

LENT 2015

FEBRUARY 18 – APRIL 5



Journey to Jerusalem

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.

A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

– Matthew 21:6-11

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DAILY DEVOTIONALS

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Ash Wednesday is the first day of the Christian season of Lent. For this year, 2015, Ash Wednesday is on February 18th.

Many of us give up certain things for the forty days (more of a metaphor than literal count). Traditionally, Christians have chosen some form of self-denial (personal sacrifice) in order to prepare for Jesus' death and resurrection. People often choose to give up a favorite food (chocolate) or drink (wine) as a way to remember and focus on the sacrifice that Jesus made for us all.

I would like to suggest an addition to the "giving it up" tradition and that is "giving of yourself" during this Lenten Season.

A few years ago I heard a Lenten sermon by a minister who put forth the idea that in addition to a "self-denial" one could consider the season of Lent a time to "give the gift of oneself".

I really liked the idea and that season decided to consciously find ways to give of my time and energy to people outside the radar of my normal day to day interactions.

What gifts of yourself can you give?

Think of old friends or extended family members that you haven't had contact with in a long time. Phone calls, visits, invitations to lunch, walks together or simply a cup of tea. There are people in the church who live alone and have no family members close by. Or remember a friend you know that could use a welcome chat or meal together.

Who can you call or contact that would rejoice in hearing from you?

Give yourself a goal of meaningfully contacting two people each week during Lent. God will be with you during this sacred time of investing yourself in others. By the end of Lent you would have given the "gift of yourself" to twelve (maybe more) people. The outcome is sure to be positive!

You will have been a blessing to those you contacted and you yourself will be blessed!

May Lent be a time for you where you open old doors and in so doing draw closer to our Lord and Savior.

"Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers." ~Romans: 12:13

"Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." ~ Philippians: 2:4



I have always liked things that are out of place. I like the stark contrast of a solitary tree in a huge field or grass (you know the “grass world” and the “tree world” are in a constant silent battle for territory right in front of us and we hardly ever notice). I love a bright swath of snow on top of one gray mountain, with a clear blue sky in the background, as the other mountains sit gray and silent. I like crispy cold days that are betrayed by a bright and clear sun making it look all warm and cozy until the door is cracked, and the first bite of the truth hits the face. I love the crocus that separates the snow, the bloodroot that sits alone in the old leaves, or the peony that defies physics as the huge flower sits on top of a long thin stem.

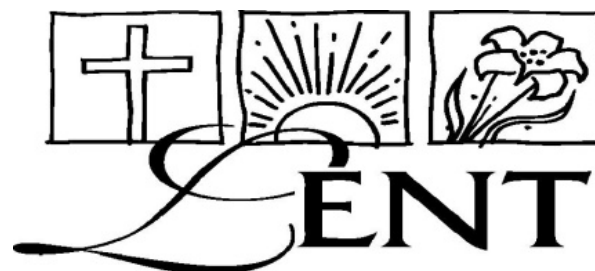
And so you will not be surprised that I was pleasantly joyful when our little one eyed female cat, Alia, recently gained access to the house by hopping out of the chimney. Her little smutty and black footprints did not bother me for I was just glad that the cat that I had thought was lost was home. As I took her outside and shook the first layer of soot off of her I thought about the mind that had somehow orchestrated this new way of entering the house. This was certainly a “solitary tree in grass” way of thinking outside the box. So you will not be surprised that I was challenged to exercise some stark ingenuity of my own as I used the vacuum cleaner to remove the second layer of soot before I got down to moments of “fang and claw” when water and soap were introduced into the scenario.

Life is lived in a world where things are ever out of place. Order evades us and can actually make life bland. The real flavor of life comes from the mixture of primary colors rather than their pure use, or the combination of the smells of yeast bread, pot roast, and bakes apples, all in one room, or the tastes of salty, sweet, and sour all in one fork-full of food. The flavor of life is best experienced in the passion of many facets that come together into a complex array of angles that we hold close as family, or friendship, or community, or relationship.

I am always a bit joyful when I see a rainbow in the middle of a storm. An eddy in a white foamed stream is a constant source of joy as the water flows back up from where it came right in the middle of the flood of water piling up in waves as it rushes down. I love that birth is announced by the water of Baptism. I am surprisingly enriched when I see grace right in the middle of destruction, pain, anger, and tragedy. The Passion of Lent for us means little unless we, who live in opulence, do not give over some little thing, like a little eddy gift right in the middle of the foaming river of life, for the sake of piety and allegiance.

I am much humbled when I recognize that the proclaimed love of Jesus would have actually meant nothing unless it had been acted upon against a beastly backdrop of passion, sacrifice, rage, anger, paranoia, and fear. Jesus seems out of place in this world. His presence is stark, solitary, and vivid. Our diseased and dim eyes are drawn to this pure presence. We cannot avoid His emoting and out of place grace for us that the suffering and pain could not destroy.

Jesus is as out of place in this world today as in the day of His passion. We enter Lent with our eyes fixed on Jesus, who stands in contrast to everything we call normal, and who offers grace where only condemnation has lived.



During the season of LENT, we turn our thoughts to the suffering and resurrection of Jesus. We are reminded of His great love for us when He gave His life on the cross. How do we respond? Most of us have the determination to grow spiritually and to be more grateful.

I have friends who begin the first of January talking about what they will “give up” for the 40 days of Lent. They mention chocolate, desserts in general, smoking, wine and other personal habits. I decided once I would join them and gave up chocolate. It lasted for about ten days.

After feeling guilty, I decided instead of “giving up” something, I would GIVE something. It was much easier than I thought. All we need to do is think about the needs of others and the opportunities we have to fulfill them. What a joyous time I was having in observing Lent by serving others.

One of the things I did was volunteering in an elementary school where I became a friend to a fourth grader named Jamie. He was from a broken home and did not receive the attention he needed due to his mother working long hours to support the family. I arranged for him to visit me and we spent many happy hours together. I took him to the nursing home where he loved visiting with the older men and women and they loved him. Today, Jamie is in the 11th grade and an honor student. We have stayed in contact and he reminded me recently that it was almost the Lenten season and that he had not understood Lent until we met. However, he did know that Jesus loved him. We both expressed our gratitude to God and agreed that we should use every opportunity to serve Him.

*Prayer: Loving God, teach us to see your presence in the world around us
and respond to those in need. Amen*

Give
from
the
Heart

My youth group and I were so blessed to have the opportunity to go to Passport. I had an amazing time and from everyone else's stories I can tell they did too. I wasn't planning on going to Passport but when a spot opened up, I eagerly accepted it and I know now that was the right choice.

What I experienced at Passport was beyond what words could explain. I saw God working through everyone; the new friends I made, myself and even the kids my group played with at the Salvation Army. There were three kids in particular who I really got to know. One was Little Man or Keyshawn. The first couple days we couldn't remember his name so to us he was Little Man. He was adorable and Rachael and I agreed that we were his big sisters. Zach, who we met the last day and didn't get a chance to say goodbye to, was a great kid. He went on and on about how great God was. And lastly, Abigale, who followed us around and also loved us like her big sister. The very last day Rachael and I told her to always remember that God loves her and she responded, "Ok but I already know that."

Just seeing these kids and what they got for lunch and how they couldn't be at home during the day, because of who knows what, made me realize how fortunate and blessed I am to have everything that God choose to give me. And that I should never ever take any of it for granted.

The week I spent at Passport really changed me. I think differently, I pray differently and I think of my life differently...no longer as missing something but perfect because God gave it to me and He does everything perfectly. He made my experience at Passport perfect. Helping so many people in so little time made me feel amazing. Getting to know my youth group so well and making new friends just added to that feeling. I was definitely meant to go on this trip even though it wasn't my original plan. God already has my road planned out ahead of me and all I have to do is follow it and give my life to Him. Luke 17:33 says "Those who try to keep their lives will lose them. But those who give up their lives will save them." At Passport I decided to fully give my life to Christ and to rely on Him no matter what.



It seems just a few days ago I was preparing my Advent Devotion. In the Advent Season we are preparing our hearts, minds and souls for the arrival of the Christ Child - a joyous occasion no doubt, once we move past the commercial clatter and distractions.

On the other hand, the Lenten Season is quite sobering as we move from that celebratory time to our preparations for Lent beginning with Ash Wednesday.

I don't know about each of you, but I would prefer to linger in the Christmas Season a while longer. I was clearly reminded of that by my 3 year old grandson Porter, who relished this past season and not just for the gifts...he was deeply saddened as we explained to him that we had to move on. I totally understand. For many of us the backside of Christmas is not fun. It includes taking down and putting away decorations, tipping the scale toward new heights and then the bills start rolling in...

But over it is and we are faced with realities and New Year's Resolutions which we wouldn't have to make if we were perfect people, would we? But we are not perfect people, far from it, and if we are truthful to ourselves the fact is we cannot face the future without a forgiving Savior; One who steps in and "rescues us" from ourselves and our sins; One who is there to console and comfort us and hits the "reset" button on our lives, over and over again. In so doing we are able to move beyond our poor conduct and seek forgiveness for those whom we have harmed - including ourselves.

As we pass into this Lenten Season we are reminded to examine ourselves carefully and in doing so we are faced with our own humanity and the darkness of sins which dwell within. Without the ultimate sacrifice of our Savior to overcome the sins of this world we would be a broken people beyond repair.

So, we take this special time of Lent to reflect upon who we are and whose we are....and prepare ourselves to gratefully receive the free gift of the forgiveness of our Savior who, indeed, set us free through His ultimate sacrifice.

Praises be to the Lord! Amen.



Reflecting on the theme of our Lenten scripture, it is noteworthy that when Jesus entered Jerusalem the crowd was asking, "Who is this?" There are many other Biblical references where the question of identity is asked. In the Old Testament Moses asked God how to describe who was sending him and God answered, "I AM."

In the gospels, Jesus even asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" It is an important question to contemplate. A wonderful little spiritual exercise is to write an alphagram on that very question. Here is mine...

When I was small I
Head you crying in the nativity
On Christmas even in church.
Did I learn much about you then? No.
On Easter I heard stories that told about
Your death and resurrection to heaven.
Out of confusion, I ran to my sanctuary in the forest.
Up in the trees, running on dirt paths, jumping over
Spring creeks;
And feeling the breeze on my face, you surrounded me in
Your green.
Then you spoke to my
Hear
And held my quivering hand.
That is when you became mine. For me, it was not
In a manger. Nor was it in stories of your
Ascension to a heaven in the sky.
My, no! I say, you are the I AM I met in the great, green creation of God.

Try writing an alphagram yourself. Write a short verse of your choice vertically down the left side of a page, one letter at a time. Begin with a word that starts with the first letter and start to write. Drop down to the next line when you come to a word that begins with a word that starts with the letter of that next line.



So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

– Galatians 6:10

In early 1960, my father, Paul Milton Alexander (1912-91), offered his services as a pilot to the then Board of Missions of the Methodist Church in New York. As he related the story later, they told him he was an answer to prayer, because the Northern Indiana Conference had just donated a plane for use in the Belgian Congo, but there was no pilot for it.

A few weeks later, my father found himself at the Cessna plant in Wichita, where he was to take delivery of a new single-engine Cessna 180. From there, he flew it to New Orleans, where he dismantled it, crated it and put it aboard a freighter bound for South Africa. In a few weeks, he met the freighter in Cape Town, where he reassembled the aircraft, still designated with its U.S. tail number, and flew it north to Élisabethville (Lubumbashi), in the southeastern corner of the Belgian Congo. This was shortly prior to independence, June 30, 1960. My father was a contract missionary, and his anticipated time of service was for only a year.

With a newly arrived aircraft in-country the Methodist Church in the Belgian Congo was now faced with the dilemma of how best to use a limited resource – its first and only airplane – in an area the size of the U.S. east of the Mississippi River. In anticipation of the new aircraft, several mission stations across the southern and central Congo had already begun to prepare their own rudimentary dirt airstrips.

At the time, my father – known eventually wherever he would land as “Paul Pilot” – was the sole pilot for the only Methodist airplane in the whole of the Congo. His early days of flying, when he was barnstorming around the Midwest in his twenties, his experience as a pilot during WWII, and his practical, commonsense approach to flying, would serve him well later in navigating a vast region covered by mostly unreliable navigation charts, at best, and landing in sometimes marginal weather on poor dirt airstrips marked with termite mounds, gopher holes or an occasional herd of goats. (I remember once landing with him at Kapanga, where the local authorities had been ordered to prevent any aircraft from landing. To do that, they had simply placed several 55-gal. steel drums strategically on the runway. I was amazed, though not surprised, when we landed anyway, weaving in and out among the steel drums!)

That first year – 1960 – proved to be a pivotal year for both Methodism and Methodist aviation in the newly created Republic of Congo. In the turmoil that followed independence, my father and the new airplane were to prove instrumental in saving hundreds of lives that first year, both foreign missionaries and native peoples, and he had the stories to prove it.

Paul Pilot was also extremely lucky: he spoke no French and certainly no indigenous language; but, somehow, with hand gestures and exaggerated facial expressions, he was often able to cajole local officials into cooperating with him in getting the mission of the church accomplished. The one-year period of his contract was soon up, and he found himself staying a second year, then a third.

In summary, what began in 1960 with a layman offering his services in mission as a pilot would blaze the trail in future years for a succession of more than a dozen missionary pilots and several more mission aircraft. Today, the United Methodist aviation mission in the Congo is carried on by largely three national pilots, one of whom is our own UMC missionary, Rukang Chikomb, whom our church supports and who spoke to our congregation just last September.

Prayer:

O Father and Lord of all creation, give me courage to do your will, to be a faithful servant of yours, to be a missionary in my own community. Remind me at every turn that I am your hands and feet in the world. Thank you for loving me. Help me to show your love to others. Amen.

Thought for today: We follow Christ's example when we serve others.

Epilogue:

In the summer of 1973, United Methodist missionary and pilot Billy Davis flew the original Cessna 180, then on its second or third engine, back to the U.S. To accomplish this feat, this modern-day Charles Lindbergh had removed the front passenger seat, installed an auxiliary 55-gal. fuel drum in its place and connected a hand-cranked fuel pump and the necessary fuel lines and valves from the pump to the fuel tanks in the wings.

On July 11, 1973, he set out from Léopoldville (Kinshasa), flying north across endless jungles and deserts, landing first at Cairo, where he mistakenly landed at a military airbase and was almost arrested and his aircraft impounded. Then it was on to Athens, Rome, Frankfurt, London, Edinburgh, out across the Atlantic to Reykjavik, to Greenland and Labrador, arriving in Lexington KY on August 25, 1973.

Billy recounted this remarkable story to Leone and me around our kitchen table one evening in Indiana, recalling that he was more concerned at the time about going down over the vast, uncharted jungle of central Africa than having to ditch in the icy waters of the North Atlantic. Today, that original Cessna 180 is retired with a new paint job, flying occasionally from a small airport in Arkansas, as it reflects on times long past.

The father said, "My son, you are with me always, and all I have is yours. But it is only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found."
 Luke 15:31-32

Last fall a small group of us studied a book by Henri Nouwen based on the famous painting by Rembrandt of the same title. This masterpiece was painted shortly before the artist died in 1669. The main figures in the painting are the ragged Younger Son who has repented and returned, the compassionate Father who embraces him, and the Elder Son who stands nearby, his face impassive. Then there are the other shadowy figures in the dark background--the onlookers, observers, nonparticipants.

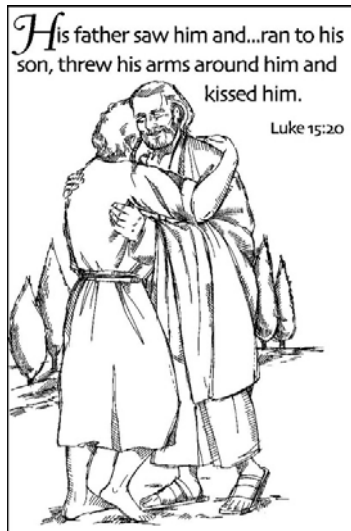
We do not know how the parable in Luke 15 ends. Jesus did not tell us. Did the Younger Son take on his new responsibilities and accept his status as the beloved son? Or did he ask to become a "hired hand" so he could still retain some control over his life?

Did the Elder Son overcome his anger and resentment and accept the Father's love and forgiveness? Did he come in and join the party, or decide to exclude himself from the celebration muttering, "It's not fair!"

And what of the bystanders, the barely visible figures in the background? They see the Father and hear his words as he welcomes and forgives the Younger Son and pleads with the Elder Son to come in. Am I one of those observers, preferring to stay in the shadows and not get too involved? Or should I come forward, into the light, and ask the Father to forgive me and bring me into the party?

In Rembrandt's painting the Father is old and almost blind, yet he radiates joyful light and power. His hands are strong and steady. We do not know what choices the people in the parable will make, but we are sure that the compassionate Father's love is constant, faithful, unconditional. He is always there, with his hands ready to embrace each of us, when we decide to come home.

Jesus said, "Come follow me!" Help us, Holy Spirit, to hurry out of the shadows and into the light of your love and joy. AMEN



In my job as a high school principal, I have all kinds of people who talk to me about their lives. One that hit me the hardest was in an interview with a former US Navy SEAL. His story put a whole new spin on my view of God and how He touches us. In his interview we started chatting about life experiences and he let us know one that I will never forget.

He was a college football player, 6'2", 220 lbs. without an ounce of fat on him when he started college. He messed up in his first semester of school and dropped out. Cutting to the chase- he joined the Navy and became a Navy SEAL. He was an assassin in the Vietnam War. He would parachute into a certain area, pinpoint his target, shoot them and then be on the run for days trying to escape the Viet Cong who were constantly looking for him to kill him. This is where his story grabbed me. He would sleep in trees while he was on the run. He said he was one of the most well trained, skilled fighters in the Navy and could kill you in a second. People feared his group because they knew of their skills.

What they did not know was that when he climbed the trees at night the true person he was would come out. He said he would cry himself to sleep every night for the two solid years he spent in Nam. One night he said he was crying and he heard a voice come out of nowhere. The voice said "What are you crying about?" He answered, "I am scared of dying." The voice responded, "You need to worry about living not dying. I will take care of you."

This exchange changed his whole life. He said he knew he had spoken with God that night. He said it changed everything for him. He was still scared but he knew he had a Higher Presence watching over him. He knew he would be taken care of, no matter what happened. When he got out of the armed services he went back to college with a new outlook on life, one that he knew would be the right way to live. He wanted to help others and make a difference in other people's lives.

He certainly had done that at our school. He had told his story and lived his story for all of our kids. There is no better role model walking our halls. His story certainly changed the way I look at many things in my own life, as it did his.

For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord; plans for your welfare, not for woe! Plans to give you a future full of hope. When you call me, when you go to pray to me, I will listen to you. When you look for me you will find me. Yes, when you seek me with all your heart, you will find me with you, says the Lord, and I will change your lot... Jeremiah 29:11-14

CHRIST has set us
FREE



Galatians 5:1, NRSV

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. ~2 Corinthians 12:9-10

I love Pinterest. (For those who don’t know, Pinterest is a website that offers a visual discovery, collection, and sharing tool. It allows you to create and share the collections of visual bookmarks (boards). Boards are created through by selecting an item, page, website, etc. and pinning it to a virtual “board”. You can save and share pins from multiple resources onto boards based on your interests, e.g. such as a theme, birthday parties, planning a vacation, writing a book, interior decorating, holidays, etc.). It is my therapy some days when I want to wind down after a long day. I have boards for Food, Family, Home design, vacations, and in 12 steps how I will have a magically clean house with kids that are joyfully playing together. If you can think it, there is something on pinterest about it. The boards are created to bring happiness and ease to my life.

The funny thing is I rarely go back to my awesome ideas that I have pinned to refer back and put them to good use. They sit all neat, tidy, organized, and ready, but go unused. I never refer back to them, but somehow they give a great sense of accomplishment that I have used my time to pin them.

It got me thinking, how many times have I have done that in my walk with Jesus? When have I taken a scripture that I have gotten in Sunday School, or a message that spoke to me in church and done the very same thing...file it away for another day. I may have the best intentions to listen to what the Lord is trying to tell me, but my efforts fall short. Life starts going and I never get back to the scripture or the message notes that seemed perfect for my life at the moment. How different would my faith relationship be if I stopped in the moment and listened to what the Lord was trying to tell me? Pray with me:

Lord Jesus help me to be present in the moment and allow me to listen and use what you are trying to tell me. Allow me to make You a priority in the exact moment you are talking to me. Amen.



... just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. ROMANS 6:4

“Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.”
~Romans 12:2

One of the milestones in my Christian journey came when I concluded, on the basis of my own experience, that the world had told me a pack of lies about who I was, who God is, and who my neighbors are. That milestone was accompanied by my realization that God in Christ Jesus is telling me the truth. It is God’s truth about who He is, who I am and who my neighbors are that is changing the way I think and transforming me to receive God’s will for my life.

This transformation is almost a Catch-22 – almost, but not completely. We are transformed by receiving God’s love for us. However, unresolved personal issues block our ability to receive true unconditional love from God. God’s love transforms us, but our wounds block God’s love from setting us free. As an Adult Child of an Alcoholic, I have plenty of experience with personal issues that interfere with me fully receiving God’s love. I have come to realize that my greatest needs in life are to be loved, accepted and to have a healthy sense of self-worth. Contrary to how the world’s culture tried to train me to meet these needs through my own performance, I have learned that God loves me with an everlasting love. God has adopted me into His family and He knows me as His beloved child. God longs for me to know Him intimately as my Abba. God has destined me to live eternally with Him. With all of my heart, mind and soul, I believe this is the truth that sets us free.

God is faithful. Things that are impossible for me, especially with my baggage as an ACOA, are possible with God. It has been my experience that the spiritual disciplines of the Lenten season are very helpful in removing the obstacles to grace within me, and thus allowing me to experience the awesome, marvelous grace of God.

“Grace, grace, God’s grace, grace that will pardon and cleanse within.” Let your grace flow freely into my life, O Lord, and enable me to dig deeper and expose my wounds to the healing balm of your love. Amen”



Just for Today....I will have a quiet half hour all by myself and relax. During this half hour, sometimes, I will try to get a better perspective of my life.

This is a quote from a 12 step group that encourages all of us to live one day at a time, one moment at a time. What a great concept! And oh how hard to do!!

Tomorrow seems just as important as today especially if we are 'planning' with children for school projects and games, or parents who have appointments, or friends we want to see and whose company we enjoy.

The truth of God is that God is time. We are not time. We don't HAVE it. We can't SPEND it. We can't SAVE it. We don't OWN it. We swim in time which is to say we swim in God, and God swims in us.

If we want to tell someone we love them, all we as humans can do is send them a prayer or tell them in this moment. Because now that moment is gone, but our love for them remains and possibly remains unsaid.

Continually and continuously, God tells us we are loved. By the air we breathe, the sun rising and setting, nature, pets, other humans, in thousands of micro-ways and thousands of huge ways. We are given opportunities to express our love. It takes action on our part. That is often where we fall down and say to ourselves "There is always tomorrow."

Tomorrow doesn't exist.

I can give you an example of a question I ponder every year when I go to India and when I come home from India. If I get on a plane in Asheville on the 26th of the month, and I arrive half way across the world on the 24th of the same month, has the 25th happened? Does the 25th exist? Where is it? Can I touch it? Have I lost it? How can I leave India at midnight on the 1st of the month, spend 36 hours in the air, and arrive in Asheville at midnight on the 1st of the month? Where is God in all this?

Time is absurd. It is precious. It doesn't exist, and it rules our lives.

How about changing the meaning to... **Just for Today....I will enjoy a quiet moment with God and relax into God's being. During this moment I will let go of time and smile.**

*My times are
in your hands.*
PSALM 31:15, NIV



I recently took my children to see the Disney movie, *Alexander and the Terrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* at the movie theater. This movie was based on the children's book which was first released in 1972, ouch, the year I was born. In the movie, as Alexander goes through his day, the most outrageous, absurd, and horrible things begin to happen to him and his family. In this silly movie, I cringed as yet again they would face a terrible and often embarrassing moment over and over again.

As the story unfolds, the characters faced with challenges began to evolve and change in a "good" way. A new found empathy began to emerge with one another through the day. Their perspectives on life began to change allowing for more compassion and less selfish ways. Their family became a strong unit standing up for and fighting for each other. Not to ruin the ending for those of you who have yet to see the movie, but more unimaginable "good" came out in the end.

Personally, I detest "bad" days and try relentlessly to keep them from happening. I'm okay with unexcitable "good." Blah is perfectly acceptable in my eyes. But honestly, I have to admit, my worst days may have actually done me the most "good." Those days shaped me, strengthened my faith, and gave me freedom. They strengthened my relationship with God with a dependence like no other.

Just imagine how much more, we as followers of Christ, can experience Hope, than the characters in this movie. Often when I'm busy trying to control my life and others, I'm inhibiting the glorious and unimaginable good that can come only from God. How can I know what God's glorious plan will be when I'm not letting him write the ending?

It's a hard feat, but I'm learning to appreciate those terrible, no good, horrible, very bad days. Even thank God for them... I still cringe when they come, but I realize that I will shout out glory to God when I've overcome! As we celebrate this Lent season, let us remember the unmistakable Hope we have through God's gift and sacrifice of his beloved son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior!

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." John 14:27



I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, not for woe! Jeremiah 29:11

I had never read or thought about this scripture before becoming involved with [ZOE](#), but I have been amazed by the power of these words to change lives.

In rural Rwanda, as lush as the scenery is, much poverty exists. Orphans, isolated and suffering from malnutrition and disease, have little hope for a future, much less one of prosperity. Yet, when ZOE's social workers come to their community and contact village leaders who begin recruiting young people for ZOE working groups that will ultimately change their lives, they can hardly believe what will happen. These children who have had nothing are offered hope and a future. Over the three years that they are connected with ZOE, they learn skills and they receive support and training to change their lives from poverty to prosperity.

When I visited these working groups last year as part of a ZOE mission team, I saw children who are praising God for fulfilling the promise found in Jeremiah. In seeing this transformation, I experience transformation in my own life also. The things I thought I needed for my wellbeing are no longer so important. My prosperity, given by God, is for me to share. God, through Jeremiah, calls me to be a part of the plan for helping others find the new life offered, through my prayers, my gifts and my support.

Prayer: God, help us to know the plans you have for us and to live them out with joy.

Hosanna
in the
Highest 

Before I went to kindergarten I remember visiting our family's homes and as I reflect on those homes, one stands out in my memory. There were no super highways to connect different towns. Consequently, Dad's mom (my grandmother), Dad, Mom, and I climbed into the auto which had a rumble seat. After what seemed to be hours and passing farm after farm, we arrived at my great grandmother's home. "Look Ed, look at what she is doing!" Yes, on her 100th birthday, I remember "Grandma Catherine" on her knees (and no glasses) painting her wooden front porch. As I opened the screen door, the aroma of fresh baked bread filled the room. Later in the day, her family of twelve children and all of their families gathered at Grandma Catherine's home to celebrate her life. At Grandma Catherine's home that day I witnessed love, laughter, and 'lotsa' hugging. As a memory I met one of my cousins. Fifty years later a package came to our home from a name that I did not recognize. It was from one of the cousins whom I met at Grandma Catherine's home. She was plotting out a family tree and wanted me to fill in our side of the family tree as much as I knew.

Since my Dad could ride the trolley from our home in Pittsburgh to his work, we never had a car. (I learned much later that Dad did not want to argue and fight with me about my wanting a driver's license at sixteen.) From Grandma Catherine's home on the farm to my parent's home in Pittsburgh, I was taught basic courtesies. In addition, I learned 'work ethic' with the mantra given to me by my Mom and Dad; "No one owes you a thing! Get a job!" I began working as a newspaper delivery boy. Even though Dad set ethical guidelines, he helped me on snowy winter Sunday mornings as we delivered the big and bulky Sunday morning newspaper. At home I heard "Ed, you have a good name. Don't every abuse it!" I knew that I could talk with Dad. Did I have a mother? Yes! Her heritage was from the Pennsylvania Dutch lineage; very strict and stern. I learned love and Dad would always listen to me. Mom was ill during the years I was growing up. Finally in our home I was offered an opportunity to attend one of three Methodist Church camps. It was there at camp that I gave my heart to Jesus and learned that if I was going to grow in the Christian faith, I needed to take my Holy Bible to Sunday school...so I did! One Sunday morning the senior Pastor quizzed me at the end of the worship

service, asking "Ed, why do you have your Bible with you?" (It was a few years later my family and I learned that he was elected Bishop in The United Methodist Church.) Many years later I sat in the opening of the Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference as a member of the clergy. The guest preachers sat on stage, one of them being the bishop who 'scoffed' at me for taking the Holy Bible to church.

My wife (Marge) and I have lived in seven different parsonages which served as our homes while I was in active ministry. Each home was provided by the church for the pastor and his family. In our first parsonage, a typical farm house, we had to remember which faucet was connected to well water. Through our appointments each parsonage had at least four bedrooms. Marge and I had to remember that each one was the church's home entrusted to us. However, our home now is ours!! We do not have to call the Finance Committee or the Board of Trustees if we have a broken pipe or leaky roof. At each Christmas season, we have invited friends in. "This home exudes love, peace, and joy", many friends have said.

So as we journey this season of Lent, let us remember Jesus' words about 'home'. "*My Father's home has room to spare...I am going to prepare a place for you.*" *John 14:2* Meanwhile as we live as a witness to our Lord and Savior in our home and in the world, we live in the here and not yet. We live in the present, hoping for the not yet (our Eternal home with Christ). As I left my Dad the last time I saw him I said, "Dad, I will be seeing you!" He sat up in bed, raised his hand and smiled, "...At Jesus' feet, our home!"

Prayer...Lord, grant us the vision of the Eternal Home that you have prepared for us. You know our needs. Give us words to witness to your Eternal Home.



Who am I? Well, I am just like you, if you happen to be a middle-aged mother of two teenagers trying very hard to remember that God is in control. The anonymity is to protect the innocent, and not so innocent, in this story.

I began learning that God is in control about 8 years ago, with a phone call from my husband's work stating that he was being rushed to the hospital after having a seizure. This was the first and last seizure he has ever suffered, and it took many months and four trips to the emergency room before we figured out what had caused it. The cause?... alcohol withdrawal, brought on by years of self-medication due to undiagnosed bi-polar disorder. Or maybe the trauma of the DTs or mistakenly prescribed antidepressants brought on the manic-depression? I don't really know, but I do know it was the best thing that ever happened to our family. It took years for me to see that, but I look back now and know that our family would not be intact, if we hadn't been brought to our knees that winter.

I would love to imagine that now the lesson is learned and I will never have to experience those nights of darkness again, but I know that is not true. I struggle now as I see my teenager make what I view as really poor decisions. I want to be in control! I want to choose her friends, her boyfriends, her major, how she spends her money, etc., etc., the list goes on and on. As our youngest enters the den of iniquity known as high school, I fear what the future may bring. If I *were* in control, I would turn back time and stop Mark Zuckerberg and all the masterminds behind social media. But I am not in control, and I take comfort in lifting up the following memory verses:

***Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation,
by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving,
present your requests to God.
Philippians 4:6 NIV***

***I can do all this through him who gives me strength.
Philippians 4:13 NIV***

***Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.
Each day has enough trouble of its own.
Matthew 6:34 NIV***



Hear my confession; I struggle with prayer. And yes, I know I'm not the only one. I participated in Rev. Annie's Prayer Workshop and learned that whatever I do, I need to be brave in doing it. I learned that my prayers didn't have to be disciplined; I can pray as I walk, dance, drive, sing. I also learned that there needs to be a balance between the listening and the praying. In Karen Appleby's Discovering Your Spiritual Type class I learned that I fall into the Path of Asceticism and using Ignatian Prayer works best for me. I attended the Spiritual Formation Weekend and learned more about contemplative prayer. I read. I listen to others pray. I do know enough to ask the Holy Spirit to intervene on my behalf.

I also search for inspiration from those who know more than I do about prayer (which is just about everyone else!). Karl Barth said, "To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world". Martin Luther said, "The fewer the words the better prayer." (I really like that one!) From the Watchman Nee we discover that, "Our prayers lay the track down on which God's power can come. Like a mighty locomotive, his power is irresistible, but it cannot reach us without rails." Our own John Wesley advises, "The neglect of prayer is a grand hindrance to holiness." And Hudson Taylor says, "Do not have your concert first, and then tune your instrument afterwards. Begin the day with the Word of God and prayer, and get first of all into harmony with Him."

Of course scripture is the most defining source on prayer. As we enter into Lent we are reminded of the prayers Jesus offered. "So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses" (*Mark 11:24-25*). Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (*Philippians 4:6-7*).

Despite all of these wonderful recommendations, I still feel as if my words offered up to God fall short. Moving forward, this is part of my lifelong journey because prayer is a discipline, much like fasting and meditation. (Yes, I need to work on those as well.) I do know that I am transformed by prayer. So, I will pray without ceasing and know that God will not judge my prayers, but will meet me right where I am.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NRSV).



Wow! Alaska was beautiful. When we first arrived we were told the “Alaskan Creation Story”. Here is how it goes – The first 6 days God created the world, the animals, the plants (you know how it goes). Then on the 7th day God rested and on the 8th day God created Alaska to show off. Now first off, I don’t think God would show off but if He had done anything to show off He would have made Alaska, as it is definitely one of the most beautiful places on Earth.

The first day, as we pulled up in our vans we saw a park with a broken swing set, a vandalized playground, and a muddy patch of grass. More importantly, though, we saw love hungry children begging for our attention. Through the week we learned that these children had discovered the best tactics to get our attention. From stealing our hats, to brushing past us, to yelling at us, these kids wanted any attention they could get...positive or negative. That first day was chaotic. Everyone had fun and we got to share our love with the kids, but since the kids didn’t focus for the lesson or singing, we struggled with sharing God’s love with them. So Tuesday we came prepared and decided to make our time in the park more structured.

As soon as we got out of the care we would split into small groups. Alex and I soon learned that, as young boy small group leaders, the kids responded well to candy. So the week went on very well! Every night we would sit down and debrief, planning improvements for the next day. Every day we began to connect and love these kids more and more.

As we soon realized, most people in our group connected with one or two people. For me I connected with a young (but mature) girl named Jailene. On the outside Jailene look like she had it all together; Mom, Dad, siblings, food, house, etc. (Out of all the children we worked with, Jailene was the most blessed). However, as we grew closer I learned that her real Dad lived in New York. Her stepfather and real mom lived with her, as well as her half-sister Esther, half-brother Emmanuel, and biological brother Wary. She also had lots of family in the Dominican Republic and in New York with her Dad. At one point while we were playing I noticed a scar on her hand so I asked her what happened. She said she wasn’t allowed to tell me. Another sad thing she told me was that her brother and stepdad were always getting into fights with each other.

On our last day there Jailene gave me 5 things....the first was a letter – Matthew 25:35-36; the second was a drawing; the third was a picture of her on her 5th birthday, so I would “never forget her” (as if that would happen); the fourth was a bracelet; and the fifth and most important was a strong realization that this world is not a fair place and that bad things happen to good people. On the last day, as you could imagine, it was very hard to say good bye to these kids. This is what I said to the kids though, “I would love to see you again on this Earth one day, but if not I know I will see you in heaven.”

The following Bible verse fits our mission trip well. We could only be with these kids for a week, just like the flowers and grass that was there for a day, but God will be with them forever.

All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower falls but the word of the Lord endures forever. 1 Peter 1: 24



And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. Ephesians 4:24 (KJV)

In a church as large as ours, it might take some work to find a place where you can feel a part of a group, feel accepted, be yourself; to feel comfortable to open up about personal things, and feel as if the people in the group understand you and actually care about you. In other words, to feel Christ's presence in your midst.

I am very lucky that I have found such a group, and it is my Sunday School Class. It is a class that includes women of all ages and backgrounds, and definitely a wide variety of life experiences. It strikes me that one of the most interesting things about our class is how life has changed for many of our members. As we journey through this life, often we think nothing will ever change. Things will always be the same. But this is not true. Things do happen to us; things that change us. Sometimes they are happy things, sometimes they are sad. Certainly the normal things change: we grow older, children grow up, go away, people come and go. In our class we have seen major life changes among our members. We have laughed together, cried together, prayed together, and loved each other through the years. The grace and loveliness in which some of our group has handled struggles is nothing less than awe inspiring and admirable. They literally have had to re-invent themselves, becoming "new women" in the face of difficulty, sickness, death, divorce, broken relationships, and broken hearts. We share the happiest of times together as well: wonderful Christmas gatherings, trips, weddings, new births, successes of loved ones and many more.

It is the willingness to see the value of living in the moment; to let go of pride, to let go of preconceived expectations that rob us of joy. To understand that holding on to "what might have been" keeps us from seeing what is happening right now, in this moment, which is the only place we find our Lord. The women in our class have taught me these lessons, which I have needed to learn so badly. My hope and prayer for all of us in 2015 is that we open our eyes and hearts to Jesus, who love us, is knocking, and wants to come in.



It is said that “the greatest gift that you can give to others is the gift of unconditional love and acceptance.” For most of my life I believed that to be true but now I believe that I saw only part of the truth and that I did not understand “the rest of the story”. Over the years there have been many times when I felt that God and his disciples were blessing me with unconditional love that I did not deserve. Instances include several occasions on which I thought I was going to die, an instance when Janet was very sick and in the hospital for an extended stay with an uncertain outcome, instances of personal experience such as prayer vigils and adult baptism and many more. The common thread that all of these occasions had was that I was receiving unconditional love from God and his disciples.

A decade ago, it happened again. Chris Zimmerman asked me to attend The Walk to Emmaus and because of my respect for Chris, I said yes. In April, 2004, I went on the walk and was blown away by the unconditional love shown to me by a host of visible people who, before the Walk, did not know who I was. Then I was told that there were an even larger group of people who were invisible, but who were praying for me by name 24 hours a day during the entire Walk and performing many acts of unconditional love both before and after the Walk.

The Walk was one of the most uplifting experiences of my life and, as a result, I began to work for the Walk in many different ways; being in a reunion group, washing dishes, cooking, distributing agape, being on a Team and being on the Blue Ridge Emmaus Board. Slowly I finally began to see the other side of the story which was not receiving unconditional love but becoming a conduit for God to “pass it on”. It was then that I realized that an essential part of the greatest blessing is that God gives each of us the gift of unconditional love and acceptance **for others**. I was not in a bad place before I understood this but now I am in a far better place. Thank you, God.

[1 Corinthians 13:1-13](#)

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child; I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.



This fall, I met a very interesting woman from an inner city church in Alabama. Kay and her husband, Charles, share pastoral duties, and as such, Kay had wonderful talks with me about ministering to the poor.

There is one personal story she shared, however, that I will always remember. It concerned a recent call Charles had to a church in Wyoming. The committee to find a new Pastor was very enthused about him, and although they were not interested in Kay as Associate Pastor, the situation offered a larger church with new challenges in a beautiful area of the country. So the two of them were flown there, and the interviews went well.

That evening Kay and Charles were given a dinner in the fellowship hall as an opportunity to meet the congregation. In a huge photograph on one wall, labeled “Charles and Kay”, there was Charles, yes, but the woman beside him wasn’t Kay! Someone had taken this photograph from their website without realizing that Charles was standing beside a woman from the congregation who was not his wife.

One of the members of the church came up to Kay with a big smile and said, “Isn’t that a lovely photo?” She explained to him that she was Charles’ wife, not the woman in the picture. The man patted her sweetly and said, “Oh honey, it doesn’t matter.” Well, no need to say that Kay and Charles turned down the offer from this church.

There are seasons, days and moments in every Christian’s life when we wonder if we matter. Our circumstances are desperate. We need God’s help. Where is He?

It is always during these most difficult moments that God the Holy Spirit prompts me to remember the cross. If there had only been me, just me, Jesus would have done what He did. Such great love tells me how much I matter. You matter. We all do.

“For God so loved the world”... He gave us Jesus. “Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!”

2 Corinthians 9:15



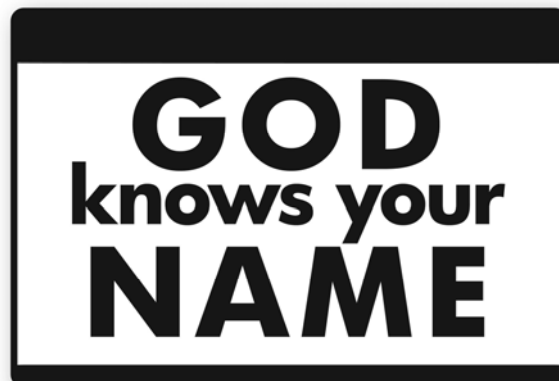
John 20:1-18...The accounts of the Empty Tomb and Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene. *Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him," Jesus turned to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher"). Vs. 15b-16*

Names are powerful. When I read John's version of the resurrection of Jesus, I am always surprised that Mary Magdalene does not recognize the risen Jesus. She mistakes Jesus for the gardener. Why would Mary not recognize Jesus? She was a disciple of Jesus. She had traveled with Jesus, heard Jesus preach and teach, and considered Jesus her friend. And yet, when she sees the risen Lord, she does not recognize him. It is not until Jesus calls her name "Mary!" that she sees and understands.

Names are important. As a young girl I confess that I wanted to change my name. Why did my parents choose "Christy"? Why not "Heather" or "Anna"? And yet who I am is bound to my name in a sacred way. When we baptize someone in the church, there is a particular emphasis on the person's name. Names are also important in confirmation and in services of death and resurrection. God has claimed each one of us in baptism, and God has named us as God's own. The promises of God fulfilled in Christ Jesus are promises of hope and love and belonging.

*In Isaiah 43:1,
the Lord says to Israel,
"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name,
you are mine."*

My prayer during this season of Lent is that we will all know the love that is showered on us by a God who formed us, claimed us, named us, and redeemed us. Thanks be to God!



And he spoke a parable to them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint... Luke 18:1

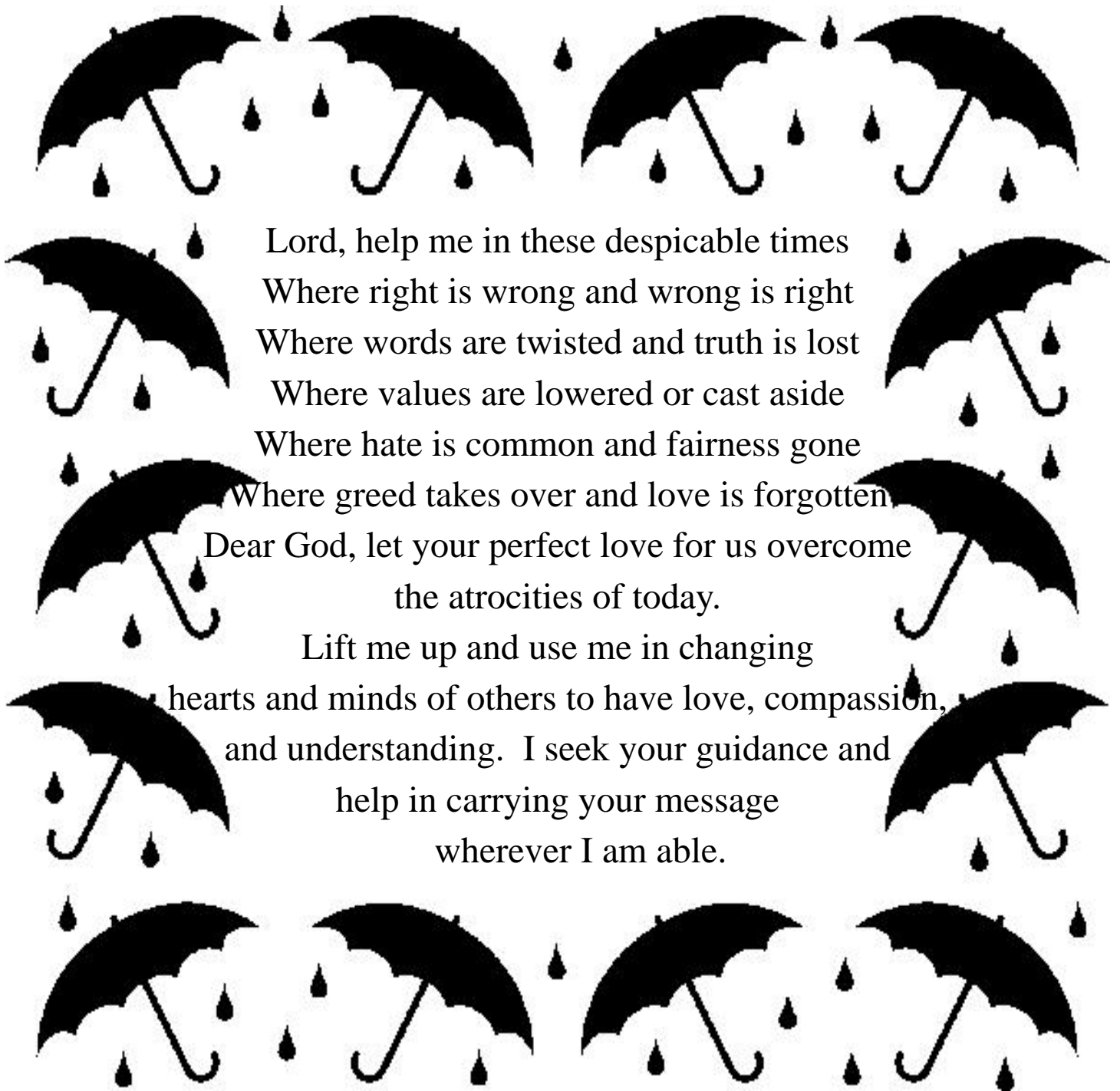
Here I am in my thirties, a new member of this amazing church and I find myself having a hard time praying. I wasn't raised praying. I didn't even think about it as a healing tool for myself or others until this past year when I starting getting more involved in Bible studies and the church. I guess I felt like it should come more naturally and not feel so forced, but that was because I didn't really know WHAT to pray for. I needed to be guided.

Right before Christmas and my son's second birthday our transmission went out in our van (again) and the quote from the mechanic brought me to tears. After applying to job after job for over a year since we outgrew my husband's income he finally decided to go to night school. He had just signed the student loan papers two days before our van broke down. We have three small children in two different schools and I also babysit, so our van is absolutely necessary in our daily life. For the first time ever a total peace came over me because I decided to give it up to God. I have never truly done that before. I didn't ask or pray for anything because I knew that I just didn't know where to start. If I had prayed, I would have prayed that the sound my van was making was a fluke and would only be a minor repair. God is not a car mechanic. So, I didn't worry (being an avid worrier, this was very hard for me.) I trusted Him without knowing what to expect other than He would get us through this.

What happened next was incredible. Every time I turned around I was receiving gifts for our family, from friends, friends of friends, kin to friends! Offers for rides and even offers to borrow vehicles were abundant! It was amazing!! One family bought all three of our kids' presents to put under the tree Christmas morning! Without even asking for anything God used our greatest gift (each other) not only to show me how BIG He is, but also how to pray. Had I prayed for and received an easy fix to our vehicle, I would not have experienced the extreme generosity that I would never have expected could bless our family! I now know that I can pray for guidance. I can pray to be humbled. I can pray to accept help when my pride wants me to deny it. I can pray for a thankful heart. I just have to pray.

Thank you, God, for being so gentle and patient with me. I trust your timing with your work in my life and I know this is only the beginning.





Lord, help me in these despicable times
Where right is wrong and wrong is right
Where words are twisted and truth is lost
Where values are lowered or cast aside
Where hate is common and fairness gone
Where greed takes over and love is forgotten
Dear God, let your perfect love for us overcome
the atrocities of today.

Lift me up and use me in changing
hearts and minds of others to have love, compassion,
and understanding. I seek your guidance and
help in carrying your message
wherever I am able.

When people think of Alaska they think of beautiful mountains, breathtaking views, cold, crisp air, and unique wildlife. But do they think of all of the underprivileged children who live there; the children who have alcoholic parents who might abuse them; the children who have houses that are falling apart and filled with too many children? Well, most people don't but our youth group did.

Before Alaska I had never really stopped to consider what the trip might be like or how it might change me. I went to Alaska because it felt like the right thing to do at the time, but looking back on it, it is obvious that the trip changed me more than I ever could have imagined. The big thing that this trip to Alaska taught me was how to see God in EVERYONE. Throughout the trip I saw numerous "God moments" when I was with the kids we were working with. These moments really stuck to me and will change the way I look at people for the rest of my life.

Throughout the week we played with the kids at the park and taught them more about God, even as we were finding out more about God ourselves. As I was realizing just how much God was a part of my life, I noticed that a lot of the kids had no idea of what or who God really was. But as the week wore on and Rachel and I did our Bible study with all of the little boys, I could see them trying to understand, even if it was because we were bribing them with candy. In fact one of the much younger boys was so eager to participate that every time I asked a question about God he would respond with what kind of insect he found in his yard that day.

While on this trip I saw God everywhere. I saw him in our Bible study group of little boys. I saw him in two little sisters as I made crafts with them and then again when on the last day at the park they jumped in the bouncy house and their faces lit up with joy. I saw him in an eight year old boy who I taught to play soccer; an eight year old boy who was well-spoken, smart, and prayed every night, but was still living in poverty. And I saw God when a girl close to my age responded that she wanted to be just like us after being asked what she wanted to be in her future.

In Alaska I loved the scenery, the animals, and the wildlife. I loved all of it; but the real thing that stuck with me was the relationships. I felt myself becoming closer to the others that joined me on the trip as we shared stories, played with the children, and did work for God, resulting in a bond with them that hadn't been there before. And then there were the children...They began as strangers and quickly grew to be friends that I could have stayed with forever. I saw the tough life that they lived, in their homes and on their faces, but the amazing thing was that I got to see the rough conditions of their life wiped off their faces and replaced by a smile.



Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, My Rock and My Redeemer. ~Psalm 19:14

Recently God revealed an ugly truth about me....that I am an addict, of sorts. I realized that I am addicted to words. Maybe a better way to describe it is that I idolatry words...positive words, words of affirmation, encouraging words, words of gratitude, words of interest, words of cheer and good will, words of inspiration, words of celebration, happy words, confident words, loving and pleasing words, words that encourage me to 'be more', to 'be better'. Words that simply fill my cup. When I receive these types of words, my cup is filled and runneth over. My addiction is fed.

Please understand that I'm not trying to make light of the serious addictions that plague our society of alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling, pornography, etc. These are devastating diseases that can destroy individuals and families alike. However, for me, I have realized that because of this idolatry of words, I could easily destroy my life and my marriage if I don't make some changes.

The problem is that my spirit longs for these type of words daily. It's like I need them like my lungs need air to breathe. So when words are negative or even worse for me, absent, I get unsettled, anxious and upset. Much like an alcoholic on a bender – I go searching for them, seeking them out, practically begging for them in very unhealthy, co-dependent manner. If I don't get them, my magic-magnifying mind flips a switch, thinking immediately that there is something wrong with me; that I did something wrong or something is wrong with the situation. I start to go crazy on the inside, and then it usually comes out on the outside as well. And the outcome is usually not positive. The voice in my head starts saying things like "He doesn't love me!", "He doesn't care about me!", "He is so selfish", "I am so unappreciated", "How difficult is it to say please, or thank you?", or even worse, "I don't need him!" My mind spirals in a deep well of doom and gloom and the result is the looming potential for me to allow this 'stinkin' thinkin' to sabotage my marriage – my relationship with the one I have committed before God to love forever.

Today I am realizing that awareness is key for me to overcome this self-sabotaging behavior...that I am powerless over it without God's help; that my life, my marriage and my relationship with my husband (who I love dearly) is unmanageable because of it; and that only God can restore me to sanity and heal me of the very thing could destroy us. So I pray daily, and often, for God's healing grace; to remember that He loves me, and ask Him to teach me how to give myself the words that I long to hear from my husband (or my family, or my friends, or my boss and co-workers, etc.). Awareness is half the battle, and with God's Grace and Mercy, He will help me conquer the other half and come out victorious!

God, I offer myself to Thee- to build with me and do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy Power, They Love, and Thy Way of life. May I do Thy will always!"

~The Third Step Prayer, A.A.



The Prayer of Saint Francis

**Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.
 Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
 Where there is injury, pardon;
 Where there is doubt, faith;
 Where there is despair, hope;
 Where there is darkness, light;
 Where there is sadness, joy.**

**O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
 To be consoled as to console,
 To be understood as to understand,
 To be loved as to love;
 For it is in giving that we receive;
 It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
 It is in dying to self that we are born to eternal life.**

No matter what I do, it seems like I am always running late. I go from house, to school, to work, to meeting and back around again trying to fit it all in; trying to keep my day in neat packages of time like my daily calendar shows. Inevitably, someone needs something from me that is not on my schedule- an extra minute of time to put on a kid's shoe, a patient who is a little sicker than I expected him to be, a friend who is having family issues, a family member who is lonely and just needs someone to listen for one more minute. These extra minutes can add up quickly. If I let them, these extra minutes can derail my day.

At some point of time at the parochial school I attended, some very wise teacher required me to memorize the Prayer of St. Francis. If I had only known then the power that this prayer would have in my daily life. It is often this prayer that keeps my day together. It is often this prayer that reminds me of God's purpose for me for this day. This prayer refocuses me, helps me slow down, and helps me give the control back to God so that I may be His instrument and not an instrument of my schedule.



As I look at the calendar and notice the date of January 17, I think of my Dad who would have been 98 years old this year. Immediate memories flood my brain; at 6'4", he was once given the nick name "gentle giant". To me, he was bigger than life. To this day, I am an avid sports nut- something he and I shared a love of from when I was young. Off we would go to watch UCLA college basketball games, attend the Sunkist International Track meet or go to the LA Open.

Dad admitted to being somewhat angry at God for the passing of my mom, his wife of 42 years, who lost a five year battle to liver cancer. He was diagnosed with cancer about 5 years later and I witnessed him trying to live each day to its fullest. As a new mom with a baby girl in tow, we would go to visit him almost every day. When it was time to leave, he would display that gentle smile, and ask the question, "Do you need anything?" I confess there was something I did want- for my Dad to really be able to lean on Jesus and claim Him as Savior. The most common response to him as I would leave was a hug and kiss, as well as the message for him to feel the peace and comfort of God.

On one occasion, my brother and I met in the driveway and talked about not having time to waste. Dad's health was failing and we were feeling an urgency to make sure he was right with God. After a brief prayer, we both went in to see Dad who was sitting outside on the back deck enjoying the sunshine and watching the white squirrel romp in the yard. When I was in the other room, my brother ran in to inform me that "He's ready!" I was not sure what he meant, but then it dawned on me that my Dad was ready to receive Jesus. We held his hands and prayed with him as he stated he was ready to accept Jesus.

From that day on Dad had a peace over him I had not seen before. He died two weeks later and although it was painful to lose Dad, I was thankful he departed from this earth with the promise of Jesus. On the day of his funeral the familiar white squirrel was lingering in the front yard. I like to think of this sighting as Dad's message to me that he was feeling peace in heaven.

Dear Jesus: You remind me of the nurturance and gentle guidance I have known from my father. I am grateful for the memories we shared. Please help me to remember how sacred our relationships are and the importance of being a witness to others - Amen



God is love.
Whoever lives in love lives in God,
and **God** in him.

1 John 4:16

“Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.” 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Sometimes my faith is tested when God doesn't seem to be hearing my prayers. He isn't answering them as quickly as I'd like or the way I'd like Him to. I feel like my prayers are becoming boring to Him because I keep asking for the same things over and over. Do you ever feel like you've prayed for the same thing for years to the point that you think, “What's the point”? Why do I continue to ask for this if He never answers?

God has His own plan and timeline for my life and for those for whom I pray. He doesn't work according to *my* plan or *my* timeline. He just asks for me to put it in His hands and He'll take care of it. That is a very difficult thing for me to do – turn it all over to Him and forget about it. Sometimes I think I turn it over to Him but then the next day I'm worrying about the same thing all over again. How do we overcome this? How do we learn to wait on the Lord? How do we learn to turn it all over to Him? Prayer is not just about the desires or the well-being of the one who prays. A vital aspect of its purpose is to allow the will of God to be done, and to bring glory and honor to His name. So during those times when I feel that God doesn't hear my prayers, I try to remind myself, that it isn't about me and what I want. It's about God's will for my life and for the lives of those for whom I'm praying.

Heavenly Father, please grant me the patience to wait on You to answer my prayers and to trust that You will show me Your will for my life. Help me to understand that if I turn everything over to You, that You will work and take care of things according to Your divine plan. Amen.



The book of Exodus recalls Israel's history in Egypt when they lived in bondage under a cruel pharaoh as slaves. It was a time when they were robbed of their dignity, beaten down to the point of not being able to 'sing the Lord's song in a foreign land'. It was only when Moses led them out of the land and the crashing waters of the Red Sea closing was heard that they could feel the winds of freedom and set their eyes toward Palestine. Can you imagine their joy when realizing, 'we no longer have to do Pharaoh's bidding'? So they sang with Moses:

*The Lord is my strong defender;
he is the one who has saved me.
He is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will sing...
about his greatness. – Exodus 15:2*

Last year I spent a week in Kakuma, a refugee camp in Kenya, where over a hundred thousand people from five different nations live, driven there out of fear for their lives. I worked with people from the Nuba Mountains of Sudan. People in the Nuba Mountains live under daily attacks from their government's bombs and fire power. We went to show solidarity and talk with Nuban refugees about their trauma experienced and healing. We explored how being driven from their homeland had affected them. It was very painful to hear these stories of war and trauma. I asked them one day, "What do you want?" "We just want peace so we can go home," said an elderly woman as she stood. Her words were not angry yet her eyes were blazing with determination to make it true.

Camp life was an in between place yet their faces were alive with resilience and their worship was joyous singing, dancing and praise. Every day we were in the camp, a goat was killed for our meals and shared with their rations of grains and beans cooked for us over an open fire on the ground. When I got sick with malaria, they prayed for my healing and saw to my comfort. They had suffered untold suffering and trauma on their journey to the camp; yet they found it hard to believe we had traveled thousands of miles to be with them.

As the Israelites moved out into the desert they were not always a happy people but they kept their eyes toward Palestine in hopes of once again returning to the homeland. Their sufferings often caused them to lose sight of 'God with us' yet God never left them alone. Jesus spent most of his ministry speaking to the suffering of those around him. For Christians Lent can be a time to reflect upon the suffering of the world and how the cross and resurrection is God's sign of liberation from suffering for all people.

Let us pray it becomes so: *Christ help us know the indwelling of Your spirit. Open our hearts to suffering of others close at hand and throughout the world. Heal us of indifference, making us instruments of Your liberating love. Amen*



Have you ever been really stressed out? Or worried about something? Let me tell you about the winter of 2009. My twin boys, Adam and Peter were just a year old and Wyatt was three. My husband David was out of town on a staff retreat in the remote mountains. And wouldn't you know, but all three boys started to get really sick. Peter was struggling with asthma and all three of them had high fevers and a stomach virus. Then, it started to snow. It snowed so much that I couldn't leave my driveway for a few days. I tried calling David but couldn't get in touch with him. His phone had apparently died! I didn't know that, and was worried that David was stranded in the snow, and worried that the boys were getting dehydrated because they were so sick. I worried that maybe I should take them to the hospital, but I wasn't sure how I could get them there. In the meantime I was running out of milk and diapers!

When the snow FINALLY melted I was able to get out of the driveway, and I drove over to the grocery store. I had all three little ones in my cart. I ran into my friend Matt, and he asked me how I was doing... Now, imagine a soda can that had been shaken up and was just opened. That is how I felt. And, I started to cry.

Maybe you can identify with a time in your life where you felt like a soda can that was about to explode.

But, God has given us the tools to handle our stress. He tells us that we don't need to worry about anything. He wants us to go to Him for everything we need. So how do you do it?

Pray. Pray about everything! When we give God full control of our lives and have complete trust in Him then we no longer will feel anxious. As I mother of three children, I have had to fully rely on Christ to get me through each day. When I pray, I can feel His holy spirit cover me in His peace and I am able to let go of my worries and care for my children with God's help.

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:6-7

**CAST ALL YOUR
ANXIETY
ON HIM,
BECAUSE HE
CARES FOR YOU.**

1 PETER 5:7, NRSV

“God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.”

1 John 4:9-10

In Jesus' parable we call the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), the young boy comes home looking and smelling like a pig. His appearance is disgusting. His actions have been reprehensible. In a very public way, he has sinned against God and brought shame and embarrassment upon his family. In this parable that Jesus tells, how does the father respond to the sight and smell of his son? The father runs to him. The father hugs and kisses him. The father puts his best robe on the boy's filthy body. The father puts shoes on the boy's dirty feet. The father puts the family ring on the boy's grubby finger.

In this parable that Jesus tells, I figured out pretty quickly that when Jesus was talking about the prodigal son's father, he was talking about God the Father Almighty. However, it took me longer to realize his description of the prodigal son was a description of me. For the gazillion times I sang, *“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me,”* the words just washed over me like water off of a duck's back. Then came that day I was reading the sermon “Struck by Grace” by Paul Tillich (Tillich, Paul, “The Shaking of the Foundations”, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, pp160-161). His words spoke to the reality of my heart. “Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure has become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed for perfection of life does not appear.” I paused and realized the scent of the prodigal was on me. That pause helped embrace Tillich's next statement: “Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness; and it is as though a voice were saying: “You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.” If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience, we may not be better than before, we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed.” Yes and Amen.

Father, thank You for Your transforming grace that has enabled me to sing Amazing Grace as my personal testimony. Help me absorb Your love into every pore of my being.

Amen

amazing
GRACE



A famous cellist, Pablo Casals (when he was 90 years old), once answered the question about why he practiced several hours each day with these words, "Because I think I'm making progress." I believe that is why I keep reading the scriptures and praying every day. Practice not only makes perfect, it makes permanent.

Since early in my childhood, I have struggled with bouts of depression and anxiety. It seemed that I would never be "good enough" even though I tried hard at almost everything. When I turned to scripture and prayer, I felt better, but not for long. So, I have had to keep going back to them over and over again to keep myself reminded that God has made me the way I am and that He doesn't make mistakes. He requires that we keep our faith in Christ as our Savior, love each other because He first loved us, and live each day for Him. Now, how can a person remain depressed when she has all of that good news!

With the approaching season of Lent, I find that I really don't want to go into a period of introspection and darkness. Those are scary words for me. To me, this time of year means that the darkness of winter is gradually coming to an end and the joy of spring is just a few weeks away. Just as the daffodils which live right outside my windows are under the dark, black earth right now, and are busy preparing to break through the ground into the sunlight, we are also preparing to break out into the light and hope of spring. Lent means the same thing. Getting ready to celebrate Easter is in my heart from Ash Wednesday on until Resurrection Day. Keeping my eyes toward Christ's resurrection makes me, as a Christian looking up, not down! Jesus is the reason for this season of joy and peace, Lent!

Keep reminding yourself of Philippians 4:4 *"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!"*



I think we all have those times when there is a disconnect between what we know and how we apply what we know. I would like to share one of those times that I experienced and the positive effect it had on me when I made the connection.

I had had a lot of emotional turmoil in my life, caused by working too hard at my job, wanting a promotion I felt I truly deserved but didn't receive; health issues that were bothersome but not life threatening, family, etc. You know how those pile up on us and cause us to worry when we know we shouldn't. I had been pleading that God shower me with peace. Then one morning, when reading my devotion, I came across John 14:27, ***Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*** (NIV)

Peace I leave with you. I already knew that verse by heart, but in reading it again in my devotion, I realized that God has already given me peace. He had left it behind for me, and all I had to do was choose to embrace what He had already given. I made my choice and while things still may cause me discomfort, concern or sometimes a little worry, I now have that solid assurance in my heart that everything is going to be okay because God will make sure that it is. That refocus of my mindset made all the difference...instead of pleading for peace through unsettled emotional discomfort, I "chose" to accept the gift He had left for me. As a result, my emotions settled down and now I can focus better and stay calm knowing God has it all covered. Sometimes our emotions need to get in sync with what we already know.

Lord, help me to trust You and to choose to accept the gifts You have already left for me. Help me to stay calm in pursuing comfort in Your arms and be diligent in continually pursuing Your word which will always provide new direction and comfort to me. AMEN



Matt. 20:12 "These who were hired last worked for only one hour," they said, "and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work in the heat of the day."

Many years ago I heard the phrase, "God does not grade on the curve." Jesus tells us that we have a generous and loving Father who is "especially fond" of each and every one of his children. Yet we have a hard time with that. When we consider The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard most of us immediately think, "how unfair!"

We live in a world that wants things to be fair. We are part of a society that does a lot of comparing, evaluating, and judging. We may not say our critical thoughts out loud, but they are in our heads. In our minds, we constantly compare ourselves to others. If we deem that they are better-looking, more successful, or more popular, we feel resentment. If we see others serving and giving more than we do, we feel guilty. If we get sick or have problems with our jobs or our marriages or our kids, we think "Why me? It's not fair." If we have worked very hard and been very good, we deem ourselves better and more deserving than the next guy, and we feel prideful. Resentment, guilt, self-pity, pride - all result from comparing ourselves to others. If only we could stop comparing!

We worry too much about what other folks think of us. We have a very hard time removing ourselves from the center of the picture! If only we could see through God's eyes.

Life's often not fair. But if we follow Jesus, there is Love and Generosity and Mercy and Humility and Hope. We can see these much more clearly if we stop grading on the curve.

*Dear Loving Father, Help us to be open and ready to praise and worship you.
Help us to remember to put our selfish feelings and desires down into third place,
below Jesus and others.*

*Help us to recognize you and your work in our world
that we may know where to go and how to serve.*

Take away our bent toward comparing.

With grateful hearts we pray in Jesus' name. Amen



Recently I taught a lesson on worship, Psalm 95, and what it meant. I talked about worship being totally about God and what He means to us and what He does for us. I feel that we go to church for a reason and that reason should always be to show our faith in Him and show Him our thanks. It was a very enjoyable lesson to teach and one I learned quite a bit from teaching.

There was one thing that came to my mind as I was preparing my lesson. We have some wonderful Sunday school classes that make our church very special. One of those is my class, the Roy Johnson Class. I can remember growing up in the church and always wanting to go to my father's class, the Roy Johnson Class, because of all of the men who were members of the class. It was a warm feeling class with a lot of my role models in there. Men who made our community what it was during those days. The class is still very much like it used to be. A large number of our church's gentlemen are members and they are a close knit group. They have always given to the church and community and continue to do so.

But the reason I thought of this class is because of the lesson I taught on worship. We come to church for many reasons. Many need support; some simply need to be with people; some want to hear the word of God and many are the givers of those things needed by others. There are so many reasons for us to be at church. Those are just a few.

The Roy Johnson class fills many of my needs. It is a great place to be on Sunday morning. I wish more people could experience this class the way I do. It is a wonderful group of givers who worship God every day and bring their strength of faith with them when they enter the Roy Johnson Class on Sunday mornings. I invite anyone and everyone to come and join us every Sunday. You will enjoy the class a lot and hear the word of God as it strengthens your faith.

Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

~Psalm 95: 1-7

*Let us come
before him with
thanksgiving.*

Psalm 95:2, NIV

In November my life changed in a significant and wonderful way - I became a mother for the first time. My husband and I had been anticipating the birth of our son for several months. In the weeks leading up to the day he was born, I began reflecting on how different life would be.

I was told I would feel a love for my child that is stronger than any kind of love I have experienced before, and that has been true. It is the kind of love that reaches a new level. It's so powerful that sometimes words cannot really do it any justice. When my son smiles, I am overwhelmed by the strong sense of love that I have for him. As all parents would say, I would do anything for my child.

God understands this deep love for a son. He loved His son Jesus just as parents love their children; only His love for Jesus was perfect and far more immense. In addition to Jesus, He also was devoted to something else: the forgiveness and redemption of His sinful children. He was and is devoted to us, so much that He allowed His son to die the most brutal death to bear the weight of our sins.

This kind of sacrifice, the willingness to sacrifice one's only Son, is pretty unthinkable. No one would want to be in the position to give your own child, especially for people who have hurt us. What can we possibly say in response to someone who gave up His son for us?

No response can ever be adequate, but we can respond appropriately. May we seek God to help us to respond with gratitude to Him daily and to tell others about His amazing love for all of His children.

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



For 3½ years I was privileged to work as a traveling speech pathologist all over the U.S. One of my assignments in 2006 was on the Big Island of Hawaii where I worked in a local hospital for 5 months. I was about a 30 minute drive from the Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, which I fell in love with. I spent a large amount of my time there, exploring and hiking. I became enthralled with Kilauea, the Park's popular volcano, which has been actively erupting with lava since 1983. The Big Island of Hawaii grows an average of 15 acres larger every year because of this volcano. I was incredibly in-tune to the realization that what I was witnessing was a powerful and unique experience; and it was happening literally right in front of my eyes. As I marveled and visited the volcano on a regular basis, I felt such an incredible spiritual connection to God. Every time I visited it, I felt like I was seeing the Heartbeat of God. God was literally "growing land" right in front of me! What a confirmation to His Omnipotent power! I left Hawaii feeling an incredible life-changing transformation in my relationship with God.

Fast forward to 2009.....I finished traveling a few years earlier and settled in the beautiful mountains of WNC. I was dating Jeff; my now, husband; working in Asheville; and involved in my local church community. I had a regular prayer time, strong faith, and the support of good family and friends. However, I was in a dry time in my spiritual life; longing for more, wanting to feel connected to God again like I did in Hawaii. As I desperately tried to find the language to explain my spiritual dryness to Jeff over dinner one night, I unexpectedly and passionately blurted out, "I WANT A VOLCANO HERE!!!" Needless to say my response caught me off guard. That was the beginning of focused reflection and prayer, asking God to lead me to the next "volcano" in my life.

About one month later I went on a retreat, hoping to find some glimpse of this "volcano"! As I prayed, God touched my heart in a powerful way. These are the words I wrote in my journal that day...

"I am the volcano! I AM THE VOLCANO! I came to this retreat to 'find' my volcano- and what I realized today is that the VOLCANO IS ME! It is not something that I had to search for, look for, discover, or even replace. It is the living, breathing presence inside my soul and my spirit. It is me! I AM THE VOLCANO! I am constantly living and growing, breathing and changing! THE HEART OF GOD exists in ME! When I look into my very own eyes, I am seeing the Heartbeat of God! The Heartbeat of God exists within me! It is not something outside of myself! It is not a 'place', or an experience. It is myself – my being, my precious heart! My love. My spirit. My nature. My self-awareness. My self-care. My giving. My needing. My life. My relationships. My sins and my shortcomings. My successes and my failures. My thoughts. My prayers. My reflections. My hopes and my dreams. My wants. My needs. My desires. My loneliness and my joys. My family. My friends. My enemies. My health. My hurts. My pains. My wounds and my scars. My healings. My God. My Jesus. My Holy Spirit...Myself. My All in All. My Volcano is ME!"

Precious Lord...Please reveal to each one of us this Easter season that Your precious HEARTBEAT exists in each one of us! Show us You are constantly "growing" us so that we may experience You more deeply and feel the power of Your love for us each day!



Years ago, traveling through Bavaria in Germany, we would periodically see a small open box with a crucifix inside. From the back seat, I heard my daughter exclaim, “Look Mom, there is another dead Jesus”. I thought at the time how grateful I was that we serve a living Lord and not a dead Jesus. Since then I have often asked myself: if He lives, where does He live?

*Does He live in heaven with the Father? Is He the one through whom I pray to God?
Does He live in the Scriptures? Is He the One of whom I study and learn?
Does He live in the creeds? Is He the One I profess through church doctrine?
Does He live in the church? Is He the One I worship?*

We could probably answer “yes” to each of these questions, but if we limit His presence to any one or all of these, we are missing the true reason for His resurrection. He did not rise to be limited to a heavenly realm. He did not rise to be studied or proclaimed in creeds. He did not rise to be confined in a church to be worshiped.

Paul, writing to the Galatian church, states that he has been crucified with Christ. And then he proclaims the resurrection, “so it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.”

So the question we might ask ourselves this Lenten season is, “Where does Christ live for me? Am I confining Him to heaven, the scriptures, creeds, or even church?” Or am I allowing Him to live “in” me and “through” me?

During this Lenten season, join me in singing the chorus from the Easter Hymn...

He Lives: “He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today. He walks with me; He talks with me along life’s narrow way. He lives, He lives, salvation to impart. You ask me how I know He lives, He lives within my heart”.

PRAYER

**Into my heart, into my heart. Come into my heart. Lord Jesus.
Come in today, Come in to stay. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.
Out of my heart, out of my heart. Shine out of my heart. Lord Jesus.
Shine out today, shine out always. Shine out of my heart Lord Jesus.**

Amen



The hardest rock, and the densest matter of the universe, is in essence similar to the outer space of our universe. We would imagine that the sub-atomic particles of a piece of lead would be dense and close together when in reality the matter is actually filled with space and distance more than substance. We would imagine that a sub-atomic visit to the make-up of the hardest piece of obsidian would reveal a massive and dense collection of physical matter when in reality the real substance of this stone are particles distant and remote held together in space by a weak form of gravity. We imagine our life to be so dense but we actually exist in a reality being filled more with space than with substance.

It is hard for us modern and prosperous people to imagine life without dense and abundant plenty. Our days are filled with excitement provided for us by local media that taps in to human interest and cataclysmic stories from round the world. We have no lack of excitement at our finger tips in our day to day lives. And when media cannot provide real accounts of drama, then the sitcoms and “reality” TV fill in the void. We moderns do not like having distance and space between our emotional, excitable, and entertainment moments. We like noise, activity, sports conquests, unbelievable stories revealed in real time slathered on our lives so that we cannot know and hear the distant call to quiet and peace.

Even our diet, shopping habits, desire for stuff, addiction to euphoria, and symptomatic repulsion to down-time points to the falsely expectant lack of reality of what makes up a proper life. We have to be entertained, filled, and immersed in excitement every moment of our spacious life or we feel left out and depressed.

Moses wondered around for years behind the little animals before he turned and witnessed a burning bush that was not consumed. Our scripture writers give little space to the wilderness experience but give great attention and climactic energy at the crossing of the Jordan into the Promised Land. Forty years of wandering around in the wilderness by a massive tribe of faithful people is just as long as 40 years of searching would be today.

Jesus is in the wilderness for 40 days, where he is tempted, only to have the events of this grueling time in temptation summed up in one verse in the Gospels. Real life in the Lord is filled with lots of preparation, huge amounts of space, and great volumes of emotionally void time when absolutely nothing of excitement and notable mention takes place and where clear sight of the next moment of ecstasy is so distant that we are unable to see our next rendezvous.

We are created for times of quiet, spaces of distant wilderness journeying, casual periods when nothing notable occurs, and life that is not filled to capacity every minute of the day and into troublesome dreams of the night. We are created creatures who need down time, silence, bland diets, and periods of fasting. We do not do well in arenas of endless excitement and in a life filled with plenty.

The Lord’s Kingdom may be the place where our reward is revealed but real and sacred life is lived in miniscule moments of every day where we are called to be responsive to the words of the Lord in faithful obedience, general contrition, quiet prayer, generous time given to someone who needs a listener, or in an acknowledgement of our real presence in the distances between ecstasy and plenty.

A Holy Lent is life in the barren wilderness and between distant horizons where faithful dependence on the Lord orders our lives in a holy piety neither orchestrated nor planned by man and our world. Only in the chaste barrenness that consumes large periods of our life can we find the Creator and Savior who owns and transcends all distance, space, and time.

Prayer: O Lord, give me quiet time alone with you as a true spiritual gift. Help me to listen and to find joy in you as the real substance of life.



“See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.” ~ Isaiah 43:19

Even as a young child, I was always fascinated with the coming of spring, when one day green would suddenly appear everywhere. Just when everything seems brown, dead, and cold for so long, one day life begins to spring up out of nowhere. I have come to believe that God created winter just so that each year we can experience the joy of a new spring. In the same way, in our lives sometimes we face dark and hopeless times. But God wants to remind us of His promise of new hope and new life when we seek Him.

In the Philippines, I co-lead a ministry called Brand New Day in which we reach out to abandoned, neglected, and abused children who have run away to live on the streets. Our theme verse is 2 Corinthians 5:17 which reads, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” We chose this verse because in everything we do to help the kids we want to lead them to Christ so that they can find new life and hope in Him. It is utterly amazing to see God fulfil His promise to these kids and youth when they give their lives to Him. They begin to respect others; they begin to want to study and feel confident to try; they are able to drop and leave behind their addictions to cigarettes, alcohol, and other drugs. Most of all, they openly testify of God’s work in their hearts. God is transforming them from the inside out, giving them new life which can come only from Him.

So as we experience the coming of spring this Lenten season, witnessing new life spring up from seemingly dead places, let us be reminded that there is always hope in Christ and that only in Him is true and abundant life.

Dear Lord, sometimes I feel hopeless and deserted, but help me to remember that you are always there to give new life and new hope, just as Jesus was resurrected from the dead. I give my life to you so that you can change me and renew me. Amen



Over the years of growing from one culture into a completely different one I am reminded of how many times I have turned my back on my Lord and Savior. I am also reminded of how I often sit on the lap of this Blessed and Wonderful Redeemer. My picture of God is He is my Father. When I do wrong I see Him looking down His glasses disappointed and nodding His head and thinking...."child o mine, how many times do I have to" Then my childlike brain takes over and Dad's speech to me become clouds of blah, blah, blah.

Then I awake in the morning and go to work and see His children. He commands of me to care for them, to embrace them, to pray for them and to bring His word to them. He commands that I bring His son into their hearts. For some reason it does not feel like a challenge to me. I know that's crazy! It should be! However, it is not because it seems natural from my very core how much He loves His children so when I spread this light to His children I marvel as He does this transformation. Nope! This is not boasting, for when this presence and His word is received they are overcome with deep love so much so they break down and cry---some tears of redemption and joy; some tears regarding their fears, their sins, their worries. But then you assure them He is real; that He is pure unconditional love. They are overcome when they believe and feel this! You can see this transformation like a looking glass and you see the light in their hearts.

It is peace. Jesus the Son of Man, the Christ, died for me and for you! The very thought that God the Father sent His only Son, who was marked for death, just for healing or loving the unlovable; it is something I struggle with so much. However, I accept that Jesus is Lord. He is my Redeemer and Teacher. God the Father is still Dad "looking down the glasses He wears" in my eyes. Knowing this vision tells me no matter what I do, say, or perform His love for me runs deep like a father or parent who deeply loves his child. I am reminded that Jesus Christ my Redeemer tells me....."you are loved and cherished, you will be taken care of, you can do no wrong, you have nothing to fear." I am "Dad's" beloved.

Jesus
Loves
+ YOU

Psalm 34:17-18 “The righteous cry out and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

Keep busy. Smile. Have a positive attitude. Work hard. You can fix this. You’re fine, perfectly fine. Keep on your mask. You don’t need any help. Do not cry. Hold it together. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

This was my daily “pep talk” to myself until one day I finally heard God loud and clear: Be Still. Smile. Have faith. Breathe. You can’t fix this, but I can. Let Go. Trust Me. I will help you.

One Sunday morning in Blessings class we were discussing the sin of pride. My first thought was “well, this is one sin that I definitely do not struggle with.” But God whispered in my ear, “Oh yes it is, Amy; you are too proud to let anyone know that your marriage is crumbling and that fear is gripping your heart and mind.” Ouch. I finally heard what God had been telling me for months, but I had not wanted to listen. I realized that I was staying busy, keeping that “perfectly fine” mask on, believing that if I tried harder and just kept moving forward that things would get better. But things weren’t getting better. They were just getting worse and peace was elusive.

I slowly started letting go and letting God into my heart to see what He already knew about my troubled marriage and my terrible fears. I asked Him to help me. I took off my “perfectly fine” mask and began to tell loved ones about my struggles and my fears. In His perfect timing, God sent his earth angels to me on so many occasions! I received a scripture from a friend written on the only piece of paper she could find in her purse – a torn envelope - because she knew I needed to hear it. The verse continues to comfort me: *Isaiah 41:10 “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”*

Once I honestly trusted God and truly believed that He would help me, I could see so many of the puzzle pieces of my broken life falling into place. Family and friends stepped in to help me with everything from childcare, to updating my resume, to helping me

find the perfect job in the most unexpected place, to sending me notes of encouragement or a meal when it was least expected, to most importantly, supporting me in my decision to separate from my husband. My family and friends were literally praying me through this journey and God continually held me and my family in His “righteous right hand.” I realize now, that though it is painful and difficult, I am thankful for this journey. It has given me a stronger relationship with God. It has taught me that this is what family and friendship are all about – being there for each other unconditionally. It has taught me to always look for the blessings in the messy moments of life. *1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”*

God gave me incredible peace, and continues to do so. He continues to surprise and amaze me with the people He puts in my path. He has taught me to be me, to be real and true, and to trust Him. My life is messy. Everyone has struggles. But He is bigger than any circumstance that I will face and has perfectly equipped me to handle it all. If I am open and trust Him, He may even lead me to be an angel on earth for someone else with similar struggles. I must admit that the sin of pride crept back in when I was asked to contribute a devotion. Questions swirled in my head... Should I submit this anonymously? Should I write about something else? But, God answered “no, Amy, this is your story, your messy, beautiful story and I want you to tell it. What was that sin we’ve been working on?” *Psalm 46:5 “God is within her; she will not fall.”*

My new daily “pep talk” from God: Be Still. Smile. Have faith. Breathe. You can’t fix this, but I can. Let Go. Trust Me. I will help you. *Proverbs 31:25 “She is clothed with strength and dignity and laughs without fear of the future.”*



It is easy for me to find peace and security in my safe little bubble I have created for myself. Notice in the previous sentence how often I referred to me!

We often find ourselves forgetting to look outward; stepping out of our comfort zone. I am guilty of that daily. When I do step out of my bubble things become challenging and unknown...but oh, so much more rewarding.

My work at The Storehouse has given me opportunities to live outside of my comfort zone. Each week we volunteers walk into a cacophony of unknowns. Stepping over newly unpacked boxes that have been strewn in the corner due to an overload of demands, we enter a din of busyness. If we cannot find something to do then we don't belong there. There are always orders to fill for clients in need of food. There are always shelves to stock. There is always something that needs cleaning. And there are always fellow workers and clients to greet.

Some of my favorite fellow workers are those who have received their share of food boxes from The Storehouse and are now giving back by volunteering. I also enjoy working with the special needs adults who either walk or take the Apple Transit to volunteer. It takes patience and understanding to learn their stories, but it is fulfilling to reach out.

We are all working together to do what Jesus asks of us: "feed the hungry; give water to the thirsty; clothe the naked; welcome the stranger; and visit the sick and the prisoner."

"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?

When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters you did for me.' Matthew 25:35-40



Wouldn't it be great if we could celebrate the resurrection – the joy of Easter – without the pain of Good Friday? (I've often wondered why we labeled such an infamous day as "good".) Contemplating what it must have been like for Christ to hang from a cross is for me all but unbearable. I confess that there have been times when I have tried to put that aside and skip from the happy emotions of Advent (peace, love, joy, hope) directly to the resurrection and the beauty and glory that is Easter.

I have often pondered how a loving God could allow His Son to die such a slow, agonizing death nailed to a cross. On the other hand, had Christ lived out His Biblically-allotted three score and ten years teaching and preaching and then died peacefully in His sleep, would His message have lived on the way that it has? Would He still have millions of faithful followers 2,000 years later? Probably not. Certainly the communion table would not be our center of worship. There is a profound message in the cross.

When the final moments came and Christ commended His spirit to God, darkness came over the land, and there was an awesome storm. Just two days later, Easter Morning dawned bright and beautiful. The stone had been rolled away. The tomb was empty. Christ had triumphed over death.

We should remember this when we are experiencing our own Dark Night of the Soul, for it we don't give up and hold tight to our faith even in the darkest hour, Easter will always come. God is good. Christ was scourged, reviled and crucified, but He did not suffer alone. And neither do we. He did not die alone. And neither do we. Indeed the message of Easter is that He did not die at all.

And neither do we.



If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. – Psalm 139:11-12

The well-known hymn “In the Garden” has a secondary title, “I Come to the Garden Alone”. And that’s what my story is about: being alone in a garden.

Before I became a Christian I took solo hiking vacations to the canyon country of southern Utah, which is a very sparsely populated area. One night I camped out in an isolated park in the high desert. I was the only person there. The tent camping area was situated in a grove of fruit trees planted by pioneers in the 1800’s. Since most Biblical references to gardens usually mean a grove of trees, I certainly appeared to be “alone in a garden”. But... was I really alone?

In the middle of that moonless night, I was awakened by a very bright light shining through the thin plastic walls of my small tent. I thought somebody was pointing a strong floodlight straight at my camp site! I crawled out to see what was going on.

And there above me, in a huge glistening arc across the entire horizon, was the Milky Way as it was meant to be seen; not masked by city lights or clouds, just billions of stars whose pooled radiance sliced the clear desert sky. Well... I couldn’t make myself stand up! I just crouched there and stared, as if in fear. I gasped out loud in awe, and a shudder ran through my whole body.

Suddenly, I didn’t feel alone anymore, and I knew at that instant that there must be a God. Even though I was not raised in a Christian home and I knew practically nothing about Jesus at that time, from that moment on I knew there had to be a God, and that He was waiting for me.

We can easily recall Biblical references of people who must have thought they were alone in a garden. Adam must have felt alone when he was first placed in the Garden of Eden. But immediately he receives a lengthy commandment from God, so he knew that God was with him. And after Peter and John departed, Mary Magdalene must have felt alone in the garden, standing and mourning by the empty tomb of Jesus. But immediately, she sees two angels inside the tomb, and then sees Jesus himself, the risen Christ, whom she *thinks* is the gardener until He calls her by name. God, in Jesus, was with Mary Magdalene.

Even our hymn goes on to sing, “*And He walks with me, and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own.*” Now I know it can be the same for each of us!

Dear Jesus, Even though I may find myself alone, I never need to feel lonely. You are always waiting for my call. Amen



The LIGHT
Shines *in the*
DARKNESS...

Easter people....who are they? As a child growing up in church, I observed that the Easter Sunday pews were always overfilled with people dressed up in new spring attire. There were new faces and people that did not regularly attend. Maybe they were visiting family and tagging along, planning on having a traditional Easter Sunday dinner and taking lots of photographs later in the day. I always enjoy looking at our pictures remembering the new outfits, sometimes including shiny patented leather shoes, a hat and white gloves. I was glad that winter was over too! These people must have been Easter People.

Fortunately, it is so much more than a big church attendance day. We grow up and realize that while there are many symbols and traditions that go along with this special day, the Easter Story of the Resurrection is a celebration and the cornerstone of our Christian Faith. The forty long days of Lent is a reminder that “it's often the journey that makes the destination worthwhile.” We learn that we must endure suffering because we have a promise of redemption. Easter people have their hope renewed each and every day through the resurrection of Jesus.

Some of my favorite hymns are sung on Easter and many joyous memories come from Easter sunrise services when I participated as a child, or from my own children's programs. In recent years, I have cherished watching our children place flowers on the cross. I love the traditions of this day. It is on this day that we breathe in the Holy Spirit and feel the victory of defeat over death in our Risen Lord! Seeing our church pews full and people celebrating this miracle, gives one renewed spirit that there is hope in our world. There are mystic powers that stir our souls and we are rejuvenated by this encompassing love that gives us power that we can only achieve through HIM. Our happiness converts into complete joyfulness. Our hearts fill with compassion and only through HIM, are we able to truly forgive. The anticipation of this day to come makes my heart yearn with excitement!

So who are Easter people? If we believe in Jesus, we are Easter people. We live out the hope of the resurrection, even when our cross seems too much to bear. One of the services we had in recent years was writing our troubles and worries on a piece of paper and attaching it to a wooden cross, covered in chicken wire. The act of placing these written concerns on that cross was powerful. Letting it go and letting God. What a peace and comfort. In our church, we have so many opportunities to grow our faith with traditions that help us remember and keep us focused on the cross. We can surround ourselves with other Easter people, whose faithfulness inspire us, those who trust in HIM....the ones who accept illnesses and misfortunes as opportunities to reveal God's love to others; those who suffer, and in the midst of pain, say “We have to be strong.” My mother recently said this to me. It was as if God, himself, was speaking through her. When things are so hard, it requires a strength that is beyond our means. With HIM, we live with confidence and hope that HE does make all things new. Even in our deepest sadness, it will be okay, because HE is there. Through Jesus, we know that our lives are intended with purpose and living among Easter people is a blessing.

EASTER PEOPLE may wear special new clothes on Easter Sundays, they may eat special dinners with their families and friends, they might even hide colorful eggs and eat bunny shaped chocolate because this is a day of celebration! It is the traditions that help grow our faith and living with HIM brings us a divine wisdom. HE is with us so “Go in peace” and know that we are loved and are to live in hope because HE HAS RISEN, indeed. Amen.



MEET OUR WRITERS



From Macon GA, **Leone Alexander** graduated from Mercer U. and taught school in Warner Robins. She and her husband of 43 years, **Paul**, moved to Hendersonville in 1988 and have twin sons and one granddaughter. Leone is a charter member of United Methodist Women, helped begin the Praying Hands Quilt Ministry and volunteers at Interfaith Assistance Ministry.



A Hendersonville native, **Amy Shipman Elkins** is a lifelong member of FUMC, where she is active in the children's ministry and the Blessings Sunday-school class. She is the proud mother of Braden (10) and Zach (5). Amy is a graduate of Converse College and spent 16 years in interior design before beginning a new career path in 2013 as a paralegal.



Paul Alexander is a retired Air Force officer and financial advisor with American Express. He was a special-term Methodist missionary in the Congo for four years after graduating from Duke U. in 1963. He and wife **Leone** have been married 43 years and have identical twin sons, Clifford and Carlton. Paul and Leone moved to Hendersonville from South Dakota in 1988.



Bea Fosmire grew up in a military family, was married to an Army officer. With degrees from the Univ. of Georgia and Wheaton College, she is best known at FUMC as a teacher and writer. She has written two books: *Growing Pains: The Risks and Rewards of Love* and *Sammy Smedley and the Power Within*. Look for Bea in the School of Christian Living or in Sunday school.



Karen Appleby is a retired ordained deacon in the Desert Southwest Conference. She has more than 30 years of experience in pastoral care and counseling and church consulting in the Florida, Missouri West, West Ohio and North Georgia conferences. She is also an author; her latest book is *Places People Pray*. She and husband **Larry** have three children, five grandchildren.



Ordained in 2002 as a deacon in the Episcopal Church, **Annie Fritschner** is called to serve the vulnerable and unwanted throughout the world. She has taken part in mission trips to Guatemala, India, South Africa and Haiti and is planning trips to Belize and Cuba. Annie is Minister of Congregational Care at FUMC. Her mantra: *Be bold. Be brave. Be hope.*



Bob Barker hails from Tucson, went to work for Exxon in 1977 in Houston, where he met his future, talented wife, **Jane**. In 1983, they both began working for Hewlett-Packard and in 1992 moved to Atlanta. They retired in 2000 to live in the North Georgia mountains. Today, they live at Givens Estates in Asheville, where Bob enjoys music, dogs and photography.



Known at FUMC and in the community for her dramatic storytelling, **Pat Greenwald** is retired after a 30-year career of researching, developing scripts and portraying the lives of notable women, as she says, "whose life stories are well worth telling." Pat is from Dallas, and she and husband **Bob** will celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary this year on Valentine's Day.



Kristen Burt is in her tenth year in campus ministry with Greek InterVarsity. As such, she helps fraternity and sorority students on college campuses start Bible studies in their organizations. Kristen grew up in FUMC, and she and husband **Michael** are the proud, new parents of a newborn son, Silas; they live in Raleigh. Kristen is the daughter of Ken and Susan Swayze.



Kathy Griffin is busy. Retired from marketing, design and manufacturing, she now works as a commercial-property manager and part-time at Talbot's, sells cosmetics and finds time to paint. She always makes extra time for her two kids and two grandchildren. She grew up in this area, is an active member of FUMC. Thursdays, she facilitates the DivorceCare ministry.



Wendy Crook is from Kings Mountain, has a BA in social work and worked in hospice. A stay-at-home mom now for 12 years, Wendy and husband **Ken** have been married 20 years and have three children: Lauren, Jackson and Samuel. Wendy is a three-year breast-cancer survivor and says her goal in life is to "learn to enjoy the moments and savor simplicity!"



Nancy Harrelson grew up in FUMC, graduated from Hendersonville HS, has a BA from Eastern New Mexico U. and an MA from the U. of South Florida. She has three living children. After traveling with her Air Force husband, Carl, she returned home to Hendersonville after 24 years and retired as a guidance counselor from East Henderson HS in 1993.

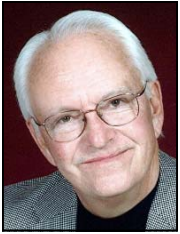
MEET OUR WRITERS



Ed Heard is a retired pastor from the Western Pennsylvania Conference, where he served five UMC churches. He and wife **Marge** moved to Hendersonville in 2001. They have been married 50 years and have two daughters and a grandson. Ed's ministry keeps him active, and he participates in FUMC worship services as well as tutors ESL students in local schools.



Originally from Virginia, **Susan Jones** is a career community college counselor, teacher and administrator and today works as a coordinator at Blue Ridge CC. She is active in UMW, has assisted with DivorceCare and enjoys participating in School of Christian Living opportunities. Susan has an adult daughter and a precious five-year-old granddaughter, Amara.



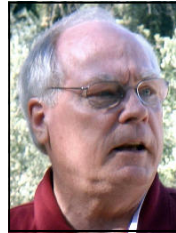
Irv Hendricks joined FUMC in 1977 and loves working as the hands and feet of our Lord, in particular the Walk to Emmaus and in many different roles within FUMC. After working for "a great company in a wonderful place" for 38 years, Irv retired from Ecusta Paper in Brevard in 1999. He and wife **Janet** have two daughters, with families, in Mooresville and New York.



Kim Jordan has been a member of FUMC for 19 years and involved in many of the ministries of the church. Today, she is involved with the Kairos team, Stewardship team and the Hospitality team. She has been employed at Camp Mondamin in Tuxedo for almost 20 years. Kim is working on a degree in psychology and human services through Montreat College.



Anna Hicks is a geriatric physician, wife of thrill-seeker and local surgeon **John Hicks** and the mother of three children. Anna is a community volunteer, member of the FUMC Kairos team and recent past president of the United Methodist Women. A modern woman faced with juggling family and career, she is most often seen driving about in her rocking minivan.



After thirty-two years of service as a pastor, **Alex Knight** retired from the Florida Conference of the UMC in 2012. He and his wife, **Cheryl**, moved to Hendersonville and joined FUMC, where he serves as team leader for the Spiritual Formation Ministry Team.



From Los Angeles, **Judy Holt** has a masters degree from Western Carolina U. in community counseling, 25 years experience now in mental health, and she is the counselor at Bruce Drysdale Elementary School. She and husband **Bruce** have a daughter, Karleigh, in college. Judy joined FUMC in 2014 and says she is so glad to be a part of our church family.



Andrea Larsen grew up in Muskegon MI and met husband **Jeff** in Winter Park CO. They have lived in Hendersonville for five years and are the proud parents of three children: Sophia, David and Silas. Andrea confesses that she has worked at two different golf courses in as many states but has never played golf. Her dream job, she says, would be to work at the local library.



Deana Johnson moved here from Louisiana in 2007. She has been a speech pathologist for 17 years and works at Hendersonville Health and Rehab. A Catholic, Deana is also an associate member of FUMC. She and husband **Jeff** were married in 2011. Deana has three passions: her two-year-old grandson Eli, visiting the national parks and growing herself spiritually!



From Lincolnton NC, **Dot Marlow** met future husband, **Glenn**, after college while she was working at Brevard College. She was in banking for 26 years, always active in the local community, served on numerous boards. Member of FUMC for 62 years, teaches Sunday-school. Dot has four children, seven grandchildren (two are UMC ministers) and lives at Givens Estates.



Erin Johnson is a missionary in the Philippines with Action International Ministries, directing a shelter and day center for street children. Erin grew up in Hendersonville, has a degree in physics from Georgia Tech and is a member of FUMC. She is the daughter of Steve and Sharon Johnson.



Dan Martin is the senior minister of FUMC. He hails from Newton NC, and he and wife **Anne** have two sons and twin granddaughters. Older son Duncan is a UMC minister in Lexington NC. Dan has degrees from Pfeiffer College and Duke Divinity School. When he's not preaching at three Sunday services, he's visiting in a hospital or preparing meals for some group.

MEET OUR WRITERS



Virginia McCormick moved to Hendersonville from Chapel Hill in 2012, where she had lived for 39 years. She and husband **Bob** joined FUMC in August 2013. Between the two of them they have six adult children and fifteen grandchildren!



Alex Salvaggio (16) is a sophomore at Hendersonville High School, plays the cello and is a member of the Hendersonville Youth Symphony. Alex plays on the HHS varsity soccer team and is a member of the Kiwanis Key Club and Henderson County Student Council. He is also a FUMC youth leader. His parents are Bart and Alisa Salvaggio.



Alice Mitchell retired to Hendersonville after 30 years as an elementary-school teacher in Fairfax County VA. She has been involved in Disciple Bible Study since joining FUMC in 2001. Her favorite course? *Jesus in the Gospels*. She and husband **John** live in Cummings Cove. She and her cat, Zachary, love to journal each morning over coffee as the sun rises.



Mia Salvaggio (14) is an eighth-grader at Hendersonville Middle School and plays the violin. She is a member of the Hendersonville Sinfonietta Orchestra, HMS cross-country team and the YMCA of WNC's Piranha swim team. Mia has a brother, Alex (16), and a sister, Anna (11). Her parents are Bart and Alisa Salvaggio.



Outgoing **Rachel Morrow** is 15 and a freshman at Hendersonville HS. She has been an active FUMC member since she and her family moved here in 2001. Both her parents are physicians, and she has a sister, **Sarah** (17), and brother, **Josh** (13). Rachel enjoys kayaking, backpacking, playing tennis, basketball and soccer, and going to youth group and on mission trips.



In 2012, **Colleen Schnitzer** moved from Dahlgren GA to FUMC with husband **David** and her three boys, where she is director of youth ministries. A 2000 graduate of the Univ. of Washington with a BA in drama, she has worked with youth in various settings: camp counselor, drama teacher and youth director. Colleen enjoys running and hiking.



Originally from Ireland, **Ryan O'Neill** has been a registered nurse for 30 years. She is the supervisor of the Park Ridge Health radiology department and the hospital's forensic and sexual-assault examiner. Born and raised a Roman Catholic, Ryan says she feels so much at home now with her church family at FUMC. She and husband **Paul** have a daughter, Abbey (15).



With degrees from Purdue and Cal State, **Sandy Sessoms** spent a career in elementary-school and Title I developmental-reading programs. She is a mother, step-mother and grandmother and with husband **Jack** has lived in Hendersonville over 17 years. She enjoys volunteering at FUMC and in her community, also gardening, golf and traveling – anything adventurous!



Susan Oakman has been a member of FUMC since 2000. She and husband **Tommy** were married in Hendersonville. Today, they're having fun raising their two girls, Grace Lee and Virginia. Susan teaches physical education at Atkinson Elementary School.



From SC, **Christy Sharp** is FUMC associate pastor. She graduated from Davidson College in 1995 and Duke Divinity School in 1999. She is an elder in the Western NC Annual Conference. Christy and veterinary husband **Otto** have three sons: Evan, Hunter and Eric. She enjoys spending time with her family, hiking and camping. She also enjoys reading and Zumba!



Robin Royal and husband **Randy** moved here from Atlanta in 2005, have been married 36 years and have two children and a new granddaughter. Now retired from human-resource management, Robin admits her passion at church is SONday Praise and the Walk to Emmaus. When not at church, Robin most enjoys spending time with her new granddaughter!



Ken Swayze and wife **Susan** have been members of FUMC since 1987. They have two children, Kristen Burt and Justin Swayze, who are both married with new sons. Ken recently retired from First Citizens Bank, is an enthusiastic new grandfather and is active in the local community and at FUMC. He also enjoys playing his guitar and doing a little song writing.

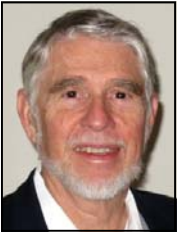
MEET OUR WRITERS



Hendersonville native **Cindy Walker** is married to **Paul Walker**, a family-practice physician. They have two grown children. A 1978 graduate of Mars Hill College with a BA in religion, she has been a member of FUMC over 20 years, is a member of the Passages SS class and the boards of the Hendersonville Symphony Orchestra and Blue Ridge Community College.



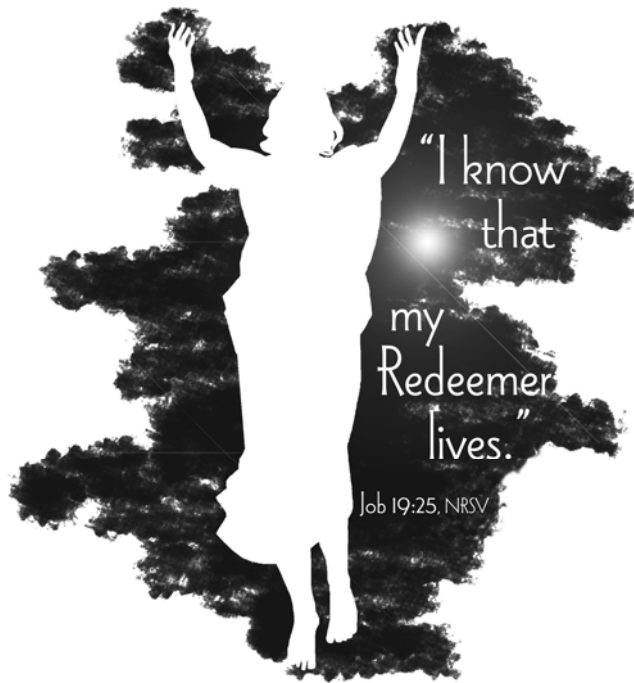
Carol Watson and husband **Austin Watson** moved to Hendersonville in 2012 from Columbia SC. She is a retired child-and-family therapist and UMC diaconal minister and was the director of Christian education at Clemson UMC in Clemson SC. She and Austin have two children and five grandchildren. Carol passionately supports Rwandan children through ZOE.



A retired UMC minister serving churches in SC and southern CA, **Austin Watson** has also been executive director for Habitat for Humanity and Lighthouse Ministries. He explains that John Wesley's belief that "the world is my parish" and that all people are children of God created in love for love has shaped his ministry. He and wife **Carol** moved to Hendersonville in 2012.



Hendersonville HS principal and native son **Bobby Wilkins** has been a member of FUMC all his life. A graduate of Hendersonville HS and UNC-A, Bobby returned to HHS as a math teacher and coach, later coaching three state championships. He has been with Henderson County Public Schools for 36 years. He and wife **Gwen** have three sons: Jeff, Jon and Sam.



The Spiritual Formation Team wishes to thank the contributors to this collection of Lenten devotionals for sharing their stories, their time and their prayers.

If you too are passionate about growing spiritually and want to share this passion with others, please consider joining our team. For more information, please call Alex Knight at 828-707-1166.

We also want to acknowledge the particular efforts of Deana Johnson and Paul Alexander in compiling this booklet.