

Hope,
PROMISE,
AND THE
PRESENCE
of
God

2021 Laity
Lenten Daily
Devotions



West Virginia Conference
The United Methodist Church



HOPE, PROMISE, and the PRESENCE OF GOD

We now enter our second season of Lent hunkered down under the cloud of a pandemic that has brought loss, suffering, and confusion to each of our lives. Daily living has become much more challenging than ever before. But in this season of Lent 2021, there is **Hope**. There is **Promise**. And, as always, there is the **Presence of God**.

Lent is meant to be a time of personal sacrifice with a focus on simple living, prayer, and fasting in order to grow closer to God. During Lent, some people feel called to set aside longer periods of time each day to delve deeper into God's Word or for extended prayer and meditation.

These devotions were prayerfully written for this purpose. The writers were asked to read and study their appointed Scriptures. Then to prayerfully listen to God's message in those words. And then finally, to share that message from God in each writer's own voice.

We ask you to do the same with each day's devotion. Set aside a special time to read the Scriptures noted. Then read the words which follow that Scripture and seek how God is speaking to you through the writer's experiences. Feel free to linger in prayer while adding your own praises to God for all the Most Holy has provided.

You will notice that email addresses are included at the end of each devotion. Consider these addresses as your invitation to personally thank each writer for their work and dedication to God's service.

*May you continue to feel the **Hope, Promise, and the Presence of God**, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God bless you, Sisters and Brothers of the West Virginia Conference of The United Methodist Church.*

Thank-You

To seek new voices/writers from the laity of the WVUMC, we called upon District Superintendents, District Lay Leaders, leaders of the UMW and UMM, and other leaders, teachers, and friends. And we are very grateful to you for your offerings and efforts to make this collection of devotions a true representation of the work of the Lord in each of the Districts of our Conference.

I want to again thank our writers for their beautiful and timely responses. As these contributions were read and formatted, all of us that touched them were truly blessed by the words from God that you allowed to be spoken in your voices.

I especially want to thank my dear friends and acquaintances that responded with beautiful devotions 'spur of the moment'. Thank you, Bishop Sandra, for the Spiritual Guidance you provide to each member of the Conference. And for allowing this project to continue each year.

My deepest thanks to the dedicated few that have worked on this collection of devotions after it was sent to the Conference Center. I especially thank you for your patience with my lack of computer skills.

May God's peace settle within your heart, and seep into each and every moment of each day.

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Ambassadors of Christ

Scripture: II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 (NRSV)

Date: February 17, 2021

Message: *O we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*

It is no wonder this passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians so often appears in our lectionary to initiate the Lenten season. It begins with a call to fellow "ambassadors on behalf of Christ" to "be reconciled to God" so as to "become the righteousness of God" (II Corinthians 5:20-21). Since separation from God is the root of all sin and sin is ever present, reconciliation necessarily describes an ongoing process of repentance (turning back) and restoring right relationship with God. We are all works in progress! However, during the Lenten season we are summoned to practice spiritual disciplines - such as prayer, meditation, self-denial, fasting, acts of charity - to help us reconcile with God through Christ, "who knew no sin" (5:21). We engage in the discipline of self-examination of conscience to focus on our behaviors and motives, to discern our "stumbling blocks" (6:3), and to repent of those obstructing our missional purpose as disciples of Christ. No doubt, gluttony and sloth engendered by months of pandemic isolation will be popular sins to repent this year! But let's not trivialize solemn Lenten practices of repentance and self-sacrifice as solipsistic New Year's resolutions.

Reconciliation with God and others must be a collective endeavor and Paul warns: "Working together, we entreat that you not receive the grace of God in vain" (6:1). Indeed, Paul's epistle is addressed to the church in Corinth that was beset by division and conflict and in need of immediate reconciliation. Does this description of a church in crisis sound familiar? After all, many of our congregations remain divided by the rampant political factionalism of the last election. The pandemic and subsequent economic decline have resulted in fear and despair. Many of us remain isolated at home - separated from communal worship and the ministries of our local churches. We have become alienated from God and our purpose in the world. The urgency of Paul's plea is amplified by the imperative - "See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" (6:2).

During Lent, we begin to see the dawning of hope and the promise of healing after a long, dark winter night. Now is the time to transcend our alienation through reconciliation with God and others. It's time for transformation and renewal of the Church as we journey towards a 'new normal' of discipleship. Now is the time to fulfill our missional purpose as ambassadors of Christ by embodying God's righteousness - "purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love"- (6:6) in the world.

Prayer: *Gracious God grant us the courage, strength, and faith to become ambassadors of Christ and embody your righteousness and justice in the world. Amen.*

Lift Up Your Soul and Put Your Trust in God

Scripture: Psalm 25:1-10

Date: February 18, 2021

Message:

In you, Lord my God, I put my trust.

Psalm 25:1

As I write this devotion, it is still the Advent season. A time we celebrate the birth of Jesus. How different it is to contemplate Psalm 25 for the season of Lent, where we journey with Jesus on the way to the cross. Praise God we know the end of the journey.

Words leapt from this Psalm such as: *show me, teach me, guide me, remember not. And then I lift, I trust, my hope, Your great mercy, Your love, You are good, upright, faithful, Your ways, Your paths, demands of the covenant.*

This Psalm of David says it all. We have to turn our thoughts, hearts, souls, and minds over to God. He cannot work in our lives if we do not depend on Him every single minute of every single day. We are either all in or not.

God will and can use and grow us if we let Him be in control and if we follow those words I mentioned. We must also worship Him, trust Him, follow His ways and His paths. This takes time. Quiet time spent with Him in prayer, stillness, reading His Word, Bible Study, and worship. We will fail at times. We will sin at times. We will not be a good child of God. BUT God will forgive us if we repent and humble ourselves before Him. He will pick us up, dust us off, and set us on the right path.

Take time this Lenten season to spend time with Him. Journey with Jesus to the cross. Jesus holds us in the palm of His hand. He is the good Shepherd who takes care of His sheep. He died for our sins and then arose and is seated with God and will return one day. We have those promises. We must lean on these promises.

Lift up your soul to God and trust Him. Open your heart and mind and let God fill you, empower you, and strengthen you, and guide you. Listen for that still small voice. And then share that love and the message of salvation with others.

Prayer: *Thank you, Father, for your son Jesus. May our souls be filled with your presence inspiring us in words and deeds for the building of your Kingdom. Amen.*

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God's Mercy - Our Hope

Scripture: Daniel 9:15-25a

Date: February 19, 2021

Message: *O my God, incline your ear and hear. Open your eyes and see our desolations, and the city that is called by your name. For we do not present our pleas before you because of our righteousness, but because of your great mercy.*

Daniel 9:8

Daniel's prophecy comes to a people who have been cut off from their land because of their unfaithfulness to God; a people which did not anticipate that they would find themselves carried off into exile, but were, nonetheless. The question for these dispossessed people is "what now?", "how do we get back to the land of promise that God had given us?", or even "will we ever get back to the land of promise?"

It would be easy for Daniel, or anyone else in the Babylonian exile, to look at their situation and determine that the onus was on them to do enough to present themselves as righteous before God.

However, in this prayer of personal and corporate repentance in Daniel 9, the prophet recognizes that their hope of being restored to Jerusalem, and even their forgiveness, does not rest in their ability to do enough righteous acts, but rather in the nature of God; namely his mercy.

Particularly during this time of Lent, it is right for us to practice self-reflection and self-examination, both individually and on behalf of those corporate bodies to which we belong, as Daniel did throughout his prayer. We need to confess, as the prophet did, those ways we have erred and sinned against God and neighbor. Yet the good news is this: our hope for forgiveness and reconciliation is not rooted in our ability to impress God with our righteousness, but rather in His nature as the God whose property it is to show mercy and forgiveness.

Prayer: *God, help us to recognize our own sins, individually and corporately. We can never do enough to deserve your forgiveness. Thank you for your great mercy. Amen.*

The Seventh Song of Ascent

Scripture: Psalm 126

Date: February 20, 2021

Message: *When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those that dream. Then our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations "The Lord has done great things for them". The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Neg'eb. May those who sow in tears, reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come back home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves with them.*

Psalm 126

Ascents were the short songs that were likely sung by the pilgrims on their way to the temple on Mount Zion for feast celebrations. This is a song of joy beyond expression when the Lord brought back the captives of Zion. God set the people free of captivity. It was fulfillment of a joyful dream.

It seemed too good to be true. We imagine the words from the mouths of the pilgrims as they describe the goodness and power of God in bringing them from captivity of Zion.

Their mouths were filled with laughter. The promise of restoration was known, but the actual moment was overwhelming. It was vivid and they sang for joy. They celebrated the great things God had done for them:

- .. joy of salvation
- .. joy of Scriptures returned
- .. joy of Christian fellowship
- .. joy of network for God

Persons from other nations saw what had been done and gave credit to the great giver of all good. A plan for God to continue the restoration of transforming sadness to joy recognizes that more needs to be done.

Restoration had only begun.

Prayer: *Lord, in your mercy, thru your power, you have set us free to find joy beyond expression to live our daily lives as your servant. Amen.*

The Heavens Opened and The Spirit Like A Dove

Scripture: Mark 1:9-15 (KJV)

Date: February 21, 2021

Message: *And it Came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in the Jordan. And straightway coming up out of the water, Jesus saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him. And there came a voice from heaven saying, thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And immediately the spirit driveth him into the wilderness. And he was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him. Now after that John was put in prison. Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel.*

Mark 1:9-15

John was baptizing people from throughout the region in the Jordan River. Many were coming to be immersed in the waters by the man living in the wilderness. Baptism was based on the daily ritual of immersion in the waters of the Jordan which offered continuous flowing water for purity and repentance of sins. Jesus was a quiet man from Nazareth who, like the other citizens, traveled to the Jordan and was baptized by John.

John had referred to One that was coming, the Messiah who would be more powerful, and he (John) who was unworthy to carry his sandals. When Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens opened and the Spirit, like a dove, descended on him. Jesus came as a man following God's call. God revealed to Jesus, in a voice only he could hear and a vision only he could see, that he was His beloved Son in whom God was well pleased. God sent His Holy Spirit to dwell within Him.

This very simply written verse transforms the *baptism of repentance* to the *baptism of forgiveness*. The Spirit of God came to dwell within Jesus, and His life changed. The Spirit immediately sends Jesus into the wilderness. During those forty days He is confronted by Satan and tested to the limits. Jesus lived among the wild beasts and was ministered to by angels.

John was put into prison. Then Jesus began His ministry in Galilee with a new message for all mankind. The message for us was to know repentance and forgiveness. The Gospel of the kingdom of God is open and at hand. Believe! What Good News...what a revelation!

I often think of Jesus and how He must have felt as He answered the call of God, the things He emotionally endured and physically suffered. We proclaim God as our Creator. Acknowledge and profess Jesus Christ our Savior. We, too, are tempted, confronted with our weakness, and sometimes feel like we are wandering in the wilderness. Through Jesus Christ we learn that the Spirit remains with us to guide and help to strengthen our walk with God. Jesus manifested what God created us to be. What love our Father has for His children!

Prayer: *Father, I lay open my heart and repent of my sin. Renew my hunger for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Strengthen me with the power of the Holy Spirit to witness and boldly proclaim you in my word and action so that I, too, may have victory. Amen.*

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God's Love Story

Scripture: Ephesians 2:1-10 (The Passion Translation)

Date: February 22, 2021

Message: Even when we were dead and doomed in our many sins, he united us into the very life of Christ and saved us by his wonderful grace! ... We have become his poetry, a re-created people that will fulfill the destiny he has given each of us, for we are joined to Jesus, the Anointed One. Even before we were born, God planned in advance *our destiny* and the good works we would do *to fulfill it!*

Ephesians 2:5, 10

During this Lenten season, many of us are reflecting and mourning anew that our sinless Savior was to be crucified. Some of us will practice various Lenten disciplines such as prayer, fasting, the giving up of certain things or behaviors, or the taking up of more or different acts of service. As we introspectively examine ways to increase and enrich our spiritual life and relationship with God during this season, we can be confronted once again with our failures and short-comings – uncomfortably so at times! Before we beat ourselves up too much or get dragged into despair, I encourage us to look to these words of hope in today's passage from Ephesians. Yes, there can still be hope, even in the dark days preceding the crucifixion. Since this is an annual remembrance, we already know how this story ends on Easter morning. And we already know our personal stories of salvation and forgiveness, where God's grace and mercy covered us.

As I read through this passage of scripture, I kept thinking about story. If you ask a child to write or tell you story or draw a picture, how often do their mom or dad, grandparent or other adult guardian, sibling, teacher, friend or beloved pet make an appearance? They will write or tell about the ones they know, the ones they love; that's who has to be included in their story. How beautiful it is that God has included each of us in His story! As verse 5 reminds us, "Even when we were dead and doomed in our many sins, he united us into the very life of Christ and saved us by his wonderful grace!" And I just love how this Passion translation says in verse 10 that "We have become his poetry." The Message translation says "For we are God's masterpiece." The Voice translation tells us "...we are the product of His hand, heaven's poetry etched on lives." Friends, remember that God knows us and loves us so much that He has written us into His story. And just as we can look ahead to the joy coming after the somber reflections of Lent, be encouraged that God has already planned and arranged – by joining us with Jesus, the Anointed One – for us to accomplish the good works to fulfill our destiny. It is already written.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, we are humbled and honored to be a part of your story. Help us to live our lives in such a way that those we encounter know that your story is not only a redemption story, but primarily a LOVE story, and is available to all. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.*

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The Message of Psalm 19

Scripture: Psalm 19

Date: February 23, 2021

Message:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands.

Psalm 19:1

During the process of editing these devotions over the last few weeks, I have read 46 amazing stories and/or expressions of grief and praise from the lay people of the WV United Methodist Conference.

But because of spending time with these other devotions, as I sat to write this one, I found the computer screen remained blank. No matter how many times I started to write, no words comparable to your words came. Or, rather, no words that made sense to *me*.

My Scripture is Psalm 19. And as I read and reread, in several different translations, I received no new insights that I felt called to share with you. Then it dawned on me what God was trying to tell me, and I was too self-involved to hear. Maybe the message of this day is not meant to be a message of *new* information. Maybe the words that I am meant to share with you are words that have lived, and continue to live, in our hearts and in our world many, many years after they were first spoken.

Please read all 14 verses of Psalm 19.

David is retelling, with joy and celebration, of God's greatness since the days the earth was created. God was still just as great in the days of David. The world that God had created, the laws that God had established to control the sun and the moon, were still functioning as God originally designed them. And these very words of praise that David spoke to God's glory are still just as meaningful and true today!

Our God created this world. God set this world into motion. God established the rules that men in this world are still meant to honor. All because of the great love God has for you and me. It matters not what evils lurk or what diseases flow across this land. *The Eternal Plan God established for God's people will stand forever.* THANKS BE TO GOD.

Prayer: Now...*May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be forever pleasing to You, O Lord, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.*

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Living Contentedly

Scripture: Proverbs 30:1-9 (NIV)

Date: February 24, 2021

Message:

... I am only a brute, not a man, ...

Two things I ask of you; don't keep them from me before I die: Fraud and lies—keep far from me! Don't give me either poverty or wealth; give me just the food I need. Or I'll be full and deny you, and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or I'll be poor and steal and dishonor my God's name.

Psalm 30:2, 7-9

Whether we, like Agur or David (Psalm 73:2), abase ourselves to the level of brute (stupid) or, like Gale Sayers (the NFL record-holding Chicago Bears running back) live by the standard “I am third” which places God FIRST and others second, the season of Lent invites us to refresh our living humbly, as Jesus taught. (Matthew 18:4, 23:12; Luke 14:11).

A state of humility recognizes God's character and providence, as well as our own weaknesses and limitations. This frees us to pray to the Lord to provide all we need: (1) His all sufficient grace and (2) daily sustenance.

As part of what author Jeremy Bouma calls God's outrageous grace, God prevents our condition from being off-balance; that is, not of too much wealth, which might tempt us to sin by boasting of achieving the wealth ourselves, nor poverty-stricken, which might tempt us to sin by ignoring God, claiming He is of no help. In either of these scenarios, our spiritual ship is in danger of, at the least, veering off course; at the worst, sinking. We are heartened by Paul's reminder that God's grace is sufficient (II Corinthians 12:9) and are uplifted by the song “*Your Grace is Enough*.”

As we think with gratitude of God providing our daily sustenance, we remember the manna God provided the Israelites (Exodus 16:8 and Deuteronomy 8:3) and Jesus teaching His apostles and us how to pray, “Give us each day our daily bread,” which can be for our physical sustenance, as well as our spiritual sustenance by way of Jesus, the “bread of life” (Luke 11:3).

Note: There is no conclusive identification of who Agur was, though he was possibly a descendant of Massa, son of Ishmael (Genesis 25:14) and living in North Arabia where he was a teacher when he received and shared the divine wisdom recorded in Proverbs 30.

“*Your Grace is Enough*” written by Matt Maher, performed by Chris Tomblin, 2004 on [Arriving](#)

Prayer: *Father God, thank you for your outrageous grace and providence. Forgive me of my hubris and lead me to live in contentment, knowing your grace is sufficient. In the matchless Name of Jesus. Amen.*

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Triumph Through Trust

Scripture: Exodus 13:21 (KJV)

Date: February 25, 2021

Message:

*Neither death, nor life ... nor things present, nor things to come, ...
shall be able to separate us from the Love of God.*

Romans 8:38-39

There are two ways to respond to adversity: with discouragement or with trust.

The problem with giving in to discouragement is that it only makes things worse, for with it may come bitterness, anger, jealousy, revenge, and so forth.

We may even try to escape through drugs or alcohol. Do either of these solve the problem?

God has a better way - the way of trust. Sometimes He may show us that we were in the wrong. When that is the case, we need to confess it, repent, and seek His forgiveness.

Sometimes, however, we can only accept what is happening and ask God to help us endure it and triumph over it.

One of the best ways to overcome adversity is to praise God right in the middle of the turmoil.

Turning to God's Word will also encourage us. Many of the Psalms, for example, were written during suffering and adversity. Follow the Psalmist's example: *Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits.*" (Psalm 103:2).

Prayer: *God, please help us to love you and others, as we become more confident in "your" never-ending love for us. Amen.*

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We Are Never Alone!

Scripture: Psalm 22:22-31 (The Message)

Date: February 26, 2021

Message: *Here's the story I'll tell my friends when they come to worship, and punctuate it with Hallelujahs: Shout Hallelujah, you God-worshippers; give glory, you sons of Jacob; adore him, you daughters of Israel. He has never let you down, never looked the other way when you were being kicked around. He has never wandered off to do his own thing; he has been right there, listening. Here in this great gathering for worship I have discovered this praise-life. And I'll do what I promised right here in front of the God-worshippers. Down-and-outers sit at GOD's table and eat their fill. Everyone on the hunt for God is here, praising him. "Live it up, from head to toe. Don't ever quit!" From the four corners of the earth people are coming to their senses, are running back to GOD. Long-lost families are falling on their faces before him. GOD has taken charge; from now on he has the last word. All the power-mongers are before him — worshipping! All the poor and powerless, too — worshipping! Along with those who never got it together — worshipping! Our children and their children will get in on this as the word is passed along from parent to child. Babies not yet conceived will hear the good news — that God does what he says.*

Psalm 22:22-31

This Psalm of David is a lament in which the Psalmist first pours out his heart and troubles to God. The Psalm starts with this question to God – “God, God my God! Why did you dump me miles from nowhere? The Psalmist, in frustration, then expresses his belief that God did not respond to his pleas for help despite the Psalmist calling out to God day and night.

Have you ever felt like you were dumped miles from nowhere crying out for help and frustrated that God did not seem to be coming to the rescue? The Psalmist reassures us that whether or not we perceive God's presence in the midst of struggles, God is always faithful and is there with us at all times – that God will never let us down or look the other way.

In our frustration and anxiety during difficult times, it's easy to think that we are bearing our burdens by ourselves and that the final outcome depends on our own strength and efforts. The Psalmist reminds us, however, that God has been there all along - that he has not wandered off to do his own thing. The outcome of our trouble is not guaranteed to be easy or painless, but we are guaranteed that God will walk alongside us.

Who needs to be reminded of, or maybe hear for the first time, this reassuring message of God's constant presence and faithfulness? Let's share the good news that we are never alone.

Prayer: *Gracious God. Thank you for your unwavering and constant presence. For that we praise you and punctuate our worship with shouts of Hallelujah! In Jesus' name. Amen.*

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Storms

Scripture: Mark 8:27-30

Date: February 27, 2021

Message:

*Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me....
Restore to me the joy of your salvation.*

Psalm 51:10, 15

Storms, especially thunderstorms in the spring, have always held a fascination for me. Their intensity and violence are as awesome as the relief and refreshment that follow them. While gathering debris left in our yard by the ravages of a recent storm, I was struck by the similarities of our own changing lives with that of a thunderstorm. As I loaded limbs, leaves, and litter into a box headed for the compost pile, I thought about all the things in my life that need to be tossed out as well. Aren't there attitudes, grudges, and behaviors that need to be trashed and replaced with more positive actions? Aren't there wrongs that need to be righted and words of forgiveness spoken? How many times do we hear the thunder of voices coming at us from all directions, urging us to follow a path we know will only lead to trouble? How many days are we blinded by the emotions of an argument, which like the drenching rain, cloud our decisions about how to treat our neighbors or how to spend our time? How many times have fears kept us from living life to the fullest?

As we take time to ponder our days and our lives during this season of Lent, may this be our prayer:

Prayer: *Dear Heavenly Father, we ask you to allow these storms of life to wash away those things which make our vision foggy and our judgement cloudy. Direct the winds carry away those bad habits and behaviors which keep us from making clear-cut choices about who we are and whose we are. When lightning flashes, shed a glorious light on our ordinary lives so that we may see the path to you more clearly. Help the rain soften our hearts and make us instruments of thy peace. As the sun breaks through, may we be found rejoicing over the newness you offer us each new day. Amen.*

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Faithfulness

Scripture: Romans 4:20-25 (NIV)

Date: February 28, 2021

Message: *Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.” The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification...*

Romans 4:20-25

In this verse Paul is describing God’s great power and how Abraham had a strong faith in God and God’s promises to Abraham. We, too, are called to believe and have faith in God. Over 2,000 years ago a man named Jesus died on a cross, was buried, but arose from the dead. WOW - what an amazing – awesome event! - the power of God displayed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This was the same power that Abraham believed. The only power in the universe that can forgive our sins - - the power of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When you believe in the resurrected Christ and accept Him as your savior, He forgives all of your sins. All you have to do is have faith and believe that Jesus died for your sins and was resurrected.

The hymn, *Great is Thy Faithfulness*, reminds us that every morning we can see new mercies from God, how His love and grace doesn’t change and won’t fail. If His faithfulness in us is so powerful, then our faithfulness in Him should grow to be an enormous faith in Him.

As we embark on this Lenten journey think about how powerful our God is and how faithful He is to you. As you deepen your understanding of His power, act upon it by showing your faithfulness to Him.

Prayer: *O Lord, as we walk this journey of Lent, please help us to remember that you are our Savior, our strength, and creator of the universe. Thank you for your faithfulness to us, even when we fail to be faithful to you. Deepen our commitment to you and increase our interest in your Word and in knowing you. Magnify in us the gifts of faith, hope, and love. Amen.*

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Awesome Bio!

Scripture: Psalm 102:25-27

Date: March 1, 2021

Message: *But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy." He also says, "In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. 11 They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end."*

Hebrews 1: 8-12 (NIV)

It seems that the demand for biographical information has increased in the age of computer technology. LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and other websites ask for biographical information. All of these platforms want users to know with whom they are communicating.

This is a big step change from the days that biographical information was only requested on resumes or curriculum vitae when making an application for school or work.

As I read the Scripture in Hebrews, I realized that Jesus' bio was being provided. What an awesome bio!

"Jesus - Son of God, creator of the earth, sovereignty, unchanging, the message from God, eternal, lover of righteousness, anointed and honored to sit beside God forever and ever."

With a bio like the one set forth in Hebrews, every human should want to communicate with Jesus no matter what platform one is using. God emptied His presence and love into Jesus as a gift to humanity as His ultimate messenger.

Let's accept Jesus' communication in this season of Lent.

Prayer: *Thank you, Father for your ultimate messenger, Jesus. Help us to daily recall that he is your gift to us and our acceptance of His message provides believers eternal life. May we understand his message and forward it to others whom we can contact. Amen.*

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Gotta Have Faith

Scripture: Hebrews 11:1-3

Date: March 2, 2021

Message: *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith or ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God. So that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.*

Hebrews 11:1-3

If you are anything like me you might have had a hard time reading this passage without hearing....

Cause I gotta have faith
I gotta have faith
Because I gotta have faith, faith, faith
I got to have faith, faith, faith

The words to "Faith" by George Michael might ring in my ears, but it's safe to say we mean very different things when we reference faith.

What is faith? Paul tells us faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.

The assurance of things hoped for, now another song comes to mind.... "Blessed Assurance."

Assurance is a positive declaration intended to give confidence, a promise. God, our creator, the creator of all things, loves us, cares for us, and died for us. Is that not the greatest promise?

Notice that Paul further describes faith as the conviction of things unseen.

Conviction a firmly held belief. It's not an old adage to be tossed about lightly. Faith is the conviction that guides my steps so that I may honor the creator who promises to give me life eternal.

Faith is what gives me confidence when the world around me is in chaos.

Faith is the peace I feel in the midst of grief.

Faith is what challenges me to love and serve the world around me.

George Michael may have a different understanding of faith, but he's right. We do "gotta have faith." We "gotta have faith" that leads to understanding. Even though I don't see Him, I know He is in control. He is at work. He is.

Prayer: Sweet Jesus, today I thank you for words of scripture and sounds of music that have given us the assurance of your love, presence, and promises. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.

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Make the Most of the Dash!

Scripture: Hebrews 1:8-12

Date: March 3, 2021

Message: *You laid the earth's foundations long ago; the skies are your handiwork. These things will pass away, but you will last. All of these things will wear out like clothing; you change them like clothes, and they pass on. But you are the one! Your years never end!*

Psalm 102:25-27

In the beginning God laid the earth's foundations. Yet, they will wear out and pass away. They are not everlasting. We see the beauty of creation every spring as new life emerges. In West Virginia as that new life fades away in autumn, we once again see the beauty of creation. Perhaps this could be a reminder to us that there is beauty to be found, even during times of loss.

Have you ever said or heard someone say, "Life is short, make the most of it!" It appears to be a very simple statement, but it carries a very complex meaning unique to your individual definition of what making the most of life means to you. I saw a post from a friend on social media who had recently lost a loved one. The post listed the loved one's life span as 1930–2020 accompanied with the statement, "Your life is made up of two dates and a dash...make the most of the dash."

This made me ponder the days of Jesus' life on earth. For those who knew Jesus and followed him during that time, he was fully human. Although he performed many wondrous acts, one of which left them saying, "You truly are the Son of God" (Matthew 14:33), they didn't realize exactly what that meant. When they witnessed his crucifixion, they thought his life had come to an end. They didn't know what was going to take place three days later. They didn't know that, as the Son of God, Jesus' reign is everlasting!

God of yesterday is the same God of today and the same God of tomorrow. Thanks be to God! Jesus set an example for all of us to follow. He showed us what it truly means to make the most of the dash. May our lives reflect the image of our living God as we make the most of the dash.

Prayer: *Everlasting Father, we give you praise and thanksgiving that you are the one true God. Your reign never ends. Help us Lord, to live a life devoted to and pleasing to you. Amen.*

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Light

Scripture: Psalm 19

Date: March 4, 2021

Message: *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.*

Psalm 19:1-4

The skies proclaim the work of his hands...they pour forth speech.

We see God's work in the sun, the moon, the stars, and the clouds in the sky. God reveals himself to us in many ways. David reminds us that God reveals himself and speaks to us through the mighty sky. We see God's power through the sun. The sun provides great light, great warmth, and a needed element for growth. We see God's power through the moon. The moon's gravitational influence has an effect on the tides of our earth. We see God's power in the stars in the sky and their ability to guide us. We see and hear God's power in the thunder and lightning the clouds create. Throughout the ages, humans have been captivated with the sky. We see messages in the color of the sky...red sky at night, sailor's delight. We use the clouds, their color, and the color of the sky to determine the weather for the day. God speaks to us through his creation, the sky.

Each day, the **light** of the sun gives way to the darkness of night, as if it is dying, to once again rise and with its brightness overcome the darkness. Each day, through the sky talking to me, I am reminded how the darkness in Jerusalem attempted to take our **light**, Jesus, from us. The darkness attempted to end our light of hope. I am reminded that out of the darkness of death, out of the darkness of a cave, our **light** arose to shine again. Each day, I am reminded of the great price that was paid for my salvation. Each day, I am reminded of the promise of our **light**, Jesus, coming again bringing eternal life to those who trust and obey. Each day, the vast sky and heaven our creator gave us speak to me of His greatness and glory. Praise be to God!

Prayer: *Almighty Father, creator of all, we thank you for the daily reminders of your greatness and the great gift you gave. We are thankful that you continue to speak to us through your creation. Just as the heavens declare your glory, we, too, declare your glory. Amen.*

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Similarities

Scripture: Acts 7:30-40 (The Message)

Date: March 5, 2021

Message: *Forty years later, in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, an angel appeared to him in the guise of flames of a burning bush.... I've seen the agony of my people in Egypt. I've heard their groans, I've come to help them. So get yourself ready; I'm sending you back to Egypt. This is the same Moses whom they earlier rejected saying, "Who put you in charge of us?" This is the Moses that God, using the angel flaming in the burning bush, sent back as ruler and redeemer.*

Acts 7:30, 34-35

We see the similarity between Moses and the Messiah.

1. EACH HAD A DIVINE CALL.
Moses in his mysterious preservation. Messiah in his mysterious birth.
Moses the burning bush. Messiah the dove-vision and heavenly voice at baptism.
2. EACH HAD A SPECIAL PREPARATION.
Moses the experience of the Egyptian court and solitude of Horeb. Messiah in the experience of the carpenters house at Nazareth and the temptation of the Jordan desert
3. EACH A NEW SPIRITUAL FORCE.
As bringing God near to men, revealing himself, Moses saw God in Sinai. Our Lord's vision on the Mount of Transfiguration
4. EACH WAS A TEACHER
5. EACH WERE REJECTED BY THEIR OWN GENERATION.

Prayer: *Father, we sometimes feel as the Israelites. There are times we feel that you left us in the battle. We know that you are with us, but so are our feelings of aloneness, the enemy seems to be taking ground. Our crying out to you seems to go unanswered. We know you are at work, help us trust you in the midst of our questions. We pray in the name of the Messiah, Jesus your Son, our only hope. Amen.*

Spirit of the Living God

Scripture: Psalm 77 (NIV)

Date: March 6, 2021

Message: *I cried out to God for help: I cried out to God to hear me. ...To this I will appeal: the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand."*

Psalm 77:1, 10

As I read Psalm 77, these two verses stood out as a short story describing Asaph's transformation. He was distressed and depressed to the point that he could not speak, sleep, or even close his eyes. All he could think about were his troubles and he cried out for God's help, wondering if God had deserted him.

When he turned his mind away from his trials and focused on God's blessings and miracles, the stress was replaced with gratitude. He realized God always had his right hand held out... all he had to do was take it.

As many biblical scholars have noted, when he put aside his troubles and doubt, he was able to see that God had been good to him. It enabled him to shed the weight of the past and embrace the glory of the future. He took a long step in his faith journey and never turned back.

This story of his transformation reminded me of a hymn:

*Spirit of the Living God,
Fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.
Spirit of the Living God,
Fall afresh on me.*

God's Spirit fell afresh on Asaph, and his Spirit can fall afresh on us if we just ask.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father help me follow Asaph's lead so I can turn away from earthly troubles and focus on your many blessings. Help me walk in the footsteps of your son, Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for our sins. Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me. I am yours. Amen.*

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Jesus Cleanses the Temple

Scripture: John 2:13-22

Date: March 7, 2021

Message: *His disciples remembered that it was written "Zeal for your house will consume me." ... After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.*

John 2:17, 22

As I pondered these verses, I was caught by the word zeal, and wondered, what does zeal for your house convey to me? How am I consumed by zeal for Her house?

In this penitential season, what might it mean to be consumed by zeal? Zeal means great energy or enthusiasm for a cause or objective. Am I enthusiastic for God? Do I display great energy in my devotion time or in my worship? What is the objective of my worship, my prayer time? Is the goal for me to experience some wonderful feeling, some brilliant insight into God? To understand some mystery that has eluded me thus far. I don't think so, at least not for me. My worship, my prayers, and the disciplines I chose are to bring me further into a relationship with the God I love, and that I believe loves me.

When I can be quiet and still in Her Presence, God through the Holy Spirit can touch me more deeply, even when I don't "hear" words, or feel something special. And in this quiet I can reflect on Jesus' words and wonder if I really understood what he said. Or like the disciples, do I have to look back and see the meaning that I misconstrued? Do I have to change my tack and try a new direction? Lent is a good time to look back at where I have stifled growth by resisting the nudges of the Spirit, and to look forward; forward to a changing relationship with God, a deeper reliance and God's presence within me, within us, within Her Church, and with all Her people and creation.

Prayer: *God be in my head, and in my understanding; God be in my eyes, and in my looking; God be in my mouth and in my speaking; God be in my heart, and in my thinking; God be at my end, and at my departing. Amen.*

Our Foundation

Scripture: I Corinthians 3:10-23

Date: March 8, 2021

Message:

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light.

I Corinthians 3:11-13a

Lent is a time of reflection and self-examination. It is a time to ask yourself, am I doing enough? What can I do to improve my relationship with Jesus Christ? What can I do to improve the life of my church and the people with whom I worship? Our scripture tells us that Jesus Christ is the foundation of the church and anything that is built upon it is to be worthy of his glory. The scripture warns not to build with the things of this world, such as gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw for they will be shown for what they are...unsuitable for building God's kingdom. They are worthless things that tarnish and rot – like envy, greed, power, and gossip. Paul is talking about the relationships we build with Jesus Christ, our church family, and the community.

Last year I started attending a new church. I had become discouraged and needed a fresh start. It happens sometimes. And it happened to me. But now I am renewed and have begun to build relationships with new people. And it's good, very good. I have learned Jesus Christ is the foundation of everything in my life. Without him, I am nothing. Why wouldn't I want to build upon that and help others along the way?

What you invest today will have great returns tomorrow. What do we do to build up the church? Are we building each other up or tearing each other down? Are we half-heartedly going through the motions of Christianity? Or are we on fire for the Lord?

In this season of Lent, take time to reflect upon these questions and find ways to make a positive change in your church and community. Find ways to build upon the foundation of Jesus Christ with solid and reliable things like your time, talent, presence, gifts, and your witness. Pray for the church to survive and become stronger than it has ever been.

Remember, we are only as strong as our foundation.

Prayer: *Dear God, our Creator, help us this Lenten season to find ways to build upon the foundation of Christ. Help us to love one another and hold each other up in times of need. Be with us as we build your Kingdom. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.*

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Making Sacrifices

Scripture: Hebrews 9:23-28 (NIV)

Date: March 9, 2021

Message: *But he has appeared once for all at the culmination at the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgement, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many;*

Hebrews 9:26b-28a

In our society today, we struggle with the idea of sacrifices. We think passing up a meal or giving some clothes to the homeless is a sacrifice. It is important that we are occasionally reminded what a sacrifice looks like.

Several years ago, I was an assistant football coach for a team that had strict rules about being late for practice. The head coach had reputation for toughness and the veteran players knew and appreciated it. They always looked forward for a young player to be the first tardy.

This particular year it happened a couple of weeks into practice. The punishment was for the guilty player to bear crawl down the entire field and back. A bear crawl (walking on hands and toes) is not easy especially in full football equipment in August heat. All other players would shed their helmets and shoulder pads and watch from the shade.

The young player took his position by the goal posts and prepared for his journey. To the amazement of all gathered, a senior captain got down beside him. This senior was our hardest worker but was very soft spoken. You only heard the occasional “yes sir” or “no sir” from him. Over the next several minutes you could see the two slowly moving up and back down the field. It was apparent the senior was encouraging the younger player all the way especially during the last tough yards.

When they had finished, the team rushed to the senior to ask why would he do something like that. He gave a powerful answer, “None of my team goes alone.” For the rest of the year, he continued this practice with anyone who was guilty of being late.

Jesus made it very clear that we would never have to *go it alone*. His death on the cross meant that we are covered in the sacrifice and the grace assures us that we can be united with the father for all eternity.

Prayer: *Dear Jesus, as we move through this Lenten season may we not polish the cross so that we forget the horrible torture that you endured. Thank you for your sacrifices and the gift of grace that gives us salvation. May we offer ourselves in powerful ways to bring others to Christ. Amen.*

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How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place?

Scripture: Psalm 84

Date: March 10, 2021

Message:

How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.

Psalm 84:1-2

Most musicians who have sung classical choral music, are familiar with the first verse of this Psalm as being the text of the central movement of Johannes Brahms' *Ein deutsches Requiem* (A German Requiem). The movement, "How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place (Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen)," depicts a peaceful contemplation of heaven, for which the believer longs.

God's people show their deep commitment to Him by longing to be with Him, and today's passage provides us with such an example. Author King David begins with a declaration of the exquisiteness of God's dwelling place, in which many scholars believe he is referring to the first temple. From descriptions in the Old Testament books of Exodus (36:1) and 1 Kings (5-7), we learn that the sanctuaries within the temple were absolutely stunning. This shows us that God has a love for beauty to make the places where we gather breathtaking.

We would be naive however, to consider David's reference to the loveliness of God's dwelling place as referring to only the temple. We must also think of God's creation of Earth and life upon it; how beautiful it is! We are so fortunate to live in such a place that we can look out our windows and see God's beauty everywhere. Children often ask adults how they can see God. The answer frequently given is that they can see God in the flowers, the mountains, the beauty of each and every person, and the beauty of this world that He created. Since God lives within us and among us, His world would have to be beautiful, and we are the ones who benefit from seeing this beauty every day. If God's temple and creation were (and are) so beautiful, imagine what Heaven will be like, and even more so, when we will be in God's presence! Oh, what beauty to behold, and oh, what it will be like when we are ultimately with Him, in a new heaven and a new Earth!

Prayer: *Father God, we thank you for the beauty of your dwelling places here on earth, the dwelling place in our hearts, and the dwelling place that we ultimately seek with You, in heaven. Be with us as we look to you for strength, joy and peace, so that we may share with others the beauty that You show within us. Amen.*

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God's Constant Love

Scripture: Psalm 107:1-3 (The Passion Translation)

Date: March 11, 2021

Message: *Let everyone give all their praise and thanks to the Lord! Here's why - he's better than anyone could ever imagine. Yes, he's always loving and kind, and his faithful love never ends. So, go ahead - let everyone know it! Tell the world how he broke through and delivered you from the power of darkness and has gathered us together from all over the world. He has set us free to be his very own*

Psalm 107:1-3

The author of this Psalm is imagining how the Israelites must have felt when they were able to return home after decades of exile in Babylon. There they had been asked, mockingly, no doubt, to “sing a song of Zion” (Psalm 137). Back in their native land, they were free to worship God openly and joyfully. Imagine how we will feel when this pandemic is finally behind us!

In this season of contemplation, may we remember all the ways in which God has blessed us, and be grateful.

I do not believe that God causes bad things to happen to us, but He does not prevent the consequences of bad decisions (sin). In the Bible, he tells us over and over again how we must live “so it will go well with you.” Yet when we fail to listen and behave as we should, He continues to love us and desires to save us from the difficulties and troubles we bring on ourselves. We just need to be patient and wait on the Lord; “his faithful love never ends.”

And when God does rescue us and continues to love us, we are called to give our testimony. “So, go ahead—let everyone know it! Tell the world ...” I pray that I can be bold enough to do that.

Prayer: *Creating, loving, and sustaining Lord, grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the living of these days. Empower us to give our testimony to your constant love. Amen.*

The Grace of God

Scripture: Psalm 107:17-22

Date: March 12, 2021

Message:

*Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress.
He brought them out of darkness, the utter darkness, and broke away their chains.*

Psalm 107:13-14

Sometimes in the church, those suffering with mental illness are met with the response to “just pray about it” and are even blamed for their mental illness as a result of sin. However, God does not give us depression or anxiety or any other form of illness as a punishment or to test our faith.

The act of presence is powerful for those with mental illness or any other illness. To know that one is not alone and abandoned in this world can help even when one cannot see the immediate effects. Praise be to God that Jesus Christ came to be present with us and remains with us each and every day. This passage from Psalm 107 speaks of the grace God grants to all when we cry out. God hears us even when we cannot put our prayers into words—through our tears, our anxiety attacks, our doubts.

We may find ourselves in various “pits” at times, whether it be depression, issues with money, or any other overbearing aspect of life (because there are so many). However, God digs us out of those pits because of God’s faithful and never-ending love for us. It may look like seeing a doctor for a prescription for one’s mental illness or it may be a friend reaching out with a phone call or card. In whatever way it may be, God seeks to be with us in our valleys and on our mountaintops, present every step of the way.

It is my hope this Lenten season that we can take the time to celebrate Christ’s amazing ministry but also be able to mourn the loss of God’s only son. Let us sit in all the feelings that may come our way this season.

Prayer:

O gracious and loving God, we thank you for your amazing presence in our lives. Many of us have suffered from mental illness and great loss over the past year, but your love remains steadfast even in our pits of despair. Let us find joy in this season and reach out to those who need your presence. It’s in Christ’s holy name we pray. Amen.

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Born of the Spirit

Scripture: John 3:1-13

Date: March 13, 2021

Message: *The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.*

John 3:8

The wind can be a powerful force – from a steady breeze holding a kite aloft, to a stout draft filling the sails of a ship, to a swirling tornado tossing everything in its path, or a hurricane-force gale pushing great waves onto the shore. We cannot really see the wind, but we know that it exists because we can hear and see its effects.

In the same way the Holy Spirit is a powerful, unseen force evident in the effects the Spirit produces in the lives of those who are “born again.”

When Nicodemus came to Jesus, he acknowledged that no one could do the things Jesus did unless God was with them, but there was still an underlying curiosity, a desire to know what it was about this man that made him different. Jesus taught with authority, he performed many signs and miracles, yet he did so with humility, patience, kindness, and love. His actions were in stark contrast to those of Pharisees and other teachers and leaders of the day.

In Galatians 5: 22-23, the Apostle Paul writes that “...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...”

As children of God, the presence of these characteristics in our lives are evidence that we have been “born again,” filled with the spirit of God and set apart from the world. We may speak with eloquence and do seemingly great things, but our most impactful testimony comes not through grand speeches and sermons or heroic deeds, but through the small day-to-day things we say and do influenced by the Holy Spirit – a kind word spoken, restraint of anger or judgement, a compassionate prayer for someone in need, humble service, or loving acceptance of others.

This is what drew Nicodemus to Jesus that night. Perhaps others may, too, be drawn to Jesus when they can hear and see the effects of the Holy Spirit in our lives and come near to discover what makes us different.

Prayer: *Gracious God, we are so thankful for the gift of your Holy Spirit and for the plan of salvation that allows us to become your children. May our hearts be filled with your spirit, so that we can bear good fruit in our lives and reflect your presence in the world around us. Amen.*

Run to the Light

Scripture: John 3:14-21

Date: March 14, 2021

Message: *For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. ... This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.*

John 3:16, 19

Light in dark times is a comfort—just ask a small child who wakes in the middle of the night. That comfort may come from the beam of a small nightlight or, if the child is really frightened, he may run to the place where his parents can be found.

Thank God for the Light of Christ when things seem so dark in our world! We can run to Jesus when things down here seem so out of control. Honestly, these past few months leave me wondering how anyone who does not know our Lord can face each day. So much sickness, so much grieving, so much fear, intolerance, and division. If you thought that this world was really all there was, where would your hope and comfort come from? If you thought when death took you or your loved ones, that there was nothing else, how terrifying would that be?

Even though believers still experience loss and sickness and rejection, we can turn to the Light of our Savior. We can do like the old hymn says and “turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face—and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace.”

I can actually sing that song out loud sometimes when I feel overwhelmed by circumstances that I can't control. Even though I'm not a great singer, I know that God hears me and welcomes my voice.

God also hears me when I pray or when I cry out to Him like I did in that tiny bathroom at the hospital just before my Dad passed. I cannot imagine coping with the things of this world without my Heavenly Father who sent His Son to be the Light of our world.

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord, for sending Jesus to be the Light of Our World. Thank you for the Hope you give to us every day, and thank you, especially, for the gift of eternal life. Please help us to shine our lights so that others might gain the salvation and hope we have in You. In the name of Jesus, I pray. Amen.*

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He Satisfies the Longing Soul

Scripture: Psalm 107:7-14 (NKJV)

Date: March 15, 2021

Message:

For He satisfies the longing soul and fills the hungry soul with goodness.

Psalm 107:9

Friends, please take to heart the words from the Psalm passage today. God is our strength and refuge, a constant help in times of despair and distress. As I write these words in the midst of a global pandemic, the day after the events of Washington DC, during the certifying of the results of the Electoral College, and as we approach our denomination's General Conference where division has been proposed, we need to be in prayer to Almighty God! Pray for unity in the many places where there are divisions. Pray for Love of our fellow church members, pray for our Country and our leaders and ask God to satisfy the longing in our souls.

The longing in our soul can only be filled through the spiritual part of our psyche. Spend time in prayer, meditate on the scriptures and live a life reflecting the love of Christ to our neighbors. And who is our neighbor? Jesus told a parable about the "Good Samaritan" (wait a minute – Samaritans? They were hated by the Jewish people, there weren't any "Good" Samaritans). But, Jesus knew differently.

Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men! Psalm 107: 8

We get ourselves in trouble when we judge others. God is the judge, only God knows the true hearts of people. Which prayer did God hear when the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18: 9-14) prayed in the Temple? Or how is the Kingdom of God like a field where the wheat and the weeds grow TOGETHER? Christians are not an island to ourselves, basically we are just one beggar telling (hopefully) another beggar where to find (spiritual) food. How much mercy will God show me, if I show no mercy to others?

Prayer: *Dear Lord, we pray for our world, our country and Your church! We pray for a spirit of cooperation and tolerance as we live together with our neighbors. Help us be a light for our neighbors as we show them the Love of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.*

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Life's Examples

Scripture: I Corinthians 10:6-13 (New Living Translation)

Date: March 16, 2021

Message: *These things happened as a warning to us, so that we would not crave evil things as they did, or worship idols as some of them did.*

I Corinthians 10:6-7a

After reading and rereading this passage, two things come to mind. First, history repeats itself. Second, I hear the voices of my parents/grandparents telling me to learn from my ancestor's mistakes. History has repeated itself many times. It is impossible to name every event, however a few examples are Economic Crashes, Assassinations, and yes, Pandemics. COVID-19 is not the first pandemic the nation has faced. AIDS is another pandemic that started four decades ago and continues to claim lives today. AIDS originated in Africa as early as 1920 and began to spread worldwide in the 80's.

Idol worshipping is another event in history that seems to continue to be passed down from generation to generation. Here is a list of 6 modern day idols:

- **Our Identity:** It is easy to place our identity in something or someone other than God. Social media following, our position at work, our abilities/skills, or the achievements may have their identity wrapped up in the wrong thing. Not only is this an idol, but it is a tough way to live.
- **Money/Consumerism:** It doesn't matter if you have money or are broke. The pursuit of money and the acquisition of things is an idol for many in our culture. Many people trust their money more than they trust God. Money is not bad; it is a tool. Like any tool, you need to use it correctly or it can cause much damage. Money isn't the problem; the way we use and view it that can become a problem.
- **Entertainment:** Entertainment comes in many forms - from Netflix to vacations, from video games to podcasts. We love entertainment in all forms. As with other modern-day idols, entertainment is not all bad. When the obsession with the search for entertainment and the chase for the best experiences becomes more important than God, it becomes an idol.
- **Sex:** Sex has become an obsession in our culture. It is everywhere. We have taken a gift from God and made it into a god of our lives.
- **Comfort:** There is an endless list of products that promise to simplify and add comfort to our life. Our lives appear to be easier and more comfortable than at any other time in history. Jesus presents followers with a very different narrative. He states that his followers will face trials, persecution, and difficulty. Comfort isn't all bad. Damage is done when the pursuit for comfort is the main focus in life. When comfort is an idol, we will struggle when God calls us to something difficult.
- **Our phones:** Many simply cannot live without their phone or an online presence. The actual phone or social media presence is not the problem. The value placed on this technology is. If we can't sit in silence for 5 minutes without refreshing our newsfeed, we might have an idol.

There are 4 questions to ask if something has become an idol? Where do I spend my time? Where do I spend my money? Where do I get my joy? What is always on my mind? Think about these questions. Don't let anything, even a good thing, take the place of God in our life.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father help us in our Daily lives to put you before any idols we may have today. Help us to use them correctly and for the purpose you created them for. Amen.*

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Light in the Eyes of Sheep

Scripture: John 8:12-20 (NKJV)

Date: March 17, 2021

Message:

Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.

John 8:12

If you have ever been around a sheep herder or a shepherd, it is fascinating to watch how the sheep and the shepherd know each other so intimately. The sheep fully put their trust in the shepherd for all the necessities as well as protection from danger. At night it is hard to know if the sheep are watching and following, but when the fire is lit, and the shepherd sees the reflective light in their eyes and they see the shepherd, he realizes they are there and they are still following him. For the sheep, darkness doesn't matter as long as they can see the shepherd.

What a great analogy of what our relationship with Jesus should be! However, we often don't keep our eyes on His light that shines in the world, and we end up like "lost sheep."

I can remember a time in my life several years ago that was very, very dark. I had lost my job in a career that I loved due to no fault of my own, and it seemed that there was no "light", no matter where I turned. You see, I was looking for that light, that direction in worldly places and NOT in Jesus Christ. Oh, like the scripture says, He was shining His light on me but I didn't follow and therefore, I walked in darkness. As I kept my eyes focused on Jesus and His light, I found a peace and a bright, permanent light in my life that has been there each day. I may not always see it, nor obey it, but Jesus will always shine forth so that He could be shining in my life.

Prayer:

Lord, open my eyes that I may see the light that shows your direction for my life. Let that light shine out to others so they may follow you. Amen.

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Sabbath Gift

Scripture: Hebrews 4:1-13

Date: March 18, 2021

Message:

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his.

Hebrews 4:9-10

Sabbath is a gift from God...a gift of love. Remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy is our gift to God. Finding a time each week to do this is often difficult. The "busy-ness" of life demands our time and energy and we often neglect to remember the Sabbath. Rest. Cease from labor. That is easier said than done, but once, several years ago, I had the opportunity to experience this gift.

I had the honor of playing Golde in a community theatre production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. In one very moving scene, Golde lights two candles and offers a blessing, as the family gathers to observe the Sabbath. In preparation for my role, and especially this scene, I was invited to the home of our local rabbi to experience Sabbath, a very traditional weekly observance beginning at sunset on Friday. The rabbi, his wife, and their young daughter were also part of the *Fiddler on the Roof* ensemble and remain my dear friends.

It was an evening I will never forget and a truly holy experience for me during each performance, as I lit two candles and extended my hands over them, drawing inward circles, bringing the light into myself. With closed eyes, a blessing was offered, and then the beautiful "Sabbath Prayer" was sung by Golde and her husband Tevye. The family joins in, asking for God's protection, strength, and blessings...to grant them long lives and to favor them with happiness and peace.

What a beautiful and meaningful way to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. This is a tradition that has been handed down through the centuries to many generations. It is a gift from God. He loves us and desires that we experience Sabbath. Rest. Cease from labor.

I encourage you to find a time to rest and cease your labor. Light candles, if you wish, and thank God for the many blessings he has given you. Ask for all that you desire. Pray for your family, others, and any needs. Open your heart and speak to God. Happy Sabbath!

Prayer: *"May the Lord protect and defend you. May God bless you and grant you long lives. Favor them, Oh Lord, with happiness and peace. Oh, hear our Sabbath prayer. Amen."*

(Excerpts from "Sabbath Prayer" - *Fiddler on the Roof*)

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Joy and Confidence

Scripture: Hebrews 4:14-5:4 (CEB)

Date: March 19, 2021

Message: *Also, let's hold on to the confession since we have a great high priest who passed through the heavens, who is Jesus, God's Son; because we don't have a high priest who can't sympathize with our weaknesses but instead one who was tempted in every way that we are, except without sin. Finally, let's draw near to the throne of favor with confidence so that we can receive mercy and find grace when we need help. Every high priest is taken from the people and put in charge of things that related to God for their sake, in order to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. The high priest is able to deal gently with the ignorant and those who are misled since he himself is prone to weakness. Because of his weakness, he must offer sacrifices for his own sins as well as for the people. No one takes this throne for themselves but takes it only when they are called by God, just like Aaron.*

Hebrews 4:14-5:4

Once upon a time when my children were small, there was no greater treat for them than going through the McDonalds drive through to get a Happy Meal. One no doubt hectic day, with cheers of joy from the backseat, I pulled up to the window to pay for two cheeseburger Happy Meals with cheese-only, girl toys, AND a large Diet Coke (for my frazzled self). The cashier responded, motioning toward the front of the restaurant, "that car paid for you."

"Wait, what?" I asked, completely confused. The cashier repeated herself, "The man in that car paid for your Happy Meals." I pulled my car ahead feeling both ashamed to accept the gift and elated and humbled by the act of kindness.

I didn't have the presence of mind, in the moment, to immediately return the favor and pay for the car behind me and that further embarrassed me. It didn't matter - my order was paid for and there was nothing I could do to change it. The car was already gone and I was still so dumbfounded that I could barely string two words together.

In Hebrews, the writer tells us that Jesus is merciful, faithful, (2:17) and crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of his death (2:9). With his death, he took all that shame and embarrassment so that we could "draw near to the throne of favor with confidence." (4:16) I didn't have confidence accepting the unexpected gift that day and there have been lots of days since that I've felt unworthy in one way or another.

But, I think the confidence to "draw near the throne of favor" comes from being elated and humbled by Jesus's act of kindness and sacrifice, not by any earthly sacrifice we might make. Friends, let joy fuel your confidence to draw nearer to Him and share your joy so that it might inspire others!

Prayer: Lord, please continue to remind us daily of Your little lessons we so often miss. Amen.

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Create in Us Pure Hearts, Oh God

Scripture: Psalm 51:1-12

Date: March 20, 2021

Message: *Wash away all my iniquities and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, only you, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.*

Psalm 51:2-5

As we grow closer to Holy Week during this Lenten Season I am reflecting on God's love and forgiveness. It is hard to comprehend that a newborn baby is born into sin, in fact, sinful from the time the mother conceived. Sadly, we are born into a world of sin and must recognize in ourselves the sinful natures we each exhibit.

In Psalm 51, David recognizing his own sin, comes before God to confess and ask forgiveness. I image how David must have felt - regretful, embarrassed, ashamed, afraid of losing God's favor. Like David, we must confess our sins and live to improve daily in the Lord's favor. It can be difficult to have those interpersonal conversations with yourself about your own faults, but they are defining moments in a relationship with God. We must be truthful with ourselves in order to grow as an individual and as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Within these scriptures, David, recognizes his sinful nature and repents to God. He then requested God's forgiveness and the presence of the Holy Spirit. That is the glorious part of the 'birthed in sin' story, our God is offering unfailing love, compassion, and cleansing from our sins. Halleluiah! He sent a savior, His Son Jesus, who was willing to die on a cross for our transgressions, lawlessness, untruthfulness, and a multitude of other sins.

The Heavenly Father battles with forces of evil every minute of every day for our souls. To the Father, we are important collectively and we are important as individuals. God is remaining faithful and continues to drive home the concept that no matter what you do, or how bad you sin, nothing will separate Him from you. Even knowing the outcome, He chose to come to earth as a human being to save us!

You are a child of God and will carry that title with you forever. God is willing to wash away every sin and offers you forgiveness and love in return.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, we ask as David asked, create in us pure hearts, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit in us. Do not cast us from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from us. Restore to us the joy of your salvation and grant us a willing spirit, to sustain us. Amen. (Psalm 1: 10-12)*

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Keeping the Word Close

Scripture: Psalm 119:10-16

Date: March 21, 2021

Message:

I have hidden your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you...

Psalm 119:1

If there is one theme throughout this chapter of Psalms, it is the Word. We must not only read the Word of God but hide its teachings in our heart so that we might not sin against God. The only way to be totally clean, is to be washed in the blood of the Lamb. His blood doesn't just cover sin but does away with it.

The psalmist is aware of his weaknesses and knows only the Lord can direct his every decision and not let him wander into temptation. The secret to life is in God's Word. We should be so full of God's Word that there isn't room for anything else. To doubt our own wisdom and strength, and to depend upon God, proves the purpose of holiness is sincere.

When we are so full of God's Word, we are learning the commandments and decrees of God and holding them deep in our hearts. What we hold deeply comes out in our actions and our words to all those around us. The Word of God should be more valuable than any material possession. If you could keep ONE of your worldly possessions and had to give up everything else, would you choose to keep your Bible? If you chose to keep your Bible, you have God in your heart more than material things.

It takes a commitment to study the Word of God and reflect on it. When you are not reading God's Word, are you thinking about it? When making decisions do you think your choice lines up with what the Word of God says? To have your mind stay with God is a very healthy choice. It is a big commitment that pays dividends.

To know the Word of God and hide it away deep within yourself is one thing that no one can ever take away from you. Nearly all true believers have many Scriptures they have memorized. In time of trouble, it gives us something to reflect on and be comforted.

Prayer: *Gracious and Loving God, guide us as we seek to keep your Word in our hearts so that we make decisions that are pleasing to you. In Jesu's name. Amen.*

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Character Witnesses

Scripture: Isaiah 43:8-13

Date: March 22, 2021

Message:

“You are my witnesses,” declares the Lord, “and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no savior.

Isaiah 43:10-11

The setting for today’s scripture is a courtroom and God’s people are called forth to provide a witness to what God has done. The witnesses are chosen by God so that they may know and believe and understand that there is only one God. Witnesses are chosen to do what witnesses do, to provide a testimony. But is understanding necessary to be an effective witness? Can feeble humans really understand the omnipotent, all-seeing, ever present God? Can a witness be effective without having understanding?

I know and believe that helicopters fly, but I certainly do not understand how. I know and believe that God sent his only Son, his perfect, sinless Son, to suffer and die for a sinner like me. As a parent, I do not understand how God could do that. To be an effective witness understanding is not always necessary, but oftentimes we Christians feel like we need to have all the answers and that may impair our witness. For example, we might refrain from offering a testimony to an acquaintance for fear they may ask one of the many things about God that we do not fully understand, such as why was a loved one not healed, why do bad things happen, etc. We can witness to the character of God even though we do not fully understand the details. We can be witnesses to His character based on what has been done for us and that is something that cannot be disputed. *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* Romans 5:8 (NIV).

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, Merciful Judge, Gracious Provider, allow us to be your witnesses to a broken, sin-sick world during this sacred time of Lent. Give us opportunities to witness to your love and unfailing mercy and strengthen our resolve to be effective character witnesses and boldly proclaim what Christ has done for us, even when we do not fully understand. Amen.*

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Listen for God's Message

Scripture: Acts 2:14-24

Date: March 23, 2021

Message:

It has always astounded me that Peter needed to tell those who gathered on the day of Pentecost that the apostles were not drunk but gifted by the Holy Spirit. How could this group of "God-fearing Jews" have missed God's miracle and assumed these men, the closest followers of Jesus, were simply drunk? Would I have listened to their words in my own language, or would I have been distracted by the crowd and quickly ignored God's message tailored for me?

With the endless distractions and overwhelming messages directed at me each minute of every day, I am afraid I too quickly discount those who may be sharing God's message with me. It is too easy for me to discount the messages of others and move on to my next task or next news feed.

During this Lenten season, I am praying for God to help me be more aware of the messages God is sharing with me through those whom I meet each day. I will slow down and not simply move to the next story or task before asking what God's message is for me. Through these actions, I seek to realize God's miracles and not disregard them through worldly explanations. I hope you will join me in listening for God's messages around us each day instead of missing the words God has tailored especially for each of us.

Prayer: *Thank you, God, for sending your Holy Spirit to be with me each day! Please help me to hear and recognize the messages You give me today and help me to have the strength to share Your Good News of Jesus Christ with everyone I meet. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.*

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Stay in the Light

Scripture: John 12:34-50

Date: March 24, 2021

Message: *Then Jesus said, "The light will be with you for a little longer, so walk while you have the light. Then the darkness will not catch you. If you walk in the darkness, you will not know where you are going. Believe in the light while you still have it so that you will become children of light." When Jesus had said this, he left and hid himself from them.*

John 12:35-36

Stay in the light and do not travel in the darkness. Each morning we have an opportunity to walk in the light and shine our light on the world. We can do this in many ways from having a positive attitude, committing random acts of kindness, sharing a smile with a stranger, or giving our time and money to help others. Seems simple enough, right? But today our focus is so easily moved from the light to the gray shadows of negative comments on Facebook, political bickering on the news, repeating office gossip, or even our jealous thoughts over another's good fortune. Before we know it, we are deep into the inky darkness and surrounded by unkind thoughts, selfish actions, and moments of self-doubt.

Thanks be to God who forgives us of our trespasses and gives us the ability to try again in the new day. Start your day off in God's light by reading his word. Say a prayer to ask for God's help to keep you on the right path. Be open to the Holy Spirit's nudge as God guides you through your day. You may have to stop now and again to readjust your light and refocus on the path, but a moment of reflection or a silent prayer can save you from taking several steps in the wrong direction.

Prayer: *Dear Father, stand before me and shine the light on the path you wish me to take. Be on my right encouraging me to take that first step of faith, be behind me protecting me from my enemies, and on my left comforting me as I go through my trials. May I never forget you are always with me. Amen.*

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Caregiving 101

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

Date: March 25, 2021

Message:

For nothing is impossible with God. Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant."

Luke 1:37-38

Sometimes being called to be the Lord's servant can be a daunting task, especially when what you are being asked to do, isn't in your plans. Just ask Mary.

Have you ever felt as if God has interrupted your plans? I'll confess that I have. There have been many times I've gone along gracefully but, sadly, other times I have not. As a flawed Christian, I am compelled to ask "why", or "why now, Lord." - knowing full well it's not my place to understand God's plan nor ask for an explanation as to what He is asking of me. I just simply need to trust Him. But sometimes that's easier said than done.

I felt this way after my Mom was diagnosed with dementia in 2017. Her illness just wasn't in my or my family's plans. This kind of thing never is. Because I live 3-hours away from my parents, I wasn't my mother's main caregiver, that responsibility fell onto the shoulders of my 86-year-old Dad. I visited frequently to help out with not only her care but to give my Dad a much-needed break. As her dementia progressed, so did my visits home. It got to the point I dreaded going. I was physically exhausted and mentally drained, and simply put – I was sad.

It was during this time that I would talk to God – I would cry, complain and vent my frustration about how unfair it was to be losing my kind, loving, beautiful, and smart Christian mother - little by little.

It was during these prayerful conversations with God, that He started to work through me. First, He showed me how to accept my Mom's diagnosis. Then He guided me, an untrained caregiver, how to handle her fragile state-of-mind with the love, grace and dignity she deserved. God gave me the words to diffuse my mom's sun-downing episodes and He gave me strength and courage the first time she didn't recognize me as her daughter.

As Mom's dementia worsened, God's love continued to guide me through so many unknown situations that I never thought I would get through. God was with my brother and me the day we moved Mom into a memory-care facility, and He was with us when she died 8 months later.

See, that's the beauty of God's love. He shows us His mercy and grace through His LOVE for us. The same unconditional love a mother has for her child or an adult child for an ailing parent or loved one.

Prayer: *Dear Heavenly Father, please help us to be still and to listen to your voice so that we may be guided through the difficult times in our lives. Amen.*

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Shinning as Stars

Scripture: Philippians 2:12-18 (NIV)

Date: March 26, 2021

Message:

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky

Philippians 2:14-15

Do you remember the Star Chart from Elementary School? Many classrooms had the brightly colored chart with all of the students' names along the left side and a variety of best behaviors and tasks across the top. A star was placed by your name when the task/behavior was successfully completed. The goal was to get a star in all of the spaces after your name. It was a special day when you finally filled all of the spaces with the shiny stars.

I smile as I imagine God our Father with his children's behavior chart, adding stars as we go through the day without complaining, or arguing with one another, or doing a kind act toward someone we normally would not notice. And how many stars did I get today? OR did I get ANY stars?

We are living in very difficult and dark days. I admit there are days when it is hard to not complain. I also have realized the pandemic isolation has finally impacted me so that I tend to be quicker to be argumentative. I am even more aware there are days when I have allowed fear to creep into the corners of my soul. It is at that time that I stop and once again reset my faith compass. This directs me back to God our Father for guidance and direction and assurance that regardless of my behavior, He loves me and forgives me. He knows I try. He knows I will try a little bit harder tomorrow, not necessarily to receive another star but because I want to please him because He loves me.

And maybe tomorrow I will at least get a glimmer of stardust so that eventually I can become a star that will light the path to our God for those who have not yet met Him.

Prayer: *Dear God, I give you the thanks, praise, and glory for the light You shine on the cloudy days and the dark nights within my heart. Help me see the opportunity and share your light with those who do not know you. Amen.*

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What is my Brokenness?

Scripture: Mark 10:32-34, 46-52

Date: March 27, 2021

Message:

“What’s that look like?” the man asked. I’d just told him God was calling me to step out and follow Him into the unknown.

What’s that look like? Indeed.

“I have no clue,” I said with an awkward grin, “and I think that’s the point.”

Through decades of becoming completely independent and self-reliant, I’d developed a powerful sense of foresight ... and I’d constructed a safe, predictable life for myself. In fact, I could’ve written the tagline for that insurance commercial: *We know a thing or two because we’ve seen a thing or two.* I’d definitely seen more—both the beautiful and the horrific—than the average guy.

I knew a thing or two because I’d seen it all (or at least taken the class or read the book). I could predict how things would play out, and with that power, I’d learned to control my world. I was secure in my own sight, and I’d become adept at avoiding risk.

Then Jesus asked me to trust him ...

As Jesus walks through Jericho, Bartimaeus—the blind beggar—calls out from the crowd. “I want to see!”

And Jesus heals him.

This interaction haunts the deepest parts of me.

No doubt, everyone in that crowd was broken, in need of healing, and blind in so many ways; but Jesus only gave one of them new sight—the one who acknowledged his blindness.

To follow Christ, we need to admit the things that blind us—our expectations, wounds, need for control, etc.—so we can see the world with new eyes ... and follow.

Prayer: *Father, forgive me for letting my anticipations, experiences, and ambition blind me. Heal me. Open my eyes to where and how you are moving so I might follow you. Help me to truly see. Amen.*

A Simple Gift

Scripture: John 12:12-16

Date: March 28, 2021

Message: *The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him. They shouted, "Hosanna! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessings on the king of Israel!"*

Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, "Don't be afraid, Daughter Zion. Look! Your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt".

His disciples didn't understand these things at first. After he was glorified, they remembered that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him.

John 12:12-16

The lone brown box stood out among the festive packages under our Christmas tree.

The sender had placed a sticker on the top – **"Do not open until December 25!"**

Each time I passed the tree it made me think how Jesus came into this world, not in a beautifully wrapped gift box, but in a plain brown box – a manger in a lowly stable.

Fast forward to his triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

Jesus did not enter as Herod would have, on a decorated majestic stallion, with all the pomp and circumstance of a king. Jesus once again came to us in a simple, humble way, on a donkey, down a different path and through a different gate.

That is how Jesus comes to us, in the still small moments of our lives.

He doesn't require us to receive him with great fanfare or elaborate celebration, just simply and quietly, asking him to come into our hearts to receive his love.

Welcome, Lord Jesus!

We are ready!

Prayer: *Dear Jesus, may we always be open and ready to receive you as our king. Amen.*

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The Smoldering Wick

Scripture: Isaiah 42:1-9

Date: March 29, 2021

Message:

*A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice.*

Isaiah 42:3

When we read Isaiah 42:3, we could understand that not breaking a “bruised reed” means that, unlike earthly rulers, our Chosen One would do no harm to people already broken or crushed. Instead, God would lift and support them. This part of the verse seems easily understood.

What about the smoking flax, or smoldering wick (depending on which translation a person reads) – what is that part about? The wick is about to lose its light in the lamp from being at its end; or “at the end of the rope.”

Like the wick, ones who previously shined so brightly, full of Spirit can “burn out” for some reason: Family circumstances, work woes, unemployment, illness – or let’s face it: “Terrible, horrible, no good, very bad,” ** and getting worse. Jesus does not “snuff us out” when we are ready to “burn out.” Jesus supports us, like those who are “bruised.” Romans 8:26-27 assures us that even when we are too weak and do not know how to pray for ourselves, the Holy Spirit will pray for us. That is powerful support!

As I write this, the second vaccine for the corona virus has been released, and the world watches with hope for a crippling pandemic to settle down. For almost a year, health workers, news providers, volunteers, and spiritual leaders have been “smoking flax” at one time or another. Loved ones in isolation smolder alone without light.

Although the Holy Spirit is there to pray for them, let’s be sure to lend our prayers as well. Like Jesus, let us support our brothers and sisters who are at the ends of their ropes, and help them shine a little longer when times are dark.

**Viorst, Judith. (1972.) *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. Athenum.

Prayer: *Our dear Lord, thank you for supporting us when we are bruised or burning out. Show us how to support one another in kindness and love. We pray in the name of the Chosen One. Amen.*

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Hope!

Scripture: Psalm 71:1-14

Date: March 30, 2021

Message:

But I will hope continually, and I will praise you yet more and more.

Psalm 71:14

After several verses of passionate expression of anguish caused by the enemy, the psalmist commits to hope in God and His sovereignty in dealing with the attack. The psalmist also promises to praise God despite the circumstances.

How many times do we find ourselves feeling attacked or overwhelmed in life? Whether we are truly mistreated by someone or the circumstances just seem to be against us, sometimes we feel as sorrowful as the psalmist did, and plead with God to rescue us and help us.

The good news is, He is here. He won't let us down. As we see in the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis, God can take what is intended for evil and transform it into good, and for this reason, we can commit to hoping in Him and trusting in his authority. Hope, in general, is the expectation that something good lies ahead.

Our hope in Christ is knowing without a doubt that something good does lie ahead, and that in the end, Christ wins, and we win with Christ. After all, God will be victorious, and our enemy will not prevail.

How would our lives look different if we began to have hope in the face of adversity and attack? Though we encounter momentary hardships, let us promise to keep hoping in our victorious God and continue to praise Him more and more.

Prayer: *Holy God, we give thanks for Your presence in our lives, especially when times are difficult. Hope is precious, and because of your promises, we have the strength to be ever hopeful and assured of victory through You. In Your name we pray. Amen.*

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Running the Race

Scripture: Hebrews 12:1-3

Date: March 31, 2021

Message: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

Hebrews 12:1-3

Today's scripture reminds me of the time I ran my first (and last) 5K race. I had just retired and was feeling a bit unorganized with unfamiliar free time. When a former coworker invited me to join her in a running class, I decided to give it a try. At first, we walked and ran a little. As the weeks progressed, we ran more and walked less until the day came when we ran without stopping for the whole lesson. Then the day arrived – race day! It was a sunny and cold morning with hundreds of mostly young people ready to take off at the sound of the whistle.

I did finish that race, running the whole distance without having to stop or slow to a walk. But I could not have done this alone. My friend ran beside me, encouraging me to keep running and there were lots of people cheering from the sidelines along the route. We kept our eyes fixed on the people in front of us running at the same pace until we finally crossed the finish line.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that our Christian life can be likened to a race where we are running – not walking – toward our finish line. Likewise, there is a crowd of saints running along beside us and before us, pointing to that distant goal. We are to run with all our might, running the same path that Jesus ran, throwing off those unnecessary weights and extra baggage that slow us down, that tarnish our testimony, and to forsake the sin of unbelief that will prevent us from reaching the final goal – our heavenly home with our amazing God.

We are encouraged to hang in there and train every day by learning more about Jesus and how he lived, by spending time in prayer and meditation, and connecting with other Christians for encouragement. We are to look to Jesus and not lose heart – to keep our eyes on the prize, our heavenly finish line.

Prayer: *God, thank you for sending your Son, Jesus, to forge the path for us and to show us how to live. Help us to be bold and run the race for your glory and honor. Amen.*

Maundy Thursday

Scripture: I Corinthians 11:23-26

Date: April 1, 2021

Message: *The teaching that I gave you is the same teaching that I received from the Lord: On the night when Jesus was handed over to be killed, he took bread and gave thanks for it. Then he broke the bread and said, "This is my body; it is for you. Do this to remember me."*

In the same way, after they ate, Jesus took the cup. He said, "This cup shows the new agreement from God to his people. This new agreement begins with the blood of my death. When you drink this, do it to remember me." Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you show others about the Lord's death until he comes.

I Corinthians 11:23-26

Maundy Thursday is the Thursday before Easter when we remember the last supper and the first communion. My mom has told me that when I was younger, before we went up to the altar to take communion, she would quiz me and ask me why we take communion and what it means. I would tell her that we take communion to remember that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and that the bread represents the body, and the grape juice represents the blood. Finally, I would tell her that "communion is not just a snack."

Now that I am older, I look back and realize that I was repeating "Sunday School answers" and that communion is so much more. Communion is a sign of love - God's amazing love for us. We take communion to remember that God loves us so much that he sent his son down to earth to die for each of us so that we can know him and spend eternity with him in heaven. What an amazing love. My favorite part of this scripture is verse 26. It says that when we eat the bread and drink the juice we show others the Lord's love. I think that this is a great way to share God's love with other people. So when we take communion, we can remember the love that God has for us and show others of his love, too.

Prayer: *Dear God, thank you for this season of Lent and that we can remember your love for us through communion. I pray that you help us share your love to others. Amen.*

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Things Make Room for Good Things

Scripture: Psalm 22:1, 19-26

Date: April 2, 2021

Message:

The crucifixion of Jesus was a terrible event. It was a brutal murder of not only an innocent man, but a perfect man, someone that never sinned. If we were faced with the pain and suffering that Jesus knew would lay ahead, most of us would be running for the hills. But Jesus stood his ground because he knew what needed to be done to pay the necessary penalty for all our sins.

Jesus' sacrifice provided the opportunity for salvation. He removed the barrier between us and God, so that those who believe in him will receive eternal life.

The thought that God loves us so much that he sacrificed his only son simultaneously drains our hearts and refills them with love. And now we have the hope of an everlasting life with him.

A 'sacrifice,' according to Microsoft Bing dictionary, is to provide a kill or offering to a divine being. We must ask ourselves, what has God asked us to kill except for our sinful nature? What has God asked us to offer except for our allegiance to God alone, our service to better the kingdom and a tithe of return?

As Christians we all make sacrifices. But when we compare our personal sacrifices to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, the things we sacrifice could not even be considered sacrifices.

Jesus made it very easy for us to have salvation and everlasting life, but Jesus also told us there would be opposition and suffering along the way.

Just as Jesus' sacrifice on the cross created an opportunity for salvation, we must also recognize that the sufferings in our lives create opportunities. God always provides a way, a different way, the only way. We may view our course change as a bad thing, but it makes room for good things.

One Sunday from the pulpit I thanked God for what he was doing in my life, and I also thanked the congregation for allowing God to work through them to reach me.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, we thank you for your Son, whose work on the cross created the opportunity for our salvation. Holy Spirit keep us mindful that in comparison, our sacrifices are merely small disruptions. And we also give thanks that You have already provided, in advance, a different way to overcome those distractions. We ask this in the Precious Name of Jesus. Amen.*

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The Best Is Yet to Come

Scripture: 1 Peter 4:1-8

Date: April 3, 2021

Message:

Therefore since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourself also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.

1 Peter 4:1-2

Since Christ suffered and underwent pain, we must have the same attitude. We ask ourselves, "Why does God allow sufferings?"

Sufferings train us in obedience, patience, and dying to our fleshly desires such as pride. Sufferings teach us God's ways to love, encourage, and comfort one another. And sufferings prepare us to fit into His Kingdom.

These things are impossible for us without the help from the Holy Spirit. Dr. David Jeremiah wrote, "In the end, just as the oyster coats an intrusive speck of sand with a smooth substance until it becomes a pearl of great value, God layers our difficulties with His greatness and glory until we develop our own pearl of great price and strength of character."

Can we trust God's will, can we soar on wings like eagles, can we run and not be weary, can we walk and not faint?

YES, WE CAN, with help from the Holy Spirit! Toney Evans wrote, "THE KING IS COMING and He's not a baby in a manger anymore." So, let us keep our eyes on JESUS! Never give up! The best is yet to come!

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, we bless and praise Your Holy name. We pray for Your Kingdom to come and Your will to be done. Jesus Christ, Son of God, forgive us our sins and help us to forgive others. In Your precious name we pray. Amen.*

Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed

Scripture: Acts 10:38-42 (NIV)

Date: April 4, 2021

Message: *how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. “We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.”*

Acts 10:38-42

Today we celebrate Christ’s life, but specifically His resurrection from the dead. This passage of scripture reads a lot like an obituary, or a eulogy. A summation of Christ’s life.

In this passage, Peter is talking to a gathering to which he had been called. He is telling of how Christ’s life had been one of living love, “*he went around doing good and healing...because God was with Him.*” Peter is saying that Christ was God/Love incarnate – in the flesh. He lived and died a life of love.

In the final part of this passage, Peter reminds us – that we, like Peter, are to testify to others of God’s love. If we truly model Christ’s behaviors, we are called to live the words “*went around doing good.*”

On Easter day, we celebrate Christ’s life, death and resurrection. How better to celebrate and honor Christ than by living His legacy. Go and do likewise. Loving all, doing good to all.

Prayer: *Gracious and Loving God, as we go forward, today and each day, open our eyes and our hearts to be Your servant, doing good and loving all people following the example of Jesus. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.*

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