



2023

“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

For centuries, Christians have made the pilgrimage to a small three-mile-long island off the west coast of Scotland, the Isle of Iona. This summer, I will travel on three ferries to reach this “thin place.” The Rev. Rachel Young, a Presbyterian pastor who volunteered with the Iona Community for six weeks in 2004, writes about her experience in *The Presbyterian Outlook*. Young says, “Iona is known as a ‘thin place’, a concept in Celtic Christianity used to identify sacred spaces. In thin places, the boundary between heaven and earth becomes more permeable. We encounter God in fresh ways that startle us out of our inattention, and we are often transformed by the experience.”

As we approach the season of Lent, I hope this collection of daily devotions and prayer might become our “thin place” - so that we might set aside time in order to *encounter God in fresh ways that startle us out of our inattention*.

St. Columba arrived in Iona with 12 followers to build a Celtic church and establish a monastic community in 563 A.D. But there is much more to his backstory.

He was the grandson of the Irish King Niall. He left Ireland for Scotland, not as a missionary but as an act of self-imposed penance for a bloody mess he had caused at home. He had upset the king of Ireland by refusing to hand over a copy of the Gospels he had illegally copied. This led to a pitched battle in which Columba's warrior family prevailed. Full of remorse for his actions and the deaths he had ultimately caused, he fled, finally settling on Iona as the first place he found from where he couldn't see his native Ireland. One of the features on the island is even called "The Hill with its back to Ireland" [historic-uk.com by Ben Johnson].

To help prepare for this year's Lenten journey, I share the following prayer from St. Columba (emphasis mine).

Let me **ble**ss Almighty God,
whose power extends over sea and land,
whose angels watch over all.

Let me **stud**y sacred books to calm my soul:
I pray for peace,
kneeling at heaven's gates.

Let me do my daily **work**,
gathering seaweed, catching fish,
giving food to the poor.

Let me say my daily **prayers**,
sometimes chanting, sometimes quiet,
always thanking God.

Delightful it is to live
on a peaceful isle, in a quiet cell,
serving the King of kings.

Jonathan

Day One, Ash Wednesday, February 22

Ash Wednesday

Joel 2: 1, 12-13 (NRSV) “Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near; . . . Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.”

I initially became aware of these verses during my first semester in seminary in 1976. I know that I had heard them and even read them prior to that because these verses are part of the First Reading for Ash Wednesday in the lectionary we use to aid in reading through the Scriptures. But my awareness for this reading for Ash Wednesday came because it was the basis for the Hebrew portion of my first seminary class on Biblical studies. We spent an entire semester looking at this reading from more ways than I thought possible. I admit that most of the particulars have long since been filed away. These words from the prophet Joel are a call to the people that God is coming! “Blow the trumpet in Zion,” prepare for the coming of God! This is a call for us as well. Today we begin the season of Lent. Lent is our time of preparation for Jesus to come and be crucified for us. Now is our time to prepare!

We are each called to prepare for the coming of God. We prepare in ways that are meaningful for our own selves, but we must prepare. Fasting is suggested by the prophet. Fasting need not be food. Giving up something that we love for a time can help us to focus on what Jesus gave up for us. Jesus gave up his life, but then he received it back again. When giving something up for Lent, look forward to the time of resurrection when it is returned on Easter!

Joel’s call to repentance is followed by a description of the God who is coming, the God to whom we repent. Joel writes, “Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.” (v.13) This is not a God looking to bring punishment, but forgiveness. Jesus came to bring love, grace, and peace. As we take time in the coming weeks to prepare for the remembrance of Jesus’ death, let us also remember his resurrection. Our God is a God of resurrection, life, and grace.

Prayer: Loving God, you are the source of all love, mercy, and grace. Help me to turn to you during this time of preparation and beyond. Amen.

Submitted by John E. Nelson
Pastoral Assistant

Day Two, Thursday, February 23

To some, Lent is the pretext for Mardi Gras. To others it means a season of sadness and dolorous hymns. Doing without, doing good, doing introspection. Fasting, praying, and cultivating a spirit of generosity during the season of Lent are opportunities for us to grow as Christians and respond to Christ's teaching by reaching out to people in need. By sharing our time, our talents and our treasure, we share what we have and who we are, strengthening and expanding the Body of Christ. To help prepare us for this rigorous exercise, let us pray this Lenten prayer attributed to Pope Francis and repeat throughout the year:

“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.”

Amen.

Submitted by Mary Ferguson

Day Three, Friday, February 24

Jeremiah 29:11 “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 a hope and a future.”

When I was in junior high my best friend lived across the street. Kathy was one of 11 children and attended a religious school. I was always welcome in their home but was expected to pitch in with chores if staying for a meal. I felt a part of their family. One weekend I learned that the mother was not coming out of her bedroom and that remained the case for over a week. When she did reappear, she had a black eye. I had been taught not to question adults and to mind my own business, so I asked no questions and did not share the information with my parents. The father had always said he wanted a dozen children. Soon we learned that the mother was expecting, this time with twins. Their wish for a dozen quickly turned into a baker’s dozen. Before the new additions were one, Kathy passed away at the age of 16. My family had moved to another city, so we traveled back to pay our respects. During that conversation the father said, “I now have the dozen children I wanted.” I began to question how a parent that committed domestic violence and would make such a statement could be a true believer in God. I never saw them again, so this left unanswered questions on how the loss of a child impacted one's beliefs.

Moving forward many years, a teenage friend of my daughter was killed in a motorcycle accident. I knew the family and watched as they moved through this loss. The mother turned away from the church, away from God and away from her remaining family. It took several years but with the help of her family and friends she renewed her faith and renewed the relationship with God and family. She no longer blamed God for the loss of Ricky.

A few years before I moved to Winchester, a dear friend lost her 35-year-old daughter due to a medical condition. I remember when I received the call letting me know that Etolia had passed. It was seven days before Christmas. I wondered how my friend would handle this loss. Would she turn away from her strong religious beliefs as those mentioned above had done? During conversations with her she asked why God would take such a vibrant young woman who served others. However, I never heard her blame God or question her faith. She held onto her belief that God had a greater purpose for Etolia and that she would meet her again someday.

Each of these caused me to question...not God but how their faith related to the losses. How could the husband in the first situation be abusive and seem so uncaring at the loss of Kathy but still profess to be a strong believer? Was the mother in situation two wrong for blaming God for taking her son so early? Why did it take her almost losing her relationship with her daughter and granddaughter to return her to her faith? How did my friend hold onto her faith after the loss of Etolia? Why did her belief never waiver?

Prayer: Dear God, I pray that those suffering loss find comfort in your word. Amen.

Submitted by Dorinda Miller

Day Four, Saturday, February 25

Spiritual Resilience

Philippians 4:8 “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”

Philippians 4:11 “Not that I speak in respect of want; for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.”

Philippians 3:12-14 “Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect; but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching for those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

1 Timothy 6:6 “But godliness with contentment is great gain.”

Resilience is defined as “springing back; rebounding, returning to the original form or position after being bent, compressed, or stretched.” In everyday language, this means that when you are knocked down, you get back up. When you’re pushed back, you press forward. When you are out of options, you create new ones and find a way to move on. In other words, a resilient person is not easily defeated. He or she finds ways to continue going forward, despite obstacles and adversities.

What does a spiritually resilient person look like?

Resilience is a product of mental discipline. Resilient people develop mental habits that allow them to maintain their bearings in times of stress and bounce back from adversity. Rather than focusing on the things causing stress and anxiety, resilient people set well-defined goals and maintain focus on those goals.

To be resilient, a Christian must focus on the promises of God contained in the Bible—the main promise being eternal life in the Kingdom of God. The hope of the Kingdom of God is unmovable and sure, regardless of the difficult reality we are dealing with. The resilient will also look at problems and trials as opportunities for growth, not as insurmountable obstacles. When they look at problems, they evaluate the causes and the factors over which they have control, and they seek solutions based on those factors. This results in personal growth and the ability to carry on in a much stronger position.

Three keys to being spiritually resilient:

1. Focus on what you can control. Focusing our attention on things we cannot control is a poor use of our time and energy. Resilient people learn how to redirect their thinking to address things they can change—things that are impactful and directly affect their lives. Sometimes areas outside of our control may be more interesting and what we naturally want to focus on. But we can make real progress only when we focus on our own lives, the thing we have control over. The factors beyond our control will continue, with or without us.

2. Reorient your thinking. Our society is in a period of rapid change, and world events are increasingly troubling. We must develop mental tools to handle these stressors. We have no control over society around us, but we do have control over what we allow into our minds and what we choose to dwell on. The quality of our lives is one thing we do have control over, and it begins in the mind. Facts don't change, but our mental outlook can. It's beneficial to critically analyze what we listen to, watch on social media and read. Is it quality and worth our time? If not, replace it with something that is. The Bible gives us many positive things to focus on. Reorienting our thought processes will provide stability in an otherwise chaotic and unstable world.

3. Learn to be content. At times, we will need to learn to patiently deal with disappointment and stressors. We can't reinvent reality, but our perspective on it can make a difference. Contentment allows us to mentally deal with life's ups and downs and maintain a balanced perspective. The Bible tells us that learning to be content is vital. Paul wrote that "godliness with contentment is great gain". This is something that Paul had to learn to practice throughout his life because of the many trials he faced. The resilient can look beyond adversity. Instead of allowing adversity to lead them into depression and hopelessness, the resilient press forward. The standards found in the Bible provide a foundation for a stable, sound mental state amid turmoil and stressful times.

Excerpted from: lifehopetruth.com Bill Welch

Prayer: Merciful Lord, thank you for your protection and guidance. Thank you for always being by my side. Because I have you, I know I don't have to be concerned or worried. Revive my spirit and refresh my soul. Give me wisdom and direct my steps as I try to move forward. Calm my heart and instill strength and hope in me. Fill me with your presence once again and assist me in trusting others. Restore my faith in you. Please take my hand in yours and lead me through these times of anger and frustration and sadness. Amen.

Submitted by Julie Bruninga

First Sunday of Lent, February 26

Psalm 40:4 “Happy are those who make the Lord their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods.”

The last few years have not been easy ones for family and friends of mine. In fact there have been several who have gone through personal tragedies/difficulties that have sought me out with questions relating to my faith, stating how could a loving God do this to a family, or ask, “How long does one have to wait for God to answer our prayers for us?” I have personally delved into areas of the Bible searching for words of scripture that might bring strength to my family members to uplift them when they can’t seem to find them for themselves in these times of self-doubt. I know from firsthand experiences when faced with bigger challenges, that I have gained strength when I place them into God’s hands and waited patiently for him to faithfully take over.

I recently read a devotion written by Jeremy Kreuze in which he stated we should bring all our complaints to God. He stated, “When things aren’t perfect, we can be quick to complain. We are willing to complain about anything: our jobs, our colleagues, the weather conditions, anything and everything that gets in the way of this Utopian world we live in. We are quick to bring these complaints to our partners/spouses, friends, or anyone in close range of listening to us. Yet, when we come to prayer to God, we refrain, any and all complaints or frustrations from being stated.

Jeremy states that God cares and wants us to come to him in all the seasons of life. He shares that praying our complaints can be an act filled with anger, guilt, and frustration as these are all feelings common to experiences of pain and suffering. He states you might be holding back your emotions from God, to hide it from him because you feel you shouldn’t be having these feelings. But the truth be told, God can certainly handle these emotions and more! He wants you to be honest with him; God is waiting for you to come with an open heart. He loves all parts of you.

So, this is what I need to encourage my family and friends to do to survive the heartbreak and to build strength: to remember as time goes by, wake up each morning, open their hearts, turn toward God, and take a moment to openly and honestly share all their feelings with God. The Good...The Bad...The Ugly...Because God is a Loving God and He loves us and wants us to share it ALL with him OPENLY.

Prayer: Hi, God. Hear us, wherever we are, in whatever state we are in, and take our pain and grief away from our lives and give us strength to live more in union with you. In your name we pray. Amen.

Submitted by Barb Bucy

Day Five, Monday, February 27



Isaiah 40:3-5 “A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together...’”

Submitted by Lydia Warren

Day Six, Tuesday, February 28

Crawl Spaces

Proverbs 3:5-6 “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.”

There are some places in the home that don't get visited very much. One of these is a crawl space. It could be under the house or even as a very small space for plumbing access in the ceiling or wall. Most of these places have no lighting and are more than a little creepy.

In our bedroom closet there is a very small attic for wiring where I have never gone. Usually, I'm brave and will go into unfamiliar places, but I cannot bring myself to open that little square door. My handyman once looked up there and said, "You don't want to go up there. It is too small!" A story from a friend has probably heightened that fear. She looked up into her attic only to have a six-foot dead snake greet her as it was hanging from a low rafter.

Another friend tells the story of hearing a noise at the cellar door. Her husband found a snake hanging down banging against the door. The next evening her daughter saw another one in the same place. The family accidentally left the crawl space door open, and the creepy crawly creatures probably thought it was a free invitation.

My son once wanted to check out their crawl space before moving, but there was no light to guide the way. When going down with a flashlight, he also found unwanted visitors waiting for him.

Those small openings allowing unwanted creatures in is much like how anger and fear, or grief can get a foothold in our lives if allowed in. In Ephesians 4:26-27 we are encouraged not to let anger get a foothold in our life. That could also apply to other emotions Satan likes to take advantage of for his own evil purposes.

Many times, we don't realize the dark one has gotten a foothold until anger and anxiety stare us in the eyes and say: Here I am; now what are you going to do about it? We can choose to ignore it, be afraid of it or engage in a battle that will define our lives. One sure thing that will tip the balance of power totally in the right direction is take the light of the Lord down in those dark crawl spaces. We should lift high the light of the Lord given to us through Salvation when going through challenging and sometimes very dark times of life.

Right now, my wife and I and her family are going through one of those dark crawl spaces as her brother, Andy, is now in Hospice because of the cancer's progress. However, we are all crouching low in prayer, sending up our petitions for healing with the assurance a light of hope and comfort will lead the way. **“Because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high will visit us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” Luke 1:78-79**

Satan will snake his way into our minds if allowed and rattle the door to our dark places where anxiety is hidden. Fortunately, followers of Jesus have a forever light to carry with them. There's no worry about batteries that get drained or light bulbs that blow out at the worst time. Carrying Jesus with us along with prayer will help our dark crawl spaces of life not to be as scary.

"I will make darkness into light before them
And rugged places into plains.
These are the things I will do,
And I will not leave them undone." (Isaiah 42:16)

Prayer: Lord Jesus, please help each of us not to fear the future but to boldly trust that You are in control when our emotions plunge us into dark crawl spaces of anxiety, fear, doubt. Calm our spirits when that big question, "why!", keeps coming to the service of our minds. Open my mouth in those times when we can't talk and don't know what to say. Help Your children to "Be still, and know that You are God." Be our comforter, healer, light in the darkness of tribulation, and bring us peace. In Your Holy Redeeming Name, Jesus, we pray, Amen.

Submitted by Dan Thompson

Day Seven, Wednesday, March 1

Mark 6:30-31 “The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. And Jesus said to them, ‘Come away by yourselves to a quiet place and rest a while.’ For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.”

Yes, Christmas is the opposite end of Lent and Easter, but nevertheless, that’s where this story begins. I inherited a large collection of nativity scenes from my dad, who loved all the different depictions and couldn’t say no to a new interpretation. I display many of them during the Christmas season, and one late winter/early spring when my kids were both actively involved in all manner of school events, I realized I’d left a rather large set on the buffet next to our kitchen table. It had been there for several weeks, and somehow, we’d all been so busy with modern life that we’d been, literally, walking right past Jesus.

I remember being ashamed that Jesus had become part of the scenery of my home, and I didn’t even notice him. Fortunately, God is loving and forgiving of our human frailty and distraction.

The words of Jesus are as true for us as they were for his disciples. “Come away by yourselves to a quiet place and rest a while.”

During this season of reflection, may we be mindful of the benefit of quiet time with Jesus and heed His advice to find a quiet and restful place to focus on Him.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for loving me through my distraction. Help me remember to step back from the busy-ness of life and rest in you. Amen.

Submitted by Sally Stock

Day Eight, Thursday, March 2

Isaiah 43:19 "Watch for the new thing I am going to do. It is happening already - you can see it now! I will make a road through the wilderness and give you streams of water there."

The Empty Nest by Donna Ashworth

My nest is as it should be now, empty.
Tidy, ordered, calm.
My babies have grown, beautifully, and flown.
Just the way I taught them to.

And my heart is full of pride, and love,
still so full of love.
But oh there is an ache there, a throb, a pang.
I have given of myself in a way that only a mother can.

So consuming is that gift,
there is scarce room for much else to thrive.
So what now? My empty nest feels hollow,
the echo of my own breath rings in my ears.

My worries have not flown with the fledglings, they linger still,
but now without the comfort of a slumbering head on a pillow upstairs.
My imagination tells the tales I don't want to see,
and my spare time, once so coveted, is now my enemy.

My nest is as it should be now, empty.
But I will not be empty little one.
I will fly, just like you, find my new place in this story.

Play music, bring friends, make noise and laughter
and fill the house with life,
so that when you come home, you see nothing to worry about here,
for that will clip your beautiful little wings.

And you will remember how nurturing your nest once was.
And you will crave the feeling of it, just once in a while.
This nest will never close and nor will I let it lose its love.

Fly, my loves, fly.
Just remember the way back home.

I love this author's work. She has just the right words to explain all the feels.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us trust in you and your vision for us as we go through the seasons of our lives. Watch over our children, and our children's children. Keep them safe, happy and healthy. Amen.

Submitted by Cynthia Benton

Day Nine, Friday, March 3

MASTER OF SOLUTIONS

Author: Melanie Schurr

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

"There are no problems, only solutions."

Without a doubt, this has been the most difficult few years of my life. A small crisis within our home has pierced our otherwise comfortable existence, and yet, even in the turmoil, light has overcome darkness.

During the onset of our struggle I was angry, frustrated and felt overwhelmed. "Why us, God? Why us?" I would ask. And although my answer did not come as immediately as I would have preferred, the Lord did reply later by showing me truth. This truth was the knowledge that there is no such thing as earthly perfection, and each and every human being will face adversity at some time in their life. However, God is greater than any problem.

Whether it is sickness, disease, relationship struggles or some other hardship, our life journey will never be perfect because perfection is only found in the Divine. Along with the beauty of laughs and smiles will be the sting of painful tears, disappointments and shattered dreams. Relationships may fail and jobs may fall through, yet will we allow these bumps along the path to alter our ability to possess peace, even joy?

How we perceive crisis when it occurs can either make or break our peace of mind, as well as affect the outcome of the situation. As the above quote conveys, nothing is really a problem because there will always be solutions.

The greatest lesson I learned this year is the phrase "Let go, and let God." The most successful solution to any problem we may face, no matter how large or small, is to trust in God.

As we act to resolve problems, we should never go it alone, but to lay the issue in the hands of the Lord; knowing that where our earthly abilities may be limited, He alone is able to do all things! While man may tell us a situation is hopeless, with God there is always hope!

And so, after doing everything possible to resolve my family's personal crisis on our own, I remembered my faith in God, and began to cleave to the Lord in a way that I have never before had to surrender in trust. Daily, I pray about the matter, then I hand the matter over to God, knowing that I have done my part, and now it is time for Him to take over. As hard a period as this has emotionally been, it has ironically also been the richest in wisdom. No longer do I feel overwhelmed by the problem,

because I now know that all the worry in the world will not help resolve the matter, and in fact, will only add to my own emotional distress.

Today, I encourage you to hand any problems you may be facing over to the capable arms of the Lord. Feel the peace and freedom which follows the leap of faith, and know that God is the Master of miraculous solutions.

Prayer: Let me lean on you with all my heart instead of relying on my own imperfect understanding. Give me clear guidance in my life. I ask for your help to direct my path. Give me confidence that your direction is always the best way to go. In the name of my Lord Jesus, Amen!

Submitted by Guy Crumley

Day Ten, Saturday, March 4

Coming Together

John 1:12-13 “But to all who did not receive him, who believed in his name, he gave them the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor the will of the flesh nor the will of man, but of God.”

After a long summer of not being allowed to have any friends over and being isolated from anyone except a very few family members, it was exciting looking forward to reuniting with friends at school. I attended a residential school as mentioned in previous devotions, for nine months out of the year. From kindergarten through fifth grade, the only home trips were at Christmas for most other children. However, many of those years I spent Christmas with a dorm parent or on campus. That place was my true home and leaving it each year was extremely sad!

There could be many reasons that you are separated from those you love. Perhaps you live far away from each other, and it takes too much time and money for frequent visits. Maybe stay-at-home orders have kept you and your family separated for long periods. The pandemic has caused similar separations among friends and family around the world. Whether your separation was caused by economic hardships, pandemics, fights, growing apart, or maybe even death, it is sweet to be able to finally reunite with those you love.

At this year's Thanksgiving meal, vegetables will have a crisper snap; mashed potatoes and gravy will be sweeter and seem warmer; the turkey will be more savory and pies unimaginably tasty! None of this will be a result of good cooks. The warmth and joy of coming together again with family and friends will add a unique sweet flavor to this year's Thanksgiving celebrations. We will all experience *retrouvaille*, the French word describing joy of meeting or finding someone again after a long separation (rediscovery). How frustrating is it that the French have the perfect word for reuniting with a friend. Look at all the English speakers who are using paragraphs of words trying to describe this phenomenon when the French have one simple word to describe this feeling. This year we are finally, “Reunited, and it feels so good.” — Peaches & Herb

Peaches & Herb released the song “Reunited” in 1978, and it won a Grammy for song of the year.

If this year's coming together seems amazing, imagine the spectacular joy coming together with Christ's family in His Kingdom!

“See what kind of love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.” (1 John 3:1-2).

God chose Israel to be his special people (Deuteronomy 7:6), but Jesus came to save Jews and Gentiles (everyone else). We have been adopted into God's family, through Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross.

We share a spiritual unity through our Lord! As the family of Christ, we are His arms and legs on this earth. From hugs and words of comfort to feeding hungry bellies, we operate by His love and we should spread His love to others when and wherever possible.

God chose us to be in His family. Paul wrote in Galatians 3:26 that it is through our faith in Jesus we are sons and daughters of God. Our faith fuels our confidence and directs our steps, as we seek God first in our daily lives. "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

May our prayers of thanks this year be filled with the adoration of Christ for our Salvation and immense gratitude for all God has provided both in physical food and that of family relationships and love!

"The pain of parting is nothing to the joy of meeting again." —Charles Dickens

Prayer: Dear Loving Heavenly Father, thank You not only for Your countless blessings but for the challenges that draw us near to You. Thank You for the hard moments when You gave us the strength to wait out the storm. Lord Jesus, You are so good. Whatever storms come into our lives, You are our Rock and Shelter. Thank You for Your sustenance that fills us, Your light that surrounds us, and Your love that never fails. In Jesus' Name, we pray, Amen!

Submitted by Dan Thompson

Second Sunday of Lent, March 5

Come. Stay. Receive. Find.

Hebrews 4:14-16 (TLB) “But Jesus the Son of God is our great High Priest who has gone to heaven itself to help us; therefore let us never stop trusting him. This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses since he had the same temptations we do, though he never once gave way to them and sinned. So let us come boldly to the very throne of God and stay there to receive his mercy and to find grace to help us in our times of need.”

Early last summer, I sold my beloved blue 1999 VW Bug since we didn't need three vehicles (Lady Bug, John's car, and a wheelchair van). Then after we no longer had need for a wheelchair van I sold it, leaving us with one vehicle. Eventually, we realized that I really needed a car. I started praying, asking God for a low-mileage car we could afford. I had boldly gone to the throne of God and stayed there knowing full-well that, through his love and mercy, he would provide us with what we needed. I will admit, though, that with far less boldness, I sheepishly added, “If possible, could it be a blue Bug?” It seemed like too much to ask, you know?

I'm thankful that God is so much bigger than I am because a few weeks later, John handed me his phone and said to look! There on the marketplace was the answer to my prayers. It was a low-mileage car and it was affordable! And... It was a blue Bug! And... I was the first one to tell the seller that I was interested in her car! I was crying happy tears as I began to receive what God had for me.

But wait, there's more! Harkening back to First Presbyterian's stewardship theme of November 2022, I found grace. Surprising grace! This low-mileage, affordable, blue VW Bug was a convertible! I never would have dreamed of asking for a convertible! I named her Lulu Bug.

But wait, there's more! Now this may sound silly to some, but I was so excited to learn that Lulu Bug also had heated seats! I asked God for a car and he surprised me with a blue Bug that has a convertible top and heated seats! All glory to God!

“So let us come boldly to the very throne of God and stay there to receive his mercy and to find grace to help us in our times of need.”

We can trust that God will never let us down. He will help us in times of need. The answer to our prayers may not always be just as we hoped. But they will always be for our good. Sometimes the answer will go far above and beyond anything we could ever dream of!

Prayer: Our dear Savior Jesus, thank you for your love, surprising grace, and mercy. Thank you that we may approach you and talk with you directly. Thank you for your suffering and death on the cross. Thank you for rising again in glory, and going to heaven itself to help us. In your name we pray, Amen.

Submitted by Marsha Nelson

Day Eleven, Monday, March 6

Psalm 121:7-8 “He keeps you from all evil, and preserves your life. He keeps his eye upon you as you come and go, and always guards you.”

“Seek Me with your whole being. I desire to be found by you, and I orchestrate the events of your life with that purpose in mind. When things go well and you are blessed, you can feel Me smiling on you. When you encounter rough patches along your life-journey, trust that My Light is still shining upon you. My reasons for allowing these adversities may be shrouded in mystery, but My continual Presence with you is an absolute promise. Seek Me in good times; seek Me in hard times. You will find Me watching over you all the time.” – from *Jesus Calling* by Susan Young

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for daily reminders of the blessings you have given us. Thank you for bringing us comfort and showing us your love. Amen.

Submitted by Kay Black

Day Twelve, Tuesday, March 7

Or Something

Luke 11:53-54 “When Jesus went outside, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, waiting to catch him in something he might say.”

I must say that my 6-year-old granddaughter Ruth astutely catches me in one of my poor verbal habit; it's the use of the phrase, “or something”. Here's an example: “Maybe we could go to the library or something.” In this case, something is indeterminate, not specific. As a teacher, I should know better. Ruth, who is remarkably kind at pointing out each time I say “or something” in her presence, is helping me to break this verbal habit. She claims I have said it a “bazillion” times! In contrast, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law are remarkably unkind to Jesus as they “besiege him with questions, waiting to catch him in something he might say.”

In the Gospel of John, as Jesus stands trial, he replies: “*If I said something wrong, testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?*” (John 18:23). Though Jesus never said something wrong, He took upon Himself all the wrong thoughts and words and actions and “or somethings” of sinful mankind to pay for our redemption, for our “resurrected” life!

The Apostle Paul declares this about our Jesus: “*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness*” (Philippians 2:6).

Maybe there's something here for us to contemplate.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, for us, You became nothing so we might be something with everything – everything that is of true value and worth. May our lives be living witnesses of our gratitude and praise to You as we seek to speak and live Your truth. Amen.

Submitted by Janet Chipman

Day Thirteen, Wednesday, March 8

In the Beginning

Genesis 1:1 "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."



After a Godly Play lesson about creation, Ruth Chipman, age 6, was inspired to create her own colorful rendering of "in the beginning, God." Children grades Pre-K through Fifth are invited to partake in Godly Play during the worship each Sunday morning. Godly Play is a time to match Bible stories to wandering--and wondering--imagination.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for all your creations that make the world a better place. Amen.

Submitted by Ruth Chipman

Day Fourteen, Thursday, March 9

Matthew 18: 4-5 “Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.”

An hour-long church service can be hard for a child. Parents (and grandparents) often bring snacks, toys, and books to try to entertain little ones and keep them quiet.

I remember a particular Sunday, almost 40 years ago, when my children were restless. A loving grandmother named Gratia Coultas happened to be sitting in our pew. (She didn't always sit on the pulpit side of the sanctuary.) Seemingly unbothered by their fidgeting, Gratia calmly reached in her purse, and without a word, presented Kim and Kristen with a tiny, but very special toy. My heart, of course, melted. Gratia certainly knew how to show God's love.

As time marched on, our church family has changed a bit. Some members have moved away, and sadly, some have passed away. Many of the children of the 1980s now have children of their own, which means that we have a whole new crop of grandparents among us.

It can still be hard for a child to sit through an hour-long church service. Parents and grandparents still bring snacks, toys, books, and now electronic toys to try to entertain little ones and keep them quiet.

I remain grateful for the abiding love our church family shows for our children. You can see it when children rush forward to hear their very own message, delivered by caring members of the congregation. You can hear it in the applause generated as their sweet little voices fill the sanctuary with beautiful music. You can feel it when, after a baptism, Jonathan walks proudly among the pews introducing the child to his church family.

A favorite new memory I cherish is from when our Alyssa was a toddler. During fellowship time, she would sometimes wander and find a pair of slacks to tug on that she thought were her Grampy's. Without fail, she found someone willing to show her love and help her find her way back to her grandfather or to me. She felt unconditionally loved, I know she did, even though she could not express it. That's what I think Jesus was talking about in the verse I chose.

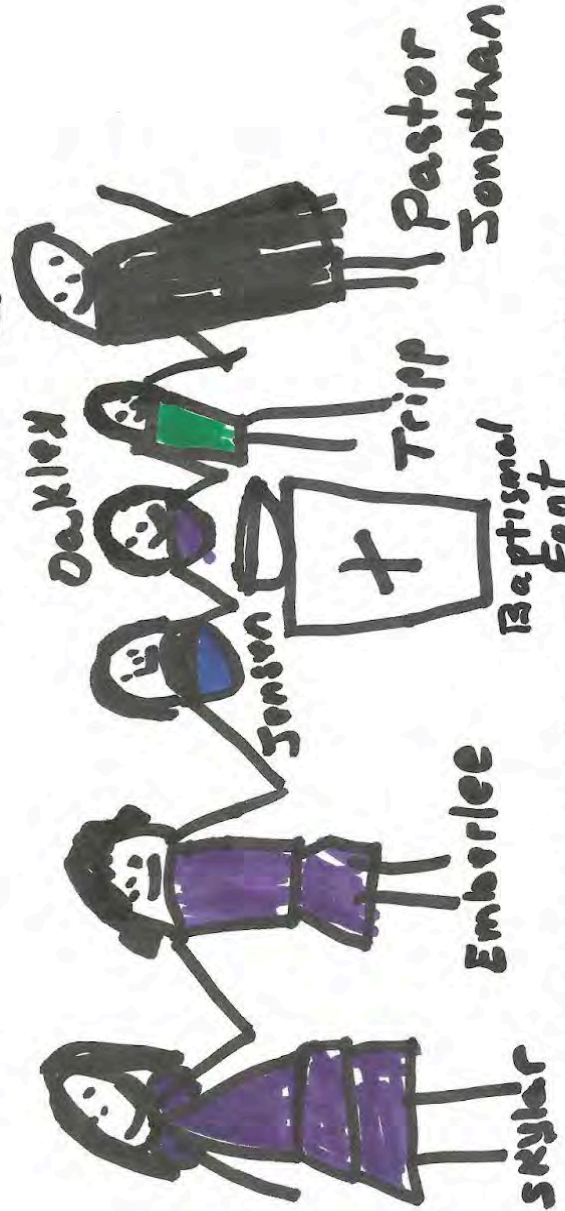
Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for a church family that loves children. Thank you especially for Jonathan and Siobhan, who introduced Messy Church and Godly Play, and for Tim Chipman who organized a children's choir. Amen.

Submitted by Penny Turner

Day Fifteen, Friday, March 10

Skylar Suhre
ay 6 2023

God's Grace



Psalms 103:8 The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in mercy.
Dear God, please take care of children. Amen

Day Sixteen, Saturday, March 11



Walking Amongst the Bees

Note – no bees were harmed during the research of this devotion, although the author was stung once.

Psalm 23:4 “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”

Ephesians 6:13 “Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground...”

Every year in the late summer the large honey pear tree in the backyard starts to drop its pears. Once this happens, bees and yellow jackets are ready to harvest the sugar and moisture from them. I found the best way to prevent the dog and me from being stung, is to rake them up and keep up with pears as they fall. I had to learn how to gently rake up the pears without alarming the bees, so I won't get stung in the process. Here is the procedure:

1. Gently roll the pear and allow the bees to fly somewhere else.
2. Scoop up the pear with a shovel and put it in the wheelbarrow or bucket.
3. Dump the pears way back in the yard where the dog or I rarely go.

You need to allow the bees to have an escape route and give them a chance to go somewhere else. Also, you need to tread lightly through the grass, paying close attention to hidden pears that might have bees on them. Once the pears are all picked up, there is no longer an attraction for them. Oh, what a lesson for dealing with adversity in life. How do we deal with those that would harm us, or situations where there seems to be no hope? We need to use the tools that God gave us: put on the armor of God, use the reasoning ability that we have been given, gently allow our adversaries to find a different path, and remove the threat when safe. God will be with us.

Prayer: Oh Lord, help us to rejoice in the small victories. Help us to stand up for godly principles, and shun evil. Help us to realize that you will be with us always. Help us to trust in you fully when adversity comes to visit. Give the evil ones a way to escape, and help us remove that which attracted them. It is in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Submitted by Stephen Holt

Third Sunday of Lent, March 12

Luke 10:38-42 “As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, ‘Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!’”

“‘Martha, Martha,’ the Lord answered, ‘you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.’”

I’ve been really busy at school lately. Now that I’m in 8th grade, and there are fewer Covid restrictions, there are so many fun activities to do. Sports, choir, student council, youth group.

Sometimes I’m like Mary in the Bible story, and sometimes I’m like Martha. I’m like Mary when I’m at school, being attentive and listening to my teacher. I’m like Martha when I get wrapped up in all the extra things, like the school musical, jazz band, and Scholastic Bowl. Maybe you’re like Mary when you go to church and listen to the sermon, or read your Bible. Maybe you’re like Martha when you get busy with the little things like keeping all the appointments in your calendar or worrying about spending too much money.

Even if you’re busy, you can still find time to worship God. Even when you feel like Martha, you can try to act more like Mary.

Dear God, thank you for all the fun things we have to do. Please help us remember to be more like Mary. Amen.

Submitted by Hannah Warren

Day Seventeen, Monday, March 13

Philippians 2:1-11 (NIV) “Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.”

Sometimes I think my kids disagree just to cause me anxiety. I need to stop asking them open-ended questions like, “What would you like to do tonight?” because they will inevitably express opposing views and I’ll be left holding the can of worms I opened. Any parent can relate to such tension-filled moments and to the corresponding longing for a like-minded family.

Like any family, churches can be ripe environments for disagreement. But also like any other family, there must be a spirit of like-mindedness for the church to function smoothly. Paul says it would make his joy complete for the Philippians to be like-minded. Jesus, as he faces his final hours on earth, prays for his followers, “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one” (John 17:20-21 NIV).

The church is a large family with a diversity of gifts and plenty of big personalities. As we journey through Lent, remember that Jesus faced the cross with us on his mind, not only as individuals, but as a united body of believers, the Body of Christ. Can we make *his* joy complete this season by creating unity in his Body? – Amy Blackledge

Submitted by Barb Bucy

Day Eighteen, Tuesday, March 14

Thank God for the Midwest

Thank you for the awe-inspiring natural wonders like the Great Lakes, the Mississippi River bluffs, the Ozarks, and our national forests. We are even more thankful for our fertile soil, flat plains, and meandering tributaries that help feed our nation with corn, beans, wheat, and whatever our gardens will produce.

We give thanks for our big cities like Chicago, St. Louis, Indianapolis, and Omaha where people congregate to shop, drive like Danica Patrick, eat at 5-star restaurants. Also, thank you for our small towns and tiny hamlets where we can find space, breathe the fresh air, and eat what we harvest.

Thanks for all the big “deals” that the Midwest has produced like Abraham Lincoln, Henry Ford, Warren Buffett, and Betty White. Thanks too for all the not-so famous Midwesterners with their unpretentious ways and their helpful spirits. Were it not for Midwesterners, there would be far less humor in the world.

Prayer: God, just in case you are wondering, we could also use a couple of more things in the Midwest. An ocean or a couple of mountains would be a nice addition. We could use more peace, patience, and understanding so we Midwesterners could pass it on to the rest of the world. Thank you. Amen.

Submitted by Jo Anderson

Day Nineteen, Wednesday, March 15

Ides of March

Isaiah 53:5 “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.”

But for William Shakespeare, March 15th might not mean anything but another date in the month of March. But because of his play, *Julius Caesar*, March 15, *the Ides of March*, lives on in infamy.

Lent includes the March 15 date this year. Lent is Christians' time of celebrating Jesus' life all the while knowing that Christ's path will ultimately lead to his death.

March 15th was a noted Roman deadline for settling debts. (Wikipedia) And in 44 BC, Caesar was assassinated at a meeting of the Senate by at least 60 conspirators. Stories state that a seer told Caesar that he would be harmed on the Ides of March, and he didn't believe the "vision."

One notable difference between Caesar and Christ, although there are many obvious ones, is that Caesar - like any of us - did not want to die while Christ did not want to die but he willingly died, for us and our sins.

“I lay down my life. . . No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord”
(John 10:17,18).

There are records and details throughout the New Testament of Jesus' suffering and his death upon the cross, whereas Caesar is a note in history. The Ides of March does not matter in our daily lives but Lent certainly does matter to us! Lent is the path to Christ's death and the forgiveness of all our sins. And a celebration of Easter, when our Lord is risen again!

Which brings me to the final difference between Caesar and Jesus Christ: Caesar was killed and died, the end. Jesus was crucified and yet he still lives!

Prayer: Lord, thank you for saving us and forgiving us all of our sins and debts. May we go through our lives trying to be worthy of your love and Jesus' sacrifice. In your name we pray, Amen.

Submitted by Sarah Yuska

Day Twenty, Thursday, March 16

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

1 John 3:18 (NRSV) “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

This is an excerpt from 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 shoed 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.

To answer Pastor Jonathan’s question above, I truly believe had he been in line behind the homeless man, Jesus would have shared in the common cup of salvation and rejoiced that the man was there to worship and fellowship with the family of God.

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

Prayer: Dear gracious God, thank you for loving us. Show us how to be like Jesus, more and more every day. Amen.

Submitted by Marsha Nelson

Day Twenty-One, Friday, March 17

Who was St. Patrick?

Romans 8:14 “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”

Patrick was born in Britain circa A.D. 385. At the time, the Roman Empire was on the verge of collapse. Barbarians were on the move, invading different regions of the empire. Roman soldiers had deserted Britain, making it vulnerable to attack. When Patrick was sixteen years old, Irish pirates invaded his village, destroyed it and took Patrick captive. He was put on a ship bound for Ireland.

In Ireland, Patrick was sold as a slave and put to work as a shepherd for pigs. In those Irish hills, life was hard. He was exposed to a harsh climate and nearly starved to death. He was completely alone, but he turned to God for comfort and companionship. Through prayer, Patrick found great relief.

Six years into slavery, Patrick had a vision from God. He was told he would return to his homeland. Not long after, he had another vision and was told his ship was waiting for him. Patrick ran away and traveled more than two hundred miles to Ireland’s southeast coast and boarded a ship headed for Gaul (modern-day France), where many people believe he trained for ministry.

After returning to his homeland, Patrick received another vision. In it, a man named Victorious came to him holding many letters. Patrick read one of the letters aloud, called “The Voice of the Irish.” As he read, he heard Irish voices calling out to him and pleading for his return to Ireland.

Years later Patrick was ordained as a bishop, a leader in the Church. Around A.D. 432 Patrick returned to Ireland to start sharing the Gospel about Jesus with the Irish people.

Patrick’s missionary work over the next thirty years was truly remarkable. He journeyed across Ireland, spreading the gospel, baptizing and confirming countless believers and founding many churches and monasteries. One of Patrick’s missionary strategies was to focus his efforts on evangelizing Ireland’s many tribal kings. His thought was that converting the kings would lead to the conversion of their subjects. His strategy proved extremely successful, and many people became Christians!

Spreading the Gospel in Ireland was far from easy for Patrick. He faced frequent opposition and was in constant danger of being killed for his bold faith. Lorica, also known as “Patrick’s Breastplate,” is a special prayer of protection that Patrick would say. Many people read it today because it reminds them of Patrick’s confidence in the Lord.

Patrick died on March 17th in A.D. 461. He is best known for organizing the church in Ireland and spreading Christianity there.

From What’s In The Bible

Submitted by Sarah Yuska

Day Twenty-Two, Saturday, March 18

Praying for Others

Romans 8:26 (RSV) “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.”

This passage in Romans has been a blessing and assurance to me over the years when I don't know how or what to pray for others. In fact, Larry and I have this scripture reference on our car license plate.

In one of my Bible study groups, we are using a book entitled “Embracing God's Grace” by Elizabeth George. The author suggested we might use a prayer based on Col. 1:9-12 when we don't know how to pray. I have begun using this as I begin my morning devotions. I pray for myself, family and friends that we may all:

Understand God's will in our lives

Gain spiritual wisdom

Please God in every area of our lives

Bear fruit

Grow in our knowledge of God

Be filled with God's strength so we can patiently endure whatever comes our way

Rejoice and give thanks always

Grow in grace and show it to others

During this season of Lent, may we all grow in our dedication of praying for others and letting them know we are praying for them. It brings hope and encouragement to know others are praying for us.

Prayer focus: Those who need encouragement.

Submitted by Karen Ladd

Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 19

John 20:29 “Then Jesus told him, ‘You believe because you have seen me. But blessed are those who haven’t seen me and believe anyway.’”

In The Garden - by Charles Austin Miles 1912

I come to the garden alone
While the dew is still on the roses.
And the voice I hear falling on my ear
The Son of God discloses.

Refrain:

And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.

He speaks, and the sound of His voice,
Is so sweet the birds hush their singing,
And the melody that He gave to me
Within my heart is ringing.

Refrain

I’d stay in the garden with Him
Though the night around me be falling,
But he bids me go; through the voice of woe
His voice to me is calling.

Refrain

A lovely story of the song’s inspiration: “The account of how this beautiful hymn was written — from the hymn-writer C. Austin Miles himself: One day in April 1912, I was seated in the dark room, where I kept my photographic equipment and organ. I drew my Bible toward me; it opened at my favorite chapter, John 20 – whether by chance or inspiration let each reader decide, that meeting of Jesus and Mary has lost none of its power and charm.

As I read it that day, I seemed to be part of the scene. I became a silent witness to that dramatic moment in Mary’s life, when she knelt before her Lord, and cried, Rabboni!

My hands were resting on the Bible while I stared at the light blue wall. As the light faded, I seemed to be standing at the entrance of a garden, looking down a gently winding path, shaded by olive branches. A woman in white, with head bowed, hand clasping her throat, as if to choke back her sobs, walked slowly into the shadows. It was Mary. As she came to the tomb, upon which she placed her hand, she bent over to look in, and hurried away.

John, in flowing robe, appeared, looking at the tomb; then came Peter, who entered the tomb, followed by John.

As they departed, Mary reappeared; leaning her hand upon her arm at the tomb, she wept. Turning herself, she saw Jesus standing, so did I. I knew it was He. She knelt before Him, with arms outstretched and looking into His face cried, Rabboni!

I awakened in sunlight, gripping the Bible, with muscles tense and nerves vibrating. Under the inspiration of this vision I wrote, as quickly as the words could be formed the poem exactly as it has since appeared. That same evening I wrote the music." (Interpretation possibly by Paul Lee Tan)

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for shining your light of love in me and through me. Amen.

Submitted by Kay Black

Day Twenty-Three, Monday, March 20

Ephesians 2:8-10 “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”

Nails

My dad did this many times over. He bought a piece of farmland. Fired up his small D4 dozer and went to work making it a better piece of property. Clearing hedge rows, terracing, building new fence (yes, everything was fenced back then) and turning non-tillable into tillable. He didn't get rich doing this in the 50's and 60's but it was good extra income to his farming operation and John Deere Dealership and it gave steady work to his two unsuspecting boys. Each time the dozer made a pass; it left many stumps and roots that had to be cut loose and loaded into a truck for the burn pile.

Sometimes these properties included a house or a barn. If the structure was not worthy of repair, usually a match would resolve the issue. But sometimes that building held within it some very good lumber which dad would repurpose into another building or structure on our farm. Enormous headers or stringers that were oak or pine. Wall studs that were a full 2 x 4 pine without a single knot to weaken them. It was lumber you cannot buy today at any price. So, this being the case, those unsuspecting sons were required to take the building down shingle and board at a time being careful to not damage the valuable timber.

Now that task alone was monumental when we are talking about a two story 10 room farmhouse. But wait. There is more. This house was of the age that each board was secured with square nails. For you youngsters, that is as opposed to round nails. These nails were made of a cast material that is not as flexible as today's nails. You must pull them out as straight as possible to avoid breaking them. So that is huge task number two. Add to that the fact that dad had heard these square nails were quite marketable in the historical building world. Therefore, each nail was pulled and STRAIGHTENED, by laying them on a brick and tapping or sometimes smacking them with your hammer. The nails then went into a wooden keg where they laid for many, many years.

OK Keith, so what is your point? After dad's time of improving farms and removing old buildings passed, he took upon another adventure. Those square nails, that his unsuspecting sons had so gallantly rescued, resurfaced. Dad decided to give them a purpose and mission none of us had ever envisioned. He sorted the nails by size and began to make crosses. A hole was drilled in one nail about one third of the way from the top to receive the other nail. Then that same nail got a hole in the very top to offer a place for a string so that it may be worn.

First, just a few were made. My brother Ken took them with him to Green Pastures Performing Arts Camp and on Lay witness trips. Giving them to believers all over the country, usually without any explanation of their origin. Dad and I would also give one to those who we thought would appreciate the significance

of a cross made of nails. In the end dad went through hundreds of drill bits and used every nail. Now hundreds of people have one of these crosses. I know that one lady asked to be buried with hers. And she was.

This was a long way to go to get to this point. How can you reach people? What is your mission? How can you spread the Word of Christ and reaffirm a faith that may be faltering? You do not have to be a bible scholar. You do not have to be a dynamic speaker. Dad touched so many people using the crosses as God's hand. Having taken a part in this ministry by tearing down the house and painstakingly straightening each nail, I have a grateful satisfaction. But more importantly, I have the lesson taught to me by my dad that anyone can reach out. Anyone can offer a gift. Anyone and anything can make a difference.

Prayer: Lord, accept our gifts as tokens of our faith. Amen.

Submitted by Keith Bradbury

Day Twenty-Four, Tuesday, March 21

Faith

2 Timothy 4:7-8 “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”

I was brought up in the Methodist church my whole childhood and I give full credit to my mother for making sure our family attended regularly. My mom loved her church friends and created her own small group (before that was a thing) named “Charlie’s Angels.” While they may have never studied the bible during their Sunday School time, they definitely had fellowship. My mom made sure I was at Sunday School and Youth Group consistently. Eventually, I taught Sunday School to littles while I was in high school. I am thankful that my mom raised me to have faith in God because I have needed my faith throughout my whole adulthood to fall back on. For example, in February of 2007, when I was 29 years old, I found out my mom had brain and lung cancer. We knew as a family how her journey with this battle would end. In March of 2007, our family decided on Hospice care in my parents’ home. Many people would come and visit my mom during this time especially her church friends. We kept her hospital bed in my parents’ bedroom so she could be with all of her things. I took many three day weekends from teaching school during this time period so I could be there with my dad and try to give him a break since he was her full time care taker. One of the last weekends that I was with my mom was Memorial Day weekend of 2007. By this time, my mom had mentioned “going home” several times and wasn’t eating anymore or having water. I was in the bedroom with her while my dad was on the porch taking a short break. My mom seemed to be trying to communicate with me by pointing at something in their room and trying to tell me “home.” I was trying to figure it out so that I could communicate with her and bring her peace. I figured out that my mom was pointing to a wooden cross that said Jesus on it; it was hung on their wall. A church friend had made it for her and it had been on their bedroom wall for quite some time. I will never forget how I felt in that moment and how much peace I had. My mom was ready to go to her heavenly home and wanted to tell me that. My mom passed away June 5, 2007 on my last day of teaching school that year. I have so much peace that she went to be with Jesus, and I know that she was telling me that she was going home with Jesus. Recently, I have unpacked the wooden cross from a box I brought back to our home. The cross makes me smile when I see it and reminds me of my mother. If my mom could have that much peace and faith at the end of her life, I need to try and have more faith as I walk through my journey here on Earth.

Prayer: Jesus, please help us to remain faithful to you each and every day even when we are unsure. Help us to keep the faith and feel your peace even when grief and darkness surrounds us. We thank you for always walking with us through our storms. Amen.

Submitted by Leslie Sparrow

Day Twenty-Five, Wednesday, March 22

Better Than Biscuits

James 5:7-8 “Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient.”

Some may have seen this posted on Facebook, but I thought it also deserved a place in the devotionals.

“A pastor asked an old farmer, decked out in bib overalls, to say grace for the morning breakfast.

‘Lord, I hate buttermilk,’ the farmer began. The visiting pastor opened one eye to glance at the farmer and wonder where this was going.

The farmer loudly proclaimed, ‘Lord, I hate lard.’ Now the pastor was growing concerned.

Without missing a beat, the farmer continued, ‘And Lord, you know I don’t much care for raw white flour.’ The pastor once again opened an eye to glance around the room and saw that he wasn’t the only one to feel uncomfortable.

Then the farmer added, ‘But Lord, when you mix them all together and bake them, I do love warm fresh biscuits. So Lord, when things come up that we don’t like, when life gets hard, when we don’t understand what you’re saying to us, help us just to relax and wait until you are done mixing. It will probably be even better than biscuits. Amen.’”

Submitted by Chad Suhre

Day Twenty-Six, Thursday, March 23

1 Chronicles 16:8-9 "Give thanks unto the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the people. Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him, talk ye of all his wondrous works."

One of my favorite books is *The Tiny Book of Tiny Pleasures* by Irene Smit and Astrid van der Hulst. This little book is full of inspiration and helps the reader slow down and savor the little things in life. The illustrations are amazing and are by a Dutch illustrator named Deborah van der Schaaf. Just seeing the pictures and reading the words make my day a better day. I don't look at this book every day, but when I do I am happier afterwards.

Here are some examples of tiny pleasures from the book:

a rainbow
going to the movies
sharing
drifting off to sleep
breakfast in bed
feeling the wind in your hair
wandering thru a new city
offering to help
a flea market score
spotting something beautiful
a sharp point on your pencil
flip-flop weather
a road trip
the smell of rain
migrating geese in V formation
a ladybug on your hand
being there for someone who needs you

God welcomes our prayers of thanksgiving for all good things. Every day we should see God's work in all parts of our lives. 1 Chronicles 16:8-9 says, "Give thanks unto the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the people. Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him, talk ye of all his wondrous works."

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to give you thanks for all the many tiny pleasures we experience each and every day. Help us to be more grateful as we live our lives to the fullest. Amen.

Submitted by Cynthia Benton

Day Twenty-Seven, Friday, March 24

Blessed to be a Blessing

Genesis 12:1-2 “Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 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.’”

Blessings. God promised Abram blessings. According to Genesis 13: 2, “Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold.” And at this point, Abram was only about halfway through his life. He had many more years ahead. Abram was destined to be renamed Abraham (which means “the father of many”). God promised Abraham that he “would be the ancestor of a multitude of nations.” (Genesis 17:4) Abraham came to have much wealth and through the generations, many, many descendants. Centuries later he is still well known in our world today. Did God give all of this (riches, descendants, fame) to Abraham for him to have and keep? Absolutely NOT!!

Read the verses at the beginning of this devotion. The last 7 words say it all, “so that you will be a blessing.” These words tell us why God blessed Abram. It was not to make him rich and powerful or so that he would be Somebody. It was so that Abram would take the blessing he received and turn around and give it to someone else. God blesses us so that we will be a blessing to someone else. For me, this is cause and effect.

I have known people who take in the blessings. They keep taking them in until they have no more room. All they want is more. This is not how it is supposed to be. These people are generally not very happy or content. They tend to be in protect-my-stuff mode. Always concerned that someone is trying to take what they have.

God has blessed us for the same reason that God blessed Abraham: TO BE A BLESSING. We may not reach the same level of blessings that Abraham ultimately did. We will not all receive the same blessings as family and friends receive. God made us to be individuals, God gave us blessings that are for us to give away to people we meet.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for the many blessings that you have given me. I pray that you will give me the courage and direction to bless those in need. Amen.

You have been blessed by God to be a blessing.

Go be a Blessing!

Submitted by John E. Nelson
Pastoral Assistant

Day Twenty-Eight, Saturday, March 25

I have found that reading what others share in the Meditations of Your Heart booklet is touching. Our church has done this so long; I cannot think of a time as a member without hearing or reading the submissions. I've written at least two submissions during its existence. It is a joy to see the variety shared: poems, reminiscing, prayers, sermonettes, devotions, drawings, and pictures. The timeline passed last year that I missed the submission date. So, here it goes...

As many of you know, I am an elder representing the Fellowship Committee. It is a rewarding task near and dear to my heart; I enjoy baking for, planning and organizing events. A year ago, the committee eased into occasional fellowship after worship. Then, we dove in head-first last fall to serve our church family after Sunday worship with themed treats. It has been my pleasure to guide this venture. At our last committee meeting, I shared a message about the meaning of "fellowship." The online dictionary lists it as three syllables: fel-low-ship. Pronounced /'fello, SHip/, a noun. The meaning I chose was the first listed: "friendly association, especially with people who share one's interests. They valued fun and good fellowship as the cement of the community." Digging deeper I researched "Biblical Fellowship". The word fellowship is derived from the Greek word koinonia. Koinonia can be defined as "holding something in common" and is specifically used 20 times in the New Testament; Philippians, Acts and 1 John were listed. I chose the **Acts 2:42** verse as a reference. **"And they devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching, and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."** Also written as, **"All the believers devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer."** Each explanation of verse 42 appears to describe our Fellowship Committee. Prior to Covid, members were signing up to serve without fail. That dedication indicates the common need of our congregation to share, interact, and visit whether eating donuts, butter braid, cookies or cake. Or drinking hot coffee, water or lemonade.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for a devoted congregation. Guide us as we continue to share our interest of fellowship. Help us value this common thread of interaction, linking us together as a church community. Amen.

Submitted by Anita Donoho-Ott

Fifth Sunday of Lent, March 26

Jesus Took Your Place

Isaiah 53: 11b-12 (GNT) “The Lord says, ‘My devoted servant, with whom I am pleased, will bear the punishment of many and for his sake I will forgive them. And so I will give him a place of honor, a place among the great and powerful. He willingly gave his life and shared the fate of evil men. He took the place of many sinners and prayed that they might be forgiven.’”

Last year on the Fifth Sunday in Lent and due to technical difficulties, Mother and I were not able to watch First Presbyterian’s service online. So, what we did was tune in to the streaming service of LeClaire Christian Church, where our daughter and son-in-law are members. Their pastor, Andy Turner, preached on Isaiah 53. This is the story of The Suffering Servant. It’s more than just a story, though. It’s a prophetic word that points us to Jesus and what he did for each and every one of us. He committed no crime. He deserved no mistreatment, no punishment. Yet, “He took the place of many sinners and prayed that they might be forgiven.”

As Pastor Andy said, “Jesus took your place, to secure your place.”

Let that sink in...

We deserve to suffer. Jesus took our place.
We deserve punishment. Jesus took our place.
We are forgiven, because Jesus took our place.
We can look forward to heaven, because Jesus took our place.
Jesus took our place, to secure our place.

Prayer: Dear sweet Jesus, thank you for taking our place. Thank you that we can look forward to eternal life in heaven because of your sacrifice and your prayers on our behalf. Help us to love and to live in service to you and to others. Amen.

Submitted by Marsha Nelson

Day Twenty-Nine, Monday, March 27

Betwixt and Between

Philippians 1:23-24 “But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.”

Two stories and reflection on my own actions as a beginning believer cause me to compose today's message.

First, a friend shared his experience with one of his riders in the cab. The passenger he was talking to has a major drinking of beer habit, even though he had lots of health problems, probably resulting from the bad habit. The cab driver asked him if he attended a church or “knew Jesus?” The passenger's response was, “I know Jesus and He knows I need this vice to survive in this world.”

Another friend told me she struggles with quitting smoking. She says, “I quit for a few days and say to myself, God understands and will forgive me if I ask, if I start smoking too much.”

In my personal situation as a new believer in high school, I took the idea of repenting very literally. I thought if I repented every time I got a little drunk with friends, shared a few dirty jokes or made fun of someone, all was fine with the Lord. Fortunately, I outgrew that crazy way of thinking as I matured in my walk of faith.

All three situations are examples of people stuck betwixt and between being a full or half time follower of Jesus.

As believers, it is imperative that we have a seriously intimate relationship with our Heavenly Father. Our level of intimacy with God will determine how much victory and success we experience in our lives. You do not have an intimate relationship by default just because you are born-again. An intimate relationship with God is available to every believer, but it must be cultivated, nurtured, and developed like any other relationship. If we are not careful we can get so caught up in trying to maintain a balance between our Christian life and fitting into this world, or group of friends that we neglect the foundation principle of Christianity and that is our relationship with God. God wants to be involved in every area of your life. He wants to communicate with you on a daily basis. Therefore, it is imperative that we do everything necessary to cultivate our relationship with God and deepen our levels of intimacy with Him.

Today's Bible Reading shows that the two things in the Apostle's mind were life and death. A third thing, however, enters in, which he has no difficulty in deciding is far better than either living in the flesh or dying in the Lord. This he earnestly desired, the coming again of Christ, at whose return he hoped to be changed, made like Him, and be with Him.

As Christians, we should have the same desire. While being part of this world, we can look forward to a better life in the next one. We can show our confidence in a better life in our daily walk of faith. Such behavior will possibly bring someone into our Family of Christ. Even just one is one less to fall into the grasp of Satan!!

“Great is the difference betwixt a man’s being frightened at, and humbled for his sins”. -
Author: Thomas Fuller”

“Betwixt the life of feeling and the life of faith the Christian has to choose every day. Happy is he who, once for all, has made the firm choice, and every morning renews the choice, not to seek or listen for feeling, but only to walk by faith, according to the will of God.” - Author: Andrew Murray

Prayer: Heavenly Father, please help me to keep you between me and the world’s demands and not fall into the trap of Satan, trying to please everyone around me. Thank You, Lord, for guiding my footsteps thus far on my journey back to You. In My Savior’s Name, I pray. Amen!

Submitted by Dan Thompson

Day Thirty, Tuesday, March 28

FIVE FINGER PRAYER

Author: Unknown

1 Chronicles 16:11 “Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always.”

As you sit with your hands together to prepare for prayer, look at how your fingers are placed.

1. Your thumb is closest to you - Pray for those individuals that are closest to you: family, friends, loved ones.
2. Your index finger - Pray for those individuals who are in teaching positions or those who have taught you something.
3. Your middle finger - This is the biggest finger. Pray for those individuals who are big in your life: world and local leaders, church leaders or others who are big in your life.
4. Your ring finger - This finger is the weakest. Pray for those who are weak, sick, shut-ins and disabled.
5. Your pinky - This finger is the smallest. Pray for yourself.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, today is Your day, and I want Your will to be done. So, whatever happens, hold my hand and let's face it together! In Your Holy Name I pray, Amen!

Submitted by Guy Crumley
and Dan Thompson

Day Thirty-One, Wednesday, March 29

Watch in Hope

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

Watch is a word I’ve noticed throughout Holy Scripture. Here’s a few “watch warnings” for our contemplation:

Jesus says, *“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15).*

Paul says, *“I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them” (Romans 15:17).*

Jesus says, *“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father...Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come” (Matthew 24:36 and 42).*

Peter says, *“Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Stand firm against him, and be strong in your faith” (1 Peter 5:8-9a).*

There is strong urging for us to keep watch – to stay alert, to watch out. Watching takes intentionality; it takes focus; it takes mindfulness. In Micah 7:7, the first verse I shared on this page, the prophet Micah – long before Jesus Christ walked and taught and died and rose again in human form – encourages us to WATCH IN HOPE. Micah strongly preaches that God hates unkindness, injustice, fake display, empty religion. God hates sin, and He will come in judgment after countless opportunities to repent. Micah prophesied that God would send a Savior to be our peace (Micah 5:5).

Micah’s words encourage us to watch in hope – being mindful of the Divine in the midst of our living, being open to the work of the Holy Spirit within and around us. In Christ, we watch – not in fear, but in hope. We watch with an intentional, hope-filled perspective, trusting in God in all things as we act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8).

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

Submitted by Janet Chipman

Day Thirty-Two, Thursday, March 30

Splash!

Matthew 18:13 “And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than the ninety-nine that never went astray.”

Her shriek was loud enough to pierce through the din of Top 40 radio and the hollering of the multitude of children splashing around in the shallow end.

It was our summertime church outing to the Beardstown Water Park, and the place was heaving in the afternoon sun.

Her mother and I sat up in our chairs as Ruth scurried to us holding her hands to her mouth as traces of blood ran down her wet chin.

“Are you ok, honey? What happened?”

“My tooth, my tooth!” she exclaimed.

Ruth’s friend scurried over to give us the full report: the two of them had been going down the waterslide when, at the bottom, underwater, a little boy had bumped his knee into Ruth’s mouth, knocking out her already loose tooth.

Nestled in a towel in her mother’s arms, church friends of all ages gathered around our six-year-old daughter. One mother dug through her swim bag to provide a cold boo-boo bag. A little friend brought over a cold drink. Pastor Jonathan sat down beside Ruth to offer his words of consolation.

Any amount of physical discomfort was soon eclipsed by Ruth’s recognition that her tooth had been lost in the sprawling splash pad: how would the tooth fairy be able to come for the tooth now?

For me, this tableau will forever encapsulate everything a church ought to be: a huddle of caring and concerned intergenerational individuals, extending friendship, easing discomfort, giving what they can--a cold drink, a towel, a word of encouragement. A church supporting the parents in their moment of need (it takes a village, after all). A church loving the child through every age and stage. A church operating as Christ’s body, animated, active, alive.

You can imagine our surprise when a little boy ambled up to our clustered assembly saying, “I think I found your tooth. Here you go.” Everyone cheered.

That’s another characteristic of the church: sharing together in the joy of something lost, now found.

Prayer: O Lord, finder and keeper of lost things, you call us to be the church wherever we are: comforting those who cry, drying those who are wet with tears, and celebrating with those who experience joy. Splash us with the reminder of our baptismal promises: you love us, we love you, and we are yours. Amen.

Submitted by Tim Chipman

Day Thirty-Three, Friday, March 31

Is Your Imagination Of God Starved?

By Oswald Chambers

Isaiah 40:26 “Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these things.”

“The people of God in Isaiah’s day had starved their imagination by looking on the face of idols, and Isaiah made them look up at the heavens; that is, he made them begin to use their imagination alright. Nature to a saint is sacramental. If we are children of God, we have a tremendous treasure in Nature. In every wind that blows, in every night and day of the year, in every sign of the sky, in every blossoming and in every withering of the earth, there is a real coming of God to us if we will simply use our starved imagination to realize it.

The test of spiritual concentration is bringing the imagination into captivity. Is your imagination looking on the face of an idol? Is the idol yourself? Your work? Your conception of what a worker should be? Your experience of salvation and sanctification? Then your imagination of God is starved, and when you are up against difficulties you have no power, you can only endure in darkness. If your imagination is starved, do not look back to your own experience; it is God whom you need. Go right out of yourself, away from the face of your idols, away from everything that has been starving your imagination. Rouse yourself, take the gibe that Isaiah gave the people, and deliberately turn your imagination to God.

One of the reasons of stultification in prayer is that there is no imagination, no power of putting ourselves deliberately before God. We have to learn how to be broken bread and poured-out wine on the line of intercession more than on the line of personal contact. Imagination is the power God gives a saint to posit himself out of himself into relationships he never was in.”

Submitted by Siobhan Warren

Day Thirty-Four, Saturday, April 1

April Fool's Day

Proverbs 28: 26 “Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom will be delivered.”

April 1st is commonly known in the United States as April Fool's Day and is a day of practical jokes. The joke player typically reveals his or her joke by saying “April Fools!” Pranks are played on peers, family, co-workers, and the public. Pranks can involve an errand for an absurd item like a left-handed screwdriver, snipes, snarks, or frog whiskers. Nancy McEntire, a folklorist, observes that the victim needs to be laughing, too, for the prank to have worked. Other countries celebrate this day with jokes and pranks as well such as France where a paper fish may be taped to someone's back or in Scotland where pranks are also played involving someone's back side.

The start of April Fool's Day is unclear. Some say it came from the Greco-Roman festival called Hilaria, others say when the Gregorian calendar changed New Year's Day from April 1st to January 1st those that continued to celebrate on April 1st were fools, while others insist April 1st is just a jocular time. Still others indicate that the day is associated with the spring weather that has sudden changes.

The positives of April Fool's Day include laughter, reduction of stress, creativity, and effort while the negatives include rudeness, confusion, deception, and misinformation. Certainly, the type of prank and the intention plays into the value of the joke.

While April Fool's Day's pranks leave people laughing in good, clean fun, the Scriptures refer to a fool as no laughing matter. A fool, as described in the Scriptures, is generally someone who “lives life as though God and God's will were of no consequence.” Fools are characterized by: despising wisdom and instruction (Pro 1:7); doing what is right in their own eyes (Pro 12:15); reckless, careless, quick-tempered (Pro 14:16-17); quarreling (Pro 20:3); and ignoring God's Word (Matt 7:26). The consequences of a fool's choices are a ruined life (Matt 7:26-7) and denial of God (Psalm 14:1, 53:1).

As you and I live out each day, we can choose to act as fools by living independently of God, rejecting wisdom, rejecting instruction, living recklessly, living carelessly, being quarrelsome, or ignoring God's Word. The result is ruination. Or we can choose to act wisely and depend on God (through His enablement), receive wisdom, receive instruction, be orderly, be thoughtful, be peaceful, and live by God's Word. The result is abundant life (John 10:10).

Prayer: Dear Lord, on this day of “fools”, please guide me to remember your words and what I can do to be the type of person you want me to be to all of your people and do what is right. Amen.

From blogs.bible.org
By P J Beets

Submitted by Sarah Yuska

Sixth Sunday of Lent, April 2

Faith, Strength, and Determination

1 Corinthians 16:13-14 “Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.”

Relying on faith has always played a huge part in everything that has happened in my life. This along with strength and determination have been significant throughout my life. I was blessed with three women that proved to me over and over again that faith, strength, and determination were vital to overcoming the challenges that life throws your way.

My great grandmother lost her husband very early in life, leaving her with a two-year-old son to raise on her own. I am sure that this was not an easy task to do on an art teacher's salary, but she did it. Through all of the challenges, she remained a very faithful Presbyterian. I wish I knew more about her younger days, but I do know that she relied on her faith to bring her through what had to be challenging times. She was also determined to be successful and had the strength to see to it that she was.

My grandmother also became a widow much too early. She did not have much when my grandfather died, but she also continued to have faith that all would work out. She too had the strength and determination along with her faith to move forward and live a successful life.

My mother is the third true example of these traits. She took a leap of faith when I was seven to create a better life for my brothers and me. Being a single mother of three children was not easy, but it was what she had to do for all of us. She was determined to make it work, and she did.

When I became a young mother in the early days of my college career, many were concerned with how we would handle being parents and me going to college at the same time. I never had any doubts about things working out. I was determined to get my college degree in four years as originally planned and to be a good mother to our son. Looking back now, I sometimes wonder how I did it all. My only answer is that I relied on my faith along with the strength and determination that were instilled in me at an early age. These along with the love and support of both Chad and our families made it all a successful and wonderful journey. My life has been truly blessed by the strong female role models in my life and I will forever be grateful.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for helping us keep the faith and giving us the strength and determination to get us through the challenging times in our lives. Amen.

Submitted by Frannie Suhre

Day Thirty-Five, Monday of Holy Week, April 3

Day by Day

Psalm 118:24 “This is the day the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.”

Each day is a rich and precious gift from God, with new grace and new opportunities.

As the time goes by and I age, there are many days that I must remind myself to remember that today is a gift from God and to rejoice in that day.

The last several years have been trying for everyone, and for me it was evident in the care-giving and then loss of my mother-in-law, then my mother. I am blessed that my dad is still going, and I treasure every day that I have with him. I have blessings in regards to having six grandchildren in the last eight years, a brother and sister-in-law, three long time best friends and a husband of over 42 years. Again, more gifts from God.

BUT just when things in life are looking good and going along smoothly, life throws a bump to remind us that each day is precious, whether it's a bump from our work, our family or our health. Life truly consists of ups and downs, losses and joys encountered on a daily basis, but that is **LIFE!**

When you hit one of those lows and your life is completely turned upside down, remember to tell yourself that *every* day is a gift from God and *every* step is a step of a journey, but also remember that God is always beside you each and every day and He takes each and every step with you.

A favorite song is “The Long and Winding Road” by the Beatles. It's a song Paul McCartney wrote at that time expressing the anguish he was feeling in his personal life. I consider the road leading to God's door, that any direction will take me to the same door with Christ in my heart always.

*The long and winding road
That leads to your door
Will never disappear
I've seen that road before
It always leads me here
Lead me to you door*

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for always walking with me - sometimes leading, sometimes next to me, and many times carrying me down the long and winding road to Your door. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Submitted by Sarah Yuska

Day Thirty-Six, Tuesday of Holy Week, April 4

It's My Birthday

Ephesians 2:8-10 (NRSV) “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

Last summer, Jacksonville Memorial Hospital Chaplain Patsy Kelly visited my mother when she was hospitalized a few weeks before her death. Mother talked to her about how she was ready to go home to be with Jesus. Patsy shared the following with her (paraphrased):

The beginning of life is very similar to the end of life. During labor, we watch the time, the breathing, the pain, and we wait. Then the birth! We forget the pain and rejoice because of new life and all the possibilities that come with it.

During the dying process, we watch the time, the breathing, any present pain, and we wait. Then the passing from earthly life into heaven! We forget the pain and rejoice because of the certainty of eternal life in Christ Jesus!

Mother died here at home in the wee hours of July 11, 2022 - my birthday. After her last breath, I remember that John, my brother Matt and I looked at each other and I said, “It’s my birthday.” They both looked at me but didn’t say anything right away. I was holding her hand and realized out loud, “She was with me 68 years ago when I entered this life. And today, 68 years later, we’re together again as she enters the next life.” After a moment, and with the emotion that we all felt, Matt said, “She gave you a gift!” Through our tears, we smiled. Even in the presence of death, we were able to smile because of the certainty of eternal life in Christ Jesus!

The Lord gifted our entire family with wonderful parents who shared the good news of salvation with each of us and lived their lives as examples of service to God and to others.

During this season of Lent, let us rejoice in all of God's gifts to us, especially the gift of his son, Jesus, who came to seek and to save all who are lost. And, after receiving this precious blood-bought gift of salvation, let us each remember to serve God and others in any way that we are able.

Prayer: Dear good and gracious God, thank you for the gift of life, for the gift of salvation, for the gift of service, and for the gift of eternal life. Thank you for our families of origin and our families of choice, wherever they may be. Help us all to keep our eyes on you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Submitted by Marsha Nelson

Day Thirty-Seven, Wednesday of Holy Week, April 5

The Journey Through

Philippians 2:1-11 “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross!”

“If you’ve faced a difficulty like joblessness, divorce, financial loss, severe illness, the death of a loved one, or parenting a prodigal, you know the taste of hardship. It tastes like concrete – rock hard and weighty enough to sink the best heart. Somewhere in my own recovery from childhood abuse, I realized that the only way out was to ‘journey through.’ When I tried to avoid the pain in various ways, things only got more difficult.

We often look for an easy way to get around the hardships of life. Yet when Jesus found himself in difficult situations, he didn’t seek the easy route – he sought his Father’s voice. What the Father said, he did. Even when he asked for a different way (**Luke 22:42 “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.”**) and the answer was ‘no,’ he still obeyed. The only way out was to journey through: through the contempt of his fellow Jews; through the torture of the Roman guards; through the incalculable weight of carrying all the sin of the world on his sinless shoulders; through the nails and wood and death to glory.

Scripture says that even Jesus learned obedience through the things that he suffered (Hebrews 5:8 - Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered). Rather than avoid hardship, during this Lenten season we are invited to enter into the darkness while keeping our ears tuned ever more closely for our Father’s voice.” — Amy Blackledge

Submitted by Barb Bucy

Day Thirty-Eight, Maundy Thursday, April 6

Luke 22:19-20 “Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.’”

This day commemorates Jesus’s last supper with his disciples. During that meal in the upper room, Jesus washed his disciples’ feet and gave them a new commandment: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34). The word “Maundy” comes from the Latin *mandatum*, meaning “command.”

Matthew 26: 17- 35, 39-42 - On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?” He replied, “Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, ‘The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.’” So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover. When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.” They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, “Surely you don’t mean me, Lord?” Jesus replied, “The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.” Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, “Surely you don’t mean me, Rabbi?” Jesus answered, “You have said so.” While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it again with you in my Father’s kingdom.” When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Then Jesus told them, “This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’”

But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.”

Peter replied, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.” “Truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.” But Peter declared, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” And all the other disciples said the same.

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”

Submitted by Sarah Yuska

Day Thirty-Nine, Good Friday, April 7

1 Corinthians 15:3-4 "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance; that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."

Paul considered it "of first importance" that Jesus died for our sins, was buried and was raised to life on the third day, following what God had promised in the Scriptures.

On Good Friday, we remember the day Jesus willingly suffered and died by crucifixion as the ultimate sacrifice for our sins.

After Judas betrays Jesus (identifying Him to Roman guards with a kiss), Jesus is quickly carted through one ordeal after another. First, He is taken to the Jewish high priest, Caiaphas, who is joined by other elders and religious leaders (Matthew 26:57, 59-60). It is here that Jesus is physically assaulted for the first time (Matthew 26:67-68).

The Jewish leaders realize that their own laws prohibit them from killing Jesus themselves, so they hand Him over to the Roman governor. Pontius Pilate tells the Jews that he "finds no fault in" Jesus (John 18:28-38). Their rabid response sends him back inside to speak with Jesus once more, eventually relenting to Jesus' death sentence. Jesus is whipped with various sharp, maiming implements, then mocked by soldiers (John 19:1-3). Betrayed by His friends and His nation, He now endures increasing physical and social agony.

Tucked within the three-hour ordeal of Jesus' death are many significant fulfillments of Old Testament prophecies (Psalm 22, Isaiah 53,) These contain details about the manner of His physical death (being nailed to a cross), ridicule from onlookers, and separation from God due to taking on the sins of humanity.

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." — Luke 23:34

"Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise." — Luke 23:43

"Woman, behold thy Son." — John 19:26

"My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" — Mark 15:34

"I thirst." — John 19:28

"It is finished." — John 19:30

"Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit." — Luke 23:46

Submitted by Sarah Yuska

Day Forty, Saturday of Holy Week, April 8

Luke 23:23 (NEB) “But they insisted on their demand, shouting that Jesus should be crucified. Their shouts prevailed.”

The voice of God
is a still small voice,
while the voice of the crowd
is a loud large voice...

How easy it is to let the still
voice of God
be out shouted!

Pilate had good intentions.
He did all he could to please everyone...
Jesus and the crowd.
But when there came a choice, and only one
voice could be heard,
the voice of the mob prevailed.

Is it possible
to have that still, far-away voice of God
win out over the loud cries heard by our ears?
That depends
where our attention
is focused.

From “A Blade of Grass by Gladys and Gordon DePree”

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, please help us keep our attention focused on You so when you come to us with a still small voice, we hear you and obey. Lead us to good choices, choices that bring you glory and praise. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Submitted by Susan Weikert

Easter Sunday, April 9

A Place for Us

He is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!

John 14:3 “And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”

This verse from the Gospel of John, spoken encouragingly to the disciples before Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, is often heard at memorial services. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we find comfort, strength, hope in these words of Jesus.

As my word of the year for 2022 was PLACE, my horizons have broadened as I have read, written and contemplatively focused on this seemingly simple, yet powerful word - place. My understanding of John 14:3 has been enlarged. Yes, I do believe – because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ – He has a prepared place for me in the heavenly realm, a place of unimaginable joy. But I also believe – because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ – He has a prepared place for me now, a place within me, a place He dwells through the Holy Spirit, a place of joyful communion with Him. As we open our hearts in faith in Jesus Christ, He is our place of refuge, our place of comfort and strength and hope, our dwelling place – now and into our eternal future.

As you know, this year's stewardship theme was GRACE OVERFLOWING. After the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the early Apostles were joyously overwhelmed by God's overflowing, surprising grace – His gift of grace that saved them, sustained them, and called them to share the Good News of God's gift of grace. They, though imperfect, became a place that Jesus prepared – a saving place, a sustaining place, a sharing place, and a surprising place of the in-dwelling Jesus – ready to share and spread the Good News of Christ, the Son of the Living God!

May we, though imperfect, move forward in our faith journey, overflowing with God's grace, ever becoming the place He has prepared for us.

Here is a blessing for all who are reading:

May you notice how each day is a holy space
And that YOU are a holy place -
A place with space to live and share God's love.
May each dawn break forth with resurrection hope,
And each evening find you gratefully fulfilled.
May you know serenity and joy,
Abundance and peace.
May you be a welcoming place,
Always and forever – a place of God's amazing grace. Amen.

Submitted by Janet Chipman

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, Pastoral Assistant John Nelson, Janet Chipman, Marsha Nelson and the Continuing Education Chair and Committee.

Sarah Yuska