

Ash Wednesday, February 14

Genesis 3:19

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

We hear this passage often quoted during an Ash Wednesday service, the day that kicks off the Lent season. I love this season, the season of Lent. It begins on Ash Wednesday, February 14th and runs until Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024. One of the reasons why I love this time of year is that it tells of Jesus' ministry while He lived here on earth. He was born for a purpose, that which God had in mind. It still amazes me how God chose Mary to be the mother of His only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. She was to be married to Joseph, son of David, and "behold, the Holy Spirit shall come upon you and you will bear a Son and His name shall be Jesus." [Luke 1:35-38] She's perplexed by this, but said she would obey God's commands. It's beyond my comprehension to believe she would be able to conceive a child through God, the Holy Spirit himself, but He did it. He created the Heavens and the earth, so why not create a child of God to help take away our sins?

We follow the journey of Christ's birth in Bethlehem, His childhood, then to His preaching the Good News of God's love for us all. I look at how much hatred there is among people just because of their nationality, their faith, or their religion. It saddens me that we can't get along with them. I love people. I pray for them, no matter who they are or what their beliefs are. I love learning about different cultures of the world. I'm a very curious person, and I love investigating different cultures, how people live, and how they practice their faith in God, or Abba. I love the history behind people's beliefs. So as I write down this short story, I remind myself to love others, even enemies. We need to stop hating one another. No one knows what tomorrow may bring, no one knows what the future will bring, let's just try to get along with each other as God and Jesus expect us to.

Our lives would be fulfilled if we would all get along, put hatred out because it's nothing but the devil roaming and wanting to destroy us. Let's win this battle and meet at the feet of Jesus at the cross where He was crucified. Take His hand and walk by the shore. Look behind and see His footprints in the sand, for He is with us if we let Him in.

Thank you, God,

**For giving us your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior of the world.
Amen.**

Deana Blake

Thursday after Ash Wednesday, February 15

Psalm 121

I lift my eyes to the hills. From whence does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not suffer your foot to be moved, he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun will not smite you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

Every day when I was a young nursing student in the 1960s, I would enter the hospital chapel early on the morning of each clinical day and pray that God would accompany me in each of my encounters with patients that day. I inevitably would open the big BIBLE to the above Psalm opening. It offered me such solace and assurance! I claimed it as my personal reassurance...and even when the days were challenging, I knew that all would be well in the long term. I shared this same Psalm with my own nursing students over the years...and I still see it as one of my favorite readings in the Bible. May it offer you the same reassurance this Lenten season.

Thank you, Lord,

For always being there with us – in all of our “going out and...coming in” now and forever! Amen.

Dottie Crummy

Friday after Ash Wednesday, February 16

Philippians 4:6

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

Unanswered Prayers

A few days ago, my sister asked if my husband, Tim, would learn a song on his guitar, entitled “Unanswered Prayers”. I thought that this was a rather unusual name for a song, so I decided to listen to this song by Garth Brooks. The essence of the song is that when you think God hasn't answered your prayers, it doesn't

mean He doesn't care, because some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers. I believe that God answers our prayers, but not always on the timeline we want or in the manner we envision. We may need to change our perception of prayer and how God responds to our prayers. A recent quote on Facebook made me stop and think about how prayers may be answered:

Faith doesn't always take you out of the problem; Faith takes you through the problem.

Faith doesn't always take away the pain; Faith gives you the ability to handle the pain.

Faith doesn't always take you out of the storm; Faith calms you in the midst of the storm.

As a young person, I faced some very difficult challenges. I prayed many nights asking for God to change things for me. While things in my life may not have changed when I wanted them to, eventually they did. Through the years, I realized that God was listening—I made it through the rough times, and my challenges made me a better person, allowed me to be more compassionate with my students, and be a better wife and parent.

Dear God,

During our lifetime we all go through problems, storms, and pain. May we always trust that you are by our side and always listening. Amen.

Marge Woods

Saturday after Ash Wednesday, February 17

Psalm 118:24

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

My 90-year-old dad fell and injured his hip last week. Although he doesn't have a prior history of falling, this was his second tumble since Christmas. He's always been strong and active, so life with a walker, even if just temporary, is an adjustment. And the reality of aging parents is stressful. What comes next for them? Am I equipped to provide what they might need? Will I be able to handle the changing seasons of life?

With these worries welling up inside, I turned to the Gospel of John and began reading the words of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, as the Lord quieted my soul: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:27-28)

What glorious promises! Jesus, the Good Shepherd, anchors his sheep to God's presence. When we're tired, Jesus promises us rest in green pastures. When we're thirsty, he guides us to still waters and restores our souls. When we're faced with temptation or doubt, he leads us on the paths of righteousness. When we're afraid, he never leaves our side. 'His goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives, and we will dwell in his house forever.' (Psalm 23:6)

What do those magnificent promises mean for my life right now? How do they change my perspective? I pondered those questions on the way to see my parents a few days ago. When my dad answered the door (fumbling with his walker), I asked him how he was doing. He said, "You know, Dee, I've been waking up every morning with a verse on my mind: '*This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it*' (Psalm 118:24). That's what I've been doing."

In those words, I recognized Jesus' loving care for my dad. In that moment, I recognized his loving care for me as well. I don't know if my dad is aware of it, but Psalm 118:24 was rooted in his heart by a song we learned at Foothills long ago: *This is the Day*. The music ministry of Foothills touched my family this week. I shared this story with hundreds of people as I taught Bible study last night, so perhaps the music ministry of Foothills touched them in some way, too.

Thank you, Lord,

**For anchoring us to your presence by your provision of the Good Shepherd.
Please continue to bless and use the ministries of our church to lovingly care for
your sheep. In Your Name we pray, Amen.**

Denise Serino

Monday, 1st Week of Lent, February 19

1 Corinthians 12:12-14

There is one body, but it has many parts. But all its many parts make up one body. It is the same with Christ. We were all baptized by one Holy Spirit. And so we are formed into one body. It didn't matter whether we were Jews or Gentiles, slaves or free people. We were all given the same Spirit to drink. So the body is not made up of just one part. It has many parts... God has placed each part in the body just as he wanted it to be. If all the parts were the same, how could there be a body? As it is, there are many parts. But there is only one body... You are the body of Christ. Each one of you is a part of it.

Gifts, Grids, and Gratitude

You may know how much I cherish my time calling numbers at Good Shepherd Ministry Center. Recently, I had occasion to reflect a little more on what it is that brings me back week after week. The joyful, helping, outgoing spirit that came alive in my classrooms is rekindled as I interact with the guests at GSMC. I feel centered and at home as I talk with our guests.

Early last summer, just after Erich stepped into his leadership position at the pantry, I slipped away for my summers of Grandparent Camps and family vacation time. I wondered now and then about who was calling those numbers in that little hallway corner at GSMC. After I returned, I was setting up one day when a woman whom Erich had asked to call numbers while I was gone, came to me and asked if she could show me something.

She recognized that the guests had number anxiety, but unlike me, who used my hands to indicate how long it would be, or asked the person to sit close so I could let them know when it was their turn, this woman had made grids. She showed me these large poster boards with carefully drawn grid lines whose boxes were then filled 1-10, 11-20, 21-30 and on and on, chart after chart, through 300! "You see," she said, "They don't know their numbers, and this way I can show them where we are and where they are in number order." Not only that, she also created number cards 0-10 for the wall so people would quickly see where to stand and not crowd each other. She laminated them all so they will last, and finally, she got an easel to raise up the poster boards so they could be seen.

I smiled as she showed all this to me, "Of course you did all this, Julie," I was thinking. "You are using your gifts." You see, for 10 years, Julie Bernardy and I taught across the hallway from one another. We were on the same teaching team in 7th grade at Montgomery Middle School in El Cajon. I taught English, and Julie, can you guess it, taught math.

Now here we are all these years later, sharing a different hallway, each of us giving our gifts in the best way we can. It never ceases to amaze, the way God provides.

Dear God,

I am filled with gratitude for the way You work in this world. I am filled with gratitude for your continual revealing of ways to accomplish good in this world. I am filled with gratitude for circles in life that allow relationships to be rekindled and renewed. I am filled with gratitude for you giving me ways to grow myself more deeply. I am filled with gratitude when I am called to remember that it is not all about me. Amen.

Linda Parker

Tuesday, 1st Week of Lent, February 20

Psalm 25:4-5

Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.

We identify God in many different ways. For example, we may use Trinitarian titles such as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We understand God to be our Creator and Redeemer. Through Jesus Christ, we experience God as the Good Shepherd and the True Vine. What I love about this psalm is that it addresses God as our Teacher.

All of us have had teachers that have transformed our lives. It may have been in preschool or elementary school when you experienced a particular teacher's care and nurture. It may have been in middle school or high school when a teacher supported you through a challenging time. It may be in college or graduate school when a teacher opened your eyes to new knowledge and wisdom. Teachers have a profound influence upon us.

My professors in seminary opened my eyes to new ways of reading and understanding the Bible. I learned the languages (Hebrew and Greek) in which the scriptures were originally written. I learned that the form in which a passage was written provided as much meaning as the words themselves. I learned the importance of historical context when interpreting a text. I learned that the perspective of the reader can dramatically change the meaning of a verse. I am so grateful for all these teachers who enriched my faith.

In Psalm 25, we lift up our prayers to God for learning, guidance, and wisdom. The scriptures are an endless source of knowledge and inspiration. Every time I read a passage, no matter how many times I've studied or preached it before, it yields something new. Our journey through life takes many turns. We need God to teach us on the right paths, the ones that bring us joy and wholeness. These are the paths of love, expressed through our compassion for others and service to neighbors.

Lent is a spiritual gift we receive each year in our faith journey. We can use each of these forty days to read, reflect, meditate, and pray on the scriptures. God our Teacher will reveal to us new insights that will illuminate the path we need to take in our life right now.

God,

Through your Word, teach me your ways. Guide me to take the paths that lead to healing and wholeness. You are my salvation, O God. In you I trust. Amen.

Rev. Greg Batson

Wednesday, 1st Week of Lent, February 21

Jeremiah 29:11-13

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

This year (and several prior), has been a year of crisis for many. Those of us who are aware of the wonderful work at Good Shepherd Ministry Center have seen the numbers of people needing support with basic necessities continue to rise. We have seen areas of our country more jeopardized with crime and poverty than many of us have experienced in our lifetimes. We have seen parts of the world affected by wars that many of us had thought were not needed, and certainly not wanted in the present day—but fighting continues nonetheless.

We have also had our own personal challenges—financial challenges, loss of loved ones and health challenges with family and friends that interrupt our sense of peace and hope for the future.

I'm the first to admit that I am not a "prayer professional". Between my lack of ability to focus for any period of time (I would probably be diagnosed with ADD were I in elementary school today!), and glances at my (paper) calendar that I love to fill, I have been challenged to pray intently for more than ten minutes at a time. However, I've found prayer a more significant need, especially in the last months of this year. It has been a need both for those I care about and for me, to keep a sense of hope—of a bright future. I'm finding more time for prayer and based on what is going on for me and my world, prayer is the answer.

God does know our world's hope and future—and He has plans for each one of us as well. I know this because my prayers give me the absolute feeling that He is listening when I call on him. I only need to make sure that I seek Him with all of my heart when I ask Him to listen. The result will ultimately benefit me and mine and our world—and provide a future that *He* has planned.

Dear God,

Each time I spend in prayer with You, I finish with a sense of peace. I know who is in charge of the health and well-being of my family and friends and I understand the need in our world for Your presence and plans. I may seek a resolution different from those plans You have for us—I understand that I do not always know the intricacies of Your plans. I will always make my best effort to seek you with all of my heart, for this is the simple request You make for me to find You. Amen.

Christie Ranney

Thursday, 1st Week of Lent, February 22

Psalm 100:1-2

Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness: come before his presence with singing.

My Dad's mom didn't come to church regularly, but we could persuade her on holidays, or when one or both of her great-grandchildren was playing the piano or handbells. When she did come, she sang with gusto. I can remember standing next to her at a Christmas concert and hearing her voice above others and feeling just a little bit embarrassed.

When I turned forty, I had a DVT (a blood clot) in my leg. This was very unexpected and startling to me. I realized that, in a way, I had cheated death. After this experience, I had many resolutions for my future. I vowed to live more fully, exercise more, and give myself (and everyone else) more Grace. At church one Sunday, I also decided to sing like my Grandma—with gusto. To sing so that God can hear. If you are near me in church, I almost apologize. (I think I embarrass my husband a bit, but I don't care.) I want to make a joyful noise. I want the Holy Spirit to know I am there. I want to sing as though I am thankful to be alive—because I really am!

Holy Lord,

Thank you for our lives full of love and laughter, service and singing. Help us to appreciate the many gifts we are given. We praise you with our song. In Your Name, Amen.

Shandra Zawacki

Friday, 1st Week of Lent, February 23

Galatians 6:10

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Luke 6:30

Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.

Adapted from the New York Times

A somewhat obscure text, about 2,000 years old, has been my unlikely teacher and guide for the past years, and my north star these last several months, as so many have felt as if we've been drowning in an ocean of sorrow and helplessness.

Buried deep within the Mishnah, a Jewish legal compendium from around the third century, is an ancient practice reflecting a deep understanding of the human psyche and spirit: When your heart is broken, when the specter of death visits your family, when you feel lost and alone and inclined to retreat, you show up. You entrust your pain to the community.

The text, [Middot 2:2](#), describes a pilgrimage ritual from the time of the Second Temple. Several times each year, hundreds of thousands of Jews would ascend to Jerusalem, the center of Jewish religious and political life. They would climb the steps of the Temple Mount and enter its enormous plaza, turning to the right en masse, circling counterclockwise.

Meanwhile, the brokenhearted, the mourners (and here I would also include the lonely and the sick) would make this same ritual walk but they would turn to the left and circle in the opposite direction: every step against the current.

And each person who encountered someone in pain would look into their eyes and inquire, "What happened to you? Why does your heart ache?"

"My father died," a person might say. "There are so many things I never got to say to him." Or perhaps, "My partner left. I was completely blindsided." Or, "My child is sick. We're awaiting the test results."

Those who walked from the right would offer a blessing, "May the Holy One comfort you," they would say. "You are not alone." And then they would continue to walk until the next person approached.

This timeless wisdom speaks to what it means to be human in a world of pain. This year, you walk the path of the anguished. Perhaps next year, it will be me. I hold your broken heart knowing that one day you will hold mine.

Dear God,

Thank you for giving us each other in our times of need. Thank you for our ability to empathize with and show compassion for one another. Help us to step out of our own self-centeredness long enough to be present with others. Guide us in showing up for our fellow human beings, whatever that may look like today. In Your name we pray, Amen.

Dennis Keller

Saturday, 1st Week of Lent, February 24

Romans 1:19-20

For what can be known about God is plain to them, for God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since his creation of the world, in the things that have been made, so they are without excuse.

How can anyone deny the existence of our Lord? You simply need to look out at a beautiful sunset; or sit at the edge of "Old Faithful" and experience a geyser in action; or gaze on the beauty of any number of gorgeous vistas in Yosemite National Park, or the Grand Canyon; the Canadian Rockies; Glacier Bay in Alaska or the view from the Eiffel Tower in Paris. Each of you can think of other glories in God's creation that you may have seen & know that a Divine Maker had to be involved in creating this world we live in!

We encounter Jesus each day in our fellow humans, as well. When you experience the birth of a baby or the excitement of a toddler at the arrival of the trash truck! When you serve those in need at a food pantry and you realize that may be the only food they are receiving...we may experience the face of our Lord. We see Jesus in the faces of teachers, nurses, doctors, pastors and sometimes in those who deliver our goods from Amazon! We have only to look for it! It is there.

If you're like me though – it's easier sometimes to see the bad things. BUT – let's endeavor to flip the coin and look for the JOY of our Savior instead! It's all a matter of perspective and proof is all around us if we only look...

Help me, oh Lord,

To see you in the things I encounter every.single.day. Please make my lens one of joy. If I repeat this practice, Lord – may it become a regular pattern when I will recognize you in all things. Amen.

Dottie Crummy

Monday, 2nd Week of Lent, February 26

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; A time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; A time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

Supposedly, this was written by a teenager. His life ended badly, having been fatally shot in a random incident. Subsequently, his parents were going through his personal effects, and found this composition he had written as part of an assignment for a creative writing class in high school:

'Every morning, we are given twenty-four golden hours. This stretch of time is one of the few things in this world that we get absolutely free of charge. If one had all the money in the world, that person could not buy an extra hour.

What would one do with this priceless treasure?

Remember, this is one day at a time. It is given only once each morning. How will you use it? Do you realize the value of this gift?

Remember too, if you waste it, you cannot get it back. Do some good.'

Dear Heavenly God,

Thank you for the gift of life. Thank you for our ability to choose how we spend our time. Thank you for giving us words and ways to express our gratitude. Help us to give of ourselves in honor of all you have given to us. Today we ask you to bless our endeavors to serve. In Your name we pray, Amen.

Paula Perry

Tuesday, 2nd Week of Lent, February 27

Psalm 139:7-12

Where can I go from your spirit? From your presence, where can I flee?

If I ascend to the heavens, you are there; if I lie down in Sheol, there you are.

If I take the wings of dawn and dwell beyond the sea,

Even there your hand guides me, your right hand holds me fast.

If I say, "Surely darkness shall hide me, and night shall be my light."

Darkness is not dark for you, and night shines as the day.

Darkness and light are but one with you.

In the mystery of God's grace, I wrote a poem while on retreat four years ago and scheduled an email to arrive in my inbox on Sunday the 21st of January. (Or did the Holy Spirit send it my way? I know which coincidence I am favoring...)

I am never alone.

I may choose to see dark,

but light is casting the shadow.

I may feel trapped in a life without

but more truthfully

I am knit into a universe,

expanding and evolving with possibilities

My loss is not the end.
Your presence is always willing;
 to stand with me
 in the fear and unknown
 in the doorway to a world of isolation.
You will hold me,
 laying your hands on my shoulder, head and heart

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for your divine Spirit that guides our lives. Help us to be open and listen so we can take action when we hear your call. Bless our families and neighbors, coworkers and friends. You honor us with your guiding hand. Amen.

David Youngblood

Wednesday, 2nd Week of Lent, February 28

Romans 5:5

...and hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Isaiah 40:31

...but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint.

We all experience challenges in our lives. Some years are better than others. 2023 was “not so good” for us. And yet we walked closer with God as we so desperately needed His strength and love. Hopefulness is often said to be “a desire with the expectation of fulfillment.” I think of it as faith in knowing God will bless us with answered prayer. Now, as we all know, that does not mean all our prayers will result in receiving what we want. Rather, prayer is a journey for us with Christ as our Counselor and Advocate. God loves us so much that He provides strength and shelters us in His love. Our Holy Spirit flooded our being, so anxiety and fear were eased and we focused on the future.

I discovered that when we answer God’s call to help others (even when we’re tired and struggling), He blesses us through them. I remember feeling surprised to experience joy and renewal after a visit with our homebound seniors. I had arrived with the intention to provide a listening ear, loving concern, and a little joy. Yet it was me who felt blessed by them.

During this time of Lent, let’s pursue hopefulness. Whether we are going through challenges or not, it is time to desire a closer relationship with our Lord with the

expectation of His calling us. We can be hopeful in all things, because our Lord is a God of Hope.

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for loving us before we knew how to love. Teach us how to hope in you completely. Our individual lives may be difficult at times but we know you are always with us. We pray for our world, our families, our friends, and our church. Amen.

Carolyn Weidetz

Thursday, 2nd Week of Lent, February 29

1 Peter 5:7

...give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you.

[Adapted from Guideposts.org daily devotion.]

God is the ultimate caregiver. He's the best in the business. And that should encourage us as we set out to care for others. If we imitate God—not just in actions and deeds, but with our motives and intents—we can't go wrong. And when we feel overwhelmed, God asks us to cast our cares on Him. Because God cares so very much for us!

So run to the Lord with your struggles. Trust God to brush away every tear, wash away every pain, and then set you on your feet again—to care for others. Caregiving, true caregiving, is an art, one modeled by the greatest Artist of all time.

Dear Lord,

As I seek to serve and care for others, help me to embrace your everlasting love. For you are the ultimate Caregiver. Amen.

Lisa Stewart

Friday, 2nd Week of Lent, March 1

James 1:2-3

My friends, consider yourselves fortunate when all kinds of trials come your way, for you know that when your faith succeeds in facing such trials, the result is the ability to endure.

2 Corinthians 4:18

...for we fix our attention, not on things that are seen, but on things that are unseen. What can be seen lasts only for a time, but what cannot be seen lasts forever.

Thomas Merton was one of the more influential spiritual writers of the last century. He wrote a now-famous prayer that seems appropriate for those times when we experience the hurricanes of life and don't know which way to turn.

“My Lord, God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does, in fact, please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do that you will lead me by the right road, although I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me and will never leave me to face my perils alone.” In Your name I pray, Amen.

Suzanne Vattuone

Saturday, 2nd Week of Lent, March 2

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Galatians 6:2

Carry each other's burdens and so you will fulfill the law of Christ.

This is submitted from a devotion for Choir Members by Andrea Doering.

I love listening to our church choir as their voices lead us in Praise from the chancel. For me, they are also a visible reminder of what praying as a community can do.

Years ago, my husband sang in the choir. He stood beside an older man who was unsteady on his feet and his legs sometimes gave out. On the other side of this man stood a young man, a good friend of ours. As the choir stood to sing, my husband and our friend were like bookends for the man between them, ready to catch him if his legs gave way. Every time we rose to sing, I watched the three men orchestrate their rise and descent.

To this day, I see the image of them in my mind as I offer prayers for my family, friends, neighbors, and country. I thank God for the people who buttress me with their prayers, helping and sustaining me when I falter. This is a great comfort we are able to offer each other.

Loving God,

Thank you for our companions. Make us aware of those around us who need to be supported by both prayer and acts of compassion. Amen.

Sally Alto

Monday, 3rd Week of Lent, March 4

Matthew 13:31

He put another parable before them saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his fields. It is the smallest of all the seeds but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

Matthew 17:20

For truly I tell you if you have faith the size of a mustard seed you will say to this mountain "move from here to there" and it will move and nothing will be impossible for you. (This was said in chastising the disciples for their lack of faith.)

My brother sent me a windowsill herb garden kit for Christmas. The first to sprout was the mustard. So it put me in mind that I should write a devotional about mustard seeds. And as often happens when you think you know a verse, well I didn't, not completely. Because in the first instance Jesus was explaining how large a tiny bit of faith can grow, but in the quote that I remembered (the second) he was actually chastising the disciples for their lack of faith.

How big is my faith? I started out thinking that I have never moved a mountain. And suddenly I remembered that I had! Three years ago, I had the wild idea to build a barn and a riding arena on the property across the street. And (very short version) in order to make the property level enough to build what I wanted; I needed significant fill dirt. At the same time, Ranch Feed was expanding their store and needed somewhere to put the mountain behind the store. Okay, so the mountain didn't willingly walk ten miles to my property, but with a vision and some trucks, the mountain did move.

I am not a prayer warrior. When I remember to pray, it sometimes turns into a lecture on what God should do. I don't have a consistent devotional practice. So, I don't hold myself up as any example of how to be a Christian. But I do think I have faith. I have had faith enough that I know God must have had a bigger plan to call Jay home too soon. I had faith that God would somehow reach my addicted child, and he is, at the moment, thirty days sober, and I hope I have faith to weather the next step if that sobriety doesn't continue.

I think the message here is that if you have to move a mountain, it's okay to use a tractor and a truck.

**Lord,
Forgive me for my tiny faith and help me to grow it until it is a big glorious tree.
Amen.**

Sarah Clarke

Tuesday, 3rd Week of Lent, March 5

Matthew 21:22

If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.

So often, my prayer time is occupied with requests for others, our world, the environment and the animals. The list can be long, and sometimes I resort to, "You know what's in my heart, please help."

Seldom do I make a personal request in prayer, it just doesn't occur to me. In speaking with friends, I find they are the same way. Is it because we think our issues are too small compared to the world at large? Do we run out of time?

We've been instructed to love each other as ourselves so there's our encouragement to think we are worthy! If we don't ask for God's help, I bet many of us find it difficult to ask friends and family for help, if needed.

Problems shared are halved. Let us feel more comfortable petitioning for what we want for ourselves in prayer or with friends, and be hopeful that these requests will be fulfilled.

Dear Heavenly Father,

Thank you for your Son and his words of instruction to us found in the Bible. Let us have faith to believe Thy will be done and that Your plans will give us hope and a future. Amen.

Sandra Hatton Eulitt

Wednesday, 3rd Week of Lent, March 6

Genesis 1:1-4

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

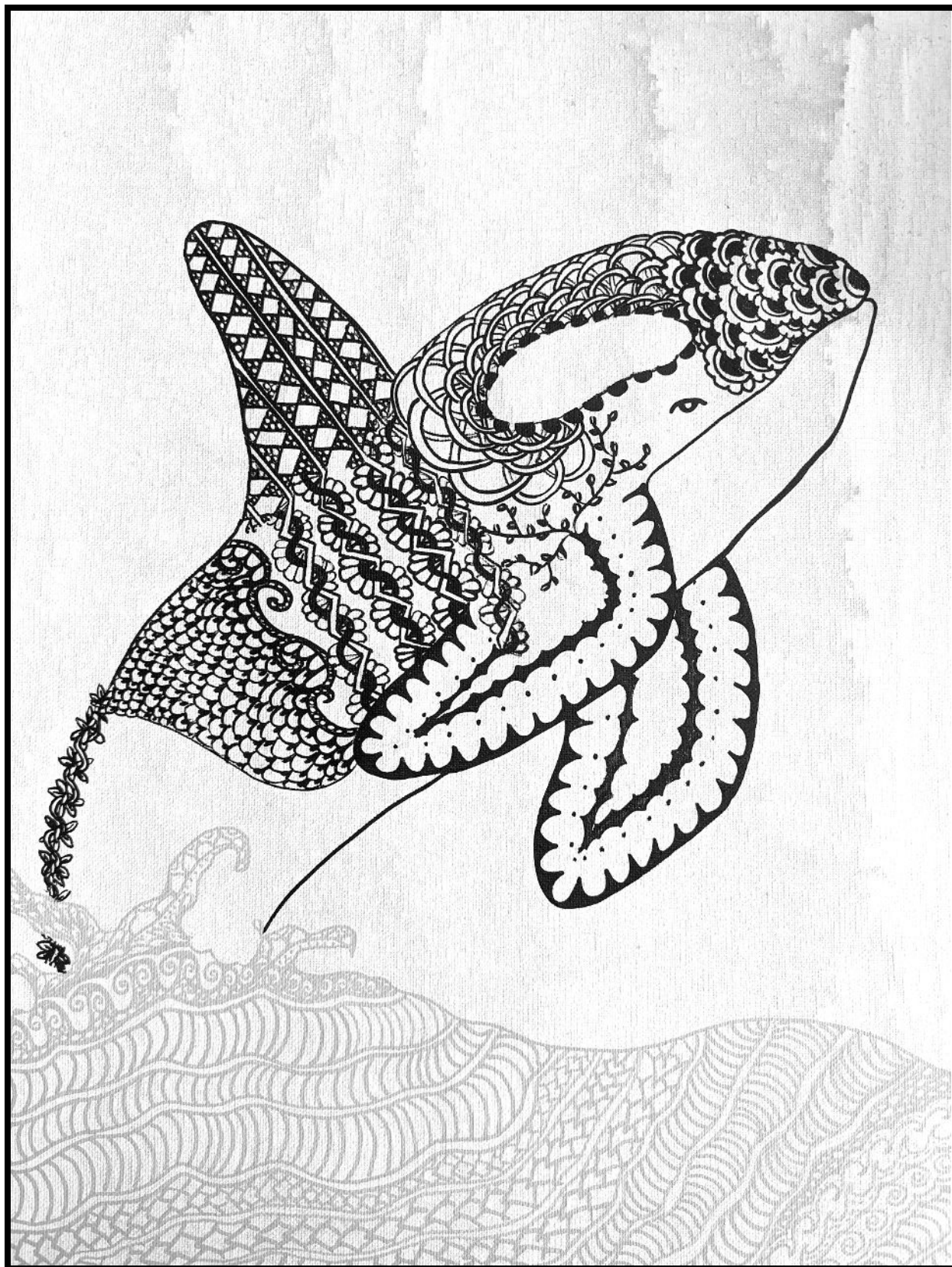
And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.

Genesis 20 and 21

And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven.

And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good.

Today is a day for coloring, writing, or quiet contemplation.



Dear God of heaven and earth,
Thank you for all we see. Thank you for abundantly blessing us with so much. Be
with those who are struggling and help them to see Your light in their darkness.

Be with us as we go out into the world to be Your hands and feet. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Shandra Zawacki

Thursday, 3rd Week of Lent, March 7

Isaiah 41:13

For I, the Lord your God, will hold your right hand saying to you, "fear not, I will help you."

God promises to support and help us through every trial. I discovered some time ago that one way to combat fears and anxieties is to pray about them. To move forward in life, if I focus on possibilities, my faith can work many wonders and yes, even miracles. Looking through the eyes of faith, many issues were turned around and faith carried me through the problems.

The following is a message I received on a postcard many years ago from the church:

"I hope this finds you.

I think of you everyday.

I miss being asked for my advice, and loving you enough to always tell you the truth.

Now that you are grown, I miss the feeling of your hand in my hand. Sitting on the side of your bed and watching you sleep.

I'm still here, you know. When you need me. When you're ready.

Love always, God."

O God,

Remind us that healing and recovery are a journey. Bless us with wisdom and faith to stay strong and positive in our world of struggles and problems. May we find that when we need something to lean on, we remember you, God. Help us to hang on to our trust in you when we feel that you are far away. Amen.

Pat Hodge

Friday, 3rd Week of Lent, March 8

Romans 15:13 King James Version

Now the God of hope, fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.

It was a rainy morning in the week before Christmas, and I was out running errands to get those last few straggling gifts. It had been a successful trip, and I

was heading to the final store on my list to visit, when I drove right past the street where I needed to turn.

It seemed rather strange to miss the turn, since I've taken this same route to the store hundreds of times and have never missed it before. Resigned to a slightly longer trip, I drove farther down the street to the next light and made a U-turn.

Finally at the shopping center, as I was headed towards the store entrance, I was walking behind a young mother carrying a little child, who had her hands full with the normal baby accoutrements, trying to get inside quickly to avoid the rain. As she was walking, I noticed she dropped what looked to be a wallet, but she kept on going, apparently not realizing she was missing anything. I called out to her and reconnected her with her wallet and she was most appreciative and grateful.

Actually, though, this felt more like a gift given to me. It was another "God Moment" to add to my collection of all the times I've seen Him at work, making a way, protecting, helping, caring for myself and others, each time strengthening my trust in Him. For me, the future seems hopeful only when I envision it filled with God's presence and active participation in my life.

So, this chance encounter left me with a tinge of joy, knowing that if I hadn't missed my turn, the timing would not have worked for me to see the mother's wallet drop. And, also, a tinge of hope, knowing I can trust God to care for our needs, sometimes even before we're aware we need help.

Dear Father,

Thank you for glimpses of Your wonderful care and provision. May my hopes for the future be based on my trust in You, trusting that You are always actively involved in my life, working out Your plans which, based on Your character, will be both loving and good. Amen.

Anonymous

Saturday, 3rd Week of Lent, March 9

Romans 15:13 The Passion Translation

Now may God the fountain of hope fill you to overflowing with uncontainable joy and perfect peace as you trust in Him. And may the power of the Holy Spirit continually surround your life with his super-abundance until you radiate with hope.

What a wonderful goal this is- to be overflowing with uncontainable joy and perfect peace... I want that in my life! And how do we tap into this fountain of hope that God offers? I believe it comes through the power of the Holy Spirit, and our only requirement, according to the Apostle Paul, is to trust in Him our maker.

I found this prayer typed and stuck in the pages of my mom's favorite book of Psalms. I'm not sure if she wrote it herself or kept it because it spoke to her.

Elbe Geer Listen/Care Meeting July 8, 1982

“Disturb us, oh Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves: when our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little; when we have arrived in safety because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, oh Lord when with the abundance of things we possess, we have lost our thirst for the Water of Life; when, having fallen in love with time, we have ceased to dream of eternity.

Stir us, oh Lord, to dare more boldly to venture on wider seas, where storms will show Your mastery; where losing sight of land, we will find the stars to guide us.

In the name of Him who pushed back the horizons of our hopes and invited the brave to follow Him, in Jesus Christ. Amen “

Lord,

Please stir us and disturb us as we follow your will. Amen.

Lora Lindblom

Monday, 4th Week of Lent, March 11

Matthew 6:26-27

Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

Psalms 50:11

I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine.

It happened nearly two years ago; a lake gull showed up on the deck railing. I thought she must be hungry, so I fed her. From that day forward, “Arnetta” showed up. Sometimes she looks for me. If there is no food on the railing, she flies low so I can see her. I named her “Arnetta.” Sometimes I’ll call her and she hears my voice and flies right around about four times before she lands on the deck railing to eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner. She’ll leave a little for the other birds, so they won’t go hungry. It fills my heart to see Arnetta. I know there is a reason why she comes, but she fills my heart and makes me feel good, it’s happiness and love.

Dear God,

Thank you for animals. Thank you for the unexpected ways we fall in love with life each day. Thank you for sending reminders of your love and creation. Please help those that are struggling today. Help them to see You somewhere or in something or someone. Help all of us appreciate the gift of life. In Your name we pray, Amen.

Nancy La Bay

Tuesday, 4th Week of Lent, March 12

Psalm 86:12

I will praise you, Lord my God, with my whole heart; I will glorify your name forever.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

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

I am God. Today I will be handling all of your problems. Please remember that I do not need your help.

If life happens to deliver a situation to you that you cannot handle, do not attempt to resolve it. Kindly put it in the SFGTD (something for God to do) box. All situations will be resolved, but in My time, not yours.

Once the matter is placed into the box, do not hold on to it by worrying about it. Instead, focus on all of the wonderful things that are present in your life now.

If you find yourself stuck in traffic; don't despair. There are people in this world for whom driving is an unheard of privilege.

Should you have a bad day at work; think of the man who has been out of work for years.

Should you despair over a relationship gone bad; think of the person who has never known what it's like to love and be loved and return.

Should you grieve the passing of another weekend; think of the woman in dire straits, working twelve hours a day, seven days a week to feed her children.

Should your car break down, leaving you miles away from assistance; think of the paraplegic who would love the opportunity to take that walk.

Should you notice a new gray hair in the mirror; think of the cancer patient in chemo who wishes she had hair to examine.

Should you find yourself at a loss and pondering what is life all about, asking, "What is my purpose?" Be thankful. There are those who didn't live long enough to get the opportunity.

Should you find yourself the victim of other people's bitterness, ignorance, smallness or insecurities; remember, things could be worse. You could be one of them!

Dear God,

Thank you for helping us to put things in perspective. Thank you for always listening to our problems; the big and the small. Thank you for our many blessings. Help those that don't feel blessed today. Guide us as we bless others. Amen.

Author Unknown, Submitted by Paula Perry

Wednesday, 4th Week of Lent, March 13

John 9:1-11

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must do the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam." So he went and washed and came back with his sight. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some said, "It is he." Others said, "No, but he is like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." So they said to him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' So I went and washed and received my sight."

Hopefulness

I have been vision impaired since my early twenties. I'm now 53 years old. Before losing my central vision (I was diagnosed with having myopic macular degeneration), I was living independently on my own. I was in my parent's house due to finances, but I had a car and I loved driving! It was my freedom.

I felt helpless after I became "blind". I couldn't do the things I had done before. We were living in Minden, Nevada, and they didn't have any services for the blind, so I came home to San Diego. I wasn't sure about a lot of things. I was feeling lost and alone. I had my faith in God, but I was living in a dark place, feeling helpless and not hopeful. It took a very long time for me to get where I

am today. Back then, I didn't feel good about life in general. My depression was not good.

Eventually, I began feeling hopeful about things I hadn't even thought I could do. I learned orientation and mobility, using a white cane for the blind. Nowadays I use a walker and a scooter. It may not be my car, however I am still able to "drive" using the peripheral vision I'm grateful to have! I began to learn to read Braille, using a computer with special software for the blind, and I enjoy reading (or rather listening to) audiobooks! I later learned how to do watercolor painting!

I still feel hopeful that someday there will be a cure for my blindness. But, I'm reminded of a passage in the Bible of how Jesus cured the blind man to see! If my Lord and Savior can do that, then, I know I will someday finally "see" for myself how great He really is! I'm feeling hopeful and I know I have my God in my heart. I know that the hopefulness of life in general can be feeling grateful for all things to come.

Dear Heavenly Father,

Thank you for everything seen and not seen. Thank you for the beauty in our lives. Help us to find beauty in others and in unexpected places. Grant us the ability to accept our circumstances and be grateful for what we have. In Your name we pray, Amen.

Deana Blake

Thursday, 4th Week of Lent, March 14

Colossians 4:5

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.

Ephesians 5:16-17

Make good use of every opportunity you have, because these are evil days. Don't be fools, then, but try to find out what the Lord wants you to do.

Barack Obama was our 44th president. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009 for his "extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples". Both he and his wife, Michelle, continue to speak to build peace and cooperation in our world, and they are acting to promote opportunities for young people. One way is through the Girls

Opportunity Alliance Network. Another way is through the Obama Foundation Leaders program. More about these programs can be found through the obama.org website.

"The best way to not feel hopeless is to get up and do something. Don't wait for good things to happen to you. If you go out and make some good things happen, you will fill the world with hope, you will fill yourself with hope," -Barack Obama

Dear All-Knowing God,

Thank you for people that continuously go above and beyond to make our world a better place. When we see or hear something or someone that does the opposite, help us to remember that you are inspiring hope and love in our world. We thank you for the many opportunities to help others, and we know that the more we can do good in this world, the more we smother the bad. Be with us now and always. In Your name we pray, Amen.

Suzanne Vattuone

Friday, 4th Week of Lent, March 15

Romans 15:13 New King James Version

Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.

Life is unpredictable. It can change in a minute, and it deals blows we don't expect. We find ourselves in a place of despair, longing for some type of comfort. In those times, we can turn to Romans 15:13, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."

The first mention of hope in this verse refers to God as the origin of hope. We will face disappointments or life-altering detours. We will experience the death of a dream or the loss of a loved one. But no matter how difficult our circumstances, we can have hope because God is our guide, our comforter, our rock that remains steadfast when everything around us crumbles.

The second mention of hope refers to us as the recipients. God pours hope into us when we choose to believe God is who he is and that God always keeps his promises. God makes hope possible by the power of the Holy Spirit living in us. We can live in hope because the source of hope lives in us. And we can share that hope with others.

Amazing God,

You are the reason for hope. When life hurts, help us keep our thoughts fixed on your enduring love. Fill us to overflowing with a hope that spills out onto those around us. Amen.

Lisa Stewart

Saturday, 4th Week of Lent, March 16

Proverbs 3:5-6

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

The unfathomable challenges of life are a given. But God doesn't move. He stays with us in the disasters and the inevitable uncertainties.

He'll stay there with us too, through every situation. We simply accept that in trust and HOPE.

We may never know the reasons for the devastating situations encountered as we move through life. We may never realize God's plan for us until we meet Him face to face.

We look back over the terrain of the years we have lived and see patterns. We gain a modicum of understanding as to the directions things in life have taken, one thing leading to another to an eventual outcome. Sometimes we can even understand why some things happened or went the way they did, to an end result.

So we breathe Praise to Him, and we accept with that act, comes Peace. Nothing guarantees a smooth everyday life. By knowing God, we have the ability to handle it.

Dear God,

Today we thank you for your constant presence. We appreciate knowing that you endure with us through our trials and celebrations, our despair and our joy. Grant us the peace that comes with trusting in you. Amen.

Paula Perry

Monday, 5th Week of Lent, March 18

Colossians 3:16

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; in all wisdom teach and admonish one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

Forgive Me When I Whine

Today upon a bus, I saw a lovely maid with golden hair; I envied her -- she seemed so gay, and how, I wished I were so fair; When suddenly she rose to leave, I saw her hobble down the aisle; she had one foot and wore a crutch, but as she passed, a smile. Oh God, forgive me when I whine, I have two feet -- the world is mine.

And when I stopped to buy some sweets, the lad who served me had such charm; he seemed to radiate good cheer, his manner was so kind and warm; I said, "It's nice to deal with you, such courtesy I seldom find;" he turned and said, "Oh, thank you sir." And then I saw that he was blind. Oh, God, forgive me when I whine, I have two eyes, the world is mine.

Then, when walking down the street, I saw a child with eyes of blue; he stood and watched the others play, it seemed he knew not what to do; I stopped a moment, then I said, "Why don't you join the others, dear?" He looked ahead without a word, and then I knew he could not hear. Oh God, forgive me when I whine, I have two ears, the world is mine.

With feet to take me where I'd go; with eyes to see the sunsets glow, with ears to hear what I would know. I am blessed indeed. The world is mine; oh, God, forgive me when I whine.

Gracious God,

Please forgive me when I fail to be as grateful as I should. Help me overcome my inclination to whine with overwhelming gratitude. Remind me to thank you at all times for the countless blessings you bestow. Amen.

Author Unknown, Contributed by Larry Skeels

Tuesday, 5th Week of Lent, March 19

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Psalms 103:1-4

Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise His holy name. Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits — who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion.

Throughout my life I have always felt blessed. I have always been grateful for everything God has given to me. Over the last ten years, I have had several physical issues that required (sometimes extensive) surgery. A few weeks ago, I had a particularly difficult physical trial. My retina tore in two places and

detached by more than fifty percent. I think it has been the most difficult of all of my physical issues (and I have had nine other eye surgeries).

Throughout all of my physical trials, I have remained steadfast in my feelings of gratitude. Gratitude for everything I can do, gratitude for everything I have instead of what I don't have. I couldn't be more thankful that my daughter stayed the first three nights with me and was willing to stay the two months I needed to recover. I am thankful that my son and daughter-in-law were proactive and bought a table and chair and special pillows in attempts to make me more comfortable. I am thankful my husband flew down from our home in Oregon to be my caregiver. I'm thankful that my sister-in-law is always willing to help when needed, taking me to so many doctor appointments.

Each day I have felt more grateful. I am thankful that I am close to my doctors. Doctor Patel (the retina specialist for Kaiser in San Diego) could squeeze me in the very next day for emergency surgery. My glaucoma specialist, Dr. Nugent, even told my retina specialist to treat me like a VIP. I am grateful for technology that could allow for a retina to be repaired. (Years ago, Kaiser only did this retina surgery in Los Angeles.) I am so very thankful to have *three* churches filled with people praying and thinking about me. I have such kind and caring friends and family—sending cards and flowers and love! I don't think I could have gotten through the last few weeks, or could get through the next few weeks without God and His many blessings.

Dear God,

Thank you for everything You have given to us. Thank you for allowing us to live our exceptional and our ordinary lives. We are grateful for the extraordinary and the mundane. Help us to see beyond our physical trials and appreciate everything we have been blessed with. In Your name we pray, Amen.

Joanne Skeels

Wednesday, 5th Week of Lent, March 20

Matthew 21:1-11

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away." This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

"Say to Daughter Zion, 'See your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. A very

large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, While others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. the crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

Heavenly Father, as we approach Palm Sunday, we remember the reason. We remember how the events that took place changed the lives of so many people. We remember that those who were present were not all of one mind, as we put ourselves into that event and examine the feelings and desires of the people who were there.

We are the **disciples**, asking to borrow a donkey and her colt from a stranger. We are nervous about it, we are resigned to carrying out the task, although we don't fully understand why. We pray for success in our assignment, and we are thankful when the owner responds graciously. *Praise God!*

We are **part of the crowd** on the way to celebrate The Feast of Unleavened Bread, enthusiastically cheering and spreading our cloaks on the road. Some of us are cutting branches and laying them on the road, while others are waving palm branches. We thank God that the Messiah is coming, that we believe he is, in fact, here. *Blessed be God!*

We have heard this man speak and seen him heal. We are the **vocal ones**, running ahead, announcing his entry into Jerusalem. We shout Hosanna to the Son of David! We are excited to greet him. We thank God that he has finally sent the Messiah we've been awaiting. *Thanks be to God!*

Some of us are in a **different part of the crowd**, fearful, perhaps angry, bewildered about what is happening and who this man might be. We are surprised by the turmoil, yet curious about him. We pray that we will soon learn who he really is and that he will pose no threat to our well-being. *Hear us, O LORD!*

We are the **citizens of Jerusalem**, some of us confused and unnerved, some of us certain of his identity and excited, all of us witnessing the seemingly triumphal arrival of Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth. We all pray that if his presence causes trouble, we will not be affected by it. We pray for our own safety and the safety of our city. *O LORD, make haste to help us!*

We are the **disciples**, walking along with him, always fearing for the safety of our beloved Rabbi, and for our own. We look around, cautiously, watching for any signs of disturbance. We pray that God will protect us all. *Save us, LORD!*

We watch as he rides in on a donkey, just as the prophet Zechariah proclaimed so many years ago. We know the prophecy, and we look on in amazement as we see it manifesting before us. *Thanks be to God!*

We wonder if what we have heard could possibly be true. We pray for answers, for guidance. *LORD, your love endures forever!*

Father,

help us to feel the excitement of Jesus' arrival this Palm Sunday, just as those in Jerusalem felt it 2000 years ago. Help us to keep that excitement and curiosity alive as we encounter Jesus during this Holy Week. We welcome him with Hosannas and praise him for the miracles he shows us in our own lives. We want to feel his presence as this week unfolds. Thank you, God, for hearing each of our prayers just as you heard the prayers of the crowd on the road into Jerusalem. Thank you for sending Jesus, in whose holy name, we pray, Amen.

Sue Kelly

Thursday, 5th Week of Lent, March 21

Ephesians 3:16

I pray that out of his glorious riches, he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.

In the article, *Start With Hello* by Amy Spencer, she says that by retreating from the world around us and tuning into our devices, we are more prone to loneliness, depression, and anxiety. She quotes research that states that low social connection is worse for our health than smoking or obesity. She says that if you haven't, it is time to let in the random people who pop into our days. It will improve your health and your emotional well-being.

Part of the positive result we obtain from interacting with strangers is because when interacting with them, we try to be cheerful and pleasant and our best selves. The old phrase "fake it til you make it" really does work. We get just as much benefit from an interaction with a stranger as we do from a loved one. We put our best face forward and feel better - acting open and happy helps you become open and happy. Connecting with others also helps you see that everyone suffers from something. Not all of our problems are the same, but we all have them.

Here are four ways to step out of your comfort zone:

Make eye contact and smile.

Be a cash-register talker. (Talk to a person in line with you or the cashier.)

Look for an easy ice-breaker. (If you're at the park, comment on something nearby - a dog, plant, or baby.)

Connect with **un**strangers—like a barista or your mail carrier.

Heavenly God,

Thank you for everything—the spectacular and the mundane. Thank you for putting strangers in our way. Help us to step out of our comfort zones and interact joyfully with those around us. Help us to see Your Spirit all around us. In Your Name we pray, Amen.

Shandra Zawacki

Friday, 5th Week of Lent, March 22

Isaiah 55:10-12

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.

Pepper Choplin is a full-time composer, conductor, and humorist. He likes to incorporate different musical styles such as folk, Gospel, classical, and jazz. He has written more than 300 anthems for church and school choirs. "This is My Word" is a choral composition by Pepper Choplin. This anthem is a paraphrase of Isaiah 55:10-12, portraying the scripture that assures us of God's faithfulness to us. Below is the anthem's text:

As the snow falls from heaven

as it comes in swirling showers from the sky, So is my Word.

As the rains bring the water to the earth that is thirsty and dry, So is my Word.

And the Word of my mouth, it shall not return empty; it will bless the earth wherever it is heard. This is my Word.

As the rains bring renewal and the tender buds begin to come alive, so is my Word. Giving seed to the sower, and the bread to the hungry 'til they thrive, so is my Word.

And the Word of my mouth, it shall not return empty: it will bless the earth wherever it is heard. This is my Word.

O Lord, when I am weary, when I feel the days I'm living are in vain,

my God help me be faithful to the Word you have given to proclaim. Proclaim the Word.

And you will go out in joy and be led forth in peace, and the hills will break

before you into song.

So be faithful, brave, and true, for I will go before you.

And when your earthly journey here is done, I'll say well done!

As the snow falls from heaven and the rain falls in showers from the sky, this is my Word.

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for the gift of music. Thank you for the people who write music we can sing and relate to. Help us to open our hearts to Your words and the meaning within the songs. We praise You with joy and thanksgiving. Amen.

Sandra LaPlant

Saturday, 5th Week of Lent, March 23

Mark 1:9-11

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Baptism: Part 1

There are references in the Hebrew Bible to the practice of ritual cleansing with water as preparation for entering the Holy Temple.

In the New Testament, John the Baptist adopted a similar purification rite – or cleansing – called baptism, which he performed as many people prepared themselves for the coming of the Messiah. People came to the Jordan river to confess all the things they had done wrong so that they would be forgiven, and cleansed, and loved.

Then Jesus showed up! John lowered Jesus into the water, too, and when he came up, God said, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." He didn't say, "This is my son with whom I am well pleased because he has proven to me that he deserves it, or because he has done many great things, or because he is perfect." God called Jesus "beloved" just as he was.

When we are baptized, God calls us his "beloved," too. We are loved just for being ourselves. Always remember: You are a beloved child of God. As Nadia-Bolz Weber says, "God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, loves you as you are."

Holy God,

Thank you for loving me -- just the way I am. Amen.

Susan Naslund

Monday of Holy Week, March 25

Mark 1:9-11

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Baptism: Part 2

Baptism is recognized by most Christian denominations. Over time, many practices surrounding baptism have evolved and there are several differences in the sacrament. Whether a denomination believes in infant baptism or in full immersion or in just a sprinkling of water, the sacrament of baptism is always a gift of grace freely given.

In addition to professing our belief in Jesus Christ, and confessing our sins, in the United Methodist Church there is an important baptismal covenant:

We are asked, "Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?"

It seems like we rarely contemplate this freedom we accepted (or that was accepted on our behalf) at the time of our baptisms.

Evil, injustice, and oppression are terms that envelop racism, sexism, egoism, classism, xenophobia, and homophobia, and even environmental harm. By our baptisms, we are given the freedom to call upon our courage to act justly and to do what is necessary to make sure all creation is recognized as God's beloved.

Holy God,

Thank you for loving me -- just the way I am. Help me to recognize all creation as your beloved, too. Amen.

Susan Naslund

Tuesday of Holy Week, March 26

Matthew 5:16

In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven.

John 1:5

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

1 John 1:7

But if we live in the light, just as he is in the light, then we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin.

Hope - a beautiful piece by Nikki Banas

"If you only carry one thing throughout your entire life, let it be hope. Let it be hope that better things are always ahead. Let it be hope that you can get through even the toughest of times. Let it be hope that you are stronger than any challenge that comes your way. Let it be hope that you are exactly where you are meant to be right now, and that you are on the path to where you are meant to be... Because during these times, hope will be the very thing that carries you through."

Dear Heavenly God,

May we reflect on the power we have to believe in hope. We can choose hope over despair. We can choose to see the good instead of the evil. Help us to envision a world where everyone has what they need; then help us go out and make it happen. May all of our small acts add up to many. May we be the light that makes you proud. May we reflect your light in our community. In Your name we pray. Amen.

Suzanne Vattuone

Wednesday of Holy Week, March 27

2 Corinthians 1:2-7

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

This is paraphrased from Holley Gerth's book, Hope Your Heart Needs: 52 Encouraging Reminders of How God Cares for You.

On a warm summer evening, the family next door is enjoying popsicles. The five-year-old boy has his favorite, orange. The twenty-month-old girl is struggling to hold hers, and suddenly starts to scream, ear-splitting and capable of breaking glass. She has dropped her popsicle in the dirt.

Some parents might say, "Oh, knock it off. You don't know about real loss. This isn't a tragedy." They could say that with impatience as they move to replace the popsicle.

NOT this pair. They lean in to their miserable child, soothing words spoken to calm the storm. They put the replacement in a gritty sticky little hand and work to comfort her even over a relatively insignificant incident.

This seems right to us, that parents would comfort a child even over the little things.

Yet, I confess I've often not expected God to treat me this way. I've been hurt or faced a loss or found fear catching me by surprise and I've told myself, "This is too insignificant to bother God about. It's nothing compared to what some others face."

Then I think of the news headline, the social media post, or the prayer request, and feel that I'm selfish to even think I have a right to mourn the silly "dropped popsicle" that's staining the ground of my day.

God says that he will comfort us "in all our troubles" (2 Cor. 1:4). There is no size limit, no height requirement, no difficulty level assigned. It is unequivocal, universal, all-encompassing. The other day a friend called and shared a difficult story. She then apologized for "bothering me with something so small." It felt right to say, "If it matters to you, it matters to me."

This must be how the heart of our God is toward us. He's not waiting for us to get over it, to snap out of it and put on a brave face. Instead He comes to us, arms outstretched to pull us close, wipe our tears and whisper love words until we are ready to take his hand again.

Yes, we need to know nothing is too big for our God to handle. Nothing is too small for him to reach out his hands to us and hold us close.

Comforter God,

It means so much to know you care about every detail of my life. Today, I am struggling with _____. Thank you for listening, responding and walking through this with me. Amen.

Paula Perry

Maundy Thursday, March 28

Colossians 3:2

Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things.

Romans 12:2

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

My mother, Alta H. Vaughan, used to say, "I'm dismissing that from my mind." She also said, "People are full of cans... and some people are full of cannots."

Dear Lord,

Thank you for taking our burdens today so that we can have lighter hearts. I lift _____ up to you. Thank you for all different kinds of people. Help us to celebrate our differences, even as we enjoy each other's similarities. Help us to be people who can and not people who cannot. Give us the power to know the difference. In Your name we pray, Amen.

Marilyn Silva

Good Friday, March 29

Psalm 34:18

The Lord is near the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Luke 9:62

Jesus replied, "No procrastination. No backward looks. You can't put God's kingdom off till tomorrow. Seize the day."

What does it mean to be brokenhearted? When the Psalmist wrote, "The Lord is near the brokenhearted," it was understood that the brokenhearted were burdened with great sorrow or grief. Some biblical translations of "brokenhearted" include disappointment and loss of hope. In Hebrew, those who are broken in heart – the *nishberei lev* – are inwardly shattered.

Some Christians today are brokenhearted when they see so many empty pews in churches on Sunday mornings. They grieve the transformations of the church that were exacerbated by the pandemic. If that describes you, I want to draw near to you. In Hebrew, the adverb "near" (*karov*) means "close enough to touch." I want to come alongside you, put my arm around you, and give you assurance that the Holy Spirit is with you. At the same time, I will whisper in your ear, "No backward looks."

Because God is doing a new thing! We have been called to open the doors and go beyond the walls of our sanctuary to connect with the Holy Spirit while serving others. God is present as we continue to cultivate a place of health and peace in our community by helping our neighbors at the Good Shepherd Ministry Center. People are intrigued by this notion, are volunteering, and are beginning to return to the sanctuary to be reminded that the resurrection of Jesus meant the work of the Divine is not yet done. This is what church looks like now! Seize the day!

One writer put it this way, "Do not be dismayed by the brokenness of the world. All things break. Things can be mended. Not with time, as they say, but with intention. So go. Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally. The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you."

Holy God,

Mend my broken heart. Then, inspire me to go and mend the church. In my mending, use my stitches to create something new and powerful that allows me to draw near the brokenhearted so that they, too, might find comfort in these times of change. Amen.

Susan Naslund

Easter Vigil, Saturday, March 30

Psalm 25:5

Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.

Oh, no! The count of Easter eggs in my daughter's basket was off by at least ten. We looked all over the pasture before we went in to get ready for church but to no avail. We began the search as soon as we got home from Easter service. All of a sudden it became clear what had happened to the errant eggs...they had been discovered by my daughter's horse, Bill, and devoured happily, leaving the shells as evidence. If a horse could look smug, Bill did, as he cantered across the field.

At least the happy memory we have of that particular Easter is still with us and it brings us to wonder how on earth did Easter egg hunts become so important? The amount of information on wikipedia on this subject is amazing. For instance, the three parts of the egg, the yolk, the albumin, and the shell represent the Trinity. Dying eggs a bright red represents the blood shed by Christ for us. Eggs were decorated thousands of years ago and embellished before they were put into early tombs. So how do we use this information to help our children observe Lent and Easter in a religious manner? Do we tell them the Easter Bunny hid the eggs? The same dilemma comes up at Christmas and the question of whether Santa came down the chimney... who supplied the stockings with Scotch tape and oranges?

The truth is always the best story. Jesus Christ, the son of God, arose from the grave and His death, burial, and resurrection is what we celebrate. He is alive, little girl, He is alive!

Dear Lord,

Let us celebrate with our families in this precious time... Help us to always guide our children in the Word of God for He is our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Phyllis M. Johns



Use this space to jot down any thoughts or doodles this Lent.

