

The Meditations of Our Hearts

A Lenten Devotional of the
First Presbyterian Church
Jacksonville, Illinois



*“Let the words of my mouth
and the meditations of my heart
be acceptable to you, O Lord,
my rock and my redeemer.”*

Psalm 19:14

2017

A Word from the Pastor . . .

Every year on Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of Lent, we read these words of Jesus:

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” Matthew 6:5-8

This is a reminder to us that we are about to embark on a spiritual journey, a time of waiting and preparing for Easter. But this is an interior journey, a journey of the soul. This is a time for us to settle down with our Bibles and the prayers of our hearts, and spend time alone with God. The time we spend in prayer leading up to the death - and then the resurrection - of Jesus is not something to shout from the mountaintops, but to do faithfully and quietly.

Our congregation has a wonderful tradition of sharing our Lenten prayers and meditations with one another. Many of our friends and neighbors have shared their thoughts and experiences in these pages, offering them to each of us to help guide us in our prayerful journeys through the season of Lent. I think of this when I read Jesus' words about not heaping up empty phrases... the reflections in this book are real. They are simple words, powerful words, words of real people living real lives right alongside us.

Reading through these thoughts and meditations is a blessing to each of us. My prayer for you this Lenten season is that the words of our brothers and sisters in Christ would strengthen each of you in your journey with God, and encourage and enlighten you during this season.

Rev. Jonathan Warren

THANK YOU!

Many people have thanked me along the way for putting the Lenten booklet together for the church. I would, however, like to thank you! Without you sending devotions to me to put into the booklet, it would not have been able to be completed. This has become a valued tradition at the First Presbyterian Church for many years now. We have enjoyed many of the devotions from the years past and it is my hope that we will be able to continue the Lenten booklet in the future.

I also want to thank Janice Briggs, Pastor Jonathan Warren and the Continuing Education leader and committee: Guy Crumley, Alexa Crumley, Jean Harlow-Truesdell, Celeste Hill, and Nancy Bradbury.

Sarah Yuska
Devotional Booklet Coordinator

Day One, Ash Wednesday, March 1, 2017

Scripture: Jeremiah 29:11-14 – For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”

Listening to God: When was the last time you really searched for me? Your days are full of other things that compete for your time and attention, but I am the only one who loves you unconditionally and forever, I hold everything in my hands. So much of what you worry about I have already taken care of for you. It will work out. Today, set aside some time to let me bless you with a deeper sense of my presence.

Prayer: Lord, please help me to take a breath every day to look around and see all that you do for me. Help me to put my troubles and worries in your hands, and not to do what I want to do, but what I need to do, for I know that you will be with me always.

Amen.

Day 1 of “Sailboat Church”, by Joan S. Gray

Day Two, Thursday, March 2, 2017

Isaiah 55: 1-7 Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! ... Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, hear that your soul may live; ...

Title - The Waters

Devotion - In this passage there is an emphatic call to come without the barrier to the eternal spring of living waters. It is clear the water is the word of God. The invitation is to drink deeply; to receive the word, reason with it, delight in it, and to listen to it like one has never listened before.

Lent is a time for us to focus on this. Even though we might be active in church, we might be prone to neglect God's word. We might forget that the taste is sweeter than honey. Lent is an invitation to see Christ as the woman at the well came to see Him --- as the limitless satisfaction for our thirsty souls. It is our invitation to return to that well and drink deeply. Whoever drinks of this water will never be thirsty again.

Prayer - *Gracious Lord, by Your mercy, open our eyes to hear Your voice, and hearing You, to return. Unveil for us the wonders of Your word. Awaken in us a new thirst for You. We ask this in Your name. Amen*

Submitted by Guy Crumley

Day Three, Friday, March 3, 2017

CLOTHE YOURSELVES

**“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”
Colossians 3:12-14**

Recently, my freshmen students and I read a *New York Times* Bestseller, *brown girl dreaming*, Jacqueline Woodson’s memoir written in verse. Born in 1963, Woodson mentions people and events of the Civil Rights Movement – telling her story of growing up in both the South and the North. One of our favorite poetic remembrances was entitled “the fabric store.” In this memoir, Woodson recalls stores “where a woman is paid, my grandmother says, to follow colored people around in case they try to steal something. We don’t go into the restaurants because they always seat us near the kitchen.”

But it’s the fabric store, “where the white woman knows my grandmother,” that Woodson, as a small child, feels welcomed. She writes: “At the fabric store, we are not Colored or Negro. We are not thieves, or shameful, or something to be hidden away. At the fabric store, we’re just people.”

My students and I could visualize the fabric store – with its myriad of colors, with its plethora of textures – seeing the beauty of each uniquely woven piece. We also discussed how we are all “cut from the same cloth” – created in the image of God. Yet too often we would rather judge the differences. When we fail to clothe ourselves “with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience...and above all, love...” we bring dishonor to the One who created us in love, the One who redeemed us in love, the One who continues to transform us by the power of His Spirit within us.

Lent is an excellent time to renew the call to purposefully, persistently, and most especially, prayerfully to clothe ourselves as the Holy Scripture teaches us – with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, love.

Prayer: Lord, You are our example of how we are to clothe ourselves to live in relationship with others. Stitch up the judgmental, prejudice rips in our souls that we may bring You honor and glory, forever. Amen.

Submitted by Janet Chipman

Day Four, Saturday, March 4, 2017

Choices...the greatest power we have in our lives are our choices. As Christians, this should always involve choosing to do the right thing. Jesus is our ultimate example of always doing the right thing. The good news is that the Lord is continually encouraging us to do what is right through the whisperings of the Holy Spirit.

Galatians 6:9 “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.”

Colossians 3:17 “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

I do feel that everything I do should be to glorify and honor the Lord. We should look for opportunities to bless people on a daily basis. Something as simple as helping someone carry a bag of groceries may have a huge impact. Ask God to lead you. By doing the right thing in every circumstance, we will not only bless our friends, neighbors and even our enemies, but it will especially be a blessing and a gift to ourselves.

James 2:24-26 “So you see, we are shown to be right with God by what we do, not by faith alone.”

Submitted by Cynthia Benton

First Sunday in Lent - March 5, 2017

ONE THING

But the Lord answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but {only} one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her." Luke 10: 41-42, NIV

I confess to being guilty of frequently wondering if I am doing what God wants. Are my waking hours being used for God's glory as much as possible. How can a person know if they are doing what God wants of them? This is a question as a Christian I should not keep asking since Jesus told us to let tomorrow take care of its self. I do alright for awhile. Then I will start wondering if I am using all the talents and material placed at my fingertips to the best purpose according to God. I have a recording studio in my man cave, several versions of the Bible and have been blessed with a college education, home and awesome family. Am I truly giving back to Jesus even half of all He has given for me? These are questions that pop into my head sometimes. I considered not even mentioning them for fear of coming across as a bit strange. However, an urging kept nudging me to write them down. Maybe this will let someone else feel they are not so unusual. When thoughts keep reappearing in my mind, I consider it to be God giving a gentle shove to get it out there.

If you had to come up with one thing that God wants from you, what might it be? Many things could come to mind for all of us. But God only desires one thing from us. Is it love, devotion, good deeds, days spent fasting, hours spent reading the bible, regular church attendance, or the money we tithe? The list could go on and on.

This phrase 'one thing' occurs only here in Luke 10, and its context tells us much about what God wants from us, above everything else. In the case of Mary and Martha we have one who couldn't find it, but the other who immediately grasped it. Martha, spiritual woman though she was, was busy serving. Mary was engrossed in listening – sitting at the feet of Jesus and just taking in all she could of Him. Mary got the 'one thing' which Jesus said was needed.

Christ has to have the preeminence. Everything else must take its place beneath Him – Mary sat at the feet of Jesus. I'm not saying that service, fellowship or preparing meals is a bad thing. We just have to get the order right.

The work of the Lord must never take the place of the Lord of the work. If it does, then no matter how good and needful it may seem, it will lack the God-given blessing and anointing it needs. It may be fruitful, but it will lack the abundance it could have had.

God wants us to serve Him out of a place of rest (in Him). Martha, who served out of doing, found herself 'worried and troubled about many things'. Is that you?

Then Jesus has the answer. When we give Him the preeminence, then we bless His heart. We do this for Him, not to get anything from Him, although that naturally happens. If you find that confusing, think of it in the context of the love you have for someone. Do you show them your love to get something in return, or just because you love them? And, in the giving of that love, do you not receive much love in return?

God so longs for us to find that 'one thing', because, as we give Him that first place in our hearts and lives, purely out of love for Him, then He returns it. In doing this we find ourselves no longer 'worried and troubled over many things', because Jesus has our primary focus. He will show us what He wants us to do, when, where and to whom. Then, as we act obediently, it'll be easy to do, and we'll be astounded by the blessing it brings to others, to God and to ourselves.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Perfect Father, please forgive me for the times I've been so concerned about the work of the Lord that I've lost sight of the Lord of the work. Today I choose to pursue that 'one thing' that Mary found with all my heart. I give You the preeminence You alone deserve. Amen.

Author: Dan Thompson, September 14, 2016

Day Five, Monday, March 6, 2017

Scripture: Matthew 18:2-5 - He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

Listening to God: When I made you, I wove your spirit together with mine. You will always be my child. The best parent in all the world cannot love as I can love you. My love is unconditional and unbreakable. When you live into this relationship, you fulfill the purpose for which you are placed on earth. Why are you always struggling to be independent? I created you to depend on me and your fellow human beings. It is when you let go and become as dependent as a little child that I can do the most in your life.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me to live the purpose of my being placed on earth. Help me to feel your unconditional and unbreakable love. Help me to be worthy of your love, My Father. Make me see you in the eyes of a child. Help me to let go and become as independent as a little child so that you can do the most in my life. I ask this in Your Name. Amen

Day 11 of "Sailboat Church", by Joan S. Gray

Day Six, Tuesday, March 7, 2017

LOVING NEIGHBOR AND OUR SELF

Scripture: **But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying “They will reverence my son.” But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance.” And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him. When the Lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will He do unto those husbandmen?**

What does Jesus mean when He says that we should care about ourselves as much as we love our neighbor? Doesn't Lent mean that we should focus on love and concern for our neighbor? (But counselors and psychologists emphasize we should love ourselves).

What's the right answer? Jesus seems to be making impossible demands on us – “love both neighbor and self”. Michelle Obama, our former president's wife, was quoted recently as saying, “I love myself, this is as important to me as caring for my girls and my husband.”

How can we care equally for self and others? In our baptism, God has given us His Holy Spirit. God's all powerful presence, here today and tomorrow, gives us the strength to try each day to love self and others. What seems at times impossible for us can happen today and the rest of our lives. During Lent, we can attempt to trust in Him to empower us to love self and others. This is our job while we still have life and breath!

Prayer: ***Lord, may we be encouraged by Your presence, our all powerful, energizing, and always present, to correct and guide us. May each of us pray for both ourselves and others, be guided to put Your power to use in words, thoughts, and deeds in the time we still have left. Amen.***

Submitted by Dr. Bill Cross

Day Seven, Wednesday, March 8, 2017

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Matthew 6:33

The following paragraphs from The Story of the Trapp Family Singers (by Maria A. Trapp, 1949) illustrate the ways in which the Trapp family learned to put all their trust in God. As I was reading the book, it struck me as a lesson applicable to us all.

“You should not be asking then what you shall eat or what you shall drink and worrying about them. The heathens may do that, who don’t know about God. You, however, must know that your Heavenly Father knows well that you need all these things. Therefore, seek first the kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you. And this half year was set apart for teaching us this lesson, that we should never forget it in the future.”

“It would have been easy for God to show us the plan for this period, as He had it all fixed up, how there would be enough concerts, enough money, extensions of our stay, helpful people, generous invitations, new friends, and new love. But then we again would not have learned that most valuable lesson, so He left us in the dark and gave us only one thing at a time.”

Dear Lord,

Although it can be difficult for us to put our trust in You, we must know that You always take care of Your children—now and in the future. Thank you. Amen

Submitted by Celeste Hill

Day Eight, Thursday, March 9, 2017

AN ODE TO JOY AMID THE SILENCE

Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. Psalm 126:5

For many decades if you asked musicians to name the world's greatest symphony, most would have answered, "the Ninth!" They would be referring, of course, to Ludwig van Beethoven's last---his Symphony no. 9 in D Minor.

Every movement is a masterpiece, and its novel finale adds a large chorus to the immense orchestra. Audiences and performers alike revere the Ninth. Hundreds of orchestras have recorded it, and thousands of students have scrutinized its magnificent pages. The work exudes such ecstasy and joy that the last movement's principal theme is sung in many churches as a hymn of praise to God: "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee."

Ironically, Beethoven wrote this composition in one of the saddest periods of his life. His hearing loss was dramatic. He could no longer perform as a virtuoso pianist. Although he was known as a great symphonist, it would be ten long years (1814-1824) between the premieres of his Eighth Symphony and his Ninth.

In this decade several of his closest friends and patrons died, leaving Beethoven with fewer benefactors and a reduced income. Lamentably, another close friendship, with Stephen Breuning, was dissolved after a heated argument. Yet another friend, Johann Nepomuk Maelzel, stole a "Battle-Piece" (celebrating Wellington's Waterloo victory over Napoleon) Beethoven had composed for him, resulting in painful lawsuits. Finally, Beethoven's brother died, leaving the bachelor composer feeling a misguided obligation to take care of his eight-year-old nephew, Carl---to the misery of everyone involved.

In the midst of these misfortunes, Beethoven's diary revealed that he turned more and more to God to find inner joy. The wretched composer cried out, "God, help me! Thou seest me deserted by all mankind. I do not want to do wrong---hear my prayer to be with my Carl for the future for which there seems to be no possibility now." Another diary entry reads, "O God, give me the strength to overcome myself; nothing must hold me to this life." He wrote to a friend in 1821, "God, who knows my innermost soul, and knows how sacredly I have fulfilled all the duties put upon me as man by humanity, God, and nature, will surely someday relieve me from these afflictions."

At long last, the Ninth Symphony was finished. He'd heard the chords and chorus only in his mind. How would the world respond? Would this piece be discounted as the work of an old, crazed man?

At the final note of the premiere, the audience exploded with thunderous applause. But the composer, standing next to the conductor with his back to the crowd, looked straight ahead, hearing nothing. Fortunately, the solo contralto noticed Beethoven's disorientation and turned him around so he could see and take a bow before the cheering crowd.

In the midst of a painful situation, it is difficult to find any joy. But Jesus, at the Last Supper, gave his disciples hope for inner peace and joy that would carry them through dark times: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

In Christ we are overcomers, singing an ode to the Overcomer who brings us joy.

Prayer: *Father, sometimes the pain of life seems overwhelming. Please keep me close to You in these times and help me to find joy and peace in the midst of the storm. Jesus, in You I have peace. Amen.*

Submitted by Jean Harlow-Truesdell, from *Spiritual Moments with the Great Composers* by Patrick Kavanaugh

Day Nine, Friday, March 10, 2017

1 Timothy 4:14-15. “Do not neglect your gift, which was given to you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress.”

Did you notice that recently, when our church installed new elders and deacons, nearly everyone seated in the pews came forward for the laying on of hands? What a beautiful sight that was! As I assume my duties as a deacon, I am reminded that we all have gifts, which we are called to share, and I am happy that at First Presbyterian, we have responded enthusiastically to that call.

It can be all too easy to keep busy within a comfort zone you have created for yourself. Sometimes you might feel that you just don't have the time to take on a single new project.

Yet God calls us – you and me – not to neglect the gifts He has given us. We are called to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, and the Bible even gives us ideas for doing so. God asks us to watch over and pray for each other, to be patient and kind and to give others the benefit of the doubt. He wants us to see the best in each other and to celebrate each others' joys. We are asked to look for ways to express our loving concern for each other.

When we cheerfully use the gifts we've been given, our own lives are sure to be enriched as well.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, Help me seek new ways to use the gifts you have given me to make your world an even better place. Amen*

Submitted by Penny Turner

Day Ten, Saturday, March 11, 2017

WHO IS JESUS AND WHAT DOES HE MEAN TO ME?

Scripture: ***"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."***
Over the last few weeks I have been listening to a sermon series by Reverend Alistair Begg. I was inspired to ask myself, "who do I think Jesus is and what does he mean to me?" The blessings I know of have been many. I can't imagine how many others beyond my comprehension God put in place. In the Divine realm I know that God, the son and Holy Spirit are three in one. God came here in human form as Christ. We are told this in Matthew 1: 23, again in Isaiah 9:6. Below I share some moments my simple human mind can recall which were rich with my Lord's influence. Christ was there in the birthing room my lungs failed and I was diagnosed with cleft pallet, (no top to the mouth.) Doctor and nurses said it would be a miracle if I survived the night. My Lord bestowed upon those medical professionals wisdom to use bone elsewhere in my body to repair the mouth. Treatment for double was tried even though no one expected it to be successful. God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit had other plans and here I am today.

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Jer 29:11

Jesus was the peace and endurance during those emotional and physical challenging years filled with mental and physical abuse inflicted by a resentful Mother until age 19 when being thrown into a very big world, alone. However, looking back, I know now I was never in danger, the hand of Divine guidance with on my shoulder. While some would consider the slip of a surgeon's hand severing my optic nerves at age five as disastrous, I call it Divine Intervention. My life could have taken a radically different path instead of arriving where I am today.

Rom 8:28:" And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Jesus' gentleness was in the hands of a dorm Mother when picking me up after the first encounter with another child at my new residential school kicked me in the face at age seven and threw me to the floor. I wanted to run far away. But loving arms and gentle hands of Miss Berneece, a Dorm mother, assured me all will be well. She never had children of her own. However, God blessed her with a gift of loving others in a very special way. Jesus' shield of love was there through my Grandmother's gentle words, hugs and weekends she let me stay at her house instead of a setting where daily demeaning comments and physical abuse were common place. Jesus poured forth enough joy and kindness in those days with my Grandmother to endure the unpleasantness.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding." Prov 3:5

The hand of God was present when my sister and best friend's brother were accidentally killed and then my precious Grandmother past away all in my sixteenth year. I wished and prayed very sincerely that my life would please end by the next year. Christ brought into my life a guardian angel in the guise of my assistant wrestling coach. We spent many hours together while I exclaimed my anger at Jesus for letting all this happen. I slowly became to feel peace through prayer and learning how to let go of pent up emotions. A few years later this special messenger of Christ moved on to a new job.

I am reminded of ***Philippians 3:7-8, But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ.***

Getting caught up in worldly possessions and demands can happen before realizing the trap has been triggered. I am forever grateful for the ear of God is always listening and never gives up on me no matter how many times I slip on life's slippery slope of deceptions. Jesus was the courage to not panic on high school graduation day when news that I was not welcome home came by phone at 6:00 Am. What should have been a moment of extreme fear of things to come, There was just a feeling of resolution,

acceptance. I shut the dorm office door and Sid, "well, my Lord, what's next?" While I received no answer that day, He must have been walking with me. The next year was filled with many close calls of falling prey to Satan's temptations. Just when I felt stealing or trying drugs or worse, food, shelter and a compassionate soul entered my life, all sent by Jesus.

"In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight." Prov 3:6

The hand of Jesus was there the day I called Judie on a pay phone in 1973 to ask for her hand in marriage and she said yes. I left school thinking we would never meet again. Our love along with nudging by Jesus continues to grow after 43 years and will hopefully continue for many more years till death do we part. Of course to then be rejoined one day in glory with my Divine Protector, Jesus.

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." Rom 12:2

Jesus was there during all the rejections when trying to find a job as a blind man attempting to support a wife. He gave me the courage to not give up which eventually landed my first job as selling newspapers on a street corner 12 to 14 hours a day. This job led to contact that made possible a job in a sheltered workshop, vending stand program and finally the opportunity to attend college.

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." Phil 4:6:

Jesus was there when those in powerful positions which could make or break a person's future kept saying it would be a waste of state funds. Then when the old guard retired, an old friend with a more opened mind gave me a chance to prove myself. Jesus my Lord and Savior, while watching out for billions of others pleading for His attention still watched over me through good and tough moments of college. With every nay sayer professor who thought there was no way I could achieve being a teacher, there was another who filled me with confidence to keep on climbing the mountain of negativity. Until that one day that pinnacle of graduation was reached with shouts of joy. I give all glory and praise to Jesus for my success.

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God." Eph 2:8:

It was God's presence which helped my Wife through two very difficult painful child births. Both according to medical personnel were challenging enough that either the Mother or child may not have survived. Those children are now 38 and 33 years old. Both independently successful and we've been blessed with two grand-children!

"But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." Isa 40: 31

There are so many more situations where I recall God's intervention was the sustaining power and peace which endured through trials and priceless joys. I cannot imagine how awesome the glory will be in His House of many mansions and joining in the choir of angels in the hereafter!

Prayer: **Precious Savior, thank you for helping me learn who You are, Your majesty, love, sternness when necessary, and eternal companionship. Without You I would be nothing. With You I can do anything. I pray all reading this today will take time and feel that warmth of the Holy Spirit while recalling Your intervention in their lives. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus name, amen!**

Submitted by Dan Thompson

Second Sunday in Lent, March 12, 2017

It's time we all stopped being so busy! It has become unacceptable to be anything but busy. These statements come from an article entitled "How to Quit being Overwhelmed for Good" written by Kate Bartolotta for the Huffington Post. Our daughter, Lindsey, who is a very busy real estate broker in Denver, CO, shared it with me and I am so glad she did.

Now we can't shirk our responsibilities but Kate is proposing a shift in our attitude. People in our lives come and go whether they are with us for two weeks or forty years. Our relationship with ourselves is from cradle to grave so it's worth taking the time to make it good.

1. **Shift our language from "busy" to "full"**. If we look at our activities as adding richness to our experience, the frantic busy feeling often dissipates.
2. **Let go of "should" and do what you want**. If you find yourself with a knot in your stomach every time you approach a certain activity, it's time to take a look at whether you actually want and need it in your life.
3. **One window at a time**. Kate says in her article that she used to work with at least 20 windows open on her computer at a time. She now concentrates on doing one or two tasks at a time and her productivity has skyrocketed with fewer mistakes. Let's take this idea to everyday life. When you are having a conversation with a person, put your cell phone away. When you are washing dishes, buy a deliciously scented soap and make this task more enjoyable. **Be present in the moment**.
4. **Ask for help**. Most people love to help others and on the flip side, most people hate to ask for it. If your life is full, too full, at a given moment to be enjoyable, ask for help. When we do this, it is a magically awesome gift we are giving each other.

Kate concludes with this thought, "If we let go of being constantly overwhelmed, we can begin to fill our lives with things we love, and fall in love with life a little more every single day".

I also want to share the following Bible verses:

Matthew 11:28: Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Romans 12:2: Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

James 1:2: Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.

Submitted by Cynthia Benton

Day Eleven, Monday, March 13, 2017

Scripture: Matthew 11:28-30 - “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Listening to God: Your walk with me was never meant to be a weary slog. If you are feeling worn out and overburdened, check your load to make sure that you are not carrying things I have not called you to carry. When you get in the yoke with me, I always provide what you need to carry the load. When you load yourself up and try to go it alone, I can't help you. Try putting the things that are making you weary in my hands right now. Call on me to do what only I can do. I will give you rest.

Prayer: *Lord, thank you for being there for me at all times. I sometimes forget to give all of myself to Your Hands and leave everything to Your Will. Help me to accept Your Will and to remember that You can help me through any problems or worries that come into my life. Amen*

Day 12 of “Sailboat Church”, by Joan S. Gray

Day Twelve, Tuesday, March 14, 2017

LENTEN DISCIPLINE

Read: **Colossians 3: 12-13** *You are the people of God; he loved you and chose you for his own. So then, you must clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with one another and forgive one another whenever any of you has a complaint against someone else. You must forgive one another just as the Lord has forgiven you. GNB*

During the 2016 season of Lent, Larry and I attended a Lenten study led by the pastor of our Englewood FL Presbyterian Church. We used the book, Give Up Something Bad for Lent, by James Moore. In the book we were encouraged to give up not the usual “good” things, like chocolate or snacking, but to give up something spiritually that we would be better off not doing. We were asked to focus on eliminating one habit or attitude that is destructive: like envy, jealousy, self-pity, procrastination, gossip, resentment, or negative thoughts.

Each chapter brought me face to face with something I could (should?) give up. At the time, I was dealing with anger over the behavior of a loved one, and knew I needed to be more loving and forgiving. I also knew I needed to focus on being less critical of others. The end result of the study was for me to adopt a daily “motto”, and to strive to abide by it, with God’s help. I now have these words posted on my mirror: *“Live each day with a forgiving spirit; replace criticism with affirmation”*.

Unfortunately, I have not been successful in living up to my motto. But I have taken some baby steps, and pray for the Spirit to lead me as I strive to continue working toward that goal; perhaps finding more bad things to give up during the 2017 Lenten season. Besides, I really do love chocolate!

Prayer: ***Lord Jesus, we thank you for the gift of forgiveness you give to us. Fill us with your forgiving spirit and enable us to spread your compassion to others. Amen***

Submitted by Karen Ladd

Day Thirteen, Wednesday, March 15, 2017

Scripture: Mark 6:37-44 - But he answered, “You give them something to eat.”

They said to him, “That would take more than half a year’s wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?”

“How many loaves do you have?” he asked. “Go and see.”

When they found out, they said, “Five—and two fish.”

Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

Listening to God: Miracles happen when you take what you have and put it in my hands. So often you refuse to give me what you have. Usually this is because you feel that it is small, insignificant, even ugly. But I want you exactly as you are. I want the real you. Don't wait until you have achieved some imagined level of perfection to come to me. Do you have fears, doubts, negative feelings, guilt, bad habits? No problem! Bring it on: I can take whatever you give me and transform you to be a blessing to others.

Prayer: ***Dear Lord, please accept and love me in spite of all my fears, doubts, negative feelings, guilt and bad habits. Help me to feel positive thoughts about myself and to be a blessing to others. I ask this in Your Name. Amen***

Taken from Jonathan Warren, Day 15 on “Sailboat Church”

Day Fourteen, Thursday, March 16, 2017

Micah 6:8 He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

“What are you giving up for Lent?” becomes a familiar lead-in to conversations with friends and family as we move through the days of preparation for the Easter season. Often the answer will be “chocolate” or another guilty indulgence. However, many see Lent as a time of preparation as we get ready to accept the gift that Jesus gave to us through his death on the cross for our sins and his resurrection as a sign of everlasting life.

If we use Lent as a time to read through the Bible and meditate on Jesus’ teachings, we can gain new insights into how we should act as Christians. As the ACTS Bible Study Class moves through the Book of Psalms, we are learning that God is happy to receive our praise and thanks, especially when it is accompanied by joyful music and celebration. God does not expect us to offer the traditional sacrifices of lambs or the harvest from our gardens. But he does expect us to live in obedience to his commands.

The Bible tells us that God expects us to show justice and mercy to others, and to walk humbly in the path that he has set before us. Jesus used many parables to illustrate acts of compassion. We read about the Good Samaritan who rescued a stranger alongside the road, administered first aid, and paid for housing at an inn until the man recovered from his injuries. Jesus told a wealthy man to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor. The persistent widow endlessly petitioned the local judge (a powerful man who cared nothing for God or mankind) for justice until he granted her request in order to get her to leave him alone.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) offers many opportunities for us to show compassion to God’s people by taking action against poverty, hunger, and injustice. It’s time to get involved, not give up. We are called to care for God’s creation by supporting measures to keep our food healthy, our water pure and clean, our air breathable, and our land free from contamination. We are called to care for God’s people by protecting children from harm, saving workers from exploitation, and helping victims of disaster. We are called to share God’s love by welcoming strangers into our community, and by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Prayer: *Dear God, We thank you for the many blessings in our world. Help us to take action, to get involved, to stand up for those who have no voice. And above all, help us to be kind. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.*

Submitted by Diane Hollendonner

Day Fifteen, Friday, March 17, 2017

Since Lent and St. Patrick's Day overlap, I would like to share a writing of St. Patrick; a hymn referred to as The Breastplate. During a time of persecution, Patrick used this prayer as a guard (hence the "breastplate") against his would-be enemy.

As is typical in Celtic spirituality, nature figures strongly into the scheme of things. While this is a lesson we tend to forget, Patrick is much like his psalmist predecessors in invoking the works of nature - the works of God's hand - when speaking to God. So here is a portion of St. Patrick's Breastplate:

*I bind myself today to the virtue of Heaven,
In light of Sun,
In brightness of Snow
In splendour of Fire,
In speed of Lightning,
In swiftness of Wind,
In depth of Sea,
In stability of Earth,
In compactness of Rock.*

*I bind myself today to God's Virtue to pilot me,
God's might to uphold me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me,
God's ear to hear me,
God's Word to speak to me,
God's hand to guard me,
God's way to lie before me,
God's shield to protect me,
God's host to secure me,
Against snares of demons,
Against seductions of vices,
Against lusts of nature,
Against everyone who wishes ill to me,
Afar and a near,
Alone and in a multitude.*

I almost feel like this speaks for itself, and I don't really have anything to add. But I guess I can say that the line that speaks most loudly to be is "God's eye to look before me." It seems to me like I've lived most of my life seeking to follow God, which is a daunting task. It's like of like putting on a blindfold and saying, "Okay, God, tell me how many steps to take before I turn." Again and again, I'm reminded of the saying, "We make plans and God laughs."

This can be really frustrating, especially when I'm really proud of my plans, or have spent a lot of time in the details. It's sort of like when Hannah was two, and we would play with blocks. I would construct a really cool castle with towers and a moat, and her great delight was in kicking the whole thing over, just so she could yell, "Mama build a tower and Hannah knock it down!!!"

Now I don't think God fells my plans just for the fun of it; rather it is because my plans weren't the right ones in the first place. The truth is, it can be a bitter pill to swallow. But as Patrick so poetically reminds us, we trust in God's eye to look before us. God knows what's happening down the road, when we have no clue. God sees a picture bigger than we can fathom. God isn't a two-year-old, kicking down our beautiful castles for fun. God is looking ahead of us, guiding us around roadblocks we can't see, making sure that in our blindfolded stumbling, we don't fall into a hole.

I encourage you to read Patrick's prayer again. What lines stick out to you? Where do you see God in nature? Which aspect of God is present in your life this week?

Submitted by Siobhan Warren

Day Sixteen, Saturday, March 18, 2017

INFULENCING OTHERS

The elders who lead the church well should receive double honor, especially those who work hard by speaking and teaching...1 Timothy 5:17.

When I saw the picture of the new officers' ordination and installation in the February 2017 Evangel, I was reminded that First Presbyterian Church is so fortunate to have members who will serve as leaders – Session, Deacons, Music, Sunday School, Youth – and other ways that are too numerous to mention. We need to pray for them and thank them for their leadership.

The following from the “Daily Spiritual Refreshment for Women Devotional” states the following:
“You are a leader. Maybe you don't think so, but you are. Someone looks up to you and would like your support, advice, and encouragement. Perhaps you doubt your ability to lead well. Still, you long to live and inspire others with a sincere heart – with intentionality, wisdom, and grace. Be encouraged, because God loves to guide you. Partner with Him, and be assured that He's working in you to influence others for good.”

Church leadership can be challenging but also rewarding. Leaders need the support and prayers of every member of the congregation and their involvement. There are many ways to assist our leaders – find your area of service at First Pres.

Prayer: ***Dear Lord, guide our pastor and leaders and help them throughout 2017 and beyond. Encourage others to be involved in the life of our church. Amen***

Submitted by Diana Olinger

Third Sunday in Lent, March 19, 2017

CHOOSING THE RIGHT CAREER

Scripture: "May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us- yes, establish the work of our hands. - Psalm 90:17

How a person approaches the new day will have significant impact emotionally and even sometimes physically. Many of us have probably thought, "not another day of that place." "TGIF!" "I can't take another day of working with that person", and the list can go on and on. As a teacher said to me many years ago, "You can wish your life away." It does seem like my 64 years have passed rather quickly. This seems more apparent as parents watch their children being an infant one day and suddenly asserting their independence the next.

Most people begin their careers with hopes of achieving success. If we haven't entered our work as a result of God's calling, we will eventually face a chasm of deep frustration and emptiness. Success flatters but does not provide a lasting sense of purpose and fulfillment. So often we enter careers with wrong motives - money, prestige, and even pressure from parents or peers. Failing to match our work with our giftedness and calling is like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. If that happens over an extended period, a person gets "burned out" and/or crashes.

At this time, many make another mistake. Workplace believers think that beginning a new career in "full-time Christian work" will fill the emptiness they feel. However, this only exacerbates the problem because they are again trying to put another square peg into a round hole. The problem is not whether we should be in "Christian work" or "secular work," but rather what work is inspired by gifts and calling. If there is one phrase I wish I could remove from the English language it is "full-time Christian work." If you are a Christian, you are in full-time Christian work, whether you are driving nails or preaching the gospel. The question must be, are you achieving the God-given calling for your life? God has called people into business to fulfill His purposes just as much as He has called people to be pastors or missionaries.

It is time for workplace believers to stop feeling like second-class citizens for being in business. It is time workplace believers stop working toward financial independence so that they can concentrate on their "true spiritual calling." This is the great deception for those called to business.

Significance comes from fulfilling the God-given purpose for which you were made. Ask Him to confirm this in your own life.

Prayer: *Glorious Heavenly Father, Model of all those who are devoted to labor, obtain for me the grace to work conscientiously, putting the call of duty above my many sins, to work with thankfulness and joy, considering it an honor to employ and develop, by means of labor, the gifts received from God. Help me this day to work with order, peace, prudence, and patience, never surrendering to weariness or difficulties; to work, above all, with purity of intention, and with detachment from self, having always a desire to gain Your approval and the end result of being with You in Heavenly bliss away from this earthly world's demands.*

Thank you Precious Father for the talents bestowed upon me and opportunities made available through Your intervention. In my loving Savior's name, Amen!

Author: Dan Thompson, September 22 2016

Day Seventeen, Monday, March 20, 2017

“Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” Joshua 1:9

In the times that we face today I feel that many people have lost their hope. As each day progresses it feels as if the world grows darker and more violent. Many times it is hard to find a light to look for. This is why God reminds us in Joshua 1:9, “Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord, your God, am with you wherever you go.”

God is a resonating beacon of hope that shines down on every corner of the Earth. In our darkest times is when he shines the brightest. Many times I find myself looking towards that light as an inspiration.

When myself and the fellow youth took our trip to Chicago we found other youth who didn't have the same structured lives that many of us take for granted. Yet every day these kids got up the same as me, got dressed, and ate breakfast all the same as me but faced different challenges. If these kids had enough faith to still get up in the morning to face the adversities that they harbor, then why can't we all.

Life is hard and will not get easier but we all have to get up in the morning. You have to find the one thing that keeps you going and hold on. “I the Lord your God, am with you...”

Submitted by Ben Hill

Day Eighteen, Tuesday, March 21, 2017

So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." (Gen. 32: 24-30)

We had no idea what exactly our son would say for his wedding vows, we only knew each of the couple would speak their very personal words. It took me by surprise, then, to hear him say very traditional words, "... in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live--"

These were not empty words, given that the one to whom he was making this promise had lived with diabetes since childhood. And then our son closed with the words, "--so help me God!" Some in the congregation chuckled. I was stunned. To me, these were the most moving words, asking while making this life-long commitment for the help, support, and blessing from God. Could he have said these vows here, at First Pres in Jacksonville? I wonder.

Years ago in a conversation, I heard from our then-Executive Presbyter that it's not the "out" people for whom the discussion about same-sex marriage within the church is the most painful. (When they don't feel welcome, they simply drop out of church, and so do their brothers, sisters, and friends.) No, our Executive Presbyter told me, it's the *parents* who struggle to reconcile their faith, their love for their children, and their congregations' responses. The *parents* would bring the topic of same-sex marriage to our Executive Presbyter when they felt their children were no longer welcome in the churches where they had grown up.

Where do we stand as a congregation? I know that, as we strive to be faithful to Christ's calling, individually our views on this matter range widely. I believe that, guided by the Holy Spirit, we have the strength also to wrestle with these questions of faith as a community.

Prayer: Creator God, when we wrestle with our faith, bless us like You blessed Jacob wrestling with the angel. Help us to see your image in all human beings. Open our minds and hearts to your boundless love and Grace. In the name of our Redeemer Christ. Amen.

Submitted by Almut Spalding

Day Nineteen, Wednesday, March 22, 2017

I sat at a stop light on Morton Avenue desperately trying not to check my emails, and as I seldom do, I looked at the driver waiting beside me. I usually do not enter into someone's world without permission and just stared straight ahead. But for some reason, this time, I looked to the side. There was a lady, perhaps 42 years old, decent car, nicely dressed, pretty... and she was sobbing. Not just a tear running down her cheek or a sad look on her face but truly sobbing. I could not look away. What do I do? Is she sick? Did she just get bad news? Is she hurt? Can I help? After what seemed an eternity, the light changed and we each drove forward. I had the urge to follow her but that did not seem appropriate and in the next block she turned right and took her story with her.

Her story..... I have thought of this so often since that day. We all have a story. I do not know yours and you do not know mine. Oh we may know bits and pieces but we cannot know the whole story. It is too long. Too involved. Too personal. Over the years, my wife and I have played a little story game. While in a restaurant or an airport, I would see a person or a couple or a family and I would dictate to her their story. Totally made up, of course, but a story never the less. She would then give me her version of their story. A silly game, but it proved to us how little we know about anyone and their life's challenges.

Understanding that you do not know the story of another will change your life. It will change how you see others and believe it or not, how others perceive you. Those who may appear laden and desperate on the outside might not be that way at all. Those who appear happy and content may carry an enormous burden. Whatever the case, I assure you that you do not understand why. Because you do not know their story.

All we can do is try. Talk to your friends and family. Talk to those who are only an acquaintance. Talk and try to understand before you judge. It is not necessary to totally understand because you never will. But you can try. We can all try.

There isn't anyone you couldn't love once you've heard their story. – Sister Mary Lou Knownacki

Submitted by Keith Bradbury

Day Twenty, Thursday, March 23, 2017

GO CUBS GO!

With God, we will gain the victory, and he will trample down our enemies. Psalm 60:12

It sure was a fun summer to cheer for the Chicago Cubs! Let's put aside my belief that God doesn't care who wins a baseball game. The fact is I've been a Cubs fan ever since I can remember. My dad grew up on the north side of Chicago. He wasn't alive in 1908, the last time the Cubs brought home the trophy, and he passed away in 2010, still waiting.... I learned from him (and others) not to count on it being "the Cubs' year."

Rather than thinking Game 7 of the 2016 World Series was pre-ordained, I look at it as "frosting on the cake." Actually, I had already won. The connection I felt with my dad last year was a reward in itself. I can't forget Dick Scott, too. And we are very blessed that we could also share this experience with Brad and Greg on this earth. This was our victory!

No, I don't believe God cares who wins a baseball game. But I feel our victory is a blessing from Him.

***Dear God,
We thank you for all our blessings, especially our family and friends. We know there will be times when we are disappointed. We pray for help in learning from all our circumstances. Amen***

Submitted by Pat Foss

Day Twenty-one, Friday, March 24, 2017

ALWAYS

Biblical References: 1st Thess. 5:16-18, 2nd Thess. 1:11, Eph. 5:20, Eph. 6:18, Phil: 4:4-7 and 5:12-14.

Philippians 5:12-14

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. NIV

I try to be a good Christian, but it's hard.

Some years ago, our family hiked to the bottom of the Grand Canyon. We followed the Bright Angel Trail into the Canyon, spent that night at Phantom Ranch, and climbed out on the Kaibab Trail. From the rim of the Canyon to the Colorado River is a drop of approximately a mile. The ascent on the second day is difficult, but anyone who has made this trip knows that words can't describe the experience. Each person will have unique memories about such a trip. Our faith journeys are similar to that. My experience, however, taught me that walking a trail is the easier path to take.

My faith journey feels like it has just begun and I am wearing a pair of stiff, new boots. Over the years, my journey has had successes and failures, but I judge that I have not attained any significant level of progress toward reaching the goal. Let's look at some of the disciplines we Christians are expected to achieve.

The letters of Paul provide sufficient material to digest for a lifetime. Paul admonishes us, in a gentle manner, to "rejoice always", "pray continually", and "give thanks in all circumstances." Elsewhere he concludes a directive with "always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." We are also instructed to "pray on all occasions." I confess I struggle to stay on the path. Each *all, always, continually, in everything, for everything* is another stone for me to stumble over. I have learned that putting one foot ahead of the other is what each of us must do until our trip comes to an end. In between times, pray constantly, because it is going to be hard.

Prayer: Lord, teach us to lean on Your Grace when our faith journey suffers setbacks and difficult stretches. Amen

Submitted by Larry Ladd

Day Twenty-two, Saturday, March 25, 2017

HOW ARE YOU LISTENING?

Scripture Reading: **"Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. Luke 8:9**

When I was growing up, our family often discussed the sermon after a Sunday worship service. One of our parents usually asked a question like "What did you think of the pastor's message?" The same question is still asked in many homes today. This is important because we gather for worship to hear what the Lord has to say to us.

Now, here's an equally important question: "How were the listeners this morning—did they listen well?" According to the Lord Jesus, listening is crucially important: "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." Or, as Jesus says after telling another parable, **"Consider carefully how you listen." (Luke 8:18).**

Listening to God's Word is a tremendous privilege, but it's also a great responsibility. And someday you and I as hearers of God's Word will have to give account for how we have listened and what we have done with what we have heard.

Listening can be difficult. After preaching for almost 50 years, I am discovering that listening is often more difficult than teaching or preaching. Again and again I find myself critiquing and even criticizing what I have heard instead of asking, "What did I hear the Lord say to me? How will it affect my life? What am I going to do about what I have heard?" That's what really matters. In the words of the apostle James, we must become doers of God's Word as well as hearers" (James 1:22).

YPrayer: ***Holy Spirit, teach us how to listen, and help us to become doers of your Word. In Jesus' name, Amen.***

Submitted by Dan Thompson

Author: Arthur Schoonveld, Wednesday, February 1, 2017 12:00 AM

Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 26, 2017

Scripture: Luke 11:9-13 - *“So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.*

“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for^d a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Listening to God: You think you have to understand everything before you can experience it. This misconception robs you of many blessings. There are some things you will never understand until you experience them. And there are some things you are not meant to understand this side of heaven. Instead of always demanding to understand my ways, experiment with trusting me. The best gift I can ever give you is the gift of my Spirit in your life. You don't have to understand it; just ask for the Spirit to come into your life and see what I do. Give me a tiny crack to operate in, and I will transform you.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, I trust You. I will endeavor to not try to understand everything. I open my heart to the Spirit and that it come into my life so I can see what You do. Open my eyes and transform me, I ask this in Your Name. Amen.*

Day 18 of “Sailboat Church”, by Joan S. Gray

Day Twenty-three, Monday, March 27, 2017

ARE YOU AN EXPERT BUILDER?

Scripture: "By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ." 1 Corinthians 3:10, NIV

Several years ago I got to watch my friends home be built from ground up. Their home had five sides, not the usual rectangle or square. It was very intriguing observing changes with every visit as the house took shape.

Work began by digging a deep hole for the foundations. The foundations had to be very carefully done, and had to be examined and approved by building inspectors before anything could continue. It made me think about 1 Corinthians 3:10 where the apostle Paul said he was an expert builder in building the Kingdom. He'd laid the foundations carefully, as everything depends on strong foundations, such as the truth of the word of God, and Jesus Christ Himself being the foundation. Next a steel skeletal frame of the house was lowered into the large hole and concrete was poured for stabilization and form the basement. This had to be straight and level. The first and second floors consisted of steel studs and cross beams. The stairs were there, but nothing around them. Everything must be checked many times with a plumb line or spirit level, because the whole structure would rely on the integrity of the foundations. They only put in the foundations once, and they must be perfectly level and straight. All work was given the okay by inspectors before construction could continue. In the same way, the teaching of the apostles had to be perfectly true. It was not to be mixed with anything else.

The next stage was interior floors, walls and other materials to give an identifiable shape of a house. This was a slow and critical process with much use of the plumb line and spirit level and diligent checking for their correct positioning. I knew about the normal every day level. But did not hadn't heard of a "spirit level." But being embarrassed to ask, I check the next best source, Google. "A spirit level is used to check the accuracy of a carpenter's type level, a perfectly horizontal surface is not needed. The level is placed on a flat and roughly level surface and the reading on the bubble tube is noted. This reading indicates to what extent the surface is parallel to the horizontal plane, according to the level, which at this stage is of unknown accuracy. The spirit level is then rotated through 180 degrees in the horizontal plane, and another reading is noted. If the level is accurate, it will indicate the same orientation with respect to the horizontal plane. A difference implies that the level is inaccurate.

Adjustment of the spirit level is performed by successively rotating the level and moving the bubble tube within its housing to take up roughly half of the discrepancy, until the magnitude of the reading remains constant when the level is flipped." This further reminded me that Jesus is the chief cornerstone in our lives, and we must constantly check that nothing has come in to move Him from His rightful position. We are to be anchored strongly in Him.

The scripture teaches us that many rejected Jesus as the chief cornerstone, and of course their lives would eventually come crashing down, as they weren't built on a sure foundation. Paul is saying that each of us should be careful how we build, for no one can build their life on anything other than the foundation of Jesus Christ. Do we need to inspect our foundations again to ensure this is truly the case?

Prayer: *Lord, I'm so glad in this very uncertain world where anything goes and everything is subjective that You alone are my sure foundation. Help me to be very careful how I build, with Your plumb line of truth, and to continually check that You are the cornerstone for my life. Please help me with this, in Jesus' name I pray. Amen.*

Submitted by Dan Thompson

Day Twenty-four, Tuesday, March 28, 2017

John 15: 1-9 - “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.”

I love watching Aspen trees in all the seasons. The heart shaped leaves are a beautiful vibrant green in the summer, quaking in the breezes. In the fall they turn bright yellow and some then turn orange. They provide magnificent scenery. Once they are gone in the winter you can see the structure of the straight trunks with branches reaching upward toward the sky. Aspen trees are among the world’s largest plants, as they grow from common roots underground, spreading to become forests.

They remind me of the early Christians with runner roots like the disciples who spread Christianity. Rooted in Jesus Christ, Christianity continues to spread and our faith sustains us. The gospel of John quotes Jesus as saying, we must remain in Jesus to bear fruit or flourish. Jesus is the vine and God is the gardener. No branch can bear fruit by itself. We need to stay connected through our devotions, prayers and worship.

Prayer: *Dear gracious, loving God, we praise you for your extravagant creations that beautify the earth and for the love you generously give us. Thank you for sending your son Jesus Christ to teach us. Help us stay ever connected to you through the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen*

Submitted by Cathy Green

Day Twenty-five, Wednesday, March 29, 2017

TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

Psalms 27:1- 1. The LORD is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid?

At this time of Lent, I always think back to what Jesus was going through at this time of his life. For those of us that remember the 1970's, 'Jesus Christ Superstar' came out as a musical at that time and was wildly popular. I loved both the music and the message, and at 16 and 17 years of age, I really thought about what Christ went through for US to be saved.

As I have gotten older and experienced life and death and pain and suffering and love and joy; the songs and words of the musical still remind me and make me think of the suffering that Jesus went through.

I also think since I became a parent, I cannot imagine asking of my child to do what God asked of His Son. And as a child, how can I not understand Jesus asking God if this is what he must do and then accepting his fate with no qualms. Christ knew his path and what was expected of him. He knew! And still, like all of us mere humans, He too questioned God. But He also knew that his Father was with him, always and that He was the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Without Jesus dying for us on the cross, we would not be saved.

With the sacrifices that God and Christ made for us, how can you not thank Him for every new day and be joyful. We also know, through our faith, that death is not the end, it is the beginning of our life with God. On our darkest days, try always to see the light, the good, the love.

Prayer: *Lord, please help me every day to see the beauty, to see the light, to see the wonders and know that anything that comes to me, I AM NOT ALONE, for you are with me always.*

Submitted by Sarah Yuska

Day Twenty-six, Thursday, March 30, 2017

HEAL THE ACHES OF MISTAKES

Scripture: **"For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good {is} not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin."**

Romans 7: 18-25, NIV

Tuesday is trash day in our neighborhood. Some neighbors leave theirs out all week while others bring that hidden Refuge from a garage or shed to the curb, come rain or shine. Then towards evening very few of us can be seen returning the containers back to their hide away until another Tuesday. When first moving here, no trash cans were left out all week. Now, out of 16 dwellings, very few of us hide our daily collection of leftovers and unwanted items out of sight. The routine reduces chances of someone going through thrown away mail, looking for personal information. In addition, there is a sense of secrecy regarding personal likes and dislikes. Last week my neighbor and I passed each other when returning our trash containers to the garage and I thanked him for not leaving that thing out all week. It makes the neighborhood look bad. He smiled and agreed.

The same behavior is common in many Christian daily lives, including myself. Calling someone a campus or work place newspaper is quite hypocritical when joining in on gossip with friends or family behind closed doors. My Wife commented yesterday after I had just checked several news bulletins that flashed up on my phone, "concentrating on all the negativity of our Country's current political situation, bringing it up whenever possible, will do very little for improving America's image around the world. We should live a life we know is right and just move on, putting the past behind us." So very true, we claim to be Christians, yet do things privately which would certainly not gain God's favor. Nothing is a secret from He who created all of us, knew each one of His children before we were born, and is well aware of our future. Accepting Christ as the Savior and the salvation gained by His horrific crucifixion and resurrection means letting go of guilt. Believers have been given a new clean slate after every prayer of repentance. What happened in the past, stays in the past.

Prayer: **"Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were {aroused} by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death. But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter."** Romans 7: 4-6

We try to hide our mistakes because we think it is possible. Even though we routinely notice secret sins of others around us being exposed, somehow there is a way for us to deny our sin and cover it up forever. It is much like the child who vehemently claims not reaching into the cookie jar, even though the protest is made, cookie crumbs are dangling from the child's mouth.

The same thing happens with believers. We try to hide our sins but eventually they are revealed. Admitting our failure allows us to gain God's forgiveness. God already knows all about our shortcomings, pronouncing unfair judgments upon others, telling lies, or any of those sins locked away in our soul's trash containers.

Pastor Doctor Robert Jeffers says,

"The word mistake can be thought of as an acrostic.

M stands for messages that give us feedback about life.

The **I** stands for interruptions that should cause us to reflect and think.

The **S**, signpost that direct us to the right path.

T, test that push us to greater maturity.

A, awakenings that keep us in the game mentally.

K, keys that allow us to unlock the next door of opportunity.

E, stands for explorations that let us journey where we've never been before.

Finally, **S**, statements about our development and progress."

The above are benefits of mistakes. But they only benefit a person if there is a willingness to admit making mistakes. Christ took all our mistakes to the grave so we can be dead to sin and alive in Christ. He chose us, we did not choose Him in the beginning. However, I pray every day that the number of those choosing Christ and accepting that glorious salvation will be greater than those who do not.

Prayer: *God of each new day, forgive me. I have been among the crowd that shouts Hosanna, save us Lord. But I tend to want Your salvation on my terms. Too often my claims of religion, our hailing of Christ, become insult, and alienation, and blame. We disgrace ourselves. Forgive us for seeking kingdoms that are not Yours. Forgive us for saying one thing and living another. Help us to walk the way of the cross. Give us strength to follow Christ. Grant us mercy. Give us peace. In my Lord Jesus' name, Amen!*

Submitted by Dan Thompson, January 19 2017

Day Twenty-seven, Friday, March 31, 2017

What is the origin of the peace sign? Supposedly it began as the logo for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the late 1950's. How do we live in peace?

John 14:27 "I am leaving you with a gift – peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid."

Our world never seems to be at peace. Major war is raging and we hear the latest statistics on the news. We hear about shootings at a school, a mall or in our own town. Peacefulness seems to elude us. How do we change this? Accept God's free gift of peace.

Philippians 4:6-7 "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

We won't find peace in this world...it will only be found in our hearts as we lean on the Lord and stay close to Him.

Numbers 6:24-26 "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."

Submitted by Cynthia Benton

Day Twenty-eight, Saturday, April 1, 2017

Ephesians 6 verse 23 –May God give peace to you, with faith from the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

When GOD solves our problems, we have faith in HIS abilities. When GOD doesn't solve our problems, HE has faith in our abilities.

One may observe God's accuracy in the hatching of eggs; those of the canary in 14 days; those of the barnyard hen in 21 days; eggs of ducks and geese in 28 days; those of the mallard in 35 days; the eggs of the parrot and the ostrich hatch in 42 days. (Notice, they are all divisible by seven, the number of days in a week!)

See God's wisdom in the making of an elephant. The four legs of this great beast all bend forward in the same direction. No other quadruped is so made. God planned that this animal would have a huge body - too large to live on two legs. For this reason, He gave it four fulcrums so that it can rise from the ground easily. The horse rises from the ground on its two front legs first. A cow rises from the ground with its two hind legs first.

How wise the Lord is in all His works of creation! Each watermelon has an even number of stripes on the rind. Each orange has an even number of segments. Each ear of corn has an even number of rows. Each stalk of wheat has an even number of grains. Every bunch of bananas has on its lowest row an even number of bananas, and each row decreases by one, so that one row has an even number and the next row an odd number.

Amazing! There's more...

The waves of the sea roll in on shore twenty-six to the minute in all kinds of weather. All grains are found in even numbers on the stalks. God has caused the flowers to blossom at certain specified times during the day. Linnaeus, the great botanist, once said that if he had a conservatory containing the right kind of soil, moisture, and temperature, he could tell the time of day or night by the flowers that were open and those that were closed.

The lives of each of us may be ordered by the Lord in a beautiful way for His glory, if we will only entrust Him with our lives. If we try to regulate our own lives, we will have only mess and failure. Only God, who made our brains and hearts, can successfully guide them to a profitable end. When you carry the Bible, Satan has a headache; when you open it, he collapses. When he sees you reading it, he loses his strength, and when you stand on the Word of God, Satan can't hurt you! Life without God is like an un-sharpened pencil - it has no point. I pray God bless you in ways you never even dreamed.

Anonymous

Prayer: *Lord, please open our hearts to the wonders around us and help us to remember that we are all God's children with promises of His love and wonder all around us.*

Submitted by Connie Roegge

Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 2, 2017

SUN / SON

Bible verse: ***“Be still and know that I am God”.***

I was talking to my granddaughter, Molly, about my days as a kindergarten teacher; remembering a song/finger play about, “The Funny Little Snowman who was happy and gay when the wind would blow and the skies were gray. When he saw the sun, he’d better run, run, run.”

Unlike the snowman, I love the sun; it makes everything seem more positive and upbeat.

Comparing the sun to the Son of God, I think positive thoughts and know with the SON I won’t have to run, run, run away from troubles and fears. He will take care of me and my loved ones.

Submitted by Marilyn Mitchell

Day Twenty-nine, Monday, April 3, 2017

Colossians 1:10

“So that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please Him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,”

I'm sure this has happened to you before. Something will trigger a memory and a song from the past will pop into your head. After recently “camping” with my granddaughter and her parents, I kept finding myself humming an old Girl Scout tune when I woke up in the morning. I can still remember standing around a flagpole in the early morning sun singing: GOD HAS CREATED A NEW DAY, SILVER AND GREEN AND GOLD. How appropriate to start the day with a reminder to thank God for the beautiful new day unfolding before me.

However, it was frustrating that I couldn't remember all the words to the song so I googled it and discovered the last two lines were LIVE THAT THE SUNSET MAY FIND YOU, WORTHY HIS GIFTS TO HOLD. Even better! Now when I hum the *entire* song I am reminded to try to live each day as compassionate and honorable as I can.

Prayer: ***Dear Lord, thank you for each new day and the opportunities and possibilities it brings. We pray that by the end of the day, our words and deeds are deserving of Your abundant gifts, in Jesus' name. Amen***

Submitted by Nancy Bradbury

Day Thirty, Tuesday, April 4, 2017

Ralph Marston writes in "The Daily Motivator": The keys to patience are acceptance and faith. Accept things as they are, and look realistically at the world around you. Have faith in yourself and in the direction you have chosen.

Psalm 25: 4-5 says, "*Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.*"

We must remind ourselves every day that God is our Savior and our hope should be in Him all day long. Whatever guidance we need we must ask God to show us, teach us, guide us. We can be sure we will be led down the right path.

Let your confident expectation be in Him all day long. Keep our eyes in today and do not run ahead into tomorrow. He will walk with us and save us from despair and destruction.

We need to pray and wait on the Lord 'expectantly'. Expect Him to answer you and show you clearly where to walk – and He will. The truth will always be our guide.

Submitted by Cynthia Benton

Day Thirty-one, Wednesday, April 5, 2017

Romans 8: 22-23 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

In this passage nature is thought of as sharing in the stress, anxiety, and pain which we ourselves feel as we wait for the promised redemption. When I think of nature, I immediately envision trees. Trees that are in full foliage during the summer, that are brilliantly colored in the fall, that are statuesque during the winter without their leaves, and that experience rebirth in the spring. This is an astounding evolution each year.

Many years ago, when I was much younger, I taught in the gifted program at MacMurray College. One summer I had created a class for third graders called "Hexapods". This is the scientific name for insects. We went out to the Town Brook running through campus and collected insects. When we brought them inside, we examined them with our naked eyes first, then under a dissecting microscope. The third graders were excited to do this, and I as the teacher learned as much as they did. We were all amazed at the brilliance of colors, the patterns on the insects' bodies and the uniqueness of their legs, heads, thoraxes, and abdomens. The beauty of nature shone through in these little critters. The majesty of our God-created natural world is astounding, just as our Lord is! Praise God!

Prayer: ***Dear Lord, we thank you for the beauty of our natural world. We ask the Holy Spirit to continue to help us be loving people in Your natural world. We ask this in Your Name. Amen***

Submitted by Guy Crumley

Day Thirty-two, Thursday, April 6, 2017

When you have entered the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, ... take some of the first fruits of all that you produce ... and put them in a basket. Then go to the place the LORD your God will choose ... Then you shall declare before the LORD your God: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, ... But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labor. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our ancestors, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm ... He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the first fruits of the soil that You, LORD, have given me." ... Then You, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house. When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce ..., giving it to the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows, so that they may eat their fill within your towns, then you shall say before the LORD your God: "I have ... given it to the Levites, the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows, in accordance with Your entire commandment that You commanded me; I have neither transgressed nor forgotten any of Your commandments." (Deut. 26: 1-2, 5, 11-13)

What *are* our commandments that we are not to forget as Christians? Refugees are not included in biblical commandments, "not a Bible issue," as one prominent pastor insisted recently. How, then, do we understand instructions in the book of Joshua to establish cities of refuge? How are we to read the above passage from Deuteronomy that is often recited at Thanksgiving?

Last year on the first Sunday in Lent, it was my turn to preach, and I shared the story of a refugee from Eritrea. We'll call him Hailab. He fled a dictatorial system that virtually enslaves its own citizens. Two and a half years after risking life and limb, after a harrowing escape through Sudan, and endless rounds of waiting for papers, background checks, and money, he arrived at Dulles International Airport in Washington, D.C. with a visa to pursue graduate studies at the University of Kentucky. Today, he is a Resident in Medical Physics in one of our country's cancer centers. Reflecting on his story, Hailab amazingly thought that it was easy. "Nothing bad happened between there and here," he said—and "I have never felt like a foreigner here." As I write this, Hailab would be one of the refugees detained at US airports. I was never a refugee myself, but I grew up with stories of fleeing from war, stories of starting over with just what my parents, and their parents and siblings—all of them refugees—could carry. Seeking a place to live in safety—that's an age old human desire. That's why the story of the Exodus is retold every year at Passover, in order *not* to forget what it is like to be oppressed and fleeing for safety.

Caring about refugees *is* a Biblical commandment. How are we to proceed?

Prayer : O God, You guided our wandering ancestors and promised them a home to live in safety, and You led the people of Israel when they fled from bondage in Egypt. Guide us in our own wanderings, and help us to remember that just yesterday, we were aliens in a foreign land ourselves. Endow us with courage and generosity to share with others the milk and honey that You have given us. Amen.

Submitted by Almut Spalding

Day Thirty-three, Friday, April 7, 2017

Scripture: Matthew 6:14-15 - For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Listening to God: When you refuse to forgive someone, you bind that person and the hurt they caused you to your soul. This blocks your spiritual growth and gives the adversary lots to work with in your life. I cannot bless you as much as I would like if you are holding on to things you should have forgiven. Unforgiveness is poison to your spirit. If you can't bring yourself to forgive, pray to me your desire to want to forgive. I want to set you free. When you let me do that, many will be blessed through you.

Prayer: *Lord, please help me to be the person that you wish for me to be. Help me to remember my neighbor as well as myself and to be more understanding and forgiving to all Your people. In Your Son's name, Jesus, who died for our sins, Amen.*

Day 31 of "Sailboat Church", by Joan S. Gray

Day Thirty-four, April 8, 2017

My granddaughter Emma age 5, has learned this very important lesson, "You get what you get and you don't throw a fit". This little bit of advice works very well in many situations. For instance, when choosing a popsicle out of the box in the freezer, you just can't really tell for sure which color or flavor you are going to get until you open that white plastic sleeve! Oh...the things we can learn from the little ones in our lives.

Daniel Gilbert in his book "Stumbling on Happiness" says, "Life will never be perfect, no matter how hard you try. Even if you pour your heart and soul into it, you will never have that perfection you seek. There will always be broken hearts, there will always be days where nothing goes right. But you must accept and learn that even the most imperfect things will always be made better with love and laughter."

One of my favorite Psalms is **Psalm 118** and specifically the following verses:

Verse 1: Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; His love endures forever.

Verse 14: The LORD is my strength and my defense; He has become my salvation.

Verse 24: This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!

Submitted by Cynthia Benton

Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017

PARKING LOT

“Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you.” - Genesis 13:17

Several months ago I decided to begin parking toward the far edge of the parking lot at work. So often I would find myself racing into the parking lot, already wearied by the anticipated demands of the rising day and intent on finding the closest spot to the door to save me a few steps getting inside.

Choosing now to intentionally park the car farther away from the building's entrance has restored a sense of equanimity to my mornings. No longer must I expend energy finding and squeezing into the nearest spot. Like a morning ray of sun breaking through a distant cloud, now I manage to cut through the morning chaos by this small controlled act. Taking a little extra time gives me the feeling that I've gained more time.

What do I do with the extra time it takes me to walk up to the building? I remember the Nigerian proverb, “When you pray, move your feet.” So, I pray. For myself and all those who enter the building this day. Some days I pray a prayer of thanks for my ability to own a car, to drive, to walk with an abled body. Some days I hope that an empty parking spot closer to the building will bless another person who may arrive more harried than I. As I walk, I remember to breathe.

Most of all, I have a moment longer to remember Jesus, who never drove or parked a car, but did an awful lot of walking.

Prayer: ***May the steps of my feet and the prayers of my lips beat a pleasing pulse in your heart, O God. Amen***

Submitted by Tim Chipman

Day Thirty-five, Monday of Holy Week, April 10, 2017

THE CROSS

The cross – the outward manifestation of God’s love and faithfulness, through Christ, to us.

On our 5th anniversary, in 1961, my husband gave me a gold cross necklace. I continue to wear it today. Many’s the time through the years I have reached for that little cross pressing it firmly between my thumb and forefinger to remind me that God is with me and His guidance would lead me through the challenge at hand.

Similarly, the giant cross at the front of our sanctuary was a great comfort. It’s imposing size always reminded me that ‘God is huge and solid and available’.

Question: Are you aware of the many crosses around you? Just take a look at a telephone pole, branches of a tree, cracks in the sidewalk, solid doors, mullions in a window (mullions are the vertical and horizontal bars between window panes) or grout between the tiles. They may be upright or leaning, but there they are! **“...lo, I am with you always.” Matthew 28:20**
Where will you look?

Prayer: ***Thank you Lord for your availability through the cross. Amen***

Submitted by Betty Jackson

Day Thirty-six, Tuesday of Holy Week, April 11, 2017

I have read a lot about Buddhism over the past three years. I would make a terrible Buddhist, too many differences between them and me. But I do not discount a lot of what they profess. So being a free born American and being raised by parents who taught me to know what I like and what I believe, I find many examples of passages I can cling to.

Specifically:

There are three types of sick people to be found in the world.

- There is the sick person who, whether he obtains the proper diet, proper medicines, proper nursing or not, **will not** recover from his illness.
- There is the sick person who, whether he obtains the proper diet, proper medicines, the proper nursing or not, **will** recover from his sickness anyway.
- Then there is the sick person who will recover from his illness **only** if he gets the proper diet, medicines and nursing.

I am the third sick person. I only cope with this world if I have Christ in my life. Turning to Him in both good times and troubled times have been my salvation. Repeatedly. I think many feel as I do. Only knowing that God is guiding us can we get to where we are going. Only with His uplifting arms can we rise above petty things. To understand one another, to help and to heal one another. To forgive one another. Take the time to talk to God. He is listening. You will recover from your illness.

We rely on Him for our spiritual diet, our scriptural medicine, our continual and eternal care.

Isaiah 58:8---Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

Submitted by Keith Bradbury

Day Thirty-seven, Wednesday of Holy Week, April 12, 2017

LIVING IN THE NOW

We have all on occasion lain awake at night, unable to sleep, consumed by worry. We worry about what we should do and how something's going to turn out, or worry about the future that is so distant we cannot possibly have any control over it. We all know the mantras about not dwelling on the past or the future, but instead focusing on the here and now. That's not as easy as it sounds, but it is surely easier when we try to let "Jesus Take the Wheel", as country singer Carrie Underwood says.

For the parent of a child born with a disability, living in the now is even more difficult. It's a frequent statement among my fellow parents who also found themselves in the world of disability, that life was forever changed from that moment of diagnosis. We immediately began to worry about the future of our family and of this child. Will he be accepted? Will I be able to give him what he needs? Will he have a happy life? What will happen to him when I am gone? In the blink of an eye, we go from giving birth to thinking about what will happen when we are no longer physically on this earth to care for this baby in our arms? Wow. How overwhelming! But how do we slow down and quiet our thoughts, focus on the here and now and enjoy what God has just given us... a beautiful baby that is a made of God and perfect in his sight.

All we can do, is take one step at a time, one learning opportunity at a time, and benefit from the knowledge of fellow parents of children with disabilities, our doctors, therapists and teachers. We equip ourselves with the information and tools we need to effectively advocate for our child to the best of our ability, trying not to focus on future hurdles but on each step of growth and development, one by one. In one of my favorite books that I often share with new parents in this situation, "Changed by a Child", Ann Lamott says, "You don't have to see where you're going, you don't have to see your destination or everything along the way. You just have to see two or three feet ahead of you". I try to live today loving my child (who is now an adult) just the way he is and not worry in constant fear about what the future holds.

Sarah Young, in "Jesus Calling: Enjoying Peace in his Presence", talks about living in the now in this way, (written as if coming from the voice of Jesus):

"Follow Me one step at a time. That is all I require of you. In fact, that is the only way to move through this space/time world. You see huge mountains looming, and you start wondering how you're going to scale those heights. Meanwhile, because you're not looking where you're going, you stumble on the easy path where I am leading you now. As I help you get back on your feet, you tell Me how worried you are about the cliffs up ahead. But you don't know what will happen today, much less tomorrow. Our path may take an abrupt turn, leading you away from those mountains. There may be an easier way up the mountains than is visible from this distance. If I do lead you up the cliffs, I will equip you thoroughly for that strenuous climb. I will even give My angels charge over you, to preserve you in all your ways. Keep your mind on the present journey, enjoying My Presence. Walk by faith, not by sight, trusting me to open up the way before you."

I still have those sleepless nights now and then. When that happens, I try to channel my worries and fears into prayer, turn it over to Him, and count the blessings in my life in the here and now.

Psalm 91:11-12 - For He orders his angels to protect you wherever you go. They will stead you with their hands to keep you from stumbling against the rocks on the trail.

Submitted by Gail Olson

Day Thirty-eight, Maundy Thursday, April 13, 2017

“Be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God.” Romans 12:2 (NRSV)

How many times have you either heard or said yourself, “But I don’t like change!” To be honest if I had a dollar for each time I’ve said that or heard it said by others, I believe I would have a pretty hefty sum in my bank account. Oftentimes, members of various congregations have made this comment when discussions like different styles of worship, song selection, service times, offerings of classes, or even brand new methods of mission offerings.

Refusal to change unfortunately has often been a very real stumbling block for both religious groups and society as a whole. *“Change involves loss of the known and risk of the unknown.”* Change may be good but not always. As we pass through life, Christ is there alongside us in this journey of change. It is through the gift of the Holy Spirit and God’s grace which allows us to throw away the old thoughts and actions and gives new insights to thoughts, attitudes, and ways of serving God. As we grow in our faith journey, daily life becomes a transition into mirroring the likeness of Jesus.

During my serving on the PNC committee, I went through a personal faith enriching experience as I read the *PIF*’s and met with the rest of the committee members. I felt such a close bonding with my team members that quite honestly, I’m sorry to say, I really wouldn’t have experienced had I not been selected to be a part of this team. I appreciated the heartfelt scriptures and devotions shared before we started each meeting as well as the prayers given prior to dismissing. This intense time we spent together gave me such a wealth of refreshing ways to be alert to God’s calling that I will never forget. It changed me in ways I never thought possible and I certainly want this sort of change to continue. As I realize (and I hope you as members of this congregation do as well) when one embraces change, we allow the Holy Spirit to renew us, remake us in order for us to serve God more effectively, and help us grow spiritually.

Prayer: *Jesus, please keep changing us. Continually renew our thoughts and hearts so that we may serve you more efficiently. As we face daily changes, helps us to see clearly with an openness and a wisdom that welcomes this change and brings us closer to you. Amen.*

1: Taken from “These Day” July 15, 2015 written by Sara Miles.

Submitted by Barb Bucy

Day Thirty-nine, Good Friday, April 14, 2017

Galatians 5:22 - But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness.

This Is My Song
(lyrics from hymn)

This is my song, Oh God of all the nations,
A song of Peace for land afar and mine.
This is my home, the country where my heart is;
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my sacred shrine.
But other hearts in other lands are beating,
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.

My country's skies are bluer than the ocean,
And sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine.
But other lands have sunlight too and clover,
And skies are everywhere as blue as mine.
Oh hear my song, oh God of all the nations,
A song of Peace for their land and for mine.

May Truth and Freedom come to every nation;
May Peace abound where strife has raged so long;
That each may seek to love and build together,
A world united, righting every wrong;
A world united in its love for freedom,
Proclaiming Peace together in one song.

This is one of my favorite songs. I cannot tell you why other than the words and music make my heart sing out for Christ when I hear or sing this tune. I even have it on my Goggle music on my phone. Whenever I feel the need of a "cleansing" song, this is one of my go to's. I think partly because of this day of "ME", with everyone doing what is best for "me" and not my brother, or sister, or neighbor, or fellow nation, I feel that this song reminds me that WE, everyone, whether you are man, woman, black, white, yellow, red, American, Mexican, European, Iranian, Syrian, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or Atheist...NO MATTER WHO YOU ARE...WE ARE ALL OF GOD'S CHILDREN, and we should always be thinking not of ourselves but of others.

Prayer: ***Lord, please help us to put others ahead of ourselves. Help us to be more understanding of differences and help us to work together as your children for peace for all.***

Submitted by Sarah Yuska

Day Forty, Saturday of Holy Week, April 15, 2017

A RISKY RUN

Faith is a great thing. I have been thinking about it a lot. Oftentimes, faith is described as believing in something that's not guaranteed. Faith is a risk, and a wholehearted risk that could have serious consequences. An example pastors use a lot is a chair. Every time you sit in a chair, you have faith that the chair will support you. You are not always guaranteed this privilege. What if the chair has a loose bolt, or the chair is old and breaks?

Recently, I went for a run and came to a cross in the road. There was a stop sign before the intersection that was along my route. As I was crossing, a car made a speedy halt right up to the crosswalk. It always scares me a little when this happens, but I never want to interrupt my run (unless truly necessary). I know if it's a competent person they will stop for one or both of these reasons: It's the law to stop at a stop sign, or they could hit an innocent pedestrian (We do have the right of way at crosswalks). I always have to have faith in the person driving. In a lot of ways, God is driving and we just need to trust Him.

Telling someone to have faith or letting God drive is difficult. As Christians, we risk a part of our life and devotion to something we cannot hear, smell, taste, touch, or see. But how will we ever know this to be absolutely true unless we have a little faith and try it? How will we know the car will ever stop if we never cross the road?

Faith is also a two way lane. It's all about giving and receiving. As a high school student, I am more likely to work harder if a teacher supports me, or has faith. When a teacher has faith, I get better grades, my teacher earns more of my respect and my best efforts. Because I put the effort in, the teacher is more likely to put more faith in me and other students to continue the two way lane of trust. The cycle is the same with God. God gives us life decisions and then has enough faith in us to choose the right choices (whether we do or not). But God's faith goes beyond me. I want to share that faith with others. By putting our faith in others like God does for us, we serve as an example so that others may make the right choices in their lives.

Romans 15:13 quotes, "May the God of hope fill you with peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. It may be hard to trust God, but the risk is worth it. If we cross the street, we can show others the possibilities and benefits that a giving and receiving relationship has to offer. So next time, cross the street; And know that God is the one driving.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, thank you for the faith You put in us to do Your will. Help me to put faith in others so that they may understand the love, patience, understanding, and trust that I have found in You. May my faith never run out, but instead, "... overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."* Help me to cross a street that I have been struggling to cross today, and bring me closer to You. Amen.

Submitted by Ellie Smith

Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017

Scripture: Micah 6: 6-8 – With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Listening to God: I demand integrity from my disciples. You cannot walk humbly with me and walk in arrogance with your brothers and sisters. You cannot be a saint in prayer and a tyrant in your job or with your family. I have given you many things that I intend you to use for the good of those in need around you. The quality of your human relationships shows the true quality of your relationship with me. If you are truly walking with me, I bring you face to face with the needs of my other children. As you treat them, so you treat me.

Prayer: ***Lord, help me to be a better disciple. I need help in remembering that You alone are the one to judge. I am here to serve You and to show Your love to others. I need help in remembering to act with love, not to judge others, and to be humble in all ways. I know that I should have only one thought, which is to love You with all my heart and all my soul. If I can do that then I will be a better disciple only with Your love and help. Amen.***

Day 35 of "Sailboat Church", by Joan S Gray