

2026

**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

After Forrest Gump's mother dies and Jenny, his "best girl," leaves, Forrest doesn't know what to do, so he just starts running. It seems like we all start running when things feel out of control in our lives, in our community, or in our world. Maybe we're trying to keep up with the world's pace, so we run and we run. Maybe the world starts crashing all around us, so we run and we run. Maybe we do not know how to handle the myriad of feelings, so we run and we run. Running is not a bad thing in and of itself, but the reason we run makes a difference. Is it out of fear or faith, peace or rage, anxiety or hope, joy or angst?

It says in Hebrews 12:1-2, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

There is so much happening around us that all we want to do is run and run and run. If you are tired of running out of fear, angst, loneliness, or ambition, I invite you to change your gaze. Henri Nouwen says, "Spiritual disciplines such as praying, fasting, and caring are ways to help us return home. As we walk [or run] home we often realize how long the way is. But let us not be discouraged. Jesus walks with us and speaks to us on the road. When we listen carefully we discover that we are already home while on the way."<sup>1</sup>

In the midst of the fast paced world... breathe, pause, listen... for Jesus is calling and leading us home:

Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me.

See, on the portals he's waiting and watching, watching for you and for me.

"Come home, come home! You who are weary, come home."

Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling, "O sinner, come home!"<sup>2</sup>

This Lenten season, I invite you to follow Jesus and run home.

Blessings, Jonathan

<sup>1</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Things*, Crossroad Publishing Co., New York, NY, 1999 p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> *Glory to God*, Hymn #418 "Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling" 2013 Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY.

Day One, Ash Wednesday, February 18

### **Looking for the New**

*Rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment.*  
(Joel 2:23)

In my very first semester in seminary, I took a required class that was intended to teach beginning seminarians how to study the Bible in preparation for preaching sermons. In this class we studied two sections of Scripture, one in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament. The passage from the Old Testament that we studied was Joel 2:1-2, 12-17. This is the Old Testament reading for Ash Wednesday this year.

The process of our study began in Hebrew. Our first task was to translate this passage from Hebrew to English. That task was much easier then than it is now, some 50 years later. After gaining the insights from Hebrew that are sometimes 'lost in translation,' we began looking at these verses from all sides and even inside out all to determine the message for us to give at that time and place. Often, this step in the process requires decision making. Several goals for people come to light. I don't remember the sermon that I ended up writing for this class. But that's OK. I have grown tremendously in the past 50 years and my audience is long gone.

When I look at this section of Scripture now, it is verse 13 that stands out to me. God is interested in what is inside of us, our true selves. God understands us, inside out. When we mess up, we are reminded that God "is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment." We need not be afraid of God. We need not fear punishment. God sees us through grace, mercy, and love. This message is sometimes lost to us when all we see is our mistakes and times that we have screwed up. We all mess up. When we realize this and feel bad, that is God's Law. But God's Law is never God's last word to us. God's Grace always follows the Law. "...for [God] is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment."

God speaks to us through Scripture. Sometimes when we read a section of Scripture, we see a message that we have seen before. But many times, we will see something new and fresh that we never thought of before. Time changes us. We are different today than we were in the past. That is a reason to re-read passages that are familiar because God may just speak a new message to you.

*Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for speaking to us through your Word. Help each of us to read the Scripture, listening for that new message that you have for us today. Amen.*

Submitted by John Nelson,  
Pastoral Assistant

Day Two, Thursday, February 19

## Home

*How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young—a place near your altar, O Lord Almighty, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your Home. (Psalm 84:1-4)*

The meme read, “Leaving your home and returning back safely is such an underrated blessing.” How many times in my life have I experienced the feeling of needing to go home, to the feeling of safety and the comfort of being home. I would make a terrible snowbird, as I’ve never been away from home for more than two weeks, before all I want is to go home. Summer camp as a child, college as a young adult, trekking across the country on a camping trip, taking a long awaited trip overseas with my husband. All wonderful experiences but in the end, the return home with an overwhelming sense of joy was something I remember clearly.

After 45 years of living under the same roof, Ed Olson's beloved wife Ginny passed away, having raised 3 boys under that roof. The house now too large and empty for Ed, then became ours, where Tim and I set out to raise our own boys. When we moved in, complete with all its furnishings, I found these words, written by Ginny, stuck to the back of a drawer in an oak flour cabinet, as if it was meant for me to find as this house became OUR family home. “The patch of the earth's surface that a man calls ‘home’ can become a part of the man, a fair exchange for the day when the man will become part of the earth. Rudyard Kipling had put that truth this way: God gave all men all earth to love, but since our hearts are small, ordained for each one spot should prove beloved over all. Our beloved spot is 269 Finley Street.” I framed that piece of paper and it still hangs on our wall 35 years later.

Psalm 84:1-4 above captures the longing of the soul for home. I'll paraphrase a related devotion that stated, “this yearning is what drives the spiritual soul of every human being. All of us are always on our way home, even though the earthly experience of coming home is a real but temporary joy. In the believer whose vision of the future is framed by faith, the joys of coming home during our life whet our appetite for going home to be with God at the end of our life. Eternal life is an ultimate ‘coming home.’ Each earthly ‘coming home’ should remind us to exercise our faith to acknowledge your real home, anticipating it with increasing, desiring joy. The Bible reveals that God's dwelling place, His home, is your home, the place that exceeds every joy and sense of well-being and safety that you have ever felt in coming home to our temporary home on this present earth. Use the joys of ‘coming home’ by faith for the anticipation of what awaits us in the future certainty of your true home, sweet home.”

*Prayer: Lord, thank you for being the guardian of my journey. As I go out, watch over my steps and keep me safe from unseen dangers. As I return home, fill this space with your peace and presence, making it a sanctuary of rest and love. Protect our going out and our going in, from this time forth and forevermore. Amen. (inspired by Psalm 121:8)*

Submitted by Gail Olson

A note of interest. In preparing for the 200th Anniversary of our church with the history committee, I came across an old directory of members that listed Vivian Dobson as having also lived at 269 Finley. Vivian is the mother of our member, Rodney Dobson, Grandmother of Justin Dobson, and name sake of little Vivian Dobson. It was at this address that Vivian Dobson ran a kindergarten in our basement. The tile floor of that kindergarten still remains.

Day Three, Friday, February 20

“In life there is always the good stuff and then there is the rest of it. Regardless of how it may look from afar, everyone’s life contains ups, downs and a whole lot of in-between. The mark of a happy life is not that it always runs smoothly – it’s how easily you are able to navigate your way around the bumps in the road.”

This is so true! We all love “the good stuff” but so much of life is “the rest of it.” But even the rest of it can be good, the normal, mundane parts of life that link the good stuff together. And when something good, or great, comes along, that feeling is even more pronounced because we have been waiting and watching for it with each day.

We must be resilient, enduring trials through faith, finding strength in God, and rising after falling. Proverbs 24:16, “Though the righteous fall seven times, they rise again.” Isaiah 40:31, “but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles.”

*Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to be resilient, able to endure what life sends our way. Help us to rise after we fall and soar on wings like eagles as we go about our daily lives. Amen.*

The Daily Promise by Dominique Bertolucci

Submitted by Cynthia Benton

Day Four, Saturday, February 21

### **Make Time for Me**

*But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matthew 6:33)*

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. (Proverbs 3:5-6)*

Many years ago we had a leak on a flat roofed dormer over the stairs which went to the second floor of our bungalow style home. Having decided to replace the flat roof with a pitched roof I started on a Saturday morning. The project turned out to be a little more complicated and time consuming than I had planned. Saturday evening the roof was still open. Sunday morning I got back up on the roof and tried to continue working on getting the new rafters in place. Things were not going as planned. I started hearing a voice telling me to "Go to Church." I tried pushing the voice aside. Then arguing that I don't have time, it's supposed to rain in the next couple of hours and I am nowhere close to getting everything done and water tight before the rain was expected later in the day. The voice continued "Make Time for Me" and "It will be okay."

After some more resistance, I finally relented by putting down my tools, getting cleaned up and going to church. Being in church was a recharge for me both physically and mentally. At the end of the service Larry Ladd asked how I was doing. I told him about the roof project. On the spot Larry offered to come help. I'm sure he could see in my face the sudden release of relief even before I could verbally accept his invitation. Within a few hours we had everything finished up. Larry's fellowship while we worked on the roof was also a nice time together. As we were getting the last of the tools and ourselves off the roof the first drops of rain started. Within a few minutes we had all the tools in the garage, Larry was on his way home and the new roof got a true test as the heavens opened up with a torrent of rain and wind. No leaks!

I am forever grateful to Larry for his companionship and sharing of his time and talents. God also taught me a couple of lessons that day. First and foremost we always need to "Make time for Him" even when other projects and obstacles are telling you they are a priority. Making time for God assures that He is the One who is in control of our life. It's easy to let other things get priority status in our daily lives and not let our will supersede God's Will. I think all of us struggle on a daily basis to keep God first in our lives.

*Prayer: Gracious and merciful God thank you for granting us the blessing of free will. Help us in our daily lives to listen for, hear and follow Your voice and Your word. We ask for Your forgiveness and mercy when we don't put You first in our lives. We know Your plan is the plan we should follow and all things are for Your glory. Please help us to keep and follow Your will before our own will. In listening and following Your will, You will make our path straight. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

Submitted by George Bengel

First Sunday of Lent, February 22

*Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you. (Romans 15:7)*

We, as a church family and a church community, have an obligation. An obligation to reach out to find those who need us. Since our marriage 3 years ago, Maryjane and I have attended several churches. Neither of us are seeking a new church, we are just trying to broaden our faith and understanding. We have attended churches in Jacksonville and in faraway places. One thing always stands out and that is the welcome (or lack of it) we receive. Surprisingly to us, in many churches, we were not welcomed or spoken to by the members. We do not take offence to this but we certainly notice it. After all, we are there to worship the Lord and not to socialize. But as you would agree, a simple greeting would be cherished.

On a recent vacation we had the pleasure to go on a “swim with the Dolphins” tour. It was way out in the wild and rough Pacific Ocean. No cages or ponds or tanks. Just wild dolphins. As we floated in the 5–6-foot swales, everyone on the boat was in the water except the captain and us. And suddenly, here came the dolphins. Dozens of them. They darted in and out and amongst the swimmers to the delight of us all. The captain turned to me and said, “You know, these dolphins could be anywhere in this vast ocean, but they chose to come to us.” I thought about that and our church. These people amongst us could be anywhere right now. But they chose to come to us. The swimmers all displayed their delight in seeing the dolphins. Welcomed them. Enjoyed them. Shouldn’t we be doing that with visitors to our church? Shouldn’t we be seeking dolphins to join us? Rejoice with us?

From that day on, we have made it a mission to never let a visitor of our church go unnoticed or unattended. And not just within the walls of our church. We must reach out to anyone who may seem out of place or in need of a greeting. It is so easy to do and it will refresh our spirit as much as it will theirs.

*Prayer: Lord, direct us to be open to all who seek your grace. Help us to reach out and be your disciple, loving, teaching, always welcoming. Your word is for everyone. May we be your messenger. Amen.*

Submitted by Keith Bradbury

Day Five, Monday, February 23

Counter-Intuitive  
When God's Way Isn't What We Expect

*"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord.*  
(Isaiah 55:8)

A pastor recently shared a story about the old "finger trap" toy. If you have ever used one, you know how it works. You place one finger in each end of the tube, and suddenly you are stuck. The natural reaction is to pull your fingers apart to get free but that only makes the trap tighter. The way to escape is completely counter-intuitive. Instead of pulling away, you must push your fingers together. Only then can you be released.

It's the opposite of what logic tells us to do.

As I listened to that story, I couldn't help but think about how often Jesus taught and lived in ways that were counter to what people expected. During His ministry on earth, He was constantly turning human thinking upside down. The world said, "Protect yourself." Jesus said, "Deny yourself."

The world said, "Climb higher." Jesus said, "Humble yourself."

The world said, "Push others away." Jesus said, "Love one another."

Jesus came to bring people together, not to drive them apart. He taught that all people could receive salvation if they would genuinely ask. He reached across social, racial, religious, and economic lines. He welcomed the outcast, healed the broken, and forgave the sinner. His message was simple, but powerful, "we are better together!"

Just like the finger trap, pulling against each other only tightens the struggle. When we pull away in pride, argument, and division, we become more trapped, trapped in bitterness, trapped in misunderstanding, trapped in endless conflict. But when we move toward one another in humility, grace, and love, freedom is found.

Sadly, even within the church, we sometimes pull against each other over differences in denomination, style of worship, or theology. Instead of focusing on what unites us which is Jesus Christ. We argue over what divides us. And in doing so, we tighten the trap.

Jesus never intended His followers to be a divided family. He prayed that we would be one (John 17:21). He knew that unity would be our strength and love would be our witness. When we come together as the family of God, we reflect His heart to a watching world.

Coming together does not mean we must agree on every detail. It means we choose love over pride, grace over judgment, and unity over division. It means we focus on the cross, the empty tomb, and the saving power of Jesus Christ.

Just like with the finger trap, freedom doesn't come from pulling harder but instead it comes from drawing closer.

Jesus' message was never about getting stuck in endless arguments. It was about coming together, recognizing our common ground, and walking forward in faith. We are not competing teams—we are one family. We are not enemies, we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

We are all members of the same Family of God.

*Prayer: Heavenly Father, forgive us for the times we pull away from one another instead of drawing closer. Teach us to walk in humility, unity, and love. Help us to see each other through Your eyes and to work together for Your glory. May we be known not for our divisions, but for our love. In Jesus' name, we pray together, Amen!!*

Submitted by Dan Thompson

Day Six, Tuesday, February 24

### **Life's Changing Seasons**

*There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot,....a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance,....a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.*  
(Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

These are some of my favorite bible verses and I have come back to them through the years, more frequently since 2023. I have come to learn personally that just as we have yearly seasonal changes, we also experience difficult seasons in our lives. My family has been experiencing bittersweet times for awhile now: the loss of Mike' s parents, his brother-in-law, and my great nephew stillborn at 31 weeks; the premature birth of our grandson at 33 weeks and then the discovery of his need for a stem cell transplant at 8 months old due to a rare immune system deficiency. Yet the joys have come as well: the birth of our first grandchild, a daughter born to our son and his wife, the birth of a great niece, another niece's wedding, the recent birth of another daughter to our son's family, our nephew's daughter's birth, the anticipation of our daughter's second child's birth in late February or early March, our niece's child's birth in early April, and our grandson's medical progress.

These events have seemed to cause my emotions and anxiety to be on a roller coaster and has left me feeling exhausted at times. I have worried constantly about my loved ones in the direct line of the effects these life events have impacted their lives. I have been especially concerned for my daughter and son-in-law living so far away and not being able to personally be of assistance to them. At times it seemed like they were experiencing a season where everything was going wrong. Still, faith in our family made us all determined to trust in God and have confidence in God's ability to be in control. Through many prayers from many family members, friends, this church family, our grandson is slowly making progress and praise to God, he is being healed.

During Lent, I find this to be a time to focus more intentionally on the season of closer communication with God. A time to reflect on the blessings He has given to not only me but ones that are close to me. A period of time when I can ask for help from Him to help me be stronger and to rely more on His strength. No matter what dreaded season you are going through: sickness, grief, job loss, broken promises, financial headaches, these things shall pass. We need to believe that in all circumstances, we can give God the glory and daily thank Him for His mercy and grace. It is a season to be able to be joyful in the knowledge that God's presence is with us today and every day.

*Prayer: Dear God, I thank you for being with us through all the changing seasons of our lives. Amen.*

Submitted by Barb Bucy

Day Seven, Wednesday, February 25

## Lenten Preparation

When I was young, we gave up some material things like chocolate and donated the money we saved by not buying the item to a charitable cause.

Years later I decided to not only give up something but to add something.  
For example...

L - Laughter (Job 8:21)

E - Enthusiasm (Ephesians 6:7-17)

N - Nourishment to my spirit (Matthew 4:4)

T - Time set aside to pray

“There is no sense falling in love with him if you’re not talking to him.”

source unknown

Also Thessalonians 5:17

Whatever you do to prepare for the celebration at the end of the 40 days, may you do so through Jesus Christ.

Submitted by Mary Sagar Mullgardt

Day Eight, Thursday, February 26

## Jesus Listens

*Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD himself, is my strength and my defense, he has become my salvation. (Isaiah 12:22)*

From January 17

Exalted Lord Jesus,

You are my Strength and my Song! Yet I confess that I'm feeling wobbly this morning—looking at difficulties looming ahead and measuring them against my limited strength. But these challenges are not tasks for today, or even for tomorrow. I need to leave them in the future and come home to the present, where I can enjoy Your Presence. Since You are my Strength, I know You can empower me to handle each difficulty as it comes. And because You are my Song, You're able to give me Joy as I work alongside You.

Please draw my mind back to the present moment—again and again. The amazing ability to anticipate future events is a blessing from You, but it becomes a curse whenever I misuse it. If I use my mind to worry about tomorrow, I cloak myself in dark unbelief. Instead of this sinful wallowing in worry, I want to trust you more and more. I've found that the Light of Your Presence envelops me in Peace when I fill my thoughts with the hope of heaven. You are my Salvation, Lord, so I have good reason to trust and not be afraid.

In Your heavenly Name,

Amen.

Daily Devotional Prayers of Peace, Joy, and Hope  
By Sarah Young

*Prayer: Dear God, please teach me to worry less. I would like to not worry about anything at all because I know, according to your scriptures, that each day will have its own troubles. Please help me to live in the present with your presence. Please help me to find joy or bring joy to my everyday life. Amen.*

Submitted by Leslie Sparrow

Day Nine, Friday, February 27

## Come and See

*The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples when Jesus passed by. John looked towards him and said, "There is the Lamb of God." The two disciples heard him say this, and followed Jesus. When he turned and saw them following him, he asked, "What are you looking for?" They said, "Teacher, where are you staying?" He said, "Come and see" and they went and saw where he was staying. (John 1:35-39)*

*At that moment his disciples returned, and were astonished to find him talking with a woman; but none of them said, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?" The woman put down her water-jar and went away to the town, where she said to the people, "Come and see a man who has told me everything I ever did." (John 4:27-29)*

### **"The Question Beneath Everything"**

**Two curious disciples begin to follow him down the road, and he turns to them and asks:**

**"What are you looking for?" It's a question that continues to echo through the ages, and one that speaks to something deep within us, especially now:**

**Some of us are looking for peace.**

**Some for connection.**

**Some for a reason to keep going.**

**The disciples don't give Jesus a straight answer. Instead, they ask, "Where are you staying?"**

**Which is really another way of saying, "Can we be with you? Can we come closer?" And Jesus replies with three words that hold the power to transform everything:**

**"Come and see."**

**The woman at the well returns to her community and says, "Come and see." And they follow her.**

As our church prepares to celebrate 200 years in Jacksonville, we will be reflecting on the history of our church. In some respects, life has really changed since 1827: modern conveniences, science, medicine, clothing, etc. But some things haven't changed. Families still suffer losses due to health, war, crime, and weather. Two hundred years have passed, and we still have hunger in our community, there are still marginalized people, war victims, displaced individuals and they are all looking for something. Two hundred years have passed and humans being human still find pleasure in the small gifts: a new baby, a bountiful garden, laughing children and friends, the wisdom of those willing to share their lessons, etc. And all those people are looking for a place to belong that can provide what might be missing in their lives.

Let's continue to be a "Come and See Church." **Come and see how we love the poor, the marginalized, the forgotten. Come and see how we give dignity back to those who have lost it, or had it taken. Come and see how we encounter God creatively, courageously, communally. Come and see how we speak for justice, stand for peace, and live generously. Come and see how inclusive we are, because that's how radically inclusive Jesus was.** Come and see not just what we've accomplished in the past 200 years but come and see what we're planning for the future for our church, our families, and our community.

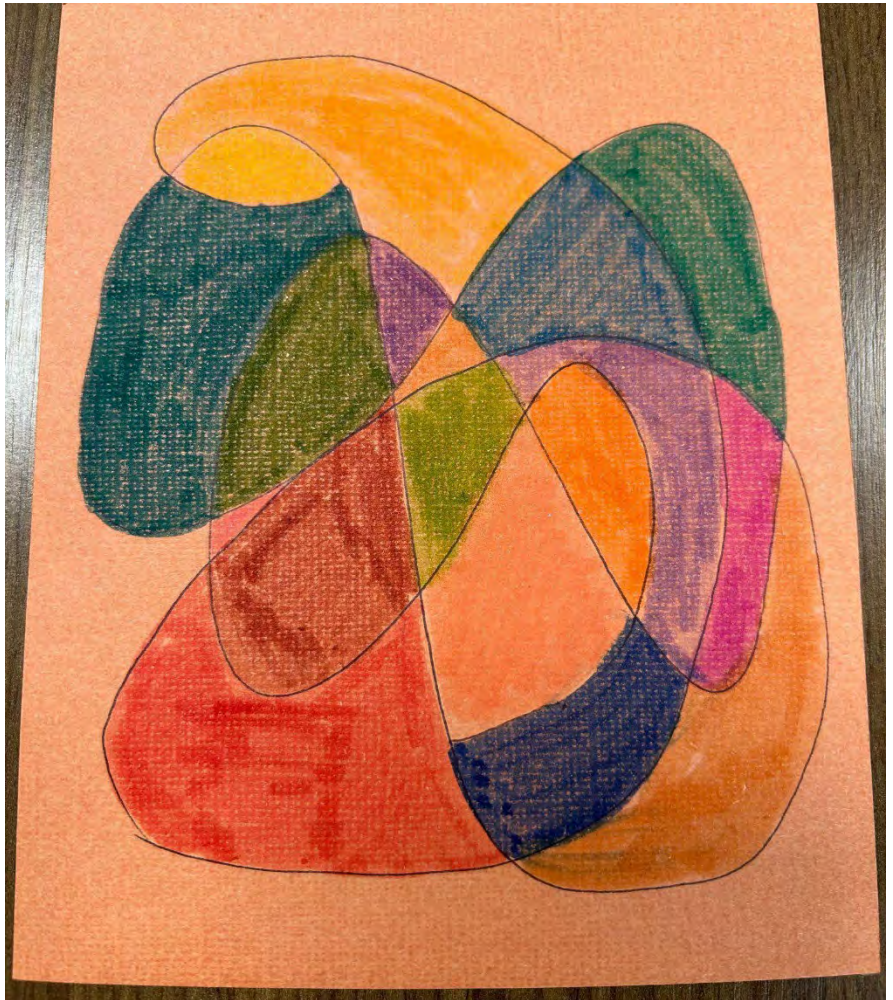
Excerpts from a Rev. Gary Noonan sermon

*Prayer: God, let us be the people that you use to give future generations the gift of love, wisdom, and abundant life. Amen.*

Submitted by Julie Bruninga

Day Ten, Saturday, February 28

One night I decided I wanted to make little gift bags for my parents. I drew my dad a picture and then put it in the bag. When he opened the bag the picture was the first thing he pulled out. He said, "I love the angel!" I said, "What angel?" I was unaware that it really did look like an angel. I thought about how something that you were just intending it to be a couple of lines colored in would turn into something so special and meaningful. Now it is on my dad's shelf in his office.



Scripture tells us that "entertaining strangers may be entertaining angels unaware." Just before Christmas, my parents took me to a Lauren Daigle Christmas concert. The concert just ended, and I went up to the stage to see if I would be able to talk to Lauren a little bit. That didn't happen and I was a little disappointed. We think this guy heard a little of our conversation about it. He came up to us and he gave me his Lauren Daigle ornament that he had received back stage before the show. I was really touched by his generosity. And to this day I still wonder if that man was an angel.

This makes me think about how in life sometimes we see things one way, but God can see it way differently. For example, when we see sadness and disappointment, God sees joy and generosity. Where we see only in black and white, He sees everything in color. What a comfort to know that God sees our past, present, and our future.

*Prayer: Dear God, we are so very grateful that you are always with every single one of us. In the Bible it tells us that "entertaining strangers may be entertaining angels unaware." We know that sometimes we see things so much differently than each other, but we also know that you also see things so much differently than all of us. In your name we pray, AMEN.*

Submitted by Ruth Chipman, age 9

Second Sunday of Lent, March 1

### Grief Study #1: Collateral Gifts

“Winter here is a demanding season--and not everyone appreciates the discipline. It is a season when death’s victory can seem supreme: few creatures stir, plants do not visibly grow, and nature feels like our enemy. And yet the rigors of winter, like the diminishment of autumn, are accompanied by amazing gifts.” - Parker J. Palmer, “Winter” from *Let Your Life Speak*

Many years ago, I remember reading that one of the great gifts of the church is that it teaches us how to grieve. Our lectionary cycle, whether we like it or not, annually carries us through Jesus’ life cycle from birth to life to death to life eternal. If we are intent on following along, there’s no getting out of going through the agony of grief.

In so doing, if we’re willing to let our hearts break, we may be given the gift of good grief. (What a paradox!)

Since my father’s death, I have been buoyed by pockets of community that have taught me how to grieve. One such community is the local Grief Group, led by Rev. Patsy Kelly and Trina Meek. It was there among the broken-hearted that I encountered the phrase “collateral gifts.”

In the negative light, following an accident or military strike, for example, we may speak of collateral damage: unintended harm or destruction.

But what if, in the wake of heart-rending loss, we train our eyes to see “collateral gifts”-- unintended joys, even pleasant surprises or bursts of light, that show up in the darkness of despair?

Opening myself to “collateral gifts,” even “amazing gifts in the rigors of winter,” as Palmer writes, has enlivened my steps through the journey of grief.

*PRAYER: O Lord, the psalmist proclaims of your “spreading the snow like wool and scattering the frost like ashes.” In the season of winter, when nature may feel like an enemy, your presence continues to buoy us, to sustain us, even to gift us in surprising ways. AMEN.*

Submitted by Tim Chipman

Note: The Grief Group gathers on the second and fourth Thursday of each month at 4:45 at the Jacksonville Public Library. For more information and/or to pre-register, email [griefgroup.jax@gmail.com](mailto:griefgroup.jax@gmail.com)

Day Eleven, Monday, March 2

*There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit is the source of them all. There are different kinds of service, but we serve the same Lord. God works in different ways, but it is the same God who does the work in all of us. (1 Corinthians 12:4-6)*

When you accepted Christ, He gave you a spiritual gift. He does that for everyone who accepts Jesus. It may be a talent or ability that you had before becoming a Christian, but God enhances it or opens your eyes to the possibilities of how you can use it for Him. Don't expect to wake up one morning and be a concert pianist if you've never had a lesson. Just pay attention to the things you enjoy doing and that you get positive comments from others about. That could easily be the gift God wants you to use for Him.

Every Christian has a gift to be used for God. All the gifts are from His Holy Spirit, but they are all different. Some are uniquely different, some are slightly different. Some are out front, ministering to the masses. Some are humble, caring for the poor. Some are teaching children, some are social. Some are writing. Some are simply being a friend, sharing conversation over cups of coffee.

All our gifts are being used for the same purpose - serving God. So, yes, your gift is different from others. But it's necessary. It's useful. It's for God's Kingdom.

by Carolyn Larsen,  
as printed in "A Gift of Grace and Gratitude"

*Prayer: Gracious God, as we start a new year, with new church officers, help us all to discover our spiritual gifts and use them in service to you. Amen.*

Submitted by Penny Turner

Day Twelve, Tuesday, March 3

### Lent Reflection

Lent invites us to slow down and take an honest look at our hearts. It is not merely a season of giving things up, but a sacred opportunity to return-to God, to truth, and to humility. God's call in Joel is not about outward performance but inward transformation. He desires our hearts, not our perfection.

Often, we fill our lives with noise, distractions, and self-reliance. Lent gently exposes these habits and asks us to loosen our grip on what pulls us away from God. When we fast, pray, or practice simplicity, we are creating space – space for repentance, space for grace, and space for renewal.

The beauty of Lent is that it does not end in despair. It moves us steadily toward the cross and ultimately toward resurrection. As we return to God with honest hearts, we discover that God has been patiently waiting, ready to restore and renew us.

*Prayer: Gracious God, in this season of Lent, turn our hearts back to You. Reveal what needs to be released and heal what has been wounded. Teach us to walk humbly, to trust deeply, and to love fully. As we journey toward the cross, prepare us for the joy of resurrection. Amen.*

Author unknown

Submitted by Barb Bucy

Day Thirteen, Wednesday, March 4

*But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. (2 Corinthians 9:6)*

In 2005, scientists germinated a date palm seed that was recovered from Herod the Great's palace atop Masada in the Judean wilderness—making it around 2,000 years old. And a 1,300-year-old lotus seed recovered from China was germinated in 1995. These remarkable examples of preservation, however, are more the exception than the rule. Seed companies today don't normally guarantee the viability of their seed for more than a few years.

Lots of things determine the quality of a harvest: the quality of the seed, the number of seeds sown, the quality of the soil, and the amounts of moisture and nutrients provided. The same is true with a spiritual harvest. No farmer would sow haphazardly and expect a beautiful, bountiful harvest. Neither should we, as we sow seeds of good works, financial investments, prayers, studies, service, and worship. We must focus on the quality of our "seeds."

We reap what we sow, whether our actions are harmful or helpful. A wrong word, an immoral activity, an angry look—all these will likely bring negative results. On the other hand, a wise word, a spiritual activity, a smile, a word of witness, a gift, a gospel tract will produce good fruit. God promises that His Word will not return void. (Isaiah 55:11) The principle of the harvest is true in every aspect of our lives – we reap according to what we have sown.

Taken from "Walking With God" by David Jeremiah, Jan. 19-20

*Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for the opportunities you give us to plant good seeds. Guide us to use good words of encouragement, helpfulness, and compassion. Help our activities and thoughts be according to your will for us. Amen.*

Submitted by Cathy Green

Day Fourteen, Thursday, March 5

### **A Gentle Nudge**

*Then I heard a voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I, Send me!" (Isaiah 6:8)*

The song "Here I am Lord" by Dan Schutte has special meaning to me. Especially this part:

"Here I am Lord, Is it I Lord?

I have heard You calling in the night.

I will go Lord, if You lead me.

I will hold Your people in my heart."

This personal story begins in October of 2021, when I made the decision to retire from the State of Illinois after 32 years of service. For several months I had been feeling a gentle nudge to retire. While I loved my job, in ways I felt it was time to leave. Even when I was asked by management to pull my paperwork back and stay, I told my manager that I was feeling it was time to leave.

Late in October, I filed all the paperwork to retire December 31, 2021. Little did I know that the nudge was for a reason.

A mere 14 months later my mother had a severe heart attack and died a few weeks later. During those few weeks I found myself back on the road going to Springfield daily. While I did not hear a voice talking to me, I did feel those gentle nudges to retire. The gentle nudge allowed me to spend an entire year with my mom before she passed. We had many wonderful experiences that year in just staying at home, traveling on a few vacations, or visiting with family in other states. I will be forever grateful for that nudge (and that I acted on it.) I will never forget the quality time I was able to spend with her prior to her death.

*Prayer: Dear God, thank you that you love us. Thank you for gentle nudges. Thank you for being with us in good times and bad. Amen.*

Submitted by Annette Simmons

Day Fifteen, Friday, March 6

## The Garden of Gethsemane

Where do you go when you're overwhelmed and need to talk honestly to God?

After the Last Supper, Jesus retreated to the Garden of Gethsemane at the foot of the Mount of Olives. John's account tells us that "... Jesus had often gone there with his disciples" (John 18:2 NIV). Jesus' disciples accompanied Him to the garden one final time, and Jesus gave them clear instructions to keep watch and pray. Then Jesus walked farther into the garden to cry out to His Father.

He prayed: "Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine" (Luke 22:42, NLT).

Jesus' soul was overwhelmed, and He was in so much agony that His sweat fell to the ground like drops of blood. But through the pain, He continuously prayed: "... My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine" (Matthew 26:39, NLT).

Meanwhile, His disciples kept falling asleep, even after Jesus woke them up multiple times to issue warnings and to urge them to pray. But by the third time He woke up His disciples, Jesus knew that the time had come to face the path God had laid out before Him.

When we face difficulties and suffering, we might be tempted to halt our prayers. Maybe you've even experienced times in your life when you felt like praying was futile. Jesus knew exactly what would happen to Him, but He still pleaded with God to take away suffering. This prayer is an important reminder of how connected Jesus was to His heavenly Father, even when He was wrestling with pain. His prayer in the garden shows us that even though Jesus was fully God, He was also fully human (Colossians 2:9; Philippians 2:6-8) and struggled with suffering just like we do.

The prayer at the Garden of Gethsemane is also a reminder of how important it is to keep our eyes fixed on God in times of deep struggle. Even though Jesus' circumstances didn't change as a result of His prayer, His heart became even more attuned to God's will.

Soon after, Jesus said to His disciples: "Up, let's be going. Look, my betrayer is here!" (Mark 14:42, NLT)

It was time for God's will to be done, just as Jesus had prayed.

Reflection: This devotional spoke to me because one of my favorite hymns is "In the Garden." This hymn was sung at the funerals of my parents per their request. Having grown up on the farm, I can identify with the garden being a tranquil place where we felt close to God's goodness. I can vividly picture Jesus in the garden in prayer and how he was so humanly emotional about his fate to come. When I need to feel close to God in prayer, I find that the outdoors in the beauty of God's creation is where I feel I can speak my heart.

*Prayer: Lord, I thank you that we all have a place where we can feel close to you and seek the answers we need in times of trouble and suffering. I thank you for your example in The Garden of Gethsemane where you seemed very human in your desires and set the example for our seeking Gods grace in prayer. Amen.*

Submitted by Larry Bork

Day Sixteen, Saturday, March 7

## Grief Study #2: Moving With

“Grief does not show you that you have lost the way; grief is the way.” -Shelby Forsythia

One of my favorite names for God is The Way. Our Quaker friends, as they speak of the divine, even drop the “The,” simply speaking of “Way.” Providence moves through our lives when Way opens, and it just as assuredly moves when Way closes. And in every closing, there are hundreds of openings.

My participation in the local Grief Group has reinforced the idea that in the wake of loss, the concept of “moving on” is incomplete at best and downright offensive at worst.

A richer alternative to “moving on” is “moving with.” When we “move with,” note that we do not bury our heads in the sand. Motion, trans-portion, trans-formation, is implied, if not required. But we do not leave our grief behind us like abandoned luggage. No, we move with the grief, we carry it as a companion not as an enemy. We move with the grief as a student moves through (and is moved by) the instruction of a teacher.

Since my father’s death, I often think of the lyrics of a song by Keb’ Mo’: *I can walk, I can talk, I can use my mind*. Simple really. Yet profound. When grief compels me to hunker down under the covers, a gentle voice reminds me that *I can* walk, talk, and use my mind. Way will open. It’s time to *move with*. And, by God’s grace, I can and I do.

What are you *moving with* today? Is it heavy or light or (paradoxically) both or neither?

How is Way shaping you, informing you, directing your steps?

*Prayer: God with us, your word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our paths. As we walk, as we talk, as we use our minds, remind us that these seemingly insignificant occurrences are actually profound gifts from you. You, who moves with us and never abandons us on the way. AMEN.*

Submitted by Tim Chipman

Note: The Grief Group gathers on the second and fourth Thursday of each month at 4:45 at the Jacksonville Public Library. For more information and/or to pre-register, email [griefgroup.jax@gmail.com](mailto:griefgroup.jax@gmail.com)

Third Sunday of Lent, March 8

## **DELIVER ME**

*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. (Matthew 6:13, KJV)*

“Father, temptations are all around us and they can serve as an opportunity for us to choose you over our own selfish interests. Inevitably, we will face temptations, just as Jesus did and everyone else has. Your Word assures us that you provide a way through any temptations without resorting to sin. Sometimes, our only way through is to fall completely on you, and by your grace you have promised that you are always willing to deliver us.

We pray for strength in these moments to lift our eyes off the problem and focus on you. We accept your hand of deliverance! The choice is always ours to say “Yes” to sin or to you. Thank you for never tempting us with evil and always being willing to pull us out of it as well. We will not be overcome because you are on our side.”

[Devotional from 365 Days of Prayers for Couples, Broadstreet Publishing Group 2020, entry for January 9th]

*Our Father in Heaven,*

*Thank you that you are always with us. Please continue to be by our side as we face temptations in this world. Assure us that you will reach out to us, if we only ask. Give us strength and resolve to make you our choice. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen and Amen.*

Submitted by David Tiffany

Day Seventeen, Monday, March 9

## Raising Up Dem Bones

*[The Prophet speaks] "The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD"... So I prophesied as I had been commanded, and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.... I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophecy and say to them: "Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people, and I will bring you back to the land of Israel." (Ezekiel 37:1-4, 7, 10-12)*

When our son was young, he was fascinated by dinosaurs. I think most children go through that period in their lives. Well, his fascination with dinosaurs led to a fascination with bones. When we put him to bed, we would read stories to him. Sometimes from his storybooks and sometimes from the Bible. One night I thought, "he loves to hear about bones. I wonder if I can find a Bible story about bones." Well, sure enough, there is a Bible story about bones. (I have given an abbreviated version above.) The prophet is speaking to a nation in exile who are losing hope of returning to their homeland. Using the image of dry bones scattered on an old battlefield, the prophet offers hope that God can and will raise up a mighty army and they will return to Israel.

Have you ever been in a situation that feels totally hopeless?  
In a place from which you see no escape?

Our God, who raises a great army from old, dry bones, will raise you up as well. God loves you and wants the best for you. When reading the story above, we see the Good News that God has to counteract the old, dry bones. Yes, we see the raising of a new army to return to the land promised to them. But verse 14 is the Grace that comes from God to counteract any and all evil that we face.

*"I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD."*

God's spirit is within us. Us: you and me. God has given us the spirit of grace, love, and hope. As it was written: *"you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD.*

*Prayer: Almighty God, we all are weighed down in times of stress and problems that seem heavier than we can bear. Come to us, raise us up, with your love and grace. Amen.*

Submitted by John Nelson, Pastoral Assistant

Day Eighteen, Tuesday, March 10

*Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise. (Proverbs 17:28)*

We were sitting in a nice local restaurant having a wonderful conversation. Then out of the blue, the speakers started blasting loud music. I asked the server if there was any chance that could be turned down. He said no, it was pre-programmed. I could see the unit on the wall and I knew that wasn't the truth, but I let it drop.

As the music continued patrons in the restaurant began speaking, louder and louder. Within minutes, the entire room was shouting, and it resonated off the walls to a point where my 74-year-old ears could comprehend nothing.

We were sitting watching a beautiful beach and a nearby family reunion decided it was time for music. The sounds of the waves rolling up on the beach completely disappeared. The sounds of children playing could no longer be heard.

After the beach a chartered boat ride took us out into the ocean. Waves were slapping the boat, everyone smiling enjoying the scenery. You guessed it. That didn't last long. The captain turned on the speaker assuming we wanted to hear the latest rap music. Those that know me know I love music. But more than music I love silence.

There are over 80 direct references to silence in the Bible. My favorite "Be still, and know that I am God." (Psalms 46:10)

I don't know when we became so obsessed with noise. I suppose it is the changing times that we must accept. But I so miss silence where I can keep my thoughts in tact and listen to the world around me. I like to speak to God in a moment's notice and hear him respond with what is near me.

*Prayer: Lord lead us to listen to your voice in the wind, in the sounds of children, in the laughter of our friends and family. Help us to be silent and know that you are God. Amen.*

Submitted by Keith Bradbury

Day Nineteen, Wednesday, March 11

## THINK

*And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:17)*

As we begin a new year, I find myself wondering what each of us, just one person among millions can do to bring about positive change where we are and maybe that positive change may spread across the whole planet!

The challenges around us can feel overwhelming, and it's easy to believe that our individual actions don't matter. But Scripture reminds us that every word and every deed matters when they are done in the name of Jesus.

We've all heard the familiar saying, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Yet, in today's world, that principle often gets buried beneath criticism, harsh opinions, and constant judgment. Sadly, many people feel free to judge others based on appearance, beliefs, lifestyle, or mistakes. But Scripture is clear, only the Lord is the true Judge of our character and our future.

So what if, before speaking or acting, more of us paused and applied a simple but powerful filter? Imagine how different our conversations, relationships, and communities could be if we lived by this acronym.

## THINK

T – Is it Truthful?

H – Is it Helpful?

I – Is it Inspiring?

N – Is it Necessary?

K – Is it Kind?

These five questions can transform how we interact with others. Words have tremendous power, they can heal or harm, build up or tear down. When we take a moment to THINK before speaking or acting, we invite Christ to guide our responses rather than reacting from emotion, frustration, or pride.

The best way to turn away from negative thinking isn't simply to suppress it, it's to replace it with something better. One pastor described this as "the explosive power of a new affection." When our hearts are filled with love for Christ, negativity loses its grip. Our focus shifts from criticism to compassion, from judgment to grace.

The Apostle Paul reminds us:

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God... because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” (Romans 5:1-5)

When God’s love fills our hearts, it overflows into our words and actions. Living with purpose, kindness, and gratitude becomes a natural response, not an obligation.

As we move forward into this new year, let us commit to the acronym “THINK” before we speak, act, or judge. In doing so, we honor Christ, reflect His love, and become agents of positive change in a world that desperately needs it.

One thoughtful word, one kind act, one Christ-centered choice at a time and we can make a difference.

*Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, we ask that You calm the storm within each of Your Children across this earthly world. When intrusive thoughts try to take hold, remind us that Your peace is stronger. Help us to focus on Your promises and to trust in Your goodness, even when our minds are restless. Fill our hearts with Your peace, so that each one of us in our life situation may rest in the assurance of Your love and care.*

*Guide us to the still waters where we can find rest and renewal. Let Your peace flow through each of Your Children, quieting the fears and anxieties that try to take root. Help us to meditate on Your Word, allowing it to fill our minds with thoughts of hope, love, and faith.*

*Thank You, Lord, for being our refuge and peace! We trust in You to keep our minds steadfast and at peace, no matter what challenges we may face. We pray in the name of Jesus, Amen!!*

Submitted by Dan Thompson

Day Twenty, Thursday, March 12

During the last few months since Guy's death, I have learned to depend on my faith and listen to the nudges from the Holy Spirit. Many times when I needed a boost, individuals appeared in stores or through calls, texts, or mail. I call these times God Winks. I respond with, "Yes, God, I feel you and know you are there. Thank you."

The following from Words of Encouragement spoke to me.

### **Word of Encouragement**

*Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6:34)*

Sometimes Lord, I admit: my heart gets heavy with what is right in front of me. I want strength for the next ten steps, not just for today. But You remind me: my portion for today is enough. If I bring You all my impatience, my doubts, my insignificant faith, will You meet me here? Let tomorrow be Yours. Today, just give me enough hope to keep my heart steady and enough strength to trust You in what I can't see.

I confess, I often want to be the hero in my own story. But You're the author: You write hope into my unknown chapters. Breathe peace when anxiety tries to take over. Thank You for walking beside me in the mess and the miracle, in my questions and my quiet trust. I may not see what's ahead, but I know Who holds it.

*Prayer: Loving Father,*

*Thank you for always being here. Forgive me for forgetting this at times. Keep sending "winks" to remind me of all I have because of you. Amen.*

Submitted by Alexa Crumley

Day Twenty-One, Friday, March 13

*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of faith produces steadfastness. (James 1:2-3)*

As many of you know, I have three amazing daughters – Allison, Lindsey and Natalie. They gave me a special gift a while back that didn't feel like a gift at the time but ended up being a pretty special one.

I received an email one morning from a company named StoryWorth. Hmmmm. The email explained the gift which was for me to answer questions sent to me via email once a week for the next year! 52 questions! Are you kidding me??!

After some choice words with my daughters, I begrudgingly started with the first question. Soon I was looking forward to each Monday and each new question. I usually would think on it for a couple of days and then answer.

After the year was over, my girls presented me (and they each have a copy also) with my hardbound book *Stories from Mom/Nana/Cynthia*. That's right...I am a published author!! I will share one question and answer below.

### **What has made your faith stronger?**

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 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, 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.

*Prayer: Dear Lord, help us accept all gifts with joy, even the ones that test our faith. Amen.*

Submitted by Cynthia Benton

Day Twenty-Two, Saturday, March 14

## Seeds of His Word

*This is why I speak to them in parables: Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.” (Matthew 13:13-15, Life Application Bible)*

In preparing this meditation I found it enlightening and fulfilling to read the whole chapter of Matthew 13 and would encourage you to also meditate on Matthew chapter 13.

I want to share with you a parable of a parable taught by Jesus in the book of Matthew, Chapter 13. In the last couple of weeks I had found four bird feeders we have had for many years. I also had collected several pieces of old pipe and pipe fittings where I could construct a pole with arms to hang all the bird feeders. I positioned the pole and feeders where I can see the birds come and go. Three of the feeders are similar in shape and size and filled with the same bird seed and one is a tightly woven mesh filled with Niger seed.

After hanging all the feeders, for the first few days no birds came to eat. Then there was one bird which came and began to eat. Over the next few days more birds began to arrive, feeding from the different feeders. It's also interesting to see how they eat from and behave around the feeders. Some fuss and fidget with the others before they will fly away not eating anything or will only eat when all the other birds are chased away. Some are picky eaters eating some seeds and discarding other seeds on the ground. At times several birds will be eating together from the same feeder as well as from the other feeders. Several birds will eat the seed on the ground. I find it interesting that I have had to refill two of the three feeders. The feeder filled with the Niger seed takes time, patience and determination to get the seed through the mesh.

Just as Jesus told the parable of the farmer scattering his seeds, I'm seeing a parallel to the bird feeders, the seed and the birds. God has provided us food for our nourishment through the verses in the bible (seeds). There are many different versions of the bible (feeders). His word is available to all of us (birds). All Christians hopefully read and study the bible in their own way through time to study and meditate (individually). Some Christians read and study the bible in depth to gain a deep understanding of His word (Niger seed and mesh). Group fellowship and Bible study groups afford us the opportunity to share time together by discussing and debating our understanding of His Living Word (eating and reading together). No matter how and when you take time to study His word none of it is wasted so long as we read with open eyes, ears, minds and hearts. Each of us gains our own understanding of His word by the time we allow and the ways in which we prepare. I would love to fully understand the meaning behind every word, phrase and verse in the Bible. I have also found that true understanding and meaning takes time and is granted to us in His time and the time we spend with Him.

*Prayer. Heavenly Father, we are eternally thankful for giving us Your Son as our savior and His teaching which are relevant throughout all time. Of our own free will, may You lead and guide us to set aside time to read and study Your word. You have blessed us with eyes to see, ears to hear, time to be with You, minds to learn and hearts to love. We pray that you open our eyes so we can read and see Your word. Open our ears to hear and be able to receive Your word. Open our minds that we may understand Your word. Open our hearts to keep and show Your word in our actions and deeds. Father, we also give thanks for the people in our lives who share Your word. Pastors, Sunday School Teachers, Bible Study Leaders, choir leaders, musicians and singers, church leaders and others who prepare homilies, lessons and study materials of Your word and make joyful sounds through voice and instruments so we may have opportunities to see, hear, understand and keep Your word every hour of every day. In everything we say and do may it be to glorify You. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

Submitted by George Bengel

Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 15

Jesus is a friend who knows all your faults and still loves you anyway.

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

At a crucial transition time a Christian woman cried out to the Lord despairing over the lack of spiritual power and fruitfulness she was experiencing in her life.

Suddenly she sensed Jesus standing beside her, asking, "May I have the keys to your life?" The experience was so realistic, the woman reached into her pocket and took out a ring of keys.

"Are all the keys here?" the Lord asked. "Yes, except the key to one small room in my life," the woman said. The Lord replied, "If you cannot trust Me in all your rooms in your life, I cannot escape any of the keys." The woman was so overwhelmed at the thought of the Lord moving out of her life altogether, she cried, "Lord...take the keys to all the rooms of my life."

Many of us have rooms we hope no one will ever see. We intend to clean them out someday but "someday" never seems to come. When we invite Jesus into these rooms He will help us to clean them. With him, we will have the courage to throw away all the "junk" and fill the rooms with his love and peace and joy.

Taken from God's Little Devotion Book for Women

Submitted by Debbie Lair

Day Twenty-Three, Monday, March 16

## Grateful

*Be joyful always; pray continuously; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:16)*

Gratitude is the strongest, clearest, most robust and radical when things are really hard.

Gratitude is not a form of passive acceptance or complicity. Rather, it is the capacity to stare doubt, loss, chaos and despair right in the eye and say, "I am still here."

Gratitude is defiance of sorts, the defiance of kindness in the face of anger, of connection in the face of division, and of hope in the face of fear. Gratefulness does not acquiesce to evil-it resists evil...by tunneling under its foundations of anger, resentment and greed. Thus, gratitude strengthens our character and moral resolve, giving each of us the possibility of living peaceably and justly. It untwists knotted hearts, waking us to a new sense of who we are as individuals and in the community. Being thankful is the very essence of what it means to be alive and know that life abundantly.

Gratitude is not a psychological or political panacea, like a secular prosperity gospel, one that denies pain or overlooks injustice, because being grateful does not "fix" anything. Pain, suffering, and injustice-these things are all real. They do not go away. Gratitude however, invalidates the false narrative that these things are the sum total of human existence, that despair is the last word. Gratitude gives us a new story. It opens our eyes to see that every life is, in unique and dignified ways, graced: the lives of the poor, the castoffs, the sick, the jailed, the exiles, the abused, the forgotten as well as those in more comfortable physical circumstances. Your life, My life. We all share the ultimate gift-life itself. Right now... Gratitude calls us to sit together, to imagine the world as a table of hospitality. To feed one another. To feast, to dance in the streets. To know and celebrate abundance.

From Grateful, a devotion written by Diana Butler Bass

*Prayer: To you Lord, be glory and honor for all you have provided. With gratitude we accept these gifts. Help us to celebrate our abundance when things get hard as well as when we prosper. We are most grateful for how You came among us to show us how to live, love and care for each other. Give us the strength to do as you taught, in Jesus name. Amen.*

Submitted by Sue Weikert

Day Twenty-Four, Tuesday, March 17

### Grief Study #3: In All Things

XII

Either we are eternal, with neither end nor beginning, or we are sprung from a single thing and proliferative -- in either case death is not death (though time cannot but give form to suffering). Believe (if you must) as I must:

In all things moment.  
In each thing everything.

-Nam Le, "Elegies," *Poetry*, December 2018

In church, we acknowledge mystery. We even celebrate it. Great is the mystery of faith, we routinely affirm. *Mysterium fidei*. Mystery, inherently, is not a puzzle to be solved. Mystery is not to be traded out for clarity. Prostrating oneself to mystery is to revere all that is holy, that which cannot be rationalized or explained, that which must be experienced.

My involvement in the local Grief Group has guided my practice through grief by teaching me to bow to the mystery of grief and love. What a different response to grief this is than trying to fix it. (Pro tip: you can't.) What a revelation to concede that grief wants to befriend me and accompany me and carry me through.

Either we are eternal, or we're not, writes the poet. Either we bow to that which numbs us or reverently stoop to that which silences our scattershot souls.

O death, where is thy sting? exclaims St. Paul. On one hand, death is the ultimate. On the other hand, what is death but life remixed?

Either we are eternal, or we are sprung from one single thing. And in that single thing, everything.

Great is the mystery of faith! Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.

*PRAYER: Lord, in the mystery of your presence, I am silenced and I am still. How like you to show up with me in this moment! AMEN.*

Submitted by Tim Chipman

Note: The Grief Group gathers on the second and fourth Thursday of each month at 4:45 at the Jacksonville Public Library. For more information and/or to pre-register, email [griefgroup.jax@gmail.com](mailto:griefgroup.jax@gmail.com)

Day Twenty-Five, Wednesday, March 18

*Speak out for those who cannot speak,  
for the rights of all the destitute.*

*Speak out; judge righteously;  
defend the rights of the poor and needy. (Proverbs 31:8-9, NRSVUE)*

Jesus told his disciples, "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow me." The Lenten season is one of preparation for the sacrifice of Christ on the very cross he calls us to take up. His sacrifice, though, did not begin at Golgotha. Nor did it begin in Gethsemane or the Upper Room. Jesus's sacrifice begins with his ministry. It begins with his washing of feet, his healing, and his fellowship with outcasts. By his actions, including his death, Jesus shows us the cross we are to bear in this life. In this Lenten season, we can reflect on the life that led to the cross—a life that proclaims "good news to the poor...liberty to the captives" and "liberty to those who are oppressed." Hopefully that reflection will lead us to action. We may believe that we are saved by faith alone, but surely our faith cannot be separated from action. As we prepare for the death and resurrection of Christ, let us not forget that he first lived a life of action. Whose feet can I wash? What good news can I bring to the poor? Who can I liberate? As we dwell in Scripture these 40 days and reflect on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, let us open our hearts to God so that Jesus himself can tell us what it means to be his disciple.

*Prayer: In this Lenten season, Lord, open my eyes to the world around me. Show me the places where I can do Your work and I will say, "Here I am Lord, lead me and I will go." Fill me with Your love so that I may overflow into others' cups. Amen.*

Submitted by David Albers

Day Twenty-Six, Thursday, March 19

While recently listening to Lauren Daigle's *Rescue*, I thought of those unhoused here in Jacksonville, each with their own story, their basic needs no longer met. The lyrics remind us that God knows each person and each need, and will provide. May we at First Presbyterian respond in love as a part of His rescue plan.

*For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.... The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25:35-36, 40)*

**Rescue** Lauren Daigle (written from God's perspective)

*You are not hidden*

*There's never been a moment*

*You were forgotten*

*You are not hopeless*

*Though you have been broken*

*Your innocence stolen*

***(Bridge) I hear you whisper underneath your breath***

***I hear your SOS, your SOS***

***(Chorus) I will send out an army***

***To find you in the middle of the darkest night***

***It's true, I will rescue you***

*There is no distance*

*That cannot be covered*

*Over and over*

*You're not defenseless*

*I'll be your shelter*

*I'll be your armor*

***(Bridge and Chorus)***

*And I will never stop marching*

*To reach you in the middle of the hardest fight*

*It's true, I will rescue you*

***(Bridge) I hear you whisper underneath your breath***

***I hear you whisper you have nothing left***

***(Chorus repeated 2x)***

Writers: Jason David Ingram, Lauren Daigle Paul Brendon Mabury 7/12/2019

*PRAYER: Dear God, as Jacksonville wrestles with how to help our unhoused adults and children, show us a compassionate way to provide resources of shelter, food, clothing and employment as well as empower them with dignity, hope, and a path towards stability. Help us to be Your hands and feet. Amen.*

Submitted by Diane Enz

Day Twenty-Seven, Friday, March 20

## Life Goes On

*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:21)*

### Reflection:

In times of turbulence and uncertainty, it becomes easy to forget the most fundamental truth: life goes on. The wisdom of God transcends our limited understanding, and the divine purpose outlasts our temporary plans. Yet during seasons of trial—whether personal, communal, or global—we face what Howard Thurman called “the great deception” the belief that despair and disillusion have the final word.

Lent invites us into the wilderness with Jesus, where he confronted temptation and the reality of evil. Like Christ in that barren place, we too must not shrink from understanding how evil operates in our world. Thurman reminds us that evil’s true target is not the destruction of our bodies or possessions, but the corruption of our spirits. When evil moves from without to within—when it conquers our capacity for hope, love of neighbor, and kindness towards all—then the citadel of the human soul is truly laid waste.

But this Lenten season calls us to resistance of a particular kind. Not the resistance of violence or vengeance, but the resistance of persistent faithfulness to “the little graces by which the dignity of our lives is maintained.” Even in darkness, birds still sing. Stars continue their gentle vigil. Hearts are still moved by kind words and gracious deeds. These are not trivial matters but acts of spiritual warfare—ways we refuse to let evil move from without to within.

The path from the wilderness to the cross to the empty tomb teaches us that apparent defeat is never God’s final answer. Our Lenten disciplines—prayer, fasting, service, simplicity—are not about earning God’s favor but about keeping alive our “sensitiveness to the movement of the spirit of God in the quietness of the human heart.” They train us to drink in beauty, clothe our lives with kindness, and overcome the great deception that whispers that hope is foolish and goodness is futile.

As we journey through these forty days, may we attend faithfully to what sustains the dignity and beauty of life, knowing that in doing so, we participate in God’s ongoing work of redemption.

*Prayer: God of wilderness and resurrection, in times when despair threatens to overwhelm us, remind us that life goes on in your eternal purposes. Help us resist the corruption of our spirits by attending faithfully to beauty, kindness, and your quiet presence within us. May we not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with the persistent goodness you have planted in our hearts. Through Christ, who faced the wilderness and emerged victorious. Amen.*

Excerpt adapted from “Life Goes On”; by Howard Thurman, in *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953). Howard Thurman was a Baptist preacher and civil rights reformer. He was a spiritual influence on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (and classmate and friend of King’s father). Significantly, King carried a copy of Thurman’s book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, with him during the Montgomery bus boycott (1955-56).

Submitted by Clayton Spencer

Day Twenty-Eight, Saturday, March 21

*When I was a child, my speech, feelings, and thinking were all those of a child; now that I am an adult, I have no more use for childish ways. (1 Corinthians 3:11, Good News)*

One day when my son, John, was in his pre-school era, he was helping my mom run errands in Jacksonville. They found themselves across from Illinois School for the Visually Impaired, and as any good, retired teacher would, she capitalized on a teachable moment. "That's a school for children who are blind," she told him, using words he could understand.

"Did they try mud?"

It took her a moment, but she remembered a few days earlier they'd talked about Jesus healing the blind man with dirt and spit. "No, John, only Jesus could do that."

Defiantly optimistic and with the confidence of a well-informed three-year-old, John smugly replied, "Well, I'd try mud."

Some would say he had a childlike faith. Recently, I've spent a lot of time in kindergarten, and I can tell you that if you think a "childlike faith" means believing everything you're told, I have six or seven things to tell you about children (sorry, like I said, I've been in kindergarten a lot lately and they're still saying it).

Naturally children do have childish speech, feelings, and thinking, and while it's a quaint notion that if we just have a childlike faith, all will be well, but Jesus didn't really say that. He told us we needed to take the lowly, humble position of a child. Ironically, that requires us to grow up, put others ahead of ourselves, and take the counter-cultural path away from worldly pride and ambition. Putting away childish things is hard work.

John's insistence on the restorative properties of mud was childish, and somewhat stubborn. I'm glad he was (and remains) passionate about helping people, but in that case, his belief was a little misplaced.

Lent is a time for reflecting and repenting as we prepare for Easter. Honestly admitting my shortcomings is humbling, but being an adult, I need to put away childish speech, impulses, and habits. I need to keep the positive aspects of childhood but shed the negative ones.

*Prayer: God, be patient with me as I navigate spiritual adulthood. Show me my blind spots and help me to humbly choose your ways. Amen.*

Submitted by Sally Stock

Fifth Sunday of Lent, March 22

### **A State of Contentment**

With all the turmoil and noise bombarding us from every vantage point, be it in print, in song, in art, on TV or the vast internet; we are being told we are not enough. We need bigger - better - stronger - prettier - smarter - fancier everything!

*“Now Godliness with contentment is great gain. We brought nothing into this world and it is certain we carry nothing out.”* (1 Timothy 6:6,7)

Accepting where we are, what we have, and how God wants us to use it will lead us to that Contentment Paul speaks of. Contentment is being satisfied with what you have and not seeking more.

*“Not that I speak in respect of need, for I have learned, in whatever state I am, there with be content.”* (Philippians 4:11)

The Lord has provided us as He believes we need. It is our responsibility to accept our position and be grateful for what we have. The grass may seem greener on the other side, but it still has to be mowed.

*“Be content with such things as you have but do not forget to do good and to share.”*  
(Hebrews 13:5,16)

No matter how much or little we have, there is someone to share with who needs our help. Share our time, our money, our faith. We must learn to be content and share as He leads us to do His work on earth.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us to find and keep contentment in our hearts as we strive to do Your will. Amen.

Submitted by Nancy Scott

Day Twenty-Nine, Monday, March 23

*"I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth." So God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth." (Genesis 9:15-17, NIV)*



Submitted by Emberlee Suhre, age 7

Day Thirty, Tuesday, March 24

Daily prayers will diminish your cares.

*Evening, morning and noon, I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice. (Psalm 55:17)*

Many children learn to count on their fingers, but a nurse once taught a child to pray “on his fingers”.

This was her method:

Your thumb is the digit nearest to your heart, so pray first for those who are closest to you. Your own needs, of course, should be included, as well as those to your beloved family and friends.

The second finger is the one used for pointing. Pray for those who point you towards the truth, whether at church or school. Pray for your teachers, mentors, pastors and those who inspire your faith.

The third finger is the tallest. Let it stand for the leaders in every sphere of life. Pray for those in authority - both within the body of Christ and those who hold office in various areas of government.

The fourth finger is the weakest as every pianist knows. Let it stand for those who are in trouble and pain, the sick, injured, abused, wounded or hurt.

The little finger is the smallest. Let it stand for those who often go unnoticed including those who suffer abuse and deprivation.

What a simple and wonderful reminder as we pray! What a great tool to use in teaching children how to pray for themselves and others.

Taken from God's Little Devotion Book for Women

Submitted by Debbie Lair

Day Thirty-One, Wednesday, March 25

*My eyes are ever on the Lord. (Psalm 25:15)*

“As our bodies age, one of the first symptoms can be a diminished ability to see. Impaired vision can cause headaches, lead to accidents, and even keep us from driving. But with corrective lenses, many of us can turn back the hands of time and start seeing things clearly again.

Impaired spiritual vision also comes from the wear and tear of time. As we are bombarded with the inevitable disappointments and discouragements of life, we might begin to lose sight of God’s greater purpose for our lives. But there is a way to reverse vision loss.

My theory is love and compassion. When God calls you to a specific place to love others on His behalf – your home, neighborhood, church, workplace, kids’ sports team – you just may find a purpose uniquely designed for you. Choosing to fulfill these purposes keeps us spiritually alive, focused, and maturing. It restores our Sight.

So practice love and compassion rather than dwelling on difficulties, fears, and discouragements – which are like scales or cataracts forming over your spiritual eyes. Jesus gave sight to the blind, and He will give spiritual vision to you.”

From Unshakeable by Christine Caine

*Prayer: Lord, thank You that I can look to You, and keep my heart free of attitudes that form scales over my spiritual eyes. I want the clear vision You offer. Amen.*

Submitted by Cynthia Benton

Day Thirty-Two, Thursday, March 26

## Changed For Good

*Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wrong. (1 Corinthians 13:4-5)*

Last year with the second half of the film version of “Wicked” entitled “Wicked For Good” came out, I found myself drawn to the title song, “For Good.” I found this devotion based on the song and found it to be wonderful. And I agree that this is one of my favorite songs from the musical. This song resonates that no matter how people come into our lives they can always change “For Good.”

“My favorite song in Wicked the Musical is “For Good.” Written by Stephen Schwartz, it is one of the most recognizable songs from the show. It is a heartfelt duet sung by lead characters Elphaba and Glinda near the very end of the show when they are saying goodbye to each other. It truly is a farewell song.

Elphaba is a misunderstood student at Shiz University, born with green skin, for which she is ridiculed her whole life. She is a person who is not hesitant to stand up for what she believes is right. Elphaba is forced to flee Oz, leaving behind a friend that has changed her “for good.” Glinda is a wealthy and popular girl who has always had her way. She despises Elphaba after she accidentally volunteers to be her roommate. But she finds that by living as roommates, Glinda begins to see the good in her, which unearths the good within herself.

Here’s what Stephen Schwartz says about this farewell song. “All the songs I write are my children, which, of course, is a bit of a cliché, but we do try not to play favorites. I’m really proud of “For Good.” I am so proud of how it has come to be used outside the show for everything from graduations to funerals.” He’s quick to add, “I want to give the book writer of Wicked, Winnie Holzman, some credit, because she actually came up with the title. When we were first talking about the final song for Elphaba and Glinda and I was brainstorming with her, and at one point she just said in the conversation, ‘Well, you know, they have had such an impact on one another. Really, they have changed each other for good.’ And I said, ‘I’m hanging up now because that’s one of the best titles for a song I can imagine. Thank you for giving me the title. Now I am going to go write it.’”

We all have people in our lives who have helped to bring about change in us for the better, just as we’ve been able to help bring about change in others. Sometimes change is brought about as a resolution to the strife we have faced, while other times, change comes naturally just by being a friend.

The gift of God’s grace is constant and available at any time. I encourage you to spend some time reflecting on who has helped change your life for good and take the time to express gratitude to them. Let us all remember His grace as we strive to see the best in others and focus on our similarities rather than our differences.”

Written by Marsha Long, Director of Hospitality Ministries – August 19, 2022 – from St. Luke’s Methodist Church, Oklahoma City, OK

*Prayer. Dear God, thank you for letting people into our lives that will change us “For Good.” Amen.*

Submitted by Annette Simmons

Day Thirty-Three, Friday, March 27

### **Letting Go and Looking Forward**

*Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing.*  
(Isaiah 43:18-19)

I am not sure if any of you are like me where you have a tendency to hold on to the past and just can't seem to let it go! No matter how many times I have been told to just release it or have read about it in self-help guides that it's important to just "let it go," I still fall back on my old habits. One of my goals this year is to adhere to some advice I was given. Here's that advice:

Sit in a quiet room, and take a moment to breathe deeply. Remind yourself, the past may hold memories, mistakes, or regrets, but it does not define what your future holds. God's grace meets you right where you are, not where you wish you had been. What is behind you has helped shape you to who you are today, but it does not have the power to stop what God is still creating ahead for you.

Begin today, right now, to choose to release what cannot be changed and place it in the hands of God. Ask Him to show you how to take one small step forward - one goal that is rooted in hope, not fear. Then give the control over to God and TRUST, really TRUST, that as you move ahead, He will guide each and every step you take.

*Prayer: God, help me to let go of the past with grace and walk ahead with purpose. Open my eyes and my heart to the new things You are preparing for me. Amen.*

Submitted by Barb Bucy

Day Thirty-Four, Saturday, March 28

*Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you. (1 Peter 5:7)*

I don't know about you but, for me, the worry and anxiety have been on overdrive lately. It seems that no matter if you are reading or watching local, national, or international news it is all hard to take in. We are inundated with natural disasters and the ways in which people are hurting each other and, for many of us, we have our own personal life stressors we are trying to navigate, as well. At times like these I find myself focused on the worry much more frequently.

A few minutes of free time? Doomscroll through the news. Trouble falling asleep? It's probably because of the worries of the world trying to take up residence in your head as you attempt to unwind. At times like these I realize I am hanging on tighter to things that are truly not within my control. I operate under the belief that if I hold on tight enough, I can control it all. I will be able to make sense of things, and I will know what to expect as outcomes. When I really challenge myself, I know that is not true and I know that it is during the times of heightened anxiety and worry that I need to turn my fears over to God and rely on my faith. In Matthew 6:25 it says, "I tell you not to worry." Easier said than done but if I then turn to the words reflected in 1 Peter, I am reminded of the relationship I have with God. A relationship that not only allows but encourages me to turn all my worries over to Him for He cares about me. When I allow myself to really settle in the words of 1 Peter I can let go of the worries, stop trying to control everything all around me and find some peace in the love and acceptance of my relationship with God.

*Prayer: Dear God, the world can be a difficult and scary place, at times. I find myself carrying a heavy burden of worry and anxiety. Please help to remember of the comfort and peace I can find in my relationship with you. Help me to feel your presence as I navigate my days and help me to remember that I never have to carry my worry alone. Amen.*

Submitted by Jeanne' Hansen Dobson

Palm Sunday, March 29

*LORD my God, I called to you for help, and you healed me. (Psalm 30:2, NIV)*



Submitted by Skylar Suhre, age 9

Day Thirty-Five, Monday of Holy Week, March 30

## Temptation

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil.*  
(Matthew 4:1)

Temptation has two basic meanings in the Scriptures: first, it is God testing our faith to bring us closer to them; second, it is God's enemy attempting to lure us away from God. Temptation can also mean different things to different people. It can mean something different today for each of us than it did years ago. Temptation also has varying degrees of intensity, between people or times in our lives.

I would like you to think of a time when you were tempted to say or do something. It could be something like being tempted to eat that extra dessert or it could be something like not being honest with someone. The first thing to remember is that you are not alone. Temptation has been going on since the beginning of time.

In Genesis (chapter 3) we read about Adam and Eve being tempted to eat of the fruit God told them not to eat. Here, they were in a magnificent garden, and they were told not to eat from this one tree. They gave in to the temptation and ate. Also, in Genesis (chapter 39), Joseph was tempted by the wife of a high ranking official in the Egyptian government, but Joseph resisted.

So, it is with us. We are tempted and sometimes we resist and sometimes we give in. Do you know who else was tempted? Yes, it was Jesus. I have always thought that the devil had some real audacity to tempt Jesus, God's Son. (It was recorded in Matthew 4:1-11.) This is an important story for us to read and understand. Jesus came into our world to not just be like us. Jesus came to be one of us. He was the same flesh and blood that we are. He got hungry and thirsty like we do. He grieved for his friend Lazarus when he died (John 11:1-44). Jesus is as human as we are. Jesus, as God, could resist the devil's very difficult temptations. As for us? God is with us to help us resist the temptations that we can and to forgive us when we cannot resist. In both resistance and failure, God uses temptation to bring us closer to them.

*Prayer: Loving God and Parent to us all, thank you for Jesus who lived as one of us to experience our life's joys and sorrows. We ask for your strength when we face temptations. Help us to resist temptation, but when we fail, we thank you for the forgiveness that awaits us. Amen.*

Submitted by John Nelson, Pastoral Assistant

Day Thirty-Six, Tuesday of Holy Week, March 31

## HE HAS COME TO US

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld His glory. (John 1:14)*

On the early morning of July 20, 2025, our family, with our National Geographic guide, hiked on one of the many unique islands of the Galapagos Islands – this one uninhabited by humans, but filled with amazing life.

All of a sudden, a native blue-footed booby came directly to us (see one of my pictures below) – with a calm curiosity, a gentle flapping of his wings, a cheery-throated greeting. For several minutes this beautiful creature walked among us. Three times our guide said, “This is amazing! He has come to us!”

Truly, it was magical; it was heavenly...because this harbinger of hope came at the exact same time that Bob passed one year ago on this date (7/20/24). With a mixture of smiles and tears, we felt so enveloped in love – God’s love, Bob’s love – a love that dwells among us, a love that never ends.

Throughout the Holy Scriptures we see and hear how God comes – again and again and again. As we continue to hike into this year of 2026, may we intentionally contemplate the continual coming of Christ into our lives, behold the beauty of God’s creation, and live in amazement and gratitude for the signs and wonders of God’s faithfulness and love, knowing HE HAS COME TO US.

On another terrain, Jesus met His disciples to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw Jesus, they worshipped Him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “...Behold, I am with you always...” Matthew 28:20

*“Behold, the dwelling of God is with people. He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them...”*  
Revelation 21:3

*Prayer: Magnificent God who comes to us, may our lives be filled with the spaciousness of love, the quietness of joy, and "the here-ness" of You. Amen.*



Submitted by Janet Chipman

Day Thirty-Seven, Wednesday of Holy Week, April 1

*Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:10)*

We had been married thirteen months during which I was not home at least every fourth night, as well as being gone 8-10 weeks when my ship was at sea. The real challenge lay ahead as the ship was preparing for a six-month deployment to the western Pacific. While some wives went home to family, Mary chose to stay in California where she worked in the advertising department of a nationally known corporation. In September 1959, the USS Kearsarge CVS-33 steamed out to WestPac with 1,800 men and two squadrons of aircraft to shadow Russian submarines.

While several hundred miles from Japan, we were diverted to Nagoya, Japan where a devastating typhoon had wreaked havoc. The city was located inland at the northern end of a large bay. The water was turbulent and carried wrecked boats, large trees, pieces of buildings as well as bodies of humans and animals, forcing us to anchor approximately fifteen miles from land. The helicopters ferried Marines and Hospital Corpsmen into the city, as well as supplies to points of greatest need. Everyone else was doing mundane tasks or watching for dead bodies floating down stream.

Six months later as we neared the end of our deployment, government officials invited the Kearsarge back to acknowledge all the Navy had done. The sea was calm which allowed us to navigate much closer to the city. As a good will gesture the ship had a two-day open house for the Japanese to come aboard.

When an aircraft carrier is moored to a pier, the hanger deck is about 35 feet higher than the waterline. Piers being 8-10 feet above the sea level, dictates the need of an accommodation ladder to board the ship. A very small flat boat about 12 x 20 ft, equipped with a small stair similar to one used to board airplanes was tied to the ladder. A small ferry was used to transport the natives to the ship.

During the afternoon of the second day, a sudden wind squall and the waves generated by the ferry caused the temporary dock to bob up and down like a cork, making it hazardous to step from the ferry to the deck. I was on watch on the Quarter Deck and descended to assist. I was holding the arm of a very small Japanese lady when the line securing the temporary deck parted. I grabbed the ladder with the other hand just as a wave splashed from the side of the ship down over the half dozen people on the dock.

I remember nothing except the diminutive lady had her arms clutched to her chest and eyes closed. No lives were lost and I knew that God was by my side.

Submitted by Merle Fox

Day Thirty-Eight, Maundy Thursday, April 2

*I am the Lord. I have called you in righteousness. I have taken you by the hand and kept you.* (Isaiah 42:6)

...a little story behind the writing of “I, The Lord of Sea and Sky” by Dan Schutte (1918)

Dan Schutte was serving as a Jesuit seminarian and composer at St. Ignatius Loyola Parish in San Francisco. He was asked to write a song for an ordination service - a liturgy focused on the call to priesthood and service. The theme of God’s calling and a human response was central.

The text draws heavily from several biblical narratives:

- Isaiah 6:8 “Then I heard the voices of the Lord saying...Here I am, send me.”
- 1 Samuel 3 The call of young Samuel, who hears God’s voice in the night.
- Exodus imagery ...referenced to freeing the oppressed, feeding the hungry and bringing light to darkness.

What makes the hymn distinctive is its alternating perspective.

The verses are written in the voice of God, speaking promises and calling people to act.

The refrain is the human response, expressing willingness, humility and trust.

Although written for a specific ordination liturgy, the hymn quickly resonated far beyond that context. Its simple melody and deeply personal refrain made it accessible to congregations and it became widely used for ordinations, funerals, confirmations. Over time it became one of the most beloved contemporary hymns in Christian worship. Its enduring power lies in how it invites each singer to place themselves directly into the biblical story of being called - and answering.

The hymn endures because of its deeply personal invitation. It places the singer directly in a moment of being called and asks for an answer. When people sing it, they are responding.

The refrain mirrors how many people actually feel: willing but humble.

“Is It I, Lord” captures both courage and uncertainty in a single question.

From *AI and the Upper Room*

*Prayer: Heavenly Father, I want to follow You, even when the path feels hard or unclear. Give me Your courage when mine runs thin, and Your strength when I feel afraid. Lead me and help me trust where You are taking me. Amen.*

Submitted by Kay Black

Day Thirty-Nine, Good Friday, April 3

### Patience

*“The water receded steadily from the earth. At the end of the hundred and fifty days the waters had gone down, and on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat... After forty days Noah opened the window he had made and sent out a raven... Then he sent out a dove... He waited seven more days... By the twenty-seventh day of the second month the earth was completely dry. Then God said to Noah, “Come out of the ark...” (Genesis 8:3-16)*

In the scriptures of Genesis cited above, Noah is six hundred and one years old when the flood ended. He had already lived more lifetimes than anyone to accomplish the mission God had given to Noah. Even after the end of the flood, Noah had to wait months before he, his family and all the animals could leave the ark. Noah is to me the ultimate example of being patient. Most of us can't wait to exit a car when we get to our destination. You see it at the end of a plane ride, all the people standing up to grab their carry-on only to stand in the aisle of the plane while the ramp is positioned and the door is opened.

I have to admit patience is not one of my stronger virtues. One of the times in my life I have had the least amount of patience is waiting to turn left at an intersection. In the past my impatience has been most prevalent when I'm the second car in line waiting to turn at an intersection. I would see a gap in oncoming traffic and the light is changing to red. I would think why didn't the driver in front of me go? There was plenty of space for both of us to make the turn and we wouldn't be stuck here waiting on another cycle of the traffic lights. In these situations I am trying to insert my will over others and over God's will. When you really think about it, what does the timing cycle of a traffic signal really take; one or two minutes? A blink of an eye compared to the patience Noah had in getting to be able to meet God's mission of building the ark, surviving the flood which lasted 150 days; then waiting months before God told him it was time to leave the ark.

For some time now I have been retraining my thought process from becoming impatient to one of gratitude and thanksgiving. Instead of feeling frustrated, I say a little prayer: “God thank you for showing me times when I need to be patient and remember to put your will before my will.” This change of attitude in looking at delays and obstacles which are always a part of everyone's daily life has had a profound impact on the happiness I experience every day.

In a devotional I recently read the author aligned the patience we have parallels to our faith in God. I have had to ponder on that thought. In reflection it makes perfect sense. The more impatient we are the more we are actually trying to insert our will over God's will in our lives. Let us all keep and expand our faith in God by demonstrating patience when opportunities for patience present themselves.

*Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for providing times in our lives where you are showing us times we need to be patient and need to remember it is Your will we need to follow and not our own. We all struggle with patience. Help us remember to be thankful for the opportunities to remember patience and help us to be Your instruments in demonstrating Your patience to others and ourselves. In Jesus name. Amen.*

Submitted by George Bengel

Day Forty, Saturday of Holy Week, April 4

*Meanwhile, all the people were wailing and mourning for her. “Stop wailing,” Jesus said. “She is not dead but asleep.” They laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. But he took her by the hand and said, “My child, get up!” Her spirit returned, and at once she stood up. (Luke 8:52-55, NIV)*



*Prayer: Just for today, what does it matter, O Lord, if the future is dark? To pray now for tomorrow I am not able. Keep my heart only for today, grant me your light – just for today. Amen.*

attributed to Tereasa of Lisieux

Submitted by Lydia Warren

## Easter Sunday

During Easter, I find myself thinking about my childhood and growing up in a country church with about twelve peers of the same age being raised in that church. Our families were mostly from the towns close to church, but there were several that traveled over 20 miles to attend. I recall attending Sunday School held an hour prior to the church service, Easter service with a sunrise breakfast organized by the church youth, homemade treats served by church volunteers before Sunday School class and now after church, teaching a Pre-K Sunday School class as a high school junior, Wednesday night Confirmation classes, Confirmation Day in our white robes, returning home multiple weekends during college; seeing the faces of my parents and faces of my fellow Confirmands' parents, and the overall feeling of welcome even now as a parent. These memories warm my heart by reminding me of how several Sunday School peers I continue to see when I infrequently visit as an adult. The faces of the remaining Confirmand parents are still as bright and friendly as I remember while others live only in my memory.

While I am grateful for my upbringing in that country church and the family that surrounded me there, I greatly appreciate the new church family here at FPC with the energetic children and "adopted parents" that attend each Sunday. I know these children are absorbing similar experiences as I did at their age, as well as the well-seasoned attendees, and know they are likely to treasure them just as I do.

In Proverbs 22:6 (NIV) it states, "Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it." Our future looks bright here at FPC as I ponder all ages of our "Children of God" ... Kinder Angels, Godly Play and Messy Church have presented a creative way to share God's great news of Jesus. Witnessing the spunky children make their way to the front of the sanctuary to the steps makes my heart happy whether they are doing so for A Time with Children or singing in Kinder Angels. Hearing the babies cooing to their families, the knock of a toy or pencil dropped to the floor, transition to Godly Play, or chatter in the pews between the Kinder Angels members all make me smile. Observing the excitement of the children and pods of conversation during fellowship time after church is further evidence of being shown the way and not turning away from it.

*Dear Lord, thank you for the children here at First Presbyterian and for those that are raising them and teaching them. Continue to guide them in Your ways through music, simple messages, and activities so they will not turn away from You. Amen.*

Submitted by Anita Donoho-Ott

Thank you!

Thank you to everyone that submitted a devotion for our Lenten booklet! We had a great response from many people which allows us to give our church a church family devotion booklet for Lent. I also want to thank the Continuing Education chair, Susan Weikert and the committee – Sally Stock, Janet Chipman John Nelson, Debbie Lair and Sarah Yuska along with our pastor, Jonathan Warren. A BIG thank you to Marsha Nelson for helping with the proof reading, and Lydia Warren for the cover art and Dana Davis who helps with all the work of putting this together for us to enjoy.