodemus is confused. Jesus breaks it down this way: I know what I'm talking about because I came from heaven, and I came so that the world might be saved from condemnation, though there are many who prefer to remain hidden because "their deeds were evil."

John's gospel doesn't intimate this, but it's speculated that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night to keep this conversation a secret. Jesus wasn't exactly popular among Nicodemus' set because he challenged them. If this is true, I wonder if Nicodemus saw himself in Jesus' comment about those who love to remain hidden (Note: While light [*phos*] and pigment [*chroma*] are different, I choose not to use "darkness" here because there's an historical practice of distorting scripture's light/dark dichotomy to reinforce colorism and anti-Blackness around the world).

What about us? Do we identify with those who avoid being exposed? Systemically, we remain invested in collective narratives that valorize our past and gloss over (or completely ignore) our ugliness. But I also don't like this kind of scrutiny for myself. There is vulnerability in being fully seen. We risk being defined by our blemishes. I trust few people with that picture, and only because I know they love me.

And there it is: love.

Again and again, God's love calls us into its redeeming *phos*.  
Can we trust this love enough to draw the drapes of our souls?