

Lent 2020

Journey with Jesus: The Lord has need of you.



**“Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her.
Untie them and bring them to me.
If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them.” (Matthew 21:2–3, NIV)**

The Congregational Church of Brookfield Lenten Devotional Guide

Offered to you by:
The Deacons and Stephen Ministers of CCB

Lenten Devotionals

“Preparing Our Hearts for Easter”

What is Lent? The word “Lent” comes from the Old English word “lengten,” which simply means “spring” — when the days lengthen and new life springs forth. It is a time in which we anticipate the victory of the light and life of Christ over the darkness of sin and death. It is, to borrow a phrase from C.S. Lewis, a season of a kind of “happiness and wonder that makes you serious.”

It is our prayer that as you journey with us from Ash Wednesday to Easter, you would be reminded of the reality of our broken humanity, but as days grow brighter, you would experience with greater abundance the reality of God’s redeeming grace. And so, just as we carefully prepare for big events in our personal lives, such as a wedding or commencement, Lent invites us to make our hearts ready for remembering Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Source: Redeemer Churches and Ministries

Submitted by: Carol Ryan

Forgive, As We Are Forgiven

*Bear with each other, and forgive one another;
if any of you has a grievance against someone, forgive as the Lord forgave you.
~ The Letter to the Colossians 3:13*

Over the years, there are many times when I have said or done something I regret. I have always experienced the feeling of being forgiven by God, when I come with a truly repentant heart. I have even been blessed to know forgiveness from some of my Sisters and Brothers in Christ.

Christ modeled forgiveness to us.
He offered God's forgiveness to the whole world.

We live each week, when we confess and receive God's forgiveness, when we forgive others, and when we hear the words... "*for the forgiveness of sins*" at God's table. May these words and our experience practicing forgiveness in our faith communities give us the peace that only Christ can bring.

No matter how many mistakes or sins we commit,
there is always hope in Jesus.

Prayer:

God, allow us to forgive and be forgiven. Let us live the way of Jesus in the forgiveness of others. Let us experience the peace that the act of forgiveness provides. Amen.

Source: Outreach for Hope, Inc

Submitted by: Mary Gallagher DeLucia and Alex DeLucia

The Journey Transforms Our Lives

Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you; they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God; for they began their journey for the sake of Christ... ~ The 3rd Letter of John 1:5-7

As much as most of us prefer things to be quick and easy, most of the important things in life are not. They tend to take time and take effort or at least they take reflection. Lent invites us to take a journey, a spiritual journey.

We find journeys throughout the Bible, Abraham and Sarah journeying to Canaan; the children of Israel journeying 40 years to reach the Promised Land, the Magi journeying to see the newborn king; the disciples journeyed with their Master, the wandering rabbi Jesus. Paul and the Apostles undertook their missionary journeys.

Those journeys were physical, but just as much they were spiritual. Those on them grew, learned, became aware and their lives were transformed.

We need this journey of Lent. We each have to make the journey ourselves, but we can journey together as a community of faith, as a church.

As we seek God, we have to reflect on the truths of our lives. You have to look for God. But you also have to be willing to look at yourself in the mirror. That takes some courage. *Who are you? Who do you want to be? More importantly, who does God want you to be? What is God doing in your life?*

As we seek God, God finds us. Come, I invite you... let's journey together.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, Help us to remember that our journeys may not be monumental, as are those described in the Bible, but will be personal, guided by You, as we respond to the needs and challenges of our world. Amen.

Source: Pastor Larry Lenow, Trinity United Methodist Church, Henrico, VA

Submitted by: Martha Parvis

Focus on Building Your Faith

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. ~ The Letter to the Hebrews 12:1-3

Like anything worth having, a strong faith takes time to build. It doesn't happen overnight, and, like a plant, it won't last without consistent care. You put daily effort into your health, your education/careers, and your relationships – so why would your faith be any different?

You can't just go to church on Sundays. Finding true faith means letting go of anxiety and fear and taking each day as an opportunity to glorify God with your thoughts, words, and actions. Strengthening faith means persistent prayer, constant reflection on God's will, and devotion to the Bible. As Hebrews 12:1-3 teaches, faith is a long-distance race, not a sprint or single moment. It involves a continuous process of humility and endurance, constantly working to stay focused on our eternal purpose.

As humans created out of God's love, in His image and for His glory, we have a duty to commit our lives to our faiths and to love one another as He loves us. Without constant awareness and openness to new revelations and enlightenment, words are just words and rituals are just rituals.

To help you keep your commitment to your faith, consider:

- Putting meaningful Bible verses on sticky notes. Keep them in your car, bathroom, and office to remind you of what's really important each day.
- Set aside time each day for meditation and reflection. Pray, meditate, or go on a walk and reorient yourself with your Christian goals in mind. Think about how you can show love and serve others in your daily life.
- Talk to God. Saying things out loud by yourself or in a group can make them feel more real. Say your daily prayers out loud, sing God's praises, and have a conversation with God.

Source: Thrive Devotional

Submitted by: Marie Immohr

Get Moving with God and Clear the Spiritual Clutter

Moving sounds like such an adventure, and it is – but it is a difficult and challenging journey as well. It is not unlike our spiritual journeys.

It begins with cleaning out and letting go. You strip your house bare in the staging phase. Everything that makes the house yours must either be discarded or put in boxes to open later. It truly forces you to prioritize and decide which things have meaning and which things can be thrown away.

I was amazed at the number of boxes we ended up with filled with things we cherish and feel we must keep. But on the other hand, the amount we gave to Good Will and the “dump store” (as my kids always called it), was equally amazing. We accumulate so much “stuff” along the way; stuff we probably didn’t need in the first place.

An interesting thing happens as the house is emptied of clutter. You begin to see the structure of the house and appreciate the beautiful lines of its underpinnings. We found beauty under the clutter!

Now isn’t that what happens when we go deep within our souls; under the clutter of our lives; under the busyness that keeps us from embracing our true selves. God has given us a beautiful foundation, made us in His image. But how often does that get buried under the clutter of life?

We had lived in that house for 35 years. A lot of stuff had accumulated; there was a lot to clear out and let go. The same thing happens with our spiritual lives. If we allow it, life has a way of filling up all the spaces within us; our busy schedules, our desire to succeed in the eyes of the world; our desire to fill our lives with more and more stuff.

But we have the opportunity to dive deep to meet God at our core every time we pray. God is there waiting to help us clear the clutter and see what really matters and let go of the stuff that gets in the way of letting our true beauty shine forth.

Prayer:

Dear God, Help me to sort through the clutter of my life, to let go of the things that are not important and to see the beauty underneath. Amen.

Written by: Toni Sullivan

Journey with Jesus: Into the Wilderness

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

³The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” ⁷Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” ¹⁰Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Find Meaningful Time to Be with God Every Day

What is the key to daily spiritual victory?

I am convinced that we are making the Christian life a lot harder than God ever intended for it to be. Our enemy Satan has confused our intention, our direction, and our goal. We know that we ought to be winning in the Christian life, yet we are losing much of the time because we are making it too hard.

I believe that the most important action you can take in the Christian life is to have a meaningful time with God daily. This action has got to be the heart of all that we do. It is the most basic of the basics. It is one fundamental that even the greatest Christian had better not fumble, or else defeat is inevitable.

Our enemy's strategy is very deliberate and deceiving. Satan wants to destroy us. He wants to get us out of God's game plan. He wants us to think that living the Christian life is virtually impossible. He has gotten us involved in knowing more about Christianity instead of doing what we know. He has the church of Jesus Christ in disarray over pointless issues that have no positive outcome for the advancement of God's kingdom throughout the world.

We have got to understand that the only way to experience spiritual power, direction, and purpose is to have meaningful time with God daily. The only way we are going to defeat the schemes of Satan is to have meaningful time with God daily. The only way our families and our churches will function properly is for us to have a meaningful time with God daily.

As Christians, we ought to be winning in life. Our enemy has already been defeated through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We already have the victory. We are to be even greater than a dominant football team over its inferior opposition. Like a dominant football team that makes itself vulnerable to defeat by not performing the basics of the game well, we ensure our defeat by neglecting the fundamental of having a meaningful time with God daily.

Source: Dr. Ronnie W. Floyd

Submitted by: Mark Lyon

Jesus is the Light

*When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.
~ John 8: 12 (NIV)*

In the Message, it is paraphrased this way... *"I am the world's Light. No one who follows me stumbles around in darkness. I provide plenty of light to live in."
~ John 8:12 (MSG)*

In this scripture passage, Jesus tells us that He is the light of the world. How does He light our way during dark and scary times?

Light gives us the clarity to see where we are going so we do not stumble and hurt ourselves or cause others to be injured in the dark.

Jesus taught us how to manage in this dark world. He taught us to love, to have compassion for others and to serve. When you face difficult choices, always choose the one that is most loving and compassionate. By choosing LOVE you will not stumble into hateful choices. By choosing LOVE you will provide safety to others.

The world is a brighter place when love and compassion are present.

Prayer:

Father in heaven, thank you for the gift of Jesus to light our way during dark and scary times. Gives us courage and strength to move to light when forces draw us away from love. Amen

Written by Ruth Reda

Listen for God's Voice in the Wilderness

*I have directed you in the way of wisdom; I have led you in upright paths.
~ Proverbs 4:11*

The Hebrew word for desert is “*midbaar*.” It’s from the word “*dahbaar*,” meaning “to speak.” Let me draw from that root term and suggest that the desert is the place where God speaks, where He communicates some of His most important messages to us.

Your desert experience might involve caring for an ailing family member or an elderly parent over an extended time, with no help at hand and no relief in sight. Your sojourn in the dry lands might be a stubborn physical condition that keeps you confined. It could be that deep soul-ache that comes with an unfaithful spouse, or a rebellious teenager....

Does God know? Does He understand?

He understands very well, my friend. After all, He’s the one who *put* you there. His schooling includes time in the wilderness. That’s where He gets our attention.

Prayer:

God, you hold us in your hands. When we find ourselves in our desert places, may we be still. Let us quietly listen for Your speaking voice. Amen.

Source: Chuck Swindoll

Submitted by: Sue Waschak

Take Time to Seek God

*It is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to Him must believe that God exists and that He rewards those who sincerely seek Him.
~ The Letter to the Hebrews 11:6*

When you first become friends with someone, you don't immediately know them completely. It takes years to know someone truly. I've been married to my husband for 10 years, we've known each other for 15, and I'm still learning new things about him. A lot has changed since the day we met in a small church hall when I was 17 and in my final year of High School. As we go through different seasons, different challenges and joys, I see him from different perspectives, revealing parts of him I wouldn't have seen otherwise.

Depth of relationship takes time, experience, and faith. When we first encounter God, we don't instantly know and understand Him completely. We get a feel for His love and grace, for His will and ways, and that understanding grows day by day, experience by experience... through faith.

It's our faith in God that propels us to seek Him out. That deep sense of knowing that whatever season or situation we're in, God has more of Himself to reveal to us and express in us that He wouldn't have been able to in other circumstances. I have faith that Jesse and I will be together till the day we die (cue romantic violins) and that faith I have in him (and ultimately in God) is part of the glue in our marriage.

Faith is a journey, not a destination. It doesn't make robots who don't have any independent thought or initiative... It asks questions knowing that there is more to learn. It has great expectations of hope and goodness. It seeks, studies, participates, has a goal, keeps moving forward and looking for ways to journey down the path of God's will and purpose. Faith has eyes and ears, it speaks and walks. It is the driving force of our 'seeking.'

Keep on seeking... there is more to know, there is more to experience, there is more of God to be revealed and expressed in you yet. And this season you're in now, have faith that He's right there with you beckoning you to seek Him out and find Him in this moment. You might see something you've never seen before.

Keep on seeking...

Source: Liz at her Devotions website, The Practice Company

Submitted by: Marie Immohr

Find Your Own Way... and Let Others Go Theirs

Sometimes what looks like fresh footprints that will lead you to a new destination is really only a sign of a well-beaten path.

~ Lin Ann Ho

One day after a big snowstorm, I was jogging through the deep snow and really struggling to make my way. I realized how much of an effort it was to make my way with no plowed path or footsteps to follow. The next day it was much easier. The snow was still soft, and my footprints were easy to follow. Five days later the snow had frozen; and the rigid ice made it dangerous for me to try to fit into the old footprints. I had to create a new path or risk breaking my ankles.

What I learned is that at different times in my life I must make different choices. At times it is all right to be carried. At other times, following in the footprints of others is appropriate, and at others you must make your own way. Sometimes it is proper to leave the old ways and start a fresh path. You find your way by attending to what feels right for you and not by looking for the easy way.

You must remember that if you constantly follow in the steps of others you will lose your way. Remember that at times other people's ways may be wrong for you. So find your own way and let others go theirs. True natives can be your guides when they have shared your experience.

Source: Dr. Bernie S. Siegel, *"365 Prescriptions for the Soul"*

Submitted by: Sharon Santi

God's Light Guides Our Path

Along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. ~ Isaiah 42:16

I took my seat in the middle section of a small local theater, but my mind was not on the performance about to begin. Pesky worries whirled around my head. *Should I take early retirement from my part-time nursing job?* Recently I'd felt pressure from the administration. *But how will I support myself then? To make ends meet, I will have to move. Where to?*

I shivered at the thought of leaving the security of friends and family. So many life-changing decisions at a time when I felt weak and vulnerable.

The theater darkened. The curtain on the stage parted. A beam of light coming from the control room behind me illuminated the stage.

*Lord, light up my life like that, I thought.
I need more light to make wise decisions.*

Halfway through the first scene, an usher came down the aisle, guiding two latecomers. The flashlight he held formed a small circle of light at their feet. Slowly, he moved ahead to the appropriate row, then shone the light into two vacant seats. He waited patiently until the man and woman sat down. Then he turned off the flashlight and walked quietly back to the entrance.

That's how I lead you! The thought was crystal clear, as though I heard God speaking. *As you read My Word and obey it, you'll have enough light to know what step to take next. And then there'll be more light for the next step, and the next. Trust Me. Have I not promised to get you safely to the right place?*

Thankfully, I relaxed and enjoyed the rest of the play.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, thank you for the light of your presence. Amen.

Source: Helen Grace Lescheid in *Daily Guideposts*

Submitted by: Martha Parvis

Journey with Jesus: Into the World of Spirit

John 3:1-17

³Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Understand the Power of God's Love

*⁶Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave.*

Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.

⁷Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.

If one offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned.

~ Song of Solomon 8:6-7

When we first saw the stream in our backyard, it was just a thin vein of water trickling through a bed of rocks in the heat of the summer. Heavy wooden planks served as a bridge we could easily cross. Months later, torrents of rain pounded our area for several days in a row. Our tame little creek swelled into a quick-moving river four-feet deep and ten-feet wide! The force of this water heaved the bridge boards up and deposited them several feet away.

Rushing water has the potential to overwhelm almost anything that stands in its path. Yet there is something that is indestructible in the face of a flood or other forces that might threaten to destroy It – love. *“Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away.”* Love’s persistent strength and intensity is often present in romantic relationships, but it is only fully expressed in the love God has for people through His Son, Jesus Christ.

When the things we consider to be sturdy and dependable are swept away, our disappointment can open the door to a new understanding of God’s love for us. His affection is higher and deeper and stronger and longer lasting than anything on earth. Whatever we face, we face with Him beside us – holding us up, helping us along, and reminding us that we are loved.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank You for comforting me with Your love during times of rejection or loss. Help me to believe I can depend on You to meet every need in my soul. Amen.

Source: Jennifer Benson Schudt, Our Daily Bread

Submitted by: Jeanie Bergman

Prepare Your Garden to Grow

For as the rain and snow come down from Heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower.

~ Isaiah 55:10

Where I live, March is a transition month. Spring wants to pop through, but winter isn't quite finished with us. I get antsy during the month of March. My hands itch to dig in the dirt. I see tiny shoots of green in my garden. Birds are chirping again, and the sun seems a little brighter each day.

So I begin preparing for spring and summer planting. I clean pots, sharpen my tools, prep the soil, and earmark seed catalogues that have new ideas for my gardens.

But then I remember my spiritual garden. Am I sharpening the tools of meditation, scripture reading, and prayer? Am I taking inventory of the new ways I can share God with the new world around me? Am I preparing the soil in my life for new and exciting challenges for personal growth?

During the month of March and the season of Lent, I see the promise of new life in my garden, and I remember the promise of new life in Christ. By preparing for God's new creation during the season of Lent, we can experience new life sprouting within us - life that can bring us new joy and give hope to those around us.

Prayer:

God of all being, may we tend the soil of our souls so that we can receive the new life you are cultivating in each of us. In Jesus' name, amen.

Source: The Upper Room, Laurie Ricker (Maryland)

Submitted by: Sue Boughton

Become a God-Watcher

Jesus said, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand.'"

~ Mark 4:11-12

In "*How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*," artist and author Jenny Odell says that birdwatching should really be called bird-listening, since most of the time you are not watching birds so much as noticing their song, then working really hard to try to identify where it is coming from, hoping for a shadowy glimpse of colored feathers amidst the leaves and branches.

Listening for, and looking for, God can be like that. God is present, throughout our frenetic busyness— but scarcely noticed until we start to actively pay attention, to tune in to God's siren song amidst all the straight-up sirens of life.

Just for today, become a God-watcher. Stop frequently in your travels from here to there. Lift up your heart, put your senses on alert, filter through the ordinary for the extraordinary. Then circle back to the ordinary and pay attention as if for the first time.

Ask yourself, "Where is the song here? What happens if I play it backwards? What is the secret message?" Wait for an answer, a divine communication. Remember that silence is sometimes how God sings, but there's meaning and purpose even in what seems like no-answer.

Prayer

God, I resist you while giving in to every other noisemaker that calls my name. Help me to resist the roar of culture, social media, overwork, the plangent whining of my own ego, and to isolate your voice alone. Amen.

Source: Molly Baskette, First Congregational Church UCC, Berkeley, CA
Still Speaking Daily Devotional

Submitted By: Leslie Sands

Go with Jesus on the Journey

*For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life . . . nor anything else in all creation, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
~ Romans 8:38*

"How are you doing?" I asked a friend recently. It was no trite question. My friend lives and works in Washington, D. C. For 40 years, she's directed mental health programs in the Department of Health and Human Services. We work together, long-distance, to equip faith communities and clergy in suicide prevention and other mental health issues. She's also a lifelong Methodist. Her commitment to follow in Jesus' way undergirds her commitment to serve.

Like other federal employees, my friend faces an uncertain future. Her salary was cut to \$1/year. She faces the threat of being fired at a moment's notice.

What troubles my friend the most, though, is that her agency could be dismantled. She and her colleagues care deeply about the people they serve, people with mental illness—and their families—who are often left out and left behind. It breaks her heart to know that service may end.

Added to the job uncertainty, she is dealing with her husband's battle with cancer and the recent deaths of both her mother and her sister. So "How are you doing?" was no casual question. My friend laughed softly over the phone line and then said, "I've discovered the journey is easier if you go with Jesus."

My friend is not particularly pious or overtly religious. She simply knows what Paul knew in his Roman prison cell: There is nothing in life or death that can separate from the love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ. As she walks through the valley of her shadows, there is One who walks with her. It makes the journey possible.

Prayer:

*Help us to remember, Lord, that wherever our journeys lead, you walk with us.
Amen.*

Source: Talitha Arnold, United Church of Santa Fe, NM
Still Speaking Daily Devotional

Submitted by: Marie Immohr

Journey to Victory with God's Help

*"Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made Heaven and Earth."
~ Psalm 124:8*

It's all about the journey.

As I reflect on a Lenten theme of hope and the journey,
I note the similarities in my own life's journey.

DESTINATION: Even when I can't see it or if I feel lost, I know where
the journey must end.

ACCOMPANIMENT: When I feel like I am alone, God is there with me, and
the prayers of others sustain me.

ENCOURAGEMENT

(by God and others): When things get difficult or seem impossible, the
encouragement of God's word and God's people compel
me to continue.

A CALLING: To something bigger than myself or better than just
myself. The paths on which I've been guided connect
me to my life's purpose – to the gifts I have been given
– to the building up of the body of Christ.

HOPE: That I will be successful in getting where I'm going.
That the destination is everlasting life in the real
presence of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Prayer:

*Lord, during this season of Lent, be with me as I make a journey of faith and
hope in the name of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Source: Outreach for Hope, Inc.

Submitted by: Mary Gallagher DeLucia and Alex DeLucia

Jesus Joins Us When We Gather

Jesus said, "For when two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." ~ Matthew 18:20

I remember playing church as a child. Neighborhood children, school friends, family members, dolls, stuffed animals and occasionally one of our family pets made up the congregation. We took turns preaching, teaching, serving Communion, singing, and taking an offering. Our services were never long, but we had a good time.

Recently on a cold winter Sunday morning, I remembered those small childhood gatherings when only three church members in addition to the worship leader, organist, and Pastor entered the sanctuary to worship. No one else braved the cold to join us. Choosing not to be discouraged, we worshipped together.

During a teaching on discipleship, Jesus reminded his followers that when two or three are gathered together in His name, He was there with them. I did not realize it at the time, but Christ was with us when we played church as children, just as He was with those of us who gathered in His name on that cold Sunday morning.

Prayer:

Lord God, no matter how many come together, may we always keep you in spirit and in truth. Amen.

Source: Upper Room, Patricia Patton (Texas)

Submitted by: Sue Boughton

Journey with Jesus: To the Well

John 4:5-42

⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. ⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)

¹⁰Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." ¹⁵The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." ¹⁷The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" ¹⁹The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."

²¹Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the

Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” ²⁵The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” ²⁶Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

²⁷Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” ²⁸Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him. ³¹Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” ³²But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” ³³So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” ³⁴Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ ³⁸I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word. ⁴²They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

Dare to Be Drenched By God's Love!

And may you have the power to understand as all God's people should, how wide, how, long, how high, and how deep his love really is. ~ Ephesians 3: 18

Most summer mornings, a delightful drama plays out in the park behind our house. It involves a sprinkler. And a bulldog. About 6:30 or so, the sprinklers come on. Shortly thereafter, Fifi the bulldog (our family's name for her) arrives.

Fifi's owner lets her off her leash. The bulldog sprints with all her might to the nearest sprinkler, attacking the stream of water as it douses her face. If Fifi could eat the sprinkler, I think she would. It's a portrait of utter exuberance, of Fifi's seemingly infinite desire to be drenched by the liquid she can never get enough of.

There are no bulldogs in the Bible, or sprinklers. Yet, in a way, Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3 reminds me of Fifi. There, Paul prays that the Ephesians believers might be filled with God's love and *"have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ."* He prayed that we might be *"filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."*

Still today, we're invited to experience a God whose infinite love exceeds anything we can comprehend, that we too might be drenched, saturated, and utterly satisfied by His goodness. We are free to plunge with abandon, relish, and delight into a relationship with the One who alone can fill our hearts and lives with love, meaning and purpose.

Prayer:

God, thank you for Your infinite and satisfying love. Please help us to know and experience the love You have for each one of us. Amen.

Source Adam Holz, Our Daily Bread

Submitted by: Jeanie Bergman

Ask God

You do not have, because you do not ask. ~ The Letter of James 4:2

The first—and most embarrassing—discovery I made about why I don't hear God's instructions is that I haven't asked for them.

A friend of mine learned this the hard way. He was a dairyman who spent seventy-five percent of his time volunteering for Christian causes. "I sort of took for granted," he told me, "that since I was attending to God's business, He would look after mine."

A dairyman's first priority is feeding his animals. With three thousand cows, he often bought grain futures, committing his dairy to a specific price for feed long before the harvest. When a bumper crop came in one year, grain prices plummeted to half what he had agreed to pay.

"I took delivery with a sick heart. It was a huge financial blow, when I was spending my time and money the way I thought God wanted me to." The words he addressed to God that night were more a complaint than a prayer: "I sure wish You'd told me!"

"And as clear as though He'd spoken aloud," he said, "I heard Him answer: *I sure wish you'd asked me!*"

"I realized then," he went on, "that I hadn't prayed at all before making that disastrous decision. I figured God knew my cows had to eat—why bother Him with the obvious?"

Why do we need we have to ask, since Jesus assures us, "*Your Father knows what you need before you ask him*" (Matthew 6:8)? Because, I've come to think, asking is entering into relationship—and relationship with Him is always God's purpose, beyond all the decisions, large and small, of our lives.

Prayer:

Before each decision today, Father, remind me that the journey with You is more important than the destination. Amen.

Source: Paraphrased from Elizabeth Sherrill in *Daily Guideposts*

Submitted by Martha Parvis

Expect Love to Come Looking for You

Jesus said, ⁴“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.”
~ Luke 15:4-5

After I turned 19, and years before I owned a pager or a cell phone, I moved more than 700 miles away from my mom. One morning, I left early to run errands, forgetting our scheduled call. Later that night, two policemen came to my door. Mom had been worried because I'd never missed one of our chats. After calling repeatedly and getting a busy signal, she reached out to the authorities and insisted they check on me. One of the police officers turned to me and said, “It’s a blessing to know love won’t stop looking for you.”

When I picked up the phone to call my mom, I realized I had accidentally left the receiver off its base. After I apologized, she said she needed to spread the good news to the family and friends she had informed that I'd been missing. I hung up thinking she'd overreacted a bit, though it felt good to be loved that much.

Scripture paints a beautiful picture of God who is Love, relentlessly beckoning His wandering children. Like a good shepherd, He cares about and seeks out every lost sheep, affirming the priceless value of every beloved child of God.

Love never stops looking for us. He will pursue us until we've return to Him. We can pray for others who need to know that Love-God-never stops looking for them either.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank you for pursuing us with persistence and providing a safe place when we return to Your loving arms. Amen.

Source: Xochitl Dixon, Our Daily Bread

Submitted by: Jeanie Bergman

No Matter Who You Are... You Can Make a Difference

Let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven. ~ Matthew 5:16

My energetic 70-year old friend Mary Ann broke her leg and had to be wheelchair bound and then on crutches for quite a while. During that time, I saw a post on Facebook from one of the women of our church, seeking help decorating for a father-daughter dance. Mary Ann's comment in response was, "If you have something I can do sitting down, I will be glad to help." Now that is a servant spirit. Mary Ann has mastered the way to make the world a brighter place for anyone whose life she touches.

So many times we fail to see our potential because we allow our limitations to discourage us. But every day we are given opportunities to reach out to serve God, to love others, and to make a difference. Whether by a phone call, a handwritten note, or just a smile, we all have the means to make our world a better place.

Prayer:

God, help us to see beyond our limitations to the potential we all have to serve you each day. Amen.

Source: The Upper Room

Submitted by: Sharon Santi

Know Yourself as God's Creation, Marvelously Unique

Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex. Your workmanship is marvelous –and how well I know it. ~ Psalm 139:14

Human beings are not special—at least according to the London Zoo. In 2005, the zoo introduced a four day exhibit: “Humans in Their Natural Environment.” The human “captives” were chosen through an online contest. To help visitors understand the humans, the zoo workers created a sign detailing their diet, habitat, and threats. According to the zoo’s spokesperson, the goal of the exhibit was to downplay the uniqueness of human beings. One participant in the exhibit seemed to agree, “When they see humans as animals, here, it kind of reminds them that we are not that special.”

What a stark contrast to what the Bible says about human beings: God “fearfully and wonderfully” made us in “his image.”

David began Psalm 139 by celebrating God’s intimate knowledge of him and His all-encompassing presence. Like a master weaver, God not only formed the intricacies of David’s internal and external features, but He also made him a living soul, giving spiritual life and the ability to intimately relate to God. Meditating on God’s handiwork, David responded in awe, wonder, and praise.

Human beings are special. God created us with marvelous uniqueness and the awesome ability to have an intimate relationship with Him. Like David, we can praise Him because we are the workmanship of His loving hands.

Prayer:

We thank you God for creating us in your image and to be like You. May we always feel your closeness and love. Amen.

Source: Martin Williams, Our Daily Bread

Submitted by: Jeanie Bergman

Open Your Heart to Serve

On Thanksgiving while visiting family and friends in a very wealthy part of Silicon Valley, we discovered the homeless population is at critical levels.

As I ran the running trail, I could not get my mind off this sight. The people who slept in this park were basically invisible to all of those running or jogging – and the homeless people who slept in tents set back in the thick brush way off the trail existed as if they themselves believed they were invisible.

These are real human beings! They are husbands, fathers, sons, mothers, and daughters – they all belong to some family!

This passage from Matthew has always been a powerful one to me:

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” ~ Matthew 9:36

I believe that first we have to see the homeless. We have to see them the way Jesus saw the crowds and be moved to compassion as Jesus was. We are called to action...

Prayer:

God, let our hearts be open to the plight of those less fortunate around us. Let our eyes and ears comprehend their needs. Let our hands serve You, by doing what we can to help them. Amen.

Source: Outreach for Hope, Inc.

Submitted by: Mary Gallagher DeLucia and Alex DeLucia

Journey with Jesus: On the Way

Psalm 23

¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

²He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

³he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

*⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.*

*⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

*⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.*

Keep Your Eyes on God

*Oh my God, in You I trust, do not let me be ashamed;
do not let my enemies exult over me. ~ Psalm 25:2*

It is impossible to pass through life without experiencing times when you cannot see your way through a deep valley... times when the package delivered at the back door comes delivered in the ugly wrapping of death, or affliction or illness or even divorce. John Seldon, the old British jurist and scholar put it even more bluntly, "Pleasure is nothing else but the intermission of pain."

You may find yourself enjoying the intermission. Today, you may be smiling. Your heart may be light and merry. Perhaps answers to prayer have come beautifully and deliberately. You are swept away in delight.

But it's also quite possible that you are caught in the grip of affliction. You may be going through some of the hardest days of your life. You may be wondering...*Why? Why me? Why this trial?*

When you persevere through trial, God gives you a special measure of insight. You become the recipient of the favor of God as He gives to you something that would not be learned otherwise.

The important thing is to keep your eyes on God, not the problem. Hard to do, for sure, but if you can keep reminding yourself of this, it will make the journey smoother!

Source: Chuck Sindoll

Submitted by: Sue Waschak

Open Your Eyes to See God in Daily Life

I find myself getting up every morning with the full intention of praying and having quiet time with God. However, my mind is not in sync with my intentions. As I quiet down and breathe deeply, my mind starts rattling off all the things I need to do today to meet the deadline of when the house is supposed to go on the market. It is frustrating and very hard to get back into prayer mode.

Today I read in Richard Rohr's daily meditation these words. "With or without the luxury of stillness and silence, God comes to us disguised as our very lives." I guess the secret is to open ourselves to God's presence in whatever is in front of us.

God's love infused within our daily lives... the planning, the eating, the chores, the work, the listening to our family members as they share their thoughts and dreams. Do we, can we see it happening in real time?

As I write this and think about opening myself to seeing God's presence, I glance out my sliding door window to see a beautiful cardinal hopping across the deck. He glances in and seems to wink at me and then continues his hopping.

God does have a sense of humor. Maybe I need to lighten up on the packing and painting and just sit and enjoy what is in front of me.

Prayer:

*Dear God, when life overwhelms us with so much to do,
help us stop for just a moment and drink in all that is in front of us
and know you are there in the midst of it all. Amen.*

Written by: Toni Sullivan

Enjoy the Journey

Few things are more difficult than driving a long distance with small children. You pack the car, it's a hot day, and you dread the long journey ahead. You instinctively know the kids will be restless. No matter how many activity books, games and DVDs you bring, you still hear the steady drone of, *Are we there yet?* How do you respond to that?

- The *irritated* response: *We're closer now than the last time you asked.*
- The *threatening* response: *If you keep asking when we're going to get there I'm gonna turn around and go home!*
- The *sneaky* response: *Let's play a game and see how long we can go without asking if we're there yet.*

No matter how you respond, on long trips, kids seem focused on the final destination.

I'm told there are two types of people: the *journey* or the *destination* types. The *journey* types of people enjoy the planning of the trip, they enjoy the driving, and they enjoy taking in the sites and all the side trips. They are enjoying the journey while on their way to their destination.

The *destination* types do not enjoy the journey—they are all about getting to their destination. They are in a hurry to get to their destination so the fun can begin rather than taking their time and enjoying the ride. Sometimes being a destination person is a necessity, but if you rushed all the time you could miss things along the way.

Now in some ways, it's not a bad thing to be a destination type, because at least you have a destination. Without a clear destination, a journey lacks focus; it lacks any way to measure progress forward because you don't know what the way forward is.

It was Ralph Waldo Emerson who said: "Life is a journey, not a destination." And so, it is and so we must learn not to become so obsessed with the destination that we fail to enjoy and embrace the journey.

Source: Life Way Journey Magazine, "A Women's Guide to Intimacy with God"

Submitted by: Jeanine Hanewicz

Go Out into the World to Serve

What does it mean to be a servant of Christ?

Jesus Himself said, *“I didn’t come here to be served; I came to serve.”* (Matthew 20:28). And He passed that legacy on to all of His people.

The disciples, however, didn’t understand Jesus’ definition of greatness. So He said to them, *“Whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant.”* This mandate was not just given to twelve people. It was for the whole kingdom of God. It is the law of the King that we are to imitate Him by being servants.

In the New Testament, a particular burden was placed upon the apostles that cost them their lives. They were commanded of Christ to go into the world and preach the gospel. And that was their mission – to the Jew first, then to the Gentile. Yet for the church to fulfill this preaching mission, a host of menial tasks had to be cared for such as the serving of tables (Acts 6:1-5).

Every believer is called to ministry. We’re called to see that all of the tasks of the kingdom take place – that the poor are ministered to, the gospel is proclaimed, the Word of God is taught, and worship takes place. But that doesn’t mean that everyone is called to be an evangelist, or a preacher, or a teacher.

The New Testament teaches that God gives every Christian a gift to be used for the service of Christ. If your gift is teaching, then you had better teach; if it’s preaching, you’d better preach; if it’s evangelism, you’d better evangelize. If your role is to be a caregiver to shut-ins, then be a caregiver to shut-ins. But each one of us is called to do our part, thus ensuring that all the ministry is fulfilled.

Source: R. C. Sproul

Submitted by: Mark Lyon

Trust in the Power of Genuine Hope

How is hope different from positive optimism?

To say of a situation, “It is out of my hands,” can represent a fatalistic remark or a mark of faith. Faith, after all, might seem to major in resignation; it too asks us to say, “I give myself into hands beyond my own.” But faith looks very different from fatalism. It is its radical opposite. Rather than displaying passive resignation, faith leads us to hopeful willingness.

A person of faith is willing to let new things happen and shoulder responsibilities that arise from unheard of possibilities. Trust in God allows us to live with active expectation, not cynicism. When we view life as a gift, as something given to us by a loving God, not wrestled by us from an impersonal fate, we remember that at the heart of reality rests the love of God itself. This means that faith creates in us a new willingness to let God’s will be done.

The word so often translated *faith* in the New Testament comes from an ancient word that literally means “trust.” Faith is the deep confidence that God is good and that God’s goodness somehow triumphs. Faith is that intimate, personal trust by which you say, “I commend myself into your strong loving hands.”

It is not hard to see how genuine hope is different from optimism. We are not talking about a sunny disposition that makes us believe things will be better tomorrow. An optimist says, “The war will be over; your wounds will be healed; the depression will go away; all will be better soon.” The optimist may be right, but unfortunately he or she may also be wrong. For none of us can control our circumstances.

No, hope does not come from positive predictions about the state of the world, any more than does faith. Nor does hope depend on the ups and downs of our life’s particulars. Hope rather has to do with God. We have hope and joy in our faith because we believe that, while the world in which we live is shrouded in darkness, God has overcome the world.

“In the world,” said Jesus, *“you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!”* ~ John 16:33

We follow One who is not limited or defeated by the world’s sufferings.

Source: Henri Nouwen

Submitted by: Mark Lyon

Be Still

Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." ~ Isaiah 30:21

"Excuse me, God, but could you please speak up?"

I can't count the number of times I have prayed this. All I want in life is to find the path God intends for me, and I will embrace the journey, struggles and all. I am a "do-er" – I am all about the action. Give me the plan, and I will do everything I can to make it happen!

But when I don't know the plan, I'm lost. Fear grips me, the fear I may head in the wrong direction. When this happens, I feel like I'm seeing hundreds of paths in front of me, and all I do is spin in circles until I collapse in frustration.

And that's when something else happens. "Be still and know that I am God." Be still. Sometimes we need to remember we are human "be-ings", not human "do-ings." I want God to speak up, to shout His will loudly so I can hear it.

But maybe I'm the one who needs to change. Maybe I'm making too much noise with all my doing. When Elijah finally heard God's voice, it was a small voice, a still voice. Be still. God is talking to you. Remember, the voice of God is right there with you.

If you're still uncertain of your path, that's OK. God promises to be with you, guiding you. You can turn left or right, and God won't abandon you. If you feel lost, be still and listen. Choose a path and step off, confident that God is journeying with you. Even if you end up taking the scenic route, you'll get to your destination.

Reflection:

How or when do you practice being still?

Can you listen for God's still, small voice speaking to you today?

Source: Julie Ische, Child of God Trinity Lutheran Church, Cedarburg, WI

Submitted by: John Pondiccio

Journey with Jesus: To the Tomb

John 11:1-7, 11-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."

¹¹After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹²The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and

believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵Jesus wept. ³⁶So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” ³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Why Is Love the Greatest?

*And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love.
But the greatest of these is love. ~ 1 Corinthians 13:13*

I memorized 1 Corinthians 13, the whole thing, while attending boarding school in the Himalayan foothills as the son of missionaries.

Its message has been ingrained in my brain for six-plus decades.

I've often found the last verse puzzling. Why does Paul say the greatest is love? Love is pretty cool, of course, but greater than faith and hope?

Faith is the heart of Christian belief. *"For by grace you have been saved through faith,"* the apostle wrote in his letter to the Ephesians. What can be more important than faith?

And what about hope? How does anyone live a day without at least a glimmer of hope?

I'm not sure I would have dared to rank faith, hope, and love as Paul did. It's rather like ranking air, food, and water.

Then again, maybe the Holy Spirit's on to something here.

Why? Because when you can't keep faith and you can't hold hope, you can always see love.

Sometimes when I have a hard time with faith or hope, I turn back to the love shown to me, especially and ultimately on the cross. And when others find faith and hope in short supply, I need to be the love they can see.

It's the greatest.

Prayer:

*Lord, help me notice those to whom I can show today that your love never fails.
Amen.*

Source: Bob Thompson, Pastor, UCC, Hickory, NC
Still Speaking Daily Devotional

Submitted by: Leslie Sands

The Divine Ladder

Unto each mortal who comes to earth
 A ladder is given by God at birth
 And up this ladder
 every soul must go.
 Step by step from the Valley below;
 Step by step to the Center of space,
 On this ladder of lives,
 to the Starting place.

In time departed (which yet endures)
 I shape my ladder,
 and you shape yours.
 Whatever they are....
 they are what we made
 A ladder of light, or a ladder of shade.
 A ladder of love, or a hateful thing,
 A ladder of strength,
 or a wavering string.
 A ladder of gold, or a ladder of straw,
 Each is a ladder of a righteous Law.
 We flung them away
 at the Call of Death.
 We took them again
 with the next life breath.
 For a Keeper stands
 at the great birth gates;
 As each soul passes,
 its ladder awaits.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, As I climb my Ladder each rung I ascend, climbing one, two, then backward at times. Toward you as I climb, I know you'll be with me along my way. This journey of life and Faith, this ladder of love and light I climb. Amen.

Source: Given to me by Marion Miller many years ago, I read this poem often and ponder the *Ladder*. As a faith journey we all climb our own!

Tho mine be narrow
 and yours be broad,
 On my ladder alone
 can I climb to God.
 On your ladder alone
 can your feet ascend,
 For none may borrow
 and none may lend.
 If toil and trouble and pain are found,
 Twisted and corded from each round,
 If rusting iron or moldering wood
 Is the fragile frame,
 you must make it good;
 You must build it over
 and fashion it strong,
 Tho the task be as hard
 as your life is long;
 For up this ladder the pathway leads
 To earthly pleasures and spirit needs;
 And all that may come in another way
 Shall be but illusion and will not stay.

In useless effort,
 then waste no time;
 Rebuild your ladder,
 and Climb and Climb.

Submitted by: Leslie Sands

Got Lint?

It's an old joke. Isn't Lent that stuff in your belly button? No, but the fuzzy stuff that gets stuck in there actually has everything to do with the season of Lent. You know, that stuff that mysteriously shows up, even when you shower really good. Don't be embarrassed because we all get it from time to time . . . lint.

Lent, not lint, is the 40 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter not including Sundays. No Sundays because Jesus rose on a Sunday. Lent is a time for humbling ourselves before God. It is a time to clean-out our souls 100% – no quick showers. Lent gives us a thorough washing. Through the course of the year our lives can become clogged with mysterious debris that steals the resurrection life from us. Sometimes we know exactly how we sin and specifically where we go wrong, but more often than not unholy emotions, attitudes, influences, and habits sneak up on us. If we are not careful, they will take up residence in our souls and distract us from knowing God's best.

These unholy things will make us impotent to be used by God. They will cause harm. Lent is the time when Christians take a really good cleansing shower. Where did that belly button lint come from anyway?

Just as Jesus stepped into the wilderness to be tested before his ministry began, we are invited to step into this season to test our openness toward God. The invitation of Lent is to admit our imperfections and sins before God and declare our need for God's presence. We have the opportunity to dedicate ourselves to a 40-day spiritual discipline – unclogging our spiritual bellybuttons – opening us to God's presence. Whatever our Lenten discipline might be (fasting, prayer, intentional bible study, etc.) we also need ample applications of the Word of God.

When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness he answered the devil by saying, *“It takes more than bread to stay alive. It takes a steady stream of words from God's mouth.”* (Matthew 4:4) This devotion guide is designed to help you encounter, not just the absence of bread during this season, but a steady stream of words from God's mouth.

Although I don't recommend taking this devotional guide to the shower with you, I do recommend that you use it daily as a partner to your Lenten discipline – so that as you get rid of spiritual lint during Lent – you can also be filled up with resurrection life. Made you check, didn't I?

Source: Ben Cathey, Lead Pastor, Ringgold United Methodist Church

Submitted by: John Pondiccio

Walk in Faith

But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" ~ Matthew 14:30-31

We have all dreamt of doing something great for God. These dreams might involve some form of sacrifice or great leap of faith. We see others around us who have sold everything to follow Jesus as a missionary in some far corner of the world and view them as a person of great faith. We maybe even aspire to be like them.

Consider this, if we had been sitting in that boat with Peter, we would have thought he was brimming with faith as he began to climb out of the boat and walk toward Jesus. But suddenly, something even stranger happened and Peter began to sink. That courage and faith he had in Jesus was getting smaller as he saw the wind and the waves getting bigger.

A true measure of a person's faith then is not just the first step of their faith journey, but the subsequent steps thereafter. We deal with this every time we get excited about something, starting any given project only to stop halfway through because it was much more difficult than anticipated.

The same thing happens when we believe Jesus would have us do something. We start doing it and it doesn't turn out like we thought it would, or the ministry isn't immediately growing, we begin to sink, losing faith in and sight of Jesus. What we must realize is that if Jesus has called us to make a first step, then he will provide a path for each step toward him after that.

Reflection:

Where is Jesus calling you to walk in faith?

Source: Short Daily Devotions

Submitted by: Marie Immohr

In Christ, We Become Part of God's Family

God destined us to be his adopted children through Jesus Christ because of love. This was according to his goodwill and plan. ~ Ephesians 1:5

I was born the daughter of an unwed teenager who decided to give me up for adoption. A couple who had always wanted children, but couldn't have any, decided they wanted to adopt. God answered their prayers when they were given permission to adopt me. God was watching over me too; I couldn't have asked for better parents. They brought me up in a loving Christian home. They always set a good example for me and taught me right from wrong.

My mother was only with me for thirteen years when she died unexpectedly. With God's help, my dad did a great job of raising me. He lived for many more years and was able to walk me down the aisle at my wedding and have a close relationship with my children.

My parents loved me unconditionally. My birth mother's decision to allow me to be adopted was also a selfless act of love. She put me first, and I will always be grateful for this glimpse of God's love. God offers us unconditional love, support and forgiveness, fulfills our needs, and never fails us. When we profess our faith in Christ, we become part of God's family.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, watch over all parents and children. Thank you for adopting us into your family. Amen.

Source: Upper Room, Mary Ann Baker (Pennsylvania)

Submitted by: Sue Boughton

Words of Peace

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. ~ Colossians 4:6

The businessman in the line behind me at the post office had a plane to catch. When others waiting in line began idle chat about the slow service, he said, "It's really not that bad; I'm sure I'll make my flight." The conversation turned to poor airline service and surly transportation reps. The businessman demurred, "I fly out of Phoenix for business every week. My flights are almost always on time. The security people are great." He began to entertain us with stories about his travels.

When my turn at the counter came, I stepped back and told him to go ahead of me.

"No need," he said.

"I insist," I replied. After he mailed his package, he turned to hand me a gift...a bright red rubber giraffe with his company logo on it.

This prompted another person in line to whisper in my ear, "That was classy."

In Colossians 4:6 Paul urges, "*Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*" Our words matter. By redirecting the conversation, the businessman turned critical spirits into appreciative hearts.

The cheerful giraffe stands on my desk to remind me always to choose words of peace.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, thank you for teaching us that peaceful words and compassionate deeds are a powerful witness. Help us recognize opportunities to plant seeds of peace. Amen.

Source: Upper Room

Submitted by: Sharon Santi

Journey with Jesus: The Lord Has Need of You

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” ⁴This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ⁵“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” ⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” ¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” ¹¹The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Use Your Gifts to Help Others

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.

~ The First Letter of Peter 4:10

Following a series of major surgeries, my older brother Lewis reminded me that growing old "ain't for weaklings." Many of us will eventually have to deal with the struggles of aging. But there can be a silver lining. Generally, in our later years we retire or work less and have more time to devote to our spiritual life. So aging isn't necessarily something to fear because it is a time when we can flourish in serving the Lord.

At the age of 82, Lewis is a good example of serving others as his body will allow. He works with various charities at his church and in his neighborhood. Recently, he took a seriously ill friend to the hospital and waited while he underwent surgery.

Everyone can serve no matter the circumstances. Even if we have to use a cane or a walker, we can visit an ailing friend or make hospital calls, and we can always pray for others. When we share the love of Christ by caring for those who are sick or disabled and by encouraging their caregivers, God blesses all of us.

If we make it a point to be aware of the many needs around us, we can find many ways to serve our Lord. God has equipped each of us in some way to be an agent of grace.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, help us to love and care for others as you care for us. Amen.

Source: Upper Room, Walter N. Maris (Missouri)

Submitted by: Sue Boughton

When One Door Closes in our Lives, God Always Opens Another

Sometimes when we least expect it, a door closes in our lives.

Circumstances may change, dreams may get shattered,

And plans for tomorrow may disappear.

But when one door closes,

God always opens another:

When we're facing disappointment in our lives,

Sometimes it's hard to see that this is also part of God's plan –

But it's true.

God knows what is best for us,

And He will lead us to where we need to be.

Have faith in him, and you will reach all the wondrous things
that he has waiting for you.

~ B.L. McDaniel

Source: [With God on Your Side...You Never Have to Be Alone](#)

Submitted by: Ruth Allen

When God Is Doing Something New, Good Things Are Coming...

Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. ~ Isaiah: 43:18-19

Sometimes God wants to do something "new" and we're still stuck in the "old." It's hard at times to let go of what's familiar, and what we know. It's easier to stay "comfortable," to just keep going with the flow, not to mess anything up. But then "new" happens, and often sends us spiraling, on one big, long loop.

For those who like change, "new" is exciting. For those who don't like change, "new" is stressful. If you're like most, you probably feel a mix of those two.

Sometimes our "new" comes out of great blessing, new opportunities. And sometimes it comes through great pain, huge loss. People move, life happens, decisions are made, many change jobs, kids grow up, and there are times we might go through some really tough struggles. We may even start to feel cheated. Like life is unfair.

But here's what I love about God. He thinks and works outside our own box of thinking. He doesn't always work in the ways that we would have chosen for our "new." He sees the big picture. He knows what He's doing. He works behind the scenes of life that unfold our every day, in the places where we can't always see or understand all the "why's."

So we can trust that He has our best in mind. That He's got our back. He's with us right now. And He's secured our future, too.

God is not finished with our lives yet. We're still here. And He has great purpose in all that we walk through, even in every life change and season.

We can rest in His care for us. He knows. He sees. He works in ways we don't always "get," but there's peace in knowing we don't have to try to control it all. We can let go of the need to figure it all out, and the striving to make things happen. We can trust Him. Our future awaits, and there's still good around the bend. God has more in store. Peace.

Source: Debbie McDaniel is a writer for Crosswalk.com

Submitted by: Sue Waschak

Keep Your Eyes on Christ and Learn How to Serve

How does serving others change our view of life?

The night before he was crucified, knowing full well what was in store, Jesus disregarded the human fear in His pounding heart and demonstrated heroic faith. Our Savior and his disciples were gathered to celebrate the Passover meal one last time. In the midst of the meal, the Lord wanted to take advantage of a teachable moment and model the lifestyle He was calling His colleagues to own. In that no servants were present to wash the filthy feet of the disciples, Jesus Himself took on the responsibility. Taking a towel and a clay-baked basin, Jesus went from friend to friend bending down to wash their feet.

When you stop to think about it, the degree to which Jesus stooped to demonstrate selfless devotion was unthinkable. It was the height of presumption. It was the depth of impropriety. God Himself was on His knees doing what was necessary no matter how degrading. It was a preview of what would occur within the next 24 hours.

Jesus was motivated to serve by what He saw beyond the horizon of this life. He could see the glory that awaited Him across a cosmic border crossing. And because He could, He was willing to endure the humiliation, rejection, injustice, and brutal death that marked His earthly life. He knew He was merely passing through.

Jesus' awareness of eternity, translated into an observable detachment from the values and demands of things on earth, was just ahead. He willingly claimed the identity of a sojourner. He was not a citizen of this country. He knew. Seeing that He was a resident alien, He willingly resisted any attempt to become naturalized. And those who would submit to His Lordship are called to do the same.

Those who live with an eternal perspective keep their eyes on Christ. Seeing how Jesus lived – His choices, goals and actions – helps us to realize what is truly important and shows us what to do with our lives.

Source: The Voice of the Martyrs

Submitted by: Mark Lyon

Share in Suffering and Sacrifice – Walk in the Way of the Cross

As they went out, they came upon a man of Cyre'ne, Simon by name; this man they compelled to carry his cross. ~ Matthew 27:32

I have to confess, Lent is my least favorite liturgical season. Many have written beautiful reflections on this season and the many opportunities for spiritual growth it holds. I couldn't agree more. But the reason this season is often so fruitful can be attributed to one overarching theme: sacrifice.

Lent is filled to the brim with sacrifice. The point, of course, is to reflect on Christ's sacrifice, to feel just a little bit of the pain he felt, and to draw closer to God as we clear out the clutter of our comfortable lives. Naturally, this isn't easy. Sacrifice requires toleration for pain. Sacrifice requires thinking beyond yourself and your wants. Sacrifice demands discipline. Sacrifice isn't fun.

Can't it just be Christmas year round?

Still, part of me is relieved that Lent has arrived. Deep down, far below my selfish nature, exists a yearning to cast off the suffocating materialism and shallowness that so often characterizes modern, American life. Deep down, my spirit desires reconciliation with the living God. Deep down, my soul is sick from spiritual fluff and wants something deeper, meatier.

Left to my own devices, those yearnings would probably go ignored. I wouldn't have the strength to give up the comforts of my life to hear God's voice a little more clearly. Thanks to the Lenten journey, when we travel the road of sacrifice with fellow believers, my weak nature is compelled to take action, to dig deeper, and to follow through with commitments.

Cardinal Newman once said, "We all suffer for each other, and gain by each other's suffering; for man never stands alone here, though he will stand alone hereafter; but here he is a social being, and goes forward to his long home as one of a large company."

I often treat faith as a private matter, as a path I can walk by myself. I confuse individuality with isolation. I ignore the scriptural truth that God created us for Him – and for one another. In Lent I can draw strength from the Church.

I can't lie – when Easter arrives, I am always relieved. Finally, a little rejoicing! But the rejoicing wouldn't be as sweet if I hadn't been compelled to walk the way of the Cross first. And the jubilation is even more poignant given that the very people I sit next to on Easter morning are the same ones that walked with me through the darker days of Lent.

Source: Sarah Phillips

Submitted by: John Pondiccio

With Jesus, There Are No Good-Byes

“And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” ~ Matthew 28:20

“Do we have to leave? Can’t we stay a little longer?”

Perhaps the saddest part about visiting a beach is leaving it. You pack up, you say your good-byes to your friends, and you imagine the beach may even be a bit sad about your departure as well.

Some of us depart in a flurry of activity. We busy ourselves with packing, sweeping, thinking that the quicker our departure, the fewer our heart pangs and the easier it will be to resume our routines. Others of us linger, leaving hours after our scheduled departure times, wanting one last look, one last hug, one last memory.

How often do these kinds of good-byes happen in your prayer life? There are days we race through, as though God is an item to check off our “to do” lists. The sooner we can get through it, the sooner we get on with the day.

Then there are times those clamoring voices vying for attention will just have to wait; you want to spend time with your Maker. You’ve reached your end, and you want nothing more than to be still in Him. So you linger, remaining there as long as possible because of the peace, the comfort, and the rest you feel.

When’s the last time you had that sort of communion with the Lord, when you wanted to remain in His Glorious presence because there was just something about that particular moment that drew you in, drew you closer?

When you experience those moments, drink deeply. Receive Jesus, welcome Him, linger with Him. As in any good conversation, give Him time to speak and yourself time to listen. If your soul feels parched, ask Him to quench it in this way. When the day becomes busy, as it surely will, stay mindful that He remains with you. He is there and present.

This was Jesus’ promise to the disciples and to us as He returned to the Father. We may not completely understand how He does this, but we can be certain that this is no hurdle for the One who conquered death. With Him there are no good-byes.

Prayer:

Lord, thank You for abiding with me even when my commitment to abide with You wanes or I am distracted.

Source: [Devotions for the Beach...](#) by Miriam Drennan

Submitted by: Marie Immohr

Journey with Jesus: To New Life

Matthew 28:1-10

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” ⁸So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”