

St Thomas Methodist Church, Exeter

The **Methodist** Church 

LENT and EASTER 2026

Let go, and be open

LENT 1 – Sunday 22 February

Let go of idols, make room for God

Bible readings

Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7

Adam and Eve are tempted to grasp autonomy by eating forbidden fruit, leading to shame and separation from God.

Matthew 4:1–11

Jesus resists three temptations in the wilderness, choosing trust in God over power, spectacle and self-reliance.

Background notes

Lent begins with a confrontation between loyalty and illusion. In both Genesis and Matthew, we see the human temptation to replace God with something lesser – something that promises control, comfort or power, but ultimately cannot sustain us. These are idols: not just statues or false gods, but anything we elevate above God in our hearts, our choices, or our trust.

In Genesis 3, the serpent tempts the humans with the promise of being 'like God'. The fruit becomes an idol: a

symbol of autonomy, knowledge and control. But the result is shame and separation. The humans grasp at divinity and lose intimacy with God.

In Matthew 4, Jesus is also tempted: to turn stones into bread, to test God's protection, to seize worldly power. Each temptation is an invitation to idolatry: to trust something other than God for identity, security or success. But Jesus resists.

In their commentary on Matthew, WD Davies and Dale Allison note that the gospel writer's account is shaped by reflection on Deuteronomy. He quotes from Deuteronomy 6–8, the same passages that reflect on Israel's own wilderness testing. Jesus, like Israel, passes through water (baptism) and enters the wilderness. His 40 days echo Israel's 40 years. He is hungry, tested and tempted but unlike Israel, he does not turn to idols. He clings to God.¹

Henri Nouwen writes that the core temptation is always this: to treat God as less than God: to replace God with relevance, spectacle or power. Lent invites us to name these idols – the things we rely on instead of God – and to let them go.²

1 WD Davies and Dale C Allison, *Matthew* (Bloomsbury, London, 2004), p. 50.

2 Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus* (Darton, Longmann & Todd, London, 1989).

Questions to consider

1. What are some 'idols' – visible or hidden – that we are tempted to trust more than God? (Examples might be success, control, approval, comfort, etc.)
2. How do the temptations Jesus faced mirror the pressures we experience in our own lives?

3. What helps you stay grounded in God's truth when you feel tested or tempted?

The good news to get across

God alone is enough. We are often tempted to place our trust in things that promise security, success or control – but they cannot sustain us. Jesus shows us a different way: to let go of false promises and embrace the living God who is faithful, present and trustworthy. In the wilderness, in our weakness, God is enough.

Prayer of blessing

May the God who is enough, draw your soul away from false promises and into truth. May you walk lightly this Lenten season, trusting the one who sustains you. Amen.

LENT 2 – Sunday 1 March

Let go of the form, embrace the spirit

Bible readings

Genesis 12:1–4a

God calls Abram to leave his homeland and trust in a promise, beginning a journey of faith without a clear destination.

John 3:1–17

Jesus tells Nicodemus that spiritual rebirth comes through the Spirit, not through human effort or religious status.

Background notes

This week's readings invite us into a journey of trust and transformation, that moves us beyond the safety of structure and into the mystery of the Spirit.

In Genesis 12, God calls Abram to leave everything familiar: his land, his family, his identity. There's no roadmap, no detailed plan – just a promise and a command: “Go”. And Abram goes. Bill T Arnold notes the stark simplicity of “So Abram went” (12:4), a radical act of obedience that contrasts sharply with the way Adam and Eve talk and rationalise what's happened to them. Abram's response is stripped of hesitation, revealing a faith that trusts God's Spirit over continuity.³

In John 3, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. Night can be a symbol of fear, secrecy and perhaps spiritual searching. Nicodemus is a man of 'form': a Pharisee, a teacher, someone steeped in religious structure. But Jesus speaks of the Spirit – of a power that transcends biology, of wind that blows where it will. Theologian David Ford describes this moment as an opening into mystery: a God who is free, who overflows our categories, who cannot be harnessed or predicted. The Spirit, like the wind, is unseen yet effective: it moves us in new directions, springing endless surprises.⁴

Author Rob Bell explores this tension between form and spirits in *Everything Is Spiritual*. He writes that forms – rituals, words and structures – are essential, but they are not the goal. They are the scaffolding, not the substance. He compares it to learning to ride a bike. At first, you rely on instructions – ‘keep pedalling, steer...’ – but eventually, something shifts. “Those

words have become flesh.” The form becomes embodied. The spirit animates the structure.⁵

This week invites us to loosen our grip on what is fixed and familiar, and to trust the unpredictable movement of the Spirit. Whether we are stepping into new territory like Abram, or wrestling with questions like Nicodemus, we are called to open ourselves to transformation that doesn't follow a formula. The Spirit may surprise us in unexpected places: in conversation, in silence, in change. Lent is a time to notice those moments, and to respond – not with fear, but with faith that God is present and active, even when the path ahead is unclear.

3 Bill T Arnold, *Genesis* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009), p. 130–131.

4 David Ford, *The Gospel of John* (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 2021), p. 88–89.

5 Rob Bell, *Everything is Spiritual* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2020).

Questions to consider

1. Where in your faith life do you feel stuck in form – engaging with the Church's rituals, words and structures, without sensing the Spirit?
2. What does it mean to 'trust the wind of the Spirit' – to be open to movement, mystery and surprise?
3. How might Abram's simple obedience – “so Abram went” – inspire us to respond to God's call, even when the destination is unclear?

The good news to get across

God's Spirit is not confined by structure. God moves freely, surprises us, and invites us into a living, breathing relationship.

Prayer of blessing

*May the Spirit who moves like the wind stir your soul today.
May you be open to mystery, surprise and the gentle breath of
God. Amen.*

LENT 3 – Sunday 8 March

Let go of scarcity, embrace abundance

Bible readings

Exodus 17:1–7

God provides water from a rock for the thirsty Israelites, revealing divine presence and provision in the wilderness.

John 4:5–42

Jesus offers ‘living water’ to a Samaritan woman, transforming her identity and empowering her as a witness to God’s presence.

Background notes

This week’s readings invite us to move from a mindset of scarcity – where resources are limited, survival is uncertain and hope is fragile – into a deeper trust in God’s abundant provision of grace.

In the introduction to his study guide *Gospel of John*, David Ford writes:

“[God] is full of grace and truth, and from his abundance, we have all received grace. His purpose is to offer us life, and John’s Gospel aims to draw readers into this boundless, everlasting love. The love between Jesus and his Father, the very love that brought the universe into

*existence. I believe the purpose of John's Gospel is to draw readers into that superabundant love of God, which is new and everlasting life."*⁶

A scarcity mindset is rooted in fear that there isn't enough: not enough time, money, energy, influence or love. It leads to competition, hoarding, anxiety and a reluctance to take risks. In contrast, an abundance mindset is grounded in trust: trust in God's provision, generosity and the overflowing grace that characterises the kingdom of God.

For disciples of Jesus, shifting from scarcity to abundance is not just a psychological adjustment; it's a theological and spiritual transformation. When churches or individuals operate from a scarcity mindset, they become inward-looking, risk-averse and protective. This stifles creativity, mission and growth. An abundance mindset, on the other hand, empowers disciples to step out in faith, share resources and embrace bold visions for justice, hospitality and transformation.

In Exodus 17, the Israelites are in the wilderness, thirsty and afraid. Their cries are not just for water, but for reassurance: "Is the Lord among us or not?" The wilderness is a place of chaos and disorder, where lifelessness seems to dominate. Yet God responds with creative generosity. Water flows from the rock; not just to quench thirst, but to reveal God's presence and power. As Terence Fretheim explains in his book *Exodus*, this is more than survival; it is an act of re-creation, a glimpse of God's original intention for life even in the harshest places. The wilderness may be dry, but it is not without potential. God's Spirit activates what is hidden, bringing life where none seemed possible.⁷

In John 4, Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well. She comes for water, but Jesus offers ‘living water’ – a source that will never run dry. The contrast is striking: the well is a place of repetitive effort and is governed by traditions; the living water is internal, overflowing and free. She no longer needs to return to the same place, bound by shame or history. Worship, too, is reimagined: it’s no longer tied to a mountain or temple, but opened to the Spirit and truth.

The Samaritan woman’s transformation is radical. She leaves behind her water jar – a symbol of scarcity – and becomes a messenger of abundance.⁸ Like the disciples who left their fishing nets, she steps into a new identity, overflowing with purpose and joy. Her story reminds us that abundance is not about having more. It’s about being filled with the life of God and sharing it freely.

6 David Ford, *Gospel of John: A four-week study guide for you and your church* (LWPT, London, 2024).

7 Terence E Fretheim, *Exodus* (Westminster John Knox, Louisville, KY, 1991), p. 188–191.

8 Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1966), p. 173.

Questions to consider

1. Where in your life do you feel stuck in a mindset of scarcity – emotionally, spiritually or practically?
2. How does Jesus’ offer of ‘living water’ challenge the idea that we must work hard to earn God’s presence or grace?
3. How might you, like the woman at the well, leave behind something that once defined you and step into a new identity rooted in abundance?

The good news to get across

God's grace is abundant and overflowing. We are not defined by what we lack, but by the generous love of God that meets us where we are and fills us with life.

Prayer of blessing

May the God of overflowing grace fill your soul today. May you drink deeply from the well of life and share its joy with others. Amen.

LENT 4 – Sunday 15 March

Let go of appearances, embrace what's inside

Bible readings

1 Samuel 16:1–13

God chooses David, Jesse's youngest son, to be king.

John 9:1–41

Jesus heals a man born blind, challenging assumptions about sin and blame.

Background notes

This week's lectionary readings invite us to reflect on how we perceive others, and how easily we can misjudge what God is doing based on outward appearances. The mindset shift at the heart of these texts is simple but profound: we need to move from judging people by appearances to recognising dignity.

In John 9, the disciples begin with a question that reflects a common assumption: "Who sinned, this man or his parents?"

The man's blindness is seen as a sign of moral failure. Meanwhile, the Pharisees appear to be righteous. But Jesus disrupts this framework. He sees the man not as a sinner to be blamed, but as someone through whom God's works will be revealed. As the story unfolds, the man grows in spiritual awareness and courage, while the Pharisees resist the truth. The one who was dismissed becomes a witness to grace; the ones who were revered are revealed to be spiritually closed.

In 1 Samuel 16, Samuel is sent to anoint a new king. He is drawn to Eliab, who looks the part: tall, strong, kingly. But God intervenes: "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature... for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." (v. 7)

David, the youngest and least likely, is chosen. The text notes that David has 'beautiful eyes' – a detail that may hint at his capacity to perceive, to be sensitive to God's call. His outward beauty is not the reason for his selection, but perhaps a poetic echo of his inner attentiveness.

Together, these readings challenge us to reconsider how we 'see' others. Who do we overlook because they don't fit our expectations? Who do we elevate because they appear successful, holy or powerful? Lent is a season of reorientation, a time to ask God to help us see with compassion, to recognise the dignity in every person and to be sensitive to the presence of God in unexpected places.

Questions to consider

1. Where in your life are you tempted to judge others by outward appearance – their status, behaviour or background – rather than looking for the image of God within them?
2. How does Jesus' response to the man born blind challenge our assumptions about who is 'worthy' or 'holy'?
3. When have you felt overlooked, dismissed or misunderstood – and what helped you feel truly seen and valued? How might that experience shape the way you recognise dignity in others?

The good news to get across

God sees the heart. Every person carries the image of God within them, and we are invited to look beyond appearances and assumptions to recognise the dignity in others, and in ourselves. And God sees your heart, and loves you through and through, more than you will ever realise.

Prayer of blessing

May the God who sees the heart open your soul to compassion. May you recognise dignity in every face, including your own. Amen.

LENT 5 – Sunday 22 March

Let go of despair, embrace 'respair'

Bible readings

Ezekiel 37:1–14

God breathes life into a valley of dry bones, promising restoration and hope to a despairing people.

John 11:1–45

Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, showing that God’s power brings life, even in the midst of grief and loss.

Background notes

This week’s Bible readings speak to times when life feels hopeless and show us that God offers real hope – hope that is strong and deeply rooted in God’s life-giving presence.

Language expert Susie Dent points out that English often leans towards negative words. She notes that some positive words have almost disappeared. One example is the word linked to ‘despair’. Its opposite is rare, but it exists:

“...one English word surely stands above all others from the corners of the dictionary. I mention it all the time, because I’m determined to bring it back. Or bring it anywhere in fact, for it never really enjoyed more than a day in the sun. ‘Respair’ has just one record next to it in the Oxford English Dictionary, from 1525, but its definition is sublime. Respair is fresh hope; a recovery from despair.”⁹

In Ezekiel 37, the prophet is led into a valley of dry bones: a stark image of death, defeat and hopelessness. The people cry out, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost.” Yet God commands Ezekiel to prophesy life: breath enters the bones, and they stand in a vast multitude. This is not just a metaphor for resurrection, but a promise of restoration for a people who feel cut off and forgotten.

In John 11, Mary and Martha confront Jesus with their grief: “Lord, if you had been here...” Lazarus has died, and the community is mourning. Jesus does not rush past their pain –

he weeps with them. But then he calls Lazarus out of the tomb, unbinding him and restoring him to life. This affirms God's power to bring life even when all seems lost.

This shift from despair to respair is not about ignoring suffering or rushing to resolution. It's about trusting that God is present in the valley, in the tomb, in the waiting – and that God's Spirit still breathes life into what feels dead.

9 Susie Dent, From respair to cacklefart – the joy of reclaiming long-lost positive words [theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/dec/26/respair-cacklefart-positive-words-english-language](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/dec/26/respair-cacklefart-positive-words-english-language)

Questions to consider

1. Where in your life or community do you feel like you're standing in a valley of dry bones: places that feel lifeless, stuck or forgotten?
2. When have you experienced a sense of 'respair' or hope returning after a time of despair? What helped you recognise it?
3. What does it mean to speak life – to be someone who helps others breathe again, hope again, live again?

The good news to get across

God calls us into 'respair'. Even when everything feels lost, God is still breathing life into what seems dead. Resurrection is not just a future hope – it begins now, in the places we thought were beyond repair. God meets us in our despair and gently calls us into 'respair': fresh hope, renewed life and the promise that we are never alone.

Prayer of blessing

May the God who breathes life into dry bones restore your soul today. May hope rise again in you, fresh and fierce. Amen.

PALM SUNDAY – Sunday 29 March

Let go of violence, embrace gentleness

Bible readings

Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29

A psalm of thanksgiving celebrates God's enduring love and the opening of the gates of righteousness.

Matthew 21:1–11

Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey, fulfilling prophecy and revealing a gentle, non-violent vision of kingship.

Background notes

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week: a moment of celebration, tension and deep theological contrast. At the heart of this day is a confrontation between two radically different visions of power: one rooted in violence and domination, the other in gentleness and vulnerability.

Jesus enters Jerusalem riding a donkey, not a warhorse. This is no incidental detail. In their commentary on Matthew's Gospel, WD Davies and Dale C Allison note the donkey is a symbol of peace, not conquest. Matthew quotes Zechariah 9:9, but notably omits the word 'victorious'. Theologian Eduard Schweizer points out that this omission shifts the emphasis: Jesus is not a triumphant warrior, but a gentle king.

Douglas Hare highlights that Matthew chose to follow the Septuagint Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible in his choice of the word *praus* – 'gentle' – rather than 'humble'. This distinction matters. Gentleness is not weakness; it is strength under control, power reimagined.¹⁰ Jesus arrives vulnerable,

unarmed, prepared to live – and die – by his own teaching: “Do not resist one who is evil.” (Matthew 5:39). He embodies the Sermon on the Mount in public, political space.

This entry stands in stark contrast to another procession happening that same week: Pontius Pilate’s arrival. As John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg describe in *The Last Week*, Pilate entered Jerusalem from the west, leading a military parade: there were horses, chariots, soldiers and weapons. It was a display of imperial power meant to inspire fear and obedience. Rome’s authority would not be questioned.

Jesus enters from the east, with no army, no weapons, no threat. His procession is a counter-narrative: a public act of resistance against violence, domination and fear. The crowd may not fully understand, but they sense something different. They shout “Hosanna!” It’s a cry for salvation, not conquest.¹¹

Psalm 118, often used in royal processions, is reimagined here. The gates of righteousness are opened not for a warrior, but for one who comes in the name of the Lord: gentle, vulnerable and true. The psalm’s refrain, “His steadfast love endures forever”, becomes a lens through which we see Jesus’ entry: not as a show of force, but as a declaration of divine love.

10 Douglas RA Hare, *Matthew* (Westminster John Knox, Louisville, KY, 1993), p. 238.

11 Marcus J Borg, John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’s Final Days in Jerusalem* (SPCK Publishing, London, 2008), chapter 1.

Questions to consider

1. How does Jesus' choice to enter Jerusalem on a donkey challenge our assumptions about leadership and power?
2. What does gentleness look like in your life, and where is it hardest to practice?
3. How do the two processions – Pilate's and Jesus' – reflect competing visions of authority in our world today

The good news to get across

Jesus shows us a different kind of power. Jesus' power is one rooted in gentleness, vulnerability and love. In a world of domination, we are called to follow the way of peace.

Prayer of blessing

May the gentle King guide your soul in peace today. May your strength be clothed in kindness, and your steps follow the way of love. Amen.

GOOD FRIDAY – Friday 3 April

Let go of certainty, embrace mystery

Bible readings

Psalm 22

Psalm 22 expresses deep anguish and abandonment, yet moves towards trust and praise, revealing a raw and honest journey through suffering into hope.

John 18:1 – 19:42

Jesus is betrayed, tried, crucified and buried.

Background notes

John's story of Jesus' death is full of contrasts. Jesus seems weak yet strong, quiet yet speaking, suffering yet still in charge. The story doesn't give easy answers. Instead, it invites us to pause and stay with the mystery, rather than trying to explain it.

"Who are you looking for?" (John 18:4). Jesus begins with a question. Even in arrest, he invites reflection. The question echoes through the whole Passion: what kind of Messiah are we seeking?

"Here is your son... Here is your mother" (19:26–27). In the midst of agony, Jesus creates new relationships. Mystery becomes intimacy. The Cross becomes a place of community.

"It is finished" (19:30). These final words are not a cry of despair, but a declaration of completion. Yet what is 'finished' remains open to interpretation. Is it suffering? Is it the mission? Is it the beginning of something new?

"They laid Jesus there" (19:42). The story ends not with resolution, but with burial. The tomb is closed. The silence begins. And yet, even here, mystery holds space for hope.

Good Friday invites us to let go of easy answers. It asks us to sit with the unresolved, the painful, the sacred unknown. In the shadow of the Cross, we are not asked to understand – only to stay.

Questions to consider

1. What does it mean to follow a saviour who suffers?

2. Where do we see crucifixion – injustice, violence, abandonment – in our world today?
3. How does Jesus' silence speak to us when we feel overwhelmed or unheard?

The good news to get across

God is with us in everything. God does not always answer with clarity. Sometimes, God answers with presence. On the Cross, Jesus enters the deepest mystery of suffering and love. Even when we cannot make sense of it, we are not alone. The good news is not that we understand everything, but that God is with us in everything.

Prayer of blessing

May the God who did not turn away from suffering hold your soul today. May you rest in the mystery, and wait in hope. Amen.

***EASTER SUNDAY* – Sunday 5 April**

Let go of fear, embrace joy

Bible readings

Jeremiah 31:1–6

God promises restoration and joy to a scattered people, declaring everlasting love and celebration with music and dancing.

Matthew 28:1–10

The risen Jesus meets the women at the tomb, transforming fear into joy and sending them out with good news.

Background notes

Easter morning begins in fear. The women come to the tomb expecting death, not life. The guards are paralysed by fear (v. 4), and even the women – faithful and courageous – leave the tomb with “fear and great joy” (v. 8). But into this fear, the angel speaks: “Do not be afraid” (v. 5). And then Jesus himself repeats it: “Do not be afraid” (v. 10). The resurrection does not erase fear instantly, but it transforms it. Fear is not the end of the story. Joy breaks in.

This week’s mindset shift invites us to move from fear – of death, of change, of uncertainty – into the joy of resurrection. It’s not a shallow happiness, but a deep, defiant joy rooted in the reality that Christ is risen and nothing – not even death – can separate us from God’s love.

Matthew 28:1–10 is rich with movement. The stone is rolled away, the angel descends, the women run, Jesus meets them on the road. Resurrection is not static: it sends us out. The women become the first apostles, entrusted with the message of life. Their fear is not dismissed, but held within a greater joy.

Jeremiah 31:1–6 offers a prophetic echo of this joy. The people who survived the sword are promised restoration. God’s love is described as “everlasting”, and the people will once again dance, plant vineyards and shout for joy. This is not just personal comfort: it’s communal renewal. The resurrection is not only about Jesus’ victory over death, but about the restoration of all things. Joy is not a private feeling; it’s a shared celebration of God’s faithfulness.

Questions to consider

1. Where in your life are you holding onto fear – fear of change, loss, failure, or the unknown?
2. The women left the tomb with both fear and joy. Can you think of a time when joy and fear coexisted in your life? What helped you move towards joy?
3. What might it look like to live as someone sent by the risen Christ – with courage, hope and joy?

The good news to get across

Christ is risen – and fear does not have the final word. The resurrection of Jesus is not just a past event; it's a present reality. It means that even in the face of fear, grief or uncertainty, God is at work bringing life, joy and hope. The risen Christ meets us where we are and sends us out with courage and purpose.

Prayer of blessing

May the risen Christ fill your soul with joy today. May you live as one who has seen the empty tomb and cannot keep the good news to yourself. Amen. Alleluia!

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