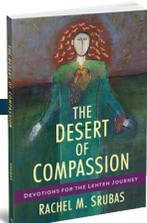


The Desert of Compassion

SERMON SERIES

This guide suggests focus Scriptures and sermon prompts for the nine worshiping occasions of Lent: Ash Wednesday, the six Sundays of Lent, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday. These sermon prompts draw from texts and themes found across the corresponding devotions in the book, and are intended to spark your thinking and provide a basic direction as you prepare the week's message.

Digital resources to accompany this series include: **title slides** featuring each week's theme, which can be used during worship or to announce the coming Sunday's theme, and **quotation images** featuring thought-provoking excerpts from *The Desert of Compassion* that can be used on-screen during worship or as part of virtual worship services. **Blank slides** are also included for you to customize with Scriptures in your preferred translation, song lyrics, and other projections for your worship gatherings.



A Lenten Sermon Series Based on *The Desert of Compassion: Devotions for the Lenten Journey*, by Rachel M. Srubas

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

ASH WEDNESDAY

Go to the Land that I Will Show You

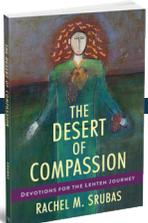
Focus Text

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”

—Genesis 12:1–2

Author Rachel Srubas begins *The Desert of Compassion* with Trappist monk Thomas Merton’s use of the desert metaphor to describe a challenging assignment he’d been given to set aside his desire for devotional solitude and devote himself instead to the compassionate care of monks-in-training. “There is no wilderness so terrible, so beautiful, so arid, and so fruitful as the wilderness of compassion,” Merton wrote. While the desert we typically associate with Lent is the one to which Jesus is driven just after his baptism, in order to be tempted, we look also to ancestor Abraham’s call to migrate to an unfamiliar land, where his struggles would be transformed into blessing.

This is our challenge for Lent: to let the deserts of hardship, pain, and struggle that we endure form in us a greater compassion for others and ourselves, with which we can be a blessing to the world. If we experience temptation in this desert, it is the temptation to turn inward and let hardship make us hard. Rather, let us embrace this calling to face the hard things of life, not knowing where they might lead, but walking in the hope that the rocky path will lead us closer to God and one another.



A Lenten Sermon Series Based on *The Desert of Compassion: Devotions for the Lenten Journey*, by Rachel M. Srubas

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Remove the Heart of Stone

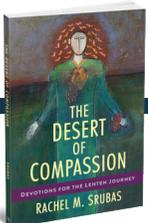
Focus Text

I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

—Ezekiel 11:19–20

The first step on our journey, and the key to resisting that temptation toward isolation and self-pity, is to embrace God's promise spoken through the prophet Ezekiel—to soften our hardened hearts so we may live with open hearts ready to embrace those in need. This is certainly easier said than done, especially when one is slogging through one's own depression, grief, or feelings of hurt and shame. Compassion means feeling another's pain as if it were your own, but sometimes this starts with feeling one's own pain—paying attention to one's emotions and how they manifest in the body, and honestly admitting to difficult emotions like anger, resentment, fear, and shame. Make congregants aware of mental health ministries in or near the church and try to reduce the stigma of seeking help.

Hardening our hearts is a common coping mechanism to (try to) spare ourselves pain, but in so doing, we miss the very connections that can heal us—the tenderness to care for another even when we ourselves are hurting, and the vulnerability to let ourselves be tended to as well. Making those interpersonal connections is the focus of next week's study and sermon.



A Lenten Sermon Series Based on *The Desert of Compassion: Devotions for the Lenten Journey*, by Rachel M. Srubas

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Reach Out Your Hand

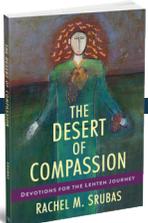
Focus Text

As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him. There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!” The crowd sternly ordered them to be quiet; but they shouted even more loudly, “Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!” Jesus stood still and called them, saying, “What do you want me to do for you?” They said to him, “Lord, let our eyes be opened.” Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.

—Matthew 20:29–34

Human connection is where lofty virtues and values get put into practice. We’ve all been guilty of moving past stories of people in pain, offering only “thoughts and prayers,” like the man in James 2:16 who tells a hungry person “Go in peace and keep warm and well fed!” When two blind men called out to Jesus, Jesus could have responded with a verbal blessing, but his compassion led him to touch them, giving them not only the gift of restored sight but the gift of connection—of knowing they were not so broken and unclean that one so holy couldn’t touch them.

The power of touch can go in both directions. Jesus told Thomas to stick his hands not only in the nail holes in his crucified hands but in the gaping wound of his side, and Jesus praised the faith of the hemorrhaging woman who boldly reached out to touch his cloak in search of healing. Psalm 74 desperately asks God, “Why do you hold back your hand?” Like many questions we ask God, God may be asking us the same question. “Why do *you* hold back your hand?” We are God’s hands and feet on earth, being Jesus to one another and serving Jesus *in* one another.



A Lenten Sermon Series Based on *The Desert of Compassion: Devotions for the Lenten Journey*, by Rachel M. Srubas

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Stay Awake with Me

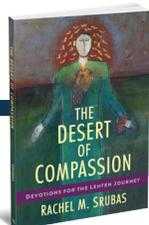
Focus Text

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” . . . Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping.

—Matthew 26:36–38, 40a

If you’ve ever held vigil at the bedside of a sick loved one, or waited up for a teenager out past their curfew, you know that even great love can’t always keep sleepy eyes open. In our quest to deepen our practice of compassion, we may find it is not just physical tiredness that threatens our commitment, but emotional exhaustion. Burnout is common among those in helping professions, and anyone moved deeply by the suffering of others may suffer from “compassion fatigue.” The antidote to such fatigue is what the author of *The Desert of Compassion* calls “distress tolerance,” defined as the “ability in tough times to draw deeply on stores of inner strength and coping capacities.”

Some of our distress tolerance is learned from those who raised us, but we can also cultivate it within ourselves, learning to remain calm and practice radical acceptance, to not be overwhelmed or panicked in the face of suffering. In the call to compassion, Jesus asks us to “stay awake,” not just to keep watch at night, but to sustain our capacity for care over the long haul.



A Lenten Sermon Series Based on *The Desert of Compassion: Devotions for the Lenten Journey*, by Rachel M. Srubas

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Your Whole Mind

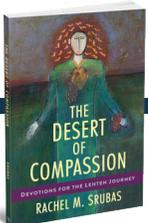
Focus Text

But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

—Matthew 16:23

Focusing on compassion for our whole Lenten desert experience may feel too touchy-feely for some in the congregation. We’ve discussed how to soften our hearts, reaching out and making tangible connections with others, and how to regulate our emotions to build distress tolerance and avoid compassion fatigue. But all this emphasis on heart and hands—loving God (and neighbor) with all our heart and soul and strength—does not mean that the mind has no place in cultivating compassion.

Studying Scripture and the lives of saints who have come before us, growing in wisdom to practice discernment, and practicing mindfulness to channel our emotions well all play a role in our journey through the desert of compassion. Like the apostle Peter, always speaking and acting before thinking, many of us are quick to follow our hearts in ways that may not be beneficial in the long term. But “setting our minds on divine things” can help us avoid some of the stumbling blocks to living a life of compassion. Recent findings in neuroscience emphasize the brain’s neuroplasticity—the ability to form new pathways and shape the way we think. This information should inspire us to set our minds on patience, acceptance, and loving-kindness, prayerfully asking God to use our minds to guide our lives.



A Lenten Sermon Series Based on *The Desert of Compassion: Devotions for the Lenten Journey*, by Rachel M. Srubas

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Do Not Condemn

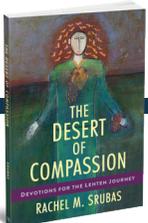
Focus Text

“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

—Luke 6:36–38

As we grow closer to Holy Week, reflecting on the events of Jesus’ crucifixion, talk of salvation and damnation may overtake reflection on Jesus’ teachings themselves. Let us remember that when Jesus faced condemnation, he met his accusers with mercy, offering them what they did not or could not offer him. Jesus’ instruction to be merciful (translated “compassionate” in some other versions of Scripture) is followed with admonitions reflecting a “what goes around comes around” philosophy. We might think of this as a version of the Golden Rule, not judging or condemning others because we would not want to be judged or condemned ourselves, but we have also learned that blessings and curses are, in fact, passed on from person to person. As the saying goes, *hurt people hurt people*.

Holy disrupter that he was, Jesus taught his followers to renounce condemning others, even though they lived—as he did—in a culture of condemnation. Common thieves could be publicly crucified for their crimes, to say nothing of Jesus himself, an innocent scapegoat whose only offense was to shine a clear, compassionate light on the condemnatory norms of an off-kilter world. Today, it seems just as common that we condemn ourselves, through shame and pressure and the belief that we will never measure up. Wherever the cycle begins, let it end with us, breaking the cycle of condemnation that leaves the whole world starved for compassion.



A Lenten Sermon Series Based on *The Desert of Compassion: Devotions for the Lenten Journey*, by Rachel M. Srubas

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

PALM/PASSION SUNDAY

Do This and You Will Live

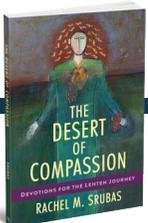
Focus Text

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”
—Luke 10:36-37

It may feel funny to focus on the Good Samaritan parable (Luke 10:25-37) on Palm/Passion Sunday, but in light of our journey with *The Desert of Compassion*, it symbolizes a culmination of the growth and preparation we’ve done throughout Lent, a simple and final call to act.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” the man asked Jesus. In response to such a question, we may be tempted to name certain beliefs one must hold about Jesus’ death and resurrection. But Jesus makes clear that the litmus test, the ultimate call of Christ, is to act with compassion toward any neighbor in need (and the parable, of course, clarifies that “neighbor” includes even strangers and enemies). When Jesus tells the man to do as the Samaritan did, regardless of ethnic differences and even his own personal safety, Jesus’ point cannot be missed: Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now with anyone in need of compassion, and you will walk eternally with God, even now.

When you act to alleviate a neighbor’s suffering without presuming to prejudge their worthiness of care, you do your part to realize God’s beloved community. It’s a wide, welcoming circle of mercy, embodied not in some faraway eternity but right where you are with whoever shows up. Compassion blurs the borderlines between earth and heaven, self and neighbor, giver and receiver, holiness and humanity. Salvation is at hand.



A Lenten Sermon Series Based on *The Desert of Compassion: Devotions for the Lenten Journey*, by Rachel M. Srubas

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

MAUNDY THURSDAY

Whose Feet Will You Wash?

Focus Text

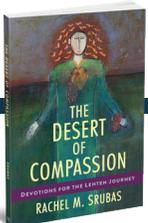
Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.”

—Luke 7:44

Unlike some of his Christian contemporaries who lived in intentional solitude, fourth-century theologian Basil of Caesarea was drawn to community life. He questioned the hermits’ calling: “Whose feet will you wash, whom will you look after, how can you be last of all, if you live by yourself?” His words should not be taken as a criticism of single people in the present day. Basil was responding to a social and religious phenomenon of his time and place, in which many Christians believed the best way to follow Jesus was to emulate for their entire lives his forty days of desert solitude.

Basil was a servant-leader for whom human compassion signified God’s activity on earth. During the dry, freezing Cappadocian winter of 368 CE, Basil created a community meal center and established a house of healing that became the first hospital. His faith was embodied in service to others, in the model of Jesus, who got up in the middle of his last supper with his disciples to wash their feet, then taught them to do the same for each other (John 13:13–17, 31b-35). Whether or not you participate in a liturgical footwashing ritual today, Basil’s “Whose feet will you wash?” is a question of compassion that warrants reflection and an embodied response.

Compassion is not only a tenderhearted feeling. It’s more, even, than an ethical choice. Compassion is a way of life.



A Lenten Sermon Series Based on *The Desert of Compassion: Devotions for the Lenten Journey*, by Rachel M. Srubas

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS

GOOD FRIDAY

Beautiful Death

Focus Text

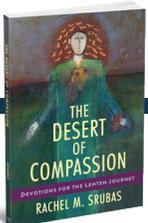
“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

—John 12:23b–24

The ironic name “Good Friday” is not a matter of putting a happy spin on a grisly, unjust tragedy. Good Friday, and all Christian life, is about embracing paradox. Jesus’ teachings and his death reveal sacred contradictions. When you and I embrace Jesus’ essential paradox—that to lose is to gain and to die is to live—we come to God, who gathers up the broken pieces of the world and makes them more complete and beautiful than they were before they broke.

As Jesus told his disciples days before his death, “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). Pay attention to that pivotal *unless* and understand: without the fatal fall, no glorious resurrected life can be lived. From this divine paradox, it follows that there can be no compassion without passion, no responsive loving kindness unless there first comes suffering.

Such is the logic and the lure of the desert. Jesus’ wilderness experience of human fragility, devilish delusion, and divine fidelity prepared him, when the time came, to emerge from the desert and share God’s compassion with the world’s deserted people. So it can be for us when we emerge having passed through the desert of compassion.



A Lenten Sermon Series Based on *The Desert of Compassion: Devotions for the Lenten Journey*, by Rachel M. Srubas

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS