

BLESSED
+
BROKEN

A DAILY DEVOTIONAL BOOKLET
FOR LENT 2018

USING THIS DEVOTIONAL

-FOUR SIMPLE STEPS-

1. CENTER YOURSELF

Sit quietly for 30 seconds or so to calm your mind and settle your spirit. Take a few deep breaths and get comfortable.

2. READ THE QUOTED VERSE(S)

Each day's reflection begins with a few lines of scripture. Take a moment to read the passage through once or twice. If you feel so inclined you may want to find the passage in your Bible and read the surrounding lines to see it in its larger context.

3. READ THE REFLECTION

As you read the day's reflection, ask yourself, "How do these words connect with my life?"

4. PRAY

To end your quiet time, say a short prayer either aloud or to yourself.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14

- ASH WEDNESDAY -

Matthew 4:17

*From that time Jesus began to proclaim,
"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."*

Having handed out thousands of them with the Outdoor Church over the years, I like to think I know a thing or two about sandwiches.

Here's my biggest insight so far: order is everything.

In case you were wondering, a sandwich with optimal flavor and moisture distribution is constructed in the following order:

1. *Bottom slice of bread*
2. *Mayo and/or mustard*
3. *Meat slices*
4. *Cheese*
5. *Lettuce*
6. *Mayo and/or mustard*
7. *Top slice of bread*

Much like sandwich-making, when it comes to this bit of scripture (which happens to be Jesus' very first sermon in the New Testament), order is everything!

A lot of people think that they need to change themselves in some way in order for the kingdom of God's love to come near to them. They need to stop drinking. They need to get a job. They need to go to church more.

But here Jesus says it works the other way around.

"God's love has *already* come near," he proclaims. God's love is here right now! It's already around us! It's already inside us! *Therefore* we should repent (literally: change our hearts). God's love is the catalyst for our transformation, not the other way around.

Thanks be to the God whose love blesses us in our brokenness, enabling us to change our hearts for the better: God, our bottom slice.

by Tom Hathaway

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15

- THE SECOND DAY OF LENT -

Psalm 80:3

*Restore us, O God; let your face shine,
that we may be saved.*

The Psalmist pleads with God for restoration – suggesting a spiritual hunger that lies within all of us! Seriously. We can only pray for restoration having once known the precious truth of God’s very face shining upon us and within us – a truth that has somehow slipped from our grasp in the day-to-day living of the human condition separated from God.

I don’t know about you, but I spend a lot of time feeling broken and groping around on my hands and knees in the dark, turning away from God’s face yet hoping to find a light, any light, that will light my path. My friends in 12-step spiritual programs say that we are built with a God-shaped hole that only a Higher Power can fill. For some crazy reason, it seems to be the human condition to try to fill that space with everything but God – alcohol, drugs, food, spending, sex – even potentially healthy things like exercise and love. But when we are using those things as a substitute for the light available to us through a relationship with the Creator who knows our very souls and loves us unconditionally, we find ourselves literally breaking apart from the misfit.

Beloved - restoration presumes a returning to, a correction, a fixing of something to its lost functionality. Restoration is about putting things back – not necessarily to exactly how they had been (although that is certainly an option) - but at least put back into working order, if not made better by the process of being restored! The Psalmist pleads with God ‘Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved’, yet it is our spiritual work to refresh our relationship with God and be made anew.

If we allow for it, the work of restoration can literally light our path and offer us hope. Imagine with just a little bit of spiritual practice our relationship with God can be restored, reinstalled, repaired, refurbished, reconditioned, rehabilitated, reconstructed, remodeled, renovated. The good news is that it all it takes is a yes, a turning toward that space in which only God fits, a daily connection with that power that knew you

before you were knit in your mother's womb, that blessed Light that comes in the dark and lights your Way.

by Wendy Miller Olapade

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 16

- THE THIRD DAY OF LENT -

Jeremiah 29:11

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

For you know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

When I was growing up, I thought of this verse as a security blanket, a safety net. It basically meant that I was safe no matter how many times I messed up. God would always love me anyway. I would escape any suffering. The trouble would end soon and I would immediately begin to thrive.

The problem with this was the context that the verse is in. The Israelites have been in exile for years because of their disobedience to God's commandments. With their interpretation of the words in this verse, they expected to be freed and able to return to their homeland right away. The promise of prosperity wasn't realized for 70 years!

Before God shared this promise, he gave them a directive to seek the peace and the prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.

Of course God knows what plans he has for us but his plans are not to benefit us personally and not a promise to remove us from the situation immediately. In Jeremiah 29:7, God directed them to seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you...

My mother's favorite saying memorized and applied to any challenging situation is... With You, nothing is accidental, nothing is incidental, and no experience wasted. This seems to say that we have an opportunity and a responsibility to use all the plans God has for us to benefit the place we are in!

by Kate Eshelman

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 17

- THE FOURTH DAY OF LENT -

2 Thessalonians 1:3-12

*To this end we always pray for you, asking that our
God will make you worthy of [God's] call.*

Worthy of a call? Could I get a rain check? A way out of my home in I-don't-know-how or I-wish-I-could? Excuses abound for unworthiness. Even more, unworthiness is an excuse.

Consider thinking outside the water bottle when it comes to your call from God. We have so many habits that distance us from the divine. How about changing just one this week, and another next week? Think of it as taking one step on a stepladder to the heaven of worthiness.

Here's one step to take: Water comes out of a tap. We don't need to buy it in a bottle. We have cups and glasses. Even if we recycled the same water bottle or purchased the more politically correct type, we could step our way to a cleaner ocean.

Consider as well the spiritual side of the way you drink water. Many women in the world walk 20 miles a day to get water. They also send their children to fetch water, the same children who then can't go to school. We become worthy of our call not just by keeping the ocean clean. We become worthy of our call by treasuring our water and remembering, always, in every way, who has and who has not. I do ridiculous things not to waste water, like using the dog's bowl to water the plants if the dog bowl needs freshening. Or washing dishes in the most conserving ways I can imagine.

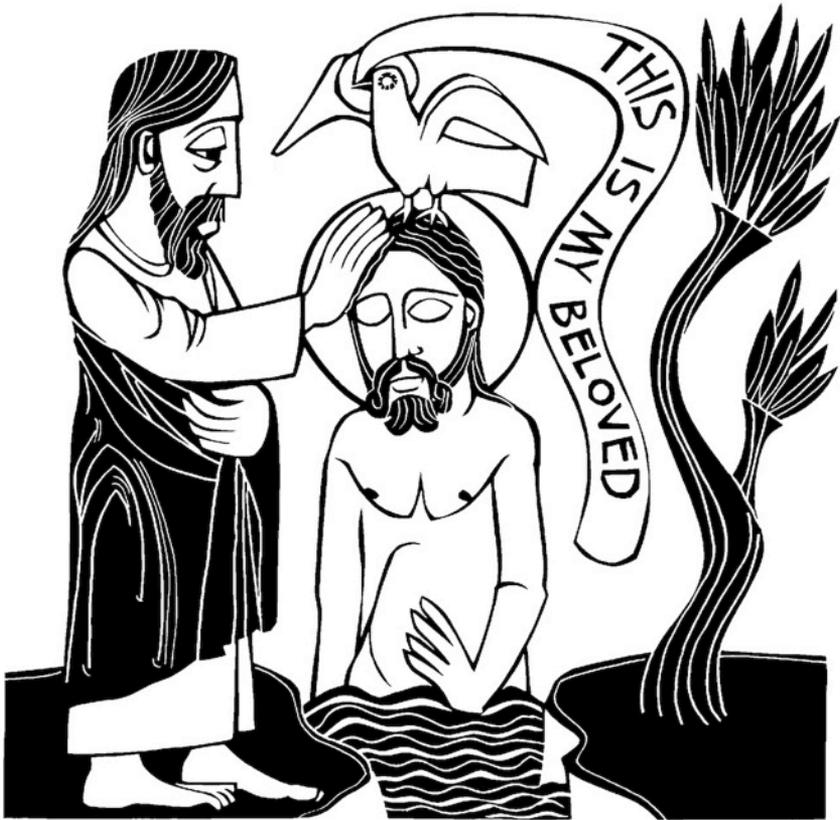
Doing these things won't make me worthy of God's call. But it will remind me of whose I am and who my friends elsewhere are. Worthiness might be a side effect. I might even run out of excuses.

by Donna Shaper

from the UCC Stillspeaking Devotional

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 18

- THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT -



by Steve Erspamer

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 19

- THE FIFTH DAY OF LENT -

Psalm 42:1-3

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

There's something strangely beautiful about longing and loss. One specific reason that I know this to be the case is that millions of people around the world still show up in droves to watch the musical *Les Misérables*. The patrons of *Les Misérables* surely realize that the French word *Misérables* looks an awful lot like miserable and [spoiler alert] a girl with one of the saddest deaths in all of musical theater (Eponine) is literally on the main poster. The people of the world know this will not be a joyful evening of light frivolity when they come and yet *Les Misérables* is one of the most beloved musical the world has ever known. Therefore, there must be something to longing and loss which draws us. Watching *Les Misérables* so many times has caused me to conclude that perhaps the state of longing and loss causes us both to remember the beautiful lives and relationships we once had and to imagine the beautiful lives and relationships we hope to have. There, my friends, at the place where past and future are intertwined into a soul-nourishing present is one place where the beauty of loss and longing lies.

The Psalmist in our scripture for today's reflection seems to be doing a bit of both remembering and imagining their relationship with God. We hear that the Psalmist remembers a time when they were closer to God, *As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.* We hear that the Psalmist imagines a future time when their relationship with God will be closer as they write, *When shall I come and behold the face of God?* Indeed, memory and imagination unite past and future into a new and hopeful present in which the entire focal point of the Psalmist's being is dependent upon God. Our Psalmist both dreams of and remembers a precious time in which they were in harmony with the Divine and the intense beauty and hope for that new present strikes us in Psalm 42: 1-3.

As we read and re-read Psalm 42 consider whether your relationship with God is primarily about memory or primarily about imagining the future. Do you yearn for a time when you were with God

to come again as a deer yearns for flowing streams? Or do you yearn to see the face of God for the first time and wonder where God is? Is it both and if so, how do you weave the strands together into a present where God is with us again and for the first time? Whatever our answers to these questions I think we should lean into the strange beauty of Psalm 42, we should lean both our longing and our loss and hope that God will be with us soon. Knowing, or perhaps, learning that it is God who we've longed for all our lives.

by Philip Balla

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 20

- THE SIXTH DAY OF LENT -

Psalm 51:17

*The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God,
you will not despise.*

The worst thing about this verse is that God doesn't put back together what He breaks.

To be fair, sometimes He does. Sometimes it goes just like in the psalm. A sinner repents, makes a sacrifice of their own spirit, and their faith is rewarded: after being broken, they're rebuilt like the psalm says, like the new Jerusalem, better and stronger than before.

But some people stay broken, and we know this, and God knows we know it, so it's pointless to try and pretend otherwise. We all know some people die broken – not cute-broken, not quirky-broken, not here-are-some-wacky-embarrassing-things-I-keep-getting-wrong broken, but suffering and scared and helpless. We all know some people start broken before they've got anything to repent for, and stay that way, and it's nothing but painful.

Maybe God can see the beauty in that. For humans it's harder.

Actually, honestly, for us it's impossible. There isn't much for us to do but be angry about it. So let's get angry:

I mean, listen. God. You want us to put our whole selves on the altar for you to tear apart? You want us to do it without any promise You'll fix us again this side of death? You want us to do it having seen with our own eyes how much you let our loved ones suffer? And You want us to like it? – like the same psalm says, to dance on the legs that You broke?

Because here's the thing. We might do it.

We're humans. And humans make absurd sacrifices. Humans get asked to do shockingly unreasonable things for the sake of love, in situations where we have no ability to find any kind of beauty, and sometimes we say yes, and sometimes it's good that we say yes, and sometimes we don't even regret it. But if we're going to come out of it

still loving the one we made the sacrifice for, somewhere along the way we need to be brutally honest about feeling real angry about it.

Maybe we're not even at the point of making the sacrifice yet. Maybe we're just ready to admit we're mad. So f--- it, let's be mad.

by Leah Vellemen

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 21

- THE SEVENTH DAY OF LENT -

Psalm 56:8

*You have collected all my tears in a bottle;
you have recorded each one in your book.*

The phrase collecting tears in a bottle was a strange thought. After searching for an explanation, I found a description of tear bottles as a custom in Roman times long before the time of Christ. Mourners would collect their tears as they followed the body of a loved one to the graveyard and place the bottles in the grave. The more tears produced, the more revered and loved a deceased person was. The use of tear bottles was resurrected during the Victorian era with elaborately decorated bottles.

The idea of God keeping track of our suffering and recording it all in a book of remembrances reminds us that God never misses a moment, a tear, or a sigh from any of us. It is sometimes hard to believe that we are not alone, God is paying attention and is with us all the time.

An excerpt from a Ruth Meyers book 31 Days of Praise is a comfort when there are challenges and sadness. You hold in Your own power my breath of life and all my destiny. And every trial that You allow to happen is a platform on which You reveal Yourself showing Your love and power... You hold the future and You will always be with me, even to my old age...and through all eternity.

by Dorothy Bader

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 22

- THE EIGHTH DAY OF LENT -

Luke 10:13

*Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!
For if the deeds of power done in you had been done
in Tyre And Sidon, they would have repented long ago,
sitting in sackcloth and ashes.*

A cruise ship passenger emerged onto the deck. He took a look around at the blue ocean and somewhat overcast sky. With a sour expression, he said, "Crappy morning."

A nearby deckhand, busy with a mop and bucket, replied in a thick Cockney accent, "Many a blind man would've given his eye teeth to see what you're seeing, governor."

There are all sorts of poverty in the world. But perhaps one of poverty's worst forms isn't considered poverty at all. It is to become untouchable. To no longer be touched or moved by acts and signs of redemption and love.

This is surely the greatest curse of entitlement and privilege. All the efforts at creating and keeping distance work! You become "untouchable." Not in the usual sense of that term. Rather, you can't be touched emotionally, spiritually. You are bereft of the capacity for either great joy or godly sorrow.

Jesus had some harsh words for people who had stopped noticing, for people who weren't awestruck and gracestruck when they had every reason to be. "If the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes."

"What," asked Annie Dillard, "do we ever know that is higher than that power which, from time to time, seizes our lives, and reveals us startlingly to ourselves as creatures set down here bewildered? Why does death so catch us by surprise, and why love?"

"We should amass half-dressed in long lines like tribesmen and shake gourds at each other, to wake up; instead we watch television and miss the show."

by Anthony Robinson
from the UCC Stillspeaking Devotional

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 23

- THE NINTH DAY OF LENT -

Psalm 139:1-4

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.

How do these words make you feel? Are they comforting to you? Or do they make you feel a little uneasy?

For some of us, the thought of having such a penetrating, all-seeing gaze directed at us might not sound so great. It's a little too eye-of-Sauron, if you know the Lord of the Rings series. A little too surveillance-state. As if we aren't already being constantly judged on our looks, our work performance, our driving, do we also have to have someone judging our thoughts, too? Is there no safe place?

For some, this idea of being so fully seen might feel like our worst nightmare. Our survival may depend on keeping certain things hidden. Like Adam and Eve, the thought of being seen naked, even by God, is more than we can bear (Genesis 3:10).

But the psalm never says that God is judging us—or spying on us. It simply says that God sees us and knows us fully. God's gaze searches for us and rests on us as if we were the only creature in the whole world. That's how present God is to us. That's how much we matter to God.

When I think about how hard it can be to get anyone's complete attention these days, the impact of the psalm really comes home to me. God's phone is switched off. God's laptop is closed. The TV is unplugged. I have God's full and complete attention, gentle, steady, and absorbed. The whole story of my life and my heart is before God's eyes—all the events I have lived through, all the choices I had to make, my partial knowledge and incomplete wisdom, my yearning to do right, my temptations and fears. All of it is recognizable to God, the psalm tells me, all of it is fully understood, by a heart that knows my heart better than I ever can.

God is with me, offering neither shame nor blame, neither judgment nor advice, but simply filling the whole of my life with God's compassionate presence.

Deep down, all of us ache to be known, understood and cared about. Do I dare to receive this gift from God? Can I allow myself to become vulnerable enough to receive the healing light of God's gaze?

And is there someone in my life who needs this same gift of presence from me today—my compassionate, absorbed attention, free of shame, blame, judgment, or advice?

by Kate Layzer

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 24

- THE TENTH DAY OF LENT -

Proverbs 1:7

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

Ugh! I really do not like it when our lessons (or our lexicon) use the words ‘fear-of-the-Lord’ or ‘God-fearing’ or even worse, “Child, I am gonna’ put the fear of God in you!” On the surface, it sounds like an awful theology spawned by an awful, punishing, judging Sky-God who sends down fire and famine and locusts on an unsuspecting people who are just trying to make each day another day in paradise! The small, broken little-girl that I have been trying to repair for 30 years is not too keen on that image of God. I much prefer the ‘baby Jesus’ God who is all about grace, forgiveness and soothing the hundred forms of self-centered fear I carry around like a rock. So, fear-of-the Lord as the beginning of knowledge? How the heck is that going to lead to anything but hurt?

But, before we can understand how the fear of the Lord leads to knowledge (or wisdom as the writer says later in Proverbs 9:10, The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding), we need to define what the Bible means by “fear” in this context. The Hebrew word that is translated “fear” can mean several things - the terror one feels in a frightening situation (Deuteronomy 2:25), “respect” in the way a servant fears his master and serves him faithfully (Joshua 24:14), or the “reverence” one experiences in the presence of greatness (Isaiah 6:5). The concept of the “fear of the Lord” is actually considered a combination of all of these – terror, respect and reverence!

So - being able to relate to God with a little bit of terror (I mean really, can you imagine that much God-love coming your way?); a goodly portion of respect (God did create the heavens and the earth and you and me and your babies and grandbabies!); and a whole lot of reverence (Dude, God is still showing up, still loving us, still forgiving us despite our human shortcomings, and is still co-creating Every. Dang. Thing. And God is still wanting so desperately to be in relationship with us that, well...Jesus!) is actually not awful, but awe full.

Reframed in this context I don’t really mind having the fear of God in me! Once my ego and intellect have arrived at the place of awe, respect and a healthy dose of terror – I have the motivation to keep God at the

center of my spirit, my walk and my life. And when I forget, the church mothers are there to remind me, “Girl, I’m gonna put the fear of God in you!” That sounds like wisdom to me!

by Wendy Miller Olapade

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 25
- THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT -



by Steve Erspamer

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 26

- THE ELEVENTH DAY OF LENT -

Isaiah 2:4

He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Judge Judy. Judge Wapner. That Judge on Law & Order SVU played by Judith Light. From these examples, we have developed a clear character profile of a judge. Judges are tough. Judges are decisive. Judges are unemotional and unsympathetic: they punish the bad and reward the righteous.

Unfortunately, we read verses like this in light of our TV images, and we come away feeling like God's getting ready to lock some people in jail and let others go free.

As the Alternative Dispute Resolution Coordinator for the New Hampshire Judicial Branch, I spend my days with the very people Isaiah says God will be like: judges and arbitrators. I see them wrestle with difficult decisions, realizing that a single stroke of their pen can have significant consequences for people's lives—good, bad, and otherwise. I see them plan birthday parties for kids who are getting adopted. I see them offer people space to tell their stories, space to complain about a neighbor or spouse or government they feel wronged them. I see them call a person struggling with addiction Mr. for the first time in his life. I see them infuse even the most gut-wrenching situations with respect for the humans in front of them, recognizing that they themselves are human, too. Yes, I even see them slump in their chairs, full of empathy and sorrow for the people in front of them, with tears in their eyes.

When I think of God the Judge and Arbiter, I think of a Being that gives voice and respect to all nations, no matter what the nations may have done. God hears their complaints and helps them come to a table, or a tent, or a meal together. God does not play Risk, moving pieces around the board. Rather, notice that they rather than He shall beat their swords into plowshares. God helps us realize our own power, a power that we can choose to channel into destruction or creativity, division or growth. We, with the help and not the condemnation of the Judge, get to

choose how we handle conflict in our homes, in our workplaces, in our governments and nations. Beating a sword into a plowshare cannot be easy work, but we have a Problem-Solver working with us to shape the solutions.

How might you work with God toward restoration of relations or end to a conflict in your life this Lenten season?

by Heather Scheiwe Kulp

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 27

- THE TWELFTH DAY OF LENT -

Isaiah 6:8

Here I am; send me.

It's tempting as a Christian to believe that God needs us, that we are her hands and feet in the universe, that somehow it's our birthright to be of service in order to live an authentic and meaningful life. When I graduated from college, I dutifully applied to join the Peace Corps. I assumed that it was a noble thing I was volunteering to do, and imagined myself deep in jungles in tents with no bathrooms surrounded by grateful people. I received an answer back (and I'm paraphrasing) that no English majors need apply, call us back with you are mature and have a useful skill to offer. I was insulted. Why didn't God call me? Here I am! I think the idea that God might not consider me ready never occurred to me. Here I am!! Send me Lord!! Since I worked as a paralegal, I decided that helping the poor at Greater Boston Legal Services might be for me. They were equally unenthusiastic, saying (again paraphrasing) you don't know much and you don't speak Spanish. What about my transcripts, my glowing recommendations from prestigious Boston lawyers? Here I am!! Call me Lord!! Often I think when we want to be of service to God what we really are trying to do is to glorify our own perception of who we are. We concentrate less on the needs of God's people and more on our own needs and desires.

A calling is often a quiet little voice. It might be your toddler wanting you to comfort him. It might be your grandmother eager for a visit and a hug. It could be that kitten you rescued on the side of the road, muddy and alone. It can be exhausting and no one is watching or at least you feel that way. But God is always watching, always with you in your small and difficult moments. Always preparing you to do God's work when you are ready, which may not be what or when you think it is.

After 60 years of living, through hard times, beautiful times, and many moments of despair, God spoke to me in that Godly way (it's more a feeling in your bones). I had reached a point in life of being down on my knees, unsure of what would happen to me next. And then when I least expected it, I was offered a low paying and unglamorous job at the public defenders office and plopped down in a medium security prison. These are my people, God said, serve them. I have met my finest spiritual teachers and I am so grateful.

Thank you Lord, for all the lessons you have taught us and the privileges that we have been given. Thank you for staying with us through our arrogance, our ignorance, our immaturity, our imperfect human condition. Thank you for your love, freely given. Here I am Lord, send me. Amen.

by Kathy Williams

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28

- THE THIRTEENTH DAY OF LENT -

Isaiah 61:1-2

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God.

In our lives everyday we are faced with challenges of our own as well as challenges that are family and friends are up against. As good Christians we are taught to always lend a helping hand and reach out to those in need.

More times than not I find myself being a therapist to all my friends and family helping them through life's rollercoaster of ups and downs. I feel as though God put me on this Earth to send his message to everyone and to help people through daily struggles and keep their spirits up to face any challenge and overcome it with the faith of the.

May we all find life in the service of others!

by Jennie Galante

THURSDAY, MARCH 1

- THE FOURTEENTH DAY OF LENT -

2 Corinthians 10:10-11

*For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible."
Let such people understand that what we say by letter
when absent, we will also do when present*

Back in the dark ages – I'm talking about the late 1990's now – my husband-to-be and I were courting long distance. We emailed, painfully slowly on the dialup connection. We made mixes of songs we liked and copied them onto CDs. And we wrote letters. His epistles arrived in my mailbox full of doodles, stories describing the new city he was in, heartfelt confessions. We could not afford many visits in those early days, but when we did see each other, it was like those letters came alive. In person, he was exactly like his letters, only more so.

Like the apostle Paul, what he said when absent, he did when present.

Those were, as I mentioned, the dark ages. Long before we could type and send our thoughts faster, almost, than we could think them. Long before our social media accounts told us who our friends were. Long before everyone hid behind the privacy of anonymity. Long before no one had to be accountable to those they communicated with, because there was no possibility of having to be in person what they are on the screen.

It's different now. Unlike the apostle Paul, we say when absent what we never would when present.

But we don't have to be like this. I know, because I have experienced it. The generous unfolding of one soul to another, piece by authentic piece. The vulnerability that is willing to show us the same face no matter how far apart we may seem. The same person revealed, whether in written word or face to face conversation.

by Jennifer Brownell
from the UCC Stillspeaking Devotional

FRIDAY, MARCH 2

- THE FIFTEENTH DAY OF LENT -

Micah 6:7-8

*Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?*

*Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?*

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

When I began this (ad)venture I did not expect the challenge to take place so thoroughly in heart, soul AND mind. I saw it primarily as the discipline of setting down words that the Spirit provides the writer.

What I had forgotten is the blessing of doing some Biblical scholarship -- discovering again how much a familiar passage speaks its own language, new perspectives to the one who is reading. Sure, I know the words. I reckon the meaning of the the command to humans regarding what is good. What surprised me is the degree to which my understanding is deepened by reading the historical data. I only had to dig into the sidebars provided in my Access Bible, New Revised Standard Version, to realize this passage is a part of the Prophetic Wisdom tradition. Like Isaiah and Jeremiah who preached dire messages to the people of Israel during periods in which dishonesty and corruption in those with power and wealth led to injustices throughout the land, Micah's message is to the whole nation.

Micah is speaking to a people. Not only to one person -- the one who hears it is a member of a society and culture which has gone terribly wrong. The Prophet focuses on the ones at the top of the economic and political ladder -- call it a message to the 1%.

Today we tend to read passages such as this as meant for individuals and to ignore the larger context. But that misses the full meaning and simply plays into the hands of the rich and powerful. The Prophet Micah even addresses Israel in the form of a lawsuit brought against the entire society, and calls on the natural elements as witnesses to injustice and degradation of the culture. He makes it clear that his indictment is against the wealthy and powerful, businessmen who use

false weights to shortchange customers -- protected by governing officials who turn a blind eye.

So, my take-away is this: God calls each of us within the context of our own times and abilities to seek the mishpat of justice, the hesed of mercy with integrity in such a way as to fulfill one's own social responsibilities, and the hatsnea 'lekheth of walking humbly, which is another way of saying be teachable. Together these elements create a way of life based in loving gratitude, including the realization that retribution does not create justice and the Divine Essence is directly opposed to the exploitation of others. These are the basis of personal integrity and the ground level of responding to the society in which one lives. Since the Creator of All does not require gifts from that which is Created, our challenge is to respond with goodness, mercy and generosity to these others with whom we share the world. As our God is the Loving Heart of Reality, we are constantly challenged to be a veritable reflection of That.

May It Be So.

by Branwen Cook

SATURDAY, MARCH 3

- THE SIXTEENTH DAY OF LENT -

Psalm 91:14-16

*Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name. When they call
to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in
trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long
life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.*

One of the most amazing gifts I am given in my job as a chaplain is to witness how people who are dying experience God's salvation and unconditional love.

I journey with people, some who were once afraid and fearful, find peace and comfort in the days, hours, sometimes minutes before death comes. It is as if they have heard God's answer to their prayers for an end to the suffering, pain, or fear; the need for forgiveness, reconciliation, or absolution. In their most vulnerable moments, in their last moments, they know God's presence. And in doing so, God honors them. God does not disappear in these final moments – God draws even closer still. It is a privilege to be with people as they die because I get to witness how present God is with them - how much God still desires closeness with them.

In this season of Lent, draw close to God in your vulnerable moments. When you are afraid. When you are lonely. When you have lost your temper. When you feel like there is no way for you to get your day (or life) back on track... remember...

God honors you. God knows you. God loves you.

by Sarah Hathaway

SUNDAY, MARCH 4
-THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT-



by Steve Erspamer

MONDAY, MARCH 5

- THE SEVENTEENTH DAY OF LENT -

Matthew 8:8

*Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter
under my roof, but only say the word
and my servant will be healed.*

Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof. But only say the word, and thy servant shall be healed. The Sanctuary call quoted it as servant, but in the catholic Mass we say soul, and we say this every time we take Communion, just as we are about to accept the Host, just as we are about to accept and embrace or relation to Divinity as beloved children. And I am struck, each time, by the wisdom and compassion of being invited by the Liturgy to admit my deepest and darkest fear, at that moment of opening my arms and my heart to accept that all encompassing, ever-lasting and unconditional Love.

I am not worthy. Oh, how I struggle with this fear, every day, not just in that explicit moment of Communion, but at every opportunity to connect, to embrace, to accept love. That I am not good enough, not working hard enough, not accomplished enough, kind enough, faithful enough, smart enough. Even sitting down to write this, the voice of doubt (Old Scratch's best weapon, after all.) whispered in my ear. Are you sure you are skilled enough, steeped in theology enough, articulate enough to compose a message worthy of the time it will take someone to read it?

I am not worthy. Not the Beloved child of Divinity that is my birthright, after all, but only a clever fraud, a carefully constructed acceptable mask, a deep dark secret of shame and disgrace. Anything but what is offered to me as my call and my election as that Beloved child. But, the truth is, I am. You are. Say it, it's your name as well as Divinity's after all. I am. I am a Beloved child of Divinity. I am. I am worthy. I am.

And the word that can and does heal that wound, that deeply instilled doubt, is the Word, is the Beloved Child of Divinity with whom I am, you are, called to remember our brotherhood and sisterhood. Say the Word, and my soul shall be healed. Say the Word. Remind me of my Belovedness, remind me and I shall be healed. I'll say your name to you, should I meet you, and tell you that you are my brother, my sister, my beloved sibling on this journey Home. Will you say mine? Will you help

me to remember that I am beloved, that I am worthy? I am. You are. Beloved. Worthy of Divinity abiding with us.

I'll add these words from Henri JM Nouwen, from his book, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*. The truth, even though I cannot feel it right now, is that I am the chosen child of God, precious in God's eyes, called the Beloved from all eternity, and held safe in an everlasting belief.

by Tony Amato

TUESDAY, MARCH 6

- THE EIGHTEENTH DAY OF LENT -

Matthew 9:12-13

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.

The Pharisees are exhibiting finger-pointing. This parable is similar to the one about the Pharisee who was in the temple at the same time as a tax collector (Luke 18: 9-14). In his prayer, the Pharisee thanked God that he was not a sinner like the tax collector. Whereas the tax collector humbly said, God be merciful to me, a sinner!

Those who consider themselves above reproach are unreceptive to Christ's healing message. In Matthew 9: 13 when Christ says, I desire mercy and not sacrifice. Is Christ asking us to simply accept others in a spirit of forgiveness?

by Rebecca Ramsay

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 7
- THE NINETEENTH DAY OF LENT -

Matthew 5:8

Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.

Always see there is Good in a Person regardless of their challenges.
God is always with us to see us through our doubt and dismay.

by Sherry Galante

THURSDAY, MARCH 8

- THE TWENTIETH DAY OF LENT -

1 Chronicles 28:1-10

I had planned to build a house of rest for the ark of the covenant of the Lord... and I made preparations for building.

King David had great plans, but God had other plans. The one thing he wanted most—building the Temple—he had to leave for his son Solomon.

David's story is a good one for this year's final days. What plans did you have for 2017? What do you need to let go of?

As the year draws to a close, a prayer by Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, written shortly before his assassination in 1980, offers this insight:

"It helps now and then, to step back and take the long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

"We plant the seeds that one day will grow," Romero continued. "We lay foundations that will need further development.

"We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning . . . an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

"We may never see the end results," Romero concluded, "but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own. Amen."

by Talitha Arnold
from the UCC Stillspeaking Devotional

FRIDAY, MARCH 9

- THE TWENTY-FIRST DAY OF LENT -

Mark 10:15

Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.

If you want to look back on a day and have no clue what just happened, spend the day with a toddler. I mean REALLY spend the day with them. Give the little one your whole presence, no cell phones or TV. From the moment they wake up in the morning (always about a half-hour too early) to the moment they finally (finally!) fall asleep, you will ping-pong from activity to activity, toy to toy, every 2.5 minutes while periodically pausing to grab the scissors or move a crystal vase out of reach. Truly dizzying!

It is exhausting and exhilarating, to experience the world as a child. Your focus is fully on the here and now, all of which is exciting and new. When you are full of the present, there is no room for negative memories of the past, and likewise, you let go of the future. Now is enough. You approach the world with curiosity, rather than judgement. Emotions are strong, but fleeting; they do not control you. Fun is your top priority!

This passage from Mark pops into my head from time to time when I am immersed in play with my daughter Peggy. Though there is much she has yet to learn, to God she is as equal as any scholar or religious leader- in fact, they could learn much from her.

Having a relationship with God does not depend on what we know, how much scripture we read (if any), or what religious background we come from. Instead, all we need is to tap into the intuition we have had since birth. I connect with the present by running around behind a toddler, but there are lots of ways we can tap into our child intuition: through a creative project, meditation, or by simply being present to those around us by making eye contact and smiling. Likewise, by recognizing the equality in others, we can help be present in their own ways.

Now, if you will excuse me – I am called to ‘be present’ at the changing table...

by Rachel Krouuze

SATURDAY, MARCH 10

- THE TWENTY-SECOND DAY OF LENT -

John 1:5

*The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness did not seize it.*

When we are in accordance with the Light, darkness can do what it may, but Light will prevail. We may not always understand the Light, and we may not always know where to find it. We may see Light flickering in the darkness, but maybe some days we are too somber or defeated to believe and hold our faith.

Sometimes it may seem easier to fall victim to the darkness... after all, the darkness does not hold you accountable like the Light does. In the darkness, we are able to have our shadows blend in with our dark surroundings if we choose. We are able to hide in the elements of darkness: blame, selfishness, self-protection. In and with the Light we are exposed. We are seen for who we truly are, and we must take accountability for our own soul... even if that seems scary. The Light reminds us that, it can be scary to be exposed in our deepest authenticity of vulnerability, but that the Light itself is all-embracing and all-loving. The Light has the potential to overwhelm you with goodness, if you so let it!! So what once seemed like a vulnerable flaw, turns out to be a Blessed gift laid upon us by the Light to help us extend into our Truest Self, grow into a more spiritual Self, and shine the Light upon others.

With the Light we are able to see not only our own Self, but those around us as well. And through their own exposure of vulnerability, we are able to connect with our neighbor and learn that they, too, are carrying the same flawed and heavy crosses as our own Self. This is power of the Light that shines into the darkness, and the darkness does not seize it.

The darkness does not seize the Light, and the Light also does not seize the darkness! They know one another well, and know that they walk hand-in-hand. One cannot know their own Self without the existence of the Other; the same is true of Light and Darkness. Let them ring true inside of you, and may you overcome your fear, and come forth out of the darkness. Let the Light expose your true Self and know that your Light can and will forever shine, for you are a Child of God.

by Sarah Deschenes

SUNDAY, MARCH 11
- THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT -



by Steve Erspamer

MONDAY, MARCH 12

- THE TWENTY-THIRD DAY OF LENT -

James 1:2-4

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

As a health care provider, I am surrounded on a daily basis by those who have an immediate need. All too often, there is some physical pain, injury, suffering that those seeking care are burdened with. It is not always physical, sometimes there is emotional pain, relationships struggles, or even loneliness. Over the many years, I have discovered that modern health care has grown too efficient, often attempting to break down issues to one single problem, then focusing care to address that need. Seeing a specialist, or undergoing a diagnostic test can answer single question. But, if your problem is too complex, often there is no one single cure, no one single provider, or one particular pathway. All too often, those in the most need, with the most complex issues, cannot get the answers they need from our modern health systems. Those who do benefit the most from our health care system, do so by persevering, thinking positively and finding the people in the system who advocate for a patient-centric treatment plan.

The lord works in much the same way. Focusing prayer or faith on one single answer may not get you the peace that is desired. Life has many obstacles and challenges that present themselves at all sorts of unique intervals. Perhaps it is money, or relationships. Perhaps there is not enough time. Perhaps, there is pain, and suffering. The lord can hear and may answer each prayer individually. But those who put their trust in the Lord can find the strength to endure. To me, it is much more effective to pray for strength at every turn, at every challenge and at every crossroads. I do not pray for outcomes, or clarity, or enlightenment, rather I pray for the strength to endure not having the answer, and then I can be free to soar, to move on, and not tire.

by Rob Miller

TUESDAY, MARCH 13

- THE TWENTY-FOURTH DAY OF LENT -

Leviticus 10:10

You are to distinguish between the holy and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean.

These are just some of God's (many, many) instructions for temple priests. Notably, these particular instructions are given just moments after God has immolated two priests for presenting an offering of "the wrong kind" of fire!

For come-as-you-are, progressive Christians like us, this is a hard verse to swallow. Much of our "brand," after all, is built around the indiscriminate nature of God's love.

But this verse does well to remind us that, even for we who follow in Jesus's radically loving way, discernment and precision still have their place.

Jesus does indeed ask us to discern things. We are asked to discern the difference between people-pleasing niceness and true compassion; between prevaricating prophets and genuine teachers; between play-acted piousness and real faith; between passing pleasures and God's salvation.

How much of the world's brokenness, I wonder, results from our failure to exercise our God-given gift of discernment in big and small ways?

May we never fall prey to the belief that an open heart requires an undiscerning mind!

by Tom Hathaway

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 14

- THE TWENTY-FIFTH DAY OF LENT -

Romans 12:2

Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

How often do we let other people shape our lives? It doesn't take long before things become habits and we find ourselves involved in things we didn't actively choose to be part of. God doesn't want us to be just like everyone else. He wants us to be the person he created.

The J.B. Phillips' translation of this verse puts it this way... Don't let the world squeeze you into its own mould. The word conformed represents the act of assuming an outward appearance that does not accurately reflect who we are at our core. We all want to fit in. The fear of being called a nerd, fool or idiot may influence us to make choices about lifestyle that may not represent what we want to be like.

The subtle process of the world influencing us is not something that happens overnight. It happens over a period of time and usually involves lowering our standards. Soon we are less interested in things of God and are focused on our new established routines. Getting up early enough on Sunday to go to church might be less appealing than sleeping late. Every time we don't go to worship it's easier to skip again next week. Pretty soon the habit is to avoid church and we no longer have an interest in renewing our faith by the benefits of being in church with our friends who are also working to renew our minds by finding the Will of God. What is the path to finding the will of God? Where is the path to wisdom and spontaneous godliness, to renewed minds? We are being honest presenting ourselves as Christ-focused people if we are conforming to the world around us. Do I really want to break from a mere duty-driven Christianity and do what I love because what I love is what I ought to do?

Because, our minds are not naturally God-worshiping minds. The spirit of our minds is by nature self-worshiping. How do we connect with the Holy Spirit to renew our minds?

We can seek the company of Christians with the same goal of a renewed mind, read our Bibles chapter-by-chapter, develop a habit of meditating on Christ-like behaviors and pray that the Holy Spirit will renew my mind so every day will be a testament to Christianity.

Kate Wilkinson's May the Mind of Christ, My Savior says it best:

*May the mind of Christ, my Savior,
Live in me from day to day,
By His love and power controlling
All I do and say.
May the Word of God dwell richly
In my heart from hour to hour,
So that all may see I triumph
Only through His power.
May the peace of God my Father
Rule my life in everything,
That I may be calm to comfort
Sick and sorrowing.
May the love of Jesus fill me
As the waters fill the sea;
Him exalting, self abasing,
This is victory.
May I run the race before me,
Strong and brave to face the foe,
Looking only unto Jesus
As I onward go.
May His beauty rest upon me,
As I seek the lost to win,
And may they forget the channel,
Seeing only Him.*

by Kate Eshelman

THURSDAY, MARCH 15

- THE TWENTY-SIXTH DAY OF LENT -

Psalm 19:1-4

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.*

*Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.
In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun.*

I have always been amazed at the wonder of the night sky. When I was a boy, my dad would point out the constellations to me. That's the Big Dipper, he would say, and there's the Little Dipper. There is the North Star. And straight overhead is the Northern Cross. In the winter he would point out Orion, the Hunter, and other constellations.

We lived far away from the city, in an area where there was not a lot of light pollution, so often the sky was very clear, and the whole sky was filled with glittering stars. We could easily see the Milky Way, the side view of our galaxy. For most of human history, people could look up at night and see the amazing canopy of stars overhead and they were filled with wonder and awe. I have enjoyed the great privilege of seeing the stars in the same way that my ancestors did, and for that I am profoundly grateful.

Today, because of smog and light pollution we cannot see the sky as clearly with our eyes, but we can see farther than ever with our telescopes and space probes. The Hubble Space Telescope has brought amazing sights to us: clusters of stars and galaxies, red dwarfs, and supernovas. Space probes have enabled us to see clear images of the moon, Mars and the other planets in our solar system. This ability to see the immense number and variety of celestial structures fills us with wonder and awe as well.

The heavens are telling the glory of God, the psalmist wrote, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Viewing the night sky can be a holy experience; it has often been that for me. It reminds me of the vastness of our universe and of the mysterious power at work in creation.

Our new knowledge of astronomy awakens sacred wonder and raises profound questions as well.

In the daytime we human beings talk a lot; sometimes we think we have things all figured out. Day to day pours forth speech, the psalmist wrote. But when we are quiet at night and wonder at the stars, then we have the opportunity to gain a new kind of knowledge. ...night to night declares knowledge. And yet, the psalmist points out, we do not hear the stars, for they are silent. There is no speech, nor are there words, their voice is not heard, yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. Even though the stars do not speak, the profound message that they send to us goes to all the world.

Look up and wonder. Be astounded! For the heavens are telling the glory of God.

by Larry Bergstresser

FRIDAY, MARCH 16

- THE TWENTY-SEVENTH DAY OF LENT -

Genesis 12:4

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

Someone once joked to me that advertisers lose interest in us once we hit 25 years old. This isn't entirely off – Nielsen reports that 95% of advertising dollars go to people under 35 years old. Trends are set by the younger generations as institutions and companies try to attract their attention.

Church is not exempt from these habits. One of the fiercest challenges in church is finding a way to give attention and care across every generation. As some receive focus, it is done at the – at least perceived – expense of others. Many congregations that figured out how to care well for their most loyal generations of membership then find themselves aging together, wondering how to serve the next generations. Congregations that have worked out a ministry model that works well for younger generations may feel inhospitable to their elders and vice versa.

As the Rev. Elena Larssen once pointed out to me: never before in the church's history have so many generations existed together. And she's right: longer life expectancy brings opportunities and challenges to congregations that have never had to work through this level of generational sharing in the history of Christendom.

We tend to focus on some at the expense of others. But we are not advertisers. Faith doesn't start at adulthood nor does it end at old age.

Septuagenarians Abram and Sarai were given a new mission by the God who wasn't even close to being done with them yet. Nor must we be. As we head into a new year, may we commit anew to meaningfully reaching across generations to see what new trend in faithfulness someone quite different from us can share.

by Kaji Douša

from the UCC Stillspeaking Devotional

SATURDAY, MARCH 17

- THE TWENTY-EIGHTH DAY OF LENT -

Psalm 37:4

*Take delight in the Lord and he will give you
the desires of your heart.*

Take delight in the Lord and s/he will give you your heart's desire...

To me, this passage appears at first as an agreement -- you do this and that will happen. On further thought I realized a deeper meaning was there for me if I dug a bit for it.

How we take delight in the Lord is different for each one of us. I love nature and I sense God better through the lens of nature. Others may prefer meditation and/or good works and prayer to experience God's presence in their lives.

When I watch birds and collect images of birds for my own enjoyment, I am reminded of the playfulness and beauty that is present for us in this world. Touching leaves as they fall and appreciating the crisp, colorful miracle in my hand, I know that all living things are here to enjoy life as they go about their business. Sun, ocean, and sand restore in me a sense of well being. The wind and rain and even the snow and ice have a wonderful tactile, bracing quality that reminds me to be aware and alert and know for sure that I am HERE NOW on this amazing planet.

My senses become alive through nature. Find whatever beckons to you and brings you delight. You will have your heart's desire.

by Nancy Sartanowicz

SUNDAY, MARCH 18
- THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT -



by Steve Erspamer

MONDAY, MARCH 19

- THE TWENTY-NINTH DAY OF LENT -

Galatians 5:22

*The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace,
patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness,
and self-control.*

I like to think that I am a reasonably kind, generous, and loving person; after all, I try to treat my family and friends, classmates, acquaintances, and those I meet by chance kindly. And yet, I struggle with the thought of loving all of my neighbors – even those who support racist, sexist, homo- and transphobic, and generally inhumane policies and opinions. How can I love those who support the degradation, suffering, and even death of other human beings, or whose understanding of “impartiality” in the current political climate differs drastically from my own? For me, it is a constant struggle to follow Jesus’ command in its entirety, to love the neighbor who may not be anything like me and is persecuted for that very reason, and the neighbor who may very much be like me, but is one of the persecutors.

Here it could be useful to make a distinction in how to interpret today’s verse: Perhaps we are called to meet the oppressed and marginalized in our society with the fruit – another word we could use is ‘gift’ – of the spirit, and are simultaneously called to demand the use of those fruits, that gift, from those privileged and centered among us. In that way, I see Lent as antithetical, but parallel to Advent: just two months ago, we were mindful of all we have and all the love in our lives while we anticipated Christ’s birth during Advent. Now is the time to see with fresh eyes the suffering already around us, and the positive impact we can have if we are mindful of the status quo and our power to challenge it while we anticipate Jesus’ suffering on the cross. After all, Jesus himself invites us – adamantly encourages us, demands of us – to share in the suffering of the less fortunate and remind ourselves and others of our privilege and our duty in the face of pain: to love our neighbor, to care for the orphan and the widow, to take in the refugee, and to help the hungry, the sick, and the homeless.

Of course, that is a tall order with great risks for some, if not most, of us. But let us also not forget the words of the Godhead who became human to model so perfectly the ideal of love: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you.... Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be

afraid” (John 14:27). With women, People of Color, LGBTQ people and others as our guide it is my prayer that we may understand what and where the fruit of the Spirit moves in our own lives, and, despite the risks, that we may delight in God’s love and protection and let the Spirit’s fruit bless us and those around us in our brokenness.

by Raphaela Mueller

TUESDAY, MARCH 20

- THE THIRTIETH DAY OF LENT -

2 Peter 1:4

*Thus he has given us, through these things,
his precious and very great promises, so that through
them you may escape from the corruption that is in the
world because of lust, and may become participants of
the divine nature.*

“The corruption that is in the world because of lust” that is spoken of in this passage from 2 Peter seems a fitting companion to the well-known verse “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil” from 1 Timothy 6:10. If we expand “lust” beyond its carnal meaning to include lust for power, lust for revenge, lust for disruption and lust for destruction, we capture a clear picture of our sad, dysfunctional modern world. In it we, the ordinary citizens, not only have to battle deep-pocketed corporate interests (the love of money), but also deeply-rooted ideologies (lust for power) that seek to twist (or tweet) and corrupt every “fact” to satisfy their own, peculiar world view.

So, what is a person of faith supposed to do? 2 Peter claims that Jesus has given us “His precious and very great promises” of salvation through knowing and seeking out a godly life with Him so that we may escape this corruption. Verses 5, 6 and 7 lay out a strategy, encouraging each one of us to “make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.”

Faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection, love. Wow! We recognize in every headline and in every “news cycle” that these qualities hold little attraction for those currently in power in our country and in tyrannical governments around the world. However, perhaps the greatest promise of salvation from Christ Our Lord can be found in Verse 8: “for if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ”, so that we may apply this Christian knowledge to fixing our very-broken world.

by Shelley Scruggs

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 21

- THE THIRTY-FIRST DAY OF LENT -

Acts 1:1-5

In the first book...I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles...

At some point, Disciples turn into Apostles.

In today's passage, Jesus evolves the Disciples into Apostles, readying them to be sent out with a message (see that word "post" in "apostle"? Just like the mail!). I for one am glad they let it happen; if they had chosen not to change, Christianity would have died when they did.

What stage of Christian evolution are you in? Do you go to church, try to live a good life, and leave it at that? Or do you talk with other people about it as well?

For the sake of everyone else in the break room who doesn't know how sweet faith can be, isn't it time to stand up to that loud atheist/fundamentalist/whatever at work?

Or do what one member of my church does: she periodically sets her Facebook status to something like, "Can't wait for church tomorrow! Anybody want to go with and then get brunch after?" You'd be surprised how many take her up on it. Or you could just be sure your FB profile lists your religion and a link to your church. Or you could write a letter to the editor—explicitly as a Christian—on an issue of the day. Or...well, you get the point: be creative.

Do you think Christianity—or your flavor of it—matters enough to be kept alive, or are you happy to let it die with you? If the latter, then enjoy your discipleship. If the former, it's time to evolve.

by Quinn Caldwell

from the UCC Stillspeaking Devotional

THURSDAY, MARCH 22

- THE THIRTY-SECOND DAY OF LENT -

Ephesians 2:8-10

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his poetry, created in Christ Jesus for good works.

We expected to pay for valet parking when we went to see The Beatles LOVE by Cirque du Soleil, so I brought along a \$20 bill. When parking turned out to be free, I decided I would give the valet, a kid probably not making a lot at this job, the \$20. He drove up with the car, gave me the keys, I slipped him the \$20 bill and he walked away while we got in the car. Suddenly, he was back, wearing a big smile, asking if we needed directions or anything. He knew he hadn't done anything to deserve a big tip and he was showing us how much he appreciated it.

We haven't done anything to deserve God's gift of saving faith, He gives it freely because we are His children and He loves us. When we accept His gift, we are transformed. He has created us to share His love in everything we do and in everything we do we give thanks to Him.

by Betsy Manouchehri

FRIDAY, MARCH 23

- THE THIRTY-THIRD DAY OF LENT -

Matthew 26:42

He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

In this passage we meet a very human Jesus. He can see the handwriting on the wall. The horrific events he had told his disciples would happen now loom large. And Jesus, like any of us who stands on the threshold of things we wish would not happen--sickness, death, divorce, losing a job, foreclosure and more--prays that he does not have to drink from this cup. And yet, like us perhaps, Jesus recognizes that there are forces at work that he cannot stop. It is at this point, as they would say in AA, he realizes that he must let go and let God. He can't have the end he wants, and so he turns to God trusting that God's will, in some mysterious way, will not only prevail but also be good. In a day and age when many can get away, at least for awhile, with the idea that they can control their own destiny, submission to God's will, instead, can sound passive and defeatist. But the truth is, the illusion of control is ultimately unmasked in every life. It is then that we stand naked before God with a choice: we can submit to despair or we can submit to the gracious mystery of God. Is it not that the first is the defeatist one and the second an act of courage and faith?

Someday, and for most of us far more than once, we will have opportunity to say, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." May the prayer allow us to open our arms to the will and love of God.

by Dudley Rose

SATURDAY, MARCH 24

-THE THIRTY-FOURTH DAY OF LENT-

1 John 1:5

God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all.

Life presents all kinds of challenges that can easily overwhelm us on our own, but God is always with us. If we always have faith in Him, He will light the way for us and bear our burdens for us.

Even during our Darkest days, when we are filled with doubt and dismay, just remember that God's light is waiting to burst forward and shine on us.

God's light will always overcome the darkness.

by Nancy MacKinnon

SUNDAY, MARCH 25

-PALM SUNDAY-



by Steve Erspamer

MONDAY, MARCH 26

- THE THIRTY-FIFTH DAY OF LENT -

Psalm 40:1-2

I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He lifted me up out of the pit, out of the miry clay; he set my foot upon a rock and made my footsteps firm.

God picks us up and sets us down. Van Morrison, in his song Whenever God Shines His Light On Me tells us that when we reach out for Him, He is there. God catches us and props us back up. Who has not had low points? Who has not experienced spirits so sad that it is painful? Yet we remember that he is inclined to me. He has heard your cry. And he is there.

I think of a child who has taken a tumble. Her parent lifts her up, dusts her off, and places her 2 feet on the ground. That is what we all need when we take a tumble. We need to be caught, put on the right path, and move on.

So when you feel that the times are too rough, that you are in great despair - reach out; feel God's blessings, When life is dark or you are confused - reach out - He is there. As Van Morrison's lyrics reminds us:

*He'll lift you up and turn you around
And put your feet back on higher ground.
God will shine His light on you. Thank God.*

by Kathleen Beyerman

TUESDAY, MARCH 27
- THE THIRTY-SIXTH DAY OF LENT -

Isaiah 1:15

When you stretch your hands to pray, I will hide my eyes from you. Though you make many prayers, I will not listen for your hands are full of blood.

What I think he meant by this was. Before you stretch your hands to pray, you must be able to pray unselfishly. By seeing the good that can be, you will feel god.

by Dylan Galante

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 28

- THE THIRTY-SEVENTH DAY OF LENT -

Jeremiah 29:11

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

I am in the midst of testing season with my fourth grade students. In January and February we finished all of the language testing that is required for English learners in Massachusetts. I am now in the three week stretch of school before MCAS testing starts. In three Tuesdays, my fourth grade students will sit for the long composition test. A week after that will be two days of testing in reading comprehension and a few weeks later, two days of mathematics testing.

These are high-stakes tests. Schools are judged by them and teachers evaluated by them. The pressure to show growth is strong and I find myself constantly poring over data, looking for a place where a final surge of instruction might make a little difference. Sometimes, during quarterly testing, we score higher than the "regular (i.e. English speaking)" fourth grade classes on a particular standard and those are thrilling moments that give me a sense of my students' enormous potential. That said, only two or three of my students will reach proficiency in either reading or math this year, but probably not in both.

They work extremely hard and I give them tall tasks they rise to meet, but learning English and content area skills takes time. I know they won't be proficient this time, but I also know (or at least try to remember everyday) that fourth grade isn't the end. Actually, for many of them, last year was their first year in the United States. The work we do today is their foundation for the future they dream of, for which their parents have made tremendous sacrifices, and for which, I am sure, God has made beautiful plans. The sad part for me is that I rarely get to see the final product. A few students come back to visit once they are in high school, but it doesn't happen often. I go out each morning knowing I need to fight hard for my students, but also knowing that their time with me is just one of a series of steps toward "the plans [God] has for [them]."

by Merri Jones

THURSDAY, MARCH 29

- MAUNDY THURSDAY -

2 Corinthians 12:9

*My grace is sufficient for you,
for power is made perfect in weakness.*

Power. We can't live without it, and we don't seem to live very easily with it either. This quote from the Second Letter to the Corinthians offers an alternative: power—from a healthy source.

Here Divinity is calling us to live grace-based lives with the promise that God's Grace is our sufficiency. And what is sufficiency?

Enough. No more, no less.

Isn't it ironic that humans so often seek power as an antidote to the feeling of insufficiency? Certainly the fear that possible, as well as factual, insufficiency engenders creates a desire for immediate, strong action to resolve the feeling. And it's so typical of the Almighty to solve the sufficiency issue—grace means we'll always be, do and have enough—before addressing the trap of power.

Our world is evidencing the misuse of power in many realms these days. People feel powerless everywhere: the United States, Syria, in our offices, in our churches. There is a solution, and, strikingly, it isn't power, or not our own power. No, it's God's Power.

God's power is what is made perfect—whole, complete, ideal—through our weakness. It's not my power that perfects through weakness. Instead, the activity of God's Holy Spirit can make anything right in my life when I'll let go and trust. And until I let go and trust, God can't.

Why should I let go and trust? It's simple. Because our sufficiency was taken care of first.

by Susan Corso

FRIDAY, MARCH 30

- GOOD FRIDAY -

Hebrews 2:17, 4:15

He was made like his siblings in every way, so that he might become a merciful high priest... For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses...

When my mother turned ninety, she entered her funeral instructions on a form entitled, 'In the Event of My Death,' a phrase she found amusing, as if death were something that might happen, or might not.

She nixed viewing hours. She hated being looked at, as countless ruined family photos attest. She also vetoed the sort of obituary that lists everything you've ever done and every last relative you're leaving behind. She wrote five lines.

The casket? Nothing high-end. She wasn't cheap, but she found ostentation silly, especially when it was headed six feet under. Besides, the Catholic funeral liturgy mandates a white cloth covering for caskets, signifying the baptized dignity of the body inside. No one would see the actual coffin. She told my brothers to buy a bargain box.

A few days before she died, she remembered that the cloth is placed on the casket after it's brought into the sanctuary. People would see it after all; they'd know she skimped. She made the boys to go back to the funeral home to 'take it up a notch.'

There are terrible sinners in this world. My mother wasn't one of them. But there is a little wonkiness in every human soul. Hers was a vanity so slight, so sweet, so human, it made us laugh and weep. It was easy to indulge.

Maybe your weaknesses are not as sweet or slight. If, as mine do, they weigh on you or cause you shame, here's Hebrews for consolation:

The Great Mercy doesn't judge our frailties, he feels them in his own human flesh. With sibling empathy, with laughter and tears, he indulges us, all the days of our lives, and at the hour of our death.

by Mary Luti

from the UCC Stillspeaking Devotional

SATURDAY, MARCH 31

- HOLY SATURDAY -

Genesis 28:10-17

And he (Jacob) dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

Should you one day make it to Jerusalem, you will no doubt also make your way to what many consider the holiest site in the world: the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which they say is on the site of both Jesus' crucifixion and of the tomb from which he was resurrected. Stop in the courtyard outside and look up, just to the right above the main doors. There you'll see a wooden ladder propped against a windowsill. No one knows for sure exactly how long it's been there, but it's visible in photographs from the late 1800s, and there's an engraving of the church from the 1720s that shows something that looks an awful lot like it. Probably placed by some careless workman who forgot to clean up after the job three hundred years ago, it's been kept sitting there ever since because the half dozen or so Christian denominations who share uneasy control of the church can't agree on whose responsibility it is or what to do with it. They call it The Immovable Ladder.

You could claim that it connects nothing, serves no purpose, helps no one. But it's hard to look at it without being reminded forcefully of how weird humans are, how feckless and fickle not only we, but our institutions are, too. So while Jacob's ladder connects heaven and earth, and your ladder connects the front yard to the porch roof, maybe The Immovable Ladder is there to connect us to our own brokenness. Maybe it's there to remind you of just how foolish you can be, and how trapped you can become.

You can't help but shake your head in wonderment and despair when you see it, and maybe that's exactly the right thing to do before you approach the place where humanity crucified love.

God, for a ladder that leads nowhere but my own foolishness, I thank you. For an empty tomb that leads beyond it, I worship you. Amen.

by Quinn Caldwell

from the UCC Stillspeaking Devotional

SUNDAY, APRIL 1

-EASTER SUNDAY-



by Steve Erspamer

WHAT IS LENT?

Lent is a season of forty days, not counting Sundays, which begins on Ash Wednesday (February 14th) and ends on Holy Saturday (March 31st). Lent comes from the Anglo Saxon word *lencten*, which means “spring.” The forty days represents the time Jesus spent in the wilderness, enduring the temptation of Satan and preparing to begin his ministry.

Lent is a time of repentance, fasting, and preparation for the coming of Easter. It is a time of self-examination and reflection. In the early church, Lent was a time to prepare new converts for baptism. Today, Christians focus on their relationship with God, often choosing to give up something or to volunteer and give of themselves for others.

WHAT IS A DEVOTIONAL?

A devotional is a booklet or publication that provides a specific reading for each day. Christians use devotionals as a way to grow closer to God and learn more about the Christian life. Devotional books are not meant to be read in one sitting; they are designed for you to read a bit every day and pray on the passages. By praying every day, Christians develop a stronger relationship with God.

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