



Lent 2022

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Lent

Lent is a 40-day period beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending on Easter. It symbolizes the 40 days that Jesus spent wandering the desert fasting and resisting Satan's temptation. Christians practice Lent to show discipline and penance to God. Though Lent is not mentioned in the Bible, it is a tradition long accepted in the Christian church. Sundays are not counted in Lent since the primary focus of all Sundays in the Christian faith should be the celebration of Christ's resurrection.

Lent remains a prominent part of the Christian faith. It is still characterized by sacrificing something for the Lord and focusing on spiritual growth. This includes not only fasting and prayer but partaking in new practices and acts of service that draw us closer to Christ. It is a time for Christians to repent of sin, renew their faith, and prepare to celebrate the resurrection of their Savior. It is our prayer that the words on these pages will be used by the Holy Spirit to identify changes that need to take place in our lives to draw closer to Christ. If one person's life is opened to God's grace in Jesus Christ then contributors to this devotional will have the greater reward.

Out of the Blue

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” 2 Corinthians 5:21

A course I taught regularly at Ottawa University is titled “The Life and Thought of Paul.” On one occasion, I was writing some preliminary remarks on the board during the first meeting of the semester. While I was doing this the following thought came to mind: “The Gospels teach us about what Jesus did and who He is; the apostle Paul teaches us what it all means.” I shared this thought and it must have come across as profound because a student remarked, “That’s what I have been missing in my approach to studying Paul.” She was no more dumbfounded than I was! I knew there was something about Paul I couldn’t articulate; this surprise prompting of the Holy Spirit changed forever my attitude toward and appreciation of the apostle.

As I have reflected on Paul since then, it has become apparent how much of our theology and belief about God comes from this apostle. How often have you quoted Romans 8:28 in times of stress and grief or encouraged someone with Philippians 4:13? As I contemplated a topic for Lent this year, today’s verse came out of nowhere. It has been said of this verse that “there is no sentence more profound in the whole of Scripture” (Philip E. Hughes). It speaks about what I consider the two great mysteries of grace. I will never comprehend the severity of my sin, my willful disobedience that brings such grief and heartache to God. Such sin deserves separation and judgment from God. At the same time, I will never grasp the width and length and height and depth of the love of God for me. For Christ to pay for my sin that I might “glorify God and enjoy Him forever” is beyond my understanding. The Son of God “loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2.20).

In short, this is the way I approach Lent. I must realize my position as one who has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23) and yet as one who has been reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:18-21). These thoughts are summed up in today’s verse, a verse I will examine in four devotions to follow. It is the hope and prayer of all the contributors to this devotional that you will walk closer to God because of the words shared during our walk toward the cross.

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

O God, the One who watches us walk away and welcomes us home because of what Christ did. May this devotional bring You (and You alone) glory and honor. In the Name of the One who suffered and died. Amen.

Reflecting at the Laver

“The Lord spoke to Moses: Make a bronze basin for washing and a bronze stand for it, set it between the tent of meeting and the altar and put water in it. Aaron and his sons must wash their hands and feet from the basin. Whenever they enter the tent of meeting or approach the altar to minister by burning up an offering to the Lord, they must wash with water so they will not die.” Exodus 30:17-20

When God revealed the plan of salvation to the Israelites it was done by the appointment of priests and the skilled construction of the tabernacle. These two revelations brought about an opportunity of intimacy with the living God that miraculously delivers. As a priest one did not just stay behind the smoking courtyard but transcended the courtyard into the tent of meeting. This transcendence into the inner court was meant to lead one into a deeper state of *reflection* and ultimately *submission* before personally ministering before God.

In front of the tent of meeting was the bronze laver that closely resembles a birdbath. Water was stationed in the top bowl as well as the bottom pedestal so that the priest could wash their hands and feet since they would be entering what is wholly different than the courtyard, God’s Holy presence. A part of *washing* was also a means of *reflecting*. To see oneself in the pool of water is to also see one’s true appearance before God, *sanctified*.

Dear reader, it is my expressed hope that as you approach Lent that you would stop before the laver of God’s presence and know that you have been washed in His living word, Jesus Christ. That is when God sees you it is who he has called you to be, His own. That is you personally have access to encountering the living God in ways that cannot be fathomed. What awaits you behind the door of the meeting will depend upon your reflection and submission in your own life.

by Ashley Phillips

Prayer

If you are looking to further your encounter at the laver of God, then I welcome you to pray this prayer:

“Thank you, my heavenly father, for sharing your treasures with your servant, thank you for allowing me to know the things closest to your heart so that I may enter your place of meeting with washed hands and feet. I ask that you bring me closer to your heart and show me your will so that I may worship you as you deserve. Show me who I am as I grow to know who you are in Christ, Amen.”

Have Faith

“... When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, ‘Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.’ But they laughed at him. After he put them all out, he took the child’s father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, ‘Talitha koum!’ (which means ‘Little girl, I say to you, get up!’). Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old)...” Mark 5: 37-43

Jesus was on His way to perform a miracle. Jairus was a synagogue leader – he was an esteemed man and had humbled himself enough to beg Jesus to come heal his daughter as soon as Jesus’s boat reached the land. Jairus’s daughter was gravely ill, so they immediately left to go to his home. Along the way, some people came out of Jairus’s house and told Jairus that his daughter had died – that there was no reason for them to bother Jesus any longer. Jesus looked at Jairus and told him “Don’t be afraid, just believe.”

At that moment, all Jairus’s hopes must have crumbled to dust. His heart must have wrenched as he experienced grief like he had never experienced before. It would have been so easy to succumb to the grief, to blame himself for not hurrying, to blame the others Jesus had healed along the way, to blame Jesus himself for not moving fast enough. But before Jairus could be lost to the depths of his mourning, Jesus looked at him and told him not to be afraid. To just believe.

And so Jesus entered Jairus’s house, allowing only Peter, James, and John to follow. He told the professional mourners to get out, that the child wasn’t dead, but asleep. And they laughed. Their mourning, their weeping, their wailing, turned so quickly to mirth. What were they thinking in that moment? Did they think Jesus was crazy? Were they experiencing so much pain that for someone to hand them the smallest flame of hope made them shut down, for fear their hearts would break again? Was it truly easier to make fun of this prophet, this healer, this incredible teacher, than to suspend their disbelief and simply trust what He was saying, crazy as it may seem?

Jesus took Jairus’s daughter by the hand and told her to get up. And she did. Despite all the disbelief, despite all of the doubt, she woke up. She walked around. She was only sleeping, just as Jesus had said.

What in your life that you have decided is dead? Your dreams? A relationship? Your hopes? Your belief that your Savior died for you—specifically you?

Maybe you’ve written these things off for good reason. Maybe they truly do appear dead. Maybe they are dead for a reason. But maybe, just maybe, Jesus is there, telling you to have faith. Telling you that this dream, this relationship, this hope is not dead, but simply asleep. Meditate on that today. Do not be afraid. Have faith.

by Sydney Shrimpton

Prayer

Lord, thank you for the miracles you perform every day. Help us to hold tight to you, to cling to our faith, to rely on our trust in you. Guide our actions and our hopes so that they may coincide with yours. Give us the faith to pursue you and Your plans, no matter how crazy or laughable they may seem. Thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen.

The Fierce and Determined Love of Jesus

“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Luke 9:51

In the gospel according to Luke there is the above cryptic anecdote, “he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” And as we are in the season of Lent, we know and reflect upon all that occurred there: the triumphal entry riding on a donkey, the cleansing of the temple, the accusations, the arrest, the trial, the last supper with his disciples, promises made and promises broken, denial, betrayal, mocking, beating and ultimately death by crucifixion. We know because we have read the “rest of the story,” and Jesus seemed to know as well.

Isn't it astonishing how early in Luke's gospel we read those words, “he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Knowing the excruciating cost of demonstrating co-suffering love, overcoming evil, defeating the principalities and powers and revealing God's eternal forgiveness, Jesus resolutely chose Jerusalem, chose the painful path of love, chose us. One might say with Max Lucado, “He chose the nails.”

The shadow and reality of Jerusalem and the Cross hovers so very early in Luke's gospel. Jesus has steadfastly set out on the way of the Cross before: he shares the parable of the Good Samaritan as an invitation to a legal scholar to practice the active way of love; he affirms Mary for her contemplative posture of worship. The shadow of the Cross is there as he teaches on prayer, shares parables, heals a crippled woman and weeps over Jerusalem. And he is resolutely on his way to Jerusalem and the Cross as he challenges graceless religiosity with the provocative grace infused parables in Luke 15.

Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem that we might all celebrate the finding of lost sheep, the recovery of the lost coin and the much celebrated return of the lost son. Is it possible to simultaneously see in the Cross the beautiful power of divine love and forgiveness as well as the heinous appearance of love refused and rejected? Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem to reveal how wide, high, long and deep is his love as well as reveal the brutal, bloody and death dealing picture of rejecting his love. Jesus high and lifted up is the revelation of what heals us and also an all too vivid reminder of the ugliness of human rebellion, rejection, and sin.

Jesus willingly and lovingly chose Jerusalem and the Cross. He chose us! During this season of Lent may we repent of our refusal to fully accept and fully give his love.

by Rev. Tiger Pennington

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner, Amen.

Seeds to Sow

“Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.
Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.” Psalm 126: 5-6

The metaphor of transformation exemplified in the dormant, planted, and harvested seed aligns with Lenten transformation. Among many paths of transformation, we are offered: the chance to fast physically and deprive the body in order to awaken the spirit, gain discipline and recognize our abundance; or perhaps the allocated time for prayer in solitude or in communion, to follow the mystics’ paths in meditation and contemplation and reflection; or further in works of service and engagement with the community.

What seeds will you sow this Lent, what sorrow will you plant in your practices and in your seeking of the joy of Easter, the joy that comes in growing closer to our Lord?

Will you fast- setting aside a change in your daily diet to recognize the season; or fast from a habit that is taking you further from the good God calls us to?

Will you take time in prayer; perhaps in a study group with others; perhaps with a journal and scripture in self-reflection?

Will you seek out new opportunities to serve in your community, with your church or a local agency for seniors or youth; as a mentor or companion; at a food pantry or shelter?

What seeds will you plant and what songs of joy will you sing come Easter?

by Fredrikson Center Team

Prayer

God of Goodness, bring us closer to you in our sowing and our reaping. We offer the work of our minds, hands, and hearts; we plant these seeds and have faith in the transformation of this season. In your name we pray, amen.

8

– Tuesday –

Depth

“You who have made me see many troubles and calamities will revive me again; from the depths of the earth you will bring me up again. You will increase my greatness and comfort me again.” Psalm 71:20-21

In the depth of darkness, the stone is rolled back. We know the tomb will be empty; the gift has been given to each of us. Let us recall the Christ within us, given to us, in these words of Thomas Merton:

“At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indulgence, as our dependence, as our sonship.

It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of lights coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the cruelty of life vanish completely. ...I have no program for seeing this. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.”

*Community Contributor***Prayer**

Gracious God, bring us into the wonder of you; the dark of these times is evident, the troubles and calamities push in upon us; bring us up again; grant that we might be the light as we journey toward the miracle of your gift in Christ.

I'm Only Human

“When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, ‘Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.’ ‘Why were you searching for me?’ he asked. ‘Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?’ But they did not understand what he was saying to them.” Luke 2: 48-50

How would you feel if you had forgotten God’s child behind? I don’t know about you, but I would have more than a little bit of fear going through my mind. So what are these verses talking about? Mary and Joseph were attending the annual yearly festival of the Passover. A festival that they have been going to every year with their son Jesus. In this story, part of the few glimpses of what we have as of Jesus’ life as a teenager, he is forgotten and left for three days in the temple. Mary and Joseph realize and hurry back to find him teaching to adults. They confront him: “Son, why have you treated us like this?” A statement that is pretty fair from a mother’s point of view towards her child. But this isn’t just an ordinary human, it’s God.

This is one example where Jesus demonstrates to others the teachings and scriptures. Jesus, shocked by this response from his parents, explains that they should have known all along that he was here. He is doing exactly what he was meant to do with his time here on Earth. And this brought to my attention— his parents were still only human. Just because they gave birth to him, doesn’t mean that they were any different than the other human beings that were around them.

Jesus is usually the easiest to relate to out of the Trinity of God. However, for us, we have to remember that Jesus was just like us. He has two hands, two feet, a head, and real blood. He is the representation of all human beings. This story always reminds me that Jesus was just like anyone else. In his early years as a teenager, we believe that he was just like any other child that was his age. This showcases the beginning of the story that most of us know about Christ. A story that will be full of miracles, parables, lessons, and changes. However, one constant in his story is the fact that we will always remain only human. No one compares to him. None of us will ever be God. The power of that imagery is something that I hold to as I remember that I still have more to accomplish through him.

by Kurt Hamilton

Prayer

God remind me that I am only human. I am not God, I am not you, but a child of the one true King. Show me your wisdom through my days so I can continue to teach others about your name and life. Let me be a voice where others can’t talk. Use me to demonstrate your love to others that can’t see it. We are children of you God, and continue to serve you every day. God, we are only human. Remind us that you are in charge and that we are your followers. Thank you for this day, as we give thanks for the hours and seconds in it. And all of God’s people said, Amen.

The 4000 Year Old Hope of Job

“Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him...” Job 13:15 KJV

Do you love rag to riches stories too? We admire these because something in us wants to embrace our successes of conquering insurmountable odds. But at what cost? For those who were sheltered growing up as a youth, suffering may be viewed as a curse from Satan and to be avoided at all costs! Satan asked God, does Job worship you without a reason? Haven't you put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? Satan challenged God that if He takes away everything Job has, Job will surely curse God. God responds by *laqach* (Hebrew for 'taking') Job's economic provision, his children, even his health (Job 1-2).

Even still, Job expressed to his friends his secure knowledge in the character of God, that God is all-knowing: What He tears down cannot be rebuilt; those He imprisons cannot be released. He leads priests away, stripped and overthrows officials long established. He silences the lips of trusted advisers and *laqach* (takes) away the discernment, He deprives the leaders of the earth of their reason; he makes them wander in a trackless waste (Job 12-13).

Ironically, *teach* (*leqach*) is derived from the same root word of *laqach* (take) (11:4). In order to learn what God is *leqach* (teaching), we have to trust God when he *laqach* (takes). The Messiah learned the *leqach* (teaching) of obedience when His health was *leqach* (taken) through His suffering on the cross (Hebrews 5:8). When the Father *laqach* (took) His Son's life there seemed to be no hope. But Job knew how the story would end for the Messiah 4000 years ago. Job confessed faith in a resurrected Jewish Messiah by saying, I know my redeemer lives (Job 19:25). After Job's skin would be destroyed, he would receive a new body and, in his flesh, he would see God; Job himself would see God with his own eyes (Job 19:25-27). Blessed is His name, He gives and *laqach* (takes) away (1:21).

by Vincent Sawyer

Prayerfully Consider

1. Journaling the reflections of your heart: What do you perceive the Father taking away from you that may have a teaching for your benefit and even greater, His glory?
2. Memorize Job 13:15, “though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.”
3. What is one thing you will do that will help you not allow Satan to steal your joy today?

*If you want to go deeper study, visit: <https://sawyerv2018.wixsite.com/knowwhyseries>

Bar-Code Faith – Part 1

“As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. ‘Good teacher,’ he asked, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’”

... ‘One thing you lack,’ he said. ‘Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’ At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.”

Mark 10:17, 21-22

“Am I saved?” asked the Rich Young Man to Jesus. It’s not an unimportant question, but is it the only question we should be asking? No, it would seem, based on Christ’s response. If our only concern, faith-wise, is whether we’re going to heaven, it can lead to what Dallas Willard called “Bar-Code Faith.” Like the striped sticker on a piece produce at the grocery store, we long to be labeled and recognized as a Christian. But, Willard asks, doesn’t it matter what’s under that label? It’s easy to identify as a Christian, but still cling to the same greed, pettiness, anger and grievance that we would have whether or not we claim that identity. Whether it be through a ritual, repeating a statement of faith, or being identified as part of a group, many of us are ignoring everything else that is asked of us when we say we’ll give our lives to Christ. For some, it seems like our most fervent hope is that after death, we’ll be scanned and added to a grocery bag of the forgiven, without much thought as to whether any real personal transformation has occurred, much less what happens to the rest of the world around us.

Christ asks the Rich Young Man to sell all he has, give the funds to the poor, and then come, follow Him. The man can’t, or won’t, and walks away sadly. His priorities and values were laid bare, and following Jesus was not at the top of the list. What are our priorities today? What really is Christ asking of us here, today? Do we place following Jesus above getting the bar-code sticker of “Christian” in the eyes of others?

by David J. Grummon

Prayer

Lord, beyond my desire to spend eternity with you, I ask that you find my faith real, genuine, and authentic. Where I fall short, transform me into who you want me to be. Give me the courage to set Christ above all other priorities.

Just Get the Facts Straight

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”
2 Corinthians 5:21

As indicated in my opening devotion, I will examine today’s verse over the course of four devotions, emphasizing a different phrase each time by italicizing the particular words under consideration. The significance of this verse is seen in that it climaxes Paul’s proclamation that God has reconciled us to Him through what Christ did for us on the cross (5:17-21).

When we read the words *God made him*, we can take their meaning one of two ways. We can understand them to mean God the Father somehow strong-armed His Son to take our punishment for sin though He did not commit a sin. That is, Jesus was coerced into paying for our sin. Some people have taken this thought to the extent that they accuse the Father of “cosmic child abuse”; such thinking claims the Father bullied Jesus into dying on the cross where He experienced the Father’s wrath for something He didn’t do. That is, Jesus died on the cross against His will.

The indictment that God treated Jesus in this manner is contradictory to a God who loves us. But even more, to call the Father a child abuser defames God’s Word and yes God Himself. In particular, such a declaration rejects the truth that Jesus’ death was a demonstration of the Father’s love for all. John 3:16 sets the record straight. Jesus was clearly onboard with this plan, for He says “The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my father” (John 10:17-18).

These words of our Lord reveal that the phrase we are studying has a different meaning, that is, God “appointed” or “installed” Jesus as the One to save us from our sin. As an example, every semester I informed the Business Office that a particular student would serve as my student worker. In a sense, I made them my student helper, not by force but by the authority given to me to choose who I knew would get the job done for me. As the remainder of 2 Corinthians 5:21 teaches us, the Father knew the Son was the only qualified person to fulfill the position of Savior and that the Father’s will would be fulfilled.

The words “God made him” should **not** come across as meaning that: God the Father exercised any unloving compulsion upon God the Son. Both Persons of the blessed Trinity were at one in this divine redemption. The Father in His love sent the Son to be the Savior of the world; and the Son showed His own love when He went willingly to the cross and discharged at so great a cost the role delineated for Him by the prophet Isaiah (R.V.G. Tasker).

The Old Testament prophet predicted that the Messiah would suffer for “the LORD makes his life an offering for sin” (53:10). The verse for today testifies that Jesus was “appointed” to this task.

The New Testament shares this sentiment. Jesus was “chosen before the creation of the world” to die on the cross (1 Peter 1:20). That is, God’s plan for redeeming His elect through Christ’s precious blood preceded creation itself. And the fact is our Savior embraced this plan.

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Dear Savior, thank you for committing Your love to us no matter the cost. Amen.

Accepting Change

“Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.” Psalm 107:1

We have experienced the visceral uncertainty of these past years; let us share in this prayer and open our hearts to the transformations of the Lenten journey.

Prayer to Accept Change

By Diana Macalintal from The Work of Your Hands

Just when I thought I had it all figured out Lord,
things change again.
When will I be able to rest
in the comfort of knowing what comes next?
You, who transcended all time,
who created the stars and set them in place,
you, who are ageless yet know every age,
grant me the grace to accept
the changes that are happening.

Empty my heart of anxiety,
and fill it instead with wonder and awe.
Release me from the chains of complacency,
and bind me to your ever-moving Spirit.

When the things I believed to be permanent and stable
are left by the wayside,
enfold me in your undying love
that I may remember in whom all things are bound.

When fear of something paralyzes me,
and grief cripples me with anger
over the loss of what has been,
send your angels to give me a gentle push
over that frightening edge of the unknown,
so that I may learn to trust in you.

For you alone are eternal.
You alone are enduring.
You alone are the everlasting Lord.
And in you alone will this restless world find peace.
Amen.

by Fredrikson Center Team

Prayer

“Let the one who is wise heed these things and ponder the loving deeds of the Lord.” Psalm 107: 43

Miracles and The Cross

A Selection from Thomas à Kempis

“Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.” Luke 9:23-24

“There will always be many who love Christ’s heavenly kingdom, but few who will bear his cross. Jesus has many who desire consolation, but few who care for adversity. He finds many to share his table, but few who will join him in fasting. Many are eager to be happy with him; few wish to suffer anything for him. Many will follow him as far as the breaking of bread, but few will remain to drink from his passion. Many are awed by his miracles, few accept the shame of the cross.”

Paradox is not easily summed up and words tend to just accumulate in the effort of description, explanation, or analogy. It is experience that wins out for its coherence, its definitive- “I can’t explain it, but I can do it, I know it.” Why does it make the sorrowful feel better to help someone else? How is it that the person with the least “free” time always makes time to keep commitments? What does it mean that the greatest feeling of purpose comes from tasks without “reward”?

Christ presents the paradox. We must be part of that paradox, we must be both: love the kingdom and bear the cross, desire consolation and care for adversity, share the table and fast as well, experience the nourishment of bread and the traversing of passion, this Lent- the miracles and the cross.

Selection from The Royal Road by Thomas à Kempis, Bread and Wine Copyright 2003 by The Plough Publishing House

by Community Contributor

Prayer

God of miracles and of the mundane, bring us unto you. Let us take up the cross this and every day; let us wake with you this Easter and each day. Amen.

Tears Turn to Thankfulness

“When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ‘Where have you laid him?’ he asked. ‘Come and see, Lord,’ they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’ But some of them said, ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?’” John 11:33-37

Lazarus was a man whom Jesus loved. While Lazarus became ill, his sisters, Mary and Martha, called to Jesus, telling Him that “the one whom you love is sick.” Jesus waited a few days before going to Lazarus – He said that this sickness would not end in death but would glorify the Father. Upon His arrival, Jesus stepped into a scene of weeping and wailing. Martha told Him that if He had come earlier this wouldn’t have happened. Mary didn’t even come to greet Him, she was so distraught over her brother’s death. There were professional mourners carrying on as though the death of Lazarus was an eternal demise. In the midst of all of this, there was Jesus, about to perform a miracle.

Yet no one believed he was there to raise Lazarus. They all thought He had come too late, that He hadn’t timed His journey correctly, that He had made a mistake. He saw the pain they were going through and the process of deeply mourning and the grief they were enduring. He saw their lack of belief and felt what they must feel – the hopelessness that stems from believing your loved one is lost forever. He saw it and felt what they felt, and He wept. He didn’t weep because He missed Lazarus. He didn’t weep because He thought this was the end of Lazarus’s life – He was about to raise Lazarus from the dead. He wept because of the sheer humanness of the moment. He wept because He felt such compassion for these people; He wept for the fallenness of mankind.

In many ways, the death and resurrection of Lazarus is foreshadowing of Jesus’s own death and resurrection. Oh, how we would weep, if the story truly did end with Jesus on the cross. Oh, how we would mourn if the story was over with Jesus surrendering His spirit and dying. Oh, how hopeless we would feel if the end of Jesus’s life marked the end of His story. But there was no mistake. There was no end to the story on the cross that day in Calvary, just as Lazarus’s time in the tomb was not the end of his story. There was no need for weeping, for mourning. This was all to glorify the Father.

There exists eternal life for us. As we walk this path of life, there are tears. But we can be certain that, as we weep, we have a victorious Savior walking alongside us, arm around us, comforting us. We do not walk this road alone and, regardless of the circumstances, our Lord remains victorious. Look upon the circumstances in your life as opportunities to glorify the Father, and watch as your tears turn to thankfulness.

by Sydney Shrimpton

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for reigning supreme. Thank you for your immense comforting, your kindness, your compassion upon us. Be with us as we mourn in this life. Help us to know we’re not alone in suffering, that you stand beside us through it all. Remind us daily that, though the circumstances of this life may be difficult to endure, you are victorious, now and forever. Amen.

No Matter What – Part 2

“When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, ‘Who then can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’”
Matthew 19:25-26

Historically, God has often spoken through prophets standing at the margins of our faith tradition, calling us to repentance, reform, accountability, and a more authentic relationship with God. Francis of Assisi in 12th Century Italy was just such a prophet. He was rather critical of how Christian faith was being expressed then, amidst the drastic economic shifts leading to the Renaissance. He didn’t leave the Catholic Church, but he rocked the status quo of his day. Born into wealth and privilege, Francis publicly rejected the lifestyle of his family, and gave up his status and economic power to live a life and create a community that demonstrated a radical call to greater discipleship, giving up things that seemed foolish to the world around them.

The Franciscan Order that grew up around him accepted poverty to embrace and accompany the poor. Francis and company embraced creation and the environment in ways that still seem edgy today. But the Franciscans didn’t limit themselves to monks and nuns living apart from everyone else. Even today, Franciscans include laypeople who want to live this life of radical discipleship while still living in the world and working in their vocations. Visibly rejecting the world’s ways and following Christ’s teachings and life of radical nonviolence, Franciscans abstain from carrying any kind of arms so that the use of deadly force is always off the table, even in the face of dangerous world. Might this risk injury or even death at the hands of others? Yes, it might, but Francis and company chose to follow Christ, no matter what.

“Who then can be saved?” You can’t blame the disciples for wondering if they had the courage for such radical discipleship. But what if, like those 12 disciples, and like Francis centuries later, we didn’t try to do it by ourselves? What if we tried discipleship within a community of others who are all asking, “How can we follow Christ, no matter what?” With God, all things are possible!

by David J. Grummon

Prayer

Jesus, in so many ways, despite my best intentions, I am flawed, messed up, and cowardly. I don’t believe I have the ability, the character, or the courage to be your disciple. But I believe you have the power to transform me into anything if I let you. Make me into who you want me to be, the person you meant me to be. Make me your disciple.

Like Riding a Bike

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” - Romans 8:38-39

Once, someone told me that our relationship with God is like riding a bike. You’re either on it and moving closer to him, or you’ve stopped peddling and become stagnant in your faith. This has stuck with me because I’ve found it to be true. When I’m invested in spending time in the word, praying, or worshiping daily, I feel connected to God and my cup is full, ready to pour into others. Ironically, these are the times when my life is not as fast-paced and hectic. I have time to slow down and be still with God.

On the other hand, when my life gets busy, I find excuses to skip those quiet moments, and the longer I remain out of my routine, the more disconnected I feel from God. Lucky for us, God is constant, even if we’re not. Romans 8:38-39 reminds us that no matter how far or close we feel to God, His love is never separated from us. No matter how long it’s been since you’ve invested time in your faith, God’s open arms gladly welcome your presence and connection.

Currently, I ask you to consider, am I in a season where I’m on the bike propelling my faith forward, or am I stuck and drifting off course? Just like our physical body needs daily nourishment, our spirit needs daily substance to live the life God intended. Today, I urge you to find one intentional thing to do to nudge yourself closer to God because it only takes one small push to get the wheels turning again.

by Nicole Hamilton

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,

We are grateful for your consistency. I rejoice in the fact that no matter how far I might stray, you are excitedly welcoming me back with open arms. Help me remember that I can never be separated from your love, and use that feeling to love others the same way. I pray that I remain on the bike, always moving towards you.

In your name, we pray,
Amen.

Are You Kidding Me?!

“God made him *who had no sin* to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”
2 Corinthians 5:21

It is easy to study the Old Testament and miss the mercy and love of God. We often envision a demanding and vengeful God, who is just waiting to inflict punishment on those who sin. But if we hold this position, we fail to see God’s grace. And this grace is never more present than in the sacrificial system found in the law of Moses (Leviticus 4:32-35). When sin occurred, the guilty one provided an animal for the atonement of sins, a means to temporarily cover the sin and restore the relationship between God and the penitent. Often this animal was a lamb, for it represented innocence and purity, essentials for achieving atonement. This lamb must be without blemish and spotless, otherwise it would not be acceptable to God.

The significance of the lamb is clear: it became a *substitute* for the offender by bearing the penalty and punishment due the one offering the lamb as a sacrifice. By offering the lamb for one’s sin, the price of the sin was paid, thus freeing the one sinning from receiving what was deserved. It should come as no surprise that the picture of a sacrificial lamb in the Old Testament carried over into the New Testament. This idea of a “perfect lamb” was applied to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

Early in Jesus’ ministry John the Baptist saw Jesus approaching and exclaimed, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). As Peter puts it, we were redeemed “with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Peter 1:19, ESV). That is to say, Jesus was sinless (2:22), which makes the words for our study today even more revealing. The grace of God comes to us by the death of Christ, a voluntary death, yet one that Christ saw as necessary (Mark 8:31). If the idea of an innocent lamb being killed gets to us, then the death of the Perfect Lamb should bring us to our knees.

The fact that the One *who had no sin* was to be punished for sin is “the great paradox of redemptive love” (R.V.G. Tasker). There is no forgiveness of sin without the shedding of blood (Hebrews 9:22) and only a pure and acceptable lamb would suffice. As we saw in my preceding devotion, God appointed Jesus to be our lamb, to take the wrath our sin deserves and to show us grace by accepting us into the family of God (Romans 8:14-16). And this relationship will go on eternally as will our praise: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain” (Revelation 5:12).

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

God of Joy, bring us new moments of joy within the unknown of this time. Where there are barriers to love, let joy lift our hearts and guide us through. May your Spirit be the music that brings us together. Your Son comes to us anew, bringing Joy to the World. Let our hearts hold true to this sounding joy. Amen.

Broken Hearted

“My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.” Psalm 51:17

We look to the Lenten season for “what to give up” and what sacrifices to offer toward renewal and transformation. Let us look to our hearts, broken in the sorrow of our torn world, and bring our brokenness to the cross. In this work of Lent, may our broken hearts be also our strength, our witness to Christ’s gift, our demonstration of Christ within us and in the world.

“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.” 2 Corinthians 4:8-12

Perhaps this year, in the hard pressing, perplexity and violence of our current times, we take heart in this, God’s work to transform us, and pray that we allow his work to be done; that we embrace with broken, trusting and willing hearts the work he calls us to and the love of our brothers and sisters on this path. What can you give? What can you do? What will you give; what will you do to transform your heart to reveal Christ within this world? Make use of your brokenness, test the strength God entrusts in you by serving his people, his Son here on earth.

by Fredrikson Center Team

Prayer

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”
2 Corinthians 4:16-18

We lift our hearts to you Lord, amen.

Open

“Taste and see that the Lord is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.” Psalm 34:8

My mom used to make hamburger helper, cooked noodles, browned ground beef and then the spices that came in the box. She was a divorced mom, working full time and tending to four kids (ages 3 to 13 at the time of the divorce). A simple meal was a necessity and a blessing.

As an adult, it is a meal that I rejected, and without reason. I just didn’t think I liked it.

The other day, I came across a recipe for hamburger casserole, which is hamburger helper without the box: elbow noodles, tomato paste, onions and ground beef, cheese. My daughter really wanted to try it. After some pushing, we made it and in fact, we loved it.

We set ideas and concepts, tastes and preferences in stone; we get stuck and forget that trying, giving it a chance, might open us up to learning a new way. If we taste and see, we may discover we have changed; or there might be another way of experiencing something.

This Lent: take to heart opportunities to try something new and moreover to try. Rather than watching something on a screen—take a walk to a park you’ve never visited; listen to a style of music that is new to you; try a new cuisine; ask the librarian or your pastor to recommend a new author. Before your expectations get the best of you—give it a try and see.

by Trish Dowd Kelne

Prayer

God of all possibilities, may we trust in your ways, open to learning and willing to begin anew. We thank you. Amen.

Patience is a Virtue

“Whoever is patient has great understanding, but one who is quick-tempered displays folly.”

Proverbs 14:29

Patience is something that is hard to practice. As one of my good friends likes to say to her preschool students, we need to practice our patience muscles. And this is so TRUE! How often are we presented in situations where our patience is tested? I have always said that I am the least patient when I am driving.

For whatever reason, when I enter a vehicle, I have this thinking that wherever I am going is now more important than everything else going on near me. I might need to practice my patience muscles a little bit more on the road.

What are some examples in the bible that remind you of patience? Maybe Simeon and Anna come to mind as they were waiting for Jesus to be born? Or maybe John the Baptist comes to mind waiting for the Messiah and carving a way for him? I am sure that we could go on and on about different examples, but one to highlight is the different stories in Ruth.

Now talk about some patience that needed to be practiced. A story of someone who was willing to wait, and that patience was rewarded with Boaz. When I think of practicing patience, I sometimes don't remember the situations where I have been rewarded with good things. How about safely getting home after driving home from work? Maybe it can be as simple as God gave me life to live and breathe in this day and that he is with me no matter what?

I think sometimes we don't realize how patient God is with us! Have you ever thought of some of the mistakes that we have made over and over and realized that God forgives us each and every time? That he looks at us as his children to give us new directions and ideas to keep us away from sin. Today my challenge is this. Let us practice using our patience muscles together. Pray this prayer with me as we ask God to continue to be patient with us.

by Kurt Hamilton

Prayer

God teach me to be more like you. When others are struggling give me the strength and reason to make sure that I am helping them just as you help me. Let me practice patience in my everyday life, in everything I do. When I stumble with patience, let me look back to your words and wisdom for guidance. As I continue to live in a world that is rapidly moving, remind me to be patient and move at your pace. Open my eyes to your vision, and your world in my everyday life. Let patience be something that is practiced instead of earned. And let patience be something that I find instead of have. God thank you for being patient with me. We pray all these great things in your Son's Holy name, Amen.

Cheap Grace or Costly Grace? – Part 3

“Do not be confirmed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of you minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Romans 12:2

For a 20th Century German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a risky, edgy guy. He published this book, The Cost of Discipleship, which called out the difference between “cheap grace” and “costly grace.” By definition, grace is free and our salvation can’t be earned, but, Bonhoeffer wrote, it came at a cost—the life of God’s Son. And because it was costly, it requires something of us. Therefore, we can either embrace costly grace, being completely transformed in radical and costly ways, or we can settle for cheap grace.

Cheap grace says, “Cool, I’m saved!” and goes about living, consuming, doing business and participating in society without much regard for anything else Christ said or did. But costly grace, which Bonhoeffer associates with true discipleship, requires us to give up all kinds of things that make no sense to the rest of the world. Bonhoeffer even went so far as to say that true discipleship requires us to be willing to let go of every other priority and allegiance—to profession, class, reputation, party, nationality, race, family, church, even to scripture—and relate to all of them first through Christ. This was more than just an academic exercise for Bonhoeffer, who was writing in 1930s Germany. The Nazis had just coopted the German Christian Church in exchange for promises of renewed influence and prestige. Bonhoeffer refused to be coopted, joined the resistance, and was arrested and eventually murdered by the Nazis. Costly grace!

Today, one could argue, cheap grace infects more than just our theology. Most of us expect all manner of paradise without giving much of ourselves in return: We want to avoid the effects of global warming without changing how we travel, consume, or do business. We want an end to sexual assault without confronting our own norms and behaviors. We want to end abortion without properly paying for better childcare, healthcare, housing, nutrition, or education. We want racial reconciliation without addressing structural racism or our own privilege. We want an end to mass shootings without giving up our guns or funding public mental health. We want an end to the pandemic without masking or having to get vaccinated ourselves. We want to get to heaven without true, transforming discipleship. Cheap grace!

What would embracing costly grace look like today? Do we have the courage for that kind of discipleship?

by David J. Grummon

Prayer

Jesus, in a world full of cheap grace, give me courage beyond what I can muster through my own will and desires. I believe you have the power to transform me into anything if I let you. Help me to authentically become who you want me to be. As scary as it sounds, give me the courage to embrace costly grace and transforming discipleship.

Salt and Light Versus Rice

“You are like salt for all mankind... You are like light for the whole world...” Matthew 5:13-16

Rice is the staple food in many countries across the world including my own- India. If I were to cook 5 cups of rice, would I add 5 cups of salt to it? Certainly not! So, in every form of preparation of rice, the rice always outnumbers the salt, yet a tad of salt makes an enormous difference in the overall outcome.

In the room in which you currently are, look up at the ceiling... What is the size of the electric bulb compared to the size of the room you are in? It is probably a ratio of 1:10000. Yet, darkness flees the entire space once the small bulb is flipped on.

If I am the salt of the earth, and the light of the world, then “little me” has the ability to make big things happen. Sometimes, because we feel outnumbered or overwhelmed at the sheer magnitude of evil or wrongdoers, we then choose powerlessness and helplessness and decide to go with the flow, not standing up for what we deeply believe is right.

Little doesn't mean insignificant. You and I are significant. Our presence should make a BIG difference in this world. Let us stop waiting to be on the side of the majority. They may be the majority, but they are the trivial majority, and you and I are the impactful minority. They are the rice of the world, and you and I are the salt of the world. They are the spacious room and you and I are the light that dispels darkness from the room. Let us make our influence felt all round!

Let us remember that you and I are the world's seasoning, to make it beautiful. So if we can just do the right seasoning to make even one life beautiful our life is surely worth living.

Be the salt and light in someone's life today. Salt does not give flavor to itself; light does not illuminate itself. They are never self-serving but truly altruistic!

by Rev. Justin D. Gnanamuthu, C.S.C.,

Prayer

Lord, you are our Light. Guide us as we follow your way. Amen.

“Again, Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’” John 8:12

Life and Death and Mushrooms

Lately I have been reading a Field Guide to the Rocky Mountains, fascinated by the descriptions of the trees, flowers, and animals of the region. What has surprised me most, though, has been the author's description of various kinds of fungi. The guide divides fungi into two broad categories: safe to eat and dangerous to eat. Some would taste great on a salad, while others can cause problems, from mild digestion issues to a rather rapid death! If you find one in the wild, it all comes down to making the right choice!

It reminds me of Deuteronomy 30, where Joshua tells God's people "I have set before you life and death, (so) choose life." It may feel like our daily choices don't carry the same stakes as Joshua (or mushroom-pickers in the Rockies), but I would suggest that our lives are filled with daily choices between life or death. Will we choose death, in the form of small-minded vengeance, destruction of relationship, or reliance on privilege and worldly power? Or will we choose life, in the form of peace, health, grace, and generosity? Over a thousand years after Joshua, a man with the same name ("Jeshua," translated Jesus), offered a man a similar choice: "Sell what you own and give the money to the poor...(and) when he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions." (Mark 10) He chose poorly.

We may not always face such dualistic choices, yet Joshua and Jesus remind us that we are faced daily with decisions about how we will live. Who we will care for. Who we will follow. Whether or not we will choose the way of God in Christ...the way of life. This Lenten season, may we hear the invitation to live differently than the rest of the world. May we choose life!

by Rev. Matt Sturtevant

Prayer

Lord, you have set before us life and death. Grant us the wisdom to choose life, and grace when we choose poorly. Amen.

Turn Your Ear

“My son, if you accept my words
and store up my commands within you,
turning your ear to wisdom
and applying your heart to understanding—
indeed, if you call out for insight
and cry aloud for understanding,
and if you look for it as for silver
and search for it as for hidden treasure,
...
Then you will understand what is right and just
and fair—every good path.
For wisdom will enter your heart,
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.
Discretion will protect you,
and understanding will guard you.”

Proverbs 2: 1-4, 9-11

Do we turn our ear to wisdom? Do we hear? Do we work to understand, as if searching for hidden treasure? This is active, an effort to make a clear path for communication and to further focus.

Our spirits, ragged and raw, block or confuse the words we hear; our own defensiveness mutes wisdom. Surely there are times when our dear friends, our trusted partners and teachers share wisdom with us. Sometimes though, we get caught up in what it means about us. What did we do or not do? What is being said about us? Is it possible to step away and refocus? What can we learn if we allow ourselves the space and care to hear and we work to understand?

by Fredrikson Center Team

Prayer

God of Wisdom, open our ears, soften our hearts and grant that we might offer such tender care to our sisters and brothers. In your name, we pray. Amen.

Practice

“Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near....Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.” Luke 2:9-14 (KJV)

Lent reminds us we are human and in need of God; be gentle with your brothers and sisters and with yourself too. As Thomas Merton said, “He (God) created man with a soul that was made not to bring itself to perfection in its own order, but to be perfected by him in an order infinitely beyond the reach of human powers.” So let us do the work of Lent: prayer, study, good works. Let us “put it into practice,” and then be gentle knowing God is working through us and perfecting us.

by Fredrikson Center Team

Prayer

Gentle God, bring us near to you; help us practice the ways your Son showed us; we trust in you.
In your name we pray, amen.

Moving from Fear to Faith

“...for I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” Jeremiah 29:11

Our heavenly father, we are still struggling in a world filled with division and anger. We strive to trust in you even as our faith in our fellow man is challenged. Our love and faith in you must out shadow all the other doubts if we are to find happiness and fulfillment in this earthly life. We seek forgiveness for the times we find ourselves focusing on our frustrations with our current situation vs. looking to you for your guidance and direction when we most need it.

We thank you for your patience with us while we struggle seeking our footing in our faith lives, which should be a priority despite any fears we are experiencing currently. We have been reminded that fear is nothing more than lack of faith and our frustrations stem from our own selfish expectations for what we want to happen in our lives.

May we use this time of contemplation during the Lenten season to recommit to our faith in your love for us and your ability to keep us happy and fulfilled if we only but surrender to your grace and care. Only through your Love for us and our faith in you can we find peace.

by Mary Alice Grosser

Prayer

“... I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.”
Isaiah 12:2

Crafted with Purpose

“You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue, you, Lord, know it completely.” Psalm 139:1-4

Do you believe God loves you? The answer to this is more often than not, a knee-jerk response, an enthusiastic “Yes!” Those of us who are raised in the church are told again and again, “Yes, Jesus loves me.” New Christians are indoctrinated with this deep, yet somehow simple truth: Yes, of course God loves me. But how many of us actually believe it? What about this: Do you believe God *likes* you?

This tends to be more difficult to answer. Though we are taught we are given our salvation by grace alone, too often it seems that we believe our actions and missteps leave God feeling more than a little fed up with us. We spend our time cowering from Him, tallying up our victories and losses, keeping an account of what we’ve done well and what we’ve failed to do, all in hope, it somehow balances out in the end. God knows you. The *Creator of the Universe* rejoices in you. Does that thought even register? It’s easy to shake our heads, thinking, “Oh, no. Well, yes, of course He loves me. He died for me. But He spends more time being exasperated by me, shaking His head at my shortcomings more than He actually wants to hang around me.”

“The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.” Zephaniah 3:17

Of course we fail; we fall short of His expectations and desires. There is no such thing as perfection. Except that there is. And His name is Jesus. And He passed on His perfection when He died for you on the cross. He clothed you in white. There are no shortcomings—not in the Father’s eyes. You are washed white as snow. That tally you’re keeping? Irrelevant. All those times you’ve messed up? Don’t matter. All the ways you’re failing God? Repent and turn.

God has searched you and He knows you. He loves you. He even likes you. Stop hiding from Him. Stop calculating all the ways you could never be as good as someone else. You are His workmanship, crafted with purpose, created for a reason. You are a work of art—*His* work of art. The same one who created the stars and mountains and ice cream created *YOU*. When you live with the joy that comes from this sense of freedom, you find that you are much less inclined to be judgmental to yourself or to others. You learn how to love fully, abundantly, in every way that you can, because you too feel that love, regardless of circumstance. You learn to extend the grace that has been extended to you. There is no need to fear, to doubt, to cower, to hide. The Lord is familiar in all of your ways. And He loves you. Run to Him.

by Sydney Shrimpton

Prayer

Lord, there is nothing more important, nothing more beautiful than the grace you continually pour upon us. Help us to extend that same grace to ourselves and to others. Help us to discover what it feels like to be fully known and loved by you. Keep us in your arms and lead us to love as you do. Transform us with these truths so that we may live to glorify You. Thank you Lord, for knowing, loving, and even liking us. Amen.

Too Much or Not Enough?

“Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” Mark 14:9

As a young boy and teenager, I dreamed of playing major league baseball and I had a major baseball card collection. I cherished the dream of playing baseball and cherished those Topps baseball cards. As a young girl and beyond, my wife Cynthia dreamed of owning a horse. About 20 years ago, with my childhood dream long past, I decided to sell my baseball card collection and give the money to my wife to make her childhood dream of owning a horse come true. And so she bought a horse and named him “Topps.”

I still vividly feel and remember the intense emotion after selling my baseball cards. Immediately afterward, sitting in my car, money in hand, tears were streaming down my face. They were tears of love and joy that cost me something and the cost made it all so much sweeter.

I was reminded of this personal scene as I read the scene in Mark 14:3-9 where a woman anoints Jesus with expensive perfume while at the home of Simon the leper. Notice first that Jesus is at the home of an untouchable outcast. Next, we notice the woman coming toward him with an alabaster jar of very costly perfume, ointment made of pure nard. To the objection of many, she pours the lavish gift from her jar upon the head of Jesus. Jesus celebrates her gift and ends the debate about the proper use of such a gift by saying, “Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

Imagine what it felt like to give this gift. Imagine what kind of encounter(s) with Jesus she must have had to be so lovingly willing to expend such a gift to pour over his head, a head soon to be pierced with a crown of thorns. And imagine what this gift felt like for Jesus. Rejection, betrayal, denial, mocking and crucifixion were all on the horizon, in his head so to speak. So, this anointing upon his head for burial must have felt particularly and profoundly precious.

The giving of the gift was so sweet because it was indeed costly. This woman is remembered because she gave much. And Jesus is Savior because he gave all.

It all makes me want to sing, “When I Survey the Wonderful Cross.” Sing the last verse with me, “Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small. Love so amazing, so divine. Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

by Rev. Tiger Pennington

Prayer

Eternal and loving God, may the immeasurable love demonstrated through the Cross inspire our devotion and overflow into caring for all. Amen.

Slip Sliding Away

“God made him who had no sin *to be sin for us*, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

2 Corinthians 5:21

The Contemporary English Version translates today’s verse with the words, “Christ never sinned! But God treated him as a sinner, so Christ could make us acceptable to God.” It is so easy to pass over this verse with only a hint of sorrow or guilt. Because of what we learn from the news media or what we watch for entertainment, we encounter evil and violence at almost every turn. This leads to us becoming desensitized and, in the end, failing to take to heart that our God is holy and offended, grieved, and repulsed by our transgressions. While we can easily gloss over sin, God—because He is God—cannot and He must somehow remove the sin which severs our relationship with Him. Such a separation can only be mended by the One who takes our place and receives the full force of God’s judgment.

Our words for today, “to be sin for us,” present a great mystery that is hard to describe in words; yet it is easy to visualize. The three hours of darkness on the afternoon of Good Friday (Mark 15:33) reveal that the sinless Son of God was accursed so that those who sin might escape the judgment due them. As Paul teaches, we are under the curse of the law because we can’t keep all the laws of God (Galatians 3:10); but thanks be to God that “Christ redeems us from the curse of law by becoming a curse for us” (3:13). These thoughts reflect what the prophet Isaiah said over 2500 years ago: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (53:6).

It’s easy to ignore or reject the biblical teaching that we are indebted to God on such a large scale. Now we must always remember that our unworthiness for all that God has done for us doesn’t diminish our worth in His sight; rather such an awareness highlights just how much we are valued by Him. Yet we tend to shy away from our need of a Savior by protesting that we are good enough on our own and don’t need to be reminded just how far away we are from Him. Such a stance produces a negative result. If we think our good deeds or good intentions are sufficient to gain acceptance from God, then we have intentionally walked away from Him, all the while fooling ourselves into believing we are drawing closer to Him. Maybe the songwriters Simon and Garfunkel had it right: we “believe we’re gliding down the highway when in fact we’re slip sliding away.” If good works achieves salvation or if there is a way to God other than Christ, then His death was unneeded and our verse for today is at best unnecessary and at worst untruthful (Galatians 2:21).

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Dear Father, give us a spirit of learning that accepts Your word as truth, no matter how painful to confront. In the Name of the Spirit of Truth. Amen.

– Monday –

Things

“When my soul was embittered,
when I was pricked in heart,
I was brutish and ignorant;
I was like a beast toward you.
Nevertheless, I am continually with you;
you hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will receive me to glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” Psalm 73: 21-26

The earlier verses of Psalm 73 speak to the gluttony we witness so brash and boldly about us; and often the experience of greed, consumption and waste falls heavy and sharp upon sometimes weary followers of Christ and his way of service.

In those weighted and stung moments, we lash out, childish and pouty, we lament: “Why can’t I have all the nice things; go on all the fancy trips; rich foods; trendy clothes; luxury cars and remodeled homes? It’s not fair!” Insert stomping of feet. We are brutish, we are ignorant. All these “things” make heavy the work of serving each other and cloud our sight of what is right. Moreover, if we feed these desires, we do then become like a beast toward our true God.

There comes the time though, when the outward polish of those with so much is stripped away; we see the limit of the comfort of these things. In grace, we return to the true comfort of service and the work of the Lord. It is what fills us and sustains us. It is what holds our hand and never let’s go.

by Fredrikson Center Team

Prayer

Lord of All Things, help us feel the comfort of your hand in ours, as we work in service with you and our brothers and sisters. Especially as we seek to set aside this Lenten journey to grow closer to you, let us see beyond the material comforts to the peace that comes from expending our hearts and spirits in service. We praise and adore you; we thank you for the wonder of your unconditional ever-present love. Amen.

Seek

“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Matthew 6:33

Our dishtowel drawer was about empty and at the back of the drawer, my searching hand grabbed the “paper-towel replacement” which we had invented in 2020. At the time, we couldn’t find paper-towels at the store. Instead, we trimmed our worn dishtowels and used those. In times of scarcity, we get creative; we make things work. And then the shelves are filled again, and we go on.

Let us come to the Lenten journey with the creativity to renew our relationships with our God, ourselves, our family, our community. What will you do to nourish this creativity? Here are some ideas to get you thinking. Reach out in prayer: every time you put on your seatbelt or every time you refill your water bottle, lift up a prayer. Reach inward with a new skill: try journaling, take a class, start an exercise program. Reach out to family: send a card or a joke via text, meet for coffee. Reach out to community: look into nonprofits and educational groups, be a mentor at church or for a younger student. What creative ways will you seek out to bring abundance to your Lenten journey?

by Community Contributor

Prayer

Lord of fullness, help us seek out creative ways to renew our connections; grant us courage to take the first step. In your name, we pray. Amen.

–Wednesday–

What Stops You in Your Tracks?

I was totally stopped in my tracks the other day by a post I read on Facebook; actually, stopped in my thoughts would be more accurate because I was not technically moving, I was simply sitting and scrolling. But the point is I stopped and could not go any further after I read this:

“Because he bends down to listen,
I will pray as long as I have breath!” Psalm 116:2

It was posted in a beautiful flowing font but that is not what struck me. It simply put an image in my mind that I could not shake. God, the God of the Universe, bending down to listen to me! The all-powerful Jehovah taking the time to listen to the very weak little me.

It struck me because it is the truth, but it was also exactly the truth I needed to hear. I had been dealing with a lack of motivation in my prayer life. It took me by such surprise I was not sure that I had ever read that verse before. So, I opened my Bible app to check it out.

I found out this is from the New Living Translation which is not what I normally read so I looked it up in several other translations just to be sure they had not taken too many liberties in the translation – as if I did not believe that God really listens to me. I found in the other translations the phrases, “He inclined his ear to me,” and “He turned his ear to me.” So, yes, God really does listen to me.

Wouldn't you think that as a Christian I would know that God listens to me? Well, yes, technically I did know that but, on that day, I needed to be stopped in my thoughts and have a new image planted in my mind to remind me that God really does make an effort to listen to me. He bends down, he takes time, he gets close. In other words, he stops in his tracks to listen to me. So why wouldn't I pray to him as long as I have breath?

by Janice Trigg

Prayer

Thank you, God, for bending down to listen to me. I will keep praying as long as I have breath.

Seeing the Way of Lent

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him. The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.” Mark 10:51 NIV

During the season of Lent, we fix our gaze upon Jesus’ journey to the Cross. Learning to see in the season of Lent sharpens the image of Jesus as the way of revealing the loving heart of Father, Son and Holy Spirit through self-giving, radically forgiving, co-suffering love. When I think of Jesus, the journey of Lent and longing to see, I think of Bartimaeus.

We encounter Bartimaeus by name in the gospel according to Mark, 10:46-52. On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus has been desperately trying to confer sight upon his disciples through a thrice repeated declaration of his impending death and resurrection. Three times Jesus says he will be handed over to be killed and three times the disciples resist the message of co-suffering love and insist upon internal power struggles. Maybe it is the disciples, and us, instead of Bartimaeus who need to cry out, “Rabbi, I want to see.”

All too often, we are like the disciples. We want to deny suffering, assert control, make sure we are on the “winning” side and operate by the love of power rather than the power of love. We can’t “see” the way of the Cross and of Jesus’ suffering as the way God reveals love, demonstrates forgiveness and overcomes the principalities and powers. To borrow from the title of N.T. Wright’s excellent book, we can’t envision the Cross as “The Day the Revolution Began.”

So ironically, Bartimaeus the blind man sitting by the roadside, beside the way, becomes the one who can really see. Yes, Jesus grants his request of sight but Bartimaeus then follows Jesus along the way and Jesus is on the way to the Cross. It seems Bartimaeus sees the way and follows along the way while the disciples protest and argue about the way.

During Lent, we are confronted over and over again with the redemptive reality of Jesus’ suffering upon the hard wood of the Cross. We are invited to see Jesus along the way. And in seeing Jesus we see God running to all of us prodigal children in order to envelop us in a divine loving embrace.

The disciples seem to be blinded by pride of position, place and power. Jesus came not to control or coerce through power but rather to invite and redeem through co-suffering love. As Charles Wesley penned, “And can it be that thou my God shouldst die for me.” Oh may we cry out all the more with Bartimaeus, “Rabbi, I want to see.”

by Rev. Tiger Pennington

Prayer

Lord, deliver us from the love of power and grant us sight to see the power of love. Amen.

For Whom Are You Looking?

“The angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here, he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.’” Matthew 28:5-6

Have you ever spent time looking for something until you find it; then stop just to wonder why am I looking for this or that? So many times in life with our busy schedules, we major in minors. But today let's spend a little time on the majors. The women went back to the tomb, the tomb is the last place they saw Jesus, therefore, this is where they thought they would find Him. But instead of finding Jesus, they found two angels. The angels told them there was no need to be afraid. This was to comfort them. Then the angel gave them the good news. Jesus is not here, because he is risen just as he said he would.

Are you looking or expecting something and don't really know where to begin looking? Well, why not major in the majors. Use this formula to process how to proceed. First talk with God through prayer, then listen for God's answer. Until now you were not ready to hunt but now you are ready to go forward. The best time to go forward with anything is always after you hear from God. Now, let us look and anticipate finding our destiny. You are majoring in majors. On your mark, get set, go!!!

by Dr. Dorothy L. Smith

Prayer

Lord God we come to you asking for your help and direction. We realize we don't know the way but you do, therefore, please lead us in the right direction to find our destiny. We want to be in your perfect plan for our life. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.

Humiliation, Anger and Routine – Blessings in Disguise

“They cried out, ‘Take him away, take him away! Crucify him!’” John 19: 15 KJV

The crucified person in those days was considered a tragic failure in life, one to be despised, shamed and considered the lowest of the low. What are/were your crucifixions? When are those times you feel/felt like a failure? When are those times you feel/felt like you’re despised or hated, if only by yourself? When are those times you feel/felt humiliated if only by your own doing? Let us take heart in the following: There is no failure the Lord’s love cannot reverse, no humiliation He cannot exchange for blessing, no anger He cannot dissolve, no discomfort He cannot soothe, no routine He cannot transfigure, and no cross He cannot triumph. All is swallowed up in victory. He has nothing but gifts to offer. It remains only for us to find how even the cross can be borne as a gift.

Humiliation, anger and routine do not feel like gifts. Yet they are! Humiliation gives us the opportunity to learn how to be our best friend. It gives us the opportunity to learn how not to care about what others think of us. How often we are tempted to act out of shame! How often we are tempted to dress and act the way we think people want us to act.

Anger can give us the opportunity to slow down, to take deep relaxing breaths, to respond in creative rather than destructive ways when we find wrongdoing has happened. It can also remind us of what the Lord says, that vengeance belongs to Him. (Deut. 32:35). That means we don’t have to waste time or energy getting back at anyone for anything. God will handle it - in His time and His way. Routine can give us opportunities to talk to the Lord because we can easily split our attention from doing something that doesn’t demand a lot of attention. I know a fellow who sings to God in his mind as he does his daily factory work.

by Rev. Justin D. Gnanamuthu, C.S.C.,

Use this as a mantra

“I thank you, Lord, for my humiliation. Take my anger, Lord, and help me to be joyful in my routine work.”

In the Quiet

“The LORD said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.’ Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’” 1 Kings 19:11-13

Have you ever snuck a quiet morning under the covers? It was a favorite time to share back when my daughter was small. Quilt over our heads, we looked at the light that seeped in through the *Grandmother's Garden* quilted pattern— the colors of the fabric flowers like stained glass. And our voices naturally turned to whispers, a closeness of play and tenderness.

This posture is one to lean into when the world looms too loud and the places, we think God will appear, instead just rage. These might be times to tuck under a garment; bring the wide world into focus and recognize the strength of self and Spirit within.

In this Lenten season, what ways do you draw near to Christ? What quiet is present, if only we take the moment to pull the cloak over our faces and stand?

by Trish Dowd Kelne

Prayer

Lord God, come to us in the quiet, call us from the noise into your place of whisper. Help us on our way to you. Grant that we may seek you, hear and go forth in your name. We thank you. Amen.

Building on Firm Foundations

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.” Matthew 7:24-25 (NRSV)

I read recently that as many as 34,000 homes in Connecticut are in danger of collapsing due to faulty foundations. Without realizing it, the company providing the concrete used for these foundations used stone from a quarry laced with pyrrhotite, an iron sulfide which over time causes concrete to crack and disintegrate. Hundreds of homes with these foundations have already crumbled.

This reminds me that Jesus used the image of building a house on a strong foundation (rock) versus building on a weak foundation (sand). Floods and rains do not cause the house built on rock to fall, but they will wash away the house built on sand. He used this image to teach us to build our lives on the solid foundation of following his teachings and obeying him. Just hearing his words isn't enough. We must put them into practice.

There is much wisdom offered to us in this world which is good and beneficial. But if we base our life on any foundation other than humble obedience to God's truth, we will be asking for trouble. Doing what God says is the only way to have a life built on a strong foundation.

by Jan Lee

Prayer

Loving God, I want to live a life built on a solid foundation. Help me to obey you. Amen.

– Wednesday –

Taking Our Hand

Our family was vacationing in Colorado. We were attracted to a tall observation tower. If we climbed to the platform on top, we could get a clear view of the snow-capped mountains surrounding the valley. My wife and 9 year- old son quickly headed up the wooden two-plank steps. I noticed my 6 year-old son was looking at the 2-3 inch open space between the two planks. He was hesitating to go beyond the first step. I offered to go ahead of him. He raised one foot, but he didn't move. So I moved behind him and told him I would be there if he needed any help. He still hesitated. I moved up beside him. He took my hand and we walked up the steps together.

"The eleven disciples went to the hill in Galilee where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him, even though some of them doubted. Jesus drew near and said to them, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always, to the end of the age."
Matthew 28:16-20

Now I need help. The hand of Someone I trust who is bigger than I, reaches out. We join hands and go forward together.

by Chaplain John Grummon

Prayer

Lord God, thank you for being with me and taking my hand. In your Holy Name, amen.

– Thursday –

Care

“A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.” Luke 7:37-38

“You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” John 13: 13-17

On this Holy Thursday, we see the example of care that is both giving and receiving. We are called to be vulnerable; allowing another to see our weakness, our needs and care for us. We are called to tend to each other, in all the muck that we encounter in the world. It is the love and act of care that Christ demonstrates and instructs us “you should do as I have done for you.”

Do as Christ has instructed you. Take time today to care for another; take time today to allow yourself to receive the care of another.

by Community Contributor

Prayer

Lord, we accept the call of your Son; we commit to caring for one another and opening our hearts to the love and care of our sisters and brothers. We honor you with our actions and know you are with us. Amen.

The Joy and Sorrow of Resurrection

“No one can get Joy by merely asking for it. It is one of the ripest fruits of the Christian life, and, like all fruits, must be grown.” Henry Drummond, theological writer, revivalist, explorer, geologist

In the book, *The Prophet*, written in 1923 by Kahlil Gibran, a Lebanese-American poet, writer, artist, and philosopher, influenced by Islam, Christianity and the Bahai faith, we find a beautiful passage on the paradox of joy and sorrow:

Then a woman said, Speak to us of Joy and Sorrow.

And he answered: Your joy is your sorrow unmasked. And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was often times filled with your tears. And how else can it be? The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.

A woman, whose lack of further identification suggests her concern is universal, is seeking clarity on the subject of joy and sorrow. The prophet then reveals the relationship between the two and the dependency of one upon the other. The prophet explains why it is impossible for us to experience only joy and escape all sorrow. Joy and sorrow must coexist. For there to be one, there must be the other. Emotions like joy and sorrow and outcomes like failure and success are continuums. They come from the same place in the heart. Joy and sorrow, grief and celebration, cannot be locked away in separate compartments. But, we attempt to do this. We see only a portion of the story of Resurrection. Joy is like wine in a cup. The cup is sorrow: the deeper the cup, the more wine, or joy, it will hold. In other words, the greater the ability for us to experience sorrow, the result is the greater ability for us to experience joy. We should not be surprised when we find traces of pain in joy or beauty in sorrow as this is the nature of a world being redeemed.

Have you ever been surprised when in the midst of the most devastating tragedy, you have experienced moments of peace, hope and even joy and gratitude?

During Lent, remembering the death and celebrating the resurrection of Jesus is the center of our faith and cause for much rejoicing and renewed hope. The cross is the ultimate example of the intricate web of sorrow and joy. In Revelation 5:12: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.” We have not been made in God’s likeness to know only pain or loss in our lives. The cross guarantees in Revelation: 21:4, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

Without sorrow, there is no joy.

Without failure, there is no success.

Without fear, there is no confidence.

by Paula Artac

Prayer

Let me learn now, O Lord, to do this as naturally as the inhale and exhale of a single breath: To breathe out sorrow, to breathe in joy. ... To breathe out sorrow, to breathe in joy. In one hand I grasp the burden of my grief, while with the other I reach for the hope of grief’s redemption. The Joy of the Lord is my strength.

The Great Exchange

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, *so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*”

2 Corinthians 5:21

As I bring my examination of today’s verse to an end, I confess I cannot do justice to its concluding words, *so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*. Sometimes the significance of a simple phrase is missed because the words are so familiar to us. The expressions “in Christ,” “in the Lord,” and “in him” occur over 160 times in the letters of Paul and describe the place where we live our Christian life. We are “hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3) so that anytime we speak of our relationship with God we are simply pointing out what living in Christ means. Our union with Christ opens the way to every blessing we need (Ephesians 1:3).

Not least of these blessings is that we become the righteousness of God. As we have seen, God substituted the Perfect Lamb of God—the Righteousness One—for sinful humanity. God was reconciling the world to Himself through Jesus’ death, and we are invited to join ourselves with Him, so that we may be identified with Him. Since Jesus was designated as the One cursed for our sins, a great exchange takes place: He trades His righteousness for our sin.

We are acceptable to God because of what Christ did for us; moreover, we become a child of God and the Holy Spirit resides in us. We are considered righteous, yet at the same time, we are being transformed in Christ’s image (Romans 8:29). That is, in God’s sight we are righteous but still we must progress in our living for Christ and become more like Him. The benefits of salvation continue after our initial conversion. We walk as He walked by the power of the Spirit and in this mysterious even mystical union, we catch a glimpse of the magnitude of what we can experience. As Paul shares, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

What is not to be lost in our words for today or the verse in its entirety is that when we became the righteousness of God, we embark on a real transformation, one of unbelievable discovery. And what is our contribution to all of this? Nothing. We can only receive it by faith. We can claim nothing. Rather, we can receive and embrace a oneness unknown to those outside of Christ, an intimacy that “begins when we come into that faith-union with Christ in his offering to God whereby it becomes progressively ours” (James Reid). Blessed by the Name of the Lord!

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

May our prayer be the words of Isaac Watts as found in the hymn “When I Survey the Wonderous Cross”:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.
Amen.

John 20: 11-18

“Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, ‘Woman, why are you crying?’

‘They have taken my Lord away,’ she said, ‘and I don’t know where they have put him.’ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, ‘Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?’

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.’

Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”).

Jesus said, ‘Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: ‘I have seen the Lord!’ And she told them that he had said these things to her.’“

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank those who contributed to this devotional booklet. First, a heartfelt thanks to those who shared their thoughts in word, so that all may be blessed. Thanks to Lee Stadler for his design work. And finally a special thank you to Trish Dowd Kelne, who also generously gave her time to help make this devotional a reality.

May our great God and Savior use these devotionals to minister to one and all.

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Lent 2022