



THE UPPER ROOM

50 DAYS OF PRAYER

BEFORE & DURING GENERAL CONFERENCE 2012

SELECTED FROM THE UPPER ROOM DISCIPLINES WITH INVITED WRITERS



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UPPER ROOM®
MINISTRIES

A MINISTRY OF GBOD

50 DAYS OF PRAYER

Before and During General Conference 2012

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The Upper Room Web site: <http://www.upperroom.org>

Cover design: Left Coast Design, Portland, Oregon

Cover photo: iStock.com

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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.

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 each week 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. Let 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 this week? 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.

Adapted from *The Upper Room* daily devotional guide, January–February 2001. © 2000 The Upper Room. Used by permission.

I was at a meeting of
the Superiors General in Europe.
They talked only of changing
the structures of society,
organizing things in a different way.
It all came to nothing.
It did not do something for the poor,
or preach Christ to those without religion,
to those totally ignorant of God.
I was happy when it was all over.
—Mother Teresa, in *My Life for the Poor*

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Introduction

This worship booklet *50 Days of Prayer* is a small miracle and an authentic response to the most important request recorded in scripture. You are invited to participate in the miracle and share in the spiritual preparation for the 2012 General Conference.

50 Days of Prayer is a miracle made possible by electronic communication. Every local congregation in every part of the world can pray with and for the 988 delegates of the 2012 General Conference. Using the internet and free, downloadable files, every United Methodist delegate, bishop, worship leader, and local church member will be able to read the same scripture, consider the same insights, and pray the same prayer for forty days prior to the General Conference in Tampa, Florida, and each day of the General Conference, April 24 through May 4, 2012. The plenary preacher of the day has written the meditation for that day, so we can all participate in the same experience of scripture, word, and Spirit.

Prayer lies at the heart of Jesus' life and work and is essential for each of us. *50 Days of Prayer* is our response to the disciples' request of Jesus: "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). This same yearning to learn how to pray played a central role in the work that God began through John and Charles Wesley in eighteenth-century England. John Wesley's first published book, *A Collection of Forms of Prayer for Every Day in the Week* (1733), addressed this desire. In 1745 John and Charles published *A Collection of Prayers for Families* and the 1780 *Large Hymnal* contains ninety-eight different prayer hymns. 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, 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 every elected delegate of the 2012 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, I am convinced that the kingdom of God can come only through prayer and discernment. In the pages that follow, we have the opportunity to be united 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 Ministries

Divine Initiative

FRIDAY, MARCH 16 • READ MATTHEW 4:18-23

Lightning struck a two-hundred-year-old spruce tree near our home. A bolt tore a top-to-bottom, four-inch-wide path through the length of the tree's bark—permanently marking it as one of several “lightning trees” that pepper our region. Thunder reverberated through the surrounding hills—announcing the branding, the tree's forever change.

When Jesus calls Peter and Andrew, James and John, his voice strikes them with a divine initiative that penetrates their routines and relationships and etches an invitation on their souls. While Simon Peter and Andrew cast fishing nets, lightning strikes: Jesus, the Light of the world, calls them. Ramifications thunder: immediately they release their nets, livelihoods, and plans. Likewise, James and John, spending time with their dad, hear Jesus' call, and Light carves change into family priorities and the community framework. Without a moment's hesitation, they turn to Jesus and leave boat and father behind for Jesus' sake.

“Come, follow me,” Jesus says, approaching his disciples much as Elijah had sought out Elisha as his future attendant in 1 Kings 19. Jesus finds fishermen working with nets; Elijah threw his cloak over Elisha's shoulders as he plowed a field behind yoked oxen. Both enter the lives of their disciples and summon them to holy tutelage. But there Jesus' purpose expands. When Jesus calls his disciples, he begins laying the foundation of believers upon which he will build his church. From the moment he extends those personal, individual invitations to join him, the disciples began sharing in his redemptive work on earth, drawing others to his eternal, Light-powered kingdom.

Jesus calls us to nothing less.

Thank you, Jesus, for initiating Light-filled relationship with us. May we desire nothing less. Amen.

—CHERYL BOSTROM

Calling on the Lord

SATURDAY, MARCH 17 • READ MATTHEW 14:28-33

Peter responds to Jesus' self-revelation by addressing him with the Old Testament title for God, "Lord." He says to Jesus, "If you are I AM, then enable me to do what you are doing." Though this may be a startling thought to us, the New Testament affirms that Jesus gives his disciples power to do what he does. We want to pull back here, keeping a distance between Jesus' power and life and us. But today's reading closes the gap, claiming that when we call on the Lord, he draws us closer to him and enables us to become more like him.

Jesus commands Peter, "Come!" Peter gets out of the storm-tossed boat and begins to walk toward Jesus. To call on Jesus to come to us means to answer Jesus' call to come to him. Calling on God means hearing and obeying God's call to us. Peter comes to Jesus, doing what Jesus does who is doing what God does. Peter, however, becomes distracted by the wind. The rock on which Christ declares he will build his church (Matt. 16:18) starts to sink like a rock. He cries out in his fear, "Lord, save me!"

Fulfilling the promise of salvation to all who call on the Lord, Jesus reaches out his hand and catches Peter. Jesus addresses him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" The phrase "you of little faith" indicates that we do not need to have full and complete faith to call on the Lord and receive an answer. Whatever the state of our faith, we must always call on God, depending on God's power, not our own.

Thankfully the rebuke of Peter's little faith comes with Jesus' holding onto his hand and lifting him from the waves. Together Peter and Jesus get into the boat. The wind ceases; calm returns.

Lord, help me hear in my cry to you your own call to me to come to you. Amen.

—RAYMOND R. NEWELL

Because You Asked

SUNDAY, MARCH 18 • READ JOHN 10:11-18

Sometimes scripture confuses me. Often when I think I'm getting a handle on a concept, Jesus delivers the punch line, and I'm lost all over again. I thought I was getting this "good shepherd" thing under control and then BAM, the other shoe drops.

Shepherd: sheep know me; I know the sheep. Father knows me; I know the Father—now we're clicking. But wait, hovering around the edges is a new group of sheep, and it doesn't sound like they're welcome, at least not by the sheep that already live in the pen.

But Jesus has a plan to create a megaflock, to mix and match and be the good shepherd for all. He will lay his life down for all of them, because he can; then he can take his life up again. No other shepherd has ever been able to pull that one off.

Who are these "other sheep"? Are they other Jewish Christian communities? Gentiles? Those who will come to believe? Jesus is talking to his Jewish flock, but his intention is unclear. Bringing in Gentile sheep would certainly preclude winning "Good Shepherd of the Year" if your Jewish sheep are voting. And one verse beyond today's reading tells us: "the Jews were divided because of these words." They didn't like it, plain and simple. They thought he was a raving lunatic. They certainly didn't want to hear that someone else might be invited into their exclusive club.

The lessons here for all of Jesus' followers are substantial. The shepherd, not the sheep, decides who is a part of the flock. If you're a part of the flock, you don't keep the Good Shepherd all to yourself. The best thing that can happen is that your flock becomes larger, more eclectic, more diverse, more interesting.

Jesus, open my heart and let me be you to my world. Amen.

—PAT EDMONDS

Responding to God's Call

MONDAY, MARCH 19 • READ LUKE 5:1-11

When we trust in God's power, we can do wondrous things that would have been impossible through trust in our own instincts. When the church listens and responds to the voice of God, the church becomes a channel for a power greater than itself; and the power of God transforms the world.

The disciples in today's passage are both powerful and powerless. They bring about a miracle. Certainly the locals would be impressed. Yet this act of power is only possible through the disciples' willingness to trust in a power greater than themselves. In this instance, such trust requires them to do something as counterintuitive as casting the nets on the other side of the boat. As Peter gives the order, we can imagine the others muttering to themselves about what good this could possibly do.

This scripture demonstrates the odd duality of powerlessness and power at the heart of authentic discipleship. The disciples manifest power, yet this power is actually the power of God acting through them. They are able to be powerful only by allowing themselves to be channels through which a power much greater than they can manifest itself. Such power requires several spiritual disciplines: faith in the efficacy of God's power, the courage to be a conduit through which God is revealed, and patience and diligence in listening for the voice of God's direction.

Creating and redeeming God, may I be a vessel through which you pour out your grace for the life of the world. May your Holy Spirit enable me to do the wondrous things that you have in store for the world. Through Christ I pray. Amen.

—STEPHEN J. CHRISTOPHER

The Gift of Memory and Action

TUESDAY, MARCH 20 • READ JOHN 13:1-17, 31-35

Just a few days ago, Jesus had sat at another table and received Mary's gift as she poured the precious perfume on his feet. Now it is his turn to give as he gathers at the table with his companions for their final meal. And so, basin in hand, he begins to wash the disciples' feet and to dry them with the towel he has wrapped around himself. Water splashes over the sides of the bowl as he moves from friend to friend, kneeling before each one.

Water has connected Jesus and the disciples since the beginning of their journey together. By the shores of Lake Gennesaret, Jesus had first met and called Simon Peter, James, and John. On a stormy lake the disciples had become terrified until Jesus calmed the waves. Another time they had watched as Jesus walked toward them on the water. They had listened with some perplexity as Jesus spoke of his life-giving water. And they had watched tears roll down Jesus' face as he wept over Jerusalem and again as he stood at the tomb of his beloved friend Lazarus.

This last meal is a meal of memory. Jesus gives them not only the gift of bread and wine by which to remember him but also the gift of water. In the washing bowl they see the reflections of all they have shared together. Yet Jesus impresses upon them that their shared journey does not end with this gift of washing. Rather, they are to continue to wash one another's feet, even as he has washed theirs. Water will continue to connect them and all who walk in the path of Christ, offering grace and comfort.

Even as I receive your gifts, O God, may I pass them on to others. Even as I know your touch, Divine Companion, may I extend your embrace. Amen.

—JAN L. RICHARDSON

A Shined-on People

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 21 • READ MATTHEW 4:12-16

In the life of Jesus, Matthew sees the presence of God that has been reaching out to the world for a long time. The deliverance prophesied by Isaiah shines beyond the prophet's time and place into the eternal now. Light streams again into the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali—those biblical regions of brokenness in which all of us live at times. Deliverance shines close at hand. Light walks around! Human eyes gaze upon the promised comfort. Ordinary folk track redemption's steps in their midst.

This light speaks with human voice. This light touches with human hands and heals. This light proclaims good news with authority. This long-awaited radiance has a name: Jesus. Salvation and wholeness move toward the world with a human face. Matthew astonishes us with his "good news." God promises redemption. God delivers in person! In the life of Jesus shines light for all people.

The message invites participation. Listen, repent, believe, follow. The saving acts of God call for response: Live in the light. Sometimes we live in the dark so long we acclimate ourselves to the limitations of a diminished existence. Sadly we accommodate a restricted hope. We know how to walk in the dark. Now we are asked to relearn light-living, to train our eyes to see the world in new ways. Jesus invites us to become part of his light-bearing. He offers himself as example and master teacher. He summons us to be his apprentices, to learn to shine as he does. In Jesus we find ourselves not only shined upon but shined through. Turn to face the light that comes to us in him!

Jesus, help me turn rightly toward you that I might be changed into your likeness and reflect the light of your saving love to all people. Amen.

—RON MILLS

Lest We Forget

THURSDAY, MARCH 22 • READ DEUTERONOMY 26:4-11

Remember the bondage you experienced as slaves—and make a place for aliens and strangers to share your faith. After reminding one another of the painful past, the Israelites celebrate the feast of first fruits with strangers present. Look at the peculiar pairing of painful memories and generous hospitality. It implies that the memory of past suffering enables individuals to empathize with present sufferers and to include them in the feast of the faithful.

I cannot afford the luxury of forgetting the pain of the past. Without those memories I am simplistic, unsympathetic, and all too eager to solve the world's problems with hurried, painless solutions. My grandchildren need me to cry a tear with those who are chosen last for a game at school; my children need me to remember the sting of having a professor translate 89.5 into a B on a college transcript. Without these and other memories I risk being distant, disconnected, even dismissive to those around me.

Glid Nandor's grotesque wrought-iron sculpture bearing the inscription "Lest We Forget" depicts a tangle of skeletons with torturous facial expressions, placed on the grounds of the Dachau concentration camp to remind the human family of its predisposition to inflict pain upon one another. Concentration camps and killing fields are snapshots of human nature stripped of empathy.

Remember the hard bondage you experienced as slaves, and make a place for aliens and strangers to share your faith. Perhaps, before we celebrate the feast of life with those familiar and alien, we will be required to look candidly at who we are and to remember from whence we have come.

Merciful God, help me remember the pain of suffering and the joy of your salvation. Amen.

—SAFIYAH FOSUA

Dwelling

FRIDAY, MARCH 23 • READ 1 KINGS 8:27-30

Solomon's declarations around God's dwelling in and beyond the infinite articulates a realization of a vastness of view beyond the human mind's capacity. His inability to grasp God's willingness to possibly dwell within the limits of earth or an earthen structure reflects our doubts about God's ability or desire to be in the smallness of our lives. So, later, God chose to dwell in a womb, in the arms of a girl, in a house fashioned by a carpenter father. God chose to dwell in the pettiness of human squabbles and perspectives and within the grandeur of human sorrow and love.

But long before Jesus' foot touched Nazareth's dust, Solomon, in spite of his incomprehension, stepped into the mystery and invited, welcomed, and pleaded God into the finite places.

And God entered in, perhaps recognizing the infinity that exists in the microscopic or perhaps acknowledging the infinity that exists in Solomon's dreaming, prayers, and visions, as well as *our* efforts and endeavors. Perhaps God enters the infinity of spirit and love that yields tiny manifestations: a wrong righted; a new baby; shelter, clothes, food for a stranger; tending of soil, water, and creature.

We view God through lenses shaped by our environment—by the vastness and limits of our experience, our hurts and joys, and our abandonments. As we dwell in the infinite God, do our vision and selves grow more infinite with greater space into which we invite God to dwell?

God, smile upon our audacity to believe we have room for you; then enter us, expand us, dwell in us. Amen.

—REGINA LAROCHE

Healing from the Inside Out

SATURDAY, MARCH 24 • READ JOHN 20:19-23

While I'd like to hope that the disciples are meeting to pray, to commune, to gather strength in their unity, I'm guessing that they've gathered primarily out of fear. Here they are in the room where they'd met just days prior to observe the Passover with Jesus. Now even this house is not exempt from their fear. Jesus had washed their feet here, reassured them of his love and commitment, reminded them of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus knew his friends, and knowing that they would be filled with sorrow he had promised peace: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" (John 14:27). And then he had promised to be with them always.

So why all this fear? The disciples are no different from you and me. Don't we have locked doors that keep us inside for fear's sake? I think Jesus knew full well what a nurse told me: we heal from the inside out. Jesus made these promises to people he knew really well. He knew their fears as well as ours: fears of inadequacy, commitment, disappointment, even fear itself. Only by coming into the locked rooms of our souls and declaring his presence does the risen Christ get our attention.

In Naomi Nye's poem "Stone House," she says, "It was a hard place to be if you were staying." Jesus knew that his disciples wouldn't stay forever in that hard place, behind those locked doors. Instead they would take their newfound resurrection strength to the frightened world outside. "Peace be with you" were his words of greeting and reassurance.

"Peace be with you." Indeed. The healing peace of Christ begins inside our own seemingly locked doors.

What fears lock the doors to Christ's peace and healing?

—NANCY FESTER

The Luster of New Creation

SUNDAY, MARCH 25 • READ PSALM 31

Our community potter discovered her talent and her art form during a season of sighing. When an accident left her unable to resume her career or even familiar household tasks, she lamented her loss in mournful isolation. Mirroring the psalmist's depiction of distress, she "passed out of mind like one who is dead" as she spiraled between deep despair and anxious fearfulness. Then, into days emptied of purpose and hands emptied of work, a friend dropped a lump of clay. The clay found a home in hands that found their natural shape around its contours. Sitting at a simple pottery wheel on a riverside bluff, her life bereft of form and function and drained of visible value, the novice artisan found comfort in forming clay and value in creating functional art. Into pottery vessels she released her sorrow, and from them she eventually poured her grief.

As she worked, the potter remembered her home in the Great Potter's hands and returned to its sanctuary. Gradually, the Great Potter's steadfast love repaired her broken heart and refashioned her shattered mind. Over time, the shining face of the Holy polished the dullness of her lament into the luster of a new creation.

"How often," says the potter today, "we whine as we're broken, reshaped, or fired in life's kiln, forgetting that all the while we're in God's hands!" Like the psalmist as he faced sorrow and scorn and Jesus as he faced death on the cross, we find rest in remembering whose we have always been. Only then can we release our anxious despair about who we have become and be formed into vessels that carry Christ to others.

What areas of my life need God's loving touch?

—CAROL PADGETT

The Gift of Shalom

MONDAY, MARCH 26 • READ 1 THESSALONIANS 5:23-24

The God of peace in the New Testament is one and the same God of shalom we meet in the prophecy of the Old Testament. This holy God's concern centers not just on our souls but also on our bodies, on our hearts as well as our minds, on our intentions and our actions. Walking in attentive prayerfulness with God in all parts of our lives calls us into wholeness and health. In a world that allows us to compartmentalize various pieces of our lives, God beckons us to become one in body, soul, and spirit, and one with God's purposes in the creation.

Consider the care of your body. How have you attended to your health and to the divine gift of dynamic energy that comes from emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual wholeness? Offer God praise for your physical well-being by caring for your needs for good nutrition, movement, and rest. God's shalom includes and extends to the stewardship of our bodied lives.

We are "not our own." We are held in God's saving grace by faith, not by our achievements or good works. God's love became very real for me as I prayed with my Covenant Discipleship group. The members honored the work of God in our bodies, spirits, and souls. I keep my copy of the group's covenant with me in my daily calendar. I give thanks for these faithful friends. As I offered a stranger the gift of compassionate listening and encouragement this week, my heart could hear their loving support to hold fast to what is good.

Consider the memory of a faithful friend. Now reflect on God's faithfulness that transcends all human effort. Ask God to grant you peace in body, soul, and spirit. Open yourself to receive this gift of shalom.

—DIANE LUTON BLUM

Saving Grace

TUESDAY, MARCH 27 • READ ISAIAH 35

Chapters 34 and 35 of the book of Isaiah relate to the anonymous prophet of the Babylonian exile, Second Isaiah, both by content and style, though they do not necessarily come from the hand of that same prophet. Chapter 34 is a passage of doom against which chapter 35 stands in marked contrast as a message of hope.

The days of the Exile weighed heavily upon the Babylonian captives. Cut off from the land of Judah and from its capital, the sacred city of Jerusalem, they mourned the deeply felt separation from God. It is in the midst of this depressing and anxious hour that the voice of the prophet is heard announcing that the God who rescued their ancestors from the land of bondage in Egypt was about to act once again to set them free in a new exodus.

The affirmation is made, against all apparent odds, that God is Lord of history who intervenes in the arena of human events, to make divine purpose known. Such purposes work consistently toward bringing freedom to those who bear the burden of oppression, for “he will come and save you.”

At times we look at the work around us; and when we witness the problems, the suffering, the physical and mental anguish of those who bear heavy burdens, we may be prone to despair. But then the realization sinks into our minds, grabs hold of our souls, that our God is a saving God. The Eternal chooses not to sit at the wayside but to meet us in our need.

*Open my heart, my mind, my soul, O God, that I may accept
your saving grace that speaks with the liberating force of
hope. Amen.*

—JORGE A. GONZALES

The Silence between the Drumbeats

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 28 • READ 1 KINGS 2:1-4; 3:1-9

At first blush it appears that young Solomon was only a humble lad who wanted to be a good king. Like his father, David, before him, Solomon reigned in a blaze both of glory and shame. His quest for wisdom was much in style for monarchs of his day. People were looking for someone to make wise decisions on their behalf. Solomon wanted to seal big political deals and construct huge public monuments to demonstrate his power. He established Israel as a regional power, but his accomplishments also sowed seeds of destruction. His marriages, while politically wise, opened the door to foreign gods. Solomon's policies of high taxes and forced labor soon split the kingdom. His wisdom gave Israel her golden age—and led to her downfall.

If the wisdom of Solomon is also the counsel of fools, what hope do we have for our own decisions? How can we possibly bear the responsibility of choices that will touch seven generations? John Wesley said Christian conversation is a path to God's grace. When we talk about our plans and worries with other believers, we gain more than the wisdom of those persons present. God actually speaks in between the words. Native American elders say God speaks in the silence between the drumbeats.

Think about this the next time you find yourself in a small group of believers. The room may not be full of brilliant minds—yet it contains wisdom. God is in the midst of every Christian conversation, speaking in the silence between the drumbeats.

*Lord, I am not wise enough to choose my own paths today.
Let me be wise enough to listen to your voice among other
believers. Amen.*

—LARRY G. JENT

Rediscovering God's Presence

THURSDAY, MARCH 29 • READ MARK 1:35-39

Jesus is in demand. He takes an early-morning break to pray. Simon's desperate words interrupt his time away: "Everyone is looking for you!" (NIV). It must have been tough for Jesus to hear those words. I'm sure that he was acutely aware of how precious his time, energy, and presence were during his earthly ministry. Yet, Jesus took time to be alone.

Mark's Gospel is the shortest of the four Gospels and offers a straightforward collection of the sayings and deeds of Jesus during his ministry. Luke and Matthew seemed to feel a little more freedom to include additional narratives and explanations in their Gospels. Mark, however, includes only what he believes to be most critical to convey his message. And here it is, a few precious verses carefully tucked within Mark's narrative to remind the reader of the importance of taking time in solitude to pray.

Perhaps this simple event, retold in the years after Jesus' death, left an impression on the early Christians: "You will always face demands and a need to manage expectations. In order to do so, you have to make time for silence and prayer. It is great to be needed and wanted. But these desires can easily become unhealthy, driving you to do things for the wrong reasons and even to become taxed and burdened by doing good."

Mark's Gospel reminds us, as it has done for centuries, that even Jesus found a solitary place to meet with God and listen. This encounter helped him maintain balance and find the right perspective, pace, direction, and intention for his daily life and ministry.

Loving God, I choose to withdraw from the demands and expectations of my daily life to be alone with you. Give me the courage to seek you and your will first. Guide my thoughts and actions today. Amen.

—DION FORSTER

God Speaks

FRIDAY, MARCH 30 • READ LUKE 10:25-37

For four years Harley resided in a health care center. Stricken with Parkinson's disease, confined to a wheelchair, eyes closed much of the time, head bent down, he sat day after day. Harley's world became reduced to listening. I visited him several times a week during those years, fed him occasionally, and spoke constantly. Sometimes he would chuckle; sometimes he would add a word or two. I found myself telling him things that I have never told anyone before or since. Jesus said, "Whoever listens."

Listening has to do with giving and receiving. It is hard to do. Our agendas—work to do, calls to make—fill our lives, minds, and hearts. We even know how to listen with our ears while our minds consider other topics. But our wandering eyes and unwelcoming body language give us away. Often we come to prayer more ready to speak than to listen.

The lawyer rises in his self-importance. To whom is he listening? Whom does he hope will listen? He comes with his own agenda and all the right answers. But Jesus invites him to hear and to think in a new way. Will the lawyer listen?

"But wanting to justify himself," the lawyer pushes on. How does our need for self-justification interfere with our listening?

We all long to be listened to. God does too. And God is patient. And God does speak—in the rustling grass, rain on the roof, blowing breezes, morning bird songs, the voice of a friend, a letter in the mailbox. All of creation reveals God's nature. At its deepest level, listening is soul responding to soul. Listen. God is speaking.

Generous God, thank you for listening to us attentively, expectantly, and compassionately. Bless us this day with these gifts that we might be your listening people. Amen.

—MEL JOHNSON

Listening for God's Voice

SATURDAY, MARCH 31 • READ PSALM 19:1-6

The first six verses of Psalm 19 portray God's created world as filled with ineffable exuberance. A profound language travels through time and space, passing on the knowledge of the mystery of God's creation. The whole world is erupting with glorious praise, though humans cannot hear it.

The psalmist is happy to wonder, and the poet's diction verges on Lao-tzu's *tao* (the truth that cannot be put into words). A line of discourse with no words saturates the heavens and the earth, the habitat of creation.

The psalmist ponders and finds that God's mysterious work of creation comes into dazzling focus with the sun. God has built a dwelling place for the sun, a sanctuary of a new life. From there the great luminary starts its course with excitement and sustains its joy every step of the way.

People in antiquity believed that the sun was a god, and they discovered a sense of justice in the regularity of its movement. The rays it spills from heaven serve as a delightful image of justice with no shady schemes and with no discrimination.

The earth may not talk much, but an Asian saying states that heaven does a lot of listening. It listens to the sound of creation from day to night, from the corner of our land to the end of the earth. It listens to the blooming sound of creation as it thaws from the freezing night of oppression. Look! The sun rises again, and God's created world is once more the way God intended it to be.

O God, may we listen for your voice in the speeches that we do not understand. May we learn from the sun that does not withhold its heat from anyone who looks up to it. Amen.

—JIN HEE HAN

The Law of Love, the Rule of Fear

SUNDAY, APRIL 1 • READ JOHN 20:24-31

Afictionados of pop psychology personality typing would have a clear category for Thomas. The man is all judgment and no intuition. The extreme nature of his requirement to believe, actually having to place his fingers in the wounds, sets this man apart and earns him the title of “Doubting” Thomas.

Titles, labels, nicknames, diagnoses can be freeing. They give us insight into the gifts and graces God has provided for our journey. They can also be boundaries that deny us the ability to become the people God has called us to be. The way that labels empower and impair in the secular world is vividly demonstrated to me on a daily basis in my work in the jail system.

Confronted by the risen Christ, “Doubting” Thomas becomes “Believing” Thomas far short of plunging his fingers or hands into open wounds. The Gospels contain story after story of the ancient equivalent of hookers, junkies, and schizophrenics, as well as lawyers, attorneys, prosecutors, and guards, who were born anew when confronted by the living Christ. The interesting thing about many Gospel stories is that those with shameful titles were often the first to embrace Jesus, while those with honorable labels walked away in disgust.

As we are followers of Jesus Christ, the only labels of concern to us are those we willingly embrace for ourselves. The first is “sinner,” for only in understanding our own fallen nature can we fully appreciate the loving power and forgiveness of God. The other is “Christian,” for it identifies us as people who, having recognized our fallen nature, follow the One who has brought us into forgiveness.

What is my label, nickname, or title? How does it empower or impair me in my walk with God?

—JEFF BLUM

Believe 25

Holy Week

MONDAY, APRIL 2 • READ ISAIAH 42:1-7; JOHN 12:1-11

We enter Holy Week greeted by a fresh beginning in the natural cycle of the seasons. April beckons us to shake off the torpor of winter. The sun warms the earth, and the sweet scents of lilacs and hyacinths flood the air. All of our senses are awakened; life seems more real. God helps us believe in the resurrection of the Son and the renewal of our own lives. The prophet Isaiah is not the first or the last to express the hope: “Behold, the former things have come to pass, / and new things I now declare” (RSV).

Somehow Mary knows that her friend Jesus has fulfilled that prophecy. After all, just the week before, she and others had witnessed a miracle: Jesus brought her brother, Lazarus, four days dead in the grave, out alive into the light of day. On this day the impact of his deeds moves her to do something that perhaps she had not contemplated. Mary takes expensive oil, anoints Jesus’ feet with it, and then wipes them with her hair. What meaning does this act of humility and love hold? Among Jews, one meaning was clear: such is done for a king or the Messiah. Does Mary suspect what Jesus quickly tells his disciples—that she is honoring his death and burial that soon will come? How can this be when the house is filled with the sweet fragrance of the ointment and Mary’s love poured out?

“Today the Holy Passion shines forth upon the world with the light of salvation. . . . He who holds all things in the hollow of His hand consents to be hung upon the Tree to save [hu]mankind” (from an Eastern Orthodox hymn).

—VIGEN GUROIAN

God's Signs

TUESDAY, APRIL 3 • READ ISAIAH 49:1-7; JOHN 12:20-36

Unfortunately we cannot track Jesus' precise activities during these first days of our Holy Week drama. The Gospels agree on his triumphant entry, but then uncertainty sets in. In one Gospel Jesus cleanses the Temple that evening, while for others it happens the following day. For one he spends his nights on the Mount of Olives, while others have him with friends in Bethany. What they do agree upon is that he spends his days teaching in the Temple, deliberately provokes the authorities, privately prepares his confused disciples, and seeks safety outside the city nightly.

Viewed from our comfortable distance, the scene becomes surreal. A peasant carpenter who spent over thirty years in obscurity suddenly makes his appearance, and in one year (no more than three) exhibits such amazing charisma that he is either passionately loved or lethally hated. By claiming to incarnate who God is, he mirrors painfully back who we are.

Today's scripture moves toward a shocking climax, so total that this Jesus with a "mouth like a sharp sword" must have been chosen from his "mother's womb," called before he was born for a lead part destined to overturn not only Temple tables but everything about life as we know it. Yet is it possible that our liberator will do so as a slave—as foolishness to our world, a stumbling block that shames our wisest and strongest? Subversion is about to take place, because the very pulse of our society is to "be someone" by competing for power, prestige, and possessions—winning by making certain that others lose. But here, Jesus is about to be destroyed for the opposite: losing one's life to gain it, dying in order to live, giving away in order to receive. No wonder Peter cries out for all of us: "Don't do it!" But when Jesus refuses, it seems easier to crucify him than to follow.

Christ, couldn't you have chosen an easier way? Amen.

—W. PAUL JONES

From Darkness to Light

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 4 • READ ISAIAH 49:1-9

The Servant” appears here “as a light to the nations.” Footnotes indicate that scholars are divided: Is the Servant Israel? Is the Servant an individual promised in Israel’s future? Because the New Testament applies the Servant language to Jesus, we also freely apply this language originally intended for Israel to the community of faith in Jesus Christ.

Those aware that they belong to a people are often exclusive. For them, having a covenant means keeping others away. Many in Israel often did so; many who are called Christian still do. When they did and we do, shadows result, leaving others in darkness. Meanwhile, though the light is available to us, we show that we are in darkness.

“I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” is the ancient promise made new this day. Only a few readers of this devotion will be pondering it in today’s Israel. The vast majority of us are doing so in faith because the light has reached “to the end of the earth.”

Talking about light is not the same thing as realizing it and being in it. In the Book of Acts, two light-bringers, Paul and Barnabas, quote this verse from Isaiah with this intent: to make all glad. And why? Salvation has come. Salvation means rescue from darkness to light, from fear to freedom, from being self-enclosed to being free to serve others among all nations—beginning, as it were, next door.

Salvation may sound like a word from ancient times or gets sounded among people who overrepeat the question: “Are you saved?” Yet it speaks to our day, our need, our search for light.

Saving God, let your ancient promises live today among the people of Israel, among believers in Christ, and in our ears, to reach our hearts afresh this day. Amen.

—MARTIN E. MARTY

The Unexpected Messiah

THURSDAY, APRIL 5 • READ JOHN 13:1-17, 31B-35
MAUNDY THURSDAY

The Fourth Gospel mentions no Holy Communion on the night before Jesus' death. Instead, John's Gospel records that Jesus rises in the middle of supper, trades his robe for a knotted towel, and washes his disciples' feet. This sacrament involves no bread, no wine, just feet—twenty-four of them at least, with ruined toenails, burst blisters, yellow corns where the hand-me-down sandals rub and thick calluses underneath. When Jesus finishes washing them, he leans close to dry them since his only towel is around his waist. Trust me, that towel is not something you want near your food when the foot washing is over.

On the next to last day of his life, Jesus gives his disciples this example to follow once he is gone, the lesson that he hopes will continue to teach them forever. This lesson is not in words either. It is a lesson in bodies, which the church has always cut a wide swath around. On the whole, we prefer sacraments with inanimate objects: a nice loaf of bread that does not move, a cup of wine or grape juice that will not talk back. These things are much easier to spiritualize than a bunch of smelly feet, each one attached to a singular human being with real warmth, real dirt, real faith, real doubts. Jesus understood how it worked. You cannot take a foot in your hands without getting really close to another person; once that happens God's word becomes flesh.

Whether or not we celebrate this sacrament on a regular basis, it is there to remind us that Jesus does not live inside a cross, an altar, a loaf, or a cup. Until we recognize him in one another, he is not here. Once we meet him in one another, there is no place he is not.

*Risen Lord, be known to us in the washing of the feet.
Amen.*

—BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR

The Crux of the Matter

FRIDAY, APRIL 6 • READ JOHN 18:1–19:42

GOOD FRIDAY

We now come, literally, to the crux of the matter, for *crux* means “cross.” The Gospel narratives echo an older account of Jesus’ work that comes from within a decade or two of the crucifixion: “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3). The first words that testify to Jesus link his death with the forgiveness of sins.

Protestant spirituality often has focused on Jesus’ death as the central moment in salvation history. But the mystery goes deeper, because Jesus’ sacrificial death is the culmination of his life and is linked to his resurrection. The crucifixion is part of the great mystery of God’s self-giving in Christ. Maybe the poetry of Charles Wesley better expresses this idea.

’Tis mystery all: th’Immortal dies!

Who can explore his strange design?

In vain the first-born seraph tries

to sound the depths of love divine.

’Tis mercy all! Let earth adore;

let angel minds inquire no more.

The image of “sounding the depths” suggests the practice of making a sound on the surface of a deep body of water, then timing the echo that comes in response. The longer the wait for the echo, the deeper the water. In Wesley’s use of this image, Christ proves the depth of divine love. His cry on the cross goes down into the depths of the divine being, and we wait for the echo. And we wait. And we are waiting still. But the echo never returns, for the divine love shown in the cross is simply unfathomable, immeasurable, bottomless.

*O God, empower me to find in Christ’s death the assurance
of the depths of divine love for all humankind. Amen.*

—TED A. CAMPBELL

On the Way

SATURDAY, APRIL 7 • READ JOHN 19:38-42

Joseph of Arimathea was on the way, but secretly. Fearing the Jews, who scoured the streets for any clue linking anyone to the now dead, renegade rabbi Jesus, Joseph secretly believed. But watching his Master die did something to him. Now he steps out of the spiritual shadows and forward into the light of Pilate's arena and asks for Jesus' body. Some people on the way make significant decisions about details others completely forget.

Nicodemus was on the way by night. He, like Joseph, feared the Jews, the same friends with whom he shared classes in the Torah and Mosaic law. The same friends with whom he deviously questioned and trapped the much maligned Master. Now he emerges from the quagmire of inquisition to the bedrock of impurity, touching the dead body of Jesus with the sweetness of myrrh and the fragrance of aloe. Some people on the way perform significant actions that others completely ignore.

Where are the headliners? Where is the disciple whom Jesus loved? Where do the freshly washed feet of Peter take him that evening? Where is he who would sit at the right or left hand of Jesus in glory?

The headliners are tucked away in some obscure spiritual corner of the way, stopped by fear. But Joseph and Nicodemus, who knew the dark night of fear, fear no longer. Never to be headliners, they understand the Way as paved with a courage motivated by death, a death that promises the new life of significant decisions and actions that others completely ignore.

Such is the way for nonheadliners who fear no longer.

Remove my fear, O God, so that I can make significant decisions and actions that others completely ignore. Amen.

—L. JOEY FAUCETTE

Go, Tell

SUNDAY, APRIL 8 • READ MARK 16:1-8

EASTER SUNDAY

The women start for the garden tomb “very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen.” Mark is telling us more than the time. The “first day of the week” recalls Genesis 1, when against the swirling darkness and primordial chaos God’s voice rang out: “Let there be light,” and there was light.

Mark is not telling us just that the sun has risen, but that light has been spoken into the darkness of the previous days. These women are the first to enter the garden of God’s new creation begun by Jesus’ resurrection.

The women cannot see all that yet, of course; too bright a light blinds as surely as too deep a darkness. Soon, however, everything will be seen in a different light: the light of Resurrection. Soon, and very soon, their every sentence will end in an exclamation point.

For now, however, they have *only* question marks—“Who will roll the stone away for us?”—and amazement. When the young man in the white robe tells them to “Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you into Galilee; . . . just as he told you,” they go surely enough, but they “said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Fear closes the women’s mouths, as it sometimes closes ours—whether the fear is that it might not be true, this gospel we proclaim; or the fear that it might indeed be really true, but we do not have the heart to live out the Resurrection.

Is that Mark’s intent? To force us into a crisis of recognition? To see our fearful selves in these women, we who are often reticent to speak of what we have seen and heard? If so, Mark also intends us to repent in the knowledge that if the truth be told, we of all people must tell it.

Resurrected One, may I proclaim your truth with joy! Amen.

—THOMAS STEAGALD

Mind the Light

MONDAY, APRIL 9 • READ 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18

I often think these instructions to the Thessalonians are easier said than done. Can I really be joyful all the time? And pray constantly? And give thanks even in the bleakest circumstances? Well, no. Some days, thanksgiving and joy are distant aspirations.

But then I realize that this instruction is not about *feeling* a certain way: feeling happy or feeling thankful. It is about *practicing* joy and thanksgiving and prayer, even when—maybe especially when—I don't *feel* like it.

I am reminded of the prayer that Jewish mourners are commanded to say—the mourner's kaddish. The prayer is recited daily for thirty days. It's not, in fact, a prayer about mourning or a prayer of bitter lament. It is rather a prayer of praise that begins with these words: "Magnified and sanctified be God's great name in the world which He has created according to his will." Why are mourners commanded to say such a prayer? Because even when they are in the pit, even when they are in the valley, God remains deserving of praise. And that very prayer, which the mourner repeats day in and day out, may in fact be one tool that God uses to heal the mourner's heart.

Just as God uses the mourner's kaddish and time to heal the hearts of the bereaved, so God slowly grows us into joyful disciples who can be people of constant prayer. God uses countless tools: neighbors, spouses, students, the sacraments, prayer books, novels, the simple act of cooking, all the aspects of creation turn us into Christians who are truly eucharistic, truly thankful.

Dear God, who is at all times worthy of praise, transform my hard heart into a heart that is always joyful. Amen.

—LAUREN F. WINNER

Lost in Wonder, Love, and Praise

TUESDAY, APRIL 10 • READ EXODUS 32:1-14

While Moses lingers with the Lord, the Israelites at the base of the mountain are ravaged with anxiety. Desperate for relief, they demand that Aaron produce a god for them. Lacking fortitude for leadership, Aaron loses his nerve and complies. Israel's self-sabotage takes the form of a golden calf, an ominous sign of infidelity that will sully her offspring for generations. The Lord offers the Israelites a pristine gift, and they settle for a fake—a terrible loss!

Israel's story is also ours. Faith requires steadiness, but we writhe with worry when the Lord doesn't deliver as quickly or convincingly as we expect. If the God of mystery doesn't address our needs as we perceive them, we clamor for a more familiar, user-friendly substitute. We make our own scaled-down deities and attribute to them God's name and saving power.

The good news is that the Lord's revelation doesn't end with the Israelites' failure or ours! Moses intercedes for the people by imploring God to remain true to God's self. In Jesus, the eternal selfhood of God confronts us with uncompromising grace: "the same today, yesterday, and forever." His enigmatic cross embodies God's irrevocable decision to give us the best, despite our unworthiness or unreadiness to receive it. Easter finalizes God's decision to believe in us. The Holy Spirit works to fulfill God's confidence in us. In the endless end, we are awakened finally to the wonder, beauty, and strength of God's gift. Having spurned so many opportunities, we are all the more grateful that the Lord doesn't give up on us.

Lord, in the aftermath of my panicked fears, your love remains steadfast. In times when I give up on you, I am grateful that you do not give up on me. Amen.

—ROBBINS SIMS

Streams of Living Water

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 11 • READ HAGGAI 2:1-9

God reminds the returned exiles that despite the ruin they see, the divine presence is sure. When we feel sure of God's sustaining presence we can take on any task, claim any future. As God's people look upon the rubble of the former Temple and their own depleted numbers it is likely hard for them to grasp the notion of rebuilding. Discouragement was natural and understandable. Yet God says, "Work, for I am with you." From any other source it might sound like a pious platitude. But God has a track record, not only with Israel, but also with us today. We can speak of God's faithfulness and power from experience, not hearsay.

Many tasks we face may seem at first and even second glance impossible. We look at what lies before us, catalogue our resources, and find the task outweighs the resources.

But if we begin a good work, we may discover that we have far more resources than were first apparent. Indeed, our hardest task is often simply making a start. The challenge of making a start is about where we place our faith and trust. Rebuilding either a physical temple or a human life and community is an act of faith that often starts small. But what we need will be supplied to overflowing if we but commit ourselves to make a start and then trust the God who "once again will shake the heavens and the earth."

But God doesn't stop there—with a good beginning rooted in faith. No, instead, God boldly says, "The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former." God is bold enough to say it. Are we bold enough to believe it?

Thank you for never abandoning us, God. When we must start over, help us to do so in the assurance of your love, presence, and power. Amen.

—BRIAN THORNTON

A New Vision

THURSDAY, APRIL 12 • READ ISAIAH 65:17-25

I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

There are moments in history when we need a new vision, a new earth vision. The old vision has failed or run its course or been corrupted, and the people of God need a new vision for themselves and their world.

Imagine the mixture of pain and distress that gave birth to this prophecy of new heavens and a new earth. Exiled in a strange land, persecuted and alienated from neighbors, an oppressed minority lived in a state of fear and hopelessness—not too unlike many oppressed persons today.

Yet out of this mixture of dread and powerlessness, a prophet arises with a vision, a vision of a new way of being on the earth. The prophet sees a world in which babies do not die, old men and women are not robbed of health, houses are not confiscated, and fruit orchards provide for the planters and tillers. The new earth vision promotes life as we imagine it ought to be.

Do we not need such a vision today? I believe God stands ready to inspire another prophet with the vision of an alternative world, if she or he will but listen! What power resides in a vision. Like a star, it draws us into the future; it guides us on our way; and it pictures the goal worth living and dying for.

Dear God, slow me down so that the wind of activity does not blow away the seed of vision. Amen.

—BEN CAMPBELL JOHNSON

Harvest Celebration

FRIDAY, APRIL 13 • READ MATTHEW 21:33-40

The use of the vineyard as a teaching illustration appears so often in the Bible that we can play it out as a scenario without ever having been there physically. Fertile soil cleared of rocks, a protective hedge, regular pruning, a wine press and a tower, and the harvest celebration!

Jesus had a way of turning to the things about him that were most familiar to his hearers and linking his teaching unforgettably with these objects and events. Likewise, he demonstrated his familiarity with scripture as he picked up words and themes from the old writings. The way Jesus picks up the powerful harvest song from Isaiah (5:1-7) and puts it in parable form, while adding the dimension of the conspiracy of the tenants, intrigues us.

In good rabbinic tradition, Jesus often ended his stories, not with an explanation but with a question. For example, "What will [the householder] do to those tenants?"

We have made an emotional connection to the story as it unfolds. Suddenly, we are involved in providing an appropriate ending for the story. We leap to condemn, for the need for justice is obvious. And then we begin to sense the application to our own lives. It is not that Jesus has played games with us. He has led us to ask questions of ourselves! And as we do, we deal with our own unfaithfulness. It is a seeming paradox but a proven truth: to live with the questions is to discover our need for God. It is frequently the means to a stronger faith.

O God, keep us coming to you with our need for understanding, but help us to be sensitive to the questions we must address to ourselves as well. In Jesus' name. Amen.

—EARL BARFOOT

Holy Encounters

SATURDAY, APRIL 14 • READ 2 CORINTHIANS 3:12–4:6

Who or what is the central focus of your faith? Paul addresses one of the most prevalent issues of our day in his second letter to the Corinthians. Something in our fallen human nature causes us to miss the point of the Christian faith and to become fascinated with the superficial trappings of religion.

Paul, before becoming a Christian, studied the scriptures; worshiped God; defended the faith; and lived a good, moral life. Yet he missed the purposes of God to the point that he orchestrated the imprisonment and death of many early Christians. The truth was veiled; he focused his faith on “right living.”

Paul writes, “When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed,” using the veil of Moses to illustrate the difference between the Old Covenant (right living) and the New Covenant (righteousness). He wants his readers to know that truth, which has been veiled, comes from a direct, face-to-face encounter with God in Jesus Christ.

Sometimes we miss the point. We love the Bible more than the God to whom it bears witness. We join the church, through whatever process, without entering into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Too often we conform to living a Christian lifestyle without ever changing our hearts. We then run the risk of having the trappings of the faith without experiencing the love, joy, and freedom that come from knowing Jesus.

Paul believed that an encounter with the glory of God in Christ would remove the veil that was hiding the truth. He was convinced that such an encounter would put his faith in proper focus. Has the veil been removed for you?

*Reflect upon your encounter with God's truth in Christ.
How will you reflect the glory of God in your relationships?*

—TIMOTHY L. BIAS

Our Help through Crisis

SUNDAY, APRIL 15 • READ ESTHER 7:1-10

Crisis reveals character. Few of us ever find ourselves in a crisis of national consequence as did Esther, but each of us must pass through the fire. In the crucible, our true mettle shines forth.

Character does not evolve by chance; it is forged by practical decisions made in mundane circumstances of everyday experience. Did Esther awaken one morning full of courage to face head-on the dreaded Haman, murderous enemy of the Jews? Hardly. Was it her lofty position as beloved queen that empowered her to engage such a bold strategy to stem Haman's evil plot? Position and power never shape true character; they only reveal what is already woven in the fabric of one's being.

Esther's upbringing serves as the seedbed of her character. Without fanfare Esther's tragic childhood is noted. (See Esther 2:6-7.) One would hardly consider this displaced orphan a likely candidate for character, let alone courage, in the face of national crisis. What a profound sense of self-esteem, destiny, and faith Mordecai nurtured in his little cousin whom he raised as his own precious daughter. Parents, whether biological or adoptive, sow the seeds of greatness in children from early in their experience.

Esther's confidence in the midst of crisis was founded upon a secure sense of who she was. Her perseverance against overwhelming odds was fueled by a clear sense of destiny. Courage arose in her heart because she knew and trusted the heavenly Father, whose sovereign hand moves history and circumstance, God's good purposes to perform.

Father, refine in me a sense of my worth in Christ and a vision of my special place in your sovereign purposes on the earth. Amen.

—LES DAHL

Imagine That!

MONDAY, APRIL 16 • READ 2 SAMUEL 11:1-15

It is a story embroiled in violation, adultery, misplaced loyalties, arrogance, deception, and murder. It is a stark, understated account of a king who abuses power, whose moral fabric is beginning to unravel. And it is a story about a woman who becomes a victim of the king's abusive power. We know little about her, only her name and that she is beautiful. We do not know what she thinks or feels; she says nothing.

Another person in this story is Uriah the Hittite, the husband of Bathsheba. He is the foil, the sharp contrast to all that dismays us about the great King David. In contrast to David who stays home when he should be with others on the battlefield, Uriah goes out to save his community. He lives out his commitment fully and wholly by denying himself nourishment and pleasure, his identification with other soldiers so complete. He is honest, faithful, trusting, courageous. (The king himself depends on one with these values to keep his kingdom and power intact!) But in the end, Uriah's integrity does not guarantee his safety or shield him from danger. He is the one who loses his life. He seems to have been powerless in contrast to the great King David. Or maybe not.

Perhaps this story is God's way of challenging us to imagine that commitment and compassion are not weakness and that the ability to command and oppress is not strength.

God of strength and wisdom, lend me your vulnerability and compassion. Amen.

—MARY DONOVAN TURNER

Choices for Abundant Living

TUESDAY, APRIL 17 • READ JEREMIAH 17:7-10

Jeremiah's words remind us that we must make choices about our lives. At the heart and soul of our choices lie questions of whom and what we will trust. Jeremiah perceives that Judah's choice violates the covenant nature of God's reign—the choice shortsighted and twisted by greed.

Trusting God is like a tree planted by the water that sends its roots down by the stream. Its leaves stay green, and it never ceases to bear fruit, a sharp contrast to the shrub in the desert. This fruitful existence reminds us of the nature of genuine relationship with God. As part of God's interconnected world, we engage in mutual relationship. God's love and justice surround us. This fundamental reality "roots" our existence as believers.

Our trust in God relieves our distress and suffering. Gradually we give up self-efforts, become honest about our utter uselessness without God, and live fully by God's grace. John Wesley indicates that this organic relationship brings experience of the divine presence: "God's breathing into the soul, and the soul's breathing back what it first receives from God."

Fruitful living involves faithful relationship with God and solidarity with other human beings. God's life-giving spirit empowers us to be fruitful as we work to restore and heal all creation.

We live in a broken world; we easily fall into isolation and try to become self-reliant. Without sinking our roots into the life-giving stream of God's grace, our lives become barren. Yet God offers restored relationship—a greening of our days and lives.

Gracious God, may your divine presence and love help us settle like a tree planted by the water so we can bear fruit abundantly. Amen.

—HEE-SOO JUNG

Beyond Limitations

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 18 • READ MATTHEW 14:13-21

Throughout our entire lives we come face-to-face with our limitations. No sooner do we arrive on the scene than we are sized up and sorted out. We are weighed and measured, compared and contrasted. Once we begin to notice that we are objects of scrutiny, we may also notice that we are not strong enough, tall enough, slender enough, or smart enough.

The disciples of Jesus find themselves faced with limitations. As they look upon a crowd of hungry people far from home, they anticipate a looming crisis. When Jesus orders them to feed the crowds, they say what seems so sensible to say at the time: “We have only five small loaves of bread and two fish” (CEV).

Only. It is a word that puts boundaries on the limitless possibility. It fences in our vision to what is practical and reasonable. It pays attention to the obvious. To the untrained eye, Moses was *only* a simple man with an unskilled tongue, not a mighty liberator of his people; David was *only* a shepherd boy, not the future king of Israel; the woman washing Jesus’ feet was *only* a sinner, not a model for how we ought to love and worship. And to the stunted imagination of the disciples, the bread and fish could *only* go so far.

Where do you find yourself “not enough”? Where do you feel limited? Limited by circumstance, by opportunity, by the hurts and mistakes of the past? Recognize that God is able to feed multitudes with all that seems meager and insufficient in your life.

God, may I trust you to do abundantly more than I can ask or think, according to your power at work in me. Amen.

—TRAVIS TAMERIUS

The Council of Bishops begins meeting today prior to the 2012 General Conference. Please hold the council members in prayer that their work may be done effectively and compassionately.

God, the Host

THURSDAY, APRIL 19 • READ PSALM 23

With the image of God as host at the table, we encounter a God who gives life to the world. It is important that our table be open to all God's people. St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco believes that the Communion table is also the table where we, as the body of Christ, host the world. The Communion table at St. Gregory is the one from which the church serves the hungry from their food pantry. This same table is used to serve refreshments for fellowship time following worship.

When I discovered the centrality of the Communion table at St. Gregory, I realized that the Communion table in many congregations sits empty most of the time. Yet we worship a God who feeds our deepest hungers—not just in worship. This same God longs for us to feed the world. Occasionally we see pictures of hungry children on television. Do we connect those pictures with the table from which we are fed? We know that Jesus' body was broken and his blood was shed for the world. Do we remember our role in sharing that holy food with all who hunger?

God prepares a table for us without waiting for us to be worthy. But that is not the last word. The psalm assures us that God's goodness and mercy will pursue us throughout our lives. We dwell with God no matter where we are.

Affirming our faith in Psalm 23 can transform our lives. When we are fed at God's table, we are changed. We commit ourselves to feeding the world with the same generosity.

Generous God, you feed all of our hungers, and you call us to feed one another. May we learn to feed one another as you have fed us. Amen.

—SUE JOINER

The Lesson of Wilderness

FRIDAY, APRIL 20 • READ JOSHUA 5:9-12

During one of the most memorable nights of my life, I awoke after three hours of sleep and rode a camel up Mount Sinai under the Big Dipper and an eyelash of a moon. The last part of the trip was on hands and knees, scrambling over rocks and boulders. I found a cleft in a cliff facing east and huddled there out of the wind and waited. Soon a tiny pinpoint of red light appeared on the horizon, and before long the entire wilderness before me was flooded with sunlight: a perfect moment for a profound insight into the meaning of life. But what came to me was, “I would have complained too.”

The book of Exodus is filled with the murmurings and grumbings of the early Israelites, who wandered this wilderness for forty years. That wilderness time for our ancestors in the faith became a time of great blessing, for there they learned to trust God for all their needs on a daily basis. Justice prevailed as every family got exactly what was needed, and no one went without. In the wilderness everyone experienced God’s sustenance, and everybody had a place at the table of plenty.

Guided by God and led by Joshua, the Israelites crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land where “the manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land” (Josh. 5:12). This land “flowing with milk and honey” held new challenges: Would the lesson of the wilderness hold? Would justice prevail in this new land dripping with abundance?

*God of justice, help us to cling to the lesson of the wilderness.
Embolden us to work for a world in which your all share in
your abundance. Amen.*

—JOYCE HOLLYDAY

The Ways of the Lord

SATURDAY, APRIL 21 • READ PSALM 26

Psalm 26 proclaims the innocence of the psalmist, a person accused unjustly by someone in the community. This psalm is a prayer attended by a symbolic action of washing the hands and showing them as clean. The psalmist cries out to God for vindication. Rare is the person who has not felt unjustly accused!

In times of trial we, like the psalmist, cry out to God. We seek God's help. We hope for the truth to reverse the situation. When false tales are told about us and we face some personal disaster, we beg God to turn the tide and perhaps even to strike down those who make the false charges.

After petitioning God to act, the psalmist denies wrongdoing and proclaims that he does not associate with hypocrites and evildoers. We see these verses as part of a ritual oath of purification. The words form a confession that contrasts the innocence of the psalmist with those who made the accusations.

"Your steadfast love is before my eyes, / and I walk in faithfulness to you" begins a positive oath formed in verses 3 and 6-12. The hand washing in verse 6 is a ritual act of purification. Because of that rite of cleansing, the psalmist can participate in the worshiping community. The accused can give thanks together with the congregation for God's great and merciful acts. There in worship the psalmist recovers the roots of relationship with God. As the psalm ends, we do not hear anger; we hear affirmation: "in the great congregation I will bless the LORD." So also is the process we experience as we move from woundedness to healing grace—in worship. The ways of God are indeed mysterious!

Consider how often you are set free in the process from woundedness to healing grace. How does that grace encourage you to follow?

—KNUT BJARNE JORGENSEN

Compelled to Shout “Hosanna!”

SUNDAY, APRIL 22 • READ PSALM 118:1-4

Sometimes our lives can seem very unsteady. When the world around us loses its bearings and chaos rules, our personal lives can feel like they are coming apart. When sudden change in family or among friends comes with deep hurt or unexpected loss, we feel all at sea. When a friend of mine lost his mother in an accident, he told me, “Everything seems strange and empty, and everything I think or do is in a fog—I feel like I’m losing my way.” Such disorientation easily calls faith into question.

When I have these experiences, I find myself being drawn back to the psalms. Perhaps *compelled* might be more accurate. So many of the psalms sing lament and praise, desperation and doxology. In the midst of finding words to express grief and anger and sorrow, we also find a phrase like “steadfast love.” Our psalm opens with the powerful refrain, “[God’s] steadfast love endures forever!” We find this refrain in many other psalms, most especially in Psalm 136 where it forms a perfect litany of life before God. To hear once again that God’s steadfast love endures forever, even against the evidence of our lives at the moment, is to be reminded of the very nature of the Holy One, Holy Three. The Eternal God takes on the human story from the inside out.

In times of uncertainty, disorientation, and loss, we can cry out, “Let your steadfast love come to me, O LORD, / your salvation according to your promise” (Ps. 119:41).

How do we come to know this? We know this by following the way of Jesus. He knew about the unsteadiness of the world. He faced head-on the struggle with the chaos of sin and death. He entered into our world of turmoil and strife and remained steadfast in love.

Reflect on where and when you have known the steadfast love of God.

—DON SALIERS

A People Set Apart

MONDAY, APRIL 23 • READ MATTHEW 22:15-22

Jesus reminds the Pharisees and us that we live in two worlds and have responsibilities in each. We live in the kingdom of the world with authorities of state. And we live in the kingdom of God under the lordship of Christ. What would the world look like if we *lived* our Sunday school lessons instead of just teaching them? Imagine this correspondence with Jesus:

Dear Jesus, your words about rendering unto God the things that are God's and unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's confuse me. I have been in the church since I was a little child. I have professed faith and been baptized. I've worked in missions and Sunday school and taught Vacation Bible School. I have led worship and tithe my resources. Isn't that enough? I do church a lot.

Sincerely yours, *A Confused Christian*

Dear Confused, thank you for your work and faith. I want you to remember that you live in two worlds—the kingdom of God and the kingdom of earth. Ask yourself what the world would look like if you lived God's kingdom approach in the world in real and measurable ways. I'm not talking about kingdom rhetoric; I'm not even talking about the work you do in the church. Remember, *doing* church is not *being* church—my body for the world. I'm talking about justice, mercy, humility, compassion, and love lived out in generous and unselfish ways in the places of your everyday life and work. Sure, give Caesar his due. But remember, you are mine; and I am counting on you to be part of my redemption plan. I love you. Have a nice day.

Jesus

Plan to live your Christian witness in deeds and words.

—LIB CAMPBELL

The Call

TUESDAY, APRIL 24 • READ MARK 1:14-20

Now is the time!" (Mark 1:15, CEB). With those words, Jesus initiates his mission and calls all to respond with a life-changing perspective and a life-engaging involvement in that mission. "Now is the time!" The in-breaking reign of God invites us to leave behind everything that ties us to the status quo and to move boldly into God's missional future.

"Now is the time!" With those words, we gather today in Tampa to begin General Conference. "Now is the time!" Will we hear the call of Jesus to catch a glimpse of and join what God is already up to in the world, or will we refuse to hear and be content with the status quo?

On this day, we too have come to the edge of a body of water and to the edge of our future. From that first call issued along the waters of the Sea of Galilee to the renewed call by the waters of Tampa Bay, we are invited to turn our attention and energy toward the vision of a transformed world. When God's reign of love, mercy, and grace arrives, everything about our life, our world, and our church must be reconfigured because at that point our business cannot go on as usual.

The Greeks distinguished time with two words: *chronos*, which is time that can be measured and controlled; and *kairos*, which is time that is filled with possibility and signifies more about quality than quantity. Will General Conference 2012 be a *kairos* moment, and will the "now-is-the-time" call become an invitation to move faithfully into God's future with hope? Or will we find ourselves locked into the *chronos* of agenda and deadlines?

Meditate on "time": this time, our time, the next ten days of time; in silence, listen for the call of Jesus and respond to this kairos moment.

—LARRY GOODPASTER

His Name Was Christian

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 25 • READ MARK 2:13-17

During an early morning worship service, a man entered the sanctuary of a church where I served as pastor. Quickly walking past the ushers he sat down on the first pew. Several things were obvious to me. He was not a member of the congregation. He looked as if he had been living in the street and had not sobered up from his drinking binge. Not long after I started preaching, he began to talk loudly over my voice, intentionally interrupting me and disturbing all who were in attendance.

It became clear that I needed to stop in the middle of the sermon and speak directly to the new worshiper. So I asked him “Brother, what is your name?” He replied “Christian” to which I responded, “Welcome, Christian. We are glad that you are here today. The people around you have come to worship God, and we want you to join us; but you can’t disrupt the message that is for you and the others as well. Am I clear?” He nodded in agreement.

With the help of the Holy Spirit and the calming presence of an usher, we made it through the worship service experience. I spoke with Christian afterward inviting him to come back, but I never saw him again. One member of the congregation rushed over after worship to tell me that the better sermon of the morning was not the one I had prepared, but the one he saw.

Jesus invited Levi to follow him . . . even though the religious community considered Levi unclean. Who would you consider so sinful as to be unworthy of God’s love? In obedience to God shouldn’t we as Christians invite everyone into a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ?

People look at our steeples and ask for love with hungry hearts. *Will the people inside love me like Jesus loves me?*

Loving God, help us to love one another as you love us. Amen.

—JAMES KING

It Is All about God

THURSDAY, APRIL 26 • READ MARK 3:7-12

Wherever Jesus went, his fame preceded him. He attracted hordes of people, eager to meet him. He was revered, even worshiped, as a healer and a miracle worker.

The scriptures tell of Jesus' power to exorcise demonic spirits. In the Markan account of Jesus' journey with his disciples to the sea, the unclean spirits that Jesus is exorcising fall on their knees before Jesus and shout, "You are the son of God." Jesus sternly orders the unclean spirits not to make him known.

We might not understand his insistence on shunning the limelight, but Jesus' interest lies less in garnering attention, recognition, and fame for himself than in focusing the spotlight on God.

How that differs from our egotistic human nature! Ours is an increasingly self-centered, narcissistic world. Corporate greed, an increasing disparity between wealthy and poor, those with privilege and those on the margins of life are just a few signs of a "me first" attitude. The slogan of the moment for far too many is "It's all about me!"

In stark contrast, Jesus shuns center-stage attention. He prefers to focus our attention and our praise beyond himself to God. Jesus demonstrates that though he is the Son of God, it is not all about him! Jesus steps outside the spotlight of fame and attention in order to point to the almighty and all-loving power of God so others will see the divine glory through Jesus' life and ministry.

Likewise, we offer our lives in service and ministry with deep gratitude to God for life and in profound thanksgiving for the grace and love of Jesus Christ. It's not about us; it is all about the power and love of God!

Gracious God, may all my words, actions, and good works today bring glory not to me but to you. Amen.

—ROBERT T. HOSHIBATA

A Sower Went to Sow . . .

FRIDAY, APRIL 27 • READ MARK 4:1-9

Beside the sea, Jesus called his first disciples. Upon it, he calmed the wind and the waves. In this scripture, the seaside again becomes his classroom and crowds flock to hear him. The power of his stories draws multitudes to him; in his parables they discover something about God and themselves. Two thousand years later, we also come to the seashore, to Tampa, Florida, to hear Jesus' stories and rediscover within them something of ourselves and God.

We were once taught that this story was about the sower, but it is not. Later, we thought this parable was about the seeds, but it is not. More recently, we've come to call this the parable of the soils. I believe Jesus' words go even deeper than the soil. This is a parable about human hearts, and Jesus admonishes us to "listen."

The wayside soil represents the hardened heart, the one that is unreceptive and ill-disposed. The stony soil represents the shallow heart, where impulses are strong but reflection is weak. The thorny soil represents those hearts that are preoccupied; they have no depth for other matters.

Today we must be this parable's good soil. During our time at this General Conference, we will engage in an Act of Repentance regarding the church's history in the oppression of indigenous persons. Upon this Florida shore, we must confront the truth of our past deeds. With hearts opened through Jesus' words, we come to this moment to "listen" and "hear." The good soil is prepared soil; good hearts eagerly hear and respond! Listen! A sower went to sow . . .

Open my ears, that I may hear voices of truth thou sendest clear; and while the wave notes fall on my ear, everything false will disappear. Silently now I wait for thee, ready, my God, thy will to see. Open my ears, illumine me, Spirit divine! (The United Methodist Hymnal, No. 454)

—ROBERT E. HAYES JR.

Only Believe

SATURDAY, APRIL 28 • READ MARK 5:21-24, 35-43

The dramatic change in the lives of people touched by the power and presence of God through the early church proved to be a nearly irresistible magnet, drawing many to believe in and follow Jesus Christ. It was clear to observers and participants: God was at work transforming individuals and communities through this new movement. It was also clear that many not only wanted to see what was going on but longed for such salvation, healing, and wholeness in their own lives.

Jairus seeks Jesus' help for his young daughter. People coming from Jairus's home bring news of his daughter's death and beg that he trouble the teacher no further. A desperate situation has become futile. But Jesus turns to Jairus and says, "Do not fear, only believe." Jesus enters a home of wailing and mourning where he asserts life over death, belief over fear.

Today people still look for evidence of God's transforming presence in the church and in the world. When they find that evidence, they often turn toward it, seeking to be close to the God who is obviously at work changing lives in such dramatic ways.

Where are the signs and wonders of God's active and transforming presence most visible today? How can you and I make ourselves and the entire church more available, thus permitting those signs and wonders to occur within and through our lives? One way the early church made itself available was by going where the wounds were because that is where Jesus went to heal, witness, serve, and offer life abundant and eternal. Can we do as much?

God of salvation, call us to belief, heal us, and send us forth. Amen.

—RUEBEN P. JOB

Pray

SUNDAY, APRIL 29 • READ MARK 1:29-39

Jesus is very, very busy in this first chapter of Mark. He calls his disciples at the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee and promptly begins to teach, preach, and heal. The pace for these new disciples must have been unbelievable, the excitement palpable. One day they are sitting in fishing boats casting nets all day; soon after they are witnessing demons cast out, sick folks healed, and their new Teacher speaking to throngs of people. They go to Simon's house to get something to eat, to move away from the crowds for a moment. But even there they find work to do—healing Simon's mother-in-law and then dealing with the crowds of people at the door who want, yearn, look, ask.

There is so much work to do—a never-ending waiting list of items to tend to. In this “day off” from the work of General Conference it may seem that the load is great and the pace dizzying. We may be tempted to keep moving. However, as disciples we follow the example of Jesus, who, in the midst of the work, rose early and found a place to be alone. And he prayed.

Jesus finds time and space to pray, to be away from not only the crowds but also his closest friends and colleagues. He finds a way to listen only to the voice of God and the deepest yearnings of his own heart and mind.

The echoes of our daily song, “Shall we gather . . . at the shoreline” may be ringing in our ears even though we are not physically gathered for our morning prayer. My hope is that this day you will find a time and a place to be alone and to pause at the end of this line of our song, “Can you hear the voice of God? . . .”

God-With-Us, soon enough the work will continue. In this moment help us pause to listen for you stirring within us. And when it is time, give us the strength to continue. Amen.

—MARCIA McFEE

Crossing to the Other Side

MONDAY, APRIL 30 • READ MARK 4:35-41

Today's text invites all the disciples of Jesus Christ, those of the first century as well as those of the centuries that followed, to travel with their Savior to the other side of what they consider to be their sea. After a busy day of healing and teaching among the crowds, Jesus instructs his disciples to go to the other side of the lake. These verses convey rich lessons about mission, the faith of disciples, Jesus' divine authority, and the submission of natural and evil forces.

- *Discipleship and mission.* Gentiles inhabit the eastern side of the lake. Jesus takes his disciples to bring the good news of God's kingdom to these people. To be disciples of Jesus Christ requires a readiness to embark on unfamiliar, new ground every time the Lord sends us.
- *Discipleship and the faith of disciples.* Facing the danger of a furious squall, the disciples grow fearful. They waken Jesus from his deserved rest, implying his indifference to their situation: "Teacher, don't you care if we drown!" (RSV). For those disciples and for us today, it is one thing to remember that Jesus is in our midst; it is another to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the master of all circumstances.
- *Discipleship and Jesus' authority.* By divine power Jesus rebukes the winds and waves in the same way he has rebuked evil spirits in people. Agitation, violence, and disorder may signal a lack of authentic and true authority. But where Christ is acknowledged as alive in the midst of his disciples, there is hope for silence and authentic peace.

Lord, we thank you for bringing us together as delegates from across the world. Be present in our midst in our times. Strengthen our faith that we may make disciples for the transformation of our troubled world. Amen.

—DAVID K. YEMBA

Discipleship by the Sea

TUESDAY, MAY 1 • READ MARK 6:48-51

Jesus walks on the water. Is this the most astonishing feature of this passage? “When the [disciples] saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out”; that is the reaction Mark reports from the disciples. Do they *really* know their master? Do they understand the clues Jesus is giving them as to his true identity? After sending his disciples off, Jesus goes up on the mountain to pray. As he descends, perhaps he sees them from a distance straining at the oars. He comes toward them not swimming but walking on the water. He intends to move by them in the same way God revealed God’s glory to Moses (Exod. 33:17–34:8) and Elijah (1 Kings 19:11–13) by passing by them.

Mark’s Gospel holds in tension the expectation that the disciples will know and recognize their teacher and the fact that it is impossible to fully know God. Their fear upon seeing Jesus is natural. Earlier, when he dispatched them to the other side, the communication between him and them had ended. But now, realizing their fear, Jesus immediately resumes communication: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” “It is I”—the same formulaic words God used when presenting himself to Moses and the people of Israel: “I AM WHO I AM” (Exod. 3:14). Using this formula, Jesus is saying more than simply “it’s me.” Implicitly he is claiming to be the Lord, to be God. At the same time he shows his human side by taking pity on his poor struggling and frightened disciples. He gets into the boat with them, and the wind ceases. The good news is this: God is always present and close, even if not fully known. Jesus encourages the disciples and us to “take heart.”

Do we understand Jesus? Will we recognize him if he comes walking toward us in so unexpected a way?

—OLAV FYKSE TVEIT

Hope Breaks Forth

WEDNESDAY, MAY 2 • READ MARK 14:26-28; 16:1-7

In our world we witness all around us signs of despair and death: nations, neighborhoods, and churches in conflict; diseases for which there are known cures continuing to ravage populations; mean-spirited persons who refuse to find common ground; prevailing cynicism.

On a morning long ago three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome go to the tomb where Jesus has been placed. They are in despair, and they expect to find death. Instead they receive the astonishing news that Jesus is alive. "Don't be afraid. I know you're looking for Jesus the Nazarene, the One they nailed on the cross. He's been raised up; he's here no longer. You can see for yourselves that the place is empty" (Mark 16:6, *THE MESSAGE*). The messenger further instructs them to tell the disciples that they will find Jesus in Galilee.

Even in the midst of great despair, of problems and circumstances for which there seems to be no way forward, of issues around which the differences seem unbridgeable; especially in these times, God's action intervenes and hope breaks forth. This is the fundamental promise of our faith.

Our Christian faith provides a wonderful cycle of hope for life. As "The Hymn of Promise" proclaims, "In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory, unrevealed until its season something God alone can see."

Jesus, who conquered even death, offers that hope. Jesus knew betrayal and death awaited him, yet he did not shrink from his call. And on that Easter morning the message was heard that bears witness to the living Christ. It must become our message: "He is not here. He is risen!"

Holy God, help us to see life's possibilities in all times. May we be open to encountering the hope you bring into our lives, our ministries, our decisions. Amen.

—JANE ALLEN MIDDLETON

For the Sake of the World

THURSDAY, MAY 3 • READ JOHN 21:1-10, 12A, 15

An interesting man, Peter. For three years—three tumultuous years—Peter lived, worked, prayed, and struggled alongside Jesus. He witnessed the mountaintop experience of Jesus' transfiguration. He listened to Jesus' teachings—sometimes understanding and sometimes missing the point. Jesus had called him “the Rock”—on whom the church was to be built. And yet Peter denied Christ that night in the courtyard when Jesus was taken away.

During those three years, Peter walked with Jesus, drinking in his message—being fed again and again through his grace and his teachings. The emptiness Peter must have felt with the crucifixion was deep. Not only was his Teacher gone, but the hope of the new future about which Jesus spoke was gone as well.

So imagine Peter's reaction to Jesus' appearance by the Sea of Tiberias! All was not lost! Death was not the end! The future was once more filled with hope!

As Jesus has done throughout his ministry, he once again offers to feed them. “Come and have breakfast.” And then these words, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? . . . Feed my lambs.” The message has shifted. Just as Jesus has fed the disciples, he now calls them to continue his ministry of caring for the least and the lost, of offering hope to the hopeless and life to the dead. No longer can Peter avoid the cost of his discipleship.

Friends, Christ's words to Peter are spoken to us as well. Christ gave his all for us. He fed us with his teachings and with his very life. And now, we must do the same—for the sake of the world.

Gracious and loving God, may we not step aside from the costly portion of our discipleship, so that upon our lives and faith, your kingdom will come. Amen.

—DEBORAH L. KIESEY

Farewell and Follow

FRIDAY, MAY 4 • READ MARK 16:19-20

Farewell usually means an end. The last two verses of the Gospel of Mark tell us the story of a farewell. “Jesus was lifted up into heaven!” That is a departing, isn’t it? However, it does not sound as if God’s mission through Jesus came to an end. The Ascension signaled a beginning. The resurrected Christ continues to be with his disciples through the Holy Spirit. His work goes on. He works with those who listen to him, trust him, and follow him. Christ’s words, shared through the ministry of his disciples, are confirmed by signs. Lives are saved, and communities are restored. The world is transformed.

In the Gospel of Mark farewell is a starting point. What about the farewell after General Conference? One thousand delegates will leave Tampa. Probably we leave inspired and also in some aspects disappointed or even wounded. No matter our feelings, we are not on our own. Christ is with us, inviting us to follow him. Focusing on him will renew and equip us. Wherever we go in order to serve the people of Africa, Asia, Europe, or America, Christ is already there. And sisters and brothers in Christ are already there.

The General Conference theme challenges the people called Methodists to “make disciples of Jesus Christ to transform the world.” This transformation is only possible through Jesus himself in the Holy Spirit. No matter on which continent we live, no matter if we are clergy or lay, no matter if we are full of joy or full of fear, after General Conference Jesus goes ahead of us. Jesus is in us. Jesus works with us. What a promise! Jesus with us! Through him and with him we are enabled to do what we are called to do.

Christ Jesus, what will happen through your Spirit in and through our church? You promise to work with us. Here we are, committed to follow you. Send us out. Amen.

—ROSEMARIE WENNER



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