2021
“Meditations of Our Hearts”

A Lenten Devotional
of the
First Presbyterian Church
Jacksonville, Illinois

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.
Psalm 19:14

Last year, in the midst of Lent, our world completely changed. Schools, businesses, and life seemed to halt. The Lenten disciplines we practiced for years took a dramatic turn, we cancelled in-person worship, and overnight we shifted to live-streaming worship. The world we live in today is very different than it was last year. We have quickly learned that we have little control in our world.

When everything is shifting and raging around us it can be very difficult to hold onto something solid. Yet, we are reminded in Psalm 46 much wisdom in times of certainty. *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea* (Psalm 46:1-3).

As a new year has come, and as seasons continue to pass, we discover that we are approaching another season of Lent. It is comforting to have rhythms and seasons. Lent can provide a helpful rhythm in the midst of chaos. Lent is a season that provides preparation and study, and a rhythm of prayer and fasting. According to the prophet Isaiah, the fast God desires the most is to lift the burden of bondage, feed the hungry, house the homeless, clothe the naked and share sympathy (Isaiah 58:6-7).

Allow this Lent to get you back into the daily practice and routine to be in step with God. The world can provide relief and quick fixes, but they are not restorative to our souls. During this season of Lent, I encourage you to find these rhythms:

- Pause and spend time with God
- Lift burdens of bondage
- Feed your hungry soul and hungry people
- Clothe the naked
- Be kind to yourself and others

For God is the only thing that is certain in an ever-changing world. Allow God to bring you refuge and strength this Lent.

Blessings,
Jonathan

Day One, Ash Wednesday, February 17

Bethsaida

John 1: 35-51- The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?" They said, "Rabbi" (which means "Teacher"), "where are you staying?" "Come," he replied, "and you will see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon. Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter). The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me." Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip. When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel." Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that." He then added, "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man."

Today, on this first day of Lent, we begin a pilgrimage, a journey that will take us from the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee down south to Jerusalem. We begin our pilgrimage at the little fishing village of Bethsaida, located on the northern tip of the lake. John tells us that it was the hometown of Peter, Andrew and Phillip, who were among the earliest members of the disciple band. Peter and Andrew were fishermen with their father and with James and John, who also were disciples.

One day while fishing, Jesus called them to be fishers of men, to become his disciples on his evangelistic mission. Fishing was hard work, and it might appear that Jesus was calling them to an easier life as itinerant evangelists. But this is not so. Jesus never calls to a life of ease and comfort. They exchanged the certain income and food supply for the uncertainty of discipleship. They never knew where the next meal was coming from or where they would spend the night. They would still be working, but in a different way.

Jesus calls us all to work, but in our work, whether fishing or preaching or healing or teaching or business, we should embody Jesus' message: we work not just to make money but to help other people, to be of service to society, and to convey the message that God loves us, cares for us, and wants to help us. Does your work do that? That is what Jesus wants you to do, and he is calling you to do it.

Prayer: *Help us, O Lord, during this period of Lent to draw closer to you, both in will and in purpose. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

In Memorial of Wallace Jamison
March 8, 2000 devotion

Day Two, Thursday, February 18

Matthew 5:9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
Proverbs 16:32 Better a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than one who takes a city.

On January 10th, Janet Chipman did Children's Time during our church service. She spoke about how she had a gratitude journal that she wrote in everyday of the year. She had done this for the past ten years. And at the end of the year she came up with a single word to focus on for the next year. This got my mind thinking ... what single word would I choose? I had no trouble with all the turmoil in Washington,D.C. and elsewhere recently --- it is peace. I will focus on peace this year for myself and others along with being a patient person with self control.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, I praise your name and hold you in the highest regard. Please keep your hand on my shoulder and your essence in my heart to provide me with patience and self-control along with spreading peace more fervently this year throughout our land. We ask this in your name. Amen.*

Submitted by Guy Crumley

Day Three, Friday, February 19

Psalm 56 :3 When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.

During a thunderstorm, a little boy asked his dad, “Do you ever get afraid?” The dad said,” sure I do. It’s OK to be scared. But it’s not OK to give up”. Imagine living your life totally unafraid. Not afraid of anybody. Of getting hurt. Of dying. Of God. Not afraid of anything. What would keep you alert. What would keep you on your toes. What would keep you from being bored out of your mind?

We live everyday afraid. Not paranoid mind you, but afraid. Getting sick. Of Covid. Worrying about your children and your grand children. The future. Finances. We can still be happy and be at peace, but the little edge of “what if” is always there. Most of us are able to keep it to ourselves in our constant battle of “what will other people think”. But it is there. Eyes darting from side to side looking for trouble. Glancing around the room when you enter to see if anything or anyone causes you alarm. Not knowing what is in the darkness. Its part of living. It is part of being human.

My brother Ken left me (us) many gifts. He wrote songs but first he wrote the poem. Then added it to music. Many of his songs stand alone as poetry. I refer to them often. One of his songs you may have heard sung in our church before. It is called, “Whenever I’m Afraid”. Listen to its message.

Whenever I’m afraid, I call upon my Jesus.

And he’ll go with me through the darkest night. And He’ll stay with me till the dawn.
Whenever I’m alone, and fears of night time all surround me, I reach my hand out and I touch my friend. And he’ll stay with me till the dawn.
Night comes around me, but your arms surround me, I thank God you found me. You’re my friend.
Whenever I’m afraid, I call upon my Jesus, And he’ll go with me through the darkest night, and he’ll stay with me till the dawn.
No ordinary light I see, and when he shines his light on me, I see, that at last I’m free, and you’re my friend.
No, I’ll never be alone, and fears of night time won’t surround me.
I’ll reach my hand out and touch my friend. And he’ll stay with me till the dawn.
I’ll never be alone.

Prayer: *Lord we know that fear itself can not harm us but our reaction to it can. Reaching out to Christ in our darkest hour is the only solution. We do not ask you to respond,” Here let me fix that.” We only ask, “here, let me guide you. Let me strengthen you. Let me be your friend”. Amen*

Submitted by Keith Bradbury

Day Four, Saturday, February 20

Matthew 4: 1-11 - Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted[a] by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3 The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.' Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

'He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'

Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 9 "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only. Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

"Many of us have probably experienced conversations, arguments, and debates where two or more differing understandings of scripture have been used against each other: The words seem powerful on "our" side, but the "other" side does not hear them the same way." (Remove the words "of scripture" from this narrative and this sentence describes our pandemic, political world!)
"Words can be used in many different ways - we all know that the childhood adage 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me' is nothing more than that in the end, an overused saying.
"The words we use matter! In this scripture passage, the devil chooses to use them to assert power, to manipulate, to distort actuality, and to tempt to self-absorption. God uses words, and The Word, to create and liberate in grace.
"In far less grandiose but equally intense terms, this dialogue of words goes on in our minds and hearts daily. In this Lent, to be centered in the Word of God through Christ for the sake of adoring God and serving the other is a salient 'call' to concentrate. There is an ancient rabbinical tale that rabbis as they begin to learn and study Torah literally 'eat' the words. Words get under your skin and become 'you.' God spoke creation into being. God said, and it was! This is serious stuff.
"In this text (Matthew 4:1-11), words drive us to God: 'Every word that comes from the mouth of God,' 'Do not put...God to the test,' and 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only God.' The words get eaten up in praise so that in the end, ONLY God speaks. Words matter: Words are matter; they make life. Words matter; they wound and heal."
"God, give us the creative grace to speak words that shape matter and persons to fuller life in Christ - words that minister the love, mercy, promises and hope of God."
Dr. H. Frederick Reisz, Jr., President Emeritus, Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary
Words Matter, Lenten Devotions published by The National Council of the Churches of Christ, U.S.A.

Dear God, in this journey of introspection and contemplation, please help me develop a keener understanding of the power of words - those I shape and share as well as those I receive. Let me know and demonstrate that words matter as I attempt to communicate the love, mercy, promises and hope of God day by day. Amen.

Submitted by Mary Fergurson

First Sunday of Lent, February 21

You Must Go Through

Isaiah 42:16 "I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them."

I recently read a story about a young girl excitedly wanting to visit her grandma but dreaded the drive through a long, dark, scary tunnel to get there. Her wise father helped to calm her fears by saying, "We have to go through the tunnel to get to grandma's house." From then on, the little girl would look for the light at the end of that tunnel because she knew the end result would bring her to her grandma.

Life, at times, can seem like this story. This past year alone has many of us struggling through so many difficulties brought on by the Pandemic. None of us have gone untouched by this COVID-19 virus. We have had family members and friends who have died; job opportunities have fallen through; postponements of weddings and/or Plan B's have been arranged to fit the regulations needed; church services, graduations, & funeral services have gone live stream; family gatherings and work requirements have gone to meeting via Zoom (or something similar); education has been through remote learning at times; and the list could go on and on!! Other years have had struggles such as job loss, illness, divorce, relocating to new area, and death to name a few being just as devastating. Each struggle has been REAL.

So much can change and so quickly at times leaving us weary and without hope. Many people, I'm sure, wish there were different answers or a different way to handle the struggles life brings to us. I personally know there have been times where I have had conversations with God pleading with him to have this "Tunnel Time" of my life to just pass right on by me. Yet we all know the reality of this: The only way is to go through it.

Even though these experiences are unpleasant, we believe (with the help of our faith) better days will be ahead. We observe tiny specks of God's light even when we have our darkest days. With God Almighty's love and care, as well as the HOPE he gives to us, we will see the LIGHT at the end of our tunnels.

Prayer: *Dear God, Help me to stay focused on your light in order for it to lead me through any dark, scary challenges in my life. Help me to find and feel HOPE through any struggle and to always see that LIGHT at the end of the tunnel. Help me to let go and give you the control. In Your name, I pray. Amen*

Submitted by Barb Bucy

Day Five, Monday, February 22

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing…
Romans 15:13a

Over the last twelve months we have had to keep our distance. Despite sadness, trouble, fear, uncertainty, and any number of things that should bring us together we have had to stay away. If happiness is a reflection of what happens to us, many of us would have reason to frown. Thankfully, joy doesn't need happiness to exist. Galatians 5:22-23 tells us, "but the fruit of the Spirit is love, JOY, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things, there is no law." As a fruit of the Spirit, joy doesn't spring from circumstances. It is a byproduct of salvation.

The children's song I learned at VBS as a kid and my daughter learned at Messy Church reminds us that we've got "the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart...down in my heart to stay." This simple catchy song teaches two important lessons.
1. Joy is a permanent fixture for those that love the Lord but;
2. Sometimes you have to dig for it. It can get stuck pretty far down there.
This Lent, I pledge to "Dig for Joy". The story of the cross and of Easter is our story too. Long dark days of sadness and uncertainty broke forth in the glory of the resurrection. This year, as we wait for Easter to dawn, dig for the joy that is already within you and, when you find it, share it with someone else.

Thank you for not giving up on us even when we sometimes want to give up on ourselves. Thank you for the light your love gives us. Help us find that light and joy you have already given us so that we may share it with others. Then, help give us the rest we need to rise up and dig again. Amen

Submitted by Stephanie Chipman

Day Six, Tuesday, February 23

"This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."
Psalm 118:24 NIV

I have a book full of fun facts and trivia for every day of the year. Each day has its own page, and although the book does start with January 1, it's not necessary to start there. I like looking up birthdays and anniversaries of people I know to see what happened on those days.

For some days, the book also includes holidays. Some of the holidays celebrate food, animals, people, and even events. A few that I find funny are "Eat a Red Apple Day" (December 1), "Cow Appreciation Day" (July 14), "Do a Grouch a Favor Day" (February 16), and "International Moment of Laughter Day" (April 14).

Holidays have been around for a long time, and many are mentioned in the Bible. After God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, he gave them a whole list of holidays and festivals to observe and celebrate. These holidays reminded the people of God's great miracles and helped them remember what God had done for them.

That got me thinking about creating some new holidays, beginning with God and how He has cared for me and my family. How about "Thank You for Keeping Me Healthy Day", or "I Made a New Friend Today Day", or "Beautiful Church Music Day". Of course, a list like this could go on forever, but I'll leave that up to you.

Gracious God, Thank you for all you do for me and my family every day. Help me to make each day a holiday and another celebration of your endless grace and love.

Submitted by Penny Turner

Day Seven, Wednesday, February 24

Capernaum

Hebrews 13: 1-8 - Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?" Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Our next stop on our Lenten pilgrimage is Capernaum. In Jesus' day this was a large port city near the great caravan route from Damascus to Egypt. While Peter and Andrew came from Bethsaida, they lived in Capernaum near the home of James and John. It is clear from the Gospel account that while he lived in Galilee, Jesus made his headquarters there, probably in the home of Peter and Andrew. It was here that he performed some of his most outstanding miracles like healing the son of the royal official and Peter's mother-in-law.

Why did Jesus stay in Capernaum? Because of the hospitality he found there. Have you ever wondered how Jesus managed to carry out his mission without any discernible means of support? The answer is only hinted at, like the verse in Mark. Speaking of the women at the cross, he writes, "*These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee."* Jesus and his disciples were fed and housed through the hospitality of his followers. And that is still true today!

Remember, *"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me."* An important duty of being a Christian is to be hospitable, and this means helping those in need: opening your home to an exchange student from overseas, offering to help a neighbor with an overflow from a family reunion, giving to the Salvation Army to house the homeless, giving a timely visit to a nursing home. As followers of Christ, we are meant to share, even a cup of cold water. How have you shown hospitality today?

Prayer: *O God, whose generosity passes our understanding, help us to be equally generous to others who cross our path. For your Name's sake. Amen.*

In Memorial of Wallace Jamison
March 15, 2000 devotion

Day Eight, Thursday, February 25

1 Peter 4:10
Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

1 John 3:18
My children, our love should not be only words and talk. Our love must be true love. And we should show that love by what we do.

It is January and as I sit here writing this, I look about my living room and see a few holiday items that remain on display. A snow-people collection,
some angels, a few strands of holiday lights , a few beautifully crocheted decorative snowflakes... Hanging on to the feeling of Christmas a little bit longer. Soon it will be time to let go and pack things away. However, things are what they are. They are pretty things and bring back good memories. However, they are just things. The real spirit needs to stay with us all through the year. The real spirit reminds us to serve and celebrate all through the year.

"The Work of Christmas" by Howard Thurman

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock.
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To release the prisoner.
To rebuild the nation
To bring peace among people
To make music in the heart.

Howard Thurman (1899-1981) was an author, theologian, educator and civil rights leader.

Prayer .. *Help us to remember the spirit of the holiday and carry that spirit with us all through the year. Remind us to listen to the little voice that says "go out and serve, share your talents and spread good will." Support us as we Go and Do the Work of Christmas. Amen*

Submitted by Linda Feleky

Day Nine, Friday, February 26

Jesus, Remember Me

"And he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Jesus said to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'" Luke 23:42-43

Even at their young ages, our grandchildren often like to engage in "Remember When" - remembering special times together that bring laughter and joy, remembering especially them.

"Remember me." Perhaps there are no more human words. We want to be remembered, to be validated.

Here on the cross of Calvary hang Jesus and two thieves. One railed Jesus: "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other thief, with such quality of faith at such a dark time, rebukes the other thief, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" He continues with confession, "…we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong."

Perhaps this "good" thief heard Jesus teach at one of His many outdoor settings; perhaps he began, at some point, to have some sort of faith. When he stole, where he stole, what he stole - we do not know. But, here on the cross, this sinner with faith prays, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Joseph, in Genesis 40:14, says something similar to Pharaoh's cupbearer upon the cupbearer's release from prison. The cupbearer did not forget to remember Joseph, who rose to power in Pharaoh's powerful court, saving people, too. Jesus will not forget to remember this thief, who rises with Jesus into Paradise, for Jesus says to him, "Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Such an amazing prayer! Such an amazing promise!

Theologian Frederick Buechner writes: "When you remember me, it means that you have carried something of who I am with you, that I have left some mark of who I am on who you are. It means that you can summon me back to your mind even though countless years and miles may stand between us. It means that if we meet again, you will know me. It means that even after I die, you can still see my face and hear my voice and speak to me in your heart. For as long as you remember me, I am never entirely lost" (Listening to Your Life, 14).
We, too, pray, "Jesus, remember me."

And Jesus replies, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Prayer: *Dear Jesus, as I, too, a sinner, pray for You to remember me, my heart knows that You ask me to remember You by living a life worthy of Your sacrificial love. Help me to remember that Your love for me is steadfast, eternal, forever. In Your mighty Name, I pray. Amen.*

Submitted by Janet Chipman

Day Ten, Saturday, February 27

I Corinthians 3:9: For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

Refrain:
I am the church! You are the church!

We are the church together!

All who follow Jesus,

all around the world!

Yes, we're the church together!

1. The church is not a building;

the church is not a steeple;

the church is not a resting place;

the church is a people.

Music and good lyrics have always been inspirational to me. During this pandemic, the chorus and first verse of this hymn have frolicked through my brain frequently. Covid-19 didn't shut down the church, because WE are the church. It's our job to continue being the church wherever we are, recognizing that we carry the church with us wherever we might go. We've just been on an unplanned "fast" from our building.

Lessons can be hard, but hopefully we will use the lesson of being away from the physical building to learn new ways to be the church. Even though this has always been the case, we've been forced to recognize the truth in Paul's message that we are God's building.

I look forward to assembling together again in the physical church building. Then, like the fourth verse of that hymn says, "And when the people gather, there's singing and there's praying; there's laughing and there's crying sometimes, all of it saying: I am the church! You are the church! We are the church together! All who follow Jesus, all around the world! Yes, we're the church together!"

Lord, help us to use this time of "fasting from our building" to reflect on how we may better serve you. Show us opportunities to be the church whether we are in the building or not. Amen

Submitted by Sally Stock

Second Sunday of Lent, February 28

NOT ABOUT US

Numbers 11: 21-30 - But Moses said, "The people among whom I am number six hundred thousand on foot, and you have said, 'I will give them meat, that they may eat a whole month!' Shall flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, and be enough for them? Or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, and be enough for them?" And the Lord said to Moses, "Is the Lord's hand shortened? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not."

So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord. bAnd he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it. Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the Spirit rested on them. They were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, "My lord Moses, stop them." But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!" And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

Most of us have probably heard the saying "Be good, and I'll give you a treat." Sometimes we think about God in much the same way---that God will give us favors in return for our good deeds. However, scripture teaches that our good deeds and good behavior will not change God's character or influence God's choices. We do not need to impress God to gain God's grace.

In today's scripture reading, Eldad and Medad clearly did not follow orders to go out to the tent, but God's Spirit rested on them and they prophesied. At times we react like Joshua when we see what God is doing through people like Eldad or Medad, who do not seem to be following God's will. But in those moments, we can remember that it is about God, not us. God can work through any person for God's purpose. That's not an invitation to live in any manner we choose or simply to wait passively for the Lord's blessing. Instead, it is assurance that it is not our performance but our willingness to fulfill God's purpose that God desires.

Prayer: *Almighty God, rest your Spirit on us and grant us the wisdom to trust in the plans you have for us. Make us willing to fulfill your purpose for our lives. Amen.*

Taken from The Upper Room, April 2020

Submitted by: Jean Harlow-Truesdell

Day Eleven, Monday, March 1

"In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also." John 14: 1-3

Skylar loves the words to Jesus Loves Me written by Anna Bartlett Warner in 1859 and to All Things Bright and Beautiful created by Cecil Frances Alexander in 1848. The words became especially important to her in 2020. During the year she lost her pet goat Prince, her dog Xena and her great grandmother Nancy. She often talks about how God loved her pets and her great grandma. The concept of them being in heaven with God seems to give her reassurance that they are being taken care of.

Her picture shows each of those she lost taking the stairway to Heaven and God.

Prince Xena Mimi

Dear God, thank you that you love me. Please give Prince, Xena and Mimi hugs for me. Keep them safe in your house. Amen.

Submitted by Skylar Grace Suhre, age 4

Day Twelve, Tuesday, March 2

He Knows

"Then Hannah prayed and said: 'My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted.'" -1 Samuel 2.1a

I knew a girl who spoke with a smile
Had a knack for friendship, would walk the extra mile

I knew a girl whose eyes shone in grace
As she looked with compassion on each creatural face

I knew a girl

We knew a girl whose lips played the flute
Whose hands spoke with imagery: nimble, astute

We knew a girl who could preach without words
A hostess, a mender, a striver in the world

We knew a girl

He knows a girl created in love
Baptized in Spirit, born from above

He knows a girl and abides with her still
Our distance, His nearness; a light distilled

He knows a girl

And what of the light one life leaves behind?

Is it measured in teardrops, keepsakes, and time?
Weighed in heartbeats weightier than gold?
Burnished like silver through stories yet told?

Lift high, rejoice

I know
We know
He knows

Prayer: Keeper of the stars, grant peace in our despair, assurance in our anguish, hope in your eternal promises. Amen

Submitted by Tim Chipman
In loving memory of Hannah N. Mansell

Day Thirteen, Wednesday, March 3

Samaria

John 4: 1-15 - Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John- although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?" Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

One thing Jesus was certainly not; he was not conventional. A good example was the Samaritan issue. Orthodox Jews regarded the Samaritans as a mongrel race whose religion was a heretical form of the real thing. It was polluting to have anything to do with a Samaritan. To go through Samaria was both dangerous and defiling. So most Jews, to go from Judea to Galilee, crossed the Jordan River and followed the river north on the east bank to Galilee. But when Jesus went from Galilee to Judea, he went straight south through Samaria. And on the way he broke another convention; he spoke to a woman. Orthodox Jews never spoke with a woman outside their own family. And that was not all. Jesus shocked the Pharisees by healing on the Sabbath, driving traders out of the temple, and claiming to forgive sins. Clearly, he was not governed by the political or social correctness of his day, and that was what got him into trouble. Also clear is his expectation that his followers were not to take their norm of behavior from secular society. We are to follow a different drummer. It is still a good practice when confronted by a behavioral decision to ask not what is socially correct, but what would Jesus have me do. Have you tried that lately?

Prayer: *Each day, O Lord, we are confronted by decisions of how to act. Make clear to us what you would have us do. For Christ's sake. Amen.*

In Memorial of Wallace Jamison
March 22, 2000 devotion

Day Fourteen, Thursday, March 4

Psalm 42:5 - Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

I cannot tell you how many times I have sat at the piano or organ and wept as I play through this song, and I will never forget the first time I discovered it. When I was home from college I would practice at First Presbyterian Church in Virden. A small sanctuary with the MOST beautiful stain glass windows ever, and a lovely small Etsy organ that I loved to play. The hymn Finlandia is difficult to play, and I dreaded practicing it. I was going thru it and struggling to get all the correct notes. And in despair, I stopped and took a break. I looked at the words and wept for what seemed like hours. It hit so many nerves for me. Today, I look to these words to carry me thru the most difficult times throughout my years.

Be still, my soul! The Lord is on your side: Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
Leave to your God to order and provide; in every change He faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul! Your best, your heavenly Friend thro' thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Be still, my soul! Your God will undertake to guide the future as He has the past;
Your hope, your confidence let nothing shake; All now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul! The waves and winds still know His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below.

Be still, my soul! The hour is hastening on When we shall be forever with the Lord,
When disappointment, grief and fear are gone, sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
Be still, my soul! When change and tears are past, all safe and blessed we shall meet at last.

Prayer – God, quiet my soul. Be with me as I focus on You and Your presence. I give you my love, I give you my concerns, and now I give you my time.

Submitted by Christine Smith

Day Fifteen, Friday, March 5

2 Timothy 1:7 - For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love, and self-discipline.

Devotion: From the works of Alexander Maclaren (1826-1910), a Scottish minister.

We all tend to cultivate those virtues which are in accordance with our natural dispositions, or are made most easy to us by our circumstances. And there is nothing in which we need more to seek comprehensiveness than in the effort to educate ourselves into, and to deduce from ourselves, kinds of goodness and forms of excellence which are not naturally in accordance with our dispositions, or facilitated by our circumstances. The tree planted in the shrubbery will grow all lopsided; the bushes on the edge of the cliff will be shorn away on the windward side by the teeth of the south-western gale, and will lean over northwards, on the side of least resistance. And so we all are apt to content ourselves with doing the good things that are easiest for us, or that fit into our temperament and character. Jesus Christ would have us to be all-round men, and would that we should seek to aim after and possess the kinds of excellence that are least cognate to our characters. Are you strong, and do you pride yourself upon your firmness? Cultivate gentleness. Are you amiable, and pride yourself, perhaps, upon your sympathetic tenderness? Try to get a little iron and quinine into your constitution. Seek to be the man that you are least likely to be, and aim at a comprehensive development of all righteousness and goodness and truth. Further, remember that this all-round completeness is not attained as the result of an effortless growth. True, these things are the fruits of the light, but also true, they are the prizes of struggle and the trophies of warfare. No man will ever attain to the comprehensive moral excellence which it is in his own power to win; no Christian will ever be a all-round a good man as he has the opportunities of being, unless he makes it his business, day by day, to aim after the conscious increase of gifts that he possesses, and the conscious appropriation and possession of those of which he is still lacking.

Prayer: Disturb Us
Written by Sir Francis Drake (1540-1596), and English sea captain and the second sailor to circumnavigate the globe.

Disturb us, Lord, when we are too pleased with ourselves, when our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little, when we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore.
Disturb us, Lord, when with the abundance of things we possess we have lost our thirst for the waters of life; having fallen in love with life, we have ceased to dream of eternity and in our efforts to build a new earth, we have allowed our vision of the new Heaven to dim.
Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly, to venture on wilder seas where storms will show Your mastery; where losing sight of land we shall find the stars.
We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes; and to push back the future in strength, courage, hope, and love.
This we ask in the name of our Captain, who is Jesus Christ. Amen.

Submitted by Julie Bruninga

Day Sixteen, Saturday, March 6

Unspoken

Scripture Reading: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28)

When Judie and I were dating in high school, we would take walks uptown on weekends. Our favorite place to go was Spatz's, a local popular ice-cream shop. As a result of dating since seventh grade, Judie had developed unique ways of letting me know about a curb, overhanging branch, or other obstruction along the path. She would ever so slightly squeeze my hand or gently move her hand down or a certain direction to indicate the need to step around something. I have since come to believe she is a natural mobility expert. Without a word, the message was passed through touch.

Through the years, I've primarily relied on Judie to help me learn paths to new work sites, around hotels during conferences or around college campuses. There have been many moments over the last 48 years of marriage that an unspoken message of love, concern, or comforting peace was communicated through touch.

Our children also learned how commands or wishes can be sent through a look. When one of the children was being a little difficult, Judie would glance their way. Boom, there was a change in their attitude. Usually they would say, "What!" Judie's glance came to be known as the "Care Bear stare." The Care Bears were quite popular back then.

When looking back, I am convinced there were a few situations when God spoke to me, not with words, but instead through His presence. Once, working with a young student who had Batten disease, I was getting inwardly frustrated helping her retain the ability to read and memorize a short poem. She would easily slip into fits of shouting or talking very fast. For those who don't know, Batten is a disease that gradually closes off nerves. It slowly takes away the person's ability to function. I silently prayed for some way to bring peace and to reach this child. Then suddenly, she put her hand over mine and softly said, "I'm trying Mr. T." Then she became quiet. I must admit it brought tears to my eyes.

Another time happened when my sweet daughter was not yet a year old. She had been crying for quite some time and I was very tired. Once again, I silently prayed for some way to help this little one be comfortable, not only for her, but also a little selfishly for my own peace of mind. A few seconds later, she put her little finger in my mouth and settled down. I held her close and thanked the Lord.

As my knowledge of Scripture matured, I found a great verse to describe those two events. *"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:16)*

The most significant time that I felt the Holy Spirit's peace pass from Him to me is when I accepted Christ as my Savior in high school. I had the joy of that experience once again in 2010 during a men's five-day retreat. It was a mountain top experience! That was a moment that only happened twice, but has left a permanent impression on my life!

All of us who have recognized Christ as our Savior and accepted Salvation have been given the invaluable gift of communication with God. This can happen through scripture, worship, prayer and other people. Most of us assume there is a minimum amount of time we have to spend reading the Bible, a minimum amount of holiness we have to achieve before God will work through us, but nothing could be further from the truth.

When you find yourself in conversation with a friend, and the passage you read that morning pops into your mind, it's not a coincidence. It's the Holy Spirit doing exactly what Jesus said He would do. *"He will teach you everything and help you remember everything I have told you." (John 14:26)*

Words, as we understand them, may never be spoken aloud by our Lord. God speaks to us in many ways, including through other believers. The verses you recall in a moment just might be God's way of speaking to someone through you! We will never know everything there is to know about God, but what we do know can save us from and guide us through all kinds of circumstances. The Bible has always been true and will always be true. It's the only thing worth basing our lives on and the only thing that will sustain us when life gets hard.

May your communion with God flourish as you engage in continual conversation with your loving, present, heavenly Father.

Prayer: *Dear Heavenly Father, please help me to notice You trying to reach me through Your touch. Grant me wisdom to realize that even though there is no hearing of Your word through my ears, I will feel and understand Your touch. Guide me through my daily activities. I pray that through Your strength within me I will remain focused on Your Word and live a life which shows the touch of Christ's love to others. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

Submitted by Dan Thompson

Third Sunday of Lent, March 7

HEAR

At the beginning of the new year, a Facebook friend posted a link to an app that would randomly come up with a person's "word of the year". I'd never done that before, as I thought it was kind of dumb to think that a silly app would be able to come up with a word for me ponder...for an entire year, no less. The directions said that if you didn't like the word that came up, you could start over and it would come up with another word.

Well, I decided that I wasn't locked in and I could always just disregard it anyway. So I gave it a try and the word that came up for me was HEAR. My first thought was how silly...I can hear. Then I realized that, yes, while I can physically hear, I don't always HEAR.

I listen to those closest to me...in our home...in our family...in our greater community. But do I really HEAR what anyone is trying to communicate behind their words?

In real life, John and I sometimes struggle with this. Especially when there is so much going on and multitasking is an "admired skill." We often have the TV on while we're looking at our phones and trying to have a conversation. To say the least, this usually does not end well, with one or both of us missing the other's point and at least one of us feeling unhappy at the end of it. We have to work at turning everything off and making it a priority to hear, really HEAR what the other is saying...not only the words, but what is behind the words as well. Full disclosure... it's not easy to do.

At this time in history when a global pandemic looms, touching all our lives in one way or another, I am so thankful for online church. My mother often says it's the best part of her week and it is for me, too. I know that God speaks to us through His Word, through song lyrics, through instrumental music, through Pastor Jonathan's messages, and through the fellowship in the Facebook comments (yes, even those!).

But if I'm being totally honest, do I really HEAR God when He speaks, or do I listen and then move on, multitasking along the way? There is so much to do, so much to be concerned about, so much responsibility. So much…

In ***John 10.27 Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me***…

God knows us. He knows our heart. He knows that sometimes it's full of concerns and troubles and things to do. He knows that sometimes it's consumed with grief. He wants us to hear His voice and follow Him. No multitasking needed...hear His voice and then follow Him. He will speak comfort, peace and love as we do.

Let us pray these lyrics from a song by Third Day:
"Let me hear Your words, above all of the voices, above all the distractions in this world
For Your words bring life and Your voice speaks promises
Lord, Your love offers more than anything else in this world"

Thank You, Lord, for knowing me. I hear Your voice and I will follow You. In following You, may I take the time to really HEAR what You, and also what others in my life are saying. Amen.

Submitted by Marsha Nelson

Day Seventeen, Monday, March 8

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

Amy Carmichael was a Presbyterian, born in Ireland in 1867. She served as a missionary in India for 55 years without a furlough. She rescued “Hindu temple children”, primarily young girls who were sold to the temple by poor parents. The girls were usually forced into prostitution to earn money for the priests.

Amy was a prolific writer. The following is an excerpt from her work entitled “Calvary Love”.

> If I can enjoy a joke at the expense of another; if I can in any way slight another in conversation, or even in though, then I know nothing of Calvary love.
>
> If I can write an unkind letter, speak an unkind word, think an unkind thought without grief and shame, then I know nothing of Calvary love.
>
> If I do not feel far more for the grieved Savior than for my worried self when troublesome things occur, then I know nothing of Calvary love.
>
> If I take offense easily, if I am content to continue in a cool unfriendliness, though friendship be possible, then I know nothing of Calvary love.
>
> If souls can suffer alongside, and I hardly know it, because the spirit of discernment is not in me, then I know nothing of Calvary love.
>
> If my interest in the work of others is cool; if I think in terms of my own special work; if the burdens of them are not my burdens too, and their joys mine, then I know nothing of Calvary love.

As I put this together, I was reminded of a favorite hymn:

> What wondrous love is this, oh my soul, oh my soul
> What wondrous love is this, oh my soul?
> What wondrous love is this
> That caused the Lord of bliss
> To bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul.
> To bear the dreadful curse for my soul?

Prayer: *May I seek- and find- this wondrous love, this Calvary Love, every day. AMEN.*

Submitted by Lynne Sheaff

Day Eighteen, Tuesday, March 9

Helping Others

While I was completing my seminary training, I was required to complete a year long internship. Marsha and I were blessed to complete my internship in Yellowstone National Park. In order to live in a National Park, we had to be employed to work in the park. We worked in various jobs in kitchens, housekeeping, night watchman, etc. It was quite interesting to say the least.

Our ministry was part of A Christian Ministry in the National Parks. We provided Services of Worship for park visitors and employees. We also provided support for employees through studies and services geared toward their needs. This often involved one on one or small group contacts.

While I worked in housekeeping in the summer of 1977, I developed working relationships other maids. Cleaning up after people can be very difficult. Some people leave their rooms relatively neat and uncluttered. Others, however, leave their rooms looking like someone had torn the room apart looking for something valuable. Maids are required to clean a certain number of rooms during their day and complete them in a reasonable time. This can be very stressful, especially if several ransacked rooms are on the list.

I struggled with this as did many others. After almost park employees at this level were college students hoping to spend time in a National Park enjoying the beauty and wonder of God's creation. The stress was often extreme. Coworkers wanted to give up their dream of a summer in a National Park because of the demands of work. Through that summer and the following months Marsha and I both had many opportunities to support coworkers with the love and grace of God.

The past twelve months have been different than any of us could have expected. We have adapted to the restrictions of life and gathering very well, I think. I also think that many, if not most, of us have lived this past year with a higher level of stress than we are accustomed to. How have you handled this extra stress in your life? Have you been open with others? Have you kept it inside? Have you been open to supporting and encouraging others who are dealing with this additional stress in their lives?

One of the lessons I learned in Yellowstone was how helpful it is when we share burdens (stress) with others. If we need to move something that we cannot pick up, we seek someone to help us. It is the same with spiritual and emotional burdens. When we share those burdens (whether they are ours or someone else's), we are blessed. So, I encourage you to share burdens with others.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Matthew 11.29 (NRSV)

Gracious God, we thank you for your presence in our lives, especially during this past year. We ask that you give us opportunities to share burdens with others that together we will be strengthened and encouraged by you grace and peace. Amen.

Submitted by John Nelson, Pastoral Assistant

Day Nineteen, Wednesday, March 10

Jericho

Luke 19: 1-10 - Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Jericho is the next stop on our Lenten pilgrimage. This was a large commercial city located on the banks of the Jordan River. It was called the city of palm trees because it had a tropical climate located as it was far below sea level. It was a very ancient city, the first one to be conquered by the Israelites after they crossed the Jordan back in the time of Joshua. It was noted for its abundance of fruits and was a great trading center.

It was here that Jesus, on the way to Jerusalem, stopped to heal a blind man. It was also here that Jesus met Zachaeus. He was a short little man who was despised by his fellow Jews, because he was a tax collector and was therefore a collaborator with the Roman oppressors. Not only did Jesus refuse to ostracize Zachaeus, but he sought him out and even invited himself to Zachaeus' home. It was a shocking demonstration that for Jesus nobody was outside the pale, that there was some good in everyone, whether a tax collector or a brigand or a prostitute or a traitor and thief.

No one is outside the love of God. Everyone is potentially redeemable. Be careful how you categorize people. We are all God's children, and those of us who have responded to God's call need to reach out to those who have not. Have you a chance to speak to or help one of society's untouchables lately?

Prayer: *We confess, Lord, that too often we write people off who are social outcasts. Help us to see in everyone the image of God no matter how much it is concealed. Help us to read out to the needy with the helping hand of Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.*

In Memorial of Wallace Jamison
March 29, 2000 devotion

Day Twenty, Thursday, March 11

Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.

-- Isaiah 10:1-2

God wants us to be a generous and concerned people. We are not to be concerned about our "stuff," but to the work of God and to the needs of others, especially those who are powerless and can't defend themselves.

Prayer: *O Father of the fatherless, please increase my compassion and commitment to work for those who are forgotten, abused, disenfranchised, and pushed aside. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.*

Submitted by Peggy Post

Day Twenty-one, Friday, March 12

Promises in Uncertainty

Psalm 37:7 - How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

When the future seems uncertain and I don't know what I can hold on to and trust, I find it helpful to remind myself of three of God's promises from the scripture.

FIrst, God's love is constant. Our jobs, statuses, and relationships can change in a moment. But when life gets hard or we mess up, God is there showing us limitless and unfailing love.

Second, God's protection is certain. Psalm 36:7 reminds us that God is our shelter and refuge. No matter the storm, God will protect us and faithfully remain by our side. We can always hold on to God.

Third, we can count on God's provision. Jesus tells us that we don't have to worry because our heavenly Father knows our needs and will provide for us. (*Matthew 6:31-33- So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*) For me, God's physical and spiritual provision have always been there.

Though life might not always be great, God is faithful to God's promises. Amid changing circumstances, we can hold on to these promises from our unchanging God.

Prayer: *Dear God, thank you for your promises to us. Help us to hold on to your faithful presence when we face uncertainty. Amen.*

Taken From the Upper Room, Jan.-Feb. 2021

Submitted by Karen Ladd

Day Twenty-two, Saturday, March 13

Jeremiah 29:12 - "Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you.

This past Christmas Frannie and Chad Suhre gave each family a framed picture with the words to the mealtime prayers each family has said for years.

Be present at our table, Lord. Be here and everywhere adored. These mercies bless and grant that we should feast in fellowship with thee. Amen. This is the prayer my family, the Gillis's, said before meals and was one I passed on to my children.

Come Lord Jesus, be our guest and let this food to us be blessed. Amen. The Suhre family has used these words in prayer before meals and was the meal time prayer that Chad grew up reciting.

Oh, the Lord is good to me, and so I thank the Lord for giving me the things I need. The sun, and the rain, and the apple seeds. Oh, the Lord is good to me. Cory and Danielle Suhre learned the words to Johnny Appleseed when they were young and used these words for prayer.

Skylar Suhre, age 4, often inserts her own prayer when praying before a meal. The words often include asking God to look after her animals and family members and teachers and always thanking him for loving us.

It made me wonder, are all prayers equal? Are all prayers heard? Is there a right way and a wrong way to pray? Does the Lord hear our words and judge us by our ability to say a proper prayer?

The Rev. Lynn Sullivan of Garden City Community Church tells of asking his Prayer Group that exact question. A member told him a story of a young boy who was overheard reciting the alphabet aloud. When asked why he was reciting the alphabet he said "I am praying to God". The man said "it sounded like you were saying your alphabet". The boy replied by saying "God knows my heart and puts the letters into the proper words".

I believe that this gives me the answer I was looking for. There is no right or wrong way to pray as long as one is praying to God and giving him praise. God hears our prayers and understands what we are feeling even if we only say the alphabet.

Dear God, thank you for knowing what is in my heart. I give you praise for understanding and loving me unconditionally. Amen.

Submitted by Dorinda Miller

Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 14

Psalms 107:1 - Oh Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. For his lovingkindness is everlasting.

The Mothers Day Gift

Last Mothers Day, when we were in the beginning of the Pandemic, my daughters gave me a gift designed to help keep me occupied in a worthwhile and enjoyable way. They gave me StoryWorth, a computer program which requires that I write each week on a question or topic selected by me. The topic I choose can be generated by the computer program or originated by me. After I write the "story", I send it in and each daughter receives a copy, and the company stores it until the year is over. Then it will be printed in a bound book. Hopefully by then I will have inserted pictures for each story. Since I like to write, the gift was really thoughtful and appreciated. However, as the year has progressed, I have discovered I have selected topics to share memories with my family about my life. In fact, they have also suggested topics for me to explore. It is not an autobiography, but it does reflect my memories and thoughts about the years I have lived. It had caused me to think about memories when I was a kid, when I was in school, when I was in college, and when I met my husband. I reminisced about our early married life and having daughters. I remembered the places we had lived and the schools where I had taught. I revisited the years since retirement.

Thinking back helped me realize what a good life we have had. I remember how thankful I am and have been for the years I have lived. Gratitude for so many good times and thoughts helps me know life has been good. Pausing to remember has been a really challenging activity. I doubt they realized how much I would appreciate their gift, but I do know they enjoy reading my stories so far. I have been encouraged to write my autobiography, and I doubt I will ever do that, but this experience includes more than an autobiography would. It includes my thoughts and dreams as well as memories. I just wish I had kept a journal over those years. It would have made remembering much easier!

Prayer: *Let us pause each day in appreciation for all we have been given.*

Submitted by Phyllis Lape

Day Twenty-three, Monday, March 15

THESE TWO

"There is no commandment greater than these two." – Mark 12:31

Over the past several years, I have included in my early morning prayer time a recitation of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). I have known these commandments since I was a boy in Sunday School at First Presbyterian Church. In my prayer time, I ask God to give me strength and wisdom to live these commandments during the forthcoming day. Most days, only with God's help and guidance, I am able to keep these.

Over the past months, I have added these verses I have memorized – verses found in each of the Gospels – when Jesus is asked by a teacher of the law, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" When I read or hear that question, I immediately review in my mind the Ten Commandments given to Moses.

However, Jesus gives His response which summarizes all of the Ten Commandments:

1. "You shall love the Lord God with all your heart, and will all your soul, and with all your mind, and will all your strength."

2. "And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus concludes that all the commandments and all the prophets hang on these two commandments.

So daily I must ask myself: am I loving God fully, and am I loving my neighbor as myself? These are great questions to ask myself prayerfully each and every morning.

My goal, especially during this season of Lent, is to follow these two commandments of Jesus, knowing that I can do this only with God's grace and strength given to me.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, thank you for the words of Scripture that teach us, inspire us, and direct us to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, without whom we could not live in obedience to You. Amen.*

Submitted by Bob Chipman

Day Twenty-four, Tuesday, March 16

Overcoming

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." John 16:23

Since March 18, 2020 I have worked from home for the first time in my 31 years with the State of Illinois. This devotion has meant a lot to me during these many months of overcoming the many obstacles that have arisen working from home.

"Remember, a child, how you played red rover? What was the goal of the game? To try to break through the barrier on the other side, of course. In many ways life is like a game of red rover. You spend a lot of time running toward obstacles, hoping you can break through. God has promised you something pretty remarkable in His Word. You're not just "coming over" you're overcoming! You're leaping above walls that once held you bound. You're sailing above circumstances that threatened to destroy your psyche. You're celebrating victories over situations that once seemed impossible. Today, instead of seeing yourself as someone who's always running toward trouble, begin to see yourself as an overcomer in His name, then get ready to take flight!"

When the State of Illinois sent us home, I did not see the many obstacles I would have keeping track of my staff of 13 and getting them all able to work remotely. I have learned that no matter what the obstacles we have we are "overcoming" them as we continue to work through a time with the COVID-19 virus.

"Prayer: I must confess, the word overcoming sounds like a lot of work. How refreshing to realize that overcoming isn't something I had to do; it's something You've already done on the cross. Thank You God, for this revelation. I'm so grateful to be an overcomer in Your name. Amen."

Taken from Daily Wisdom for Women - 2017 Devotional Collection

Submitted by Annette Simmons

Day Twenty-five, Wednesday, March 17

"Judge not that ye be not judged." Matthew 7, verse 1

In an early January worship service this year Janet Chipman encouraged both our children and adults to select a single word upon which we might focus in the New Year. In an instant I selected the word "heal". It seems to me particularly appropriate in responding to the pandemic that has so ravaged our world, and so, too, a prescription for our dealing with one another individually and corporately.

In the weeks following Janet's Sunday morning challenge, I was wading through a just-published 900-page biography of Abraham Lincoln by historian David Reynolds which my wife had given to me as a Christmas gift. Entitled simply *Abe*, Reynolds examines the effect mid-Nineteenth Century cultural and religious norms influenced President Lincoln. (Though Abe was not a member of First Presbyterian Church in Springfield, Mary Lincoln was. The pew they occupied now rests in the narthex of the current church building – built in 1872.

Lincoln delivered his Second Inaugural Address a mere six weeks prior to his assassination. References to religion permeated the Second Inaugural, which contained fourteen mentions of God, three references to prayer, and four quoted or paraphrased Bible passages.

The president did not describe the Confederacy as an enemy; nor did he declare that God is exclusively in the corner of either combatant in the long Civil War. "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces [a reference to slavery]; but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered—that of neither has been answered fully."

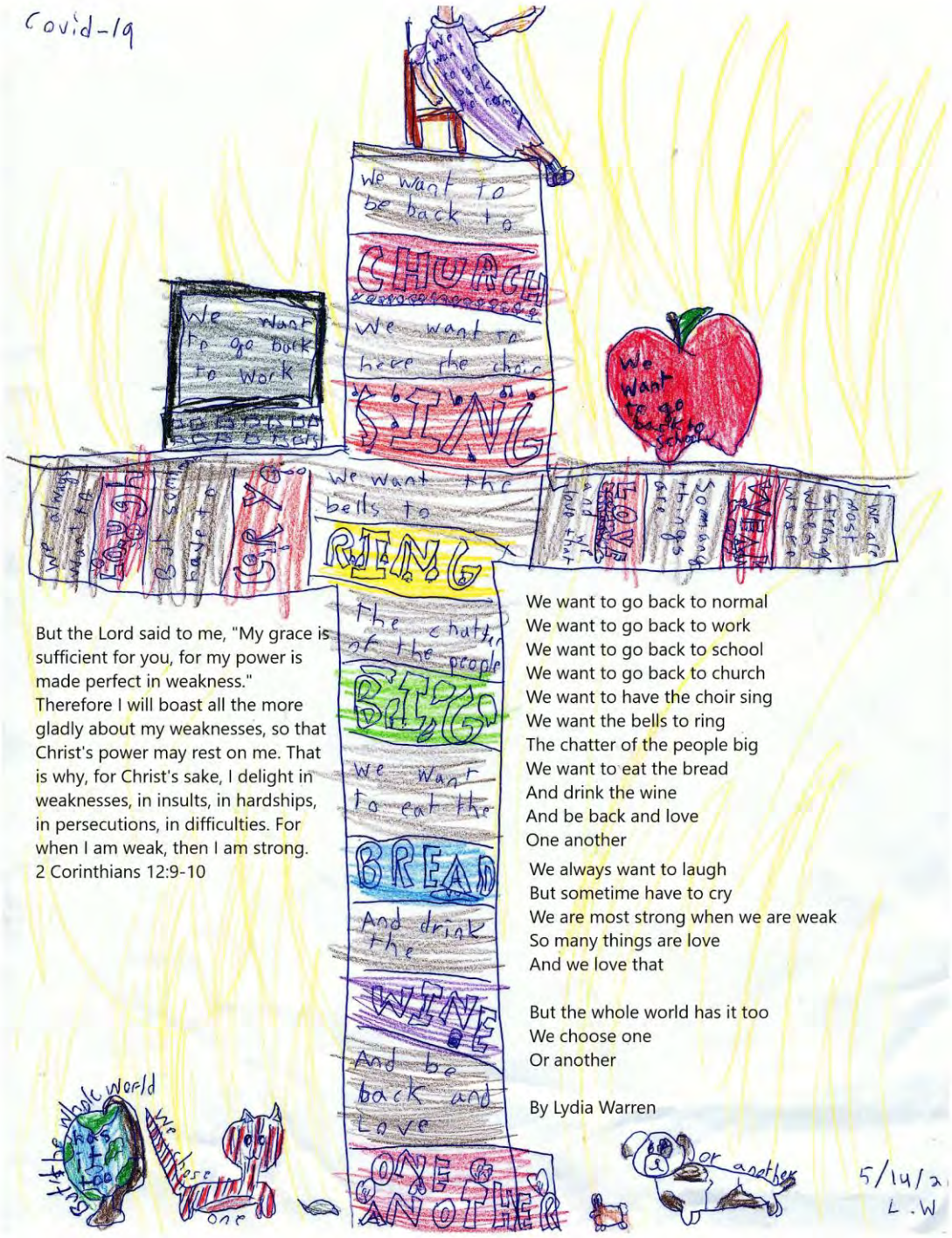
And the powerful conclusion full of grace and mercy:

"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations." Truly a call for healing.

Oh God, we pray that you bless us in our daily walk with your healing presence, in our bodies, hearts and minds. In your beloved Son's holy name, Amen.

Submitted by Dave Truesdell

Day Twenty-six, Thursday, March 18



But the Lord said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.
2 Corinthians 12:9-10

We want to go back to normal
We want to go back to work
We want to go back to school
We want to go back to church
We want to have the choir sing
We want the bells to ring
The chatter of the people big
We want to eat the bread
And drink the wine
And be back and love
One another

We always want to laugh
But sometime have to cry
We are most strong when we are weak
So many things are love
And we love that

But the whole world has it too
We choose one
Or another

By Lydia Warren

Submitted by Lydia Warren

Day Twenty-seven, Friday, March 19

God knows me

Psalms 139: 1-14 - You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely. You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light becomes night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

The Psalmist assures us that God knows us, knows what we are doing, where we are going and is familiar with all our ways. Before a word is on our tongues, the Lords know it completely. The idea that God is our Creator, Protector, and Comforter is wonderful and reassuring to me. However, as the supreme judge of us, I'm not sure I'm comfortable being totally watched. My words and actions aren't always the best. When I play golf and hit a really bad shot, I don't want God to hear me. When I'm impatient driving in traffic or my computer goes on the blink, I'm not at my "Sunday" best.

The concept that God is omnipotent, omnipresent (present throughout the whole of creation and into eternity) and omniscient (all- knowing) is overwhelming. It is beyond my human understanding that God can know every person who ever lived, know what they do or did, and know their thoughts and words. The good news Jesus brought us is that we are forgiven through his death and resurrection, and our belief in him. That I can rely on!

This leads me to another favorite scripture: Philippians 4:8-9: Finally, brothers [and sisters], whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable---if anything is excellent or praiseworthy---think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me,--- put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Prayer:
Gracious, loving God, please be with us to guide us by the Holy Spirit to use words and actions that are helpful and according to your best plan for us. We thank you for your mercy and forgiveness when we don't do our best. Help us to be the kind of people you designed us to be. Thank you for sending your Son Jesus Christ to be our Savior.
Amen

Submitted by Cathy Green

Day Twenty-eight, Saturday, March 20

2 Chronicles 20: 20-30 - And they rose early in the morning and went out into the wilderness of Tekoa. And when they went out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, "Hear me, Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in the Lord your God, and you will be established; believe his prophets, and you will succeed." And when he had taken counsel with the people, he appointed those who were to sing to the Lord and praise him in holy attire, as they went before the army, and say, o"Give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever." And when they began to sing and praise, the Lord set an ambush against the men of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah, so that they were routed. For the men of Ammon and Moab rose against the inhabitants of Mount Seir, devoting them to destruction, and when they had made an end of the inhabitants of Seir, they all helped to destroy one another. When Judah came to the watchtower of the wilderness, they looked toward the horde, and behold, there were dead bodies lying on the ground; none had escaped. When Jehoshaphat and his people came to take their spoil, they found among them, in great numbers, goods, clothing, and precious things, which they took for themselves until they could carry no more. They were three days in taking the spoil, it was so much. On the fourth day they assembled in the Valley of Beracah, for there they blessed the Lord. Therefore the name of that place has been called the Valley of Beracah to this day. Then they returned, every man of Judah and Jerusalem, and Jehoshaphat at their head, returning to Jerusalem with joy, for the Lord had made them rejoice over their enemies. They came to Jerusalem with harps and lyres and trumpets, to the house of the Lord. tAnd the fear of God came on all the kingdoms of the countries when they heard that the Lord had fought against the enemies of Israel. So the realm of Jehoshaphat was quiet, for his God gave him rest all around.

It has been said that trouble comes in threes. I think of our one hundred eight year old house. A few months ago, my wife noticed a water leak by our clothes washer in the basement. The long and short of it was that a new water line needed to be installed running across the entire length of the basement. After our plumbers did that and we paid the bill...we gave a sigh of relief. Alas, a couple of weeks ago, my wife commented that the radiator heater in the upstairs bathroom was cool feeling and the pipes running from it felt the same way. In came Aire-Serve and it was discovered there was a valve in the basement that was partially clogged. They unclogged it and the heater in the upstairs bathroom was warm again, and the radiators in the bedrooms were warmer than they had been. But they said the valve would just clog again; they had to order a new one. It would be there in two days. We got a call two days later saying the valve that was sent was cracked so they' d have to order another one. Aaaahhhh! As we face trouble in our lives our prayer can be like Jehoshaphat's:

Prayer: *"Lord I know you are in charge. So I choose to recognize this trouble as your problem, not just mine. I admit that I cannot handle this situation, yet it needs to be resolved. What do you say Lord?"*

Submitted by Guy Crumley

Fifth Sunday of Lent, March 21

James 4:14 - Yet, you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

Mortal life is defined as 1 (of living beings, esp. human beings) subject to death. 2 of or involving life or the world. 3 ending in or causing death; fatal.

People do not like to "talk" about death and dying. Even though it is something that none of us will escape from! Are you prepared for your end? We should be prepared with a will, power of attorney and any documents that protect your family and any property.

When searching for how many people have prepared a will, the percentage to me is unreal. Several sites stated that by the time most people reach their 70's, 80 % have a will, but this figure drops as the age lowers, and on average 42% of all adults have a will. The first will my husband and I had, I was pregnant with Jonathan, our oldest son who is now 36. We didn't own much, just household items, a couple of vehicles, and some farm equipment. But we wanted our son protected and to show our love by showing that if something did happen to us, he was taken care of since we don't know what tomorrow will bring. When the twins came, we added a few changes, again for the unknown tomorrow. Now with all three of the boys adults, some of the protections are not needed to show our love, but we still have things in order to make that unknown day easier when the time comes.

Worldly goods are much easier to list and protect on paper for that unknown tomorrow. But, spiritually, to be ready for life that God offers us after death is a scarier tomorrow that we don't want to think about. We don't know when "tomorrow" is our last today, and I pray that I will be "ready" when I reach my "tomorrow". I know deep in my heart that God gave us Jesus, His only son. I know that Jesus, unselfishly, died for US, all of us! Jesus died for our sins, to give us second birth. This does give me peace, but it doesn't reduce the unknown tomorrow of death. It doesn't erase sadness when someone dies. But it does offer comfort! God is there to guide us, comfort us and be with us for every tomorrow we have.

Prayer: *Thank you Father for providing love to all of your children, for guiding us, helping us and bringing us comfort on the dark days in our lives. Thank you for today and for the promise of tomorrow.*

Submitted by Sarah Yuska

Day Twenty-nine, Monday, March 22

Do Your Job

"I want to know Christ." -Paul, as recorded in Philippians 3:10

Tommy is one of the most gregarious kindergarten students in the school. Even a facemask can barely disguise his big smile. As Tommy and I passed in the hallway one day, we quietly greeted one another and kept walking.

"Oh, Mr. Chipman," Tommy called back, as I turned around to look at him. With a twinkle in his eye, he raised one small arm and exclaimed, "Do your job!"

I've heard plenty of upbeat phrases such as "Keep it up!" and "Do your best!" but being charged by a kindergartener to do my job was a first.

In the preface to his memoir *A Promised Land*, Barack Obama reflects on the job of the American president: "I [want] to pull the curtain back a bit and remind people that, for all its power and pomp, the presidency is still just a job..."

What is the job of a Christian?

Let me propose one simple answer: *To desire God.*

Say what you will about belief and good works. In some circles, you'll get an earful about having a "personal relationship with Christ." Talk about doing justice and loving mercy. All important stuff. But to me, the only prerequisite to faith is this: a hunger and thirst for God.

Peter W. Marty boils it down like this: "The essence of relationship with God is desiring God."

If the Apostle Paul, deep into his ministry, can write "I want to know Christ," not "I *already* know Christ," then surely that's enough for you and me. After all, our thoughts, actions, and words always follow our desires.

Christian, today, do your job! Desire God.

Prayer*: No matter what we do, be it principal, president, or pastor, stir in our hearts today, Lord, a desire for you. No matter what that looks like. No matter how that turns out. Teach our hearts to thirst for you. Amen.*

Submitted by Tim Chipman

Day Thirty, Tuesday, March 23

Cast Your Cares upon Christ

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

As we muddle through the despair, loneliness, and fear that we deal with during this pandemic, we should be laying those anguishing burdens on Christ. That's not so easy to do, is it?

When the COVID really hit and everything shut down, I must have had many of the same thoughts that you did: What should I do now? Where can I go? How can I maintain my relationships? Where can I find toilet paper? It was irritating and frightening at the same time. What a frustration!

Next was the feeling of isolation. I was cut off from all the groups that I loved so. People were truly afraid to interact. I needed an outlet, something that I could do that would help others and get me around others. I asked our pastor if I could help with the church service broadcast. That is where I found something useful to do that helped others and helped me at the same time. What a blessing!

I am so grateful that I stumbled into that activity. I would like to think that God lead me there and gave me the courage to ask. I thank my church for providing that need that could be filled.

The Bible is full of stories about people who overcame their despair and fear by doing God's work on earth. Paul is an extreme example of this. Paul survived prison, shipwrecks, floggings, and was stoned. Yet he held onto his faith and looked toward God for this comfort.

"We are hard pressed on every side, but are not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our body." 2 Cor 4:8 – 10

Feeling helplessness, remorse, loneliness? Turn toward God and he will give you comfort. Get active in the community of Christ (our church) where there is meaning to life and satisfaction in God's work.

Prayer – *Dear God, comfort us in times of trouble. Help us to look past our despair, helplessness, and loneliness, and instead look to you for guidance. Embolden us to ask what we can do to help others. Give us the strength to use our talents to further your work. In that, may we feel your love and that peace that passes all understanding. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*

Submitted by Stephen Holt

Day Thirty-one, Wednesday, March 24

Bethany

John 11: 17-28 - On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was less than two miles[a] from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you."

Just as Capernaum was Jesus' headquarters while he was in Galilee, so Bethany became his base while he was inJudea. It was the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, his close friends, whose hospitality made possible Jesus' mission around Jerusalem. Bethany was a sleepy little village - an easy two mile walk from the capital city. So after a busy day in the temple, Jesus would have no difficulty going there for the night. In his Gospel, John records the remarkable conversations that took place between Jesus and the two sisters.

When you think of it, some of Jesus' most important lessons were given not to huge crowds but one-on-one to those who would listen: the woman at the well, Nicodemus, Mary Magdalene in the garden, and here at the home of Lazarus. We can learn much from good books or listening to sermons or hearing a famous speaker deliver an address. But the most important messages from God often come to us from a quiet conversation with a friend or in the silence of our room while at prayer or meditating on a verse of Scripture.

If we turn off the television set, stop the radio, and in silence listen, God still speaks to us. But we must really listen, quiet our rambling thoughts, and open our heart and minds to God to hear what he is saying. The voice will come, as it did to little Samuel long ago. Have you listened to God today?

Prayer: *O God, who speaks to us out of the stillness of our own hearts, give us ears to hear and willingness to listen, for your word is life. For Jesus' sake. Amen.*

In Memorial of Wallace Jamison
April 5, 2000 devotion

Day Thirty-two, Thursday, March 25

Do You Have an Appointment?

Psalm 121 says: (from the International Children's Bible)
I look up to the hills. But where does my help come from? 2My help comes from the Lord. He made heaven and earth. 3He will not let you be defeated. He who guards you never sleeps. 4He who guards Israel never rests or sleeps. 5The Lord guards you. The Lord protects you as the shade protects you from the sun. 6The sun cannot hurt you during the day. And the moon cannot hurt you at night. 7The Lord will guard you from all dangers. He will guard your life. 8The Lord will guard you as you come and go, both now and forever.

Since March 2020, like most everyone else, John and I have had to socially distance from our immediate family...Emily and Steven who live 2 hours south of here and Greg, Jessi and Dominic in South Jacksonville. After having our grandson Dominic with us for part of nearly every day since he was an infant, having to stay apart has been really hard.

During the summer, we had scaled down backyard birthday parties, outside only. After school started and it was decided that he and his mother would be part of the district's remote learning program, John (a.k.a. Pop) constructed an outdoor obstacle course so they could come over for P.E. In November, we celebrated Dominic's 6th birthday all bundled up and spaced apart in the garage, with multiple heaters going. We discovered that we could have one of the electric heaters OR the toaster going, but not both at the same time! On the warmest Saturday in December, we hosted a brief socially distanced Santa Drop, also in the garage! We had fun opening stockings and just laying eyes on each other, which truthfully, was the best part.

Since it's been too cold for backyard visits, I've been trying to stay close to Dominic by having audio and/or video calls with him. But, like most 6 year olds developmentally, if he's engrossed in another activity, it's hard for him to just switch it up to have a conversation with Buhbo (his name for me). So I began to ask for an appointment. A time when he would be ready to talk which would make it more pleasant for both of us. Last Saturday, this was how the text message request for an appointment went:
4:01 - Me: Hey, do you think Dominic might have a few minutes for his Buhbo?
4:02 - Jessi: He wants to know if tomorrow would be okay. He said it's too late in the day to make plans. 😂
4:03 - Me: LOL...well, okay. But not during church. ❤

I tell you, this boy cracks me up! We did have our Sunday afternoon video call and he had so much to show me about all the new stuff he was learning in Minecraft. I don't understand most of it, but that doesn't matter. We were connecting in the best way we could.

While contemplating the writing of this devotion, I got to thinking. When God is trying to speak to me, am I so engrossed in what I'm doing that I put Him off and ask to make an appointment for a more convenient time?

One thing I'm sure of, and am so thankful for, is that He never puts us off. He never asks if we have an appointment. He's never sleeping or taking a vacation day. He's always right beside each of us, guarding and protecting us every step of the way. Always connecting with us through prayer and through His Word.

Thank you, Lord, that You are always with us and that we can always count on You. Help us to be attentive when You call and ready to do Your will in our life and in the lives of others. Amen.

Submitted by Marsha Nelson

Day Thirty-three, Friday, March 26

Psalm 131 - O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a child quieted at its mother's breast; like a child that is quieted is my soul. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore. RSV

This time of year-winter-with it's short days and cold weather forcing more inside time, can play havoc with mood. This year facing the pandemic, social distancing and stay-at-home orders make winter even more depressing. The following was written by Frederick Buechner in Whistling in the Dark.

DEPRESSION

One of the most precious of the Psalms seems to be one of the least known as well as one of the shortest. It is Psalm 131. “O Lord, my heart is not lifted up,” is the way it begins, “my e;yes are not raised too high;/I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.”

To be in a state of depression is like that. It is to be unable to occupy yourself with anything much except your state of depression. Even the most marvelous thing is like music to the deaf. Even the greatest thing is like a shower of stars to the blind. You do not raise either your heart or your eyes to the heights, because to do so only reminds you that you are yourself in the depths. Even if, like the Psalmist, you are inclined to cry out “O Lord, “ it is a cry like Jonah's from the belly of a whale.

“But I have calmed and quieted my soul,” he continues then, and you can't help thinking that, although maybe that's better than nothing, it's not much better. Depression is itself a kind of calm, as in becalmed, and a kind of quiet, as in a quiet despair.

Only then do you discover that he is speaking of something entirely different. He says it twice to make sure everyone understands. “Like a child quieted at its mother's breast,” he says, and then again “like a child that is quieted is my soul.” A kind of blessed languor that comes with being filled and somehow also fulfilled; the sense that no dark time that has ever been and no dark time that will ever be can touch this true and only time; shalom—something like that is the calm and quiet he has found. And the Lord in whom he has found it is the Lady Mother of us all. It is from her breast that he has drunk it to his soul's quieting.

Finally he tells us that hope is what his mouth is milky with, hope, which is to the hopelessness of depression what love is to the lovesick and lovelorn. “O Israel, hope in the Lord,” he says, “from this time forth and forevermore.” Hope like Israel. Hope for deliverance the way Israel hoped and you are already half delivered. Hope beyond hope, and–like Israel in Egypt, in Babylon, in Dachau—you hope also beyond the bounds of your own captivity, which is what depression is.

Hope in the Father who is the Mother, the Lady who is the Lord. Do not raise you eyes too high, but lower them to that holy place within where you are fed and quieted, to that innermost manger where you are yourself the Child.

Heavenly Father, Quiet our souls. Fill us with Your calm. Thank you for the hope of salvation You give us through your Son. We cling to hope because we know Your love endures forever. We pray that those among us struggling with severe depression seek and find the medical help they need knowing that You have also provided that hope for us. In Jesus name we pray. Amen

Submitted by Susan Weikert

Day Thirty-four, Saturday, March 27

We Belong

God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.
Ephesians 1:5 NLT

Studying family history and finding stories on the family tree can give us a sense of belonging. In my quest to learn more about my ancestors and distant cousins I recently submitted a DNA specimen and anxiously awaited the results. I had been warned to prepare myself because surprises can be devastating; nonetheless I proceeded with my plan. The results arrived and I was pleased to see that I belonged on the family tree that I had studied for years.

This reminded me of how God in His love for us made a way to adopt us into His family tree. The genealogies recorded by Matthew and Luke help us understand how. The lineages are the same from Abraham to David and then Matthew and Luke trace the lineage of Jesus through two brothers: Solomon and Nathan. Solomon's line led to Joseph and Nathan's line led to Mary. In this way, according to Donald Grey Barnhouse, "…the Lord Jesus became the legal Messiah, the royal Messiah…the only possible Messiah." Why? Because He was born of Mary's flesh and was adopted by Joseph thus fulfilling all Old Testament prophecies. Jesus belonged on his family tree because of the bloodline and adoption!

As we approach Easter we rejoice because God made a way to redeem us from the curse and to establish our place on His family tree. Because of the shed blood of Jesus and His victory over death we can become the children of God through faith! No DNA test can surprise us; once in God's family we will always belong there.

Prayer: *Lord, thank you for welcoming us into the family of God. Please show us every day how to welcome others who want to belong to your family. Remind us to be kind, caring, thoughtful, and quick to help those in need. Help us to live in such a way that others want to belong to your family. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

Submitted by Nancy Holt

Sixth Sunday of Lent, March 28

Strong

by Hannah Warren

In a World with hurt and sickness
In a World with hate and sorrow
We stay strong

With the Pandemic
With many deaths
With lonliness and missing others
We stay strong

With too many zoom classes
With too many restrictrons
With too many rules
We stay strong

Staying social distanced
Wearing masks
Trying to stay strong

I can do all things through
Christ who strengthens me.
Philippians 4:13

Submitted by Hannah Warren

Day Thirty-five, Monday of Holy Week, March 29

John 14:27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

The disciples had just received news that turned their world up-side-down. Jesus told them that one of them would betray him, that he would die, and that even Peter would publicly deny him three times. Suddenly, their journey with Jesus -- so full of teachings and miracles and new experiences – was coming to an end. Jesus reached out to the disciples with these words to reassure them.

A year ago, our world turned up-side-down. We have experienced many losses – too many to list here. We have adapted our lives by wearing masks, isolating ourselves from not only the general public but also our family and friends, and learning to exist in a "virtual" world of communication for work, school, and socialization. Our hearts are truly troubled.

Jesus wants to remind us that God knows all of our troubles and He will take care of us because He loves us. Jesus has filled our hearts with peace – peace that will bring healing, peace that will comfort us, peace that will give us hope for what lies ahead. We only need to stop being overwhelmed by the worries that surround us and find a quiet time to open our hearts to God in prayer, surrendering all our troubles to God and searching the scriptures for passages that help heal us. Take heart – God is with us!

Prayer: Dear God, we thank you for your great love for us. We rejoice that we are able to turn to you in times of trouble, when our hearts are full of sorrow and worries. Help us to see hope instead of despair, and help us reach out to others to offer that same hope to them. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Submitted by Diane Hollendonner

Day Thirty-six, Tuesday of Holy Week, March 30

It is okay (a poem of validation for the year 2020)

It is okay to leave this year behind
It is okay if you haven't found a silver lining since February
It is okay if all of that spiritual or emotional work you were planning to do on yourself never ended up happening
It is okay if you didn't read a single book all the way through or you read a book every day because fiction felt safer than real life
It is okay if you didn't become an expert chef and your banana bread never came out quite right
It is okay if you gained the weight you promised yourself you'd lose
It is okay if you watched too much tv and your kids watched too much tv too
It is okay if you cried more than you laughed, but I hope you got a few laughs in at some point along the way
It is okay if you felt overwhelmed by grief, loss, sadness, confusion, and fatigue –
we all felt some version of these and if you are reading this right now,
you made it through.
It is okay to close your eyes and say to yourself,
I am a strong, resilient [person].
It is okay if, after you said that, you opened your eyes and still felt worried
I worry too.
It is okay to stop everything for five minutes, put on your favorite song, and dance with your family or by your [...] self.
It is okay to find joy in the midst of darkness
It is okay, to sit down and just
breathe.
It's okay if you didn't realize how much you actually liked spending the holidays in your hometown until you couldn't do it
It is okay if the added roles, responsibilities, and jobs have felt crushing
It is okay if you couldn't do it all.
None of us can.
It is okay if you had to cut back on spending and teach your kids
that life is not about what you have but who you are with.
It is okay if on the surface everything seems fine but deep down, your heart is broken and the pain is bone deep.
It is okay to ask for help even if you don't think you deserve it.
It is okay to rest.
It is okay to admit that this was the worst year of your life or miraculously ended up being the best
And it is okay if
you are not okay at all
and what you really need to hear is…
It will be okay.
somehow, someway, someday.
It will be okay.

Romans 8:26-28

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Author: Cleo Wade

Day Thirty-seven, Wednesday of Holy Week, March 31

Jerusalem

Matthew 21: 6-17 - The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"
The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it 'a den of robbers.'" The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were indignant. "Do you hear what these children are saying?" they asked him. "Yes," replied Jesus, "have you never read, "'From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise'?" And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.

We end our Lenten pilgrimage at Jerusalem, the "City of Peace", which despite its name has experienced countless wars and been drenched by the blood of thousands during its nearly three millennia of history. Despite its troubled past, or perhaps because of it, it is sacred to three world religions: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Here David placated the avenging angel. Here Isaiah had his momentous vision, and here Simeon and Anna held the babe who had come to redeem his people Israel. Even more important, it was here that Jesus was crucified to bring salvation to all persons.

This is the heart of our faith. It was because of this sacrifice that we proclaim that an obscure Jewish peasant from an obscure corner of the Roman Empire in an unremarkable time in human history has come to be revered as Lord and God for a greater portion of the world's population. Soon we celebrate his death on our behalf and his glorious resurrection, also for us. So as we put on our new spring clothes, and hunt down hidden Easter eggs and gather to hear glorious music and sing triumphant hymns for Easter day, we must never forget that the cost of all of this was a cruel cross to be followed by the world's greatest miracle, the resurrection of our Lord. We are the Easter people who believe that life is not just the distance between birth and death, but that beyond this life is life eternal with our Lord. Even so come, Lord Jesus!

Prayer: *Help us, Lord Christ, to rededicate our lives to your service, and to proclaim anew that because you became mortal for us, we might become immortal with you. Alleluia! Amen.*

In Memorial of Wallace Jamison
April 12, 2000

Day Thirty-eight, Maundy Thursday, April 1

"For I will satisfy the weary soul, and every languishing soul I will replenish." Jeremiah 31:25

When I was young, one of my favorite books featured a young girl who was forced by her eccentric aunt to learn to play the violin. She didn't much like it and wasn't very good at it. In fact, the only song she was ever able to master was a hymn called "Art Thou Weary, Art Thou Languid", which she thought nicely summed up her attitude towards the violin.

As a girl, I thought that sounded like a terrible hymn, and I was glad that we didn't sing it at our church. But now in the year of our Lord 2021 on what feels to me to be the 322 day of Lent, I am here to tell you, friends, I art weary and I art languid. I am weary of masks and washing my hands and social distance. I am weary of Zoom and FaceTime and Google Meets. I am weary of the word unprecedented.

I actually had to look up the word languid for a precise definition. My Dictionary app says: (of a person, manner, or gesture) displaying or having a disinclination for physical exertion or effort; slow and relaxed.

Well, that also sounds right! Sometimes I am languid to the point of not wanting to get dressed! (I mean what is the point, we aren't going anywhere).

I share this not because I am seeking pity. I know I am fortunate to have a stable home loving family, and plenty to eat. No, I am sharing this for two reasons:

First, because I have an inkling that many of you are also weary and languid, and I want to wave at you through the gloom to say: I am here! I am with you! You are not lazy or crazy, this is just hard!

And second, and most importantly, because maybe you (and I) need the reminder that God he made a promise to us, over and over again, that He is with us, that he gives rest to the weary soul, that weary is not a pleasant way to be, but it is also not a wrong way to be.

Waving wearily at you through the gloom, my friends.

Heavenly Father: We are weary, but we know this will not last forever. Please bring your comfort and strength into our hearts today. Amen

Submitted by Marilyn Webster

Day Thirty-nine, Good Friday, April 2

Psalm 145: 1-2 - I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever. Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever.

When we lived in Knoxville, TN, we were season passholders at Dollywood. It's true that we enjoyed the roller coasters and children's area, but a little-know gem about this amusement park is its musical offerings. Daily, Dollywood performers put on musical reviews, Gospel concerts, singing and dancing acts from across the globe, and full-scale dramatic performances, like a musical Christmas Carol, complete with a hologram of Dolly herself acting as the Ghost of Christmas Present.
One Saturday afternoon, tired of rides and lines and funnel cakes, we ducked into the theatre to watch a music group we didn't know, lured by the padded seats and air conditioner. One stage came a family act, The Dunaways, who sang a nice set of country-leaning Gospel songs. In one number, the lead singer's young daughter came out and strummed her child sized guitar alongside her mom and grandma. But they sang one song that day that became something of an anthem for me.
Some of the lyrics go like this:

> Well, she started her mornings with the Old King James and a good strong cup of coffee
> Singing "Rock of Ages" while the bacon fried, that's what my grandma taught me.
> There ain't no church like church in the kitchen,

with the prayers and praise and the pass-the-fried-chicken.
You don't know what you've been missing
If you've never had church like church in the kitchen.

The song goes on to describe grandma's kitchen, full of good food and fellowship, and more importantly, the community of believers that gathered around the kitchen table.

As a young mom, I sang this song while I fried my own bacon, or baked cookies, or made another bowl of mac and cheese. I sang other things too, "Blessed Assurance," and "Be Thou My Vision" and Frozen's "Let It Go" on endless repeat. But this song reminded me that this little sphere of mine, the kitchen table, the food I made for my family from God's bounty, the prayers that we said each meal, these were a way for our family to gather as a tiny church of four people.

This year, we've all found ourselves gathering as tiny churches. Maybe you've been only one. Maybe your tiny church has included some extended family or a neighbor. We've shared literal church around our table this year, celebrating communion over a computer screen with club crackers and apple juice (or one memorable Sunday, grape soda…which after all, is a lot like grape juice, right mom?).

We are all anxious to return to "real" church, but even when we do, let's not forget that we all preside over a church in our kitchen, or in our office, or classroom, or workroom. These little, everyday acts that we do are a witness to God's love for us. The daily kindnesses we share are a way to spread the Kingdom of God. The hymns we hum while we work are a continual act of praise.

God, thank you for allowing me to sing your praises in all kinds of places, and so many different ways. Show me today where I can shine your light to those around me. Let my smallest acts be an offering to you. Amen.

Submitted by Siobhan Warren

Day Forty, Saturday of Holy Week, April 3

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

This verse "speaks" to me. Frequently I remind myself of the message. I believe it and when I am able to put it into practice I do feel peace. A friend inquired of what I was doing. I replied "Life!" Thank you to my friends who help guide me through life and help me find peace. May we all remember to seek the peace of God.

Prayer : *Wonderful father, we do not always remember to bring you our requests to you in prayer. Forgive us. God our father thank you for all you provide. Please continue reminding us through the Holy Spirit that you are always available to bring us peace. Amen*

Submitted by Alexa Crumley

Easter Sunday, April 4

"Remember me of God"

After worship one Sunday, Ruthie asked about the cross: what it is, what it means. As her four-year-old mind processed what she heard, she stated, "Oh, the cross is to remember me of God!" Of all that has been written and could be shared about the cross, and the incredible sacrifice and unfathomable love it represents, we might all be accurate in echoing her words: *yes, the cross remembers me of God.*

Prayer: *Remember us, O Lord, as we seek to remember you. Amen*

Submitted by Ruth Chipman

Thank you!

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

I also want to thank Dana Davis, Pastor Jonathan Warren and the Continuing Education chair and committee: Lynne Sheaff, Jean Harlow-Truesdell, John Nelson, Siobhan Warren.

- Sarah Yuska