

2018

“Meditations of Our Hearts”



LENT

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

Romans 12:1-2 “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

This year, two “holidays” bookmark our Lenten journey: Ash Wednesday is on Valentine’s day, and Easter lands on April Fools’ Day. For me, it causes me to figure out how to proclaim the Christian message that does not conform to the world, but rather is transformed by God.

Lent is a forty-day journey that leads to Easter and has its roots in Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness. It is a period of reflection, prayer and fasting. We ponder the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. The music during Lent is usually more somber and there are intentionally no “Alleluias” sung. Sometimes people give something up or “fast” as a daily reminder. While others will add a spiritual discipline.

On a romantic holiday where cards and chocolates are often exchanged, this year we begin a journey that cannot compare at all to God’s love for us, which is unending. I hope in your daily Lenten devotions you can engage in spiritual worship and a renewing of your mind. As you take this journey, I hope by the end you are not surprised or “fooled” that Christ is still alive and can transform you.

I am thrilled for the many voices in our congregation who have such an important message to share. Each voice offers an opportunity to not to be conformed by the world. Each perspective is like the tiles of a beautiful mosaic, each unique, but when put together creates a marvelous display of God’s love.

Please set aside time each day to read scripture, pray and reflect. When you do, take a deep breath, letting go all the distractions the world has, and remember that God has a plan for you that is good and acceptable and perfect. During each day, look for the many ways God may be speaking to you.

Blessings,
Rev. Jonathan Warren

Thank you!

Many people have thanked me along the way of 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. Throughout this year, if you find inspiration to write something of your own or read a devotion that means a lot to you, please don't wait until January of 2019 to send it to me, send it to me at any time in the year either through the church office or by my email, sarahyuska@gmail.com.

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

- Sarah Yuska

Day One, Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2018

What is Lent?

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."

A traditional approach to this church season is that, for the 40 days of Lent, we should give up something important to us - chocolate, smoking, favorite games, desserts, purchasing - i.e. desired appliances, clothing, etc., etc., etc. Doing so implies that this will prepare us for Easter and make us think more about Christ's giving Himself for us on Good Friday! Another tradition in some areas - Quebec, St. Louis, New Orleans, Rio, is to have a gigantic party before Lent; enjoy yourself to excess before you give up things for Lent.

But there's another way to look at Lent and to live during Lent. We can let our minds focus on how to give of ourselves from what God has given to us and then serve others more fully, more appropriately, and more joyfully! We thus put to use God's free gift of Christ to use for others.

Start with devotions every morning, in the process thanking, forgiving, asking directions, praying for wisdom for what to say to others and how to care. We might start, if we don't already do so, by calling one and/or sending cards to the ill and the bereaved. We could think about things we have that others might really have a need for. We could consider how we might try to mend broken relationships and also attempt to see the good in others, rather than judging them adversely.

Giving up certain things in Lent may be helpful, but let us at the same time grow in joyful service to our Lord Jesus Christ.

- Submitted by William Cross

(From the 2008 Meditations of Our Hearts)

Day Two, Thursday, February 15

Psalm 130: 1,2,5,6.

Out of the depths I cry to you Lord; Lord hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. I wait for the Lord...I wait for the Lord.

You cry, you beg, and you scream trying to make God hear you. It is all in vain; He already does. He listens when you whisper. He listens when you don't say a word. He listens when your heart breaks or when you can't make a sound or even a coherent thought.

He listens, He hears, He knows. He knows every thought, feeling, and sin.. There is no hiding or covering up. We are all unmasked before Him. Yet he doesn't have a long list in his back pocket of all we've done wrong and all the ways we have messed up. If He did, we'd all be done for. Instead, He forgives us our wrongs, teaches us what we can learn from our mistakes and comforts us when it's all too much.

So instead of crying, begging, and screaming for attention, breathe and wait. Inhale, exhale, and wait at his feet.

Prayer

Lord, I praise your name. Thank you God for being with me. You're with me through the good and the bad. Thank you for being a God who sees me. You see me when I bring you glory and when I bring you disgrace, and love me the same. Lord, teach me to wait in your presence. I ask this in your name, Amen.

- Submitted by Guy Crumley

Day Three, Friday, February 16

Gratitude

Since my retirement, I've become somewhat of a master with the hot glue gun, ribbons and dried flowers. Yes, I have been spending quite a bit of time on Pinterest, choosing crafty projects to tackle. It was during one of these searches that I saw Gratitude Jars. What a fantastic idea! I imagine taking a Mason jar from the cabinet and gluing some burlap around it. Then I'll grab some orange and brown ribbon with turkeys or colorful fall leaves, and hot glue it on to make it look cute.

Now, for the slips of paper! I'll find some little patterned slips of paper the family can use for writing their gratitude phrases. We will capture sweet moments for which we are thankful. Of course, we will jot them down immediately and then — maybe later that year, say Christmas — we'll pull them out and read them as a family.

Everyone will sit around the fireplace, drinking eggnog, taking turns reading them, smiling at the sweet memories.

Psych! Okay, let's get real! It's more likely my gratitude jar will take in three or four slips of paper before being shoved to the back of a shelf somewhere, forgotten. It's a great idea, but somehow a pretty jar doesn't do the heart work for me.

In [Luke 17:11](#), ten lepers dare to approach Jesus. They are unclean. They are contagious, and despised by all who see them. Jesus sends them to the priest, and on the way, their disease is healed. No more disfigurement. No more pain. They can return to their jobs and families. Imagine their joy as they danced into the temple, showing the priest their restored fingers and skin as new as a babe.

One, a Samaritan, returns to thank Jesus.

Only one.

There is no doubt the other nine are just as elated, but only one is grateful enough to return and thank Jesus. Nine people are healed on the exterior, but there's some inner work that still needs to be done.

Sometimes our greatest heart work takes place when we acknowledge where we are the least thankful.

Maybe this Thanksgiving your house will be full. There'll be dirty dishes. Lots of them. Family will converge upon your home. Kids running everywhere. Maybe that one uncle or cousin will tell that same old joke — the corny one that isn't that funny, but he can't help but tell it year after year. You see your great Aunt coming toward you, the one who loves to grab your face and kiss you smack on the lips, arms outstretched. She's already puckering up as she makes eye contact with you, "Come give me some sugar!" It's easy to get distracted by the noise or the mess, but I can't help but wonder, *what if we stepped into our ingratitude with honesty?*

Dear Lord, today I saw the mess and heard the noise but failed to be grateful for the people around the table. Let me pause for a moment and point out all the reasons I'm thankful.

People get busy with life. Errands, work, family, church meetings... I never have time to do what I want! I'm soooooo busy!! Where did the day go?!

God, have I thanked You lately for giving me a feeling of usefulness and purpose in my life?

Oh Lord, I gripe about my husband always up in his office working. He's busy all of the time! Can't he even take time out for lunch with me every now and then or go take a walk with me?... when just months ago I was praying that we'd have enough money to pay our taxes and for our daughter's upcoming wedding.

God, have I stopped to thank You for provision?

I have a birthday coming up...another birthday. 60 is staring me in the face! When I look in the mirror, I see those years adding up.

Father, I see wrinkles and years gaining, but I failed to thank You for another day. I'd like to change that.

When we step honestly into areas of ingratitude, it has the power to change us. We run back to Jesus, aware of the immense gifts we've been given.

Maybe one day I'll make that pretty jar with a burlap ribbon, but for now I'm asking the Holy Spirit to open my eyes to see where ingratitude might be taking root.

This Thanksgiving, and every day, let's listen to our words. Let's look for the miracles and write them on our hearts.

Let's run to Jesus and tell Him ... thank You!

Father, sometimes we take my miracles for granted, or we think You already know that we're grateful. For whatever reason, I haven't expressed that, and I want to do it today. I'm falling to my knees to say how grateful I am. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

1 Thessalonians 5:18, "In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

1 Chronicles 16:34, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever."

Day Four, Saturday, February 17

Open My Mouth

“When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and began to give it to them.” –Luke 24:30

The sacrament of communion takes on new and different meanings when being force-fed goldfish crackers by a wiggling one-year old. Before our daughter Ruthie was born, I always looked forward to communion as a time of quiet contemplation, the only (welcomed) interruption being that of my neighbor, reminding me of the power and mystery of the bread and of the cup in which we were partaking.

Communion now with Ruthie is not wholly un-quiet—I still manage to close my eyes, if only for a few seconds. But Ruthie’s good-natured (welcomed) interruptions have brought a new awareness to my participation in this sacred ritual.

Take, for example, the Sunday last fall when Ruthie lifted a goldfish cracker to her lips just as I brought the communal bread to mine. Very intrigued by Daddy also eating during worship, Ruthie delicately deposited one goldfish cracker on my tongue. This was great fun, and with increasing speed, the goldfish continued to land inside my lips even as we sang the last hymn:

*Open my mouth and let me bear
Tidings of mercy everywhere
Open my heart and let me prepare
Love with Thy children thus to share**

The irony of munching on goldfish crackers during communion and communal singing was not lost on me. It’s easy to imagine the multitudes singing on that day when Jesus lifted and served the loaves of bread and fish. Those men and women and children, like me, couldn’t keep from smiling, and nor could they keep the bits of food from spraying from their mouths. Jesus was filling every need. Cups were running over.

I have often asked God to open my eyes, to open my mind, to open my heart. Now, I remember to ask God to open my mouth, so I might consume, and proclaim, and share, the fullness of such a feast.

Prayer: Spirit Divine, stir in us an appetite for you. Nourish us with the gifts of communion. Fill our hearts to overflowing. Embolden us to share with our neighbors. Amen.

*“Open My Eyes, That I May See” Clara H. Scott, 1895

First Sunday in Lent, February 18

WORK FOR GOD

“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.” Colossians 3:23

This is my 32nd year of appraising and selling real estate in our area. My real estate office is downtown Jacksonville. Prior to being a Realtor and Appraiser, I worked for 11 years in a downtown bank, and prior to that 2 years for the City Government in the Municipal Building.

So, for a total of 45 years I have worked in downtown Jacksonville, all of the work sites within one block of each other!

Some might say that I have not gone very far physically; that is true. I walk by each of my former work buildings almost every day and often remember how I felt working there. However, spiritually, I have grown by leaps and bounds; I have gone far.

I often like to think of the verse noted above and consider all of my work as work for God. I know I am blessed because each work day I look forward to driving downtown and beginning my work day.

When I view my work as if working for God, I have a whole new attitude for the years ahead and for the 45 years already behind me. I can be satisfied in my work and enjoy continuing to help others.

I look forward to driving downtown Jacksonville each work morning for several more years!

Prayer: God, thank you for the opportunity to have work each day. Thank you for the privilege of helping other people through my work. May I always know that ultimately my work is as if for You. Amen.

- Submitted by Bob Chipman.

Day Six, Monday, February 19

2 Timothy 4:5 But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

When I was a freshman in High School I took on the task of mowing the town's two cemeteries. They were (and are) quite large so I decided to put together a crew to get the job done in a timely manner. It would mean I would make less money because I would have to pay for the help, but it assured I would do a good and quick job for the Cemetery Association. And it would help insure I would have the job in the future. I even learned to offer a bonus if we finished faster hoping they wouldn't figure out that I was paying them hourly and they would have less hours.

In those days, for the most part, we did not have riding mowers. Only push mowers, with the exception of a 110 John Deere riding mower. My Dad was a John Deere Dealer, so guess who got to ride that. Each of the mower guys brought their own mowers and gas. There were 4 of us and we should be able to get the job done in two days.

Cemeteries are hard to mow. Hundreds of tombstones to mow around. If the mower didn't get it, you must reach down and pull any remaining long grass. Back then the only weed eater we knew of were goats and we didn't have any of those.

Now being a "boss", I had an obligation to keep an eye on the others as we set to mowing. For the most part they were farm boys and excellent workers. But I noticed one guy would mow up one side and down the other, turning the corner in grass he had already cut. Each time making a wide swing out and around to start down the other side. I went to him and suggested that, when turning, he also mow across the end. Therefore, getting a lot more done with each round. I told him to "Keep your mower in the tall grass". He was reluctant at first but then understood my point. To get the job done, keep your mower in the tall grass.

It might be a sort of holistic approach to life, so let's think about that for a moment. Keep Your Mower in the Tall Grass. Life is short. We all know that. Every minute of every day provides us an opportunity to move forward physically, mentally and spiritually.

Physically, we are reminded that we have only 7 days in a week. What we do in those days, how we spend our time will eventually become a part of our legacy. And I am not talking about your occupation. That is merely something to keep you occupied. I am talking about what you do, who you see, where you go, what you need... who you are. We all need down time but even that can be filled with kindness to others and as a planning session for your next mow. Don't allow yourself to fall into nothingness with mindless technology or regrets for what might have been or coveting that

which will be of little use to you in the long run. Do something. Help someone. Thank someone. Encourage someone. Be someone. No wide turns. Keep your mower in the tall grass.

Mentally you can constantly mow anytime, anyplace. Even quiet meditation will advance your ability to think, see and hear clearly. Keeping an open mind in all situations you can process new ideas and understand old ones. It is impossible to sit and think about nothing. It can't be done. God didn't design your brain that way. So make your thoughts ones you can use. Ones that will create, ones that will inspire and cause understanding. Ones that will make you and those around you more positive. Happier. More tolerant. But make it happen every minute of every day. Keep your mower in the tall grass.

Spiritually is perhaps the easiest mow for me and certainly the most vital. But you must mow hard. Very hard. All day. Everyday. You cannot swing wide on the ends. You can waste no time; you can waste no effort. Life hands you so many wonderful things. Life hands you so many terrible things. Accept with grace each and every blessing and do not take it for granted. For when you learn that you just lost your job, your friends are divorcing, or that a loved one is very, very sick, you better have that spiritual mower in the tall grass. If not, you will not be ready. You can complete the job with His hand. Grasp that hand and hold it tight. He will not let go if you don't.

Prayer: Lord, each day you give us the time and the tools to do our job of going about your business. Teach us diligence in making our lives an example as Christ did for us. Keep our minds and our hands and our hearts in order. Amen

- Submitted by Keith Bradbury

Day Seven, Tuesday, February 20

Miracle

The world is full of miracles
Things us humans can't understand
Even if we see the answer it is swiped from our grasp
So we try again
And again
But even then we can't see it clearly
Like a sauna
You can see your side but
The other side is all fogged up.

We all see the world differently
Some see disease and sunburns
While others see new life and the end of life
Some see pain and suffering to get land
Others see new opportunity for land.

The world is a miracle but also mysterious
We ask ourselves if we know everything
But in truth we are scared of the unknown
Of the things that go bump in the night
Or the things that we know are out there
Just not where they are.

The world is a miracle
In one swift movement
There was light
God split the darkness and gave us opportunity
An opportunity to connect heaven and Earth
Only
I'm still waiting for that miracle.

Day Eight, Wednesday, February 21

1 John 5:14 - This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.

As I sit here in my kitchen to reflect on ideas to share for our mediation booklet from various sources, I can't help but be brought back to thoughts shared in the December's These Days Devotions by Leanne C. Masters. Her thoughts central around daily/weekly happenings that seem to come to a lot of us from all directions; work, kids, school, home, spouse, etc. We just want to say "I don't want to do this!"

She goes on to say "None of us want this, Not this world and not the difficult things we are dealt with in it. We deal with crisis situations in our homes, in our work, in our communities, and in the world. We run ourselves ragged trying to keep up with the tasks we are given and the tasks that we choose. The world around us is hard, it is broken. The world is hurting and we are tired."

As Leanne says "we have no control over the actions of others or over the actions of the world. But we have control over how we respond and what we do in the face of all we encounter. It may not be what we want, but these are the times and all the situations that we have found ourselves in. And we can choose to ignore them, or we can choose to face them.

It is my prayer throughout 2018 and this journey through Lent, that I can be reminded that God has the bigger picture than what I can envision. Surely he hears all my prayers and the answers are revealed in his time. I must have faith and trust in God that he hears me, will respond in ways beyond my comprehension, and give me guidance so I can grow to understand what God is calling me to do.

Prayer: Dear God, help me to trust that you will always respond to my prayers and give knowledge to me in order for me to respond to the difficult situations in my lie and the world around me. Help me to act with kindness to spread your Good news and to do good in this world

- Submitted by Barb Bucy

Quoted parts taken from These Days Daily Devotions for Living By Faith, December 2017; "I Don't Want This" by Leanne C. Masters

Day Nine, Thursday, February 22

WHAT'S SO AMAZING ABOUT GRACE?

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. *1 Timothy 1:12-13*

The ship pitched and tossed in the open sea, yet the motion and the sea spray did not distract the sailor intent on his reading. He had recently been given the classic by Thomas á Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*. He was both fascinated and convicted by the words on the damp pages. The author kept emphasizing the immeasurable grace of God, freely extended to all.

Though still in his twenties, John Newton had been at sea since early adolescence. He had long since abandoned his Christian upbringing. As a sailor, and later a slave trader, he took great pleasure in shocking people with his lecherous profanity. He seemed as far from God as one side of the ocean is from the other.

The night after finishing *The Imitation of Christ*, Newton's old ship hit a storm that convinced everyone aboard that the waterlogged craft was doomed. In the midst of the tempest, Newton cried out to God, who saved the ship---and transformed Newton's life.

A few years later, Newton left the sea. Eventually he felt called to full-time pastoral ministry. Without a university education, he crossed many hurdles before being ordained; at the age of forty, he took his first pastorate in the little English village of Olney.

Newton had a remarkable gift of communicating the truth of the Bible, both in his speaking and his writing. One day, wanting to compose a hymn for his congregation, he thought back over his debauched slave-trading years. He slowly wrote what was more than a simple hymn; it was the story of his own life:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

The grace of God that had saved such a wretched sinner as himself would always figure predominantly in Newton's preaching, continuing through a pastorate in London, where he preached until he died in 1807, an octogenarian.

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Think for a moment. Ponder the most cruel, heartless person in history. Now consider that Jesus Christ died for that person. On some lesser scale, you may know someone who seems simply *too* selfish or wicked to be saved. In your mind a Christian witness to this person seems fruitless; he or she seems impenetrable and imperturbable.

Then consider John Newton, the iniquitous slaver who became one of England's great preachers, whose hymn is probably the best-known gospel song in America today.

Finally, contemplate the words of Titus 2:11: "The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to *all* men." God never gives up on anyone, and neither should we.

Prayer: Father, thank You for Your amazing grace that has reached down to me. I thank You for a grace that can transform the vilest of hearts, a grace that doesn't give up. Forgive me when I give up on brothers and sisters whom You love. And help me to be an instrument of Your grace, leading others into Your open arms. Amen.

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

Day Ten, Friday, February 23

Squirrely

Scripture reading: “If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have the gift of prophecy and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.” 1 Corinthians 13:2)

A few days ago one very desperate hungry squirrel spied one bag of trash I sat on the back screened in porch. It was late and bitter winds convinced me to take that trash to the garage later.

The squirrel chewed a large hole in our screen and checked out a possible awesome evening dinner. I guess he found nothing interesting enough for eating. There was no torn bag or trash taken back through the escape passage. In fact, the little visitor lost the way out.

Judie, who is not really fond of wild animals had quite a shock when opening the back door only to be greeted with a frighten backyard neighbor eager to escape or find somewhere warmer. After propping open the porches screen door and watching from around the corner, Judie saw our furry friend swiftly jump out that opened door, disappearing up on the roof.

God’s children sometimes get lost, searching for anyway out of bad choices, difficulties encountered, and the list could go on and on. Panic can drive one into a corner with no apparent way out. None of this worry is necessary. A door has been opened to freedom by Christ’s sacrifice and resurrection. He made possible a right relationship with God which otherwise could never have been opened.

I am very convinced of importance to spend time in prayer rejoicing during both mountain top or valley experiences. What you say, rejoicing when life gets rough? Yes, because we can be assured in happiness or during the most desperate times of loneliness, or Abandonment, “What a friend we have in Jesus,

All our sins and grief to bear.

What a privilege to carry

Everything to God in prayer!” True Christians do not squirrel away faith, bringing it out only during despairing times, on Sundays, or for appearing Christ like among neighbors and friends. Constant communication through prayer, regular meditation over Scripture with He who created all things is a must.

“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,” says the LORD, who has compassion on you.” (Isaiah 54:10)

There are a few special places on my bucket list to visit. Even though I’ve never been to the Holy lands, climbed Mount Everest or stood on River Jordan’s shores, I am sure they exist. A wide variety

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of media and one on one discussion with people who have visited these places have provided convincing truth. Even In the same way but with significantly more fervor, I open wide eyes to my soul towards Heaven, origin of all truth provided mankind through Christ and Scripture. “Where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth” (Psalms 121: 1-2)

In this earthly world, friends are those who share in joyful as well as those challenging life’s moments. A similar relationship should exist with Christ as a friend. Willingness to share our burdens has been made quite obvious for on the cross, our burden gladly bearing, He bled and died to take away sins of all man.

However, inviting Him along all journeys including joyful ones, and expressing genuine gratitude through prayer is sure to bring smiles and angels singing in Heaven.

Take time with me today and the rest of your life to “sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.” (Psalm 95:1-5)

Prayer: Awesome Lord Jesus, You are my rock and salvation. Grant me wisdom this day to share this conviction with others so they may realize what is missing in their lives.

May I do and say what is acceptable to you today. In Christ’s name amen!

- Submitted by Dan Thompson, January 16 2018

Day Eleven, Saturday, February 24

When God Winks at You

Every time you receive what some call a coincidence or an answered prayer, it's a direct and personal message of reassurance from God to you – what I call a *godwink*.

Have you ever had that feeling that someone was looking at you, and when you looked up, you saw someone you loved looking back at you? Mom or Dad or Grandpa, looking back at you? Maybe they gave you a little wink.

You had a nice feeling from that small silent communication. What did it mean? Probably - “Hey kid...I’m thinking about you right this moment. I love you! I’m proud of you. Everything is going to be alright.”

That's what a *godwink* is. Every so-called coincidence or answered prayer is God's way of giving you His small, silent communication. It's a little wink saying “Hey kid! I’m thinking of you...right now!”

My mom loved hummingbirds. She had a feeder outside every window around her house and loved watching them, keeping the feeders full, fussing at them when they would fight over the feeders. She took pictures of her hummingbirds, knew them by their coloring, even gave them little nicknames. Whenever we visited, she would have stories of her hummingbirds, which one was the newest in the group, how the ruby throated one seemed to be the boss of the group and the emerald green throated one favored the feeder on the north side of the house...

My mom passed away in 2000. She was only 72. She was in the hospital recovering from pneumonia when she had a stroke. Two days later, she was gone. Her wish was to be cremated. My dad took her ashes and spread them at a favorite place of theirs; a state park in the Missouri Ozarks, where they had their honeymoon in 1953 and where we spent our summer vacations camping two weeks out of every summer from then on. My two sisters and I offered to go with him, but he wanted to do it alone.

In 2004, my dad passed away after a short 2-month battle with cancer. His wishes were to be cremated, as well. My sisters and dad's two brothers and I headed to the Ozarks with dad's ashes, to spread them where mom's ashes had been spread. We weren't sure exactly where dad had sprinkled

mom, but had a pretty good idea. There was a campsite on the Jack's Fork River where we always set up camp. It was outside of the main flow of traffic around the campsites, the woods on one side of us and the river flowing by on another side. We went there with dad's ashes, hoping it was the spot. Each of us took turns scooping some of dad's ashes, tossing them in the air and watching them scatter with the breeze heading out to the river. As I took my scoop, I said, "Well dad, during your short time on this earth, this was your little piece of heaven," hoping we were close to where he

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scattered mom's ashes. Suddenly, a little ruby-throated hummingbird flew right up to my face, looked me in the eyes and hovered for several seconds. It took my breath away. He was inches from my face! We all just froze and watched as the little bird flew from me to each of my sisters and then back to me before disappearing, following the current of the river. It was then that we all knew, we were sprinkling dad in the right spot.

I have always felt that God was sending us a direct, personal message of reassurance. It was a little miracle! It was a *godwink*!

Maybe you have had *godwinks* of your own. Maybe you just thought, "Nah! Coincidence!" or "There is a mathematical or scientific explanation for that." But, what if God is communicating with you, in a nonverbal way? Think about it! Keep your eyes and heart open to "hear" God communicating to you through life's circumstances. *Godwinks* are all around us!

Jesus said, "*My sheep know my voice.*" (John 10:27)

"In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps" (Proverbs 16:9)

- Submitted by Donna Stare

Second Sunday in Lent, February 25

Christmas 2017...oh yes, it will always be remembered as the year we loaded 10 people (6 adults and 4 kiddos) into 2 vehicles and drove 13 hours 1 way (thru the night) so our family of 13 could be together and enjoy 6 month old baby Benton's 1st Christmas.

But I get ahead of myself...this is how it all began. Each of our three grown daughters mentioned this idea independently to my husband and me. And they all said, emphatically, we would rather have LESS gifts and spend MORE time together instead. This is the stuff that warms a mom's heart.

As the idea was discussed and discussed again, it slowly but surely became a reality. We found a house online to rent that would sleep all of us and was only a few blocks from our daughter's home in Denver. Our good natured son-in-laws were on board also. They have learned thru the years that when the Benton Ladies set their minds on something, it's best to just step aside and hang on for dear life.

We were blessed with safe travels and no weather concerns or car trouble. We were blessed with mostly good health (only one succumbed to that awful flu that was going around) and not a single argument amongst us except maybe between the two three year old boys. We were blessed with one wonderful moment after another that have now faded, ever so slightly, into wonderful memories.

Little Benton welcomed us with a smile that first morning, one that I will never forget, and he embraced the chaos that had arrived from Illinois with glee. Our family truly enjoys spending time together and for that I will be forever grateful. Some of the best gifts we ever receive are not wrapped in pretty paper and tied up with a bow.

James 1:17 (ESV)

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

- Submitted by Cynthia Benton

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Day Thirteen, Monday, February 26

God's Presence on Monday

Scripture Reading: "“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” (Psalms 139: 7)

On Monday, as we go about our different duties and tasks, are we aware of the Presence of God? The Lord desires still to be in His old temple, wherever we are. He wants the continuing love and delight and worship of His children, wherever we work. Is it not a beautiful thing for a businessman to enter his office on Monday with an inner call to worship: “The Lord is in my office—let all the world be silent before Him.” If you cannot worship the Lord in the midst of your responsibilities on Monday, it is not very likely that you were worshipping on Sunday. Many people have the idea that they leave God in the church sanctuary, and when we leave and drive toward home, we have a faint, homesick feeling that we are leaving God in the big box. You know it’s not true but what are you doing about it? Pray that God would teach us how to transform our responses to frustrations, our relationships, our decisions so that they would be pleasing to Him. Take Him with you wherever you find yourself on Monday and every day!

"Funny but it seems I always wind up here with you

Nice to know somebody loves me

Funny but it seems that it's the only thing to do

Run and find the one who loves me." Karen Carpenter reminds us never to feel alone in her song, "Rainy Days and Mondays." Christ has taken all our burdens to the cross, gladly bearing,

He bled and died to take away our sins. Take some time to hang out with Jesus today, not in stressful moments but also thanking Him for joy bestowed upon your life this awesome Monday!

Prayer: Father, As I begin a new week, I lay before you my whole self, spirit, soul, and body. I ask that you would re-calibrate all that I am to align with your great will for me. May I keep my thoughts in line with your thoughts, my desires in line with your desires, my words aligned with your Word, and may all I do bring you pleasure. In my Savior's name, amend!

- Submitted by Dan Thompson, January 29 2018

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Day Fourteen, Tuesday, February 27

THAT'S GOOD

“God saw everything that He had made, and indeed, it was very good.” Genesis 1:31

“Even in your old age I am He, even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.” Isaiah 46:4

I continue to learn “at the knee” of my almost 94-year-old mother through my daily visits to her at Heritage Health. When I read the daily thought wheel and the daily devotional to her, she always responds, “That’s good!”

For her Christmas letter to family and friends, my mother chose Isaiah 46:4 to encourage and uplift others. Genesis 1:31 teaches us that what God makes (has made) is good. And it’s only with God’s guidance and power can what we (man) make be good.

I see how challenging the aging process is; growing older is difficult. The lack of mobility, the dimming short-term memory, the susceptible frailty I would not describe as good in and of itself, but even these aging challenges with an attitude focused on the goodness of God and His good promises can bring good into our world. Knowing what God makes (has made) is “very good” is comforting, is hopeful, is transformational. Knowing even in our old age, God “makes” and God “carries” and God “saves” - that’s good! Knowing God became Emmanuel – God with us – that’s good! Knowing Christ’s death on the cross on the day we call Good Friday and His resurrection on Easter are proof of His forgiveness of our sins and His gift of eternal life to us – that’s indeed very good!

The Psalmist expressed in Psalm 27:13, “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” In Christ, we always live! The Apostle Paul boldly proclaimed in Romans 8: 28 that “all things work together for good for those who love God.”

Prayer: Lord, we humbly ask that You enable us to see, to declare, and to trust in Your goodness all the days of our lives. Amen.

- Submitted by Janet Chipman

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Day Fifteen, Wednesday, February 28

I read the book “Lots of Candles, Plenty of Cake” by Anna Quindlen for my book club a few years ago. There is a really good chapter on friendship and I want to quote a few lines from it. “Ask any woman how she makes it through the day, and she may mention her calendar, her to-do lists...but if you push her on how she really makes it through her day, or, more important, her months and years...she will mention her girlfriends.” The author also says, “We trust our friends to tell us what we need to know, and to shield us from what we don’t need to discover, and to have the wisdom to know the difference.” This quote really rang true for me, “The women I know who are happiest today are the ones who have close female friends.”

What does the Bible say about friendship?

In the 6th chapter of Luke, verse 31 it says, “***And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them***”. And in John 15:12, “***This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.***”

- Submitted by Cynthia Benton

Day Sixteen, Thursday, March 1

Deuteronomy: 28:2 All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God:

Dear Yesterday,

Sorry I had to leave so quickly. I tried to spend as much time with you as I could but somehow it just slipped away. I know there was a lot more to accomplish but I hope you understand that I had to move on.

I am sorry not everything turned out the way we planned but we cannot have any regrets. We worked together and did the best we could for the time we had. I am with today now and the possibilities seem endless. New opportunities and options. I could not appreciate these without the experience you gave me. For that I will be forever grateful. The good experiences will remain with me forever. I have already forgotten the bad ones. And that is as it should be.

Today is different than you dear Yesterday. Today can be whatever I make of it. Today can be a beginning or it can be an end. You, on the other hand cannot change or offer any new adventure. Your lessons were valuable but they are now only history.

After today we expect tomorrow. But no one knows for sure. Tomorrow may be a broken promise so I will not cling to that any more than I cling to your existence. Yesterday, with you I can accomplish nothing. The same is true of tomorrow. Today is all I have. Today is all I need.

We will never meet again. While that is a bit sad we both know why. So, I move on.

Sincerely,
KB

Prayer: Each day is a blessing. Yesterday, today and perhaps tomorrow. Precious Lord we thank you for each one.

- Submitted by Keith Bradbury

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Day Seventeen, Friday, March 2

Vapor Trails

Scripture: 1 Peter 4:11

If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

I drive to Springfield to work every day. Occasionally the weather conditions are just right where the sky is filled with vapor trails from jets headed to many different destinations. On this particular day the conditions were just right where you could see there were a multitude of vapor trails. Interestingly none of the vapor trails appeared to be the same. Some were very long lasting, even, steady, and gently widened as the plane continued on its path through the hemisphere. A few appeared, disappeared and reappeared as the plane flew its course. Others stayed in place for period of time and then disappeared leaving no trace of the plane which had passed through the space. Several of the vapor trails appeared to cross paths at a variety of angles. All in all the number of vapor trails was also a wonderment. Just on this one day to see so many planes going so many places. I'm sure they are up there every day, but on this one day their invisibility exposed for all to see.

As I watched these vapor trails it made me think of me and my walk through life as a Christian. I asked myself what kind of a vapor trail do I leave behind? All of us leave something behind in everything we do. The people who I come in contact with, do I leave the best impression of what

God would want someone to remember? Are my words and actions what God wants from me as a Christian? What is my vapor trail in the path of life? Obviously most of the time we will never see or know the impression we had on someone, or the impact we left after an interaction. That for the most part is for God to see and judge. As I look back on life I know there are things I should have done better. Hopefully those parts of my vapor trail are soon forgotten and not long lasting. I would like to think that the long lasting, even, ever widening vapor trail is the impact we leave when God is our jet engine and we are doing His work, His way.

Prayer:

God please be the engine that powers my actions, words and deeds at all times in my life. My hope and prayer is in all things that I say and do will be a good and positive representation of your words and works which will bring honor and glory to you. Amen.

- Submitted by George Bengel

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Day Eighteen, Saturday, March 3

The Golden Rule as Written Through Different Faiths

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. Matthew 7:12

Choose thou for thy Neighbor that which thou choosest for thyself...

Baha i Faith

Make thine own self the measure of the others, and so abstain from causing hurt to them...

Buddhism

And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise...

Christianity

Do not to others what ye do not wish done to yourself; and wish for others too what ye desire and long for, for yourself...

Hinduism

None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself...

Islam

Love thy neighbor as thyself...

Judaism

- Anonymous

- Submitted by Connie Roegge

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Third Sunday in Lent, March 4

Matthew 5:5-9. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Over the last few months, the past years, and previous decades our potential enemies have grown. And they continue to grow. Everyday the press, the radio, and the tv highlights our differences; differences in beliefs, traditions, cultures, and politics. We as a country and we as individuals take sides and draw lines over and over again. Daily we are presented with the portrait of the "other." Hostility is felt on a personal, local, and global scale.

And yet, in the middle of all this discord, we hear of our call to be perfect. This isn't a "dot your i's and cross your t's" perfect. This is a call to love as God loves --- to love unconditionally, to love our enemies and those who persecute us. We are called to see in that portrait of the "other", the image and likeness of God. We are all made in the image and likeness of God. And as with the variety on the natural world, so too in humankind. We are called to love generously and universally

with a desire for justice for all. We are made in God's image. It is a pretty spectacular heritage. Let's all live up to it!

Dear Lord,

Praise to the glory of your kingdom. With all the negativity in the world directly around us and from afar, help us to be a source of love. Help us to forgive our enemies. Help us to spread love and justice throughout the world. We ask this in your name. Amen.

- Submitted by Guy Crumley

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Day Twenty, Monday, March 5

Scripture Reading: ***“And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the entire world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.”***

I'm very excited for our brief rest bet from freezing weather that has brought a major chill to any outdoors activities. It might sound strange to say this. But the outdoor silence in 20 below degree weather is quite deafening. Even a train whistle several blocks away seem filled with Loneliness as its cry drifts through the wilderness to my ear.

When doing some research, I learned that the joyful of April when spring arrives is called “Nisan”, the Hebrew calendar. This time is very Anticipated by many where there is a transition from winter to Spring. The ice finally starts melting and new life springs forth during this month. Doesn't it make sense that Jesus) died and rose again from the dead during this month; the month of the transition from that which is frozen to that which is alive?! Our 12 month calendar makes very plain cold days lay ahead in January, February and March before the warmth of April arrives. For the unbeliever or person sitting on the fence, there time of rescue is running out. There is no calendar warning of tragedy, or sudden end of earthly living. *“Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he walks naked and they see his shame.” (Revelation 16:15) “But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. (Luke 21:34-35 — “)*

The power of God melts through thick ice, and infuses life into all things! Is your love growing cold and frigid? Then allow the Lord to thaw you out! The world is cold to the things of God -- but as Saints, we need to be sure that we're not allowing the world to numb us with its coldness; rather, we ought to be melting the frozen world around us!

Let's not get iced over with the snow, and freezing winter weather, (for those of us who are shivering through it just now), or even worse, the cold hard world around us. The Lord our God is a sun and shield. His warmth will fill us and will radiate out into the lives of others if we will abide in His loving Presence.

Feeling stuck in our relationship with God can feel a lot like being bone cold. It's a deep down soul weariness where we long for God to show up with all His radiance and power, and instead we find ourselves pressing in and calling out, and all we hear back is the echoing of our own voice.

This is the winter of the soul. But winter has its own beauty, and while it may look and feel like death, it is not. Life is all around. In my life I have learned to rest in these seasons of winter, to go in to my "war room" of peace, "underground" like much of nature does, to get quiet and be still before God. I remind myself of the truth that we are being transformed into "His image with ever increasing glory"

When due to demands of this world cause skipping of prayer time in morning or evening, I genuinely feel a major emptiness. On those nights, I end getting up after falling to sleep for a few hours to pray as I should have earlier. Mornings may find me disappearing into a place not visited by many passersby and invite Christ along on my day's journey. Reaching for Christ's hand for help starting a new day is even more life giving than that morning coffee or tea! What goes in the mouth eventually

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leaves our bodies. However, when Christ is allowed to enter our souls, He never leaves. During rain, snow, sunshine or any type of weather life throws our way, Christ endures it with us. We are being transformed, we are being made new, and we are being filled with Holy Spirit of God.

We do not have a one-time encounter with God and then live our lives floating through life. No, we walk it out. Sometimes we soar, sometimes we fly, but a lot of the time we just walk without stumbling. And you know what? That is glorious. To walk through this life, seeking after Jesus, desiring Him and trusting that He is with us all the time no matter what – that is glory. That is the good stuff of life. It might not feel like it always, but it is. It is because this is where we are learning to work out our salvation. Where we are learning to hear the still, small voice of God in the winter season and know it is good. That He is good.

Each day I thank God for allowing me to live another day with my Wife, children and grandchildren. I have been blessed beyond what I ever expected in this earthly world. But I also realize there is even a more glorious life waiting. Upon graduating from High school, I would have called anyone crazy if they suggest I'd be sitting in a warm home of my own, have a beautiful loving, supportive family unit and enjoying a comfortable retirement one day. All those things were a dream I thought not possible. But I am one example of God's wondrous ways and unceasing faith. "No longer will you need the sun to shine by day, nor the moon to give its light by night, for the LORD your God will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun will never set; your moon will not go down. For the LORD will be your everlasting light. Your days of mourning will come to an end." (Isaiah 60:19-20)

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for the blessings you have bestowed on my life. You have provided me with more than I could ever have imagined. You have surrounded me with people who always look out for me. You have given me family and friends who bless me every day with kind words and actions. They lift me up in ways that keep my eyes focused on you and make my spirit soar.

Also, thank you, Lord, for keeping me safe. You protect me from those things that seem to haunt others. You help me make better choices, and you have provided me with advisors that help me with the difficult decisions. You speak to me in so many ways so that I always know you are here.

And Lord, I am so grateful for keeping those around me safe and loved. I hope that you provide me with the ability and sense to show them every day how much they matter. I hope that you give me the ability to give to them the same kindness they have provided to me. I am just so grateful for all of your blessings in my life, Lord. I pray that you remind me of just how lucky I am, and that you never allow me to forget to show my gratitude in prayer and returned kind acts. Thank you, Lord. In your redeeming name, Amen.

- Submitted by Dan Thompson

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Day Twenty-one, Tuesday, March 6

TIME

In their hearts, humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps. Proverbs 16:9
Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring. Proverbs 27:1

Time flies, I cannot believe that we are already months into the new year! It seemed like it was just yesterday that we finished celebrating the new year, and poof...time is gone.

As a child, I do not remember feeling like the time was going by too quickly, not during school nor even during the summer. I must admit though that it seemed like by the time I got to college and then married the years started to just fly. Now looking back at that time frame, which does seem like it was yesterday when it has been quite a few years in reality, I am sure it is because of many “daily jobs and daily living” that at that moment what made the days seem to fly by. I also think maybe it

all depends on age, because I see my children and their “plans” for their future seem to parallel what David and I were planning at the same time frame, so maybe the time really is getting faster for us every year. If you ask someone at a “mature” age about time going faster and they will usually say that time seems to be going faster and faster each year until it is almost spinning.

What I personally have learned, with those passing years and the trials, tribulations and joys in my life, was that you can, and should, plan “your time”. But know that our plan is not always God’s plan, nor is it on “our timeline”, but God’s timeline. I do not think personally that God has a file on me or that I have no control of my day or life. I do believe that God does let a person make their own mistakes and choices, but also with His love, help and forgiveness, we are forgiven because of His Son dying for our sins. The other thing that I do believe 100% is that every day is a gift, and it is a gift from God. We should be thankful for each and every day that we are given. We should try to honor God each day with our choices and be ready for when that day comes and your life on earth ends and we then enter our Father’s house. So each and every day try to take five minutes to take a breath, relax and thank God for the day that you have been given.

Prayer: Dear Father, Thank you for giving me today and I pray that tomorrow I can do a better job to honor You in this world. Help me every day to be a better person and thank you for guiding me along my journey in this life.

- Submitted by Sarah Yuska

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Day Twenty-two, Wednesday, March 7

*The heavens declare the glory of God,
The skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech,
Night after night they display knowledge.
There is no speech or language
Where their voice is not heard.
Their voice goes out into all the earth,
Their words to the ends of the world.
Psalm 19:1-4*

I belong to Monday Conversation Club, one of the group of literary clubs here in Jacksonville, that makes our town such a special place. (By the way, Monday Club might be the most Presbyterian

of the literary clubs, with almost 1/3 of its membership also on the rolls of First Pres.) Where usually we spend the club year studying literary or history topics, this year our topic is Our National Parks.

Each meeting we are treated to glimpses of God's handiwork – whether it's the desolation of the Badlands, a sunrise at Acadia, the beauty of a Joshua Tree, the natural hot springs in Arkansas, the majesty of scenic Alaska, or the wolves that are being re-introduced into Yellowstone. That's just the first half of our year. It's difficult to understand how someone could not believe in God when looking at these beautiful places.

I leave each meeting praising God for the beauty of his creation (and adding places to my bucket list!)

Thank you, God, for the many gifts you give us. Give us eyes to see the beauty in all of your creation.

- Submitted by Pat Foss

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Day Twenty-three, Thursday, March 8

“I still have a hope.”

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. Hebrews 10:23

What would life be like without hope? Have any of us gone one day or one hour without hoping for something? I hope I pass chemistry. I hope the check comes in the mail today. I hope my friend gets well. More important than all of our earthly hopes is the eternal hope that we have a home in heaven thanks to the love of our savior who died for us and rose from the dead. Every Sunday we are reminded of how Jesus helps us while on our life's journey...”Bringing Hope: Every Hour, Every Day.”

I have been encouraged by reading the letters written by my great grandfather to my great grandmother during the American Civil War. His story is one of hope. Matthew was conscripted

into the Confederate Army in April of 1862. He reluctantly left behind his North Carolina farm, his wife, four young children, and one on the way (my grandfather). His letters home were full of hope. I hope my friends will save my wheat and oats. I hope I get a furlough soon so I can plant the corn. Catharine, I hope I get a letter from you today. But his greatest hope was getting home to see his family. On Easter Sunday 1863 he wrote, "I still have a hope that I may get back to you and the dear little children again. That is my prayer and has been all the time." Matthew was soon thereafter given a furlough and saw his family again. That was their last time together. I suppose Catharine found comfort in the many times Matthew encouraged her to hope for eternal things. In one such letter before his death he wrote, "Dear wife, pray on and if I never see you on earth any more I hope we will meet in heaven where we will part no more."

Sometimes we hope for something and we are happy that things have gone our way. Sometimes our hopes are dashed to pieces and we find ourselves in times of sorrow and sadness. It is a comfort to know that through all of life's ups and downs we have, as told in Hebrews 6:19, "...an anchor for the soul, firm and secure." That anchor is our hope in Christ for today and forever.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us find, keep, and always profess our hope in you. Amen.

- Submitted by Nancy Holt

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Day Twenty-four, Friday, March 9

Psalm 32: 3.7

While I was silent. My body wasted away through my groaning all day long...Therefore let all who are faithful offer to you, at a time of distress, the rush for mighty waters shall not reach the.

"I'm sorry." These are often two of the most difficult words to say to someone. Fear, pride, laziness, apathy --- these are just a few of the "reasons" we avoid apologizing and taking responsibility for the mistakes he has made. Asking for forgiveness can even be more difficult, for in doing so we make ourselves even more vulnerable than we did when we first apologized. But what a relief when we've taken both of these steps! While we might still have to live with the consequences

of our mistakes, the acts of apologizing and asking for forgiveness are the most significant steps toward healing and reconciliation that we can take. Lent is a time of self-examination and reflection on one's relationship with God.

And reflection of one's relationship with God. Why not use this time to take the first steps in repairing a broken relationship --- with a friend, a family member, or God. There can be no better way to prepare for Easter.

Prayer

With praise Lord, you are my hiding place. You preserve me from trouble and surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Thank you for your forgiveness and steadfast love. Give me the strength to mend the broken relationships in my life. I ask this in your name. Amen.

- Submitted by Guy Crumley

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Day Twenty-five, Saturday, March 10

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. John 3:16

Most of us have now learned to live with voice mail as a necessary part of our lives. Have you ever wondered what it would be like if God decided to install voice mail? Imagine praying and hearing the following:

Thank you for calling heaven.

For English, press 1

For Spanish, press 2

For all other languages, press 3

Please select from one of the following options:

Press 1 for request

Press 2 for thanksgiving

Press 3 for complaints

Press 4 for all others

I am sorry, all our Angels and Saints are busy helping other sinners right now. However, your prayer is important to us and we will answer it in the order it was received. Please stay on the line.

If you would like to speak to:

God, press 1

Jesus, press 2

Holy Spirit, press 3

To find a loved one that has been assigned to heaven, press 5, then enter his or her social security number followed by the pound sign. (If you receive a negative response, please hang up and dial area code 666)

For reservations to heaven, please enter JOHN followed by the numbers, 3:16

For answers to nagging questions about dinosaurs, life and other planets, please wait until you arrive in heaven for the specifics. Our computers show that you have already prayed for today, please hang up and call again tomorrow.

The office is now closed for the weekend to observe a religious holiday.

If you are calling after hours and need emergency assistance, please contact your local Pastor.

Thank you and have a heavenly day.

Prayer: Dear God, we are so thankful that prayer is readily available to each of us, regardless of time, place, or subject matter. When we need YOU, YOU are there for us and always ready to listen to anyone who is willing to call upon YOU. What a wonderful feeling this is for believers everywhere!

- Anonymous
- Submitted by Dee Hill

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Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 11

Psalm 104: 19-24a - You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting. You make darkness, and it is night, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out. The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God. When the sun rises, they withdraw and lie down in their dens. People go out to their work and to their labor until the evening. O Lord, how manifold are your works!



Inside the heart is a depiction of creation: the stars, the sun and moon, and a girl and a boy. The border is made of pearls.

Prayer: Dear God, help me to enjoy and care for your beautiful earth. To always think of the people and the beautiful sky you created. Thank you for always making us precious and special like a pearl. Amen.

- Submitted by Lydia Warren

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Day Twenty-seven, Monday, March 12

Ps. 92: 12-15: The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, "The Lord is upright; he is my Rock and there is no wickedness in him."

Ps 71:9 Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone. Ps 71:18: Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come.

As I am admittedly in "old age" at this time of my life, these scriptures remind me of how vital senior citizens are to the continuity of the Christian faith and work. Seniors have background and perspective on life and know how important their faith is to living well, constructively and fruitfully. It is important to stay in shape physically, to keep active with all moving parts working as well as possible, by eating right, sleeping enough, getting regular exercise. It is just as important to stay in shape spiritually through daily devotions to God, and to keep worshiping with our community of believers. By staying connected to God and Jesus through prayer, scripture and worship we hopefully can discern their will for us and have a sense of direction.. They give us incentive to live fully, to praise God, get our priorities in order and live life to its fullest. This is what makes our lives meaningful: knowing there are things to do, people to love and help, projects to do, goals to strive for; in essence staying involved in our families and community. It is essential to pass our faith on to the next generation – to our families, friends and those we meet who may not know the love and power of God.

- Submitted by Cathy Green

Day Twenty-eight, Tuesday, March 13

Consider it pure joy . . . whenever you face trials of many kinds. James 1:2

Regina drove home from work discouraged and tired. The day had started with tragic news in a text message from a friend, then spiraled downward in meetings with co-workers who refused to work with any of her ideas. As Regina was talking to the Lord, she thought it best to put the stress of the day aside and made a surprise visit with flowers to an elderly friend at a care center. Her spirits lifted as Maria shared how good the Lord was to her. She said, "I have my own bed and a chair, three meals a day, and help from the nurses here. And occasionally God sends a cardinal to my window just because He knows I love them and He loves me."

Attitude. Perspective. As the saying goes, "Life is 10 percent what happens to us and 90 percent how we react to it." The people James wrote to were scattered because of persecution, and he asked them to consider their perspective about difficulties. He challenged them with these words: "Consider it pure joy . . . whenever you face trials of many kinds" (James 1:2).

We are each on our own journey of learning to trust God with hard circumstances. The kind of joy-filled perspective James talked about comes as we learn to see that God can use struggles to produce maturity in our faith.

Lord, please change my attitude about hard times. Bring about joy, perseverance, and maturity in me.

- Submitted from Daily Bread Devotions

Easter In Sunday School

Mrs. D-Ott: Hello. Today is Easter.

Hannah: I can't wait to find eggs!

Kid: Me too.

Mrs. D-Ott: Let's play a game about Easter.

Hannah: Oooooo, I love this game.

Mrs. D-Ott: You go first Hannah.

Hannah: Yes! I got a match.

[a few minutes later]

Mrs. D-Ott: I will read you the story. Jesus died on a cross and came back to life three days later.

Scripture:

Matthew 18:2-4

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.

An Easter prayer for you:

Dear God, I was sad when you died on the cross and happy when you rose from the dead. You changed the world with Jesus. Amen.

A Play by Hannah Warren, Age 9

Now that spring has finally sprung, we can spend some time outdoors enjoying nature and the rejuvenating warmth of the sun. It is so easy to lose touch with the beauty of nature when we spend too much time indoors. As I go about cleaning up the yard after a long winter, I try to give thanks for the beauty of the outdoors and the smell of spring flowers in bloom. The skies, trees and flowers, the animal kingdom, the mountains, rivers and seas all remind us of God's power, His glory and love for us. We live in such an awesome and wondrous world.

I would like to share a reading from the book of Acts, Chapter 14, Verse 17: **“But he has given proof of what he is like. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven. He gives you crops in their seasons. He provides you with plenty of food. He fills your hearts with joy.”** And also a reading from Isaiah 17:11: **“In the day you will make your plant to grow, and in the morning you will make your seed to flourish.”**

- Submitted by Cynthia Benton

Day Thirty-one, Friday, March 16

Isaiah 43:2 - When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

Do you have a perfect life? I know I don't, although I sure do feel like I am one of the lucky ones and feel very blessed with what I do have in my life. I have family, friends, a place to live, good health and food to eat. Does this mean I am never troubled with any problems? No, like everyone in this world I have worries and problems.

I have been raised to believe that this is life, plain and simple, the everyday ups and the downs are what makes it life. With farming you have the "circle of life" each and every year. *Ecclesiastes 3:1-4 - To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven: A time to born, and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck what is planted; A time to kill and a time to heal; A time to break down and a time to build up; A time to weep and a time to laugh; A time to mourn and a time to dance;* Does that mean I am ready for the ups and downs that life throws at us? No, but I do believe that God is with you always and He will guide you through the darkness and the light. That does not mean God gives you the answer that YOU want, or in YOUR time frame, but simply that He is with you always! That alone can give you strength. Sometimes, you think he has forgotten you or not heard you, but that is simply not true! *Isaiah 41:10 - So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*

I have no answers, and have more questions that I don't think there is always an answer for, but I do know that I have one who will listen and will not forsake me and will guide me with his hand. *Deuteronomy 31:8 - The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged."*

Dear Lord, Thank you for being with me every day of my life, until the end of my days. I am thankful for your guidance and your consistency in being there for me always. I know I am not worthy of all you have given for me, but I am thankful that you forgive us for our shortcomings and are with me through any dark days and share in the sunny days. Amen.

- Submitted by Sarah Yuska

Philippians 4: 4-7 “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, 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.”

John 16: 24 “...Ask anything in my name and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.”

We can hardly remember what it was like before we knew Alyssa, our now 2-year old granddaughter. We prayed for a baby long before she was conceived and then prayed with her parents through a risky pregnancy and delivery.

Those prayers were answered when, the day after Christmas of 2015, a tiny, baby girl joined our family. Because Aly was born seven weeks early, she spent her first month in the NICU, learning how to breathe and eat at the same time. Her mommy, and daddy when he could, spent her days and nights in Springfield, holding her, nursing her, and assuring her that she was loved. Many of you held our families close in prayer as well.

Certainly every birth is a miracle and proof of how much God loves us, but we will always feel this one was extra special. We have spent the last two years celebrating and rejoicing this child of God, and we feel many of you share this joy with us.

We love watching Aly amongst her Church family. She smiles and blows kisses and we know she feels your love. You pick up her toys when she drops them and you smile sweetly at her when she tugs on your slacks. Alyssa is growing, learning, and surprising us every day.

Thank you for your part in Aly’s life. She truly has made our joy complete.

God, thank you for blessing us with children and grandchildren. When we teach our children to love you, we grow closer to you as well.

- Submitted by Steve and Penny Turner

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Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 18

Jeremiah 29:11

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.



“I started this sketch of this ship during Pastor Jonathan’s sermon because he spoke of letting go of the oars and letting God guide our ship.”

Loving God,

Give me faith during the times I'm weary, discouraged, and beaten down. Inspire me to trust in your great promises. Please give me courage, O Lord, when my faith wavers. Help me obey your word no matter how challenging it may seem or how discouraged I feel. Allow me to follow Christ, to let go of the oars, and to sail the course you have set for me. For you have given me a bright future in Jesus, filled with hope! Please help me live more consciously aware of this great gift. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

- Submitted by Kieran Kelly

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Day Thirty Four, Monday, March 19

Our Good Shepherd

Scripture: Psalm 23:1-6 - The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my live, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

My favorite verses in the Bible are Psalm 23:1-6. There's so much meaning that can be grasped from those six verses. We can trust that God is with us on our journey of life and he will provide for all our wants. As a young boy, I was surrounded by my family and friends. As the years passed, my family grew as well as the number of friends I was acquainted with. As I have experienced "green pastures" or needed to have "stilled waters," the knowledge of God's restoring my soul gives me gratitude. It is comforting when I feel stressed or weighed down by life's burdens that I have a place which God restores me.

As I grow older, I am experiencing the loss of family members and friends. These are dear people to me and their exit has left an impact on me. But as I remember these verses, I am reassured I have someone who will be by me always during this life's journey and this person is Jesus Christ. He always promised he would be there to the end of age. This astounding knowledge is the comfort one needs until our call comes to bring us to our heavenly home. In Matthew 28:20, Jesus said, "I am with you always."

Prayer: Good Shepherd, thank you for the comfort you bring us, assuring us that you will be by our side through each aspect of our journey in life. Amen

- Submitted by Mike Bucy

Job 5:8-9

But if I were you I would appeal to God. I would lay my causes before Him. He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted.

It's a God Thing

I knew I was dead! My father was going to kill me or at least ground me for the rest of my life.

He had let me use the family station wagon, as long as I picked him up from his pharmacy at 9:30. I looked at the clock and it was 10 p.m. How could my teenage brain have failed me?

Suddenly, the phone rang, and I knew it was my dad calling with my death sentence! To this day I can still hear his trembling voice saying "Thank God, you are safe. I have been praying you wouldn't walk through that door. "

At precisely 9:30 he and his employees were being held at gunpoint by two men who needed narcotics and money. The intruders tied up the staff and fled. For the next half hour my dad prayed, worried that I had interrupted their crime, and struggled to get free. He called me before he called the police.

Thank you, Lord, for intervening. Thank you for the great and small miracles you perform every day that we do not even recognize. Thank you.

- Anonymous

Psalms 139 13-16

13 For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. 14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. 15 My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. 16 Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

Some of you may or may not be aware that today is International Down Syndrome Awareness day! 3/21 get it? Trisomy 21 means that our children have a third chromosome on number 21. Truly created in the mother's womb in most cases just a few hours after conception. Nothing about our children is hidden yet, society tried to hide them for years. We are so lucky today that we can celebrate this day instead of hide it.

God truly made our children All children to celebrate. All of us were woven to be unique and none from a different thread. Every person deserves our kindness and our time. Please take the time to stop and let All of his children be a child. Our houses may be dirty, laundry undone, therapies to do, but none of these will matter when we go home. Only the love we give and relationships that we forge. He sees all that is good and he sees good in All.

Aimee Veith

II Corinthians 5:20 For we are ambassadors for Christ...

6:2 For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you and on a day of salvation, I have helped you." See, now is the day of salvation!

The readings for Ash Wednesday offer sage advice on how to pray and give alms in meaningful and acceptable ways.

Upon careful reflection, we recognize that an acknowledgement of our faults and shortcomings can be a positive experience that prepares us to accept an invitation to return to the Lord with our whole heart and without distractions. And to trust His understandings and compassion.

This is the God I know and the ONE who empowers us to ignite the goodness in ourselves and to become better people and serve one another. This should not be a season of remorse. It should be the inspiration and impetus for simple acts of charity, a time to mend fences, a time to renew prayer life, and a time to be joyful. It is a time to remember that each day is a gift. It is a time to anticipate Easter, rebirth of the trees, the flowers, and ourselves. Let us make Lent a joy-filled season!

Dear Lord

I praise your name. Starting right now at this moment, help m to be a better person and to look out for my fellow man. With ask this in your name. Amen.

- Submitted by Guy Crumley

Day Thirty-eight, Friday, March 23

Scripture : 1 John 5:1-14

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

For years my daughter Deanna has suffered from frequent, severe migraine headaches that only medication and a dark, quiet room can lessen. Seeing this, I feel helpless and wish I could suffer in her place; but I can't. So for three years now I have been praying for her healing – fervently, hopefully, confidently, and with as much faith as I can muster. And yet my daughter continues to experience this pain that I can't fix.

The Bible tells us that we will receive if we ask. But it also tells us of two sets of disciples who prayed for two different men of God to be released from prison. I'm sure both groups prayed fervently, hopefully, confidently, and with as much faith as they could muster. Yet an angel freed Peter, and John the Baptist was executed. Did Peter's disciples pray harder than John's disciples? If not, why does God seem to answer some prayers and not others?

Surely God hears all our prayers and answers us. Sometimes the answer is immediate, sometimes God says, "Not now." And sometimes we may never know the answer. I will continue to pray for my daughter – knowing that God's love for her is even greater than mine. I trust that God hears us and responds in ways beyond our understanding.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to trust that you will always respond to our prayers, though we may never understand your timing or your answer. Amen.

- Submitted by Dave Truesdell
From *The Upper Room*, August, 2017

Job 42:1-6 - Then Job replied to the Lord: "I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. "You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.' My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

At the end Job never got an answer to his question of why all these disasters had happened to him. So in that sense this is a very disappointing book. But on the other hand Job finally got a response from God. In effect God responded by asking what right Job had to question the acts of the Almighty at all. The implication was that Job would not understand if God did reply to his question. God's ways are not our ways nor his thoughts our thoughts. And Job accepted this. He was grateful that God finally spoke to him and was willing to receive the divine mandate, even if it left his basic question unanswered. In the end, of course, Job was restored to health and prosperity again, and so the story ends.

What does this say to us today? In the first place we cannot expect God to explain how he administers justice in the world or even how he deals with each one of us. Secondly, we must accept with patience what may seem to us unfair treatment in the confidence that God knows what he is doing, and that in the end all will turn out well. This is God's world, and we can see only a small part of it in our lifetime. So we must say with Job: "*I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted...therefor I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.*" Finally, it all depends on trust. We must trust God that he wills only the best for us, even if that means that we have to walk through the valley of the shadow to get there.

Help us, O Lord, to trust where we cannot see or understand. Give us the faith that despite our setbacks and losses your providence will, at the end, lead us into the joy of your near presence; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

- Submitted by Wallace Jamison

(from the 2008 Meditations of Our Heart)

All glory, laud, and honor
To thee, Redeemer, King,
To whom the lips of children
Made sweet hosannas ring.
St. Theodulph

Matthew 21:8-10a - Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road, and others cut branches from the tree and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before him and that follows him shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" and when he entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred...

Jesus was singular in his power to stir people. "...all the city was stirred,". It is not too difficult to move, stir a specific interest group, but an entire community, a generation, can only be stirred deeply by something that touches the very soul, and conscience, and destiny. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred because he deliberately acted out Zechariah's prophecy by riding on a donkey. He stopped concealing his role as Messiah. He also defined the kind of Messiah he would be, not the popularly awaited conqueror on a war-horse, but one who comes in humility and service, riding a beast that is still a symbol of poverty around the world today. Few have moved a city or a world as Jesus. None have so deeply moved mankind. He journeyed toward a cross, held by the central purpose of his life, to take upon himself the sin of the world, to be the Savior and hope of many.

Heavenly Father, who loved the world and sent Jesus to seek and save the lost, I thank you that he came among us as a servant, meek and lowly, the friend of sinners, and the companion of the poor. I remember with joy that the common people heard him gladly, and the multitudes welcomed him. Lord Jesus, enter now my heart. Enter now our dear world of friends and neighbors near and far, and mercifully grant that I may follow the example of his loving compassion day by day. Amen

- Submitted by Samuel Stuart
(from the 2008 Meditations of Our Heart)

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Day Forty-one, Monday of Holy Week, March 26

Numbers 22:31-33 Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed down, falling on his face. The

angel of the Lord said to him, “Why have you struck your donkey these three times? I have come out as an adversary, because your way is perverse before me. The donkey saw me, and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let it live.”

In researching animals in the Bible, I came across an explanation of this verse and the idea that animals have reasoning skills that we often do not credit them with. The donkey in this story was protecting its rider from harm as it could reason that the rider was in danger and needed its help.

There have been a few times in our lives in which I have witnessed the reasoning skills of our animals. The first is when Danielle was riding Skip as they were preparing for show season one spring. They were practicing in the arena as they had done numerous times. Skip stumbled in one section and was unable to regain his footing. Chad and I watched as he tried his best not to fall, but he tumbled forward, sending Danielle tumbling to the ground as well. Often times when this happens the horse will run wild, but Skip understood what happened and after getting up, headed straight to Danielle to look over her. You could tell by his look that he was upset by what had happened and he wanted to make sure his girl was okay. Danielle was sore, but felt up to continuing their practice but both with the mindset that they were going to take it easy so that nothing else would happen to their partner.

The second time is when I arrived home to find that our goat had given birth to her first baby and it was lying in a wet heap in the mud and rain. I was the only one home and after checking in with the rest of the family realized that I was going to be the only one home for a while. I struggled with what to do because I am not brave when it comes to dealing with dead animals or anything that might be a bit “yucky”. I quickly decided that after having lost a baby goat the previous year, I had to do something. God gave me the courage to take care of the nearly lifeless baby that had been left for dead by its mother, after all it was one of God’s creatures and needed help. After taking it inside, drying it off, and warming it up there appeared to be hope. The next step was to convince the mother that she needed to help also. She had initially shown no interest in the baby, but after she saw me caring for it along with my encouragement, she decided that it was going to be okay. With our help, Momma Poly decided to care for and nurture her baby. I believe she was able to reason that it was okay because she trusted me and if I was willing to invest time to save this little life, she should too. Nearly a year later, Baby Rain is the sweetest and friendliest goat we have ever had.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for allowing us the opportunity to experience all the wonders of Your creation. Thank you allowing us to be the caretakers of Your animals, and in doing so helping us grow and learn from them. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

- Submitted by Frannie Suhre

Psalm 51:10--Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.

I can't help but to be thankful for those such as Luther who lived with a willingness to walk out into the unknown standing against the religious leaders of the day to speak the truth of God's word. Likewise, let us be willing to give all we have to honor the God who has so freely given all to us. Let us hold nothing back in our pursuit of all that is right.

I'm not sure anyone could compile a true "top-ten" list of all that Martin Luther said. However, the quotes listed below are my personal favorites, and I hope they inspire you as well. To God be the Glory!

1. The whole being of any Christian is [faith](#) and love. Faith brings the person to God, love brings the person to people.
2. The [Bible](#) is a remarkable fountain: the more one draws and drinks of it, the more it stimulates thirst.
3. I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word: otherwise I did nothing. The Word of God did it all.
4. A simple layman armed with Scripture is greater than the mightiest pope without it.
5. Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.
6. God created the world out of nothing, and so long as we are nothing, He can make something out of us.
7. I know not the way God leads me, but well do I know my Guide.
8. None can believe how powerful prayer is, and what it is able to effect, but those who have learned it by experience.
9. Peace, if possible. Truth at all costs.
10. As long as we live there is never enough singing.

Each day, let us encourage one another to take some intentional time, even if for only a few minutes, just to rest in God's closeness without any intense agenda. This fills our inner reservoirs of body and spirit. Some prefer to sit or lie down in silence; others listen to special music. Some prefer to walk and notice what God wants to show them. Some like to dance, stretch, paint, garden. Others may wish to hold a special picture that reminds them of God's love, or a special cloth, a flower, a rock, or some other object. The important thing is just to soak in God's healing nearness without agenda. This can be done either in various moments throughout the day, or at a special time, whatever works best for us.

- Submitted by Julie Bruninga

Flora Wuellner: Seven Suggestions for Healing and Renewal

Day Forty-three, Wednesday of Holy Week, March 28

The Four Words

“This too shall pass.” I have heard and said these words too many times to count. President Abraham Lincoln even said these words in a speech many years ago in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. It is interesting that the wisdom of the world can be expressed in a four word sentence.

I first heard these words from my mother when I was a little girl. When I was sick or experiencing trouble with my girlfriends, she would say, “This too shall pass”. These were her words of advice when I was upset over a terrible breakup with a boyfriend or a bad grade in school. After I was married and a mother of three little girls, I heard these words a lot! My life at that time was spent taking care of children with various illnesses, bumps and bruises, enduring sleepless nights, and just dealing with all the tough stages we go through as parents.

Before I even realized it, I was also uttering those four words to my daughters and they were rolling their eyes at me as I had once rolled my eyes at my mom. Let’s face it...the only constant in life is change! Change is inevitable. When something in my life is not going well, it is actually a comfort to know that every feeling and every situation is temporary.

But what then when my life is going well? “This too shall pass” is true in good times as well as bad. These four words have helped me to praise the good situations in my life and to enjoy each and every moment for as long as they last. When I am on a vacation, I am living it up instead of thinking about when the vacation must come to an end. When I am with my grandchildren, I am enjoying every part of being a “Nana” because I know they will grow up all too fast.

Life is about moments...about collecting moments. Not all of these moments are good ones but many of them are great! The “this too shall pass” frame of mind helps me get through the painful times and also helps me enjoy, even more, the happy ones.

2 Corinthians 4:17-18: ¹⁷ For our present troubles are small and won’t last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever!¹⁸ So we don’t look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.

- Submitted by Cynthia Benton

Day Forty-four, Maundy Thursday, March 29

Ephesians 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the Gift of God.

‘I Was There When It Happened’ (song title)
Yes I know when Jesus saved me, (saved my soul)
The very moment he forgave me (made me whole)
He took away my heavy burdens
Lord, He gave me peace within (peace within).

There are some people who say we cannot tel
I whether we are saved or whether all is well
They say we can only hope and trust that it is so
Well, I was there when it happened and so
I guess you ought to know.

I don’t care who tells me salvation is not real
Though the world may argue that we cannot feel
The heavy burdens lifted and the vile sins go
I was there when it happened and so
I guess you ought to know.

Songwriter Fern Jones

Released 1957, music by legend Johnny Cash

My reaction to hearing this song during a TV documentary was that before we can receive salvation, we must first acknowledge its existence. We need to remain open and be mindful of God’s grace around us, and accepting of his grace when it does appear.

During the January 2018 Officer retreat we sang hymn #557, Open My Eyes.

Open my eyes that I may see
Glimpses of truth, Thou hast for me
Place in my hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp and set me free.

Silently now, I wait for thee
Ready, My God, they will to see;
Open my eyes, illumine me,
Spirit Divine!

Clara H Scott, pub. 1895

**Prayer: Open our eyes, our ears and our hearts so that we will be there when it happens.
Amen.**

-Submitted by Linda Feleky

Read Mark 5:2-17

An excerpt from *Pastrix* by Nadia Bolz-Weber

I, like any good middle-class, mainline Protestant, tend to arrogantly look down my theological nose at talk of demon possession as superstitious snake handling nonsense, as though it's the embarrassing spiritual equivalent of a monster truck rally. I was feeling squirmy about people who talk of evil spirits and demons like they are beings in and of themselves, until I remembered that, at one point in my life, my own depression had felt so present, so much like a character in my life, that it had actually felt right to go ahead and give her a name. I named my depression Francis.

Francis first stopped by in my teens and early twenties and was written off by my family as being "moody." But later, when I found myself coming to like the same things Francis liked – booze, emotionally unstable boyfriends, self-destruction – she finally just moved in, turning my studio apartment into a Wilderness.

She was a terrible roommate. She kept the place filthy and always told me devastating things about myself. When Francis lived with me, I was no longer able to do simple things, like remembered if I'd showered or shopping for groceries. Francis distracted me so much that I would forget to eat. Four or five months later, when my pants had gone down a couple of sizes, my parents started to worry. One day, my mother realized that Francis was my problem and suggested I go talk to a therapist about evicting her.

She's a bit of a dope fiend, Francis, but it ends up there is one drug that she doesn't like. It's called Wellbutrin. Two weeks after my therapist prescribed it, she was gone.

But not for good. Now, twenty years later, she still knows how to find me, and sometimes shows up unannounced and stays a couple of days. So given my history with Francis, maybe demons having their own names and saying things out loud to Jesus is not so foreign to me after all.

I started wondering: If Jesus rowed up in his boat while I was in the throes of another roommate situation with my demon Francis, and I were to say to him, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" would Jesus say, "Oh, me? I have nothing to do with you"? Of course not. That's why demons are afraid. Because Jesus always has something to do with them.

Which is exactly why our demons try to keep us from people who remind us how loved we are. Our demons want nothing to do with the love of God in Christ Jesus because it threatens to obliterate them, and so they try to isolate us and tell us that we are not worthy to be called children of God. And those are lies that Jesus does not abide.

God, you know the number of hairs on my head, and you call the stars – and even me – by name. You also know the names of the demons that each of your children lives with, even when we refuse to name them ourselves. You call them pride, depression, addiction, workaholic, selfishness, laziness, greed. And you, only you, can cast these demons out of us. I am not strong enough to fight my demons on my own, but I pray that you give me the strength to lean on you, to realize that this is your fight, and to allow you into my life so that you may cast my demons away. I take comfort in the words of Paul, "For when I am weak, you are strong."

In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

- Submitted by Siobhan Warren

Day Forty-six, Saturday of Holy Week, March 31

Psalms 103:13-14 As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.

James 5:11 The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

The dictionary defines “compassion” as “a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering” while another source suggests that “compassion” is a good quality of character for a human being to possess. It’s important to note that the emotional connection that is felt motivates us to take action to somehow make things better.

God knows us intimately. He loves us, and feels compassion for us when we are hurting. We can find comfort in the messages of hope as we read the Bible, seeking out examples of God acting with compassion towards his children, even when they turn away or stubbornly continue down the wrong path. Jesus also showed many acts of compassion as he wept with his friends when they were mourning a death in the family, healed the sick, shared the message of God’s love with the crowds who followed him, and welcomed even children and outcasts to benefit from his ministry.

As Christians, we are called to show compassion towards others who are suffering. The daily news tells us about fires, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, famines, wars, shootings, and unimaginable cruelty in this world. Even in our own community, we are asked to respond to the needs of the hungry, the homeless, the victims of domestic abuse, and those who are dealing with serious illness or the loss of a loved one.

Jacksonville is a caring community where churches, businesses, and individuals are quick to take action when a need is presented. Sometimes the needs are overwhelming – how do we help and where do we start? Donations of money, time, and talents are always appreciated. Sometimes even the smallest gesture, such as sending a card of thanks or a note to tell someone that they are not alone means a lot.

Take the time to be compassionate in thought, word, and deed – it will make the world a better place!

Prayer: Gracious God, open my eyes and let me see the needs of others around me. Give me the right words to say and the right actions to take as I try to help. Above all, remind me to be kind to everyone, even when I don’t know their needs, because kindness is always the right choice. Amen.

- Submitted by Diane Hollendonner

Easter Sunday, April 1

The Day of Resurrection

Luke 24:5-6 - Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not; he has risen.

The day of resurrection! Earth, tell it out abroad:
the Passover of gladness, the Passover of God.
From death to life eternal, from sin's dominion free,
our Christ has brought us over with hymns of victory.

Our hearts be pure from evil, that we may see aright
the Lord in rays eternal of resurrection light;
and, listening to his accents, may hear, so calm and plain,
his own 'all hail' and, hearing, may raise the victor strain.

Now let the heavens be joyful! Let earth its song begin!
The world resound in triumph, and all that is therein;
let all things seen and unseen their notes of gladness blend;
for Christ the Lord has risen, our Joy that has no end.

Thank you, Lord, for giving us Your Perfect Son to save us from eternal death. Thank you for raising him from the dead to give us a Living Savior and the promise of eternal life if we but accept your incredible Gift of Grace for the remission of our sins. Amen

- Words by John of Damascus, 8th Century
Translated by John M Neale, 1862
Submitted in the 2008 Meditations of Our Hearts

