



Iona, Scotland

2024

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

As we begin this Lenten journey together, know that despite being flawed and broken, God calls each of us by name and asks us to be partners. Holy and flawed work together in this beautiful, messy world.

During my sabbatical, I took a journey from the Scottish mainland to Iona, which is a small island on the western coast of Scotland. When I left the ferry to board the bus, it was absolutely pouring rain. There was a long line to get on the bus and since I was worried about my luggage getting wet, I covered it with my umbrella. Despite wearing a raincoat, my clothes were soaked. I have a pretty strong stomach, but this narrow windy road had me feeling uneasy. After an 1 ½ hours on the bus, we arrived to the next ferry port. The rain was unrelenting and for the short ferry ride, the boat rocked up and down until we arrived. I was wet, queasy, and thoroughly exhausted. Along the journey, “Is this worth it?” kept ringing back and forth in my head.

I stayed at an ancient church with roots there since the 6th century. St. Columba and the monastery is credited for being the birthplace of Christianity for the whole of Scotland (part of our Presbyterian heritage). Parts of the church we worshiped and prayed in were built in the 12th century. There was intentional community: we ate and worshiped together, we stayed in dorms, and we even had chores.

It was near the end of the week in Iona, when I finally let go of grief from Covid that I didn't even know was there. I could be the full person God intended, recognizing my flaws and celebrating the holy. This is what I wrote in my journal when I left Iona.

Goodbye Iona. I leave feeling full. I laughed and cried, I left things I needed to leave, I grew and gained new insight. I am waking up and ready for this next part of the journey.

I encourage you to take time to discover what you have hidden not only from God, but from yourself. Discern those things you need to let go of and are clinging to. Be intentional. The journey ahead may not always be easy, but God is going with each of us on it.

Jonathan Warren

Day One, Ash Wednesday, February 14

Ash Wednesday

Psalm 28:2 The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in Him, and He helps me. My heart leaps for joy and with my song I praise Him.

Back in the good old days of banking we used the three C's to determine the soundness of a loan. Cash, Collateral and Character. I must admit that I leaned heavily on the last one. I knew customers with hardly a dime to their name and I would loan them whatever they asked for. I knew others with a net worth of millions and I would not loan them coffee money. Why? Trust. It is all about who do you trust? I knew the one would do whatever it took to repay the loan. I knew the other would find any reason he could find to pay late or not at all.

As Christians we are taught to trust the Lord with our hearts and minds. To trust in Him gives you hope and confidence and peace. But there are so many times we have hesitated to trust Him. When times are hard, illness strikes or hope wanes. When you are anxious about tomorrow or regretful about yesterday. We fall into the trap of, "Why me?" Why is the Lord not taking care of this? The answer is simple. He is. And he will take care of it in His time. Not yours.

Too often we ask God to move a mountain instead of giving us the strength to climb it. The Lord knows the outcome of everything. It is up to us to reach that outcome through Him. Trust. When you climb up a ladder you do not look down at each rung. You just climb, knowing (trusting) that the next step will be there. Do the same with each day. With each relationship. With each trial. With each joy. For this is what He asks of us. Have Faith. Trust in the Lord.

Prayer: Lord, we pray that if we are blind, you will let us see. If we are weak, you will give us strength. If we are lost, you will show us the way. Amen.

Submitted by Keith Bradbury

Day Two, Thursday, February 15

DO YOU WANT TO FAST THIS LENT?

Pope Francis tells us how:

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 worry and have trust in God.
Fast from complaints; contemplate simplicity.
Fast from pressures and be prayerful.
Fast from bitterness; fill your hearts with joy.
Fast from selfishness and be compassionate.
Fast from grudges and be reconciled.
Fast from words; be silent and listen.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF LENT?

According to Philip Endean SJ, Lent cannot be a time for wallowing in the negative. The English word 'Lent' comes from the same root as 'length.' Lent, the time of spring's first stirrings, is a time for our being lengthened. We are to grow into the full stature of Christ, to move nearer the kingdom prepared for us before the world's foundation. It may be very noble, and may meet some psychological need within ourselves, to think about Lent as our trying hard, as Lent being our effort. But when we think that way, the focus is probably on ourselves. What Lent is really about is opening ourselves to someone else, about stretching ourselves, so that we can receive the gift of new life coming from God alone.

Some people think that Lent is about resisting our temptations to chocolate or alcohol, that doing this we somehow gain merit, and rise above mere sensuality. But this way of thinking does not have much to do with the gospel. When Matthew and Luke in their different ways name the temptations Jesus faces, it seems as though Jesus himself is growing into, being stretched towards, the full reality of his mission. He has to recognize that his way is not that of simple miracle-working. He has to realize that his kingdom is a kingdom given from above, and therefore not of this world (John 18:36-37). Jesus is not proving his moral fiber, but growing in his sense of his own Identity.

The mindset we bring to Lent is very important. Lent is 'this great season of grace,' God's gift to the Church. Lent places us before the author and pioneer of our faith, Jesus Christ, and asks us how we might follow him more deeply. Lent is only Christian if it is positive.

Lent is for lengthening, not for constriction. As we begin the forty days, we need to ask the Spirit where we are being called, here and now, to grow. We need to ask ourselves what we must do in order to further that divine purpose. We need to stop confining ourselves, and instead be open to the one who calls light out of darkness, brings life out of death. It is not really about our effort, still less about our looking miserable. Rather, with humble pride, we boast that all we can do is to plant and to water. The real growth, the true lengthening, comes from God (1 Corinthians 3:5-7).

*Philip Endean SJ is Professor of Spirituality at Centre Sèvres, Paris.
Submitted by Mary Sager-Mullgardt*

Day Three, Friday, February 16

Luke 6:35 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgives you.

“A single act of kindness throws out roots in all directions, and the roots spring up and make new trees.” Amelia Earhart. Her quote makes me think of how My Tree began. We had a flowering crabapple tree in the front of our yard . When they widened South Main Street, I cut three sprouts from its roots and planted them in our garden in the backyard. One of the three sprouts grew and I planted it in our side yard, and named it My Tree. It was an inspiration that came from Mark Hirsch and That Tree, a two hundred year old oak tree on the property that he bought in Wisconsin.

Kindness doesn't cost anything, yet it is the richest gift you can give. If speaking kindly to plants helps them grow, imagine what speaking kindly to humans can do. Sometimes the smallest act of kindness can take up the biggest space in someone else's heart. And we can give more kindness to get more kindness by: forgiving, listening with empathy, loving unconditionally, giving compliments generously, overlooking faults and mistakes, being patient and gracious, accepting imperfections, encouraging, and being uplifting.

Prayer: Dear Lord, We praise your name and love you. Help us to spread kindness in our surroundings through many different ways, and to forgive those who don't forgive us. We ask this in your name, amen.

Submitted by Guy Crumley

Day Four, Saturday, February 17

Every day we have things that weigh us down including laundry, dishes, and never ending to-do lists. But some seasons of life are more stressful than others. Relationship problems, financial issues, health scares, marital struggles and parenting frustrations all can make life hard.

Working harder does not solve emotional stress.

So, what can we do with all this stress?

1. Trust that God is in complete control of your life. Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit. ~Jeremiah 17:7-8

2. You will make it through these difficult times because the Lord your God is with you always. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. ~Joshua 1:9

3. Give your thoughts over to God and seek Him in prayer. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ~Philippians 4:6-7

4. We will all have troubles in this world – allow God’s Word to bring you joy and peace. Trouble and anguish have found me out, but your commandments are my delight. ~Psalm 119:143

5. Your struggles have a purpose. Perhaps it’s as simple as bringing you into a more intimate relationship with God or maybe it’s more – perhaps God is taking you through the fire so He can more fully use you for His glory. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. ~James 1:2-4

6. Sometimes we add more stress in our lives by doing too many things. Seek God as you re-evaluate your priorities. But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” ~Luke 10:41-42

7. Share your heart with a fellow believer who will encourage you and share wisdom with you. Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad. ~Proverbs 12:25

8. Do not let the ways of this world stress you out. Follow what God says, not what the world tells you to do. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. ~Romans 12:2

9. Is your heart troubled? Do not give way to fear. Jesus came to give us peace. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. ~John 14:27

10. Do not lose heart. God is moving in ways that you cannot see. Trust Him!

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. ~2 Corinthians 4:16-18

So many times we pray and pray and pray for others needs. Pride can keep us from praying for ourselves. Humbly bow your knee and go to God in prayer today for yourself.

List for God all that is stressing you out. Ask him for guidance, clarity, help and strength for each new day.

Give thanks to God for His grace and presence in your life. Pour out your soul before His throne and then focus on all that He has done and not the stressful things in your life.

Let your heart and mind be at peace through focusing your thoughts on God and His truth today...and give thanks for the ordinary things in your life. He loves you so.

Keep walking with the King!

Submitted by Gail Olson

First Sunday of Lent, February 18

2 Corinthians 5:7 We live by faith, not by sight.

You Can't See It, But It's There

We have heard this lesson be taught so many times to children. You can't see God, and you can't see the wind. But, you know they are both there. This summer I was reminded of this again and as we traveled to Alaska. One of the many things I was excited about was Denali. Now, I realized that only 10% of people who travel there get to see the entire great mountain. For 3 days it was in front of us, we were told "It's there, you just can't see it". We were not among the 10% that were able to see Denali. However, I knew for a fact it was right there. I was there with The Great One even though I could not see it.

I also very much wanted to see a whale. As we went out on the boats, we could see the water spout from their holes! They were there, but again we just couldn't see them. Finally, in a blink of an eye one flipped out from the water for one brief second. I am here! Just like the flash of a smile on a child's face, or an unexpected squeeze of a stranger's hand are other ways of God saying, "I am here! You don't always see me, but I am right in front of you." All of the time. Whether you can see Him or not.

It is frustrating that we do not see such things sometimes with our physical eyes. However, there is a piece of the scripture here we are missing. 2 Corinthians 5:6 says "Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are home in the body we are away from the Lord." There is the kicker. We still have our bodies. We can't comprehend this yet. But, isn't it comforting that we will. The entire scripture reads "Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight." Keep the faith, and know that God is always here.

Prayer: Dear God, help us know you are here with us always. Be with us during the bad times and keep us grateful during the good times. We cannot comprehend Your love, Your immortality and Your invisibility as we are away from you now. Keep our faith strong by showing us your power and glory in other worldly ways. Amen.

Submitted by Christine Smith

Day Five, Monday, February 19

Philippians 2:4 Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others.

If You See a Need Near, Don't Be Afraid to be God's Ear

Last year as we were celebrating Mr. Rogers Day, someone shared this quote from him: "The Holy Spirit translates our best efforts into what needs to be communicated to that person in his or her place of need." This made me think about an encounter I had had earlier that week with a student.

This student, a high school sophomore, came to their first hour class looking like they were having a rough day, but this is not uncommon for high school students at 8:20 in the morning. When they did not raise their hand for the breakfast count for the following morning, I became a little suspicious as they always plan to eat breakfast the following morning. I went ahead and signed them up with their brother's input that they would probably change their mind by morning. I saw this student for two more class periods before lunch and nothing seemed to have changed as far as their mood, but they continued to do what was expected of them in class.

After lunch, I went to my co-taught class which this student also happens to be in. Towards the beginning of class, I looked over the list of students who had eaten lunch that day and noticed that this student had not eaten lunch. (They sent a list of who actually ate because our lunch count had been off, so we were tracking who had and had not signed up.) This sent up a red flag. After we got the students started on their task for the day, I asked this student to come with me. We went to my classroom to chat. I really thought this would be a short conversation, but it ended up lasting the majority of the class period.

I do not do this often with students other than brief chats when they need to talk, but that particular day, this student really seemed to need someone to talk to and I truly believe that God made sure that I saw it. I feel that taking the time to listen was what the student needed and it communicated to them that someone outside of their family cares about them. It seems to me that this student has grown from this encounter and their school experience has been more positive.

Prayer: God, please continue to guide us in helping one another in times of need, even if it is as simple as being a listening ear to show that they are loved by others and especially by You. Amen.

Submitted by Frannie Suhre

Day Six, Tuesday, February 20

Matthew 11:28 Then Jesus said, Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

Jesus doesn't say, "Come all who are perfect" or "Come all who've made the best choices in life." Instead, Jesus invites the tired and worn-out to come to Him and He promises us rest!

I must admit it took many years before I could leave small suitcases of hate and resentment behind. I grew up in a home where I wasn't wanted and carried that bitterness into my adulthood. I would get angry inside when wise adults who would try teaching me good versus bad attitudes to maintain. It took bad judgements on my part to cause a radical readjustment of my behavior and threw away all that unnecessary baggage. Jealousy of others who had a great home life and cool experiences and successes as they grew up just wouldn't let go of me.

Then Jesus entered my life and I saw the world in a whole new way. Those challenging past experiences helped me mold me into a better person overall. Jesus lifted away all my baggage and placed them onto a never-to-return luggage cart.

"Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind." Philippians 3:12-15

My life has been filled with many dear friends, both old and new. I treasure each of their bits of wisdom and love. Each of them along with Jesus have taken away all that unwanted baggage.

We who have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior have been assigned a purpose that requires that we are moving forward in progressing toward our spiritual maturity. As we move on from stage to stage, year after year, we find that goal that God has for us is to finish our journey in this life with Him. The challenge for us in moving forward with the Lord is knowing when and what luggage in our lives must be left behind or discarded from us. These things have no positive place in the dominance of our minds or our emotions.

We all have relationships, experiences, and troubles in life that are at times very painful and even damaging to us and we find it difficult to move on because of the negative impact that these experiences have on us.

God's ways are not our ways, but God's ways will always deliver us when we walk in accordance to His counsel from the Word:

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I know you have called me to live as a light in this world to reveal You. Please help me to break from the painful bondage of my past issues so that I can live in the full energy and freedom to pursue your goals for my life. I will give You praise and thanks. Grant me wisdom to help others to lay aside that heavy baggage that weighs them down spiritually and emotionally. May I help others see the peace You've brought to my life and then desire the same for themselves. In Jesus Name, amen.

Submitted by Dan Thompson

Day Seven, Wednesday, February 21

Luke 12:12 For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.

For Inspiration

In November, when I started to think about writing this devotional, I was certain I would write about God's power of healing after I tried to defy gravity on the ski slope. I thought, and Googled, and prayed for inspiration. Nothing.

December. Maybe I would write about God's hand in the modern medical miracles I witnessed in the hospital. Think, Google, Pray and pray for inspiration. Nothing!

The New Year. I can write about kindness. Everyone was so kind when I couldn't even roll over. Plus, the congregational kindness helped me when I was on the mend. Think, Google, PRAY, PRAY, PRAY for inspiration. Nothing!!

January. Finally! Got it! Thank you, God, for inspiration.

Lord, thank you for inspiring all who inspire us. Thanks for the prophets and saints who wrote the Bible. That was a big ask. Thank you for inspiring Pastor Jonathan every single week so he can write his sermons. Thank you for the Bradbury brothers who often put an outside-the-box but on-target spin on their writing. Thank you for the authors of children's books who help our little ones follow your path. Thanks for our favorite authors who offer insight and humor when we need it. Thanks for the composers and lyricists who sing your praises and lift our spirits.

Prayer: Maybe, Lord, you could give a little more inspiration to the mainstream media and social media. Also give us the wisdom to understand what is real and important to you when we read, listen, and watch. Amen.

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

Submitted by Jo Anderson

Day Eight, Thursday, February 22

Psalm 121:8 The Lord will keep your going out and coming in.

“I shook my fist at God wondering where God’s love had gone. Yet it was there all along: in the kindness of a friend, in the skilled hands of a doctor, in the sunrise of a new day, in the blossoms that herald the promise of a new season. These are all God’s love notes to each of us.

God sent the Holy Spirit with a promise to be with us always. We are never alone in this challenging life.

God is awesome. God’s works are joy-inducing and breathtaking and happen every single day. Often we forget how kind people can be. Or how a kid picks up a piece of garbage to make the world a better place. All we need to do is stop, breathe in, listen, and live in thanks.

When we go through difficult situations and unwelcome seasons, we feel broken and shattered. In those moments we often question God. We forget that in our brokenness, God can mold and shape you and ultimately bring us back to the path we need to be on. God will rebuild us even stronger than before. Even when it feels like we are being broken, God is always building us up.

God is patient and kind. And God loves and forgives me. I’ve discovered that if I trust that God is in control, it’s easier to be more patient. When I do that, God has this remarkable way of bringing all things to fruition.”

And my nightly prayer: Psalm 4:8 - *In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone Lord, make me dwell in safety.*

Submitted by Kay Black

Random prayers, paragraphs, or sentences I have circled or underlined in passages throughout the year 2023 from: The Upper Room, The Word in Season and Forward Movement

Day Nine, Friday, February 23

Exploring Joy

Hebrews 12:2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the JOY set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

John 15:11 These things have I spoken to you, that My JOY might remain in you, and that your JOY might be full.

“Christianity spreads through the JOY of disciples
who know that they are loved and saved.”

-Pope Francis

JOY. What a small word with deep meaning for Christians. We sing, “Joy to the World, the Lord is come.” In the Gospel of John, chapter 15, Jesus prays that His joy might be in us, and that our joy might overflow. Perhaps reflecting on joy, a fruit of the Spirit, does not fit with the more somber tone of Lent as we travel, once again, with Jesus to the cross. Yet, it was the JOY set before Him that Christ endured the cross as the Savior of the world (Hebrews 12:2), our Savior.

Second to love in the listing of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, “Joy is more than a temporary happiness; joy is lasting and based in more than simply an emotional reaction to our circumstances; it is an active choice of attitude. As followers of Christ, we rejoice, because in Him, we have redemption” (nationalshrine.org). Joy is a common theme in Jesus’ teachings; He wants us to be joyful. How? We find joy when we keep an intimate relationship with Jesus, the source of all joy. The Bible is filled with numerous references to joy and to rejoicing. In our Fall 2023 Acts Class study, we were blessed by exploring joy.

During Lent 2024 – may Christ lead us into more – more obedience, more forgiveness, more peace, more hope, more love, more joy. In the words of Pope Francis, “Christianity spreads through the joy of disciples who know that they are loved and saved.” In the words of Mother Teresa, “One filled with joy preaches without preaching.” In the words of Nehemiah, “...for the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10). In the words of Psalm 16:11 – “In Thy Presence is fullness of joy.” In the words of Joan Chittister: “The person of hope, the person who knows that God is in the daily, knows joy...When we give ourselves to joy, we learn to love life. To love life is to determine how to enjoy it, whatever its boundaries.” In the words of Corrie ten Boom, “When we are powerless to do a thing, it is a great joy that we can come and step inside the ability of Jesus.” In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Scatter joy!”

Prayer: Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of Your Holy Spirit to hear with joy what You say to us, to speak with joy the good news of Jesus Christ, and to live with joy because we fix our eyes on Jesus, our Savior. Amen.

Submitted by Janet Chipman

(If you are interested, you can find the 10th volume of my students’ Lenten Booklet on the Routt Catholic High School website; our theme this year is Exploring Joy.)

Day Ten, Saturday, February 24

Hebrews 13-51 Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise-the fruit of lips that openly profess His name.

Broken

I was in Dollar Tree last night and there was a lady and two kids behind me in the LONG line. One was a big kid, one was a toddler. The bigger one had a pack of glow sticks and the baby was screaming for them so the Mom opened the pack and gave him one: which stopped the tears. He walked around with it smiling, but then the bigger boy took it and the baby started streaming again. Just as the Mom was about to fuss at the older child, he bent the glow sticks and handed it back to the baby. As we walked outside at the same time, the baby noticed that the stick was now glowing and his brother said, "I had to break it so you could get the full effect from it." I almost ran because I could hear God saying to me, "I had to break you to show you why I created you. You had to go through it so you could fulfill your purpose."

That little baby was happy just swinging that "unbroken" glow stick around in the air because he didn't understand what it was created to do. There are some people who will be content just "being" but some of us have been chosen by God to be "broken". We have to get sick. We have to lose a job. We go through divorce. We have to suffer with the disease of addiction. We have to bury our spouse, parents, best friend, or our child because, in those moments of desperation, God is breaking us, but when the breaking is done, then we will be able to see the reason for which we were created...so when you see us glowing just know that we have been broken but healed by his Grace and Mercy!!!

Author: Unknown

Prayer: Precious Lord we are blessed that you allow us to not only bend but also break when we must. Your healing Grace and Mercy will always carry us through. Amen

Submitted by Keith Bradbury

Second Sunday of Lent, February 25

Last year, when I was feeling the weight of so much loss, I heard this song by Leonard Cohen for the first time, and it really spoke to my spirit.

Come Healing

O gather up the brokenness
Bring it to me now
The fragrance of those promises
You never dared to vow

The splinters that you carry
The cross you left behind
Come healing of the body
Come healing of the mind

And let the heavens hear it
The penitential hymn
Come healing of the spirit
Come healing of the limb

Behold the gates of mercy
In arbitrary space
And none of us deserving
The cruelty or the grace

O, solitude of longing
Where love has been confined
Come healing of the body
Come healing of the mind

O, see the darkness yielding
That tore the light apart
Come healing of the reason
Come healing of the heart

O, troubled dust concealing
An undivided love
The heart beneath is teaching
To the broken heart above

And let the heavens falter
Let the earth proclaim
Come healing of the altar
Come healing of the name

O, longing of the branches
To lift the little bud
O, longing of the arteries
To purify the blood

And let the heavens hear it
The penitential hymn
Come healing of the spirit
Come healing of the limb

O let the heavens hear it
The penitential hymn
Come healing of the spirit
Come healing of the limb

Prayer: Dear God, we cry out for your healing, your grace, and your peace. As we long for the hope of Easter, we thank you for sitting with us in our grief. Amen.

Submitted by Marilyn Webster

Day Eleven, Monday, February 26

Psalm 88: 3-4 I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death. I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like one without strength.

Jesus Knows Our Troubles

From www.mayoclinic.org: Depression is a mood disorder that causes a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest. Also called major depressive disorder or clinical depression, it affects how you feel, think and behave and can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems. You may have trouble doing normal day-to-day activities, and sometimes you may feel as if life isn't worth living.

More than just a bout of the blues, depression isn't a weakness and you can't simply "snap out" of it. Depression may require long-term treatment. But don't get discouraged. Most people with depression feel better with medication, psychotherapy or both.

Last summer, after I had unintentionally masked how I was feeling for months, I suffered a depressive episode compounded with anxiety. At first, I didn't know what was happening. I just knew that I was so sad, so tired, and so unwilling to go out among other people. If it wasn't an important healthcare visit, I just didn't go. I stayed home from choir rehearsals. I didn't go to church. I canceled hair and pedi appointments. I didn't stay on my low-carb way of eating. I had to force myself to do basic hygiene. I didn't crochet. I didn't cook or bake or read or clean the house. Look at a list of symptoms of depression/anxiety, and most of them would describe me.

Thankfully, I was already seeing a therapist and I already had an appointment with my primary care physician. Both are essential to my ongoing recovery.

As hard as it was, I felt I had to reach out and share what was going on with a few others. So, also essential for my ongoing recovery continues to be the support and prayers from John, our family, and our church family here at First Presbyterian. In my heart, I knew I had to be open about it so that maybe my experiences would help someone else.

Honestly, I'm still sorting it all out. I have good days and bad days. Sometimes I still have to force myself to go to choir or church or to the store, but at least I'm able to do it most of the time now. There are definitely more good days than bad days.

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892), who was known as 'prince of preachers,' also suffered life-long depression. The following is from Spurgeon's Sorrows: Realistic Hope for those who Suffer from Depression, by Zack Eswine:

"The mind can descend far lower than the body, for in it there are bottomless pits. The flesh can bear only a certain number of wounds and no more, but the soul can bleed in ten thousand ways, and die over and over again each hour."

But Spurgeon knows that the pains refine a person to be able to relate to others who might be weighed down by the affliction:

When a person "has been through a similar experience" of depression, "he uses another tone of voice altogether. He knows that, even if it is nonsense to the strong, it is not so to the weak, and he so adapts his remarks so that he cheers" the sufferer "where the other only inflicts additional pain. Broken hearted one, Jesus Christ knows all your troubles, for similar troubles were his portion" too.

If you feel anything like this, you are not alone. You haven't done anything wrong. And even though it would be great, you can't just "snap out of it." Psalm 34.18 says: "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." God works through healthcare professionals, loved ones, church family, and our friends.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for loving us. Thank you for knowing all our troubles because you've been there, too. Thank you that you will never leave us or forsake us. Amen.

Submitted by Marsha Nelson

Day Twelve, Tuesday, February 27

John 14:19 Before long the world will not see Me anymore, but you will see Me. Because I live, you also will live.

Something to Live For

Many people harbor anxiety because the future is unknown to them, and become pessimistic and discouraged. We must constantly remind ourselves that life is extremely precious, so that we don't fall into the trap of depression.

Even if the future seems bleak, you can be assured that your life and future are in God's hands. God is in control of everything. There is joy in Christ because He is the Rock on which you can build your life. His grace is sufficient to get you through each day.

Seize this life and live it in abundance of Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior.

Prayer: Through all the changing circumstances of life, Lord in joy as well as sorrow, my heart will sing Your praises and thank You for the abundant life that You have made possible for me. Amen.

Shared by a friend. Source: One-Minute Devotions, Grace for Today

Submitted by Alexa Crumley

Day Thirteen, Wednesday, February 28

The Youth Group reflected upon the meaning of Jesus' incarnation. Some of the students drew art, and others chose to write a haiku about Jesus coming to live on earth. These are haikus that students agreed to share with you.

Although these poems speak about the events of Christmas, Jesus' incarnation is intertwined with the events of Easter. Without Jesus' human birth, there would be no sacrifice in his death. Without the beginning as a vulnerable baby, the ending as a vulnerable man would not have the same impact. It is Christmas that makes Easter possible.

Jesus comes to us
He cleans us of all our sins
Praise to God above
- Geoffrey Ott, 12th grade

Laid in the manger
The Messiah was born
Hope is now restored
- Haven McGee, 7th grade

Mary had a babe
The angels told the shepherds
They were blown away
- Hannah Warren, 9th grade

Day Fourteen, Thursday, February 29

Faith and trust go hand in hand. Faith is a belief system; trust is action. All the time I spent in Sunday School as a child and also my confirmation classes helped form the foundation of my faith in God. Giving birth to three perfect baby girls, seeing my grandchildren come into the world so perfectly made, how can one not have faith in some higher being? Look at our beautiful world! "God created the heavens and the earth...."

Now... fully trusting God is sometimes hard to do. Worry, stress, anxiety, fear, doubt. These are all things that nag me and cause me to not fully trust God as I should. Sometimes I think it is a journey...two steps forward and one step back...over and over again as I live my life. I am a work in progress for sure. He is there for me when I pray to Him and I feel a deeper sense of trust because of prayer. Faith is trusting God even when you don't understand His plan.

The above was written for Storyworth and the question was "What has made our faith stronger?" Let me start at the beginning. It is Mother's Day, 2023. I receive a random email that I almost delete because it is from a site called Storyworth. Then I realize that this email is my Mom Day gift from my three grown daughters, Allison, Lindsey and Natalie. I read it more closely and I see that Storyworth is the gift that keeps on giving, for an entire year, once a week. I read further and see that all my stories will be shared with my daughters each week and will, at the end of the year, be printed in a book. Hmmm. How wonderful. How amazing. How daunting. Whose gift is this anyway! Well, I have risen to the task and I have answered my questions every week so far. It really has been an interesting journey, one involving some deep thinking, one of good and not so good remembrances, one that I didn't know I needed to take. Allison, Lindsey, Natalie...you're welcome and thanks!

Prayer: Lord, help me to accept all the gifts in my life, even the ones that don't seem like gifts when I first receive them. Some gifts like family, friends, sunshine, smiles, kind words are easy to see and accept. When you give me gifts of adversity, help me see that these gifts are given to get my attention and are given to help me grow in ways I didn't even know were possible. Amen.

Submitted by Cynthia Benton

Day Fifteen, Friday, March 1

Mark 12:31 The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than this.

Neighbors

The Sunday after my mother passed away was Mister Rogers Sunday. One of the hymns we sang that Sunday was a song with the text by David Gambrell, with the music by Wil Smith. The first verse states: "Jesus teach us to be neighbors, living, loving side by side, hands for helping one another, arms of welcome, open wide. Ever learning, ever growing, Jesus, teach us all to be children of the new creation, joined in true community."

Neighbor is defined in the Webster's dictionary as: "to adjoin immediately or lie relatively near to; to live or be located as a neighbor."

As we were singing this hymn it struck me that this church exemplifies this verse. This wonderful congregation was sent to help get me through this challenging time.

Without the help Pastor Jonathan not only during mom's passing but also during her stays in the hospital over the six-week period. For Christine who played for the service even though it was a work day. For an exceptionally good friend who offered to sing. For the choir and their help during this time. For my PEO chapter who checked on me and my mom during this time and provided food for the service. For the other friends at the church who provided food not only at home but also for the luncheon after the service.

Loving your neighbor goes far beyond the people we often believe to be our neighbors. Being a good neighbor means that you invest in others in meaningful relationships that help a community grow. This is what this congregation is all about. We may not physically be neighbors living next door to each other, but we care about each other and help the best we can.

Prayer: Dear God help us to be better neighbors every day, to help each other the best we can. Not only for our neighbors who live next door to us, but for our neighbors that are members of this church or may live across town, across the state or across the country.

Submitted by Annette Simmons

Day Sixteen, Saturday, March 2

Family & Heritage: The Genealogy of Jesus

Jonathan's sabbatical theme of Family & Heritage provides a compelling subject for September's Session devotion. It inspired me to do some reading about God's family tree and why it's meaningful.

We are members of God's family through Jesus Christ. We have been born into this spiritual family, not based on our parent's faith, but rather on our believing and receiving Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

While researching this topic, I was reminded that the Bible is full of genealogies and family histories, especially in the Old Testament. Interestingly enough, there are two genealogies of Jesus in the New Testament, one in the gospel of Matthew and the other in the gospel of Luke, each of which link directly to Old Testament lineages.

That prompted another thought: Why are there two genealogies? And why are they different? Matthew's text traces the lineage of Joseph, Jesus' earthly father, back through the line of Jewish kings through Solomon and King David. I learned that this means that if Israel had had a Jewish king at the time of Jesus' birth, Joseph was the rightful heir and Jesus would have been heir apparent.

Luke's account, some believe, traces the lineage of Mary back to King David, but through the lesser known of David's sons Nathan. Both genealogies present Jesus as not only the legal descendant of the Jewish throne, but also the biological one. Both family trees include Jews and gentiles, men and women, and some sketchy characters to boot, according to one writer: idolaters, prostitutes, polygamists, murderers, liars and thieves.

Other interesting points: Matthew draws his family tree in descending order ending with Jesus, using Abraham as the starting point, while Luke ends with Adam, using ascending order to draw the familial line from Jesus to God. Matthew perhaps offers up the legal(royal) lineage that includes adoptions, and Luke largely traces actual blood, or birth, descent.

Why these differences among the gospel writers? What were their purposes in presenting Jesus' family and heritage in their unique ways?

According to one Biblical scholar, when comparing the texts of Matthew and Luke – having dropped out the material that was common to Mark and another “mystery” source – it becomes clear that Matthew, who deals almost exclusively with the application of Old Testament prophecy to Jesus' claims of being the Messiah, was writing for a Jewish audience.

Luke's text is clearly meant for gentiles because his emphasis is on “the universality of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Jesus is not simply the savior of the Jews, but the savior of the gentiles, and the kingdom of God ... is for every tongue and tribe and nation.” This scholar goes on to ask why does Luke, who accompanied the Apostle Paul on his missionary journeys, not stop his genealogy with Abraham but go on to Adam, who is representative of the human race? He posits that Luke is introducing Jesus as savior of the world of Jew and gentile.

Calling the gospel of Luke the Ladies' Home Journal of the Bible because it contains more references to Jesus dealing with women than any of the other gospels, the author further states that Jesus is not just savior of the Jews, not just savior of the gentiles, not just the savior of men, he is also the savior of women.

These family trees provide fascinating insights into the historical reality of the person and work of Jesus, and illuminate the fact that God has entered our story, allowing us the opportunity to be part of His family and His story.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we thank you for the inspiring theme of Jonathan's sabbatical renewal journey of Family & Heritage, which helps us appreciate the importance of both, and for the safe return of Jonathan and his family. We also give thanks for the gospel writers who have drawn your family tree illustrating your humanity and how it entwines with our historical heritage. We thank you for our earthly and heavenly connections, and especially for the saving grace of your sacrifice on behalf of all people. In your name we pray. Amen.

Submitted by Mary Fergurson

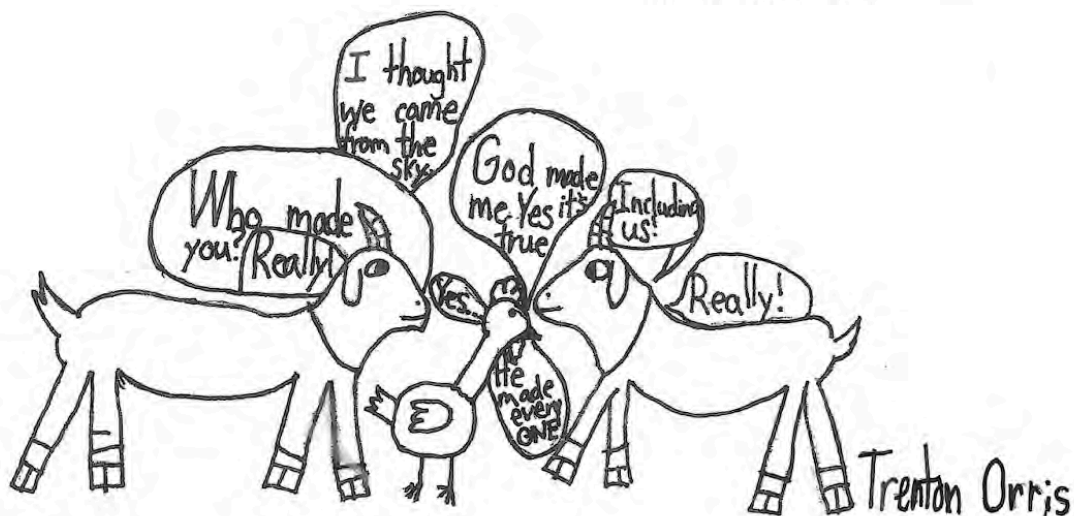
CREATION AND PROVIDENCE

20 All Things Bright and Beautiful

Refrain

The musical score is written for voice and piano. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system contains the first line of the refrain: "All things bright and beau-ti - ful, all crea-tures great and small,". The second system contains the second line: "all things wise and won-der - ful, the Lord God made them all." The piece concludes with a double bar line and the word "Fine".

In His hand is the life of every creature...
from Job 12:10



Day Seventeen, Monday March 4

Tetelestai
(It is finished)

The first part of the gift
came in the beginning days of winter
according to some
(or others say the early days of fall)
and if the angel had visited her
with the news, you will bear a son,
in those first few days of
fall's first fruits celebration.

Would a summer
child been any different
I think not

Love agape love is the
gift we have been given,
it led to the cross.

He earned salvation for the world
the work was finished
and the gift was complete
(sins forgiveness and life everlasting)
as he spoke the word

Tetelestai
there has
been no greater gift
no greater love

Linda A
Meece 2024

Day Eighteen, Tuesday, March 5

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

Waiting on God

Have you ever had to wait on something in your life? I'm not talking about waiting 30 minutes for an oil change or waiting in line to check out for groceries or waiting for a delicious dinner to cook. I'm talking about waiting on God. You know He is with you through the entire process but it may take so long for something to happen that you wish he would hurry up and take you through it. Personally, I had to wait on God for 35 years of my life for one of the biggest moments of my life. I believe I had to wait 35 years so that I was ready for the experience that God was going to give me and my family. God was about to bless me with relationships with my biological family. Now that took some time coming and everything needed to be aligned so that the experiences could happen.

The first thing you must start to believe is that God knows what He's doing. I know this may be hard to hear because on Earth we are people who have feelings about almost everything. There are tragic things that happen in our lives or illnesses or other life events that seem to not make sense to us when they are happening and when we are going through them. In fact, in our day to day lives, we can start the day content and by the end of the day become angry or frustrated about something that happened. While waiting on things in our lives, we can become afraid or scared or forget that God is in charge. God knew I needed to wait 35 years to meet my biological family even though throughout my life I had struggles being adopted and coming to terms with all of it. It was the right time because it was His time; not mine. Everything fell into place easily. I was able to find my biological father in less than an hour through facebook after I received my original (not amended) birth certificate. I was able to meet him about 1-1/2 months later since he was in Illinois for his yearly trip to visit his mom, my biological grandmother. And because it was the right time, I was able to meet more and more of my biological family during the summer of 2013 and I have been able to maintain these relationships. The relationships have helped heal deep wounds that some of my biological family members had and have helped me fill the spot in my heart that nothing else could fill.

The next thing you must start to believe is that God's silence doesn't mean things aren't happening behind the scenes. Throughout my 35 years of waiting, I had times when I started my own search for my biological parents. In fact when I was about 25, I found out some information about my biological father and mother but it wasn't quite correct. I took a trip to the small town I was born in to do my own searching; however, now I know I was in the wrong place. I had contacted the agency I was adopted through but all I received was a letter or two that gave me general information about my biological parents. The right time came after a bill was passed in the state of Illinois in 2012 allowing adoptees to get a copy of their original birth certificate. I applied for my certificate in the spring of 2013. By the time I applied for my birth certificate, I had become a mom myself and understood what it meant to have my own child.

The last thing you must start to believe is that God never lets go of you as you are waiting on Him. He is always with you throughout the ups, downs, tears, and laughter. The waiting period is when, in fact, we should be drawing closer to God and knowing that he is truly in control. I haven't always understood why I needed to wait but now I understand He was preparing all of us and our relationships. I have learned that God had me go through this when I did so that I could share it with people and know that even though it didn't happen in my time, things will happen when He is ready. One thing to ask yourself is whether you are going to trust God for his timing. Are you willing to wait for 5 years? 20 years? 35 years?

Prayer: Dear God, please help us not to lose our faith as we wait on your timing in our life. Please help us to know that you are not letting go of us as we go through the journey. Even when we are afraid, angry, sad, confused, or hopeless, you are there for us. Amen.

Submitted by Leslie Sparrow

Day Nineteen, Wednesday, March 6

This year I am involved in the JHS musical, Godspell, which is from the 70's and based on the Gospel of Matthew. While I've been reading the script, listening to the music and watching versions of it, I've felt a stronger connection to the church and Jesus. This musical combined two things that I love, musical theater and the Bible. One of my favorite songs and the most impactful song to me is called Beautiful City. So, I'd like to share the words of the song with you.

Out of the ruins and rubble,
Out of the smoke,
Out of our night of struggle
Can we see a ray of hope?
One pale thin ray reaching for the day...

We can build a beautiful city.
Yes, we can. (Yes, we can)
We can build a beautiful city.
Not a city of angels,
But we can build a city of man.

We may not reach the ending,
but we can start.
Slowly but surely mending,
brick by brick,
heart by heart.
Now, maybe now,
We start learning how.

We can build a beautiful city.
Yes we can. (Yes, we can).
We can build a beautiful city.
Not a city of angels,
But we can build a city of man.

When your trust is all but shattered.
When your faith is all but killed.
You can give up bitter and battered,
Or you can slowly start to build!

A Beautiful City.
Yes, we can. (Yes, we can)
We can build a beautiful city,
Not a city of angels,
But finally a city of man!

You can listen to the song at <https://youtu.be/La4vDsl3350?si=2WshSNRPGy6QtcP->

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for allowing us to learn about you in new ways. And thank you for the gift of music. Amen

Submitted by Hannah Warren

Day Twenty, Thursday, March 7

Exodus 4:10-12 Moses said to the Lord, “O Lord, I have never been eloquent. I am slow of speech and tongue. The Lord said to him, “Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I the Lord? Now go; I will help you speak and teach you what to say.”

In Explorers Bible class we have been studying Exodus and learning of Moses. He struggled with self confidence and doubted that he would be able to accomplish what God was asking him to do.

Basically God was saying, I made you, I know what you can do. I will help you.

This spoke to me. When I don't feel up to a task I remind myself of who made me and His promise of being here for us.

Creator: Praise you for creating us and equipping us with what we need to be of service to you and others. Forgive us when we “forget” who is in charge. Keep reminding us that you made us and are there to help us through life's journey. Amen.

Submitted by Alexa Crumley

Day Twenty-One, Friday, March 8

Mark 13:34 Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming - in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning - lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!

How Long is a Second?

Today's devotion title may seem like a silly question. However consider a few situations such as:

That second a child enters into this world. Parents will never forget that the "second" they gazed upon their new gift of life.

Then on the other hand, there is that final second of life a loved one must watch. That moment seems like forever and yet over in a brief second.

I am reminded of those moments long hoped for such as the first day of school, graduating, getting a job, marrying that special spouse, all came very quickly and were over in a second. Each of these situations and more live on in our minds all of our lives.

I was recently talking with a friend who shared they were told their family member only had a few years left to live. Her sister was taken to her Lord almost to the day in that amount of time. My friend said it all happened so very fast and during that time, every second was never more valuable than before.

I must admit that it hit home much closer than I wanted to hear. Unfortunately, it isn't until we are faced with challenging life threatening situations that time becomes very important. Jesus tried to get this across in today's Scripture Reading.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, "Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong" (1 Corinthians 16:13). The rest of the verse is clear, but what does "watch" mean? Our Lord could return any second and we should be prepared. It isn't wise to put off something that should happen today until tomorrow since tomorrow may be too late. He said the result could be eternal torment instead of peace. Paul wasn't telling us to be passive spectators of entertainment or anything else. He meant something far different. It is spiritual watching coupled with prayer that gives one the strength to survive temptations and difficult situations. When life is easy, gratefulness is easy. But not in the storms. Not in the worried nights of anxiety or the lonely house begging for the sound of a familiar voice. Not in the empty nursery or pocketbook. Not in the hospital when pacing the waiting room hoping for good news. Gratefulness hinges on our willingness to accept God's will over our own. Accepting that He is in control, and we can trust Him. In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, we see God's instruction to always be thankful: "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." In the storms of life, God is our only hope. His faithfulness and His goodness are present even during the darkest storm. It might not happen immediately, but could happen any second. Thankfulness grows as we cling to Him. We are grateful not only for the joys of restored health and overcoming grief, but for the sorrows that brought us to a place of utter dependence on Jesus.

Each day when rising, make sure to give thanks to the Lord for every second with friends, loved ones and a good quality of life. Offer gratitude not only for the “easy-sailing” blessings, but also for the storms.

Prayer: Dear God, 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 me the strength to wait out the storm. Jesus, You are so good. Whatever storms come into my life, You are my Rock and my Shelter. Thank You for Your sustenance that fills me, Your light that surrounds me, and Your love that never fails. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Submitted by Dan Thompson

Day Twenty-Two, Saturday, March 9

John 8:12 When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

The Light of the World

When our two sons were young, we had an Advent wreath at home, and every night as we lit the candles, we recited this verse together. It became a favorite of mine.

In the past few weeks, we have had more dreary, cold, and windy days than we have had sunny, and I found myself feeling shut-in. One morning, I remembered this passage and wondered how I might be the light of Jesus to those around me. I started with phone calls to friends where we shared laughter and prayer concerns. Then I began going through cards Larry and I had received from family and church friends going back to early COVID days when he entered the nursing home. As I realized how much those brightened our lives, I began a list of ways all of us can be the light of Jesus. Card ministries, volunteering at food pantries, homeless shelters, schools, libraries, prisons, delivering doorbell dinners, and making rice meals were among the list. But then there are the encouraging words we can say to neighbors, co-workers, store employees, waiters, health care staff, and others. Prayer is another way to be the light of Jesus as we remember all who are ill, grieving, serving in the military, first responders, snow removal workers, utility workers, delivery persons, school employees, our church ministers and employees, not to mention our own family and friends!

During this season of Lent, may we all look for ways we can be the light of Jesus to the world.

Prayer: Precious Lord, we give you thanks and praise for the light and salvation you brought to our world. Help us to share that gift with others. Amen

Submitted by Karen Ladd

Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 10

**“Let them praise His name with the dance;
Let them sing praises to Him
With the timbrel and harp.”
Psalm 149:3**

During the school year, my small home is filled with the joyful noise of my five great grandchildren. As you can imagine a 7-year-old, a 5-year-old, a 3-year-old, a 16-month-old and a 14 month old can make a great deal of noise ranging from laughter to crying and everything in between.

A favorite activity of all is singing and dancing along with YouTube. You might find us, yes me included, dancing and singing along to Tooty Ta. Or perhaps to Shake Your Sillies Out. But one thing is for certain. The 16-month-old will request his favorite by saying Bib and pointing at the tv. For those of you that have heard the Kinder Angels at church you might recognize that as The Bible song.

The YouTube video includes a robot dancing along so you can imagine that I have a room full of robots dancing and singing. The song starts with the line “The BIBLE, yes that’s the book for me. I stand alone on the word of God, the Bible” It goes on to add a meaning for the letters: B makes you brave and bold, I is for your insides and your outsides and L is for love forever. All qualities that I try to instill in these children.

B makes you brave and bold. Yes, we must stand firm in our faith but it is essential to do so in love. The girls are in school now. One in first grade and one in pre-K. The first day of school is always a time they must be brave as they start new adventures. This song helps them to remember that they should do everything in love and that God is always with them.

I is for your insides and your outsides. It is not enough to just act kind to others. It is important to see the whole person. Truly care about their feelings and take the time to learn. There is more than just the outside appearance...there is also the heart and soul.

L is for love forever. This is the easier one to explain to the kids. My love for them is forever. Their parents' love is forever. And God’s love is forever.

Encouraging them to show love for others even though it may seem difficult at times, is an important lesson. I try to instill in these five a love for God, a love for family and friends, self confidence, respect and honesty. Thanks to the Kinder Angels for giving the girls an avenue to learn and express these qualities through music. Perhaps they will bring their brother and cousins to be Kinder Angels in the future.

So, if you ever drive past my house and glance through the picture window you may see a room full of dancing robots praising His name with dance and song. Stop in and join us!

Prayer: Dear God, never let us forget the joy of being a child of God. Let us sing and dance as we praise your name. Love is forever. Amen

Submitted by Dorinda Miller

Day Twenty-Three, Monday, March 11

Luke 24:50 ...and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Continually Blessing

If you sit close enough to the grand piano in our sanctuary and pull out one of the pew Bibles and turn to the last page of the book of Luke, you'll see the most brilliant child's markings--jagged pencil lines and swooping circles, the perfect illustration on the lower white space of the page.

The markings are most certainly the work of a pre-reader and a pre-writer, so I suppose the precocious artist had no idea that she or he was illustrating the final verse of this page, this chapter, and indeed this gospel book, which details the Ascension of Jesus. According to the narrative the witnesses to Christ's going-up were filled with such "great joy" that "they were continually in the temple blessing God."

Our children are a blessing to us. This we know. And not just because they're little and cute and energetic. Our children, unwittingly, give imagination (and occasionally resuscitation) to our faith. They enliven our wonderment at the mystery of faith. And the lessons we think we might be teaching us, as it turns out, may shrink in the stature compared to the lessons they're teaching and reteaching us.

May the unknown child who illustrated page 861 of this particular pew Bible continue to make their mark on the life of the church. May they continue to draw out expressions of their faith journey that strengthen, challenge, and enliven us all. May this child forever be "continually in the temple blessing God."

And may the same be said for each of us--each of God's children.

Great God, in others we might find great sources of great joy. Great God, in you, we live and move and have our being. As you write our stories, might you add our names to your book and may we continue to be drawn and colored and indelibly marked up as yours. AMEN.

Submitted by Tim Chipman

Day Twenty-Four, Tuesday, March 12

Psalm 147:1 Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.

God Is In This Place

God is in this place. This sanctuary is a symbol of his creative power working among us.

Through these windows the clean white light of his Holy Spirit diffuses to glowing color, reminding us of this infinite mercy and grace.

Strength and wisdom are in these walls; they rest on the cornerstone of our love for his blessed Son, Jesus Christ!

Enter in reverence. This is a house of communion and prayer. All earthly din, struggle and tension shall yield to quietness and peace.

We shall find guidance and we shall know the wonder of God's eternal truth proclaimed in word and in song.

God hears our voices, our offerings of love in song; for the noblest music of all belongs to him!

We come to learn friendship and understanding, and to follow Jesus, our dear Savior and friend.

God is in this place. He calls us, he calls us to serve a world outside. Strong in hope, renewed in faith, we shall strive to build Christ's kingdom here on earth.

Let our hymn of dedication and praise resound!

Prayer: Thank you for the gifts of music, song, our beautiful place to worship you and the wonderful congregation we have to worship with. You have blessed us abundantly. Let us bless our community now in return. In Jesus name, Amen.

Submitted by Sue Weikert

Written by Mary Caldwell in 1975 and came out of our old hymnal "The Worshipping Church"

Day Twenty-Five, Wednesday, March 13

Interesting meaning of Good Morning

- G** - Get Up, **Romans 13:11** - And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.
- O** - Open Your Heart, **Ephesians 3:17** - so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,
- O** - Open Your Mind, **Romans 12:2** - Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will.
- D** - Dedicate Your Day To God, **Colossians 1:18** - And he is the head of the body, the Church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.
- M** - Meditate On God's Word, **Joshua 1:8** - Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.
- O** - Optimize Your Faith, **Romans 5:2** - through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we[a] boast in the hope of the glory of God.
- R** - Rebuke All Evils, **Proverbs 27:5** - Better is open rebuke than hidden love.
- N** - Never Doubt God's Love, **Matthew 21:21** - Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, if you have Faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done.
- I** - Inspire Someone, **Job 32:8** - But it is the spirit in a person, the breath of the Almighty, That gives them understanding.
- N** - Nothing Should Scare, **Psalms 27:1** - The LORD is my light and my salvation - whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life - of whom shall I be afraid?
- G** - Go Out With Joy, **John 16:24** - Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.

Source unknown

Submitted by Mary Sager-Mullgardt

Day Twenty-Six, Thursday, March 14

2 Corinthians 12:9 But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Grace is when God gives us good things that we don't deserve.

Mercy is when He spares us from the bad things we deserve.

Blessings are when He is generous with both.

Truly we can never run out of reasons to thank Him.

God is Good All The Time!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we praise you for all you have provided especially for Grace and Mercy. Forgive us for forgetting your gifts. Thank you for always being there for us. Remind us of your truth and power when we forget. Amen.

Submitted by Alexa Crumley

Day Twenty-Seven, Friday, March 15

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

We've all experienced it and more than likely numerous times throughout our lives.....
WAITING! Waiting for those footsteps indicating our kids are back home from their night out. Waiting for that ONE phone call. Waiting for results of recent medical tests. Waiting to hear that announcement of the birth of a baby. Waiting for the light to change green. I could go on and on giving examples of times of the WAIT! No matter our age, the waiting doesn't get easier and can get the best of us. Nine times out of ten, as I wait, I become more anxious and my mind tends to worry about all sorts of possibilities!

Since spring of 2023, I have gone through so much waiting from medical issues to the news of the arrival of our two grandchildren. Some of my waiting has resulted in such joy and happiness and others have ended in deep sadness. I wish I could have read the above scripture from Isaiah sooner as I would have felt so much calmer if I had. This scripture encourages us to find strength and persistence in our faith journey. Waiting upon God doesn't indicate indifference but instead to have a patient trust in HIS timing. This is tough, very tough. In the midst of life's challenges, we need to let this verse remind us that we need to anchor our hope in God. We will be able to gain a renewed strength that goes beyond our own. Just like eagles rising on the wind, maybe we will find a sense of purpose and endurance in these promises, knowing that in due time, we'll soar to new heights.

I would like to share a poem I found based on this scripture written by an anonymous poet: Isaiah 40;31, a timeless verse,

Where strength and hope beautifully converse.
On eagle's wings, we learn to soar, In God's embrace, forevermore.
A beacon in the darkest night,
Guiding us towards the eternal light.
Patience, a virtue, in waiting we find,
Renewed strength for heart and mind.

In His promises, our trust secure,
An inspirational call to endure.
Mountains may rise, storms my blow,
Yet in His grace, a steady glow.
So, let Isaiah's wisdom ignite,
A flame within, burning bright.
On eagle's wings of faith, we rise and strive,
In God's love, forever alive.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, in the quiet moments of waiting, we turn to you. Grant us patience to wait upon You, not in laziness but with hope. Strengthen us, like eagles on the wind, that we may rise above life's challenges. Teach us to find comfort in Your timing, knowing that Your plans are perfect. Teach us flexibility, endurance, and unswerving faith. May You guide us and build our trust in You bringing us ever closer to Your plan for our lives. In Your name we pray. Amen.

Submitted by Barb Bucy

Day Twenty-Eight, Saturday, March 16

A Prayer to Trust God in Uncertain Times

By Susanna Foth Aughtmon

Isaiah 51:15–1 For I am the Lord your God, who stirs up the sea, causing its waves to roar... And I have put my words in your mouth and hidden you safely within my hand. I set all the stars in space and established the earth. I am the one who says to Israel, You are mine!

Following Jesus is a mixed bag for most of us. We triumph... we fall... we get back up and Jesus helps us dust off our knees... and we continue on the journey of following, listening, questioning, and worshiping, asking Him to shape our lives into something that glorifies Him

It seems that in this season in my life, Jesus is once again gently prying my fingers off of my own life. He is asking me to live in a place of uncertainty and anchor myself in who He is rather than try and rearrange my circumstances. He is asking me to wait on His direction instead of barging ahead on a frantic path of anxiety

It's hard. It seems that I am incredibly human after all. I don't bend to His will or words so easily. So, this morning, I'm taking a deep, non-controlling breath and saying to Jesus, "You are right. I am Yours. Do Your thing. I will trust You." Even when I don't have a clue about what is coming around the next corner.

Because according to the One Who established the earth... He's got this too.

Submitted by Jo Anderson

Fifth Sunday of Lent, March 17

Exodus 3:3 And Moses said, “I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.

Luke 19:2-10 “And, behold there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was chief tax collector and was rich. And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.”

Curiosity

Curiosity might kill the cat, but a lack of curiosity can kill the soul. Curiosity is a Divine gift. Curiosity expands horizons and is even fundamental to the human race surviving and even thriving in its evolutionary process. The act of wonder is central to developing and sustaining faith in God.

There is a challenge to sustaining curiosity when childhood is past. As people age, their reservoirs of curiosity tend to dry up and apathy increases. There is some truth to the cliché of the narrow-minded, novelty-averse fogey who rigidly adheres to his routines and opinions. But the older we get the more God calls us to renew our childlike Curiosity.

In the modern world, with information available at the click of a button or swipe of a finger, curiosity is at an all-time high. While some forms of curiosity have risen, the more lasting and satisfying forms of curiosity receive little use. Scientists recognize three different types of curiosity: diversive, epistemic, and empathetic. Diverse curiosity demands little focus or attention span resulting in low levels of satisfaction. It thrives on a diet of click-bait and sensationalized news feeds. Epistemic curiosity is a deeper search for knowledge and understanding that requires focus, effort, and persistence. Empathetic curiosity is really a form of epistemic curiosity that is focused on people rather than just information. Empathetic curiosity is a deep interest in those that live around us. Epistemic and empathetic curiosity are more closely aligned with God's creation of humanity.

God is continually offering new experiences. The challenge is to stave off apathy by listening to His call--oftentimes a call that is fun, exciting and can bring you joy. We may not be like Zacchaeus climbing a tree to see someone we've only heard about or like Moses going into nature to see a burning bush that doesn't appear to have burnt at all. But God invites us to use our whole mind through experience and opportunities. As we grow in epistemic curiosity about God, we will simultaneously grow in empathetic curiosity toward those people whom he has placed around us. Isn't that part of the plan that God has set forth for the people He created?

Prayer: Lord, Creator of all things, help us see the world through the eyes of a child. Teach us through experiences to learn about our neighbors near and far. And, in doing so, we can help all your children in the world thrive in their knowledge of your greatness and beauty. Help us avoid the easy answers of click-bait or confirmation bias that provide no long-term solutions to the struggles facing our neighbors. Amen

Written with the help and words from websites: "Modern Reformation", The Case for Curiosity by Aimee Joseph and "Westminster Presbyterian Church", God's Gift of Curiosity by Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski.

Submitted by Julie Bruninga

Day Twenty-Nine, Monday, March 18

Trust in God's care helps us live with uncertainty, because no matter what happens, we can rely on His constant presence and care for us.

When we acknowledge His control over all we can accept life's hidden mysteries... such as what tomorrow will bring.

It's okay

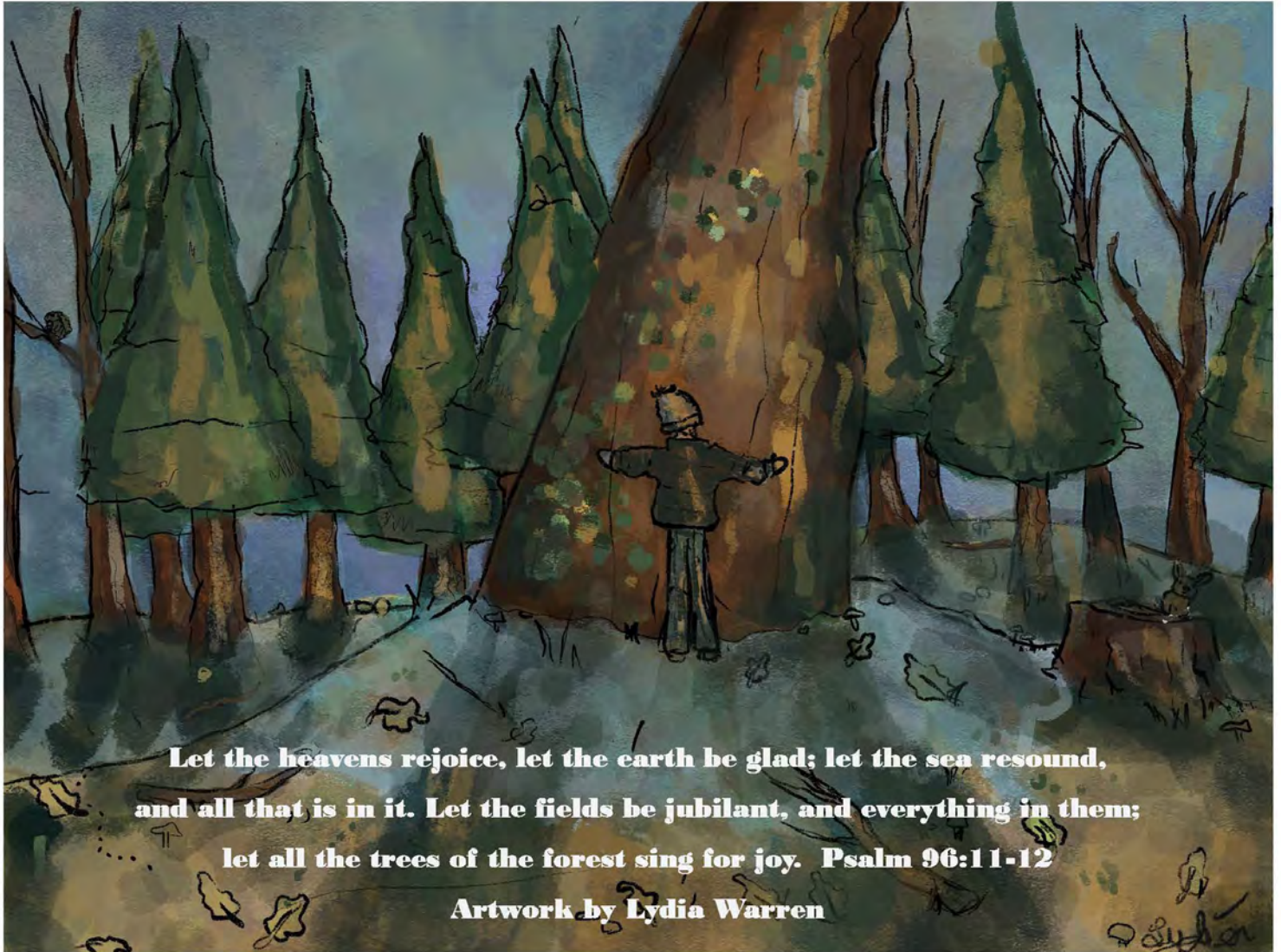
With God

We can cope with surprise.

Submitted by Debbie Lair

From Heaven Help Me Through Another Day!

Day Thirty, Tuesday, March 19



**Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound,
and all that is in it. Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;
let all the trees of the forest sing for joy. Psalm 96:11-12**

Artwork by Lydia Warren

Day Thirty-One, Wednesday, March 20

Isaiah 11:6 The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.

Matthew 19:14 Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

A Little Child

Sitting in the choir loft, I can't see what's happening in the chancel, but I can see the congregation. On most Sundays, the people are solemn. Their faces usually show little or no emotion. I'm sure they are respectfully listening and taking it all in.

But when the Kinder Angels are singing...every single person, regardless of age or ability, is smiling and their faces light up with joy!

The little children, leading us in praise and worship.

One Sunday morning, the congregation was praying the Lord's Prayer together, and a young boy was reciting it in a clear angelic voice. He was starting each phrase just half a beat before the rest of the people. It was beautiful...and each person in the congregation was blessed!

A little child, leading us in prayer.

There is just something about hearing the voices of sweet children that ignites us on the inside. The joy of the Holy Spirit fills us and, at least for a little while, all is well with the world.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for loving us. Thank you for the precious little ones you have entrusted to our care. Help us to be like them in childlike faith, praise and worship. Amen.

Submitted by Marsha Nelson

Day Thirty-Two, Thursday, March 21

Hebrews 10:25 ...not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

The bible is clear that God's glory cannot be contained by any building because it is everywhere. God's house, that is, the place where God dwells, is within us and among us during our everyday lives. Maybe dwelling in God's house each day is more about our mindset than the physical place where we find God. Perhaps it is looking for the beauty of God that surrounds us each day, even when we are unaware.

Now I am a senior citizen. My husband has already gone ahead of me to be with the Lord, and I am finding Psalm 121 more valuable than ever. Sometimes a challenge seems too big for me to handle now, but then I hear God's gentle reminder, "I will keep your heart safe," and my anxiety is eased.

I thank God for the people who buttress me with their prayers, helping and sustaining me when I falter.

Give us your peace when we can't see the next step to take.

But that same church is a place where millions have grown in faith. It is people intentionally seeing God. It is a space to learn and grow, to serve and be served. It is imperfect, but in it we get glimpses of perfect love. And there are moments of perfect praise and perfect joy in Christ.

Prayer: Loving God, thank you for our companions. Make us aware of those around us who need to be supported by both prayer and acts of compassion.

Submitted by Kay Black

Random prayers, paragraphs, or sentences I have circled or underlined in passages throughout the year 2023 from:
The Upper Room, The Word in Season and Forward Movement

Day Thirty-Three, Friday, March 22

Ecclesiastes 4:4 And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Keeping up with the Joneses

Keeping up with the Joneses nowadays can be a much harder and overwhelming process. With social media and "reality" TV all around us all day long and showing us what all the "important" people are doing makes our own lives seem boring and useless. Even with Tik-Tok and other various bloggers, these modern day "influencers" make it seem like only they have the right answers and that you need to follow the "pack." I think it is worse for younger people today.

For most of us, especially those of us at a "mature" age, we know that reality TV is nothing even close to REALITY! They show such a fictional life that the players involved don't even know what is truly real anymore. I used to tell my sons that it didn't matter what so-and-so did or had. What YOU do or how YOU act is the only thing that matters. It isn't about "things", it is about the type of person you are. Do you help others, or do you ignore problems?

We don't have to keep up with the Joneses, we don't need to follow someone else's statements, we don't have to be a certain way to make friends. We ARE God's children and following Him is the only person that we should listen to and try to follow Christ's example the best that we are able, and not care or worry about the Jones'!

Next time you see someone posting on social media and you are feeling inadequate... Remember *2 Corinthians 12:9-10 - But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

Prayer: Dear God, Help me to be strong when I am feeling less than adequate and to know that your love is all I need to be seen. Help me to show others the true worth of a person by acting in the way that you would want us to act. Amen.

Submitted by Sarah Yuska

Day Thirty-Four, Saturday, March 23

It was a warm Sunday evening in 1942, and sleep didn't come easily as I anticipated the next day. As a second grader I was going to ride my bicycle 1-1/4 miles to our one room country school. It seemed to be awfully early when my dad awakened me; however, his words still resonate deep in my mind.

"They have taken your mother away and she won't be coming back."

Much of that day remains a blur, except being dressed, fed, and shuttled off to the home of my cousin and his new bride. When I returned home the parlor (an unheated room only used for special events) was vacant of all furniture except the piano. The next day was filled with one car after another driving in and leaving food and flowers. After lunch a hearse bearing the casket pulled up to the front door and cousins assisted the driver getting the casket into the house. Before leaving, the funeral director tacked a large dark bow to the doorpost, an ugly symbol announcing that someone had died. My sisters and I were not allowed to enter the room until the "flower" lady had arranged flowers around the casket, completely hiding the adjacent walls from floor to above the windows.

The next day was hectic as the funeral was being held in our home. Neighborhood farmers set up nearly a hundred chairs in the lawn which the funeral director delivered. Some of the men assisted by parking cars in the pasture. The immediate family sat upstairs in the hallway during the service. The minister stood at the front door to conduct the service. The procession into town to the cemetery was easily one mile long, according to my cousins.

In later years, my sister who was 15 years old, shared with me what she recalled. That evening after we were home our dad said, "Your mother is gone and we are not going to talk about her." Though I don't remember hearing those words, that rule was strictly adhered to.

Only after serving on the committee for Preparation for Ministry several years ago, did I ever reflect on how those events affected my life. Each candidate was questioned about their life journey, their understanding of inter-personal relationships and knowledge of the Bible and the church. Only after CPM had a very challenging and complex candidate, I thought about what shaped my life.

I never experienced a grandparent saying "I love you" (I only had one). While I assume my mother probably expressed her love, I can't remember it. The word LOVE was not in the vocabulary of my family of aunts, uncles, or cousins. I was unaware that love should be central to our lives. After dating for some time, my high school sweetheart said, "I love you." I didn't know how to respond and it was some time before I shared those three precious words in return. I thank God that Mary taught me to love. I am fortunate to have children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and many friends with whom I can and do share love.

1 John 4:8-11, He who does not love does not know God for God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest amongst us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us we also ought to love one another.

1 John 4:19, **We love, because he first loved us.**

Submitted by Merle Fox

Sixth Sunday of Lent, March 24

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

A Sabbath as Resistance Meditation

To let go of the week that has passed
Breathing in ... Breathing out ... (repeat)
Like every other week, it has been a week of doing ...
We each had a to-do list of what we wanted to do ...
We each had great hopes for the week ...
We gave care to one another, we answered to others, we hoped it was enough ...
Although much remains undone, for this Sabbath moment we resist ...
Breathing in ... Breathing out ... (repeat)
Like every other week, it's been a week of struggle ...
At times it felt as if things were falling apart ...
At times it seemed we went from one thing to the next without pause or rest.
Although much is still unsettled - broken even, for this Sabbath moment we resist ...
Breathing in... Breathing out ... (repeat)
For this sabbath moment feel your frustration, your worry, your anxiety drift to the back of
your mind...
Let your struggles float away for a moment ...
Breathing in ... take in the fresh air of Sabbath ...
Breathing out ... let go of your need to fix it ...
Breathing in ... take in the fresh air of Sabbath ...
Breathing out ... let go of your worry and fear ...
Breathing in ... take in the fresh air of Sabbath ...
Breathing out ... let go of the voices that hold you back ...
Breathing in ... Breathing out ... resist (repeat)
We let go of the week and we welcome this Sabbath time of resistance ...
Let yourself rest and breathe for just a few moments and consider how this is a form of
resistance.

Submitted by Brad Smith

By Rev. Shawna Bowman, *Coming Alive in Christ*

Day Thirty-Five, Monday of Holy Week, March 25

No Two Alike

Graceful, beautiful snowflakes, floating down to earth.
All created to be unique, each holding significant worth.

Just like an intricate snowflake, we come from up above,
To bless the world with beauty, to serve the world with love.

No two of us alike, we hold our own design.

And because we are so different, we get a chance to shine.

When our Heavenly Father makes snowflakes,
I think He takes great care. He works on every detail.

He makes them precious and rare. He lovingly spends time on every one.

He blesses them all the way through.

Since He care so much about snowflakes,
Imagine how much He cares about you!

(Adapted from poem by Mandy Williams)

The above poem can be connected to James 1:17 and 1 Corinthians 12 where the authors speak of people having talents that are gifts from God and the importance of each part of the body.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for making us unique like snowflakes. Help us use our gifts to your glory. Amen!

Submitted by Anita Donoho-Ott

Day Thirty-Six, Tuesday of Holy Week, March 26

Psalm 62:8 Trust in God at all times, pour out your heart before Him. God is a refuge for us.

Before my sister, Irene, passed into eternal life, she shared some plans and wishes. One was to include the following hymn in her service of life. It is a hymn from the most recent Moravian Book of Worship: "In The Bulb There Is A Flower". Text and tune by Natalie Sleeth 1986. This hymn is also found in our hymnal, under number 250.

"In the bulb there is a flower, in the seed an apple tree,
In cocoons, a hidden promise, butterflies will soon be free,
In the cold and snow of winter, there's a spring that waits to be,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

There's a song in every silence, seeking word and melody,
There's a dawn in every darkness bringing hope to you and me,
From the past will come the future, what it holds, a mystery,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

In our end is our beginning, in our time, infinity,
In our doubt there is believing, in our life, eternity,
In our death, a resurrection, at the last, a victory,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see."

I had not heard this hymn prior to this time. I find it comforting and certainly a witness of our faith in victory over death and of our eternity with Jesus Christ.

Prayer: "Father God, we thank you and give you praise and glory for Your plan of salvation through Jesus Christ, How comforting to know that after death, a resurrection, unrevealed until its season, something You alone can see. Amen"

Submitted by Lila Painter

Day Thirty-Seven, Wednesday of Holy Week, March 27

Let's Face It

Psalm 105:4 Look to the Lord and His strength; seek His face always.

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

As I write this Lenten offering near the end of January, Bob's face is quite red and beginning to peel due to a treatment recommended by our dermatologist. Several of you have been encouraging to Bob because you have gone through this same treatment; many of you have offered him comforting words as the healing process continues. One of his favorite comments has been this: "I always knew you were a Crimson, through and through, but to dye your face red!"

We have been bantering back and forth with face-to-face "face talk" – a face-off with no poker face and no boldface writing. We scrolled Facebook, used FaceTime to talk to Andrew and family in Chicago, and even held our face cards close – all while facing this minute challenge. The one thing about Bob, he didn't lose face but kept at his daily duties, with a shine on his face – due to both the Vaseline and his joyful spirit!

We have enjoyed thinking about Biblical references using the word face. Abraham fell on his face and laughed at God's promise (Genesis 17:17). Jacob says: "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved" (Genesis 32:30). Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the tablets of stone; he "did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God" (Exodus 34: 29) – this same Moses who earlier "hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God" (Exodus 3:6). In Psalm 51, David pouring out his heart, seeking forgiveness, prays: "Hide Thy face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities" (verse 9). Stephen's face shone as he preached; "and gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15). Matthew 17 records the Transfiguration of Christ: "And He was transfigured before them, and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became white as light" (verse 2). All too soon, "Then they spat in His face, and struck Him; and some slapped Him (Matthew 26: 67).

Let's face it...our face is pretty important; our face, our visage, communicates messages all the time. We can be encouraged by Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 3:18: "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

Because Jesus Christ "set His face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51) to endure the cross for our sins and then be raised in glory for our glory, we can face this life with the assurance that God is with us and for us. Thanks be to God!

Prayer: Lord, let's face it... Your love for us is overwhelming, a love we cannot fully comprehend. We seek Your face as we travel with You and one another through this season of Lent and forevermore. Amen.

Submitted by Janet (and Bob) Chipman

Day Thirty-Eight, Maundy Thursday, March 28

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.

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

From A Blade of Grass by Gladys and Gordon DePree

Day Thirty-Nine, Good Friday, March 29

2 Corinthians 5:17-19 (NRSV) So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

In my time as a Hospice Chaplain, I met a large variety of people, with many different diagnoses. One of the more difficult diagnoses for me to work with was dementia. Different people can have different types of dementia but one commonality in hospice patients is a lack of the ability to communicate meaningfully with others.

The son of one such patient called me to ask if I would visit his father and just spend a little time with him, read a Psalm, pray 'The Our Father' and that would be all that is needed. I visited with this gentleman several times during his time in hospice. Before visiting him, I spoke with the Staff at the facility where he lived and was told that he had been a quiet man of faith who had stopped communicating over a year before.

Most of our visits went pretty much the same. I came and sat down with him, held his hand (touch is important in ministry with dementia patients), talked with him, read a Psalm, said 'The Our Father' and a short prayer, and took my leave. One day, he was in his wheelchair in the hall, so I knelt next to him for the visit. As I opened my Bible, I started to drop it because I was using only one hand. I started to pull my other hand from his to grab the Bible and he grabbed my hand tightly. He did not let go. So, I continued our visit as I always did. As I took my leave, I said that I needed to be going and immediately he let go of my hand. It took me by surprise, I expected to have to pull my hand out of his hand with at least some force. I learned an important lesson that day. Even though people with dementia do not communicate with us they are still present inside in some fashion. Perhaps it is their spirit, I do not know.

Things are not always as they seem. We do not always understand what people say or do. We do not always see situations from the same perspective as other people. We do not always have all the information about situations or decisions. We can always learn something new if we are willing.

God is working in us to be new creations. God has entrusted to us the Ministry of Reconciliation. We can do this because God is with us, strengthening and encouraging us to do the work which God has called us to do. Stepping out into new territory (or new behaviors) can be scary. But becoming new is what God is leading us to. Becoming new is what God is working in us.

Prayer: God of all Creation, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." (Psalm 51:10) Help me to be that new creation willing to serve you in new ways. Amen.

Submitted by John E. Nelson,
Pastoral Assistant

Day Forty, Saturday of Holy Week, March 30

Prayer for what you find on the mountaintop: God above, We thank you for allowing us to journey up. That we would be able to see a place not just from within it but from a distance is a gift we do not readily comprehend. Here, as we look out at what seems as if it can fit in the palm of our hand, remind us of beauty's vastness. In this moment may we be both large and small. Remind us that beauty isn't merely for our consumption, but that it is something to be protected. Grow in us a wonder that is willing to bow to the beauty of the natural world, that it would be a path to humility and not ego. That we would understand it does not exist for us, but it is our divine fortune that we would be moved by it. And we are moved, God. May this view form us and keep us, as we allow our souls to remain stirred when we return to the ground we've known. May it be so.

Breathe

INHALE: God, awaken my soul to beauty.

EXHALE: I resist the tyranny of despair.

INHALE: I can pause to behold.

EXHALE: I am healed in beauty's wake.

INHALE: I choose a life enchanted.

EXHALE: There is miracle in the mundane.

Confession: God of delight, We confess that we have grown numb to the beauty of this world. We have not protected what is good and true and enchanting. We have forgotten how to marvel at the mundane with the same gravity as we would behold the mountain or valley. We have not looked up to witness the miracle of our architecture. And in our self-hatred, we have failed to delight in and honor the faces we pass each day, including our own. Forgive us our inattention, and in your mercy remind us that we are so much more than our pain. Guide our gaze toward the beautiful. Amen.

Forgiveness: Let your soul receive this rest: The same God who makes the death of the tree burst with color can draw us into wonder even in the midst of tragedy. May the divine have mercy on our inattention, that we could grieve what should not be and delight in all that survives us. Amen.

Benediction: So may you fall in love again and again with the beautiful. And may that enchantment keep you from the captivity of despair and usher you into dreaming. In your beholding, may you become a faithful protector of every person and piece of creation, including the earth that trembles beneath your feet. Go in peace, to pay attention. May it be so.

Contemplation:

1. When are you most inclined to practice wonder? What form of art or nature tends to stir your soul?
2. When was the last time beauty disrupted you? Did you resent its disruption or welcome it?
3. Is wonder a privilege? Is it possible to lack access to beauty?
4. Who in your life is an audience of beauty? What of them have you suppressed in yourself and how?
5. Are you more inclined to marvel at nature or human artistry? Why do you think this is?
6. Travel into a memory of when something mundane captivated you. What allowed you to be attentive to beauty in that moment?

A liturgy about wonder from *Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Staying Human* by Cole Arthur Riley.

Submitted by Rev. Siobhan Warren

Easter Sunday, March 31

Psalm 63: 7-8

**For You have been my help.
And in the shadow of Your wings I sing for joy**

**My soul clings to You;
Your right hand upholds me.**



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, Pastor Jonathan Warren, Pastoral Assistant John Nelson, Marsha Nelson, the Continuing Education chair, Susan Weikert, and her committee. I also want to give a big thank you to all of those who contributed to the booklet, there is no booklet without your help and with a time crunch!

Sarah Yuska