



2022

“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

A Word from The Pastor

We are in the midst of a generational shift, similar to the way wars and the depression affected generations of people. We are entering a third Lenten season in which a pandemic ensues. We are beyond exhausted physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually.

When I share stories or see pictures from a few years ago, I often find myself qualifying it as “Pre-Covid”. I think that eventually, we will come to a time that will be “Post-Covid”. But right now, we seem to be stuck right in the middle things. We’re living in a liminal period, and that is an uncomfortable place to live.

The season of Lent is also a liminal period. It is a time of waiting. It is a time of almost, but not yet. And these days, we are so familiar with this idea of almost but not yet. We’re almost back to normal...but not yet. We’re almost comfortable with participating in certain activities, but not yet ready to resume all parts of our “before” lives.

For many years, this Meditations of Our Hearts devotion has been a part of our church’s Lenten practice. These pages help us while we wait for the celebration of Easter. The words we will read over the next 40 days will encourage us, strengthen us, challenge us during Lent’s liminal period. We are almost to the season of Easter, but not yet. First, we journey with Jesus toward the cross.

My prayer for you this Lent is that you will be blessed by the act of waiting. May God give you patience and endurance as you wait through this season.

Jonathan

Day One, Ash Wednesday, March 2

Time for...

“... now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed.” Romans 13:11 (NKJV)

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans describes what it means to live as a Christian, radically trusting God, and why it is essential for Christians to live this way. Paul emphasizes that time is of the essence; it is time to get up, get to work, to live fully into the promises and provisions of God.

To begin our second semester together, each student in English I was asked to select a word for 2022 to finish this phase: It's TIME FOR...Each student visualized that word and reflected upon why this particular word was needed in our school, or community, or world as we live together in this new year, in this time of 2022. Student responses included time for integrity, patience, kindness, peace, faithfulness, truth, action, holiness, positivity, unity, love. From this activity, a seed was planted to focus the eighth volume of the Routt Lenten Devotional Booklet that I spearhead around TIME for...

The booklet created by my freshmen students and me, along with thoughts from our Routt seniors, is divided into sections with an emphasis on these: Time for Listening, Time for Looking, Time for Forgiving, Time for Praying, Time for Watching, Time for Loving – now and forevermore.

Recalling Christ's time of 40 days in the wilderness, the season of Lent is a special time for strengthening our faith, for building our relationship with God, which “takes time”. In our fast-paced society, when what we think is urgent often crowds out the important, we need a reminder that though we say, “We don't have time”, it's more about the choices of how we use our time. Time is a gift from God, and we need His wisdom and guidance to make the most of our time while here on earth. Too often, the most important tasks from God's perspective get pushed aside.

Let us commit ourselves during Lent 2022 to “awake out of sleep” – to delve deeper into using this time to grow closer to God and to live more fully into the promises and provisions of God.

Gracious and Holy God, thank you for the gift of time. Encourage us on our faith journey to be intentional during this season of Lent to draw closer to You – listening, looking, forgiving, praying, watching, loving. Amen.

Submitted by Janet Chipman

Day Two, Thursday, March 3

“Therefore, let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fail. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry,” 1 Corinthians 10:12-14

Are our imaginations held captive by an image of a “perfect body”? Do we not eat enough of the appropriate foods and begin to lose weight and find ourselves with an eating disorder or depression? Or are we focused on an image of “the good life” and find ourselves swept into workaholism, stealing, or lying to appease the image we worship? We don’t talk much about idol worship, except when we talk of celebrities. It may involve becoming a slave to this celebrity.

In his protective love, God warns us not to let devotion to an image enslave our lives. The images we worship are more likely to come through television or other social media. Taking an inventory of the things we consider important may alert us to false gods in our lives.

Dear Lord, we praise your name and ask that you assist us in opening our eyes and helping us see your protective love. We ask this in your name, Amen.

Submitted by Guy Crumley

Day Three, Friday, March 4

"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." Colossians 3:12-17

ANYWAY

People are unreasonable, illogical, self-centered...

Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives...

Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you win false friends and true enemies...

Be successful anyway.

The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow...

Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness will make you vulnerable...

Be honest and frank anyway.

People love underdogs but follow only top dogs...

Follow some underdogs anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight...

Build anyway.

People really need help but may attack you if you try to help...

Help people anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and you'll get kicked in the teeth...

Give the world the best you have anyway.

-Kent Keith

O most gracious God, each and every day is a new beginning for us to help make the better place by being the best we can be. Guide us in the path you have set before us. Grant us patience when the task seems pointless and endless. Refill our hearts with love and confidence when facing the world each morning as we set forth to follow what you have willed us to do. And, when the day is over, and we're feeling overwhelmed, unappreciated, at a loss, we pray that you will give us the strength to do your will Anyway. Amen.

Submitted by Julie Bruninga

Day Four, Saturday, March 5

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” 1 John 3.18 (NRSV)

This is an excerpt from a (pre-Covid) story in Pastor Jonathan's sermon on January 23, 2022: “There was a Catholic church with a homeless man who sat in the back. Everyone seemed to be welcoming and loving and caring to this man, and when they had communion, they shared a common cup. When the homeless man came up for communion, he, like most before him, drank from the common cup. However, then everyone in line after him didn't drink from the common cup.”

Pastor Jonathan went on to ask, “I wonder what Jesus would do if he were in the line behind him.”

I can't stop thinking about this story.

The loving Catholic parishioners smiled and said the right things. Then when they could have put their love for a fellow child of God into truth and action, it just didn't match up with their words. When they could have truly welcomed the man as part of their community, they did the opposite. I can't help but wonder how that made the visitor to their church feel. I wonder if their actions made the man feel loved. Did they build up his faith? Or did they make him feel less-than and further away from God.

Here are some familiar examples of how Jesus expressed love for the poor, the afflicted, the less-than:

- He ate with tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2.15).
- He healed a disabled woman on the Sabbath (Luke 13.16).
- He touched and healed the man afflicted with leprosy (Matthew 8.2-3).
- He talked with the Samaritan woman at the well, drinking the water she gave to him (John 4.7-9).
- When his disciples shooed away the children for not being important enough to take any of Jesus' time, he rebuked them and welcomed the children, holding them and blessing them (Mark 10.13-16).

If Jesus had only been a preacher, a “talking head” if you will, would the people have followed him, and would a world-wide Christian faith have been born? I think not. It was Jesus' hands-on ministry to people, no matter their station or lot in life, that made the difference. He was willing to practice love in truth and action, going against social norms and religious laws to do so.

This Lenten season, let us examine our hearts and minds and strive to show love to all in truth and action.

Dear Lord, thank you for loving us. Show us how to be like Jesus, more and more every day. Amen.

Submitted by Marsha Nelson

First Sunday of Lent, March 6

Meet Life Head On

“Get ready, be prepared...” Ezekiel 38:7

Everyone faces challenges. For some, those challenges completely overwhelm them. Other people refuse to give in to those challenges. I probably fall somewhere in between depending on the circumstances. From the book Trusting God Day by Day by Joyce Meyer, “I can do whatever I need to do in life through Christ”. We need to be mentally and physically prepared for each day. We cannot be easily discouraged.

Easier said than done right? I have a very good friend facing some tough health issues and another very good friend who lost her spouse about a year ago. I admire both of these ladies so much. They do not let their challenges weigh them down. I’m not saying they don’t have bad moments, bad days; but overall, they are cheerful and grateful and amazing.

“Trust in Him. Be encouraged – God’s given you everything you need in order to do what He’s called you to do. So, get ready and be prepared. Trust God to help you stand up to whatever challenge comes your way.”

God, please help me with every challenge that comes my way. Help me to get ready and to be prepared. Help me to put my trust in you. Amen.

Submitted by Cynthia Benton

Day Five, Monday, March 7

New Meaning of Lent

Jesus said, “As the Father loved me, I too have loved you. Remain in my love.” John 15:9

“When I was in primary school, I remember several children talking about having to give up candy for Lent—and not being happy about it. But we don’t just have to give up things we enjoy for Lent. We can also give up bad habits like putting ourselves down, thinking badly of others, gossiping, or having unrealistic expectations of ourselves. These habits restrict love, rather than help it grow and who knows, when we give up negative thoughts, words, or behaviors for Lent, we may find that we enjoy it so much that we wish to give them up forever!

But Lent is not just for letting go of things; it can also be about taking something up. After all, Jesus took up his cross. Perhaps we could take up reading more about Christ during Lent, try new ways of praying, or take more time to enjoy simply being in God’s presence. Maybe we could choose to reach out to someone we don’t know well.

God can lead us in all sorts of ways. Instead of feeling resentful about giving something up for Lent, we may find ourselves looking forward with anticipation to the new experiences God is calling us to in this season.

Living Lord, guide and challenge us during Lent. Help us to discover anew your grace and love in this season. Amen.

Upper Room, March 2021
Meg Mangan (New South Wales, Australia)
Submitted by Cathy Green

Day Six, Tuesday, March 8

The Beauty In Silence

“For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him.” Psalm 62:5

My favorite part of the day is early in the morning when I get up before anyone else and the house is totally silent. I spend that time with God, and I find that the silence strengthens me and helps me get focused for the day. I spend some time just sitting and enjoying it.

Our world today is very noisy, busy, and at times stressful. When you feel stressed or frustrated, go somewhere that is silent and just enjoy it for a few minutes; I believe you will find that your soul begins to calm down. Inner peace and quiet are vital for hearing from God or sensing the direction He wants us to take. Outer silence helps promote inner silence. Learn to love silence and you will be more inclined to hear the still, small voice of God. At a time when Elijah desperately needed to receive direction from God, he had to wait until all the noise passed, and only when he was in a gentle stillness did he hear the still, small voice of God speaking to him (see 1 Kings 19:11–12).

Father, help me learn to love the silence so I can hear Your voice and sense Your presence. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Author: Joyce Meyer
Submitted by Dan Thompson

Day Seven, Wednesday, March 9

Angels Among Us

Scripture Reading: “Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph, her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” Matthew 1:18-21

Children really make every season of life, especially during the Holidays! However, there is one very special child who makes every Christmas eternally remarkable. This is the Christ Child! If it weren't for God's gift to Mankind, this joyful time of year would not be possible.

After once again watching “It's a Wonderful Life”, (for the one thousand time”, with Jimmy Stewart as the awesome leading actor, I was reminded of Joseph's encounter with an angel. His visitor brought fantastic news for all mankind!

People from all over the world have reported encounters with mysterious beings. They appear to bring important messages or lend much-needed assistance, then vanish without a trace. Could they be angels or even guardian angels?

Some of the most fascinating and uplifting stories of the unexplained are those that people perceive as being miraculous in nature. Sometimes they take the form of answered prayers or are interpreted as the actions of guardian angels. These remarkable events and encounters lend comfort, strengthen us and our faith. There are countless stories of people reporting encounters with mysterious beings. They appear to bring important messages or lend much-needed assistance, then vanish without a trace. Could they be angels or even guardian angels?

Some of the most fascinating and uplifting stories of the unexplained are those that people perceive as being miraculous in nature. Sometimes they take the form of answered prayers or are interpreted as the actions of guardian angels. These remarkable events and encounters lend comfort, strengthen faith, and even save lives. They almost always seem to happen when they are needed most.

In the article, “Personal Stories of Angel Encounters”, Erica tells the story about when she was young, and going through a lot of things that a young, 16-year-old girl shouldn't have to endure. “You can try to imagine. My mother and I were arguing a lot. She was very angry because she was going through things of her own. She took it out on my little brother and me.

I went to sleep one night after crying and praying to God; I prayed for hours until I drifted off to sleep. I woke up in the middle of the night to a bright light in my doorway. It was so bright that I had to squint my eyes to look at this beautiful light. Then, a very tall, what appeared to be a man walked out of the light to the edge of my bed and kneeled over me. He spoke my name and put his hand on my arm and started to whisper something in my ear. I could not understand what he was trying to tell me because as soon as he touched my arm, I started feeling really tired and fell back to sleep. He made me feel so much comfort. I still think of my angel until this day.”

Erica's story reminds me of a moment I'll never forget at age seven. You might think, "no way." However, I say a very positive, "yes way!" I unfortunately just had another encounter with the terrifying bogeyman in the basement of our house. That was one way my parents punished me for not eating everything at the table or some other infraction. I was sitting in the back seat of our car thinking it might not be so bad to just throw myself down those basement stairs right into the scary man's arms and get out of this world. I learned later that man was my father or someone he got to take his place to do that scary task.

The more I considered the idea, all outside noises became silent and a soft lady's voice sitting in the same seat, but on the other side of the car said, "don't worry Danny, things will get better. There are those who love you." I tried reaching out to touch her and she was gone. Amazingly, the next week I left home to attend a residential school for the next 14 years which I still call my true home.

I can think of at least seven other potentially life ending events in my life where a guardian angel must have been present in order for me to still be here today. I might share some of those situations in future devotions.

My point here is as just as God sent an angel to Joseph for guidance, He still sends them even still today to watch over each of us. "For He will give His angels charge concerning you, to guard you in all your ways." (Psalms 91:11)

Of course, we cannot know with absolute certainty whether or not each believer has a guardian angel; but we do know that God's angels care about us and that they can intervene in our lives as they are called by God and that's a wonderful thought! The verse above says that all the angels rally for the protection of one saint. And there is lots of biblical evidence that sometimes we might even entertain angels among our circle of friends. If you wish to check some other Biblical references out, read: Psalm 91:11-12, Psalm 34:4-7, or Hebrews 13:2 for a few. One sure way of meeting your angel in person is by accepting Salvation and you will meet him or her when being greeted by Jesus in glory!

Take time today to Thank God for those angels in your life.

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

Heavenly Father, You alone know all my needs and have the ability to bring me through this world. Thank You for the gentle ways of guiding my footsteps when I step off that path you've designed and getting me back on track. Thank You for the angels You have put in my life and are still adding more each day. Please grant me wisdom to share Your love and good news with others that they may feel the presence of Your angels and accept Salvation. In the Holy Name of Jesus I pray, Amen.

Submitted by Dan Thompson

Day Eight, Thursday, March 10



Submitted by Lydia Warren

Day Nine, Friday, March 11

God is So Goo

“But now, O Lord, you are our Father, we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.” -Isaiah 64:8

We have played and replayed a recently produced church CD featuring our daughter singing the song “God Is So Good”.

The song title on the CD’s cover is missing a letter and the deficit has elicited a new understanding of God’s divine power. Without the letter D, the song title indicates that “God Is So Goo”. Has there ever been a better description of our creator?

Goo molds itself to the shape of its container.

It's sticky.

It flows freely.

And kids love it.

What a great image of God and one that is wholly true to my experience.

God has undoubtedly flowed freely to meet me where I am and filled me in ways that are real, though unique to my experiences and very different from the ways worked in others. God has been blessedly sticky in my life, and let us not forget “let the little children come into me.”

Leave it to God to embody goo and to use a CD sleeve to reinvent my understanding of the divine.

If that’s not the utter essence of goo, of God, then I don’t know what is.

Mold me, make me, shape me, O God, til I become the very essence of goo in your almighty hand. Amen.

Submitted by Stephanie Chipman

Day Ten, Saturday, March 12

Encouragement

"Anxiety weighs down the human heart, but a good word cheers it up." Proverbs 12:25

When anxieties overwhelm our senses, what do we do? There are as many coping mechanisms as there are people in this world. When we are faced with the unknown, may we practice turning to Jesus. The more we do it, the more natural it will become. When we are filled with worry, we can take it all to God in prayer. He has plentiful, perfect peace to calm our anxious thoughts.

There is also so much power in an encouraging word from a friend. Good news can turn the tide of our angst. Instead of staying isolated in our anxiety, let us make time to talk to a good, trusted friend. Sometimes an outside perspective is all we need.

Wise God, thank you for your promised peace that fills me as you remind me of your persistent presence that never leaves. Lift the load of my worry that I may diligently and delightfully do all that is mine to do today. As I share my life with others, may I be encouraged by what you are doing in their lives, as well. Amen.

From 365 Days of Prayer and Praise
Submitted by Reggie Benton

Second Sunday of Lent, March 13

Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.”

Psalms 19:1

“the moon and stars to govern the night; His love endures forever.” Psalms 136:9

We all know the song: *Twinkle twinkle little star, How I wonder what you are? Up above the world so high, Like a diamond in the sky. Twinkle Twinkle little star, How I wonder what you are?* As children we sang the song and as adults, we sang it to children...it brings us familiarity and comfort.

Growing up in the country, I have always looked to the sky and stared up at the stars. I did not know the names of the constellations, but that didn't matter to me. I just liked seeing the stars. I then learned when I was in school that the stars were used as a guide for people, just like God guides us.

When Jonathan went to college and then later the twins, Patrick and Christopher, I would sometimes look at the sky at night and send a wish and a prayer to them because I knew that if they looked to the sky, they would see the same stars in the sky that I was seeing at that exact moment no matter where either of us might be. Now, they might not have cared or thought I was being too sentimental, but for me I got comfort in knowing that the world wasn't that big, and the boys weren't that far away - all because of the stars.

As I have aged, the same comfort of seeing the stars in the sky at night comes to me no matter where I might be in the world, those same stars are in the same location. Just as I know that God is with me always, but for some reason (to me) I feel like the stars are also a physical sign that God **IS** with me... every night wherever I am. God made the stars and the night, just as God made the earth and made me and made you, each different and each an individual. So, for me, at night, I do not need to be afraid of the dark, the stars are there as is God.

I still “send” a message to my sons at night when I see a star, even if they never know, but God is sending me a sign each and every night using stars telling me that he is always there.

Dear God, Thank you for the stars in the sky. Thank you for always being with me. The stars are your creation, the star led us to Christ, and the stars will always lead to home. Amen.

Submitted by Sarah Yuska

Day Eleven, Monday, March 14

"And I will be a father to you, And you shall be sons and daughters to Me," says the Lord Almighty. 2 Corinthians 6:18

Today's To - Do:

Sing —loud

Skip the dishes

Do cartwheels

Eat ice cream cones

Lick up the drips

Wear your favorite jeans

Go barefoot

Make somebody laugh

Dance in front of the sunset

Live like the wind and beautiful child of God you are.

By Sarah Mueller

Dear Lord, I pray for gentleness and patience, and to view others the way you do. Amen.

Submitted by Kay Black

Day Twelve, Tuesday, March 15

Twenty-five years ago, in keeping with an alleged Scottish trait of being thrifty, I took on a project for which I lacked requisite skills. In a rented building that needed some remodeling, stood an old air conditioner (7' x 2.5' x 6') that needed to be removed. I soon encountered two - 2" iron pipes that resisted my efforts to remove them. Going high tech, I borrowed a carborundum cutting tool and without any instruction proceeded. Within minutes, what seemed like being hit in the leg by a baseball bat, I found myself lying on my back.

After two ambulance rides, I arrived at Passavant Hospital for a ten day stay with two visits to surgery for a compound fracture of the tibia. I returned home with crutches, a wheelchair, and a daily routine of cleansing the wound and applying medication. That duty fell upon my beautiful and loving wife, Mary.

During those first two weeks, I realized how blessed I was.

1. God was with me on that very hot morning when I was in a locked building with no one aware of my location or situation.
2. That Mary, without hesitation took on the unbelievable task of caring for the open wound, preparing meals and all the usual household chores while working each day.
3. That I had employees that took care of my business during recovery.
4. That my work should not take precedence over my family but enjoy their love and support.
5. For members of our congregation that brought meals and offered to assist.
6. For Wally Jamison who stopped by several times and offered prayer.
7. For many Jacksonville people and the surrounding communities that sent cards, phoned and prayed for a speedy recovery.

In gratitude to God for the above blessings, I was determined to attend church three days after exiting the hospital. Because of six stainless steel pins protruding from the leg and a large metal device holding them in place, I could not wear trousers. Dressed in shorts and a golf shirt, our son pushed the wheelchair to the church and up the newly installed ramp. It was during the coffee hour that I experienced what handicapped people endure all the time. While a few people greeted me, it was evident others were uncomfortable with my presence. It was then that something happened I will never forget. About six weeks earlier, I had photographed a five-year-old girl and her mother. They were in church that day and the little girl came over to check everything out. She kneeled down by my extended leg and carefully examined the hardware and the steel pins penetrating the side of the leg. Each pin was surrounded by Betadine medication (which had the appearance of dried blood). Upon rising she walked up to me, put her arm around my neck and said, "I am so sorry!"

We read in ***Matthew 18: 1-5 - At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? He called a child, whom he put among them, and said "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."***

Only the love of God and of Jesus is more perfect than that I witnessed in this small child!

Most holy and glorious Lord God, we praise you for the many blessings we enjoy daily. Forgive us when we think our time is limited and too valuable to listen for your counsel. Open our mind and eyes that we may again witness the supreme sacrifice of our Savior Jesus. Amen.

Submitted by Merle Fox

Day Thirteen, Wednesday, March 16

Circle Up Around the Throne

“And they were singing a new song around the throne.” - Revelation 14:3

This fall Stephanie and I found ourselves privy to a most intimate and unique concert experience in the woods of Tennessee. This “songwriters circle,” as it was called, featured five artists on a small stage underneath a large white circus tent illuminated by strands of white lights. The patter of light rain on the roof added rhythmic accompaniment to the stripped-down acoustic music.

No pretense, no costuming, complete vulnerability, mistakes and restarts, and the feeling of perfect authenticity as these five sculptors of sound brought their works of sonic art to life for an audience of about five hundred. (You may not recognize the singer-songwriters’ names, but you would know their songs--for example, one of them co-wrote Eric Clapton’s Grammy-winning Song of the Year “Change the World”.)

Sitting in the audience, Stephanie and I were not alone in riding the range of emotions these songs and the stories behind them elicited, from belly laughs to rolling tears to pensive recollection. Song after song, story after story, the communal totality of the experience was worth even more than the sum of its parts.

It is said music is the universal language. That night I was certain it was true, that this universal language is also a lexicon of Love, straight from the Author and Perfecter of our faith.

Thank God for music. What a wonder that God can use us as divine and dynamic instruments.

Dear Lord, tune our hearts to tell Thy story and sing Thy grace, in imperfect pitch, with perfect authenticity. Amen.

Submitted by Tim Chipman

Day Fourteen, Thursday, March 17

Surprise!

“On a Sabbath, Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.” Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.” Luke 10-13 NIV

“During the fourth watch of the night, Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him, walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost”, they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”” Matthew 14: 25-27 NIV

Most people like surprises. At least when they are good surprises! It's fun to get a birthday card, and a big surprise if it has money inside. It's fun to eat at McDonalds occasionally, and really fun to find they toy inside the Kids' Meal. Our 5-year-old granddaughter, Alyssa, is crazy about LOL dolls right now, and they come with toy surprises wrapped up in the packaging.

Surprise is a good word to associate with Jesus, too. He was constantly saying and doing things that surprised everyone. Just when people thought they had him figured out, he would say or do something they did not expect. For example, “The first will be last and the last first”, or “The least in this world will be the greatest in my kingdom.” Sometimes, Jesus would perform miracles like healing a cripple or walking on water.

Christians today love to learn about Jesus. Many people spend their whole lives learning all they can about Him, and it seems that the more we learn, the more surprises we discover.

Heavenly Father, thank you for sending us your son, Jesus. Help us to always be on the lookout for other good surprises in our daily lives and to recognize that they come from you. Amen.

Submitted by Steve and Penny Turner

Day Fifteen, Friday, March 18

A-Tisket, A-Tasket, A Full or Empty Basket

Scripture Reading: “They all ate and were filled.” Matthew 14:20

Once when our daughter, Amy, was very young, her and I got up early on Easter morning. She was excited to check out her Easter basket. Of course, the first thing that caught my beautiful little daughter's eye was a chocolate bunny. Both her and I snatched up our bunnies and were enjoying the sweet tasting ears when Mom came on the scene!

Mom's words were quiet, but firm. “She hasn't had breakfast yet.”

My only defense was, “well it is Easter, and she is excited. It only happens once a year. After all there is some nutrition in the milk that goes into making milk chocolate.” Realizing my comment wasn't the best, I said, “she could probably get a bowl of cereal.”

This was our first beautiful little girl, and I had a bad habit of spoiling her. Amy finished her basket of treats off in a few days. She said, “I wish there was more. Can I have some of your' s Daddy?” Of course, I shared. However, both baskets were empty after three days. No matter how many times we checked, nothing changed. There just wasn't any sweeter stuff! I told her, “Well, sweetie, we still have you, Mommy and me as a family to have fun together.” Then with a pounce she jumped on me and we had a little wrestling match in the front room.

Sometimes God uses the unexpected to open our eyes to His power. In the Bible story of Jesus feeding the 5,000, we see the doubt of Jesus's disciples and the provision of God through a miracle. The Scripture details the account of how five loaves of bread and two fish became enough to feed 5,000 with leftovers! Jesus' Feeding of the five thousand reminds us of Jesus' compassion for His people. We see this in the first part of the passage when it is mentioned that Jesus was traveling and healing the sick at the same time. At the end of the day, the disciples wanted the crowd to go away because it was getting dark. But then Jesus said to them, let the people remain and instead give them some food. The character of Jesus is exhibited in this part of the passage. His compassion is without bounds that even when He had traveled far, healed the sick, and did so many wondrous things, His priority was still with the crowd that followed Him. This scenario of Jesus feeding 5,000 people supports the fact that Jesus is the Lord that saves His Church. His compassion is so boundless that He gave His life for His children which includes “all of us.” Also, each one of us are sinners. Jesus knows this and turns no one away. Feeding the multitudes is Jesus's way of sending this world a very important message meant for all generations. Come to Him and your soul will not go hungry. You will not wither way either emotionally or in spirit. He will fill you with enough nourishment of the Holy Spirit which can be shared with others.

Most of us can recall times when first starting out, raising children, in between jobs or an economic downturn in the local community. Funds were short, but there were usually

inexpensive ways of having fun and just enjoying each other's company. God always provided. Maybe not as much as you wished.

However, when looking back, like myself, you probably remember if God was included in the daily routine, we didn't go away empty handed. Our hearts were filled with hope and renewal of spirit!

In both the stories of feeding the multitudes in Scripture, the bountiful love of Jesus is very obvious. His arms are always wide open, and his table filled with food and drink for the spirit. Despair gets nowhere when you eat there. Coming to our Lord in prayer and meditating on His Word are two ways to ensure that your basket of faith is never empty. It might seem to get low at times. But The Lord will replenish your spirit when you knock on the door in genuine prayer and thanksgiving.

"Yes, the Lord GOD will come with might, With His arm ruling for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him and His recompense before Him. Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, In His arm He will gather the lambs and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing {ewes}." (Isaiah 40:10-11)

Thus, feeding the hungry is both an act of compassion and a demonstration of the presence of God's kingdom. Throughout the centuries, Christians have followed the lead of Jesus in seeking to feed people, especially those with limited access to food. Increasingly, we are striving to help the poor, not only by feeding them, but also by helping them to develop the means to feed themselves at the tables of this world and gaining wisdom to come to the table of the Lord.

If you're in a situation that needs a miracle, give God room to work through ways you never imagined or dreamed. Sometimes the miracle is not what we expect, but God knows what we need!

Lord Jesus, Thank You for the laughter of children, for my own life breath, for the abundance of food You provide us in this world. Thank You for the food and drink of the Holy Spirit which nourishes our souls each day, giving us confidence and hope on our walks of faith. Amen.

Submitted by Dan Thompson

Day Sixteen, Saturday, March 19

Forgiving Grace

“A man’s wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense.” Proverbs 19:11

In his day Franz Liszt (1811-1886) was famed as the world's finest pianist---number one in his class. Well behind him in reputation, many lesser pianists attempted to scratch out careers, sometimes stooping to unscrupulous methods to capture attention. One young woman in this group (her name has mercifully been forgotten) concocted a notorious whopper to attract a larger audience. For a recital in Berlin, she advertised extensively that she was a “pupil of Liszt” (whom she had never even met!). She assumed she could get away with this. Who would know her secret? And surely Liszt would never find out.

Imagine the woman's horror when, on the very morning of her publicized performance, the newspapers announced that Liszt himself had just arrived in Berlin. What could she do now? Her duplicity would be publicly exposed, and she would be disgraced. After wrestling with remorse, she decided to go to Liszt and confess her misdeed.

Begging for an interview at his hotel, the woman entered his suite in trepidation, fearing the master's wrath for such a disrespectful offense. With many tears she confessed---and waited, expecting to be banished from his presence.

Far from showing fury, the great Liszt attended her thoughtfully as he worked through an idea in his head. The woman listened incredulously as Liszt quietly asked her the name of each piece on her program. Selecting one, he asked her to sit at his piano and play it for him.

She began. Liszt listened and eventually interrupted with several hints about how to perform the composition. Then he smiled, and with a pat on the cheek, he dismissed her. “Now, my dear, you may call yourself a pupil of Liszt.” By his actions he went beyond forgiveness. He helped her save face.

That wiser and humbler woman left the hotel, graced with a Christlike gesture of clemency. To an adulterous woman Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you . . . Go now and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11).

When someone shows you disrespect or more blatantly “sins against” you, how do you react? Like Liszt? Like Christ? Can you even contemplate the possibility of leaving “vengeance” to God and repaying an offender with kindness? “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you” (Eph. 4:32).

Father, I need Your grace in this area. It is easier for me to hold grudges than to forgive and move on. Help me to have Your forgiving nature and a heart of compassion. You have forgiven me so much; now let me extend this forgiveness and love toward others. Amen.

From *Spiritual Moments with the Great Composers* by Patrick Kavanaugh

Submitted by Jean Harlow-Truesdell

Third Sunday of Lent, March 20

The Promises of God

Scripture: "I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth." -Genesis 9:13



Dear God, we thank you that you love us. We thank you for your great promises, and we thank you that you are so special. Amen.

Submitted by Ruth Chipman, age 5

Day Seventeen, Monday, March 21

Six years ago, my life became one like I had never known before. I was alone! My house was empty! There were no children running through the house and no husband to share life with. I was alone in my own little world.

I married right out of high school and that marriage produced three wonderful children, Frannie, Richie and Kyle. It took me many years to finally conclude that this marriage must end. I had married a man who had an addiction that made our lives unsafe especially for one of my boys. After 11 years of marriage, I left with three young children and started a new life. Some might say I was now alone. Alone I was not, I had my three children and my belief in God.

A few years later I remarried. Again, my husband had similar addictions as the first. Would I never learn? To this marriage there was a son born, Trevor. After 11 years in this marriage we both decided that we could no longer live our lives together as husband and wife. Because of our love for one another we did attend marriage counseling classes at my church. The addiction continued and I finally gave up. Again, not alone because I had my children and my faith in God.

I was determined that there could still be that happy, everlasting marriage for me. And that brings us to Bob. Bob had a bit of a rough edge and was never afraid to say what he thought. He was not a church goer but did not begrudge me for attending. As I learned after our marriage, Bob had the same addiction as the first two but was a reformed alcoholic who had moved to sobriety many years before. Whew, was that a relief. There were indeed rough years but our marriage lasted well over my normal 11.

Bob had developed lung issues and in February 2016 he took his last breath. As I have mentioned Bob was not a church goer. But two weeks prior to his passing he asked to visit with my pastor and he gave his life to God. The Sunday before his last day, he went to church with me, something he had only done once before. He knew he was soon to be gone from this earth. I sat with him holding his hand as he peacefully transitioned. I was now truly alone! No one was in my home except for me...and my belief in God. I was extremely scared!

Isaiah 41:10

“Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God.

***I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you,
I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.”***

Not one to give up easily, I faced my fear and relied on God to see me through. I sold my home, I retired from my work of thirty years and moved across the state to Winchester. I have family around me daily and I feel their love and support as I always have. I am not alone. I joined First Presbyterian in Jacksonville and found my faith renewed. With God, my family, my church and my friends, I may be lonely at times but no longer feel alone.

Dear God, I am seeking your guidance and touch for those feeling alone and isolated. Please fill their hearts and be all things in their life. Amen.

Submitted by Dorinda Miller

Day Eighteen, Tuesday, March 22

The scripture reads “Yea though I walk thru the valley of the shadow of death” not “Yea though I walk thru the valley of the shadow of no toilet paper.” Our faith is being tested. Passing or failing, your response will mark a significant milestone in your walk of faith. But even more importantly, how you deal with this test is your Christian witness!

In times like these, people will notice someone who responds differently than the crowd. True faith is the thing that empowers us to respond differently. This is not to say we will not have anxious feelings or experience moments of doubt, but ultimately our response should be grounded in God’s promises. Real Faith is believing God’s promises are more real than anything we can see or feel in this world...and that includes the Coronavirus and empty shelves on the toilet paper aisle.

2 Corinthians 5:7 “For we live by faith and not by sight.”

Plagiarized directly from Rick Lane, President of Community Bank, Madill, OK.

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for helping us cope with these trying times. As we wade through these uncharted waters, please help us to understand your plan and maintain our faith. Please fill us with your joy and spirit so we can uplift others. Amen.

Submitted by Jo Anderson

Day Nineteen, Wednesday, March 23

Watching in Hope

“But as for me, I watch in hope for the Lord, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me.” Micah 7:7 (NIV)

If you have not read the book of the prophet Micah, perhaps now is the time. Divided into three parts, each beginning with “Hear” or “Listen”, Micah preaches that God hates unkindness, injustice, fake display/empty religion. God hates sin, and He will come in judgment after countless opportunities to repent. He will send a Savior to be our peace (Micah 5:5). One of the most well-known verses in this book is this:

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

In Micah 7:7, we see the great faith of Micah in our God who forgives us, who saves us, who hears us. We, like Micah, can watch in hope, as Christ will come again. Watching means being alert, being aware, being focused, being mindful of the Divine in the midst of our living. It takes intentionality. It takes openness to the work of the Holy Spirit within and around us. It is time for watching with an intentional, hope-filled perspective, trusting in God in all things as we act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

Almighty God, may we, too, actively watch and wait in hope while we actively work for justice in the world. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Submitted by Janet Chipman

Day Twenty, Thursday, March 24

Riding A Bike!

"In all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." Proverbs 3:6 (NIV)

Oliva was so close to riding her bike. She could push, glide, coast, and pedal. But while she had the coordination to get going and stay going, she couldn't find her confidence.

For months, she'd suit up in her bike gloves and helmet and loop endlessly, teetering back and forth on her toes. At bedtime, we'd pray for her to master bike-riding, a huge deal in the life of a six-year-old.

I'd like to say that immediately after that, she pushed off down our hill and rode until dawn, but life isn't like the movies. For a week straight, Brian did sprints up and down our street, balancing, correcting, and encouraging her with every step. Then suddenly, she just went.

At dinner that night, we shared our highs and lows. "My high is riding my bike. It's just such a free feeling," she said, nailing the exact moment of liberty she experienced as she pedaled away.

I think God must often see us like this: content to wobble along, unaware of how much freedom is available to us with just a little confidence and an extra push. The times I have struggled hardest are also the ones when I looked to myself first, a lesson I'm afraid I have had to learn again and again. Turns out, overcoming human nature isn't like riding a bike; it's more like lassoing a unicorn.

These days, Olivia pedals freely, working on her tight turns and getting ready to race to cousins during our annual vacation. And my prayers for her—that she always seeks His help first and finds the strength inside herself when she needs it—continue to come true.

May I always find my strength and confidence in You, Lord. Help me learn when I need to spread my wings and fly. Amen.

By Ashely Kappel
Daily Guideposts 2022
Submitted by Dan Thompson

Day Twenty-one, Friday, March 25

"In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry." Jonah 2:2

My grandsons spent the night with me last Saturday. As we were getting ready the next morning, I called for them to come brush their teeth. Everett, being the stereotypical rule-follower, bounded into the bathroom and dutifully brushed his teeth. Arthur, a three-year-old skeptic, hesitated, then replied, "I don't know if I want to." He makes me laugh. After a short while he obliged, and the teeth were brushed.

After giggling about that for a moment, it occurred to me that I've been in his position lately. He knew it was something easy to accomplish. It was something he's used to doing. His parents have explained it's important for his teeth to be clean. His teeth feel better when they're clean. He just wasn't sure he wanted to do it.

Lately I found myself not knowing if I wanted to be physically in church. While nothing painful has happened to me in our church, like so many I've experienced cumulative grief and the sadness was dragging me down. I knew it wasn't hard to accomplish. I'm used to doing it. I know it's important to keep my soul clean by surrounding myself with friends who support me in my faith. I always feel better after I've been there. I just wasn't sure I wanted to do it.

After the teeth were brushed, I loaded up Everett and Arthur and we met their parents at church. And it was a good day.

During this time of penitential preparation, it's important for me to remember that from the depths of my sadness, even from the shallow parts of my sadness, God listens to my cry.

Dear Lord, Thank you for being a loving father, mindful of my sorrows and eager to be a help and comfort. Amen.

Submitted by Sally Stock

Day Twenty-two, Saturday, March 26

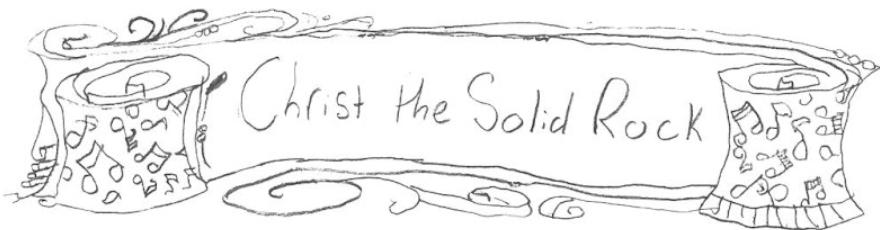
"A One Word Prayer"

"I just breathe the name of Jesus
when my heart is filled with fear.
And though I cannot see His face,
 I know that He is near.
When I whisper "Jesus" softly
 I'm admitting I'm in need.
By calling out that precious name,
 my stress-bound soul is freed.
 It's a one-word prayer I utter
when I'm not sure what to pray.
 It's a prayer of sweet surrender
 when I'm weary of "my way".
I pray "Jesus" when I'm worried
 or when I am depressed.
I say "Jesus when my mind's confused
 or when my life's a mess.
It's a prayer He always answers
 as He gives me eyes to see
 evidences of His presence
 and His tender love for me."

Prayer: Dear Lord, I honor You for the blessing of a new day. My life is Yours Lord and everything I have belongs to You. I pray that You set my feet on the right path today and grant me divine wisdom to make the right choices that will glorify Your name. Renew the gifts and abilities You've so generously given me so I can be a blessing to others just as You've blessed me. In Jesus name, Amen!

Author: Greg Asimakopoulos
Submitted by Dan Thompson

Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 27

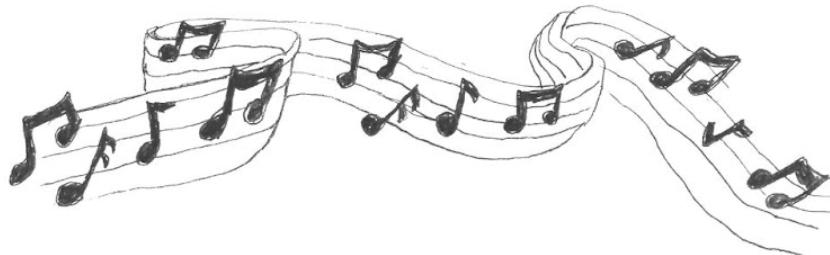


His oath, his covenant, his blood support me in the
whelming flood; When all around my soul gives way,
he then is all my hope stay.

On Christ The Solid Rock

I Stand, All Other Ground

Is Sinking Sand; All Other
Ground Is Sinking Sand.



Submitted by Hannah Warren

Day Twenty-three, Monday, March 28

When It Seems That Wrong Is Winning

Scripture Reading: "He will judge the world with righteousness and the people with His truth". Psalm 96:13b

"Does it seem that your unethical co-workers prosper? Does it seem that even though you try to live according to God's ways, you are always overlooked? Taken advantage of? Does it seem that the wicked prevail? And the righteous get stepped on?

In your child's school, do the cheaters prosper? And the honest students get lower grades? Do you wonder why some of the superstars who continually have brushes with the law are allowed to continue in their professions, making even more money in the process? Doesn't it seem useless at times to stand for God when those who live contrary to His will receive all the benefits and you don't?

Don't lose hope! Although it may seem that God is allowing people to get away with evil today, He is coming back! And He will judge all men, all women, and all children with equity, with righteousness, and according to His Truth, His standards! At that time, those who have been living contrary to God's Word and His ways will have to account for all their thoughts, decisions, and actions. God's judgments will "set things right," punishing the wicked, but helping and protecting those who have a relationship with Him (Deuteronomy 32:36; Psalm 135:14; Revelation 20:11-13).

The next time that it seems that wrong is winning out, that the unethical prevail, and that evil has dominion over good... know that Jesus is coming back! He will exercise His divine kingship, He will judge, and the day will come when "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow - of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:10-11 NIV)"

In short, we who believe know the true ending to the greatest story ever told!!!"

Father, I take this opportunity to thank You for a new day, a new season and a new opportunity to be in Your presence. I pray that You fill me with Your joy and the peace of Your Spirit. Direct my heart and mind towards You. Thank You for Your reminder that both in seasons of celebration and in seasons of brokenness, You're still with me. Thank You for Your daily powerful presence in my life. Thank You that You surround me with favor. I surrender to You that You may be glorified through my undertakings today. In Jesus name, Amen.

Author: Marji "Mike" Kruger
Submitted by Dan Thompson

Day Twenty-four, Tuesday, March 29

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Romans 5:8

During my adult life I have experienced the loss of 3 dogs and two special cats. Dina Paisner, actor, and model, said she had watched her friends mourn the loss of their beloved pets and realized it is not the pet they miss, but the loss of their unconditional love.

I only partially agree with her. Yes, I do miss the love of Baron, Gunther, Wolf, Olivia, and Lula, but I also mourn the loss of their companionship. To have someone that was excited to see you each time you returned home, who hopped on your lap every time you sat down and was constantly my shadow, is what hurt also.

But we all have God's unconditional love – a love offered freely and has no bounds. In that we can find great comfort.

Dear Lord, when I am struggling with sadness or discouragement, let me put my trust in you and your unfailing love. Amen.

Submitted by Kay Black

Day Twenty-five, Wednesday, March 30

Forgiveness

“And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so your Father in heaven will forgive your sins.” -Mark 11:25

Several years ago, I was given Viet Thanh Nguyen's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Sympathizer*, set in both Vietnam and the United States at the time of the Vietnam War (or the American War, as the Vietnamese might say).

This year, for Christmas, I was given the sequel, *The Committed*, set in the drug-dealing culture of 1980s Paris, France.

Nguyen's sharp and existential writing, and the harrowing tales he depicts with fierceness, force me to blow the dust off of any number of my cherished preconceived notions and collected complacencies.

Take, for example, the aftermath of a torture scene in which the main character (whose name we never learn) is obligated to interrogate the man who previously had tortured him. Rather than abuse the captive, the main character offers the most unthinkable of responses to his prisoner: forgiveness.

When the prisoner yells, “I don't want your forgiveness!” the main character responds, “You don't have to want my forgiveness. I am just giving it to you.”

“I would [torture] you again!” the prisoner screams.

“And I would forgive you again,” responds the main character.

I don't know the horrors of being a prisoner or of being physically impaled. But in my four decades I've learned something of the torture brought about by my own refusing to offer forgiveness. I know when I refuse to forgive, sure the ravaging feelings I hold will be felt by my offender, in truth, the only torture I bestow is on myself.

I wasn't expecting to encounter the gospel in my reading of Nguyen's latest novel. But I won't soon forget this example of forgiveness--unexpected, freely given, how absurd! A heavenly arrow fired from an abyss of hell.

O God, if my heart is truly set on you, I simply don't have the space to carry the boulder of unforgiveness. I refuse to hold on to anything against anyone. I freely choose forgiveness, just as you have chosen to forgive me. Amen.

Submitted by Tim Chipman

Day Twenty-six, Thursday, March 31

Worry is NOT my Boss

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life." Matthew 6:25

What is the meaning of worry...give way to anxiety or unease; allow one's mind to dwell on difficulty or troubles.

Yep. That's it. I am really, really good at worrying and have been for many years. I have even passed the worry gene on to one of my daughters which I feel terrible about, and you guessed it, also worry about. This pandemic has brought on epic waves of worry which have done nothing but drain my strength for everyday life.

In the book More Power to You by Margaret Feinberg, she says, "Through prayer you can hand God all your needs, all your concerns, all that triggers your anxiety. You don't need to hold back". And I have learned to do that, to almost "discuss" my worries with God. I used to contact my sister-in-law/friend with some horrible thing that I was just sure was going to happen and she would basically talk me down from the ledge. She would ask me these questions: What is the worst thing that can happen? Do you really think that that is what is going to happen?

I am a huge fan of the television program "This is Us" and the characters Randall and Beth. They are raising three daughters and when they have a crisis rear its ugly head, they play the "worst case scenario" game. In a recent episode, the game spiraled so far out of control that Beth remarked that they needed to play a different game!

Let's all try to not let worry boss us around. I will if you will!

Dear God, I lay my anxiety and worries at your feet. Grant me peace of mind and a calm heart. For this I thank you. Amen.

Submitted by Cynthia Benton

Day Twenty-seven, Friday, April 1

Awe

"O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. Here is the sea, great and wide, which teems with creatures innumerable, living things both small and great." Psalm 104:24-25

I remember seeing a forest of giant redwoods for the first time. There were some small children nearby, giggling and chattering and pushing each other around. Nobody had to tell them to quiet down as we entered. They quieted down all by themselves. Everybody did. You couldn't hear a sound of any kind. It was like coming into a vast, empty room.

Two or three hundred feet high the redwoods stood. You had to crane your neck back as far as it would go to see the leaves at the top. The trees made their own twilight out of the bright California day. There was a stillness and stateliness about them that seemed to become part of you as you stood there stunned by the sight of them. They had been growing in that place for going on two thousand years. With infinite care they were growing even now. You could feel them doing it. They made you realize that all your life you had been mistaken. Oaks and ashes, maples and chestnuts and elms you had seen for as long as you could remember, but never until this moment had you so much as dreamed what a Tree really was.

"Behold the man," Pilate said when he led Jesus out where everybody could see him. He can't have been much to look at after what they'd done to him by then, but my guess is that, even so, there suddenly fell over that mob a silence as awed as ours in the forest when for the first time in their lives they found themselves looking at a Human Being.

-Originally published in Whistling in the Dark

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your son to be just like us, to understand and know what it is to be human. Thank you, Jesus, for going on then to make that awful sacrifice, to take on all of our sins so that we can be forgiven and live with you in eternity. In Jesus name, Amen.

Submitted by Susan Weikert

Day Twenty-eight, Saturday, April 2

Strength For Today

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.” Deuteronomy 31:6

The Lord reminds his people over and over again in the Scriptures that he is with them wherever they go. He never abandons his children. Not only this, but the very fact that he has to tell them to not be terrified and to take courage meant that what they were facing was not easy. In hard times, when the proverbial rug gets pulled out from beneath us, that is when God says, “be strong and courageous... do not be afraid.”

Do we trust that God’s Word to his people throughout the ages is the same Word he speaks to us today? When we would otherwise be overrun by anxiety and fear, God reminds us that he is with us and that he will never leave. So, take courage today; the Lord is your strength!

Lord my God, thank you for the reminder of your presence with me in trouble and in the face of the unknown. I praise you, for you are right here, guiding me through the storms of uncertainty. I will be strong, and I will be courageous, for you. Lord, are my confidence. Amen.

From 365 Days of Prayer and Praise
Submitted by Reggie Benton

Fifth Sunday of Lent, April 3

Blessings

"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." Genesis 12:2 (NRSV)

A few weeks ago, I preached a sermon on blessings. I would like to take a few minutes to wonder a little about this verse in Genesis. First, who is this guy, Abram? Why did God choose him? Perhaps, Genesis 10 & 11 will help answer these questions. I would guess that most people do not remember what is in these two chapters because they are the genealogies tracing the heritage from Noah to Abram. There are lots and lots of names, fathers to sons for generations. Finally, we get to Abram, son of Terah. Who are these people? I really cannot say for sure. What I do know is that genealogies give way to stories. Now we see that Abram is part of the story of Salvation and as Genesis unfolds, we see God acting in history, involving people in the story of Salvation that takes us to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But the question remains, why did God choose Abram? It was Grace. Abram did nothing to earn being chosen by God. He does not appear to be special in terms of power or prestige. He rather seems to be a lot like you and me. Indeed, he was just like you and me. As God chose Abram, so God chooses [insert your name here].

God chose Abram to bless him. This makes me wonder, "What were these blessings that Abram was going to receive?" It was to be "a great nation." So, did this happen? Yes, it did. Abram accumulated great wealth and his descendants became a great nation, for a time. But I do not think that God had physical wealth and power in mind in saying that Abram would 'father' a great nation. (Abram would later become Abraham, 'the father of many.') Abram's blessing was much bigger and more important than wealth and power. Abram's blessing is our Salvation through Jesus Christ!

We are descendants of Abraham because of our faith in the Blessing, which is Jesus. Since we are Abraham's descendants, we inherit the same Promise that God gave to Abram with the same responsibility: "so that you will be a blessing."

I mentioned in my sermon that I was studying Genesis while in seminary when this verse came alive to me. So, I went back to the old worn Bible that I was using during my college and seminary studies to see what I may have written in the margins. (Writing notes in the margins of your Bible is something I highly recommend.) The gem that I found is perhaps why this verse spoke to me. My professor preferred this translation, "and you be a blessing." The meaning changed me. I am blessed not so much that being a blessing will happen to me, but rather that I am to actively be a blessing.

God has blessed you. Go, be a blessing!

Gracious God, thank you for blessing me so richly. Help me to be a blessing. Amen.

Submitted by John E. Nelson, Pastoral Assistant

Day Twenty-nine, Monday, April 4

Love Story

“O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” John 17: 25-26

Most of us who are nearing the autumn of our lives have developed a lengthy medical history. I have asked doctors more than once, if I go to the same hospital or doctor's office all the time, why is it necessary to recite a complete health history to their helpers/or nurses. Their response is that all the computers don't talk across medical facilities.

In preparation for a recent foot surgery, a lady from the surgeon's office called to get filled in on my medical history. I commented that information was shared just a week ago. Her response was, "Well, we don't have the information yet and sometimes everything doesn't get shared, or computers don't always communicate between hospitals." She was very kind and genuinely interested about what caused my blindness. I shared the story of doctors accidentally severing the optic nerves to both eyes at age five when removing cataracts. "That was terrible! They should have known not to cut back there!"

I responded: "It was actually a wonderful thing!" As a result of an event, I was sent to a school filled with loving people and met a truly remarkable loving wife. She blessed our family with two beautiful children which also made possible three grandchildren. Judie's faith in me on more than one occasion, brought forth courage to persevere and achieve things I once thought were impossible dreams.

God's love slowly molded me in His time, bringing me to this current day of being a successful educator, being very committed in my walk of faith, being a loving father and devoted husband. The path was a bit challenging now and then. However, God had my back and never allowed me to sink too far into despair that I would not continue towards the plans he had for me.

A much more significant love story is the one God demonstrated at Calvary. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

In John 3:16 we are assured that God is love. And not only that, He showed His love by sending His son to die for us.

If you're like a lot of people, you may have found yourself doubting God's love for you at some point in your life. This frequently happens when you're faced with tough decisions, disappointment, financial concerns, emotional or physical heartache, or the death of someone close to you. I must admit there have been those moments when I doubted God was paying attention to my life. Now as a retired assistive tech specialist, I make sure my students know I am a Christian and ask if there is anything I can pray for in their lives. In a few situations we've said a prayer together.

Instead of living in a fog of doubt, why not instead look to Romans 8:37-39, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I encourage you to check out these few Bible stories which demonstrate God's amazing love for His children, no matter what they have done.

- God's Love Through the Creation of Man in Genesis.
- God's Love through Job
- God's Love in David's Psalm
- God's Love Through Jesus as He Washed the Disciples' Feet
- God's Love in Mary

And one more and perhaps the most important is Heaven where Jesus has gone to prepare a home for each and every one of us!

Prayer: God of endless Love, I come into your presence so aware of my human frailty and yet overwhelmed by Your love for me. I thank You that there is no human experience that I might walk through where your love cannot reach me. Thank You Lord for being my lifelong companion even in those times where there was a lack of awareness on my part. Please forgive me for sometimes being weak in spirit and thank You for my Salvation. In the Name of Your Son, Jesus, Amen!

Submitted by Dan Thompson

Day Thirty, Tuesday, April 5

“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’” Psalm 42:1-3

While sleeping at night continues to be a challenge for me, the other night as I tossed and turned, I got up and walked to our bedroom window where the moon glistened on the snow. The sparkling of the light drew my attention to the landscape lights barely visible through the mounds of snow. There's something mesmerizing about the quiet of the night when you're warm inside and the world seems still and peaceful. A movement just outside of my vision caused me to turn my head. Three deer were slowly walking towards the light, heads down sniffing for food. I stayed very still since they would see any movement as a reflection in the window and quickly run away. The larger one raised her head as though she sensed something, her ears pricked up and her eyes looked straight at me but apparently not seeing me. Satisfied that there was no imminent danger, she and the others continued to paw at the snow to dig deeper for vegetation. Soon another one appeared to join the group. With tails wagging and focused on finding something to eat, they seemed content that they were safe. As the minutes went by, they slowly move a little farther away and the group split up a bit. Maybe one was the “mom” as she raised her head to see where the smaller one had gone and started walking in that same direction, needing to know that her baby was safe.

There seemed to be a lesson in the darkness of that night. The innocence of life, the trust of someone watching over us and the need to stay vigilant as we navigate life. Covid isn't the only thing that continues to challenge our everyday living. It has certainly caused us to be more aware that simple living isn't always so simple these days; that a lot can be done from a distance and being “watched” can be comforting when we need such guidance. Sometimes we are the “watcher” but maybe we take for granted that we are being “watched” in a way that should bring us comfort.

At Corry's funeral one of our musical choices was a hand bell solo by Deb Boston of the hymn “As the Deer.” Corry had been in church one Sunday when the hand bell choir had played it and he was moved by it....and miraculously had told us how much he loved it. It seemed only fitting that we would honor him by having it played at the service. It gave new meaning to that verse and my fascination with deer. For me they remind me of a beautiful moment that brings Corry a little closer. But the more important message lies in the comparison of deer seeking food and water and my own thirsting for God. It's good that we hunger and thirst for God and His righteousness. And for me, this reminder came in the dark and stillness of a snowy, cold night as these deer continued to search for food and drink in the storm of winter's darkness.

Let's not forget to keep searching and believing and trusting in the goodness of a God that doesn't stop “watching” us even in the challenges of whatever we are facing.

Loving, Refreshing God, thank you for the reminder that you are always here. I may lose my way in the darkness, but we are in constant need of food and water and You. Help me to seek you in the brightness of day as well as the darkness of night. Your nourishment can give us hope for the future and even peace for the past. Thank you for your love, guidance and care, now and forever. Amen.

Submitted by Nancy Bork

Day Thirty-one, Wednesday, April 6

SKYLAR SUHRE
AGE 5

Psalm 30:2 — The New International Version (NIV)

² LORD my God, I called to you for help,
and you healed me.



Submitted by Skylar Suhre

Day Thirty-two, Thursday, April 7

“Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails.” Proverbs 19:21

The Senior Center Quilters accepted the challenge of a “Mystery Quilt” last fall. Starting in September, the participating members received a set of directions each month with steps to complete before the next meeting – buying fabric, cutting strips and piecing blocks, then finally sewing the blocks into rows, and putting the whole thing together to discover what the quilt design would look like.

Although I’ve been sewing clothing since I was nine years old, this was my first “real” quilt. I struggled for years with the warning I’d read in a quilting magazine “If you measure or cut even one thread out of line, the end result will be lop-sided. If it wouldn’t be perfect, I was afraid to start. With encouragement and advice from my quilting friends, I followed the instructions and forged ahead.

Guess what – some of the blocks aren’t entirely square. Some of the seams don’t match up exactly. There are a few puckers, a few small pleats, and a few wonky spots where my new sewing machine and I didn’t quite agree on how to proceed. But I have faith that when the quilter has worked her magic to sew the layers together and I have added binding to finish the edges, I’ll have something beautiful. I’ll have the courage to start out again on a new project with a fresh stack of fabric and a pleasing pattern, knowing that it may not turn out perfect. I’ll enjoy the journey and look forward to seeing where it takes me.

During this season of Lent, take time to examine all the pieces of your life and see how they fit together. We may start out with a plan firmly in our heads (and hearts), but God’s hand has sketched out a greater design.

Dear God, you know each piece that is a part of me. You have a plan to make those pieces form a beautiful display of brights and darks, stripes and zig zags, flowers and sparkles. Thank you for stitching all the pieces together to make me whole – maybe not perfectly, but in a pattern that is pleasing to you. Help me provide warmth and love for all who cross my path. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Submitted by Diane Hollendonner

Day Thirty-three, Friday, April 8

"The Lord has told you what is good. He has told you what he wants from you: Do what is right to other people. Love being kind to other people. And live humbly, trusting your God." Micah 6:8

The above passage was one of the entries on the church website a few weeks ago. We all know what we should do and what is right. A few days later, Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor was being interviewed on a television talk show. She was quite impressive. One of the topics of discussion was her new children's book entitled "Just Help." She said the inspiration for the book was her mother who taught her that if she saw someone in need, 'just help.'

I thought it might be interesting to take some time and intentionally watch for these words in action. " Just Help."

The next day while at a grocery store, there it was. A woman riding in a scooter was unable to reach an item on the top shelf. A young man, unknown to the woman, came along and secured the item for her and went on his way. Simple act of kindness.

For several months a farmer has been helping a neighbor with farm chores. When asked why the farmer continues to help the neighbor, the response was fifty years ago, his family was able to help our family with farm chores. It is the right thing to do, fifty years later. Just Help.

During our recent beautiful snowfalls, observing people choosing to clear snow off their neighbors' driveway or sidewalk.

It is nice to intentionally look around and notice the good deeds around us and folks offering to Just Help other folks. Give it a try and make the offer to Just Help.

Dear Lord, help us to notice all the good things around us. Guide us and help us to notice the needs of others. Any Day can be a Random Act of Kindness Day. Support us and remind us to give with a light heart. Amen.

Submitted by Linda Feleky

Day Thirty-four, Saturday, April 9

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

Hope

If you only carry one thing throughout your entire life,
Let it be hope.
Let it be hope that better things are always ahead...
Let it be hope that you can get through even the toughest of times...
Let it be hope that you are stronger than any challenge that comes your way...
Let it be hope that you are exactly where you are meant to be right now,
and that you are on the path to where you are meant to be...
Because during these times, hope will be the very thing that carries you through.

Nikki Banas

Dear Lord, thank you for being with me daily, help me to know that you have a plan for me and that you are beside me always and will carry me through the hardest and darkest of times in my life. Amen.

Submitted by Sarah Yuska

Sixth Sunday of Lent, April 10

“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” Matthew 6:16-18

“Do you want to fast this Lent?

Fast from hurting words and say kind words.

Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.

Fast from anger and be filled with patience.

Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.

Fast from worries and have trust in God.

Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.

Fast from pressures and be prayerful.

Fast from bitterness and fill your heart with joy.

Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.

Fast from grudges and be reconciled.

Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.”

Attributed to Pope Francis

Dear Lord, Open my mind and my heart so that my spiritual Lenten journey takes me to places of universal truth, wisdom and peace - travels that will light my path forever.

In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

Submitted by Mary Ferguson

Day Thirty-five, Monday of Holy Week, April 11

Unburden Yourself

"Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." 1 Peter 5:8

There are times in our lives where life can feel heavy. Since March 2020, this has been excruciatingly true. To handle the challenges presented, our first inclination may be to just take a deep breath and decide to just increase our strength. Most of us would like to believe that we can do anything through our hard work and determination. Adding fuel to the fire, is the fact we live in a society where self-reliance, long hours, and over-responsibility are cheered on and highly encouraged. But getting tougher or trying to solve the problem(s) by yourself is not the answer. We must recognize the truth that we are inept and inefficient, and there is nothing wrong with that!

Both sides of my family have been going through some difficult times. In my search to find help for them, I came across a devotional in the booklet *Upper Room* on April 8, 2021. This was the tug I needed to share with my family to help them and I would like to share it with you. It was entitled, "Gather Your Elephants."

"Newborn elephants are susceptible to attacks from predators like lions and hyenas. As a mother elephant gives birth, the herd gathers to protect her and the newborn.

My daughter's family is going through a very difficult time. For us, gathered elephants symbolize the protection her community gives her by their prayers. A small wooden elephant sits by my kitchen sink. My daughter's friend gave her two small elephant figurines when she moved away, knowing that the days ahead could leave my daughter vulnerable. The elephants serve as a reminder that she is not alone. When she feels overwhelmed by her situation, the elephants remind her of the community that will support her with prayer in whatever comes her way. When a hard day hits, my daughter gathers her community by texting me, her sisters, and her friends who immediately surround her with prayer."

This story spoke volumes to me, and it spoke to many of my family members as well. God is not asking us to grow stronger to carry the load alone. Instead, he wants us to admit that we are incapable and to hand over the matter to him. We are to surrender our troubles and trust in the One who is able to conquer. In times of vulnerability and pain, we need to ask others to surround us and pray for God's powerful presence. His ability knows no limit and he will bring relief if we just pray to him and just ask as He already knows what we need.

Lord, help us to depend less on our abilities and help us to share our struggles with those who gather around us and encourage us through prayer. Lead us to trust more in your power to carry the load for us. Amen.

Submitted by Barb Bucy

Day Thirty-six, Tuesday of Holy Week, April 12

"The bird sitting on a tree is never afraid of the branch breaking, because it's trust is not on the branch, but on its own wings!"

Covid, world unrest, civil unrest, the economy, cancer, flood, wind, fire. Loneliness, depression, heartbreak, death. Fears. Any of those hit home for you? I bet they do.

As Christians we are allowed.... no, encouraged to fear God and Love God. We are sound in our existence, but it is in our faith that we trust. Faith in God in this life on earth and faith that there is an afterlife. Every day we encounter roadblocks. Obstacles that can easily alter our path for that day or for eternity. But our faith can destroy those or at least reduce them to the point of only a nuisance. I am reminded of the mule who fell in a well and each time his master threw dirt in on top of him, took a step up, until finally he was freed from the pit. He had faith in his master. I have faith in my master.

How much are we willing to risk on our faith? All things.

1 Corinthians 2:5 "That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of man, but in the power of God". To paraphrase a comedian from the 1960's. God put you here. God can take you out. Our faith is everything that lies in between.

There is an end to life here. In faith there is no end.

Death takes the body. God takes the soul. Our mind holds the memories. Our heart keeps the love. Our faith lets us know we will meet again. -Kelly's Treehouse.

God on high we ask that today, in everything and in every way, we strengthen our faith. May our thoughts, our words, our songs, our lives be a testament to our faith in your most divine love and forgiveness. Amen.

Submitted by Keith Bradbury

Day Thirty-seven, Wednesday of Holy Week, April 13

A Duty to Be Joyful

“You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace.” -Isaiah 55:12

Recently, themes from two books of poetry converged in an unanticipated way.

In Illinois College professor Kara Dorris’ “Prayer for Winter,” from her most recent collection of poems, the speaker, a pecan farmer, asserts,

Each day we go out, bend & lift until
our weaved hands are full.
But are we only duty’s bit & whip?
Where is the release, when we will know
everything is possible
& suddenly nothing is necessary?

The word “duty” resounds--and I write this on the third of three snow days, absolving me temporarily of my professional work duties. Dorris’ verse speaks to that ubiquitous feeling we’ve all felt: is my body more than just a machine for completing tasks? Is there more to my life than my work? Am I worth more than the sum of my duties? Lord, I just need a break.

This notion of “duty” paired nicely, if in contrast, to a gem I found in Christian Wiman’s compilation of poetry entitled Joy, from Anna Kamienska:

Joy--it’s not just a gift. In a sense it’s also a duty, a task to fulfill. Courage.

Astonishing: the notion of joy, neither as a random gifting of exuberance nor a feeling based upon one’s circumstances, but rather “a duty, a task to fulfill.”

Is Christ asking us to be dutiful in our obligation to joy?

Reread the above verse from Isaiah: “You will go out in joy...” Sounds like a call of duty to me.

And yet could there be a greater exhortation, any nobler task to fulfill, than to infuse joy into the places God calls us to?

Dear Lord, You know that we tire of our duties, and that’s why you call us to rest. But, Lord, don’t let us tire of fulfilling the duty of infusing joy into our work, among your creatures, throughout your creation. Amen.

Submitted by Tim Chipman

Day Thirty-eight, Maundy Thursday, April 14

"It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.... When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet." John 13:1-5, 12-14

There was one particular Maundy Thursday service when I was about five years old. I don't really remember it, but I remember everyone talking about it for years after. The pastor (at the time, young and full of "ideas") decided that, like Jesus, participants in the service would wash each other's feet. A tub of water stood at the end of each pew, along with a stack of towels. The entire idea of washing other people's feet was deeply uncomfortable. To Americans, our feet are seen as very private, maybe because we're worried that they are dirty or smelly... maybe because we have bumps and bunions... maybe because until recently fashion dictated that feet be covered. And in the fashion of the day, most of the women wore skirts and pumps, and panty hose. Obviously, the pastor hadn't thought this one through! How can one possibly wash the feet of a woman wearing panty hose?

The next year, the service returned to normal, where all the people sat in their pews and listened to the sermon and the choir, like good Presbyterians.

As an adult, I find the whole story very funny. It's funny that the people in my small, rural town couldn't get outside their comfort zone to try something new and creative. It's funny that the unofficial dress code of the congregation kept half the people from participating. Like many things that make us uncomfortable, I think feet are funny. And I sincerely hope the pastor also found this funny... although maybe after some time had gone by.

But we can see from the scripture that although none of this felt funny to the disciples, they too were deeply uncomfortable. Washing feet was a common practice, born of necessity for people who walked along stone or dirt roads everywhere they went. But it was not the job of the host to wash feet. It was not the job of the rabbi or the leader. It was the job of the lowliest, of the servant. Jesus removed the vestiges of his role (took off his outer garments) and took up the mantle of a servant (wrapped a towel around his waist). He demonstrated his willingness to turn the established order on its head; a God who became a human, a teacher who became a servant, a savior who became a sacrificial lamb.

And what's more, Jesus instructed his disciples to live in the same way. They, too, were to take up the towel of a servant and wash other's feet. In fact, the minister's stole is a reminder of Jesus' towel.

While literally washing people's feet might make us uncomfortable, there are many ways each of us can take up this role of serving others. We can make a meal, make a phone call, make an effort to be in relationship with one another. We can look for ways that those around us need a small but tangible blessing. Or, like the disciples, we can put aside our discomfort and receive the blessing and ministry that others offer to us.

Jesus, you humbled yourself to wash other's feet and ask us to do the same. Forgive us when we feel too proud to do small acts of mercy. Illumine us when we fail to see the ministry that is right in front of us. Embolden us to put aside our discomfort and accept the kind acts of others. Amen.

Submitted by Siobhan Warren

Day Thirty-nine, Good Friday, April 15

An Inpouring and Outpouring of Love

"And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. "Romans 5:5 (NIV)

After my mother's passing at the age of 94, I boxed up her small pitcher collection and brought them home with me. I do not know when or how she began this collection; I cannot ask now. I think my mother would be very pleased that I have re-gifted some of these pitchers to family members, particular to her last two grandsons whose weddings she could not attend. With each pitcher, I wrote a note, sharing that the pitcher comes from Grandma's collection, how proud and happy she would be for the recipient(s) of the pitcher. And I included these powerful words from Romans 5:5 – visualizing God's love poured into their hearts, my heart, the human heart through the Holy Spirit

In a marriage, in any relationship, we need to open our hearts to God for God to pour His love into our hearts. We cannot love others, as Christ would have us love, without His love poured into our hearts. God's love is so beautifully described in I Corinthians 13. Please read this chapter. What a beautiful image and provision of God's inpouring love so we can outpour His love to others.

God of Love, forgive us when we do not embody your love, when our hearts are not open to Your inpouring love. Purify our hearts that we may flow with abundant love, outpouring Your love with joy and thanksgiving. Through Christ, Our Lord. Amen.

Submitted by Janet Chipman

Day Forty, Saturday of Holy Week, April 16

Transition and Rebuilding

"As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James's son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him." Matthew 4:18-22

Transition and rebuilding are difficult and hard. Recently, Brad and I have lost our parents. We are now transitioning into being “THE grandparents”. Now, we move into a different stage of our lives together. Life without our girls in our house. We miss seeing our parents, we also miss seeing our girls. But now we are refocusing and rebuilding. There are many changes we want to make on our long-neglected house, and we are in the process of starting projects. These projects are time consuming and costly, often overwhelming.

Imagine the transition and rebuilding the disciples went through as Jesus first asked them to “Come, follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Mark 1:17). Their transition of being a fisherman and then putting total trust in God for their nourishment and sustaintment is astounding. Not only did these disciples rebuild, but they built and formed churches as we now know them. We cannot even imagine the challenges the disciples must have faced. In Matthew 4:21 it says “Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James's son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately the left the boat and their father and followed him.” They left their father, and I am sure they missed him terribly. Again, overwhelming is probably not a powerful enough word to describe what the disciples must have felt during this transition.

Our church now seems to be transitioning and rebuilding. We do not have all of our church family in attendance at this point in time. We miss many members of our family, just as we miss our parents and our girls. We need to make an effort to rebuild and refocus our relationship with God and our church members. I realize this rebuilding process is different for each of us. I am not sure what that rebuilding may look like at this point, but it is again consuming and overwhelming in many ways. We pray that our members find God in their own ways, but I also pray that we take our own steps to rebuilding. Whether that is rebuilding your trust in God, rebuilding by attending worship in person, or rebuilding by reaching out contacting others in your church family.

God, help us be a part of rebuilding and transition at our church. Keep us connected with you and with those at our church. We pray for this transition and many other transitions that we face throughout our lives. Amen.

Submitted by Christine Smith

Easter Sunday, April 17



Be Bold and Be Strong

Be Bold and Be Strong
Banish fear and doubt
For the promise of your God
Is to bless your coming in
And to bless your going out
Rejoice, rejoice
Rejoice, rejoice
Rejoice, rejoice
Rejoice, rejoice

- by Eugene Greco, Exalt the Lord
album, 1990

"Yes, be bold and strong! Banish fear and doubt! For remember, the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." Joshua 1.9 (TLB)

"The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore."

Psalm 121.8 (NRSV)

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Philippians 4.4 (NRSV)

Years ago, I was the pianist and worship leader at a local church. There were so many praise and worship songs that were meaningful to me. This scripture song was one of my all-time favorites. I printed out the words and hung them on the refrigerator so I could read them every day and be encouraged.

During the uncertain and challenging times in which we live, I hope they encourage you, too.

Gracious God, thank you for your promises and provision. Help us to remember and to rejoice. Amen.

Submitted by Marsha Nelson

Thank you!

Lent is a period of 40 days during which Christians remember the events leading up to and including the death of Jesus Christ, whose life and teachings are the foundation of Christianity.

It is a time of reflection and of asking for forgiveness, and when Christians prepare to celebrate Jesus's resurrection at the feast of Easter, which comes at the very end of Lent.

I want to thank all of you who contributed to this year's devotional; to share your reflections and prayers for our church family to read during Lent.

I also want to thank Dana Davis for all her help and time, along with Pastor Jonathan Warren and the Continuing Education chair and committee: Lynne Sheaff, Jean Harlow-Truesdell, John Nelson, Liz Hollendonner.

- Sarah Yuska