

# Lent in Plain Sight

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## SERMON SERIES GUIDE

The simplicity of Jill Duffield's *Lent in Plain Sight* makes it a very relatable foundation for your congregation's Lenten series. Using each of the objects described in your altar décor, bulletin/screen imagery, and sermon illustrations encourage congregants to carry the symbolism of these ordinary items into their daily lives.

While each devotion highlights a particular aspect of the week's focus object, key themes arise that can provide an excellent basis for preaching on *Lent in Plain Sight* at your church this season. Sermon Starters for the ten worshiping occasions of Lent explore these themes, drawing from the gospels, other Scriptures, and concepts explored in Duffield's devotions.

Make use of the weekly object and focus Scriptures slides as well as blank slides for songs and other media to enhance your worship experience.



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# ASH WEDNESDAY: DUST

**Focus Scriptures: Genesis 2:4b-7 and Luke 9:1-6**



The refrain of this holy day, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return,” makes a clear allusion to the creation story of Genesis 2. In contrast with the cosmic, disembodied voice of God in Genesis 1, the next chapter depicts a literal down-to-earth God, molding a human out of the dust of the ground. Science complements this image, affirming that humans are made of the same core elements as all life on earth, our planet itself, and the stars of our galaxy—and like everything else in the universe, we are impermanent. The elements that form our body will one day return to the earth.

This imagery can make us feel very small and insignificant. Indeed, Scripture depicts people at their lowest as reduced to dust and ashes (Job 30:19). But Scripture also shows how God makes us more than the sum of our most dusty, elemental parts. “He raises up the poor from the dust,” says Hannah in her song of praise (1 Sam. 2:8). When sending out his disciples, Jesus tells them to “shake the dust off [their] feet” where they are not welcome. We are made of dust, and yet empowered by our Creator to rise above the ash heap, capable of doing great things. It is in this tension that we live and seek to serve.



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# FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT: BREAD

**Focus Scriptures: Exodus 16:4-12 and Matthew 6:7-15**



Both of today's Scriptures emphasize God's provision in the form of just enough bread for the day. Just as the wandering Hebrews received manna each morning, which would rot if stored up for the next day, Jesus tells his followers to pray each day for that day's bread.

The concept of God's provision can be a minefield, abused in the name of prosperity gospels and shaming people for "lack of faith," but we do see in Scripture that provision comes in many forms. Like those gathered on the mountainside where a little boy shared his five loaves (John 6:1-13), sometimes provision comes through the generosity of others. Sometimes it comes from one's own advance planning (Eccl. 11:1-2), or by pleading for justice (Mark 7:24-30).

The lesson is not that all our needs will be magically met and we will never want for anything (poverty worldwide and in our own backyards disproves that belief), but that there is goodness in the world and enough to go around if we make it so. Jesus, the "Bread of Life" (John 6:35), nourishes our souls as we learn what "enough" is for us and work to help everyone have what they need.



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# SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT: CROSS

Focus Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 and Mark 8:31-38



Do you ever stop to think how bizarre it is that the symbol of our faith is an instrument of execution? Can you imagine a religion directing its praise toward a guillotine or an electric chair? By venerating the cross, we celebrate the inverting of all worldly forms of power. Money, success, dominance, and political clout are proven worthless by Christ's humble assent to execution and ultimate victory over death. This is why Paul says the message of the cross is "foolishness" to those who don't understand. It does seem foolish, in the eyes of our society and even by many in the church, to choose the way of humility and compassion over the way of power and wealth. But this is the way of Jesus.

So when Jesus tells those who want to be his followers to "take up their cross," we are willingly taking a path others will call foolish. This path might mean taking up the burdens of others, suffering with them and making sacrifices for others' benefit. Taking up the cross might also mean laying down a lot of the things we were taught to pursue—even when laying those things down seems foolish.



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# THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT: COINS

Focus Scriptures: Luke 21:1-4 and John 2:13-22



Today's texts both take place in the temple, and both involve coins, but beyond that they seem quite different. In our text from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is watching people depositing their financial offerings into the treasury. He directs his listeners' attention to a poor widow, donating two small coins, and declares that while wealthy people have also given money (a good and important thing), the widow's gift is even more worthy of celebration. We picture Jesus smiling at this generous woman and embracing the teachable moment.

Our John text, on the other hand, has Jesus flipping tables and dumping out containers of coins that the corrupt moneychangers had been extorting from the people who had come to make sacrifices. We picture Jesus enraged, chastising the greedy and upending their commerce.

While there is a lesson here that money can be used for good or ill—given sacrificially for the glory of God or dishonestly gained through dubious business practices—these two stories may actually be sending the same cautionary message. Jesus' condemnation of the moneychangers is much more overt, but we can also sense a subtle condemnation of the religious system that would take from this poor widow "all she had to live on."



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# FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT: SHOES

**Focus Scriptures: Exodus 3:1-6 and Mark 6:6b-13**



“Remove your sandals,” God said to Moses. “Wear your sandals,” Jesus told his disciples. These divine instructions might feel familiar to parents of small children, who always seem to have strong feelings about their shoes, refusing to take them off before tracking mud inside or climbing on furniture, and then refusing to put them on when it’s time to leave the house!

The circumstances of wearing and not wearing shoes in today’s Scriptures illustrate an important duality. Like Ecclesiastes reminding us that there is a time to plant and a time to reap, a time to mourn and a time to dance (Eccl. 3:1-8), these texts from Exodus and Mark demonstrate that there is a time to stop and a time to go. God tells Moses to take off his sandals before the burning bush, to feel the earth beneath his feet and be grounded in that holy moment. By contrast, shoes are just about the only thing Jesus wants his disciples to have for their journey. No money, no bag, no extra clothes—just sandals and a staff. He wants them to move, to walk unencumbered as they proclaim the good news. This Lent, is God calling you to stop and listen, or to get moving and step out in faith?



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# FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT: OIL

Focus Scriptures: Psalm 23 and Matthew 26:6-13



The story of a woman anointing Jesus with oil from an alabaster jar appears in all three synoptic gospels (see Mark 14 and Luke 7). In Luke, she is described as a sinner and anoints his feet instead of his head, but no matter the details, this story offers an image of extravagant love for Jesus. The oil is expensive, and could have been used sparingly, but this woman pours it all out on Jesus' head. Imagine the mess and the overpowering scent!

This woman took the gesture of anointing an honored guest, coronated royal, sick person, or dead body to the extreme. We must surely agree that Jesus is worthy of such treatment. But we also take note, in Psalm 23, that God also considers us worthy. Though we may be walking “through the darkest valley,” we can trust that God wants good things for us and will offer us comfort: a peaceful place to rest, a clear path, a seat of honor—and, yes, a generous anointing for our head. We do not worship the worthy Christ as wretched peons, but as beloved children of the Most High God.



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# PALM SUNDAY: COATS

Focus Scriptures: Genesis 37:1-11 and Luke 19:29-40



We often tell the story of Joseph and his coat “of many colors” (more accurately, “with sleeves”) as a happy one—a father’s gift to his beloved son. But that gift symbolized a lot of dysfunction in that family dynamic. Dad showing blatant favoritism, then Joseph flaunting the gift (and his self-aggrandizing dreams) in front of his already-resentful brothers who then sold him into slavery and put blood on the fancy coat in order to cover up their misdeeds.

Contrast that with the crowd that gathered to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem. Their coats were probably not extravagant ones with great sentimental value, but they were perhaps the only heavy garment they owned—and yet they threw them to the ground to be trampled by a donkey, so focused were they on honoring this unlikely king. Were there any in the crowd who held back, hesitant to give the coat off their back, afraid of looking foolish or possibly losing their garment?

As we move into Holy Week, we see many opportunities to choose between glorifying ourselves and humbling ourselves. We know which Jesus will choose—washing the feet of his disciples, serving bread to his betrayer, declining to defend himself, and accepting a humiliating death. Which will we choose?



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# MAUNDY THURSDAY: TOWELS

Focus Scripture: John 13:1-15



The story of Jesus’ final night packs many significant moments and messages into what must have been just a few hours. We see our ritual of Holy Communion inaugurated in Jesus’ blessing of the bread and wine, we see Jesus foretelling his betrayal, praying in a garden, getting arrested, and—according to the Gospel of John—delivering a sermon that is way too long for dinner table conversation. But as we near the end of this Lenten series “in ten objects,” note that tonight’s object is not a loaf or cup, not a bag of coins, not a drop of sweat or blood, and not a sword. Rather, it is a towel.

The act of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet—even those of Judas, who would betray him, and Peter, who still doesn’t “get it”—is the central takeaway for us. Frankly, it’s the lesson we most need. To be a servant of others, no matter how much status or privilege we actually possess, is the most Christlike thing we can do. When we accept Jesus’ inversion of our earthly system, we willingly participate in the first becoming last and last becoming first, and help it be so.



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# GOOD FRIDAY: THORNS

Focus Scripture: John 19:1-11



The crown of thorns is a symbol of mockery. Those soldiers guarding Jesus had very little power of their own; they were servants of the state, “just following orders,” totally expendable in the eyes of the empire. They didn’t even have the authority to kill Jesus themselves, if they’d cared to do so. But what power they had, they used to demean and harass the person in their custody. “King of the Jews, eh?” They found a purple robe to put around him and fashioned a crown out of thorns to simultaneously mock him and cause additional pain.

We often think of Jesus dying “for our sins” in a very theoretical way, a metaphysical transaction. But we have evidence all around us of the ways we participate in the evil systems that killed Jesus. We are complicit in the mockery and exclusion of people unlike us. We are complicit in unjust economies that enrich a few while leaving many in poverty. Good Friday is a good day to reflect on these things, sit with that discomfort, wait, and watch for the sign that there is another way.



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# EASTER SUNDAY: STONES

**Focus Scripture: Luke 24:1-12**



What is the heaviest thing you have ever tried to lift? We picture the stone that sealed Jesus' tomb as larger than a person, immovable if not for those angels that appeared in the garden that Easter morning. That seems unlikely, since Jesus' friends who went to the tomb that morning were prepared to open it up again and anoint the body, which they hadn't had time to do before the Sabbath. Their sorrow was the real immovable stone. What could lift the weight of such grief and loss?

How much lighter their hearts must have felt, learning that Jesus was alive again? The miracle of Easter is more than a rock moved or even a body reanimated. Resurrection means there are no more immovable stones. The seemingly endless pain of a loved one's death, a fatal diagnosis, deepest depression, or a lifetime of abuse will not be forever. While death appears to have won the day, life will always have the last word.



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