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**Lenten Devotional Guide**  
St. John's Episcopal Church  
Tampa, Florida



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St. John's Episcopal Church of Tampa, FL  
*Cover design by Samantha Van Wormer*

## Introduction to Our Lenten Devotional Guide

The period from Ash Wednesday to Easter, known as Lent, is a season for self-examination and repentance. The clergy, staff, and parishioners of St. John's have prepared the devotional readings in this guide for the days from Ash Wednesday through Easter. The guide includes contributions from our youngest parishioners to our seniors, from our newer parishioners and those who have been members for decades. We hope that it will be a blessing to you and help you to deepen your Lenten practice.

*Eternal Lord, of love behold your church  
walking once more the pilgrim way of Lent,  
Led by your cloud by day, by night your fire,  
moved by your love and toward your presence bent:  
far off yet here-the goal of all desire.*

*So daily dying to the way of self,  
so daily living in your way of love,  
we walk the road, Lord Jesus, that you trod,  
knowing ourselves baptized into your death:  
so, we are dead and live with you in God.*

*If dead in you, so in you, we arise.  
you the firstborn of all the faithful dead.  
and as through stony ground the green shoots break,  
glorious in springtime dress of leaf and flower,  
so, in the Father's glory shall we wake.*

Thomas H. Cain, Hymn 149

Blessings,  
Marci Thomas  
*For the St. Clare Chapter of the Daughters of the King*

## Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2024

### **Joel 2:1-2**

*Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains, a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come.*

### **Joel 2:12-17**

*Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God? Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her canopy. Between the vestibule and the altar, let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep. Let them say, “Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”*

Perhaps one of the most striking things about Ash Wednesday – and all of Lent for that matter – is the fact that while we are contemplating our need for forgiveness, reconciliation, and of healing, and as we come to grips with our own mortality (“*to dust you shall return*”), what is clear is that God’s infinite mercy is always near to us. The Lord Jesus is there beside us, ready to walk with us during this journey through Lent, just as He himself went into the desert wasteland as he began his earthly ministry. That is the great and wonderful mystery of God’s mercy it seems to me – that while God holds his people to a high moral standard, he is also immediately ready to forgive when we fall short. I think we often forget that on Ash Wednesday.

The Church in our liturgy this day invites us to do a self-evaluation, to repent, to seek reconciliation, and to engage in healthy spiritual practices such as meditating on God’s Word in Scripture and by fasting. Why? It’s not because the church wants us to feel guilty or to make us feel bad (although that might be a natural reaction when we search the depths of our own souls). No, the reason for this journey through the desert wasteland of Lent is so that we will come out the other side into Paradise, to be embraced by the loving arms of God.

The traditional Scripture reading for Ash Wednesday is Joel 2:1-2,12-17 and it gets to the heart of this idea. What God wants from us is a transformation of the heart, mind, and soul. It's not about outward and hypocritical displays of public penance to impress others (as Jesus warns us of in Matthew 6). It's the opposite of that. It's God's voice telling us to *"return to me with all your heart... rend your hearts, not your clothing... Return to the Lord your God for he is gracious and merciful."*

As we take up our Lenten practices this year, as we contemplate all the ways in which we need healing and reconciliation (with both God and our neighbor), as we genuinely seek forgiveness and to make amends, let us also remember the love that God has for us and the infinite ocean of mercy that we have been baptized into. We mustn't forget that at the end of this journey is the joy of the Easter celebration. The shame of the cross that Jesus endured, the agony of his pain wasn't for nothing. It was for us. God loves us and that is why he lived among us, felt what we feel, taught us, helped us, stood up for us, and even died for us. That is why he is so merciful. Because he loves us and wants each one of us to join him in his eternal life. While this journey indeed begins with ashes, it ends with Resurrection and a new, unending life.

The Rev. Dale W. Van Wormer  
*Priest Associate*



**Thursday, February 15, 2024**

## **Psalm 22**

Do you have a favorite Bible passage that encourages you during times of pain or sadness? There are many people who find solace in Psalm 23 where David writes about being strengthened and guided by God in even the darkest of times. While Psalm 23 has notoriety, Psalm 22, just one chapter before, is often forgotten, despite its significance. I'm sure you've heard how it begins: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?..."* Many attribute these words to Jesus as he hung on the cross but originally, these were the words of David. Moments before Jesus' last breath, as he was in total anguish, he recited the beginning of this Psalm.

*And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'*  
(Matthew 27:46).

It's noted that some bystanders thought Jesus was calling for Elijah, but perhaps there were others who had greater spiritual discernment and understood what Jesus was saying. Before studying this passage, Jesus' words didn't add up for me either. If the Father and the Son are One, how could Jesus be forsaken? Perhaps this was an outcry of pure agony where Jesus was just feeling forsaken? Through greater research, I came to understand that Jesus was referencing Psalm 22.

You see, in Jesus' day, scripture was not broken up into chapters and verses (it wasn't until 1227 A.D. that chapter division began; interestingly by Stephen Langton who later became the Archbishop of Canterbury). Scripture was often recited orally and referenced by quoting a portion of it rather than naming a chapter and verse.

Jesus' public reference to Psalm 22 is deeply profound for many reasons. Just like we seek scripture for comfort and direction in times of distress, so did Jesus. As his physical body was dying, Jesus, both fully man and fully God, connects to David's words on human suffering and uses his last moments to point towards the Father. It is incredible to think that Jesus quoted this passage while fulfilling what was written by David many generations before. It's the ultimate declarative "mic drop" moment in which Jesus shows his divinity.

*But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people.  
All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads; 'He trusts*

*in the Lord; let him deliver him; let him rescue him for he delights in him!’ ... For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet — I can count all my bones — they stare and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.*  
(Psalm 22:6-8, 16-18)

Just as it was written, Jesus was despised, handed over, mocked, crucified, and even had his clothing gambled for. Isn’t it amazing to think that Jesus was quoting scripture of all that was coming to pass?

In the same way that Jesus’ story does not end at the grave, Psalm 22 closes in a triumphant way. *“They shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it.”* Yes, he has done it! He has overcome death for the sins of the world. Jesus fulfilled exactly what he said he would and in his own final words, *“it is finished”* (John 19:30).

I encourage you to prayerfully read the entirety of Psalm 22 for yourself. During this Lenten season, let us reflect and proclaim the great sacrifice that Jesus made for us all. In God’s mighty love for us, through Jesus, we can receive atonement and salvation.

*Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*  
(Corinthians 15:55-57)

Samantha Van Wormer

**Friday, February 16, 2024**

**Book of Common Prayer, Rite 1 (p.48)**

*O ye Ice and Snow bless ye the Lord: praise Him and magnify Him forever.*

Words from the Cantic 'Benedicite, omnia opera', said or sung, rather infrequently these days, at Matins or Morning Prayer during the seasons of Advent and Lent.

Ice and snow are not something the inhabitants of Tampa have to worry about very much. The same cannot be said for the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste (present-day Sivas in Turkey), who were victims of the persecutions of Licinius, who, after the year 316, persecuted Christians of the East.

In the year 320, forty Roman soldiers who had openly confessed themselves Christians were condemned by the prefect to be exposed naked on a frozen pond near Sebaste on a bitterly cold night, that they might freeze to death. Among the soldiers, one yielded and, leaving his companions, sought the warm baths near the lake for any who might prove inconsistent. One of the guards set to keep watch over them beheld at this moment a supernatural brilliancy overshadowing them, and at once proclaimed himself a Christian. At daybreak, the bodies of the confessors were removed and counted - thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine. But what's this? Forty? The soldier who had been watching over them and proclaimed himself a Christian, had thrown off his garments, and joined the remaining thirty-nine.

During these forty days of Lent, let us examine our own commitment to our Lord, and wonder how we might have reacted on that night in Sebaste.

*O ye Ice and Snow bless ye the Lord: praise Him and magnify Him forever.*

Simon Morley  
*Organist and Director of Music*



**Saturday, February 17, 2024**

**I Thessalonians 5:16-18**

*Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will in Christ Jesus for you.*

In chapter five of his first letter to the church at Thessalonica, St. Paul's message is to encourage Christians there to be prepared for Christ's return and to advise them on their spiritual growth; it's a perfect guide really for all Christians, and it's particularly pertinent during Lent. The simple verses in this passage bring Christians simple directives to guide everyday life and are ones I'm trying to embrace this Lenten season.

St. Paul first calls us to rejoice. However, since I tend to be a worrier, I am more inclined to "worry always" than to "rejoice always". I find the solemnity of Lent and the penitential nature of sacrifice often easier to embrace than finding joy in all the circumstances that life brings. Trying to reframe my perspective, to turn worries into things for which to rejoice, takes concerted effort. For example, instead of worrying about getting "everything" done, I should be trying to rejoice that God has given me the means to handle the responsibilities; instead of worrying over the challenges loved one's face, I should be trying instead to rejoice that God loves them more than I do and that his plans for them are perfect. While these examples are more in line with Christian doctrine, for me this mindset is often quite challenging.

Praying without ceasing comes a bit easier because turning to God to handle my worries actually lessens those anxieties. Talking with God throughout the day brings me not only closer to Him, but also gives me a greater sense of peace. Praying not just for help with my own issues but praying ceaselessly about everything — for those I love, or giving thanks for blessings I've received, or for help with frustrations and annoyances (like bad drivers or irritating co-workers), and for everything in between — allows me to have a more positive perspective on it all. This practice also helps me to find more love in my day and less judgment in situations that can be quite frustrating. Hopefully, at the end of each day, this process also points out to me all the things for which I should "rejoice" and be thankful, anchoring me more into gratitude than worry.

Ultimately, these practices support us in finding joy in and gratitude for all that Christ has done for us; what a comfort to know that in the end this is God's will for us in Christ Jesus—to live in that joy, through prayer and gratitude. So, after forty days

of Lent, I'm hoping that these practices will not only draw me closer to God but will also be practices I can carry forward beyond these days of Lent into the celebration of Easter to come; maybe they're ones that you can find helpful as well.

Lisa Leal

### **I Thessalonians 5:16-18**

*Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will in Christ Jesus for you.*

Rejoice always. That seems like an easy thing to do when life is going well. Rejoicing when we have food, a home and our health comes pretty easily for most. Rejoicing always when we do not have these things- now that is the challenge and probably why Paul included this statement in his letter. He knew we would need direction during the days we struggle with our reality.

As many of you know, the last few years have been some of the most trying of my life. My wife, Maureen, has always been one of the healthiest people I know. She walked 3 miles daily, took care of our grandchildren, mowed lawns, as well as many other physically challenging tasks. Over the last few years, I have watched her go from a healthy woman to needing 19 doctors. Her days consisted of constant doctors' appointments, in and out of the hospital, including a few stays in the hospital where we didn't know if she was coming back home. On top of this, I was diagnosed with cancer, needed surgery and had a long recovery. "Rejoice always" seemed impossible when we were just living day by day.

Enter in the hands and feet of Jesus; my church family and friends. Maureen has always been the cook of the family. If she doesn't cook, I'm probably eating Lay's Potato chips for dinner. When suddenly she couldn't cook any longer, I received the blessing of meals and prayers from the church. I received the blessing of encouragement and concern from our friends and family. God showed His love through others helping with doctor and treatment suggestions. My family felt the prayers and was lifted up through the church. For that I give thanks. Having our needs taken care of and the love that was shown to us has helped me to rejoice; has helped me to pray; and has helped me to give thanks to Jesus Christ for the blessing of the people in our life. For this, I will rejoice.

Ken Johnston  
*Sexton*

## Sunday, February 18, 2024

### **Luke 15:11-32**

#### *The Parable of the Prodigals*

Jesus never gave it a title. The word prodigal never occurs in the story. The first dictionary definition of prodigal is “recklessly wasteful.” From that definition, calling it the Parable of the Prodigal Son makes sense. But the second definition of prodigal is “exceedingly extravagant.” Was the father not exceedingly extravagant in his love for his son? Using that definition, isn’t this the Parable of the Prodigal Father? Isn’t that really the lesson we want most to learn from the parable, that while our sin is great, God’s forgiveness is even greater? And then there’s the elder brother. Aren’t we supposed to gain some insight into our lives from the elder brother? While he doesn’t squander his inheritance in reckless living, he does squander his inheritance by never really knowing how much he is loved by his father, and in that doesn’t he also waste his father’s love? So, we might call it the Parable of the Prodigal Elder Brother.

It’s the Parable of the Prodigals. With whom do you identify? Are you running from responsibility? Are you wasting your inheritance as a child of God? Are you turning your back on your loving heavenly Father, for whatever reason? Or have you been there, done that, and returned, accepting the love of your heavenly Father?

Maybe you identify with the prodigal father. He’s a wonderful example of how we should treat others. Maybe it gets even closer to home than that. Perhaps you have a child who has run from your love and returned, and you have welcomed him or her with open arms. Or perhaps the child has not yet returned, and you yearn for the opportunity to welcome your child back. So, you identify with the prodigal father.

Then there’s the elder brother. There are a lot of good qualities in the elder brother. He’s responsible. When the fields need to be planted, they’re planted. When the crops needed to be harvested, they’re harvested. No one has to go behind him and make sure he does a good job. He trusts him because he is trustworthy. Those things that are essential for the family business he does without expecting thanks. Society needs elder brothers. We couldn’t function without them. If you want something done and done well, you go to the elder brother.

And there’s something else that we like about the elder brother. He leads a morally upright life. The younger son does everything his father taught him not to do, but not the elder brother. There are all kinds of examples of reckless living, but the person

who strives to live according to the way he was taught from childhood is rare. There's part of us that cries, "Go for it, elder brother, you're right on the mark!" But there's great sadness in him. He really is prodigal, for he doesn't realize that he truly has the "good life." He's always been at home, in the presence of his father, but he has lived without joy. He doesn't know how wonderful he has it. Always in the back of his mind is that his brother has the really good life, doing what he wants to do, no responsibilities. His anger is always just beneath the surface, and when his brother returns home and is accepted back freely, with a party no less, that anger comes quickly to the surface.

The elder brother all too often characterizes the attitude of religious people. We try to live a disciplined life, and sometimes we look at those who do exactly what they want to do, and we secretly, perhaps subconsciously, think they're the ones who really have the good life. It comes to the surface when someone who hasn't lived a Christian life has a deathbed conversion, and you'll hear a Christian say, "Well, he had the best of both worlds!"

The elder brother also has a huge moral problem. He doesn't recognize his relationship with his brother. "This son of yours," is how he refers to him. He doesn't go to the party. He couldn't rejoice that his brother had returned to the fold, that he had repented and changed his life. He saw himself as superior, not recognizing his own faults. That can be a big one for us Christians. How easy it is for us to pass judgment. We can see the splinter in someone else's eye, but not notice the log in our own. Jesus never condones the sins of the flesh, but neither does he see them as the worst sins. Jesus is always much harder on the sins of the spirit, that sense of moral superiority so prevalent in religious people of every age. But elder brothers, take hope. The loving Father stands ready to receive you back as well. Join the party!

It's the Parable of the Prodigals, not just of the prodigal son. With whom do you identify? Perhaps you're a mixture. Let us seek the love of our heavenly Father and show forth that love in our lives.

The Rev. Fredrick A. Robinson  
*Retired Priest in Residence*

**Monday, February 19, 2024**

**Psalm 30: 4-6**

*Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. As for me, I said in my prosperity, "I shall never be moved."*

In Lent we are exhorted to conduct self-examination at almost every turn. To lessen distraction, the church is stripped of its usual glorious flowers, hallelujahs are suppressed, we are reminded to be penitent weekly—if not daily in private—and we are encouraged to make sacrifices of some usual pleasure or to undertake a study or project that might be taxing but hopefully of benefit to self or others. A common view is that Lent is not the most “joyous” time of the liturgical year.

In my own simplistic view, Lent is a bit like the dark night in which struggles and trials and tribulations and my own shortcomings are magnified. But even though I tend to be a worrier who can let my unbridled fears and anxieties overtake me in the dark of night, a new day invariably comes. My cares and worries may not vanish, but they pale in the bright light of morning. One of my favorite poets, John O'Donohue, reminds me beautifully of this blessing:

*I arise today  
Blessed by all things,  
Wings of breath,  
Delight of eyes,  
Wonder of whisper,  
Intimacy of touch,  
Eternity of soul,  
Urgency of thought,  
Miracle of health,  
Embrace of God.*

As the Psalmist says, weeping tarries only for the night. The darkness yields to the joyous light of dawn. We open our eyes to the “[e]mbrace of God,” the resurrected Christ, God’s “favor for a lifetime.” For me, even during the somber nights (and days) of Lent, Easter has arrived.

Chris McAdams

<sup>1</sup> John O'Donohue, “Matins,” in *To Bless the Space Between Us*, 7-8 (New York: Convergent Books 2008).

<sup>2</sup> English Standard Version ESV

**Tuesday, February 20, 2024**

**Hebrews 11: 1-3**

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith[ our 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.*

Once the issue of food is resolved and the joint issue of housing/clothing is taken care of ... people instinctively shift their focus to who/what/why we are and where we are going. Following that shift in focus, it has been my experience, that almost all people want two fundamental principles guarding themselves and the people they love. The first is security and following closely is peace of mind. How do these two issues fit into our daily reflection ... our prayers for today?

Imagine you lived 2000 years ago. You are comfortable in your circumstances ... you have been taught or lived with the daily persecution experienced by all Jews. You have experienced subjugation and oppression living under foreign rule. You know the absence of any real security and the basic lack of control is your greatest fear.

Become a first century Jew for a moment. Your entire existence is lived in the hope that the Messiah would come ... an unbeatable warrior returning the world and your circumstances to some sense of normalcy. Now return to today ... are we any different? The absolute chasm between God and man is one we all have felt. Will we allow our hope to guide us & our needs to be met? Until we can accept the basic fact that there is something/someone capable of caring enough, loving enough, and strong enough to bind our wounds – to remove our insecurities – to bring us to faith - we are lost. Like the first century Jews, our hope and our conviction is that He will be there is forefront in our minds ... and only then will we allow ourselves to surrender. Reflect today on this hope. Lord, hear my prayer – my soul is longing for the glory of you ... hear O Lord and answer me.

Dave Kenyon



## Wednesday, February 21, 2024

### **Psalm 32:8**

*I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.*

### **Psalm 143:10**

*Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. Let your good spirit lead me on level path.*

Wearing many hats as a mother, a healthcare provider, a volunteer, and a homeroom Mom, (who is stretched and pulled in many directions by choice or otherwise), I find comfort in the combination of both scripture verse and hymns. Although the season of Lent for many Christians is a time of reflection and of remembrance, I find it difficult to feel fully saturated or satiated with the Holy Spirit because of my life's "business." To foster moments of refocus throughout my day, I remind myself of the solemn days of Lent, leading up to Easter.

These words encourage me to slow down, be still, be accepting of what has happened and what is to occur, and, lastly, they remind me to breathe. For me, the gentle reminder of certain verses, whether in a scripture reading or in a hymn, soothes me and allows me a moment, albeit brief, to reflect on the season of Lent. "Lord, lead the way" has been my mantra for close to twenty years. It reminds me to focus on the power of my Heavenly Father who possesses all authority for the direction for my life. It has taught me acceptance, patience, perseverance, and faithfulness.

### **Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing**

*And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19).*

*Come Thou fount of every blessing  
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace  
Streams of mercy never ceasing  
Call for songs of loudest praise.  
Teach me some melodious sonnet  
Sung by flaming tongues above  
Praise the mount, I'm fixed upon it  
Mount of Thy redeeming love.*

## **Blessed Assurance**

*Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him (James 1:12).*

*Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!  
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!  
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,  
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.  
This is my story, this is my song,  
Praising my Savior all the day long;  
This is my story, this is my song,  
Praising my Savior all the day long.*

I hope these verses provide you with comfort as you read them, and the melody fills your soul on this day during our Lenten observance.

Carla Cole

**Thursday, February 22, 2024**

**Psalm 46:10**

*He says, “Be still, and know that I am God; I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.”*

Recently some of my study mates (you know who you are) and I were discussing how being in community today compares to being in community in the early church. What is community? Personally, I think community is a time of growth and learning together for everyone. An important time to break away from thinking inwardly and focusing outwardly with others. Sharing and listening. Out of “self”. Leaving distractions behind. But do we have more distractions today that we are missing our opportunity to hear God’s word? Or, do we have more opportunity to listen to God’s word because of so many modern conveniences?

When reading this verse initially, one is inclined to think “I must stop what I’m doing and listen.” As I study the verse, my NIV Study Bible footnotes that Psalm 46 is “a celebration of the security of Jerusalem as the city of God” and “probably predates the exile.”

How did Moses, King David or any of our Biblical ancestors ever live in community? Paul, the disciples, and the early church? From studying the Bible, I can tell you, it was a struggle. One can find many scripture verses to back this up. Did the early Church have as many distractions as we have today to keep them from hearing God’s word? Absolutely. From the sound of this Psalm, and from the state of our world, things haven’t changed much. God is still warning us to “be still and know that I am God. The Hebrew phrase for “be still” can be translated to “enough”, the major theme of this psalm. God speaks to us so many times and then finally puts his foot down and says “enough.” Are we listening? Some things change, but some things are always the same whether it’s Old Testament, New Testament or you or me. God is saying “enough.” Be still, and know that I am God.

Sharon Stoll

**Friday, February 23, 2024**

**2 Corinthians 5:16-21**

*From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view] even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we no longer know him in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So 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 God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

This passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians has had a major impact on my life since June 2010, and has remained a constant reminder that there are NO coincidences when it comes to God's presence in our earthly journey.

By way of explanation, I was working a Kairos Team (prison ministry) and was a table leader with six inmates in my assigned group. One gentleman, who had been imprisoned for over thirty years, had a spiritual awakening after hearing a particularly powerful and emotional witness talk about forgiveness and reconciliation given by an Episcopal priest on the Team. (The Team is ecumenical, comprised of Christian men from all denominations.) Upon returning to our table, when it was just the inmate and me, as the rest of our group were enjoying a ten-minute break, the fellow broke down-his "hard shell façade" cracked-and he tearfully said to me "Ray, how can any loving God forgive me? I have done unspeakable things that brought me here, and surely there is no hope for me."

As I listened and tried to console the seemingly inconsolable man, I reached for the Bible sitting in front of us and opened to this passage. I pointed specifically to 2 Corinthians 5:17 and asked him to read it out loud. He did so, and I said, "you have already told all of us that you accept Christ as your Lord and savior, and as Paul tells us here, you are forgiven in Jesus' eyes and are "made new." Your past sins are forgiven in God's Law. He cried again, but tears of joy this time. We even had a laugh when I mentioned that he still had time to serve under "man's law," but in God's eyes his slate was clean, and he was "made new." Since that day, this scripture has meant so much to me that, when I was asked to be the Lay Leader for a Cursillo Weekend in 2015, I chose 2 Corinthians 5:17 as the Weekend Theme. I have a banner with the scripture to always remind me of the power of that message.

Ray Stoll

**Saturday, February 24, 2024**

**2 Timothy 2:20-21**

*In a large house there are utensils not only of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for special use, some for ordinary. All who cleanse themselves of the things I have mentioned[g] will become special utensils, dedicated and useful to the owner of the house, ready for every good work.*

This passage from 2 Timothy is one of my favorites in the Bible, and it's especially poignant during this season of Lent. The verses remind me of the importance of humility and servanthood in my daily life, and to being open to the opportunities that God gives me to help others.

Fun fact: I hate trash. It's ironic because I am an inherently messy person. But being near actual trash (wrappers, discarded food, etc.) makes me anxious. So, when Timothy mentions the possibility of becoming a "waste can" in order to honor God, it really hits home. Can I truly be that selfless, sacrificing my comfort for a greater good? Am I able to live out my faith in such a meaningful way, serving others because that is what God calls us to do?

Mother Teresa once said, "Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love. It's not how much you do, but how much love you put into doing it." Sometimes it's easy for me to forget that statement in my busy, everyday life. It's easy to think that bigger is better ("crystal goblets and silver platters"), and that I need to do something truly great to change the world. But Mother Teresa reminds me that the small decisions and choices that I make every day are forming the person that I am—forming my faith and forming my witness to the world.

Recently, I have been re-reading Shane Claiborne's book *The Irresistible Revolution*. The book is a call to arms for the Church; an inspirational challenge to do things differently. On the topic of 'small faith', Claiborne says, "We live in a world that has lost its appreciation for small things...but amid all the supersizing, many of us feel God doing something new, something small and subtle." Even the smallest actions, done in love, can make a difference in our own personal faith, and in the world. We can all choose to be a container that God can use.

I pray that today we can all have the faith and patience to do something small to serve others—help our neighbor, say 'I love you', forgive someone who has hurt us—and then watch the ways that God transforms our mustard seed of action into something truly extraordinary. Thanks be to God.

Ayana Grady  
*Director of Children*

## Sunday, February 25, 2024

### Matthew 6:14-15

*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

I did not grow up in a church that really focused on Lent. The idea of taking the season following the celebration of Christmas and Epiphany as a time of repentance was somewhat foreign to me for much of my young life. As a member of St Johns, I have come to embrace the idea more and more each year. I have begun to think of Lent as a time, not only of penitence, but more importantly, of thoughtful and prayerful reflection. I use the time to think about how I can become a better person, a better member of our community.

Taking the time to truly be intellectually curious and honest is somewhat daunting. I often wind up with a very difficult reminder of my own truth and reality. Not only during Lenten reflection, but also every week, I am faced with phrases we say in Mass that tend to give me pause, not simply because of the weight of those phrases, but also because I understand that I don't always take the time to do those things in my everyday life. For instance, when we say our prayer of confession, I am constantly aware of the phrase "by what we have left undone." And, when we say the Lord's Prayer, the line "*forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us.*" are weekly reminders of those things I can do better.

Matthew 6:14-15 says: *For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

Forgiveness is difficult for me. I catch myself spending too much time reflecting on those moments in which I have perceived that someone has wronged me. I find myself carrying anger for people who are not even a part of my life anymore. I have often wondered why I do this. Am I just that hard headed that I find forgiving to be so daunting? Or, as I have often wondered, do I feel so unworthy of forgiveness from others that I can't seem to forgive easily? Every week we ask God to forgive us as we forgive others. I take that to mean that we are asking forgiveness in the style and level that we have chosen to forgive. Therefore, if we are not forgiving are we deserving of God's forgiveness? Matthew says no. It took me a long time to understand that verse, to understand that I have to be able to forgive in order to expect forgiveness. After all, isn't forgiveness one of the greatest gifts God gives us? Didn't Christ come to our



world and give his life in order that we may achieve forgiveness from God?

I now understand that God's forgiveness is a gift. It is, in my mind, one of the greatest gifts for which we could ask. But it comes with a caveat. God has asked us to also forgive our fellow man. He has asked us to stay out of judgement and, if that is the case and we have committed ourselves as Christians to be more Christ-like, shouldn't we also strive to forgive?

Too often, forgiveness is lacking in my life. That is my fault. This Lenten season, I have chosen to work much harder to improve that aspect of my own life. I hope you all have a great journey this Lent.

Dallas Coffield

**Monday, February 26, 2024**

**Romans 15:14**

*I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another.*

Lent is one of the most somber times in our liturgical calendar, but it is also one of the times in our year when we can feel an especially close communion with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Just like at Christmas, we sing familiar seasonal hymns together, contemplate sermons that remind us of where we all are in God's plan, and turn our spiritual devotional time toward similar themes and readings that deepen our faith. We share the same emotions and reflections in this Lenten season, the same painful gratitude for all our Savior did to ensure our salvation.

Romans hold many treasured verses for me as it does for many of us, but simple line 14 stood out to me this year. The repetition in this translation of "I myself" and "you yourselves" has a rhythm that caught my ear. The verse reminds me of the bonds and strengths within our Parish, which were identified by our Vestry and Strategic Planning Committee in our recent planning process. They are the things I love most about our parish home and our fellow parishioners and our Episcopal identity: that we are confident in each other's faith and good intentions, and that we are happy to learn from one another.

From the outside we may look like a group of typical South Tampa folks, but knowing us better, I recognize that we are helping each other learn about God's love just by being our unique selves. And although we may not be filled with all knowledge, as Romans asserts in this verse, we each have our own wisdom and perspective that help us instruct each other. That we embrace each other's distinctive identities and faith journeys makes St. John's the welcoming place we confirmed as we began our planning process. And that is what I believe is what makes the miracle of Jesus profound and resonant today and far into the future. Let us be confident in our unique natures, and our common community this Lenten season and embrace how much we have still to learn from each other.

Lee Lowry  
*Director of Communications*

**Tuesday, February 27, 2024**

**I Thessalonians 5:16-18**

*Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

I have found that accepting and integrating the paradoxical elements of our faith into practice can be the most challenging aspect of walking with Christ. Christianity is filled with invitations for us to hold seemingly oppositional truths at the same time. We are so often tempted to lean into the simplest “answers,” the most logical viewpoints, or (if truth be told) the easiest precepts to follow. We want to find and cling to what we perceive as unchallenging ideas. However, in life and especially in the Christian walk, I find this quote from F. Scott Fitzgerald quite apt:

*“The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.”*

This is nowhere as evident in the above passage from I Thessalonians, specifically in its calls to rejoice and give thanks.

In our natural selves, we tend to experience a roller-coaster of attachment and aversion—we have varying degrees of things we like or dislike in our lives, and we would only tend to celebrate getting and keeping what we want. Paul, however, is admonishing the Thessalonians to do the paradoxical when he says, “Rejoice always... in everything give thanks.” Both rationally and emotionally, we would reject those notions. Rejoice when I’m suffering? Give thanks when I experience injustice? Appreciate when evil affects people I care about? How can genuine joy arise in and even for those situations?

I think these revelations of “*God’s will for you in Christ Jesus*” call us to the deepest spiritual values. When we are in fear, anger, stress, or any other unpleasant emotion caused by our circumstances, our earthly nature (that often drives us to these) exists right alongside our spiritual nature, one which calls us to express love and embrace our total dependence on God. In the middle of suffering, we are summoned both to compassionate action (for ourselves or others) and to the deep humility of knowing that we are not ultimately in control: God is. We become our truest selves when we feel that which makes us most human, joined intimately with that which evokes our most divine qualities.

So, just as Fitzgerald would have us use our highest intellectual faculties, Paul is exhorting us to hold the paradoxical worth of all that we don’t want in our life and all

that we do want. Both deserve joy and gratitude because both drive us toward God in Christ Jesus. And if all of life compels rejoicing in and thanksgiving to the Divine, then Paul's other admonition—to pray without ceasing—is quite easily performed. What are parts of your own life that you have the deepest aversion toward, and how can you transform them into love-in-action intimately linked with utter dependence on God? And can you then rejoice at your fulfilling of God's will in Christ?

Scott Neumeister

## Wednesday, February 28, 2024

### **Colossians 3:2**

*Set your minds on things that are above, not things that are on earth.*

Lent is a great time for a spiritual reset. If giving up sugar or caffeine for 40 days isn't for you, perhaps take some time to think about the things that are weighing you down and keeping you from God. Decluttering can be a way to release spiritual and physical clutter from our lives and help us to return our focus towards our relationship with God.

Consider these tasks to declutter and refocus your spiritual journey:

1. Toss, re-home, or donate one item daily for 40 days.
2. Clean out one area of your home every day for 40 days.
3. Use your cleaning time to pray.
4. Don't forget non-tangibles (social calendar, finances, mental and spiritual clutter).
5. Set aside personal time for God.

Lyz Pickette

**Thursday, February 29, 2024**

**Matthew 28:19-20**

*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

This passage emphasizes not only following the way of Jesus individually but also sharing and spreading his teachings to others, inviting us to walk the same path. For me it really highlights the significance of walking the way of Jesus in the Christian faith. Never did the meaning of this become more real than when Alex and I took our trip to the Holy Land in April of last year (2023).

Our trip was called “Behold the Man” and we literally walked in Jesus’ footsteps. It was the most incredible life changing experience for us. We were called “Pilgrims,” and Alex and I shared our pilgrimage with 13 other married couples. By the time our trip was over we all had become spiritually bonded by our shared experiences in Israel.

I tracked our steps on my apple watch and was amazed to see that our walking pilgrimage added up to 56.5 miles. There was so much to see and so many memorable moments and experiences it’s hard to pick out my favorite from all of them.

Sharing Eucharist in Shepherds’ Field and other holy places was very special; going to Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found; walking in Jericho, Nazareth, Bethlehem, Mt. of Beatitudes; climbing to the top of Masada; swimming in the icy cold Sea of Galilee (which I never knew was a freshwater lake) and floating in the Dead Sea, were only a few of the unforgettable moments.

All of us were especially looking forward to our visit to the Jordan River. There we all had the opportunity to renew our baptismal vows and be immersed in the same river as Jesus. This became a humorous memory for us as my view became blocked and I was unable to see Alex as he went underwater. When that happened, I got pretty upset and so our leaders told him he would have to get dunked a second time (just so I could witness it). However, Alex was confused as to why he had to do it twice, and he asked, “Did I do something wrong?” Now we always say that Alex was doubled dipped, LOL. Two days before we were to fly home, we awoke in our hotel in Jerusalem around 5:00am to head to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. This magnificent church is the site where Jesus was crucified and buried. It is very popular with all who visit the Holy City, so

getting there early was important to avoid the “Disney-like” crowds. On our way there as the sun was rising, we were able to stop at each of the Stations of the Cross. While I have recited the Stations of the Cross many times in my church life, this time was so much more powerful because I was where my Lord took his final steps to the cross of crucifixion.

A few weeks after we were back in Tampa, Alex was confirmed by Bishop Scharf. That day was so wonderful because all our dear pilgrimage friends came to the service at St. John’s to witness and celebrate with us. This reunion was so special and became the icing on the cake for all of us.

Barely 6 months after our pilgrimage, things became so drastically different in the Holy Land. It became a war zone which makes me so sad. I am eternally so grateful we had the opportunity to go there, but now I pray for the many people whose lives have been lost or torn apart by the conflict in Gaza and Israel.

Ultimately, by walking in Jesus’ steps in the Holy Land it became a personal and transformative journey for me. I gained a deeper appreciation for the challenges and triumphs of Jesus’ life, and I hope to carry the lessons learned into my daily life and always share the love of Christ with everyone I meet.

Donna Gem





**Friday, March 1, 2024**

**Matthew 16:21-22**

*From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised.*

In Mark 9:30-32, Jesus tells his disciples, *“The Son of Man is now to be given up into the power of men and they will kill him, and for 3 days after being killed he will rise again.”* In Matthew 20:17-19 Jesus tells them, *“We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life.”* The disciples still didn’t believe him. Then finally, in Matthew 26:2 Jesus says, *“As you know, the Passover is two days away - and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.”* This was right before the Jewish leaders made their plans against him. Later, on the cross Jesus asks that if he can be spared this death, that God do so, but if not, he says, *“Thy will be done.”*

Recently I’ve thought a lot about how Jesus must have felt knowing, for some time before it happened, that he was going to die a violent death, including the gruesome details of how it would happen. Jesus told his disciples several times about what was to come and advised them to keep it secret. He knew that this path was his Father’s will and being the man he was, he went about his ministry healing the sick and performing miracles no matter how much fear he felt. Oh, to be like Jesus and walk through the dark days, frightened yet knowing the outcome is one that is his Father’s will and one that will take away the sins of the world.

I’m a generally optimistic person. I try to view things in a positive light. One of my favorite hymns is *I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light*. I love the imagery in that hymn as we sing – *“I want to see the brightness of God”* or *“In Him there is no darkness at all.”* But try as I might to see the good in all things, there are times when I feel like I imagine Jesus must have felt.

There are times when I sit in darkness waiting for God to answer prayer or to help me understand what to do next. Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, says *“If I have any expertise, it is in the realm of spiritual darkness: fear of the unknown, familiarity with divine absence, mistrust of conventional wisdom, suspicion of religious comforters, keen awareness of the limits of all language about God and at the same time shame over my inability to speak of God without*

*a thousand qualifiers, doubt about the health of my soul, and barely suppressed contempt for those who have no such qualms. These are the areas of my proficiency.”* She speaks the words of my thoughts so eloquently.

Even on Good Friday, when Jesus is in deep anguish, suffering on the cross, he does not waver. I can only imagine how alone he felt as he took on the sins of the world. What amazes me though is that as Jesus is about to take his last breath, his faith shines in the dark as He says, *“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”* Jesus did not give in to despair but placed himself in God’s hands. Out of despair.... Hope. As I think of dark times in my life when I am fearful and uncertain about how to proceed or I have grief about something that has happened to a loved one that I had no way to control, I know that my only hope is to sit in the darkness and wait. I need to be still and know that faith is the only way through my suffering. I look to Jesus knowing, that unlike him, I may never fully understand what God has in mind for my life. My task is to wait, listen, and try my best to do God’s will. Like the hymn says, *“I want to walk as a child of the light, I want to follow Jesus.”*

I am grateful for this time of reflection during Lent, when I stop to contemplate the message of hope. Love shines through the darkness and before long, it is Easter.

Marci Thomas

**Saturday, March 2, 2024**

**Psalm 46:10**

*Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations; I am exalted in the earth.*

The season of Lent always seems to come up on me by surprise each year. Like all of us, I have grown accustomed to celebrating the Christmas season with great gusto, enjoying lots of food, drink, and frivolity with family and friends during the 12 Days. It all just seems to carry on through Epiphany and into the fun and excess of Gasparilla at the end of January. Then suddenly it is Ash Wednesday, and the brakes in my life are suddenly applied. Lent's arrival always feels awkward and abrupt, as I finish my last Manhattan Cocktail on Mardi Gras (and often at 11:59 pm before Ash Wednesday!).

On Ash Wednesday we get ashes reminding us of sin and our own mortality (something we haven't been thinking about in a few months, and something quite apart from the feasting and mirth we have been experiencing!). Then, on that first Sunday in Lent, our St Johns Choir performs the beautiful Great Litany in solemn procession. I find the self-realizations it conjures in me to be a painful reminder of all that I am NOT doing! Then the Rector calls us to a season of penitence, fasting, self-denial and self-reflection. I often sigh in that moment . . . The season of groveling has begun (as I jokingly call it). Time to put fun in a sealed box until Easter. Indeed necessary, but I still want to shout "Ugh!" when it arrives.

Each year I struggle with what to "give up" and what to "take on." Sometimes I give up alcohol cold turkey for the full 40 days. Sometimes I give up social media. It's supposed to be something that is indeed difficult to be parted from for 40 days. But other times when I've been going through a difficult period in my life, I give up something like brussels sprouts, knowing I'm just not capable of giving up something really hard. But I always do give up something. That is important if I am to feel true joy on Easter Sunday. Then there's the fasting and meatless Fridays, which sometimes I do and other times I don't. It's a lot to be hit with all at once!

The "taking on" part of Lent is something that has become more emphasized in recent decades, so I also try to take on some kind of additional service during the 40 days, as well as spending more time each day in prayer and reading scripture. Surprisingly, this part always feels vague for me to put into practice, and I don't know whether I'm always successful.

But I think the most important thing in Lent for me is “the great pause”. A time to just be still and be present in the moment. A time to think about my life and those around me. A time to spend in some silence, so I can actually hear God speaking to me without all the chaos and chatter. This pause is where I always feel the greatest growth. If I am successful during Lent in creating this sacred space, I find I am ready to face Holy Week and come with great joy to Easter Sunday, renewed and empowered in my faith.

Peace and blessings to you on your own Lenten pilgrimage this year, wherever it leads you!

Michael Eachon

## **Sunday, March 3, 2024**

### **Psalm 119:105**

*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*

We decided to ask our children the meaning of this verse. It’s always fun to hear what goes on in a child’s mind. You may be surprised to find the wisdom we were able to unpack in each of their responses.

Our nine-year-old Henry said “It’s similar to the sun. It lights up the world and shows you the way.” I liked his comparison to the sun. The sun rises and sets every day. Not just on holidays when we make a point to attend church or once a week on Sundays. Every day is a time for reflection, especially during Lent. During this 40-day span, take time to read the Bible and allow God to guide you.

Our eight-year-old Leo said “God’s light shows the way.” Simple but effective. Would you start a journey to a place you’ve never been without directions? Not likely, especially in today’s world with smart phones. We don’t have to wander around to get where we want to go. Through the Bible, God’s word also provides directions to a happy life with the destination being everlasting life in Heaven. God’s Word has been compared to a spiritual compass. His word illuminates the path for each step and keeps us from missteps and wrong turns. Just as we wouldn’t journey without directions, the same applies to our life. Using God’s word as our guide creates a more fulfilling life and leads us to our ultimate destination.

Our five-year-old Gust said “The light makes your feet glow, and you follow the path to God’s house. And that’s it. The end.” Gosh I love that. All believers of Jesus Christ have glowing feet, and we follow the path to heaven together. And that’s it. That’s our happily ever after. How sweet is that? Jesus directs us to God’s light, and we too can be a light for others as we journey together.

We even asked our three-year-old Felix. He had a short and sweet response. Felix said, “The light goes click.” It made me think of having an aha moment where the light bulb clicks and turns on. We’ve all had these moments, where nothing makes sense and suddenly God shines His light, and it all goes click. Pretty profound for a three-year-old. ;) Our journey through life takes many dark turns with dangerous pitfalls and slippery slopes. Even in our dark moments, God shines His light on how he’s working in our life.

Let God be your light as you journey through this Lenten season. Let us pray that God will be with us during this time of self-reflection and teach us how to use your word in everyday life. Amen.

Dorsch Family (Jordan, Meagan, Henry, Leo Gust and Felix)

**Monday, March 4, 2024**

**Matthew 5:43-46**

*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.*

Lent is a time for reflection and meditation, and a time to examine our lives and our spirituality. Reading Jesus’ words from Matthew causes me to reflect on the world we’re living in and how people have become divided to an extent I’ve never seen; I’m not sure how many of us have true “enemies” but the deep divisions among us can sometimes feel that way. Society is fractured into subsets of groups that seem more inclined to “cancel” others than to have meaningful dialogue about issues. Groups separate themselves from “other people” with whom they disagree, feeling themselves to be right and justified in their thoughts and actions.

I often wonder how we will ever find common ground and repair these divisions when it seems that we focus on how the “other” is wrong; we feel we have the only reasonable (and therefore correct) position. Media and social media feed this too. We watch and “follow” people who agree with us and therefore our ideas are reinforced because the people we “see” feel the same way we do; we must be right! We rarely stop to ponder why all those who disagree with us feel the way they do. In light of the passage above, how counter-cultural it might be to not only try to understand those who are different from us, but to actually try to love them? To deal with those who persecute us not with judgment, but with love? In the end, while this is a variation on “love your neighbor,” it’s a call to love the unlovable neighbor we’d rather avoid or the one we just don’t understand.

During this holy season of Lent, I’m trying to find ways to see the good in my “enemies” and to try to find what it is that God loves in those people who, while they might not be the textbook definition of an “enemy”, are still people I might ordinarily be inclined to steer clear of rather than engage. While not the easiest way to become more like Christ, this practice certainly can make significant changes in me and might just make changes that could ripple out a bit into society. How many of us loving our enemies and those who persecute us would it take to turn the tide of deep divisions we all feel in our world? With all apologies to Hal David and Burt Bacharach, what the world needs now is love, and that love can start with me following Jesus’ command here; maybe my singular efforts won’t change the world, but those efforts will change my own heart, and at least that’s a start.

Lisa Leal



**Tuesday, March 5, 2024**

**2 Timothy, 1-7**

*For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.*

There it is again! I've seen it twice now, in two days. I don't remember hearing or reading this Bible verse before. *"For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind (2 Timothy, 1-7).* It had a strong effect on me the first time I read it...I'm sure because of my circumstances. The second time, which was the next day, I felt like this was a "God moment."

I had recently moved back to Florida after a difficult marriage, and I had moved in with my mother, in her tiny two-bedroom, one bath apartment. She was happy to have me there, and oh, was I happy to be there. Mom and I had always been very close, and for the last 7 years had lived almost 2000 miles apart. We had such great conversations...something I had been without for some time, and we laughed together, something else I had been without for some time. Every night, we took our dinners into the living room so that we could watch The Waltons while we ate. What sweet memories those are. But I was so scared, so very scared. When I arrived at mom's, I had my furniture and about \$700 to my name (No car!). I was 48 years old, and I had dropped out of college during my senior year. Now what?

Those frightening times were brought to mind when I started to think about our soon to start Lent season. Jesus himself was afraid of what was coming in the future. He even asked God to "let this cup pass from me". My fear was nothing compared to his. In the end, God never left Him, but brought Him to His dwelling place, and placed Him by His side.

When I felt such fear in those past days, when I was starting out anew, I knew I would be alright, as long as I stood fast in my Faith, and stayed close to Him. The Bible verse I was seeing frequently was a reminder, and I was grateful for it.

As for the "God moments", I had them over and over, to the point that my family, and I, were amazed, and so very thankful.

Ruby McCowan

**Wednesday, March 6, 2024**

**Matthew 4: 1-4**

*The Parable of the Prodigal Son*

*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted[a] by the devil. 2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’*

*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written: “He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only. Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.*

This summer I was fortunate to fulfill a lifelong dream of visiting the Holy Land. As we drove through the Judean desert with our guide, I was struck by the utter desolation of the place. It is arid, rocky terrain where virtually nothing grows. I found myself thinking about Jesus in the wilderness. Jesus had just completed a time of fasting, prayer, and spiritual discipline. I envisioned what spending forty days alone and hungry in that place must have been like for him. I imagined how tempted anyone would be upon being offered untold riches and power. But Jesus resisted temptation and chose a path that he knew would bring him unimaginable physical pain. He did not succumb to Satan's taunts.

Every day we have the opportunity to emulate Jesus in resisting temptation: the temptation to gossip about our coworkers, the temptation to sleep in on Sunday and skip church, the temptation to ignore those in need. We must follow Jesus and resist these temptations. We must practice fasting and prayer to strengthen us to conquer such temptations and always remember that Jesus died for our sins. We have a choice to do what is right, just like Jesus.

Valerie Hamm

**Thursday, March 7, 2024**

**1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**

*Rejoice always; pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the Will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

Throughout my life, when confronted with difficult situations, I have usually come to the realization that rejoicing in God for His outcome is the only way... was the only way. Of course, it was too frequently after trying it my way or the way of my friends first! Why is that? We know better, or soon will come to know better...

I have my challenges as I move too quickly through life, leaving corporate life, adjusting to more free time and new or expanded activities. Unexpected challenges with home ownership when a water pipe burst inside a wall... insurance, what it does or not cover and sometimes depending... replace all the wood floors as the insurance recommends and all that brings with it... moving everything out for a couple of weeks to start...

As I went to bed one night with all of this visually floating over my head and the tears gently slipping down my cheek, I felt the touch on my head and was filled with overwhelming JOY! Oh my God, Rejoice of course! You are in charge; it's going to be just fine.... Maybe different than I had thought, but just fine.

I slept peacefully and awoke with such peace, and it is still there as I continue to work through the daily issues of life. Hopeful I will go forward leading with Rejoice first without having to put little notes on mirrors, etc.

C.S. Lewis in his notes to his "The C.S. Lewis Bible" observes that all sadness (not arising from repentance of a sin or hastening to achieve assistance) is simply bad and I think we sin by needlessly disobeying the apostolic injunction to "rejoice" as much as by anything else.

Therefore -- REJOICE

Pam Shives

**Friday, March 8, 2024**

**Psalm 119:105**

*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*

Lamps create light in the darkness. God's word serves as a lamp bringing wisdom to the believer's mind. God does not fully reveal our future with the lamp, but he gives us direction in our path of life. The dichotomy of light and darkness is expressed in many ways. The idea of moving from darkness to light is a familiar theme. We are told that moving from the darkness of selfishness, sin, and despair towards selflessness, seeking to help those in need and living a godly life, brings us into the light of hope, faith, and grace, all coming from God, who is light and love.

Moving from darkness toward light is not an easy path for some of us. The darkness that surrounded me during and after my husband's death seemed at first inescapable. But eventually and with amazing and persistent help from my St. John's family, I found a path that guided me back to the light of hope. I have read that light reveals the power of God, of goodness.

When I first joined St John's church, Fr. Hoyt Massey told a story in a sermon: he asked a young Sunday school boy whether he knew who the men in our stained-glass windows were. Without hesitating, the boy answered, "Sure. They're the guys the light shines through." That story has stuck with me for nearly 50 years. Are we the guys the light shines through?

Jesus said, "Let your light shine so that others may see your good works and give glory to your heavenly father." That's quite a charge! We must first dedicate ourselves to creating good works, embodying a life of kindness and charity in our daily lives, that can show the Christian life to others who do not know the path to God. We must bring them the light of Christ.

Sally Olsson

**Saturday, March 9, 2024**

**Matthew 5: 21-24**

*You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. So, when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.*

In this passage, Jesus aligns anger with murder to clarify the Commandment, “You shall not murder,” because of the potential harm it can cause to another person.

Have you ever been angered or felt resentment from someone’s words or actions? Examples include being cut off in traffic, feeling excluded, or being insulted. I’ve experienced these situations countless times. I try to ask myself if it truly matters, and most of the time, it doesn’t. Other times, I seek clarification from the person. However, I admit that I sometimes unconsciously allow my anger to fester and justify my resentment.

The quote attributed to St. Augustine, “Resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die,” deeply resonates with me. I find that my anger can turn into resentment, which only harms myself and drives a wedge between me, the other person, and God. Cyril of Alexandria’s words further emphasize the importance of loving others, as ‘...one who does not love his brother does not love the Lord’.

Reflecting on my anger can lead to personal growth through forgiveness and reconciliation. I may have contributed to the situation with a misunderstanding, misspoken words, not listening, or inserting my bias.

A friend recommended a daily prayer to aid my reflective efforts. It involves telling the person I am sorry, asking them for forgiveness, thanking them for the lesson(s) I learned, and expressing my love for them. This method of prayer helps me recognize, understand, and accept my part in the situation. It’s invaluable as it changes my actions and heart towards the person, allowing me to reconcile with them and with God. Although it’s not always easy, the journey is well worth it.

By embracing forgiveness and reconciliation, we can surpass the poison of anger and resentment, and find comfort in the transformative power of love, compassion, and acceptance.

*“Love is creative and redemptive. Love builds up and unites; hate tears down and destroys. The aftermath of the ‘fight with fire’ method...is bitterness and chaos, the aftermath of the love method is reconciliation and creation of the beloved community...Yes, love-which means understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill, even for one’s enemies-is the solution.”*

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Tania Wilkes

**Sunday, March 10, 2024**

**John 11: 32-35**

*When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and greatly moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him. “Lord, come and see.” Jesus began to weep.*

Undoubtedly, like most of you, what I remember most about chapter 11 of John’s Gospel is the story of Jesus miraculously raising Lazarus from the dead. More recently, however, I’ve been struck by these four words from verse 35: *“Jesus began to weep.”*

In one of her lament psalms written after the tragic murder of her twenty-one-year-old son, poet Ann Weems took heart from Jesus’s own weeping, by proclaiming, “He stands with the mourners, for his name is God-with-us.” In the midst of her profound grief, she found comfort in Our Savior’s tears because he legitimized human grief by joining himself forever to those who mourn. Indeed, as I have come to understand and accept, his tears invite us to discover that our own grief and sadness are woven into God’s own life, whose life is mysteriously woven into all the grief and sadness that can happen to us as human beings together on this earth.

While I recognize that my own experience with grief is not unique but simply the human condition, I never could have imagined what an emotional roller coaster awaited me when faced with my own tragic loss. On the one hand, I discovered how ungentle mourning can be, how glib condolences can sometimes feel, and how much emotional pain one can endure. As the writer Anne Lamott once said: “The game of life is hard, and a lot of us are playing hurt.” On the other hand, the magnitude of the tragedy also put everything else in perspective; little acts of kindness by others, for example, became an elixir for a troubled and saddened soul. Indeed, the compassion that I experienced during my “dark night of the soul” helped lead me to a greater truth and understanding about the meaning of life. Like Ann Weems, I came to accept the comfort of Christ always being with me, always asking for room in my heart.

The triumph of gratitude and humility over resentment also helped remind me that the time we had with our lost loved ones was a gift – a gift beyond our deserving, graciously given by God, and thus not to be possessed. In *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, Reverend John Claypool concludes: “To be angry because a gift has been taken away is to miss the whole point of life. That we ever have the things we cherish is more than we deserve.”

Nicholas Nitch



**Monday, March 11, 2024**

**1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**

*Rejoice always; pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the Will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

Each day I wake up early and start my day with two or three biblical readings, prayer for the world, family and friends, and meditation, (which can take me over an hour), then yoga and a run or a walk on the Bayshore. I have read and listened to the *Book of Joy* at least fourteen times. Both of these amazing men: (Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, pray for over 4 hours). My routine gives me a sense of peace, hope, control, and complete appreciation for the day I have been given. I look for the miracles that are all around me on my time out under the morning stars and rising sun. My rescue dog, King Louis accompanies me on the entire am routine. He sticks by my side and shows me love and attention. He is a loyal companion, and a true reflection of how loved I am by God.

When I perused the biblical verses that spoke to me, the one referred above shouted to me. I sincerely try to live my life in this manner. Do I succeed each day? Of course not, but what matters is that I try. I try to look for the good and rejoice always. I find myself praying all day long. I am in conversation with Christ about Life and the mundane, and the wonderful.

In fact, praying is my real go to. At times it is not an easy thing to give thanks for all – none of us are immune from pain and sadness and to pray in thanksgiving can seem quite hypocritical. However, I am a consummate optimist. I try to find the good in people, and in each day.

I'm not saying I don't have tough days. As I divorce lawyer and a criminal lawyer I see a great deal of sadness, anger, and pain and at times I allow the pain to leak into my soul. I want it to just stop, I want the adverse parties to just get along, to work it out. I want to turn back the hands of time and help my criminal clients not make such horrible decisions. But alas, I cannot, and so I pray.

I am ever so grateful to GOD each day for my family and my friends who I have now and who I will meet in the future. My three sons, my husband, and my Mom, give me immense JOY and I find myself so overwhelmed with gratitude for them at times that I am unable to pray out loud, fearing the tears of joy will steal my voice.

I believe greatly in the power of prayer. Prayer helps me to focus. Prayer helps me to stay grounded. Prayer helps me connect with Christ.

This Lenten season I challenge us all to rejoice always and pray without ceasing. Do not wait until you are at church, pray everywhere always. I believe God loves to hear from us.

Leland Baldwin

**Tuesday, March 12, 2024**

**Psalm 32:1**

*Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away!*

What is the true meaning of happiness? Is it our fancy car, home, or status in social circles, or is it the feeling of joy we find in the love and acceptance we receive from others? I never fully understood what it meant to be happy/accepted until I was about thirteen years old. Thirteen is unequivocally the most awkward time in any person's life. At age thirteen, the Sacrament of Confession became a part of my life. I was blessed to partake in this powerful, moving, and humbling sacrament of reconciliation with others my age, my peers. Because of that opportunity, I felt I could make a confession and not do it alone. We are creatures of community and love, so much so God that said to Adam, *"it is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him"* (Genesis 2:18). We are not made to be alone and cannot handle everything on our own. This became more apparent to me later in life after being on lock-down, with a house full of family, and albeit slightly going insane, realizing being together is where we need to be. A few years ago, I wrote on my blog:

"If the pandemic has taught me anything, is that slowing down and spending time with family is important and fulfilling. We cannot raise our kiddos alone! It does take a village! Do not ever be afraid to say, "I need help," or "I cannot do this on my own." Know that you have a community, that we are all going through the same things. Slow down, pray, and know God's grace will always get you through another day of this beautiful, chaotic, perfect, pretty little hot mess expression of mom life! As mothers all we need to do is raise our children, with the help of God's grace, and love our neighbors as our selves. The rest will all fall into place."

This is the same for everyone; know you are not alone. Confession, no matter what age or season you are in life, can be intimidating and takes discernment on the call to partake. When you can reflect on your crazy, chaotic, messy life, slow down, and listen, you can be closer to God and put the noise behind you. Review your true self, reach out to a priest, confess, and allow yourself to be closer to God. Being able to reconcile “out loud” to a priest in the Sacrament of Confession makes the joy of forgiveness tangible. There is no doubt. After all, that is what a sacrament is intended to do: be an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace. (Book of Common Prayer p. 857). To know you are forgiven because Jesus gave himself for us, and he gave us this sacrament to be closer to him, is true happiness.

*Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not conceal my guilt. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.” Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin.*  
(Psalm 32: 5-6)

Prayers for all to have a happy and healthy Lenten season, preparing for the joy that is to come on Easter day.

Kate Wood

## **Wednesday, March 13, 2024**

### **Psalm 121: 1-2**

*I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.*

Over the years I have come to love reading and reflecting on the Psalms. On a weekend retreat many years ago we were all given a devotional book, with the Psalms included, and since that time I have used one of the Psalms each day in my daily devotions. The Psalms speak to me and help guide me on my spiritual journey. My favorite is Psalm 121.

Psalm 121 was written by an unknown author a long time ago. It is a reflection and a commentary on the protection that God gives to travelers as they go to Jerusalem for a yearly festival and pilgrimage. The Psalmist seeks protection and peace from God on that journey. The various roads they traveled to Jerusalem were rough and full of danger.

*I lift up my eyes to the hills; from where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth. With the maker of heaven and earth watching over us, we need not fear anything* (Verses 1 and 2).

As a newly elected Vestry member, in my previous parish, I first reflected on this Psalm during a Vestry retreat. We spoke about our need to look to God for guidance and strength as we embarked on our journey as a Vestry member. I was so struck by the message of Psalm 121 that I have returned to it time and time again as I have faced various challenges in my journey through life.

*He will not let your foot be moved, and he who watches over you will not fall asleep. Behold, he who keeps Israel, will neither slumber nor sleep; The LORD himself watches over you; the LORD is your shade on your right hand, so that the sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night* (Verses 3 to 6).

These verses remind us of the hazards encountered on the journey to Jerusalem, however they also remind me of the obstacles we encounter in life each day. Our journey through Lent is meant to keep us focused on God, and on Jesus, who are our constant companions on our journey through life. The Psalmist also reminds us that God is always with us - *“he who watches over you will not fall asleep.”*

The Psalmist again reminds us of God watching over us in the concluding verses: *The LORD shall preserve you from all evil; it is he who shall keep you safe. The LORD shall watch over your going out and your coming in, from this time forth for evermore* (Verses 7 and 8).

Let us not forget these comforting words on our journey through Lent. Let us not lose faith that God and Jesus are with us, watching over us, and protecting us on our journey.

Paul Brokaw

**Thursday, March 14, 2024**

**I Peter 1:24-25**

*For all flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever.*

I got a stark reminder of the fragility of life this past year. My father, even at ninety-one years old, was in remarkable health—no ongoing conditions, a relatively stable mind, minimal need for assistance at his ALF. When I got the news that he had fallen and was in the emergency room, I was concerned but not worried. He’s still strong, I thought. Yet once he was admitted to the hospital, the word that kept reappearing in my conversations with his doctor was *frail*. Within a few days, he was in hospice care, and one week after that fall, he was gone. Fully realizing that death at ninety-one is no “tragedy” or unexpected event, the precipitous drop from “grass with flower” to “withered and gone” still shocked me.

We are often very reluctant to take a hard look at the impermanence of life. Our culture is incredibly “life-affirming,” as well as bolstered by fantasies of permanent youth. Moreover, we have amazing medical technologies that extend life. Thus, we tend to shut out and deny any sober look at how transitory the world is. Rarely do we individually undertake what Kurt Vonnegut called the “duty-dance with death” — a both intellectual and emotional engagement with the ways that life decays and dies right before us, and within us.

And yet, I cannot totally denounce our archetypal longing that drives us to life — affirmation, to youth-adoration, to medicine-lionization. We deeply know that all the opposites of what we see in our reality must also exist: if there is decay, there must be renewal; if impermanence, stability; if ever-present death, everlasting life. So, our embrace of withering and dying must co-exist with the deep pursuit of their polarities — and what lies beyond them.

In the above verse, Peter is paraphrasing Isaiah 40:6-8. A major difference lies in verse 7: *“The flowers wither, when the wind sent by the Lord blows upon them.”* The profound truth of the Scriptures’ wisdom teaching is that both decay and death AND our efforts to stave them off are part of the Lord’s perfect plan. While we try to integrate the world of opposites in our psyches, with the “word of the Lord,” we can find these profound principles, not only in the Bible, but in all the ways the word manifests in our lives.

Fortunately, the “word of the Lord,” our access way beyond the glory and dissolution of the flowering grass, can arrive in two ways: “*Those who seek me diligently will find me*” (Proverbs 8:17) indicates our side of the dance. Conversely, “*The word of the Lord came to me...*” (Jeremiah 1:4) shows the Divine’s action toward humanity — constantly pursuing us to be in communion. So, whether in Lent or any other time of year, how will you both seek and allow yourself to be sought by the word of the Lord? And especially, how will you use all the daily signs of life and its impermanence to both intensify your seeking and open you even further to what ways the Word is coming to you?

Scott Neumeister

**Friday, March 15, 2024**

**I Thessalonians 5:16-18**

*Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.*

I believe that all of us – us being those who strive to live a Christian life – desire with our whole hearts to become adopted Sons & Daughters of God our Father. During this Lenten Season we take time from our busy schedules to seek an intimacy with God that deepens year upon year. In the back of your mind, you may thank God that Lent doesn’t fall around Thanksgiving or Christmas – how would we ever accomplish 40 days of fasting and prayer during those hectic times? Like anyone, that first begins meditation – stopping the voices in our heads is often the hardest part. It is to that end that I would like to share some of my journey towards our living Lord. Praying without ceasing is something that I have been working on my entire adult life.

Once convinced of the reality of God I have felt His presence and talk with Him with a conscious and unconscious train of thought. Using a method known as “Breath Prayer”. My spiritual director convinced me to try it. I now thank God for him daily! There are a dozen or so examples of this method of prayer. You can learn this method from a good spiritual director, a practicing priest, deacon, monk, nun, or lay person. Seek and you will find. My prayer for you this day is that you will seek to learn this method of prayer. I can only say - I know with all my heart – God lives within me and we walk and talk every moment of my life.

Jeannie Kenyon

**Saturday, March 16, 2024**

**Psalm 33:6**

*By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of His mouth.*

I love to walk. It's my thoughtful, reflection, meditation time. It's also my special time with my little dog who also loves to walk. She gets excited, wiggles, and wags her tail as we start off and then proudly prances along. Fortunately, there is almost always a very nice breeze where we walk, and I am grateful for what I think of as this "breath of God."

Last fall my son lost his years long battle with cancer. His last eight days were spent in hospice care at my daughter's home in the Pacific Northwest where he was loved, cared for, comfortable, even babied, although he was over 50. He was rolled around in a wheelchair by his sister and nieces wherever he wanted to go. He was able to watch Sunday Night Football with his brother-in-law. Some of his friends drove for hours from out-of-state to come and say goodbye. He got to eat his favorite snacks. He had made his peace with his condition, was happy and in no pain.

I was able to spend this time with him and the family remotely. We learned this new way to connect during the tragedy of COVID, and it turned out to be a blessing for me to be able to participate in these activities with our family and friends. I was able to continue to love and feel loved and not feel left out. Many of my friends from my former Bible Study group up there stopped by to visit him as "surrogate mothers." They would call or text me afterwards and tell me, "Charles continues to be his charming and fun self."

I learned how to hold grief and grace at the same time and continue to breathe. I have read and loved most of the contemporary mystics. Some of my favorites are Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen. They speak of holding grief and grace at the same time, but this is when I fully understood and felt what they were talking about. My daughter and son-in-law would get my son all tucked in and comfy in bed in the evening and would call me so that we could say good night. My son would say, "I love you, mom." I would catch my deep breath and God would hold me long enough to speak the words, "I love you, too, Charles, billions beyond infinity."

Sometimes when we experience something beautiful and extraordinary, it "takes our breath away." That's what I believe for my son; that at the end, the gift God gave him was so extraordinary, it took his breath away.



Lord, today I lift up all those in Hospice Care, their family and friends, the Hospice Staff and Volunteers. I know that you surround them each day and night with your love and grace. Please strengthen them and fill them with the courage and comfort they require. May each of us at our end be reconciled with ourselves, the world, and each other; and may we experience that extraordinary gift from God that takes our breath away.

Shirley Susich

## **Sunday, March 17, 2024**

### **2 Corinthians 6: 3-10**

*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: in great endurance, afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; in 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 look—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.*

In years past, when choosing how to participate in Lent, my decisions were often self-centered. There always seemed to be a secondary gain, something in it for me that I would have wanted anyway rather than a sacrifice, like better fitness or going to bed earlier.

Participating in Lent set me on the right path. However, I now see that although in name I was making a change in my schedule or giving up something that I enjoyed, my reasons for doing this were not really in line with what the season of Lent offers us as Christians.

I have matured some since then in my spiritual journey, and I believe that it is most important for me to set my intention when thinking about how to participate. Intention is the process of creating a clear and focused mental or emotional effort toward a specific goal or outcome. I want to be more mindful and present when

participating. I want to open the door for better communication with God and practice this willingly, making time to work on prayer (linked to a sacrifice in this circumstance) despite a busy schedule or other excuses. I must learn to make time for what is important, as well as for what will allow me to better feel God's grace flow through me, to do His will at work, at home and with my neighbors.

I want to learn to quiet my thoughts so I can really listen and rest. I want to be reminded that God is with me both in joy and suffering, when I make good choices as well as mistakes, as I am imperfect but loved. I am grateful.

Laura Cruse

**Monday, March 18, 2024**

**I Thessalonians 5:16-18**

*Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

I will always remember experiencing the “inevitable” annual return of Lent as a child. Even though I had been raised to understand (if not fully appreciate) the significance of the Lenten season – to “embrace the tradition of fasting as a sign of giving up a little in gratitude for getting a lot”, so to speak – I didn’t exactly grasp the concept of reflection on my sacrifice as an opportunity to deepen my faith. From my perspective, Lent wasn’t about repentance, renewal, and preparation; rather, it epitomized “the beginning of the end” in a very different manner than that which Jesus might have sensed to be the call from His Father! In fact (and more portentously), my “sense” was in stark contrast to the real meaning of the sacred season—the significance of Lent found in the ultimate sacrifice, and the celebration of the Resurrection.

I refer to this “beginning of the end” for all the puerile sentiments one might expect from a kid: it meant I was going to have to give up something like chocolate, or junk food, or some toy; whatever was “vital” to me! Accordingly, I treated the pancake feast on Shrove Tuesday as if it was my own “last supper”, promptly triggering a fear that the very next morning my own personal agony would begin. I was facing temptation for something I hadn’t even foregone yet! —certain I would never be able to “survive”, and already longing for that first Sunday in Lent, when I could “legally cheat.”

With God’s help through the years, I finally “contemplated the cross”; I thought about Jesus’ journey and profound selfless sacrifice. And it was a good thing, because over time, “fasting” had become much more difficult – the toys bigger and the temptations greater – albeit only to ego. I had become more deeply entrenched in self-importance than self-examination; focused on behaviors that interfered with deepening a connection with God.

Little did I know back then, but had I heeded Paul’s simple yet powerful reminders to the Thessalonians, rather than agonizing and dreading each moment thinking about self – what I was “losing” – I could sooner have embraced Lent as a period of preparing myself for the celebration of Christ’s resurrection.

- Instead of worrying, I would have embraced rejoicing in the assurance of God’s love, and the knowledge of His presence in good times and bad.

- Instead of “going it alone” I would have prayed more often, as a constant reminder of His presence – strengthening my relationship with Him, and myself in the journey.
- Instead of feeling sorry (for myself, or for situations), I would purposefully cultivate a thankful heart, expressing gratitude to God for everything – big or small – for all that I have, rather than what’s lacking.

As abundant the amount of richly reinforcing and positively encouraging scripture as can be found in Paul’s Letters to the Thessalonians, these verses serve as my constant reminder that it’s not about “giving things up”, but instead using the time and experience to focus on repentance and reflection; to open our hearts to God’s cleansing grace through prayer, confession, fasting, giving, and expressing gratitude for all that we have, rather than pain from what we have sacrificed.

*Almighty God,  
During this sacred season of Lent, may our hearts be filled with joy in Your presence.  
Guide us through this journey of self-reflection and sacrifice with a spirit of  
rejoicing, always mindful of Your love and grace.*

*Encourage our unceasing prayer, that our heartfelt conversations might draw us  
closer to You. Grant us the strength to express gratitude, not only in times of joy,  
but also amidst the challenges of our journey, to give thanks, through Your Son, our  
Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Bob Alter

**Tuesday, March 19, 2024**

**Hebrews 13:7**

*Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you, consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.*

We all need role models for motivation, inspiration, and support. As Christians we must seek good role models and we must strive to be good role models.

Good role models may include parents, grandparents, religious leaders, teachers, friends, and neighbors. Charles Barkley challenges parents saying, “I’m not a role model...Just because I dunk a basketball doesn’t mean I should raise your kids.” He points out that being a good athlete does not make you a good role model, that it is not athletes’ responsibility to raise children. He suggests the need for finding good role models. So, whose responsibility is it to be a good role model?

It is the responsibility of Christians to be good role models. For Christians the ultimate role model is Jesus Christ. Therefore, to be a good role model we must imitate Jesus.

*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.*  
(Peter 2:21)

But how do we imitate Jesus? How can we be more like Jesus?

- Pray.
- Study Jesus and study how he overcame temptation; refusing to use his powers after fasting for forty days and nights to turn stones to bread, refusing to throw himself from the highest point in the temple, refusing to ask his followers to bow down and worship him.
- Love God as Jesus told us to - with all our heart and soul.
- Love your neighbors as thyself. Ask yourself, do I love my neighbors as I love myself or people that I consider to be like me?
- Be charitable; Jesus cared for the poor and healed the sick. Question yourself on what you are doing to aid the poor and sick?

- Be thankful; Jesus thanked God for food and thanked God for hearing him when he raised Lazarus from the dead. Are we truly thankful for our blessings or more focused on what we do not have or want?
- Forgive, as Jesus forgave the people that killed him.
- Be a good listener. Jesus valued people by listening to them and responding thoughtfully and patiently. Do you truly listen or just assume that you understand and know best?
- Continue to mature and grow spiritually and emotionally. Oliver Cromwell said, “He who ceases to be better ceases to be good.”
- Adhere to the Ten Commandments.

Let's commit ourselves to seeking good role models and being good role models.

Vera Furtick

**Wednesday, March 20, 2024**

**Matthew 6:1-4**

*Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. “So, whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

In today's fast-paced, digitally driven society, the words of Matthew 6:1–4 resonate profoundly. As we navigate a world where TikTok and Instagram showcase our every deed, this scripture urges us to reflect on the essence of our acts of righteousness.

The verse warns us against performing good deeds solely for the sake of public recognition. In a culture where social media thrives on instant validation, it's easy to fall into the trap of showcasing our generosity like a trumpet blast. However, the scripture reminds us that true reward comes from a higher source – our Father in heaven.

Consider the contrast between the quiet, hidden acts of kindness and the clamor of social media platforms. As we give to the needy, let's embrace humility. Rather than seeking applause, let our compassion be a silent force, making a difference without the need for digital trumpets.

In this Lenten season, let's reflect on the authenticity of our actions. Are we driven by a desire for earthly recognition or a genuine love for others? As we detach from the constant gaze of social media, we find a sacred space to connect with our Father in heaven, who sees our hidden acts and rewards them beyond the reach of any virtual spotlight.

May this season of Lent be a time of sincere reflection, reminding us that true fulfillment comes not from the digital applause but from the quiet joy of making a difference in the lives of others.

Roddy Belfati



**Thursday, March 21, 2024**

**I Thessalonians 5:16-18**

*Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

Have you ever had a day where you feel like nothing goes right and everything is harder than it should be? I am picturing the sort of day that Alexander experiences in the children's book, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst. His day starts with him waking up with gum in his hair and spirals downward from there. How do you feel when you have one of these sorts of days? What is your frame of mind at the end of the day? My guess is that when things go wrong, you can start to dwell on those sources of aggravation and get stuck in a negative cycle, making it hard to notice the things that do go right.

During this time of Lent, we want to keep in mind that counting our blessings can actually help us overcome our tendency to dwell on the negative. Being grateful can make us feel better and focusing on our blessings can help us build optimism and positivity. This Bible verse encourages us to be thankful for what we have and to thank God for what He has provided.

I try to remind my kids of this when they complain about a school day or a soccer game. Rather than reflecting on the negative, I ask them to recall a smile from a friend, a visit with the neighbor's pup, or a friendly chat with a teacher or teammate. I encourage them to try not to be like Alexander. In the end his mother says, "Some days are just like that," but I encourage them to end the day thinking back on a few positive interactions and saying a quick prayer to thank God for them.

Research shows that gratitude can enhance our well-being and happiness. Giving thanks and counting blessings helps us refocus on what we have instead of what we lack. Studies have found that gratitude can help us feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, and build stronger relationships. It can also help us sleep better, lower stress, and be less depressed.

We can choose how we respond to the world, and if we look for reasons to be grateful, we are more likely to find them. As we focus on being thankful, it is easier to be happy. There is comfort in finding even a small thing to thank God for and hopefully when we do that, more will come to mind. God hears our prayers and cherishes them. He gives us strength, peace, and His love.

Sara Brickelmeyer

**Friday, March 22, 2024**

**I Thessalonians 5:16-18**

*Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

How can a message from one of the apostles, Paul, so long ago, in approximately the year 50-51 A.D., be relevant to me, to us, today, centuries later?

"Rejoice always" Paul encourages us: today, how can I rejoice always when in the Holy Land today, where Christ himself lived, taught, and died, men, women, and children – kin in our human and divine family – are being blown to pieces? This reality is brought home to us thousands of miles away by the internet, by social media – and my heart aches, tears well up in my eyes at the horror of it and my mind goes numb.

"Pray without ceasing" the apostle counsels us to remind us of how to prepare for Christ's return, which may occur "like a thief in the night" (5:2). How can I pray without ceasing, dear Lord, when hopeful prayers begun in earnest two years ago at the outset of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, are becoming faint-hearted as this war appears to be unceasing? My heart grows weary, my mind dumbfounded by the senselessness of it all.

"In everything give thanks" Paul's exhortation, unwavering in its idealism, incites more resistance: give thanks for EVERY-thing, you mean, even for injured, aging knees and back in need of local repair or my sisters' diminished eyesight and hearing, or my homeless neighbor who sleeps under a small, plaid blanket on the bare, dirty, cold cement floor of the bus shelter I drive by on my way to work? Lord, how can I, so stuck in my identity with our human frailty and finiteness, give thanks for ALL of this as Brother Paul counsels from ancient halls of Your eternity?

As in David's psalm of old and in the words of Your beloved Son, Jesus, as he hung dying on the cross, I cry out: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" And then, a small, quiet, steady voice from within this din of travail and turmoil speaks up: "Surrender your spirit – die before you die – in each and every little and big crucifixion of human life."

For what is the alternative – to remain depressed in the denseness of our earthly nature and existence or to "*soar on wings like eagles...[to] run and not grow weary... not be faint*" (Isaiah 40:31)? My hope is restored in the Lord who will renew my strength. It is for this hope, for its resurrection again and again, that Jesus became human like us, died, and rose again – to show me, to show us, the way to live authentically, wholly human, holy divine.

Jan De Pinto  
Parish Secretary

**Saturday, March 23, 2024**

**Psalm 27: 13-14**

*I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage, wait for the Lord!*

In studying 1 and 2 Samuel this year, I have been struck by how many times King David turned to God for direction and courage when faced with a wide variety of decisions and challenges, many of which were life-threatening. When he failed to do so and took matters into his own hands, things ended badly. For instance, his first attempt at moving the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem resulted in the death of Uzzah because the Israelites followed the example of the Philistines rather than abiding by God's instructions for properly carrying the ark (2 Samuel 6).

While not free from sin or its consequences, David did not try to control his path to becoming King. Rather, he trusted in God's plan and waited for his time to be King over all of Israel. After the ark is correctly carried into Jerusalem, the Lord says to David through the prophet Nathan *"your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever"* (2 Samuel 7:16). While King David gave thanks to God for this blessing on him and his descendants, we give thanks that Jesus came to establish God's promised eternal kingdom and died on the cross to free us from the bondage of sin.

My own tendency to want to be in control leaves me tempted to use the season of Lent as a way to manage my actions. It is easy enough to give up sweets (well, not that easy) or to find inspiration on the Internet for a Lenten discipline that may as well be a New Year's Resolution. One year, I adopted a suggestion I saw online to clean out a cabinet or drawer every day during Lent. By Easter, my junk drawers were much more organized, but I don't know that I had drawn any closer to God.

As I contemplate a Holy Lent this year, my desire is to spend time daily in prayer and scripture reading, come to worship services at St. John's, and wait for the Lord to show me how I can best take part in God's Kingdom on Earth.

Betsy Graham

**Sunday, March 24, 2024**

**I Thessalonians 5:16-18**

*Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

These short verses in Paul's first epistle to the church at Thessaloniki provide three simple directives – to rejoice, to pray, and to give thanks – and often during such an intense scriptural period as is Lent, what helps to refresh me is the very simplest of instructions. These reminders help me to dismiss the world's pervasive clutter, noise, and angst, and instead concentrate on actions and intentions that strengthen me and my relationship with God and the community around me.

To rejoice -- we celebrate the majesty and might of our lord and savior Jesus Christ, we give glory and honor to his name, we attend mass and sing praises and hymns. Together with other Christians as the community of Christ, we are called to gather to worship and glorify God, celebrate the Eucharist, and be sent out into the world in peace to love and serve God and others as faithful witnesses of Christ.

To pray constantly – we develop and strengthen our practice of prayer, of communication with Jesus and the saints, of quiet and mindful devotion to the faith and those angels who, when on earth, so beautifully lived out that faith for all to observe and admire. Through prayer, we deepen our faith and strengthen our Christian resolve to delight in God's will and walk in Jesus' ways.

To give thanks – when I begin my day with a spirit of appreciation for the many blessings that have been bestowed upon me by God, I find myself to be more patient and kinder with the world around me. I have been blessed by God with a loving and growing family, a happy and healthy life, and a meaningful and satisfying opportunities in business and with other community institutions – so just why shouldn't I begin each day feeling blessed and fortunate? As found in James 1:17 (*"every good gift and every perfect gift is from above"*), we should attribute these blessings to the generosity and beneficence of God.

Implicit in this attitude of gratitude, however, is the sense that I must share my blessings with all of God's kingdom. I didn't sacrifice like Christ on the cross to obtain these blessings; in fact, my "sacrifices" have hardly been so. Giving thanks to God, for the goodness He has shared with me, means also to include all others in my blessings that derive from God – not only with things of the material world, but also a generosity of my spirit, of patience and compassion and empathy, and even with those

around us who we aren't immediately drawn to love.

The practices of glorifying God, praying constantly, and appreciating and recognizing the heavenly source of our good fortune equip and nourish us to be the generous Christians that Christ calls us to be, no matter what the circumstance and no matter who those others may be.

Steve Straske

**Monday, March 25, 2024**

**Psalm 121:1-2**

*I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.*

“Only God can keep me safe” is a simplified description of this scripture. Also, known as A Song of Ascents, many scholars believe that this psalm (and several others) were sung by worshipers as a traveling song on the road to Jerusalem for pilgrim festivals.

Reading or praying Psalm 121 takes me back to my college days. “*Levavi Oculos*” or “Lift thine eyes,” is the motto of my alma mater. I am reminded of the majestic hills of the Roanoke Valley in Virginia where I can remember feelings of awe and inspiration as I surveyed the surroundings.

This psalm has been a favorite of mine for many years, as it relates to feelings of the magnitude and beauty of the earth, and to the higher power that created it. But it's not just hills. Another favorite scriptural citation of mine is from Matthew 6:28-19 “...consider the lilies of the field how they grow, toil not, nor do they spin...even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these...”

That brings back memories of a trip to the Ngorongoro Crater in Tanzania and riding through herds of zebras in the midst of fields of beautiful yellow flowers. An amazing contrast in colors! Through my extensive travels, I have had many opportunities to see the beauty of the earth, making it difficult for me to respond to the question, “Which is/was my favorite place?”

On trips to the Holy Land, I have experienced lifting my eyes up to the hills reading scriptures out loud, or in silent meditation. There are several hills to climb as one

travels to and around Jerusalem as reflected in this passage, and our belief is that God has been watching over the journeys. Recently, I had a similar experience in Jordan on Mount Nebo where Moses looked out over the Promised Land.

It's important to read both verses one and two to understand the full meaning because help is from the Creator who made heaven and earth, not just the hills themselves as beautiful as they may be. We are under God's care as we look to the hills. This is all the more reason for us to make every effort possible to care for creation.

I'm not sure how, if or when I ever learned how to pray using those words, but I know that the beauty of the earth manifested in the outdoors has given me spiritual comfort. At very difficult time in today's world, we must do our best to remember the beauty of the earth, while not ignoring everyday tribulations. We can remember that God's people are still a band of pilgrims and that the journey of faith is a community affair, especially during this season of Lent. The world may be a scary place, but with help from the Lord, we can still see its beauty and trust God to be our protector.

*Note: for Psalm 121, and with the quote from Matthew, I've always preferred the King James Version.*

Sally Thompson

**Tuesday, March 26, 2024**

**John 14: 27**

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.*

Modern mystic, Howard Thurman, spiritual advisor to the Reverend Martin Luther King, wrote in his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, that fear is the root cause of separation among human beings. If this observation is true, what might we do to address and overcome our fear of those unlike ourselves?

I have been helped on my own journey by responding to Franciscan Father Richard Rohr's invitation to Action and Contemplation. The form of contemplation I have followed is Centering Prayer, a wordless way of praying taught by Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault, among others. Two decades of this practice have given me slowly emerging insight into how interconnected all humanity and creation are, and how precious each and every member of the human race is in the eyes of God.

The Action half of Rohr's invitation to transformation for me has been volunteering in feeding and supporting those who are homeless and/or food insecure at Faith Cafe. Over the years of listening and conversing, serving plates and cleaning up, I have come to know our guests as beloved children of God, living in very challenging circumstances, rather than as strangers to be feared and avoided.

I believe God speaks to each of us through the conduits of grace that we are open to. The following prayer written by St. Teresa of Avila in the 16th century has long been an inspiration and a comfort to me:

*Let nothing disturb you.  
Let nothing make you afraid.  
All things are passing.  
God alone never changes.  
Patience gains all things.  
If you have God you will want for nothing.  
God alone suffices.*

Making time to be alone with God, to share your thoughts and to listen, is the beginning of a transformative journey. Godspeed to each of you as you pursue your own unique spiritual journey.

Sally Wiley



## Wednesday, March 27, 2024

### From Our Youngest Parishioners

*The following observations on Lent were compiled by Kate Wood and Leland Baldwin during Sunday School for high schoolers, and Ayana Grady during Children's Chapel and Youth Council. Our devotion for today concludes with a thoughtful, beautifully written devotion by Maggie Welch (10th grader at Plant).*

#### Reflections on Lent during Children's Chapel

- *Lent is not just something in your pocket in the laundry. It's when you can't eat meat or chicken tacos, but also waiting for Jesus.*
- *In the season of Lent, we choose to give up something—pizza, cupcakes, or Dino nuggets. Some people also donate clothes to others.*
- *Lent is important because it's the time before Easter. The Israelites were waiting for the Messiah, and they were so happy when He came. It's like making New Year's goals. Jesus helps us to be good.*

#### Reflections on Lent from Lower, Middle and High Schoolers about what Lent means to them

*Waiting for God and being patient and listening to God speaking to you.*

- Martha Wood

*A season to give up something that you like because Jesus gave his life for us.*

- Michael Wood

*When Jesus was in the desert and fought temptations.*

- Maggie Wood

*A time to reflect on my habits and bring myself closer Jesus.*

- Annie Graff

*A good time to commit to build new habits.*

- Rowan Cruse

*I see Lent as an opportunity to grow in my relationship with God. In Lent, I can either give something up or pursue something new. Whatever I do, no matter if it is big like making amends with someone or small like limiting my screen time, I am placing trust in God that this can be done, and that it will be good for me. This has helped me greatly in growing in my faith.*  
- Luke Osborne (Youth Council)

### **Hebrews 13:16**

*Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*

My family has never really celebrated New Year's. I don't know why. But my parents do go on the Keto diet, try to exercise every day, and go dry for the month of January. They call it "Keto-dry-a-uary". They do it to remind themselves of the blessings in our lives, the simple pleasures of a lazy Saturday, a cold beer after work, a slice of bread. They do it to prepare themselves for the coming year, and to go into it with gratitude.

One of my teachers at school does what he calls "Austere October" to prepare for the holiday season. He intentionally deprives himself of luxuries, so that the holiday season is more enjoyable and intentional. Similarly, in Lent, we intentionally deprive ourselves of a simple pleasure—be that candy, alcohol, or social media, to prepare ourselves for Easter and the Resurrection. We are intentional and deliberate, we reflect. And while the New Year's was a few months ago, while every day is a new beginning, and while we were already baptized and forgiven for our sins, Easter is special. It is THE DAY. The day to end all days. It's why we are who we are. It's why we are Christians. It's the day we were forgiven for our sins. So, shouldn't we prepare for it? Shouldn't we be a little more austere than we normally would be, so that we can be prepared for the forgiveness of our sins?

Now every year I resolve to give something up for Lent. Some years are more successful than others. But no matter how it goes--every year, by the time Easter rolls around, I feel ready and prepared to open my arms to God and to Jesus. I let them in. And we all should. Because He already has.

Maggie Welch

## Maundy Thursday, March 28, 2024

### **John 13: 34**

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*

This night Jesus knows that all things are in his hands. He knows that he has come from God and is going to God. God has given him the choice to do whatever he wishes. Yet with such tremendous power at his disposal, Jesus chooses to teach, to teach something new. Like a good teacher Jesus first shows his disciples what to do and then explains what he has done. He gets up from the table, takes off his outer robe, and ties a towel around himself. He pours water into a basin. And then Jesus takes the smallest, least significant task that they all know so well, and he elevates it so that it becomes the icon of discipleship—washing his disciples' feet. A simple task to teach this most powerful new commandment, “*...love one another. Just as I have loved you...*”

On Maundy Thursday we gather. Our tradition is to remember this new commandment. This simple act teaches us to remember that we are disciples of Jesus because we love him and one another as he loves us.

Finally, Jesus has one more thing for us to remember, his last lesson. Love will be betrayed, denied, and forsaken. Love will be condemned and flogged. Love will carry a cross and be crucified. Love will forgive. Love will die and be laid in a tomb.

What does Jesus want us to remember? “*...he loved them, [he loved us] to the end.*”

The Rev. Mary Alice Lopez  
*Deacon in Residence*

## Good Friday, March 29, 2024

### Lamentations 1:12

*Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?*

When I was Rector of St. Paul's, Salt Lake City, a church in a downtown section of the city, we had a three-hour vigil service on Good Friday, from noon to three. This was to reflect on the time that Jesus hung on the cross. Various clergy from the area gave meditations on the Seven Last Words of Christ during those three hours, with hymns and times of silence in between. Since the church was on a busy corner with many people passing by, one year I decided to put a loudspeaker outside the church and basically broadcast the service to the passersby. I was hoping to spur some interest in them and entice some people to come in at least to see what was going on. I repeated this quote from the book of Lamentations in the bible on a regular basis during those three hours: *"Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?"* (Lamentations 1:12).

This quote was more than just a gimmick, to me it was both personal and global. By that I mean that Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross is incredibly meaningful to me personally, and it has had a tremendous impact on the world. Sometimes on Good Friday I place myself in my mind standing at the foot of the cross with Jesus hanging on it. This helps me realize and appreciate the magnitude of his sacrifice for me and for all the people in the world. I don't like to focus on pain and suffering, but it does happen to us in this life. To know that Jesus went through all that anguish and sorrow on Good Friday helps me to realize the extent of his love for me and for all humankind. He loves me more than I could ever know. That helps me when I am in distress, especially to know that God in Jesus knows what it is like to suffer. I am humbled by his love.

The world has never been the same since Jesus' death on the cross. *"O Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world"* we repeat in our liturgy week by week. He will do that if only we and the rest of the people in the world let him! Historically there has not been a more impactful event in the world that the death and resurrection of Jesus. It changed the course of Middle East, the Roman empire, the entire continent of Europe, North and South American, Australia and New Zealand, parts of Asia, and especially Africa, where the Christian (and especially Anglican) church even today is growing by leaps and bounds.

So, *"Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?"* People go on with their business on Good Friday as if nothing has happened. But a few people went into that church in Salt Lake City to check out what was going on. I don't know the impact it had upon them, but maybe they realized the love that Jesus had for them and maybe, just

maybe, they let Jesus into their lives and decided to follow him as Lord. For us as Christians we do not pass by, and it is critical for each of us to ask, “What does Good Friday mean to me?” That, I cannot even put it into words.

The Rev. Donald Goodheart  
*Retired Priest in Residence*

## **Holy Saturday, March 30, 2024**

### **Job 19:21-27, Hebrews 4:1-16 and Romans 8:1-11**

Please resist the temptation to move spiritually and emotionally directly from Good Friday to The Great Vigil of Easter without contemplating Holy Saturday. The Vigil and the first celebration of the Holy Eucharist of the Sunday of the Resurrection will happen tonight, but today is Holy Saturday. This is the day when we weep with the apostles. Jesus is dead and buried. All they had worked for, all they had learned and preached over the past three years, all of their hopes and dreams had been utterly shattered by Jesus’ crucifixion and death. They were terrified of what the future would bring, indeed afraid for their very lives. They were scattered like lost sheep. As each apostle contemplated returning to his previous life as a fisherman, tradesman, or perhaps a tax collector, he must have felt a desolate sense of emptiness, disappointment, anger, and frustration. If we are to fully appreciate the miracle of the Resurrection, then Holy Saturday is the day on which we are called to feel that same desolating sense of loss and emptiness.

Holy Saturday is the only day in the Church calendar that is about death. Even Good Friday is about life; about God’s sacrifice for us through which we receive the gift of eternal life. Holy Saturday commemorates the time between Jesus’s death on the cross and his resurrection on Easter Day. It is the only day in the calendar of the Church on which the celebration of the Holy Eucharist is prohibited. “Eucharist” literally means “thanksgiving,” but on that day there was nothing for which to be thankful. Jesus had not yet risen. To his followers, their friend Jesus was dead and gone forever.

On this day, try to let yourself feel the same emptiness the apostles felt. That devastating sense of loss unites us with them. It is in that void within us on this most holy of days that the Holy Spirit does his work. Out of that emptiness will come a profoundly deepened sense of joy as you emerge from the darkness of Holy Saturday

into the blinding light of the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The gift of resurrection is not only the gift of eternal life. It is the gift of true life and true peace here and now in our earthly existence. It is a gift for which we can be exceedingly thankful.

On this Holy Saturday, as you look ahead to the Easter celebration, please STOP. Be still. Think about today. Tomorrow will come tomorrow. But for now, even if just for a few moments, feel the pain of the apostles. It is in that pain that the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead will bring you life and peace.

The Rev. Charles E. Connelly  
*Retired Priest in Residence*

*[N.B. For further meditation and prayer, I commend to you the very brief Liturgy for Holy Saturday which you will find on page 283 of the Book of Common Prayer.]*

## Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024

### **John 3:17**

*Jesus Christ came into the world not to condemn the world but that the world may be saved through him.*

Alleluia, He is Risen! Happy Easter! Did you know that Easter is not just a day but an entire season in the Church's life? The great fifty days last from Easter Day until the day of Pentecost. We mark the season of Easter with the opening acclamation at every Eucharist, "Alleluia Christ is risen." The people respond, "The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!" I hope all of us at Saint John's take the opportunity to contemplate the risen Christ and the empty tomb this Easter season. I pray that we all focus on the hope the resurrection of Our Lord gives us and have confidence that "*Jesus Christ came into the world not to condemn the world but that the world may be saved through him*" (John 3:17).

What we spent so much time focusing on this season of Lent, the atonement of the sins of the world, was accomplished all those years ago on the original Good Friday. The bodily resurrection of Jesus and those who were witness to his resurrection are proof that our sins are indeed forgiven. Washed away in the immaculate blood of the lamb of God, God's very own begotten son Jesus Christ, Our Lord! What was once impossible is now, and has been for two thousand years, the ultimate reality that we have access through the power of the Holy Spirit to a direct relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

We spent the past 40 days taking a deep look into our relationship with God, with our brothers and sisters in Christ, and with the world. Let's spend the next 50 days rejoicing that all those relationships are redeemed. While not perfect, they all are redeemed by Jesus Christ through the grace of God. For that, we should all proclaim Alleluia! Praise God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we could ask or imagine. Praise him from generation to generation in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever. Amen.

The Rev. Christian M. Wood  
*Rector*



ST. JOHN'S CHURCH

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IN THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF SOUTHWEST FLORIDA