Lenten Devotional 2022
St. John's Lutheran Church in collaboration with Shepherd of the Hills
The season of Lent has arrived again. Typically, for me, Lent is a time when I can often find myself busier than normal and it is easy to get caught up in work and life while forgetting that we are given this season, an opportunity, to spend focused time with God and with our faith community. This year for the season of Lent we will be focusing on the theme of “Humility: Making Room” from the value Humble. Through this devotional may you also spend time about what it means in your life to make room through the value of humility.

Every season that a devotional is put together I have found joy and connection in many different ways. I want to say thank you to all of our amazing writers. This season we were blessed to collaborate with the saints at Shepherd of the Hills, as well as St. John’s writers. There is such a beauty in seeing these devotionals come to life with so many voices. Thank you as well to Rebekah Turnbaugh and Espy Foft for their help in designing and editing the final product. I pray this devotional helps us all to ponder where God is calling us to in this season of Lent.

Blessings, Katie Holeman
ASH WEDNESDAY
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
by Kim Maness

When I read today’s reading my first thought was how similar the actions of people 2,000 years ago are to our own actions today. In these verses, the people are looking for public recognition in their actions of charitable giving, praying, and fasting. I see a similar parallel in our society today when we look for approval and recognition through social media outlets and we are consumed with how many people are following us and liking what we post, and so liking us. I see this as the same type of recognition that people were seeking so many years ago. Jesus calls us to examine our motives for the things we do that are meant to honor Him. We are called not to seek earthly validation but instead to glorify our Father in heaven by seeking heavenly validation. Jesus wants to do the right things, for the right reasons, which glorify and honor Him. He tells us we are not to boast about our actions. While it is sometimes hard for us to put aside our pride it is good to be reminded that Jesus loves us as we are and He calls us to have a humble heart.

The second part of today’s reading speaks to us about storing up treasures in heaven vs. treasures on earth. By human nature we crave earthly things but Jesus calls us to set our hearts and minds on heavenly treasures, such as salvation, eternal life, and forgiveness. While it is not wrong for us to have possessions here on earth, it is wrong to allow our things to possess us and draw us away from God. We need to remember that earthly treasures are fleeting but heavenly treasures are eternal. During this Lenten season may we be reminded to focus our attention on our future with God in heaven and on the riches of our treasures in heaven.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of your holy word. May we use it to fill our hearts and minds to draw us closer to you. Help us to put aside our desire for earthly validation and treasures and turn our desire to following you. In the name of your precious son, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.
Psalm 9:1-2, 9-16
by Irene Wong-Chi

As I read the first two verses of this Psalm, a very early childhood memory sprung to mind of my grandmother teaching me how to pray to God for the first time. She taught me to kneel at the foot of my bed to say a bedtime prayer, to thank God for his abundant blessings and for the wonderful people in my life. As I read verses 9-16, however, the Psalm seemed to have taken a different tone, and I struggled to connect a very wonderful memory that the first two verses elicited with the remaining verses of this Psalm. So I did what many of us often do in life when we need confirmation or verification on a subject...I turned to Google.

Yes, I realize the internet is not always the best source for information, but I needed inspiration and some semblance of guidance regarding what Psalm 9 is all about. In my so-called “research” I discovered that the topic of this Psalm is that “the success of evil is only temporary, and in the end, the righteous will endure...” Suddenly it made sense to me. As we get older, we encounter many obstacles in life, unforeseen adversities, times of trouble, and unrighteous individuals, but we must not lose sight of God’s plan for us. We must continue to seek God throughout all our adversities and trust that He will provide justice for all his children, for what we may be going through now is not permanent.

Even though my grandmother passed away nearly 37 years ago, she essentially taught me the rest of this Psalm. That we must continue to thank the Lord with our whole heart, rejoice and sing his praises, and to turn to Him in times of trouble for He will provide for the righteous always.

PRAYER: Lord, we thank you for your constant love, blessings, and guidance. Help us to remember to turn to you whenever we face adversities in life, and that we may be of service to others as you have always been there for us.
In this text, God assures Moses that God’s covenant with the Israelites still holds despite the suffering they are experiencing as Egyptian slaves. God assures Moses that God hears the “groaning” of God’s people. God also promises to deliver the Israelites from slavery and to bring them into the lands that had been promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob before them.

When I reflect on this story I think about it from several perspectives:

• The relief and solace of discovering we are not forgotten by God, even when nothing around us makes evident that God is attending to our pain.

• The nearness of God when we are in pain.

• The encouragement and empowerment of learning that God’s plans, while not yet realized, include us—and more than that, include our flourishing.

But what also occurs to me is that knowing God’s plan for us is not the same thing as experiencing the flourishing that is promised by God’s plan. When we identify with the Israelites, one of the legacies we claim is a responsibility for faithfulness even as we wander in the desert, wait on the Messiah’s return, and/or groan over and lament the trials and tribulations of our present times. Just as God’s grace is unconditional, we claim our unconditional faithfulness to God. When we are honest, this challenge is one that most of us cannot help but fail from time to time. Just as the Israelites fail in their faithfulness from time to time and yet remain God’s people, so do we. This is, to me, one of the greatest assurances of all. And one that is particularly poignant when I reflect on Lent as preparation for understanding Easter.

**PRAYER:** God, you know us better than we know ourselves. Help us to remember that you promise to be with us always and your promise is certain. As we continue this Lenten journey help us to not lose sight of you and to remember fully we are named and claimed children of God. Amen.
This familiar passage is filled with many thoughts as I reflect on my life as an aging person who has lived the greater part of her life. I began, remembering all the times I was disappointed by the behavior of others toward me, when I prayed for something and my prayer was not answered as I felt it should have been, having competed with friends to determine who was more successful at a competition. I spent so much time fretting over something that today seems so ridiculous and yet, at the time, felt like a life and death matter. Reflecting on these and many other memories I recognize how detrimental to my health and relationships it was to expend so much frivolous energy on trying to prove to others my worth. Actually, today I realize it was more about proving my worth to myself.

The blessing of reflecting on my life is that I acknowledge that, though my life so often felt filled with pain and suffering (much of which today I realize was of my own making, and were blessings too), I am called to appreciate the beauty of the words of the writer of Ecclesiastes. Over my lifetime I have continually received the blessing of God at work in my life, how God has taken my pain and suffering and used it to mold me into the person I am today, a person who I hope is someone who can companion another person to help them see God is at work in the pain and suffering they feel they are enduring in their life today.

Yes, “for everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven.” My prayer today is that all those I am privileged to encounter be filled with a sense of peace in the times when they feel that God is farthest from them, that they know God is secretly planting his grace and mercy in their times of pain and suffering, molding them into someone who, as they age and reflect on their life, will see the active presence of God in every event in their lives.

**PRAYER:** Gracious God, life on this earth is filled with times of pain and suffering as well as joy and wonderment, yet we are always faced with the desire to have everything be perfect as we bring our prayers to you. We believe that when we get what we pray for is when you are present. Yet, it is when we do not get what we pray for that we discover a deep inner strength and courage we did not even know was deep within us. May all those who pray to you find an inner peace far beyond their understanding. Amen.
When I think of “temptation,” I visualize someone dangling a “treat” in front of me (anything chocolate, please). But out of curiosity, I searched on the web for clues to other perspectives on “temptation.” An article written by Rev Dr. David Lose, resonated with me. He wrote, “temptation is not so often temptation toward something... but rather is usually the temptation away from something – namely, our relationship with God and the identity we receive in and through that relationship.”

Are we tempted to walk away from God when a pandemic sweeps across our “normal” lives? This is exactly the time that the daily practice of gratitude keeps us firmly planted. Jesus replies to Satan: “Man does not live on bread alone.” We sense a daily spiritual renewal when we are connected to God’s amazing abundance and grace.

Are we tempted to worship possessions or compare ourselves to others? “Why can’t others see things MY way?” “Those people should know better.” “If only I had (more money, more friendships, more time, less restrictions).” To be in relationship with God allows us the freedom to love and be loved, just as we are. No comparison. No excuses. No shaming. We do not need to prove ourselves worthy of God’s love. It is freely given, no matter what. In the waters of baptism, we are all God’s children.

Are we tempted to doubt God’s guidance in our lives? Who is not tired of ever-changing CDC guidelines? Why can’t God just come forth and end this assault on our world? “Do not put the Lord your God to the test,” Jesus tells Satan. God knows what we need but will not give into our demands to control outcomes. Reframing our current circumstances as growth opportunities creates a vastly different response to life. Trust that God pours out his love and grace for us moment by moment.

**PRAYER:** Dear God, I am so grateful for your compassion and grace. In times when I am prone to doubt and fear, discouragement and impatience, let me pause to remember whose child I am. Through your Son’s death and resurrection, I am forgiven for the many times I am tempted to control life rather than surrender to Your unending wisdom and mercy. Knowing you is pure joy, and I am forever grateful. Amen.
When reading this Psalm, which is also titled “A Prayer of David,” I cannot help but think that this is a fairly common sequence for people asking God for help. He starts out by arguing his case that he is worthy for God’s protection. He states that his “lips are free from deceit,” that “you will find no wickedness in me” and “I have avoided the ways of the violent.” Next, he makes his call for help—protection from enemies. To bolster his case, he describes their flaws. He says that “They close their hearts to pity; with their mouths they speak arrogantly.” He also describes them as “wicked.” He asks God to help him by confronting them and “By your sword deliver my life...” To close, he expresses his trust in God and that God will protect him. In the end though, I do not believe that all of this is necessary. Asking for God’s help does not require a “winning argument.” You only need to ask.

**PRAYER:** Dear Lord, your love and protection are a constant in our lives. We all are worthy of your guidance and help. Help us to better understand your unwavering love. Amen.
I heard a Christian doctor once say that his spiritual mentor told him, “Over forty years of age there is not much more to learn about success. But humility, there is still plenty to learn from.” So anyone over forty shouldn’t pray for success, but humiliation. Try this on for a Lenten practice at any age: “God of knowing, please humiliate me today!” Yikes!

Joshua stood before an angel of the Lord and was dressed in filthy clothes. He was disgusting in front of majesty! Not to mention Satan, the “Accuser,” was there just to make it crystal clear how loathsome he truly was. Now that is humiliating!

But what did Joshua the Priest learn from this humiliation? God still made room for him to grow and flourish and be renewed. It must have been humbling to have an angel dress you in clean clothes and new head covering. This story echoes forward to the father in the story of that prodigal son and his return home in rags, only to be given a robe, a ring, and a party. Perhaps God may truly use moments of humility to surprise us with tender love and connection. Maybe I’ll try that prayer on after all.

**Prayer:** God of knowing, please humble me today, making room for me to grow in wisdom and to feel your tender love. Amen!
In my prior faith tradition, the Bible was inerrant, infallible, and its every word was not just true, but factual. I was stumped by the book of Job. That God and Satan could wreak such havoc in Job’s life, and the lives of his children just to make a point made me want to tear out my own hair. I identified with Job’s wife and children, and just had to stop reading so as not to lose my faith entirely. Happily, that’s no longer the way I approach scripture. Reading Job as folklore, being given the freedom to study this as myth, looking for the truths in it, made all the difference.

Suffering exists. We’ve all suffered unjustly, won and lost financial security, said good-bye to loved ones, and endured pain. If you haven’t, you will, and there are no pat answers here. The cast of characters contains a confused, justifiably-angry protagonist, well-meaning but bumbling friends, creation as its own character, and the Creator. God makes no excuses, doesn’t apologize for the cruelties and pain inflicted on Job, but does pull his gaze upward and outward. He calls Job, and us, to look past our circumstances, beyond the suffering of today. He calls us back to wonder and awe. We may never understand the “why” of our losses, but existence itself on this beautiful, vast, amazing planet spinning in a beautiful, vast, amazing universe seems to be its own consolation, its own compensation. Somehow, it’s enough.

**PRAYER:** Holy Creator, near to us even when we cannot feel you, thank you for this story, and for the reminder to persist and persevere, sitting on our ash heaps when needed, but eventually looking around, up and out for reminders of your grandeur, grace, and glory. Remind us to tend to our loved ones with patience, humility and tenderness. We need your tender care. Through Jesus, who endured such loss himself to show us the Way, in fact, to be the Way for us. Amen.
Matthew 9:2-13
by Pam Debnekoff
(Reprised from the Lent 2021 devotional)

The power of “words.” When I reflect on this passage, Jesus’ words, “why do you think evil...which is easier to say your sins are forgiven or rise up and walk,” stood out to me. How easy it is at times to join the crowd, to doubt someone’s intention, to put another down, instead of seeing possibility. I am reminded how often it can be just a couple of words that someone shares that brings freedom, encouragement, and empowerment to another—to see the possibilities and potential in that person. How can we bring empowerment to those that cross our paths, to listen, to see, to encourage each other to be the best we can be? Challenge: Last year I decided that I would write a letter of gratitude, one each day to 40 strong women that had touched my life with support and encouragement. I plan to do this again.

I challenge you this Lent to join me in sending a few notes to people in your life that might need a word of encouragement.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, thank you for your empowerment in our lives. Help us to be an encouragement to all who cross our paths. Amen.

Philippians 3:17-20
by Makayla Smith

To be honest with you all, I did not know what to write for this devotional, but my sister (Addy) reminded me about the book The Hate You Give by Angie Thomas. The message behind The Hate You Give is how you should love people for who they are and not try to make them into someone that they are not. Similar to how in the last phrase in this verse, it says that “Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.” Meaning that our differences are not what defines us as people, but rather how we react to those who are not like us. Instead of judging others we should recognize how we are all children of God, and God who made us in God’s image. The book conveys the idea that all members of humanity should be treated equally. The verse to me all shows a similar thought, that no matter who we are or what we do, God loves us all the same.

PRAYER: Dear God, please help us to see the good in others, help us to realize our wrongs and help us to fix them. Take care of those who are sick and hurting. Please help those who are suffering. In your name we pray. Amen.
The ride into Jerusalem

Have you ever read these verses and wondered what it would have been like to be there?

The crowds had increased as Jesus rode into the gates of Jerusalem, and were shouting praises as he rode by. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” Only the power of God could have brought us such light and joy.

Jesus is the stone that they spoke of when they said it was rejected by the Jews. Jesus came to be the Messiah and became the sacrifice on the altar for us. I hope that I would have understood how that could be, but I don’t think I would have.

“You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.”

They are all singing these words, as it is a tradition at Passover. And yet, maybe they are hearing a new meaning – each one of them, humbly and with confidence in divine grace, say again praises to God – for what is about to happen.

“Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.”

These verses seem to end as they began, with songs of praise and blessing. God surely has shown these people time and time again his love and grace—proof that his love is forevermore.

If only it ended there with praise and thanks. But then again, no, thank God it did not end there! Jesus’ ride into Jerusalem was for them, all of them. And for us—all of us. The complete atoning sacrifice of God’s only son, Jesus Christ our Lord. The road once filled with jubilation, followed with betrayal, torture, and finally death on the cross. And, we all know that God’s enduring love could not be stopped by the cross. Jesus rose up from the dead! We all know the story. Jesus’ ride into Jerusalem was only the beginning of great sadness turned to unimaginable joy for all people, that there is a Redeemer, even Christ the Lord. In him the covenant of grace is sure and everlasting.

I wasn’t there, and neither were you. But we can continue to shout songs of jubilation, share the story with our children and grandchildren, so that they, too, learn to sing glory to God!

PRAYER: Dear God of enduring love, hear our songs of praise and thanksgiving to you. Give us voices to tell the story, share your word, and Live your Love in the World. We pray this in the name of your son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.
It’s easy to get so wrapped up in our own journeys that we struggle to understand others who travel differently. Our walks sometimes seem difficult enough on their own. Whether other travelers seem hostile, needy, or angry, it’s much easier to just stay disconnected or discouraged.

But that’s not what Jesus does, of course. On his journey to Jerusalem, he is walking toward great suffering, but he walks with great courage. Even though he is under threat by Herod and the Pharisees, and even though he is walking to his death, he stays true to the other part of his mission: as he travels, he never forgets those around him. Even when challenged, he continues to cast out demons and heal people who are sick and hurting. Despite the weight of what he’s facing, he doesn’t lose his focus on helping those who need healing and salvation. He continues to reach out in love.

Even when talking directly about the people of Jerusalem—those who stoned and killed the prophets, those who he will also face—Jesus is filled with compassion. He wants to gather them as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, keeping them safe and warm and cozy and comforted. They aren’t willing, but he travels forward anyway, knowing that even those people will have the opportunity to bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

**PRAYER:** Loving Lord, equip us to minister to those around us as we journey through life. Give us not only compassion for others but also the energy and ability to act on it. Let us be your presence on Earth, pointing others to your sacrifice and salvation. Amen.
Psalm 105 recalls God’s promise to Abraham to bring Israel into the Promised Land and the mighty ways that He kept that promise. This passage focuses on God’s grace: God chooses Israel as His people, delivers them, and reveals to them how they are to respond both in faith to Him and in trusting obedience to His Law.

Israel had humble beginnings—though Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all received God’s promise of Israel’s greatness, the land was not yet theirs. Instead, they spent decades as seminomads, wandering from place to place, but chosen and protected by God’s grace. The psalmist is praising not only what God has done for His chosen people with their promised land, but also what He has done for them for eternity. Even today, we still have not seen the complete fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel—we won’t see that until the last day—but God’s people continue to praise Him and bring glory to Him for all that He does for them along the way. If we don’t review how the Lord has delivered His people in the past, how He has delivered us at the cross, then how are we ever going to think that God is present in a very powerful, special, loving way in the present, let alone in our future?

God freed His people from slavery. Christ has rescued us from sin and its eternal punishment. All God’s promises find their fulfillment in Jesus, who hung on the cross and then ushered in a new era by rising from the grave. Praise God for His goodness and faithfulness!

**PRAYER:** Praise the Lord, for in Christ we receive the blessings promised to Abraham. Amen.
According to the dictionary the definition of humble is to have awareness of our defects. In today’s reading Paul reminds us to be aware that we too have defects. We are not to be so proud that we cannot admit our sins or when we are wrong. As an example, Paul offers a tough list of our ancestor’s defects as they wander in the wilderness and how some of them didn’t make it out of the wilderness.

During this Lenten season, Paul calls us to reflect on our defects, look at where we have gone astray, and seek honest reconciliation with God. Acknowledging our sins is not about guilt, but more about honesty and self awareness in our relationship with God and with others.

We are living in a time of conflict and change. Are we too proud to seek the forgiveness of our neighbors and seek reconciliation? As the prophet Micah writes: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” Remember God is faithful still.

PRAYER: Gracious and loving God, help us to get back to the basics of our relationship with You. Help us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with You. All this we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.
After a few readings of this passage I was convinced I saw messages for those struggling with illness. I reached out to a dear friend who has been living with stage 4 cancer and cancer treatments for over 4 years. His response to me was so well-put that I offer it with his permission:

Yes this story does have parallels to my illness and current health. The story of Jehoshaphat and the nation of Israel turning to the Lord and putting their trust in Him, in their hour of need, is more dramatic and much bigger but turns on the same belief, appeal to the Lord and trust in His response. Just as Jehoshaphat had to turn to the Lord, I was brought to my knees and had to turn to Him.

Early on I had to turn [my treatment] over to the Lord and ask Him for strength, to calm my fears and to heal me if that was His will. I was also very public about my need for prayer, and I got a lot of it (verse 4b—“Judah assembled to seek help from the Lord”). He gave me strength and calmed my fears. I do not think that I am anything special and wonder sometimes why I was given this extra time, but it is the Lord’s doing.

When you trust in the Lord you must be prepared to accept His response, no matter what the outcome (verse 15 “...for the battle is not yours but God’s”).

**PRAYER:** Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for always being there for us when we need you...and even when we don’t think we need you. Thank you for the scientists and doctors whom you have inspired to create medicines and treatments to fight even the most serious of illnesses. Like Jehoshaphat may we immediately turn to you when we are afraid, or ill, or troubled. May we always remember to ask others to pray for us—such prayers we know you hear. Thank you for fighting our spiritual battles for us. Verse 12b—“We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.” Amen.
Psalm 63:1-8
by Bishop Emeritus David Mullen

Your steadfast love is better than life. Psalm 63:3

The meta-message of the scriptures from beginning to end can be expressed this way: the fulfillment of our lives is the faith that prompts us to love and trust in God above all else—and that as pure gift. Any glimmer of such faith is never an achievement. It is Christ as becoming faith itself alive in us, teaching, and healing, as on the Cross crying out the longing of our souls, clinging to God for dear life. Christ’s presence shows us that anything we think we have accomplished on our own is chaff in the wind. Let the Spirit blow the chaff away to reveal the reality: true life is consciousness of God in every way, and every day, the merciful presence no matter what. This is the wondrous gift of Eternal Life, now and forever dazzling our souls: Your steadfast love, O God, is better than life.

PRAYER: Creator, deep within our hearts we long for your presence. Give us the light of your steadfast love, that our lives, our work, and our voices, may give the world glimpses of your presence, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

(Adapted from the ELW psalm prayer assigned for Psalm 63)
Wake Up!

How often have you emerged from a deep sleep to hear someone in your household ask, “Are you awake?” Have you had an experience that you knew was a “wake-up call?” Has something happened in your life that was a “rude awakening”?

Sardis, named in the first verse of today’s reading, was a city in Asia Minor that was well situated to defend against worldly enemies. It was fortified on a mountain spur and, down below, the river Pactolus served as a moat. But five and a half centuries before the birth of Christ it was overrun by the Persian army of King Cyrus II, when—ironically in light of today’s reading—a watchman fell asleep at his post.

The nascent Christian community in Sardis was one of seven to receive Jesus’ message as described in Chapters 2 and 3 of the Book of Revelation. Much like that watchman 550 years before, too many of Sardis’ Christians had become the opposite of awake to God’s Word. Spiritually they were sleepwalking. And unless they woke up, their works would not be found perfect in God’s eyes.

Do we sometimes find that even though the Father’s name is in our hearts and on our tongues, we’re simply going through the motions? Walking in our sleep? Twenty centuries later, Christ’s message to us is the same as his message to the church in Sardis: Wake up!

PRAYER: Lord, if you find me not fully awake to your love and your Word, don’t hesitate to throw open the curtains that block Your light in my heart, and shake me until my eyes and my ears are fully open, so that I may strive each day to become more perfect in your sight. In Christ’s name we pray, amen.
When I first saw that this was the text I was assigned for this year’s Lenten Devotional, I was uninspired. Yes, we all know the story—Joseph is a good guy and doesn’t want to publicly disgrace Mary, but he can’t actually marry her, so he comes up with a compassionate plan to dismiss (or divorce) her. But then he receives a vision from God telling him it was OK to take Mary as his wife because she did not conceive the baby she carried by another man.

But as I read and thought on this passage a bit more, I can see that God was doing a much bigger work with Joseph in those times before Jesus was born. I believe that this is part of Joseph’s salvation story. God was asking Joseph to get close to the outcast, and perhaps to even become one in doing so. God was asking Joseph to risk his reputation by standing with someone who would, no doubt, be whispered about in the public square and discussed at dinner tables. The work of the Christ Child was already getting started in bringing together Joseph and Mary, the righteous and the shamed, condemnation for neither and salvation together.

**PRAYER:** God who holds all of us in your love, may your message to Joseph to not be afraid to get close to those who are outcast be a message we hear in our own lives. Give us the courage to risk the approval of others for the sake of living into the wholeness and goodness of all your creation. Amen.
In these passages Jesus was teaching. When several Galileans were killed by Pilate and their blood was mixed with other sacrifices, Jesus said, “Do you think these men were worse sinners than other Galileans? I TELL YOU UNLESS YOU REPENT YOU WILL ALSO PERISH.”

Then using another parable Jesus taught, 18 men died after the tower of Siloam fell on them. Jesus said “Do you think they were more guilty than other men in Jerusalem? But I tell you NO BUT UNLESS YOU REPENT YOU ALSO WILL PERISH!”

Next Jesus taught them the parable of the fig tree. An owner found no fruit on his fig tree for three years. He told the gardener to cut it down. The gardener begged the owner to allow him to dig and apply fertilizer and work with the tree. He said if there was no fruit after that, we will cut it down.

In other words, people who don’t bear fruit are similar. They need proper nourishment and healing. Many people could hear of and follow Jesus’s teachings and improve. They could repent and follow Jesus and not perish forever. Jesus tries to speak in parables to teach the people in his culture to understand they needed to listen to Jesus and follow his ways.

**PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, thank you that we have the benefits of your Holy Bible to teach us Jesus parables and realize his words are appropriate for today. We want to follow Jesus teachings and his perfect examples. The way to live in Christ’s glory is to seriously repent, follow his ways. We want to follow the narrow path that leads us to Christ and to his promises. We adore Jesus Christ. Thank you for sending us the one perfect one to save us! Amen.
When I was little, and I still find myself doing it sometimes, I would always be a little nervous to ask or tell something to the waiter at a restaurant. I would often have to repeat myself, struggle to make eye contact, and stumble over words while the worker tried to decipher what I was trying to order. It’s crazy how someone working personally to give you wonderful service can make you feel so jittery or uneasy, almost like you are trying to appease them instead. With age I started to understand that our relationship with the waiter is a mutual bond and there is no point in thinking of ourselves as anything lesser than them.

While the messages of Psalm 39 are not as light hearted as a kid stuttering the word “nachos” to a waiter, David similarly tries to find his voice to fit God and to show him that he is looking for understanding and worries of his actions not being enough. David seems to know that he is nearing the light at the end of the tunnel and asks the Lord to help him put aside the struggles and fears of passing on and let him enjoy his final days. This is a very passionate prayer that shares how familiar it is to seek hope when we are facing the existential crisis of life and death that plagues every soul on Earth. David also seeks forgiveness, one of the many themes of this season of Lent, as he worries of what could come from sin of himself and others.

**PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, may you help us gain trust and comfort through you. Strengthen us to find our voices and speak to you as a familiar, and face the treacherous parts of life that may plague our minds. Amen.
Today’s text begins with a heavy recount of an act of terror on the Galileans, worshippers gather in their holy place and are greeted with violence and suffering. In today’s world, we know these unforeseen acts of terror all too well. In a season where our days are sometimes clouded by these horrific instances beyond our control, I choose to shift my attention on what is in my control. The second half of today’s text, as we read the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree, helps us discern a seemingly heavy first half of the text.

Jesus shares the parable of a fig tree who after years of being barren, seems to be facing its final days. Until, one hopeful gardener brings light to the need for additional care of the tree, a season of redemption and renewal after years of being barren. Additional soil added, more sunlight given, and perhaps a bit of tending to it’s branches. Any gardeners out there empathize with this tree?

Today, I invite you to look at the fig trees in your life. Either literal or figurative. What seems barren? Where can you pour additional soil, step into the sunlight, and bear the fruit of such added care? It is here where we open the door for renewal and redemption. In a world that is so often faced with happenings beyond our control, I find myself grounded in the trees of my garden that are within my control. How can the trees I pour into bear fruit for the greater Kingdom? Where do I witness hope for renewal?

**Prayer:** God of renewal, help us, during this season of Lent, to lean more heavily into your grace and love so that we may be refreshed and able to live your love into the world around us with all its uncertainties as well as new life. Amen.
Numbers 13:17-27
by Justin Ling

After reading the passage a few times I was reminded of our family’s recent move to the central coast. Our family was given an opportunity that would benefit us greatly, but it was met with a lot of concern and anxiety, from all of us. Our children in particular were not enthusiastic about the idea of moving to a new city, going to a new school, and being surrounded by strangers during a pandemic. They were going to be little fish in a big new pond, so to speak. As a family, we talked a lot about how new opportunities can be scary, but meeting new people, experiencing new things and being open to change will enrich our lives. We were excited about the opportunity, but not about the challenges that came along with it.

In the passage, I think the Israelites were expecting that God would provide a new home just for them. Even though this land was full of milk and honey, some were not keen to move because other tribes were already there. God aimed to provide them with the home they were looking for, but the Israelites did not trust God’s direction. The thought of the challenges ahead and the idea of sharing their new home with other tribes was looked upon unfavorably. There was a lack of humility, and instead, there was pride, anxiety and fear. But, God knew what was best for the Israelites and he knows what is best for all of us—humility, compassion and sharing with communities beyond our own.

PRAYER: Lord, give us the wisdom to see that the bounty which surrounds us is not just food for our bellies, or a roof over our heads. The sharing of knowledge, ideas and perspectives, the various cultures, and the traditions of those around us feed our hearts and minds. Give us the strength to temper our distrust and find humility in our daily lives. Amen.
I am not certain if I should admit this, but I don’t remember every sermon...either sermons I have preached or sermons I have heard. But, but there are some sermons that I do remember. Some sermons have stuck with me for years and years.

When I read Psalm 32, and that opening line, “Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered” I am taken back to Christ Lutheran Church in Long Beach, CA around 1975. I remember Pastor George Johnson preaching on this text. He questioned the premise of the psalmist. ‘Really, happy are those whose sins are forgiven? Aren’t the really happy people those winning at a gambling table in Las Vegas? Aren’t the really happy people those who won the lottery, or just got a job promotion?’ Pastor Johnson went on to describe any number of folks for whom the world would title ‘happy.’

But then came the turn, the memorable part of the sermon...he turned his argument around to talk about real joy. There is a blessing and deep joy when relationships are healed, and conversely, there is a bodily ache when there is no reconciliation. The Psalmist is correct, happy and blessed ARE those whose sins are forgiven.

This psalm has much to speak to us today. I think of families that ache because they find themselves on opposite sides of...what shall we name...vaccines? Politics? Lifestyle choices? Those who live with unforgiven sin and broken relationships are sins that fester like an open wound. They ache for healing, wholeness, and true reconciliation. May we find the joy of the psalmist in our work of confession and receiving forgiveness from God and subsequently from one another.

**PRAYER:** Dear Jesus, the path to forgiveness is painful and too often we fear that pain more than we trust in you. Help us to remember the joy and blessing that is found when we live reconciled to you and reconciled to our loved ones and friends. Amen.
Luke 1:26-38
by Steven Johnson
(reprised from the Lent 2021 devotional)

While recording the Magnificat and Annunciation vocal tracks for the Holden Evening Prayer in 2020 for Advent (Luke 1: 26-38), I experienced a transcendental connection with the divine; it was one of those moments where the clarity and wisdom brought forth by the Holy Spirit will forever be heard in a more significant and purposeful way. It became clear that I was in fact “on the right path” and there is nothing wrong with life or where I am right now. (My mind wants to compare life now to that of pre-social distancing times.) I am also clear that in making peace with where I am now, life’s blessings will unfold in many pleasing ways.

While Luke’s accounting is of the Angel Gabriel speaking to Mary about becoming pregnant and giving birth to the Son of God, there is an essential life giving message here for everyone; regardless of gender, race, level of education, or social class: trust and allow the messages that you receive from the divine and feel the resonance expand within your heart. These messages are a glimpse into the heart of God and a call to be of greater service to others. Undoubtedly, Mary and Joseph faced daunting circumstances as they set out on their journey. It was through courage, humility, and in trusting the divine that gave them the sustenance to be amazing servants and to Live God’s Love In The World. Together, we can embrace God’s love and be of service to our community and the world.

PRAYER: God of Love, as we find the Wonder in Wandering this Lenten season, may our paths lead us to encounter your love even in the most unexpected of places. May our actions be motivated through your heart of generosity, allowing us to be of humble and meaningful service to ourselves and each other, regardless of life’s unexpected twists and turns. Amen.
Sixteen years ago, on a trip to the Holy Land, I attended a presentation, where I heard Rami Elhanan tell his story. It was one of terrible heartbreak and loss, but also of choosing the way of peace over the path of revenge. Rami belongs to a group that none of the members ever wanted to be a part of called Parents Circle Families Forum. You see, joining means you have lost a loved-one in the long-standing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. For Rami, who is a Jewish Israeli, it was his 14-year-old daughter who was lost in a random act of violence in the marketplace in Jerusalem in 1997. It took some time for him to let go of the desire for vengeance, but a year after his daughter died he was invited by a friend to attend a meeting of the Parents Circle. He says he saw Palestinian families getting off the bus, who had also lost family members, and they came over and hugged him and offered greetings of peace. He says it was a transformative moment, to see his own pain reflected in those he had perceived as enemies. He realized we all have a choice to make—we can continue cycles of pain and loss, with no winners only losers or we can choose the way of peace.

On the Families’ Forum website (www.theparentscircle.org) Rami’s story is titled “Replacing Pain with Hope.” This might be a good summary title for the First Letter of Peter too. It was a letter written nearly 2000 years ago to a fledgling church community, made up of many who were outcast from their own families and social networks because of their newfound commitment to Christ. Feeling lost and alone, isolated and persecuted, the people were struggling with what it means to be followers of Jesus when everything seems set against you and it feels like there is more suffering in your life than blessing. The answer the pastor who wrote the letter (let’s call him Peter) offered was that they should start by having “unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind.” While this is often easier said than done, we all are invited into a new family, defined not by how we repay our enemies in kind but what we say about the hope that is in us. We have a savior who suffered with us and for us, so that in our own suffering and wilderness wandering, we may remember our calling to bless even those who cause us pain. As we prepare our hearts and spirits along this Lenten journey, may we open ourselves to transformative peace as we live into the hope that is ours.

PRAYER: O God, whose eye is on the righteous, transform us in our wilderness journey, so that we might choose your way of peace and reconciliation over the instinct toward revenge. Where we fail to live up to our calling, let us trust in the saving work of Christ, who draws us ever closer to you; the One in whose name we pray. Amen.
Reflecting on this reading from Luke, there is an almost overwhelming motif of courage. Our journeys in Lent often need reminders of this courage, and Jesus’s parable here allows us to see this virtue reflected in each person involved. Between the man and his two sons, each person has courage, yet this courage comes from a different place for every individual. For some, it stems from wisdom and age; in others, an acute awareness of their lack of either. Courage on behalf of the ones who must return to their communities in the wake of failure, and courage on the part of those who receive them with the fattened calf. Courage is seeing injustices in our lives and speaking against them. Courage is defending the grace we give to others.

In a time of uncertainty that often feels insurmountable, it’s easy to feel lost and untethered. As both sons in this parable turn to their father, baring their shame and their anger, we must turn to our Father with all of our emotions and sins and open our hearts to remembering the acts of courage that have saved us. Courage in giving your only son to save mankind of their own sins. Courage in giving of yourself, through life, body and blood, as the ultimate act of love. Courage through letting this faith sustain and buoy you through the difficulties of an ever-changing world.

**PRAYER:** Loving creator, it is through times that require courage that you remind us of your capacity to move through us. Just as the prodigal son returns, let us have the strength to turn to you in our times of doubt and hardship. Bless us in our journeys, bless us in our homecomings, and instill in us the courage we need to look to you in our joy and doubt, our successes and failures. Amen.
Chances are it has been a heartbreaking past few years for you, maybe more, maybe less, but I think not one person can say they don’t need their heart to be mended. It is easy to say “God mends my heart,” but it is another thing to feel like He is doing so, actually and truly, feel it in your heart. Psalm 53 opens with someone who does not feel God in their heart; the passage continues on to say that there are no people on Earth that are actively seeking to understand God. It is easy to read this first part of the Psalm and feel absolute dread, because isn’t this how the world is right now too? Corruption, ignorance, cruelty, it’s circulating in our lives.

What I know I forget to think about is the second part of this Psalm when I become so consumed with my breaking heart: God is watching His people and he will provide for us a full heart. A full heart does not mean a perfect one though. It also does not guarantee one that has never seen pain or caused it either. We are fallen people, broken people with broken hearts; we get overwhelmed by fear and don’t always learn from our mistakes, unfortunately. My challenge to you, after reading and praying over this Psalm, is to choose to seek something God is trying to show you: find that small joy today. In doing so, you will be seeking to understand our God better. If you can’t find anything today, keep looking; when you do find that small joy, find the next thing that makes your heart just a little bit less broken. Continue searching for the next thing. Trust me, I know it’s difficult and you’ll fail sometimes, but keep going. To honestly feel God in our hearts we have to open our hearts to Him, but He is there waiting and watching

**PRAYER:** Dear Lord, I want to feel you in my heart and in all aspects of my life. Forgive me when I am overcome by the brokenness and turn blind. Help me in my pursuit to seek you. What do you want me to see today? Amen.
In my adult life I’ve been fortunate to travel to a number of countries, and in those travels I have always made it a point to attend a local church on Sunday. Even when I don’t understand the language, I look forward to the experience of watching a community come together, and in some cases, belong to that community myself. I’ve been to a Chinese Christian service in Singapore, a Serbian Orthodox service in Montenegro, and a Lutheran service in Germany. But, given that Lutheran churches aren’t always the easiest to find, I have attended many Catholic masses as well, and heard them in both local languages as well as in Latin. One of the things I appreciate about the Catholic service is the similarity of the liturgy to ours—it has allowed me to follow along where I might otherwise be lost, and thus feel more in tune with a community that would otherwise not be my own.

As part of the traditional communion liturgy in both the Lutheran and Catholic churches, we are asked to proclaim the three mysteries of our faith: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. Those three mysteries are rehashed in this Bible passage in somewhat different words, but the point is the same—to remind us that Jesus died not for himself, but to take away the sins of many. We are all sinners—every single one of us. Hearing the mysteries of our faith spoken—whether in English by a Catholic priest in Dublin, in Czech by a Catholic priest in Prague, in German by a Lutheran pastor in Cologne, or on Youtube by Pastor Amy in our living rooms—brings us together by equalizing us as a community of believers. We are all sinners, and Christ has died and risen to save us from those sins, and He will come again one day. While around the world millions of us say those words in a place that is not our usual church home, we are still part of that community, and those words of faith bind us and bring us home together.

**PRAYER:** Holy Sustainer, you know our hearts better than we know ourselves. You also gather us as community, even while apart. Help us to see our communities and to find ways to live your love in them during times that are uncertain. Amen.
The story of the feeding of the 5,000—a vivid picture from my long ago Sunday School days and more than a few sermons. A camera ready miracle—a throng of people had gathered to hear Jesus preach and heal in a desolate place. The day was growing late. The disciples asked Jesus to encourage the people to leave to find food and shelter for the coming night. Instead Jesus directed the disciples to divide the crowd into groups of 50. After giving thanks and blessing the small amount of food at hand, five loaves and two fish, Jesus directed the disciples to feed the multitude. Indeed they did, from miraculously never empty baskets, with food leftover filling 12 baskets.

As I have been thinking about it, what struck me most about this passage was the emphasis on numbers and quantities—of people, food, baskets. Maybe I especially keyed into that because I’m a retired CPA. In today’s world, we try to quantify everything. Everyone is looking at the metrics—measuring in numbers, using numbers to evaluate and judge, project outcomes. And then, when we do quantify the issue, the problem, the challenge, we ask “is there enough?” Is there enough money, enough resources, enough sales, enough income? The truly astounding answer that Jesus demonstrated that day was that with God, there will always be “enough.” “Enough” to strengthen us and carry us through what life may bring to “live God’s love in the world.”

PRAYER: Loving creator. Through ancient stories we know of your power and love for all people. Through our own lives we see these daily miracles too. Help us to open our eyes and our hearts to receive and share your love with those around us because through you we know there is always more than enough. Amen.
Last weekend, I met my great-great grandmother. No, not in person, for she passed away 88 years ago. Rather, it was through the words of her memoirs, translated from German script and painstakingly compiled into a document that allows me, her great-great granddaughter, to begin to know her. Just a bit, so far. (There are many more years of her words still to read!) Her name was Anna Rempel Dyck.

As I read Psalm 126, words and phrases jumped out. Words that Anna used frequently, often numerous times on a page:

Shouts of Joy
The Lord has done great things for us
We rejoiced
Tears

Prayer, worship, hymns and music were front and center in Anna’s large family and close-knit community. The hardships and tragedies she describes brought me to tears. Yet each paragraph describing a struggle or sadness is followed by a longer paragraph of their blessings, the love God has for them, and the love they have for God.

Anna grew up in South Russia. Such a large and complicated family with siblings and step-siblings. In the late 1800s there was no TV, radio, and few books. The family sings a lot and not just at church. Anna describes one such evening in great detail. First a few voices, then more join. Even the children. Two play flutes. They have hymn books at home. Apparently they all have beautiful, strong singing voices (I did not inherit that DNA). Their voices and music fill the room, surrounding them as a manifestation of God’s love and blessings. It is a collective praising of God for His grace to all his children. They sing until they have sung all the songs in their home hymn books. Then they sing Psalms. The reader (me!) senses that they do not want to stop! It’s as if they are feeling God’s love inside them. At the same time, they are thanking and praising and loving God right back.

It’s a surprise to find myself feeling such a bond to Anna. Perhaps God had a hand in the timing of our ‘meeting.’ Perhaps her words can help me know God in new ways. So, this Lent, I’ll walk in the Wilderness with great-great grandmother Anna in my heart. Together, across time and place, a new space for God just might open within me.

**PRAYER:** God of love, you meet us where we are every day of our lives and breathe new life into us through a multitude of ways. Help us to be attuned to your ever living presence in our lives lived through others and let us walk together with those on this earth and the saints who came before us. Amen.
1 Corinthians 10:6-13
by Lauren Mercer
(reprised from the Lent devotional 2021)

In life we are surrounded by temptation. It follows us around until we give in. This passage reminds us that temptation is natural and God still protects us when we fulfill those desires. In life we are destined to make mistakes and today’s passage ensures us that God is always there to “provide a way out so that you can endure it.”

In my young life I have experienced many temptations. Giving in to certain desires in the moment feels inevitable and like a risk worth taking, but once I have done the deed I feel guilty. I feel trapped in worries and I feel like there is no way out. As soon as I take a step back and reflect on my decision, I am reminded of God’s promise that he will not let me be tested beyond my strength. I can look to God for direction and forgiveness.

PRAYER: Forgiving God, thank you for promising to never let us be tested beyond our strength, and for leading us to a path to where we are always able to find our way back to you.
Exodus 12:21-27
by Brian Blomster

Moses proclaims that by following the Lord’s instructions to slaughter the Passover lamb, to dip hyssop into the lamb’s blood, and to touch that blood above the door into their homes, the people of Israel in Egypt shall be spared God’s wrath upon the Egyptians. It is a message of God’s power, love, and fealty.

We know, though, that our Lord’s protection is not only a shield against pain and destruction. Why do we know this? Because we all have been stricken, sometimes cruelly and beyond our ability to comprehend meaning in the stroke that wounds us. Does that mean God’s power eludes us, or that God finds us unworthy of his protection? Did we not dip our hyssop into the spiritual blood and apply it to our lintel?

No. When we live and profess our faith, it cannot be conditioned upon God sparing us pain. Rather, we profess it in how we accept the grace that comes to us—sometimes quickly, other times belatedly—that helps us live while the wound heals. Or, as we faithfully await that healing.

God is neither magic show nor party to bargaining. What our Lord freely gives, and through Jesus’ sacrifice that the prophets foretold, is the full and certain knowledge that love and faith are our bulwark. It is that which allows our discernment, to know that we can suffer mightily, and even despair, while holding fast to our faith without quitting, certain that our pain will be assuaged, our joy restored, and that our glory—and the glory of those we’ve lost—is assured.

PRAYER: Precious Lord, you know our hearts, our doubts, our sorrows, our heartbreaks, our desires, and our joys. Through us, show the fierceness of your love and your care for our suffering. Know that we are yours and that we freely admit our need for your love and compassion, even as we do what we can to share your love in a world that would have us shrink from this calling. Bless us and those who have entered your presence and glory, and give us peace.
One way or another, Jesus would have to die. That was clearly the intent of the chief priests and the scribes, who saw Jesus as a threat to their power and authority. Depending on which Gospel you read, the decision that Jesus must be killed was reached for different reasons. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it is Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his cleansing of the temple that prompted their murderous rage. In John’s Gospel, that decision was made when they heard that Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. “What are we to do?” they asked, “this man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy our holy place and our nation.” We read in the text for today that they made the decision that Lazarus must also die—to get rid of the “evidence” of Jesus’ power and authority, even over death.

None of this dissuaded Jesus from continuing his ministry of healing, of proclaiming that the reign of God was near, of seeking out the least and the last and the lost. Nor was he dissuaded from his journey to the cross. Near the end of his earthly ministry, he gathered in Bethany with his friends, Mary, Martha, and the newly re-vivified Lazarus. Prophetically, after Mary anointed Jesus’ feet with a costly ointment and wiped them with her hair, Jesus said, “She did this in preparation for my burial.” Jesus knew he was about to be delivered into the hands of those who sought to kill him by the very disciple who questioned Mary’s act of love, hospitality, devotion, and thanksgiving. Yet on to Jerusalem he went, to the upper room to celebrate the Passover, to Gethsemane to pray, to Golgotha to be crucified, and finally, to a newly-hewn tomb, where he would be buried, wrapped in linens and anointed with spices. Yet not even his death would be the end of his life-giving witness, in spite of the best efforts of those who sought to do just that.

**PRAYER:** Gracious and loving God, as we move through Lent to Holy Week, the Three Days, Easter and beyond, give us faith and courage to reflect the power of the life-giving Gospel of Jesus’ love. Cause us to be bold, to be prophetic, to act and to serve with the resolve of Jesus for those he calls us to see and love in his name. Amen.
Psalm 5:1-12
by Lucy Lindgren
(reprised from the Lent devotional 2021)

In Psalm 5, David cries out to God, listing how he prays, and asking that God listen. To accentuate his point, he compares himself to his enemies, talking about how he will be celebrated while his enemies must be punished. But who are his enemies? This talk of “them” and “us” is shown throughout the Psalm and also plagues our society and our lives as Christians. These categories represent a multitude of different groups for various people, any and all of the many divisions in our modern-day culture. In our religious lives, we may sometimes stumble upon ourselves thinking along similar lines—“us” being “real Christians” and “them” being “those other people.” When we compare ourselves to others and our religion to other religions, where do we draw the line? What is “right” and “wrong”? What is “Christian” and “that other nonsense”? Who is a sinner and who is a saint?

This Lenten season, we must remember that we are all both sinner and saint. In the Psalm, David asks for the way to be made clear, directions to be given so he may safely walk among his enemies. God, with his patient grace, knows that these enemies can be others around us, and that we also have enemies inside ourselves. God has given us the power to handle all of our enemies with love and compassion, and has given us the knowledge that can all be deserving of his protection, even when we feel the least worthy. We will always be welcome at the table of plenty. Jesus died on the cross and took away our sins, not so that we may judge others, but so we may experience grace and share it with the world.

PRAYER: Loving God, thank you for the gift of your grace. Lead us to follow in your footsteps and treat everyone with compassion, spreading your love. Guide us in walking paths among our enemies, and bridging divides. Remind us that we can always seek refuge in your open arms. Amen.
This passage begins right away with the foreboding words, the antichrist is coming and antichrists have already come, then explains that antichrists are enemies of the Gospel who deny the Father and the Son, who seek to deceive the faithful. Those who have been anointed however, know the truth, and no lie comes from the truth. Eternal life is promised to those who abide in the Son and in the Father.

So how do we know the truth? Sound reasoning and experience are just not enough. What we need is Divine revelation! And we find that in the Scriptures, and in this case, specifically in the Gospels.

John 1:14 “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

John 14:6 As Jesus spoke of his departure, Thomas’ (and the other disciples) wanted clarification about what Jesus meant when he said they would know the way to the place He was going. Jesus answered, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

John 1:17 “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

John 18:37 When Jesus was brought before Pontius Pilate, Jesus said to Pilate, “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.

And what does God say? Matthew 17:5, Mark 9:7, Luke 9:35 “Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: ‘This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!’”

I believe that to listen in this context means not merely hearing what is said but allowing the message to truly penetrate and impact how we live (which could not be done except through the grace of the Holy Spirit). Also, in this passage the author of 1 John calls for us to abide (continue firm or resolute through trials and difficulties) in the truth. Jesus is truth and demonstrated that truth by how He lived, what He did, and what He said. We should seek to know truth by examining it under the light of Christ. A few years ago there was a popular saying, coined with the acronym WWJD, or What Would Jesus Do? This is especially relevant today as we are so often confronted with so many seemingly contradictory truths. The Scriptures help us to hear what God wants to say to us, and Jesus is our truth.

PRAYER: Lord of life, guide us in your truth, teach us your ways, help us to expand in love, work to heal others, act justly, walk humbly, and forever abide with you, our God and Savior. Amen.
Jesus is being very direct and intentional. Knowing that He was headed to Jerusalem to be betrayed, mocked, tortured, and executed, he asked the twelve to “watch” as He declared that the fulfillment of their messianic covenant. They would live to see an eternal promise accomplished in real time, with real tears, real pain, and real sorrow. He proclaimed that the curse of sin and death would be defeated when He would rise again on the third day. Yet, the disciples could not comprehend and understand the gravity of his words.

We live in a post christendom world that needs the church to live out its faith in ways that are now counter cultural. Words aren’t enough. People need to see Christ’s love in action. Our lives must reflect that “He is risen” and show how accepting and understanding that truth could change their life forever. It is time for us to live a direct and intentional life that proclaims this truth. We must live our lives in ways that manifest His Good News and share the transforming love of God.

**PRAYER:** Christ our redeemer, thank you for your example of sacrificial love. Thank you for bringing salvation to the world. Please help us find ways to love others and share our faith as we go about our daily routines. May we live in ways that point others towards your redeeming promise and help us be ready to share the Good News to all who seek you.
Psalm 31:9-16
by Sarah Jessop Street

Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love. (Psalm 31:16)

In today’s reading we get some of the Lentiest of Lenten messages. The section is framed at the beginning and is ended with cries for help from God and a trust that God can save them from their distress—and in between we witness the rawness of human suffering. This reading, with its trust in God’s power and pleas for help, begs us to ask “why?” Why, God, do you not always take this suffering away? The descriptions point to sickness, depression, and desperation. Why, oh God in all your power, do you allow your servant to suffer like this?

I wish I had an easy answer for this. But I don’t. And if I tried, you would see through it right away. We lose people we love, who we cannot live without. We are plagued by illness, depression, substance abuse, loneliness, and strained relationships. And God does not (always) come in and miraculously remove our pain.

No, God doesn’t remove the challenges in our lives, the suffering that doesn’t seem to atone for anything. Rather, we have a God who would join us in our suffering. Who would come into the world and into a family—messy and broken as they are. Who would feel betrayal, fear, and sadness. Crying in grief over loss. Jesus comes alongside us in our own suffering, demonstrating that these feelings of loss have a place in the heart of God. That our sadness can be as sacred as our joy. And whatever happens, however we feel and fail, God’s love is steadfast.

**Prayer:** Oh God who joins those who suffer, make your presence palpable. When we are at our most alone, let us feel your dwelling with us. In this time of Lent, allow us to acknowledge our humanity and invite you into the messy broken places with us. Let your face shine upon us. Amen.
God is full of grace and mercy. These words can be challenging to hear in times when we find ourselves surrounded by political unrest and life uncertainty due to a pandemic and changes in our economic and political worlds. Yet, nonetheless God is with us. The words of Isaiah remind us that in no uncertain terms God is with us always and forever. There is nothing that will separate us from God’s grace and love. So often we can find ourselves angry or frustrated with how our lives are going and forget that God’s care far outreaches our understanding. This Lenten season, let us try to see that God is with us and sends the Spirit to guide us all the days of our lives.

**PRAYER:** God of abundance, you know us and love us even still. We fail, yet you are with us. Help us to see that your love for us far exceeds our understanding and we only see a glimpse of your care for us. Amen.
This Gospel is really the heart of our faith and is easily recognized. However, the message does not end with God loving us and sacrificing God’s only son. “Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.”

There is a little darkness in all of us at times. There are things we don’t want brought into the light. People have struggled in big and small ways and always have. I think of this as the world struggles with current illness, issues, conflicts, and divisions. As humans, we are never far from strife, fear, anger…darkness. So why would God love us? These passages remind us that God is our Father. Why do we love our children? Just as parents do, God would and has given everything for us. His sacrifice of God’s child was too big, too important to ignore. His sacrifice and promise prove that he loves us and presents a path for eternal life for everyone. We have a choice to come into the light through Jesus.

**PRAYER:** Dear Lord, help us to know your love and that when we cry, you cry with us. Please help us and guide us to remember to choose light for ourselves and others through you. Amen.
This scripture from Luke embodies the Passion story beginning with the Last Supper and ending with His death and burial and all the twists and turns in between. However, instead of the discussion of Jesus suffering and dying for our sins, which is not to be diminished, our devotion will focus on Jesus, the divine human, and what He teaches us about humility and service.

At the Last Supper, Jesus poses the question, “Who is the greater…the one at the table or the one who serves?” He then, modeling true humility and selfless love, says, “I am among you as the one who serves.” He encapsulates His teachings of service and building community as in the Sermon on the Mount, by utilizing the partaking of the bread and wine with each other, connecting the past, present, and future and then adding humbly, “do this in remembrance of me.” He didn’t say, “because of me” or “because of what I am going to do for you” or “because I am the Son of God,” just simply, “in remembrance of me.”

Jesus struggles in the Garden, wanting to please His Father, as any good Son might. Knowing what is ahead, questioning whether He needs to do this, He once again, yielding in trust and humility to His Father’s will, allowed Himself to be arrested, “not My will, but Thy will, be done.”

Jesus knew that at any given time during His arrest, trial, and crucifixion, He could have used His powers, His divineness, to stop any part of it. In fact, His enemies taunted Him with that very thought, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” But instead, with humility and grace, Jesus not only withstood the abuse, He forgave them!!! “Forgive them for they know not what they do!”

Jesus continued to provide examples of self-giving love and humility as He showed care and concern for His followers, His mother, and even the criminal being crucified beside Him, rather than showing any concern for Himself even as He neared death “I am among you as the one who serves...” As He draws His last breath, Jesus humbly says, “Father into your Hands, I commit my Spirit,” providing us with one of the greatest “how to live your life with humility” examples.

In His human life and death, Jesus provides us with the greatest examples of love, grace, humility, and service. He died to save us; He gave His life in exchange for our chance for eternal life. He “humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.”

**Prayer:** Our beloved Savior, with grateful hearts, we ask that you stay present, Lord, in our lives as we work to follow Your examples of self-giving love, humility, and service. Help us to be ever mindful that the greatest is the one who serves. You gave your life for us so that we might live in You. Teach us to speak as you did, with kindness and forgiveness, rather than harshness and hatred to those who wish us harm. Grant us the wisdom to commit our lives to You, praying always, “not my will, but Thy will be done.” In your precious name, Amen.
Psalm 36:5-11 is sometimes called the “Gospel of Light,” as it repeats the phrase “In your light we see light” to hold the light of Christ up to “the wicked” described in the beginning of the Psalm. As I read, reread, and meditated on this passage, my ideas became clear and then hazy. I was intimidated and felt deep doubt that I had anything to say. And, as much of the human experience reading about divine love, I think that may be the point.

**Boundless love.** The boundless, steadfast love of God described in this passage is nearly unfathomable. The natural metaphors for this love are “extending to the heavens...faithfulness ... to the clouds...righteousness like the mighty mountains... judgements are like the great deep.” Outside of the Bible we say “to the moon and back” or “as deep as the sea.” The moon and back is 477,710 miles - it could take you 40 years to drive that many miles, but you could do it. The deepest part of the ocean is the Challenger Deep, which is near Guam and 36,200 feet below the surface of the ocean—this is as deep as an airplane is high when you can take off your seatbelt.

My take on comprehension is that it’s a combination of experience and a little imagination. But, even thinking about the universe makes me a little dizzy; intellectually I give up a bit. Which makes me think of other ideas that people find hard to comprehend, unfathomable based on their own experiences. That LGBTQ+ love is strong, holy, and sacred. That while faith communities have harmed the LGBTQ+ community, we also stand within faith with courage and clarity. That systemic racism works deliberately on a level that is both unseen and pervasive; convincing white people that they have it just as hard as people of color in order to perpetuate itself. And I wonder, if we can have faith in the boundless, dizzying love that is God, what would it take to have faith in these basic tenets of social justice and be moved to act, advocate, and love?

What would I have to say about boundless love? It is a goal, a truth, and an ideal. It is why I come to church and what I hope to bring into the world. And sometimes it doesn’t make a bit of sense to me.

**Prayer** for boundless, perfect love: Dear God, the ocean is deep, the mountains high, and the universe so big that we cannot imagine it. The experiences of others are so personal, so beautiful and different from ours that how can we do anything but rejoice? The holiest and most sacred of beliefs may be the ones that we don’t fully understand, but we move forward with anyway. Today, help us know that we don’t need to ‘get it’ or live it to feel and share the boundless, unfathomable love with people who are different from us.
As I read this passage I find I can easily relate to the prophet’s frustration as he tries to reach the people of Israel when he says, “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing at all.” Just as Christ met with much opposition during his life as he ministered, so often we as Christians do too as we try to spread God’s word and glory. I don’t know about you, but sometimes when I don’t get through to a nonbeliever I give up, thinking, “Well, I tried.” Christ, however, persevered as should we. God says, “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” So this Lent I am challenging myself and you to continue to be that light even when we feel uncomfortable or think we may fail.

**PRAYER:** Dear Lord, Give me the confidence to spread your word. Give me the wisdom and discernment to reach others where they are in their lives. Make me the light so they will know your love and salvation. Amen.
I was in a meeting recently that began by asking those in attendance to share a bit about a person that had impacted us on our journey of faith. As I considered my response, I found myself filled with gratitude for the “great cloud of witnesses” that, throughout my life, has demonstrated the beautiful and varied ways of following Jesus through their examples. In today’s reading from Hebrews, we’re reminded that when the going gets tough, we can look to these faithful witnesses, be they family, friends, or saints of old, and be encouraged.

But we’re also blessed with the ultimate example of faith in the fully divine, fully human, person of Jesus. As “pioneer” of our faith, Jesus is the first source of our faith, modeling for us what it means to trust God with our whole lives. And as “perfecter” of our faith, Jesus humbled himself, enduring the cross and its shame, and in so doing, fulfilled God’s promises to all of humanity. It is this same promise-keeping Jesus that we are called to fix our eyes upon when we are growing weary or losing heart. For there is a wellspring of strength to be found when we consider Jesus: strength to right past wrongs, to turn the other cheek, to cling to faith in the face of doubt and to run the race of faith with endurance.

PRAYER: Holy God, thank you for the cloud of witnesses you’ve placed in our lives that have pointed us towards you. Thank you especially for the gift of your Son, Jesus, pioneer and perfecter of our faith. In difficult times, please point our hearts and minds back to these witnesses and to Jesus, so that our endurance in running the race of faith might in turn serve as a witness to others. Amen.
After every party, before we left, we had to make sure to say good-bye to Grandma and Grandpa. Saying good-bye to Grandpa was easy enough, just a hug and a “see you next time!” But with Grandma, it was so much more. Being a devout Catholic, she made sure we left with a sign of the cross but then she added “La señal de la Santa Cruz” or “The sign of the Holy Cross.” Imagine a normal sign of the cross, the one that goes from your forehead, to your chest, to your shoulders...well la señal de la Santa Cruz started with that, but then went to back to the forehead down to the bridge of your nose, to the tops of both eyebrows (a mini sign of the cross for your forehead), then it went down to the top of your lips, to your chin to both cheeks (a mini sign of the cross for your mouth), and finally it went down to the top of your collar bone, to your chest, to both shoulders (a mini sign of the cross for your chest) all while she whispered in Spanish “por la señal de la Santa Cruz, de nuestros enemigos, líbranos, Señor Dios nuestro (by the sign of the Holy Cross, from our enemies, deliver us, Lord our God).”

As a child, I had no idea what she was doing or saying; to the point that she would ask me to repeat the cross and the prayer on her and instead I would wave my fingers around her face making wispy sounds under my breath to imitate her prayer since I had no idea what she was saying! The whole ritual made no sense to me at all, but it meant the world to my grandmother, and it honestly brought us so much closer together and was her way of showing me her love and her faith in God. Today’s reading from Exodus is one that may not make much sense to us today on a first read; a very demanding God for a very specific ritual for gathered people to show their faith to God and if it wasn’t done correctly, there would be dire consequences.

The first Passover may seem a little dark, but it did lead us to the celebration of Passover; a time for people to gather and to show their faith and love to God. The “whys” of the first Passover don’t have to make much sense to us today, but we must be able to recognize the significance of it and what it brought us: an opportunity to gather and express our faith. A lot of the rituals and rites that we do in a religious context don’t make much sense from an outsider’s perspective: baptisms, signs of the cross, weddings, communion, Passover, a multitude of crosses over your face and lips and chest; but we do them not for others opinion, but for ourselves. These different rituals are a way for us to show the love that we have for each other as a community and to God, even if there are parts that don’t make sense to us just yet. Now that I am older, I have finally learned the words to “La señal de la Santa Cruz” and even though I am no longer Catholic, I will occasionally do and say that prayer. Not because it makes sense to do it, but because the ritual connects me to my grandmother and the love and faith she instilled in me. May your Passover be a connecting and loving time for you and your friends and family!

**PRAYER:** Loving and evolving God, we may not always understand your original ways, or the rituals and rites placed before us, but we thank you for the many different ways that we can show and share our love and faith to you and each other.
The passage that I was asked to reflect on includes several events, so familiar to many of us-- the Betrayal in the Garden, Jesus’s trial by Pilate, Peter’s denial, and the Crucifixion. There are words of Jesus that I’ve grown to know well enough to quote. As Jesus tempers the possible violence at Gethsemane, he says “Am I not to drink the cup that the Father gave me?” In response to Pilate’s question, “Are you King of the Jews?,” Jesus replies “YOU say so.” When Jesus finally gives up his spirit on the cross, his simple words are “It is finished.”

These words stay in my head, thanks in part to my favorite musical of all-time, Jesus Christ Superstar, and also being blessed for several years to experience Scot Sorensons’ Easter drama of this gospel! However, Jesus’s words are not the ones that I often hear most loudly. The quotes that hit my heart are Peter’s: “I do not know him.” And the crowds’: “Crucify him!! Crucify him!” Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are times that I reflect on my own denial of Jesus, my own blindness to good, and my own ignorance when following the crowd. I don’t WANT to be Judas, Peter, or any one in the mob shouting “crucify!” The good news? I don’t have to be. That is what Easter Sunday is all about—an example of salvation and forgiveness given to all of us that miraculous Easter morning. We are human, we make mistakes, but God’s promise is there for us all. Thank you for showing us the way, Jesus.

**PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, When I open my mouth, please help me use the examples of Jesus in my words “thy will be done,” and not hurtful words, thoughts, or actions. Thank you for the Easter promise of salvation, for your grace and your love. Amen.
I remember in college, in one weekend, attending both the funeral of a high school football buddy and volunteering at a nursing home. While painting pumpkins with a woman in her 80s I reflected on the loss of a friend in his 20s. That experience changed me and my perspective on life and death. Baptism is this for us too.

It may be odd to think of baptism and death in the same sentence or hear them in lines of scripture together, but the ritual of covering or splashing a human with water in the name of the Triune God is a ritual of death and new life. The old self is gone through the mystery of the Holy Spirit and the person is a new creation in Christ. My baptism (and Lent can be thought of as a journey toward baptism or affirmation of baptism) is a reminder that then, now, and in the future, I can be made new. The way I used to think or see can be changed. You can teach an old dog new tricks at any age. Through the Divine Mystery and my baptism I am forever claimed and accepted by a God who loves me as I am, AND at the same time loves me too much to keep me stuck in spiritual infancy.

**Prayer:** O God of mystery, I thank you for the gift of baptism and how you continue to make me new each chapter of my life. May I lean into the promises of baptism as you walk with me into a future of growth and spiritual maturity yet ahead, through the guidance of Christ Jesus. Amen.
Remember... In an age in which memory is not presumed, when “memory care” so often needed, how should we hear these words from the “two men in dazzling clothes” in Luke’s resurrection account: “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.”

There is so much to remember. Remember when I told you, when I passed on those words of wisdom, when I came to your aid, when I was patient instead of angry, when I held your hand even when cognition failed you.

Remembering is important. But the Easter promise isn’t just about our recall of Jesus’ words and deeds - the kind of remembering that used to seem so easy, yet now more challenging with each passing year. Remembering can seem so daunting. But here is the really Good News: Easter is primarily about another sort of remembering - the putting of the many pieces back together again. Easter is about Jesus re-membering us, and the whole of creation. Re-making. Repurposing. The women head to the tomb taking spices to anoint Jesus’ dead body, only to find death, sorrow, and despair giving way to the new, the unexpected, the impossible made possible. May you give over to Jesus the brokenness of your life - the end result we presume already written. Remember, that with Jesus, all things are possible!

PRAYER: God of remembrance. Through you all things are made possible. On this Easter Sunday help us to remember your promises to us and to live our lives always in response to the grace and love you pour out on to us every day of our lives. Amen.

ALLELUIA,
HE IS RISEN!