

THE UPPER ROOM

60

DAYS OF

PRAYER



 UPPER
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INVITE • ENGAGE • INSPIRE

60 DAYS OF PRAYER

For General Conference 2016

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The Upper Room Disciplines

In this best-selling annual devotional book, 53 writers from various backgrounds, locales, and Christian traditions plumb the depths of scripture. Each week introduces a new theme based on scripture passages selected from the Revised Common Lectionary.

To order *The Upper Room Disciplines*,
call customer service at **1-800-972-0433**

AN OUTLINE FOR SMALL-GROUP USE

Here is a simple plan for group meetings based on reading these devotionals. One person may act as convener or the role can rotate among group members. You may want to light a white Christ candle to signal the beginning of your time together.

OPENING

Convener: Let us come into the presence of God.

Others: **Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for being with us. Help us hear your word to us as we speak to one another.**

SCRIPTURE

Convener reads the scripture suggested for that day. After a one- or two-minute silence, convener asks: What did you hear God saying to you in this passage? What response does this call for? (Group members respond in turn or as led.)

REFLECTION

- What scripture passage(s) and meditation(s) was (were) particularly meaningful for you? Why? (Group members respond in turn or as led.)
- What actions were you nudged to take in response to the meditations? (Group members respond in turn or as led.)
- Where were you challenged in your discipleship? How did you respond to the challenge? (Group members respond in turn or as led.)

PRAYING TOGETHER

Convener says: Based on today's discussion, what people and situations do you want us to pray for now and in the coming week? Convener or other volunteer then prays about the concerns named.

DEPARTING

Convener says: Let us go in peace to serve God and our neighbors in all that we do.

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Grant me today, Lord,
a new heaven and a new earth.

Grant me the wonder of a child
who for the first time
opens her eyes upon the world;
the joy of a child who discovers
Your splendor in each object,
in each encountered being,
a reflection of Your glory.

Grant me the joy of one whose steps are new.
Grant me the happiness of one whose life is each day
fresh and innocent and hopeful,
each day pardoned.

—Michel Bouttier, in *Prayers for My Village*

CONTENTS

AN OUTLINE FOR SMALL-GROUP USE / 3

WELCOME / 7

INTRODUCTION / 8

MEDITATIONS BEFORE GENERAL CONFERENCE

Proclaim / 10–19

Lead / 20–29

Nurture / 30–39

Send / 40–49

MEDITATIONS DURING GENERAL CONFERENCE

As We've Gone / 50, WARNER BROWN

Go and Announce / 51, GREGORY V. PALMER

Going under Authority / 52, CHRISTIAN ALSTED

As You Go, Be Learning / 53, SALLY DYCK

Going with Courage / 54, SUDA DEVADHAR

Love and Love Alone / 55, DEBORAH L. KIESEY

As You Go, Call All / 56, CYNTHIA FIERRO HARVEY

That We May Be One / 57, MARY ANN SWENSON

Evil Is Going Too / 58, JAMES SWANSON SR.

Go to the Lost Sheep / 59, JOHN YAMBASU

Who Goes Where? / 60, ELAINE J. W. STANOVSKY

MEDITATIONS AFTER GENERAL CONFERENCE / 61

USING A FINGER LABYRINTH IN PRAYER / 70

Welcome

Dear brothers and sisters in the United Methodist family, we know that our prayers matter, and in that certainty, I invite you into a 60-day prayer journey as you prepare for the 2016 General Conference.

Church leaders, delegates, and interested others will soon gather in Portland to listen to one another, to discern God's will for The United Methodist Church, and to make decisions that will guide United Methodists around the world in fulfilling our God-given purpose. As they and you seek to open your heart and mind to God's guidance, these meditations offer a communal practice that is intended to nurture a spirit of unity and discipleship. Pray with the assurance that others are offering the same prayer.

The meditations in this booklet begin the week after Easter, on Thursday, March 31, and continue through Sunday, May 29. They will guide you for the forty days before the opening session, through the eleven days of General Conference, and into the nine days after the event's conclusion. Each meditation during General Conference, May 10–20 (with the exception of May 17), has been written by the bishop who will preach that day—so you can encounter insights from that day's proclaimer of the Word.

The Upper Room staff produced this publication at the invitation of the Worship Committee of the General Commission on the 2016 General Conference, and we at The Upper Room feel honored to have been entrusted with this task. I look forward to our sixty days of prayer together.

—SARAH WILKE
Publisher, The Upper Room

Introduction

This *60 Days of Prayer* booklet serves as a response to the most important request recorded in scripture, “Lord, teach us to pray.” We invite you to join the delegates, bishops, and leaders of the 2016 General Conference in their spiritual preparation for the event, through the event, and the days after.

Every local congregation in every part of the world can pray with and for the 864 delegates of the 2016 General Conference. Using the Internet and downloadable texts, every United Methodist will read the same scripture, consider the same insights, and pray the same prayer for forty days prior to the 2016 General Conference in Portland, Oregon (March 31 to May 9), each day of the General Conference (May 10 to 20); and nine days following the event (May 21 to 29). We can all participate in the same experience of scripture, word, and Spirit.

Prayer lies at the heart of Jesus’ life and work and remains essential for us and for the church. Prayer played a central role in the work that God began through John and Charles Wesley in eighteenth-century England. In North America, the lives of Philip Otterbein, Jacob Albright, and Martin Boehm all bear witness to John Wesley’s teaching that “God does nothing apart from prayer.” As the Methodist movement spread to the Caribbean (1759), Sierra Leone (1792), Australia (1815), Africa (1816), and Latin America (1830s), prayer served as the primary source of spiritual direction and vitality. In Asia (1783) and the Pacific (1822), the story is the same.

We believe that God wants to lead and shape the future of The United Methodist Church through prayer. This guide to prayer will

- serve as a daily guide for elected delegates of the 2016 General Conference.

- provide a means for those present at the General Conference to be united, surrounded, and supported with prayer.
- engage every United Methodist man, woman, youth, and child in prayer. Every family, small group, and local church around the world can pray *with* and pray *for* this General Conference.
- open a new pathway for spiritual growth and faithfulness in all congregations, for all members and friends—united in prayer as the body of Christ.
- establish a prayer network within The United Methodist Church that can actively support the spiritual preparation needed before the General Conference, intercede faithfully during the days of the Conference, and participate in the spiritual implementation of the decisions made at the General Conference.

What will happen as we pray together? No one knows for sure. However, we believe that the will of God will come through prayer and discernment. The pages that follow offer us the opportunity to unite in prayer for God's will to be done in God's way and in God's time.

Lord, teach us to pray.

—TOM ALBIN
Dean of the Upper Room Chapel

—DENISE MCGUINNESS
Executive Director, Living Tree Services, P.S.

Prayer Team Cochairs

Therefore, Go!

THURSDAY, MARCH 31 • READ MATTHEW 28:19-20

Go on! Get out of here!” The guest preacher had promised to share his favorite benediction. What a startling conclusion to a formal worship service! But Jesus specializes in startling conclusions, and Matthew makes it clear throughout his Gospel that following Jesus is not for those who want a static, cloistered faith. We must be willing to get going!

Today, just five days after celebrating the miracle of Resurrection, we commit anew to going on the way with Jesus as a denomination. “Therefore, go” remains central to our mission as The United Methodist Church, and we have the opportunity to pledge ourselves fully to that mission as we begin our General Conference prayer journey together. What will this meeting accomplish? What difference will it make to the world? How will we stay true to our mission? With Easter music still ringing in my ears, I am suddenly aware of the unlimited, unimagined power of God and prayer.

“Therefore, go” is also central to my faith as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Too often I try to regard discipleship as another item on my to-do list. Go out there, make a disciple or two, check it off my list, and move on to the next task! Throughout worship at General Conference, we’ll explore how Matthew’s Gospel reveals an “in it for the long haul” element to our going with Jesus. We do not know what we will encounter on the way. But there is good news: Jesus will be with us, with our church, and with the world for the entire journey. Let’s get started!

Jesus, we are unsure where this journey will take us, but we are willing to go with you. Amen.

—LAURA JAQUITH BARTLETT

Back to Basics

FRIDAY, APRIL 1 • READ JEREMIAH 31:10-14

The period of exile in Babylon is also called the Babylonian captivity. The people of Israel were captives of the most powerful empire of their time. To them the situation must have seemed hopeless. Yet the prophet Jeremiah proclaims the power of God that will free Israel even from such a mighty master: “The LORD has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.”

Many powers can enslave us. But none is mightier than the past. Against any other master, we can rebel. But the past we cannot change, which makes our feelings of failure so overwhelming. Years have gone by, and we are powerless to undo what we did or even to recover the time we lost when we failed to do what we ought to have done. We may try to undo the consequences of our past—and in most cases we should. But the past itself we cannot undo. It is there, apparently forever, with a givenness we cannot challenge. Despite our best efforts, we cannot undo it. It is a far mightier master than the Babylonians were to Israel. Just as Jacob (Israel) was bound by “hands too strong for him,” so are we burdened by the weight of a past we cannot change. But the God who ransomed Jacob from “hands too strong him” can also ransom us from whatever binds us—no matter how strong—even from the weight of the past.

That is the meaning of forgiveness. God ransoms us from the power of our sin, from the shame of our failures, from the weight of the past. Thus, as we approach new work, we can do so with joy similar to that reflected in Jeremiah’s words. Read them again, and rejoice with him!

Cast away from us, O God, all our failures and sin. Grant us the joy of those who return to you from the exile of sin and guilt. Amen.

—JUSTO L. GONZÁLEZ

Spiritual Maturity

SATURDAY, APRIL 2 • READ HEBREWS 5:7-9

The Gospel writers give us glimpses of Jesus at prayer. From them we learn that he wept, groaned in spirit, and struggled with temptation. The author of Hebrews boldly describes the “loud cries and tears” that sometimes accompanied the prayers of Jesus and the obedience he learned through suffering. The picture that emerges reveals him as deeply engaged with life at all levels and as courageously responsive to his vocation.

The reference to “the days of his flesh” emphasizes the transitory nature and frailty of human life. Undoubtedly the agony of Gethsemane was in the writer’s mind. In the garden Jesus offered up, in a representative and sacrificial way, the anguish of all people in times of extreme need. He confronted the fear of death, asking God to remove the cup, but finally consented to the divine will. In this terrible struggle, the human Jesus learned obedience to God’s will through the suffering he endured.

Maturity or “perfection” in human character is not static but develops through our responses to life’s constantly changing circumstances. Luke 2:52 states that “Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature” through obedience to earthly parents and God. The wholehearted embracing of life’s ambiguities and responsibilities, along with the relinquishing of self-interest, made it possible to speak of his “being made perfect.” Living each day attentive to God’s voice is the means by which we identify our fear, pray our anguish, and grow to full stature as those created in the divine image.

Consider areas in which God is calling you to growth through obedience.

—ELIZABETH J. CANHAM

The Gift of Faith

SUNDAY, APRIL 3 • READ MATTHEW 14:22-33

In the mid-nineteenth century, Johann Christoph Blumhardt pastored a small church in a German village. There was nothing exceptional about his work—nothing, that is, until a couple in the church told him about problems they were having with their daughter. Pastor Blumhardt met with them to pray and to visit with the daughter. Pastor Blumhardt realized that he might be dealing with a demon like those he had read about in the New Testament. Though Germany's historical-critical scholarship was preparing to explain away demons in the modern world, here in a small German parish Blumhardt revealed Jesus' power in an exorcism.

As in Jesus' day, the good news of liberation from a demon's power spread quickly. People came to see what new thing was happening—what power had been unleashed by Pastor Blumhardt's ministry. God was indeed doing a new thing, and Pastor Blumhardt wanted to be faithful to it. He began to realize that many people came for the wrong reasons. He began to tell the "thrill seekers" that the exorcism wasn't a healing for its own sake but a sign meant to point people toward God's kingdom.

The miracle of Jesus walking on water immediately follows the feeding of the five thousand in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus knows what Pastor Blumhardt learned centuries later: We are often more interested in the miraculous signs of God's power than we are in the kingdom movement toward which they point us. Jesus calls the disciples *oligopistoi*—"little-faiths." He is talking to all of us. It's one thing to see the power of God and know it's real; it's something else entirely to trust the Lord who asks for everything, even as the storm rages about you.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, give us faith to trust our whole lives to your kingdom movement. Amen.

—JONATHAN WILSON-HARTGROVE

What Only Faith Can See

MONDAY, APRIL 4 • READ PSALM 121

I slept well as the pitch-black and sticky night relaxed, freed from the cacophony of hooting car horns and the gossip of the day—until I heard the whack of wood on concrete. John, our night watchman, had just killed a poisonous viper that had slithered near the front door of our home in Ghana, West Africa. My wife, Safiyah, and I served there as missionaries. Friends had told us, “Get a night watchman to guard your house so you can sleep at night.”

The Israelites trusted God to keep divine watch over them, a trust not available to followers of other gods. In verses 3-4 of Psalm 121, the psalmist declares that Israel’s God does not slumber or sleep. This statement stands in contrast with Israel’s neighbors who commonly believed that their gods “slept” during the winter months and revived during seasons of growth.

I once toured the temple of another religion. It contained physical representations of the gods worshiped there and a gong. When asked the purpose of the gong, the guide replied, “We beat the gong to make sure the gods are awake.”

The psalmist took every opportunity to affirm faith in the God of Israel. This God made heaven and earth. This God never slept. This God provided shade as a refuge. The belief that God could provide shade for the pilgrims indicated their belief in a huge God capable of shading them from the sun by day and the moon by night. The psalmist goes on to say that God will keep us from all evil.

What about you? Of what do you boast about God? Which of God’s characteristics do you rehearse to yourself and with others in corporate worship? Your declarations about God help you see life with the eyes of faith.

God, since you never slumber or sleep, free me from anxious nights and fearful mornings. Amen.

—KWASI KENA

On the Road

TUESDAY, APRIL 5 • READ LUKE 24:33-35

This passage began with the disappointment and bewilderment of Jesus' followers, especially those two traveling the road to Emmaus. We now move to the confirmation of Jesus' resurrection and the sharing of that good news with the disciples of Jesus Christ.

In the passage, we see a sense of urgency. Although it was evening, the two people traveled many miles back to Jerusalem to meet the eleven disciples. Their encounter with the risen Jesus was so overwhelming that they could not wait even an hour. Because of their joy, distance did not matter to them, and darkness did not cause them to hesitate. This urgency to share the good news is the foundation of our evangelism and the church's mission. Nothing can stop us from sharing the awakening experience of meeting our risen Lord.

When the two arrive, they find the eleven disciples gathered in one place. They also have experienced the resurrected Christ: "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" We do not know whether Jesus appeared to Simon before he appeared to the two people on the road to Emmaus. The time of appearance is not important. What matters most to them is the confirmation of Jesus' resurrection. He was truly dead on the cross but was truly risen as he had promised and as scripture had foretold. Sharing their experience of encountering the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus becomes the model for the church's life, and the awakening experience at the breaking of the bread gives added meaning to the Lord's Supper in the life of our church.

O God of resurrection, give us the sense of urgency to share our experience of the living Christ with other people. Amen.

—JUNG YOUNG LEE

Resurrection Hope

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 6 • READ 1 PETER 3:18-22

This passage serves as the scriptural basis for the phrase in the Apostles' Creed that speaks of Jesus between death and resurrection: "He descended into hell." All too often our response to this clause of the creed is one of bewilderment: What can this possibly mean? In some cases this clause is actually left out of the creed. Yet it, like the text from First Peter, points us to the astonishing character of our hope by asserting that all barriers to God's life-giving love are shattered on the cross.

The barrier shattered here is the one that separates the living from the dead, those who die without hope from those who live in hope. The passage speaks of those who died in the flood whereby God sought to cleanse the earth of its defilement by violence and violation. Those who were swept away had no hope of transformation. Yet it is precisely to these, to all who had died, to all who have fallen under the just judgment of God, that Christ makes proclamation between his "death in the flesh" and his resurrection.

Because of this descent into the prison house of souls, we dare to have hope for all who seem to be separated from the gospel through death or judgment. For not even death or the wrath of God can prevent the gracious announcement of hope for all based upon the death and resurrection of Christ.

So strong is our resurrection hope that we cannot give up hope for anyone, however far he or she may seem from Christ; for whether in life or in death, Christ has drawn near to them.

O God, thank you for our hope in Christ. Amen.

—THEODORE W. JENNINGS

Dwelling

THURSDAY, APRIL 7 • READ PHILIPPIANS 3:17-4:1

What does it mean to speak of our homeland as heaven? Because of the suffering and brokenness of life “in the flesh,” the Gnostic sect believed that ordinary life in our world is evil. Instead, its members thought that we human beings were meant to be “spiritual,” completely unconcerned with the physical world. Many of these Gnostics identified themselves as Christians. They believed in Jesus—but not a flesh-and-blood Jesus. On the contrary, they thought Jesus was like a ghost sent to give us the saving message of his Father who dwelt outside creation to draw us to a spiritual world beyond.

The early church fought hard against such a dualism that denied the goodness of God’s creation as well as the reality of the Incarnation. Instead, our Christian ancestors affirmed that God never intended our world to be broken. In Romans, Paul insists that creation itself is groaning in a kind of bondage connected with human sin. At the end of time, when we receive our resurrection bodies, he says, the physical world will also be restored to God’s original and loving intent. This restored earth is our homeland. (See Romans 8:18-25.)

What form this restoration will take and its timing is not for us to know, however, and speculation on it can sidetrack us from the real job of Christian loving and living. Nevertheless, we need to be reminded of God’s love and care for this very world we live in.

God of all creation, teach us to know your world as you intended it to be, and help us love it and live in it as your gift. Amen.

—ROBERTA C. BONDI

The Day of the Lord

FRIDAY, APRIL 8 • READ LUKE 3:1-6

Luke roots the story of John the Baptist in history by telling us who was in charge of what at that time. The list includes the Roman emperor, the Roman governor of Judea, the Ituraean ruler of Galilee and his brother who ruled parts of Syria. It ends with a little-known ruler of Abilene, a territory northwest of Damascus, and two of the high priests in Jerusalem. At first reading the list seems a tedious prologue to John's ministry, full of obscure names that are hard to pronounce. Luke has a good reason for including it, however—one that goes straight to the heart of his Gospel.

If we were to spread out a map of the world in ancient days and stick red pins in the locations where the powerful governed, we would have a canvas that stretched from Jerusalem to Rome. It would include Judeans, Syrians, Greeks, and Romans. It would include the most powerful military leader on earth, as well as the most powerful religious leaders in Judaism and all the people who lived under their rule.

Luke points out that the story he is about to tell applies to all the above. It is not a local story about a Hebrew charismatic who founded a new sect of Judaism. It is a universal story about a divine savior who came to change the world. Luke quotes the last line of Isaiah's prophecy as his theme: "And all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Before the church ever existed, the gospel was given to all people. To this day the church exists for those who do not belong to it.

In what ways do you attempt to possess Jesus? To whom do you think Jesus belongs, and what must people do to belong to him? Try doing what God did: Give Jesus freely to the whole world.

—BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR

The Desert Shall Blossom

SATURDAY, APRIL 9 • READ ISAIAH 35:5-7

They wait. People of the “desert.” The ones beyond the right words to say. Beyond our ability to grow green again. People, places, and situations become dry. It is easier to abandon them to the desert. It seems a less embarrassing thing to do.

These are not waiting for the “annual rain.” They are used to the quick fixes that have come and gone with the first hot wind. They endure the promises of those who do not know the desert. It has become easier to expect burning sand instead of water and to know the company of jackals. Stoicism hurts less. Hope has become brown and dry.

Then God comes. Nothing God touches can remain the same. It is not a flash greening. It is a deep-down watering, which permeates the core of being. It is the restoration of ground water, not seeping but flowing in a current so that all life is changed. Roots begin to grow deeper. Stoicism turns to hope. Once hope has rooted, joy appears.

Gradually, the wilderness is greening. Pools of water appear where sand burned weary feet. Water rushes over stones that knew only wind. Jackals seek out other deserts.

The eyes of the blind are opened. Some receive their sight, but all see. The ears of the deaf are unstopped. Some catch the rush of water, but all hear. Spirits long dry begin to feel, for whatever God touches is changed.

We have waited for God, not really expecting an appearance. And God has come.

*Master of the desert,
God of the impossible and improbable,
Lord of time,
water me,
according to your will. Amen.*

—RAY BUCKLEY

Discernment and Keeping the Faith

SUNDAY, APRIL 10 • READ GENESIS 12:1-9

When the Lord calls Abram, he goes. Abram does not hesitate. He does not wonder whether he is doing the right thing. He does not think about the cost or the risk. He simply follows the Lord's command without murmur or objection.

The lives we lead today often make it difficult to follow Abram's example. The ties of the material world bind us tightly. Busy with work, our families, and the thousand demands of daily life, we cannot easily imagine surrendering them and heading off to a new place because the Lord has called us to go there.

Our greatest temptation comes in not seeking the one true God who became incarnate in Jesus Christ and whose timeless and perfect will always binds us. Instead we seek a lesser god, a god who will never ask us to do anything we do not want to do, to surrender anything we do not want to surrender, or to go to a place where we do not want to go.

At the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop told his flock that God does not care what we possess but whether, when God knocks on our door and demands that we surrender what we value most for the Lord's sake, we will answer. If we find we never have to give up anything, we may not be following Christ. He may demand that we give up cherished material possessions or cherished political views or a cherished position in our community. But the one thing every Christian knows for sure is that sooner or later the Lord will come knocking.

Heavenly Father, help me to lay aside the things of this world, to listen for your call to sacrifice, and to answer it joyfully and unquestioningly. Amen.

—STEPHEN L. CARTER

Are We There Yet?

MONDAY, APRIL 11 • READ EPHESIANS 2:1-7

As we say in the Baptist church where I grew up, I walked the aisle when I was eleven years old, some five decades ago. Vacation Bible school was in session. Our church building was a sanctuary in more ways than one. The massive brick structure offered not just a place to teach kids about Jesus; the ground-level classrooms were the coolest refuge in town. Going forward was not hard. For a preteen, it felt momentous, something that would change my life forever. I walked forward at the invitation and confided my decision to the preacher.

Salvation is a word we may associate with spiritual revivals. Ephesians addresses God's saving activity in Christ. The first three verses state what we're saved from: death through sin, following the ways of the world, and being children of wrath. The writer is not chastising so much as reminding us of the past so that we can more readily value our inclusion in God's life-giving story of salvation in the present!

At eleven, my life-changing commitment didn't hinge on turning from my past "sins," but in the ensuing years it raised weighty questions about how to be a Christian. Many times I wanted to abandon that statement of faith, but the commitment I made then has ended up making me. It has never turned me loose, though my understanding of what it means has changed as I have matured.

I have come to appreciate the richness of God's mercy and kindness. I value God's willingness to take the initiative for my benefit and salvation. I am "alive together with Christ." With that promise, I try to meet each moment with hope.

O God, hear me, strengthen me; let me hear you. Amen.

—BILL DOCKERY

Called into Covenant with God

TUESDAY, APRIL 12 • READ 2 SAMUEL 7:1-11, 16

Even when we have well-intended purposes for God's work, it is good to keep in mind that God's will must always prevail. Faithfulness does not simply mean offering our best for God but, rather, listening to discern what God may wish us to do.

King David sincerely desires to do something great for God. Inspired by his own sense of pleasure, David notes that he himself lives in a house of cedar. If this pleases him, surely an even greater house for the ark will please God. This makes sense, doesn't it? But God desired to build a spiritual lineage (or "house") for David. From this heritage God would choose both the time and descendant who would build a temple. More importantly, from the spiritual lineage would come the messiah.

How often in our lives do we assume what will please God based upon our human experiences of pleasure rather than the knowledge we gain from our spiritual life? We gain spiritual knowledge through intentional openness to God, through listening for and sensing the presence of God. Spiritual knowledge comes with the openness and expectation that God does have a will and a purpose, a purpose that we can know through prayerful living.

However, the word of God comes to David through the prophet Nathan, and David is able to hear. Persons of faith live to please God through their being and their actions, knowing that God delights in our prayerful listening.

Grant, O God, that the rhythm of each day may include time to be present with you, to know you more clearly, and to love you more dearly. Amen.

—NATHAN D. BAXTER

God's Wisdom, Hope, and Promise

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 13 • READ JOHN 16:12-15

We do not always readily receive God's words to us. Jesus knows that many of his followers will be "at sea" without some augmented seriousness, some assurance from Jesus before he, in bodily form, departs from this earth. So Jesus says to them, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth."

Many to this day still do not understand the fullness of that promise. When have you heard a devout Christian say something like this: "I wish Jesus had not been taken from us. I wish we could have escaped that loss." But Jesus' ascension was not a loss to us; it was a gain. The Lord in his ascending received new power. Once he inhabited a few hundred square miles; but now that he is risen, he is available to all people on the earth at all hours of the day and night. In his resurrection he became accessible in new ways. The risen and ascended One is no longer hemmed in by the confines of time and space that encumber us.

Spiritual matters for us are far less confusing than they were during the forty-day span from Easter Day to Ascension Day. To wish we could turn back the clock denies the power of the Holy Spirit who can be with us in both our joys and our sorrows, in the times of trial and in the times of victory over sin. So rejoice and be glad, for the Spirit gives to us far more than the ascension of the Lord could possibly remove from us.

Even more, the Spirit makes present to us and active among us promises that Jesus made during his ministry that we have largely forgotten. What we and our ancestors in the faith do not recall, the Spirit brings to our remembrance.

*Holy Spirit, come among us, minister to us now and always.
Amen.*

—LAURENCE HULL STOOKEY

Incarnating Holy Spirit

THURSDAY, APRIL 14 • READ LUKE 3:15-16

It is a matter of rare spiritual maturity to know that one is *not* the Messiah. No one throughout my seminary training ever warned me against a messianic complex. On the contrary, I was encouraged to take Jesus as my model, to be a servant of God to the people. In subsequent decades of working with clergy, many of them exhausted from trying to meet the expectations of others and themselves or crushed under the sheer need of their parishioners, I have observed that having a messianic complex is, for many people, indistinguishable from commitment to Christ.

John the Baptist knew better. Though he was more famous than Jesus ever was in his lifetime, John was never tempted by popular accolades or by his indisputable sense of calling to think of himself as the messiah. He had a magnificent role to play for God, but he never edged over into identifying his role with that of the Messiah.

Martin Buber once commented that there is something incommensurate between *thinking* oneself a messiah and *being* a messiah. It may be that many of us fall into messianic roles because we haven't died to our egocentric need to "be" somebody. It is just possible that Jesus himself refused the messianic role later generations laid on him. His temptations in the wilderness seem explicitly to have been rejections of the current messianic hopes. Rather than identify with God, he related to God. He found his calling and followed precisely that, whatever later generations would call him.

Can we relate to the same divine powers within us that Jesus related to? Can we be vessels of divine healing without identifying ourselves with the Healer?

Grant me, O God, to be only myself and do only what you call me to do. Amen.

—WALTER WINK
(1949–2012)

Welcoming God

FRIDAY, APRIL 15 • READ JAMES 1:17-21

We human beings are to do what is good. It is unlikely we would find much argument with that statement. But how are we to do it? Or more to the point, why is it so hard for us to do good? to be good? If we look around us, we do not need to look far to see that wasted lives, inhumanity, corruption, and evil are very much a part of our society, from the small family unit and the neighborhood to the national and global levels.

Perhaps we have misinterpreted our role in the task. James tells us that all good deeds have their origin in God. Even as God created the universe by a word: “God said . . . and it was,” so now in our midst the word of truth from God causes a fallen world to be good. If our hearts are hospitable to that word of truth, then God’s own goodness begins to recreate us.

We are to rid ourselves of all that opposes the good word, to pull out the weeds of anger and sinfulness like a good gardener who wishes to make room for the good seed. The good seed is God’s word. We cannot create it for ourselves—only make room and welcome it. That is task enough.

Give us hearts open to you, O God, so that your word may find a home within us. Amen.

—CATHERINE GUNSALUS GONZÁLEZ

Come, Holy Spirit

SATURDAY, APRIL 16 • READ ACTS 2:14-21

Peter, who denied he even knew Jesus, became the rock on which Jesus would build his church. Here he speaks with authority. Flanked by the apostles, he addresses the crowd's concern. No one among them is drunk. They have never been more sober. He reports that at nine o'clock that morning the Spirit hovered over them with tongues as of fire, reformed them from within, and made them messengers of the Most High. Not with his own words but with those of the prophet Joel, Peter explains what happened. Let us listen to this prophecy as if for the first time, personalizing its declarations.

We may be young or old, male or female, slave or free, Gentile or Jew and yet be designated by the Divine as prophets who refuse to be satisfied with the status quo. Life as we know it takes another turn. Nature itself records the end of one era and the beginning of another. This transformation will take us with Jesus from the agony in the garden, through the scandal of the cross, to the glory of Easter morn. Blood, sweat, fire, smoke, and mist—these and other symbols of turmoil point to the change that earth and its inhabitants are about to undergo. With the coming of the Spirit, our salvation is at hand.

As the apostles receive a new start by the Holy Spirit, so too must we become Pentecost people, shunning all projects of self-salvation and letting God be God in our lives. Our posture becomes one of abject humility, for only when we bow down before the Most High and call upon God's name can we detach ourselves from all forms of idolatry and make a radical commitment to charity.

*Come, Holy Spirit, pour upon us the balm of salvation.
Anoint us with the oil of gladness that we may have the
courage to proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord. Amen.*

—SUSAN MUTO

Leader or Servant?

SUNDAY, APRIL 17 • READ MARK 10:42-45

Muse a while on the seeming oxymoron of “servant leadership.” We have lost the shock value of Jesus’ words and actions that specify that true leadership involves serving others, not ruling them. Yet, in many ways we have reversed Jesus’ reversal by accepting the term *servant leader* but reinvesting it with the trappings of power and privilege. We are all familiar with the title of the supreme pontiff of Rome, “servant of the servants of God.” While we rightly praise humble pontiffs, in actual fact the position is vested with authority and power not much different from the authority and power of any political leader.

Protestants can easily become self-righteous, noting with disapproval the pomp, power, and privilege accorded the “servant of the servants of God.” But haven’t we done the same? We have avoided the term “servant of the servants of God,” but don’t we give greater authority and veneration to supervisory leaders than to pastors? In United Methodist circles, bishops are no longer called by name but by title. And don’t we value serving affluent churches more than poor churches? Why are our most effective pastors sent to big churches as reward for doing well, rather than to our poorest churches where they might help the church grow? If we truly valued servant leadership, wouldn’t pastors vie for appointments to rural or inner city or poor churches where leadership would indeed be sacrificial? In Mark 10 Jesus explicitly reverses the social position of leader from a place of power to a place of sacrificial service, even to a place he calls slavery. His crucifixion sealed this reversal where the Highest suffered with the most lowly for the sake of saving the lowly. We are followers of Christ.

How do we guard against the dangers of pride of place when we choose where we want to serve?

—MARJORIE HEWITT SUCHOCKI

New Venues of Obedience

MONDAY, APRIL 18 • READ PSALM 51:6-12

Effective physicians are never satisfied with merely looking at the symptoms of a disease. They want to know what is going on inside the sick person and discover what triggers these symptoms. Modern medicine has invented several instruments to examine the inner workings of a human body. Thus the medical world uses x-rays, scans of different types, and laparoscopy to understand our inner workings.

God, like a good physician, wants to examine our “inward being.” God’s only instrument is a nudge to kick-start human willingness to open up. That is why the book of Revelation presents Jesus as saying, “I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you” (3:20). The psalmist willingly opens the door. He knows that God desires “truth in the inward being” and therefore pleads with God to teach him wisdom in his secret heart.

Only when we make the request, “Purge me,” does God come to clean us up. Only when we say, “Wash me,” will God step in to do so. Only when we utter, “Create in me a clean heart,” does God come to “put a new and right spirit” within us. When God calls us to new venues of obedience, God waits for our reply, “Yes, Lord.” The Holy Spirit’s presence in us perennially calls us to follow God’s path. When we say yes to the Spirit, we discover that our joy is restored and “a willing spirit” is sustained in us.

This psalm does not end with pleas for a renewed life alone; it ends with praise to God and a resolution to sing aloud God’s deliverance. When we say yes to God’s forgiveness, we sing God’s salvation not only through words but with our whole lives.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me today. Amen.

—M. THOMAS THANGARAJ

The One We Do Not Know

TUESDAY, APRIL 19 • READ PSALM 126:1-6

To live as Christians is to live in a dream state. The best dreams are those from which we do not want to awaken. In them we enjoy unabandoned play or we find everything suddenly making sense or we relish the embrace of a lover. Then when we awaken in the darkness of a cold morning, another day of duties begins to make demands on us, tempting us to shut our eyes and try to extend the dream, the wonderful dream.

But duties press upon us, and we put our feet on the cold floor and hobble to the bathroom. In minutes the dream is forgotten, and reality envelops us with its demands, worries, and responsibilities.

To live as Christians, however, is to continue to live the best of the best dreams: the dream of unending sabbath rest, when we can cease from our labors; the dream of a life that makes sense and where it doesn't make sense, the peace and trust to live in the mystery; the dream of a life lived in the constant embrace of Love.

So important is this "dream" that we must strive weekly—in worship, in prayer, in scripture reading—to remember it. That's what all the means of grace are about: exercises to help us remember that the "reality" of burdensome responsibility is not as real as the dream.

Then, like the psalmist, we can laugh—partly because the dream is such a joy and partly at ourselves for our silliness in so quickly forgetting the dream. And mostly because we are reminded once more how when God gets hold of us, everything gets turned upside down and inside out.

Lord, fix in my mind the dream, and fix in my heart the joy of knowing its reality. Amen.

—MARK GALLI

Chosen For . . .

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 20 • READ 1 PETER 2:2-10

In a world that pronounces so many of us “not good enough,” what might it mean to believe that we really are chosen, precious, and beloved? In new members’ class we talked about baptism: this holy moment when we are named by God’s grace with such power it won’t come undone.

Fayette was there—a woman living on the streets, struggling with mental illness and lupus. She loved the part about baptism and would ask over and over, “And when I’m baptized, I am . . . ?” We soon learned to respond, “Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.” “Oh, yes!” she’d say, and then we could go back to our discussion.

The big day came. Fayette went under, came up sputtering, and cried, “And now I am . . . ?” And we all said, “Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.” “Oh, yes!” she shouted as she danced all around the fellowship hall.

Two months later I got a call. Fayette had been beaten and raped and was at the county hospital. So I went. I could see her from a distance, pacing back and forth. When I got to the door, I heard, “I am beloved . . .” She turned, saw me, and said, “I am beloved, precious child of God, and . . .” Catching sight of herself in the mirror—hair sticking up, blood and tears streaking her face, dress torn, dirty, and rebuttoned askew, she started again, “I am beloved, precious child of God, and . . .” She looked in the mirror again and declared, “. . . and God is still working on me. If you come back tomorrow, I’ll be so beautiful I’ll take your breath away!”

Lord, baptize me in the waters of your grace so that I always remember who I am and the One to whom I belong. Amen.

—JANET WOLF

Gifts of Discipleship

THURSDAY, APRIL 21 • READ HOSEA 11:1-11

Saying that God hurts, Hosea places an amazing concept before us. The Invincible God experiences pain. The Designer God, Author of the Universe, feels the agony of human refusal to return love, the love that helps and heals the child. God hurts, ultimately, because God's child hurts and attracts more hurt.

The child attracts hurt by chasing puny gods that entice but harm. Greed, as seen in the corporate malfeasance that led to the 2008 economic collapse, is one of those gods. Another is biased justice, as viewed in the current practice of meting out capital punishment almost exclusively to the financially disadvantaged. Individual unwillingness to forgive serves as another puny god that calls forth God's judgment. Any act of lust, serving gods that abuse others while serving selfish needs, makes a demand of God.

What demand? These idol-worshipping behaviors demand the God-gift of wrath. God's rage serves as much more than an envious response of a spurned parent. Anger expressed at mistreatment elevates the dignity of the oppressed one and serves notice that victimization cannot and will not be silently tolerated. God's fury demands a defending response to pain, a response that stops the unkindness.

God longs for our love, for us to be reconciled to God by loving treatment of one another. Hosea reminds us that God's heart breaks when we fail to love and that God will gift our failure with an angry response. It is not a threat. It is a promise! Amazingly, even with the promised anger, God dares to bring us home. Astonishing love it is—a love to be grateful for but not to be taken for granted.

God of love, help us to love as you ask and as you have shown. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

—VANCE P. ROSS

Sins, Sinners, Sinlessness

FRIDAY, APRIL 22 • READ LUKE 15:3-10

Several months ago in worship, preparing to take Holy Communion, I was painfully aware of a recent sin. I didn't feel ready to give that sin up, and I knew it. So I prayed, "O God, I don't feel worthy to take Communion this morning. . . ." Quick as a flash I heard God say in my heart, "Oh? And all the other times you have been?" I was startled. Are we worthy? Never. Are we welcome? Always. That is the nature of God's dealing with us.

In Wesleyan terms, we call God's ready welcome preventive grace. This grace bears us toward God even before we decide to begin the journey. It is God wooing us, beckoning to us, searching for us.

God does not usually come into our lives like a demolition expert, razing old structures with one spectacular explosion. That might actually be easier—to walk away from one way of life with its problems and spoiled relationships and to start over fresh. But more often, God changes us the way opening windows changes stale air inside a house—little by little, displacing the old with something fresher, healthier, more appealing.

And God persists. Like a shepherd with willful and stupid animals, God follows us into our ravines, saving us so that eventually we may cooperate in the process of our being saved. We may pat ourselves on the back for our resolve to be better, but there is a prior question: What (or Who) made us dissatisfied with where we were? God, our faithful lover. And when we turn from self-destructive ways and choose something healthier, who is our happiest cheerleader? Again, God.

O God, for your grace that seeks me even when I don't want to be found, I give you thanks. Amen.

—MARY LOU REDDING

A Time of Healing

SATURDAY, APRIL 23 • READ PSALM 30

There is always a before and an after. The psalmist shows us life with God between this before and after. We go from despair to joy, from feeling utterly alone, cast down, and forgotten to feeling uplifted, supported, and healthy. We must be careful not to imagine this before and after of life as caused by God's toying with us. Nor would it be helpful to our souls to see life as endless cycles of absurdity moving continually back and forth between the sublime to the grotesque.

Both ways of seeing life constantly tempt us. The psalmist shows us a God who walks with us in time, content to be with us in life's every moment. Before you awoke this day God was there with you, waiting to enter it with you. Before you encounter events and relationships that may disappoint or hurt or drive you toward despair, God is prepared to move you through the day. Even if this day brings you to mistakes that displease God and hurt your neighbor, God will not abandon you but will await your repentance and your turning again to the way of faith.

God is the God of the again and again, always wishing to bring us to an after: *after* we have fallen, *after* the disappointment, *after* the hurt. This is God's way, forever drawing us from the signs of death to the sight of life. Therefore we are bold both in our praise and our complaint to God, knowing that in either moment we live with a God with excellent hearing. The time between before and after can seem endless, but there will be an after because God is faithful.

Lord, remind me in my difficult moments that there was a before and you were with me then and there will be an after because you are with me even now. Amen.

—WILLIE JAMES JENNINGS

Touchstones of Wonder

SUNDAY, APRIL 24 • READ EXODUS 17:1-7

I find it a strange, disconcerting image: the people of God quarreling with the Lord. In the Christian cultures I know—liberal, conservative, and in-between—we don't argue with God. We'd rather complain about one another.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, divine complaint is an honored tradition. Job famously challenges God. Prophets try to resist the divine plan when God taps them for service. In this Exodus passage, the whole group raises its voice against God's management of the precarious desert sojourn.

We modern Christians reluctantly aim harsh words at God or question divine arrangement. In the Old Testament, an argument with God suggests a real relationship. Anger assumes communication and emotional connection. It presumes a ground rule of engagement: The Judge will hear the bill of resentment and will respond and make answer, if not amends.

I have a few complaints myself for the divine in-box. Why do we seem to be wired for tribal, limited loyalties rather than for universal love? Why the terrible maldistribution of riches and disasters and suffering and luck (and water) across the world? We are awash in mystery.

I read this passage again. I stand amazed that a relationship with the Creator of the universe is possible at all. In the ordeal of daily need in the boiling desert, this truth is what the Israelites ultimately remembered. Frustration with God gave way to a greater experience: the mercy of God. It's what they learned and remembered, which is why we honor it even now.

Holy God, with gratitude I call your name. With conviction I admit my dependence on you. With hope I ask your blessing. Amen.

—RAY WADDLE

Dwelling

MONDAY, APRIL 25 • READ PSALM 84:1-4

Softness of feather, heat of breast, turning of small bird body. . . . These work on the mud, leaves, twigs, and incidental matter to shape a nest for mother to sink into, for eggs to emerge into, for babies to break into.

Human parents shape space to sink into, blanketing it with comforting colors and textures; burrowing into the heart of a watching, protective community as they prepare a resting place for the expected young one. Similarly, spaces of shelter and care are shaped for the elder at life's end.

In good circumstances, humans shape a cushioning nest place for their vulnerable and frail. Is that the truest home or dwelling place? A place shaped around our most defenseless and breakable (sometimes broken) pieces and selves? When those pieces are held and honored, we can sing our contentment like the swallow in a sheltered place.

We begin to learn from these how to shelter our souls in the house, altar, hand, love of God. We begin to draw around ourselves the things of God. We begin to dwell, turn, burrow into the presence and person of God.

As we begin to dwell and sing, how do we remember the unsheltered, the endangered in body and spirit—those needing housing, community, companionship, or respite from warfare? How do we dig, shape, turn out home places with room enough for all, including those with brokenness so close to the surface it frightens us?

Sometimes this means actually sinking our hands in the mud and concrete of a building project or sinking our hearts into the dark places of another's story. Perhaps in the sinking in, in the turning and dwelling, shelter is created.

Homemaking God, teach us to dwell in you with total abandon and release. Empower us to fashion space from who you are for all your children and creation. Amen.

—REGINA M. LAROCHE

Inward and Outward Religion

TUESDAY, APRIL 26 • READ HEBREWS 11:8-16

Part of inward religion is our vision of God's future. Faith is not only the "conviction of things not seen," it is also "the substance of things hoped for" (11:1, KJV), because the things hoped for are things that have not yet been seen. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews goes on to illustrate this point in the rest of chapter 11 by giving examples of those who lived in hope of the unseen things that God had promised. Abraham and Sarah come first: Abraham set out for a place he had never seen; Sarah conceived a child in her old age, another event "not seen" beforehand.

On the one hand, our bodies and brains react against this idea: Synapses develop in our brains in such a way that old habits and old ways of thinking become familiar and comfortable, and we find it difficult to think beyond the things that we are accustomed to seeing. On the other hand, humans delight in breaking stereotypes and conventions. Part of the role that the visual arts play is to challenge the usual ways we think, to open up new connections and thoughts and possibilities for us. The visual arts help us to "see"—not that which is merely imaginary but that which has been "unseen" as yet.

Part of the regular discipline of the spiritual life, then, must be to envision new futures that God intends for us. We are not eternally stuck in a cycle: God is already out front with new hopes and dreams and ideas. The challenge of faith is to allow ourselves (regularly!) to be startled by God's surprising plans and to live according to that faith.

Give us grace, O God, to think new thoughts, dream new dreams, hope new hopes—even as you have thought and dreamed and hoped for us. And give us grace that we may live by your surprising vision. Amen.

—TED CAMPBELL

Where the Spirit Works

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 27 • READ JOHN 7:37-39

In a time when lack of access to clean water afflicts so many, the image of flowing rivers is both potent and poignant. Thirst is one of the hardest deprivations to bear—the one physical form of suffering Jesus named in his last hours on the cross. To bring water to dry fields or clean water to a person dying of cholera represents a powerful ministry. Jesus promises rivers of living water in desert country where his hearers know its significance.

Jesus is referring to the effect of the Holy Spirit on the lives and ministry of those within his hearing—and ours. Not only will the Spirit quench our thirst or give us unlimited access to the source that sustains our lives; but when the Spirit is “poured out” on us, we will become conduits of living water for others. The Spirit will empower and authorize us to bear God’s own gifts. This is the ordination of all believers upon which Luther insisted: Our own hearts, transformed by the action of the Spirit will be like artesian wells where water from a deep source is constantly replenished.

Flow is a verb worth pausing over while reflecting on this passage and on life in the Spirit. What *flows* from us comes almost in spite of ourselves. We simply open a way, and the water finds its course through the hills and valleys and rocky places of our lives into the open spaces where others may reach it. The Spirit that comes as wind and flame and Word also comes as water that finds its way through any terrain, persistent and patient enough to wear away the resistance of granite and make tunnels in any wall.

Gracious God, may your living water flow through us as we act as agents of your grace and bearers of your good gifts. Amen.

—MARILYN CHANDLER MCENTYRE

Where Heaven and Earth Meet

THURSDAY, APRIL 28 • READ LUKE 2:22-40

In his book *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, John O'Donohue shares an idea for a short story he hoped to write: the notion that in the course of our whole life, we would meet just one other person. That idea prompts compelling questions. If we could meet only one person, how would we prepare? What practices would we undertake in order to become ready for such an encounter?

In today's reading we meet two people who have devoted their lives to this kind of preparation. Simeon and Anna have oriented their entire being toward waiting, to making ready for the One they knew would come. When Mary and Joseph bring the infant Jesus to Jerusalem in order to present him at the Temple, Simeon and Anna are there: Simeon, drawn by the Holy Spirit "who rested on him"; Anna, who has spent much of her life living at the Temple—a sacred place in itself. Having long practiced the art of waiting, Anna and Simeon are so prepared that when they see the child whom Mary and Joseph bring, each of them recognizes Jesus. Their years of anticipation have come to an end. Waiting gives way to welcome as they greet him with blessings and with joy.

Christ calls us to this kind of anticipation. How do we prepare ourselves so that, like Anna and Simeon, we will recognize Christ when he shows up in the people who cross our path? How will we make ourselves ready to welcome him in all the ways he will appear?

May your eyes be open to see the face of Christ; your ears be open to hear the voice of Christ; your heart be open to welcome Christ; your hands be open to bless Christ in everyone you meet.

—JAN L. RICHARDSON

Walk through the Waters

FRIDAY, APRIL 29 • READ MATTHEW 14:28-33

Peter's impulsive but utterly honest response to Jesus' appearance in the storm is so consistent with all we know of him. "Let me walk on the water like you have done, and come to you" (AP). His initial response is enthusiastically full of trust. His eyes are on nothing but Jesus. Then Peter notices the reality of situation that rages around him, and his heart is seized with the cold hand of fear. Instead of looking toward the one who has come to rescue, Peter is overwhelmed with the thought of what might be happening to him. Boldness and trust disappear as fear and doubt rise up within him. Only Jesus' strong hand keeps him from the water's chaos and death.

You and I have been on this lake many times. If we have not yet been, life will inevitably take us there. Sometimes it is only in the midst of extremity in our lives that we can understand God's care for us. But those times—the death of a loved one, the suffering of a child, the moral pain of witnessing injustice and oppression going unchecked, the endless string of our own broken promises—are very strong and very real. We, like Peter, take our eyes off God's offer of salvation, and we sink like stones.

God wants nothing more for us than to release us from our self-preoccupations and to free us from the enemies within. The One who was present at the creation of wind and wave and who knows our fears and doubts remains ruler over the sea and bringer of grace. So when we allow God to come to us and permit ourselves to move toward God, the winds are calmed and we know him for who he is—God-with-us.

*Forgive us, Lord, our doubts, little and vast. When in the night the storms threaten, keep our eyes on you alone.
Amen.*

—DON E. SALIERS

Risky Business

SATURDAY, APRIL 30 • READ RUTH 4:13-17

God takes a risk on the most unlikely situations, hanging the whole of human history on two homeless widows—one old and past the age of children, the other a foreigner. God moves in our lives as an unseen, unheard presence, calling us to risk all just as God risks all.

The women's risk pays off; they secure their futures when Boaz takes Ruth as his wife. Boaz also takes a risk. He joins himself to a woman who has already been married, who is not of his country or brought up in his faith.

The people in the story—Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz—venture into a risky relationship, but the birth of a son seems to confirm the wisdom of taking a chance. As the village women know, Obed is a sign of God's blessing, one who will restore Naomi's life, keep her in her old age, and affirm the precious worth of a daughter-in-law.

We know that this baby, born of an unlikely union, is the ongoing link to another baby, one who would come from the most unlikely union of all, that of God and humankind. Through Obed, God builds the house of David, a house big enough to include the outcast, the foreigner, the sinner, the victim, the heartbroken: "And Salmon [was] the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David" (Matt. 1:5-6).

It is risky business to entrust the salvation of the world to the destitute and defenseless. It is risky business to leave it all in the hands of women and children. But that is exactly what God has done.

Reflect on where God is taking a risk with your life. How will you respond?

—MARTHA HIGHSTREET

Call, Promise, Response

SUNDAY, MAY 1 • READ EXODUS 3:16-18

Here Exodus records God's call and promise to Moses and the leaders of Israel, the call to leave Egypt and the promise to lead Israel to a better land, in God's own way. The call comes out of God's love and compassion. God's loving providence will always move us, whether by inner promptings or external events, to change, to grow.

"I have decided that I will bring them out of Egypt" (GNT). Egypt was at one time the salvation of the Hebrews. God's people were called *to* Egypt, the land where Joseph served with authority, to be saved from famine. But now, a new king has arisen over Egypt "who [does] not know Joseph" (Exod. 1:8). The Hebrews have grown in number and become a threat to Egypt; they live in oppression. It is time to leave the situation that once had saved their lives. So God calls them to new life, to a new land "flowing with milk and honey" (Exod. 3:8).

Like Israel, the church and each of us are part of a pilgrim people. God calls us to one stage of life; when we have matured there, God calls us to the next. To go on, we may have to leave behind what at one time was our salvation. Would refusal to change and grow indicate resistance to God's call, to God's loving care for us? God calls us continuously to new life and liberation, both internal and external: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17).

Where is God calling me now? Where is God calling you? Where does the promise of new life reside? What old habits, ways, relationships, addictions hold us captive? What must we do to be free of them, to move on to new life?

Holy Spirit, lead me. Enlighten my mind and strengthen my heart that I may see where you call me now and have the courage to respond. Amen.

—THEODORE TRACY

Right Relationship with God

MONDAY, MAY 2 • READ PSALM 1:1-4

We are not at peace until we find ourselves rooted in true relationship with God, an organic and life-giving relationship. Until we reach that place, we may feel restless, tense, and dissatisfied in our soul journey.

Psalm 1 describes right relationship with the Creator as like a tree planted by a stream. The roots move toward water naturally, strongly. Fertile, watered land brings forth healthy plants and trees.

When we look at our lives, sometimes we see ourselves in an uphill battle and find the way difficult. We feel uprooted and vulnerable. Our lives are not refreshed but withering. Israel finds itself in a similar place. God has made covenant with Israel. Israel tries to remain in holy relationship with the Creator God, and its prophets urge no more alienation or separation from God. Even though the people of Israel stray far from their original relationship, they believe that God's redemptive grace will be available as restorative power.

"Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night." Blessed is the one who meditates on the law of the Lord and faithfully pursues right relationship with God. Blessed is the one who desires true relationship with God.

On our life's journey, may we, like trees planted by streams, sink our roots deep into the living water. Then may we gradually be grounded in God's Spirit and bear fruit with a peaceful mind.

Creator God, make us a blessing to this earth of yours and all that are part of it. We desire to bear fruit in your graciousness and abundance. Amen.

—HEE-SOO JUNG

Discerning Discipleship's Call

TUESDAY, MAY 3 • READ EXODUS 33:18-23

Involvement precedes interest. Before a deep and genuine interest can be generated, we must risk at least a minimum degree of involvement. Waiting for the mood to strike us before we take the first critical steps toward discipleship may mean a lifetime of boredom and wasted opportunities.

The first son initially says no to discipleship's call. The mood does not strike him. He is disinterested. Later, he repents. Perhaps the mood still does not strike him, but he feels he should do it whether he feels like it or not. He gets involved, and interest develops later. His feelings and moods follow from his actions.

John Wesley wrote that he went "reluctantly" to a meeting on Aldersgate Street. He did not let his mood and feelings dictate his actions. He acted his way into feeling. He responded to the concrete moment, and his emotions followed later.

How often do we turn away from discipleship's opportunities because we just don't feel like getting involved? How often have we reluctantly said yes only to discover later how important such an activity was to us?

Almighty and gracious God, help us to follow you faithfully not just when the mood or moment strikes us but at all times. Amen.

—THOMAS R. HAWKINS

Choose Life Wholeheartedly

WEDNESDAY, MAY 4 • READ MATTHEW 5:17-20

To fulfill the law and the prophets is to choose life wholeheartedly; it involves both doing and teaching. Anyone who has taught others recognizes that we learn more when teaching a subject than we ever thought possible. How much truer would this be in the doing and teaching of the righteous commandments found in the law and prophets?

But Jesus requires something else of those who would be “called great in the kingdom of heaven.” He directs his followers to righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. He moves us back behind the legal commandments and their interpretation to God’s fundamental intentions for humanity. The righteousness Christ calls for is based on the divine will of love and justice for all.

What does this new statement of a very ancient experience mean for our lives?

It means not necessarily *doing more* but *being more* in touch with the will of God.

It means reflecting on one’s own sin before speaking a judgmental, hurtful word to another.

It means strengthening, not diminishing, the community of God’s people.

It means choosing life through a series of little deaths to selfishness.

The paramount righteousness does not result in conformity to a norm but continuing commitment to a covenant relationship with God and with human companions on the journey. It is to take into ourselves the pain and joy, the burdens and blessings of the commandments to love God and neighbor.

You show me, O God, what is required to follow in the way of Jesus. Help me live that way of love today. Amen.

—BARBARA B. TROXELL

God's Messengers

THURSDAY, MAY 5 • READ LUKE 1:67-75

Zechariah is no longer mute. His season of enforced silence provided a time of spiritual deepening in which he became aware of God's activity in his midst. "Filled with the Holy Spirit," he speaks aloud a prophecy about his son, John. The prophecy begins by proclaiming God as the source of all that has made the present moment of joy possible and who secures the people's future with "knowledge of salvation." Zechariah remembers God's mighty acts: God redeemed the people, raised up a mighty savior, spoke through the holy prophets, saved the people from their enemies and from any harm. Remembering the past is a spiritual act that establishes the meaning of the current relationship with God. Remembering the past brings forth the basis of future hope.

Zechariah, as God's messenger, is a time traveler. To guide and reassure his generation, he enters the past through remembering and the future through prophetic envisioning. In hearing his message, we travel into sacred history, and we travel forward to a future that is intended for us. In this future we serve God freely, without intimidation and oppression—a future in which we are fully capable of living "in holiness and righteousness." How can we prepare to discern and embrace this future? Perhaps contemplative listening to God's messengers in a personal season of silence will deepen your spiritual vision and guide your feet "into the way of peace."

O God, you know the longing of our hearts to experience the present and future you intend for us. May we discern your messages and rest in your companionship. Amen.

—LUTHER E. SMITH JR.

The Council of Bishops begins meeting today prior to the 2016 General Conference. Please hold the council members in prayer that their work may be done effectively and compassionately.

The Disciple's Journey

FRIDAY, MAY 6 • READ LUKE 10:1-11

The seventy disciples must have felt terrified. Without warning, it seems, Jesus sends them into the world to begin their ministry.

In some ways, it is what the disciples have desired. Surely some of them have been thinking, *I want to be like Jesus. I want to do the things that he is doing.* But it is one thing to have those thoughts and another thing entirely to act on them. Now the time to act has come. They can no longer sit in the background, watching Jesus teach and do works of power. It's their turn to step up. As if that were not enough pressure, Jesus adds a catch: Carry nothing.

We would have a hard time following Jesus' direction today. In our daily lives, our focus on schedules, plans, and material possessions leaves little space to hear how God wants to use us that day. Or for mission trips, we send out reconnaissance teams to study the mission field and figure out its needs. Then we plan for months, accumulating supplies that will meet any need that the mission team might have or encounter. While necessary for many mission endeavors, imagine the possibility of engaging the mission field and following Jesus' direction: Carry nothing.

Carry nothing. These words invite us into the moment, to lean into the arms of Jesus who supplies our needs. *Carry nothing.* It reminds us that our power does not come from possessions or planning but from our faith and trust in the Son of God who holds all power in his hand.

Lord of love and light, free us from the entrapments of material possessions and dependence on our own efforts that keep us from leaning into your abundant grace and power. Help us to love and trust you fully and to carry that love into the world. Amen.

—CHANEQUA WALKER-BARNES

When God Comes to Us!

SATURDAY, MAY 7 • READ ISAIAH 6:1-8

In today's reading we focus on God's call to Isaiah: "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?'" The words do not appear to be spoken to Isaiah, but Isaiah can hear them. Because the burning coal has seared his unclean lips, blotting out his sin and dispelling his guilt, Isaiah can hear the voice of God! Moreover, he responds, "Here am I; send me!" We know the rest of the story from the verses that follow: God calls Isaiah and commissions him to tell the people of Judah of coming destruction. Isaiah is to speak a message they will not heed until the land is "utterly desolate" (6:11).

When God comes to us, God calls us to go into the world. We fear the searing coal and the hard task. We feel burdened; we draw back. We can hardly keep our own lives together. How can we say to God, "Here am I; send me"?

We can respond affirmatively to God's request because in God's cleansing, God clears away our fear, our resistance, our disability; we have only the task and its own difficulties—and we have God's energy for the task. When we experience God, God propels us into the hard tasks: feeding the hungry, comforting the sick, visiting the prisoners, fighting oppression, preaching the word.

"Here am I; send me." Surely it is worth releasing ourselves to God and passing through the refining fire that blots out our sin so that we can hear God's voice and respond clearly to God. God enables us to answer, "Here am I; send me." Being able to answer and to act is itself a gift from God and brings us peace.

Redeemer God, we want to see you, to hear your voice. We acknowledge the world's great need. By your grace we will respond, "Here am I; send me." Amen.

—N. SUE VAN SANT PALMER

The Body of Christ

SUNDAY, MAY 8 • READ MATTHEW 10:40-42

The disciples take little with them, so they will literally rely on the goodness of others to survive. They cannot be picky about food or accommodations; they will accept whatever is given from whoever will give.

We dislike having to rely on others. Especially for cultures or families that celebrate self-sufficiency, receiving hospitality can be more difficult than offering it. To give out of our abundance to those who have less makes us feel good. To be the ones in need, especially when we can offer nothing in return, challenges our independent, prideful hearts.

As Jesus commissions his disciples, he makes an astounding promise: “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” As if to diminish the anxiety of relying on others, he promises that they will actually be the presence of God in Christ to those who receive them.

For a year after college, I lived and taught in another country. From the moment I arrived, my students and their families overwhelmed me with hospitality. I had absolutely nothing to offer except my presence and gratitude, but I came to realize that perhaps that was enough.

This final lesson is both difficult and joyous. Though we often feel more comfortable bestowing hospitality, our willingness to receive graciously is a gift. As humble strangers, we can become the presence of Christ to those who welcome us. We offer the opportunity to be a blessing and to be blessed. As our communities learn to give and to receive, we become the body of Christ.

Gracious God, thank you for the ways you have blessed us through others. May we receive what others have to give so that we become the presence of Christ in their midst. Amen.

—BETH LUDLUM

A Time of Benediction

MONDAY, MAY 9 • READ 1 CORINTHIANS 1:3

As a pastor, I have always felt deeply privileged to give the blessing, or benediction, to the people of God. At that moment I know I am sharing in a ritual as old as the Christian faith, words that, in one way or another, have been part of Christian worship since the birth of the church. Long ago, I decided to share that privilege: I encouraged the members of my congregation to say the benediction together. With our people holding hands, making eye contact, and speaking the words strongly to one another, the time of benediction has become a powerful spiritual moment.

This is the way community should be. The benediction becomes our prayer for one another, a time when we wish for one another the most precious gift life can bestow—the gift of God.

We always run the risk of our faith's becoming simply another self-improvement course or a system of belief or a way of making the world a better place. All these may be part of faith; but at its heart, faith is about receiving God. Jesus came to offer us a relationship with the living God who comes to us as Father/Creator, as Son/Savior/Lord, and as Holy Spirit/Encourager. The gifts of grace and peace about which Paul speaks flow from this relationship into our lives, making us different.

The world has its own greetings. People say, "Have a good day"—a kindly wish. Christians say, "Have the grace and peace of God"—a saving gift. We offer this supernatural, transcendent gift to one another in the benediction. None can give the grace and peace we offer but God. None can mediate it but Jesus. None can sustain it but the Holy Spirit.

Employ Paul's benediction as your gift to all those you meet today.

—PETER J. STOREY

As We Have Gone

TUESDAY, MAY 10 • READ MATTHEW 28:16-20

As president of the Council of Bishops, I welcome the readers of *The Upper Room 60 Days of Prayer for the 2016 General Conference*. Your prayers and spiritual support are essential to all of us who gather in Portland, Oregon. Together may we remember what the Christian men and women, young and old, around the globe have done to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to us. Because they have gone in obedience to Jesus' command to go—making disciples, baptizing, and teaching them to obey everything that Jesus taught by word and deed, we are here today.

Because faithful followers of Jesus have gone into “all the world,” we gather here from all over the world. We gather as a global community of believers because of their faithfulness.

Our God is a missionary God who seeks and saves those who are lost. United Methodism began with the mission of John and Charles Wesley to North America. We are a missionary people. We go in faithful response to our Lord's commission to “go and make disciples.”

We are fed at our Lord's table. In our Wesleyan tradition, this is an open table. All are welcome: young and old, from the east and west, from the north and south, from the lowliest to the most esteemed. In Christ we are one people, one body, one church. We share one hope, one faith, one baptism, one God, one mission.

We deeply engage in our Lord's mission. We cannot fail and we cannot stop. Why? Because our Lord assures us, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Lord Jesus Christ, lead us, feed us, send us—to all people in all places. Amen.

—WARNER BROWN

Go and Announce

WEDNESDAY, MAY 11 • READ MATTHEW 11:2-6

In our sensationalized media age I often get the gut feeling that questions that could help the public engage in civil discourse and make wiser decisions are instead intended to embarrass or entrap. Jesus was not immune to this tactic—especially from the religious leaders who wanted so desperately to expose him as a fraud.

Yet questions can generate new thoughts and perceptions. Honest inquiry that seeks to pull back the layers of knowledge and complexity is always in order. So the question in today's text posed to Jesus by John the Baptist's disciples is one that allows Jesus to shed light, deepen knowledge, and inspire faith: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answers by citing his actions on behalf of the blind, the lame, the deaf, the leper, the poor, and even the dead. His answer is compassionate yet firm. If John and his disciples are not sure just who Jesus is, they now know.

Jesus, indeed, is the one who was to come. But because Jesus came in a different guise and fashion, acting more like a servant than a messiah, people weren't sure. Jesus showed them and shows us a view of the God who works among the lost, the last, and the least.

We dare not fault John for sending his clarifying question. Remember, Jesus said of John, "Among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist." The real question now is this: In what ways do we announce to the world that Jesus is the One who has come through our compassion for "the least of these"?

Dear Jesus, you are the way, the truth, and the life. Help us to know you and to see the new thing you are doing. Amen.

—GREGORY V. PALMER

Going under Authority

THURSDAY, MAY 12 • READ MATTHEW 8:5-13

I sit in the dentist's chair; she is about to perform a root-canal treatment. I am anesthetized, and the dentist begins. I affirm her as a trained professional who knows how to perform the procedure, but suddenly panic hits. *What if the anesthesia doesn't work? What if the dentist hits a nerve and sends me through the roof?* That's when I realize how hard it is to let go of control.

The serious illness of a beloved servant has taken a Roman centurion to the place where control ends and faith begins. The centurion knew how to use the power of authority, the power of fear, the power of violence, and the power of death. He knew his soldiers would obey his every command. But when it comes to the illness of his trusted servant, his power is powerless. That's when he turns to Jesus. The centurion decides to humble himself and submit to a *greater* authority, acknowledging his unworthiness to ask Jesus for anything.

Jesus surprisingly lifts up the humble submissive faith of the centurion. And he names it: the strongest faith he has seen so far.

In these beginning days of General Conference, this passage serves as a wonderful reminder to let go of every desire for power and control and instead receive another kind of authority from Christ based on prayer, humility, and forgiveness. If we desire to follow Christ and to walk under his authority, we let go of control and submit ourselves to him, trusting that he knows what he is doing.

*Lord, we are not worthy to have you come under our roof;
but only speak the word to us, and we will be healed. Amen.*

—CHRISTIAN ALSTED

As You Go, Be Learning

FRIDAY, MAY 13 • READ MATTHEW 9:9-13

As we go, we are called to learn God's way of mercy. How do we learn mercy? David Brooks, in his book *Call to Character*, says brokenness or suffering is what makes people compassionate or merciful. Do we learn mercy through the experience of our own brokenness? Or do we become bitter victims? Learning mercy implies that we emerge from our brokenness not as victims but as people who care enough to work toward making sure that others do not experience the same brokenness. Mercy often carries a justice element to it.

Why do I care that "all" means "all" in our church? Because I know what it's like to be rejected by the church I love. While my "home" church denomination greatly shaped who I am and my faith, when God called me into ministry, that same church rejected my call! Now I'm a "born-again" United Methodist in the sense that I want everyone to be received and accepted by a church that professes grace toward all. Countless people experience rejection, shunning, denial, and are made suspect in our churches and communities because of their race, color, disability, sexual orientation, economic and class differences—all aspects of being that persons have little or no control over. Maybe you've always been well received, listened to, noticed, and encouraged. If so, learning mercy may prove difficult.

But more likely, you too may have had a wounding life experience that has inflicted brokenness. What is your point of brokenness, and how does it motivate you to make sure that you don't treat others like the righteous ones in Jesus' day treated Matthew?

Help us learn mercy, O God, and let the test of our learning be in the ways in which we demonstrate mercifulness to the Matthews of our day. Amen.

—SALLY DYCK

Going with Courage

SATURDAY, MAY 14 • READ MATTHEW 2:1-12

Faithful to their profession, the magi willingly move out of their comfort zone and, intrigued by the bright new star they observe, set out on a journey. They take with them the best gifts of their culture: gold, myrrh, and frankincense. The magi's inquiry forces Herod and his religious advisers to search their own scriptures.

The magi continue on their quest. Although the star leads to a stable, they experience no disappointment, for the child is more important than the location. They bow in worship and adoration and then, obeying God's direction, return home via a new route. The magi's journey challenges us to ask many questions as we make decisions that will impact our church in this next quadrennium:

As delegates entrusted with this holy work, are we, like the magi, fully prepared for the twists and turns our journey may take on the road ahead?

- Are we listening respectfully to the full range of voices and positions before making decisions?
- Are we bringing our best as worthy and faithful disciples of Jesus Christ to glorify our Creator God?
- Do we attempt to find God and experience the love of Christ even when discussions take us to the stable? How open are we to acknowledging God's presence in our deliberations and to learning from God?
- When the Holy Spirit nudges us to a completely fresh and new direction in our deliberations, do we have courage enough to give up our agendas and follow God's calling?

O God, may we be open to the promptings of your voice in and through our search for your guidance. Amen.

—SUDA DEVADHAR

Love and Love Alone

SUNDAY, MAY 15 • READ EPHESIANS 4:25–5:2

The book of Ephesians is a “circular” letter, meaning it wasn’t directed to one particular church but was passed from one congregation to another. In chapters 1–3, the writer deals with some great truths of the Christian faith, and in chapter 4 the author explores how we can live out those truths. Ephesians 4:25–32 (*The Message*) says this :

- No more lies.
- Be angry—but don’t use your anger as fuel for revenge.
- Watch the way you talk.
- Don’t break God’s heart.
- Forgive one another.

These rules make sense on one level, but we still have trouble living by them. Too often we distrust those who disagree with us and choose to believe that we alone have the answers. We fear those who are different. We care for ourselves and our passions first. And yet, . . . listen:

Watch what God does, and then you do it. . . . Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with [God] and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn’t love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that.

Our call is to live an extravagant life of love that exceeds the rational limits of our society, our culture, and our world. A love so simple, yet so profound. A love so extravagant that we willingly give ourselves away for the sake of God, for the sake of Christ, and for the sake of the world.

Loving God, give us hearts for love alone so that when our day is done and our work complete, it is you who is glorified. Amen.

—DEBORAH L. KIESEY

As You Go, Call All

MONDAY, MAY 16 • READ MATTHEW 22:1-14

Many today share a fascination with royal weddings. Millions watched when Princess Diana and Prince Charles married. And “watch parties” met to view Kate Middleton and Prince William’s wedding. Would you consider not responding with a positive RSVP to a royal wedding? Or can you imagine sending out invitations only to discover on the day of the wedding that no one wants to attend?

Here in Matthew 22 we have a king who, after all the invitees regretfully decline, chooses to invite everyone willing to attend—good and bad. Can you picture a banquet hall full of fits and misfits? I can. You and I experience this every time we gather at the Communion table.

And what are we to make of the one who comes terribly underdressed for the occasion? Can you imagine not dressing appropriately for a royal wedding? Did he refuse to wear the wedding robe traditionally provided by the king? Unimaginable. Or is it?

How often have we refused to wear the “wedding robe”? Remember the time we thought we were better than them and didn’t have to wear the wedding robe? Or the time we felt that we were not worthy enough to wear it? Truth be told, all of us need the “wedding robe.” Wearing the robe covers a multitude of sins.

Jesus invites us all to his banquet—a feast of the finest gifts of grace. A feast for fits and misfits! Good and bad! You and me! And best of all, robes of forgiveness, love, and acceptance. Robes that cover our brokenness and remind us of our worthiness are freely and readily available for all of us to wear.

Gracious Host of all that is good, we accept your banquet invitation to abundant grace and love. We stand here in our robes, ready for the celebration! Amen.

—CYNTHIA FIERRO HARVEY

That We May Be One

TUESDAY, MAY 17 • READ JOHN 17:20-23

Today, the United Methodist Conference welcomes ecumenical leaders from other Christian churches around the world. Bishop Ivan Abrahams, General Secretary of the World Methodist Council (a body of 80 Methodist, Wesleyan, and related Uniting and United Churches with more than 80 million members in 133 countries around the world) will proclaim the word. In addition, world leaders from other Christian communions including the Eastern Orthodox churches, Baptist churches, Pentecostal churches and the Roman Catholic Church will be present—all together in worship and prayer. All together in Christ. All together in response to Jesus' prayer for oneness.

Unity is a gift from God. Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and prayer makes us one in Christ. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in and through Jesus Christ. There is one God, one faith, one hope, one baptism. We believe in Jesus and honor his word, which calls us into unity and oneness. We are one body with many members—an important understanding. Jesus said that our unity, our oneness, our genuine love and respect for one another would enable the world to believe that he was sent by God.

This year, as I represented The United Methodist Church at the National Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches, and the Parliament of World Religions, I experienced a sense of joy and hope that lifted my spirit and increased my resolve to live in accord with Jesus' prayer. Will you join me in praying, "That they may all be one. . . . so that the world may believe that you sent me."

Loving Lord Jesus, we join our prayer with yours—that we may be one—so the world may believe that God sent you to seek and save us all. Amen.

—MARY ANN SWENSON

Evil Is Going Too

WEDNESDAY, MAY 18 • READ MATTHEW 12:43-45

Planting a garden requires that the gardener prepare the soil, clearing it of vegetation that would hinder the growth of the crop to be planted and grown. For the crop's ongoing protection, the gardener must constantly guard against weeds that grow up and seek to rob the plants of the nutrients needed for their maturity.

Weeds that destroy life and plants that nourish life grow in the same plot of land if the owner of the garden does not diligently tend to the garden.

During a *60 Minutes* interview with Holocaust survivor Yehiel Dinur, who testified at the 1960 trial of Adolf Eichmann, Mike Wallace asked Dinur why he cried and then collapsed to the floor at the trial. Dinur explained that his reaction was not what he had anticipated. Although Eichmann personified evil, the encounter made Dinur realize that sin and evil are the natural human condition.

"I was afraid about myself," Dinur concluded. "I saw that I am capable to do this . . . I am . . . exactly like he."

Dinur's words spoken fifty-six years ago still ring true today. If we do not tend our lives, we can allow evil to grow where we intended holiness. Evil, like weeds, actively seeks a place to dwell and flourish. When we stop tending our lives we become welcome homes for evil. We often think of people like Eichmann and others as "evil." However, our foibles are more than little missteps without consequences; they build patterns of destructive behavior. A few weeds can take over an untended plot of land. Jesus warns us to fill our lives with words, actions, events, and people that sanctify our lives.

Lord, help me guard my heart from little evils so that no evil may find a welcome place in my life. Amen.

—JAMES SWANSON SR.

Go to the Lost Sheep

THURSDAY, MAY 19 • READ MATTHEW 10:5-15

Jesus forbids his disciples to preach to Gentiles and Samaritans and directs them to the Jews. Why would he give such a racist instruction?

Being a Jew himself, Jesus may have desired that the Jews first receive the message of God's reign. Or perhaps Jesus realizes that the strengths and weaknesses of his young disciple team would preclude their venturing into risky territory. Preaching to Gentiles and Samaritans required particular qualities and skills with which the disciples were not fully equipped.

Like all good teachers, Jesus knows that effective ministry requires appropriate planning for maximum impact. So maybe he decides to start from the known (Jews) and later venture into the unknown and more challenging territory of the Gentiles and Samaritans.

And as a strategist, Jesus knows that effective ministry demands that he prioritize his priorities. Biting off too much can be disastrous. Starting small with limited objectives can offer an ideal solution. So he decides to focus on Galilee, a well-known terrain.

Notice that just as Jesus is specific in the choice of place, so also he mentions specific objectives: Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. The disciples are to focus on the helpless and hopeless in society. In Jesus' realm, these people top the list of Jesus' priorities. Jesus' priorities and focus for ministry have not changed. Nor has his charge to us. Anything less is unacceptable.

Gracious God, help us never forget that we live in a hurting world. Teach us to prioritize our priorities so we may reach out to all who daily search for your love. Amen.

—JOHN YAMBASU

Who Goes Where?

FRIDAY, MAY 20 • READ MATTHEW 27:62-28:8

What do you do the morning after the crucifixion? If you are Pilate and the chief priests, you send soldiers to seal the tomb shut, once and for all! They prefer that Jesus be dead and buried. They want to squelch the crazy rumors that he might rise from the dead. They want to kill the story of hope so things can get back to normal.

Next day, the Marys go to the same place to see the tomb. Matthew doesn't tell us what they seek. Maybe they just aren't finished following Jesus. When an angel unseals the stone to reveal an empty tomb, they run to spread the word—the Pharisees' worst fear. The great good news couldn't simply die on a cross. Jesus lived on through changed lives: hungry fed, lame healed, lost found, outsiders welcomed. You can't shut that down! Jesus lives in the beloved community. As disciples follow Jesus beyond the tomb, Jesus lives.

Last June, nine African American Christians were shot dead in a cold-blooded act of racial hatred. What did the families of the dead do? They went to see the tomb. They returned to the scene of the crime, the church. They forgave the gunman and told him to ask for God's mercy, saying, "It'll be all right." That's what disciples of Jesus Christ do. Standing in the shadow of death they tell the story of "Jesus and his love." They turn hate to love, death to life.

Wherever you stand today on the last day of General Conference, ask yourself where you are headed. What have you seen? What story will you tell? A story of death and curse? Or of life and blessing?

*God, let me see flowers in the desert and light in the darkness so that the story I tell is of love that bears all things.
Amen.*

—ELAINE J. W. STANOVSKY

Go to Where the Wounds Are

SATURDAY, MAY 21 • READ MATTHEW 28:16-20

I will never forget the day a bishop of the church laid his hands on my head and told me to “take authority to preach the Word of God and to administer the Holy Sacraments”—filling me with Spirit-confidence and courage in that moment. I felt equally overwhelmed with humility and a good measure of anxiety. I imagine the eleven disciples on that Galilean mountain experienced a combustible mixture of boldness and fear when Jesus gave them authority to go and make disciples of all nations.

It did not take me long to learn that the authority to “go” did not reside in the words or sign-act of the bishop. The authority came from going to the places where Jesus went.

Jesus went to where the wounds were and proclaimed healing. As students and practitioners of the gospel, we are charged to go with our loving presence to those forgotten ones. We are charged to go with our prophetic witness to those endangered ones for whom the gospel call to justice and mercy has seemed far removed from their lives.

We are charged to go with our pastoral care to those broken ones whose lives have been shattered by the storms and accidents of life or by poor choices made by others or themselves. We are charged to go with our joyful proclamation to those hopeless ones whose souls have been crushed by despair, doubt, depression and then to cry out for the Spirit of God to be born within them.

We go, therefore, to where the wounds are with our loving presence, our prophetic witness, our pastoral care, and our joyful proclamation because that is where Jesus went and that is where we are now called to go.

Gracious and loving God, help us always to go, as Jesus did, to where the wounds are. Amen.

—BRUCE R. OUGH

Follow Me!

SUNDAY, MAY 22 • READ JOHN 21:15-23

Failure, broken promises, betrayal, and denial—Peter has done all these things after publicly vowing never to deny Jesus. Jesus’ disciples fail him and abandon their call.

The runaway disciples have fished all night and caught nothing. As dawn breaks, Jesus calls to them and tells them to put the net on the other side of the boat. They catch more fish than the boat can hold. The Bible says this was Jesus’ third appearance to the disciples after the Resurrection. It is a miracle of mercy. Jesus comes to them, guides them, reveals himself to them—and then comes the detailed account of Peter’s restoration. Three denials, three questions, three affirmations—the process of healing and restoration takes time. It is a process, then and now.

We all need revelation, restoration, and guidance. Yet, within minutes of Peter’s restoration and his positive response to Jesus’ command, “Follow me!” he takes his eyes off Jesus and focuses on the behavior of another disciple, “Lord, what about him?”

Jesus’ response to Peter “What is that to you?” flashed through my mind and into my heart in 2006 when I questioned the actions and attitudes of others in our United Methodist Church. “What is that to you, Tom? Follow me!” I believe the call of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit is the same this Pentecost season: “Follow me!” The call to follow comes to every disciple. Regardless of our words or actions, our sense of loss or gain—nothing matters except our response to the call of the Lord Jesus Christ, “Follow me!”

Jesus, forgive my sins, my failures, and my need to determine others’ actions. Enable me to be a faithful disciple—to feed your lambs, tend your sheep, and follow you. Amen.

—TOM ALBIN

Therefore, Keep Going!

MONDAY, MAY 23 • READ MATTHEW 28:16-20

So now it's over. The debates, the long hours, the hotel room living, the disappointment, the excitement, the worship. Hallelujah! General Conference is over, and it's time to head back to our regular lives. Is this how the disciples felt after the Resurrection? It's been a wild ride, but now it's over so we can all get back to normal? Matthew's Gospel reflects some doubt (verse 17) that anything has changed. Then Jesus speaks again, "Go!"

Because now it's just beginning. The cleanup, the processing, the reporting, the unpacking. Yes, that work will be done, but it's more than that. General Conference is over, and now it's time to head into the world—back to our communities that look to us for a hint that something has changed, that the status quo is somehow different. We return to our neighborhoods filled with hurting people, hungry people, lonely people—those desperate for a word of hope, a sign of resurrection. Back to our churches that eagerly desire to hear again the call of Jesus: I am your hope! I am the resurrection! I am here with you always, for all time!

The reality is that we continue on the way with Jesus Christ. General Conference is over, but we continue working, walking, marching, celebrating the good news of God's victory over death. The One who sends us out to "therefore, go!" is the same One who equips us with everything we need for the mission. The One who calls us on the journey is the same One who goes with us and who will never abandon us. Let's continue on together!

God of the journey, we are grateful for your call and your presence with us as we continue together on the path of love and discipleship. Amen.

—LAURA JAQUITH BARTLETT

Release and Resolve

TUESDAY, MAY 24 • READ MATTHEW 18:21-22

In my ministry as a pastoral psychologist, I have had the privilege to be invited into churches to help them heal a long-standing conflict. Underlying most of these is the fact that people are holding on to old hurts and dissensions, feeling afraid to express their true emotions to the one who hurt them. Instead, they voice their concerns through the gossip grapevine and develop unrest at a covert level throughout the church. Only when a safe place is made for all to tell of their wounds and to start letting go of the bitterness due to the lack of forgiveness can energy flow again toward healing and wholeness.

Peter asks Jesus how many times he has to forgive someone who harms him. He figures that his answer of seven is very generous and goes above and beyond the usual expectation. Jesus surprises him by saying in effect, “No way, seven is not enough! You have got to forgive continuously.” Jesus also commands them to love one another.

If we truly love one another and ourselves, we will let go of any desire to hold a grudge or bitterness. We will seek to resolve conflicts directly with the one who hurt us rather than taking revenge or destroying someone’s reputation.

In our time together at General Conference, conflicts surely have arisen. Where are you holding on to some hurt or dissension? Where do you need to resolve an issue with a brother or sister? Where, as the church, do we need to heal divisions so that we can truly be the body of Christ, united?

Gracious Healer, help us to forgive as we have been forgiven. Teach us to see one another through eyes of love, and grant us the courage to resolve conflicts and let go of bitterness. Amen.

—DENISE MCGUINNESS

A Prayer of Intercession

WEDNESDAY, MAY 25 • READ ISAIAH 55:1-9

O loving Christ who waits for us all
to move forward,
to change inward,
to love outward.

Wait now with me as I long and learn to become
more like you.

Guide me to wait with the lost,
to stand with the weak,
to have a heart for the brokenhearted.
Amen.

Pray

- for all who await news from runaways
- for expectant parents
- for wisdom
- for gentleness toward yourself and others this day

—PAMELA C. HAWKINS
From *The Awkward Season*

The Loving Shepherd

THURSDAY, MAY 26 • READ MATTHEW 18:10-14

We Christians have a penchant for making the simplicity of our faith downright complex. We desire to have spelled out in detail what we are to do, when, toward whom, how often, and when we can stop. For Jesus, rules simply illustrate how to live a faith not governed by rules.

My favorite story concerns a tiny gray lamb. The other sheep ostracize her for being different and, in feeling unwanted, she comes to believe that she is not worthy of being wanted. If she is dumb and unlovable, then it hardly matters what she does. Whether thoughtful or mischievous, she will never belong. This heaviness descends over her until there comes a day when she doesn't care anymore—so she wanders off. The farther away she drifts, the more certain she is that if the other sheep do notice, it will be with a snicker of “good riddance.” Night comes, and the darkness is darker than she recalls it ever being before. She hears strange noises. She is cold, hungry, and frightened.

But sometime during that shivering night, the lamb dares to believe that she hears within the harsh wind a hint of a familiar voice, even the sound of her name. It is the shepherd who has left the ninety-nine because of her.

The frightened lost lamb fears she is within seconds of a sound thrashing or worse. But there are neither angry words nor a blow from the shepherd's staff. Instead, he lifts her gently, wraps her in his own cloak, and after a long embrace puts her securely on his shoulders, saying, “I've missed you!” The shepherd himself understands what it means to be scorned and abused. And so home they go, enjoying the love and warmth of each other.

*Shepherd of all, hold me in your warm and loving embrace
until my fears subside. Amen.*

—W. PAUL JONES

From Becoming Who God Wants You to Be

Choosing Life with God

FRIDAY, MAY 27 • READ MARK 9:33-37

We know Mark as the freight train evangelist. Just reading his first chapter without pause can leave us nearly breathless. By the time we get to this point in the Gospel, not only have many actions been recorded but the word *immediately* has been peppered throughout. This is no sit-down story. Jesus is on the move—healing, teaching, exorcising demons, feeding the hungry, and on and on.

Then something happens to bring it all to a halt. Is it a run-in with Pharisees? A scrape with the Sanhedrin? Is it fatigue or weariness or disillusionment? It is none of these things. In the middle of chapter 9, the center of the Gospel, everything comes to a halt because Jesus perceives that his disciples are talking about their own greatness. Jesus sits down—one of the few times in the entire Gospel—and teaches his disciples.

It is very important to notice that the one thing that slows down the pace of this Gospel is the evidence of selfish ambition on the part of Jesus' disciples. Who is the greatest? Who is the best? Who is on top? Who is more special? When Jesus sensed that this was the subject of their conversation, he sat down.

Think for a moment about what makes you “sit down.” What leads you to set aside whatever you are doing and look the other person in the eye? For Jesus, it may have been his concern that the very heart of his teaching and witness might be misunderstood, overlooked, or forgotten.

Jesus sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” This is important; this is critical. In a nutshell, this is discipleship.

*O God, grant me ears to hear this word of Jesus. Beginning now and throughout this day, give me courage to live it!
Amen.*

—PAUL L. ESCAMILLA

Pray without Ceasing

SATURDAY, MAY 28 • READ 1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-28

Pray without ceasing. It's a tall order. But we at The Upper Room place Paul's admonition at the head of all we do. Considering ourselves as hosts of the place where the world meets to pray, we facilitate a global wave of prayer that travels the world each day just as surely as the sun. And now that the sixty days of prayer for The United Methodist Church and its 2016 General Conference draws to a close, it is my great privilege to invite you to continue praying with Christians around the world as we all go on toward perfection.

What does it mean to pray without ceasing? The particular forms will look different for each of us since each person bears the divine imprint in a unique way. But the intent behind our prayers makes us one. We pray in order to yoke our hearts and minds together, striving to see through the temporal to the everlasting. We pray to join ourselves in the divine trend toward righteousness, justice, and peace. We pray to participate in the intimate relationship of the Trinity, to love more fully as God loves.

At The Upper Room we believe that prayer infuses the rhythms of each day. We strive not to remove ourselves from the world in order to pray but to weave our prayers into the fabric of our fleeting lives. We stand at the intersection of being and doing, bidding inner lives outward and outer lives inward. As you return to your homes around the world, we invite you to join us each day where the world meets to pray. Tell us the tales of those who labor among you. Breathe peace in your community where chaos swirls. Help the weak. Pray with us and know that the world is praying with you.

Gracious God, we join our voices in ceaseless praise and prayer. Amen.

—SHAWN BAKKER

Discernment in a Broken Body

SUNDAY, MAY 29 • READ LUKE 18:26-27

The church is not perfect. Sometimes we wish it were. Sometimes we even think it is. Moments of Christ in action through the church move us to joyous thanksgiving. Other moments painfully remind us that the church is made up of persons like ourselves. We are the body of Christ, the church. And we carry all of who we are into the church. So it should not surprise us that the body of Christ is broken and fractured. The conflicts, halting discipleship, fragile faith, timid witness, and qualified commitment are a natural outgrowth of who we are as individual Christians.

While we may look at the church in its various expressions with joy at times and dismay at others, we must remember that new life is possible. Transformation can begin today. Resurrection power is available to us and can be invested in the church this very moment. With God's help we can initiate change this very day!

This is true because our first line of defense against further brokenness lies within each of us. My efforts to stop the brokenness and to take the first step to reform and transform the church must begin with me. My prayer for a holy church marked by righteousness and love can be answered only as I yield my life to the way of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. The transformation begins with me. What a liberating thought! I am not powerless and without options. With God's help I can surrender my life to the transforming, life-giving power of the Holy Spirit and in that very moment begin the journey toward the wholeness and faithfulness I want to see in the church.

O God, I give my brokenness to you; reform and transform me for your purposes. Amen.

—RUEBEN P. JOB
(1928–2015)

From *A Guide to Spiritual Discernment*

Using a Finger Labyrinth in Prayer

THEREFORE GO • READ MATTHEW 28:16-20

The labyrinth has provided a way for Christians to pray with our bodies as well as our minds and our spirits since the twelfth century. As we go in response to Jesus' command, we make the spiritual journey—releasing, receiving, and returning.

FIRST MOVEMENT: Releasing (Confession)

Begin with your confession, silently or aloud. When finished, slowly move your finger forward along the labyrinth. Move at your own pace toward the center. Let the words of your confession stay with you.

Quiet your mind as you move through the labyrinth. What needs to be confessed, changed, forgiven, confronted, or healed in your life? Release these situations to God as you move forward.

SECOND MOVEMENT: Receiving (Centering)

When you reach the center, rest your finger there for a moment, then read the scripture for the day.

Read the passage slowly, as if you have never read it before. Center on God and be open to what God reveals to you through the reading. Return your finger to the center of the labyrinth and reflect on the passage.

THIRD MOVEMENT: Returning (Intercession)

As you prepare to leave the labyrinth, place your finger at the same opening in the center where you entered. Begin to move your finger back along the same path on which you entered. As you return from your time alone with God, offer prayers of intercessions and blessing. Hold each person and situation in the light of Christ, then continue the journey.

WHEN YOU HAVE FINISHED

Leave your labyrinth prayer to go “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Amen.



