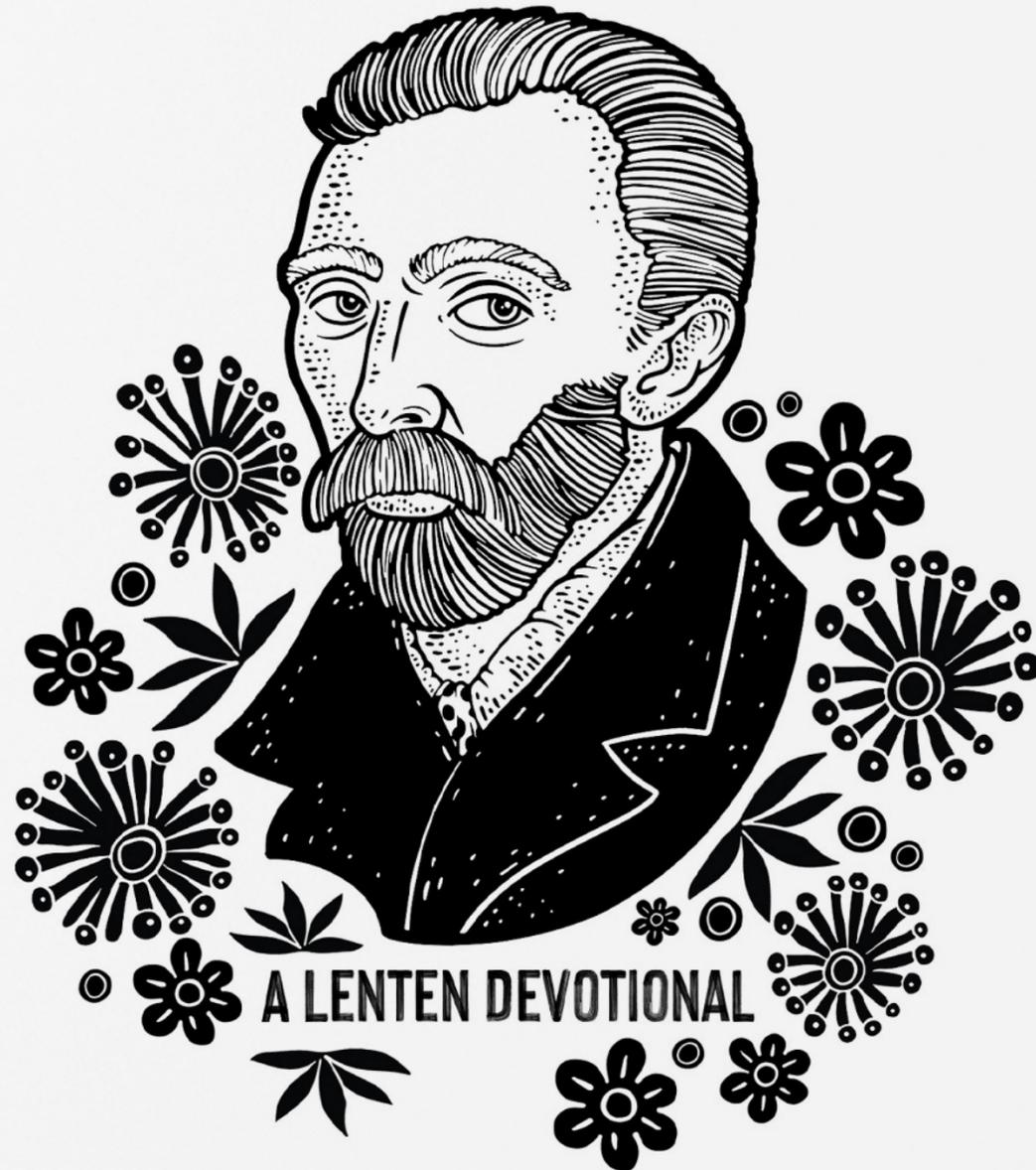
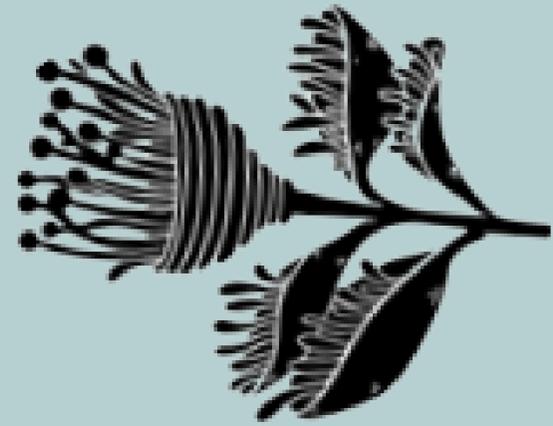
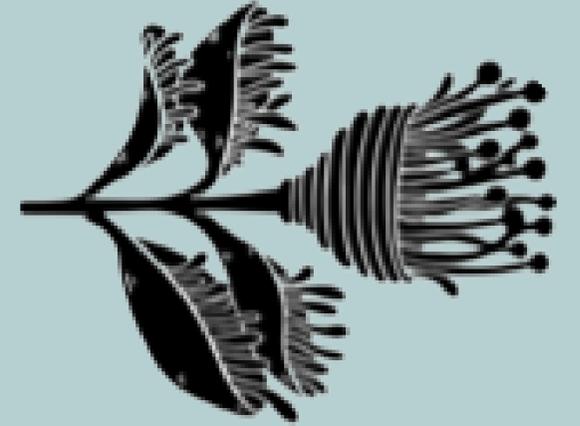


VINCENT VAN GOGH AND THE BEAUTY OF LENT





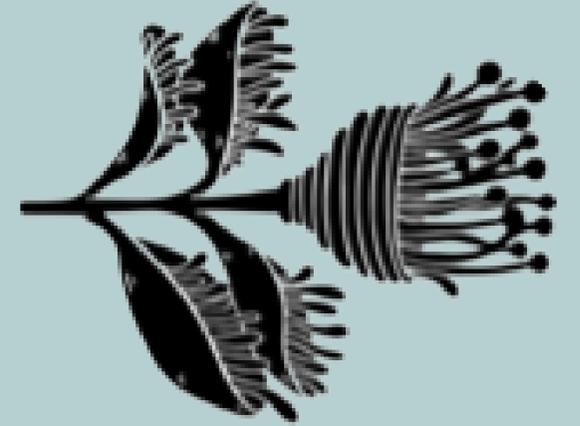
LET THERE BE LIGHT



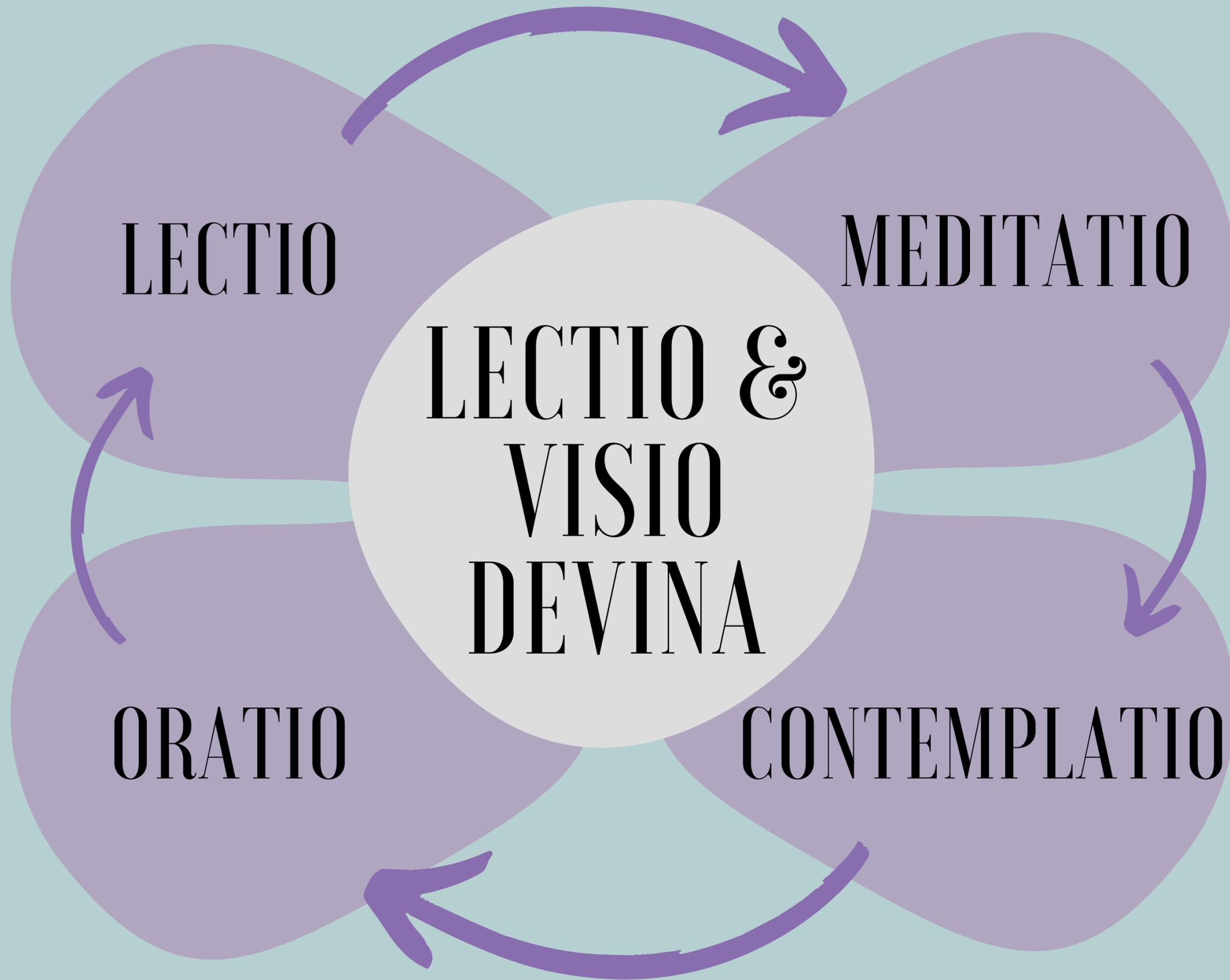
- Vincent van Gogh devoted his life to light.
- Son of a Christian Pastor, he set out to be a preacher and missionary himself, but his ministry eventually took the form of brush strokes and canvases.
- He created 2000+ luminous works of art – including nearly 900 paintings – in just ten short years.



LET THERE BE LIGHT



- The word “Lent” refers to the “lengthening” light, the growing days that, in time, will coax the sunflowers to open, the wheat fields to rise again, and the irises to bloom.
- Van Gogh will be our companion on this forty-day pilgrimage. We’ll look to the traditional Lenten Scriptures and the paintings and letters of Vincent van Gogh to be our guides.

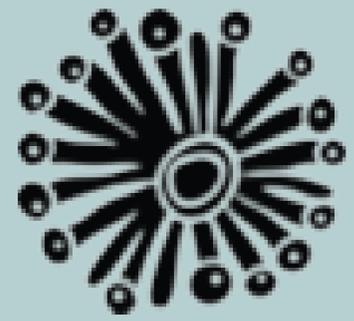


Go to our website
to learn more
under "Teach Us
to Pray" tab!

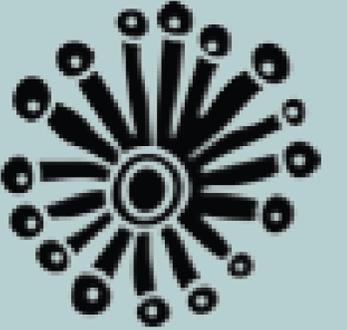
HOW DO YOU PRONOUNCE “VAN GOGH”?

There are at least four “correct” pronunciations of “Van Gogh,” each considered acceptable in its own context. In North American English, it’s “Van Go.” In British English, it’s “Van Goff.” In French, it’s “Van Gog.” And in Dutch (that is, the way Vincent himself would have pronounced it), it’s “Van Khokh” – with the guttural “kh” pronounced like the “ch” in “chuzpah.”





VAN GOGH'S LIFE: A SKETCH



FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

READ AND LOOK

SCRIPTURE

Luke 4:1-13

PAINTING

"The Potato Eaters," by Vincent van Gogh

JESUS ANSWERED HIM,
"IT IS WRITTEN, 'ONE
DOES NOT LIVE BY
BREAD ALONE.'"

+ LUKE 4:4



"The Potato Eaters"





MEDITATE

In Luke's story of Jesus being tested in the wilderness, the devil attempts to lure him into taking actions – feeding himself, bowing to the devil in exchange for worldly power, and jumping from the pinnacle of the temple – that each imply either a lack of trust in God, a lack of respect for God, or both. Recognizing this, Jesus cites the story of the Israelites in the wilderness, the humbling forty-year journey in which God taught the people to trust, so they might learn that no one lives “by bread alone,” but rather by the continual mercies of divine generosity (Deut 8:3).

In effect, through each of these temptations, the devil invites Jesus to abandon trust in God, and to imagine instead that he can trust in himself alone: for nourishment (“feed yourself!”), for power (“all this can be yours!”), and finally, for security, “testing” God by putting himself in danger, to see if God will rescue him. Three times, the devil tempts; three times, Jesus refuses, insisting that God is the true source of human well being – and humbly refusing to presume otherwise.

For Van Gogh, the values he held most dear – humility, honesty, connection with nature – were often most exemplified by rural farmers. Likewise, in his ministry as a missionary and, later, as a painter, Vincent lived a life of poverty himself. As an expression of Christian devotion, this form of life trusts in God for guidance, care, and security – and accordingly, finds human dignity not only in the wealthy palace, but also (even especially) in a farmer’s humble home.

"Peasant Woman Digging up Potatoes"



PRACTICES

- This week begin each day by lighting a candle of humility, praying, “Faithful God, strengthen our trust in you, for you are the true source of our well being. Grant us eyes to see the dignity in all people, no matter their wealth or station. Give us this day our daily bread, as well as the insight to understand that we do not live by bread alone, but by your daily love and care. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

- Find out more about where your food comes from (start with one or two of the meals you eat this week!), and research an advocacy organization fighting for farm and food workers (foodtank.com is one great place to start).
- Do you know the color palette of your life? Which colors do you love – and which do you see on a daily basis? Is it more “unpeeled potatoes,” more “rainbow brilliant,” or somewhere in between? How would you like to adjust the palette? And here’s an idea: There are apps that take the photos in your Instagram grid and use them to generate a color palette unique to you.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

READ AND LOOK

SCRIPTURE

Luke 13:31-35

PAINTINGS

"Sunflowers" and "La Berceuse ('The Lullaby,' or 'Woman Rocking a Cradle')," by Vincent Van Gogh

"HOW OFTEN HAVE I DESIRED TO
GATHER YOUR CHILDREN
TOGETHER AS A HEN
GATHERS HER BROOD
UNDER HER WINGS,
AND YOU WERE NOT
WILLING!" + LUKE 13:34



"Sunflowers"



"La Berceuse
('The Lullaby,' or
'Woman Rocking a
Cradle')"



MEDITATE

- In this passage from Luke, Jesus strikingly figures himself as a mother hen, gathering together her chicks under her wings. He longs to care for Jerusalem, even as they reject him; he longs to gather them into God's sheltering love. In the "La Berceuse" triptych, Van Gogh likewise envisions an overarching motherly love, gently rocking the cradle of humanity, singing a lullaby. And on each side, a vase of brilliant sunflowers symbolizing gratitude, evoking both the glories of the fields outside and the sweet serenity of a home: a simple arrangement of flowers, boldly, beautifully, impossibly yellow.

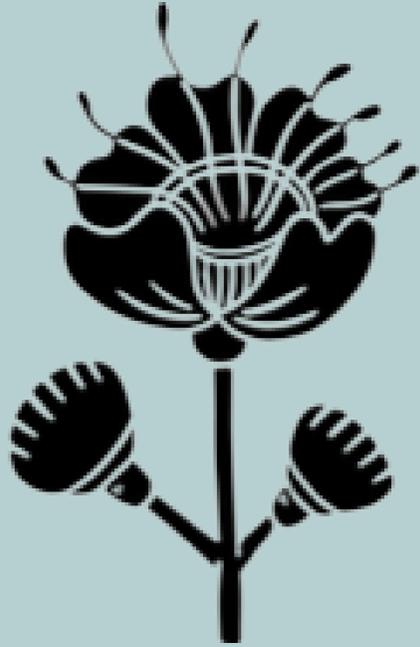
MEDITATE

- Accordingly, whenever we look at this painting – as countless thousands now have (it's at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City) – we take up the position of a child in a cradle, rocking and listening and remembering home, like sailors out on the open, starlit sea.

"Girl Kneeling in Front of a Cradle"



PRACTICES



- This week begin each day by lighting a candle of gratitude, praying, “God of grace, thank you for the cradle of the world, for the lullaby of your love, and for the brilliant colors of creation. Shelter us under your wings, Mother, and give us the strength to follow you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”
- Make your own “lullaby triptych” this week, either with Van Gogh’s images of sunflowers and “La Berceuse” or with other paintings you admire (or create!). Display it somewhere you’ll see it every day: the corner of a mirror, up on the fridge, or on a bedside table.
- In this week’s passage, Jesus longs to gather in even those who reject him – a tender, maternal image of forgiving love, even in the midst of estrangement. Reach out this week to someone from whom you feel estranged or distant: a handwritten note, a call, or a text can help stitch the world back together, one relationship at a time.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

READ AND LOOK

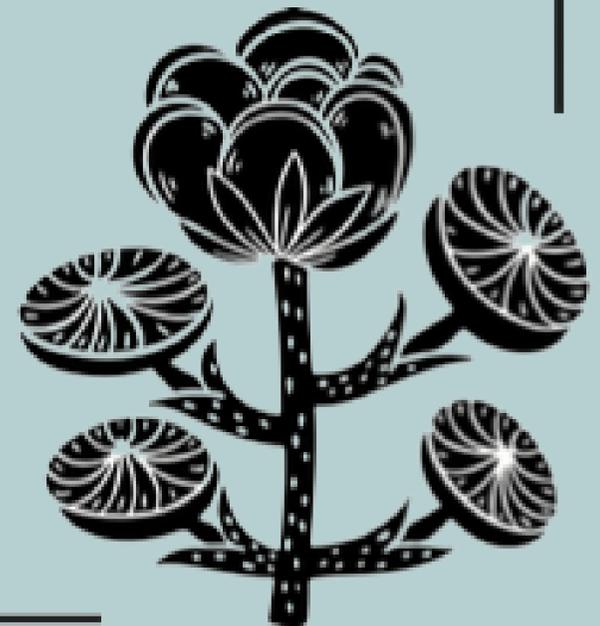
SCRIPTURE

Luke 13:1-9

PAINTING

"Almond Blossom,"
by Vincent van Gogh

"HE REPLIED, 'SIR, LET IT ALONE FOR ONE MORE YEAR, UNTIL I DIG AROUND IT AND PUT MANURE ON IT. IF IT BEARS FRUIT NEXT YEAR, WELL AND GOOD; BUT IF NOT, YOU CAN CUT IT DOWN.'" + LUKE 13:8-9



"Almond Blossom"





WHAT IS PAINTING FOR?

There are many answers to this question, of course, but Vincent had a particular one in mind. In 1889, just a year before his death, he wrote to a friend that his ambition was “to make of painting what the music of Berlioz and Wagner has been before us... a consolatory art for distressed hearts!”

In other words, for Vincent, a painting’s purpose is to console, to comfort, to encourage us when we are distressed or brokenhearted, just as certain pieces of music do. Understood this way, a painting is a kind of gospel, a visual declaration of “good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18).

MEDITATE

- In his parables, Jesus often draws on imagery from nature and agriculture, worlds with which his listeners were intimately familiar. Human life, this week's parable suggests, should be "fruitful" – and God expects the fruits of love and justice to abound in our lives and communities. Jesus compares the situation to a farmer who plants a fig tree, and then, when it fails to bear fruit, makes arrangements to cut it down. But the gardener compassionately intervenes, requesting one more year; with carefully applied fertilizer, the tree may bear fruit yet!

MEDITATE

- In “Almond Blossom,” we encounter not only the fruitfulness of nature, but also Vincent’s desire to learn from his Japanese counterparts, as well as his efforts to bear fruit as an artist himself. For him, painting wasn’t just a way of recording or depicting nature; it was a way of “living close to nature,” both for the painter and for the viewer. Learning from the almond blossom and the fig tree, we may ask: What “fruit” do we hope to bear in our lives this week, this year, this season of life? What “fertilizer,” what nourishment and support do we need – and how can we provide that support to others?

"Blossoming Branches"



PRACTICES

- This week begin each day by lighting a candle of creation, praying, “God of love, help us bear fruit today. Inspire us to live in ways that enliven the world, protect the vulnerable, and care for creation. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”
- Take a “close up nature walk” this week, intentionally looking for small beauties we might otherwise overlook. Twigs, mosses, lichen, fungi, blossoms, buds, blades of grass – anything small is fair game. And if you’re so inclined, start a sketchbook to remember your discoveries. As Vincent insists, such looking is “well worth the trouble”!

PRACTICES

- The point of the parable Jesus tells is to underscore how much God wants and expects us to bear fruit of love and justice in our lives, not at some point later on, but right here, right now. What sort of fruit do you think he has in mind? What concrete steps can we take this week? What “fertilizer” can we lay down for the sake of future fruit, for ourselves and for others? Discuss these questions with friends or family, over a meal or online.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

READ AND LOOK

SCRIPTURE

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

PAINTING

"The Sower" (November 1888), by Vincent van Gogh

"BUT WE HAD TO CELEBRATE AND REJOICE, BECAUSE THIS BROTHER OF YOURS WAS DEAD AND HAS COME TO LIFE; WAS LOST AND HAS BEEN FOUND."

+ LUKE 15:32



**"The Sower"
(November 1888)**



MEDITATE

- A parable is a form of storytelling that invites the listener to imaginatively enter a scenario, a kind of space within which we can reflect on the ideas and challenges the parable poses. In this famous parable – often called “The Prodigal Son,” though its real subject is the extravagant, transformative grace of God – the key question, and the cliffhanger with which the parable ends, is whether or not the elder son will celebrate his brother’s return. Jesus tells this parable to the religious authorities around him, the “elder brothers,” so to speak, who are looking down on the “younger” siblings with whom Jesus is sharing meals during his ministry.

MEDITATE

- Likewise, Van Gogh's paintings are intended to create experiences, little worlds we can imaginatively enter and explore. "The Sower" evokes Jesus' parable (Luke 8:4-8) – and the sower himself, with the sun's halo glowing behind him, may be seen as a kind of Christ figure, the Word of God sowing the words of God. With this in mind, the central tree suggests multiple things at once: the cross, the tree of life, and the growth to which every seed is called.



Reflecting on these two parables together, we may ask: How are we like the younger of the two siblings? What maturation, what new growth do we require? And how are we like the older sibling? What resentments, what bitterness is holding us back, inhibiting the seeds of forgiveness and joy in our hearts? What's keeping us from celebrating? If Jesus is an artist, as Vincent suggests, how might his teaching continue to shape and renew our lives?

"The Sower" by Jean-Francois Millet



"The Sower" (June 1888)

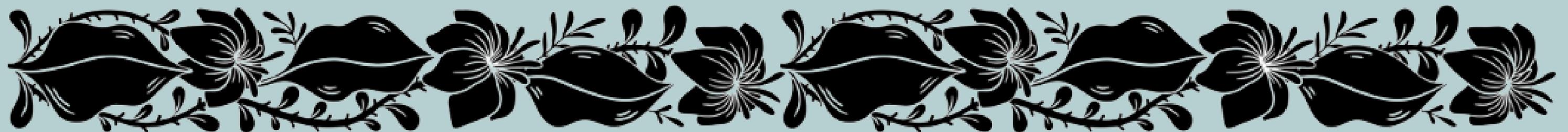


PRACTICES

- This week begin each day by lighting a candle of transformation, praying, “God who changes minds and changes lives, help us let go of what’s holding us back, and to grow, and grow, and grow in communion with you. Inspire us to celebrate, today and every day. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”
- The image of a sower is also an invitation to consider how many of our actions, too, are like scattering seed: outcomes are often out of our control, and sometimes out of our sight entirely. Intentionally take some actions this week in the spirit of the sower, planting seeds and letting go. Give an anonymous financial gift, for example; write a note of encouragement to someone; or plant a tree that will provide cool summer shade long after you’re gone.

PRACTICES

- The sun's halo effect in "The Sower" could be understood to suggest that saints are all around us, out in the fields as much as in positions of power or prestige. Who are the "everyday saints" in your life who have given you gifts along the way? Take an inventory. Write down the names and gifts in a journal, and if you like, compare lists with a friend or family member. And then make a point to reach out to a few names on the list. It'll make their day – and yours!



FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

READ AND LOOK

SCRIPTURE

John 12:1-8

PAINTING

"Shoes," by Vincent van Gogh

JESUS SAID, "LEAVE HER ALONE.
SHE BOUGHT IT SO THAT SHE MIGHT
KEEP IT FOR THE DAY OF MY BURIAL.
YOU ALWAYS HAVE THE
POOR WITH YOU, BUT YOU
DO NOT ALWAYS HAVE ME."
+ JOHN 12:7-8



"shoes"



MEDITATE

- In this passage, we stand on the eve of Jesus' death – but only Lazarus' sister, Mary, seems to understand this. She anoints Jesus' feet with expensive and aromatic perfume, tenderly anointing his body for burial. Judas scolds her for not selling the perfume and donating the proceeds to the poor, but Jesus rebukes him, not only for his cynical attempt to use the cause of “helping the poor” to line his own pockets, but also for missing the point that only Mary has perceived: Jesus is about to die. The situation calls for tenderness and honor, not haughty pontificating – and Mary has risen to the occasion.

MEDITATE

- When Jesus says, “You always have the poor with you,” he isn’t endorsing inequality. Rather, he’s alluding to the Book of Deuteronomy’s exhortation to be “open handed” toward your neighbors in generosity and grace: “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor’” (Deut 15:11). Far from a statement of apathy or resignation with respect to neighbors in need, then, Jesus’ remark is a reminder of God’s command to be generous – another rebuke to Judas’ self-serving hypocrisy.

- Throughout his life, Van Gogh was profoundly interested in the lives of impoverished communities and people. Like a kind of artistic friar, Vincent lived a life of poverty himself (friars were monks who voluntarily lived in poverty, residing not in monasteries but out and about in the world; St. Francis is a famous example). And in this painting of a pair of shoes, like Mary, Vincent turns his attention to the feet of a human being: his own, but also the feet of the anonymous former owner of these shoes, and by extension, the feet of ordinary working people everywhere. In a sense, Vincent anoints such people with his painting, lifting up these common objects – and the common lives they invoke – into the light of dignity and struggle, beauty and grace.

"shoes"





PRACTICES

- This week begin each day by lighting a candle of beauty, praying, “God of loveliness and light, give us eyes to see the beauty all around and within us, especially in common, ordinary places. Keep us mindful of the dignity of all your children. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”
- One of the best ways to learn about those most in need in your community is to look through the lens of a local service organization. Pick one with a good reputation (ask around if you aren’t sure), and start with their website, and then their annual report. How is their ministry a kind of window through which we can see our neighborhood more clearly? And how can we help?

- Try your hand at making a still life, with pencil or paint, crayons or markers, whatever you have on hand. As your subject, choose a common, everyday object: a pair of shoes, or a mug, or a chair, or a candle – the more ordinary and overlooked, the better. Use the process to discover the beauty and presence of the object, the sparkle of glory in a supposedly humdrum spot.
- Mary's tenderness is inspiring: simple, generous, tangible, and powerful. Look for opportunities this week to bring more tenderness into the world: a kind touch, a kind word, a moment of understanding. Throughout each day, countless occasions call for tenderness; follow Mary's lead, and rise to the occasion.

