

2017 First Presbyterian Church
Lenten Devotional



Lenten Devotional Booklet

2017

First Presbyterian Church ~ Keeping Christ Central

Omaha, NE

fpcomaha.org



First Presbyterian Church

*A Heart for Christ in the
Heart of the City*

As we prepare our hearts for Holy Week and Easter, there are a number of opportunities to be aware of within the community of First Presbyterian Church. We hope you will not only want to be a part of it, but that you will encourage friends and family to join you.

Ash Wednesday Meal Ash Wednesday Service	March 1 5:45 – 6:15 pm 6:30 pm	Dining Room Sanctuary
Wednesday Night Downtown Meal Worship and Communion	March 8 –April 5 5:45 – 6:15 pm 6:30 pm	Dining Room Sanctuary
Palm Sunday Celebrating the Triumphal Entry of our Lord	April 9 10:30 am	Sanctuary
Maundy Thursday <i>Living Last Supper</i> Communion Worship Service	April 13 6:30 pm	Sanctuary
Good Friday Candlelight Service “The Seven Last words of Christ”	April 14 6:30 pm	West Hills Church 3015 S 82nd Ave, Omaha, NE 68124
Easter Morning Celebrating the Resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ: “He Lives!”	April 16 10:30 am	Sanctuary

For more information on any of these call the Church office at 402-345-5383 or visit the website at www.fpcomaha.org



1 Thessalonians 5:16-18: *Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

Prayer is an important part of our spiritual journey, and many prayers are more fervent during this period of Lent. Jesus was our ultimate role model in this as He went to His Father in prayer throughout His brief life on earth. These devotions end with a prayer to help us make that connection each day with God. Our prayer is that each of you deepens your relationship with our Lord and Savior, whose tremendous sacrifice of love is the basis of this Lenten season.

The first devotion in this booklet is for Ash Wednesday, February 10, and the 47 day Lenten season ends on Easter Sunday, March 27. All of these devotions have been written by the worshipping congregation of First Presbyterian Church. We thank each of them for sharing their spiritual writing gift.

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

On the day you read each person's contribution & the associated prayer, please pray also for the devotion writers who made contributions to this booklet.

March 1 Ash Wednesday The Familiar Story

Scripture: Deuteronomy 11: 18-22 *You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.*

Reflection: Over the last few days, Lori and I started to watch an entire movie series that we watched a while ago. What we have found is that there is some enjoyment in settling down on the couch, turning on the movie, and recalling the various characters, plot twists, and drama. We have enjoyed remembering the story as it unfolds and emerges, and there have been several times that we picked up on new aspects of the movies that we had not noticed before. In some cases, watching these movies, knowing the ending, painted a certain scene in an entirely new light, giving it a second meaning as we could see how the overall story gave new meaning to this particular scene.

Lent is like that as well. From the beginning of Lent, on Ash Wednesday, until the triumphant resurrection, we recall the story of Jesus and his ministry. We begin remembering that time when Jesus was in the desert fasting and being tempted, and we continue through the story to the last supper with His disciples, and all the drama that occurred afterward: his arrest, his torture, and finally His death. Now, for most people, the story would have ended there, but Jesus was special, Jesus had come on a mission to beat death, and so we know that even at this darkest time, the story isn't over.

On Easter Morning, we celebrate when the tomb is discovered to be empty, and we find out that Jesus has achieved victory over the grave and sin, and has accomplished the mission He came to do, bringing hope and salvation to a fallen world.

As we hear these passages, we now can do so in light of the resurrection. We see these passages through the lens of the cross and Easter morning, and suddenly passages take on a new meaning. For example, when Jesus spoke of rebuilding the temple in three days, through the lens of the resurrection three days after

his death, we can see that he wasn't talking about the temple of Jerusalem, but rather he was referring to his own resurrection.

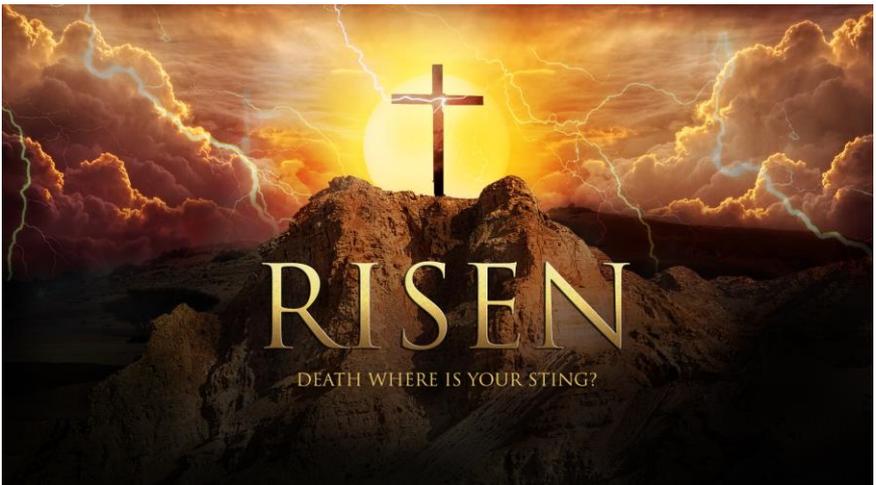
We also see new details as we hear these stories again. By knowing the overall story, new things emerge as we hear the story again, able to focus beyond what the larger narrative is. Instead we might notice details that we had missed before:

- The donkey that was waiting for the triumphant entry;
- Jesus healing Malchus after Peter cut his ear off;
- Pontius Pilate's rejection of the Chief Priest's authority and their request to change the words above Jesus' head on the cross.

This Lent, take the time to hear about Jesus and look for details and stories you may have missed. The story of Jesus is so rich, and so incredible, that something new emerges each time we read and study it. What an incredible opportunity we have to constantly be learning about our Savior!

Prayer: Merciful Lord, be with us these several weeks as we walk towards Calvary with you. May we hear your message in a whole new light, and during the times in our walk with you when your story darkens, may we hold fast to the true light that awaits us at the end, the message and power of your resurrection, and our hope to eternal life. Amen.

Contributed by: Pastor Jon



March 2 The First Thursday in Lent

Katie

Scripture: Proverbs 31: 10-31 *A good wife, who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life. She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands. She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from afar. She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and portions for her maidens. She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong. She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night. She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle. She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy. She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household are clothed in scarlet. She makes bed coverings for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple. Her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land. She makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers sashes to the merchant. Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all." Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.*

Reflection: My mother was a saint and this passage from Proverbs describes her to a "T". My mother was Katie Thissen. On the farm between Neligh and Oakdale, she was the outdoor girl. Her sister, Anna Thissen, was the hearth girl.

Katie often told how she rode two horses at a time, barefoot with one foot on each horse, over the pastures. Anna was a worker inside the house, helping with cooking and cleaning. She was also an expert seamstress.

In 1907, Anna drowned when the horse leading their carriage shied at a bale of wire left on the bridge over the Elkhorn River. Carriage, horse, and both girls entered the water. The hired man had to save Katie to prevent her entering the water to help save Anna.

When Anna died, my mother came to Omaha and took sewing and tailoring lessons with Anna's tools, and became Anna's place in the family, treading her sewing machine and making dresses for the dowagers of Neligh and its surrounds.

This passage fits my mother, Katie Thissen Schmidt. It even describes my dad, as in verse 23, "her husband is known in the gates." Plying the streets of Neligh, Dad became known as the "Sage of Neligh".

On a Monday, while waiting for Daniel Plan friends to arrive, I picked up a pew Bible to get an idea about what to write. The Bible opened to Proverbs 31, long a favorite since my Mother's death in 1985.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, help me to be the mother that Katie was. Bless and watch over our entire family; three sons, eleven grandchildren and eight great grandchildren, as we face our dwindling years.

Contributed by Mary Mahoney

March 3 The First Friday in Lent **Hangin' is any man's business that's around.**

Scripture & quote: *"If we wish to serve God and love our neighbor well, we must manifest our joy in the service we render to Him and them. Let us open wide our hearts. It is joy which invites us. Press forward and fear nothing."* - Katherine Drexel
Proverbs 24:12 *Don't excuse yourself by saying, "Look, we didn't know." For God understands all hearts, and he sees you. He who guards your soul knows you knew. He will repay all people as their actions deserve.*

Reflection: Released in May of 1943, The Ox-Bow Incident opened to reviews which are striking in the consistency of their ambivalence. There could be no denying that it was a great movie, nor could there be any pretense that an audience of that time would enjoy it. In spite of making it on the lowest possible budget, the studio nearly lost money, and never would have made The Ox-Bow Incident if Henry Fonda hadn't been determined to star in it. The eponymous incident is a lynching, and as a teenager in Omaha, Fonda had witnessed the lynching of a black man accused of a crime investigators were certain he had not committed, and the attempted lynching of the mayor, who had told the mob they must not do this thing.

On Friday, September 26th, 1919, Omaha Police arrested William Brown on a charge of rape. Although the County Attorney felt certain that no man as arthritic as Brown could have raped anyone, he charged him with sexual assault, and planned to empanel a grand jury on Monday. On Saturday morning, The Omaha Bee ran a story, more lurid than accurate, under the headline, "Negro Assaults Young Girl While Male Escort Stands by Powerless to Aid Her."

On Sunday, the 28th, William Fonda took his son, Henry, to the print shop he owned, across the street from the courthouse, because there was something he wanted him to see. Henry was puzzled. No one would be working at the shop on a Sunday, so nothing would be happening. But from a second story window, Henry saw everything.

An angry mob proceeding to the courthouse that morning had been peaceably dispersed several times, but each time had regrouped a few minutes later, ever closer to the courthouse. And as they went, word of where they were headed and what they intended spread, so that other groups of similar inclination were on their way to meet them. By three o'clock, the police surrounding the courthouse were themselves surrounded, and vastly outnumbered, but believed themselves to be in control of the situation. By five o'clock, the courthouse and the police protecting it had become engulfed by more than four thousand angry white men. A pair of police attempted to scatter the crowd by flailing vigorously with their night sticks, charging toward the apparent ringleaders. Unintimidated, the crowd charged back, disarming the two and flinging a third through a glass door. From inside, other officers sprayed a fire hose at the crowd, momentarily driving it back, until people from the rear of the mob moved forward, pushing through the wet and confused men in front of them, flinging rocks, and shattering windows. As the first group of police shut off the disappointing fire hose, another group fired their revolvers into an elevator shaft, hoping the sound of gunfire would frighten the mob. It did nothing of the kind.

As the mob began splintering a door to force their way in, the Chief of Police came to a window, asking to address them. In a few minutes, they were calm and listening. He asked them to allow justice to take its course. This was not what they wanted to hear. With renewed frenzy, the mob pressed forward again, overpowering and looting individual policemen before resuming their efforts to smash through the doors.

Inside, police moved prisoners to the fifth floor, then set up a defensive line on the fourth floor, where they intended to hold back the mob or die trying. They held back the mob.

By seven o'clock, members of the mob had brought gasoline, and were pouring it throughout the first and second floors. By eight o'clock, the police had an inferno beneath them, and no way of holding it back. They also had no means of escape. Anyone attempting to flee the building was shot at by several gunmen outside. Firemen arriving on the scene were kept away from the building by the mob.

It was nearly eleven that night when Mayor Ed Smith went out to address the crowd, which now numbered nearly fifteen thousand. He implored them to let the law handle this case, adding that "if you take him from this courthouse, it will be over my dead body." Obliging, someone clubbed the mayor, someone else grabbed him, and in the course of the melée, a rope was put around his neck, then removed as he was rescued and taken to a car which was overturned. He was taken out of the overturned car, and dragged by another rope around his neck to the southwest corner of the courthouse lawn and hoisted on a street lamp. He hanged there momentarily until a car drove through the crowd to reach him, and four or five men managed to cut the rope, get him into the car, and drive him to a hospital.

The fire had now moved to the third floor, where two bottles of formaldehyde were stored. When the heat broke the bottles, the burning formaldehyde rapidly filled the building with toxic fumes. The remaining police moved the prisoners to the roof.

What happened next cannot be confirmed; the least suspect of accounts say the police began attempting to negotiate the release of white prisoners while black prisoners implored Brown to give himself up; if he didn't, they would surely all be lynched, unless they died in the fire.

It was now clear to everyone, particularly to everyone on the roof of the courthouse, that William Brown had no hope of seeing the sun rise. Beyond that, all accounts of the next few minutes are suspect. Everyone on that roof had reasons to say what they said about those few minutes, and no one had anything to gain by telling the truth. All that matters, really, is that when those next few minutes had passed, the mob had William Brown, and he was certainly dead even before they'd taken him the two blocks to the corner of Seventeenth and Dodge, where they hanged his body, and continued to shoot it as it hanged there. It was later taken down, doused in kerosene, and burned. And when it had ceased burning, it was dragged through the streets. The next week, the

rope used to hang and drag him was cut into short pieces, each of which was sold for a dime. (\$1.25 in today's dollars.)

How did this account of a historical incident ninety-eight years old, the defining moment of Henry Fonda's life, the most execrable event in our city's history, find its way into a Lenten devotional? With the approach of Good Friday, we reflect on the crucifixion, and we will find no better reflection of that than this. A mob demanding a death, a civil authority finding no fault in the accused and pleading for justice on his behalf. Everywhere we meet the cross. In our own hometown. At our own doorstep.

Prayer: With confidence, we present ourselves before you. You see the many evils to which we are exposed. Trials and sorrows often depress us. Help us in our distress, grant that we may endure all with love and patience until it be your will to deliver us from all our ills. Amen. Contributed by Stacy Stephens

March 4 The First Saturday in Lent **Knowing God in the Garden**

Scripture: Psalm 46:10

- *Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!* (English Standard Version)
- *Stop your striving and recognize that I am God! I will be exalted over the nations! I will be exalted over the earth!* (NET Bible)
- *Let go [of your concerns]! Then you will know that I am God. I rule the nations. I rule the earth.* (God's Word® Translation)

Reflection: The first Sunday of February, Pastor Jon delivered a sermon on knowing God. He asked us to think of ways in which we came to know God. His words got me to thinking about how I came to know God. Religion was an integral part of my family's life. All five children were baptized. My mother taught us to say our prayers at night as we went to bed, we said grace at meals and went to church. My father taught us to sing Christmas carols. So, we knew God was always around, lurking about to see if we did what we were supposed to and were honest. However, I would say that my personal feelings for God began in a garden. Not at our house, but at our neighbor, Lily's, house.

When I was four Lily gave me a clump of tiger lilies that I planted in our yard. I have taken clumps of Lily's lilies with me



from home to home and planted them in the yards of the various homes in which I have lived. I loved to spend time in Lily's yard. Her gardens were healthy and beautiful. Lily was mostly blind, but she certainly grew beautiful plants. She often invited me to help her while she worked in the garden and easily expressed how God influences growing things and the blessings they are to us. There was a peach tree in Lily's yard, and when I was eight, I made my first pie at Lily's house from

those peaches. Lily was a devout Lutheran and very active in her church. She also cared very much about God's earth. She gardened naturally and even composted in the 1950's, teaching me about the circle of life. Things were different then, not so many pesticides were used, so there were lots of butterflies. I developed a strong love for butterflies that I have to this day. Lily taught me about the Christian implications of the lives of butterflies. I loved knowing this and there are times this knowledge has brought me comfort.

My children all spent time in the garden with me. We would often talk about the miracles there, such as the fact that a whole head of lettuce grows from a seed that is literally a small black speck; and the beauty of the spring tulip that emerges from planting a rather ugly thing that looks like an onion in the fall to sit in the freezing cold ground for months. Several years ago, I carpoled to work with my pastor's wife. Occasionally, on a Monday morning, I would tell her that I had not been in church because God and I had had a nice time in the garden Sunday morning. One year, for my birthday, which is in spring, she and her husband gave me a box of notecards that had the quote from the poem God's Garden by Dorothy Frances Gurney printed on the front, "One is closer to God in a garden than anywhere else on earth." They recognized and appreciated one of my personal ways of knowing God.

The Bible includes many powerful messages about and from gardens. In fact, gardens figure prominently in some of the most important events in both the old and new testaments. I included three versions of the same Bible verse above because they all clearly express ways of knowing God In the garden, where we can

“stop our striving” and recognize and focus on God. I love the hymn, In the Garden, often sung at funerals, which gives me pause, but is beautiful and pretty much expresses my always growing relationship with God. As the prayer for this devotion, I offer the hymn.

Prayer: In the Garden

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

Chorus:

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

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

Chorus

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

Chorus Amen.

Contributed by Merryellen Towey Schulz

March 5 The First Sunday in Lent **God is Big Enough for Questions**

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 9:19 and 22b-23 *Even though I am a free man with no master, I have become a slave to all people to bring many to Christ. . . Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some. I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings.*

Reflection: I heard this scripture in a sermon by Pete Briscoe from TellingTheTruth.com. It stayed with me because it opened my eyes to a better understanding of my purpose in God's plan. The apostle Paul had been called to reach as many as possible by finding common ground, and I have a circle of diverse friends and associates, with whom I've been finding common ground.

Less than a year ago, I was just as ignorant about the depths of our Lord Jesus as any of my non-believing friends are today. I had learned about Him when I was a child, and I believed he was a good man, a teacher who had healed people and performed miracles. But my real knowledge, my saving knowledge, was extremely limited.

When I came back to the church, I struggled to accept Jesus as something more than the good man and miraculous teacher of my childhood. The stronger, more profound words, LORD and Savior, didn't resonate with me. Still, I read the whole Bible, attended Bible studies, and read Bible commentaries, studying and digging deeper. Time and time again, I would go back to the things that I loved, the amazing miracles, the wondrous healing, the inspired teaching, but then I'd arrive at LORD and Savior, the Jesus on the cross, the Jesus in the tomb. Death and resurrection. These concepts were so far removed from my everyday life, they didn't resonate with me and I couldn't understand why they drew so many in. I felt I could just disregard them or read around them, keeping only what I did like. But time and time again those words and concepts kept popping up, I couldn't dodge them. I stepped back, still lost, but Jesus' words rang in my head, "Seek and Ye shall find" (Matt 7:7).



So I sought, a part of me feeling I could expose the absurdity behind those words I just couldn't connect with; I felt I could extract the parts I did connect with and delete the rest. With that, I'd have my own version of the Gospel, one I could accept without feeling confused. But my studies brought me to a very different result; a miracle I hadn't expected. Through reading great commentaries such as William Barclay's Daily Study Bible and St. Athanasius' On the Incarnation, I discovered the cornerstone, and came to a deeper understanding of Christ and his brilliance. That brilliance which now resonates in my heart, soul and mind, and pours out in a glorious golden light from the humble, tarnished brass lamp of my life lived in and for Christ.

My inquisitiveness led me to examine other philosophies and their holy texts, such as the Bhagavad Gita, the Koran, the Tao Te Ching, and even books by Atheists on their belief and disbelief. Anchored in Christ, I discovered intriguing, thought provoking grains of wisdom in these readings. Always, they have pointed me back to Christ, where they are made complete. So, like Jonah, I tried to run from God, I looked for answers in other

places, but He always led me back to His word, and there I found the Ultimate answer. As I continue to seek, I'm always amazed to learn once more that there is no darkness the light cannot penetrate.

Christ won my heart, and became my Lord, and now blesses me with ample opportunity to share the Good News. Enlightened with a better understanding of the mindset which drives my diverse circle of friends and associates, I'm better able to approach them on the topic of God. I'm learning to communicate clearly and compassionately with both the Muslim and the Atheist because I have an understanding of how they came to believe what they believe, and how their belief can point toward Christ, even though they never would have guessed that it might.

Prayer: Dear Lord and Savior, thank you for becoming the New Covenant in which we are free from sin. Continue to turn us into what we ought to be. Let us go into the world and win many to your body. Remind us that there are many ways to accomplish this from simply living a righteous lifestyle to full-fledged evangelism. May we all play our part. Amen.

Contributed by David McBride

March 6 The First Monday in Lent **Find Us Faithful**

Scripture: Matthew 25:21 *His master replied, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"*

Reflection: The choir is rehearsing a song by Jon Mohr. The song contains these words, "After all our hopes and dreams have come and gone; And our children sift thru all we've left behind; May the clues that they discover and the memories they uncover become the light that leads them to the road we each must find. O may all who come behind us find us faithful."

The song made me think of things that have been left to me and what they tell me about the faith of people I never met.



1. A bible with the Inscription “presented to Freddie Grosse by her Momma-December 24, 1863. Freddie was my great-great grandmother. This Bible tells me that in Vaiden, Mississippi, in the middle of the Civil War, my family was trusting in their faith to see them through. My grandmother was only two when she was given this bible.

2. Mr. Weir’s velvet covered photograph album. Rush Weir is not a relative. He loved my great-great aunt, Annie. She did not marry him and predeceased him. The day before he died, Mr. Weir gave my great aunt \$80,000.00 in bearer bonds. The remainder of his fortune went to Ole Miss where several buildings



were built with it including Weir Hall, and to other charitable causes. Mr. Weir’s father was a founding member of the Shongalo Presbyterian Church and among the first Elders elected. My father told me Mr. Weir was a faithful member. He always

made certain the church had the funding it needed, but never gave first. He wanted others to experience the joy of stewardship so he always gave last.

3. A photo from Mr. Weir’s album of an older woman dressed completely in black. The Great Wall of China is behind her. This is a relative who spent her life as a Presbyterian missionary to China. I can’t imagine the challenges she must have faced as a woman missionary in China. The photo is from the 1920’s. I do not know her name, but she was raised by my great uncle in a two-room house with a dog run between the two rooms in Oxford Mississippi. I do not know if she was one of his 8 children or one of the 7 taken in when his sister died leaving 7 children, including my 2-year-old grandfather, orphaned. I know her religious training was at Black Jack Presbyterian Church outside Oxford. I know Black Jack Church was important to my family. When Jim’s 37-year-old cousin was murdered, she was buried from Black Jack. Her grandfather had been a pastor there. Upon returning from the funeral, Stephanie’s Dad sent me many photos reflecting the love my family had for this church and the service they had provided over the many generations of membership.

4. Church organ music. My great aunt, Magdalena, was educated by Julliard’s School of Music in New York. She died just before her 103rd birthday. She offered me her piano, which I could

not accept, and gave me her extensive collection of church music. She had devoted herself to two things-teaching music lessons and serving Shongalo Presbyterian Church. She was the organist and a leader of the Christian Endeavor Society. She also provided a Bible School each year for churches with predominately black membership. I do not believe she ever traveled farther than 100 miles from Vaiden, and yet she provided as much discipleship as people who travel the world.

I hope that what each of us leaves behind demonstrates the kind of devotion to our faith I have discovered in thinking about four items and following the research leads they provide. If the choir had not been rehearsing Mohr's song, I might not ever have thought about what our "stuff" says about us.

Prayer: Lord, please let those who come later find that everything we leave reflects our devotion to Christ. Amen.

Contributed by Mary Wilson

March 7 The First Tuesday in Lent **Revolution or Restoration?**

Scripture: Micah 4: 1-4 *It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it, and many nations shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.*

He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide for strong nations far away; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.

Psalm 90: 3 *A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.*

2 Peter 3: 8-9 *But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

Reflection: I have been listening to a book about the making of the very popular hip-hop Broadway musical, “Hamilton: The Revolution”. I was very surprised to hear that the phrase “the vine and the fig” is included in the lyrics because it was in the favorite scripture of George Washington. I’ve never heard George Washington had a favorite scripture, and I wondered what the prophet Micah might have said about “sitting under the vine and fig tree”, and what it could mean. It turns out that during this period of war and strife, George Washington had a vision of providing a land where



people could live out in the open in their own place of peace, as Micah prophesies in Micah 4:4. George Washington envisioned it occurring during his lifetime, and hoped to be able to help it to come true. I don’t remember ever reading this passage from Micah, but found it to be a great promise.

When Micah made the prediction that President Washington loved, it was about times still to come, for them and for us. A time when the whole world will be at peace. It comes to pass in a world made by the Lord who established the highest of mountains. It’s a time when all the people will flow to the house of the Lord. In the verses that follow this passage, Micah prophesies the Babylonian exile and the return, which have already happened. I love the way the final phrase in this passage is translated in The Message, “The God-of-the-Angel-Armies says so, and he means what he says.” Our hope comes from knowing that the “God-of-the-Angel-Armies” has a plan for peace and in the end, all will worship Him together. God means what He says, and He keeps His word.

We feel so much division and divisiveness in our world. People are afraid and at war, physically and emotionally. We pray to God to do something. Now. However, we are reminded many times in scripture, both in the Old and New Testament, that God's time is not our time. As Peter explains, God isn't slow. He's patient. His patience is so that all can come to follow Him before the end. The time is coming, and we have work to do.

Prayer: Dear Lord, You have always done what You've promised. And You will keep the promise made in Micah too. Help me to do Your work in the world, so that when the time comes, there will be more people who enjoy Your kingdom forever. In this time of division and divisiveness, help me to remember that my hope is in You and that my true home is where You are. Amen.

Contributed by Lori Snyder-Sloan

March 8 The Second Wednesday in Lent
Little bulb full of hope

Scripture: Psalm 62:5 *For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.*

Reflection: This morning as I sat at my dining room table writing and enjoying my cup of coffee, I looked up to see that my amaryllis had finally flowered. During Advent, we unwrapped a gift of Christmas each week, a word – joy, hope, peace, love. When I unwrapped the word Hope, I also showed the children my amaryllis bulb and talked about the hope that one day that funny looking bulb would grow and produce lovely blooms. Hope, that God's people had of the promised Messiah, the love of God becoming flesh and blood. Hope, that we have in Jesus that we will be with God when our life is over. Hope, that we have in the Holy Spirit that God is always with us.

Well, about a week after that I decided I should plant the bulb and see what happens, I don't have a green thumb, so even though it was for Hope, I didn't have a lot of it.



Every now and then I would notice that little bulb sprouting and changing, which would then remind me to water it. Which would then cause it to grow more. This week its blooms began to appear! Beautiful red flowers and I was reminded of HOPE. Hope that my bulb would actually flower had been granted. Hope that we have in the promises of Jesus. As I sat and admired my amaryllis I noticed the shadow it cast across the table and onto the wall behind it, a cross. There in the quiet of the morning, before the busyness of the day got ahold of me, God reminded me of his promise. The shadow of the cross, the hope we cling to, the sacrifice Christ made.

Prayer: God, thank you for HOPE. For the little reminders that you are faithful to keep your promises. For your love, which continues to grow. Help us to live into those promises, to not discard them but to know without a doubt that you are faithful and will keep your promise. May we put our hope in you and nothing else. Amen.

Contributed by Pastor Jenni

March 9 The Second Thursday in Lent **A World of Unrest**

Scripture: Mark 28: 18-20 All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

Reflection: The time of Jesus' betrayal and arrest was a time of unrest. Where anger and judgement was the theme of the day. Many did not know who to trust or believe.

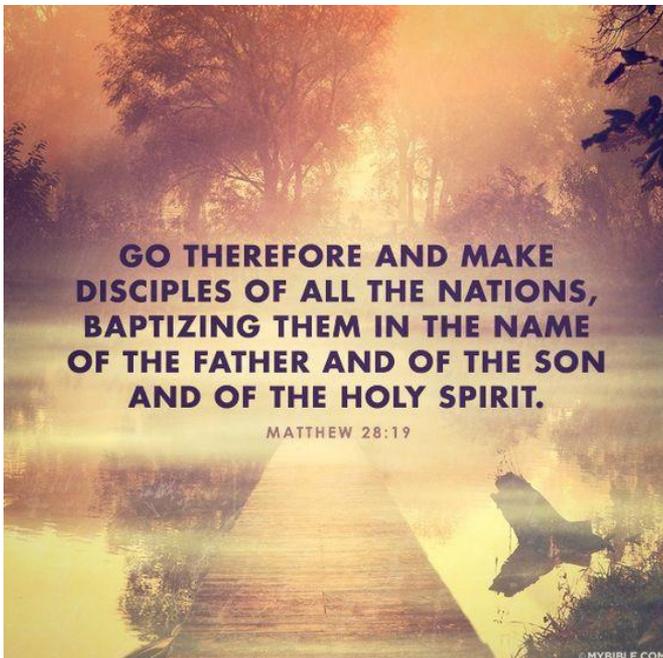
Today, we too see much mistrust and anger. Where violence prevails and at times we feel a great distance from the commandment of "Love thy neighbor." We do not feel this is the reason God gave up his only Son for us. As Presbyterians we are "Easter People"; people who believe in the risen Christ, forgiveness of sins and life eternal.

Our prayers are for all of us to remember what sacrifice was made for us on the cross. That in the Great Commission (Mark 28: 18-20) states; "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” In this Commission are the words “I am with you always” a demonstration that Jesus is the true Immanuel, “God with us” (Heb. 13: 5,6) now and forever. Not just when our world is at peace but even in ages of anger and dissension we are called to find peace and love.

Prayer: (from “Prayers from the Reformed Tradition” Intercession: For Healing within Society) Almighty God, through Jesus your Son you created all things in heaven and on earth; all nations, authorities and powers were created through him and for him. In him all things are held together in unity. Break down the barriers which separate us from each other, and bring peace to the troubled affairs of the world. May divisions be healed. Instill our hearts with the desire for true peace, justice and mercy, that all people everywhere may live with dignity, free from fear of violence; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Contributed by Bonnie and Dennis Brown



March 10 The Second Friday in Lent **Jesus' Resurrection and My Realization**

Scripture: John 13:15 *For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.*

Scripture: Matthew 6:24-27 *No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?*

Reflection: Jesus Died for Us; Do We Live for Him? Put yourself in Jesus' place. Can you imagine what He must have been thinking the night before He was crucified? Although He knew the fate He faced in just a few hours, one of the most important things on his mind was to wash His disciples' feet. Then He told them, "I have given you a model to follow."

We all know that is another way of saying we should imitate Jesus in all our daily activities. We need to listen, really listen, to what Jesus has to say to us. If Jesus is in our heart, if we study His Word, if we trust in Him, we will do the right thing. Since we are believers, we have God's mercy and the Holy Spirit in us forever; no one can take that away! Sit back and REALLY experience the love He has for us. Remember what God has done for you; then count your blessings. As you do this, thank God and the people that come to mind. Can you think of something within the last week when you felt a spirit of gratitude? Not for material things, but for things that draw you closer to God.

We feel so much better when we love and live our faith. God loves us, but He wants us to love Him back with all our heart. He wants us to do His will in the world so we can be happy with Him forever in eternity; our great reward will be waiting. Jesus wants us take care of others; we need to do what Jesus would do in any situation. Some people need food to eat or warm clothes to wear. If we obey Jesus' command, we will use our hearts and hands to serve them and we do it all for God's glory. Some of us need help (I know I do), that's why I believe in God's power to make up for my weaknesses. I have to listen to His Word and be open for a relationship with Him. He wants us to ask questions. I do ask

questions, but I never want to wait for a reply; I think I know the answers and I find out the hard way that I don't. When trouble, anxiety or fear threaten to overwhelm you, turn to Jesus. Confess your fear and ask for His help to trust Him. If you feel you cannot move toward Him, ask Him for that help, too. Then deliberately open your heart to Him.



One of my favorite songs is
“When We Are Living, When We
Are Dying”

The verses make me shiver:
When we are living, it is in Christ
Jesus, and when we're dying it
is in the Lord. Through all our
living we our fruits must give.

Good works of service are for
offering, when we are giving or when receiving, we belong to God.
Mid times of sorrow and in times of pain, when sensing beauty or
in love's embrace, whether we suffer, or sing rejoicing, we belong
to God. Across the wide world we shall always find those who are
crying with no peace of mind, but **WHEN WE HELP THEM, WHEN
WE FEED THEM**, we belong to God.

Another favorite song is “Here I Am, Lord” I have heard my
people cry, my hand will save. I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear my light to them ? Whom shall I send? I have borne
my people's pain, I have wept for love of them, they turn away. I
will break their hearts of stone. Give them hearts for love alone, I
will speak my word to them. Whom shall I send? I will tend the
poor and lame. I will set a feast for them, my hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide till their hearts are satisfied. I will give
My life to them. Whom shall I send?

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.

Jesus says, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If
anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in. One
important thing I have learned is that we can live the worldly way
OR we can live God's way, but we can't do both. I want my future
to be with Him, God will take care of the rest.

Prayer: Jesus, you know we love you and we know God has a
plan for us. We are so grateful for everything you do for us and we
are reminded of your ultimate sacrifice every time we share
communion with you. Amen.

Contributed by Judy Money

March 11 The Second Saturday in Lent
Are you a dog person, or a cat person?

Scripture: Matthew 10:29-31 *Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.*

Colossians 3:12 *As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.*

John 15:13 *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

Reflection: I have noticed that we humans like to divide ourselves bilaterally, assuming that we should fit neatly into one of two categories. For example: Are you left brained, or right? Are you a morning person, or a night person? Do you prefer red licorice (yuck) or black licorice (yummm...)? My favorite is: Are you a dog person, or a cat person?

I recently read a joke about the nature of dogs and cats that not only highlighted the personality differences between the two species, but also struck a chord about how humans interact with the world and its creator. Here's the joke:

A dog looks at its human and thinks: "He feeds me. He loves me. He takes care of my every need. He must be a god!"

A cat looks at its human and thinks: "He feeds me. He loves me. He takes care of my every need. I must be a god!"

The joke hinges on how a dog and cat view their place in the universe. The joke anthropomorphizes dogs and cats a bit (maybe quite a bit), but it also makes me pause and take stock of what it means to be a "dog person" or "cat person". What category do I fit into? Like the dog in the joke, do I recognize that the blessings I enjoy – family, health, security – come not from anything I intrinsically deserve, but because God loves and cares for me. Or am I more like the cat – feeling a sense of entitlement? After all, I was born in a country that is ruled by democratic law and order. I have benefited from the blessings of modern medicine. I have never faced religious discrimination, or racial hatred. I have been protected, provided for, praised and pampered; perhaps to the point of forgetting, or maybe ignoring, that these blessings come not from anything I innately deserve but from the grace of God.

It takes diligence to be thankful for the many blessings of life in the United States. I think it's even more difficult to be humble about the advances in science, technology, medicine and everything else that I enjoy today. Make no mistake; I am very grateful that I landed on planet earth in 1962. I would have been a miserable Neanderthal. I probably would have succumbed to plague in the middle ages; and I don't think hanging out with pilgrims at Plymouth Rock sounds like it was much fun. Through no power of my own, I am alive at a wonderful moment in history; compelled to be grateful for the blessings of the modern world, humbly recognizing they come from God.

That is the crux of the joke about the cat and dog. The dog, feeling cared for and loved, recognizes his master and his own place in the universe. The cat does not recognize his master's benevolence, assuming the love and care he is showered with is his due – expected and deserved. The danger we face living with all the blessings of modern life, is not that they will somehow corrupt us, but that we will forget where the inspiration to create those blessings comes from. In many ways we have become like the cat – thinking we are responsible for it all, we are only enjoying what is due to us.

I have heard well-meaning people bemoan their fate at having to live in “the post-modern era” or the “age of humanism”, somehow equating human achievements with a fall from grace. That attitude is the cat speaking, not recognizing God's gifts in science, technology, medicine, fine arts and literature. The cat attitude assumes progress is accomplished without divine inspiration, blaming advances in modern life for all the trouble in the world. Arrogantly misusing the blessings we have been given, we blame the gift instead of taking responsibility for our actions. We are like a child, who given a wonderful box of crayons, draws on a wall; then blames the crayons when he is caught and scolded.

Now, before I alienate everyone who owns and loves a cat, I must say that I have known many charming ones. Indeed, part of a cat's charm is their attitude of entitlement and superiority. I have lived with several dogs, and have enjoyed the love and adoration that they bestow upon their humans. Both creatures serve as a reflection of what we are like – and what we should strive to be. Although it's comforting to arrange life into neat categories, people rarely fit completely into neat slots. I like to think of myself as grateful and humble; but does my behavior indicate to others that I am? I am blessed in so many ways, it is time to turn the joke on

myself and say: "He feeds me. He loves me. He takes care of my every need. He must be God!"

Prayer: Lord, Jesus told his followers that you care and love your creation so much that you mark even the sparrow's fall. You inspire scientists, doctors, and artists to learn, understand, and create. You loved the world so much you became a man and lived among us. Innocent, you took on our transgressions. Laying down your life as payment for our sins, you defeated death. All that I have is a gift from you. Keep me humble, mindful of my place in the universe, and grateful for all the blessing I enjoy today. Amen.

Submitted by Karen Kroupa

March 12 The Second Sunday in Lent **Looking for Joy During Lent**

Scripture: John 2:1-4 ...*Three days later there was a wedding in the village of Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there. Jesus and his disciples were guests also. When they started running low on wine at the wedding banquet, Jesus' mother told him, 'They're just about out of wine.' Jesus said, 'Is that any of our business, Mother...This isn't my time. Don't push me.' She went ahead anyway...*

Reflection: In my middle years, I discovered Lent was my favorite time of the church calendar. I like the traditions, the quiet reflection that's encouraged, the solemn study of Christ's life and death. However, this year, I admit to a certain dread. The last six months have been difficult: my mom's death, a good friend's and a teaching colleague's deaths, and of, course, the losses in our church family. I am emotionally tired.

Recently I found a ring I lost in my house over a year ago. Mom gave it to me. I told her I had lost it, and every time I saw her after that, she asked if I had found my ring yet. When I did find it, I had a moment of unexpected pure joy.

Later I realized my moments of joy had been fewer lately. Or, probably more accurately, because I let other feelings dominate, I had missed the possibility of joyous moments.



Jesus' first recorded miracle—when He turned water into wine—contains joy. The scene creates a happy story: the community gathered for a wedding, the mother and son together, the humor (we also can empathize with the horror felt) of the hosts running out of wine at a crucial moment. And, for me, a delightful moment is when Mary nags Jesus to do something. He reacts as children may: “Let it go.” He reconsiders and saves the day and not with the “cheap stuff.” (v. 10)

Mary's nagging reminds me of Mom's nagging: “Did you find the ring yet?” It annoyed me every time, of which there were many, but when I did find it, I yelled upward, “I found it, Mom.” I wished I could have called her, but I believe she knows.

You probably have stories from the New Testament that make you smile and even laugh. These stories enable us to further realize Jesus' humanity. Ironically, understanding his humanity makes his journey to the cross and his torturous death all the more tragic.

But understanding Jesus' humanity also allows us to imagine Him laughing along with our moments of joy. God is with us through all of our times of joy and sorrow.

This Lent, I will continue as I have in the past, but I'm resolved to look purposefully for joy—both in the study of Jesus and all around me.

There is so much joy to be had: spring is coming, the cardinals are singing, and early plants will soon be popping through the ground. I can choose to remember Betty Bennet's hearty laugh, Jack Anderson's dry humor, Mom's great nagging talent, carefree times spent with friends. I will recognize my losses and understand there will be more, be comfortable with my emotions which are nearer the surface, and look for the joyous times in Jesus' life. And with that, I don't need to dread the solemn season of Lent.

Prayer: Dear Lord, Be with all who grieve. Help us to understand the wonderful range of emotions you give us and to know you are with us through everything. Help us to savor the extraordinary range of Jesus' life on earth. In your name, Amen.

Contributed by Kathy Stockham

March 13 The Second Monday in Lent **Praying for Those Who Witness**

Scripture: John 15:14-21 *You didn't choose me, remember; I chose you, and put you in the world to bear fruit, fruit that won't spoil. As fruit bearers, whatever you ask the Father in relation to me, he gives you. But remember the root command: Love one another. If you find the godless world is hating you, remember it got its start hating me. If you lived on the world's terms, the world would love you as one of its own. But since I picked you to live on God's terms and no longer on the world's terms, the world is going to hate you. When that happens, remember this: Servants don't get better treatment than their masters. If they beat on me, they will certainly beat on you. If they did what I told them, they will do what you tell them. They are going to do all these things to you because of the way they treated me, because they don't know the One who sent me.*

Reflection: Do you know Andrew Brunson? or Asia Bibi? Maybe you know Petr Jasek or Haile Nayzgi. How about Dr. Assad or Lacheng Ren or Helen Berhane?

The list could go on and on, but these brothers and sisters in Christ share one common experience--they are in prison or completely ostracized from their home and family because of their Christian faith.

Andrew is an American pastor who has served with his wife in Turkey for 23 years, but is now in his 18th week of confinement with 19 other prisoners in a 10-person cell

Asia Bibi, a young wife and mother in Pakistan has been on death row since 2010 for sharing her faith with a co-worker. Petr Jasek, a Czech national who has much experience and training in hospital administration was arrested in Sudan in 2015 along with two Sudanese pastors. Their offense?--helping a young man injured in Darfur during a demonstration. The three men face a potential death sentence.

Haile Nayzgi, a church leader in Eritrea, was arrested in 2004 and remains in prison. Helen Bertrane, a singer from Eritrea was arrested for recording a Christian music album and was imprisoned in a shipping container for two years.

Lacheng Ren is imprisoned for sponsoring a new Christian bookstore in Taiyun, China. Pastor Yang Hua was arrested in China after his church grew too large.

Dr. Assad was a dedicated Muslim in Bangladesh and became an Iman. His study of scripture led to his turning to Christ, which then led to his loss of home, property, wife and children. All is promised to be returned to him if he will renounce Christ. Instead, he is now a medical doctor. His testimony: "I treat the body, but my greater work is the treatment of the soul. Often, I prescribe medicine and include a prescription of Bible reading. My life purpose is to fulfill Jesus' commandment of loving God and others. Please pray for me that I would work for Jesus until my death. If I die for Christ's sake, I am okay because I love Jesus and Jesus loves me."

We need to take the words of Hebrews 13:1-3 to heart: "Let love for your fellow believers continue and be a fixed practice with you (never let it fail). Do not forget or neglect or refuse to extend hospitality to strangers in the brotherhood, being friendly, cordial, and gracious, sharing the comforts of your home and doing your part generously, for through it some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison as if you were their fellow prisoner, and those who are ill-treated, since you also are liable to bodily sufferings. (Amplified Bible)

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the courage and faithfulness of those who are not ashamed of Your gospel and thank you for the many who are coming to know You through their witness. Forgive us for our complacency and reluctance to share Your truth with those around us. Amen.

Contributed by Joyce Reimer

YOU DID NOT
CHOOSE ME,
BUT
I CHOSE YOU
AND APPOINTED YOU
so
that you might go and
BEAR FRUIT-
fruit
THAT WILL LAST...

JOHN 15:16



March 14 The Second Tuesday in Lent Angels Among Us

Scripture: Matthew 28: 5-6 *And the angel answered and said unto the women, "Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay."*

Luke 2: 9-14 *And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, "Fear not; for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger". And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men".*

Reflection: Have you ever questioned people when they state that they truly believe in angels and that they see them working amongst us everyday? I had never had an encounter with angels so I was a little skeptical. Of course I knew that the angels were the first to declare that Christ had been born. One of my favorite Christmas carols is "Angels We Have Heard On High". And I was always mystified by the angels knowing first hand that our crucified Christ had left the tomb and had risen. How could those light as a feather like creatures move a huge rock?

Well as of January 16, 2017, the day of one of our infamous Omaha ice storms, I became a true believer in angels. I fell on my back steps, went up in the air and came down flat on my back on the cement 2 steps below. My head hit the bottom step and 4 staples later (in my head) I am living proof that "someone" or "something" kept me safe. Concussion report - clear, MRI - clear, spine cervical scan - clear, not a headache and no black and blue marks anywhere?????? Psalm 91:11 reads "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways".

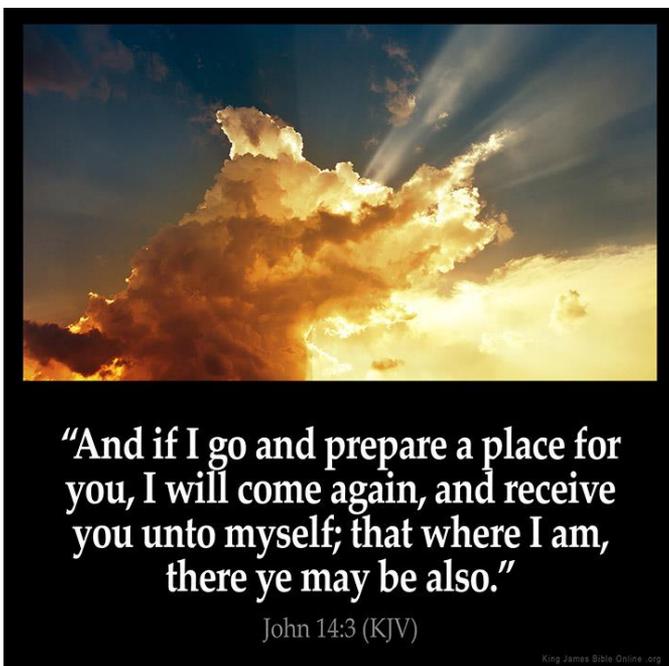
I will let you draw your own conclusions but I am a true believer each and everyone of us has an angel that is on duty 24/7.

Prayer: We are so grateful that you have sent us your angels to guide us and protect us. I am strengthened and encouraged to imagine them with me every day and night. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Contributed by Gloria Stover

March 15 The Third Wednesday in Lent
A Room for Us

Scripture: John 14:1-4c *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.*



Reflection: As we approach the Easter season and have the “Seven Last Words” on Good Friday, I always end up with tears on my cheeks because of the agony Jesus went through to forgive us of our sins. I also put death in a personal perspective of my family. My dad will be gone 17 years this year, my aunt 15 years, and my mother 14 years. This time span also included two dogs, Reggie, my aunt’s dog, and Charlie, our dog. As you can see this is a lot of death in a fairly short period of time.

When my family passed, I tried to find out as much as I could about Heaven. I would go to Parables and read many books about people who have suffered life-altering experiences. The thing is through all my readings, I have never been able to get an answer as to what Heaven is really like. I have many questions:

Will we know our family when we get to Heaven? How will we know our family when the body is here on earth? Is it beautiful with flowers, birds singing, and will dogs be in heaven as well? I know the spirit leaves the person when they pass, as they no longer look quite the same as when they were alive. The spirit has gone with God. It has been said there are no marriages in Heaven. It has been said that previous family members will meet us when we get there. Is this true?

As you can tell, I am very curious about this next phase of the life hereafter especially, I think, because I just got done prearranging my funeral. I didn't think doing this would again bring a few tears, but it did as I was looking at the finality of my life. Am I in a hurry to find out what Heaven is like? No, but I will go when God takes me. I just hope that God has prepared a room for me, and if I am lucky enough, that I will again recognize my family. Thanks be to God.

Prayer: Dear Lord, Thank you for going through the hideous torture and agony of your death on the cross so that you may forgive our sins. Please be with us each day to guide us so that our words and actions are pleasing to You. Amen.

Contributed by Joyce Prohaska

March 16 The Third Thursday in Lent **Lesson in a Question**

Scripture: Galatians 5:22-23 *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control; against such things there is no law.*

Reflection: It often surprises me what my students happen to pick up during their school day. I have been checked by telling a student to take something to the school secretary, only to have them ask, "what's a secretary?" The office is then my response.

Working in a Dual Language School with 93% that are Mexican has been a challenge. We in America seem to think that they come to our country knowing the ins and outs of our society, language, customs, etc.

Well the children don't. I see their eyes opened to all the wonder and joy that learning something new can bring.

The other day Kevin T. looked at my wall by my desk and saw an old bulletin cover that I had put up. He wanted to know what it said.

I read the scripture passage about the Fruit of the Spirit. I just told him that's the way I tried to live my life. He asked me what a couple of the words meant that were unfamiliar. His response was "Oh, that's good." and he went on his merry way.

Who knows whether I planted a seed or just made sense at the time. Hopefully he can see these in the way I treat my classes. It's an ongoing path that will never be done until we see Christ face to face.

Prayer: Lord God, you are the source of all our strength. Make us good witnesses to others. It doesn't hurt to plant seeds of kindness where we go and touch those who may be different than ourselves. Keep this nation a place where we welcome the tired, poor and disenfranchised. Let your love guide us. Amen.

Contributed by Lindsey McKee



But the fruit of the Spirit is

love, joy, peace,

patience,

kindness, goodness,

faithfulness, gentleness,

self-control;

against such things there is no law.

Galatians 5:22-23

March 17 The Third Friday in Lent When You Don't Feel Like It

Scripture: Psalm 119:89-96 *Your word, Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens. Your faithfulness continues through all generations; you established the earth, and it endures. Your laws endure to this day, for all things serve you. If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction. I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have preserved my life. Save me, for I am yours; I have sought out your precepts. The wicked are waiting to destroy me, but I will ponder your statutes.*

Reflection: Have you ever felt like staying on the “back burner” when it comes to nurturing your faith and doing anything extra for your church? I have recently experienced some of those feelings, and I don't like it when I do. In fact, I feel like I should be doing more, but I don't have the “gumption” or the energy to overcome how I sometimes feel.



I recently read a devotion that addressed these feelings. It says, “We all struggle with spiritual discouragement and lethargy. Some days our circumstances threaten to overwhelm us, and we struggle just to pray. Many times we just don't feel like doing the things we know we should. For one reason or another, God sometimes seems far off and unreachable.”

The writer continues by saying “David faced times like these in his life. The Psalms are filled with verses that express his despair

and feeling of abandonment. Yet the Psalms also give us the key to living victoriously during the dark periods of life, as in Psalm 119: *“My circumstances or feeling have not changed God. He is the same God today as He was when He hung the stars in the sky, led the Israelites through the Red Sea, and fed the five thousand. All things, even the things affecting me right now, are God’s servants, designed to help and bless me spiritually.*

“Recalling God’s faithfulness and control over everything that touches us gives us strength to walk with God even when we feel like giving up in despair. So, the next time you feel spiritually drained or inadequate, remember, you have a choice. You can wrap yourself up in excuses and self-pity, or you can choose to draw your strength from an unchanging God.”

Wow! Words I needed to hear on the day I read it!

Prayer: Lord, even when we feel discouraged and apathetic, let us seek you for courage and strength to help us through those times we feel alone. Amen. Contributed by Susan Bay

March 18 The Third Saturday in Lent **Locus of Authenticity/Identity**

Scripture: II Tim. 3:16-17 *All scripture is inspired by God [God-breathed] and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work .*

Jud. 21:25 *In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*

Rom. 7:22-8:1 *For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, But I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me a captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!-- So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.--There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*

Reflection: I used the singular "locus" in the title to introduce the topic, but for most of us, a plural "loci" might be more descriptive. Consciously and subconsciously, we are likely look to various locations for authenticity and identity--family, clan, genealogy, faith connection, school, occupation, social class, city, state, nation, political party or public personality, to name just a few.

Along with these more "external" loci are more "internal" loci such as personal insight, emotions, impulses, needs, talents and "gifts," strengths and weaknesses, and various other personal attributes. External loci can be internalized. Internal loci can be expressed externally and thus influence others. Almost of necessity, there are inconsistencies, conflicts, even competitions amongst loci. Individuals and groups will try to prioritize the various loci to resolve the situation, but this is never entirely successful. Even so, for groups and, perhaps, individuals, there can be periods of relative stability, punctuated by often difficult times of reassessment and transition.

I recall my college years of the late 1960's and early 1970's as being in the midst of one of those transition times for much of our society. It has often been characterized as a "generation gap."

Traditional loci, particularly external ones, and institutions that supported them, came under wide suspicion, perhaps because of large social issues such as civil rights and the Viet Nam conflict. There was much searching for a new synthesis of loci, often prioritizing internal loci over external, but with some reaction to this as well. Numerous commentators have held that mainline Protestant denominations, such as our PC(USA), never fully recovered from or successfully addressed these transitions. Further conflicts and transitions have come along since.

On a grander scale, J. Galtung, T. Heiestad, and E. Rudeng, in their article "On the Last 2,500 Years in Western History: and Some Remarks on the Coming 500" (Chapter XII in XIII: Companion Volume of The New Cambridge Modern History, ed. by Peter Burke, 1979, Cambridge University Press) outline what they see as structural trends in Western civilization, from an individualist, actor-oriented antiquity; to a collectivist, structure-oriented middle ages; to our individualist, actor-oriented modernity; to a possible, postulated collectivist, structure-oriented post-modern era.

Where then should we, as children of our modern/post-modern era, but also as people of Christian faith, turn in our search for authenticity and truth, both for our own sakes and also as the foundation for our identities? How do we then communicate with a wider world that may have little knowledge of or interest in a God who may well challenge its loci of authenticity and identity? The Scriptures that have come down to us from antiquity as the word of God by way of divinely inspired prophets and apostles testify to the difficulties and challenges to those who would identify themselves as people of God. For us, on the one hand, the Scriptures begin as something external, and a challenge, to us as

individuals, to our various communities, and to our modern/post-modern era. Yet it also testifies to the power of God to encompass and transform every aspect of our inner being, through the work of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, providing us with a new internal foundation and locus of authenticity and identity.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, in this time of preparation for Holy Week and Easter, open our hearts and minds to Your transforming power, that we might be more authentic and faithful witnesses to Your glory and the joy of Your salvation. Amen.

Contributed by Alan R. Reinartz



March 19 The Third Sunday in Lent
Do Justice, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly with Thy God

Scripture: Micah 6:8 *He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?*

Reflection:

What does the Lord require of you?

1. What does the Lord require of you?

What does the Lord require of you?

2. Justice, kindness,

walk humbly with your God.

3. To seek justice, and love kindness,

and walk humbly with your God.

The words used in the hymn is a paraphrase of the scripture, Micah 6:8.

According to the Glory to God hymnal, the verse highlights the legal, ethical and covenantal requirements of religion, intertwining the scripture to magnify the commitment of believers.

I became familiar with this hymn many years ago, when my family traveled to Synod School at Buena Vista College in Storm Lake, Iowa. This yearly pilgrimage was memorable for us and included my nieces and in-laws. As a family, we joined other Presbyterians in a weeklong immersion of learning, teaching and celebrating God's love. It was a commitment, we made to ourselves, to get in the zone (so to speak) leaving all else behind and communing with a larger religious community.

One year when we were in attendance, we had the opportunity to meet and worship with Jim and Jean Strathdee who are the authors of this simple, but awe-inspiring hymn. They led our nightly worship service in song and dance. For this hymn, they divided the attendees into three sections, each section sang a verse repeatedly as did the other two sections. It was powerful to hear we were one voice among many. Have you ever sung a hymn that you didn't want to end? That's the impact this hymn had on me.

We are reminded daily, in all we, as Christians, say and do, to act justly, mercifully towards all and to walk humbly with our God.

Prayer: Lord, in our daily walk, remind us what is good; to act justly, love mercy and to walk humbly with You. Amen.

Contributed by Greg Caddy

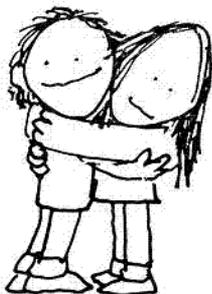


March 20 The Third Monday in Lent

What is love? How do we show it?

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

1 Corinthians 13: 4-7, 13 *Love is patient, Love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*



Reflection: Love comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Often it comes as a surprise. We love the newborn, whether it is a child, cat, dog, ferret and other newborns. We receive a gift from a loved one. We “love” the gift, but we love the giver more. We receive the gift of Grace and Love from our Lord Jesus Christ, but do we thank Him for the Grace he bestows on us? How do we share our love for him?

Often we take the Grace and Love from God for granted or don't even realize that we are on the receiving end of His Grace. Let us share with others what He has granted us. Love can be a kind word to a stranger or as simple as letting someone in line ahead of us at the grocery store. To help someone across the street; shovel a walk for someone; share your garden produce with others; help with Scouts; help with the food pantry, are more ways we can share our Love with others. Let us never forget the gift of Grace and Love from God. After all, He died on the cross for our sins, it is the least we can do for him.

Prayer: Dear Lord, let us always be mindful of your gifts to us. Remind us to Love people, not things. Help us to show your Grace and Love to all we meet and come in contact with. We pray this prayer to you who taught us how to pray. Amen



Contributed by Arline Oliver

March 22 The Fourth Wednesday in Lent
Searching

Scripture: Luke 11:9 *And I tell you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.*

Reflection: A Sunday School teacher asked her students: "Where does God live?" Expecting an answer like "In Heaven!" she was surprised when one student replied: "He lives in our bathroom!" Inquiring why the child would give such an answer the student went on to explain: "Every morning my Mom pounds on our

bathroom door and says, 'My God! Are you still in there?'"

Surprisingly this is the wonderment and mystery of the seasons at hand-Lent and Easter! God can and will be found in the most unexpected of places-in heaven-on a cross-in a tomb-in daily bread and cup- perhaps even in your bathroom! Certainly in your life!

The challenge of the days at hand is always to "seek and you shall find"! (Luke 11:9). Where does your God live? Where will you find Him?



Prayer: "Great and good God, give us pure hearts that we may see you, humble hearts that we may hear you, hearts of love that we may serve you, hearts of faith that we may live in you, reverent hearts that we may worship you, here and in the world out there, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

(Prayer by Dag Hammarskjöld – 1905-1961 – taken from Book of Common Worship.)

Contributed by Rev. William Dean Osick

March 23 The Fourth Thursday in Lent **Our Guide in Change and Challenge**

Scripture: Romans 8: 35-39 *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Reflection: I was asked to participate in the Lenten Devotional for 2017. It has always been difficult to put my thoughts and feelings into words. Then I found something Max wrote just before he died in 2014. I would like to share it again and add to his thought:

"Four years ago I was given the opportunity to speak to the congregation of First Presbyterian. I told that changes and sad occurrences had caused me to move to Omaha and transfer to First Presbyterian.

First Church soon became home, something that Omaha would never be. I told the congregation that their outpouring of caring and compassion was more than any other I had experienced. That was what sold me on First becoming my church family. Little did I know what would occur in the last two years and almost four months that would affect my family and further strengthen my bond with my church family.

September 2012, my son James passed. I would have given anything if I could have traded places with James. January 2014, brought another change when I was diagnosed with lung cancer. I don't know where I would be without the prayers of my friends, family and church family.

October 2013, Linda and I decided to have her mother Teddy come live with us. Teddy transferred her church membership to First and has been warmly welcomed by all. Teddy has had some health issues and received many prayers from church members.

Natastia, my oldest grandchild went to Europe this past summer and received support from several church members.

Some people have asked if I have ever wondered why all these things have happened to me and my family. When asked that I am always reminded of a song that Kris Kristofferson wrote. The first

line goes something like this, "What have I ever done to deserve even one of these blessings I know. Why me, Lord Jesus".

As a member of First I was given the opportunity to serve on the PNC. We hired a young man who I have seen grow in confidence and ability in all aspects of his duties. I have worked with Jon a lot in his time here; we have always teased each other. I have experienced a bond with Jon that I never had with any other pastor. The blessing of church family and the bond with Jon is something that I will cherish my whole life.

In summation let me state that First Church has given me and my family more Love and support than we ever could ask for. We have truly been blessed by our Church family.

With my deepest heartfelt appreciation and love"

Max

After we lost our son, James, then Max passed away, November 5, 2014, after he had just finished this letter. Then I lost my mother on, February 20, 2015. My family, my church family and God were with me. They were very supportive, caring, and loving, and my rock. I'm very proud of my beautiful and wonderful daughter and two lovely granddaughters. I'm very blessed to have them in my life. Natastia will be beginning a new challenge in her life with college and we will be there to support her along with God.

More changes and challenges are ahead of each and every one of us, but we will have God there to guide us. Amen.

Contributed by Linda Hooker



March 24 The Fourth Friday in Lent **An Attitude of Gratitude**

Scripture: Psalm 95:2 – *Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving.*

1 Chronicles 16:34 – *Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His loving kindness is everlasting.*

Psalm 92:1 – *It is good to give thanks to the Lord and to sing praises to Thy Name, O Most High.*

Psalm 100:4 – *Enter His gates with Thanksgiving and His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him, bless His Holy Name.*

Reflection: Everyone reading this devotional has been given a multitude of gifts and blessings by God. The variety of these gifts and blessings can fall in many different categories. Some of these areas might include: physical health, family, friends and relationships; faith and spiritual strength; financial standing; and material possessions. This is not an all-inclusive list of areas of God's possible blessings for us, but it does cover a lot of them.

It is easy to look around and see people who seem to have been blessed more than we have in some fashion; and to possibly be resentful, jealous, envious of whatever others might seem to have. I believe God wants us to be thankful for what He has given us and not begrudge what we don't have.

I believe we need to have an "Attitude of Gratitude" and daily dwell on the positive things we do have in our lives, and to be thankful for those things.

Daily, I try to look for the good in my world. It could be being thankful for my miraculous body – eyes that see, heart that beats, lungs and organs that function, hands that work, etc. It could be being thankful for a warm bed to sleep in, a roof over my head, a place to call home. (There are millions/billions? of folks in our world that don't have these things.) Hungry? I can go to the fridge or cupboard or drive thru McDonald's whenever I want. Thirsty? Turn on the faucet for clean, pure water. Warren Buffett has said if we are born in the United States, we have already won the lottery. I believe that, and am thankful for the great blessing of living in this country. I am regularly thankful for family and friends and what they mean in my life. I am thankful for my faith, the Bible-based preaching of our pastors and the wonderful fellowship we have here at First Presbyterian Church.

I find my day is better when I dwell on the things in my life to be thankful for and then thank God for them. To be content with what He has given me has a profound bearing on my peace of mind. I recommend an "Attitude of Gratitude" for everyone!

Prayer: Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:18)

Contributed by Tom Helligso



March 25 The Fourth Saturday in Lent
Let the word go forth from this time and place

Scripture: Exodus 17:9-13 *So Moses said to Joshua, "Choose some men for us, and tomorrow go out and engage Amalek in battle. I will be standing on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." Joshua did as Moses told him: he engaged Amalek in battle while Moses, Aaron, and Hur climbed to the top of the hill. As long as Moses kept his hands raised up, Israel had the better of the fight, but when he let his hands rest, Amalek had the better of the fight. Moses' hands, however, grew tired; so they took a rock and put it under him and he sat on it. Meanwhile Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side and one on the other, so that his hands remained steady until sunset. And Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the sword.*

Reflection: In a previous century, when I was a teenager in a fundamentalist congregation, our pastor spoke about the Church of the Four Buddies. Annie, Avery, Noah, and Sam. When something needed to be done, Avery Buddy asked if Sam Buddy could do it, and Sam Buddy would say that Annie Buddy could do it.

But who finally did whatever needed to be done? That's right. Noah Buddy. And just imagine if Noah Buddy had been there, instead of Aaron and Hur, when Moses needed someone to keep his weary hands lifted.

I remember reading another story at about that same time. My Dad subscribed to Readers' Digest and my brother subscribed to Boys' Life, so I'm not sure if it was a Drama in Real Life or a Scout in Action. But someone at a beach had gone out too far, and was in trouble. So the lifeguard swam out. People at the dock had noticed, and were waiting when the lifeguard brought the swimmer in, and pulled him up and were attending to him, but hadn't noticed that the lifeguard was now exhausted, too, and unable to pull himself out of the water. The real hero that day was a boy who had been crippled by polio. He pulled himself out of his wheelchair and dragged himself to the edge of the dock, reached down to the lifeguard, and pulled him out of the water. Yeah, that boy had never thought of himself as somebody special, but he certainly wasn't a nobody.

All we know about Hur, really, is that he would become the grandfather of Caleb. Aaron was a key player throughout the book of Exodus, something of a right-hand man to Moses, and all Hur did was stand opposite Aaron on the other side of Moses. But when it came time to park Moses on a rock and support his hand until Joshua won the victory, Hur certainly wasn't a nobody.

Although very few of us can remember January, 1961, I'm fairly certain all of us remember hearing the phrase, "ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country." Of course, Kennedy had lifted that catchy phrase from the headmaster of his grammar school, and now I'm taking it a little further, suggesting that you think of what being a part of this congregation has done for you, and ask yourself, during this season of introspection, what you could begin doing for, and as a part of, your congregation.

Normally, these devotional readings conclude with a prayer, but this time, I'll end with the final paragraph of that inaugural address, and ask you to add your own heartfelt "amen" to it.

"Finally, whether you are citizens of America or, ask of us the same high standards of strength and sacrifice which we ask of you. With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own. "

Contributed by Stacy Stephens

March 26 The Fourth Sunday in Lent
Giving up something besides chocolate for Lent

19 things you might consider giving up this Lent and beyond:

1. Fear: God is on my side. In Him I am more than a conqueror. (See Romans 98)
2. The need to please everyone: I can't please everyone anyway. There is only one I need to strive to please.
3. Envy: I am blessed. My value is not found in my possessions, but in my relationship with my Heavenly Father.
4. Impatience: God's timing is the perfect timing.
5. Sense of entitlement: The world does not owe me anything. God does not owe me anything. I live in humility and grace.
6. Bitterness and Resentment: The only person I am hurting by holding onto these is myself.
7. Blame: I am not going to pass the buck. I will take responsibility for my actions.
8. Gossip and Negativity: I will put the best construction on everything when it comes to other people. I will also minimize my contact with people who are negative and toxic and bring other people down.
9. Comparison: I have my own unique contribution to make and there is no one else like me.
10. Fear of failure: You don't succeed without experiencing failure. Just make sure you fall forward.
11. A spirit of poverty: Believe with God that there is always more than enough and never a lack.
12. Feelings of unworthiness: You are fearfully and wonderfully made by your creator. (see Psalm 139)
13. Doubt: Believe God has a plan for you that is beyond anything you could imagine. The future is brighter than you could ever realize.
14. Self-pity: God comforts us in our sorrow so that we can comfort others with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.
15. Retirement: As long as you are still breathing, you are here for a reason. You have a purpose to influence others for Christ. That does not come to an end until the day we die.
16. Excuses: A wise man once said, if you need an excuse, any excuse will do.
17. Lack of counsel: Wise decisions are rarely made in a vacuum.
18. Pride: Blessed are the humble.
19. Worry: God is in control and worrying will not help

March 27 The Fourth Monday in Lent

The fruit of the Spirit isJoy!

"I've got joy like a fountain, I've got joy like a fountain,
I've got joy like a fountain in my soul.
I've got joy like a fountain, I've got joy like a fountain,
I've got joy like a fountain in my soul."

Traditional American lyrics and tune

I wanted to write a devotional about 'joy', as it feels like we could all use some. Here's one path:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, **joy**, peace, patience, kindness, goodness faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Galatians 5:22-23

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 2 Corinthians 3:17

You were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather serve one another in love. ...
"Love your neighbor as yourself." Galatians 5:13-14

"Who is my neighbor?" asked an expert in the law. Jesus responded by telling the story of The Good Samaritan and concluded by asking the lawyer, "Which of these was the neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The lawyer answered, "The one who had mercy on the man." Jesus replied, "Go and do likewise." from Luke 10:29-37

Carry each other's burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. Galatians 6:2

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Galatians 6:7

A harvest? Like crop of fruit?? "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Galatians 5:22-23

Dear Lord of joy, open our eyes to opportunities for serving others in your name, and so experience your joy. Amen.

Submitted by Amy Rodie

March 28 The Fourth Tuesday in Lent
The Meaning of Passover: Changed for Us

Scripture: Exodus 12: 13-14: *The blood shall be a sign for you, upon the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall fall upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt. This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as an ordinance for ever.*

Matthew 18 and 26-28: *He said, "Go into the city to such a one, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, My time is at hand; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'" ...Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*

Reflection: Wikipedia tells us "The Jewish people celebrate Passover as a commemoration of their liberation by God from slavery in Egypt and their freedom as a nation under the leadership of Moses. It commemorates the story of the Exodus ... in which the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt." Key symbols in the Passover story are the blood on the doorposts, and the unleavened bread used by the Jews as they fled Egypt so quickly they left their leavening behind. They celebrate being passed over by death and gaining freedom from the Egyptians. When Christ celebrated the Passover feast with his disciples, he gave new meaning to the symbols of the feast. The bread was broken as his body soon would be and he told his disciples the bread was his body. He took a cup of wine and changed our image of the Passover blood of a lamb to His blood that would be shed for us, saying "this is my blood".

The Passover feast of the Jew becomes our communion. The unleavened bread representing flight and freedom becomes the body of our Lord and Savior. The lamb's blood, represented by wine, becomes the blood of Jesus, shed to give us forgiveness of our sins. The bread and wine, taken together, become tokens of our forgiveness and a promise that we will join Christ in heaven and have everlasting life.

Prayer: Father, help me always to remember the body broken and the blood shed to give me forgiveness and everlasting life. Amen.

Contributed by Don Swanson

March 29 The Fourth Wednesday in Lent
Inner Peace

Scripture: Proverbs 14: 29-31 *A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones. He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.*

Reflection: “If we stop looking for occasions to be offended, we can be at peace with ourselves and our circumstances. When you encounter someone saying things that you find inappropriate, or when you know they’re wrong, forget your need to be right and instead say ‘you’re right about that!’”

“These words will end the potential conflict and free you from being offended. Your desire is to be peaceful, not to be right, hurt, angry or resentful. If you have enough faith in your beliefs, you’ll find that it’s impossible to be offended by the beliefs and conduct of others. You won’t know God unless you’re at peace because God is peace.” My reflection was taken from the book, 10 Secrets for Success and Inner Peace, by Dr. Wayne Dyer.



We are living in difficult times and I often find myself feeling uncomfortable because I don’t like conflict. I need to remember that being right is not my goal. I thank God for the many blessings we have and continue to strive for inner peace. To find inner peace, we must release old resentments and be able to forgive, as Jesus did when he was being crucified. When Jesus was on the cross being crucified he said “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing”. Luke 23: 34

Prayer: Heavenly Father, as we look to the celebration of Easter, a time when Jesus died for our sins, guide us to turn our lives to Christ and experience the inner peace that comes from forgiveness and acceptance. Amen.

Contributed by Jeanene Gustafson

March 30 The Fourth Thursday in Lent What is Caesar's?

Scripture: Mark 12:13-17 *Then they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to trap him with his own words. When they came they said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are truthful and do not court anyone's favor, because you show no partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?" But he saw through their hypocrisy and said to them, "Why are you testing me? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." So they brought one, and he said to them, "Whose image is this, and whose inscription?" They replied, "Caesar's." Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were utterly amazed at him.*



Reflection: At the time of his death, on January 13, 1922, Joseph Hopkins Millard, in whose memory our Millard Hall was named, was our city's oldest banker, both in terms of his age, which was 85, and years in the profession. His first banking job was as a cashier at the Omaha National, which his brother Ezra had founded. He would later become president of the Omaha National, after founding a bank in Virginia City, Montana, as well as the South Omaha National Bank. He was a founder of the Omaha and Northwestern Railroad, and served as director of the Union Pacific Railroad for fifteen years. He had also been Mayor of Omaha in 1871, serving for one year, and had been chosen by the Nebraska Legislature to represent our state in the United States Senate as an eleventh-hour compromise candidate in what newspapers of the day (March 28, 1901) described as one of the most bitter fights our legislature had ever seen. Debate had lasted three months, and Congress was already in session. His wife, Caroline, had passed away on January 3rd of that year, and her absence very likely figured into his willingness to accept an appointment which would keep him away from Omaha much of the time.

His term in the Senate would be wholly unremarkable if he had not presented a report in favor of President Roosevelt's preference for a lock system in the Panama Canal.

In May of 1914, he donated \$12,000 for an organ in memory of his wife. This new organ was dedicated on March 13, 1917. The previous organ had been sold, along with all the pews, when First Presbyterian had moved from 17th & Dodge. In 1970, when FPC acquired the organ currently in use, the Millard Memorial organ was sold to The Gospel Tabernacle.

Joseph Hopkins Millard was born in Ontario, Canada, on April 20, 1836, and his parents moved the family to Jackson County, Iowa, when he was fourteen years old. Yes, he was another of those immigrants we've heard so much about lately. After two years as a clerk in Dubuque, he began working for himself as a real estate agent in Omaha. Prior to the homestead act of 1862, settlers in the American West had to purchase their land at \$1.25 an acre. Adjusting for inflation, the cost of a sixty-acre homestead would be the equivalent of \$2000 today. As a professional arranging the sale of farmland to new arrivals in Eastern Nebraska, he literally made it his business to welcome immigrants.

Prayer: Lord, grant us the wisdom and discernment to recognize which things are Caesar's and which are yours. Let us remember always everyone, whether Senator, banker, realtor, or immigrant, who made your church what it is now and what it will be tomorrow.

Contributed by Stacy Stephens

March 31 The Fourth Friday in Lent **Take Others to Christ**

Scripture: Mark 9: 16-29 *And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able." And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me." And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes."*

Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

Psalms 103: 1, 6-8 Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!... The LORD works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Reflection: Many things are broken in this world, and many good people are upset by injustice, cruelty, and suffering. I've noticed that in many instances this awareness of injustice and cruelty then leads good people to become angry, cruel, and unjust to other people – lashing out with accusations and name-calling, and a



spiral of anger, cruelty, and injustice perpetuates. It makes my heart so sad. I have to admit that BOTH the injustice AND the anger make me angry too. I see many places in the Psalms where the Lord's wonderful ways are extolled, and His ways look quite

different from ours: merciful, gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. As Christ's disciple, I want to be more like God than like the angry mob, but I also know I am to be Christ's hands and feet in the world. How can I do both? In my despair about this, I cried out to the Lord, and in one week was led to both these passages – through a sermon and in my wonderful Bible study class.

I was privileged to be able to hear the Stated Clerk of the PCUSA preach at our church, using the passage from Mark, above. He used the passage to point out that Scripture teaches us not to lean on our own ways, for they are faulty – both as individuals and as the Church. This passage teaches us that the faithful pray and take others to Christ, and Christ heals. Through Christ, we can make things happen that we can't do through our own power, or by our own ways.

One of my favorite passages of Scripture is helpful to me here, *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil.”* (Proverbs 3: 5-7). So when I find myself becoming angry at either the injustice OR the anger, I pray to God in trust and ask to become more like Him: merciful, gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Does it always work? No, but God isn't finished with me yet.

Prayer: Lord of my life, please make me more like you - merciful, gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love - and through this to bring more people to you. For you, alone, can solve the problems this world faces. So many are hurting; so many are angry. You died and rose again so that we could be restored to you and reconciled to one another. Yet we throw that away in our anger. Please reach down to this hurting world that needs Your love, and help us to reach up as well. Amen.

Contributed by Lori Snyder-Sloan



April 1 The Fourth Saturday in Lent Becoming God-powered



Scripture: 1 Timothy 4:4-5 *Since everything God created is good, we should not reject any of it but receive it with thanks. For we know it is made acceptable by the word of God and prayer.*

Reflection: As I learn the Christian calendar, I enjoy getting a deeper understanding of our many traditions. While studying the history of Lent, I found this interesting article www.churchyear.net/lent.html which explains that Lent has its roots in Jesus' wilderness fast. That's one of the reasons why Lent is a season where people give something up. Yet Christians as a whole, particularly Protestants, really aren't dogmatic about it, or even very strict. I think this is great! Meaningful worship comes from the heart, not from compulsion. While this season of Lent instills in us a desire for self-improvement, we must remember that our true aim should be to improve our relationship with God. If our focus is merely to improve ourselves, or to appear righteous in the eyes of others, then we might be doing the right things for the wrong reasons.

In Matthew 6:31-33 Jesus tells us: *"So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need."*

Does the idea of fasting or "giving up" cause you some worry? Then you might be approaching it wrong, you might be depending on your own power to overcome the desires. With that in mind, let's experience this Lenten season with a renewed mindset, let's choose to give up our self-will and allow ourselves to become God-powered rather than self-powered.

Let's draw closer to God and allow Him direct us. When we feel our desirous temptations arise, let us pray, "lead me not into temptation," and ask Jesus to fill us with the power of the Holy Spirit. In that mindset, when we fail, we won't have to beat ourselves up. We know that all of us fall short of the Glory of God, yet are forgiven, and accepted by grace. When we need reassurance, we will open the Word of God and be encouraged by chapters like Romans 13, where verse 17 tells us "For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

Prayer: Dear Jesus, as we give ourselves up to you, we come to you in thanksgiving for teaching us that it's okay to be imperfect. Thank you for freeing us from all the rules and regulations that just fill us with worry and fear. Instead, you taught us that by seeking God above everything else we will be satisfied. Once satisfied by You, our lives naturally become righteous and we begin to smile at our failures because your Spirit lives in us and radiates joy.

Contributed by David McBride

April 2 The Fourth Sunday in Lent **Impossible Dreams**

Scripture: Galatians 6: 1-2 *My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*

Reflection: "It is not the responsibility of knights errant to discover whether the afflicted, the enchained and the oppressed whom they encounter on the road are reduced to these circumstances and suffer this distress for their vices, or for their virtues: the knight's sole responsibility is to succor them as people in need, having eyes only for their sufferings, not for their misdeeds." — Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, Don Quixote

My 13-year old son Sean has reached the age when I have become an embarrassment to be endured, instead of the pillar of wisdom and the safe-harbor of his young existence. I had heard that every child reaches this onerous stage but Sean had not shown any signs of it until the last few months. His speech has recently become peppered with: "I'm too old for you to come to swim practice.";

“Why do you walk so close to me?”; “I’m trying to keep a low profile.”; “Don’t sing so loud”; “DON’T EMBARRASS ME!” Of course, my counter to all this is to threaten to be as embarrassing as possible, whenever I have the chance. My son is convinced that someday his mother will stand up in the stands at a swim meet and start twerking. As gratifying as it may be to be able to spontaneously jump up in a crowd and gyrate like Beyoncé, I think I would either throw my back out or lose my balance and tumble down the bleachers. Most days I limit my embarrassing behavior to merely existing within 20 feet of my son; and to singing.

Admittedly, I am a mediocre singer (at best) but I love singing. My favorite songs to sing are the Broadway musical tunes I grew up listening to. Now, whenever I think Sean needs a little dose of an embarrassing mom, I burst out into “Oklahoma”, “Singing in the Rain”, “Here come the Jets”, “Aquarius”...I have quite an extensive repertoire. One of my favorite songs that really fits into my limited vocal range and performance ability is from “Man of La Mancha”: “The Impossible Dream”. For those not familiar with this musical, it’s an adaptation of Cervantes’ novel, Don Quixote. Don Quixote is a masterpiece on many levels. Credited by some as being the first modern novel, it is one of the first examples of social/economic commentary. The allegory was not lost on the Court of the Spanish Inquisition. It was held in suspicion by more conservative factions of the church because the main character, Don Quixote rejects the norms of acceptable society. The elderly nobleman having gone insane from reading too many stories of chivalry and knighthood, turns his back on his social position and embarks on a quest to right the wrongs of the world. Along the way, he embraces the socially unacceptable and exposes the hypocrisy of the socially elite. Sound familiar?

The lyrics of “The Impossible Dream” reflect the desire to strive to make the world a better place; to battle evil, even while recognizing human limitations. The lyrics speak about the imperfect person reaching for perfection by helping others. Powerful lyrics like “To be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause” should be enough to inspire the most complacent among us. But do they? They closely echo themes found in the New Testament, but after 2000 years, it seems like many still turn a deaf ear to the needs of the oppressed and compromised. I confess, it is much, much easier for me to belt out a rendition of “The Impossible Dream”, or to turn a page in the Bible and read in Philippians 2:4: “Do not merely look out for your own personal interest, but also for the interests of others.”, than to actually “Run where the brave dare not go”.

Lent is often observed by giving up something in recognition of Jesus fasting in the wilderness before making the ultimate sacrifice to redeem humankind. I am not sure where or when that tradition started but as I have grown older, I am beginning to think it has no true significance for most people today. I give up chocolate for a few weeks and think somehow it helps me understand the sacrifice of Christ? I don't think so. Jesus literally devoted his life to saving people. I believe the sacrifice he desires from me is more than a dietary restriction I would benefit from anyway. The sacrifice Jesus desires is support for my fellow human beings and good stewardship of the world. It's much more of a sacrifice to give aid to an immigrant family, support switching to clean energy, or write to government representatives to advocate for fair and inclusive laws. It is a frightening prospect to put my personal interest on the line and would be an impossible endeavor, an unreachable star, except for the grace of God.

Prayer: Lord, this Lenten season, as I prepare myself for the celebration of Easter, help me see those in need who are so often invisible. Help me listen to voices that are so often unheard because of the shouting of the powerful or popular. Give me the courage to do what I can to give hope to others, even when it requires more than is in my nature to give. Amen.

The Impossible Dream

To dream the impossible dream
To fight the unbeatable foe
To bear with unbearable sorrow
To run where the brave dare not go
To right the unrightable wrong
To love pure and chaste from afar
To try when your arms are too weary
To reach the unreachable star
This is my quest
To follow that star
No matter how hopeless
No matter how far
To fight for the right
Without question or pause
To be willing to march into Hell
For a heavenly cause
And I know if I'll only be true
To this glorious quest

That my heart will lie peaceful and calm
When I'm laid to my rest
And the world will be better for this
That one man, scorned and covered with scars
Still strove with his last ounce of courage
To reach the unreachable star

music by Mitch Leigh and lyrics by Joe Darion
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Contributed by Karen Kroupa



April 3 The Fifth Monday in Lent **Dies Irae Revisited**

Scripture: Matthew 7:1 *Do not judge, or you too will be judged.*
James 1:19-22 *My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Therefore...humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.*

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

Reflection: Last night, Mary and I went to an orchestra concert that featured the music of a composer who, for many years, was tormented by a bureaucracy of music critics appointed to judge the political and patriotic “correctness” of the music he wrote. The penalty for failing to live up to the fickle standards of the governmental bureaucracy could result in the banishment, or even the disappearance and untimely death of the composer. At times, it was difficult for him to write at all, not knowing whether his next performance could be his last.

This despotism affected all aspects of Soviet life, not just the composition of music or the visual or performing arts, but all aspects of living: sports and recreation, acts of humanity, judgments of work or religious acts performed within the empire. Even the practice of any form of religious practice was subject to governmental scrutiny, and many churches were closed or converted to government warehouses. Any human activity one could imagine was yoked with its own government bureaucracy and affected by its own definition of what served the interests of the regime as being patriotically or politically correct.

It is unimaginable to live so many years under this type of repression and fear, or even the threat of this degree of repression (even in a democracy), and maintain one's focus and demeanor. Yet Dmitri Shostakovich pressed on, under a horrible dictatorship, focusing on his music, single-mindedly avoiding the controversies and the politics of his day, hoping for a day in which he could create music freely and express himself musically, as he wished.

The capabilities of the Romans did not allow Jesus and his followers to be monitored so closely as people in the current era, but Jesus and his followers each realized that one false move (even inadvertently) could result in the terrible punishment of crucifixion.

Similarly, the practices and atrocities of the Romans as occupiers of Palestine and as agents of repression led to great anger and the zealotry of many of Jesus' friends and disciples. Eventually all the apostles are thought to have been executed, usually by crucifixion.

James' advice to press on, and be slow to anger is as wise in our day as it was with Shostakovich, or with the followers of Jesus in those earlier times. But James realizes that anger can take over people's lives, and leads to practices that can overwhelm righteousness in God's eyes.

There is much anger in America today. You need only to turn on the television or radio to see the angrily biased reporting of the news each day. American anger is expressed in whispers and shouting, conversations and often in political demonstrations, and in our increasingly disgusting election campaigns.

The danger is as James expressed it: the increasing loss of what is righteous in the sight of God, or to slip or fail to follow the "word" of our Lord. The taming of what makes one angry is not always so easy, especially when triggered by outrageous events. For the Russians during the communist era, they would quietly tell little jokes with those they trusted, to mock the Stalin regime. Yevgeny Yevtushenko wrote a little poem called "Humor", which Shostakovich set in his 13th Symphony ("Babi Yar"), after Stalin died, to ridicule the excesses of the Stalin regime.



We can use reasonable humor, but we especially need the help of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the remembrance and following of his word.

Prayer: Dear Lord, Bless our lives with the music of our interests and pastimes, and chase away all the noise of the conflicts among us. Be in our lives at all times, and help us to deal with our challenges as Jesus dealt with his. Give us the wisdom to replace our anger with the peace of your truth and understanding, the willingness to forgive others regardless of their faults, and to be clean in spirit, and to revere you most of all. In the name of the father, the son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Contributed by Jim Wilson

April 4 The Fifth Tuesday in Lent Expectation

Scripture: Luke 8:40 *Now when Jesus returned, a crowd welcomed him, for they were all expecting him.*

Reflection: Expectation can bring many emotions to us; excitement, dread and anxiety are just a few. Our daughter Nicola is expecting a child. As I write this devotion, I know she will deliver a little girl tomorrow morning. I am so excited to meet this new addition to our family. With 3 older brothers this little girl will either be a tomboy who can hold her own in any situation, or she will be a little princess spoiled by all the members of the family. This expectation of our future is exciting to all of us, but of course carries concerns and worry for Nicola as she goes into surgery for her C-section.



Life here on Earth as a Christian is a bit like that. We have many expectations in life. Our expectations start with small things like finding friends, doing well in school, security of a home to live in, food to eat, people to look up to, such as

parents that are responsible and who will take care of us and love us. As we grow older, some of those expectations remain, but we add to them things like finding a mate to share our lives with, children, and ultimately grandchildren, happiness, health and a house. None of us has the same expectations in life which in part is what makes each of us unique.

Expectations can be reasonable or they can be unrealistic. It is good to have expectations of doing well in school, but if we only focus on the grades, we lose sight of the most important part of school, which is to learn lifelong skills.

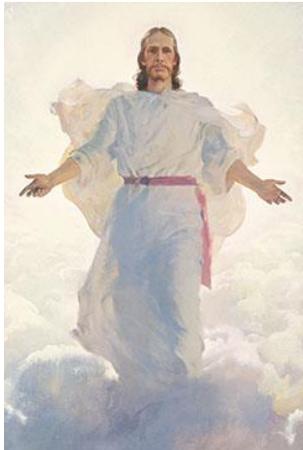
As a Christian my greatest expectation is life after death with our Savior Jesus Christ. That expectation comes with the knowledge that Christ died a very painful and humiliating death on the cross to save me from every sin I make in my life. I am so humbled by that knowledge.

God loves me so much he gave his only Son to pay for my sins. I can't imagine sacrificing one of my own children to help save anyone else. My motherly instinct would kick in and I would protect them to my own death. How could God give up his only Son for me who doesn't deserve saving. It is because I am human and selfish and God is loving, kind and full of grace. It again changes my outlook on life and death. I now have expectations of life after death where there is no pain, sorrow, illness or death. There is only peace, happiness and contentment in Heaven.

I look forward to my life with Christ after I leave this life here on Earth, but grieve the expected loss of my Earthly family and friends. I rely on God's love to carry me forward doing His work, and enjoying my family and friends while I wait for that day. Easter is the pinnacle of our expectations. We remember the love God has for us when we study his word and read about Christ's death on the cross. Christ willingly gave his life to save us from sin and eternal death. He conquered death and we are assured of life eternal when we accept Christ as our savior. My anticipation of His return is the ultimate expectation of my life. What joy and celebration there will be when that day occurs.

Prayer: Father God thank you so much for your love and grace. We are selfish and always try to do what we want instead of what you ask of us, and you continue to love us anyway. Help us to remember the joy of this Earthly life and teach us to share your love to others through our actions and words as we eagerly await the expected return of Christ.

Contributed by Joy Heller



April 5 The Fifth Wednesday in Lent The History of Light

Scripture: Luke 11:33 *No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar, but on the lampstand so that those who enter may see the light.*

Reflection: A regular listener of NPR's Planet Money podcast, I recently heard an episode that gave me new perspective on that passage because it put the imagery into a historical context.

An economist interviewed for Episode 534: The History of Light, which is available at

<http://www.npr.org/sections/money/2016/11/30/503769949/episode-534-the-history-of-light>, studied the costs associated with candlemaking in ancient Babylon. The economist also made candles the way the Babylonians would have and measured the light produced, concluding that a day's labor could generate light for just ten minutes -- ten dim, smelly minutes.

Oil lamps were developed, and the Romans' slightly more efficient lamps mean that at the time of Jesus, someone might work all day to stay up another half hour.

Eventually people learned how to obtain oil from whales. But



even this abundant source of fuel meant that well into the 1800s, a day's labor translated into just an hour of light.

Kerosene quintupled that efficiency.

Innovation accelerated. From a day's labor representing five hours of light around 1850, America's power grid now translates a day's labor into 20,000 hours of light.

In short: Is Luke's statement -- and others like it throughout the Bible -- so profound in the context of such abundance? Jesus as the light of the world? God's word as a lamp unto my feet? So what? It's the flip of a switch.

But I think the part that transcends time and circumstance is where that light shines. Certainly I put a light in my basement. I'm grateful for it every time I do laundry. But its usefulness hardly compares to the brave light in the attic of a darkened house or the welcome lamp at a front door.

Prayer: Send forth Your word, Lord, and let there be light.

Contributed by Josh Nichol-Caddy

April 6 The Fifth Thursday in Lent A Time of Prayer and Listening

Scripture: Psalms 4:4b *Commune with your own hearts on your beds, and be silent.*

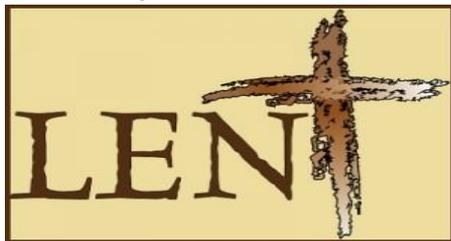
Psalms 46:10 *Be still, and KNOW that I am God.*

Reflection: During Lent, many people consider giving up something as a sacrifice – like God gave His son for us.

For me, this is a very special time – a time to become even closer to my Abba, Father, my daddy, God. During this time, I take a closer look at my relationship with Him. In the book of John, we see that Jesus' life was always very closely connected to communion with his father in prayer and listening, so he would be sure to fulfill all that the Father had created for him to do on this earth.

So, as this season of Lent plays out, I find myself becoming very quiet and try to practice more listening for and to God's voice. As these scriptures command us, Be Still and KNOW that I am God. When I arise, before my feet hit the floor, I say good morning to God, Jesus and Spirit. I thank Him for the new day and ask if there is something He wants me to do for Him that day, or if there is something He wants me or needs me to know for the day. Then I become very quiet for 10-15 minutes (pencil in hand) and listen.

Scripture tells us to pray without ceasing. For me, this is just asking God to be a part of everything in my life (cleaning house, doing dishes, etc.) and doing everything to His glory. After all, He has put us where we are for a reason. And I believe this is to accomplish His will for our life in our sphere of influence. This can be a daunting task, but GOD says He will NEVER leave us or forsake us. We are never alone. So, by prayer and listening, I try to enjoy the awareness and companionship of my Lord even more during this season.



Prayer: Thank you, Abba, Father, for the wisdom of all your creation. Be with me as I endeavor to better hear and listen to your still, small voice during this Lenten season and throughout my days.
So Be It! Contributed by Rebecca Horejs

April 7 The Fifth Friday in Lent

Good Friday

Picturing God's Healing and Help Through Prayer

Scripture: *Philippians 4: 4-7 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Reflection: In "The Help", an excellent book and movie that were popular a few years ago, one of the main characters, Aibileen, would write out her prayers in a notebook. She explained to another character that she felt she could get her point across a lot better if she wrote the prayers down. One of our church's former associate pastors used the church photo directory to pray for each person in the church as he was preparing to begin his ministry with us; in that way he became familiar with our names and faces. A different associate pastor told us in a sermon that he and his wife kept a basket full of the past year's Christmas cards near their table so that they could take out one card each day and pray for the sender as they said their table grace. I like these good ideas because sometimes the list of people who need prayers feels kind of overwhelming. I have a few ways that I organize my own prayers that I would like to share with you.

When I pray for people who are ill I like to visualize each person standing in a circle with others who are in need of healing. Then I picture a circle of their loved ones and day-to-day caregivers around them. The next concentric circle is made up of doctors and nurses along with other medical caregivers and pastors. The last circle is made up of all the other people who care about them: friends, neighbors, co-workers, and relatives. I like to think of the people placing their hands on the shoulder of the person before them, like we do when we ordain new Session members or Deacons. Then I ask God to bless all of these people and picture his love flowing from one person to another.

Sometimes when there has been a terrible disaster, such as an earthquake, it can seem overwhelming to pray for those affected. God knows what they need, so saying, "God, please bless the people of ..." is good enough. If, however, I want to pray for those affected for a longer time.

I will start by asking God to first bless the weakest or most in need of help: the babies, small children, those with health impairments or problems with understanding or learning, the elderly, and the lost and frightened pets. Then I pray that God will help the strongest: the older children and teenagers, young and middle aged adults, and the police and rescue workers because it is they who have to do the hard work of rescuing and helping others. I ask God to bless and help the trapped, the injured, the grieving and the souls of those who have died.

I'm sure that other church members have their own methods of organizing their prayers. It would be interesting to share this with one another.

Prayer: God, we are so thankful that we have you to talk to and that you understand our needs and desires even if we can't always articulate them very well. Thank you for listening to our quick prayers and our long prayers and for answering our prayers, too. Help us to remember to start and end each day by talking with you. Amen.

Contributed by Julie Symens



POWER
of
PRAYER

April 8 The Fifth Saturday in Lent

Helen Keller

Scripture: Psalm 119:18 *Open my eyes so that I can see the wonderful truths in your law.*

Mark 4: 21-23 *Jesus said to them, "Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a large bowl or a bed? Don't you put it on its stand? What is hidden is meant to be seen. And what is put out of sight is meant to be brought out into the open. Everyone who has ears should listen."*

Reflection: Friday night I watched "The Miracle Worker" on TV. It was on channel 55. "The Miracle Worker" is about Helen Keller and her teacher, Annie Sullivan. Helen is very naughty at first with her teacher, but then Annie decides to have Helen stay at a small cottage for two weeks near her home. Helen's parents take Helen to the cottage and leave Helen there for two weeks with Annie. Helen does not know where she is because she can't see or hear. Helen learns for two weeks with Annie, then goes home. At dinner, at home, Helen is naughty again. Annie drags Helen outside to the water pump. Helen says "Wa wa" for the first time ever. Annie calls Helen's mom who is overjoyed and cries tears of joy. It makes me almost cry because it is happy and sad. The sad part is at the beginning when her parents are happy because Helen is healthy, but then her mom realizes that Helen can't see or hear. Her mom screams. Helen grew up very famous and did lots of speeches, but the movie doesn't show that part. At the end of the movie, Helen hugs her teacher, Annie. Annie came from the Perkins School in Boston. Annie is blind. Also there are lots of books about Helen Keller and her life.

We are so blessed that we can see and hear. The Bible tells us God made us eyes to see and ears to hear.



Prayer: Dear God, Thank you for letting us see and hear. We pray for people like Helen Keller who can't see or hear. God bless modern medicine to make high fevers go away. Amen.

Contributed by Lily Symens

April 9 Palm Sunday Planks and Parking Spots

Scripture: Matthew 7:3-5 *“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”*

Reflection: A few weeks ago, my boyfriend (Adam) and I were having some trouble finding a parking spot at the restaurant we chose for dinner. After several tedious minutes of navigating up and down the narrow aisles, we finally found a free space. Only one problem: The car in the adjacent spot was parked crookedly. “UGH!” I (probably loudly) complained to Adam. “That guy did a terrible job when he parked, so now it’s going to be hard for me to get into that spot next to him. Now I’m going to be over the line, too. I hate it when people can’t just park the RIGHT WAY.”

Being the rational and cautious person he is, Adam waited until we were safely parked and walking in before pointing out that, while crooked, the car next to me had actually managed to stay within the lines of his space. I was the one who had parked over the line while I was busy yelling at someone else for bad parking. Oops.

Naturally, the realization that I had made a mistake made me a little crabby (at least until I ordered food). It’s never pleasant to admit that you’re in the wrong, and it’s especially irritating when someone else points it out; however, I begrudgingly realized that a dose of reality is sometimes exactly what I need to keep my ego in check.



Whenever I find myself quickly blaming others for errors or irritating situations, the Bible verse about taking the plank out of your own eye before trying to remove the speck from another’s eye always sneaks up on me. Pointing fingers at someone else is definitely easier, but before I do that, I should probably examine my own shortcomings—with a little introspection, I just might just find a plank in need of removal.

Prayer: Lord, next time I want to blame someone else for a problem in my life, please help me find the courage to examine my own imperfections first. When a situation is my fault, help me to gracefully admit my error and work to correct the problem. When a situation is actually another person's fault, help me to be patient, understanding and forgiving. Amen.

Contributed by September Symens

April 10 Monday of Holy Week
The Power of the Resurrection

Scripture: John 3: 14-16 *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

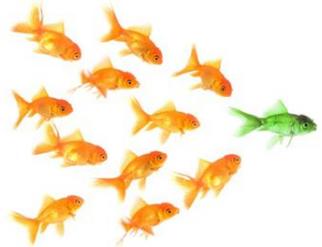
Reflection: When asked if I would write a Lenten devotional, I agreed. Later, I thought, whatever possessed me to say "Yes?" All of a sudden, I thought if my best friend from third grade through high school and beyond could write a book and get it published, why couldn't I write something?

As we enter this Lenten season we read in the gospel about Christ leaving the earth and going to heaven. The disciples were scared. Jesus comforted them by telling them he would ask the Holy Spirit to comfort them and give them power to live a Christian life.

God's love and caring for us is magnificent – he died on the cross to make a way for us, but also made a way to spread the gospel around the world inviting people to be saved.

John 3:16 says: "For God so loved the world, that he gave us his only son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life."

Think about this...we are not people just wandering around the earth. We have hope in the Lord. When we read his word...he directs our words and thoughts in the right way.



Prayer: Dear God, you have given us so much. You gave us your Son so believers will not perish but have everlasting life. We are forever grateful. In your loving name, we thank you. Amen.

Contributed by Betty J. Sender

April 11 Tuesday of Holy Week
Can You Hear Me Now?

Scripture: Deuteronomy 6: 4-12 *Shema! Listen!*

Reflection: Talking to our son Jake since he has moved back home sometimes can be difficult. Maybe you have this issue in your house as well. Here is the reason you may recognize, Jake wears earbuds often. I have no idea what he listens to but I know it's not me.

Our conversations often start like this, ' Hey Jake, I have a question for you. Jake! HEY Jake'. Now I am waving my arms trying to get his attention. 'JAKE!!!'. Then the earbuds come out and he says, 'Are you talking to me?'

Listen, I am not the extrovert you all know my wife to be. I travel on business and when I fly I not only put on headphones, I put on a set of noise canceling Bose headphones. The result is silence, and then if I choose music. The music is crystal clear and the world around me disappears.

So here's my Lenten suggestion. In this distracting world, use the days of Lent as your noise canceling headphones. Play the Words of Jesus by getting into His Word. Get to church. Pray. Meditate on Him. Have a Jake-like focus on what you are hearing. Just after Easter two men had a Bose-like conversation with a stranger on all that had happened during 'lent'. Their walk with and focus on Jesus resulted in their hearts burning for Him. Lent is here, put on the Lenten headphones or earbuds and focus on God's great gift to you, Jesus and His redeeming work! You will be blessed!

Prayer: Dear God, help us to focus on You, listen to You, and not use earthly distractions to prevent us from hearing Your Word. Amen.

Contributed by Keith Petersen



April 12 Wednesday of Holy Week
Lost and Found

Scripture: Matthew 18:12-14 *If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.*

Reflection: Over the past few months, I have experienced the loss of many wonderful people. Some of these folks have been members of First Pres that I was blessed to come to know through activities, phone calls or visits. Each one left a unique impression on my heart. Some, I am convinced were people of strong faith, confident of their place in eternity. A few, unfortunately, were people who seemed lost, struggling so much with this world that I wonder if they even considered their role in the next one.

Loss can tear us up emotionally and confuse us spiritually. We question the whys and hows of sickness and tragedies. We often become angry at unnecessary suffering and angrier yet at the injustice of the loss of young people. I know personally that most people deal with, at the very least, a disturbance of their faith foundation when they lose a loved one.

Lent is the time to strengthen that base, to build it up with the words of the Lord, the promises He made and the examples He set: He lived; He loved; He suffered; He died; He forgave; but most importantly He rose; He lives; He loves; He forgives!

I often wonder what happened to all the things I have lost over my lifetime: keys, money, notes...the list goes on and on. I would guess that eventually everything is found by someone, somewhere, whether is it a coin pocketed by a lucky passer-by or a litter conscious person putting a stray item in a trash receptacle. I admit also to be curious about those lost folks who wandered while they wandered...

Jesus is the Shepherd who finds lost sheep; the Savior who replaces lost faith; and the Way who guides us all back to where we belong.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to remember that no matter how hopeless life seems, You find the lost and You seek the wandering. Amen.

Contributed by Sherri Petersen

April 13 Maundy Thursday Waiting

Reflection: How do you define waiting? Do you think of it as simply an inconvenience to be endured—or a period of anticipation and perhaps even blessing?

The Psalms are full of references to waiting for God to save, to act, to do something. “*Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord*” (Psalm 27:14).

“*We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield*” (Psalm 33:20).

“*Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; do not fret when people succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes*” (Psalm 37:7).

From a Biblical perspective, waiting is not just something we have to do until we get what we want. Waiting is part of the process of becoming what God wants us to be.

Part of the lesson is that we learn the difference between our demands and God’s desires. And we learn what God means when He says, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways” (Isaiah 55:8).

For when we enter into the Lord’s timetable (or at least are forced out of our own), it quickly becomes clear that what we think we need doesn’t always match up with what God knows is best for us. Waiting can lead us down the path of healthy humility to a place where we can “Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness” (Psalm 29:2).

Often when we find ourselves waiting, whether in traffic or for good (or bad) news, we try to distract ourselves. Why? Because waiting is uncomfortable; it’s proof positive that we’re not in complete control of our lives. Instead of checking email or calling a friend, use this time to find the good things God has waiting for us as we wait. Here’s how:

1. Be where you are.

Step back and observe your feelings—notice them, but don’t dwell on them. Where are you? What does it look like? Smell like? Try to be fully present and accept that you are where you are for a reason.

2. See whom you’re with.

Are there others around you? Can you do even one small thing to make their day a bit better? Mother Teresa once said, “We feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop.”

3. A quick smile, a friendly comment or a sympathetic look can change someone's life.

4. Pull out your prayer list.

We're always complaining that we have no time to get everything done—especially when our plans are interrupted. But interruptions are pockets of time for prayer, if we choose to use them that way.

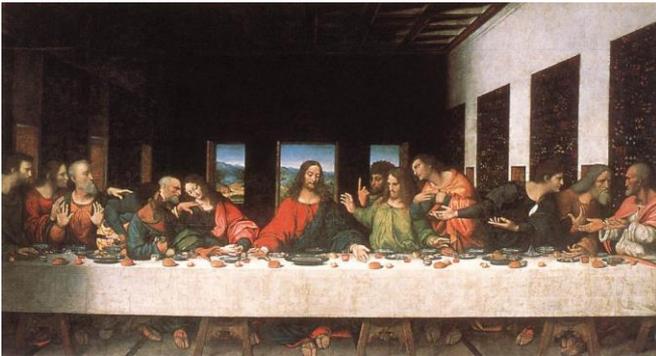
5. Work on memorizing a praise psalm.

Try Psalm 18, 111 or 135, any of which make good ways of waiting on God while you wait for... whatever!

Do you know that another meaning for "to wait on" is to act as a servant? When we are "waiters" we are expected to be attentive, to be alert to whatever it is that God might ask of us. If we are truly waiting for God, we are waiting (wanting!) to serve Him in every way possible. "For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!" (Isaiah 30:18).

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for the opportunity to be able to speak straight to you – what a privilege! Help us to use that time when we are "waiting" to talk to You!

From Guideposts.org;
Contributed by Sandi Helligso



April 14 Good Friday

It's Friday, but Sunday is Coming!

It's Friday

Jesus is praying, Peter is sleeping, Judas is betraying

But Sunday is coming!

It's Friday

Pilate's struggling and the council is conspiring

The crowd is vilifying, they don't even know

that Sunday is coming!

It's Friday

The disciples are running like sheep without a shepherd

Mary's crying, Peter is denying, but they don't know

That Sunday is coming!

It's Friday

The Romans beat my Jesus

They robe him in scarlet, they crown him with thorns

But they don't know

That Sunday's coming!

It's Friday

See Jesus walking to Calvary

His blood dripping, his body stumbling, and his spirit's burdened!

But you see, it's only Friday

Sunday's coming!

It's Friday

The world's winning, people are sinning

And evil's grinning

The soldiers nail my Savior's hands to the cross

They nail my Savior's feet to the cross

And then they raise him up next to criminals

But let me tell you something

Sunday's coming!

It's Friday

The disciples are questioning

What has happened to their King

And the Pharisees are celebrating

That their scheming has been achieved

But they don't know, it's only Friday

Sunday's coming!

It's Friday

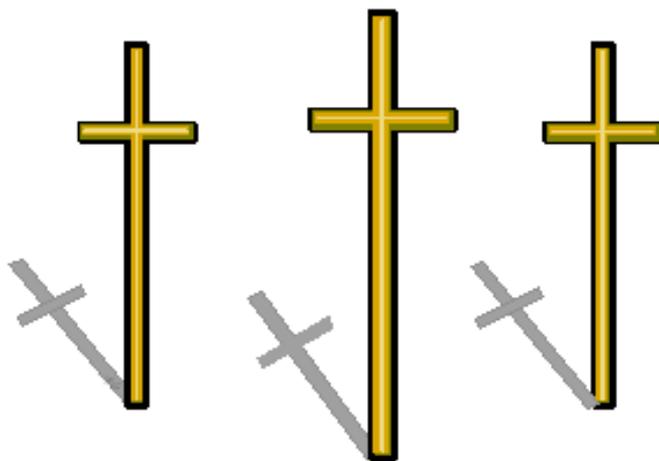
Jesus is hanging on the cross

Feeling forsaken by his Father

Left alone and dying

Can nobody save him?

It's Friday
But Sunday's coming!
It's Friday
The earth trembles, the sky grows dark
My King yields his spirit
It's Friday, Hope is lost. Death has won.
Sin has conquered and Satan's laughing.
It's Friday
Jesus is buried
A soldier stands guard
and a rock is rolled into place.
But it's Friday
It is only Friday,
Sunday is coming!



April 15 Saturday of Holy Week
Trust in the Lord

Scripture: Proverbs 3: 5 *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.*

Reflection: Recently, we were watching the television series, The Crown. In one of the first episodes, Elizabeth was a young girl studying to someday be the Queen of England. Her headmaster emphasized a particular lesson pertaining to trust and told her to underline the word trust. As Queen, it would be important for her to be able to trust those close to her. The government and monarchy relationship only works when the two sides trust each other.

Later in life, Queen Elizabeth needed to refer to that lesson regarding trust. The Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, had kept from her important information pertaining to his health and inability to govern. Queen Elizabeth referred to this lesson when admonishing Churchill and discussed their relationship and the importance of trust.

This episode of The Crown made us think about trust and the need we all have to trust people around us - our spouse, children, parents, friends, neighbors, employees/employers, etc. We also need to trust those who lead our country, state and city. Trust must be earned and in today's world, it seems to be in short supply, especially with those holding elected office. People earn our trust and maintain that trust by being honest and faithful. The people that we trust can lose our trust by being untruthful, misleading or not being forthright, like Churchill was with the Queen.

This episode also brought to mind how very fortunate we are that there is one constant that we can trust in, the Lord. What a wonderful gift that we have been given to always trust in the Lord. When we worry, have anxiety, it is because we have forgotten to trust in the Lord. It is not always easy to put our trust in the Lord. We have to consciously do it. Consciously set aside our plan and let Him lead us the right way. And as we do so, our trust will bring us closer to God and to our faith.

Let us remember to put our full trust in God and experience the peace that our trust in Him will bring.

Prayer: God, we ask you to help us put our trust in you each day of our lives. A trust in You and Your word that will bring us strength in difficult times. A trust that will bring Your peace to our hearts and minds. Amen.

Contributed by Trudy and Scott Darling



April 16 Easter
Grace Wins Every Time

Scripture: Romans 6: 14 *For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.*
Ephesians 2: 8-9 *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.*

Reflection: Matthew West sings a song called “Grace Wins”.

The song begins with the following verse:

Here comes those whispers in my ear
Saying who do you think you are
Looks like you're on your own from here
'Cause grace could never reach that far.

Scripture tells us about how God’s grace is victorious in all sorts of situations: the woman at the well, the prodigal son, the good Samaritan, the sick and unclean, the thief on the cross, and ultimately that God’s grace wins for you and me. The stories I hear from our congregation also reflect this message as well; heart-breaking stories of sin overpowering an individual life until God’s grace was shone to them. Lives have been changed through the work of God. Each of our lives has been changed by grace. Ever since the fall of Adam and Eve, we all have sinned, we all have fallen short of God’s hopes and wishes for us. Some sins seem more dramatic, more serious, perhaps because we don’t think these are things WE would do. The reality is this. Every sin that we commit, separates us from God. From little white lies to perjury, from anger in our hearts to abusing our bodies with sex or drugs... all create a barrier and wall preventing a perfect relationship with God.

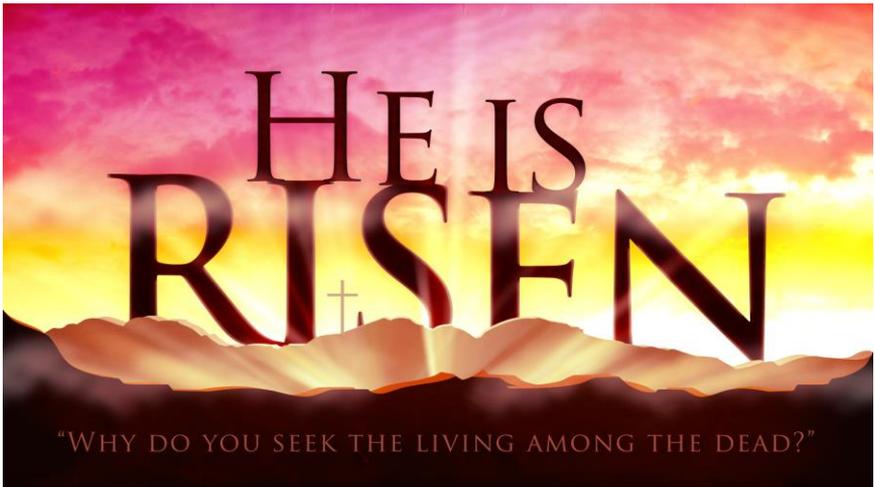
The good news is this, today we celebrate the ultimate victory over sin, when Grace won, once and forever. Through Jesus Christ’s sacrifice on the cross and His resurrection which we celebrate Easter morning, we are forgiven, we are healed, we are whole and pure in God’s eyes once again!

I want to close with the chorus to “Grace Wins”.

There's a war between guilt and grace
And they're fighting for a sacred space
But I'm living proof
Grace wins every time!
Hallelujah!

He is Risen!
Grace Wins!

Prayer: Grace giving God, draw near to us as we draw near to you this special day when we celebrate your victory over sin and all that separates us from you. May we constantly be reminded that your grace is enough for anything we have done, and that your forgiveness has already occurred through Christ's resurrection that first glorious Easter morning. Help us to live lives worthy of the calling you give to each of us, and when we fail at that, help us to turn and return to you for forgiveness, strength, and nourishment. Amen. Contributed by Pastor Jonathan Sloan



These devotions are a wonderful, personal gift from the congregation to the congregation and church friends during Advent and Lent. If you would like to contribute to the Advent 2017 or Lent 2018 booklets, it is never too early. Send your devotional to Lori Snyder-Sloan. Thank you!