

Lent 2021

***Lessons from the
Wilderness***



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

Mark 1:12-13

**The Congregational Church of
Brookfield
Lenten Devotional Guide**

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

Lenten Devotionals: *“Lessons from the Wilderness”*

Last year, our Lenten season began with great promise. A hopeful winter sunrise was shining in on our little 7am service in the Meetinghouse. This brief time of prayer, song and imposition of ashes is a favorite worship service for a number of us because it is so small and intimate. Often it’s only a half-dozen or so of us, so we can share from the heart our joys and concerns for prayer, as well as our hopes for the upcoming Lenten season of repentance, self-reflection and (hopefully!) spiritual transformation and renewal.

But little did we know on Ash Wednesday, February 26, 2020, as we gathered in a larger circle than usual – our small gathering was doubled by 5 or 6 visiting guests who joined us from the wider community – that we would soon be separated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Their experience of our church’s *Welcome* vision priority was warm and positive, they said, and they stated their hopes to join us later in our church for Lenten worship services.

Of course, most of those Lenten worship services were not to be the same. Our 2020 Lenten theme, *“Journey with Jesus,”* seemed almost cruelly ironic, as we had to isolate ourselves from each other and suspend in-person worship entirely. If we were to journey “with” Jesus through the season of Lent, for its 40 days and 40 nights to match the call of Jesus into the Jordan wilderness after his baptism, clearly our “with-ness” would have to be purely spiritual and virtual – as we worshipped only over Zoom in our Covid isolation.

Lent 2020 turned out to be the world’s longest purple church season, as we literally gave up going to church for Lent. No in-person Holy Communion or passing of the peace. No singing together. No coffee, cookies or fellowship hours! How did our active and social church hold out until June before beginning in-person prayer meetings in the parking lot?

This year, as Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, February 17, we are holding a virtual gathering on live Zoom – as we invite participants to join us in sharing some of what we have learned over our year apart. Our 2021 Lenten theme, *“Lessons from the Wilderness,”* invites us to reflect on what this year of separation, struggle and suffering has taught us – about the presence of God-in-Christ (Emmanuel), about Christ’s body (the church), and about ourselves.

Our Deacons and Stephen Ministers are sharing these devotionals as an offering to you, their beloved congregation, to guide you through this season in a way that we hope is both helpful and positive. We want to look back on the past year and listen to what God has been saying to us, and give thanks. Because, let’s face it, 2020 was not ALL bad!

Many of us learned important new computer skills that have helped us connect better with family and friends in other states, and even in other countries. Some of us learned to bake bread, do puzzles, or sing in a virtual choir. All of us have had to learn to rely upon God’s grace, and our own family members, in new and important ways.

Let us look forward to Easter 2021 with hope and anticipation of the good things God is saying and doing, and will be saying and doing, in our lives and in the life of our church – right now, in the season of Lent, and in the years to come.

Blessings,
Pastors Bryn and Jennifer

Lessons Learned in the Wilderness

Some have compared COVID-19 to a shared, global wilderness experience. The analogy seems appropriate. Whereas exile is more like the experience of not being at home in the culture, the wilderness is more akin to living in a time of scarcity and uncertainty.

Consider what the wilderness involves: food is in short supply, water is scarce, wild animals roam in the night, exposure to the elements is real, and one is far removed from the comforts of home. The wilderness is a place of scarcity and danger—there is much to fear in the wilderness. However, there is also much to gain in the wilderness.

The wilderness is often mentioned in Scriptures as a place of preparation for God's people. Moses spent decades in the wilderness before he saw a burning bush that was not consumed. David spent much of his early life as a shepherd and then as a fugitive trying to survive in the wilderness. Now we know this was by design—God was grooming him to be Israel's shepherd king. Elijah, John the Baptist, and Paul each spent time alone in the wilderness before launching God-ordained and Spirit-appointed assignments. Jesus Himself spent 40 days fasting and praying in the wilderness, during which time He was severely tempted by the devil but where He also enhanced an abiding reliance upon his Heavenly Father in preparation for his public ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing.

What is the point? God can, and He often chooses, to use the wilderness periods of our lives to prepare us, refine us, and create a total reliance upon Him.

We are not happy for the COVID-19 wilderness in which we find ourselves, but we also trust that in the midst of the danger and uncertainty of it all, God is with us. There are lessons to learn in these places of unsettledness and discomfort. One of the major concerns we share for the church is that we would come out of this wilderness season and miss what God wants us to learn. Not to be any different would be a tragedy.

Perhaps what we must come to crave above all else in these days of chaos is the gift of clarity, in addition to a renewed dependence upon the God who is present in every situation and invites us to cast all our cares upon Him.

Prayer:

Lord, help us to realize that we can learn from this time of our Covid-19 wilderness. You have given us an opportunity to learn and grow closer to you. Amen.

Wandering the COVID-19 Wilderness

I have led you forty years in the wilderness; your clothes have not worn out on you, and your sandal has not worn out on your foot.

~Deuteronomy 29:5

Halfway through the Christian observance of Lent, we join the world in the wilderness of COVID-19. “I hadn’t planned on giving this much up for Lent,” someone wryly posted on social media. None of us had, and the losses, both large and small, continue to mount.

And though we know that Lent ends on Easter Sunday, we have no idea when we’ll be able to leave this COVID-19 wilderness. The *not-knowing* is precisely what makes this a real-life wilderness experience.

These are times when we can experience God in ways that sustain our hope and give us courage to persevere and grow. For most of us, this isn’t the first wilderness we’ve experienced, nor will it be the last. We know that a wilderness experience changes us, for good or ill. How we are changed is determined, in large measure, by our response to circumstances beyond our control.

Jesus’ wilderness time harkens back to the 40 *years* that the ancient Israelites spent in the wilderness after their escape from slavery. The biblical books of Exodus and Numbers tell their wilderness stories, so wonderfully human and spiritually powerful.

They underscore several wilderness lessons for us all to learn and spiritual tasks to master.

The first wilderness task is acceptance. No matter how we got here, we’re all in the wilderness now and there’s nothing to be gained by complaint or blame. We’re bound to experience a wide range of emotions in response to this new reality, sometimes in a single day. Allowing ourselves to feel that emotional range is part of what acceptance requires, while recognizing that not every emotion needs to be acted upon or taken as the sole interpreter of reality. The sooner we accept our new reality and make our home here, the better off we’ll be.

A second wilderness task is to focus on daily sustenance, distinguishing between wants and needs. God provided wilderness food for the ancient Israelites in the form of manna, a simple substance that fell from the sky each night. It wasn’t fancy fare, but it sustained them. Nor could they hoard manna, for whenever they tried, the food would rot. Likewise for us, simple meals and simple pleasures are what will sustain us as we must let go of so many hoped-for events and celebrations.

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Nor can we plan very far ahead with any certainty. Focusing on the gifts and tasks of each day helps us experience God's grace through small things that we might otherwise miss.

A third wilderness task here is learning to share the responsibilities of caring for the wider community. God originally called Moses to lead the people from slavery in Egypt through the wilderness toward their land of promise. But the burden was too much for one person to bear, and Moses cried out to God for help. God instructed Moses to gather 70 others in one place, and God then took some of the spirit of leadership entrusted to Moses and gave it to the 70. For those of us who have resources, energy, and gifts to share, now is the time for us to step into the circle of leadership and provide whatever help we can.

A fourth and most important wilderness task that I'll mention here is learning to trust that God is present. While stripped of so much, we can experience a depth of spiritual connection to God utterly unique to the wilderness. As we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and completely honest in our prayers, our relationship with God in Christ becomes more real, a source of daily guidance and abiding love. I personally love the fact that the people of Israel felt completely free to complain and rail against God. "Can God really spread a table in the wilderness?" they demanded to know. (Psalm 78:19) As it turned out, God could and still can. It may not be the table we had hoped for, but it will be enough.

More than once, biblical writers describe the ancient Israelites as people who wandered in the wilderness. So if you feel as if you're wandering these days, rest assured that you're not alone. We're all walking more by faith than by sight now. But just because we're wandering, doesn't mean we are lost, for we are always walking in God's sight. Keep following the light that shines in darkness and trusting in the One who promises to be with us always. We'll get through this wilderness together.

Prayer:

Lord, may we learn from our time in this Covid-19 wilderness that You are always with us...in the wilderness...in the darkness... bringing us to the light of Your love for us. Amen.

Source: Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde

Submitted by: Marie Immohr

The Blue Hyacinth

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

~1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NIV)

As I was walking through my neighborhood, I noticed a neglected garden with lots of weeds and dry soil. Then I spotted a beautiful blue hyacinth. It reminded me of the saying, "Bloom where you are planted."

At times in my life that saying has encouraged me – times when I have found myself in a place or situation where I have not chosen to be. In such a time and place it's easy for me to give into self-pity and complaining. The better choice, however, is to choose to bloom and flourish.

For me, the verses from 1 Thessalonians quoted above provide a model for how we can thrive in difficult situations – be they related to work, finances, relationships, health, or home.

First, we can think about all we have in Jesus to be joyful about.

Second, we can pray constantly, honestly telling God our feelings and asking for God's help. After all, nothing lasting can be achieved on our own.

Third, Paul says we are to be thankful for all the gifts God gives us each day. Joy returns when we praise God, who loves us wherever we are, no matter where we are planted.

Prayer:

Loving God, thank you for your constant goodness. Be with us wherever we are today and grant us joy and a thankful heart so that our lives honor you. Amen.

Source: Ann Stewart, *The Upper Room*

Submitted by: Sharon Santi

Surely the Presence of the Lord Is In This Place

Read this song, and – today – look for God’s presence around you.

CHORUS: *Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place;
I can feel His mighty power and His grace.
I can hear the brush of angel’s wings, I see glory on each face;
surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.*

In the midst of His children
the Lord said He would be.
It doesn’t take very many; it can be just two or three.
And I feel that same sweet spirit
that I felt oft times before;
Surely I can say I’ve been with My Lord.

CHORUS

There’s a holy hush around us
as God’s glory fills this place.
I’ve touched the hem of His garment, I can almost see His face.
And my heart is overflowing
with the fullness of God’s joy.
And I know, without a doubt, that I’ve been with the Lord.

CHORUS

Lyrics by Lanny Wolfe

Link to the song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xAOL70S-8TY>

Submitted by: Mary Gallagher-DeLucia and Alex DeLucia

Genesis 9:8-13

⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” ¹² God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

1 Corinthians 4:1-9, 15-16

^{4:1} Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. ² We ... refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God’s word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

⁵ For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord

⁶ For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

⁷ But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;
perplexed, but not driven to despair;
⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken;
struck down, but not destroyed...

¹⁵ so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart.

A Loving Father

Therefore, I as a prisoner for serving the Lord...

Beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling...You have been called by God...

Always be humble and gentle, be patient with each other

Make allowances for each others' faults

Because of your LOVE

Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the spirit,

by binding yourselves together in peace.

~Ephesians 4:1-3

Dear Loving Father, you are with me, you see all that I experience, all that I think, and care for all that I feel.

You are with me, you see my frustrations, all my thoughts that run thru my mind, and hold me as I cry.

Thank you loving Father. You are with me, and us. I ask for help in all of my relationships, in the knowledge that you love us all, and You are with us.

You, and only You, truly understand the dynamics of what happens...

May your hand on our lives create love, forgiveness, and peace.

Source: Author unknown

- Submitted by: Mary Gallagher-DeLucia and Alex DeLucia

Strive to Trust God

While reading from “*Jesus Calling*,” by Sarah Young (*Devotions for Every Day of the Year*), the following devotion just got through to me. These devotions are what helped me through this past year. So I want to share this one with you.

STRIVE TO TRUST ME in more and more areas of your life. Anything that tends to make you anxious is a growth opportunity. Instead of running away from these challenges, embrace them, eager to gain all the blessings I have hidden in the difficulties. If you believe that I am sovereign over every aspect of your life, it is possible to trust Me in all situations.

Don’t waste energy regretting the way things are or thinking about what might have been. Start at the present moment – accepting things exactly as they are – and search for My way in the midst of those circumstances. Trust is like a staff you can lean on as you journey uphill with Me.

If you are trusting in Me consistently, the staff will bear as much of your weight as needed. Lean on, trust, and be confident in Me with all your heart and mind.

Scriptures for Reflection:

*But as for me, I am like a green olive tree in the house of God;
I trust [confidently] in the lovingkindness of God forever and ever.*

~Psalm 52:8; Amplified Bible (AMP)

*Trust in and rely confidently on the LORD with all your heart
And do not rely on your own insight or understanding.
In all your ways know and acknowledge and recognize Him,
And He will make your paths straight and smooth
[removing obstacles that block your way].*

~Proverbs 3:5-6; Amplified Bible (AMP)

Source: “*Jesus Calling*,” by Sarah Young

Submitted by: Ruth Allen

Teamwork

Please help me dear God
To write well today's page
For it's my life's story I'm writing
And I'm on the stage.

The things that I write
And the things that I say
May well help another
In some special way.

Help me Lord to listen
And answer wisely when asked
And work ever so willingly
And perform well each task.

Let me share joys of laughter
And love from my heart
To encourage another
And give him a start.

Let me rejoice in the splendor
And hear well Your voice
So that when my day is over
I'll give thanks and rejoice.

Rejoice that together
We wrote well a page
With You as Director
And me on the stage.

Prayer:

My help is from the Lord who made heaven and earth.

~Psalm 121:2

Source: Chris Zambarnard from "The Sympathy of Life", the Salesian Collection by Sara Tarascio

Submitted by: Ruth Allen

Letting Go and Letting God

Since the pandemic began, I have opened my heart to daily prayer, which has helped me through these past several months. Each day is different, because life has so many ups and downs, but my thoughts are the same. As I wake up each morning, I wonder about my day, what is in store for me, so I begin to pray:

DEAR LORD,

There are so many cares and concerns; I don't know where to start,
So I lift them all up, because they are coming from my heart.

I know the Lord is listening: I feel it in my soul.
All my concerns are more than just a few....
But I lift them up to the Lord...because he knows what to do.

By letting go and letting God come into my life each day,
He takes the weight off my shoulders, because I began to pray.

Praying each day, for all my concerns and such,
He is there to listen, and he has taught me to truly trust.

With all the ups and downs, I have been able to share;
I know God will take care of them, because I have lifted them up in prayer.

I end my devotion with a reading from Proverbs:

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will set your paths straight.*

~Proverbs 3:5-6 NIV

Written by: Ruth Allen

Extraordinary in the Ordinary

It's been said that one of the challenging things about life is that it's so daily! Indeed, it is. Life's not always exciting, thrilling, full of emotional highs and great feelings. Most of the time life's very ordinary. We get up, get ready, go to work, do our job, come home, go to bed and then do the same things all over again the next day. We go through the routines of daily living. Nothing seems too special. It's just life – daily life!

One thing that often happens in the flow of daily life is the loss of expectation and anticipation of the special moments. We fall into the rut of the ordinary and fail to look for the extraordinary in our ordinary lives. Because of this, we miss many of the special moments and unique opportunities God brings our way. The ordinary anesthetizes us to the extraordinary. Let me explain.

There are many stories in the Bible of God showing up in unique and special ways in the lives of ordinary people doing very ordinary things. One example is found in **Acts 8**. It's the story of a man named Philip. Philip was a servant in the early church who loved to share his faith with others. One day, Philip was walking on the road that led from Jerusalem to Gaza. While he's walking, God is talking to him.

As Philip strolled along, he saw a chariot heading down the same road. The chariot happened to be transporting a very important official from Ethiopia. The Holy Spirit spoke to Philip and told him to go and walk alongside this carriage. Philip obeyed. When Philip approached the chariot, he heard this man reading from the scroll of Isaiah the prophet. Philip saw an opportunity. It was an extraordinary moment in an ordinary day.

Philip asked the official if he understood what he was reading. The man said that he needed some help, and Philip offered his assistance, jumped in the carriage with him and began telling the man about Jesus. Take a look at Philip's response to this amazing moment:

***“So beginning with this same Scripture,
Philip told him the Good News about Jesus.”***

~Acts 8:35 (NIV)

This man accepted Christ that day, was baptized and went home a new man! A great moment in Philip's life, a moment that resulted in him sharing his faith in Jesus with someone else, happened because Philip looked for extraordinary, special moments in the midst of an ordinary day and an ordinary activity. What started out as an ordinary walk turned into an extraordinary opportunity for Philip to be used by God.

Yes, life is very daily and very ordinary. But remember, God has extraordinary, special moments and opportunities for you in the midst of your ordinary life and activities. Keep your spiritual eyes open to see them and your spiritual ears tuned to hear God's Spirit guiding you to embrace the unique, divine appointments in the mundane of your daily life!

Source: Dale O'Shields

Submitted by: Mark Lyon

The Command to Rest

Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the LORD has been good to you.

~ Psalm 116:7

We humans aren't as unstoppable as we'd like to think. Every night, we have to stop what we're doing and close our eyes for a few hours. We aren't capable of finishing our creations in a day, a week, or even a year sometimes. We must break off and sleep before then. Individually, we have to acknowledge our limitations and rest, even if inadequately, before springing up again for our work. Our progress comes in halting steps, our work never quite finished, so unlike the God who created the world in six days and *then* rested. Sleep is a physical humility, an acknowledgment of God's greater power and our trust that he works and watches even when we're unconscious. It means believing that he "gives to his beloved even in his sleep" (Psalm 127:2).

So what happens when we get so busy that we don't rest?

I'm talking about physical rest as well as mental rest. We read lots of health articles about the importance of reducing stress, and plenty of spiritual growth advice focuses on not worrying. And of course the doctor is always telling us that we need a good eight hours of a sleep a night. But – and maybe it's just me – sometimes it's tempting to wear my lack of sleep, my busy schedule, and my looming responsibilities like a badge of honor.

We secretly glorify the people who do it all, no matter the costs. Sure, we all have busy seasons with a new baby or the project due at work. But often, I think my refusal to rest is a symptom of self-sufficiency hardening into pride. The longer I'm awake, the longer I can control my environment and my results. It means less trusting that God will give me what I need and more time scraping together what I need and desire. Often, it means getting so busy doing things for God that we neglect our primary relationship with him.

The command to "be at rest" isn't just for our benefit. Rest is not a guilty pleasure we have to sneak. Instead, we need to think of rest as a grace-filled reminder that we are creatures of clay dependent on a much stronger God. Our energy levels wind down until we are forced to acknowledge that – surprise! – we can't engineer our lives as much as we'd like to think. But that weakness allows God to make us a promise in Matthew 11:28: "*Come to me... and I will give you rest.*"

God can bless even our rest when we're following him. And he *wants* us to rest as an acknowledgment of our human limitations. When we rest, we're expressing our faith in God's ability to bring *all things* to completion.

Source: Katherine Britton, Crosswalk.com Editor

Submitted by: Mark Lyon

Genesis 17:1-7**God's Promise to Abraham**

^{17:1}When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." ³Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him,⁴"As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.⁷I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

Romans 4:13-24**God's Promise Realized through Faith**

¹³ For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵ For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.¹⁶ For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, ¹⁷ as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. ¹⁸ Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." ¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. ²⁰ No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²² Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." ²³ Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, ²⁴ but for ours also.

Times of Transition

Transitions in life are hard. They mean that one part of your life's story is over and a new one is about to begin. They are the space between where faith is tested and fear fights to creep in. They are a temporary "no man's land" that we have to walk through in order to grow. As we walk through them, it's hard to see what's coming next. The territory is so unknown that we put our attention and focus on the transition rather than on where we're being transitioned to. We question God's providence in our situation during these times.

As I've thought about all of that, I started wishing God would give us the warnings about transitions approaching in our lives and the [reasons] behind them. As I prayed about it, God reminded me how many times Jesus told the disciples what was going to happen to him in Jerusalem and why. They never heard a word of it and were shocked [that night] in the Garden of Gethsemane. They entered a time of transition between having Jesus walk with them daily and having the Holy Spirit coming as their guide. Like us, they were confused, frightened and wondered where God was in the transition.

God speaks to each of us daily. He says things we ignore or don't want to hear so we block Him [from our minds]. We use our selective hearing when He speaks of things that scare us. The disciples heard Jesus tell them about the transition, but they weren't listening. Even when we know a transition is coming, it's still natural to be scared. We're afraid of change. The last few years have taught me that change is necessary for growth. When we fight it, we fight growing... we fight the future God had for us and we fight God's will. Our times of transition help prepare us for the change. They grow our faith and trust in God's plan for our life. It's something we can only see when we take the time to look back.

God has something greater for you on the other side of this time of transition. It may take longer than you expected, but hang on. The reward will be worth it. The growth you will experience will be like no other time in your life. Don't give up in the time of transition. Hold strong to your faith and trust God to see you through.

Prayer:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, 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.

~Philippians 4:6-8 NIV

We are a people of faith, not a people of fear!

The scripture reads, “*Yea though I walk thru the valley of the shadow of death,*” not “*Yea though I walk thru the valley of the shadow of no toilet paper.*”

Our faith is being tested. Passing or failing, your response will mark a significant milestone in your walk of faith. But even more importantly, how you deal with this test is your Christian witness!

In times like these, people will notice someone who responds differently than the crowd. True faith is the thing that empowers us to respond differently. This is not to say we will not have anxious feelings or experience moments of doubt, but ultimately our response should be grounded in God’s promises.

Real Faith is believing God’s promises are more real than anything we can see or feel in this world... and that includes the Coronavirus and empty shelves on the toilet paper aisle.

Prayer:

For we live by faith and not by sight.
~2 Corinthians 5:7

Source: Rick Lane

Submitted by: John Pondiccio

Lessons from the Wilderness

The LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year, after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying, "Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel..." ~Numbers 1:1-2

Why is the book of Numbers in the Bible?

The book of Numbers explains why it took forty years for Israel to get to the Promised Land after they left Israel. God promised to Abraham that he would make of him a great nation (fulfilled in Exodus) and give them the land where he was a sojourner. But that doesn't happen in this book because the people demonstrated a lack of faith in God's promise to give them the land.

But God's promise will not fail. In spite of Israel's faithlessness, God remains faithful (and this theme runs throughout the Bible). Israel grumbles and complains throughout the book, but God still leads them to the Promised Land (although the first generation who came out of Egypt was condemned to die in the wilderness). Even when a pagan prophet is summoned to curse the people (Balaam), he ends up blessing them instead (Numbers 22-24).

It becomes tiresome to read of Israel's constant bickering, complaining, and outright disobedience against God. Though this book is not a pleasant read, it is critical that we learn the lesson God is trying to teach us through it. Their disobedience and God's punishment of his people is a lesson for us.

Yet even in this dark and depressing book a bright light shines through. God's patience and compassion are on display to give us confidence that in spite of our failings his faithful, covenant love for us is sure and steadfast.

Prayer:

Father God, reading about Israel in this book is like looking in a mirror. Forgive us of our stubborn and rebellious ways. Patiently and lovingly lead us on to the Promised Land. Amen.

Source: David Maxson

Submitted by: John Pondiccio

God's Faithfulness

Sometimes bad things happen, and there's nothing you can do about it.

For 40 years, the prophet Jeremiah warned the people that judgment was coming. Day after day he encouraged them to center their lives on God, put Him first, live lives of integrity and generosity. He was demonstrative. He was creative. They didn't listen.

In 588 B.C., the Babylonians encircled Jerusalem. They laid siege for two years, finally breaking through the walls and pillaging God's beloved city.

Rather than saying, "I told you so," Jeremiah lamented. He was brokenhearted by what had happened to his people. In desperate sorrow, the prophet wrote four acrostic poems, grieving his loss from A to Z.

After two-and-a-half chapters of pouring out his distress, Jeremiah says in Lamentations 3:21-26:

Yet I call this to mind, and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's faithful love we do not perish, for his mercies never end. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness! I say, "The Lord is my portion, therefore I will put my hope in him."

Even in the midst of grief, Jeremiah experienced the great faithfulness of God. He "called to mind" the Lord's faithful love, His mercies that never end – his faithfulness every morning.

After "calling these things to mind," he took a second step. He verbalized, out loud that God was his "portion" and said, "I will put my hope in Him."

If you're feeling grieved today about the state of our world, these might be good steps for you to take as well. Think about some ways the Lord has been faithful to you. Express out loud that you are putting your hope in Him. This is one of those seasons to "wait quietly" for the Lord's rescue. Great. Is. His. Faithfulness!

Prayer:

You are my Portion. I put my hope in You today. Deliver me, and all my loved ones from this virus and its effects on our economy. I choose to wait on Your faithfulness today. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Source: Hal Seed in his book, *The God Questions* Submitted by: John Pondiccio

Lessons from the Wilderness in Such a Time

For the wandering Israelites, there were many lessons to be learned in the wilderness. Foremost was patience. After Moses informed the people that they would have to remain in the wilderness for an extended period of time, the people decided in their grief to take some of the promised land right then and there, despite warnings to the contrary.

They tried, they failed, and they were decimated (Num 14:39-45).
They could not wait and paid for their impatience (cf. Ps 106:13).

Another lesson from the wilderness was: *Take only what you need* (Exod 16:16-21). No hoarding. This admonition applied to manna then and today applies to . . . (fill in the blank).

Perhaps the most important lesson from the wilderness for the church is this: Be creative.

In our COVID wilderness, God is finding ways to be present in our virtual gatherings. The results have been surprising. Online worship has become decentralized and more creative; our homes have become our new sanctuaries. I suspect that certain developments in our evolving, adaptive ministries will be sorely missed once it is truly safe to refill our empty buildings and campuses.

Case in point: with inspired teamwork and creativity, Columbia Theological Seminary hosted a commencement this year unlike any other, one that could never be replicated in any physically gathered way. Rather than feeling cheated by COVID-19, our graduating students felt unexpectedly moved and blessed in ways not possible in a traditional setting.

Creativity only comes by trial and error. We must be patient also with ourselves as we improvise and experiment our way through this wilderness.

Let this liminal time be the occasion to cultivate new ways of ministry without succumbing to nostalgia. The Israelites never went back to Egypt, despite their yearnings to do so. God made sure of that.

Through the wilderness of pain and promise, the people discovered new ways of being in community while traveling together, yes, for a very long time.

Being a “refuge” for refugees in the wilderness, both then and now, begins with loving God, just as the psalmist says. And our neighbors, just as Jesus says.

Source: William P. Brown, Columbia Theological Seminary

Submitted by: John Pondiccio

From Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

As a child, I spent my time out of school alone, taking care of farm animals. If I didn't do it, the animals would have just been given food to survive but not cleaned. I loved doing it. God seemed more friend than parent figure. I prayed constantly for no other reason than the love of doing it. There were animal lives coming into my world and those going out. I had questions, but the world seemed fresh and new.

Let your gentleness be known to all. The Lord is near.

The horse and ponies put up with me. They didn't step on me when I fell under them when we were running together – though one of their hooves pulled out a chunk of hair from my head! The horse even got me out of a ravine that I led us into. My limited riding skill couldn't get us out. It just leapt. Sitting on its back, I didn't know the horse was in the air until it made its descent, coming down.

Do not be anxious about anything, but I had a light bulb to change, for I could not see without it. It was 3 stories up in the MIDDLE of the barn. It meant walking across a 20 foot long, 12 inch wide 3/4 inch thick oak plank. Its end tips were resting on the barn beams. The plank bowed under the weight of my 10-year-old body. I still wake up in a sweat from dreaming about it.

But in everything, by prayer & petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. I prayed hard as I reached high above my head to change the bulb. Once again light was shed upon where I tread.

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Has there been a time in your life where you felt you were operating by a wing and a prayer? The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus.

Prayer:

In all my ignorance, dear God, please protect me from dangers seen and unseen. Thank you for your continued protection in the areas that I am ignorant to. Amen.

Written by: Pete Lane

Exodus 20:1-20

20 ¹⁻² GOD spoke all these words:

I am GOD, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of a life of slavery.

³ No other gods, only me.

⁴⁻⁶ No carved gods of any size, shape, or form of anything whatever, whether of things that fly or walk or swim. Don't bow down to them and don't serve them because *I* am GOD, your God, and I'm a most jealous God, punishing the children for any sins their parents pass on to them to the third, and yes, even to the fourth generation of those who hate me. But I'm unswervingly loyal to the thousands who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷ No using the name of GOD, your God, in curses or silly banter; GOD won't put up with the irreverent use of his name.

⁸⁻¹¹ Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Work six days and do everything you need to do. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to GOD, your God. Don't do any work—not you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your servant, nor your maid, nor your animals, not even the foreign guest visiting in your town. For in six days GOD made Heaven, Earth, and sea, and everything in them; he rested on the seventh day. Therefore GOD blessed the Sabbath day; he set it apart as a holy day.

¹² Honor your father and mother so that you'll live a long time in the land that GOD, your God, is giving you.

¹³ No murder.

¹⁴ No adultery.

¹⁵ No stealing.

¹⁶ No lies about your neighbor.

¹⁷ No lusting after your neighbor's house—or wife or servant or maid or ox or donkey. Don't set your heart on anything that is your neighbor's.

* * *

¹⁸⁻¹⁹ All the people, experiencing the thunder and lightning, the trumpet blast and the smoking mountain, were afraid—they pulled back and stood at a distance. They said to Moses, "You speak to us and we'll listen, but don't have God speak to us or we'll die."

²⁰ Moses spoke to the people: "Don't be afraid. God has come to test you and instill a deep and reverent awe within you so that you won't sin."

Lessons From A Violet

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

~James 5: 16

After returning from a long vacation, I retrieved my African violets from a friend. Three of the four plants had lovely purple flowers and deep green leaves. The fourth had soft, yellow leaves and no blooms. I was surprised, but then I recalled that I hadn't seen blossoms on that plant for at least two years.

Patiently, I continued to water all my violets, even the fourth plant. Gradually, its leaves turned from pure yellow to a pretty shade of yellow-green, but it remained flowerless. Eventually a tiny purple flower appeared! It seemed to be hiding under the leaves – just waiting to be discovered. Then more blossoms popped up among the now green leaves. Each day brought me joy as I checked for more flowers.

What spiritual life lessons this hardy little plant provided! God is with us, even when we least expect it. Patience, persistence, faith, and prayer will bring us blessings. How many of us have found our prayers answered after we had already given up hope! We may encounter people and situations that turn out to be just the answer to our prayers. Let the unexpected bloom; situations like these remind us that God is working in our lives.

Prayer:

Dear God, help us to be hopeful and to trust you. May we always expect your nearness, protection, guidance, and love. Amen.

Source: Linda Kinde, *The Upper Room*

Submitted by: Sue Boughton

Love

*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.
~1 John 4:16*

At my nephew's wedding, I was asked to read a paraphrase of the famous reading from 1 Corinthians 13. Even though it was a civil service and God wasn't mentioned, God was present because love was there.

We as Christians are called to love our neighbor as ourselves. (See Matthew 19:19). If we can celebrate human love – a love that is dim compared to God's love – how much more can we celebrate God's pure love for each and every person we meet?

My nephew's wedding was a reminder to me of how much God loves everyone. God is calling me to love not only my family but also those around me whom I don't always find lovable. God loves all of us, and we are called to do the same.

Prayer:

Dear Father, help us to be reflections of your Love.

We pray the prayer Jesus taught us saying,

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed by thy name.

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Source: Carol Denereaz, *The Upper Room*

Submitted by: Sue Boughton

My Burden is Light

Jesus said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

~ Matthew 11:30

From the age of five, I have carried the secret shame of abuse. I have been lonely and often have felt like damaged goods. At times this burden has seemed greater than I could bear. I have even had thoughts of suicide.

Though I had heard Matthew 11:28-30 many times, I never understood how Jesus' yoke could be easy and his burden light. But after many sessions in therapy, God showed me that I did not have to bear the shame and guilt of abuse because I was never at fault – and that my resting place is in Jesus and his love. God had not left me but had carried me for more than 30 years.

Forgiveness has been a large part of my journey. It was never about saying what happened was okay. It was about letting go of anger and bitterness as I let the love of Jesus into my heart. Now for me, the yoke and burden of Jesus is his love and sharing his hope with others. No matter our circumstances, Jesus takes our heavy burdens and offers us the yoke of his love.

Prayer:

*Dear Lord, help us learn not to allow our past to define who we are.
Thank you, Jesus for carrying our burden. Amen.*

Source: Michelle Nash, *The Upper Room*

Submitted by: Sue Boughton

The Lord restores my soul

One night I woke up around midnight feeling anxious, and everything just snowballed from there. I was worrying about areas where I felt like a failure. My long list of responsibilities loomed over me, and I could not find peace.

Finally, I prayed for God's help, and Psalm 23 came to mind. This Psalm has always been a soothing balm for me as I visualize God's green pastures and still waters. But this time God showed me something different.

Verses two and three do not begin with the pronoun "I" but with the pronoun "He," meaning God. While I had been wrestling with all the things that I had not been doing, the Psalm was showing me that God is the one who is in charge of the doing.

I do not restore my own soul. I do not lead myself in paths of righteousness. I do not fulfill any of the promises here – not one! It is God who does the guiding, providing, restoring, and all other good things. I had been struggling needlessly with burdens that were not mine to carry.

The heavy weights of worry and anxiety began to be replaced by peace, and I was able to go back to sleep. Nothing was left for me to worry over. God had it all covered.

Prayer:

*Good Shepherd, thank you for reminding us that we are not in charge.
Help us to find peace in you. Amen.*

Source: *The Upper Room*

Submitted by: Sharon Santi

I Am a Planner

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

~Jeremiah 29:11

As many of you know, I am a planner. Ask me in the summer what anthems the choirs will be singing the following Christmas, and I can list them right off. My Sundays are planned out far in advance.

And then, last March, the pandemic hit; and I mean HIT. I was planning to take our Alleluia Choir to a Children's Choir Festival on Saturday, March 14th. Two days before, we made the difficult decision to cancel. Not long after that I attended (via our new best friend, the internet) a webinar showing scientific evidence that in-person singing was out of the question. The deep breathing and projecting of singing voices could spread the virus throughout a congregation.

All that planning, out the window. It was a punch in the gut.

So what do we do when plans are suddenly stripped away? We face a void full of questions without answers. We are uncertain about the future. We fear for ourselves, our loved ones and our friends. And what do we do when the future is uncertain and the way forward is murky at best? We pray. But even when I prayed, I found it hard to concentrate on that. However, as we say in the United Church of Christ, "*God Is Still Speaking*,"....

As I looked for new choir music, I came across an anthem arranged by UCC composer Tom Trenney with these words (from a Guatemalan song by Raul Galeano, translated by C. Michael Hawn):

*"God is here today,
As certain as the air I breathe
As certain as the morning sun that rises,
As certain when I sing you'll hear my song."*

Our choirs recently sang those words. At a rehearsal with the children, I asked them to tell us something that they were absolutely certain of. Two of their answers were, "I know God is always there for me," and "I know that when I pray God will hear me."

There it was. God was still speaking – through the children, to me – in the midst of a global pandemic. They helped me discover, and more importantly believe, that God is here today. It's as certain as the air we breathe.

Prayer:

*Dear God, please help me see the ways you are still speaking to me today.
Send me the messages of hope that you know I need to hear. Amen.*

Written by: Toni Sullivan

The Art of Waiting

*I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry.
He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.*

~Psalm 40:1, 3

How do you handle waiting? Do you experience boredom, frustration, anxiety or maybe eagerness and excitement? I suppose it depends on what it is that we are waiting for.

The time of this pandemic has certainly thrown us all into a time of waiting. During this past year I often heard people say, "I've had enough of 2020, why don't we just jump to 2021?" But when we leap ahead, what do we miss in the here and now?

Sue Monk Kidd, in her book *"When the Heart Waits,"* has some insights into the process of waiting. She says, "These days, the idea of waiting doesn't conjure up the idea of being tuned in as much as it does the idea of being tuned out. We denigrate it to idling."

We have been saying, "when we get back to normal" or "when we get back to life as we know it" a lot this past year. But will it ever again be "life as we've known it"?

Sue Monk Kidd also compares the time of waiting to the cocooning of a butterfly. While the butterfly is in the cocoon, transformation is taking place. It takes place in the quiet and stillness of the cocoon. As we are now isolated from each other by physical distancing, we are in many ways, cocooning. Do we fight it, or accept it? Do we only look forward to an unknown future, or can we take the time to look at what is right in front of us in the here and now?

As I try that, I begin to see with new eyes. I see people helping others. I see people connecting with family and friends over Zoom. I see our church finding new ways to connect in worship. I am finding more time for walks, and prayer, and looking inward. I see the beauty of God's Creation.

I love these words from Mother Teresa,
"Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today. Let us begin."

My hope is that once we are past this pandemic, I can continue to see what is in front of me with new eyes and with appreciation for all the gifts it has to offer me.

Prayer:

*Dear God, help me to see and wonder at what is before me right now,
and give thanks and praise for the gift of what is. Amen.*

Written by: Toni Sullivan

John 3:14-21

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. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Ephesians 2:1-10

^{2:1}You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

God is Faithful

And now, brothers, pray for us. Pray that the Lord's teaching will continue to spread quickly. And pray that people will give honor to that teaching, just as happened with you. And pray that we will be protected from bad and evil people. (Not all people believe in the Lord.) But the Lord is faithful. He will give you strength and protect you from the evil one. The Lord makes us feel sure that you are doing the things we told you. And we know that you will continue to do those things. We pray that the Lord will lead your hearts into God's love and Christ's patience.

~The Everyday Bible, 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

If you have ever had the opportunity to visit Yellowstone National Park, you have more than likely been privileged to see Old Faithful perform. Old Faithful, named in 1870 during the Washburn-Langford-Doane Expedition, was the first geyser to be named [by European explorers*] in the park. It has been erupting in nearly the same fashion throughout the history of the park, shooting boiling water into the air at heights of 90 to 184 feet. It is an amazing sight to see.

Our God is also faithful. God is faithful in meeting our needs, healing our bodies, and providing for our physical and mental needs. God leads us and directs us. Recall the times in your life when God was faithful to you. Did you receive the gift of safety in a time of turmoil? Was your body healed when you were ill? Were your financial needs met when you thought there were no options?

In all of these situations and more, God proved to be faithful. You are a living testimony to God's faithfulness. Tell someone today about how God met your need.

Prayers:

Holy One, I stand amazed at your faithfulness and ever-present love. Amen.

Source: Todd Diedrich, *Our Daily Bread*

Submitted by: Jeanie Bergman

* If you go to <https://www.nps.gov/yell/learn/historyculture/historic-tribes.htm> you can read more about the historic tribes of Native Americans who relied for 1400 to 1700 years on the bison herds who grazed throughout Yellowstone, before it became a U.S. National Park.

Wilderness Experience

*And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan;
and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him.*

~Mark 1:13

Our wilderness experience may seem to stretch beyond forty days. Health issues, loneliness, and the deaths of loved ones may be among the wild beasts challenging us, but have you also noticed the angels?

Who has ministered to you and helped you cope? The list likely includes our pastors, healthcare workers, friends and family. Under normal circumstances, we probably would not recognize those we do not know such as grocery store workers, post office employees, and delivery drivers.

Surely we should elevate them, and others, since they make the wilderness a less hostile place to dwell.

Prayer:

Dear God, when our wilderness experience threatens to overwhelm us, let us remember that you send angels to minister to our needs. Let us be grateful for the many ways your angels comfort us and smooth the rough places. Amen.

Written by: Martha Parvis

Over the Hill

But good people will grow like palm trees. They will be tall like the cedar trees of Lebanon. They will be like trees planted in the courtyards of the Lord. They will grow strong in the courtyards of our God. When they are old, they will still produce fruit. They will be healthy and fresh. They will say that the Lord is good. He is my Rock, and there is no wrong in Him.

~Psalm 92:12-15, The Everyday Bible

My milestone birthday arrived with a jolt. “Sixty years old, Linda? Hard to believe you have turned sixty!” Friends and family repeated the mantra over and over by phone or in person. I took the jokes, the kidding, and the funny cards with good humor, but later my thoughts became anxious as I mulled over the facts.

It was true I was no longer a spring chicken. My knees hurt. My hair was turning white. My reading glasses needed to be upgraded. Dental work was ongoing, and I probably needed hearing aids. I wondered if God could still use me as I aged, or would I become increasingly irrelevant and useless?

It was then that I came across a wonderful promise to older Christians like me in Psalm 92:14. The word “still” caught my attention. God can still use us as we grow older.

God will not set us aside, but rather promises to give us opportunities to serve. Opportunities may include leading others to Christ, being part of a prayer team, or helping in the kitchen. The key is to be faithful.

Prayer:

Sustainer of life, thank you for assuring me that you can still use me in your kingdom, no matter how old I am. Give me the strength to serve you to the best of my ability. Amen.

Source: Linda Jinkens, *Our Daily Bread*

Submitted by: Jeanie Bergman

Lifting the Fog

The Lord is good to those who put their hope in Him. He is good to those who look to Him for help. It is good to wait quietly for the Lord to save.

~Lamentations 3:25-26, The Everyday Bible

My husband and I took a road trip one winter to the Grand Canyon. The weather forecast indicated below freezing temperatures, but we decided to brave the cold. Despite the snow-covered ground, cars were already filling the parking lot on the morning of our arrival. We set out on the trail, trying not to feel disappointment as the fog obstructed our view in every direction.

As it turned out, all we needed was some patience. The fog eventually began to lift, much like a curtain at a theater. At first we could see a few trees and then a little bit of the canyon. Eventually, the entire beauty of the snow-topped trees and the vast canyon stretched out before us, drawing us in. I was thankful we had waited. Just a little patience was all it took to see the beauty behind the fog.

Sometimes in the fog of our lives, we are unable to discern and understand God's plan for us. However, if we are patient and wait, the Almighty will lead us through the unknown and uncharted territory until we can see clearly once again.

Prayer:

Divine Guide, give us patience to wait on you as we attempt to navigate the fog of life. Amen.

Source: Amber Harvey, *Our Daily Bread*

Submitted by: Jeanie Bergman

A Fresh Start

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

~Psalm 118:24

Each day God provides a fresh start. At my house, the day often begins watching trees silhouetted against a brilliant sky that then quickly fades. This wilderness experience makes me appreciate the abundant, but often fleeting experiences of God's hand in the natural world, especially in winter.

Frequent walks in the woods reveal frost glistening on bare branches, moss cushioning rocks as if inviting one to rest, and a skim ice delicately protecting the water below. A variety of birds visit the feeder, discarding many seeds to the delight of the squirrels on the ground. Cardinals gently feed each other the tastiest morsels.

Today, snow covers the ground, and for a short time everything seems to be washed clean.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, as our busy lives slow down, thank you for the opportunity to notice the beauty of your creation renewed each day. Amen.

Written by: Martha Parvis

Resurrection Power

*“Here is not here; he has risen, just as he said.
Come and see the place where He lay.”*

~NIV Bible, Matthew 28:6

Here we are, right in the midst of Lent. Looking with anticipation toward the day we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We are also looking forward to the coming days that will be filled with sunshine, blossoming flowers, and singing birds. The calendar says that spring has arrived!

Isn't this the most exciting time of the year? We can see and even feel new life surrounding us on every hand. Every day we awaken to the wonderful joy of the resurrection. Winter, with all its wonder, is giving way to rebirth. Aren't you thrilled?

Just think how overjoyed the women at the tomb were on that first Easter morning! “He is not here; He has risen” were the sweetest and most unexpected words they had heard in their whole lives.

Let us live our Christian lives with the enthusiasm that resurrection power can bring! And like the women on that morning long ago, let us share the good news.

Prayer:

God of life and life anew, help us live our lives dominated by the resurrection power and excitement we can only find in Jesus. In the name of Him who was raised from the dead. Amen.

Source: Jeffrey A. Lambert, *Our Daily Bread*

Submitted by: Jeanie Bergman

John 12:20-36

²⁰Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.

²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

²⁷“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.”

²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” ³⁰Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

³⁴The crowd answered him, “We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?”

³⁵Jesus said to them, “The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going.

³⁶While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.” After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

Darkness

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

~John 12:24

We did not choose to fall into the darkness of a pandemic. The routines that defined our old life may now seem dead. What has replaced them takes root and grows, allowing new life to flower in ways we have not imagined.

When family members must spend more time together, ideally, we discover ways to adapt and refresh these relationships. When we are kept apart from extended family and friends, we value the opportunities to connect with them in new ways.

When the ways we work and play are no longer viable, we become innovators and new ideas blossom. When suffering surrounds us, and the fragility of life is apparent, helpers lift those in darkness. We will emerge changed with a new capacity to flourish where we are planted.

Prayer:

Dear God, let us be mindful of the ways you provide opportunities for growth, even when we appear to be buried in the darkness. Amen.

Written by: Martha Parvis

Prayer Changes Things

Luke 22: 36-53 NRSV: *Jesus Prays on the Mount of Olives*

At the beginning of this story, Jesus tells his disciples to arm themselves with swords. This implies that he wanted them to be prepared for a violent confrontation.

Luke 22:36-39: Then Jesus asked them, "When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?" "Nothing," they answered. He said to them, "But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one. It is written: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors'; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment." The disciples said, "See, LORD, here are two swords." "That's enough!" he replied. Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him.

Then Jesus goes into the garden and spends the night in prayer. It was a night of anguish and doubt as he prays that they will not come into a time of trial. In the end he makes the statement, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; not my will but Yours be done."

Luke 22: 39-46: He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial." Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed. Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial."

When the guards came in the morning, Jesus's disciples were prepared to use their swords to protect him. He stopped them from using violence and healed the one person harmed by a disciple.

Luke 22:46-53: While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; but Jesus said to him, "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?" When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, "Lord, should we strike with the sword?" Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!"

After a night of prayer, Jesus refused to use violence. Prayer changes things. Let God's will be done.

Prayer: *Father in heaven guide us in using peaceful means to reconcile with others. Amen.*

Submitted by: Ruth Reda

Detached

I can center myself in my world. I can sit in quiet meditation with my intentions set on my place in society. I can calculate where and what I should be. Or I can sit in contemplative prayer and center myself with my true self, my higher being or with a higher power separate from myself. What's the difference?

When I let my "world" be my higher power, I am giving power to a system of beliefs shared among the people in my circles. When I center myself with a higher power, I am absolved from the restraints and demands of our societies and clear out so much clutter in my head. This approach allows more clarity. It's the difference between prioritizing what matters right now and what matters most. When we learn to connect with a higher power we begin to experience an easier existence – one where our power comes from the source and our motives are pure.

Similarly, I can detach with anger or I can detach with love. We all have or have had people in our lives that are not healthy for us for a variety of reasons. They may make us question ourselves. They may not understand us and may even judge us. They may be caught in a downward spiral in their own life and the energy they share extinguishes our lights. Detaching may seem counterintuitive to sharing our lights and offering love and kindness, and it is, if you detach with anger. The motive of our hearts affects every cell in our bodies.

Centering ourselves in a higher power and not in our superficial existence allows our motives to come from a pure place – a place where there is a bigger picture. Our decisions aren't so much for selfish reasons, but because we are called to do more, to be more in this world. We cannot live out our purpose if we allow these relationships to continue. So we detach with love. With love we step away and keep a protective distance. The energy around us has not been disturbed, but rather it has been restored. With this restored energy there is room for new relationships and situations to enter our lives and perhaps even a rekindling of an old one.

Life is a journey we may not always have control over, but our centering force keeps us grounded and true to ourselves and our purpose. When we keep these things in line, we avoid the downward spiral that stems from unfortunate events. When we keep centered within our own beings, we are empowered to continue down our paths without fear. We continue down this path with light loads because our burdens are few.

Practice kindness, forgiveness and centering for yourself – and watch your world unfold.

Written by: Tosha Gordon

Walk. Don't run.

Walk, don't run.
That's it.
Walk, don't run.

Slow down, breathe deeply,
and open your eyes because there's
a whole world right here within this one.

The bush doesn't suddenly catch on fire, it's been burning the whole time.
Moses is simply moving
slowly enough to see it.

And when he does,
he takes off his sandals.
Not because
the ground has suddenly become holy,
but because he's just now becoming aware that
the ground has been holy the whole time.

Efficiency is not God's highest goal for your life,
neither is busyness,
or how many things you can get done in one day,
or speed, or even success.

But walking,
which leads to seeing,
now that's something.

That's the invitation for every one of us today,
and every day, in every conversation, interaction,
event, and moment: to walk, not run. And in doing so,
to see a whole world right here within this one.

Source: Rob Bell

Submitted by: Tosha Gordon

Note: In December of 2020 our church family suffered the loss of one of our dear young adults. Nick Ruschmeyer succumbed to the cancer he had fought on and off with such courage for 10 years. If there was ever someone whose life was marked by lessons he had learned from the wilderness, it was Nick. As a backcountry skier, ice and rock climber, snowboarder, terrain park manager, and guide for all of these things and more, he not only experienced God in the wilderness, he helped others to experience God in that way too. Nick did so much more than just guide people on physical journeys, he accompanied so many on journeys of the heart and spirit – of discovering who they were and who they were called to be as friends, family, and contributors to this world in this grand adventure we call life. In his 31 years he left a lasting impression on the hearts and lives of many. May we all take a lesson from Nick and be willing to accompany others on the journey.

In The Shadow of the Mountain

Practice gratitude. Accept the pain in our life.
Forgive and let go of it.

Just do it. Be creative, try hard, think clearly and stay focused.
Live Your Best Life!

It's going to be all right. At times you will get down mentally,
at times you will get beat down physically.

But in these moments it is important to remember that it's going to be all right.
I call this HOPE.

Life is not about leaving the most impactful steps behind to be observed and relished.
The goal is to leave a properly placed delicate step that will fade with time,
as all impressions do.

My hope is that the step is worth following,
but if not, it will fade and only become a memory.

I hope that my print will become stepping stones so the generations after my time
have something worth building upon and something to make their own.

If I have accomplished this, I have left the world a better place.

Much Love.

Written by: Nicholas Ruschmeyer

A Prayer Walk

What if each chair you sat in had been prayed over? Each place you visit? Even your house? How powerful would it be if we filled the world with prayer over every street, every school, every community?

A prayer walk is a form of intercessory prayer, praying for the needs of others around you, even if you do not know them or their needs. You simply walk around a location and pray for each person, each house, each seat, each need your heart hears.

Praying as You Walk

On a beautiful Saturday morning, I watched them come in. One by one they arrived and silently entered the sanctuary. No words were spoken, no directions given. They just began to walk. Up and down each pew, pausing here and there. They walked through the whole sanctuary, pausing at every seat, in the alcoves where prayer partners pray with those in need, along the altar kneelers where we receive communion, even around the altar from where service is led.

I finally asked what they were doing because I'd never seen anything quite like it. This silent, deliberate walk through the sanctuary. Each Saturday morning this group meets and silently prays over the sanctuary. They pray over each seat that will be filled the next morning, covering each person in prayer even though they don't know who may sit there the next day.

This prayer walk was beautiful and moving. The next morning during church service, the space felt somehow more sacred, knowing my seat had been prayed over.

How Can You Take a Prayer Walk?

You can also do a prayer walk like this – in your own neighborhood, around your community. Walk alone, find a friend to walk with you, or prayer walk as a family. As you walk, say silent prayers. Simply spend time in prayer, becoming more aware of those around you and ask for God's blessings upon them. Maybe you know the specific prayer needs of a neighbor, but more likely you won't know the specifics. Simply be open to the lead of the Holy Spirit and pray.

Below are some examples of how you can pray as you walk, even if you don't know the people you're praying for:

- If you see a bench in a yard or park, pray for those who will sit upon it.
If you see bicycles, pray for the safety of their riders.
- If you pass a house, pray that the members of the household may know Christ and may come to know, trust, and rely on his guidance in their lives.
Pray for the health and safety of those inside.

Continued on next page...

- If walking in your community, pray for those you see, pray for the businesses. Pray for the schools, teachers, administrators, and children in school.
- If prayer walking through church, pray for those who will sit in the pews. Pray for God to speak into their hearts and heal and comfort them.
- Or prayer walk in your home, praying over each room and those who use it. Pray over the kitchen and the meals that will be prepared.

Prayer:

Lord, walk with me and guide my words as I pray for my home, my neighbors, and my community. Amen.

Source: Kathryn Shirey from *Prayer & Possibilities*

During this past year, and especially at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, many were outdoors walking. I learned the importance of not only physical connections but also spiritual connections and praying for one another while we are apart. Prayer Walking seems appropriate during this time. So, this spring and summer, as you are outdoors walking, make it so much more. Add some prayers for those you encounter, homes you pass by, and your community. God will be with you as you pray.

Submitted by: Leslie Sands

Mark 11:1-11

Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

11 When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it.

³ If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'"

⁴ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?"

⁶ They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.

⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields.

⁹ Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "*Hosanna!*

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰ *Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!*
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

¹¹ Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

The Shepherd in the Dark

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

~Psalm 23:4 (ESV)

Onward it comes. The world slows to a still. We hold our breath. We listen. We watch. And the affliction stretches swiftly across the land like a darkening tide.

We feel, again, the long fingers of fear scratching at our lungs. Fear of loss. Fear of death. Fear of the chaos held at the gate.

We are lost in a trackless forest of information. We grasp for the apple of knowledge in the hope it will bring us peace, and yet fear lies coiled like a worm within the apple. We consume the apple; the worm consumes us. The food we hoped would satisfy only makes our hunger more painful. No amount of knowledge will take our fear away.

To be human is to stand suspended over a chasm. To be human is to be vulnerable. But when have we ever *not* been vulnerable? We have never been more than one week, one day, or even one moment away from losing the things we love in this world. O Lord, we have always been in your hands. At your mercy. Why should that frighten us now?

The shadow of death is an old enemy and a wise friend. *Memento mori*, it whispers. *Remember your days are numbered. Remember your days have always been numbered since before the first day dawned. Remember each day is a gift. And remember you have never been anything other than wholly and frightfully and wonderfully dependent on your God.*

Your rod and your staff are our only comfort. We are not lions on the high rock. We are sheep in the dark valley. We follow as sheep wherever you lead us. We pray for the shadows of night to pass and a new day to dawn. We pray for green pastures and still waters. We pray knowing you go before us and knowing you are already there. You walk with us even where the shadows are deep, and your voice calls each of us by name.

You are our shepherd in the darkness. You lead us to light and life.

Source: Timothy Dalrymple, *Christianity Today*

Submitted by: John Pondiccio

Conviction

As he looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small coins. "I tell you the truth," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

~Luke 21 1:1-4a

Jesus uses this vulnerable widow to lift up her conviction as an example for others to model their conviction after. The position of vulnerability is far from a position of favor, but the stories of those who are vulnerable have a unique ability to break through our resistance and to stay with us.

My friend had a head injury that left her rather talkative, and unable to move easily. To know her was to have heard stories of her obedience to both God and her parents.

This one day she and I were walking with my best friend's two kids at their school yard. They teased me as much as their dad did, and we got caught up in one-upping each other. Without giving it any thought, we took off running, and I heard a soft voice saying, "Pete, I'm running, Pete I'm running." I thought that it was one of the young kids saying it. I turned to see that it was her.

With the rush of multiple thoughts coming to me at once, I remembered that I had been behind her once while she descended a staircase – both hands on opposite walls for balance, walking slowly with each cautious step. I remembered that due to the severity of her brain injury, her family was told that she would never think again... never eat again... never talk again... and never walk again. The significance of this milestone for her still brings me to tears. No one will ever convince me that I witnessed anything less significant as Jesus enabling a lame one to walk.

She often asks me if I think Jesus forgives her sins? I remind her that her well-read Bible tells her so. Her kindness, her vulnerability amongst her immovable faith inspires me to no end.

Prayer:

Dear God, Thank you for those times where inspiration is found in quiet, unexpected places, at unexpected times. Thank you, also, for the times when someone sees something in me that inspires others. May I live a life worthy of that. Amen.

Written by: Pete Lane

Sticks and Stones

But when the time arrived that was set by God the father, God sent his Son, born among us of a woman, born under the conditions of the law, so that he might redeem those of us who were kidnapped by the law. Thus we have been set free so that we might experience our rightful heritage. You can tell for sure that you are now fully adopted as his own children because God sent the Spirit of his Son into our lives crying out, Papa! Father! Doesn't that privilege of intimate conversation with God make it plain that you are not a slave but a child? And if you are a child also an heir, with complete access to the inheritance."

~Galations 4:4-7 from "The Message"

I drove her a thousand or so miles south to the veterans' cemetery for her to meet her dad for the first time. Better late than never. How she hoped and prayed for this day to happen. The head stones were at ground level, she would apologize each time her guiding eyes dog led her in a way that her foot touched a stone. I laughed.

Each of the 3 days that we were there she would stoically kneel in the morning's dew-ridden grass, continually run her fingers across the grave stone and talk with him for 30 minutes or so. Our sneakers were wet for the rest of the day. She was fine. I was an emotional wreck. She thanked me for enabling the trip. Then without provocation she blurted out, "You don't know what it's like to be a bastard child!"

Being Amerasian in her place and time meant that you didn't know your father. Being Amerasian meant your mom was tricked into a life-and-death decision for survival. Throw in a disability and leprosy in the household and the taunting and shunning were relentless. She was right. I didn't know what it was like. I was born into white privilege. She had a hole running through her soul for her whole life. She was fine, but inside I cried some more.

Knowing who her father is now has made a big difference in her happiness. Newly found cousins regularly call and talk for hours, as if they always knew each other all along. There is joy that wasn't there before.

As the heroic adults that I have leaned on during impossible times pass on, I find a compass in knowing my beautiful and wonderful earthly dad but also my Heavenly Father. Should I entertain feelings that aren't exactly fruits of the spirit, I will eventually come around leaving the turmoil and settling into the comfort of knowing where my true comfort lies. Thanks be to God for this Good News.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank you for your ever-present peace. It is not always recognized, but always appreciated. Amen.

Disclaimer: I use the word father because it supports my story, never wanting either gender to feel excluded or any less worthy or less appreciated.

Written by: Pete Lane

It's About Relationship

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

~John 13:34-35

I was asked recently what I have learned during this wilderness time. When I boiled it all down, the answer that I found in my heart and spoke aloud was, "It's about relationship."

The blessing and the heartache of this time is about relationship. The challenge and joy of this time is about relationship. The doubt and faithfulness of this time is about relationship.

Over the last year I have worked with 6 different wedding couples, all of whom have had to make concessions or changes to their plans for their "BIG day." When pressed about why they were willing and almost more joyful about doing so – about moving dates and changing guest lists and venues – their answers, to the one, were about relationship. It wasn't about the big party. It is about the relationship they have, the love they share, the life they are building, and the desire to be surrounded by those most important as they take the first step over that threshold.

Over the last year as I listened to people who were feeling isolated and lonely, or prayed for and with those who were on the brink of death or who had loved ones who were – those who were already missing the physical presence of loved ones or who were trying to ready their hearts and souls to do so – the heartache and challenge they were feeling and expressing was about relationship. It was about the ways that those dearest to us leave an indelible mark on our hearts and in our lives.

It was about the power of hugs and body heat and real eye contact that draw us closer to one another. It was about trying to figure out how to celebrate lives with family members when the guidelines were tight and the numbers small – when evaluation of relationships had to be done in order to determine who could be "in the room."

Over the last year when we have reached out with a need on behalf of our church family – someone needing Tylenol or diapers or groceries or a meal or anything else, the generosity of time and gifts that have been given in response has been such a blessing, and it has been about relationship. It is about the relationship that we have entered into as brothers and sisters in Christ in this small corner of God's vineyard.

Over the last year I have been blessed to hear countless stories of connection and reconnection with people through technology, of families sitting down to more dinners together, of teachers who have gone above and beyond to reach out to students, of nurses who have held hands, of new friendships forged through homeschooling or baking or Zoom happy hours. All of these stories are about relationships.

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And over this last year I have heard people express doubts and questions and assurances and visions of how God has shown up in their lives. That, too, is about relationship – our relationship with God who is present and still speaking, who offers challenge and comfort, who calls us and cares for us in many different ways – even when we are not sure where exactly we stand.

On the last night of his life, Jesus sat at the table. He surrounded himself with people with whom he had built relationships – relationships marked by discipleship, friendship, healing, challenge, call, deep faithfulness, and love. And he shared a new commandment – a commandment that they love one another – that the end of his physical presence among them would not mean the end of their relationships with him and could not mean the end of their relationships with one another. The deeper they went, the more they loved, the more people would come to understand his message.

As we gather each Maundy Thursday we are reminded of that commandment – that *mandatum* – that we love one another. Sometimes loving means joy. Other times it means challenge and heartache. Other times it means opportunities to call out or share gifts with one another. Other times it means our growth in faith.

No matter what, love is a commandment that we receive as members of Christ's family. And no matter what, it's about relationship.

Prayer:

Holy One, help us to realize the depth of what we have experienced throughout this year – the highest highs, the lowest lows, and everything in between. Help us to realize the ways that through it all we have begun and continued and cultivated deep relationships with others and with you. Bless us with relationships that challenge and comfort and help us to grow. And in the days ahead may all we do be a step farther in following your commandment to love. Amen.

Written by: Pastor Jen

Even in the UGLY

My thoughts are all over the place this morning. That is not really anything new for me these days. I know – we all know – the juggling we have to do sometimes just to get through the day. My mind is running through all the tasks I need to get done today – some of them are brought over from yesterday, because I ran out of steam. I am looking ahead to next month and trying to sort out things – scheduling, babysitting, therapy, etc. I am 99.9% sure you have a running list that looks almost like mine!

So, how does God keep tabs on all that? Psalm 139 reminds us that He knows our thoughts before we think them and our words before we speak them. Man...He is busy! Nothing has caught Him by surprise. Not our caregiving journeys, the global pandemic, the crazy politics... He already knew all of that. And He's gone before us into 2021 and beyond. That just blows my mind.

Isaiah says it this way, “*Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord or as His counselor has informed Him?*” Who taught God all this?

Then in the next verse of Isaiah 40, the prophet says, “*With whom did He consult and **who** gave Him knowledge and informed Him of the way of understanding?*” I cannot comprehend how God knows so much – but I know He does. And I know He knows me.

He is not too busy to be intimately acquainted with my ways or my thoughts. That blows my mind. People sometimes choose not to be around me. I understand that. I can be a bit high-strung when under pressure! But God **NEVER** chooses to separate from me or my craziest thoughts. And trust me, I can be way out there sometimes. Especially when I think it just can't get any worse.

I don't know about you, but as a caregiver, particularly when my daughter or sister are not doing well or are having a rough time, my thoughts get very ugly very fast. Memories of them both before these dreaded diagnoses run through my head and seem to mock me when I see all they *can't* do right now. I get angry, frustrated, and often, ugly. I want to just give up. God never shies away from that kind of ugly. He waits. He comforts. He consoles. He carries me until I can try to stand again. But He never gives up on me. Or my ugly.

Today, I will just be grateful for His compassions, mercies, grace and love that never fail. I'll purposefully be thankful for His heart that is always chasing mine down even in the ugly. I'll take joy in the truth that He still wants to be with me even when I am very sure I've given Him lots of reasons to not want to be with me! And today – when He chases me, I might let Him catch me.

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord, for remaining my strength even when the challenges of the day, the month, even the year – seem to get me down and make me ugly. Thank you for staying by my side through my ugly. Continue to give me strength when I can't seem to find my own strength. Amen.

Adapted from: Daily Devotions for Caregivers

Submitted by: Jeanine Hanewicz

ResistDance

You have turned my mourning into dancing, you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.

~Psalm 30:11-12a (NSRV)

When I was in chemo, my doctor prescribed a bolus of merriment every day against the depression and fatigue. Luckily, I had small kids, which helped.

One of our most reliable ways to get our joy on became what we dubbed the Three-Minute Dance Party. Even if we were running late for school, toothbrushes in hand while packing lunchboxes, we submitted to the religious ritual of putting a song on, loud (sorry, neighbors!), and shaking what God gave us, with help from Michael Jackson, Ricky Martin and Janelle Monae.

Even if I wasn't in the mood when I started dancing, by the end of the three minutes, my joy was full-on and organic. Music and movement prime the pump that feeds down into the deep well of joy that God has placed into the core of every human being.

Dancing is a way of working out the toxic stress sludge in our muscles. It helps us stay alert and strong, yet not rigid. The opportunity to "power pose" that dance provides is scientifically proven to increase confidence and change our brain chemistry. Whether you disco or dab, mosh or jitterbug, the three-minute dance party will tap divine joy.

So, Beloved, in these hard times, these cancerous times, the long days of chemotherapy for our culture and politics, when your strength is flagging and your will to resist flatlining, I hope you dance.

(With reference and appreciation to the song "*I Hope You Dance*," by Lee Ann Womack, Mark Sanders and Tia Sillers, MCA Nashville, 2000)

Prayer:

Holy One, don't let some hell-bent hearts leave us bitter. When we come closer to selling out, make us reconsider. May we give the heavens more than a passing glance, and when we get the choice to sit it out or dance – YOU hope we dance. Amen.

Source: Molly Baskette, originally from a devotional book *Rise Up!* and now resubmitted to UCC Still Speaking Daily Devotionals.

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When Lee Ann Womack sang this song, I loved it. Especially During this time of isolation due to Covid, I have learned to keep on dancing and keep on praying. If you've never heard the song, do search for it on YouTube and take a listen. It's a slow but beautiful song. Below are the partial words ...

I hope you never lose your sense of wonder,
You get your fill to eat but always keep that hunger.

May you never take one single breath for granted
God forbid love ever leave you empty handed.

I hope you still feel small when you stand
beside the ocean,
Whenever one door closes I hope one more opens.

Promise me that you'll give faith a fighting chance,
And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance,

I hope you dance.....I hope you dance.....

I hope you never fear those mountains
in the distance,
Never settle for the path of least resistance.

Livin' might mean takin' chances,
but they're worth takin',
Lovin' might be a mistake, but it's worth makin'.

Don't let some Hell-bent heart leave you bitter,
When you come close to sellin' out, reconsider.

Give the heavens above more than just
a passing glance
And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance,

I hope you dance....I hope you dance.....

Link to the song:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RV-Z1YwaOiw>

Submitted By: Leslie Sands

John 20:1-18**The Resurrection of Jesus**

20 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. **2** So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” **3** Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. **4** The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. **5** He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. **6** Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, **7** and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. **8** Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; **9** for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. **10** Then the disciples returned to their homes.

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look^a into the tomb; **12** and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. **13** They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” **14** When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. **15** Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” **16** Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew,^b “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). **17** Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” **18** Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.