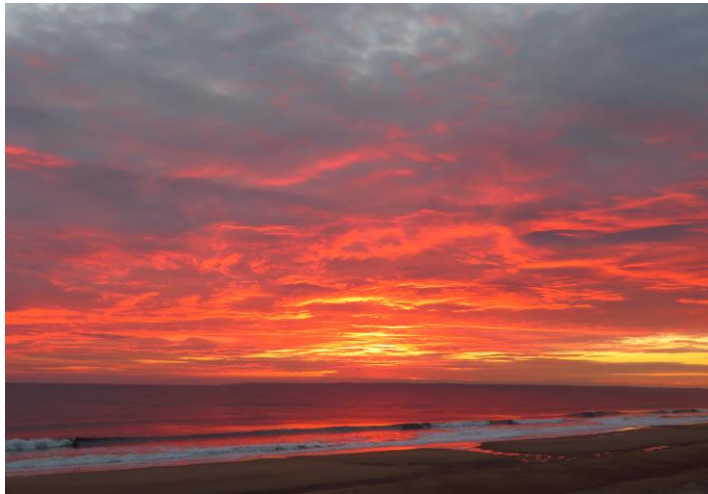


*Consider the Habits That  
Shape Us*

**Fourth Presbyterian Church  
Lenten Devotional 2021**



Dear Fourth Church,

In a year where the habits and routines that we've relied on for years – in-person worship, gathering for concerts and shows and classes – have been entirely disrupted, the way we choose to spend our time instead is all the more significant. How do we stay connected to one another, and to God? The new rituals that we've formed over the months of this pandemic, either adapted from pre-Covid times or new altogether, shape the character and color of our days.

It feels particularly special, in the midst of all the habits that we've had to change, that we maintain our annual tradition of compiling this Lenten devotional. I hope the habit of reading these reflections throughout the Lenten season inspires comfort and introspection, as it does every year.

In peace,  
Laura Blanton

## ASH WEDNESDAY Wednesday, February 17

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### 1 Peter 4:10-11

**Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.**

Have you ever noticed how some people are sick, seemingly *all the time*? They are the first to get the cold that is going around, and the last to get better. I am a member of this group and have been as far back as grade school. Because of fibromyalgia, there are times when a gentle touch or actions intended as therapy result in tears. It can incapacitate me for days or even weeks. And, when my body fails me and prevents me from sharing what I think are my “gifts,” I feel like I am the ultimate let-down to others— that I am failing in my moral commitments.

This passage may seem to reinforce that feeling of failure, saying “whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified.” However, this passage actually counters my failure feelings when I reflect. Is repeatedly calling myself a failure when I am unable to do things “speaking the words of God”? Is God glorified through pushing myself past the limits of my body? Does letting my body crumble possibly diminish Jesus Christ’s sacrifice endured on the cross? In actuality, this passage *calls* me to rise to the situation and discover new gifts. It is not a *judgement*. The limits of my body actually can serve as a way to open new doors, and find the “manifold,” or the many varied gifts God has bestowed upon me.

- *Christine Keller*

## SECOND DAY OF LENT

Thursday, February 18

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### Psalm 42:2

**My soul thirsts for God,  
for the living God.**

**When shall I come and behold  
the face of God?**

This Scripture passage leads me to reflect on the times in my life when I have felt far away from God and thirsty for a fuller awareness of God's presence in my life. This is something that has ebbed and flowed for me, not at all in sync with the externals in my life. In some of my times of greatest grief and fear, I've felt sustained by God's presence - and there have been times when everything seems calm and easy, but I feel empty and unable to focus my heart and spirit on my relationship with God. Right now I'm in such a thirsty patch, and it's tempting to keep pushing ahead with my own agenda, to paper over my feeling of emptiness, to procrastinate on dedicating the intention and space that are necessary for growing and deepening my relationship with God. This Psalm passage is a blessing to me in reminding me that these times of thirst are part of everyone's faith journey, and that we need to acknowledge our thirst honestly in order to be able to open ourselves more fully to our relationship with God.

- *Laura Massie*

## THIRD DAY OF LENT

Friday, February 19

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### 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.**

The last 12 months have been an incredible journey for most of us. It has been a year of many lessons and losses.

However, some of the most impactful truths we know are in this passage and were magnified this year. We can always rejoice in our relationship with God, we should always pray in thanksgiving for His closeness, His protection, and His wisdom. And, despite all that happens, through prayer we have our faith, our Father, our Savior and our Holy Spirit with us. He walks with us always.

- *Alyce Lee*

## FOURTH DAY OF LENT

Saturday, February 20

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### Lamentations 3:25

**The Lord is good to those who wait for him,  
to the soul that seeks him.**

Patience is not one of my virtues. Just ask Jared. I have a hard time waiting for things I really want: an upcoming event, a present under the tree, a cake baking in the oven. I often have to actively remind myself that the anticipation is worth it--and that there can even be something special about the waiting time, too. I need others (like Jared or friends) to keep me accountable and slow me down, even more so when the thing I'm hoping for is not guaranteed. Company often gives this "in between" period meaning beyond just biding time.

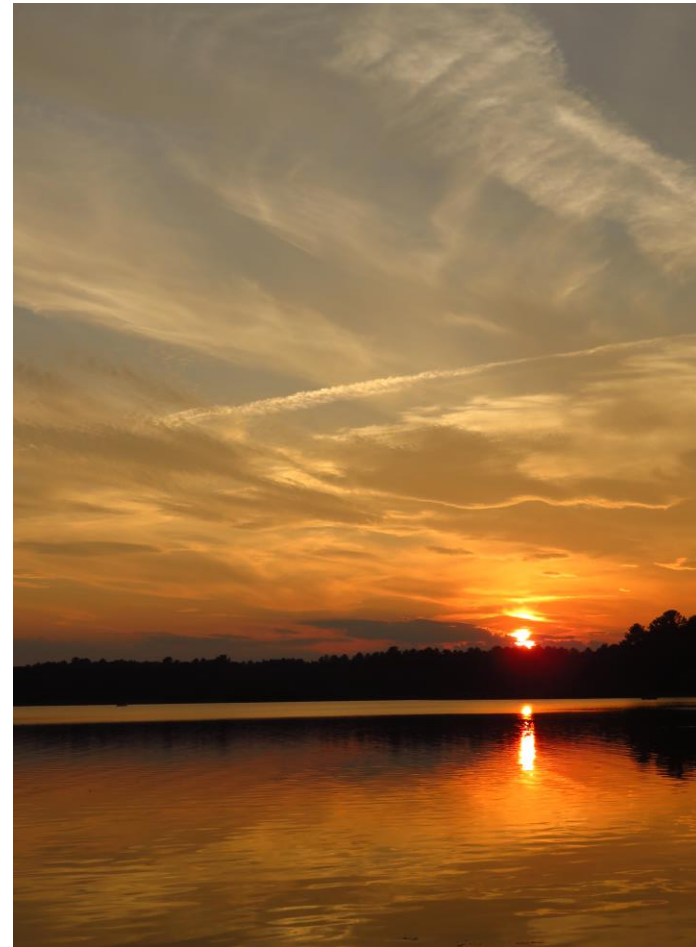
The reminder that Lamentations offers us today is that the waiting is worth it, especially when it comes to waiting on God's timing. If you're like me, and you have a hard time always believing that at face value, seek out a friend today to join you in prayer and anticipation. Maybe you're waiting on some good news, a new job, a chance to gather again with friends and family, a miracle. Share with your friend the hardest part about your waiting, and ask them to stick with you in this "in between" time. Perhaps they can even share about some waiting of their own.

- *Kristin Rinehimer*

## FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Sunday, February 21

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*Sunday Sunrise (c) SMG*

## FIFTH DAY OF LENT

Monday, February 22

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### 2 Timothy 1

**[F]or God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.**

Reading the story behind this letter, I discovered it's calling us to be a witness to good news: we are spiritual beings trapped in a human experience, and there is One who has come to save us from the trap. Humbling stuff!

I hear this passage encouraging us to accept God's empowering spirit so that we may witness to another Way of living, a Way that's foreign to the world's ways. But feeling like an outlier in the world can quickly make us afraid, putting us right back in the trap of our limited self we're trying to escape when we've hardly started.

Therefore, if we feel fear, we can know it's not from God. On the flip side, if we feel bravery, it's not our bravery, but God's gift to us, along with God's power, love, and self-discipline. It's pretty wild, but even self-discipline isn't about our own doing! We can't free ourselves or anyone else, all we can do is accept and witness to God's liberating gifts, moment by moment.

Given how often I'm getting in my own way, it's a huge relief that I don't have to rely on myself for power, love, or self-discipline. Thank God.

- Joe Welker

## SIXTH DAY OF LENT

Tuesday, February 23

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### 1 Corinthians 12:26

**If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.**

At Fourth Church, we are in the habit of singing a song that I think might be the most important and meaningful piece of music in the liturgical year--and you won't find it in the hymnal! Yes, I'm referring to "Happy Birthday" of course. While this song might not seem to have the same gravitas as say, Amazing Grace or Silent Night, what we do by singing this silly ditty together is quite important. Being part of a community means that on your birthday, someone will reach out with a kind message or a song. It means that when you reach a milestone in your life you can share your joy with others, and alternatively when you are grieving you are not alone. This passage reminded me of one of the first friends I made at Fourth Church. His name was Gail Hancock and he sat next to me in "our pew." Gail lived by himself in South Boston and did not have family close by. What I found out through hanging out with Gail was that he was a prolific painter and a gifted poet. Andy and I have many of his paintings hanging in our home. Gail was loved by the church, and when he passed away it was mostly church members who attended his funeral. I think sometimes that if it had not been for the Fourth Community, Gail would have spent his final years all alone. Community, above all else, is what makes a church (or a recovery program) so successful. So, blow out the candles on your cake this year knowing the Fourth Community rejoices together with you!

- Lauren Basler

## SEVENTH DAY OF LENT

Wednesday, February 24

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**Psalm 27:14**

**Wait for the Lord;  
be strong, and let your heart take courage;  
wait for the Lord!**

I have trouble waiting. Every morning, my daughter insists that she must put her socks on by herself. If I try to help her, she yells, "No, MY turn!" And so, I sit on the floor next to the door while she struggles to pull her socks on her feet. I can't help but be antsy. It takes real effort on my part not to jump in and do it for her.

Here the Psalmist tells us to wait for the Lord. I think this instruction is not so much about what we should do in God's absence (because God is never truly absent), but rather, what we should do when we are so caught up in our own lives that we fail to recognize God in the ordinary.

When I wait for my daughter to put on her socks, lo and behold, she gets better at it! Joy! When I make the choice to wait for the Lord, lo and behold, I get better at recognizing God's presence all around me.

*- Jacob Blanton*

## EIGHTH DAY OF LENT

Thursday, February 25

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**Hebrews 13:1-3**

**Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.**

There is so much to think about in these few short lines but for the purpose of this reflection I want to focus on the first line: "Let mutual love continue."

Fourth's Evening Prayer Service has proven to be a way to "let mutual love continue." For almost one year now, we have met every night to pray together. We pray for each other, for our loved ones, and for the world. We pray aloud and silently, we pray written and rote prayers and we pray the prayers that are written on our hearts.

Praying for someone is also an act of loving them and there are so many ways that we can pray for and love others....We can think positive wishes for them. We can give air hugs (and hopefully real hugs soon)! We can text, call or email to let them know we are thinking of them. We can drop off a meal, a plant, or a plate of brownies. All of these are prayers.

Prayer is the voice and action of love. My prayer for you this Lent is that you know that love....That you are that love.

"For they'll know we are Christians by our love."

*- Debbie Duval*

## NINTH DAY OF LENT

Friday, February 26

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Isaiah 43:18-21

Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.

I am about to do a new thing;

now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert.

The wild animals will honor me,  
the jackals and the ostriches;

for I give water in the wilderness,  
rivers in the desert,

to give drink to my chosen people,

the people whom I formed for myself  
so that they might declare my praise.

I wonder how verse 19 resonates with you in this familiar, hopeful passage from the Prophet Isaiah. But the idea that there's one more new thing coming my way has not landed so well with me this morning. The months since Lent a year ago have brought nothing but a steady stream of new things, and these new things have certainly stretched my abilities. Family relationships, work, worship, a new community: all went end-over-tea-kettle in a shift that left me breathless in the unfolding. Some days I struggle to breathe deeply: others to exhale. And yet, after our soul-searching and potential desert-of-the-soul wanderings, what is Lent's message if not the contemplation of a new thing?

Isaiah implores us, "Do not remember the former things, or consider things of old." Paths in the wildernesses of our lives are assured to us by God. I seek the river in *my* Lenten desert, filled with waters of life to quench my particular thirst. It's thirst for renewal and wholeness that I seek in the new thing Isaiah proclaims. May you, too, seek God's river flowing with your soul's renewing drink. May you find blessing on your journey to wholeness, holy and true.

- Shannan Hudgins

## TENTH DAY OF LENT

Saturday, February 27

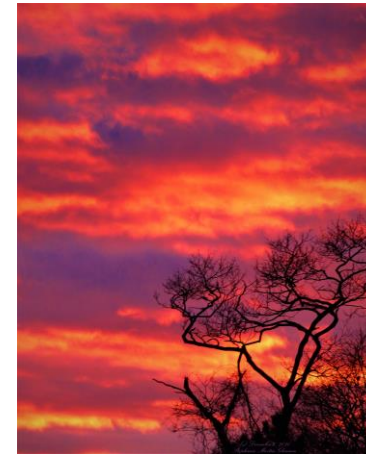
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Romans 12:12

**Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.**

I often forget that Lent is a time of hope. Usually I think of it as a time of pensive reflection. But this year especially, this passage, and its message of hope, feels particularly important. As we have been patient through this past year, I'm reminded that there is much to be hopeful for! Hopeful for vaccines, hopeful for a new season, and hopeful for seeing each other in person once again soon. So, although times have been tough, don't let it beat you down. Be patient, persevere, and rejoice that we have much to be hopeful for.

- Jared Rinehimer

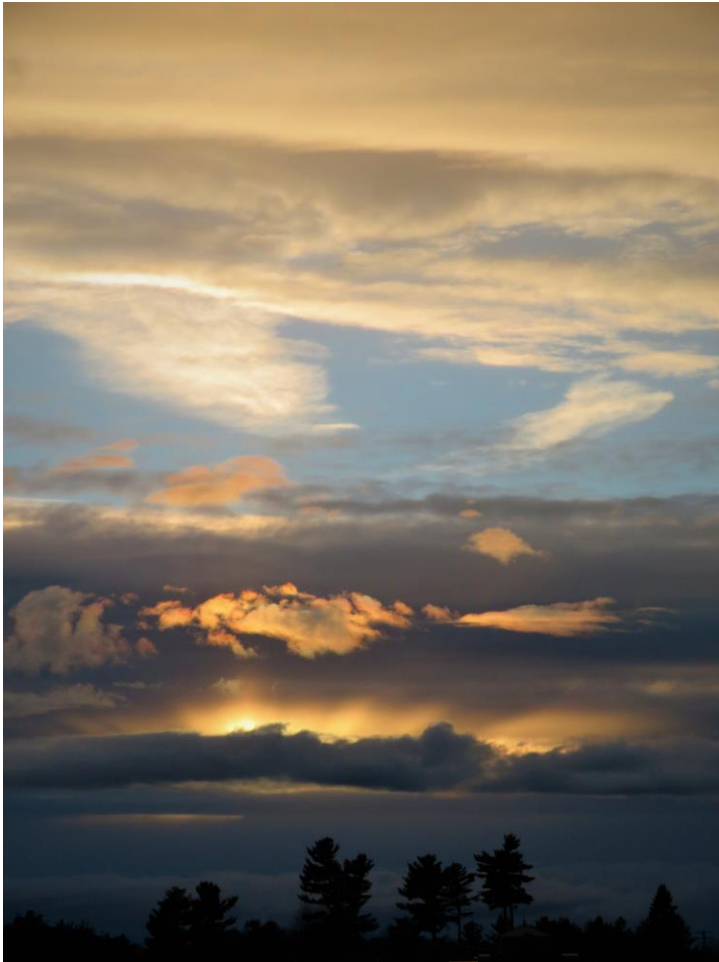


*This photograph was taken in Gloucester just as Shannan was speaking at sunset during the Ordination of Rev. Duval (December 6, 2020 ©SMG).*

## SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Sunday, February 28

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*Sunday Sunset (c) SMG*

## ELEVENTH DAY OF LENT

Monday, March 1

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**John 14:27**

**Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.**

What salient words for today. Do not make the world's troubles your own, do not make them your troubles. Simply accept His peace. He has given it to you. Accept him, believe in him, trust in him. Accept his love, accept his peace.

John goes on to talk about faith. "I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur you may believe."

That is all John asks us to do, to believe and to love.

- *Chuck Ferrell*



## TWELFTH DAY OF LENT

Tuesday, March 2

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### Ephesians 5:2

**[A]nd live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.**

I wish you could have met my Dad - we called him Papa. Papa was retired when I was home with 3 small kids and we spent a lot of time together. We would go on adventures in his caravan also known as his "ashtray on wheels." Papa loved to smoke basic cigarettes - really smelly ones. Being a "stay at home" mom, I would love to escape in that ashtray. We would load up the car seats and go to Building 19 1/2 for free coffee and hunt for bargains.

Papa had a gift of being truly "present" in every conversation he had, whether it was talking to me or a 3-year-old who wants to tell you why root beer is the bestest popsicle ever.

During this Lenten season, I am challenging myself to be more present in conversations I have with people I know, but more importantly, with people I think I know.

To slow down - to listen - to take the time to be present, and if I need inspiration to accomplish this I will light a match and smell the "fragrant offering" of the memories of the car rides with a man who continues to be present.

- *Barbara Erikson*

## THIRTEENTH DAY OF LENT

Wednesday, March 3

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### Mark 1:12-15

**And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.**

**Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."**

In this reading I was drawn to the word tempted.

I say the Lord's Prayer often, in and out of church, concentrating on this part--Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

Personally I have fallen to all my temptations bad.

Now knowing that others have been tempted and not given in gives me hope that I can too.

What Jesus learned in 40 days and 40 nights took me 30 plus years to learn.

I too believe in the good news.

I hope who reads this finds it too.

- *Mark Abbott*

## FOURTEENTH DAY OF LENT

Thursday, March 4

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### Psalm 34:18

**The Lord is near to the brokenhearted,  
and saves the crushed in spirit.**

I admire this verse for its simplicity and immediate relatability. We all (over the age of 2) have experienced heartbreak and demoralization of some form or another, and I know it's in those times when I need God the most. When you feel like you're in the bottom of a pit, the greatest fear is that somehow you'll be stuck there forever, but connecting with God and remembering God's vision for us that is much larger than your particular situation can help provide the energy you need to start climbing out. Remembering that God loves us and suffers with us is also a great comfort in times of trial.

Psalm 34 outlines a feature of life that I've certainly observed to be true: that life is better when you try hard to be good. God does not promise that bad things won't happen; on the contrary, verse 19 says, "The righteous person may have many troubles." But given difficult circumstances, you will achieve the best outcome and avoid the most suffering (for yourself and others) by drawing near to the Lord and navigating your difficulties with integrity and kindness. In doing so, you can better live with yourself and you build loving relationships that support you through hardships.

- *Tim Sanchez*

## FIFTEENTH DAY OF LENT

Friday, March 5

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### Habakkuk 3:17-19

Though the fig tree does not blossom,  
and no fruit is on the vines;  
though the produce of the olive fails,  
and the fields yield no food;  
though the flock is cut off from the fold,  
and there is no herd in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;  
I will exult in the God of my salvation.  
God, the Lord, is my strength;  
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
and makes me tread upon the heights.  
To the leader: with stringed instruments.

I generally rejoice in the Lord when good things happen, a new baby born, a sick friend recovered, a new promotion, when I think I left the stove on in the apartment, come back home and see that I actually did turn it off...Thank God! But the opposite is much harder. In the midst of everything going wrong can you still rejoice? Can you still find peace? Is there some truth greater than all of your problems, that says everything is ok right here and now? For me not really, but I think I have had small glimpses of this, how about you?

- *Andy Ward*

## SIXTEENTH DAY OF LENT

**Saturday, March 6**

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### **John 10:14-15**

**I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.**

These verses are from a speech in which Jesus explains why he is a good leader, contrasting himself with the corrupt leaders the Jews followed at the time. These two verses in particular offer a striking lesson in leadership because Jesus focuses on his relationship with his followers: how well he knows them and they know him, and the lengths he is willing to go for them. This has prompted me to think about how much more supportive of someone a leader, teacher, friend, neighbor, etc., can be if s/he knows the person well. Many of us are probably craving meeting and connecting with new people and experiences, but in this Lenten season marked by COVID, let John 10:14-15 remind us of the care we can give and receive in our existing, close relationships, even when that care is from a physical distance.

*- Alexa Jackson*

## THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

**Sunday, March 7**

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*Varanasi, India (c) SMG*

## SEVENTEENTH DAY OF LENT

**Monday, March 8**

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**Lamentations 3:22**

**The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,  
his mercies never come to an end....**

None of the books of the Bible strikes Hollywood script-writers as offering material for making a romantic comedy. As its title suggests, the book of Lamentations is not going to see Jennifer Aniston and Vince Vaughn cast in a modern adaptation.

Lamentations is a song of bitter wailing, and sorrow.

Its five chapters describe the destruction of Jerusalem, by the Babylonians (586 BC). It is tied to the covenant warnings, about unfaithfulness, by the prophet Jeremiah. The city, its king, and priests ignored their obligations, and God brought them to judgement. The city is sacked, the Temple is rubble, and the people are deported to exile.

Our Soup and Study discussions, this year, looked at the Old Testament prophets. We discovered that while God will act in bringing about judgement - this judgement is never without the promise of Hope. Even in the darkest hour of judgement, God always promises grace. This is, because God is gracious. Faith's hope is in the character of God, and it is this hope that the writer clings to - in these two verses.

What happened at the Cross is that God's judgement and mercy met. Our Hope is in the person of Jesus.

*- David Craig*

## EIGHTEENTH DAY OF LENT

**Tuesday, March 9**

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**Isaiah 61:1**

**The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;**

When I'm feeling brokenhearted, I like for people to give me a hug. When I was feeling captive with my arm cast and then got it off, it felt like freedom. Going to a new school this year feels like a release because people understand me.

*- Fiona McCusker*

## NINETEENTH DAY OF LENT

Wednesday, March 10

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### Micah 6:8

**He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?**

We have spent many Matthews family vacations on Lake Michigan visiting my brother-in-law and family. Cousins, aunts, and uncles fly in from all over the country to enjoy a fun filled week of togetherness! We have become friends with a family in the town of Holland and spent time with them in their beautiful home. The first time I walked into their very large family room, my breath was taken away because a stenciled version of Micah 6:8 encircled the four walls:

This is one of my favorite verses, and I asked our hostess why she chose that particular verse. She told me that her whole family sat down together and decided on Micah 6:8 because they wanted to be reminded of how to live every day. I have thought quite a bit about what it would be like to wake up every morning and look at Micah 6:8 on my wall – to be reminded every day – many times a day – of what the Lord requires of me. So during this time of lent, I am focusing on the ways I can: show mercy and have compassion for those in need; do justice by helping to create a world of equality; and to humbly serve with my whole heart. May we all reflect on these acts during this Lenten season and throughout the whole year.

- Sharon Matthews



## TWENTIETH DAY OF LENT

Thursday, March 11

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### Psalm 37:1-5

**Do not fret because of the wicked;  
do not be envious of wrongdoers,  
for they will soon fade like the grass,  
and wither like the green herb.  
Trust in the Lord, and do good;  
so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.  
Take delight in the Lord,  
and he will give you the desires of your heart.  
Commit your way to the Lord;  
trust in him, and he will act.**

Sometimes we find ourselves pacing aimlessly. Our thoughts and our feelings are searching for a road map.

Stepping on to a journey without any specific guidance is scary.

God's promise to us is; Do not be afraid. I will hold your hand and will guide you through. Don't be distracted by the evildoers, or those who say they know it all. They are like the grass, will wither, and die.

Committing yourselves to have a relationship with God will help us to overcome the obstacles.

He is calling us to do his will. Don't be afraid to take the journey, and fulfill the promise.

- Shemiram Fabian

## TWENTY-FIRST DAY OF LENT

Friday, March 12

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### Mark 2:1-5

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people[a] came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

In reading this passage one cannot help but think about our own faith. We all practice our faith in song and prayer, but there is more to it.

Now Jesus knew that the crowd he spoke to was not sure if he had the authority to forgive sin and heal the sick. But through the ceiling come these men who on their faith alone felt that if they could just get their friend inside, Jesus could heal him. This man's friends demonstrate true faith is not a passive belief, but a trust that drives action.

Jesus told us we could move mountains if we have true faith. He tells us that if our sins are forgiven, and we have faith we will see his promise.

How can we measure how much faith we have? I don't think that is possible. We can only work on strengthening it. To take action by caring for one another. By serving one another in whatever way we can. Most of all by trusting in Jesus and his promise.

- Susan Devine

## TWENTY-SECOND DAY OF LENT

Saturday, March 13

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### 1 Corinthians 3:16-19

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written,

“He catches the wise in their craftiness[.]”

I see two parts to this passage: You are a temple and don't deceive yourselves. How do they fit together? Paul tells the Corinthians that they (the you is plural) are God's dwelling place. And then comes the warning: if you destroy the group, God will destroy you. Paul doesn't go into specifics about how to keep the peace or what people should do when they come together to prevent the group from breaking up. Instead, he asks them to look inward. He says that the way this group could fall apart isn't from people trying to be mean. It's from people deceiving themselves, from people who are sure they're doing right because everything in their world tells them that they're right.

Paul's writing to people who are so sure they're “right” in their worldview that they no longer need to listen to the people in their community. Paul asks them to be “fools,” to question common sense when it bumps up against the real lives of people they love. Paul says, in that moment where big ideas conflict with people we care about, that we should remember that it's only together that we're God's temple.

- Mike Motia

## FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Sunday, March 14

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*Volubilis, Morocco (c) SMG*

## TWENTY-THIRD DAY OF LENT

Monday, March 15

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Psalm 51:10-12

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

A phrase I've been dwelling on recently is "progress, not perfection." In all the areas of my life – as a parent, a friend, a scientist, a member of our community – it's easy to focus on all the ways I believe I fall short. This is, unsurprisingly, not a recipe for happiness.

It helps to remember that it's impossible to have a perfectly clean heart with a right spirit at all times – that's why the practice in worship of confessing our sins each week and being reminded of God's constant grace is so powerful. The idea of progress, rather than perfection, is key here. We still ask for God's help in working toward a clean heart. But, instead of lingering on failures and mistakes, it's much more rewarding – and importantly, *sustaining* – to instead shift those thoughts into seeing opportunities for growth, improvement, and progress.

- *Laura Blanton*

## TWENTY-FOURTH DAY OF LENT

Tuesday, March 16

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### Mark 8:1-9

In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, “I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance.” His disciples replied, “How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?” He asked them, “How many loaves do you have?” They said, “Seven.” Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed. They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. Now there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away.

What really jumps out to me about this story is the idea of having faith that there will be enough. The idea of scarcity can be panic inducing and often leads me scrambling to cover every angle and figure it all out. There have been moments—not as many as I wish—when I’ve been able to tell myself: this is going to be ok. There is going to be enough. I love the idea that where we think there might be nothing—a desert—we can find abundance. There have been so many days in the last year where I’ve felt like a desert inside and there just isn’t going to be enough of me either. It’s hard sometimes to find the source that feeds and replenishes. Then I’ll have one of those moments—hanging out with Finn and Fiona, hearing from an old friend, taking a walk, seeing the snow fall on the pond where I work, connecting with my 4th folks—that reminds enough is all around me.

- Diane Devore

## TWENTY-FIFTH DAY OF LENT

Wednesday, March 17

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### Isaiah 1:17

[L]earn to do good;  
seek justice,  
rescue the oppressed,  
defend the orphan,  
plead for the widow.

Dear Isaiah,

Right. Are you kidding? I know you prophets are prone to the dramatic but this is a pretty big ask, don’t you think?

You do realize that I’ve got a wife and kids and other family and friends to take care of; a job, a house – with a mortgage – some health issues, and responsibilities at church, and I need some me time and you wouldn’t want me to give up my occasional prayer time, would you?

And where does climate change and world hunger fit on your list? I know you’ve got that whole thousand years is one day in your time but I don’t have that luxury. 24 hours in a day, 7 days in a week and then I am out.

I’m not saying that the things that you are suggesting are not good things to do. They are, and as soon as I have any spare moments in my days, I’ll get right on them. But right now, my plate is full. In fact, with scraps falling to the floor every day. So, Isaiah, with all that I have going on, can I get a pass? No? Okay, fine. I’ll take another look at my list. Maybe I can squeeze in a little time for justice, the oppressed, and the occasional orphan and widow.

Actually, maybe I should just start with “learn to do good”.

- Ric Bailey



## TWENTY-SIXTH DAY OF LENT

Thursday, March 18

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### Joel 2:12-14

Yet even now, says the Lord,  
return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
rend your hearts and not your clothing.  
Return to the Lord, your God,  
for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,  
and relents from punishing.  
Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,  
and leave a blessing behind him,  
a grain offering and a drink offering  
for the Lord, your God?

It's hard to hold the amount of suffering and loss we've experienced in the last year. A lot of the time, I think I'm emotionally a little numb, detached, distracted. I usually struggle on in my own life circumstances until I get overwhelmed. That's usually when I remember the 6pm prayer service. I join the Zoom meeting, and I'm comforted by the familiar faces, familiar voices, and the sight of the sanctuary in the background. I'm grateful for the sense of returning. Sometimes it's not until I'm sharing my prayer request that I really feel my own sadness, exhaustion, and grief. I can feel the heaviness in my chest and the tears that have suddenly materialized. I'm reminded that we're not meant to grieve alone. This passage is comforting to me because it offers that same reminder – God is there, ready for me to return when I need company in my sadness, fear, and loneliness. I'm grateful for that reminder, and I'm grateful for the ways that Fourth continues to be a place to return to, even when we're physically apart.

- *Christine Powers*

## TWENTY-SEVENTH DAY OF LENT

Friday, March 19

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### 1 Peter 5:6

**Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time.**

I am thankful that I have people who love me that I can go to when I need help. One day I felt sorry for myself getting mad at someone that didn't deserve it; so I apologized to him. I know I get mad, but people that love me calm me down.

- *Barry Monteiro*

## TWENTY-EIGHTH DAY OF LENT

Saturday, March 20

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John 1:1

**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.**

There's a scene in the movie *The Neverending Story* where the world has been nearly wiped away, and two characters are together in a vast, empty darkness, holding a single grain of sand by the light of a candle. It's a near-ending, but also a beginning, and the image has always stuck in my head.

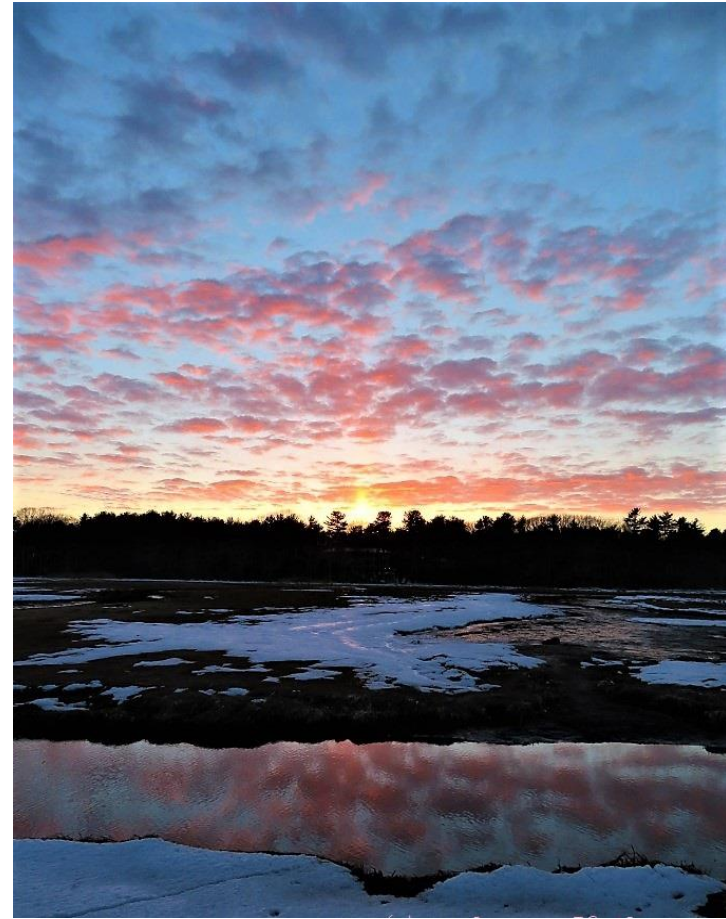
I know that this verse is establishing Jesus as God's Word, as identical to God, at the outset of his life and ministry on Earth. But what it brings up for me is a sense of stillness and wonder and smallness: no matter how wrapped up I am in the worries and trappings of this physical existence, this verse will immediately remind me that none of them were present in the beginning, and none will be present in the end, either.

- McNeill Shiner

## FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Sunday, March 21

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*Deepening Dusk (c) SMG*

## TWENTY-NINTH DAY OF LENT

**Monday, March 22**

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**Acts 15:8-9**

**And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.**

This passage is especially poignant in this time of the pandemic. Many feel emotionally spent and find it difficult to be available to others, I speak for myself when I say this. Are their questions about how God is with us at this time? Are you their God? Do you hear me calling and asking for your help and guidance? I believe we can all help each other through this time by reassuring each other that God is there hearing our prayers and giving us comfort even when we don't feel it or believe it. We share our prayers together in our nightly "Zoom" service; prayers for each other and our families. Prayers for our world and its impact in our daily lives. We care for each other and hear our cries and pain as well as thankfulness and joy. It helps to know we are not alone in this time, God hears our prayers and that gives us comfort and the encouragement to continue our daily lives. This pandemic will get better and the world will change yet never be the same having experienced how different it has been this past year. There is "hope"! People are being vaccinated and we look forward to being together again! I know I look forward to that time as do many others.

We are fortunate to have "Fourth Church" guiding us through this time. When I think of this passage I think of what a special place it is! Everyone is accepted no matter who you are or where you come from, whatever wrongs we have done. It doesn't matter if mistakes have been made or we were led on a wrong path, we can choose to change and take the right path in our life journey. It's never too late! We need not give up but put one foot in front of the other, if we fall we can pick ourselves up and start again. The reassurance is that God is always with us on this journey, God sends the Holy Spirit upon us. There is no distinction between us, we are all the same and accepted by God. "For he purified our hearts by faith".

- Cheryl Sessler

## THIRTIETH DAY OF LENT

**Tuesday, March 23**

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**Zephaniah 3:17**

**The Lord, your God, is in your midst,  
a warrior who gives victory;  
he will rejoice over you with gladness,  
he will renew you in his love;  
he will exult over you with loud singing.**

When I read this type of beautiful poetry in the Bible, I expect it to be about singing praise to God, as in most of the psalms. So I had to read this verse over a couple of times to realize that it is talking about God singing over us. What a humbling and awe-inspiring idea. I have wonderful memories of learning to sing about God and to pray to God through song. Song continues to be my favorite form of prayer, which I attribute to the witness of the organist at the church I grew up in, Brian. Brian taught me to sing through our children's choir, and he elevated every service with his booming voice. He was gruffly kind, with a sarcastic sense of humor that never missed the chance to make fun of me and a huge heart that was evident every time he saw me in the pews after being away. Brian passed away at the end of last year. Christmas mass was missing something special without his rendition of Ave Maria. But it makes me glad to think of God exulting over Brian with loud singing, the way that Brian always did for God.

- Becca Tweedie

## THIRTY-FIRST DAY OF LENT

Wednesday, March 24

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Psalm 73:26

**My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion  
forever.**

I've been struggling a lot recently with not feeling God's presence, and not feeling connected with church. I tend to yo-yo back and forth between two extremes:

- God is great and strong -- therefore I should will myself into feeling strong and connected.
- This isn't working -- maybe God is not as strong and as great as I'd thought?
- No, God IS great -- time for more willpower!  
and so on.

And thus this passage strikes me as a paradox.

God is the strength of my heart; my heart fails; therefore, God fails or God is no longer with me?

No, the psalmist says, my heart may fail, but God will be my strength and portion forever. One does not negate the other.

I'm not sure how this works, but I'm trying to trust that it DOES work. God's existence and goodness don't depend on how I feel (or even on how I act). God is always our strength, even when we don't feel strong; when we fail, God will always somehow pick up the pieces.

- *Katie Stansifer*

## THIRTY-SECOND DAY OF LENT

Thursday, March 25

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1 John 4:7

**Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.**

God is beloved and God loves everyone God creates and God is the creator of everyone and everything so God loves every single one of us. I show people I love them by taking care of them.

- *Lijah-Blue Jacobs*

God loves everyone through Covid. God shows us love through having snow and being able to have fun in the snow. I show people I love them by showing them my affection.

- *Onyn Jacobs*

Everyone is loved even if they do bad things they are still loved.

When you are born you are loved by God. I show people I love them by playing games with them.

- *Kaden Jacobs*

## THIRTY-THIRD DAY OF LENT

Friday, March 26

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### Isaiah 58:10-11

[I]f you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.

The Lord will guide you continually,  
and satisfy your needs in parched places,  
and make your bones strong;  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water,  
whose waters never fail.

I volunteered at the Fourth's summer meals program for a day last year. I didn't do much beyond rolling hundreds of forks and knives into napkins, but got a glimpse of our well-oiled food operation as well as bones it strengthens and smiles it sparks. We sowed the seeds of our blessings then, which bore fruit in our 2020 budget.

My father grew up fatherless and poor in war-torn Korean countryside, and subsisted off American aid. He had a rough transition to the Korean capital Seoul and often felt gloomy there, but found hope and community in his church and the Lord guided him through medical school. He healed many destitute for free, and was blessed with a botanical garden he built on a parched land.

Although I've fallen short of the high standard Fourth and my father have set in feeding the hungry and serving the afflicted, God still graciously watered my body and soul through the pandemic. I also find solace in Isaiah prophesying the advent of Christ during the fall of Israel. The past year felt like unraveling in darkness at times, but I believe God of light will replenish his garden this year.

*-J.Y. Lee*

## THIRTY-FOURTH DAY OF LENT

Saturday, March 27

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### Jeremiah 29:12

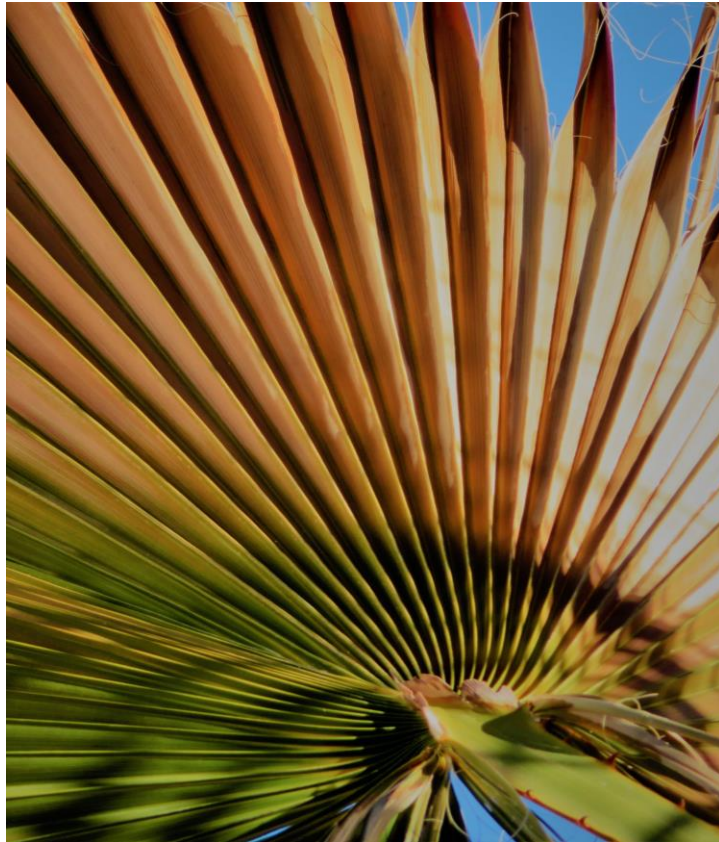
**Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you.**

As a kid, I only thought of prayer as literally trying to talk to God. A prayer was just a simple message, maybe a request, from me to God. This caused a lot angst for me as a teenager, as defining prayer so narrowly meant that if something you prayed for did not come to fruition, no matter how important the prayer, it meant that God heard you and did not help you. Harsh! Now my understanding of God is pretty different than when I was a kid, and so too is my understanding of prayer. God is not some bearded man in the sky who I relay messages to when I need some help. God is in every breath I take and is in the midst of our congregation, whether we're gathering in person or virtually. When we hear each other's prayers, that means God is hearing them. Conversely, when we call upon each other for help, we are calling upon God.

*- Walter Edstrom*

**PALM SUNDAY**  
**Sunday, March 28**

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*Palm Tree at High Noon (c) SMG*

**THIRTY-FIFTH DAY OF LENT**  
**Monday, March 29**

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**Philippians 4:4-7**

**Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**

I had a colleague at a mission hospital where I worked who would respond to pretty much everything with the question, “Have you prayed about it as much as you’ve talked about it?” Whatever anxiety or problem was confided to her elicited that response, and to be perfectly honest, it got pretty annoying. But, reflecting on this passage, she had a point. I’m a do-er, so when confronted by difficulty or anxiety, my impulse is to try to fix, try to control. I lay out long and thorough to do lists, but all too often, prayer doesn’t make it on the list. And so then, even if I do manage to solve my problem, it’s only a material change, and my anxious heart is still just as anxious, waiting to receive the next problem or difficulty that comes my way. Lent is a reminder to me to reflect on the practices of my life, and this passage is a reminder that God calls me to practice prayer, to make it my reflex, something on the top of my to-do list no matter what, and especially when I’m worried or anxious.

*- Kayla McKinsey*

## THIRTY-SIXTH DAY OF LENT

Tuesday, March 30

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Jude 24-25

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

It sounds like “As for God.” God who keeps me standing in ferocious emotional storms? God who guides me through natural disasters (Cue pandemic)? God who has helped me back to my feet when I stumble and fall? That God? Well, nothing short of all glory and honor to God in the highest. That God who sent his only son to die for my sins? That God who elicits rejoicing (Which to me is the sound joy makes when it escapes my mouth)? That God who gave me the unmerited gift of sobriety? Let me try to make it simple. Everything of worth and value in my life, I owe to God. My relationship with my daughters, the job I have held for thirty years, the heat in my pipes, the food in my fridge, my connections with this community, heck any community I owe to God. The clothes on my back, shoes on my feet, the medicines to keep me healthy and the doctors who treat me... I have no illusions. These are gifts I did nothing to earn. My maker, sustainer and savior, with the help of Jesus Christ, through the holy spirit, were I to sing your praises I would die long before I was half finished. It has been this way for as long as I can remember, and will be as for as long as I can imagine. Amen.

- *Dave Courage*

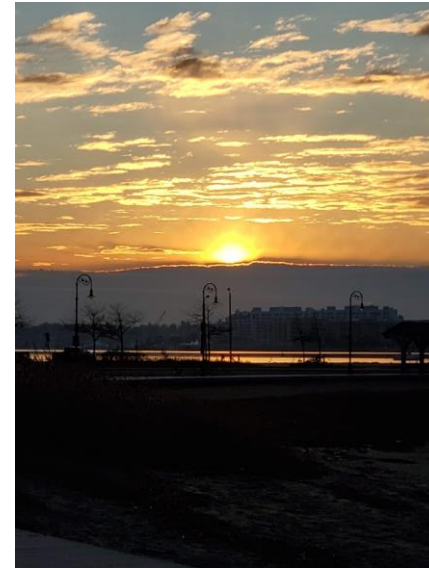
## THIRTY-SEVENTH DAY OF LENT

Wednesday, March 31

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Psalm 30:5

For his anger is but for a moment;  
his favor is for a lifetime.  
Weeping may linger for the night,  
but joy comes with the morning.



I walk my dog, Sadie, every morning between 6:30 and 7a.m. At this time of year, our walk overlaps with the sunrise. I find the sunrise to be incredibly glorious as it changes colors and sizes and shapes until the fiery sphere emerges from the horizon. The sunrise is God’s promise that a new day is coming and whatever is troubling me feels pale in comparison. This daily habit is very comforting and gives me hope.

- *Kathy Burger*

## THIRTY-EIGHTH DAY OF LENT

**Maundy Thursday, April 1**

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**Romans 8:35**

**Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?**

Paul's first question is readily answered: even if we abjure what the Lord requires of us, we will not be separated from the love of His Son, forever at his side, interceding for us. The second question seems a stickier thicket; what is missing may tell us as much as what is written. It lacks a "who," a decision-making agent: an unanchored interrogative precedes a string of hardships, seven harsh subjects in search of a predicate. Significantly, Paul remains faithful after enduring each and every one of them.<sup>1</sup>

Last year's devotional, "Come Near to Me," presciently dwelled in drawing closer to each other and God over immeasurable distances. Coincidentally I was assigned another Maundy Thursday reflection: "may your will be done" (Matthew 26:42). "Will" here again does the heavy lifting, conjoining Paul's trials—and therefore ours—with the power of invincible love to surpass even the approaching darkness of betrayal, immense suffering, and death. Nothing—no *thing*—especially not death, separates us from the love of Christ, who Frederick Buechner wrote "loves the whole doomed, damned pack of us" who "have all walked in different gardens and knelt at different graves," and will be "heading out into the same blessed mystery." Only that love, as "the alpha and omega"<sup>2</sup> within a state of grace, makes us become "more than conquerors" ever could be (Romans 8:37).

*-Stephanie M. Glennon*

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 14:19-20, 15:36-40, 16:19-22, 23:12-15; 1 Corinthians 4:11-12; 2 Corinthians 11:24-28, 12:7-8; 2 Tim. 4:6-16.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

## THIRTY-NINTH DAY OF LENT

**Good Friday, April 2**

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**Isaiah 6:8**

**Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"**

We all hope to serve with Isaiah's eagerness. To enthusiastically raise our hands as soon as it becomes clear that a volunteer is needed. This is easier said than done- we're tired, overwhelmed with obligations and worries. We're afraid that we aren't prepared to take on the task at hand. Our lives get loud, and we don't always hear God's call. Today I am reflecting on the times I happily accepted a call, and was eager to give of myself for God and for others. I'm remembering how that made me feel - whole and useful and like I'm part of something amazing. I'm resolving to look for opportunities to serve with an eager heart.

*- Julianna Cogswell*



## FORTIETH DAY OF LENT

Holy Saturday, April 3

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Matthew 28:20

**“...And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”**

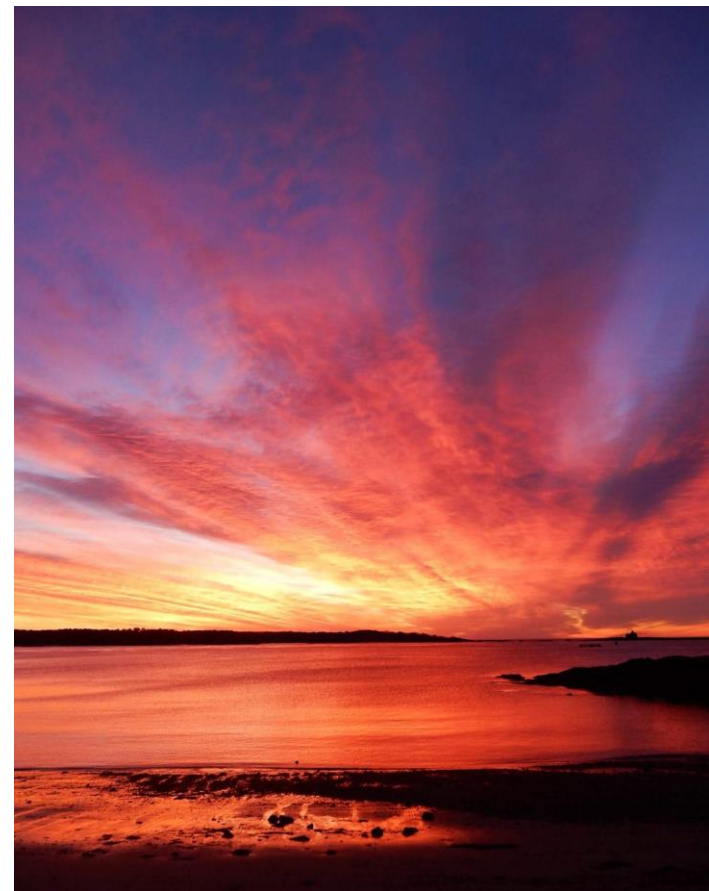
This passage is very profound. God is letting us know that if we follow Him as disciples and learn of God's ways we can be filled with the Holy Spirit and eventually meet Him in heaven. He also teaches us to obey everything of God's word, and holy scripture readings will guide us in ways that are pleasing to God. So, when we follow God's holy word, we will follow on to the end of the ages. When all is said and done we will always follow our Lord and Savior into the light of our destination in a holy world. We, as brothers and sisters alike, will grow together in God's ways and be together always. Thank you, God, for your inspiration.

- *Sheila Buckman*

## EASTER SUNDAY

Sunday, April 4

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*Easter Sunday Dawn (c) SMG*

