



Belvidere First

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

LOVIN' JESUS  LOVIN' YOU

First United Methodist Church

610 Bonus Avenue

Belvidere, IL 61008

**2026 Lenten
Devotion Booklet**

February 18 (Ash Wednesday)

*Yet even now, says the Lord,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
rend your hearts and not your clothing. Joel 2:12-13*

So right now, even though we just want answers, God is asking us to sit in the ashes of our questions and doubts.

Ash Wednesday asked that of us. We need to feel the weight of uncertainty and sit with the pain of not being able to go forward or backward.

We may feel a bit like Ross, Chandler, and Rachel in a scene from the show “Friends.” Ross purchased his dream sofa, but he needed help from his friends to maneuver it up the narrow, U-shaped stairway to his apartment.

The three friends muscled it up the first half-flight and began the second turn, with Ross at the top and Rachel and Chandler holding the weight at the bottom. You can imagine the scene. Ross is completely invested in getting this mammoth thing to his apartment. Rachel and Chandler are willing to help, but they need to get the angle right, or it’s not going anywhere.

Ross starts giving directives ... “Pivot.” Rachel and Chandler wrestle the sofa a few more inches, and then Ross yells again, “Pivot.” And then he yells again, “Pivot, Piiiiivvoooooot!!!!” as if by saying it louder and exaggerating the word, those at the other end will be able to make it happen.

But the sofa is too big and simply stuck. Chandler, at the lower end holding most of the weight, finally loses it and starts yelling ... “Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!” (sorry, I know that’s not appropriate language ... just quoting here).

They all stop. Rachel and Chandler are sweating and glaring at Ross, who finally speaks, “I guess there’s no more pivot.”

Sometimes that’s how it feels. You run out of options. You’re stuck. We can’t fix whatever is stuck on our own. We can attempt to muscle that sofa up the stairs, but if it doesn’t fit, it doesn’t fit. On Ash Wednesday, God is asked us to come to Jesus with our stuckness and begin a journey with Him toward the cross. More than pivot, we are called to repent.

Submitted by Cindy Marino

February 19

"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." Philippians 4:13

February 15, 2026 would have been our 67th Wedding Anniversary. My husband, Jerry died five years ago on December 26, 2020. With God's guidance, we accomplished so many things together. The best being our two daughters, Karen Rowe Frazer and Diane Rowe Byers. They have been our inspiration and reasons for so much of our lives. I love looking back and reflecting on the memories captured in the many pictures. Jerry, you are deeply loved and always missed, but I feel your spirit is with us every day.

This bible verse has such strong meaning for me. In January 1975, at age 37, Jerry had lifesaving emergency gastric surgery. In the hospital, I sat and prayed to God to save Jerry's life. Over the hours that evening, as the sheriff's deputies made multiple trips bringing blood to the hospital, I prayed. The sixteen pints of blood he received that night helped save his life. God was with us! Thank you, Lord, for the doctors and surgical team who performed miracles on the operating table and for the donors who donated that life saving blood. God was with us! Thanks be to God!

God also gave me strength throughout Jerry's treatment for cancer. Forty-three years after his gastric bypass surgery, Jerry was diagnosed with gastric cancer. I thank the Lord for being able to care for Jerry at home where he could have family and friends around him to give him comfort and peace. God was with us!

Dear God,

Thank you for being the source of my strength each day when I am weak, tired, or overwhelmed. During trying or challenging times, thank you for lifting my spirits, and reminding me that I can do all things through you. Thank you for encouraging me that I am never alone and to keep moving forward in faith. Father, thank you for all the good things you have done in my life. May I learn to be grateful for my many blessings. Help me to be the kind of person you want me to be at all times.

Psalm 28:7 "The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in Him, and He helps me. My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise Him."

Amen

Submitted by Carol Rowe

February 20

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”

–Matthew 5:43-44

My father spent his career working in law enforcement. In his personal life, my dad had no enemies, but because of his vocation people often treated him with disrespect, contempt, or even hatred because of the uniform he wore. Sometimes, this hatred would impact me with things said or done at school, and we received some threatening, anonymous phone calls at home.

Things were particularly bad during the Vietnam War because we lived in a university town. Many of you can recall that our country was deeply divided then and it was a time of civil unrest. Students in our town would riot in the spring after their final tests were complete and before going home to their parents.

My father's duty was to protect the public and their private property from an angry, destructive mob. To many people he was not a man doing his job, or even a human being—just a symbol of the laws and government policies they found objectionable.

Today, we find ourselves deeply divided once again on issues of politics and national policy. Too often we are intolerant of our neighbors because of their political affiliations, beliefs, or jobs. We forget that there is more that unites us than should ever divide us.

Would you pray with me about this? Lord, help us to see the humanity in our neighbors. Give us strength and wisdom, not to demonize others when we disagree with them, even on important issues. Give us the compassion to “turn the other cheek” to those who treat us unjustly or see us as enemies. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Submitted by James Hazlett

February 21

Lenten Devotion:

"OLD HYMNS"

Scripture: Psalm 104:33 – "I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being".

Music has been part of my spiritual journey since I was in 3rd grade and joined the Junior Choir at my previous church. It was led by a wonderful woman – Marie Louise Hunt – who inspired and encouraged me then and even as an adult and had kids of my own. It was in that choir I learned (by heart!) my first hymn...Onward Christian Soldiers. I still have the first two verses memorized!

All my life, no matter what the circumstance, I've been able to draw from memory a hymn that led me to feel God's presence and calm my soul. Here are a few of my favorites that come to mind:

Calm and Peace in my heart: It Is Well With My Soul
Joy: Oh Happy Day
Courage to face difficulties: Standing On The Promises
Comfort: Precious Lord Take My Hand
Trusting God: Tis So Sweet To Trust In Jesus
Gratitude: The Doxology
Salvation and Peace: Amazing Grace (MY FAVORITE!)

I could list dozens more, but suffice to say, I will never get tired of remembering and singing them like "there's nobody listening!" Don't get me wrong – I love the new contemporary music too and count them also as some of my favorites, especially in my most joyful daily journeys. But there's just something special about an old hymn that leads me closer to God and gives me a peace only He can supply.

I've shared my music for countless celebrations – weddings and funerals come to mind. I only hope in those cases my voice gives families some joy and/or comfort at such times in their lives. I'm just so thankful I still have a voice I can raise up and celebrate God's goodness in any and all situations.

Who knew all those years ago, when Mrs. Hunt saw a "smattering" of talent in that 10 year old, that I still would be singing God's praises 60+ years later. And it's my prayer that "When The Roll Is Called Up Yonder", I'll still be able to carry and tune in God's Celestial Choir!!

Prayer: Heavenly Father.

Thank you for the gift of music and the scores of songs written throughout the ages that tell of your promises. Purify my heart and fill me with your spirit. Let me minister and not just perform. May I touch hearts and draw people close to you.

In Jesus name...AMEN

Submitted by:
Debbie Steinborn

February 22

Hand it over

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

Somebody recently shared with me that they can't stop overthinking and worrying. About things that may happen, that will likely never happen and things that are totally made up in their head. They then asked how I deal with the overwhelming anxieties of life. I responded that I very rarely worry. Their response was "Wait, then what is going through your brain when you're trying to sleep?" Well, all the normal things of course. To do lists, meetings, conversations, kids, etc. But once I realize that I'm starting to get stressed, I immediately turn my thoughts to prayer.

The words of Philippians 4:6 don't deny the reality of worry, but they offer a different way of responding to it. There is also no promise of immediate relief from our thoughts, but there is a promise of a God who listens and responds. Each worry is an invitation to pray and then to be willing to sit in that unanswered prayer knowing that God is working on it.

Putting a name to what we need is called petition. Even if those needs are messy- *especially* if they are messy. That can be difficult because sometimes we don't know how to put words to our anxieties. Thankfully we have a God who already knows.

Speaking of thankfully, how can we be expected to pray with thanksgiving when we are barely holding it together? Not only is God present when things are good, but He is present when everything is NOT good. Joyful!

During Lent, we often focus on what we are going to give up. But what if we focused instead on what we're giving over to God? There is a special freedom in that surrender, and it is ours if we are willing to hand it over.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, During this season, and seasons beyond, I come to you with all my worries. Teach me to connect with you in prayer, name the things that keep me up at night and do so with a thankful heart, knowing that you are already at work. Amen.

Submitted by Jenny Tillema

February 23

The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness his mercies begin afresh each morning. Lamentations 3:22-23.

At our church we have an open women's ministry group that meets once a month. This month we had the opportunity to pick up a small paper star with a word on one side. When I turned mine over it was Gratitude.

I smiled thinking I am grateful for so many things. Easy...but Gratitude-(not grateful) is more a person leading by example when it comes to faith.

In our weekly Bible study group at the end of the week's lesson our leader asks if anyone has a Joy? And recently when she asked, the room was silent (including me). Next our leader asks for concerns. Of course we have them (including me). I have reflected quite a bit since then. In my lack of gratitude. A few days later I woke up with a song in my head.

NEW TODAY- (By Micah Tyler)-

"I can rest on Your shoulders
There is grace to start over
Your mercies are new today
Your mercies are new today,
Help me rise like the morning sun."

So many blessings we have received: my husband fell going into church (his shoestring untied and he stepped on it with his other foot) completely went down rolled, got himself up. With lots of friends and church attendees surrounding him from our congregation-he hobbled into church and sat to get his shoe on and take a quick self-assessment. Our wonderful pastor came from inside the church and put his shoe on. (humble example!)

The Lord also blessed us by my husband not having a scratch or bump anywhere. Moreover, his back that has been hurting for weeks, is better! God's Gift! And everyone's silent prayers were what he needed.

Prayer: Merciful Lord, guide my words and actions to be gracious and encouraging so that they may bring others closer to you. Amen

Psalm 118:1

*Give thanks to the Lord for he is good!
His faithful love endures forever.*

Submitted by Valli Jo Rubeck

February 24

Psalm 61:2. From the end of the Earth, I will cry to you, Lord, when my heart is overwhelmed, lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

As I've gotten older, changes are happening! I am trying to navigate the differences in my life, like physical limitations that I'm not used to having. That being said, I feel very blessed to be able bodied enough to go where I want and where I'm needed. Other situations like the state of our country in the world can stop me in my tracks. I can also let myself become overwhelmed with the feeling of having little or no control over circumstances in my own life, my kids and grandkids lives, and the injustice happening in our world. I can feel the effects of a swirling mind. God has provided counsel with friends and family, but I can still hang onto thoughts and fears. I can play them over and over in my mind.

This Psalm is such a good reminder that our major source of strength is God who is a rock who is higher than I. He is our hope. If I look back on my life, I can see where God was in it in all aspects. That gives me so much hope. In sharing those times with others, I can give hope to them as well. We need to follow our rock in our actions.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, I thank you for being such a gracious God who's always there for us. You are higher than ourselves. No matter the outside circumstances and pressures of this life, we need to always be looking for your guidance. In the beginning and in the end, we know that it is you, Lord, that is our hope and strength.

Submitted by Sharon Blachford

February 25

Isaiah 26:3,4

“You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord, is the Rock eternal.

Driven by....?

After signing up to write one of the Lenten devotions I immediately began to think about what I should write. I was drawing a blank when one day I pulled into a strip mall parking lot behind another car. As I looked up at the car in front of me, I saw a worded decal in the rear window. It said, “Driven by Faith”. Normally something like that would say, driven by Ford, Dodge, Chevy, pick a car company and at first, I didn’t think anything of it. God caused me to pause and I read it again. This wasn’t about what gave power to the car, but about what powered or drove the driver of the car. I knew then that the Holy Spirit was speaking to me about what, or more specifically **who**, was driving me each day, and that I should incorporate what this decal said in this devotion.

Earlier that day one of my nephews had told me that he had just found out that he had prostate cancer. Thankfully he is a firm believer in God and had put his trust in Him many years before. For most of his life he had been driven by his faith in God. I shared with him that whenever I faced a trial, or a struggle of some sort including a cancer diagnosis seven years prior, that there were a few different verses that God had given me over the years that I have always clung to, to remind me of the hope, strength, and peace that is found in trusting Him. One of them is the Isaiah 26 passage at the top of this devotion. When we keep our minds steadfast in our faith in God and trust Him completely, we can be in perfect peace no matter what comes our way. During this Lenten season and beyond recommit yourself to allowing your trust in God to drive you forward each day in peace.

Are you driven by faith each day or have you allowed yourself to be driven by something other than trust in God?

Prayer: Dear Father in Heaven, please enable me to remember to daily put my trust in you and allow you to be the power that drives my life in faith.

Submitted by Pastor Paul Bundschuh

February 26

Scripture: Luke 18:18-30

When I was in first grade, my Sunday school teacher, Mrs. Wheeler taught that we needed to ask Jesus to come into our hearts & want Jesus to be a part of our lives. I remember walking away from class and the prayer I prayed in those hallways of the Christian Education building as a first grader...“Jesus, I want you to be in my heart. Please live there.” I also remember the feeling I felt... It was warm and comforting. I wasn’t sure what happened but knew that I trusted Mrs. Wheeler and I knew that I loved Jesus. Some days I wonder, if I knew all that I know now about Jesus and the world, would I make the same choice?

Recently, I was visiting a member of my church who is in the midst of chemo for an aggressive cancer. We talked about her treatment and her family when she said, “I feel so helpless and hopeless about the state of the world.” As we continued to talk, we agreed together that we would hold on to hope and not fall into hopelessness. We prayed together for health and strength and grace. Then we shared communion together and both agreed that even though the prepackaged communion elements aren’t our favorite, they tasted like hope.

Every morning before I start my day, in my morning prayer time, I decide if I’m going to follow Jesus that day. If I’m honest, some days are harder than others and some days I’m more hesitant than others. And in so many of those moments, I’m reminded that I need a Savior like Jesus.

I need a Savior. I need someone who will save me from myself. I need someone who will remind me that the world is bigger than myself. I need someone who will challenge me to love everyone even when it’s hard...I need someone who will love me when I feel unlovable and unworthy. I need a Savior like Jesus.

Jesus didn’t just come to die, but to show us how to have life and life abundantly. We are saved when we choose life over death...Hope over cynicism...Joy over despair...Abundance over scarcity...Generosity over stinginess...Peace over violence...Love over hate. Jesus is our Savior now, in every moment. Jesus has already chosen us. May we choose him every day.

Prayer: God, in times where hope seems far, remind us where you are and where you’ve always been. Help us to choose you and those you love over and over and over again. May we remember that we belong to You and each other. In Jesus’ name... Amen.

Submitted by Melissa Meyers

February 27

Psalm 34:18 - The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

In the past few years I have experienced the loss of my mother and father-in-law, in addition to the loss of my father over 25 years ago. All of those special elders in my life were true believers and shared with all who loved them their assurance that they would be joining the Father and we would all be reunited in Heaven someday.

Last year I unexpectedly lost my only sister to pancreatic cancer, who died within a month of her diagnosis. Deb was not only my Big Sister but also my best friend. Angie (my sister-in-law) once described us as two different personalities with the same heart. Deb was my person, the one who shared all my stories and secrets. She knew my heart and supported me with love and an unequaled sense of humor. The loss of the last member of my core family knocked me to my knees. However, during her brief illness Deb ended every day saying, "Today was a good day." She often told people at her bedside that she knew she would soon be reunited with a host of people she loved and had missed. Deb was at peace and shared a sense of calm assurance that a better life was waiting for her.

This past year has been a year of self-reflection and healing. I've received so much support from family and friends who understand the ache I've felt and the overwhelming sense of loneliness and loss. Through it all I have been steadfast in the knowledge that God sees my sadness and feels my emptiness. I am certain that God has been with me during the dark and lonely times and reassures me that this time apart is just a short period, as we will all be reunited in Heaven. I know in my heart that this is not "good-bye" but rather "see you soon".

Prayer:

Dear God, You know my sadness and how grief weighs heavily on my heart and the hearts of those who have lost special people in their lives. You are always near. Fill the emptiness in our hearts with your love and presence. Help us to feel Your nearness even when no one else is around. Please mend the broken pieces of our hearts and bring comfort to our weary souls. Help us to remember the joy our loved ones brought into our lives and find solace in the special memories. Let your presence be my companion, offering comfort, hope, and reassurance that I am never truly alone. Amen.

Submitted by Tammie Bahling

February 28

Gift of Life

Romans 12:6-8

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

Author: Unknown

When my daughter handed me her progress report. Every box was checked with praise – except one: “Distracted in large groups.” She looked up at me through her smudged glasses and asked softly, “How am I doing Mom?”.

Before she could feel embarrassed, I knelt down and told her the truth: “Yes, you do look around a lot. You noticed Sam sitting alone and you comforted him. You noticed when Banjo wasn’t feeling well. You noticed Grandpa slowing down and you waited for him. And every time we cross the bridge, you notice the view.”

Then I smiled and said, “That’s not a flaw – it’s your gift.”

Her eyes brightened, and I realized her distraction wasn’t about losing focus, but about paying attention to life. Because some people rush through the world, and others stop long enough to see it. The ones who notice – the ones who really see – are the ones who make it better.

Prayer:

Dear God, you are eternal, and our time and lives are in Your hands. Forgive us for hurrying and rushing through Life. Help us to slow down, to live unhurried lives, to gaze upon You, to discover the destination You have in mind for us, to learn to be centered on You once again, and to be refashioned into who You meant us to be. May we learn to be like Jesus, who had many things to do, but He was never in a rush. May we be Your instruments of love and grace to the people You bring into our lives daily and live out the Gospel so they may find hope in Jesus through us. Amen

Submitted by Greg Simross

March 1

“...you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love...” Jonah 4:2

It wasn't until my Disciple 3 reading assignment in mid-January that the whole story of Jonah came alive for me. While the fish might be the headliner, it's the story's other details that are not to be missed. Let's examine the first chapter of this short book.

The Lord tells Johah: “Go to Ninevah, rampant with evil, sinful people, and warn them to repent or they will be ‘wiped out’ in 40 days.” Jonah detests the Ninevites and wants no part of it; he boards a ship headed in the opposite direction, telling the sailors he is running from the Lord. The Lord brings a massive storm and puts the ship in peril. Jonah knows it's his fault, confesses as much and tells them to throw him overboard and the sea will calm. The sailors are reluctant but finally “...they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him.” (Jonah 1:15-16) *In the next verse, the fish swallows Jonah but the story ends well. I encourage you to read it.*

Takeaway #1: When we receive God's instruction, we best obey.

Silly Jonah. But relatable, right? How many times have I pretended not to hear God's voice instructing me how to proceed when it's not the way I want to go? As this story warns, sometimes our sin and disobedience not only affect us but can hurt others, too. God's ways are always the right ways. His will is always for our best.

Takeaway #2: God can reach anyone at any time.

The books says that the sailors worshipped different gods. But when they saw God's power on display, they immediately prayed to God and vowed to serve him. Even in Jonah's disobedience God worked for good.

Takeaway #3: God gives us second chances (and then some).

As Jonah himself wrote, God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. We can trust God to take care of us as he did Jonah. When we commit our lives and follow Him, we can live confidently in His grace and mercy. We aim for right living, but when we mess up, God forgives us.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help me live in obedience to you. May my actions honor you and help others come to know you. Amen.

Submitted by Katie Belinson

March 2

Don't be afraid for I am with you. Don't be discouraged for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand. Isaiah 41: 10

Grandma and the clump of grass (poem)

Grandma and the clump of grass
As the health of my grandma started to fade
She began walking down the sidewalk
To the gravel circle driveway
For fresh air and a change of scenery.
As a younger woman
She walked that way often
To hang up my grandpa's overalls
On the clothesline.
Rows and rows of denim blowing in the wind.

Grandma and the clump of grass
On the walks we encouraged her
To carry her cell phone just in case.
But she usually didn't
On one particular day
She reached the end of the driveway
Turned around lost her balance
And down she went!
She screamed out for grandpa
To help her but with the windows
Closed and the TV on
He didn't hear her.
Her screams went unheard, she thought
After lying there a few minutes
She saw a clump of tall grass next to her.
She grabbed it and pulled herself up
With what strength she had.

Grandma and the clump of grass
As she told me that story
She said nobody helped me
Not even God and I called out to him
She said
She wasn't a believer at the time
But she was in desperate need.
As our conversation continued that day
I said, "I think God heard you that day
Because that wasn't an ordinary clump
Of tall grass.
God was there with you!"
I wonder if she believed me.

Prayer: I emerged from the depths of despair with God only to unfold my wings. To become a beautiful butterfly. To fly on. Soar my child.

Submitted by Jennifer Mitchell

March 3

Wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving; considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. James 3:17

Last Spring I was blessed to be part of the group that led a Women's Retreat. When we met to begin the planning, it was suggested that each of us take one of the words from the scripture from James to present. I immediately said that I would do any of them except submissive. If you know me at all, you know that submissive is not the adjective anyone would use to describe me! However, as the meeting continued, I felt this voice saying...take it, take it. So, I spoke up and said that I would take submissive as my part of the scripture.

After letting ideas roll around in my head for a while, I came up with three ideas that describe being submissive in my faith.



Being submissive is letting God be in the driver's seat. So often I get busy trying to plan everything, worry about everything, and be in control that I forget that's not what God wants. He has me covered. I just need to move out of the driver's seat and let him take control of the day.



Being submissive requires listening for God's ideas. Sometimes we call these "God Moments". You know, those times when you end up behind someone at the checkout counter that comes up short on money or you are right there when a friend needs a helping hand. That is God putting us right where He wants us if we just listen.



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Being submissive needs us to think like the Nike slogan, "Just Do It"...God wants us to not just hear His ideas, but to follow through and do it. It is so easy for me to ignore those nudges I get from God, to say someone else will do it, or maybe tomorrow. That's usually when those nudges become a 2x4 smacking me across the forehead! When we get those ideas...just do it.

Prayer:

Dear Lord,

I thank and praise you for how much you love me and want to use me as your hands and feet. I thank you that each morning I can get out of bed knowing you are in the driver's seat and I do not have to be the one in charge. Help me to take the time to listen for your voice and to do your will. Amen.

Submitted by: Cindy Poulter

March 4

Yes, ask anything in my name and I will do it! John 14:14

In 1972 Keith and I were married. After a year we felt it was time to start a family. Our prayer became “God help us to be parents.” A year later after testing, doctor's visits and many prayers, we were told we were unable to have children and if we wanted children to look into adoption.

We applied for adoption through Illinois Children's Home and Aid Society. After filling out the application, several interviews, and many prayers, six months later we were told we did not qualify. The reasons were we had not been married long enough and Chrysler, where Keith worked, was not a stable job. Jesus, you said ask in my name and I will do it. We are continuing to ask.

It is now the end of 1974. A friend told us about the Holt Adoption Agency in Eugene, Oregon that dealt with Korean adoptions. “God we are asking in Jesus' name to let us become parents”. Catholic Social Services became our local agency because they were the only ones in the area doing international adoptions. After filling out the initial applications and interviews we were accepted. However, we were told we had to wait one year to actually begin the formal process.

Waiting, praying and more waiting and praying. A year later (1976) we began the formal process of adoption – forms, interviews, references, background checks and financial obligations. “In Jesus' name, God help us be parents for a child from Korea.” Nothing moves quickly in the adoption process, especially when working with two different governments and their requirements. More waiting.

In July 1977 we were notified that a little girl, Kim Sung Hee, could become our daughter. We were given two small pictures and a little medical information to base our decision on. We knew instantly she was an answer to our prayers. We were told it would be in January 1978 that she would be able to come to the states.

September 29, 1977 we received a call at 10:30 a.m. That our daughter, we had named Jennifer Kim, was in San Francisco and would be in Chicago at 4:00 p.m. Our daughter arrived with nine other babies, all being adopted. When our five-month-old daughter was placed in my arms, tears streamed down my face and my prayer was, “Thank you God for making us parents in Jesus' name. Amen.”

Prayer:

God through your son Jesus you promised if we ask in his name he will do it. God your answers are not always quick, and you may not always answer the way we would expect but you answer. Thank you, God, for being a promise keeper and answering at the right time as we keep on praying. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen

Submitted by Carol Dashner

March 5

"I have promised to meet all your needs according to my glorious riches. Your deepest, most constant need is for My Peace. I have planted Peace in the garden of your heart, where I live; but there are weeds growing there too: pride, worry, selfishness, unbelief. I am the Gardener, and I am working to rid your heart of these weeds. I do My work in various ways. When you sit quietly with Me, I shine the light of My Presence directly into your heart, In this heavenly light, peace grows abundantly and weeds shrivel up. I also send trials into your life. When you trust me in the midst of trouble, Peace flourishes and weeds die away. Thank me for troublesome situations; the Peace they can produce FAR OUTWEIGHS the trials you endure"

Philippians 4:19 2 Corinthians 4:17 Jesus Calling/ Sarah Young

In my love for gardening, I know how easily weeds pop up to take away the beauty and nutrition from my flowers. My Lord knows this of me and continually works on my heart. My prayer is to stay focused and trust the Lord in all things. The good, the bad and the ugly!

Prayer: Lord, I commit to making time to sit quietly and listen for you to speak to my heart. Help me recognize your light and find peace through trials. In your name I pray, Amen.

Submitted by Carla Walter

March 6

1 Thessalonians 5:15

Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and everyone else.

A while back I was embarrassed by a harsh unnecessary comment in front of others. My reaction was to get even to let the offender know how angry I was by somehow getting even. In my thoughts I discussed with God that because the comment was underserved my anger and payback was justified. Thankfully, by God's grace, He made me realize that the right thing to do was turn the other cheek and show the same grace He was giving me. Dropping the matter gave me more peace than any payback could have. Since then, I try hard to make a conscious decision to respond peacefully and calmly to any circumstance that might raise my defenses. Taking a deep breath and saying a quick prayer has de-escalated the negative emotion to a more positive response. When I respond in a knee jerk way, regret sets in, when the response is thought out, the benefit is a peaceful heart.

Prayer: Lord God in Heaven, creator of all things, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thank you for the teachings of Jesus and scripture to show us how you have graced us not by getting even but by righteousness and love. Help us to mirror that grace in every situation. In Jesus' Holy Name, Amen.

Submitted by Becky Newport

March 7

“For I know the plans I have for,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future”. -Jeremiah 29:11

November 6, 1996 started as a normal day. I had no idea my life would change in a profound and debilitating way. I was having coffee with my mom when suddenly, I felt extreme pain in my head and passed out. The doctors eventually found the cause. My brain was literally falling out of my head and was wedged in my spinal column. Its called Chiari Malformation. It is rare and no one really knew how to treat it.

Over the course of 2 ½ years, I had 5 experimental brain surgeries, bacterial meningitis 3 times, and mono. My hearing became so sensitive, that even with earplugs, I couldn’t be around noise. Any kind of light hurt my head so badly that I was in a room in the pitch black. My body didn’t work. I had to be tied in a chair because I had no balance. I couldn’t feed myself or take care of myself in any manner.

During this time, I talked to God a lot and my faith deepened in a big way. I really had no choice other than to put it in God’s hands. I knew God had my back and I would come out of this and be able to use whatever happened for His Glory. I also knew if I died, I would be with my Lord and I was good with that, too. Fortunately, I made it. I still have many neurological problems and a headache that I can only describe as an ice cream headache 24/7, 365 days a year for the last 29 years.

But here’s what I discovered. The more I leaned into Him, the stronger I was. 2 Corinthians 12:9 says, “My strength is made perfect in weakness.” God will strengthen and provide all of our needs, whether its here on Earth or in His arms in Heaven.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, thank you for giving us strength and comfort on days when we can’t make it alone. Thank you for giving the angels charge to bear us up in their hands, lest we strike our foot against a stone. Help us to keep our eyes on you. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Submitted by: Missy Ingersoll

March 8

Mark 11:24 NIV

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have it, and it will be yours.

For the last year a friend of mine who has prostate cancer that has spread into the bones of his body core has been in my daily prayers that there may be remission and his pain may be controlled. He has become a strong advocate for older men to continue having PSA tests into their eighties. Some medical professionals feel you can age out of need for a PSA because the cancer is slow developing. With his permission I have included his name on several prayer lists.

While we are in Florida, I attend the Methodist Men's Bible study. A few weeks ago, I asked for prayers for my friend and went into his struggles in combatting this disease. At the close of the prayer time one of the men said, "that makes up my mind, I am going to start treatment". He had been given a choice by his doctor to start treatment or just wait. Last week he began treatment.

The result: The man who was searching found an answer to his prayer.

My friend with the cancer was able to help another man through his struggle with the disease.

I have a new friend.

Peace be with you

Submitted by Dave Meyer

March 9

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us fixing our eyes on Jesus.

Hebrews 12:1-2

Do not be anxious about anything, instead pray about everything. And the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds.

Philippians 9:6

I chose these two verses because of an experience that I had many moons ago when I was still able to run longer trail runs. Norm and I were in Missouri for a race that we often ran in the spring. The course ran from a higher point past Lone Elk Park, down to and along the Merriac River, then up again to higher ground at the turn around, and back to the start/finish. Going up to the turn around you ran through some rocky switchbacks and made a 180° turn. This point in the course was my Achilles heel. Despite running the course many times and knowing it well, I have managed to go wrong at this point several times and had to retrace my steps until I was back on the correct trail. Coming from one direction it looks like the trail goes straight instead of turning. This day I had started going the wrong way but quickly realized that I needed to turn around. I had just gotten back on the trail when I met a gal coming toward me. She was not sure which way she should go. I was sure about which way I was going until we started talking about which direction she should be going. You had to be there. Brain cells die off quickly sometimes and it's a tricky turn. The race director finally made a sign with a big red X for that spot, after several of us went wrong one year. We both quickly sorted out which way we were going and went our separate ways, but I must have still had a mystified look on my face because the next runner that I met asked me if I was okay. I said I was, but I had felt a little lost. He asked me if I was a believer and I said that I was. We prayed for direction in life. We said goodbye and as he went past me, I saw the back of his shirt. Instead of the usual club name or race name it read "Running for Christ". I went on my way sure of where I was and where I was going, not just on the trail but also in life. I never saw him again, but I will never forget that day. I still get lost and I can't tell you how many times I have stumbled in life, but I always know that I can pray to Jesus for guidance and comfort.

Prayer: Dear God, you are so wonderful. We see your handy work all around us every day. We are such a small part of this universe, but we know that we can call out to you when we are lost and you will show us the way home. Thank you, Lord. Amen

Submitted by Joyce Yarger

March 10

PAPER BAG PRAYERS

1Thessalons 5:16-18 (note: the little word "in" is very important, not "for" all circumstances.)

"Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus."

What is a paper bag prayer? It's a to-go kind of prayer, fast food for thought reminder to talk to God about anything. Choose any small item that will fit in a paper bag to remind you to pray. Whenever you need encouragement or a smile, reach into your bag and pull out an item and pray--about ANYTHING, ANY PLACE, ANY TIME. I have been amazed at the direction this has taken me. I'll share a few of my items and thoughts.

First the paper bag itself. Since its flat bottom design in 1870 there has been little change! The paper itself is thicker, sometimes a paper handle is added but basically it's the same. Groceries can be carried in it, ripen fruit in it, even wrap a gift or garbage in it! I think of the unchanging love, hope and grace of God and give thanks.

There's a green maple leaf from my back yard. Oh, the fond memories around that tree and backyard. It has survived the "pruning" by two young sons who needed a branch to play with. For 60 years it has withstood rain, snow, sleet, and wind while still providing spring and summer shade. Lord, you give us so many spectacular things in this world like rainbows, rivers, mountains, and forests but I'm glad you put magic in small things too. It challenges me to remember my smallness. Small things can be magic if we use the life you give us to notice miracles, ready to keep learning and seek sanctuary with you.

I have a small seashell. I keep it because it's pretty. It reminds me of the first time I stood at the ocean's shore watching the waves wash over my bare feet in the sand. As I looked out over the water I thought about people on the other side of the world viewing the same ocean. A reminder that ALL people are God's children, loved and wanted. Grace freely given.

I believe God has also given us the gift of laughter. In my paper bag are a rock, piece of fabric, a thimble, blank recipe card, a key that doesn't fit any lock—silly happy things with special meaning.

Prayer: Lord, you know doctors say laughter is the best medicine so I hope you can also laugh when you see your children putting silly items in their paper bags knowing they remind us of your grace and hope. May we look through the bits and pieces of our lives and find one small item each day to talk to God about. Guide our thoughts and prayers as we seek to know you more. In Jesus name we pray. Amen

Submitted by Patsy Meyer

March 11

Isaiah 41:10 - “So do not fear; for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

Philippians 4:6-7 - “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

One big outcome from participating in a couple FUMC Disciple classes - where you discuss and dissect the texts; the Word of God - is you discover that you're discussing and dissecting yourself as well. For me, I was uncovering the sources, emotions and effects of my intense mood shifts. Or, as I call them, the pendulum swings. Events of the day, people's comments or actions, things not going how I planned, in work life or personal life... this inner pendulum would swing me from one end to the other. And then I would let it 'get lodged there' for a while, in a stuck position, often for way too long. Before it eventually, but slowly, swung back the other way.

I knew about it, but I didn't really want to know about it. Can you relate? Do you feel the same way at times?

Reading more about God's grace and love revealed His reassuring presence and told me there's a way to get rid of the counterproductive worry, anxiety, defensiveness, silent moodiness, and so on. Both bible verses above have spoken to me - constantly telling and reminding me - to just hand it all over to God. Jesus made the offer to let him "course correct" those feelings from stressful or angsty situations for me, for all of us. With His comfort and strength, the arc of my pendulum narrowed. I could sense it, feeling more inner peace during those "life happens" moments. Honestly, it still swings today - there's always more work to be done - but a lot less often and with a lot less momentum, because His hands are controlling and anchoring the weight of it.

We are not - and can't be - in control of all circumstances, environments and people that surround us. God is the only one truly in control.

Our shared prayer: "Lord Jesus, you calmed a raging storm with just a word, so my prayer and petition is that you will quiet my mind and my emotions - and fill me with your peace that surpasses my understanding. Thank you for sharing your strength and calming me with your presence, Amen."

Submitted by Rick Belinson

March 12

“Then all the disciples forsook him and fled.” Matthew 26:56

I have always been fascinated by the disciples, especially that last week in Jerusalem. They were a bunch of small-town fishermen and friends who met an itinerant teacher/healer from Nazareth who asked them to be his followers. He went out with two or three of them on short teaching trips or other times took the whole group. And he became popular! (A crowd of “five thousand” is no small thing.) The Disciples became the “groupies” or set up men at the venue. They were well known. People came up to them to talk. I’m sure they thought they’d made the right career choice, that their futures looked great and they were in the “in” group.

Then that week it all fell apart. They fled back home and tried to make sense out of the past three years. I was raised in the church. My family ran things; there are stained glass windows dedicated to my mother there. Christianity was easy. I went to college and married a preacher’s son. I was in on the “family plan” to heaven. I know how the disciples felt.

Then the disciples got word from Peter and James. “We’re going to reorganize in Jerusalem. Are you in?” The disciples had to reach into themselves to discover who they really were and to accept who Jesus really is. They discovered the gifts they had carelessly and mindlessly accepted from Jesus: Grace, forgiveness, rebirth, a glimpse of eternity. They chose to go back to Jerusalem and go out on mission trips to Spain, India, Egypt, Africa, and the known world.

My meeting with God was over this same self-discovery. I had to learn that Jesus waits for me to see him, to unearth the gifts within myself. To “see” what society dismisses as not worthy and to move into action as best I can. It was not easy to work through this. It still isn’t easy, but it has made all the difference in how I live.

Prayer: “God calls me to make choices, help me to find my gifts and then lead me to see what I can do, what I can give each day to live in the way of Christ. Amen.

Submitted by Karen Neibarger

March 13

Jeremiah 29:11-12 -- For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. (English Standard Version)

I credit my fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Roth, with inspiring me to be a teacher. She chose me, along with a few others, to go to the kindergarten class twice a week to help them with their handwriting practice. I was also able to teach at my church's Vacation Bible School each summer during high school. Those opportunities helped me to realize that I wanted to become a teacher.

I earned a Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education and spent 30 years teaching. I expected to continue until retiring at a ripe old age. That was not what God had planned. A series of events led to my decision to "retire" from teaching at 53.

I struggled with what type of job I could do. I watched employees everywhere and asked myself, "Could I do their job?" After 6 months I was hired as a desk attendant at an independent living senior apartment building. I had traded my 9- and 10-year-olds for 80- and 90-year-olds.

This was NOT what I thought I would be doing. I was overeducated, underutilized and working only part time. During my five years there, I was given more responsibilities and eventually was made full-time. I called tenants to check on them and answered the phone at the front desk. Both of these activities terrified me when I started. I led group activities and got somewhat comfortable speaking in front of adults. Most importantly, throughout my five years there I never doubted that I was where God wanted me to be.

Then came a moment when I knew that it was time to move on. The new manager had learned all I had to teach her, and the drama among other staff members was too much. I began submitting applications for other positions on days when things had been too much. I was contacted for an interview. And I got an offer. I accepted and began working as a patient service representative for a busy Family Healthcare Center. I was answering phones and making phone calls to patients. Both of those activities had terrified me when I left teaching. I had found the job I thought I wanted when I left teaching, but definitely was not ready for. And now I was ready.

Prayer: Dear Lord, Thank you for taking care of us when we don't understand what's happening in our life. Thank you for providing certainty when we are unsure. And thank you for showing us the plan at Your time. Remind us that we can call on You and you will hear us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Submitted by Kathy Vehmeier

March 14

Revelation 21:4 "He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever."

She was lying in her hospital bed. I sat down next to her, and she began to talk about her love for her family, her daughters and her husband. She told me how blessed she felt to be able to watch her girls deal with her illness. She was proud that they never gave up on their faith, never turned their backs on the church or their family. She shared with me all the things she and the girls had talked about doing before she died, like taking a family portrait as well as throwing an anniversary party that all their family, friends, church family, and community attended. She then talked about her cancer, about her doctors and treatments. She admitted she was tired, and said she was ready to go.

We had an extraordinary experience in that quiet and peaceful room. Her face had a beautiful glow. There was no sound except for our voices (and you know how impossible that is in a hospital!) I have absolutely no doubt God was in that room with us, and He was working through her. I felt it. We talked about healing, and she shared how she had hoped and prayed to be healed. But we both acknowledged that sometimes healing happens in ways different from what we expect or want. She told me she knew her healing would happen in heaven.

I saw her one more time, in her home, before she died. We talked about our hospital conversation. I told her that God had touched my heart through her, and that I was forever changed. She began to cry, and told me that her one wish in life was to touch one person with God's love. "If I can touch just one person, then all of this was worth it".

I went on vacation. She died two days later.

I had been touched by God and forever changed.

Father God, I come to you with a broken heart. This world we live in is full of pain and heartache. I know I cannot carry this heavy load alone, so I lay it at the foot of the cross. Thy will be done. Amen

submitted by Linda Lennon

March 15

2 Corinthians 1:3–4 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.”

Prayer is one of the most important parts of daily Christian living—not because it's another religious task to complete, but because prayer has the power to connect us with God. In Lent, we return to what is essential. We slow down. We tell the truth. We open our hands and both offer and receive life from God through prayer.

Jesus models this for us. He prayed daily. He prayed honestly. He didn't tidy up his feelings before bringing them to the Father. He prayed in gratitude and in grief, in crowds and in solitude, with confidence and with tears. And Jesus prayed for others. Again and again, he carried people to God in love.

That's part of what Paul is naming in 2 Corinthians: God meets us in affliction, consoles us in our pain, and then uses that comfort to help us hold others when they cannot hold themselves. Prayer becomes one of the holy ways that comfort travels—God to neighbor, neighbor to neighbor, and back again.

Being prayed for can be just as powerful as praying. As a pastor, I've had the privilege of praying with many people. But I've also been on the receiving end of prayer, and I can say without exaggeration: it is a means of grace. It is one of the ways God sustains us when our own strength runs out.

This past March, our world turned upside down. Our 13-year-old son, Luke, started complaining of headaches. At first, we assumed stress or migraines. But the pain worsened—relentless, pounding, unbearable. We rushed him to the ER hoping for something simple.

What we weren't prepared for was the diagnosis: Pott's Puffy Tumor—an incredibly rare and dangerous condition. An infection in the sinus cavity in his forehead was filling with fluid, so much that it was close to breaking through his skull and putting his life in jeopardy. We were told he needed to be transferred immediately to a children's hospital for emergency surgery. Becky and I have never been so scared.

Even after the first surgery, Luke's pain was intense. Even with the maximum morphine allowed, he still screamed. Watching your child suffer like that—helpless, uncertain—changes you.

We did what we could, which often didn't feel like much besides praying. But we didn't pray alone. Our community surrounded us. People from church, friends from far away, even people we hadn't spoken with in years—lifting Luke, lifting us, with prayer. And those prayers became tangible: a prayer shawl and a handmade pillow arrived at the hospital. Small things—until the middle of the night, when Luke wrapped himself in that shawl and clutched that pillow like a lifeline.

Then he said something I'll never forget: "When I hold this, I feel like God is with me." That's what prayer can do. It doesn't always remove suffering. But it makes God's presence real. It becomes grace you can hold onto—comfort that reaches you through the hands of others.

Luke needed a second emergency surgery, and thankfully, it worked. Even though he will have lifelong medical needs, he is back to being a typical 13-year-old boy: eating us out of house and home and laughing at memes I don't understand.

What I do understand, and thankfully Luke now does as well, is this: through prayer, and love made tangible, God carries us one day at a time. Even when it may not feel like much, prayer can change everything. This Lent, may we develop the habit and practice of prayer so that the God who is full of mercy may be revealed in and through us to console the afflicted.

Let us pray...God of mercies, meet us in our affliction. Teach us to pray like Jesus...honestly, daily, and with love for others. When we cannot find words, receive even our silence. And when we are too weak to pray, let the prayers of others become strength for our souls. Make your presence tangible to us, and help us trust you one day at a time. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Submitted by Pastor Eric Blachford

March 16

Psalm 23:4: "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me"

It is true that Psalm 23 is one of my favorite Psalms. I go to it often when I am weary from whatever is going on in my life. It doesn't just speak of death (although it is used quite a bit at funerals), it speaks of life. It makes the promise that God will be here for you every step of your life. From beginning to end.

This passage became very important to me on October 12th of 2002. My mother passed away that day. Why was I running late, why didn't I stop over to her apartment until after Sunday School, why, why, why. I beat myself up over this for years; usually every battle in my mind was followed with "if I had only". My heart was heavy at her loss, and in my mind, the fact she was all alone that day she died. It took me many years before I understood, my mom was not alone. Jesus was there with her to welcome her into heaven. All the people who she loved dearly, who went on before her, were also there to welcome her home. She no longer had to worry about pain and her health; she was now free of all those earthly chains. I don't remember when it happened, but I know it was several years later and I just could not carry the guilt of that day within my heart, on that day I offered it up to God, and said, "I surrender this to you God, please heal my heart". This is a big step for me, as I am a very introverted person and I have a very hard time giving things up. I have always said, if I don't worry about it, no one will. I believe God works miracles in all our lives, I believe that day he was trying to spare me and my 5-year old daughter, the pain of seeing my mother as she took her last breaths; of us being the ones to find her. Verse 3 of Psalm 23 is the promise that was given to me that day: "He restores my soul". I had been in a very dark place for several years, and he made good on his promise. I just had to listen and come to him.

The prayer I leave you with is from a friend's website, it is entitled "Give God 20 Seconds". Dear God, as the Holy week is coming, I just want to say thank You. Thank You for carrying the cross I could never carry. Thank You for good health, for my family, for all the lessons, and for the peace You give me each day. In my prayers, You Listen; In my silence, You speak. In my believing, You work. In Your mercy, I find strength. In your light, I find clarity, In Your Word, I find the path. No matter the circumstances, I find peace and rest in You. With You I have everything I need. God, I love You, and I promise to share prayer with a friend today.

Amen

Submitted by: Debbi Bloomingdale

March 17 Submitted by Dennis Hissong

Proverbs 3:5-6 "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

Message: In December of 2024, the company I had worked at for 38 years was sold. It was an anxious time for me. There was a lot of ambiguity regarding the transition. Would I have a job, what I would be doing, and where would I be working? After the restructuring, things changed. I went from being very social at the office, lots of traveling, long hours and enjoying time with co-workers, to a whole new world working remotely; just me and the dog at home all day. I made the comment to my wife that maybe I need to start going to church again just to be around people. At the Easter service in 2025, Pastor Jim explained that he would be doing a sermon series on how to get in touch with God, to connect with God. I thought this was my call to reconnect with the church, so I made the commitment to myself to start going regularly again.

A few weeks later, my primary doctor ordered routine labs as part of my physical. Everything came back within normal limits. I was seeing a urologist for other issues, and he noticed that there was an abnormal increase in my PSA since the previous year. He told me that he thought I had something going on and said we could redo the labs in 6 months or we could do a biopsy. I chose the biopsy. If something was going on I wanted to know now.

The biopsy results came back. I had prostate cancer. I think that once I heard the word cancer, I checked out. I was 21 when my dad died of lung cancer and my youngest child was 21. I'm not sure I heard anything else the doctor said at that appointment. It broke my heart having to tell my sons what my prognosis was knowing what I went through at their age. That was one of the darkest times of my life and I didn't want them to experience the same.

So testing was done. I was given two treatment options, and they both had same probability/outcome in 15 years. One was hormone therapy with radiation and the other was surgery. I just wanted the cancer gone. Given the options we decided on surgery, we found later it was the right choice. It took 5 months from the diagnosis to surgery. When the surgeon came out to talk with my family after surgery, he said I had made the right decision. The cancer I had was aggressive and would not have responded to the hormone therapy and radiation. On my follow-up appointment the week before Thanksgiving, he told us that I was cancer free.

Throughout this process, I felt supported and loved by close friends and family. Pastor Jim had recently gone through cancer treatment and was a great sounding board. We kept the news mostly to ourselves, but before my surgery my wife reached out to the women's group, and I was put on the prayer chain. The responses she would read back to me and the overwhelming support brought tears to our eyes more than once. We had people praying for me that I knew and people I didn't know. I was led back to church at a time I needed it most.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, creator of heaven and earth, great is your name and worthy of praise. We thank you for loving and guiding us through the good times and bad. We thank you for your faithful community that supports one another and for putting the right people in our paths at the right time. We thank you for healing and the free grace of salvation. Amen!

March 18

Jeremiah 29:11-13
New International Version

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

This verse became very important when Leta and I were going through fertility and adoption issues. I leaned into it and believed that God had a plan for us to be parents. I will say however, after failed attempts and adoptions falling through, I had started to think that I was just to be a great uncle and that guy kids loved to be around. I questioned and cried and even begged, hoping that the pain in my heart would be heard. We had just had what we thought was a sure thing, then the adoption fell through. Leta and I were at the end. We were not going to try anymore. We couldn't get our hopes up. That changed when John's birthmother reached out, stating she was pregnant and wanted us to adopt. She was family and of course, we said yes. We were cautiously optimistic. We had come so close before, but this time it was different. June 10, 2010, John Patrick Tane Gordon was born and our lives changed. 8 months later, on February 23, 2011, a judge finalized the adoption and even though John had been with us since birth, this felt like the fulfillment of my prayer.

Then, 3 months later, before John had his first birthday, I was in the hospital, fighting cancer. I spent 36 days there, and John's first birthday. But unlike waiting to be a father, I knew the outcome. I knew that God had not given us a child to raise just to have my life cut short and have Leta raise John as a single parent. I believed that I would be cured and be able to celebrate many more birthday's with him. God has fulfilled his promise. I am cancer free and I have had 14 more birthdays with him. I now watch as God guides John's life in Christ and what he has in store for him.

Prayer: Dear Lord, Thank you for listening to my cries. My cries of anger, of despair or hopelessness. Thank you for not leaving me in that state. Thank you for being a benevolent God who knows my heart and works to fulfill my desires that honor you. Let my life be a reflection of you and always keep my eyes and heart upon you. In your name, Lord Amen.

Submitted by Ronn Gordon

March 19

Psalm 127: 1-2

Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain.

Unless the Lord watches over the city,

the guards stand watch in vain.

In vain you rise early and stay up late,

toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves.

This Psalm was recited by families walking through Israel on the way to Passover. (Psalms 120-134 are the Psalms of Ascent – walking up the hill to Temple.) Children learned the words from grandparents. Teenagers with attitude joined in because their parents said so. Elders whose eyesight was fading would close their eyes to help them focus. Together we learned that all our planning and hard work are less important than God's involvement and blessing.

Some had taken time off from work for pilgrimage. Some had worked overtime to be able to afford the journey. Some were about to start a new chapter in life and others wondered why the last chapter had gone so poorly. We were reminded by the voices of close friends and family, and folks we'd never met: here's the thing, the main thing.

This Lent, let's spend a minute thinking of what we put our hands to in the year past, and what we might do in the year ahead. Let's consider the difference God's involvement could have made, might make. If God were to get involved in your life in the year to come, what might that look like? If God were to "build the house" of First Church, what might that look like? Let's let go of unfruitful toil and rest in God's doing.

Prayer: God, source of all our gifts, our successes, guardian of our home, church and community, stand in our place and bring about your will, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Submitted by Pastor Jim Bell

March 20 (submitted by Paul Vehmeier)

Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear.

But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

“Come,” he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!” Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”

Matthew 14:25-31 (NIV)

It was about 1:30 in the morning when the tree fell. The way I remember it, my first thought was “What did the dog do now?” followed by a violent shaking from Kathy saying the tree fell. She says she just nudged me. The tree was a 65-foot-tall white pine. It fell between the house and the garage. Minor damage to both, but it destroyed the backyard gate, damaged the fence, and pulled down the power line to the garage.

Later that morning I began calling the insurance agent, tree removal services, and an electrician. They would take care of the immediate, visible things. Later there were calls to construction companies, plumbers and other contractors for things we couldn’t see. When the tree went down it pulled the roots growing around the sewer line which broke the connection. The tree guys came and took care of that problem which revealed the damage to the driveway. Costs were mounting faster than I could count.

Once the tree was gone, I began building a new gate to keep the dog in. The fence was there, mostly, but without a gate there was a four-foot hole. I went to get some tools out of the basement. I couldn’t find them. I knew where they were supposed to be, but they weren’t there. I broke. I yelled at God! I asked, “Why can’t things be easier? Haven’t we struggled enough? Why is it always the hard way?? I just want to get something fixed!”

There was not a lot of damage to the garage roof, I didn’t think insurance would pay for it. I thought the sewer line would be labeled a preexisting condition that insurance wouldn’t pay for. I thought a lot of things. I saw the wind and the waves and was terrified. I took my eyes off of Jesus. I was going to fix it all. Kathy and several friends said follow the process and give it to God to fix.

It is easy to keep our eyes on Jesus when things are going well. When life gets hard, we stop looking, or we start down a different path. I had a pastor say one time we want to go from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, mountain top to mountain top. But to get from one to the other you have to go through the valley of the shadow of death. It is hard to see Jesus betrayed, beaten, and hanging on a cross. You have to see that. From the cross Jesus reached out his hand and caught me. In my case as the process played out, everything was covered and was fixed. Oh, me of little faith, why did I doubt?

Prayer: Lord, give us faith this Lenten season, to keep our eyes on you. Even when we have the faith of a mustard seed, help that faith grow it in us. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

March 21

Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.

They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. Lamentations 3:22-23

Behold, I am making all things new. Revelation 21:5

Last June one of my good friends was diagnosed with cancer. I happened to be at the hospital when she and her husband heard the news. For three weeks, we watched the decline and then Carolyn went home to heaven. One would think I would know this routine by now. As a Hospice Chaplain, this is the road I walk with people every day. And losing a spouse was all too fresh in my heart. Our friend group, Carolyn and her family, and I talked a lot about heaven those days and what Carolyn was looking forward to. With tears, we stood on the promises of salvation. That brought hope and eased some pain. Carolyn will be fine.

Yet it is another matter to talk about our part: the letting go. We talked about seeing her in heaven, but not about the current pain of letting her go. Obviously she filled a place in our lives, and if I let Carolyn go, who will I be with this void inside? There is emptiness; there is pain; there is loneliness. We don't really want to talk about that.

This journey through Lent is another road with which we are familiar. We've walked it every year and one would think I would know this routine by now. We are walking with Jesus and listening intently to what he has to say because we know where he is headed. We hear about his love for us and our love for others, how we are to live our lives trusting him in a world filled with trouble. We are warned many times that he is leaving, and there is that letting go again. I'd rather not talk about letting go, Jesus. I'd rather talk about spring coming, or about how we will celebrate Easter since I know what happens next!

Letting go plays a significant role in our lives. We let go of our children as they grow into mature adults. We let go of friends as one of us moves away. We let go of abilities as we age, of dreams as time runs out for them, of our homes, of burdens, regrets, attitudes, timing, control... Who will I be without all of that? It doesn't get easier with experience, but in the letting go, God does a great work. He takes the emptiness and uses that as the soil from which He will make something new. Rather than being consumed and emptied, we find there is more to our story, a new purpose, a new found strength. The hard stories are always the good ones because they talk about redemption.

Wherever you are asked to let go today, stay on this road through Lent, and be at peace. Stay close to Jesus. Listen to him, trust him. Let him fill that empty place as he wishes. One glorious morning you will find there has been healing, there has been grace, forgiveness; there is a bright tomorrow. A new day has come because God has made all things new.

Submitted by: Rev. Joy Starwalt

March 22

Philippians 4:13

I can do all things through Christ, who gives me strength.

Life can become overwhelming at times. Moving to a new home, raising 2 toddlers, preparing for another baby, earning a masters degree, working a full time job, coaching a high school track team, all while growing in relationship with Christ, are just a few of the responsibilities that can lead to overwhelming moments for me. I can hang my head and count down the days until my kids are old enough to sleep through the night. I can complain about the work that goes into turning our new house into a home. I can go through the motions at work and at home, just to wake up and do it all over again.

No. I get to... spend time with my children, be in relationship with my wife, earn a living to support my growing and healthy family, further my education, mentor young adults, and grow closer to Christ every single day. I can find joy when this life is weighing me down, but only in the one who can offer eternal joy and everlasting strength.

The Lord has blessed me with these opportunities. I need to use them to glorify his name through the choices I make, the mentality that I hold, and the way that I live my life. I can do all things through Christ, and Christ alone, who strengthens me, no matter the adversity that I may face.

Prayer: Lord, hold this congregation in the palm of your hands. Help us to move out of your way, so that you might work through us. Give us the awareness and courage to use the blessings or hardships you have given to us to glorify your name, without hesitation. Help us to grow closer to you through our trials, seeing them as opportunities to demonstrate our commitment and humble dependence on you.

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Submitted by Bo Price

March 23

“I am making everything new.” (Revelation 21:5, NIV)

Meditation: Beyond the Fence I Built, into God’s Garden

When Lent begins, I used to ask myself, “What should I give up?” This year, however, I find myself reflecting on a different question: “What am I seeking?” – seeking God.

For a long time, my faith has lived inside the fence I built.

The spiritual standards I set for myself, the people I felt most comfortable with, and a version of God I could easily understand—all of these formed a sturdy enclosure. Inside it, I felt safe. And yet, I was still thirsty. I began to realize that I was missing the vast breath of God at work beyond my fence.

As I have been studying Galatians, guided by N. T. Wright’s interpretation, I have been reminded that salvation is not about escaping this world and going to heaven. Rather, it is God’s work of new creation—God coming to renew this world. The first visible sign of this new creation is family. In Christ, people who differ in personality, perspective, culture, and even in the way they live out their faith are gathered into one single family.

Through my own experiences of living between cultures, I have come to see how easily we draw boundaries—sometimes out of fear, sometimes out of habit, and sometimes without even realizing it. We protect what feels familiar, while quietly distancing ourselves from what feels different. These invisible fences shape not only our relationships, but also the way we imagine God.

This Lent, I want to step beyond my narrow frameworks. I want to loosen the certainty that says, “God must be like this,” and soften the judgments that say, “That person is not for me.” Whether it is differences in worship style, spiritual language, generation, or life experience, I long to let God dismantle the fences I have relied on.

When we stop striving to shape our faith by our own effort and instead entrust ourselves to the rhythm of the Holy Spirit, we begin to notice something surprising: God is already near. God is not only a Creator or Judge, but the Lord who stands in the midst of our community, reaching out and saying, “Come—let us make a new land together.”

Where the fences fall, God’s vast garden begins to unfold. And there, I hope we will meet faces of a new family—faces we have never imagined before—made one in Christ.

Prayer: Loving Father, during this season of Lent, lead us out of the old frameworks that confine us. Help us cease our weary striving to make ourselves holy by our own effort and open our eyes to Your presence already among us, making all things new. Teach us to live beyond our differences as one family in Christ. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Submitted by Pastor Jay Shin

March 24

Hebrews 13:2 Do not forget to entertain strangers; for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.

Hebrews 13:5 Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, for God said “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you”

In the fall of 1982, we were dairy farming and were visited by an 18-yr-old guy from Germany who was staying with our cousin. He had lived on a dairy farm in Germany and wanted to see an American farming operation. He ended up staying with us for several weeks. He was a Christian and really didn't expound on his faith but would read his bible daily and talked about his life. At the time I was really struggling with my faith and even told him at one point I didn't want to hear about Jesus. As the days went on I found myself asking him questions about his walk with the Lord. On November 26, 1982, I asked Jesus to be my Lord and Savior. Little did I know it would take a character right out of a scene from "Heidi" to lead me to Christ! Jesus would see me through some very dark days and also bless me beyond what I deserve. I've had so many encounters with strangers (angels unaware) who are now beloved brothers and sisters in Christ who have been and continue to be a gracious gift.

Prayer: Oh Lord! It's with a humble heart that I give you all praise and thanksgiving for the grace and mercy you have shown to me. Thank you for your love and the sacrifice your son Jesus made on the cross. Forgive me for neglecting to be all that I can be for you. In the holy name of Jesus. Amen

Submitted by: Angie Dietterlen

March 25

The scripture that I just can't escape comes from Mark 12:28–31

²⁸*One of the scribes . . . asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?”* ²⁹*Jesus answered, “The first is . . . ³⁰you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. ’* ³¹*The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”*

I don't have to tell you how confusing, difficult, & depressing the world is to many of us today. Lately, I find myself purposely avoiding watching or listening to the news, so much that I actually feel guilty for my inability to live a normal life and be up to date on things that are going on in the world and specifically our country. Friends and family often question how could I not watch the news, “don't you think you need to know what's going on in the world?” . . . And when I have to agree, it makes me sick to my stomach and I feel powerless, depressed, and life seems just a little more hopeless. It makes me angry at politicians, friends, family. . .literally everyone. The state of the world constantly reminds me that I am doing a lousy job of loving the “Lord my God with all my heart, and with all my soul, and with all my mind, and with all my strength.” And I'm definitely failing at “loving my neighbor as myself”.

On days when I can find a way to bring this scripture back in focus, I feel better, I feel more hopeful, and I'm reminded to try to be more patient, compassionate, and understanding of those that I encounter each day, not just the old white guys (my demographic) but also the young, the aged, white, brown, black, male, female, folks that sound & look like me and those who don't. I think that if we could just follow these two commandments, we could change the world. . . . for the better.

Prayer: God please give me the strength to really love my neighbor as myself and please help me love the Lord with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my mind, and with all my strength! Help me to remember that everything begins with these two commandments. Amen

Submitted by Bruce Poulter.

March 26

Listening to God

Isaiah 30:21

Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’”

Psalm 143:10

Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground.

I was raised in the church (in fact in this congregation of the United Methodist Church). I went to Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, Confirmation, Methodist Youth Fellowship, and participated in the Appalachia Service Project. I learned the typical stories of the Bible that kids learn. I knew that God loved me, and I felt His love through my family and the congregation, and I never doubted it. But growing up I didn't learn how to listen to His voice. That has been an ongoing education as an adult, from various Bible studies I've done, and especially paying attention to fellow believers who were more mature in their faith than I was.

In June of 2024 my husband Stu and I moved from Belvidere, where we were both raised, to Wild Rose, Wisconsin, near the lake cottage that his family has had for generations. It was something we had looked forward to for a long time, but it was also difficult to leave family and friends behind. Besides family and friends, my church was the thing I missed the most! I knew I had to find another congregation to connect to in our new community. We went to several church services, and along the way I felt God reassuring me that we were on the right track. Sometimes I watched the Belvidere service online before or after attending a church in person. On 3 Sundays the same scripture was used in both services, and there were other coincidences too. Each time I felt a familiar peace, and felt God's Spirit reassuring me that we were in the right place. The church we decided to continue with is not a United Methodist church, but the pastor assured me that their beliefs are in line with John Wesley's. They also used the same curriculum for VBS that our Belvidere church used, and I've begun volunteering with the children's program.

I will continue to listen for guidance and assurance as I look for ways to serve in our new community. I still have a long way to go to be fully “in tune” with God's voice, but I'm working on it!

Prayer:

All praise to you, Heavenly Father, for your wisdom to know what is best for your children. Forgive us when we don't recognize your presence all around us, and when we try to go our own way. Thank you for the reminders that you are with us and that you care about us. Even when we don't know the direction your Holy Spirit is taking, inspire us to believe and follow where you lead. Amen.

Submitted by Angie Bahling

March 27

Scripture.....*Psalm 100:1-2*

Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness, come before His presence with singing.

I chose March 27 for my devotional contribution because it is my mother's birthday. Psalm 100 was one of her favorite verses.

I had gone to college and was home for a weekend visit. Jokingly, I asked my mom if she missed me. What she said hit me harder than I wanted it to. She told me she missed hearing me sing and play my guitar late at night. My bedroom was in the basement of the parsonage, directly under my parents bedroom. I was young and didn't realize the "noise" I was making was being heard by anyone but me! She must have listened to hundreds of my "concerts" and suffered through all those stages of learning songs and how to play guitar. But she never said a word, probably because she knew that if I was aware she (or anyone) could hear, I'd quiet down.

God enjoys our joyful noise even when we're not sure He's listening. But He is listening!! The saying goes "Sing like no one is listening. Love like you've never been hurt. Dance like nobody's watching and live like it's heaven on earth!" Make that joyful noise!

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for giving us the ability to make noise. Continue to bless us on our journey toward becoming better musicians in your blessed symphony. In Jesus name we pray. Amen

Submitted by Dan Holmes

March 28

Luke 19:29-44 As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, ³⁰ “Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it.’” ³² Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” ³⁴ They replied, “The Lord needs it.” ³⁵ They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: ³⁸ “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” ³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” ⁴⁰ “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” ⁴¹ As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it ⁴² and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁴ They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.”

Palm/Passion Sunday is a day of paradox: a day of silence and shouting, of celebration and disappointment, a Savior on a donkey leading a procession. Some things just don't add up. Will we ever come to terms with Jesus' presenting Himself in such humility? We so want a king! A wealthy, powerful king who can wave a scepter and fix the world! Unfortunately, if any human had such power they would be more likely to use it to serve themselves. Sort of explains why we need a Savior.

On Sunday mornings we, as pastors, enter worship in somewhat of a haphazard procession. We stop at the altar while the preaching pastor offers prayer. It is often a raw and vulnerable and humbling moment for me as we stand before God. We are prophets who offer God's proclamation to the congregation and priests who represent the people before God. Some Sundays it's almost more than I can bear to feel the weight of the paradox in how ill-equipped I am for this, and how powerful God is in bringing us to it.

I am always reminded in that moment, standing before the throne of Jesus, that it will never be my words that reach someone in love, but God's work in and through our willingness to simply show up.

On that first Palm Sunday, Jesus showed up. Bold and determined, with strength that defies human logic, Jesus presented Himself in humility, willing to allow God's plan to take its course. Jesus, “who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped.” He led the procession. He is still leading the procession.

When and how has Jesus showed up for you? How will you show up for others?
Prayer: Merciful God, we give ourselves to you. Use us this day to proclaim your love in humility. Give us the strength to show up in Jesus' name, Amen.

Submitted by Cindy Marino

March 29

Zechariah 9:9

“Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

Most of us are quite familiar with the story of Palm Sunday. Jesus sent two disciples to borrow a donkey colt, which he rode into Jerusalem. Crowds of people waved palm branches, spread their cloaks in the road and shouted “Hosanna!” welcoming Jesus as the king who would save them.

This story is told in all four gospels with remarkable similarity (references below). We have no doubt as to its historical validity. But have you ever asked yourself why the crowd behaved that way? This local preacher rides into town – not on a tall, powerful horse but a small donkey – and suddenly folks are praising him as their king? There must be more to the story.

Indeed, there is. For a better understanding, we need to look at the Old Testament. Jesus’ famous yet humble arrival in Jerusalem was foretold by the Prophet Zechariah more than four hundred years before it happened!

It’s easy to get caught up in the celebration and spectacle of Palm Sunday. We sing joyful hymns and watch children march through the sanctuary waving palm branches. But we need to remember why it happened. The people of that time and place lived under the iron boot of a brutal Roman dictator. They were sick of it. And at that moment, they were convinced that Jesus was the Messiah – the promised king who would save them from that oppression as told in the Old Testament.

Now that we better understand the Palm Sunday story, the rest of holy week begins to make sense. The people eventually realized that Jesus was not there to overthrow the Roman government. He was not the sort of king they were expecting. Less than a week later, the crowd shouted, “Crucify him!” (Matthew 27:22-23)

We are sometimes guilty of turning away from Jesus when he doesn’t meet our expectations. We pray for relief from the pain and anxiety of this earthly life, and lose patience when our circumstances don’t immediately improve. God does answer prayers, but we need to remember that Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world. The salvation he paid for on the cross is eternal. Hear the lyrics of that hymn: “O may we ever praise Him with heart and mind and voice, and in His blissful presence eternally rejoice!”

Extra credit: Read Matthew 21:1-11, Mark 11:1-11, Luke 19:28-44, and John 12:12-19

Submitted by Curt Newport

March 30

“An angel from heaven appeared to Him and strengthened Him.” -Luke 22:43

This quiet moment in the Garden of Gethsemane, found only in Luke’s gospel, draws us into Jesus’ suffering. In His anguish, He is not removed from pain but met within it. It reminds us of Christ’s humanity and the truth that He truly understands and empathizes with us in our weakness. (Hebrews 4:15).

Two years ago, I found myself in a dark night of the soul, caught in a “perfect storm” of crisis; one involving my husband and another with my twin sister. As the weight of uncertainty grew, my health began to suffer. Every phone call, medical test, and doctor’s report sent my body into a state of alarm.

One morning during my quiet time, a wave of fear, doubt, and sorrow came crashing over me. I knelt before the Lord, overwhelmed and exhausted, unable to see beyond the next minutes and hours. I cried out, *“Please, Lord, help me just get through this day!”*

Jesus spoke clearly to my spirit: *“No. I will show you how to live in this season.”* In that moment, I sensed that this cup would not pass, but neither would He (Deuteronomy 31:8). His promise was not my escape, but His presence.

God the Father sent an angel to strengthen Jesus, not to take away His suffering, but equip Him to endure it. Lent calls us to do the same: to place our needs before the Father, and trust God’s grace meets us right where we are. Often, the cup will not pass. Still, whatever God allows, He meets us with grace, strength, and His sustaining presence that will carry us through.

Now, on the first anniversary of my sister’s death, I continue to learn what it means to “live in this season”; to be sustained by His Word, His presence, and the power of His Holy Spirit (Ephesians 3:16). Just as Jesus called upon His Father in His hour of need, so can you. I promise you, He will meet you in your suffering and replenish your strength. Trust Him. He is faithful. *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”* Philippians 4:12

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, as I walk with You through this Lenten season, help me to trust You in my weakness and to rest in the grace You provide for each moment. In Jesus’ Mighty Name, Amen.

Submitted by: Cynthia Bland-Bell

March 31

For I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.” - John 12:49-50 -

These may be the last public words Jesus spoke on this day during Holy Week. Today! Jesus was channeling God whenever he taught, preached, healed, argued. What a life, to come to the end and be able to say that we have spoken just what God has directed us to speak. O, for that to be true of us.

Jesus assures us that he knows God's every direction, including the words given us to speak, are designed to bring the hearer, the one with whom we relate, to eternal life. Not just to heaven after we die, but to a life tomorrow that will never fade away for all eternity, that will pass through death and come out intact on the other side. The things Jesus has said to you are for that purpose in your life.

Let us spend time in God's word as we observe this Holy Week. Perhaps you might read the account of Holy Week in one or more Gospels, remembering that everything Jesus says and does is out of obedience to the Father and for the sake of our eternal life here and now. Let us intend that the words we speak this week flow from God's input and seek to invite, describe and inspire eternal life in all those who hear us this week. For this reason God gave us the Scriptures, for this reason Jesus came to earth, and for this reason we live, speak and act in Jesus' name.

Prayer: Praise to you, Lord God, for the gift of your word, your guidance and wisdom. Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ, for the gift of eternal life and your perfect example. Amen

Submitted by Pastor Jim Bell

April 1

Luke 24:1-12

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! It always makes me smile when we say that together on Easter morning!

But why? What does Jesus' resurrection have to do with us?

It means that whatever you have given over to Jesus has gone to the cross with Him, died with Him, was resurrected with Him and has been redeemed! Howard Thurman, in his book *The Meditations of the Heart*, refers to this as the “glad surprise.”

The fact that Jesus was not in the tomb where they laid Him confounded those who made this discovery. If His body was missing, it was either stolen or resurrected. A stolen body makes rational sense. But a resurrected body makes our hearts leap. Which would they believe? Which would you believe?

Your response is crucial in understanding how faith works in our lives. With faith, we serve a God who continuously makes all things new. We live in the certainty that the worst thing to happen is never the last thing, and our worst day never needs to define us. We live with wonder as we contemplate the mystery that God is and anticipate the next surprise that God is preparing. We live without regret knowing God already loves us and came among us. God took the worst we could offer and turned it into the best God could provide.

Or, we can believe the body was stolen and spend our lives managing our disappointment.

Nah

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, open our hearts to your glad surprises in our lives. Give us a sense of anticipation, of expectation for the new thing you are always doing. Help us live into your offering of renewal, restoration, redemption and resurrection as we unite with Jesus in His sacrifice on our behalf. We are grateful for glad surprises. Amen.

Submitted by Cindy Marino

April 2 (Maundy Thursday)

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart.

Jeremiah 1:5

The easiest way to get Carly to go to sleep when she was little was to play Broadway show tunes and scratch her back. One night when she was about three, while listening to some cheesy love song and having her back scratched, she was much more wiggly than usual. I told her to be still and she told me that I wasn't scratching in the right place. I scratched all over while she wiggled to try to help me get just the right spot. Finally she said, "Mommy, over here, on my wingbone...where my wings once were."

I stopped cold and asked her to repeat what she said. She repeated, "*where my wings once were.*" Her wings? Could it be that children carry a memory of the divine—a whisper of heaven that we forget with time? In that simple moment, God reminded me that He knew Carly long before I did. She was never an accident or an afterthought — she was part of His plan from the very beginning. Her innocent words took my breath away. I will never forget the peace that I felt in that moment.

My daughter—known, loved, and set apart by God. Of course she is. We heard it from Jeremiah. Praise be!

Heavenly Father, thank you for the most precious gift we have ever received. May each child know and experience the love that you so freely share; may every parent know the joy of this extraordinary blessing. And may we always be acutely aware of and grateful for the sacrifice of your only Son through whom we know perfect love. In Jesus' glorious name we pray. Amen.

Submitted by Sue Holmes

April 3 (Good Friday)

Isaiah 53:3-5

³ He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. ⁴ Surely, he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

As a child Good Friday was a day off school and the start of a 3-day weekend. At one time there was a church, I can't remember which one, that had someone dressed like Jesus and he carried a heavy cross all the way down State Street with people following. As I got older, I never understood why it was called "Good" Friday when Jesus died such a horrible death.

As I grew in my spirituality and my life in Christ, I came to realize that "Good" Friday is called "good" because it represents the moment our sins and debt was settled. While it was a day of brutal suffering, it was also the ultimate demonstration of God's love, where an innocent man took the punishment of the guilty to reconcile humanity to God.

Take time today, to sit quietly in and remember Jesus and his sacrifice for us.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we sit at the foot of your cross today with humble hearts. We thank you for enduring the weight of our sins and for the sacrifice that brought us peace. Help us to never take your grace for granted and to live in the light of the redemption you purchased for us. As we wait for the hope of Sunday, teach us to love others with the same selfless love you showed at Calvary. Amen.

Submitted by Karen Frazer

April 4 (Holy Saturday)

In the Wait

*I Peter 5:10 “And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.”
Psalm 46:10 “Be still, and know that I am God.”*

It seems that everyone turned away from Jesus on Good Friday. Judas. The people. The disciples. The religious leaders. As I sit in the quiet of Saturday ... hoping ... waiting. I am imagining what it was like to be those first believers. Jesus' life and message was such an example of enduring love. He saw those on the margins as well as the religious leaders. He offered second chances and extended forgiveness.

What happened to him wasn't fair. What is happening to many people is not fair. Illness, relationship betrayal or unjust treatment of undocumented human beings in our country – not fair. We wait in Holy Saturday, knowing that instead of the promise of “fair” we have the model of Jesus in the face of uncertainty. He looked to the face of his Father. He poured out his heart of hurt to God and then chose to trust in God's goodness. In the times of our lives when we can't possibly know that yesterday's heartbreak would be Sunday's joy ... Jesus invites us to trust God's heart of love.

Today we wait in holy anticipation. Some of us are preparing for company. Some are preparing for Easter worship ... all the details. The music, the flowers, the Gospel message of resurrection hope. Just like we wait “knowing” that Easter is coming – our lives ... our stories can wait with our eyes on Jesus, knowing that the hope of resurrection is a promise. There will come a day when we get to see Jesus face to face. Living on this side of the cross carries a spoiler alert for each hardship and challenge we face. Even in the uncertainty of the Saturday wait, we know that Easter hope is promised by a faithful God. I don't just believe it, I'm counting on it!

Prayer: God of hope and promise, create space in my day for me to sit and imagine what it was like for those first believers who weren't sure that Easter was coming. Stir in me a gratitude that cannot be contained, but that bubbles over into a joy that covers the hard circumstances of my life. Please give me an image of Jesus' enduring love that hopes for all people to one day step from the quiet and uncertainty of Saturday, into the joy and hope of Easter Sunday. In the name of our risen Savior, Jesus. Amen.

Submitted by Pastor Pam Rossmiller

April 5 (Easter Sunday)

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So, she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” ~ John 20: 1-2 NIV

I grew up in the church and have heard the resurrection story dozens of times. Either in the church service, in Sunday school, within a choir anthem or in Bible Study. My grandparents, parents, sister, aunts and uncles often told the story to me. I grew up with singing parents and learned that for a singer, Easter has some of the best hymns: *Christ the Lord is Risen Today, Up from the Grave He Arose, He Lives, and Crown Him with Many Crowns* to name a few. I thought I knew the Easter story.

In Disciple Bible Study the question was asked, “Who was the disciple Jesus loved?” The initial answer by class members was, “John obviously.” Pastor Steve responded by saying “Is it? When there is no name listed, as in this context, you can insert your own name.” So, the disciple Jesus loves is; Tiffy, Jim, Missy, Mike, Bud, Kim, Jay, Jeri, Jim, Collin, Kathy, and YOU, the person reading this, YOU are the disciple Jesus loves.

One song that I have sung for Easter is called *In This Tomb*. I have been privileged to speak the words of John 20:1-2 as the narration that begins the song. It usually takes me several rehearsals until I can say it with out my voice breaking or the tears starting. Two years ago, as we were practicing the song I was thinking about Mary and two things occurred to me.

First, I realized that it was with heartbreak that she went to tell the disciples of the empty tomb. Mary had not realized what had happened. Then I thought my family was Mary! They told me about the empty tomb. Instead of heartbreak they told the story with joy! They told me about Jesus breaking the bonds of death so I could have eternal life! This message that was first shared with heartbreak is now shared with joy and excitement as we celebrate Easter.

My next thought was to whom am I being Mary? Am I sharing the news of the empty tomb with people in my family? Do friends see the risen Christ in my words and actions? Am I sharing the joy of the empty tomb?

Prayer: Lord, we come before you on this joyous day. Thanking you for sending your son to pay a debt he didn’t owe, because we had a debt we couldn’t pay. Thank you for all those that have shared their stories during this journey of Lent. In the name Jesus your son and our Savior, Amen.

Submitted by Paul Vehmeier

