Jesus Said What?
A Lenten Journey Back to Jesus

Eight services from Ash Wednesday through Easter

Jesus Said What? invites us to listen again to the surprising, challenging and sometimes uncomfortable words of Jesus. It asks what would happen if we truly read Scripture through the lens of grace, love and belonging. Sometimes we have to clear away a few things we've picked up along the way before we can hear Jesus clearly again.

That makes the book a natural fit for Lent. Lent gives us a chance to slow down and take an honest look at what's shaping our faith. It's a season for turning back toward Jesus, which may mean rethinking an old assumption, letting go of a fear or admitting that something we've always heard in church doesn't sound much like Jesus when we really stop and listen.

The series would begin on Ash Wednesday with Jesus' invitation to repent, which is really an invitation to turn around and head in a new direction. Then each Sunday would take up something Jesus said or did that still has the power to surprise us, make us squirm a little and change the way we live.

We'd talk about loving our enemies, reading Scripture with mercy, making room at the table and giving up our need to earn God's love or prove that we're right. Palm Sunday would remind us that Jesus didn't come to enjoy a parade. He came to challenge the things that were keeping people from experiencing God's grace. Then on Easter, we'd ask whether Jesus can be trusted again, especially by people who have been hurt or disappointed by the church.

The sermons would work on their own, but the book could give people a way to keep wrestling with the questions during the week through personal reading, small groups and churchwide conversations.

Using this outline

Each service includes a sermon description, a possible direction, two brief creative suggestions, a hymn and a modern worship song, and an invitation for the week. Adapt these ideas to your congregation. Song titles link to music or reference resources; use the selections in the way that best serves your worship setting.

Ash Wednesday: Turn Around

Scripture: Joel 2:12–13; Mark 1:14–15

Sermon Description:

Repentance is an invitation to change direction and believe the good news. Jesus calls us toward a life shaped by God's love, even when that means admitting we've been heading the wrong way. Ash Wednesday gives us room to acknowledge our limits and return to the God whose mercy makes a new beginning possible.

Possible Sermon Direction:

Begin with the experience of realizing you've taken a wrong turn. Explore repentance as an honest response to grace, with Joel's description of God setting the tone. Invite people to name an assumption or habit that has drawn them away from Jesus and consider what turning toward him would mean during Lent.

Creative Suggestions:

Recalculating. Describe missing a turn while driving and hearing the navigation system offer a new route. Use the image to open a conversation about returning without getting stuck in shame.

One honest sentence. Before the ashes, allow a quiet moment for people to complete this prayer privately: "Jesus, help me turn toward you in…"

Song Suggestions:

Hymn: Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days (Claudia Frances Hernaman). A prayer to walk with Jesus through Lent and receive his guidance.

Modern: The Heart of Worship (Matt Redman). A prayer of return that places Jesus at the center of our worship and attention.

Invitation for the Week:

Choose one habit or assumption to examine during Lent. Pray each day for help taking one concrete step toward Jesus.

First Sunday in Lent: Love Your Enemies. Seriously.

Scripture: Matthew 5:43–48

Sermon Description:

We begin with one of the sayings Christians admire and spend considerable energy explaining away. Jesus invites us to resist harm without allowing hatred to shape us. Enemy-love asks us to consider the humanity of people we resent while holding appropriate boundaries and refusing to excuse what they've done.

Possible Sermon Direction:

Explore the difference between seeking someone's good and giving them access to hurt us again. Connect Jesus' teaching with God's generosity toward people on both sides of our divisions. Help the congregation consider how resentment affects ordinary choices and what a loving, truthful response could look like.

Creative Suggestions:

The reply you don't send. Describe drafting an angry message, then pausing before sending it. Ask how love could change the response while preserving its honesty.

The shared sunlight. Show a photograph of sunlight falling across neighboring homes. Return to Jesus' image of the sun rising on people we welcome and people we struggle to love.

Song Suggestions:

Hymn: Help Us Accept Each Other (Fred Kaan). A prayer for learning to love across the divisions we create.

Modern: Make Us One (Jesus Culture). A congregational prayer that acknowledges pride and hostility and asks God to heal our divisions.

Invitation for the Week:

Pray for someone you resent without excusing the harm. Choose one response that protects your boundaries and refuses to feed hatred.

Second Sunday in Lent: Jesus Read Scripture Differently Too

Scripture: Matthew 12:1–14; Hosea 6:6

Sermon Description:

Jesus takes Scripture seriously enough to challenge interpretations that ignore mercy or human need. Hungry disciples and a man needing healing bring the purpose of the Sabbath into focus. Following Jesus may require us to hear familiar words with fresh ears and pay closer attention to the people affected by our interpretations.

Possible Sermon Direction:

Trace how Jesus responds to the Sabbath disputes and returns to Hosea's call for mercy. Ask what happens when protecting an interpretation becomes more urgent than caring for a person. Invite the congregation to read with attention to context and with enough humility to let Jesus challenge a familiar conclusion.

Creative Suggestions:

The empty chair. Place a chair beside a stack of rulebooks. Ask whose experience might be missing when we discuss what the rules require.

A rule that helps. Describe a hospital's quiet-hours policy and a compassionate exception for a frightened patient. Connect the purpose of a rule with the person it's meant to serve.

Song Suggestions:

Hymn: There's a Wideness in God's Mercy (Frederick William Faber). Keeps God's generous mercy at the center of the service.

Modern: Teach Us Your Ways (The Porter's Gate, featuring Leslie Jordan). A prayer for teachability expressed through shared life and compassionate love.

Invitation for the Week:

Read Matthew 12:1–14 again. Ask where attending to someone's actual need might change your response this week.

Third Sunday in Lent: Who Gets a Seat at the Table?

Scripture: John 4:1–42

Sermon Description:

Jesus crosses social and religious boundaries to speak with a Samaritan woman. He takes her questions seriously and entrusts her with news she carries to her community. Her encounter with Jesus invites the church to consider who feels welcome among us and whose voice we've failed to hear.

Possible Sermon Direction:

Explore the barriers Jesus crosses and the conversation he makes possible. Avoid filling in the woman's story with assumptions about her morality or why she comes to the well. Ask what genuine belonging requires of a congregation, including whose gifts and questions are welcomed before they've met our expectations.

Creative Suggestions:

Pull up a chair. Begin with one chair set apart from a table, then move it into the circle. Ask what changes when someone is welcomed into the conversation.

Walk the welcome. Tell the story of arriving somewhere new. Describe the difference it makes when someone walks alongside you and introduces you by name.

Song Suggestions:

Hymn: For Everyone Born (A Place at the Table) (Shirley Erena Murray). Joins belonging with dignity and justice for everyone.

Modern: Hallelujah Sing (The Porter's Gate, featuring Latifah Alattas and Audrey Assad). An invitation to the table that makes room for weariness and offers peace.

Invitation for the Week:

Help someone feel at home through a personal introduction or an invitation to share a meal. Let them set the pace.

Fourth Sunday in Lent: Stop Auditioning for God

Scripture: Luke 10:38–42; Matthew 11:28–30

Sermon Description:

Jesus meets the exhausted and anxious with grace, reminding us that we don't have to earn what God has already given. Martha's worry and Jesus' invitation to rest speak to people who feel their worth depends on being useful. Lent can become a season of receiving love we've been too busy trying to deserve.

Possible Sermon Direction:

Treat Martha with compassion as you explore the anxiety underneath her service. Ask what people fear would happen if they stopped producing or taking care of everyone else. Connect Jesus' invitation to rest with the freedom to serve from a place of being loved, and give the congregation a moment to receive that invitation.

Creative Suggestions:

The imaginary scorecard. Hold up a scorecard labeled "Productivity," "Usefulness" and "Getting it right." Set it down while asking who taught us to measure God's love this way.

A moment to receive. Allow 30 seconds of quiet. Invite people to rest their hands and hear Matthew 11:28 without planning their next task.

Song Suggestions:

Hymn: Come and Find the Quiet Center (Shirley Erena Murray). Makes room for stillness within a crowded and anxious life.

Modern: Pause (Lovers Lane Worship). Invites a rhythm of grace that fits Jesus' welcome to the weary.

Invitation for the Week:

Set aside ten minutes to rest without accomplishing anything. Let that time become a way of receiving God's love.

Fifth Sunday in Lent: What If Being Right Isn’t the Same as Being Faithful?

Scripture: Luke 18:9–14

Sermon Description:

The Pharisee has the right language and a respectable record, yet his comparison with another person keeps him from humility. Jesus tells this story to people who trust in their own righteousness and regard others with contempt. His invitation reaches anyone who has confused a good religious record with a heart open to mercy.

Possible Sermon Direction:

Let both prayers expose habits we recognize in ourselves. Resist inviting people to feel superior to the Pharisee, which repeats the very pattern Jesus challenges. Explore how certainty can close us off from another person’s experience. Present humility as the freedom to receive mercy and remain willing to learn.

Creative Suggestions:

The comparison sentence. Display “At least I’m not…” and leave it unfinished. Ask people to notice privately whom they use to reassure themselves that they’re doing well.

An open question. Tell a brief, true story of changing your mind after listening to someone you’d dismissed. Emphasize what became possible when you stopped defending your first conclusion.

Song Suggestions:

Hymn: Dear Lord and Father of Mankind (John Greenleaf Whittier). A prayer for forgiveness and a quieter, more trusting faith.

Modern: Lord, I Need You (Matt Maher). A prayer of dependence that gives the congregation words for receiving grace.

Invitation for the Week:

In one disagreement this week, ask a sincere question and listen before explaining your position. Notice what you learn.

Palm Sunday: Jesus Doesn’t Stay in the Parade

Scripture: Mark 11:1–18

Sermon Description:

The crowd welcomes Jesus with celebration, but Mark’s account soon takes us into the temple, where Jesus confronts what worship has become. The fig tree and the temple scene raise questions about fruitfulness and the purpose of God’s house. Holy Week asks whether we’ll follow Jesus when his presence challenges arrangements we’ve learned to accept.

Possible Sermon Direction:

Follow Mark’s sequence from the entry into Jerusalem to the next day’s confrontation in the temple. Hold the fig tree and temple scenes together as a challenge to religious life that fails to bear fruit. Attend to Jesus’ concern for a house of prayer for all nations, then ask where our church practices help people approach God or place barriers in their way.

Creative Suggestions:

From palms to a table. Place palm branches beside a small table. Move from the branches to the table as you trace the passage, asking where we’re willing to follow Jesus after the celebration.

Look at the entrance. Show a photograph of your church’s entrance. Ask what a newcomer encounters there and which barriers Jesus might call the congregation to remove.

Song Suggestions:

Hymn: All Glory, Laud, and Honor (Theodulf of Orléans; translated by John Mason Neale). Welcomes Jesus as king and opens the question of what following him will require.

Modern: Hosanna (Hillsong UNITED; written by Brooke Ligertwood). Connects praise with a prayer to see clearly and love as Jesus loves.

Invitation for the Week:

Identify one church practice that makes belonging harder. Discuss a concrete improvement with someone who can help put it into action.

Easter Sunday: Can We Trust Jesus Again?

Scripture: John 20:1–18

Sermon Description:

Mary comes to the tomb grieving what she believes has been lost. The risen Jesus meets her personally and calls her by name. Easter invites people who have been disappointed, wounded or pushed away by religion to consider whether Jesus may still be more trustworthy, compassionate and alive than they imagined.

Possible Sermon Direction:

Stay with Mary's grief and confusion before moving to recognition and joy. Distinguish trust in Jesus from automatic trust in people or institutions that have caused harm. Proclaim resurrection as hope that meets people where they are, and invite a small next step without demanding that anyone's healing be finished by Easter morning.

Creative Suggestions:

Stay with the question. Read Mary's words in John 20:13 and pause before continuing. Let the congregation feel the loss the story acknowledges before it announces resurrection.

Called by name. Tell a brief, true story about someone remembering your name when you felt overlooked. Use it to explore Mary's recognition when Jesus addresses her personally.

Song Suggestions:

Hymn: Christ the Lord Is Risen Today (Charles Wesley). Gives the congregation a joyful proclamation of resurrection and hope.

Modern: Christ Is Risen (Matt Maher). Celebrates Christ's victory over death and invites people toward renewed life.

Invitation for the Week:

Choose one manageable step toward renewed trust: read John 20 again or speak honestly with someone who respects your questions and boundaries.