

2023 Lenten Devotional

**JESUS IN THE
WILDERNESS**



MARVIN
Methodist Church

Foreword

By John Berry

Marvin Methodist Church, a member of the Global Methodist Community, is very pleased to present its seventh book of Lenten devotionals written by the laity of the church. This book is the product of the study, thoughts, prayers and reflections of the writers. Each devotional is written on one or more of the scriptures assigned as daily readings during Lent. This edition is the third edition covering Year A of the Lectionary. While some of the scripture passages repeat from prior editions, the authors share new devotionals on them.

Lent is a time to reflect on our lives and the condition of our souls; a time to seek Jesus, reflect on what Jesus has done for us, what his life, death and resurrection mean; and renew our commitment to faithfully follow Jesus Christ. Many of the devotionals will have a prayer or raise a question for that day.

The devotionals begin with Ash Wednesday and end with Easter Sunday. Sunday devotionals are included, 47 days in all.

As you read the scriptures and the devotionals, it is our hope that you want a deeper relationship with Jesus. It is easy to say we want more of Jesus. It is not so easy changing our habits to actually get more of Jesus. For many of us, complacency with our lives, our comfort, our hobbies, even our daily routine of Bible reading, prayer and study, may keep us from getting more. While Lent is often seen as a time to "give something up," perhaps it is time to focus on adding something. And if giving something up is your practice, try to fill the missing something with a focus on obedience.

Please read the scripture passage in full as part of your use of this book. As you read the scripture and the devotional, you will likely draw other insights from your reading. Enjoy your time studying, and open your hearts and minds to these new insights and understandings. We hope you will discuss the devotionals with your fellow church members, your friends, neighbors and others. Perhaps the devotional will spark a discussion that allows you to share your faith story. We have included the email address of the writer so that you may contact the author if you want.

Thirty-four writers participated in this project, and without exception, all were richly blessed by their efforts. Please enjoy your time reading, praying, reflecting, contemplating and discussing.

Acknowledgments

This devotional guide was written and produced by members of Marvin Methodist Church in Tyler, Texas. It is meant for the reader to use during the 40 days of Lent, plus the seven Sundays during Lent, beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending Easter Sunday. The scripture passages were taken from the Revised Common Lectionary furnished by the Vanderbilt Divinity School (Year A) and several of the writers have added additional passages, hymns and other writings as their sources of inspiration.

Each day provides the reader a scripture passage to read and thoughts to ponder. Some raise questions, some end in prayer. All point to the powerful message of Jesus at the cross, his death and resurrection.

Thanks to our contributing writers: Jan McCauley, Julie Brown, Mac Griffith, Regina Childress, Catherine Gaertner, John Fry, Dona Julian Cassel, Rosie Niebuhr, Tami Bell, Katie Butts, Ellie Butts, Stephen Perkins, Chris Hill, Christy Hill, Peggy Berry, Suzy Bruce, Laura Jackson, Linda Armstrong, Shawn Dunn, Laurieanne Tuttle, Hannah Trammel, Josh Trammel, Leslie Roberts, George Roberts, Travis Roberts, Randy Cook, Dick Knarr, Karen McBee, Mike Gregory, Jensy Gregory, Paul Breedlove, Mike Simpson, David Ward and John Berry. Again this year, John Berry spearheaded the project. Special thanks to Marc Donaldson for his leadership, to Cyndi Behrend for her design work, to Diane Hawkins for her publishing expertise and to many other members of the staff and volunteers of Marvin Methodist Church for help in printing and assembling the devotional books.

Most of all, thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for giving life to us all, giving us minds and hearts to read, hear, understand and speak. May God be glorified and may you be blessed.

Ash Wednesday, Feb. 22

Isaiah 58:1-12

More—same—less

As I approach Lent each year, I tell myself I will do something to make this year's Lent different—something to bring me closer to God, to follow Jesus more fervently, to worship with all of my being, sensitive to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Yet, do I really do anything different? Am I just going through the motions? Does God even hear me? Why does God feel so distant when I am reading my Bible and praying?

Surely, I am just like the Hebrew people mentioned in Isaiah 58 who fasted and went through the motions—seeking God, eager to know his ways, asking for just decisions, humbling themselves, but all to no effect. They even fasted. Still, God did not answer them. Why am I not getting through to God? Why were the Hebrews not heard by God on high?

Am I complacent in my routine? Does my reading, praying and study change my life? Does it affect how I treat others? Does it lead me to a greater sense of thankfulness for what God has given me? Does it free me from anxiety? Am I getting closer to Christ, following him obediently or just going through the motions?

I suspect we all want that closer relationship, or we say we do. But do we really? Do I really? Am I happy in my comfortable life, reading my Bible, praying, going to church, sometimes teaching Sunday School? Do I want more? Do I want the same? No growth, no deeper relationship. Do I want less? Am I tired? Do I really see a difference with any change?

I would think we all want righteousness to go before us and the glory of the Lord to be our rear guard (verse 8), but how do we get it? It doesn't come automatically. It requires a change of heart—a change so significant and so powerfully unnatural to our self-interest that our habits fall away and we are focused on being obedient, not merely fasting or doing without something we like. It requires us to feed the hungry, satisfy the needs of the oppressed, clothe the naked and refrain from quarreling, malicious talk and pointing fingers.

This Lenten season, as we all prepare our hearts to understand the sacrifice of Jesus, the suffering crucifixion and the glorious resurrection, let us also focus on getting more out of life. Not more wealth, not more comfort, not more idle time for relaxing or pursuing our hobbies. Let's focus on obedience. Jesus told us what to do. Love God. Love others. God told us what to do in the Ten Commandments—love God, love others. So do it. Loose the chains of injustice. Stop quarreling. Oppress no one. Share your food, clothing, possessions. Be generous and consider each person as a child of God who is special and worthy of our sharing our gifts.

Traditionally, we “give something up” for Lent. We fast. Or we abstain from alcohol or chocolate or something we like to eat or drink or do in our spare time. This year, let's not merely give up something we like. Let's consider this passage and give up malice towards others and gossip. Let's thank those who serve us. Let's share our possessions with the needy. Let's remove all sources of rebellion against God. Let's remove those idols

that keep us from obedience. Let's feed the hungry. It's not all that difficult. We can donate to our church and local charities that offer assistance to the needy. We can donate to the food bank and help feed the hungry. For today, in our community, it is easy to give. Giving will be the easiest thing to change. Giving up those idols—well that will be the challenge!

It's not a matter of not knowing how to be obedient. It's a matter of not wanting to be obedient. It's time for a change of heart this Lent. Want more.

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————— **Feb. 23** —————

Jonah 3:1-10

A whale of a story

*And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh,
in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people
who cannot tell their right hand from their left—
and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:11 NIV).*

One of the great stories of my childhood is Jonah and the whale. You remember how Jonah was thrown into the sea, swallowed and then remained inside the whale for three days before being spat out on dry land. What a whale of a story!

As an adult, though, the story takes on new meaning when I read in Matthew 12:38-41 that Jesus refers to Jonah when the Pharisees ask him for a sign. Jesus answers, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here."

Wow! Jonah's experience was not just a time out for disobeying God. His experience was foreshadowing Christ's crucifixion and resurrection three days later. Jonah's story points us to Christ and offers critical lessons for us today.

Jesus compares the Pharisees of his day to the Ninevites of Jonah's day—not a flattering comparison. The Ninevites were so evil Jonah ran when God first asked him to preach to them, hence ending up in the whale. Jonah 3 explains Jonah repents and is successful in getting the Ninevites to change their evil ways, as well. Yet in Jonah 4, when they do repent and God shows mercy, Jonah is angry these people did not get what they deserved and throws a "pity party." God patiently explains his heart for the sheer number of Ninevites—some who didn't know better—and their innocent animals to Jonah, whose heart had been hardened by their evil.

I admit I have seen people who, I felt, did not get what they deserved. But, Christ's sacrifice on the cross reminds me I don't get what I deserve either, as I am a sinful man.

Because God forgave the wicked people of Nineveh and those who nailed Jesus to the cross, I am called to forgive, as well.

Like Jonah, it is not always easy, and “hating the sin but not the sinner” is a challenge. It is also easy to focus on the sins of others while ignoring our own. The story of Jonah shows us God is faithful and helps us when we ask for help with our mission of humility and showing grace.

Jonah truly is a whale of a story that reminds us it is a good idea to obey God. It also points us to the cross—the greatest example of forgiveness ever—so we, too, can have the heart of God and show mercy to others.

Prayer: Thank you Jesus for coming to earth to not only give us your example of how to live but for sacrificing yourself for our sins so that one day we can spend eternity with you! In your holy name we pray, Amen.

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————— **Feb. 24** —————

Jonah 4:1-11

Volunteers wanted

I cry when we sing Charles Wesley’s famous hymn *And Can It Be That I Should Gain*. It continues, *Amazing love! How can it be that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*

The missionary prophet, Jonah, followed God’s orders (finally) and delivered the message of God’s love to Nineveh, a large, evil city—and they all repented! Yes, *amazing love*.

My heart wants you readers to know the true story of a tribal prince from Liberia, Prince Kaboo. A Christian missionary renamed him Samuel Morris. If you research him, you’ll find more information.

Kaboo was born in 1873 to a tribal chieftain. During tribal wars, he was frequently captured because he was the chief’s son. After being captured, Kaboo was to be executed the next day because his tribe could not pay the extreme ransom for his life. During the night, Kaboo’s chains fell off his body and a heavenly voice told him to run. This was validated by spies who witnessed this miracle. Kaboo ran for many days until he came upon a Christian missionary school. After staying there a long time, he was converted to Christianity and learned the English language. Prince Kaboo loved Jesus! He frequently sang this song, *Jesus is Mine*:

Fade, fade each earthly joy. Jesus is mine. Break every tender tie. Jesus is mine.
Earth has no resting place. Jesus alone can bless. Jesus is mine.

Kaboo wanted to go to Taylor University in Fort Wayne, Indiana, because that is where the missionary lady at the school had studied. The details of his voyage from the west coast of Africa to New York City are riveting. Most of us could not have survived the voyage. He led the captain and crew to faith in Jesus Christ. He told them of God’s love. Kaboo’s arrival in New York City had a great impression on the leading clergy as Kaboo

took to their pulpits and told of God's love.

He made it to Indiana. Suffice it to say, he turned Taylor University on its ear, proclaiming God's love as he walked through the campus. His frail body caught pneumonia and he died on campus after being there only a couple of years. According to his biography, there was a great funeral and soon afterward, students volunteered to go to Africa as missionaries.

God loved Kaboo. Kaboo loved God. Hence the WORD was loudly proclaimed, and the Samuel Morris Foundation still exists.

Like Jonah, Kaboo was God's instrument to spread the word of God's love from Liberia to Indiana! His chains fell off and he ran a journey for Christ. How will you answer when God calls?

Prayer: Dear God, Let me be your voice to show your love. I volunteer. My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth and followed Thee.

Dona Julian Cassel

————— **Feb. 25** —————

Matthew 18:1-7

Become like little children

As I grow older and become deeper and more immersed in God's Word and the study of it, it dawns on me what a wonderful teacher Jesus was to those who were truly listening! He told parables that were tools, examples, lessons for everyone; yet, depending on where he was, who he was teaching or who he inspired and changed, the story was perfectly suited to the person or persons who needed that particular lesson at that particular moment in time.

In Matthew 18:1-7, the disciples asked Jesus who was the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven? (I don't doubt that some competition was within their questioning.) Jesus responded that *children* were the greatest in the Kingdom. Excuse me?

Jesus was illustrating to the disciples that they should be humble and eager to learn and to please God, the Father, just like children are eager to please! He wanted them to understand that just as children depend on their earthly parents to provide all of their needs and wants, Jesus wanted his disciples to be completely dependent upon God. This in and of itself could lead to a rebirthing, a resurrection, a becoming a new Creation in Jesus alone—every moment of every day.

We cannot return to the safety of our mother's womb as a baby, but Jesus calls us to start over with the dependence, trust and unconditional love that is present within a child's heart. Is that not also the heart of Christ? Further, he's asking us to be 100 percent vulnerable to him and his perfect will for our lives.

Jesus had extremely direct and harsh words for those who cause children to stumble! Since we are all his children, created in his image and infused with the power of the Holy Spirit, are we taking care to nurture one another in love, healing, forgiveness, hope and faith? Are we as protective of one another in Christ as deeply and as vigilantly as we are

invested in the love and nurture of our own children?

In the scripture reading on Sunday, Jan. 29 (1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1), the Apostle Paul stated in part, "Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."

God's Kingdom is dependent upon your dependence and upon our obedience!

Neil T. Anderson states in his book *Victory Over the Darkness: Realize the Power of Your Identity in Christ* that since we are incapable of determining God's thoughts through mere human reasoning, we therefore must be dependent upon divine revelation. How can we possibly remain dependent and be what Jesus calls us to be by the power of the Holy Spirit if we do not ponder or visit his Holy Word daily? For as children of the most high God, we must also be obedient in *becoming the Word*. That must become our instinctive reflex as we seek to be like Christ. We are role models for other children of God who are aching for understanding, hope, acceptance and unconditional love, just as we are.

Prayer: Holy Father, gracious God of perfect love and eternal hope, give us the constant desire to move deeper into your Holy Word and character, by the power of the Holy Spirit within us. Help us be like obedient and dependent children, running to your presence continually for solace, hope, forgiveness and inspired direction. Protect us from the darkness, Lord—for just like children, we carry much fear and feelings of resistance to Your Truth. Help us to realize that being dependent upon you carries responsibility and care to be emotionally healthy within our thoughts and in the way we relate to our own selves and to others. Grant us the courage and fortitude to remain completely dependent upon you for our every need and thought. All praise be unto you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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Feb. 26

Psalm 32

Rejoice, be glad, shout for joy

"Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered" (Psalm 32:1 NIV).

Psalm 32 is a psalm of penitence, or confession. It is one of the seven penitential psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143) we read and reflect on during the Lenten season. In Psalm 32, David is speaking to us from experience. He is encouraging us and giving us assurance of God's unconditional forgiveness.

When David fell from grace when he committed adultery with Bathsheba, he was confronted by the prophet Nathan. After a period of arrogance and callousness toward God, a period that may have lasted a year or more, David's "agony of sin" overwhelmed

him, and he pleaded for God's mercy and grace. He knew he didn't deserve forgiveness, but he confessed and acknowledged his sin. David's confession is the basis of Penitential Psalm 51.

In Psalm 32, verses 3 and 4 (NIV), David reflects on the agony of sin: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer." When he acknowledged his sin, confessed and asked for forgiveness, God forgave the guilt of his sin (verse 5).

David knew what it was like to be overwhelmed in the guilt and misery of sin. He encourages us sinners in verse 6, "Therefore let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found; surely the mighty rising waters will not reach them." Sin causes fellowship with God to be broken.

In the Psalms, God has been referred to as "our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1). For David, God was "my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance" (verse 7). In verse 8, David received a promise from God, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will guide you with my eye." This is the blessing of forgiveness. Fellowship with God is restored.

God not only forgives our sins (carries away), he also covers our sins (verse 1), which is the gracious act of atonement through the blood of Jesus Christ. He does not count or impute our sins against us (verse 2). They are gone forever. We are righteous through Jesus Christ.

During this Lenten season, let us reflect on Jesus Christ, his suffering, his sacrifice, his death and his resurrection. But let us also reflect on our own lives and our relationship and fellowship with Jesus Christ. Let us examine ourselves and confess our sins to the Lord and ask for forgiveness. Through Jesus Christ, we have the power to overcome sin. Trust in him. "Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!" (Psalm 32:11).

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Feb. 27

Ephesians 4:22-24

Seeing the view

I was in Yellowstone National Park on a cold May evening. I drove out on the East Entrance Road toward a park boundary. When I drove this road in past years, lodgepole pine trees blocked much of the mountain views. This year, however, I saw the results of forest fires from earlier years. Even though I know that fire is a part of nature's processes, it was sad to see the destruction caused by the fires. But as I continued looking around, it was as if the downed trees opened the skies so I could see the mountains in the Absaroka range. The beauty of the snow-capped mountains was breath-taking. The

results of the fire provided an unobstructed view of the scenic beauty.

As I looked at this view, I wondered about my life. Are there things in my life that hide the beauty of God from those with whom I come in contact? Do my speech, my habits, my busyness, my activities distract from God in my life? Will I be brave enough to ask the Holy Spirit to purify me and remove the dross from my life that may distract others from seeing God? Colossians 3:8-10 speaks of removing ungodly aspects from our lives. "But now you must get rid of all these things: anger, passion and hateful feelings. No insults or obscene talk must ever come from your lips. Do not lie to one another, for you have put off the old self with its habits and put on the new self."

Prayer: God, please purify me and remove those things in my life that distract others from seeing you.

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Feb. 28

Genesis 4:1-16

The stain of sin

Genesis gives us the story of creation, God's love for us and the human journey of sin that separates us from his love.

After God created the world, he created man and woman in his image in a perfect world. But, like Cain, we just cannot be faithful to God's wishes for our lives. It seems, even today, we have so much knowledge about doing God's will, but we refuse to follow the path to the perfect relationship with God. The stain of our sin and rejection of God's plan for us separates us from God and creates adverse results.

So it was with the first brothers by natural reproduction, Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve, mark the beginning of civilization. Abel was the first born and handled the flocks (rancher) while Cain tilled and worked the soil (farmer). As they were commanded by God, they both made their burnt offerings. God looked upon Abel's favorably. Cain's, not so much. Was Cain's offering given begrudgingly, or not the best he had? Cain did not like it that God viewed Abel's offering more favorably. Cain became increasingly angrier at his brother. As this anger festered, he sought to murder Abel. Cain lured his brother to the field and slew him.

When God asked Cain where his brother was, Cain answered him, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" Here we see that Cain does what we do so many times. When Cain was rightly judged by God, he plays the victim. At this point God curses Cain for his sin against his brother and God. But God protected him from death. His true punishment was separation from God. "Then Cain went out from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden" (Genesis 4:16).

The story of Cain and Abel illustrates God's warning to us, that we need to be faithful to his commandments and directions for our lives. This direction is clarified in the New Testament when Christ gives us the greatest commandments: "Love the Lord your God

with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength." The second is this: "Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12: 30-31).

Prayer: Thank you, Lord Jesus, for saving me from the consequences of my sins and giving me eternal salvation. Come Holy Spirit.

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March 1

Exodus 34:1-9, 27-28

The ultimate do-over

And the Lord said to Moses, "Write these words; in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." And he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments (Ex.34:27-28).

This was the ultimate do-over, the sensational second chance, the mulligan of all mulligans.

Most Christians, along with other millions who have seen Charlton Heston as Moses in the old Cecil B. DeMille epic *The Ten Commandments*, are familiar with the story. A lot happens between Exodus 19 when Moses meets with God on Mount Sinai where "the finger of God" writes the testimony of His Law for His people (31:18), to Exodus 32:19 when Moses breaks the stone tablets bearing God's hand-written law after finding the Israelites partying around their newly-created golden calf idol.

For 13 chapters we read how God gives Moses explicit instructions about God's laws, God's justice, God's worship, God's protection, God's covenant with God's people. Then as soon as the law is written, the people are breaking it. In his righteous anger, God is ready to destroy these people he has saved from slavery and starvation, but Moses intercedes. And he doesn't just ask God not to kill them, but boldly asks him to continue to be with them, to lead them with his presence. Because God so loves Moses, He doesn't just agree to these requests, but goes even further—as God always does. He tells Moses to bring him two more stone tablets so that he can write his same words down for them again. He is their God, and he knows his law will help them be his people, set apart for the salvation of all nations.

At this very same time, take note how God creates his model for Moses's preparation: 40 days and 40 nights. If you look for it, you will see repeatedly in the Bible that the most crucial, transformational preparations with God last for 40 days and nights. Moses on Mount Sinai for 40 days and nights; Elijah fleeing Jezebel for 40 days and nights hiding in a cave; Jesus after baptism fasting for 40 days and nights in the wilderness while being taunted by Satan; and the resurrected Jesus appearing to His disciples for 40 days and

nights before ascending to heaven—all these testimonies and more show us God's best plan for how we can prepare for being close with him. It is not coincidental that both Advent and Lent, our seasons of preparation for growing with God, last 40 days and nights. These are holy days set aside to make us different, set apart for the Lord. Let us use them wisely.

Prayer Focus: Prayers for all of us who need second chances and praises for our God who so graciously gives them.

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March 2

Psalm 121

I Lift my Eyes

What mountains do you lift your eyes to? Is it the Rockies? The Smokeys? The pine-tree-lined hills of East Texas? Or maybe even the rolling waves in Galveston?

I am a national park geek. I love visiting national parks and as my husband always says, "We've never visited a national park and thought it shouldn't be one!"

One of my favorite things to do in the parks is hike. I love seeing God's variety in his creation. From alpine lakes in Rocky Mountain National Park to hoodoos in Bryce Canyon to geysers in Yellowstone to arches in, well, Arches National Park, the views are always breathtaking and not just because you've hiked your bottom off to see them!

I always take pictures. But when I do, I always find myself thinking, "a photo will never do this view justice." But the photo is more for the memory, the reminder of the places we've been and the wonders we've seen. I keep the photos and memories to remind me of the vastness of God's love for us. For how much he cares for each and every one of us!

I lift my eyes to the mountains. Where does my help come from?

I have to admit, I've always read this Psalm and thought about seeing God's creation and its greatness and how I'm protected because the God who made all that is the same God who loves me! And if he can make all that, then me worrying about whatever it is I'm worrying about is pretty stinking useless!

Not that it is not a good message, but in preparation for this devotional I also did a little research. Psalms 120 to 135 share the common title of a *song of ascents*. In the Hebrew language the word *ascents* is related to the verb to go up. The temple Jerusalem is on top of a hill, so going there involved an ascent. It is thought that pilgrims on their way there for agricultural festivals sang these songs.

Another thing I read mentioned how it was possible that for a pilgrim looking at the mountains, the rugged terrain of the hill country on approach to Jerusalem, would evoke images of danger and difficulty because robbers often lurked in the hills. The pilgrims needed God's protection on their way up to worship him.

Maybe the mountains you lift your eyes to aren't beautiful masterpieces of God's hand.

Maybe they are a mountain of debt, an insurmountable illness, a seemingly impossible situation. Maybe your mountains have hiding robbers lying in wait to add more strife to your already weary shoulders.

Whether the mountains we lift our eyes to remind us of the greatness of God and his sovereignty over all or the challenges of life we face, we can still find peace in the knowledge that we are under God's protective hand. We can still use the thought of looking up to see past the strife right in front of our noses to see God and his will and his love and his desire for us be in relationship with him.

So, as we lift our eyes to the mountains, may we always find comfort knowing, never doubting, that the God of the universe is our God. He's our friend, our father, and our protector.

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March 3

Micah 7:18-20

Who is a God like you?

I am the grandfather of two children under the age of 4. Each of them is amazingly brilliant and stunningly beautiful—a purely objective, non-biased opinion! If you doubt me, I have a picture or two on my iPhone that I'll be happy to share. We are blessed to visit them regularly. We spend our time crawling around on our hands and knees, digging in the dirt, splashing in puddles, giving piggy-back rides, reading books and generally playing hard from start to finish. Cookie and Randaddy return home utterly exhausted and completely content.

In the midst of that contentment, however, a nagging realization often creeps in: The world will not always be kind to our precious little ones. Much like our own grandparents before us, we often lament the state of the world in which our grandchildren live and must learn to navigate. At these times, it is helpful to remember there truly is nothing new under the sun.

The people of Judah had lost their way. Again! God sent the prophet Micah to proclaim a message of judgment to a people who were persistent in their pursuit of evil. After reminding them (and us) that God is absolutely consistent in judging sin, Micah also reminds us that God is faithful when he exclaims:

Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy (Micah 7:18-19).

Who is a God like you? Micah was not the first to have this revelation. His words are an echo of his ancestors in the faith. Similar praises were raised by Moses (Exodus 15:11, Deuteronomy 33:26), Solomon (1 Kings 8:23) and David (Psalm 113:5). The God of whom Micah, Moses, Solomon and David spoke ultimately fulfilled his covenant through his son, Jesus, through whom he continues to pardon sin and forgive the transgressions of the remnant of his inheritance.

My maternal grandparents, George and Mavis Newby, were faithful Methodists. Growing up in West Texas, I spent many weekends with them. Each Sunday, I'd watch my grandfather write a check for his tithe and drop it in a basket before leading the singing in the men's Sunday School class. My grandmother took great pride in her perfect attendance record and decorating the church for special occasions. She and the other church ladies could set up and take down a potluck with military precision. Poetry in motion! Their faithfulness helped lay the foundation of my faith. They are part of the reason I am woven into the remnant of his inheritance.

It is my prayer that, like Micah, I will be an echo of my ancestors in the faith. I pray that my grandchildren will see in me the faithfulness I saw in my grandparents. As they grow up in this troubled world, I pray that I do my part to help them know Jesus who tells us: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

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March 4

Luke 7: 1-10

An amazing faith

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel" (Luke 7:9).

As one who frequently prays to the Lord for healing—for others and myself—I am drawn to scripture where Jesus answers prayers for healing, especially in miraculous ways. If I am honest, I want to learn what it takes to get Jesus to answer my prayers. Today's story in Luke about the centurion sheds invaluable light on what inspired Jesus to heal.

Up until this point in his ministry, Jesus had targeted his messages to the Jews. Suddenly, a request for healing comes from a most unlikely source: a Gentile centurion whose servant is dying. Unlikely, because as a Gentile, the centurion would have had a pagan upbringing. Yet, he had befriended the Jews and even built them a synagogue. As a centurion he was a Roman Army officer whose skill in brutal martial arts earned him his title. He was in charge of 100 men whose job it was to subject the Jews to the Emperor's rule. Yet, showing unusual compassion, the centurion reached out to Jesus to save his lowly servant. And, he humbly asked the Jewish elders to intercede because he was "not worthy to ask Jesus to come into his house." The centurion, no stranger to authority, acknowledged that Jesus had so much authority he could heal from anywhere. That faith led Jesus to not only heal his servant but to respond as never before to man: amazed! Once again, Jesus saw the heart of man, not his appearance.

The thought that Jesus could be amazed by a mere man—a Gentile—is almost unthinkable, which is why it is so encouraging. (Jesus was written to be amazed only one other time in the Bible: amazed at the *lack* of faith of those from his hometown, Nazareth). The case of the centurion is encouraging because he had not spent time in

spiritual training nor led an exemplary life, attributes we would associate with garnering Jesus' favor. It was the centurion's faith in Jesus in spite of his upbringing and position that impressed Jesus; a faith we are called to emulate.

That is the faith I want: A faith that will amaze Jesus; a faith that inspires Jesus to heal; a faith that will allow me to look at the heart of people so I can respond as Jesus did and does. Perhaps it is time to pray as fervently for an amazing faith as I do for healing!

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, you know our hearts, our needs and our prayers. Please give us the amazing faith we need to turn to you and trust you with the outcomes of our prayers. Thank you, Jesus for loving and healing us no matter our station on earth. May we share the same heart and ministry to those we are called to serve. Amen

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March 5

John 3:1-17

The benefit of the doubt

We really like to look down on the Pharisees. After all, they went from being arrogant people at the top of their society only to be remembered throughout history as power-hungry men who completely missed what was right in front of them, even demanding the crucifixion of the one they said they were waiting for. It kind of seems like righteous justice. But in my mind, Nicodemus was different from what I usually think of when I imagine the Pharisees. He recognized Jesus was from God, he just didn't know what to do with the information.

John 3 begins with Nicodemus confessing *"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."* But Nicodemus certainly had questions! He asked, *"How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"* I have to say that seems like a reasonable question.

I imagine Jesus starting verse 10 with a light chuckle and speaking in a calm voice. No condemnation. *"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."*

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Your understanding of this passage may depend on how you voice the words of Jesus. Is Jesus speaking in a calm, even voice? Is Jesus speaking in a stern frustrated voice? Is

Jesus reprimanding Nicodemus, the pharisee? And how do you read other passages in the Bible? What if you read most of the Bible and you hear an angry and judgmental God? Why do we do that? I'm not saying that it's not warranted in some passages, but don't God and Jesus deserve the benefit of the doubt? Can't we take them at their word that they love us and truly want the best for us? After all, in Romans Chapter 8 we are told that we can never be separated from the love of God. He loves us and wants good for us.

Let's give God the benefit of the doubt even in sickness, financial hardships and moments of confusion. I think we would all do well to remember God and Jesus as our loving savior who enjoy their children and want good things for us. Why not read your Bible and hear those compassionate voices of love? Love that went to the cross for you. How do those voices sound to your soul?

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March 6

Hebrews 3:1-6

Which way to go?

Every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant in order to affirm the things that would be spoken later. But Jesus was faithful over God's house as a Son. We are his house if we hold on to the confidence and the pride that our hope gives us (Hebrews 3: 4-6).

I remember learning cursive writing in third grade. We had exercise sheets with each letter, both upper and lowercase, printed as it was to be written, including arrows to guide you through the process. We wrote those letters over and over until we could write in cursive without thinking about what we were doing.

God chose Moses to reveal his laws for the Jewish people to live in a right relationship with him. Just as Moses led the people through the wilderness toward the Promised Land, he led by example the way to worship God and how to live according to laws God had given. Over the centuries those laws and practices became ingrained into the very fabric of their lives. There were very strict guidelines on what was acceptable and what was not, and those guidelines covered every area of daily living. The rules were known as the Law of Moses, and he was highly honored as the deliverer of their people and the giver of the laws that were the foundation of their society.

Then Jesus came along and rocked that foundation by declaring that he was the fulfillment of the law that Moses declared so long ago on Mount Sinai. While Moses was a great man, he was still human, and he had faults and failures just like the rest of us. Jesus, who was fully human, was also fully divine and lived a sinless life and died as a sacrifice for us so we could be reconciled with God and have a personal relationship with him by

his grace through our faith in Jesus. We only need to believe and declare Jesus as savior, love God and love others as God loves them.

No wonder Jews who became Christians struggled with their new faith. Living out *love God and love others* is a lot less clear than following hundreds of specific requirements. To love God and love others requires time spent in prayer and reflection, discerning God's will for our lives and our interactions with others. But there is also a freedom that comes with an individual relationship, one that allows God to lead us down a path that uses our unique gifts and talents for his purpose.

Remember those cursive letters? Over the years, each student developed their own style. Some adhered closely to the basic style, and some, like me, have a hybrid of cursive and printing. Even though they all differ, the message can still be understood by those who learned the foundational elements of writing the alphabet. That is the same with following Jesus—if you stay true to the foundation of loving God and loving others, you will give a message of love and light and freedom to a hurting world. And your message will be given in such a way that it will touch someone who might have missed it if it was delivered another way.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, help us remember whose we are and let us always seek to have you fill us with your love so we can carry it to others. You will guide us if we allow. Amen.

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March 7

Psalm 128

Praise and prepare

One of my early memories of scripture is learning the word *psalm* is Greek for words accompanying music. The Hebrew word means *praises*. Many scholars believe that these series of psalms (120-134) known as the Psalms of Ascent or Songs of Ascent, were songs that the faithful sang on their way up to the temple mount for the festivals. In Psalm 128, the psalmist speaks of blessedness of the fear of the Lord.

Fearing the Lord isn't about being scared. It's about ultimate respect and reverence for the Lord God. To fully know God, to be close to Christ, is to have such a deep understanding for all that he is and all that he is capable of that we make deliberate conscious efforts to avoid evil whenever possible. In Galatians 5:16, Paul tells his readers, *Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh*" and in Thessalonians we are told to "*abstain from every form of evil*."

The psalmist advises us that our faithfulness and reverence for the Lord will be a blessed one, fruitful in all ways. Even though we live in a sin-filled world, we shall do and keep doing all we can to reject that sin and grow closer to God and dive deeper into his word.

In this season of Lent, while we use this time to prepare for the passion and death of our Savior, followed by his glorious resurrection, we can take this time to read over each of

the Songs of Ascents, praising God and preparing our hearts to respond to him. Imagining that you are among the Hebrew faithful climbing the road to Jerusalem may help your praise and preparation.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for your abundance of blessings on the faithful. May we always remember to walk in your ways and learn to live in the fear of the Lord. Amen

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March 8

John 7:53-8:11

Supplementary passages: Romans 3:23, Matthew 7:1-5, Romans 6:1-2

God looks at guilty sinners through the grace and truth of Jesus Christ

Have you ever had something you did wrong spread out in the open for everyone to see? Or how many times have you been tempted to judge someone or fear being judged after what you or they may have done? That is exactly what has happened to the woman in this passage, who has just been caught in the act of adultery.

The Pharisees have brought a woman, most likely a teenager given the age of marriage in the Jewish culture of the day, to Jesus to decide whether she should be condemned for her sin. Being an obvious trap of the Pharisees to try and catch Jesus, Jesus responds with the following: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her," echoing a similar sentiment to what Jesus said in the Beatitudes in Matthew 7:1-2: "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you." He hits at the very heart of the issue: The men holding this tribunal do not have ultimate authority over sin, and it is the Lord only that may execute justice over sin. With no one around after Jesus' words except Jesus and the woman, Jesus issues a statement that is not just for the woman, it is for all of us: "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more."

This passage teaches us three truths:

All of us are in need of the saving grace and mercy of Jesus Christ, whether we consider ourselves religious or not. Christ has come for everyone! As written in Isaiah 53:6, *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

Jesus calls us to confession and repentance, laying our sins bare before him, welcoming us into his arms as his children: 1 John 1:9: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

Through Jesus, we are able to experience the full grace and mercy offered to us through his death and resurrection. We are then called to fully experience this grace in all aspects of our life and put it on display for others. *Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving (Colossians 2:6-7).*

As we continue reflecting during this season of Lent, let us give further thanks for the promise we have as those who profess faith in Jesus: He no longer condemns us. He has paid for every bad act, every temptation given in to and every sin we have committed and will commit. Because of this, we can allow his grace to rule over our hearts and minds as we go about our daily lives, continuing to give our daily worries, struggles and anxieties over to him, because Jesus cares for us.

Prayer: Father, show me the areas of my life where I need to let your grace shine through. Help me to understand how to live my life in further accordance with your Word, to love your truth, and to share that love and grace with those around me. I thank you for making yourself known to me and illuminating these truths in my life. I love you, Lord. Amen.

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March 9

Exodus 16:1-8

You're gonna miss this

As the mother of two very active, very opinionated elementary-aged girls, I often find myself thinking of the lyrics to a country song, *You're Gonna Miss This*. The song follows a young girl throughout her life as she grows up, always ready for the next stage. When she is young, she wants to turn 18 so she can make her own decisions; when she is newly married, she wants a bigger house instead of her affordable apartment; when she is a mother of young children, she just wants them to stop crying. The moral of the story told in song is to appreciate what you have in the present because you will miss it in the future.

In reading the verses for today's devotional, the lyrics again came to my mind. When the Israelites came into the Desert of Sin, they were tired and hungry. Although they had experienced miracle after miracle, always receiving what they needed from God, they focused on what they did not have and grumbled to Moses and Aaron that they wished they were back in Egypt where they had "pots of meat and all the food we wanted." This is the same Egypt the Israelites cried to God to rescue them from, which he did.

Whether it is wishing for a future in which we do not experience challenges or engaging in selective memories of the past in which we romanticize our experiences, grumbling separates us from God. It is a rebellion against his will and an attempt to place what we think we need above what God knows we need. But despite this act of separation and lack of appreciation for all he does for us, God remains steadfast. Just as he provided for the Israelites, God provides for us. It comes in the form of sustenance in the Desert of Sin, in the daily peace that surpasses all understanding and most of all in the form of Jesus who died on the cross so we all may live.

With that in mind, let us pray. Dear God, next time we want to grumble about how we miss the good old days or we long for a day when the current challenges do not exist, let

us instead remember all the ways you have provided for us; most of all by sending Jesus, your son, to die for us. Help us to seek your will in everything we think, say and do. Amen.

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————— **March 10** —————

Exodus 16:9-21

What happened to all the toilet paper?

Many aspects of the COVID pandemic were unprecedented. One of the most surprising, unprecedented occurrences for me was the hoarding of toilet paper. Why did people decide to panic-buy Charmin (or Cottonelle or even the single ply generic brands)? Behavior researchers noted several reasons, including the fact that panic buying begets panic buying, it's natural to want to overprepare, and it allows us to feel a sense of control. These feelings and reactions are not new; in fact, as today's verse details, the Israelites exhibited the same tendencies in the Desert of Sin.

In these verses, God provides the food that the Israelites requested. With the provisions came instructions. Moses clearly tells the Israelites to take only what they need and not to store it. Some members of the group did not follow the instructions, though, and found that the next morning the food was "full of maggots and had begun to smell." In addition to the food going bad; however, we also learn that the next day God also provided more, fresh sustenance. The Israelites found that they didn't need to store the food, it would be provided to each in the amount they needed.

As the behavior researchers noted in their analysis of the COVID toilet paper shortage, our sinful human nature causes us to hoard in an effort to exert control over uncontrollable circumstances or simply to follow along with what others are doing in an effort to not be left out or left behind. By doing that, we ended up facing a situation in which many did not have what they needed. Imagine, on the other hand, trusting in God that he will provide; putting aside what we may think is best for our selfish human interests and thinking instead of what is good for the whole. If everyone had acted in that way, no shortage would have ever existed.

Although the COVID pandemic was indeed unprecedented, the Bible still provided the roadmap to navigate its challenges, whether very serious dealing with loss from the disease or a bit more trivial like lacking toilet paper. It is a great reminder to seek his word, his direction, and trust that he will provide.

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————— **March 11** —————

Psalm 95

Sing your praise to the Lord

Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. Come let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord

our Maker; for He is our God and we are the people of His pasture, the flock under His care (Psalm 95:1-2).

Rich Mullins sings, "Sing your praise to the Lord. I could never tell you just how much good that it's gonna do you." Does that make you want to sing? I mean, we all want something that's going to do us some good! I believe we were created to praise and worship God; and to have a close relationship with Him. We don't have to go to church to go to Heaven, but it is strongly suggested that we do. In today's world, we need all the help we can get to stay focused on what truly matters in our life—and what truly matters to God. Being in a live church service will do that for any Christian.

Maybe you can't sing well. I, who once was at least a pretty good singer in the choir, can no longer sing. Some problem with my vocal cords has given me the singing voice of a man. I am still devastated about losing this ability to praise the Lord in a way I enjoyed, but now on Sunday mornings I think about all the time and preparation that goes into the music for our church services. And people all over the world are doing the same thing in honor and glory for our Lord. How wonderful!

I once read about how Charles Wesley, a great hymn writer, often went reluctantly to church gatherings (maybe because they were so long). But still, he "felt revived" and glad he went because of the songs, readings and prayers. We were told recently in a Sunday service the percentage of people who have not returned to church after COVID-19 restrictions. I don't remember what it is, but it is too much. Anyone reading this knows how special it is to worship our Lord in community. We are "the people of his pasture." He cares for us and longs to have close fellowship with us.

And about singing: John Wesley said, "Sing all. Sing lustily and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead or half asleep. Do not bawl so as to be heard above the rest of the congregation but strive to unite your voices together." So for those of us who tend to bawl, we may try to sing quietly to ourselves, but I think God is happy with us "making a joyful noise." It is the joy of the Lord that gets us through.

My hope for you is to sing with enthusiasm this Lenten season. And on Easter Sunday, go ahead and "sing with good courage," even if you tend to bawl. I will be doing the same (even as I feel sorry for those around me)!

Prayer: Dear Lord. Thank you for music and how it can do me some good. Help me join you in worship as I lift my praises to you. I am so unworthy of my Jesus' sacrifice to redeem me from sin. Please remind me often of the importance of worship and how music is a beautiful tribute to your glory, whether I am listening or trying to sing. I pray this

Lenten season will bring my brothers and sisters in Christ back into fellowship, for that is where we all belong. All honor and praise to our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

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March 12

Romans 5:1-11

He is with us

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1).

In Romans 5:1-11, we learn about having faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and how he will bring us through anything, as long as we have faith in him. It may not happen exactly as we expect or want, but whatever happens God is able to redeem things and bring good from our circumstances, even our decisions.

I grew up attending church faithfully every week. I sang duets with my sister and did everything according to what my church taught me. I was married at the age of 19 and by the time I was 23, I had two children, ages 3 months and 2 years! At that time, I could tell my marriage was in trouble; I never dreamt it would have ended in divorce.

Growing up, I had been sheltered by my parents, and I had no idea how I was going to take care of two young children on my own! I won't say it was easy, because it wasn't, but as verse 3 states, suffering produces perseverance and perseverance makes you stronger, gives you character and hope. I have always been a positive person and therefore, I was positive I could do this on my own. I'm sure God would have preferred I make better decisions in my young life, but he never left my side! The decisions I made back then made me the strong woman I am today, and I have never regretted any of it! The rest of my story, and best of all, is God's redemptive work that has blessed me with 51 years of marriage to my husband, Joe.

I'm not sure how anyone gets through life without having faith in God. I know I would not be where I am today if I had not had faith that God would continue to walk by my side!

I will end with one of my favorite hymns!

My Faith Looks Up To Thee
Thou Lamb of Calvary, Savior Divine
Now hear me while I pray;
Take all my guilt away;
Oh, let me from this day
Be wholly Thine!

As we celebrate Lent, let us remember how we got where we are today and let us especially remember how God was with us, even in times of trouble or heartache or distress, to lead us through. Hallelujah!

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March 13

Genesis 24:1-27

One more time

What is your request? Pray to God and remember this story.

Long ago, a chief servant of Abraham was fulfilling an oath he made to his master:

That Isaac, the heir to the promise, will not marry a local Canaanite woman living in the area. (I wonder why?)

That he would go to the homeland of Abraham's relatives and find a wife there. But under no circumstances is Isaac go back to live among Abraham's relatives. God made a promise!

Then, the servant saddled up ten camels and took a month-long journey through the desert to find a wife for Isaac. Upon arrival, he was exhausted and a foreigner in a distant land.

The servant bowed down and prayed to the Lord, the God of his master, Abraham, to show him the way.

The servant was asking for a miracle, "Let it be the one who gives me a drink and waters my camels, too."

Before he finished praying, a young woman named Rebekah came out with a water jug on her shoulder. Running over to her, the servant asked, "Will you give me a drink from your jug?"

She responded, "Yes and I'll draw water for your camels, too!"

Can you imagine how many gallons of water ten camels can drink?

How many times do you think Rebekah went back to the well to draw more water?

And she did it for a stranger. What do you think happens next? Keep reading in Genesis and find out!

Among many things, this is an example of God always showing up!

The question remains: Will we be available?

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March 14

Psalms 81

Remembering to remember

Sing for joy to God our strength, shout aloud to the God of Jacob! Begin the music, strike the timbrel, play the melodious harp and lyre (Psalm 81:1-2).

As a musician I love the beginning of Psalm 81 and its references to singing and instruments. Sounds like the start of a party! And it is, but if you read further you

discover the rest of the story!

Psalm 81 was written as a hymn to be sung and played for holiday festivals, but for a serious reason. The Psalm is to musically remind God's people to listen to Him and follow His commands, It also regales how God warned the Israelites in the past how to live, yet their stubborn hearts turned from God and their heaping upon themselves devastating consequences. Sadly, this was not just a one-time oops; this was a pattern of disobedient behavior. No wonder the Israelites needed a creative reminder in the form of a hymn to sing and play at celebrations.

It would be easy to armchair quarterback and shake our heads in disgust at the Israelites. Yet, are we any better? Think of the help we need just to remind ourselves to show up on time, remember important appointments, even wake up! We are creatures who are not prone to doing or remembering what we are supposed to do. It is called sin and we have to combat it constantly with reminders to stay in God's lane. We need daily time in his Word, weekly time in fellowship with believers at church and yes, even singing of God's provision and love for us. That is the celebratory part of Psalm 81; God says he wants to bless us if we will listen to him:

In your distress you called, and I rescued you" (Psalm 81:7).

I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it (Psalm 81:10).

But you would be fed with the finest of wheat; with honey from the rock I would satisfy you (Psalm 81:16).

What great incentives to follow God. Now, if we can just remember to do what it takes to do it! If our Apple watch, smartphone and daily planner can help us achieve worldly goals, they can be used to achieve our spiritual ones that have eternal benefits. Lent is a great time to use every tool we have to create daily habits in Bible study and prayer to follow Jesus. We also can tune into Marvin Church texts and social media posts reminding us of mid-week studies, Bible reading programs and service opportunities. Can you imagine what the Israelites would think of our opportunities to be reminded today? We also have even more distractions!

While we have more gadgets and tools than the Israelites for reminders, we also have more distractions, which is why nothing replaces weekly worship at church. It is there, like them, we are reminded of God's will for our lives through instruction and glorious music. This Sunday, remember Psalm 81 when you turn to the hymns and "Sing for joy to God, your strength!"

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, we don't want to be a stubborn people. We want to realize the blessings you have for us by following your will for our lives. Help us remember to remember your faithful protection and provision so we will be diligent in following your ways. In Jesus' name, amen!

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March 15

Jeremiah 2:4-13

A lament of God

Draw near to me, O house of Jacob,
Hear my prayer, O Israelites.

By the rivers of Babylon I sat and wept
as I remembered the covenant of Abraham.

Do not try to hide yourselves from my anguish, O Israel.
I trusted you.

Your evil ways took over and
Have scorched the love I have for you.

You have cast me aside, I the Lord God
of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel.

How could you have done such a reckless thing?

I brought you out of Egyptian bondage.

I sustained you along the journey with food and water.

I gave you light in the darkness.

I guided you by my hand through countless wretched miles
Of desolation and your endless complaining.

I have had my fill of giving and giving
And watching you deliberately destroy
The gifts I freely gave to you.

A land that was rich and flowing in milk and honey
Was soon stripped and laid to waste with no thought at all.

Disaster will come upon you now

And your children and their children.

Your plans will be confounded and you will be humbled.

Your dreams of prosperity will all be devoured.

You will once again be owned in bondage.

And for what?

Worthless, cheap idols—that is what you chose instead of me,

The Lord your God, your fountain of living waters.

You will now hew broken cisterns for yourselves that cannot even hold water.

By the rivers of Babylon, I sit and weep,
When I remember Israel.

O Israel, why have you forsaken me?

I loved you with a forever love.

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March 16

Psalm 23

It's what you do when you're going through

I can remember my early days as a new believer. I was in my early 20s with three mentors (spiritual mothers) who were about three times older than I: Mother Ingram, Mother Howard and Mother Daniels, all three pillars in my faith walk. I would often go to them with questions as a young wife and mother. They were domesticated and sophisticated. They were master chefs, preparing meals from scratch with no recipe books or measuring cups. Each one presented a knowledge and understanding of scripture, without one commentary or a class.

Needless to say more than 30 years later my life is the better, as I am still applying and benefiting from being their mentee. In many ways, they're all interwoven in many areas of my life, both practically and spiritually. Mother Ingram taught me how to persevere in prayer (she prayed about everything and anything). Mother Howard taught me the importance of studying the scriptures (line by line, precept by precept). But it was Mother Daniels who taught me the most valuable lesson. She taught me how to go through the hard places, the low and uncertain places of life without wavering in my faith. Mother Daniels had serious struggles with her adult son, his addiction and all that came with it. She would always quote Psalm 23, but her focus was not on her soul being restored, not on the still waters or the green pastures. Her focus was found in the valley. I didn't quite understand this, until I began having my own valley experiences. As I matured, I began to realize the following.

A valley is in between two mountains.

There is often a stream of water (the purest water) in the valley, as it comes down from the mountains. Where there is water there is life.

The shadow from the mountains provides protection from the sun.

King David wrote, *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

Notice he said, he's walking through, knowing God is with him. He didn't set up camp there, he stayed in forward motion with his eyes on the Good Shepherd. He is trying to figure things out by looking back. He already knew goodness and mercy were following close behind him.

During this Lenten season, be intentional to walk through your valley experiences with your eyes fixed on the one who is always with you. Remember it's what you do when you're going through. Jesus went through the valley of scourging, crucifixion and death to get to the glorious resurrection.

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March 17

1 Samuel 15:22-31

Complete obedience

1 Samuel 15:22-31 is a story about disobedience, misguided priorities and the consequences of both (separation). It relates how Saul, Israel's first king, failed to follow God's explicit instructions. As we learn in the verses preceding the aforementioned, God directs Saul through Samuel to totally destroy the Amalekites without exception: men, women, children, infants and livestock. Why? Because, as God, says, the Amalekites had attacked the Israelites after their captivity in Egypt. God saw his chosen people through the battle and even promised Moses that in due time the name of Amalek would be "completely blotted out under heaven" (Exodus 17:14 NIV).

Saul does most of what God commanded, but did not destroy the prize livestock. He attempts to justify his actions by claiming the livestock were spared only "to be sacrificed to the Lord your God, but we totally destroyed the rest" (1 Samuel 15:15 NIV). Why do you suppose Saul refers to God as Samuel's and not his own?

Beginning in verse 22, Samuel admonishes Saul for his failure to follow through in compliance with God's commands and shares with Saul the price God will exact from him for such failure: loss of his kingship, symbolically demonstrated by the tearing of Samuel's robe. Specifically, Saul's sin was prioritizing his will (saving livestock for sacrifice) over God's (destroying all livestock).

The incarnation of God the Son was the first step in God the Father's plan to redeem his creation. In this case, God required a sacrifice. The humanity of Jesus wished for another way to accomplish the purpose, but conceded the Father's will to be done. The script was written, and perfect adherence to it was required. In contrast to Saul's story, the story of Jesus is one of obedience, essential sacrifice and the consequences of both (redemption).

This season of Lent is oftentimes the motivation to forgo an enjoyable activity or pleasure for the sake of sacrifice. Refraining from such things as social media, alcohol, sweets, etc. are among the more common choices selected. Our intent, of course, is to share in some very small measure the ultimate sacrifice Jesus was called on to make for our benefit: his life for ours. While these examples of self-discipline are commendable, God really wants us to love Him and to love each other.

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March 18

1 Samuel 15:22-34

To obey is better than sacrifice

Mrs. B was her name. Her skin was black. Black as onyx. She had huge black eyes, filled with a softness and kindness that immediately drew you to her and made you like her.

They were eyes that had seen plenty of heartache and grief, but also had seen, and had chosen to dwell on the glory of God's creation. Even when healthy, she was only about as big around as my wrist. For 78 years, her skin had been soft and now was leathery, but still soft. Good skin. All her life, she told me, she had been the picture of health. As she said so beautifully, "I am blessed."

But now, in the wee hours before dawn, lying on a stretcher in the emergency room, those big, black eyes were intermittently wracked with pain. That beautiful soft leathery skin twitched off and on in agony. Her belly was very distended, and our investigations had shown an intestinal obstruction which would require an operation.

I had called my surgeon friend and he had reviewed all the findings and concurred that surgery was indicated, and indicated right now. So, at 3:30 a.m. we were inserting the proper tubes into her body in preparation for the surgery. At that point I got an unexpected lesson in life, and a biblical lesson from this wonderful servant of the Lord, Mrs. B.

I was carefully explaining the problem to her and was trying to use words she would understand. After telling her all I knew about her condition, I asked her for permission to do the surgery. Even though it was many years ago, I can still see the calm assurance on her face, and her answer still rings in my ears: "Obedience is far better than sacrifice."

Well, dummy here didn't get it on the first pass. It was I who did not understand her words. So, I asked again for permission ... same answer: "Obedience is far better than sacrifice."

Then it struck me. This elderly sick lady was being obedient to trust and to do what she saw the Lord had in mind for her, and in the process was able to teach a young doctor a valuable lesson he has never forgotten: "Obedience is far better than sacrifice!" Happily the surgery was successful and she was able to return home in a few days to continue teaching those near her about—what else but obedience.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for your son, Jesus, who was obedient even unto death for our sake. Thank you, Lord, for life's lessons. Thank you for tough times. Thank you for those who have been down this path of life before us and are willing to teach us by the manner in which they live their lives. And then teach us with kindness. Wow! Thank you especially for lessons on obedience. Thank you for Mrs. B. Amen.

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March 19

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Listen and obey

In reading yesterday's passage, and in reading about Samuel the priest of God, we learn that Samuel follows God's instructions, even to kill God's enemy, when directed to do so. His reputation preceded him. After Samuel warned Saul that God has rejected Saul as king because Saul turned away from God and did not follow God's instructions, Samuel is told by God to find a new king for Israel. Samuel asks God how he will be protected

should Saul find out. God devises a plan and Samuel follows it closely.

The people of Bethlehem were frightened when Samuel walked into the city. Samuel put them at ease and invited them to sacrifice to the Lord with him. "Consecrate yourselves and come to the sacrifice with me." Samuel's mission was to anoint a king, one of Jesse's sons. One by one, Jesse brought his sons to Samuel, and one by one, there was the same answer: "The Lord has not chosen this one."

Perplexed that God's anointed son of Jesse had not been presented to him, Samuel asked if there were any other sons. Jesse answered that there was still the youngest, tending the sheep. Surely, Jesse thought, my youngest son—only a boy—would not be the chosen king. Samuel was insistent. We will not sit down until he arrives.

David is presented to Samuel and Samuel clearly hears God's message: Rise and anoint him, this is the one.

Once again, God turns conventional wisdom upside down. Surely it is the oldest child who is the one to be anointed. And Samuel, after seeing the oldest, Eliab, had no doubt but that Eliab would be the anointed king. But as we all know, God does not look on the outward appearance. He looks in the heart.

And oh, what a heart did God find in David!

Yet the lesson for us is not in the son God selected, but in the obedience of Samuel. While Samuel had his opinion, he set aside his personal opinion and waited for the Lord's clear instructions.

Would I be so obedient? Would I even ask God for guidance? Am I going my own way without regard to what God tells me to do? Do I even spend enough time with God to listen to his clear instructions? These questions hit me like a knife through my belly. How can I obey if I do not hear? How can I hear if I do not spend the time needed in prayer and communion with God?

How indeed?

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————— **March 20** —————

Psalm 146

The one we can trust

In Psalm 146 before anything else is mentioned, the psalmist demands his soul to praise God. Only God, for the rest of his days. How often do I forget to worship and affirm God before anything else? Our deep-rooted belief that God is perfectly holy and the only one to be praised will inevitably affect everything we do, think, feel and speak. I pray that our hearts are oriented to worship first, before all things, and that this heart shift would result in a heart change that affects everything we do.

Furthermore, the psalmist goes on to say that not only is God to be praised, but God is to

be trusted. The Hebrew word for trust that is used here is *batah*, meaning *to feel secure or to have confidence in*. The writer is exhorting his readers to consider how God is not like the earthly princes, but he is set apart. God can save. God is eternal. These are attributes no person on earth can claim and therefore, we should feel secure and have confidence in a God whose ways are so far above ours, yet he is so unbelievably reachable and near.

That's the beauty and wonder of who God is, that he is so astonishingly above us in every single way, yet he made himself so close. He made heaven and earth but left the heavenlies to plant his feet in the lowest places—with us. He doesn't starve the oppressed of true food, but he gives the bread of life and lifts the heaviness. He doesn't give prisoners the sentence they deserve; he served their sentences with his life, death and resurrection. He removes the scales from our eyes and allows us to be enlightened by his spirit and see him for who he is. He exalts the lowly and loves the righteous. He sees the cast off, the lost, the ones without a place to lay their heads, and he is near even when the world turns a blind eye. He can fill any void that exists in the human heart, and he is the only one who can. He is sovereign over every single soul—those near to him and those far. And he is forever. Praise the Lord.

As we move through Lent, it is my prayer that we stop to marvel at the beauty of a God who can be trusted. As Marvin church I pray we collectively lean back into his embrace and feel the gravity of his deity and his humanity. His ability to be so far above all that the world tells us we should exalt, yet so shockingly near.

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March 21

Isaiah 42:14-21

Waiting and seeing

"You have seen many things, but you do not observe them; your ears are open, but no one hears" (Isaiah 42:20).

In a sense, Lent is a time of waiting. Waiting to celebrate Christ's victory over sin and death.

God is waiting, also. He is waiting for us to come to him. He is waiting to lead us from the darkness into the light.

To see, not just look. No, not a glance, but to really see. To use our ears and hear. No, not overhearing, but to really listen and comprehend. He has given us all we need to show others, yet we tend to rebel by allowing idols in. Idols like entertainment, luxury, wealth, fame, success—even the Easter bunny!

Yahweh is just, fearsomely just, yet his grace and mercy restrain his justifiable wrath, guiding us to restoration. Our idols block the light of God and prevent us from seeing his justice and mercy just as it did the Hebrew nation in this passage. Consider your idols.

What will it take to really see, to really hear, to enter that covenant relationship?
Oh God, turn our darkness into light.
Open our ears that we may hear!

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March 22

Matthew 9:27-34

I'm still in need of a savior

Have mercy on us, Son of David! (Matthew 9:27).

God, help me (have mercy on me)! How often do we go to God saying this, wanting him to take away our affliction(s)? And I'm not talking about physical blindness, as was the case in this scripture. I'm talking about spiritual blindness. Right now, I am referring to an affliction we all have: sin. A song by DC Talk (*In the Light*) describes our affliction well. *This disease of self runs through my blood; it's a cancer fatal to my soul. Every attempt on my behalf has failed to bring this sickness under control.*

I am reminded of a recent sermon by our Pastor Doug, based on Romans 7: 7-25. *I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate I do (Romans 7:15).* This passage has always been one of my favorites, and most disliked. I certainly dislike the fact that this is about me. It calls me out on my sin. I like it because it makes me feel normal.

I mean, Paul says it. But God doesn't want us to be alright with being normal. He calls us to perfection. As John Wesley puts it, "But what is perfection? The word has various senses: here it means perfect love. It is love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul." Love excluding sin—that seems impossible to me! Or maybe I don't understand what it means. I do think it is something to strive for. By perfection, Wesley did not mean moral flawlessness or sinlessness. He meant perfection in the sense of maturity. Wesley believed we could become perfect in love in this life.

Until that sermon on the passage in Romans, I always felt helpless. I've read the Bible through for the past eight years. When I get to this scripture, I always feel guilty. I focus on how I have failed God. I need some instructions. I like one, two, three. But the answer has been there all along, in verses 24-25: *... who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!* That's it. That's the answer I've hoped for all along. It's been there, but I did not see it. I have just read it. And it's not one, two, three—it's one, and only one. Jesus is all we need. He is the answer to our affliction of sin. I need to spend more time with him. I need to focus more on his words and his life—and his death. Hallelujah for Easter!

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March 23

Psalm 130

Out of the depths

How many of you have a playlist? Or, if you're like me, perhaps an old mixtape of songs that you listen to on a road trip? Psalm 130 would fall right in the middle of that playlist for the Jews. This song is one of 15 Songs of Ascent the Jews were known to have sung on their walks up to Jerusalem. Yes, up. Fun fact: Jerusalem sits *up* on a hill, hence Songs of Ascent.

What makes a good song for a road trip playlist? A song that strikes a chord within your soul. A song that can be belted out with a friend in the passenger seat. A song that can be sung over and over again. I think that's why Psalm 130 made the Jews' playlist.

"Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord." The song begs, "Lord, hear my voice!"

We've all been there. It's relatable, right? Maybe you are there now. Maybe you are waiting for the Lord to speak.

Charles Spurgeon writes, "The waiting itself is beneficial to us: It tries faith, exercises patience, trains submission and endears the blessing when it comes." Waiting is hard. But when we know who we're waiting for, we can wait through the night.

This Lenten season, we know the wait is good. We know what is coming. There is no reason to fear the night. The Jews had to hope, but we know that Jesus Christ has come, has died and has risen from the dead! He has conquered sin and death. And he will come again.

May Psalm 130 and this Lenten season shed new light on the hard place you may be in. Know that you are not alone.

Prayer: God, thank you for allowing us the space to sing our hearts out in agony. Thank you for seeing us through what sometimes seems like a long night. We trust in you and your love for us. God is good all the time, and all the time God is good. Come Lord. Amen.

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March 24

Ezekiel 33:10-16

Watchman

The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel and he was appointed Watchman for the people of Israel and Jerusalem

As the watchman, he, Ezekiel, was the prophet who foretold the people of Israel and Jerusalem the doom which was punishment for their sinful lives. The people heard but did not change their sinful ways. The watchman sounded the alarm but the people

treated it as a curiosity and did not heed the warning. When they died it was their fault, for they heard but did not heed the warning.

God then spoke to Ezekiel again. Ezekiel pointed out to the people God would save all who practiced righteousness and repented from sinfulness. Even the wicked would be saved if they gave up their sinful ways and repented. In other words, repentance and abstaining from sinful ways resulted in life! The opposite resulted in death! Ezekiel blew the warning horn so that all Israel and Jerusalem could be informed of the impending punishment of slaughter, destruction and imprisonment by the Babylonians.

The small town in which I grew up had a railroad shop for repair and maintenance of locomotives and rail cars. Leaving school late each afternoon, I rode my bicycle by the shops daily. Over the years I came to know the watchman who was on duty every night. He befriended a young boy on his bike and always explained his job of warning the community of any trouble which might arise. He did not blow a horn like Ezekiel but he had an electric siren which was very loud. He took his job very seriously. In the years I knew him only once did he sound the alarm. In the early morning hours, a small fire broke out in one of the buildings. Thankfully, he sounded the alarm in time for the fire trucks to quickly arrive and extinguish the blaze, preventing any major damage. I was so proud of him for being such a good watchman. By the age of 14, I thought I might like to be a watchman someday. At age 14, I was unaware of the story of Ezekiel.

Now I can recognize the importance of being a good watchman. The job has the potential of saving property and lives. And like Ezekiel encouraging people to do right, thereby saving their souls and avoiding God's punishment. I marvel how the Bible provides a blueprint for daily living. Ezekiel lived 571 years before Christ. So this 571-year-old story points out that warning of impending trouble is still a valuable activity. One should trust that the Lord wants to save all people and he sends a watchman to assist us.

I pray we would ponder our responsibility to trust God. His judgment against idolatry, rebellion and indifference is inevitable. Idolatry and rebellion require action. Indifference is so deadly because I can do nothing and easily slide into indifference, no action required.

Dear Lord, send your Holy Spirit to fill each of us with the desire to rid ourselves of idolatry, rebellion and indifference. Assist us to commit diligent effort to obey God whatever, whenever and wherever. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

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————— **March 25** —————

Psalm 45

Adoration of the perfect son

I confess that on first reading, this psalm did not clearly speak to me. Perhaps I was reminded of a human coronation—King Charles or his mother, Queen Elizabeth, and all

the pomp and ceremony for a monarchy that has little more to do than ceremonial events. Yet, after further reading and studying, my lack of enthusiasm in this psalm abated. Instead of ambivalence, I was convicted. The psalm speaks so clearly about adoration of God's perfect son. Is my adoration of Jesus likewise ambivalent? Is the purpose of this psalm's inclusion in our Lenten studies to bring forth the importance of adoration?

Towards the end of Lent, it is important and refreshing to consider Psalm 45 for it is a psalm of adoration and praise pointing to Jesus, Lord of all, whose throne will last forever. Our obedience and sacrifice have a purpose—to bring glory to God in the person of his son, Jesus Christ. The object of our adoration is not temporary, like an earthly king. The object is eternal.

Among the many stated attributes of Jesus are his excellence, grace, blessedness, might, majesty, truth, humility, justice, eternity, righteousness. And while the psalmist, a son of Korah, praises the majestic King, he brings us along to join him. Like the writer, we are called and amazed by Jesus' majesty, righteousness, skill, joy, blessedness, power and might. We are ready to ride with him with our swords on our side, riding for victory in the cause of truth, humility and justice. He will achieve awesome deeds. There is no doubt that the object of the psalm is the most excellent of men and there is no doubt that this points solely to Jesus.

And the Holy Trinity is mentioned too. Look at verse 7: *...therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.* The first God is God the Father, the "you" is Jesus the son, the anointing with the oil of joy is the Holy Spirit. Yet, all three exist in this common purpose: truth, humility and justice. As powerful, as majestic, as splendid and excellent is this Jesus, yet he is still humble. His power lies not only in his strength and majesty, but also in his humility.

Jesus is the perfect object of all of our senses—sight, hearing, smell. And we, the church, when we are in complete adoration of him, make the church attractive to all around us. All glorious is the princess within her chamber (verse 13). Even the wealthy are impressed and want to know more (verse 12).

Listen, daughter, and pay careful attention: Forget your people and your father's house. Let the king be enthralled by your beauty; honor him, for he is your lord (verses 10-11). The bride is the church. The king, Jesus, is enthralled by our beauty. He loves us. He desires our adoration. We owe it to him. Forget all else, follow Him. Forget your fathers, what they did, what they had, where they came from. For wealthy or poor, this moment is for you in the here and now. Your parents will not save you. But instead of looking to the past for salvation, look to the future. For your sons will become princes, taking the place of your fathers, your forefathers who brought you here, and with joy and gladness, you will enter the palace of the King. Your sons will march with the King, Jesus.

Jesus is Lord of all—men, women, young and old. He calls us all. He loves us all. Jesus is worthy of our praise. He is the most excellent of all. He is worthy of our adoration.

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————— **March 26** —————

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The walking dead

As a young boy growing up in the '50s and '60s, I loved to watch cartoons on Saturday mornings. Around Halloween, the cartoons would feature ghosts, goblins and, of course, skeletons. When I heard a xylophone, I knew a skeleton was out and about, haunting and scaring the viewers. In today's world of entertainment, zombies have overtaken skeletons in popularity. Witness the high ratings of *The Walking Dead*.

We normally associate bones by themselves, absent muscle, sinew and skin, with death. Bone is the only tissue of a once-living being that does not decompose. Ezekiel was no stranger to death and destruction. His prophesied during the Babylonian captivity to broken and despondent Hebrews, now separated from the Promised Land. For all practical purposes, the captives were dead and seemingly without hope of being redeemed.

But God is faithful. He brought Ezekiel to a valley filled with dry bones. No evidence of life was apparent. Surely death was no stranger to this place. God begins with a question: "Son of man, can these bones become living people again?"

"O Sovereign Lord," replied Ezekiel, "you alone know the answer to that" (NLT). God commands Ezekiel to speak directly to the bones, telling them the Lord will bring them back to life by breathing on them. This is the Holy Spirit in action. Ezekiel does as commanded. Lo and behold, the bones begin rattling, arranging themselves in proper order, followed by the formation of skin around them. But they remained motionless. So, God instructs Ezekiel to call upon the winds to breathe life into the reinstated bodies. When he does this, the bodies awaken and begin breathing once again. The message is loud and clear. Separation from God and the hope of his promises in the form of the Babylonian captivity was a path to destruction and death, the result of sin and disobedience. But God, in his infinite power, can raise these bones and cause them to once again, become living people.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul instructs the community of faith to live in the light and life of Christ in all they do and to cast aside all forms of evil. *Awake, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light* (Ephesians 5:14. NLT). And the same is true for us. It was the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross that provided us the opportunity for redemption. Until his death and resurrection, we were like the dry bones in the valley. Until we received the breath of the Holy Spirit, we were not fully awake (we were the walking dead) to all the riches and promises we have beyond this earthly grave. As we meditate and pray during this Lenten season, let us be awake and responsive to His guidance.

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————— **March 27** —————

I Kings 17:17-24

The Lord hears

This passage takes place in the home of a widow in Zarephath. Elijah, as directed through the word of the Lord, has been living among the widow and her son, who provided food and a place to stay while experiencing a drought. The Lord provided provisions even though food insecurity and doubt persisted. The widow saw that God provided. But then something horrible happened.

The widow's son became ill. His condition got worse and even worse. The widow cried out in anger towards Elijah, feeling as though her child's death was punishment from God for her previous sin. The widow's ill son stopped breathing, only to be revived after Elijah's plea to God in verse 21, *O Lord my God, I pray, let this child's soul come back to him.*

The story of Elijah and the widow in Zarephath is one most can relate to at some point in our lives either firsthand or by way of association with others experiencing times of doubt, trouble, hopelessness and tragedy. Often times, our lack of understanding when life takes a tragic or unexpected turn that knocks us on our backside is met with, anger, doubt and disobedience. It has been said that the cure for doubt is in the doubter, not that which is doubted. Romans 14:23 states that *whatever is not from faith is sin.*"

Do you ever question that which God is revealing to you through prayer? Perhaps it is something convicting or a call into something new and unknown. How might we practice faithfulness even when we lack understanding or are emotionally hurt?

We can surely relate to the widow's bitterness. Terrible things happen—divorce, loss of job, financial struggle, illness, addiction, the unexpected loss of someone we love dearly. At these times we might doubt the loving omni-presence of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet, God promises to hear our confession of even our darkest unbelief. Amid tragedy, hurt and doubt, our loving and merciful God is still ever-present and desires our faithfulness and obedience to his will.

Know always that the word of the Lord is truth.

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————— **March 28** —————

Psalms 143

Penitential prayer from Psalms

I work a lot. I enjoy the work God has provided me to do. It satisfies my soul.

It is easy to fall prey to duty and routine. Consequentially, duty and routine sap personality clean of joyful play that repairs the working soul. Recently, I came home from an out-of-town meeting. It was mid-afternoon, late January, and sunny. I quickly donned comfort clothing and took my newly purchased Cruiser Electra Bicycle for a spin. I

tooled downtown.

I noted an artist exhibition featured at a downtown building, parked my bike outside and wandered into the large expanse for a look-see.

Jesus paintings telling the immense complicated tale of Christ Jesus were displayed. Light captured golden flecks buried in the paint. Scrying patiently into the art—messages, symbolism and complexity revealed Christ Jesus. I could read clearly: Our Savior has taken away the sins of the world.

One painting, Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, revealed to me the meaning of the Aramaic word *gethsemane*: pressure.

Meditating on this, I suddenly intuited the connection of the pressure of sin and the cleansing of repentance. My sin, all sin, was pressing Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane until sweat like drops of blood fell to the ground. Jesus's immense pressure of receiving my sin crushed him.

Hostility pursues me.

Hostility crushes me to the ground (Psalm 143:3).

When I am convinced of my need for active participatory repentance, personal prayerful confession serves as a pressing. My sin is ever before me. Layers and layers of horrifying sin is sloughed off me through acknowledgment of my sins. As I become clean, I discover hidden deep within is the perfection of the full salvation of the soul. The pressure of relinquishing my sin preserves my life and brings me out of stress and anguish.

Join me in meditating on seven penitential Psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143).

I spread forth my hands unto thee: my soul thirsts after thee, as a weary land. Selah.

Teach me to do your will,

For you are my God;

May your agreeable Spirit

Lead me on smooth ground (verse 10).

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March 29

Matthew 22:23-33

Catching Jesus

Let's try to trick Jesus and see if we can catch him with our insightful understanding and questions. Let's prove Jesus wrong—the Sadducees.

Can Jesus be tricked?

Each of us was uniquely created by God for his purposes. He loves you and me and wants us to know him intimately as our Savior. Who am I to question the creator? Yet, if I come to Christ with questions and a sincere heart, he will help me understand and give me a helper and guide: the Holy Spirit. The verses of Matthew 22:23-33 are about a

question from the Sadducees. Instead of a sincere heart, their desire was to trick Jesus and to catch Jesus in his responses. They wanted to prove Jesus was wrong.

The Sadducees wanted to know who a widow would be married to in the afterlife. However, the Sadducees didn't believe in an afterlife and based much of their theology on the Pentateuch: the first five books of the Old Testament, also known as the Law of Moses. Since those books do not explicitly discuss an afterlife, the Sadducees had become committed to the teaching that there was no resurrection and no afterlife. Life simply ended with death and was no more. They also believed in unrestrained free will—meaning God had no role in the personal lives of humans. Everyone was master of his or her own destiny. When you think about it, the Sadducees' questions to Jesus seem silly. Did they really think Jesus could be tricked? Did they not know Jesus would immediately recognize their question as an invention of man's folly?

Who is our Savior, Jesus Christ? He is God. He knows our hearts. Christ knows our true intentions even when we may not understand his ways or his word. Christ is faithful to give us understanding with the help of the Holy Spirit, if we come to him with a heart that is open to him and his ways. Christ wants all people to know him as their Savior. He does not use tricks to draw us close to him. He is everything that is perfect and pure. He is the unblemished sacrifice for our sin. He chose to die for you and for me.

God is not mocked, tricked or fooled by our ways.

Lent is a time of reflection. Ask God to search your heart, mind and soul to cleanse you and to fill you with his ways and his purpose.

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March 30

1 Samuel 16:11-13

The shepherd king

In these scriptures we see David being chosen by God to lead His people. The Lord who has removed His spirit from Saul, the reigning king, sends the prophet Samuel to Jesse's home to find a replacement. Jesse has eight sons, and Samuel thought God's choice would be Eliab, the oldest, because he had the physical characteristics to fill the role. After the Lord rejects Eliab, God tells Samuel that He does not look at the things that people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.

After the Lord has rejected seven of Jesse's sons, Samuel asks if Jesse has any other sons. Jesse responds that he has a younger son who is in the field tending sheep, and Samuel insists on having this son brought to him. When Samuel sees him, the Lord instructs that he be anointed as the future king of Israel to ultimately replace Saul. I can only imagine how surprised a youngest son, tending sheep, would be to suddenly be chosen by the Lord to be king of his nation. Obviously, God saw the degree of David's faith, which his brothers lacked.

Later, David is described as a man after God's heart. Perhaps his faith and obedience

are more important than any earthly quality. One commentator suggests David was chosen because God works through a willing heart. Another reminds us that he was chosen because God knew he would seek his guidance in leading the kingdom. Whatever the reason, David was the Lord's choice.

This brings us to application for us today. As believers in God's gift, the Lord Jesus Christ, God chose us to live his truth and wants us to work like David for the advancement of God's kingdom. In this Lenten season, let us rejoice in God's choosing us to be His people at this time and place.

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March 31

Psalm 31:9-16

Wait on the Lord

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose (Romans 28:8).

Late last spring, my personal and professional life was put on trial. As a theater teacher, I end up spending many extra hours with my students—way more than a classroom teacher—and sometimes, more than their parents. I tell many students that my job is not just to teach them about theater or acting or any of the other things that go with it; my job is to make them better people: more compassionate, more aware, more empathetic, people who are going to make the world around them a better place. Because that's what theater does.

A side effect of this is that while I encourage students to explore who they are and how they fit in the world and what their purpose is, this happens at a time when parents sometimes don't pay as much attention to their own child. And one day they look up and they don't recognize them. And this scares them. Satan used this fear to manipulate the heart and mind of a parent and then used the parent's influence to turn my principal and superintendent and the entire school board against me. I was sent home the last week of April and was told I would not be finishing the school year, and things then escalated to the point that I am not allowed on that campus. This was hard. After a weekend of confusion, I turned to the Scriptures. I began with the 40-day prayer journal (available at the Welcome Center). I read through the Psalms more than once. I copied Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and first Thessalonians. I listened to Tony Evans' sermon series while I took my three-mile walks. And I noticed themes.

Over and over for two months, every passage I read, every song, every sermon said the same thing: Wait on the Lord. He will go before you against your enemies. Be silent. Be courageous. You are being prepared for something better. The Lord will take care of those who persecute you.

And I had complete and total peace. I didn't have a job, but I knew it would be OK. So I waited. I continued to be faithful in diving into God's word. Job opportunities came along that seemed perfect for me, but God said no, wait. I've got something better. And then I got a call from Kilgore High School. I hadn't even applied yet. It was not ideal. The program was in distress. But I went to interview and within moments of meeting the principal, I knew this is where God had led me. I told the principal everything. She was in disbelief that I was treated in such a hurtful and unprofessional manner. But she assured me that I was just what Kilgore needed. And she was right. Every day now another thing happens that reminds me that I was now where I needed to be, where God had been preparing me to be. He rescued me from Sheol and rewarded my faithfulness. I know he will also repay the arrogant and wicked. I may not see it, but the Lord is always faithful.

Prayer: In good times and in bad, dear Lord, may we be encouraged to wait on you and lean into your faithfulness. Amen

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April 1

Lamentations 3:55-66

Do not fear

You came near when I called you, and you said, 'Do not fear!'

Tradition assigns authorship of the Book of Lamentations to the prophet Jeremiah.

Tradition also says that Jeremiah sat weeping outside Jerusalem's north wall "under the knoll called Golgotha, where our Lord was later to die" (*Wilmington's Guide*, page 208).

Israel had wandered from God and was in constant sin. Jeremiah witnessed the downfall of Israel, the people killed and their captivity in Babylon. "These events Jeremiah detailed in Lamentations so that God's people would remember and reflect" (Devotional Archive, Good Shepherd, Jan. 12, 2019).

Jeremiah was the weeping prophet of Israel. He grieved over Jerusalem's demise for its generations of sinful life. He spent his life warning the Israelites to stop their sinful ways and turn back to God. His words fell on deaf ears. For his efforts, he was ridiculed, scorned and his life threatened. He was thrown in a deep well, a pit, to die, as Jerusalem was looted, burned and the temple destroyed. He was in the pit because all the tribe of Judah rebelled against God and God decided to exile Judah to Babylon. He was in the pit because God wanted to give Judah a chance to repent. Jeremiah was God's voice.

Jeremiah did not choose his life, as God knew him before he was formed in the womb (Jeremiah 1:4). The Lord was the reason Jeremiah was in the pit as God told him, "Stand up and say to them whatever I command you" (Jeremiah 1:17).

From the depths of despair, Jeremiah cried out to the Lord from the pit. And the Lord heard his cry, "You drew near on the day I called on you, and you said, 'Do not fear! You, Lord, took up my case, you redeemed my life'" (v 57-58). A devotional I read this week from the *Daily Verse* brought to life this lament from Jeremiah, "The invisible,

omnipresent God is never far from any one of us, but his presence oftentimes seems distant, during times of deep distress and anguish of heart."

Jeremiah urged his people to make a self-evaluation of their lives. But they wouldn't listen. We need to do our own self-evaluation. It is when we do a deep dive on ourselves that we find those captive sins we have covered up and continue to cover up. Jeremiah had lots to complain to God about, especially about those who plotted against him. But the Lord redeemed Jeremiah's heart and delivered him from the pit.

The Lord knows our heart, most often better than we do.

Earlier in Lamentations 3:40, Jeremiah said, "Let us search and examine our ways and test them and let us return to the Lord." This is the season to reflect on our lives and what lies in our hearts. In our weakness, God is our strength. When we call on God, God will listen, and God will sustain us.

Do not fear!

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April 2

Matthew 27:11-54

The crucifixion of Christ

I have had 33 years to love him, to encourage him, to listen to him, to be exasperated by him. He has always known about this day, but I did not know how hard it would be for me. Where are the ones who claimed they would never deny their Savior? I do not see any of them. Jesus has been repeatedly beaten; He looks so weak. God, could I only touch him or call to him?

He is dragged before Pilate, a coward, who smirks a question, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus quietly replies, "You have said so." The leading priests and elders accuse Jesus of many crimes, but he remains silent as a lamb going to slaughter. I want so desperately to scream out, He is Jesus the Messiah. I want to hold His face in my hands and turn it toward me. But I fear it would be the last thing I would do in life. Pilate washes his filthy hands and releases Barabbas the murderer to the unruly crowd who scream out, "Crucify Jesus, crucify him!"

Jesus is taken away by the Roman soldiers. I walk in the shadows now. Trying to keep up and yet remain unnoticed. Tears wet my face. I can hardly see where I am going. But I must keep moving for Jesus. The Roman soldiers remove his clothing and put a purple robe on him, a crown of thorns is crushed into his forehead and a stick is placed in his hand. A crudely written sign, *King of the Jews*, is placed over his head. The soldiers spit on Jesus; they take the stick from his hand and beat him. When they grow weary of this, they pull off the purple robe and order Jesus to put on his clothes. He can barely stand to do this. I watch in agony.

Jesus is ordered to pick up his own cross and carry it (John 19: 17). He struggles, drops the

cross, he picks it up again and staggers under its weight. He is directed to carry the cross to a place called Golgotha, The Place of The Skull. He continues to struggle and fall under the weight of the roughly-hewn cross. Simon of Cyrene is noticed in the outer rim of the crowd. The Romans soldiers yell for him to pick up the cross and help Jesus carry it to Golgotha. My arms ache to hold him again, to comfort him. That will not happen now. God, where are you?

At Golgotha, the soldiers offered a drink of wine mixed with gall, offered as a painkiller. Jesus refuses it after a taste. I could not watch as the soldiers nail his hands and feet to the cross. My heart is breaking at this sight. While Jesus is agonizing in pain and struggling for breath, the soldiers callously divide up his clothing and cast lots. A sign is affixed to the cross above the head of Jesus, *This is Jesus, the King of the Jews*.

Two robbers were placed on either side of Christ. Why? Everyone in the crowd begins to yell at Jesus, "You saved others, save yourself now!" The ridiculing is unbearable for me. I am sobbing as friends come to surround me in the final moments of the life of Christ.

The sky grew dark at noon. Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus shouted out again around 3 p.m. and gave up his spirit. At that moment the earth seemed to heave in agony, the curtain in the temple was torn from top to bottom and the tombs of many were opened. The Roman soldiers were terrified at all they saw. They said, "Truly, He was the Son of God." He was God's only Son. He was my firstborn Son.

Can't you just hear Mary thinking this, saying this, agonizing over this?

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April 3

John 12:1-11

Extravagant love with selfless motive

As I read this passage in John's gospel account, we see that this is at a point six days before the Passover where there is a plot to kill Jesus, and he is laying low in the town of Bethany. He is in the company of Martha, Mary Magdalene, Lazarus and his disciples. We see the scene unfold: Mary anointing Jesus with some of the most expensive perfume money could buy at the time and Judas, who ended up betraying Jesus, astounded at her "waste" of this costly perfume. Judas made a statement claiming that the right thing she should have done was to sell the perfume and feed the poor with the proceeds from its sale.

Mary understood the gravity of the situation and who Jesus was, and by this very act was stating with her life, that he was worth *wasting* her life on. Jesus was more valuable to her than money, possessions and reputation. Jesus was worth all she could give, even when it didn't make sense to everyone else around her. This story exposes two ideas that Jesus made very clear in his teachings in the gospels that challenge us as his followers.

The first is that we cannot simply add a little Jesus to our self-governed life, a life where we do things how we selfishly desire, while adding him in where we can fit him, only giving him access to parts of us we are comfortable with letting him speak into. No, Jesus requires that we lay down our entire life for him, that we give him everything, that we become so transformed by him that all of who we are and how we operate every part of our life (our time, our finances, our community, our behavior, etc.) in this world is shaped by Jesus. Jesus is Lord and he doesn't settle for just some surrender. He wants it all and requires it all for those who claim his name. He is either Lord of all of us or none of us, and this is for our ultimate good as he who created us knows our hearts will only be satisfied and fully alive when we give him everything we are and possess and lay down our lives for him. This is the great dichotomy of the gospel because it breaks through the religious boxes for God that we create and that we are comfortable putting him in.

The second thing this story exposes is our motives in showing our love to Jesus. Mary's motive in this story was not to do something for him that was going to gain her public recognition. Actually, the opposite occurred in this story. If we only do good works for Jesus when it can be seen and recognized by others, then we have to question our true motives. Do we just want to be seen as someone who is a devoted follower of Jesus? Will we show our love for him when no one is around to see—or if seen, when we are misunderstood or chastised? Our motives in our devotion for him should always only be to love and please him, even when it doesn't make sense to those around us.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, show us where we have settled in our love for you by only giving you part of us, not all that you desire and require for us. In doing so, make clear to us the joy of laying everything down at your feet in surrender is the only way to truly experience the fully alive and transformed life you have paid for us and desire for us. May we soberly deal with our motives in the things we do for your sake, that it may be only for your glory and to please you, even when it doesn't make sense. Give us boldness to proclaim your goodness to everyone around us. Come Holy Spirit and do a work in us.

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————— **April 4** —————

John 12:20-36

Have hope—die to self

And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him."

This isn't the first time Jesus told his followers to die to themselves. In Luke 9, he said to deny yourself and take up your cross daily to follow Him. In Matthew 16, he told the rich young man to sell what he has and give to the poor and then he could follow Jesus. John

12 isn't the first time Jesus's followers had heard such commandments, but it is the last time. This is his final public speech before his death and resurrection. It's further unique in that he is speaking to Greeks who have come to see him—this is not his typical audience—and likely it's the first time these people have heard him. It's the message he wants them to hear and take home with them. Salvation is free by grace alone, but the daily act of dying to self to follow him is how our faith is played out.

It's convicting that Jesus's final public words consist of the reminder to die to ourselves. At first glance, these words seem discouraging, certainly not the parting words we want to hear. But Jesus doesn't leave us there. His words are full of hope—He promises fruit, eternal life and ultimately honor.

What do I need to allow to die in my life that I might better serve him? What do I need to surrender so that my focus can stay on Jesus? Do I need to lay down my own plans, my wants, my pride, my ego, my self-centeredness? (Notice how so much of that is about me and not about him.) What steps of faith is he calling me towards that I may follow him? Obedience always brings reward, and as Eugene Peterson reminds us, "faith is a long obedience in the same direction." It is the daily surrender of self that we may better serve and know Him. Salvation is free by grace alone, but the sanctification—the daily act of dying to self to follow him—is how our faith is played out.

He wants so much more for us. Only when we can die to ourselves, to surrender our own purposes, can we better glorify him. And he will bring fruit and life out of death—He is Lord of resurrection and redemption. He has conquered death. He is faithful to his promise. He will bring forth life out of death, death to self and life in him.

May his final public speech convict my heart daily to let go of what I grip so tightly so that I might cling to his robe. He longs to use us for his Kingdom and to bring forth abundant life.

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April 5

John 13:21-32

The prediction

After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at the table at Jesus' side, so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it." So, when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. Then, after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into Judas Iscariot. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." No one

at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that because Judas had the money bag, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the feast," or that he should give something to the poor. So after receiving the morsel of bread he immediately went out.

And it was night. When he had gone out, Jesus said now the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is in him, God will also glorify him in himself and glorify him at once.

Jesus, who knew that Judas would betray him, allowed it, even though he had been friends with Judas. Jesus knows everything and everyone. This is a prediction of his betrayal by his friend. Peter, one of Jesus's disciples, was trying to "point the finger," but we know that Peter would also betray Jesus by denying Him. Jesus predicted this, too. But unlike Judas, only Peter would come back and seek forgiveness. Peter denied Jesus three times that night before the rooster crowed.

We all can betray and sin against Jesus. And we all do. But Jesus loves us all no matter what. He wants to forgive everyone. He forgave Peter, and Peter became a leader in the church. He would have forgiven Judas, too. But Judas decided to hang himself because he was so ashamed. He didn't seek Jesus' forgiveness. He thought it was all over. Even when we sin, God still forgives us no matter what. God wants a relationship with all of us.

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April 6

John 13:1-17, 33-35

Love God, love others

Today, we are in the upper room. Jesus is alone with the closest of his followers—his 12 disciples. Verse 1 tells us that *Jesus knew his time had come to leave and go to the Father*. He withdraws to this quiet place with these men with whom he has shared life and deep love. He gets up from eating the meal and begins to wash the disciples' feet. Normally this would have been done by a servant as the men arrived. It was a menial task barely noticed because it was done for others all the time by servants in a home. Jesus had never done this act of service. And he waited until they were already eating, so it is a deliberate act meant to emphasize a point. No one says anything until he gets to Peter. Peter objects. This is his Lord. This is his rabbi teacher. He is uncomfortable and questions why Jesus would do such a thing for them. Jesus explains it best in verses 13- 17. *You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you should also wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.*

Then he follows this with verses 34-35: *A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my*

disciples, if you love one another. This wasn't actually the first time they had heard this because when the Pharisees tested Jesus on the greatest commandment (Matthew 22: 37-39). Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." *This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself."*

Simply put, love God and love others. Neither of these is easy to do.

Do you serve others willingly in the will of God or in your will? Do you look at where you serve as a cross that you bear gladly for God or burdened and annoyed?

Author Hannah Whithall Smith asks it this way: "The soul finds itself saying, instead of the 'May I?' of love, the 'Must I' of duty." How is it with your soul where and when you are serving?

In his book *Christian Perfection*, John Wesley says this, "Do all the good you possibly can to the bodies and souls of your neighbors. Be active Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might Be an example to all of denying your self and taking up your cross daily Let them see that you simply aim at pleasing God in everything Settle in your heart that from this moment on you will aim at nothing more than that love described in the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians. You can go no higher than this."

Today, ask God to help you *do all the good you possibly can* with the heart and humility of a servant aiming to please your Lord. Examine your life asking, "How much love is demonstrated in my life?" List what you need to change about your attitudes and actions toward those around you.

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Good Friday, April 7

John 18:1-19:37

The offense of truth

It would be safe to say we live in a world where there appear to be no absolute truths. One might ask, why is that? Is it perception? Is it misinformation, or perhaps too much information? Maybe its presentation or desensitization? Can it be, for the most part, folks are on a quest for their own truths?

One would have to ask, what is it about the truth or lack of it, that drives people to it or away from it? Truth in and of itself, is just truth (however that may look). But when the truth of God is taught, applied and lived out loud, it brings freedom for some, sobering and relentless threats for others. Most people seek to eliminate the threat, as it was with Jesus in John 18. Here we find Jesus betrayed, arrested, interrogated, harassed, and unfairly judged for living and being truth. His uncompromisable life of truth was offensive and threatening and needed to be eliminated by the religious hierarchy.

Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me" (John 18:37).

Although societal norms give push-back and would, if possible, negate the necessity of any absolute truths, we as believers, must resist the comfort of placating this mindset. Our sole purpose for existence is to testify to the truth. The truth of who Jesus is. He is the anointed one with the anointing, the one that removes burdens and destroys the yokes of oppression. He is the great redeemer, our deliverer. He is our peace, giver of all things good. These are just some of the truths which bring hope to a dying world and give Good Friday its significance. As we prepare for the celebration of Resurrection Sunday, ask yourself, do I live an offensive life of the truth (in Christ alone)?

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April 8

John 19:38-42

Nicodemus, who had previously come to Jesus at night

*For God so loved the World, that God gave his one and only son,
that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

Nicodemus helped carry the body of Jesus alongside Joseph to a nearby tomb. It was daylight. Nicodemus would be observed hoisting the body of Jesus from the cursed cross-laden Golgotha with Joseph of Arimathea while Mary Magdalene and the other Mary followed.

Nicodemus recalled the first time he had visited Rabbi Jesus. It was night. He did not want to be seen by anyone from the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus realized the singular conversation with Jesus had been like a small mustard seed planted inside his thoughts. Jesus' words had been seeds, taking root in his heart.

His enthusiasm to see and speak with this new teacher spurred him to say with enthusiastic wonder, *Teacher, I know you are from God. No one performs signs unless God be with him.* Instantly Nicodemus could see. He could see that this rabbi offered a new understanding. Nicodemus was exhausted with worrisome proclamations of the Sanhedrin. They were boorish and feigned eternal knowledge, keeping men subdued in ignorance. The exhorted law was weighty and dark.

Jesus's teaching was 1000 interlocked koans (paradoxical anecdotes or riddles) waiting for connecting understanding. Nicodemus could see the new teaching was emanating from the law. Jesus' teaching was a liberating outcome. In the dark, light filled Nicodemus' understanding.

Nicodemus had purchased approximately 100 pounds of incense. He and Joseph would slather all the open wounds with aloe, provide relief from the deep punitive lacerations. Nicodemus imagined wounds would be restored with healing balm. The myrrh would offer a sweet scent to cover the flesh. Rabbi Jesus's body would not stink; Jesus would not decay.

Nicodemus recalled the words Jesus had spoken to the Jews who had questioned his

authority, "What sign can you show us that prove your authority?" Jesus had answered in a koan, "Destroy this temple. In three days, I will raise it up again." Resurrection awaited. Nicodemus had unraveled this spoken non-sequitur and imagined Jesus rising like the sun in three days.

A vision, faith, a revelation! Nicodemus was not sure the source of this heavy awareness, but he understood that Joseph, Mary and Mary also believed. It is why they acted. Why they were willing to be seen carrying and attending to Jesus. "I am his disciple. I trust his teaching," Nicodemus thought.

Aloud, Nicodemus said to Joseph, "but have eternal life." Nicodemus' shocked emotional wounds at the sight of crucified Jesus allowed him to hopefully speak softly, in mantra, "but have eternal life ... but have eternal life ... but have eternal life." The song began, Mary: God so loved the world. Women in duet: God so loved the world, God gave his only Son; Joseph: whosoever believes in Him; All: shall not perish but have eternal life, yes, have eternal life.

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Easter, April 9

John 20:1-18

Believe

Perhaps selfishly, I assign the scripture assigned for Easter Sunday to write myself. Whether it is based on the story of the empty tomb as told by the Apostle John or by Matthew, Mark or Luke, the events make the hairs on my arms stand up. Reading the texts gets my heart racing. I pick out a new detail I had overlooked before. I meld the various stories together to get a full feel for what happened on that glorious morning.

In this passage, I am especially taken with Mary's reaction. I weep with her as I consider the grief she felt when she discovered that the body of Jesus was gone. Sure that it had been stolen, she could not contain herself. As tears welled up in her eyes, I am sure that she could not recognize anyone around her by mere sight. It is no surprise to me that she misunderstood Jesus, the risen Savior, to be a gardener. Mary was frightened beyond her wits, angry at the thought of the stolen body, full of intense sadness at the crucifixion—the horror of seeing Jesus die in front of her eyes, and then it's all over. He is dead. What is she to make of her life, her future, her existence now?

And in the midst of the confusion and fear, she hears Jesus call her name. As I have said before, he calls all of us by name. He knows us that well—better than we even know ourselves. And in that knowledge, there is the opportunity for us to answer that call—to make Jesus more than the one who calls us, to make him our Lord and Savior.

But what does that mean? What difference will it make to me tomorrow? Do I truly understand and appreciate the sacrifice? Do I truly feel the love of God for mankind? I've answered the call. I love Jesus. He is my Lord and Savior. But can I get more of him?

And what will it take to get more of him?

We are all disciples at a point on our pathway. Wherever we are, we can move forward. We can find what it is that leads us to feel God's pleasure.

I confess. I get anxious from time to time. I worry about things at work or at home. I worry about the future my granddaughters will encounter. I pray for their safety. I pray that I will be around to see them as they grow up and I pray that I can have a part in their answering the call of Jesus as he calls their names. So maybe I need to put my "money where my mouth is." Maybe I need to stretch and do something uncomfortable. Am I too complacent with my life and circumstances to get more out of Jesus?

My wish for you (and me) is that this year, Easter Sunday will last every day. The glory of the resurrection will be front and center in all I do and say. Jesus's calling me will remove that anxiety. Sure, I'll still have trouble to deal with. But when sleep is interrupted by anxious thoughts, worries about the day, worries about the future, I pray that I will call on Jesus and allow the Holy Spirit to put them aside. Let's intend to focus on the glorious grace we have received. There is nothing else as important.

Yes, believe. Hallelujah! He is risen!

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