

Reflections

Daily Devotional Guide

May–August 2020

NextSunday Resources

6316 Peake Road, Macon GA 31210-3960

1-800-747-3016 (USA) • 478-757-0564 (Advertising)

Keith Gammons
Publisher

Carol Davis Younger
Editor

Katie Cummings
Assistant Editor

Dee Kelly
Chelsea Madden
Deborah Miley
Church Relations

Dave Jones
Graphic Design

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Reflections

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Themes for May–August 2020

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From the Editor

At the start of every summer I fantasize about those lazy, hazy days in Nat King Cole's song that ideally define this season.

I'll picture three months full of playtime and deeper breaths. I'll imagine days that are longer than our agendas, and an enjoyable booklist to work through.

In May I revel in all the possibilities that may lie ahead.

By August I'll wonder aloud where the summer has gone.

Finally I'll admit that what I really hope for each summer is a return to childhood.

In *To Bless the Space Between Us*, John O'Donahue writes, "Someone asked me recently: What is it that haunts you? I said, 'I can tell you exactly; it is the sense of time slipping through my fingers like fine sand. And there is nothing I can do to slow it.' One of the Psalms prays: 'O Lord, help me to see the shortness of life that I may gain wisdom of heart.' As we get older time seems to speed up."

I put an emphatic "Yes!" in the margin.

What would happen if we joined the psalmist each day this summer and asked God to help us value the time we have and use it to love? Would such a daily prayer affect our hours?

If God teaches us how brief life is, will we become more thoughtful about which books we choose to read, which debates we care to engage in, and which concerns we'll pour our hearts into?

Would we linger with a Scripture text until we heard something surprising in it?

Would we finally make the phone call that we've been delaying, or write the note we've needed to send?

Would we use the time we have to embody our prayers with actions?

In loving more fully would we experience the fullness of time instead of being haunted by its passing?

How will we spend this summer season?

Carol Davis Younger

About the Writers

Brent Newberry (May 1-2), pastor of First Baptist Church, Worcester, MA, is pursuing a DMin at Boston University's School of Theology. Originally a Southerner, Brent and his dog Zooey enjoy basking in all four of New England's seasons. He also enjoys fantasy baseball, good fiction, photography, writing, ramen, and being an Enneagram 4w3.

Melissa Fallen (May 3-9) is the senior minister of Glen Allen Baptist Church in Glen Allen, VA. Melissa has a doctorate in ministry from Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond. She has spent her ministry career in both the academy and local church. She lives in her hometown near her family and coaches basketball at the local high school. She is author of the new book *Lost and Found: From Losing Your Job to Finding Your Joy*.

Judson Edwards (May 10-16) is the author of twelve books, including *Quiet Faith* and *Bugles in the Afternoon*. A retired pastor, he lives in Cedar Park, TX with his wife, Sherry.

Jane Webb Childress (May 17-23) retired from teaching writing and literature at Stephen F. Austin State University, the small East Texas school that beat Duke in basketball. As part of an Intercultural Harmony Grant, she helps to organize and conduct arts workshops and other activities that promote wellness across cultures.

Vernon Davis (May 24-30) has spent years in pastoral ministry and theological education. He taught theology and served as the dean of two seminaries in Missouri and Texas. Vernon has a lifelong interest in music and hymnology and has published two hymns.

Melissa Graham Meeks (May 31-June 6) is the director of professional development for a peer learning educational technology company. Melissa coaches teachers and professors in running online writing workshops in their classrooms. She asks unanswerable questions in the Sacred Space Sunday School class at Highland Hills Baptist in Macon, GA.

Guy Sayles (June 7-13) is assistant professor of religion and philosophy at Mars Hill University and an adjunct member of the faculty at the Gardner Webb University Divinity School. He also blogs at FromTheIntersection.org.

Molly A. Martinez (June 14-20) is the executive administrator of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, NY. She earned her PhD from Yale University in Sociology of Religion. She is passionate about church life, time with her family, photography, arts and crafts, and dancing Argentine tango.

Tim Moore (June 21-27) is the writer-in-residence and former pastor at Sardis Baptist Church in Charlotte and the author of *Practicing Midrash: Reading the Bible's*

Arguments as an Invitation to Conversation (Wipf & Stock). He and his wife, Magay Shepard, are the proud parents of college triplets—Abby, Hannah, and Michael.

Elizabeth Nance-Coker (June 28–July 4) pastors Lakeview Baptist Church in Camden, SC. She holds a doctorate of worship studies and is passionate about incorporating lament into worship. Elizabeth and her husband Dennis have two middle schoolers, three grown children, two dogs, four cats, and one fish.

Graham Walker (July 5-11) is the McAfee School of Theology professor of theology at Mercer University. He is also the president of the Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary, a consortium of nine schools in the Pacific Rim that provides doctoral education. He cherishes family life with his wife, Mimi Damonte Walker, who is also his pastor at the Church at Ponce and Highland. He loves to hang out with his five grandchildren and learn new ways to see the world.

Brett and Carol Davis Younger (July 12-18) live in Brooklyn where they love New York summers, Plymouth Church, and living in a 194-year-old house that makes them feel young.

Greta Fowler (July 19-25), a native of Birmingham, AL, is the proud pastor of Gray's Chapel in Adairsville, GA and recently completed her doctorate. She and her husband, Brad, have a teenage son. She loves movies and traveling with her family.

Caroline Koster (July 26–August 1) is a New York City corporate attorney, wife and mother to two twenty-something sons. She's a frequent speaker and a lay leader at Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, a tireless Southern cook, and a mediocre tennis player. Her bipartisan op-eds have appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*.

Kimberly Knowle-Zeller (August 2-8) is an ordained ELCA pastor, mother of two, and spouse of an ELCA pastor. She lives with her family in Cole Camp, MO. You can read more at her website: kimberlyknowlezeller.com

Lance Wallace (August 9-15) works in higher education communications and is a member of Parkway Baptist Church in Johns Creek, GA. He and his wife, Carla, spend their time volunteering with Scouts, marching band, and church while raising three boys ages 18, 14, and 11.

David Mallette (August 16-22) has spent his entire life in places of spiritual transformation: theaters and churches. He is a partner in a consulting firm that recruits leadership to arts organizations. He and his wife live near Princeton, NJ, where they are members of Trinity Episcopal Church.

Alice Horner-Nelson (August 23-29) serves as an associate pastor at Calvary Baptist in Denver, CO. She loves coffee, painting, a good sense of humor, her husband, and her two cats.

Carol Davis Younger (August 30-31) is the editor of *Reflections*.

Friday, May 1

Psalm 62

My Spanish-speaking friends remind me every Advent that the word for “hoping” and the word for “waiting” is the same: *esperando*. In English, the words somehow diverge. “Waiting” conjures up images of grocery lines, busy signals, and the dreaded three dots in a text message conversation. “Hoping” connotes anticipation, albeit sometimes with unrealistic expectations.

The English word “longing” seems to capture the tension of both words, as *esperando* does. We want something deeply, but we must wait for it, however impatiently.

In today’s passage, the psalmist paints a picture of safety, where a person *shall never be shaken* (v. 2); God is their *salvation* (v. 2) and *refuge* (v. 7). But words about waiting and hoping also surface in these verses, reflecting souls that long to be in God’s presence.

Any number of reasons, full of joy or tumult, can compel us to long for God.

Though Easter was less than a month ago, we quickly distance ourselves from the longing we felt between Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday. We want to move past our emptiness and forget the pain we experienced at that time. Yet we still live in that liminal space between how things are and how they should be. God is making all things new, but God isn’t finished yet. We wait, and we hope.

When we find ourselves overwhelmed by work, frustrated in our relationships, and longing for cycles of violence and systems of oppression to end, we can turn to the psalmist’s words of hope as we wait: *power belongs to God, and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord* (vv. 11-12).



Consider

What have you been longing for?

Pray

God, be our hope and strength as we wait. Amen.

Saturday, May 2

Mark 6:53-56

Mister Rogers would say, “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’”

His words, sometimes spoken after national tragedies, have guided children and parents alike. Searching for the helpers encourages us to see our challenges and adversities through a different lens. Instead of reinforcing fears, recognizing helpers reinforces the power of kindness.

Kindness reframes our ministry to look more like the ministry of Jesus. If fear and kindness are both contagious, then lead with kindness. Love your neighbors as yourselves.

In today’s passage, we encounter Jesus and his disciples just after he frightens them by walking on water. As they dock their boat, needy people bombard them. Friends carry those who need healing closer to Jesus. They let kindness lead them, and their loved ones are healed. They touch Jesus’ cloak and recover.

Perhaps greater than the miracle of physical healing is the way Jesus deepens, mends, and restores relationships. Maybe those healed relationships help repair whatever else is broken. What if the Jesus-inspired gift of their collective faith heals them? What if that faith, combined with the longshot dreams of those in need of healing, is how God makes them well?

Maybe that’s how we help the world heal, by deciding together that our brokenness, even when daunting, is not hopeless. The resolve to believe God can mend our brokenness creates space and movement within and among us. It invites us to touch the cloak of the God of resurrection, who raises us all up to walk in newness of life.



Consider:

How might our world change if we pursued kindness instead of fostering fear?

Pray

God, teach us to be kind, even when we’re afraid, so we’ll love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.

Sunday, May 3

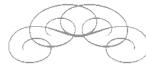
Acts 17:1-3

Have you ever had that dream where you are back in high school and about to take an exam for which you didn't study? Or, have you ever tossed and turned because you dreamed about stepping up to a podium to make a presentation for which you were completely unprepared? We may pride ourselves on being prepared for whatever responsibilities we're assigned, but these all too common dreams disturb us and reveal the fear of inadequacy lurking in our brains.

Many, even those of us born or grafted into an evangelistic tradition, find that sharing our faith in Christ can be a scary assignment. Maybe we feel unprepared to communicate what we believe and why. Perhaps we think we need a certain vocabulary or personality that feels awkward or unfamiliar to us. Our reticence to speak of faith keeps us from wonderful conversations with people who wonder why we don't.

Paul, one of the earliest and most well-known proclaimers of Christ's gospel, doesn't walk into Thessalonica with a "turn or burn" sticker on his donkey. Instead he enters the synagogue, *as was his custom* (v. 2), and holds a lively Bible study there for three sabbaths. Paul argues the Scriptures, explaining and proving the message of Jesus' death and resurrection. The point of Paul's argument is not to start a fight, but to proclaim the Christ he has experienced. Within his familiar setting and language, Paul shares what he now knows to be true.

Beginning with familiar verses of Scripture, Paul proclaims God's ongoing story, one we are also witnesses of and participants in. Because those ancient words are living ones, their truth grows in every age. When the wisdom in Scripture speaks to our experience, the words we need to share will come to us afresh.



Consider

Choose a word, phrase, or sentence from today's text to reflect on throughout the day. Tell someone about what you experience.

Pray

God, teach me your ways, that I may naturally share your good news. Amen.

Monday, May 4

Acts 17:4-5

Auburn or Alabama? Pepsi or Coke? The mountains or the beach? Some choices are easy for us. Others are anything but simple. If you've ever wrestled over which job to take, you understand this. Choosing whether or where to move grows complicated when you weigh the pros and cons. Pondering whether to take a risk or defer a dream can create an angst that won't let us go.

When presented with an important choice, pay attention to how you react—your emotions might teach you an important truth. We often choose on the basis of what is easiest, most familiar, or least fear inducing. But Jesus constantly calls his disciples to difficult tasks, unfamiliar activities, and leaps of faith that require the counsel, “Be not afraid.”

Paul and Silas offer their listeners an invitation to know Jesus as the Messiah, and a great many of them do. But others *became jealous, and with the help of some ruffians in the marketplaces they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar* (v. 5). Even the most heated Bible studies don't end so dramatically. Had those who were highly upset paid attention to their *jealous* reactions to those who chose to follow Jesus, what would they have learned about themselves? What fears caused them to enlist ruffians, form a mob, and create a scene? Maybe they realize that if Paul and Silas are telling the truth, the way of Jesus will disrupt life as they know it.

Some realities never change. Whenever we offer our allegiance to Christ alone, Jesus causes a holy disruption in our lives too. Oh, that we would be bold enough to make that right choice each day.



Consider

What holds me back from completely following Christ on a daily basis? What reaction do I have when I turn away?

Pray

God, help me join those who hear your good news of abundant life and devote themselves to you no matter the costs. Amen.

Tuesday, May 5

Acts 17:6-7a

The angry mob that forms in verse 5 levels their accusations in verse 6: “*These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also.*”... Not only that, but they accuse Jason and some other believers of offering hospitality to Paul and company. From the accusations of the crowd, it seems that Paul and Silas have been proceeded by their reputations. Maybe the people of Thessalonica were amused when they heard about Paul and Silas preaching outrageous things in other cities, but now this disruption has landed at their front door and it’s a different story. It may be ironic that these rioters accuse Paul and Silas of creating chaos, but they do understand that faith in Christ changes the world.

How often does our faith turn the world upside down? When does following Jesus lead us to upset the order of the day so that people accuse us of “turning the world upside down”? We can point to leaders in our history whose movements did so. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela come to mind.

Sometimes, though, we’re content to just let others speak for us instead of using our own voice to express our faith. What would happen if we took back our rightful place in the city square instead of relying on the sound bites or tweets of religious leaders? Would our world change? Would the risen Christ empower us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, set the captives free, and proclaim the hope of the gospel in word and deed? How would our faith grow if we eagerly embodied Christ’s love for the world? Would we not only be accused of *turning the world upside down*, but demonstrate how Christ’s love, grace, and mercy sets the world right side up?



Consider

What does turning the world upside down look like for your community?

Pray

God, you changed the world so we might know love in its fullest. Give us courage to share this experience with others. Amen.

Wednesday, May 6

Acts 17:7b-9

In case you haven't been reminded by the daily news headlines, this is a big election year. As the political primaries wind down, the country's focus shifts toward the two major party conventions this summer. Each candidate claims to have the power to make our country better. They try to win our votes by telling us how electing them will improve our individual lives. We all have opinions about who has the best platform to execute the responsibilities of the president. We would be foolish, however, to think that placing all of our hope in any one person or party platform will somehow make our lives infinitely better.

As people of the gospel, our allegiance and hope should solely rest in the hands of Jesus Christ. That does not negate our political influence or our responsibility to engage the political system. At the end of the election season, however, Christ will still be king. No president we elect can contradict that truth.

Today's Scripture reports the conflict that arises in Thessalonica when Christ's followers hail Jesus, and not Caesar, as king. Disciples of every age must confront the temptation to put our hope in earthly kings. While effective political leadership is important because it determines the future of many, Scripture calls us to acknowledge the place of earthly authorities but devote all that we have to the living God. While the authorities of this world will fade away as Caesar did, God, our creator, will far outlast all earthly kingdoms.



Consider

What unfair expectations do I have of my political leaders that I should reserve for God alone?

Pray

Everlasting God, help me to see that your kingdom is eternally important, and help me to devote my full allegiance to you. Amen.

Thursday, May 7

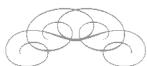
1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

If you've ever studied the five love languages that author Gary Chapman made popular, you know that speaking "words of affirmation" is an effective way to communicate care. For anyone in the church at Thessalonica whose preferred love language is affirmation, Paul's introduction would have been so welcome. He immediately describes how much he loves and values their congregation.

Sometimes we look past these pleasantries in Paul's letters as simply words of formality, but imagine how important these words would be to a struggling church. After Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, the community is just starting to understand what it means to be Christ followers. They face the ridicule of those outside the church for abandoning other faith traditions and leaving behind their false gods. Despite their challenges, Paul commends the faith, hope, and love that he finds in their actions.

We often underestimate what encouraging words can do for people and communities. Too often we're quick to criticize or name a wrong, but Paul reminds us that powerful words can build up a community. What would happen if we spent our days looking for ways to affirm the people within our congregations for what they regularly do? How would building one another up deepen our faith and our community?

Our churches don't look identical to the early one at Thessalonica, but we share similar challenges: volunteer burn out, extensive time commitments, hurt feelings, and more. A few words of affirmation could revitalize weary souls and enliven our work.



Consider

In what new ways could I encourage the people within my faith community?

Pray

God, thank you for all the workers who faithfully serve you in seen and unseen ways. Amen.

Friday, May 8

1 Thessalonians 1:6-10

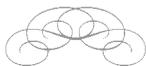
Have you ever looked at someone and thought, “She speaks just like her mom,” or “He walks just like his dad?” Most of us tend to share some of the characteristics of those we admire the most, even in the way we walk or talk. Watch young children beside their mentors and you often see them adopting the older person’s posture.

When mentors suddenly notice someone imitating their actions, they often feel the burden of responsibility and wonder what kind of example they’re offering. Will those who are watching follow the good things the mentors try to do? Or will they adopt all of the bad habits they see?

Imitating people we respect is natural. The church at Thessalonica must have valued Paul and Silas’ teaching in Acts 17 because Paul commends the church for imitating them. Then he bestows the highest praise on the Thessalonians by indicating that they are imitating the Lord. Even in the face of persecution, they become an example of how to follow Jesus.

What would it take for people to talk about our churches this way? What effect would we see if the model of Jesus became the pattern for our week? Would hope, joy, and love become more visible in our homes, streets, and communities?

May we be people who build a reputation for imitating Jesus. May we orient ourselves to serving a living, true God.



Consider

Who models the life of a Christ follower for you? How do you try to imitate their example?

Pray

*Christ, may my life reflect yours in ways that leave no doubt whom I serve.
Amen.*

Saturday, May 9

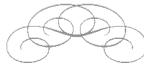
Mark 13:9-11

If Jesus were the hiring manager at your company, he would most likely be fired pretty quickly. From the earliest pages of the gospels where he simply says to the disciples, “Come follow me,” to these verses in Mark where he gives more detailed instruction, we see he’s not too specific. He doesn’t make the job of discipleship sound reasonable either. In today’s passage, Jesus’ message is to stay on high alert and expect to be persecuted. He tells his followers that they will be brought before all kinds of authorities and are always expected to proclaim the gospel.

After hearing this job description, how many would respond, “Where do I sign up?” Yet something about Jesus’ vision for this work is so compelling that his message and his messengers have endured for over 2,000 years.

While most of us will not face the same kind of persecution that the earliest disciples did for proclaiming the gospel, we’re called to offer a message that is still counter-cultural. This gospel still stands on the side of the poor, still persists in the face of injustice, and still remains at the bedside of the broken. The good news still disrupts systems and confronts abusive authority. The world still thirsts for this kind of redemption.

As we hear about the challenges of proclaiming the good news, we also glimpse what a world that fully lives into God’s Kingdom looks like. In that world we find hope, wholeness, and joy. When we finally envision that, perhaps the only question we have left is, “Where do I sign up?”



Consider

In what ways could I proclaim Christ’s good news so that hope, wholeness, and joy might thrive in our world?

Pray

God, the work you call us to take up seems difficult. Help us find abundant joy in pursuing your Kingdom and seeing it realized. Amen.

Sunday, May 10

Acts 18:1-4

The apostle Paul takes three long missionary journeys. Every one of them depends on the gracious hospitality of others. When he arrives at the city of Corinth, at the end of his second trip, he finds a couple who welcome him with open arms.

Like Paul, Aquila and Priscilla are tentmakers, so Paul joins them in their business in exchange for his room and board. It must have been a wonderful arrangement, because he stays with them for eighteen months. They become such close friends that when Paul leaves Corinth, they go with him to Ephesus. Because the writer of Acts includes these verses in the narrative of the early church, these details are meant to convey more than Paul's calendar. We learn that friendship is essential in the work of Christ's people.

Some people just have the gift of hospitality. My wife, Sherry, and I recently returned from a trip to Oregon where we stayed with friends for a week. When we left their home, I commented that our friends are bountifully blessed with this gift. They welcomed us warmly but also gave us space to do our own thing. They served us delicious meals, listened gladly to tales of our grandsons, and seemed genuinely thankful to have us in their home.

This was the ninth time we've traveled to Oregon to see them, and we never tire of making the trip. And, though I can't say this for certain, our friends never seem to tire of our company. They have become our Aquila and Priscilla. Friendship like this is an essential gift of God's grace.



Consider

When have you been the recipient of hospitable friendship? How has that nurtured your faith? When have you extended hospitality to nurture others?

Pray

God, thank you for the Aquilas and Priscillas in our lives. Give us the sensitivity and opportunity to show hospitality to others. Amen.

Monday, May 11

Acts 18:5-11

Resilient. That's the word that comes to mind when I think of the apostle Paul. True, many other words capture what we know of him: *passionate, outspoken, fearless, tireless, and authentic.* But to me, *resilient* best describes Paul's life and ministry.

In today's verses, Paul is still in Corinth, living with Aquila and Priscilla and venturing to the local synagogue to tell the Jews there about Jesus. When they oppose and revile his message, Paul declares his intent to make the Gentiles his new audience.

He leaves the synagogue and sets up shop in a house right next door. One night he receives a vision that tells him not to be afraid, and he settles into his new ministry to the Gentiles. Luke reports that he stays in Corinth for eighteen months.

That's typical Paul. Shut one door in his face, and he'll find another one. Toss him out of the synagogue, and he'll start teaching in the house next door. *Resilient* might as well be his middle name.

When our children were small, they had a favorite toy that they played with constantly. The child-sized clown was weighted at the bottom, so no matter how many times they pummeled him, the clown always bounced back up, his smile still firmly in place. They couldn't keep him down.

That's the way it was with Paul. He once said that he could do all things through Christ who gives him strength. His resilient life proved that his statement was more than mere words.



Consider

What issue that I'm facing right now makes me want to quit? How can I find the resilience to persevere?

Pray

God, today I claim the promise that I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength. Amen.

Tuesday, May 12

Acts 18:12-17

One reason Paul needed to be extraordinarily resilient was that he was constantly being criticized and attacked. Like the toy I mentioned yesterday, someone was always pummeling Paul.

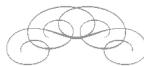
In today's verses, the people of Corinth are battering him, claiming that he is persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law. When Gallio, the ruling official, refuses to hear their complaint, they turn on Sosthenes, a synagogue official, and beat him up.

This passage reminds us of two painful truths. First, we too will probably be pummeled at some point in our lives. When you read the Bible, you quickly become aware that Scripture's heroes and heroines are no strangers to conflict. Nearly all of them had to face criticism, even abuse. Why should we think that no one will ever throw a stone at us?

Second, some people are just angry and will seek out nearly any target for their anger. When this crowd in Corinth could not vent their frustration on Paul, they turned on poor Sosthenes and beat him senseless.

No one knew these two truths better than Jesus. He faced constant criticism and persecution and ended up on a cross for crimes he did not commit. But we stand in awe at his response: "When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly" (1 Pet 2:23).

May we find even a small measure of that attitude when someone attacks us.



Consider

When I feel under attack, what is my best response to my critics?

Pray

God, may you give me the resilience of Paul and the grace of Jesus as I deal with the conflicts in my life. Amen.

Wednesday, May 13

Acts 18:18-23

In rapid succession, Luke ticks off the final stops on Paul's second missionary journey: Cenchreae, Ephesus, Caesarea, Jerusalem, and Antioch. He mentions these places so quickly that it's easy to think that Paul was taking short trips. In truth, the opposite was true. Paul wasn't hopping on jet planes, he was sailing on slow ships and walking on tired feet.

Where did Paul get his energy? What motivated him to keep traveling, keep preaching, keep dealing with conflict, keep spreading the gospel throughout this part of the world? When we read the book of Acts, Paul comes across like the Energizer Bunny, never growing tired or losing his passion.

Frankly, this makes most of us feel both envious and guilty. Envious because we don't seem to have the same energy Paul did. And guilty because we don't seem to have the same passion Paul did. More days than we care to admit, we sleepwalk through our activities, filled with more boredom than passion. And our relationship to God seems downright dismal compared to Paul's.

But people like Paul come into our lives not to make us feel envious and guilty, but to challenge us, to show us how passionate and joyful a relationship with God can be.

As we read these verses today, we see Paul trekking around the ancient world, spreading the gospel and challenging us to have that kind of passion and faith ourselves.

The small-in-stature apostle from Tarsus keeps challenging us to be more than we are.



Consider

Remember a time when you approached a problem or situation with Paul's level of energy. What made you so enthusiastic? How might you bring an element of that passion to one of your current projects?

Pray

God, restore unto me the joy of my salvation. Amen.

Thursday, May 14

1 Corinthians 1:10-16

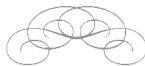
This passage raises an issue that most Christians have to grapple with at some point in our lives: conflict in the church. Has there ever been a church that didn't have conflict? Evidently, the church at Corinth has more than its share of contention, as Paul addresses two letters to them. Here at the beginning of his first letter, he confronts their internal fracturing directly.

The church in Corinth is divided into factions. Some of the believers there like Paul's perspective and theology. Some prefer the way Apollos does things. Some think Peter's approach is best. And some believe Jesus was on the right track.

So, on any given Sunday, the Paul group huddles in one corner of the church, the Apollos group huddles in another, the Peter group circles up across the room, and the Jesus people do their thing in the fourth corner. Each group, no doubt, think they are right and the others are wrong.

Paul says that he's glad he only baptized three of the Corinthian church members, so that, in effect, the Paul group can disband. As we'll discover tomorrow, Paul believes that only one group, the Jesus one, needs to keep meeting. Jesus is the reason the church at Corinth even exists. The power and wisdom embodied in Jesus' cross are the only tools that can rescue their contentious church.

As we read today's passage, we affirm that two things are certain. At some point, our church will have to deal with conflict. And the only remedy for that conflict will be found in the wisdom and power of the cross.



Consider

How can I be a peacemaker when my church faces conflict?

Pray

God, when our church passes through a contentious time, show me how to be an agent of reconciliation and harmony. Amen.

Friday, May 15

1 Corinthians 1:17-25

When Paul asserts that the cross is a symbol of power, some think he sounds ridiculous. As he acknowledges, the cross is a stumbling block to the Jewish people of his day and complete foolishness to the Gentiles.

Now, two thousand years later, we still have trouble seeing the cross as a symbol of power. Dollar bills, guns, judicial robes, and marching armies are the images of power that we usually acknowledge. I think of those as symbols of right-handed power—the power to force, intimidate, and defeat others.

But right-handed power isn't sufficient for most of the tasks of life. If we want to mend a broken heart, write a poem, teach a child to read, or reconcile a friendship, right-handed power is useless. We need left-handed power—a power that seeks to support rather than rule over. Left-handed power serves, listens, sacrifices, and suffers when necessary.

The power of the cross that Paul describes in these verses is the ultimate example of left-handed power. He brings it up when addressing the church conflict in Corinth because it is the only kind of power capable of healing that conflict. Pushing, shoving, dominating, and shouting will never cure the problems of the Corinthian church. Serving, listening, sacrificing, and suffering just might.

In his second letter to the church at Corinth, Paul will remind them that “everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new” (2 Cor 5:17). For all of us who serve Christ, one of the things that has become new is our understanding of the word “power.”



Consider

What does “power” mean to you? How does your faith affect the way you define it?

Pray

God, show me how to use left-handed power in my life. Then give me the grace to practice it. Amen.

Saturday, May 16

Mark 9:33-35

On their walk to Capernaum, Jesus must have overheard his disciples discussing which of them would get the most prestigious post in his new regime. Yet when he asks them about their discussion, they are silent. They knew he would not be pleased with them.

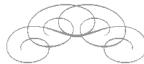
So Jesus sits them down and reminds them again that his is an upside-down kingdom. The ones who want to be first of all must be servant of all. They are not to focus on right-handed power and attempt to climb to the top. They must choose the left-handed power that descends to the bottom and becomes the foundation.

These verses in Mark are an ideal way to conclude our look at the Corinthian church. All week we've been thinking about that congregation and Paul's relationship to it. This is obviously a church in turmoil, filled with contention and division.

The Corinthian Christians are hooked on right-handed power, power that wants to dominate and intimidate. Paul has a lot to say to them about power, in particular the left-handed kind that Jesus displays on the cross.

Remember that Paul writes his famous "love chapter" (1 Cor 13) to this church, reminding them that of all the virtues they could develop, love for one another is the most important. No matter how talented, intelligent, orthodox, or emotional they might be, if they do not love one another, their faith is in vain.

Paul's message to the Corinthians perfectly reflects Jesus' words in verse 35: *Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.*



Consider

What does it mean for me to be last of all and servant of all?

Pray

Good and gracious God, show me specific ways to be last of all and servant of all today. Amen.

Sunday, May 17

1 Corinthians 12:27-31

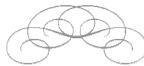
And I will show you a still more excellent way (v. 31b).

I once read 1 Corinthians 13 during a beautiful garden wedding at the rustic country home of dear friends. They joined our church 30 years before, on the Sunday after my pastor husband and I had joined. Their son Michael was five that day. Now he was marrying a lovely young woman. During the ceremony, we heard gunshots in the distance. Here in East Texas, we felt confident that was just target shooting, and joked about it being a shotgun wedding.

Now, though, the incident reminds me of Deuteronomy 30:19: “See, I have set before you two ways, the way of life or the way of death.” The way of the gun so often means, “I’ll get mine and I’m not afraid to defend it by the quickest solution.” In verse 31, Paul wants to picture an even more excellent way: the way of love.

As perfect as 1 Corinthians 13 is for a wedding—and what marriage doesn’t need reminders to be patient, kind, and unselfish—Paul is actually talking about relationships within the church. We had raised and baptized Michael in our church community. With his blond stick-up hair, he was our Bart Simpson, getting into all kinds of interesting trouble and drinking nine Dr. Peppers on the first day of youth camp. We loved him anyway, with patience and kindness, never giving up. He rewarded us with his wit, creativity, and insight. He and his wife are back in our church with their own two boys, and we won’t give up on them either.

We hear the gunfire that represents the way of death with increasing frequency in our culture. May churches choose Paul’s more excellent way of love, that we may form Christians who will resist the lure of the way of death.



Consider

What are ways that your church lives out Paul’s more excellent way of love?

Pray

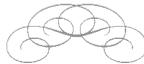
Loving God, thank you for staying with us over the long haul. Show us how to practice living in your love. Amen.

Monday, May 18

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

As a preacher's daughter, preacher's spouse, and active layperson, I've heard a lot of great preaching. I know from close range how much hard work goes into a great sermon. But I've also been privileged to know the great love that these pastors demonstrate. My father's preaching inspired me to walk the aisle of First Baptist Church, Polo, Missouri, and give my life to Christ. But I saw love when I watched my father hold the plastic basin for one of my best high school friends when she was sick after surgery. The first time I heard the great Jim Forbes preach, I was pregnant with our older daughter; even in utero, she seemed to experience the power of the Spirit, kicking and dancing as Jim preached and the amen corner shouted. I also know of Jim befriending young seminary students at a retreat, taking time to listen and mentor. I'll never forget Nancy Sehested talking about the extravagant grace of the "150-gallon" God when she preached at our wedding. A joyful picture of her love hangs on my bulletin board as she baptizes black, brown, and white prisoners in a tank at a maximum-security prison, all of them laughing. Just last week, my husband Kyle ended his sermon with a story that left us all in tears. I also see him leave his porch chair late at night to go get gas for someone who's shown up at our door.

These preachers would be crushed to think their beautifully crafted words were nothing but *a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal* (v. 1) or, in Richard Hays's translation, "the empty echo of an actor's speech," or, as Eugene Peterson puts it, "the creaking of a rusty gate." Thanks be to God for their powerful demonstrations of love that give their beautiful speech substance.



Consider

When have you seen the gifts that are shared in church being amplified by the love that the giver shows to others?

Pray

God, forgive us when we become nothing but empty noise. Fill us with your love that you may use our gifts for your service. Amen.

Tuesday, May 19

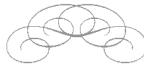
1 Corinthians 13:4-7

When my young daughters were watching Disney movies, *Beauty and the Beast* was always my favorite. The characters illustrate the do's and don'ts of love that Paul describes. Patience and kindness shine in Belle's relationship with her father. Her persistent kindness moves the Beast to stop insisting on his own way. Mrs. Potts is a delightful contrast to Lumière and Cogsworth's irritable bickering. Gaston is a hilarious caricature of boastful arrogance, until he goes too far and isn't funny anymore. Despite their hardships, Belle and the Beast believe that love can break an evil spell. And it finally does, restoring everyone to their best selves.

Churches include similar characters.

When we say, "She's so rude," or, "He's full of himself," Paul reminds us to examine ourselves. Was it necessary to embarrass the new members about making the coffee wrong? Shouldn't I stop comparing myself to the person who "has it all"? Can I move past not getting to choose the carpet color?

Practicing patience and kindness helps us endure all things—even the light-colored carpet that shows every stain. In pursuit of transforming love, may we become a church of Belles.



Consider

Where in yourself do you see qualities of what love is and what love isn't?

Pray

Jesus, transform us by your love so that we may grow into our true, best selves, ready to serve and love. Amen.

Wednesday, May 20

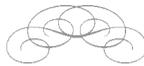
1 Corinthians 13:8-10

When a beloved deacon in our church was dying, a number of us drove to Houston to say our good-byes. I was traveling with a group of women. When we stopped for gas, we also stopped to look at the deep blue of the December evening sky. “It’s just so beautiful,” I said. “Sometimes it’s hard to believe there’s anything better.”

“Oh, there is,” our friend Susan said, then told us the story of her near-death experience. She had been a 17-year-old exchange student in Brazil. Though she was a strong swimmer, she got caught in the undertow off the beach in Rio de Janeiro. As water filled her lungs, she finally stopped fighting and “experienced the most perfect bliss. It’s indescribable.” The next thing she knew, a lifeguard was resuscitating her, and she was angry to have to come back. She walked home that night under the outstretched arms of Jesus, in the form of the beautiful statue that stands over Rio.

Susan received a glimpse of “the perfect [that] supplants the partial” (Richard B. Hays, *Interpretation: First Corinthians*). Her story helped us to trust that our beloved deacon was truly “in a better place.” Though all of his good works had come to an end, the love he showed to others never would.

In this world of the incomplete, we are left with a lot of questions. Why did this good, fit, apparently healthy man die of an aortic aneurysm at age 57? Why did our friend Carl have to die of AIDS in his thirties, before they developed the drugs that would have saved his life? I remember a group of us singing around Carl’s hospital bed: “Farther along we’ll know all about it, farther along we’ll understand why.” So “cheer up, my brothers” and sisters, “live in the sunlight. We’ll understand it all bye and bye.”



Consider

What gives you hope that love never ends?

Pray

Merciful God, we bring you our grief over all the ways that love seems to end in this world. Help us trust that your Love never does. Amen.

Thursday, May 21

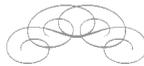
1 Corinthians 13:11-12

My family loves the Harry Potter books. So it's hard for me to read Paul's words about putting away childish things and seeing through a mirror dimly without thinking of the Mirror of Erised ("desire" spelled backward), which reflects the desire of one's heart. Harry can see his parents in it, back when they were healthy, happy, and alive. It's hard for him to stop watching.

I understand. Last year a distant cousin posted a home movie from 1953—before home movies were common—that included my parents three months before they married. There they were! So young! So beautiful! Alive and healthy and happy. The film surfaced shortly after my dad died, and it was hard to stop watching.

Author J.K. Rowling says of the Mirror of Erised: "The advice to 'hold on to your dreams' is all well and good, but there comes a point when [it] becomes unhelpful and even unhealthy.... Life can pass you by while you are clinging on to a wish that can never be—or ought never to be—fulfilled" (Pottermore.com).

How and when do we cling to "childish things" in our churches? Do we embrace sentimental songs and scriptures without moving deeper into their challenge to live the way of Jesus more fully? Or do we dwell nostalgically on the times when the church was "great"—even though it was less inclusive of all of God's children and failed to address abuse and injustice? The desire to become mature disciples involves seeking to see God's dream for us more clearly, anticipating that day when we'll see God face-to-face.



Consider

What "childish thing" would God have you put away? What "grown-up thing" could you replace it with?

Pray

God, help us to develop healthy relationships with our past, affirming what is helpful and casting off what is not, so that we may move into your future. Amen.

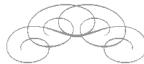
Friday, May 22

1 Corinthians 13:13

Practicing faith and hope are challenging disciplines for us when each day brings news that parts of the world are burning, flooding, and being lost to extinction. The effects of climate change draw nearer. When flooding caused the collapse of the Houston postal service station's roof, our mail didn't come for a week. (I'm certain that our notice about winning the Publishers Clearinghouse floated away in the floodwaters.) We know people trying to recover from a recent flood whose house isn't repaired from the previous one. Some church members are dealing with the trauma of surviving a tornado that killed someone and seriously injured others.

Young people ask if it's right to bring children into this world. We older ones who had similar fears at their age offer shreds of hope from the past. And youth such as Greta Thunberg, the Parkland survivors, and Malala Yousafzai offer us hope from the future as they work to better the world for themselves and their children.

Meanwhile, we embody hope by practicing our faith. We study, sing, and pray to the Living God who has seen humans through every imaginable trial. We work together to make every little change and to elect leaders to help make big ones. Paul reminds us that our work means nothing unless love undergirds it. We stay after church to snack and talk because we love each other. We gather around bonfires to sing and laugh. And we come to the communion table to remind each other of Christ's body, given for us. Richard Hays reminds us that at the end of time, only love will remain. We won't even need faith and hope anymore when all has been perfected and revealed.



Consider

How does your church keep faith, hope, and love alive in hard times?

Pray

God, you love this world so much that you sent us Jesus. Fill us with your love, and help us learn from Jesus how to love the world as you do. Amen.

Saturday, May 23

Mark 12:28-31

My natural state is to be more of a human “being” than a human “doing,” and I’ve enjoyed indulging that in retirement. On a recent Sunday, though, I found myself frantic with busyness, trying to do everything. I read the chapter in the book for Sunday school and joined the discussion; I cooked for the potluck after church; I sang in the choir; I helped wash the dishes after the potluck. I was trying hard to love God with all my *passion and prayer and intelligence and energy* (v. 30, The Message).

It was a good thing that I was immersed in this week’s writing assignment on that Sunday because it would’ve been so easy to forget about love. While helping clean up, I stepped into my husband’s study to leave my dish there. A friend sat alone on the couch, crying. A wet dishtowel was still in my hand. I had an easy excuse to slip back out, but the Love chapter of 1 Corinthians and Jesus’ Great Commandment compelled me to stop, give her a hug, and offer some words of encouragement. Then, just when I thought I had surely earned my afternoon nap, it became apparent that I was the only person available to go out on the playground with our associate pastor’s five-year-old son while she was in a meeting. I sat on a bench while he climbed on the monkey bars, and we had a delightful conversation about how he loves kindergarten and knows what 30+30 equals. Rather than being drained, the time was energizing. Sometimes trying to give all we’ve got to love God and God’s people is just exhausting. Other times, we’re reminded that love never ends.



Consider

When did you have an opportunity to share God’s love this week? What helps you experience the energy of God’s never-ending love?

Pray

Generous God, as we give of ourselves, help us recognize that your renewing love is present with us. Amen.

Sunday, May 24

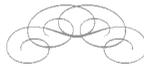
1 Corinthians 15:1-8

How do you make something that is meaningful to you meaningful to someone else? At times we struggle to put our deepest truths into words. We want to share those life-giving experiences that have formed us with those who mean the most to us, but how do we do that effectively?

Read 1 Corinthians this week as Paul's witness to the story that radically changes his life. See it as his way of helping the people he loves face some of life's most challenging problems and deepest mysteries. Although it contains a lot of theological reasoning, consider it primarily as Paul's compelling testimony to the meaning of the living Christ in his daily life and enduring faith.

Paul's life demonstrates the economy of grace that is basic to the Christian way. First, he receives a heritage and a story he did not invent himself. He takes this gift by faith, letting it form his experiences. Paul lives by the truth of this gospel of grace and discovers it to be a trustworthy guide for life's routine and an unfailing resource in life's crises. He confidently shares the meaning he finds in living in the way of Christ with others. As Augustine would later say: "What I live by I impart."

We too have received a story, a legacy of grace. May we experience its truth fully, live in its love consistently, and know the joy of seeing its transforming power in the people we love.



Consider

How did you receive the heritage of faith? To whom are you grateful for introducing you to the way of Christ's love? To whom do you feel responsible to share its meaning?

Pray

Gracious God, deepen my gratitude today for those who showed me the way of Christ's love. Help me find ways to make what is so meaningful to me meaningful to others for whom I care. Amen.

Monday, May 25

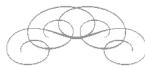
1 Corinthians 15:9-11

Have you ever had the painful experience of trying to convince someone of something you didn't fully believe yourself? Perhaps you were trying to sell a product you knew was less effective than it was advertised to be. Or you tried to write a letter of recommendation for someone you didn't know well or didn't think was well suited for the job in question. Or you were asked to sign a petition for a cause you could not conscientiously endorse.

Paul proclaims grace effectively because he has experienced it firsthand and believes in it fully. His words ring true. His teaching bears the authenticity of testimony. He doesn't commend to others what he hasn't tested in his own life. Paul attributes everything he has become to God's life-changing love: *By the grace of God, I am what I am* (v. 10). His story describes a radical transformation; he has no other explanation for this dramatic change in his life than the power of God's love.

An authentic experience of grace results in profound humility rather than spiritual pride or excessive religiosity. Paul remembers how he inflicted pain on those who were followers of Jesus. He knows that he is unworthy of God's favor. Overwhelmed by God's grace, the only thing he can do is express his deep gratitude. Robert Robinson, who wrote the hymn, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," conveys the response of the grateful heart: "O to grace how great a debtor / Daily I'm constrained to be."

Paul has a profound sense of stewardship for this grace he has experienced. It births his sense of mission and his desire to become all that God desires him to be. Those who experience life-changing grace bear grace to others. The "graced" are meant to become the "grace-full."



Consider

Name something done for you that you can't repay. How did you respond?

Pray

God of Grace, help me become gracious like you, so that those who know me well will find it easier to believe in you and your persistent love. Amen.

Tuesday, May 26

1 Corinthians 15:12-19

In the dimly lit room, my daughter sits on the edge of the bed, holding her mother's hand. Death is approaching soon, and her mother becomes restless.

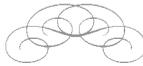
"Are you afraid?"

"I don't know what it will be like."

They talk about how no one knows what it will be like. Then our daughter remembers how her mother would sit on *her* bed when she was a little girl frightened by the latest thunderstorm or scary thought. "You taught me to say, 'What time I am afraid, I will put my trust in Thee' (Ps 56:3). You taught me how to choose faith over fear."

They traced those times in her mother's life when she had faced new experiences with no certainty of what lay ahead: when she got married, when she became a parent, when she grieved the loss of family and friends, when she moved and joined church congregations she didn't yet know but grew to love. In each situation, her mother had put her trust in God and chose faith over fear. God cared for her in every new experience. And in that moment, they felt assured that God's love would lead her through the next steps into the life beyond.

Paul says, *If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied* (v. 19). For Paul, belief in Christ's resurrection dispels all uncertainty about whether the God who is our hope through this life will be lovingly present for the life to come.



Consider

When you think of the inevitable experience of death, which has the greater influence on your thought: faith or fear?

Pray

God of life and love, in your mercy grant me the assurance of your caring presence through all the days of this life and in the life to come. Amen.

Wednesday, May 27

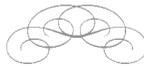
1 Corinthians 15:20-26

What difference does Christ's resurrection make? Does it matter whether it really happened? Would people all over the world still believe Jesus' teachings about life and faith if it didn't? Would they still follow his example?

Think about Jesus' early followers in the aftermath of his death. They are disheartened to the point of despair and fear their future. Abandoning the new way of life they had joyfully embraced with great expectations is tempting. Their hope shatters as they absorb the reality of Jesus' death. But when they dare to believe the reality of the resurrection, all of this changes.

Paul proclaims that the reality of the living Christ is the key to recovering their hope. As these Christians begin to think of Jesus as more than a memory, they start speaking of him in the present tense: Jesus Christ is Lord! Early followers begin to see the resurrection as more than something that happened only to Jesus. They begin to see it as a promise that, "because he lives, we shall live also" (Jn 14:19).

Christ's resurrection provides the power to form a new humanity that continues to be shaped into his likeness. God calls followers of Jesus to live in the present with a confidence and hope based on Christ's victory over death. Tragically, many continue to live defeated lives, as if the resurrection did not happen. Yet to those in whom the Spirit of the risen Christ abides, irrepressible hope and courage will arise.



Consider

How does belief in Christ's resurrection help you face the inevitability of death without fear? In what ways does it bring you new hope in the possibilities of your life today?

Pray

God, bring new hope to life in me so I can face the uncertain future and the challenges of the present. Amen.

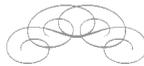
Thursday, May 28

1 Corinthians 15:51-55

While death is an inevitable experience that awaits each of us, we rarely talk about it until we have to. We find death an awkward topic and feel uncomfortable around those who have lost loved ones, unsure of how to share their grief or offer comfort. In the absence of words that seem real and relevant, we often rely on platitudes to soften death's harsh reality and mystery. However, when we follow the counsel to “hug, hush, and hang around,” we discover the ministry of presence that most effectively demonstrates our love.

Scriptural images of the death experience provide a foundation for a theology of hope that confronts death. But much about the end of earthly life remains a mystery. The ancient Hebrews spoke of death as being gathered unto one's people. Jesus assures his followers that to depart this life is to be at home with God. For Christians, the resurrection of Christ becomes the crucial clue for understanding death as victory rather than defeat, a new beginning rather than an ending.

Paul focuses on death as change: *we will all be changed* (v. 51). In death we divest what is temporal about us to claim what is eternal. We exchange what is perishable for what is imperishable, we trade what we cannot keep for what we cannot lose. Paul speaks of our bodies as being perishable, but he proclaims the hope of a spiritual body, an imperishable home of the soul. He affirms the continuity of this life with that which is to come, but proclaims a radical difference. What we tend to see as final defeat is actually the experience of victory over all the limitations and painful loss in this life.



Consider

How do you care for others in their time of grief? Think of someone who is effective in comforting others and give thanks for them. Who has been a strengthening presence for you in a time of loss?

Pray

God of life and love, assure me of the reality of resurrection and the truth of your promise of eternal life through the living Christ. Amen.

Friday, May 29

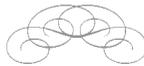
1 Corinthians 15:56-58

Our expectations for the future affect how we live in the present. When we find the future unclear or foreboding, finding the motivation for today's tasks is often difficult.

Years ago, I served a church near a growing state university. When I moved there, I discovered a section of homes in the area that looked much like all the others nearby, except none of these houses had been properly maintained. Yards were overgrown with weeds. Roofs needed repair and siding needed repainting. Windows were broken and some of the houses stood vacant. When I asked about this area, I learned it was under eminent domain and would in time be demolished so that the university could expand. There was no future for these houses, so there was little motivation to do the work to maintain or improve them.

Paul proclaims that we need not fear the future or give in to despair. Christ is risen. To live in the power of this resurrection is to live free from the fear of death. In Christ, the future has become a friend. Our worst fears—that death is the final word about us—are overcome.

Paul proclaims that Christ's resurrection makes not only *his* earthly work enduringly meaningful, but also ours. Living in the power of the resurrection means living with confidence that our work for Christ is not in vain. Nothing is more important than offering someone else what we've found meaningful in Christ. The spirit of the living Christ enables us to live each day free from the fears of death and the meaninglessness that tries to make prisoners of us all. Such lives are beacons of hope for those who struggle to face the future unafraid.



Consider

What is your primary motivation for doing good deeds? When you're discouraged and doubt the value of your work, how do you renew your commitment?

Pray

God, I confess that I sometimes fail to see the worth of what I attempt to do. Reassure me that the smallest service rendered in your name is valuable. Give me the strength to endure in the work you give me to do. Amen.

Saturday, May 30

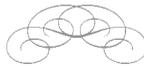
Mark 12:26-27

He is God not of the dead, but of the living (v. 27). Jesus' response to his disbelieving Sadducee critics affirms the resurrection of the dead. As Paul contends in 1 Corinthians 15, Jesus' resurrection and the promise of our own create the essential foundation of Christian hope.

Throughout the Scripture story, God's relationship to life is a dominant theme. God lives, and God is the source of life. God creates all life, and the breath of God gives a distinctive existence to humans. The Hebrew Scriptures speak often of "the living God" as a characteristic that distinguishes Yahweh from lifeless idols and from all false gods in which people put their trust. As the living God, Yahweh acts in human history, challenging the covenant people to realize the fullness of their lives through faithful response to God's persistent covenant love.

Jesus embodies God's life and love fully. John says, "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people" (Jn 1:4). Jesus proclaims, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10). To be a follower of Jesus is to experience new life, a life that is not defeated by death.

God who gives life sustains it. When we feel depleted and defeated, the God of the living renews life in us. As believers, we can confidently pray every day: "Breathe on me, Breath of God, / Fill me with life anew, / That I may love what Thou dost love, / And do what Thou wouldst do" (Edwin Hatch).



Consider

The life we can experience as believers in the living God is not only unending; it is also resilient in difficult times. Consider whether you have experienced the reality of resurrection here and now.

Pray

God of life, bring these gifts to life in me today: the joy of living, and the confidence that overcomes my fear and doubt. Amen.

Sunday, May 31

Acts 2:1-4

I'd like to meet the creative committee that organized the Holy Spirit's debut. For hundreds of years, God is portrayed as a James Earl Jones figure behind clouds, burning bushes, Balaam's memorable donkey, a carved treasure box, and a curtained-off inner closet stuffed with symbolic freight. For thirty years plus three recorded ones, Jesus is present in skin and bones. But fifty days prior to this Acts event, Jesus has Passover with his team, is crucified shortly thereafter, then is resurrected. Folks talk, touch, and eat with the resurrected Jesus for a little over a month. Then Jesus is gone again. And, the Holy Spirit is all, "Wait for it. Tornado Sounds! Tongues of Fire! Foreign Languages!" Where did the idea for that triumphal entry come from?

It's a little too much noise for me, a little too much spectacle.

I don't want to be present in this scene. When I go to the sanctuary on a high holy day like Pentecost, I expect church to be, you know, quiet. Ordered. Routine. Strangers are fine; introverts preferred, but well-mannered extroverts can be tolerated a few pews away. Hymns are good; familiar ones are better; new ones that aren't simply a chord, a chorus, and a coda are acceptable occasionally. Being moved to tears over the world's brokenness, or stories of mighty impact from minuscule means is cathartic, but tying our emotions to church business, local politics, and national issues should be rigorously avoided. Sermons on repentance should sound like a doctor ordering exercise, fiber, and hydration; we can nod in agreement and move on, chastised but unchanged.

The Holy Spirit at Pentecost is scary. I don't want God to show up sounding like thunder, looking like fire. I don't want God to make me talk with strangers in a language they find familiar. Not at church.

Oh.



Consider

The Holy Spirit never shows up this way again. What's the lasting impact of this scene in your church and in your life?

Pray

God, help us receive the Spirit, untamed and flamboyant. Amen.

Monday, June 1

1 Corinthians 12:1-3

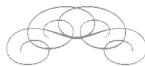
Paul was Saul, the persecutor. As Saul the crusader, he stood tall while those who had hurled stones at Stephen laid their clothes at his feet. He petitioned the high priests for permission to raid prayer gatherings. He imprisoned those who followed The Way—as in Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6).

Yet, here is the same man, the converted Paul, saying that God’s Spirit is manifest only in confessing Jesus, not cursing him. This seems obvious to twenty-first-century Christians who have only known Jesus as the bedrock of our faith. We don’t know Jesus as the radical rabbi whose death rent the curtain of the holy of holies in two.

Allegiance to Jesus as Yahweh is not obvious, then or now. It is not inevitable that a Gentile, much less a Jewish person, would conclude that an itinerant revival preacher nailed to a sinner’s cross was the Messiah. They found plenty of reasons to curse an upstart prophet who spoke of revolution, then chose to suffer and die rather than flex. For those abused under Roman rule, a disruptor of daily religious life and a Savior for the afterlife seemed to be hardly any comfort at all.

To answer the Corinthians’ questions about the Holy Spirit, Paul reminds them that their history is as checkered as his own. They’d been led astray by mute idols; they’d grown up involved in a city renowned for its twelve temples. Now they are being led by a talking God who animates their lives like wind in trees.

Saul cursed Jesus with as much conviction as Paul confessed Jesus. I bet he credited God’s Spirit in both seasons of his life. If I were a first-century Corinthian, I might prefer a mute idol to a preacher talking out of both sides of his mouth.



Consider

Do you know the Jesus others would curse? How does their view change your confession?

Pray

God, prevent us from being so sure that your Spirit is in our corner. Give us a view of Jesus that changes everything. Amen.

Tuesday, June 2

1 Corinthians 12:4-7

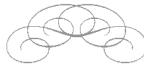
The sameness of God is harder for me to imagine than the differences of gifts, works, and manifestations of the Spirit. Steeped in years of diversity training, my default is that difference is good. I don't need much convincing that individuals, given the same inputs, behave in individual ways. I'm programmed to notice and value difference.

I travel for work, and in airports, I play a game while waiting. I try to place everyone I see in a Venn diagram. I group people by ethnicity, economic class, relationship status, employment industry, fashion foolishness, food choices, happiness levels, etc. I look for overlaps and outliers. Then, I draw a great big circle around them, and I repeat this mantra: God made, loves, and redeems them all. And, I try really hard to feel equal affinity toward the groups and the individuals. I try to feel happy that Heaven might be like the airport. I haven't succeeded yet.

I play a similar game in the cereal aisle. At my grocery store, the aisle begins with Captain Crunch, with Cheerios in the middle and Quaker Oats toward the end. There's every indication of variety: packaging, core grain, shape, additives, nutritional boasts. But, all of it is more or less sugar. I've learned enough about nutrition to recognize the sameness.

I keep trying to learn enough about God to be able to see the sameness across the wide diversity between and within faithful people everywhere. In her book *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others*, Barbara Brown Taylor recounts this analogy from Raimon Panikkar: The world's great rivers don't meet on earth; rather, the rivers meet in the sky where, transformed into vapor, they form clouds and rain down on the world.

The Spirit's mystery is in the sameness, not the differences.



Consider

What would it take to be able to see the similarities that exist in everyone we meet before we noticed the differences?

Pray

God, you are at work in everyone. Help us join your work and set aside our differences. Amen.

Wednesday, June 3

1 Corinthians 12:8-11

As children, my sister and I played endless rounds of the matching game “Guess Who”? We’d each set up our tray, flip up all 24 faces, and set our character card at an angle to prevent cheating. Then, we’d parry each other with yes/no questions in an attempt to guess the other person’s character. “Is your character female?” “Yes!” Smack down all the men. “Is your character wearing something on their face?” “No!” Smack down all the women wearing glasses, earrings, and hats. “Is your character Susan?” “Yes. . . . Mama! She cheated!” (You knew that was coming.)

This passage about the different gifts makes me think about that board game. Imagine the key 24 people in your realm of work, church, city, neighborhood, and family. Now, whose superpower is wisdom? Knowledge? Faith? Healing? Who pulls off miracles? Anticipates consequences and needs? Discriminates between good options and real opportunities? Who’s great at outreach? Who excels at mediation?

My list of spiritual gifts diverges from Paul’s passage because I don’t really go around thinking of my good friend as a prophet, but I’m always thankful for the ways she sees two moves ahead without forgetting 10 moves back. I don’t think of the leader of a really tricky church committee as a person who is “distinguishing between spirits,” but his ability to truly listen to all the stakeholders and define a path forward is impressive.

It doesn’t much matter what we call the gifts of the Spirit. The point is that we can guess who has them and can draw out those gifts in each other. And it certainly helps if we can spot a gift in others without feeling cheated ourselves.



Consider

Who needs to be nudged about living into their spiritual gift? Which gifts are missing from your realm, and who does that mean you’ve overlooked?

Pray

God, give us the right questions to ask of others and ourselves so that our gifts come together without friction for the common good. Amen.

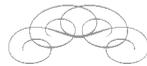
Thursday, June 4

1 Corinthians 12:12-13

The body of Christ made sense to me for more than three decades. I learned about it in Sunday school, choir, Sunday evening services, and Vacation Bible School. Through that metaphor, my teachers helped me see how the work of our church was connected to that of other churches all around the world. A dollar given for the missions offering would multiply as it made its way to Africa, defying all economic logic. Together, our different projects, choir performances, and mission trips built the kingdom of God through elbow grease and shoe leather.

That vision shattered for me one Sunday morning when I visited my in-laws' church. My husband's family attends the Nazarene church down the street from the Baptist church where I grew up. You could walk between them, if you trusted your antiperspirant. At the time, we lived out-of-state, so visiting our parents on Sundays meant trying to sit in pews with both our mothers. We left the 8:45 Baptist worship service and drove up the street for the 10:45 Nazarene one. We passed the Episcopal church on the catty-corner, went over the railroad tracks, and stopped at the four-way intersection that faced the Nazarene church. On the left was a new mural celebrating First African Baptist Church as the site of Martin Luther King, Jr's first sermon, delivered on April 17, 1944. It startled me. I never knew that.

After we parked, I looked back down the street and saw it for the first time: First Nazarene, First African Baptist, Christ Episcopal, First Baptist, Immaculate Conception Catholic—all in a line—then hang a right for First Methodist. It looked like the leg and foot of a stick man, if you connected all the dots. A stick man, indeed.



Consider

What are the connection points between you and other Christians? Between your church and other churches? What connections are missing? What must you confess to draw the line boldly?

Pray

God, we confess that we've limited your body to make it look like ours. Show us how to connect and embody your vision more fully. Amen.

Friday, June 5

Mark 1:4-5

What understanding of sin would draw folks into the desert to confess, repent, and be baptized? I'm sure there's theological scholarship on this, but I don't know it. Instead, I'm left with the ideas about sin that we absorb and invent for ourselves.

I absorbed the message that Eve's sin tainted the bloodline forevermore, like a congenital disease. Jesus was the chemotherapy for everlasting death.

I absorbed the message that my sins of commission and omission separated me from God as if I were in Seattle and God were in Hawaii. Jesus was my ticket to sunshine.

I absorbed the message that sin was personal, like a credit card bill I racked up but that only Jesus could afford to pay off.

I invented the message (that I should probably have left in middle school) that sin was like flatulence, inevitable, shameful, but usually easy to hide. Jesus might know, but if it doesn't cause problems for others, we can all politely pretend my sin wasn't a serious offense.

I invented the message that sin has a valve like a sewage pipeline. By my choices in ethics and friends and hobbies, I could keep sin to a trickle. Jesus could help me monitor the knob.

I invented the message that sin is offset by holy habits and a few sparkling acts of kindness. Jesus isn't crucial in this little myth.

I don't have a theology of sin that would make me leave work and shirk home duties to go listen to a prophet. I certainly wouldn't stand for hours in a long line to be dunked in a dirty river by a strange man.

What did these early believers know about sin that I'm missing?



Consider

What messages about sin have you absorbed and invented? How do they shape your spiritual life?

Pray

God, help us go to great lengths to confess our sins, receive your pardon, and move forward to think, feel, and act out of your deeper well of love. Amen.

Saturday, June 6

Mark 1:6-8

A “he said/she said” about whether to go hear John:

Him: He wears camel hide and leather, lives in the desert, and is building a following.

Her: A fan club for a sweat penitence clothing line?

Him: No, he’s not spreading a fashion statement. He’s like a prophet of old.

Her: We haven’t had a genuine one in centuries. I bet they’re saying he’s the new Elijah.

Him: This guy only eats bugs and honey. It’s a protest diet, like vegan but holier.

Her: He follows extreme Levitical dietary laws. I bet there’ll be a cookbook out soon: honeyed locust with cinnamon, salted caramel locust, and baklava with roasted insect bits.

Him: Nothing will make people give up their meat and three. They go because he baptizes synagogue-goers.

Her: Seriously? Why? I thought only Gentiles needed baptism.

Him: He’s baptizing those who express sorrow over sin and commit to lead holy lives.

Her: Huh. Baptism as a resolution benchmark. I bet there’s a book in that too. People really think he’s a guru?

Him: He says he’s not the real deal, but the Messiah will come soon to baptize with the Spirit. Want to go hear him talk about repentance in the desert?

Her: Absolutely not, but there’s no way I’m going to let you go alone.

Him: Pick you up at 8 am. Wear your cute sandals.



Consider

Would you vote to go or stay home? Why?

Pray

God, we discount what we find weird. Give us wisdom to discern when you are doing a new thing in a new way. Amen.

Sunday, June 7

Job 1:1-5

Where is God when trouble comes? How do we maintain faith when tragedy strikes? What does God's love mean for the parent who buries a child, the family whose home is washed away by a flood, or the wife who watches her husband disappear into the fog of Alzheimer's disease? When we ask such anguished questions, we're in the company of Job.

For the next five weeks, readings from the book of Job prompt us to ponder and pray about life's disorienting experiences. Job doesn't give us definitive *answers* to our hardest questions; instead, it offers reassuring *responses*, which help to heal our fears. It speaks to our hearts even more than to our minds; it doesn't just add to our knowledge, it increases our wisdom. Job is about restoring trust in God's goodness.

Job is from Uz, an Edomite city. He isn't Jewish, but he's ardently devoted to Israel's God. He is wealthy, enjoys his community's respect, and cares attentively for his family. He also has a settled understanding of how God relates to human beings: God gives people what they deserve; loyalty to God leads to blessings from God. Job assumes his comfortable certainty is a sign of God's favor.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, however, Job's comfortable world will collapse, along with his confidence in God. In distress, this good man, who has depended on God, faces the hard truth that faith doesn't protect us from pain. As his story unfolds, we see how he courageously faces disillusionment, wrestles with God, and, eventually, develops a wider and wiser faith. His witness calls us to do the same, to struggle with suffering and with God and, eventually, discover that the worst things are followed by new and hopeful things.



Consider

What hard realities have you been reluctant to admit to other people and to hash-out with God in your prayers?

Pray

God, give me courage and faith to speak the truth in love, especially in my conversations with you. Amen.

Monday, June 8

Job 1:6-12

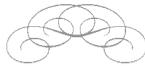
Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said: “Life can only be understood backwards but must be lived forwards.” Often, when we’re in the middle of an intense experience, we can’t make immediate sense of it. Insight comes later—if it does—as we look back. That is true for Job: his trust in God will be renewed near the end of his story, as he reflects on what he has undergone and encounters God’s vast and merciful mystery: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (42:5).

This is true for us, too: meaning emerges over time, as we sift our experiences. It has been true for me in recent years as I’ve dealt with the physical, emotional, and spiritual complications of an incurable illness. It’s in the looking back that I see patterns of grace that weren’t evident in the hardest moments.

Even the structure of the book of Job encourages us not to draw conclusions too soon. The first two chapters and most of the last (42:7-17) are a Jewish version of near eastern folktales about the undeserved suffering of a righteous man. Such tales frequently included conversations between good and evil gods, conversations like the ones between God and Satan in Job (1:6-12; 2:1-6).

The folktale which frames Job’s story is told in standard Hebrew prose, while the remainder of the book contains remarkable poetry. In a rich literary conversation, the poetry questions the prose, and, by the end of the book, we will come to a more compassionate view of God’s dealings with humanity. We see, hear, and feel more, and more truly, than we did at the beginning.

It takes time to recover from trouble, to stand on firmer ground again, and to discover how our struggles have changed and, perhaps, enriched us.



Consider

When have you reached a conclusion about God or about how life works that you had to—or were able to—revise?

Pray

Spirit of God, guide me as I review my journey and learn from it. Show me the ways you’ve been with me. Amen.

Tuesday, June 9

Job 1:13-22

Sometimes all the news is bad. Disaster arrives in wave after crashing wave, each new one more destructive than the last. Storms strike in rapid succession; debris piles up. The emergency which *is happening* leaves little time to deal with the one which *has happened*.

In a single devastating day, Job loses nearly everything which gave him security, status, and companionship. In a series of frantic reports, messengers bring Job terrible news. Before one of them can finish recounting the grim events, the next messenger brings another awful announcement: all Job's flocks of oxen, donkeys, sheep, and camels were either stolen or killed, and all his servants were murdered. The final report describes a fierce windstorm which destroyed Job's eldest son's house, where his children had gathered, and left none of them alive.

By the day's end, Job is childless and nearly destitute. He would no longer savor the love of his children. His poverty robs him of material comfort and of his standing in the community. What's more, though it didn't happen immediately, the calamities he endured will erode his once-strong trust in God.

At the end of that dreadful day, Job says, *the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD* (v. 21). The narrator adds that *in all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing* (v. 22).

Soon, however, Job will angrily lament what has happened to him; he will question and argue with God. Even so, God will honor his honesty: Job has spoken of me what is right (42:7).

The crucial thing, in seasons of both delight and distress, is to keep talking with and listening to God. The conversation itself is the way of faithfulness, the way we endure, learn, and grow.



Consider

What has sustained you and your faith in your most challenging and disillusioning moments?

Pray

Empower us, God, to keep listening and speaking to you. Help us trust that you honor honesty about our hurts and hopes. Amen.

Wednesday, June 10

Job 2:1-7

Early in the book of Job, we find two perplexing conversations between God and Satan (1:6-12; 2:1-6) in which they strike deals to test Job, who is unaware that something done in heaven will diminish his life on earth.

When the book of Job was written, understandings of how the God of Israel related to evil were shifting. “Satan” hadn’t yet developed into God’s determined opponent whose task was to thwart God’s good intentions. Instead, Satan played an approved role, something like “a prosecuting attorney.” He was an accuser who probed humanity’s flaws and reported his findings to God. He was a crusty and cynical operator who conducted opposition research on God’s favorites.

These ideas about Satan were ways for Jews of that time to account for evil without blaming God for being its direct cause. They saw a vast, reassuring difference between God’s allowing evil and God’s causing it.

These stories also told their audience something Job himself didn’t know: God affirms Job as a man of exemplary character: *My servant Job is a blameless and upright man* (see 1:8; 2:3). Job is later pressed to defend his integrity against the speculation of friends who say he brought on himself the awful things that befell him. Because of these conversations between God and Satan, however, we know that not even God thinks Job deserves what happens to him. That’s a surprising insight, consistent with the view of God that Jesus gives us. In his encounters with evil, Jesus demonstrates that God doesn’t play “good cop” to the Evil One’s “bad cop.” Jesus reassures us that God isn’t capricious and harsh; God opposes evil with justice and overcomes it with love.

We can trust that, whatever trouble’s source might be, it isn’t God. God is always *for us*, never against us.



Consider

Why does it help to know that God doesn’t inflict our pain, but, instead, accompanies us through it?

Pray

God, help us to trust that you are with us when the way is hard. Amen.

Thursday, June 11

Job 2:8-10

I have rogue plasma cells which wreak havoc in my blood and bone marrow. What I've learned is that even though I'm the one who has this cancer, I'm not by any means the only one afflicted by it. My pain touches my family and close friends, too. My diminishment changes the role I'm able to play in their lives. My uncertain future generates anxiety for them.

Job's abject suffering—scraping his festered sores and sitting on an ash-heap—trouble his wife, of course. She also suffered loss. Seeing no way for Job to escape his misery, and sharing his presently unacknowledged and unspoken disillusionment with God, she urges him to “*Curse God, and die*” (v. 9). Job resists her desperate counsel, though he comes close to cursing God in the protests he soon unleashes against heaven (see chapter 3).

We shouldn't be too hard on Job's wife. She knows him well, she loves him, and she's confident that he's done nothing to bring this terrible trouble on himself. She speaks out of confused anguish, feeling that Job would be justified in rejecting the God who seems to have abandoned both of them. She also knows that there are some things worse than death.

Crisis can be wildly chaotic. It's crucial for us to be honest with ourselves and with one another—as Job's wife is—so that we can move through our bewilderment. Maybe—though we're not told—Job's wife will eventually be able to join him in saying, “Blessed be the name of the LORD” (1:21).



Consider

How do your toughest problems affect those who love you? What impact do their challenges have on you?

Pray

Merciful God, help me to see, hear, and respond compassionately to others' difficulties and disappointments. Amen.

Friday, June 12

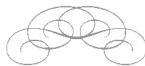
Job 2:11-13

From time to time, esteemed teacher of pastoral care Wayne Oates would affirm the restoring power of genuine listening by saying something like: “I don’t know much about healing by the laying on of hands, but, over and over again, I’ve seen people healed by the laying on of ears.” We all long to be known, welcomed, and loved. We need to have our dignity respected and our experience validated. To thrive and flourish, we need at least one person to hear us patiently and tenderly, to celebrate who we are and what we achieve, and to stay in the room with us when we admit our shame and failures.

Soon after Job’s harrowing losses, as he sits amid the ashes of grief and speaks only in bursts of lamentation, three of his friends come to *console and comfort him* (v. 11). When they first see him, Job is so changed by his suffering that they don’t recognize him (v. 12). Like friends who shave their heads to identify with a buddy who’s enduring chemotherapy, they tear their clothes as Job has torn his, and add their voices to his laments (v. 12).

The best thing they do is sit with him on the ground for a week without saying a word (v. 13). We don’t know whether or not Job speaks while they are silent. Maybe he tells his story and talks about his pain. Maybe not. We do know that when his friends eventually speak, they are harsh with Job. At the outset, though, they give him the priceless gifts of shared silence and unhurried listening.

When I’ve been most disheartened, advice didn’t help. Neither did heroic cancer-survivor stories and sentimental faith-slogans. What helped and healed were the ways people told me, often without saying a word: “I’m with you. I trust that God is, too. I’m listening.”



Consider

Who are the people in your circle of relationships who would feel encouraged and renewed by your listening lovingly to them?

Pray

Gentle and listening God, open my ears and heart to the stories that others yearn to tell. Amen.

Saturday, June 13

Psalm 22:1-11

Maybe it was when you were nine years old and your best friend moved away. Or perhaps the night your father screamed at your mother, slammed the door, and didn't come back. Or when your grandmother died and you never again opened the back door of her farmhouse to be greeted by cookies baking, her bright smile, and her arms wrapped around you.

Whenever we first *named* the experience of feeling alone, it wasn't by any means the first time we *felt* it. We experienced aloneness when, as babies, we woke in a darkened room, couldn't hear the beating of our mother's heart or our father's rhythmic breathing, and couldn't, even with our whimpering and crying, bring them to our sides. Before we could describe the experience, we realized there were times when the people we needed wouldn't be near.

Jesus experienced abandonment. He died alone; his friends all "deserted him and fled" (Mark 14:50). Most painfully, he died without feeling the presence of God on which he'd always depended. Surrounded by darkness, just before he drew his last breath, Jesus cried out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34).

He drew those words from Psalm 22. They helped him voice his pain and gave him permission and courage to ask "Why?" Some people say that we shouldn't question God, but I can't trust a God who is too fragile for my questions. Besides, Job, the prophets, the psalmist, and Jesus show us that injustice, cruelty, and absurdity demand that we ask questions and lament.

We don't always get answers. Sometimes nothing changes except this one crucial thing. When we feel alone, ask "why?" and listen closely. Sooner or later, we'll hear a Voice whisper "I love you."



Consider

What causes you to ask, or want to ask, "Why?" What do such questions tell you about what most matters to you?

Pray

My God, my God, "Why?" When will you reassure me of your love? Amen.

Sunday, June 14

Job 3:1-26

Aunt Laura got a toothache on Mother's Day. But it wasn't a toothache. It was brain cancer.

We had gone to her apartment at ten that morning to pick her up for church. Sundays were the highlight of the week for my 87-year-old, childless, widowed aunt. After church, she'd have us over for lunch and serve us heaps of rice and beans. No matter that I was in college and my brother in high school, she'd pat us on our heads, straighten our hair, and ask about our grades as if we were her own youngsters.

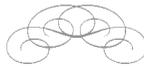
But there would be no church or lunch that day.

We dashed to the emergency room. *Cancer. (What?) Terminal. Six months, max. (Wait, wait! I'm still processing the word cancer!) Hospice care. Here, take these pamphlets. Next!*

We drove back to the apartment in silence. Eventually, the brooding elephant in the room trumpeted.

Aunt Laura cried, "We were just going to church! It was just a toothache! Why? Why?! *Why?!?*" And there were no right words to offer in response. Instinctively, we knew this was her moment to cry, to scream, to grieve, to shout, to throw up her hands and ask: "Why?!"

Just as Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar made room to listen to Job's lament in this part of his story, we needed to make room for this part of the grief process. Surely, there would be peace or wisdom or reason or hope down the road. But for today, Aunt Laura needed to exhale. When someone is telling us, *I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest; but trouble comes* (v. 26), our best response is to be quietly present and listen.



Consider

When have you or someone you love encountered shocking circumstances that made you ask questions for which there were no clear answers?

Pray

God, help us understand the process of grief. Let us embrace the catharsis that comes from releasing a full exhale in order to inhale peace for the road ahead. Amen.

Monday, June 15

Job 4:1-9

Is not your fear of God your confidence, and the integrity of your ways your hope? (v. 6)

My third grade teacher didn't like me at all. To her chagrin, I was always restless, giggling, and talking with others during class. Every week she called my parents about my behavior.

I was being my usual talkative self when I met Alicia, who always sat by herself during recess. No one ever asked her to play. When I said hello, I quickly realized that something about Alicia's eyes and voice were unfamiliar. That afternoon, my mom explained to me that Alicia had Down's Syndrome.

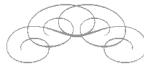
The moment I became friends with Alicia, we started getting picked on. I knew it wasn't fair of the other kids, and I knew they only did it because Alicia had a disability, but I didn't want to get picked on, either.

When I told my mom that I didn't want to play with Alicia anymore, she asked, "Do you like playing with Alicia?" I responded that I did. "Doesn't God teach us to be a friend to those who are lonely or in need?" God does. "Then," my mother said, "you already know in your heart you're doing the right thing. Even if it isn't popular."

I had my answer. No matter the playground scuffles, my friendship with Alicia mattered more.

When my mom came to pick me up one afternoon, my teacher ran over to us. *Oh, no...* I lowered my head, ready for the day's reprimand of my classroom talking. Instead, she gave my mom the biggest hug. As it turned out, her daughter's name was Alicia.

The light we need rests, as Job and I both learned, in revering God and living in the integrity of our hope.



Consider

What particular challenge or hardship has made you question your beliefs and ask if you are on the right path?

Pray

God, keep our faith strong and confident in your word, particularly when we feel tempted to abandon it. Amen.

Tuesday, June 16

Job 7:11-21

Therefore I will not restrain my mouth, I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul (v. 11).

My breakfast tray came, but I couldn't open the milk carton. If only they'd hurry up with those test results and release me from the hospital. I had to prepare for my graduate qualifying exams. *I don't have time to waste.*

I fumbled with that little red and white carton and recalled the last 12 hours. I remembered falling, and an ambulance, and how I kept trying to sign my hospital admission papers but couldn't hold the pen. Was I just in shock? Was that why the fingers of my left hand weren't doing as I commanded?

When the neurologist walked in, he cautiously sat next to me and said "stroke," "TIA," and other acronyms I didn't want to hear. Maybe physical therapy would help. Maybe a miracle. But I'm only twenty-five, I thought. I need to read more, write more, and walk more. I need to do everything!

With my still strong right hand, I slammed the milk carton on the tray as hard as I could. No medical rationale was going to make me feel better about my prognosis.

The doctor kindly reached out and opened the carton. I sipped the milk and wept. Tomorrow would be another day for hope, I thought. Or gratitude. Or selflessness. Or showing love to others. But not today. Today I wept.

My mother was in a corner keeping her tears at bay. With her silence, she let me know that the grief I felt was okay.



Consider

*When have you experienced grief that you could not possibly hold inside?
Why is silence an effective response?*

Pray

God, give us the wisdom to let ourselves, and others, fully experience the sorrow we feel. As Job unveiled the bitterness in his soul, remind us that expressing anguish can prepare for challenges you will help us conquer. Amen.

Wednesday, June 17

Job 8:1-14

Zita stormed into Laura's house like a force to be reckoned with. For as long as we had known her, she would unapologetically trample through any room, using one hand to poke items—or people—with her cane, while wildly gesticulating with the other. We knew she wanted to visit her sister, but today was *definitely* not a good day.

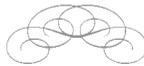
Aunt Laura's cancer had moved to her brain, causing unrelenting pain. Meanwhile, my mother and I were running a two-woman relay race of diaper and sheet changes, feeding tube cleanings, and endless night shifts. Where was mercy for Aunt Laura's pain and suffering? I'd like to speak to the manager, please.

With her cane swinging with full force, Zita headed straight for the kitchen. Before we could say anything, a wonderful aroma filled the air. Behind Zita came her daughter-in-law Cielo, carrying pots of food.

Heavenly calm came over the room as Zita peacefully made her way to the stove and warmed up all the food she had prepared for us. My mother, holding back tears, said, "You didn't have to." Zita gently put her hand on my mom's shoulder, "Yes, I did."

Just when we were emotionally spent, exhausted and hungry, we received the nourishment we needed at the most unexpected time, in the most surprising way.

When someone surprises us with their compassion, God is present. If only Bildad had been the kind of friend who understood that.



Consider

Who has surprised you with their compassion? Who have you surprised in such a way that God felt present in the situation?

Pray

God, help us to not miss the many ways you reach out to nourish us. May our assumptions about others never keep us from recognizing and accepting the gifts you offer us through them. Amen.

Thursday, June 18

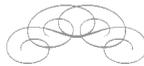
Job 8:20-22

Two guitars, four maracas, three egg shakers, and a tambourine. We were ready to head into the ICU! It was my stepfather's third week in the cardiac intensive care unit after surviving two emergency bypass surgeries and a five-day coma. None of us knew what lay ahead. The only predictability during those days was the twos: two visiting hours in the morning, two in the evening, and only two visitors at a time. No exceptions.

Except on this day.

The drill sergeant receptionist paused as we marched in, hopeful and with instruments in hand. She looked us over with even more disapproval than usual. Was she going to kick us out? Then, a twinkle of joy appeared in her eyes. She looked cautiously over her shoulder and hit the access buzzer, hiding her slight smile.

Into the ICU went seven family members and their ten instruments. We sang our way to my stepfather's bed, drowning out the morbid beeping of life-support machines along the way. A new, joyful rhythm took its place. Soon the nursing staff and security guard joined in! Surely, no song would erase the uncertainty of what lay ahead for my stepfather, or anyone else in the ICU. But for that day, the need to pause, sing, and give thanks overcame us all. Eight years later, my stepfather still recalls that day as one of his most joyful ever.



Consider

When have you found yourself feeling overcome by inexplicable joy or hope during a moment of grief?

Pray

God, help us embrace the joyful moments that peek through our times of great need or pain. Let us remember God's commitment to us, as with Job, to fill our mouths with laughter and joy amidst our toughest moments. Amen.

Friday, June 19

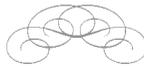
Job 9:5-10

The hurricane struck on a Monday, and we had front row seats to the catastrophe. Hurricane George, one of the century's deadliest storms with sustained winds of over 150 mph, ripped through Puerto Rico like a chainsaw-wielding monster.

When it was over, debris was everywhere. Electricity and running water were nowhere. We surveyed the wreckage and our eyes glazed over. On a small and narrow street containing nearly identical homes, how could the damage be so disparate from one house to the next? One home's back porch had collapsed. Another's cement wall had crumbled. Five trees had skewed the house across the street; less than 20 feet away, the trees in our yard remained upright.

Job declares that God *does great things beyond understanding, and marvelous things without number...I do not perceive him* (vv. 10, 11). Why does so much suffering exist in the world? Why does chaos have its way with us? Realities we can't explain lead us to grapple with questions about who God is.

After we took in the puzzling trail of wreckage, our stunned collective silence turned to light chatter. The chatter turned into conversation. The conversation led to planning. By dusk, a neighborhood barbecue was in the works. We would have plenty of time to sort out the next steps and ponder why the storm traveled the way it did. But first it was time to eat and give thanks. We couldn't make sense of the storm by seeing into the past, and we couldn't see what the road ahead looked like. All that was clear was that we had each other.



Consider

When have you experienced circumstances that could not be clearly explained? What did that experience teach you about God and living with faith?

Pray

God, though the earth may shake and the wind may howl, help us not lose sight of the gifts in front of us. No matter what our circumstances may be, help us live for you and build community with those around us. Amen.

Saturday, June 20

Job 13:1-12

If you would only keep silent, that would be your wisdom! (v. 5)

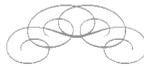
Everyone in the waiting room sat with the life-altering question their doctor would answer for each of them today: Was it benign or malignant? In a few minutes, I would soon find out for myself.

I looked at my mother, and she extended her hand with a knowing glance and a deep sigh. What déjà vu vortex had we been sucked into? Waiting room memories flashed before me: oncology wards with Aunt Laura, cardiac units with my stepfather, neurology clinics and physical therapy centers for my stroke rehab. Were we seriously here again?

Perhaps we sat in silence because of all the waiting room practice we'd had. Or perhaps words had no place there that day.

I squeezed my mother's hand and she twirled my class ring back and forth on my finger. I tapped the rhythm of whatever canned song was playing overhead on her palm. Our loss for words felt exactly right as my callused hand and hers had their own conversation about the tragedies we had overcome. The soulful quiet, that rich silence, was so calm and soothing that I almost didn't hear the receptionist call my name.

I took a deep breath. My mom offered her hand one last time, and I gave it a squeeze. Her hand was all I needed. It brought the gift of presence.



Consider

When have you needed to offer comfort but found yourself at a loss for words? What does offering your gift of presence involve?

Pray

God, help us embrace silence when words alone are not adequate. Help us remember the impact and wisdom that simply being present for others in soulful moments of silence can have. Amen.

Sunday, June 21

Job 14:7-15

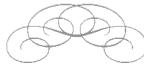
The book of Job moves back and forth between Job's voice and the voices of his visitors. Job has reached a low point; he is despondent. If we were to see this moment on a Broadway stage, he'd be singing in a minor key with the lights darkened. The audience would hush, straining to hear every word of his pain.

A tree when it is cut down has hope, Job sings (v. 7, paraphrase). Shoots will sprout from its roots. But, he concludes, mortals have no such hope. When they die, they do not rise again (vv. 10, 12, paraphrase).

Job's despair consumes him. His children are gone. He will never hear their laughter again. They will never again hug him. He prays his one hope, that God will take him to Sheol, the place of the dead. There, he could rest until God's anger has passed. If God would temporarily hide him in death, he could stop feeling and find respite from his agony. Then, upon his return to life, things might be different.

Job's prayer is hard for us to hear, but important. Too often we try to cheer up the grieving. Uncomfortable with their pain, we quickly talk about heaven and how their loved ones are in a better place. We try to turn their sadness towards happy thoughts. Job will have none of it. He doesn't believe in heaven. He wishes to be dead, to stop feeling so sad.

A widow once told me she wished she had died with her husband. I was too young and full of hope to sit with her in grief. Thankfully, another woman, whose husband had been dead for a decade, understood. She didn't try to cheer the woman up. She patiently sat with her. No advice, no trying to fix her, just presence. When the new widow felt heard, when someone honored her grief, she slowly started to live again.



Consider

If God is to uplift us when we are hurting, we need to be fully present where we are. How well do you practice being where you are?

Pray

God, help us to be fully present where we are. When life is good, encourage us to dance in the moment. When life brings hardships, help us to lean into the challenges and the sadness so that your grace may carry us. Amen.

Monday, June 22

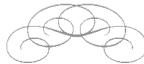
Job 15:1-6

Eliphaz returns to the stage of Job the musical, having sung before in chapters 4-5. Gone is his earlier sympathy for Job. Now he does not hide his contempt. He declares that Job's words *can do no good* (v. 2). Eliphaz will no longer sit with Job's grief.

Job's complaints make Eliphaz nervous. He thought he had God all figured out: God makes the righteous profit and the wicked suffer. But Job, who is suffering terribly after numerous disasters, clings to his innocence. If Job is right—that he is suffering due to no fault of his own—then Eliphaz does not have God all figured out. Job's anger at God creates a faith crisis for Eliphaz.

How would you deal with someone's crisis if it called your own beliefs into question? We live in a society where people and their families are hurting from addiction, sexual assault, fears of being deported, rejection for being gay or lesbian. They are not an issue or controversy; they are people who need compassion. It is hard to empathize with people if their crises shake the foundations of our own beliefs. Fear consumes compassion. But "perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18).

Eliphaz decides to attack Job in order to protect his own beliefs: *Your own mouth condemns you, and not I; your own lips testify against you* (v. 6). In this man's view, Job *must* have committed sins, and therefore Job's words are *windy*, full of hot air (v. 2). Eliphaz is more interested in being right than being in relationship. Jesus shows us a better way by caring for hurting people, especially when the religious people of his day called them sinners. Jesus is more interested in connecting with people than in winning an argument.



Consider

How might calmly listening to another's struggles and caring for them, even when it challenges your beliefs, make your faith stronger?

Pray

God of love, help me to see you in all the people that I meet this day. However they make me feel, renew your love in me so that I may share your compassion. Amen.

Tuesday, June 23

Job 16:1-5

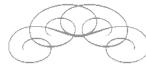
Job snaps at Eliphaz and his other visitors—*miserable comforters are you all*—concluding that they are the ones with *windy words* (vv. 2-3). If their situations were reversed, he admits that he'd speak as they do. Being self-righteous is easy if you haven't walked in someone else's shoes.

In *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey recommended, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." This is harder than it sounds. Projecting our own experience onto another person's story creates conflict and miscommunication. Always making our own experiences our first reference point when we're listening to others leads to all sorts of misunderstandings. This contributes to generational clashes between parents and children, divisions between people with opposing political opinions, or conflicts between Americans of different races.

During the O.J. Simpson murder trial twenty-five years ago, a number of polls showed that white people and black people had almost completely opposite opinions as to his guilt. Roughly 70% of white Americans thought he was guilty of his wife's murder, while roughly 70% of black Americans thought he was not guilty. People watching the same trial viewed it through their different experiences, which influenced how they perceived the information.

Job is angry because his visitors never try to understand his story; they just try to persuade him to accept their theology.

Understanding begins with curiosity that leads us to ask questions—not to investigate, but to explore. We patiently listen as if we are receiving treasured information. Only in relationship will we be ready to connect the pieces. Seek first to understand.



Consider

How hard have you worked to understand those who are different from you?

Pray

God, create curiosity within me so I'll listen carefully to the stories of those I encounter, especially when they are different from my own. Amen.

Wednesday, June 24

Job 17:1-7

“I wouldn’t know what to say.” That’s one of the reasons people give for not visiting a friend who has lost a loved one. The truth is that few of us do know what to say. In many situations, nothing *can* really be said. In Job’s case, his losses are so overwhelming that any words would be inadequate. Still, we often function under some illusion that what those in grief want from us are words. Without having any to offer, many of us disconnect from the grieving.

A friend once confessed to me that he doesn’t remember anything people told him in the days and weeks after his daughter’s death. What he did remember was the presence offered by friends—the visits, the dinners dropped off at the house, the people who remembered his daughter’s birthday. One person occasionally stopped by his office and asked to hear a story about his daughter. What he remembered during his time of grief was the love embodied by the presence of his friends.

Job feels alone in his grief and in his anger. No one understands him. No one gives him space to be angry. They want him to grieve the *right* way and don’t approve of the way he is doing it. Job is isolated from everyone and he blames God for [*closing*] *their minds to understanding* (v. 4).

Job’s visitors thought he needed advice and instruction. He would have been better off if they continued to just sit with him and never opened their mouths. What he needed were people to simply be with him in his grief rather than judge his anger at God. Job needed people who would let him vent and cry and yell. Who needs that from you today?



Consider

Are you uncomfortable around people who are grieving or suffering? Why? What needs to heal in you so that you can comfort those in sorrow?

Pray

Jesus the Christ, forgive us when we abandon those who are suffering because of our own discomfort. Empower us today to become your loving presence for someone who is hurting. Amen.

Thursday, June 25

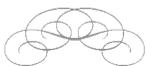
Job 17:13-16

You are about halfway through Job's poetry over this five-week series. By now, you may be a little tired of him. You have watched his mood swing from grief to anger to lament to righteous indignation, and his friends' early sympathy turn into accusations. It never seems to be over.

Living through grief is like riding an emotional rollercoaster. As time passes, you start to experience some good days, but really sad days still pop up. You think you are getting better, and then you break down crying. There's no timetable. There's no finish line to grief, which you can cross and say, "At least I'm done with *that*."

After my parents died, my brothers and I faced the daunting task of cleaning out the house that had been our childhood home. Surprisingly, those trips back home became grief therapy. I cried while reading my parents' letters, and gained new appreciation for the love that shaped me. Thumbing through old baseball cards and dusting off the ping-pong table in the basement brought back kind memories. In my dad's workroom, filled with his tools, I would close my eyes and sit for a while, smelling him in the sawdust and grease. It took us almost two years to sort, sell, give, and throw away the house's contents. At times it seemed as if we would never get done. Yet somewhere along the way, those trips moved me from being broken-hearted that my parents were gone and that my preschool-aged children would never know them to feeling fully blessed that they had been my parents.

Job's return to despair is part of the emotional rollercoaster of grief. Reading five weeks of Job gives you a taste of it. Though, in this case, there *is* a finish line.



Consider

Name a time when you rushed something and regretted it. What can time alone do to prepare you for the next thing God has for you?

Pray

God, grow patience in me. Make me aware of all that is going on around and within me so that I can live this day fully and learn what I need for tomorrow. Amen.

Friday, June 26

Job 18:1-21

Bildad first speaks in chapter 8, begging Job to repent from the sins that caused his calamity, so that God might restore him. He now aims to convict the unrepentant Job of his wickedness. Perhaps, though, he overreaches. The *you* in verses 2-4 is plural, implying a defensive attack. He screams at Job and anyone else who would question his theology—the moral foundation of the earth shall not change because of *you*!

Over the next seventeen verses, Bildad raves about how the wicked lose everything. He points the finger at Job, who has very recently lost everything, and at anybody else that has suffered tragedy. He believes God makes the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer, and Bildad defends his theology at the top of his lungs. To be fair, portions of the Bible support his theology. Deuteronomy operates from this way of thinking. Proverbs is steeped in it. Psalm 1 could be its cover page.

The book of Job was written during the Babylonian exile, when the Jewish people had lost everything. Job's story was their story. Like Bildad, some prophets and priests said that God was punishing them for their sins. Job tried to kill this theology, yet it persists even today. When Rabbi Kushner wrote, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* after his son died, it sold millions of copies because people long to be free from this oppressive view of God. Kushner used Job to declare that God does not cause bad things to happen in our lives.

Remember this from reading Job: God is not the cause of the bad things that happen to you; God cares for and cures you from the bad things that happened. God loves those who suffer and works to relieve their suffering. Contrary to what Bildad says, you are never Godforsaken.



Consider

Where do you see God at work when bad things happen?

Pray

Good Shepherd, when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, help me to trust that you will lead me to green pastures and still waters. Amen.

Saturday, June 27

Job 19:1-6, 21-27

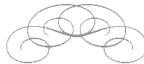
I know that my Redeemer lives may be the best-known verse (25) in all of Job thanks to Handel's *Messiah*. Handel was one of the world's greatest composers, but that didn't make him a great theologian. Reading the verses that lead up to this famous verse is important.

After enduring Bildad's blistering condemnation, Job asks, *How long will you torment me?* (v. 2). Whatever errors Job committed, how did they harm his visitors? Why do they persecute him? They should have pity on him because, as they say, God has persecuted him and ruined his life. Isn't that reason enough?

Job accepts Bildad's point that *his* god has done this to him. His suffering must come from the divine, he reasons, for who else could do this to him? But Job insists it was done *unjustly*. Bildad's god is unfair, because Job doesn't deserve this. *O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock forever* (v. 24), Job wishes. Then future generations could stand against Bildad's theology.

Now Job makes a turn that continues through the rest of the book. This becomes his first speech that doesn't end with a wish for death. From now on, he hopes for his *Redeemer* (v. 25) to provide justice. The identity of this Redeemer isn't quite clear. The word gives Handel permission to claim this is Christ, though I'm uncomfortable tying it up so neatly.

What is clear is that Job has changed. Now Job pursues God and believes that he'll receive justice. When our theology no longer makes sense with the hard realities we experience, Job invites us to transform our theology, listen for a new word from God, and look for a Redeemer whose being is larger than we've yet to understand.



Consider

How has your theology changed in the last ten to twenty years? How might it be different in the next ten to twenty years?

Pray

God, help me release those beliefs that restrict my faith, open me to beliefs that make my faith soar, and give me wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Sunday, June 28

Job 31:29-37

Job's culture wants an easy explanation for the difficult problem of suffering, so they embrace the idea of divine retribution. If you are righteous, you prosper. If you are wicked, you experience pain. Since Job is experiencing unimaginable suffering, his friends take it upon themselves to locate its cause and explain it to him. They offer ample sins that Job must have committed because of his severe, painful losses.

Job, a righteous man, knows better. He wants answers, but realizes that no easy ones apply to his case. He passionately challenges God to name the reasons for his sorrows, to reveal what sins he committed. Job recites a catalogue of offenses based on what his current culture believes is wrong. What did he do to deserve divine punishment? This wounded man demands an encounter with God that will satisfy his longing to know why God allows a righteous person to suffer.

Both suffering and living with unanswerable questions are painful realities of life. Job's response to both of these experiences is to persistently tell God about them and seek understanding. In the depths of his pain, Job moves toward God, who does not will us to suffer but desires that we trust in God's ultimate love for us when we do.

During experiences of suffering, James 5:11 reminds us how important our endurance is: "You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful." When we look to the past, trying to find a reason for our trials, we lose focus. Instead, as we learn to live with our questions we can pray to encounter God's presence each day.



Consider

How can we live in pain without losing faith in God?

Pray

Gracious God, help us to grow through the challenges we experience. When we encounter suffering, give us courage. Comfort us with the sure knowledge that you are God with us, Emmanuel. Amen.

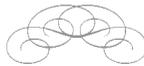
Monday, June 29

Job 36:1-12

In the passage today, the self-described sage Elihu shares his unsolicited wisdom with Job. Suffering, in Elihu's view, is the warning God sends to safeguard someone from sin. This idea reflects the deeply held traditions and religious attitudes that surround divine retribution, when God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous. Elihu claims to speak on God's behalf, but he merely shares his own understanding of how God works. His message isn't from God.

Elihu's words focus on the idea that our superior and just God expresses redemptive concern for the unrighteous by afflicting them as a form of spiritual discipline. We hear extensions of this type of thinking in our time, when self-described sages bypass empathy and proclaim that everything happens for a reason or assure us of their conviction that God won't give us more than we can handle.

This false friend perceives an arrogance in Job that fails to hold him accountable to God. But as we read his story, we see clear indications that Job lives faithfully, such as the way he honestly pours out his emotions to God. Let Elihu be the warning God sends to safeguard us from wrongdoing when we're tempted to judge another's relationship with God.



Consider

What could we say to share empathy rather than judgment with those who are suffering?

Pray

Loving God, grant us the wisdom and insight to convey your love in challenging circumstances. Give us courage to listen for you, speak your words, and bring your light into the darkness. Amen.

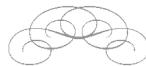
Tuesday, June 30

Job 38:1-11

Up to this point in the book of Job, we've heard humans respond to the problem of suffering. Now we hear how God responds to the questions Job raises in his search for the meaning of justice, righteousness, and suffering. Some will summarize God's reply as "I am God and you are not!" But don't overlook the Almighty's desire to engage Job in conversation. *Gird up your loins like a man*, says God (v. 3). *I will question you, and you shall declare to me* (v. 3). How interesting that God responds to Job's questions with questions. Jesus often does the same in the Gospels when people ask him for answers.

I view the response in this passage as God's breathing, "I care about you, even when the circumstances don't make sense." Envision the vivid picture described in these verses of God carefully measuring in order to lay the foundations of earth. Consider the description of God at work in creation in Proverbs 8:30-31, when Wisdom speaks, "Then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race."

In today's text, God's voice comes out of the whirlwind. Out of chaos, God speaks about the order of creation. God brings words of assurance to Job, even as this poetry begins explaining the ways that God is present in human life. Comparing elements of creation with the human birth process makes us notice how God gives life to the world. We see God working on the earth, in the cosmos, and upon the sea. The way God sets boundaries for the waters reminds us that God is not disinterested in our world. God cares deeply for us, for all people and all of creation. This conversation with God offers Job a glimpse of hope.



Consider

What evidence of God's work—that you have seen, heard, tasted, or touched—offered you hope in a difficult time?

Pray

God, our Creator and Redeemer, thank you for your love and care. Help us grow aware of your work in our world. Amen.

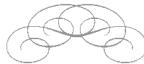
Wednesday, July 1

Job 38:12-27

Job wants to hear from God, so that's what happens through the poetic language in chapter 38. "*Who is this?*" (v. 2) God first asks about the one who seeks an encounter with the Almighty, then spends today's reading describing who God is. God is the one who has been at work in the world long before Job existed, creating order out of chaos. From the beginning, God has been laying the foundation of the earth, establishing what were thought in Job's day to be the four regions of the cosmos: the earth, sea, sky, and underworld.

God is the one who actively prepares the way for new life. This poem expresses God's creative power, God's engagement in redeeming what is desolate. New life will follow the existing chaos. *Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt, to bring rain on a land where no one lives, on the desert, which is empty of human life, to satisfy the waste and desolate land, and to make the ground put forth grass?* (vv. 25-27)

These lines are meant to assure Job, who has known the empty desert and has dwelt in desolate land. God has been making a way for new life since the beginning, for this is who the Creator is. These lines are meant to assure us as well. When we have experienced the desolation of suffering, God's picture of growing grass in a wasted land offers hope we can grasp.



Consider

When have you seen new life grow out of desolation?

Pray

God, help us hear this assurance that you will bring new life when we are mired in the empty, wasted, and desolate. Amen.

Thursday, July 2

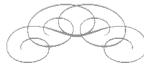
Job 39:1-12

God continues to respond to Job's questions by describing divine concern for all the animals in creation. In Job's ancient Near East agrarian society, people who kept sheep and goats necessarily knew the important details about their livestock, such as when the birth seasons occurred and the length of the gestation periods.

But God cares for more than the familiar sheep and goats of domestic flocks. God notes the wild mountain goats and wild deer, the wild ass and wild ox. Job doesn't know the details about these animals, but God makes the point that these lives that cannot be tamed are known to their Creator, who creates ways to provide for them.

Earlier, Job complains that he has lived a righteous life. He knows many contemptible people who thrive, though they should be banished from society. The wild ass becomes God's metaphor for the outcasts to whom Job refers. Job is wrestling with the cultural assumption that one's sins cause one's suffering and he seeks God's explanation for his problems. God points him towards evidence that God cares for all creation and is present with the outcast. God is caringly present with Job, hearing and responding to his concerns.

When we suffer, God is with us. Immediate relief or explanation may not come in the form we seek, but God's response to Job assures us that God is strengthening and sustaining us. Thanks be to God.



Consider

When have you struggled to trust God in the midst of adversity? How do we seek God's comfort when we feel God is far away?

Pray

God, you give life to the world. Breathe your Spirit into us today, that we may know of your love and care. Amen.

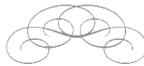
Friday, July 3

Job 40:1-5

After God responds to Job, God asks Job for his response. The Almighty gave Job ample reasons to reframe his response to the suffering he's experienced. God explained the complexities of creation, and the chaos within the created order. God seems surprised at the way Job succumbed to disillusionment.

Job responds to God by backing out of the dispute. After hearing the perspective of the Author of life, Job has no rebuttal to offer: *See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth* (v. 4). If we could hear the tone in his voice, would it be the definition of humility? This gesture of deference that Job uses, *I lay my hand on my mouth*, is the same gesture that distinguished persons from his community showed to him in 29:9. Job makes it clear that he knows he may have overstepped his boundaries by challenging God. For Job, the consequence of living through catastrophe has been losing his trust in God. To truly live again, he must learn to trust again.

Through their dialogue, Job realizes the limits of human comprehension when it comes to understanding the God who is infinitely more than we can grasp. Yet, made in God's image, humankind is created with the capacity for deep loyalty to God. As we call upon God, this relationship grows. Even in suffering, we receive God's strength to endure. Our hope becomes a peace that passes understanding, an assurance of God's presence at all times.



Consider

How do we rebuild our relationships after trust has been shattered? When have you seen the hard work of honest dialogue restore what was broken?

Pray

Merciful God, thank you for your grace. Through your love we can find new meaning in life, even after horrific events. Help us to trust you more each day. Amen.

Saturday, July 4

Job 40:6-14

On this Independence Day, as ideas about liberty and justice for all echo in the atmosphere, we read this continuing conversation between God and Job about whether or not God is truly just.

Job's own righteousness has been an absolute certainty of his life. Now, after his life has fallen apart despite his upright living, his trust in God is uncertain. God debunks Job's idea that a divine concern for justice should result in vigorously removing all injustice, issuing Job a challenge: if Job were in God's position, could he do better? Because Job is adamant that retribution should fall upon the wicked person, how would Job operate the cosmos to ensure that the righteous evade suffering?

The book of Job makes no attempt to explain God, but it does provide us with plenty of examples of the way humankind misunderstands God, the world, and suffering. Job's story gives us opportunities to ponder our existence, our relationships with other people and with creation, and what we expect from our relationship with God.

All of us are works in progress. The relationships that matter most in our lives deserve all that we have to offer. When we love, we don't hold back what is on our hearts. We share our concerns, our ideas, our deepest questions, and our honest struggles. We care enough about our relationships to not be apathetic or dismissive about them. This is why we take a deep breath and speak up. This is why we learn to listen. God engages Job in conversation and his life will change. May we love enough to engage with God and find ourselves changed as well.



Consider

Because you love, what brave conversations do you need to have?

Pray

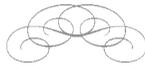
Holy God, help us talk to you about everything. Teach us to bring you our pain, our problems, and our love. Guide us with the grace and strength that only you can provide. Amen.

Sunday, July 5

Job 41:1-11

With a hushed tone my grandfather whispered tales of the mythical “Leviathan of the deep” into the imaginations of all his grandchildren. From the description of Leviathan’s scales, fins, and massive jaws, we imagined a great and powerful beast that must be both respected and avoided with all our being. This beast, for whatever reason the Creator formed him, was our creaturely limit. The Leviathan set a circle around our youthful possibilities and that circle, now embedded in our young psyches, became the point beyond which we dared not go. The Leviathan was a creature with whom we could not negotiate. We couldn’t persuade, deceive, cajole, or even discuss our wishes with it. We couldn’t tame, defeat, or harm it. We could and should respect its creaturely existence as the mark of our absolute boundary.

As we grew older, the Leviathan proved to be a shape-changer. We learned in time that absolute limits come in all shapes, forms, and sizes. When God speaks to Job, God reminds him that there are limits in our lives that he, and we, should respect. Our childhood memory of the beast’s scales, fins, and jaws may fall away, but the truth of those limits remains as they take on new forms. God whispers a message of hope that transverses those imbedded and anchored limits from the deep waters of life where the Leviathan reigns. God speaks plainly and clearly to Job: “everything (including Leviathan) under heaven is mine.”



Consider

How have the imaginary creatures of your childhood come to reflect real life experiences that frighten you today? How do you hear God assure you today that there is no depth nor height that separates you from the love of God? (Job 41:10-11, Rom 8:38-39)

Pray

I will acknowledge as many shapes of Leviathan as I can before you, O Lord, for I know that you alone can domesticate them. You alone can give me the courage to live in the Leviathan’s world courageously. Amen.

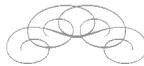
Monday, July 6

Job 41:12-25

I was driving my three-year old granddaughter home when she asked me, “Lolo (her name for grandfather), what are all those signs?” I was puzzled. What were the “signs” she saw? Upon further investigation, I discerned that she was talking about the gravestones in the cemetery that we’d passed on the way back to her house. In an admittedly clumsy way, I did my best to explain that those were stones to mark the memory of those who are no longer with us in person, but whose influence remains in our lives. I heard myself say, “They have died.” I felt the deep pain of revealing this life lesson to her. Soon she began to name all the loved ones in her community that she wants to remain more than memories on stones.

The more descriptive God becomes about the Leviathan, the more we realize God is describing something no mortal can repel: death itself. Whatever the poet who wrote Job intended, the consequence of the Leviathan is something even *divine beings dread* (v. 25, CEB). By this point in the story, Job has hinted that he believes there could be life on the other side of death, but he has no assurance of this hope (19:25).

Psychologists tell us that as we age, the fear of death recedes into the background of our daily lives unless we experience the death of a loved one. Then that early terror resurfaces. Job experienced the traumatic loss of his children, household, property, and status in the community. Job knows all too well the thrashing of the Leviathan in his life. With Job’s traumatic story of loss, will Job ever be able to believe that God is not “awed” by the Leviathan (v. 12, CEB)? Can Job believe that God is sovereign over death itself?



Consider

What event in your life first led you to become aware of your mortality? How does our society mask the reality of our mortality from plain view?

Pray

God in heaven, you know my heart, my fears, and my anxiety concerning death. Lead my heart to assurance that in you all my fears find a place to rest. Amen.

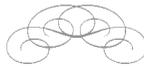
Tuesday, July 7

Job 41:26-34

None on earth can compare to him; he is made to be without fear. He looks on all the proud; he is king over all proud beasts (vv. 33-34, CEB).

Leviathan may fear no other, but by his thrashing all other proud beings in the Leviathan's world will know fear. And humanity may be the most dangerous of all the other proud beasts. Carl Sagan wrote in his book *Contact* that humans are such an interesting species, capable of beautiful dreams and horrible nightmares. Similarly, in his painting "Saturn Devouring His Son," the Spanish artist Francisco Goya captured the nightmares of the proud and fearful in the 1820-23 Spanish Civil War. His painting depicts the Greek myth of the titan Cronus (Saturn, in Latin) who hears a prediction that one of his children will overthrow him. Fearing the loss of his power and authority, the titan devours each one of his children at their birth. Goya's artistic reflection on the civil strife in early nineteenth-century Spain captures our human history of fear and the violence that follows from it. We can't help but link this story with the murder of the Bethlehem children under the fearful reign of Herod at the announcement of Jesus' birth as King of the Jews (Mt 2). The potent mix of fear and loss of control often leads to a desperate and violent attempt to regain order.

Job faces difficult questions. His life has been compounded by the tragic loss of his family and the isolation of his grief. He has endured scapegoating by his friends. He appeals to God for an audience and explanation. The voice of the Lord responds, but not with the answers that he sought. How will he respond? How would you respond?



Consider

Where have you seen the tyranny of fear and violence exposed in your community, workplace, or neighborhood? In what ways could you break the cycle of fear and the abuse of power?

Pray

God, give me the wisdom to recognize the violence within myself that comes out of a fear of loss. Help me locate my strength in you, and grant me courage to seek redemptive actions that break the cycle of fear and violence. Amen.

Wednesday, July 8

Job 42:1-6

Primary speech isn't necessarily about words. Primary speech refers to a person's development of language, both in forming words and in recognizing who is communicating. It's the cooing of a child in her mother's arms, the eye-to-eye contact that says you're recognized, listened to, and valued. Primary speech establishes necessary connections that sustain us, bringing life and forming community.

When Job tells God, *I know that you can do all things* (v. 2), he knows that he's been heard, understood, and valued by the Creator of the universe. This is the same Creator who called all life into being and placed the limits on that life. What the writer describes is similar to the experience of prayer. Job concurs. He moves from knowing *of* God to an experience that involves personal pronouns: *but now my eye sees you* (v. 5). Job asks us to move from reading this drama to our own experience of talking to and speaking for God. Our scenes involve the joy and pain that is vivid to us, where God is the author of all that is a blessing, and where we wonder what role God plays in all that is painful. Job's prayers model a radical response to life itself.

Radical prayer must be foundational. It must be our primary speech, at the center of all that I am, all that you are, all that we are. Praying will undergird us while we write, work, love, walk, play, and give. Prayer is the practice for deep, purposeful living; it takes us from our initial insecurities to our finding the courage to be and create. Prayer connects us to each other and to our planet through God, the very source of our being. We begin by simply acknowledging that we live unto God: "Lord, in you we live and move and have our being." The primary speech of prayer is our compass for the daily journey of seeking understanding.



Consider

Think of a time in your life that felt most sacred to you, a "thin place" where God was close. How would you describe that experience?

Pray

Maker of Heaven and Earth, remind us that in your recognition of us, your tender care for us, we find ourselves. Amen.

Thursday, July 9

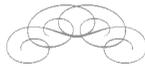
Job 42:7-9

Whenever you turn on the television, there always seems to be some fictional detective or legal team working to bring a perpetrator to justice. The casts of these urban dramas often include cliché characters like overworked police officers, peculiar judges, and burdened attorneys.

At the center of the drama are the victim and the perpetrator. If an innocent person is falsely labeled as the perpetrator, they are the scapegoat. Sometimes we viewers relate most to the eyewitnesses to the crime, the bystanders in the story. Bystanders often know enough details to intervene and prevent the crime, or they know enough information to bring perpetrators to justice.

Bystanders stay on the fringes of the story. They might irritate us because, while we can't intervene in the story, they often can. After a long stretch of watching Job's accusers, God moves from bystander to an active role. God stands with Job in solidarity over against his accusers. Unfortunately, God's silence had allowed Job's friends to become his accusers. Only when the bystander chooses sides can the story come full circle.

The drama of accusers, perpetrators, victims, bystanders, and scapegoats happens daily, and painfully, in our lives. We see these dynamics play out in our offices, schools, families, and churches. May God's role in standing for Job inspire us to care enough to tell the truth, resolve conflict, and move the story to where it needs to be.



Consider

Reflect on a time when you saw a scapegoat identified. How did you respond? What makes it so complicated and dangerous for us to leave our role as bystanders and identify with the accused?

Pray

Champion of the marginalized and outcast who talked with the woman at the well, endured the Cross, and still stands by our side when we see or become scapegoats, grant us courage to be your presence in solidarity with others. Amen.

Friday, July 10

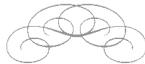
Job 42:10-11

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech outlines the wrongful injuries that result from racism, laying a foundation that could be used for righteous anger against a nation that falsely promises equality. Yet, King does not build a future of revenge, but frames America's debt to "the Negro people [as] a bad check." He then develops a way forward by describing a faith in America that "refuses to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt." King transitions from anger, the basis of revenge, to debt that seeks accountable, responsible action. King concludes with a unifying vision that binds the true freedom of the nation to its ability to advance together as a community where former tormentors and the tormented are transformed into a united family.

"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood....

I have a dream that one day...in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers."

When the Lord of the universe stands against Job's three accusers and vindicates him, Job might easily feel justified to retaliate against them. Our history books brim with cycles of revenge that span generations. Unless a new path forward can be imagined, the default response of oppressed people is usually violent. Yet, when God vindicates us, God also gives us larger dreams to pursue, visions that move us forward.



Consider

Why is it so common for us to seek retaliation when we are injured? If payback is our default response, what breaks the escalating cycle of revenge?

Pray

God of new possibilities, cycles of revenge are always at our doorstep. Open your way to us so we may move forward. Teach us to dream anew. Amen.

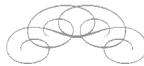
Saturday, July 11

Job 42:12-17

Every Sunday morning as the hymns are called, a church matriarch will leave her hymnal in the pew rack and sing from her incredible memory. She can recount sermons, Sunday school lessons, and precious moments within our faith community's life. She weaves us together through her care, love, and attention to detail. I imagine her as our link between the past, present, and future. She reminds us of so many moments in our history, the wonderful times and the crises. She recalls the saints of our past and the hopes and dreams we hold for our community's future. Not everyone is able to do what she does for us. Some fear losing the past so intensely that they convince themselves there can be no future. Others have been so afraid of the past exerting control on the present that they disdain the past. With compassion, wisdom, and creativity, our matriarch embraces both the past and the future and proves those fears wrong. She is our chain of memory.

Job finds himself in a pivotal moment. Yes, the blessings of the Lord now flow generously, but the dangerous memories of the past cannot be blotted out. Survivors of tragedy, like Job, always find themselves in this difficult, important place. They are links in the memory of their losses, even an entire lost community. Will they hold onto those memories or disdain them?

Those who have crossed into the arms of God need to have their stories told. May there be witnesses who courageously tell those stories. And may there be listeners who value the ones who have gone before. As Job learns in the midst of his tragedy, it is God who hears the stories when no one else listens, and it's God who holds all stories in eternity.



Consider

What does embracing the past and the future look like for you? How do you learn to do that?

Pray

Lord of yesterday, today, and tomorrow, your love is a cord that holds the beads of time. Show us how to weave our lives into a tapestry that celebrates your creative beauty and wisdom. Amen.

Sunday, July 12

2 Corinthians 1:1-4

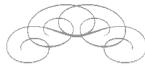
Twenty percent of US adults admits to struggling with loneliness. Former US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy says this staggering statistic creates serious issues. In talking with Kate Bowler on her podcast, Murthy says that addressing loneliness pushes us to ask deeper questions like, “What’s our purpose?” We move beyond, “Who am I?” to “Who are we in relation to each other?” and “What kind of connections are we making?” Bowler says, “Loneliness may be the disease, but we are all medicine.” This problem should prompt the church to respond. But sometimes those who bring their sorrows to church leave with more.

After miserable experiences in Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens, Paul stays in Corinth almost two years, founding a strong congregation of Jews and Gentiles. Corinth was a first-century Las Vegas. This church Paul loves struggles to be true in a materialistic culture.

Then a group announces, “We’re not paying attention to Paul anymore; Peter is a real disciple.” Others say, “We’re with Apollos; he’s the only one who can preach.” Paul tries to smooth things over, but it gets worse and the criticism stings.

Paul could keep his hurt feelings to himself. Instead he writes an honest letter because that will be good for the church. If Paul is vulnerable, they may realize what a church should be. If he opens his heart, they might open theirs. He tells them God comforts us when we’re hurt so that we can comfort others. He believes in the healing power of God’s people because he knows its source.

Source: “Vivek Murthy: The Loneliness Epidemic,” Everything Happens with Kate Bowler, Podcast audio, Nov. 5, 2019, <http://everythinghappens.libsyn.com/vivek-murthy-the-loneliness-epidemic>.



Consider

Why is being vulnerable so crucial for a congregation?

Pray

God, strengthen us when we are hurt so that we can share the source of our healing with others who are wounded. Amen.

Monday, July 13

2 Corinthians 1:5-7

Sometimes the church pretends to be a gathering of people who have it all together. We are reluctant to talk about hardships and treat some of those problems as secrets to be hidden. We hide honest feelings and try to look our best—as if we are forever meeting our new in-laws.

That kind of pretense is deadly to the church. Insincerity becomes second nature. If we only pretend to be the church, we never experience the church. When we pretend we're immune to the world's problems, we deny the grace that makes us God's people. Henri Nouwen writes:

Nobody escapes being wounded. We all are wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not "How can we hide our wounds?" so we don't have to be embarrassed, but "How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?" When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers.

Though wounded by the Corinthians, Paul refuses to let the brokenness he feels become the last word in their relationship. His *unshaken* (v. 7) hope for the church rests on God's work in the world through Christ and within us. Nouwen continues, "Jesus is God's wounded healer: through his wounds we are healed. Jesus' suffering and death brought joy and life. His humiliation brought glory; his rejection brought a community of love. As followers of Jesus we can also allow our wounds to bring healing to others."

Some who dismiss the church make pretense or hypocrisy a major reason why they do. But an experience of Grace that meets us in our brokenness and leads us to hope, healing, and love is hard to reject .



Consider

When has Grace met you in your brokenness? How do you share that?

Pray

God, may we remember who we are. May we remember that you are the one who restores us. May your grace make us gracious people. Amen.

Tuesday, July 14

2 Corinthians 1:8-9

Desperately depending on God's grace isn't easy for some: the self-sufficient, the type A's, those who test well, and trophy owners, for starters.

Paul also spent time on a list of the self-confident. But being *weighed down with a load of suffering...so far beyond our strength that we were afraid we might not survive* reminds him again of his need for Grace (v. 8, CEB).

The confidence we most need comes from God. By Grace, we help each other understand that we don't earn God's love or our place in Christ's Church based on our achievements. Our acceptance comes from God, who envisions what the church can become when Grace works through God's people. Understanding this makes us honest.

Congregants are as likely to have problems as anyone else. Christians suffer from abuse, alcoholism, addictions, and estrangement from parents, children, and friends. Christians worry about their jobs, their health, getting tired, getting old. We feel as overwhelmed and inadequate as others. Most of us have known more losses than wins.

Being Christ's Church means learning to be honest about who we are and what we've experienced. The most helpful people for cancer victims are often those who have cancer and will talk about it. When a woman suffers a miscarriage, she needs to hear others say: "It happened to me, too, and the loss felt overwhelming." When depression threatens to tear us apart, we need friends who know what that struggle is like.

Anne Lamott writes of living with faith in *Traveling Mercies*, "we can't do it when we have our act together, because we can't do it when we're acting." We have to stop trying to impress one another, show our scars, and share the source of our healing.



Consider

What moment in your life helped you recognize your great need for God's grace? What will help remind you of that truth today?

Pray

God, you are the source of true confidence. Help us learn without ceasing that our lives rely on yours. Amen.

Wednesday, July 15

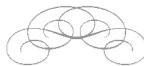
2 Corinthians 1:10-11

Being honest enough to open our hearts to God and to each other makes us the church. But being this honest is difficult. It's so hard, in fact, that we need God's help.

The Voyage of the Dawn Treader in C. S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia series includes the story of a spoiled brat named Eustace. He wanders off on a deserted island, falls asleep in a dragon's cave, and wakes up to discover that he has become the dragon. He's become, externally, the creature he already was internally. As a dragon, he begins to realize how selfish he's been. His character is slowly improved by being a dragon, until he feels lonely and wants to be a real friend. Eventually, the great lion Aslan comes and tells him to take off his skin. Eustace scratches and his scales begin falling off. Then he scratches a little deeper and instead of just scales, his skin peels off like a banana's. He feels wonderful, but then he sees that he's still rough and scaly. He has a smaller suit of scales underneath the first one. He scratches, tears, and peels off this skin too, but the same thing happens again. He scratches off a third skin and steps out of it only to find a fourth.

Then Aslan says, "I'll have to do it for you." The first tear Aslan makes is so deep that Eustace thinks it's gone into his heart. And when Aslan pulls the skin off, it hurts more terribly than any layer before. But finally the dragon's skin lies on the grass and Aslan throws Eustace into the water. It hurts at first, but then the pain of baptism is gone. He's finally a human again, a real person capable of honesty and love.

God will help us shed our artificial layers, too. We become authentic as God makes us authentic. If we let God help us, the church will be an honest, loving community that shares its suffering and its healing.



Consider

In what ways is God helping you to become more honest and caring?

Pray

God, make us your people. Give us the courage we need to let compassion overcome self-centeredness and fear. Help us trust that you are at work in and among us for your great good. Amen.

Thursday, July 16

Philippians 2:1-4

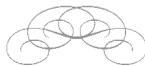
Nebraska farmer Herman Ostery had a problem. His barn needed to be moved 110 feet to make room for a new road that was coming through. He planned to tear it down, though it was in fine shape, and rebuild it 110 feet away, but he dreaded all that work. When his neighbors heard about this, they had an unusual idea: “What if we all picked up your barn together and carried it where you want it to be?”

Herman was dubious, but agreed to let them try. Days later, 328 friends and neighbors arrived. Using a hydraulic jack, they lifted the barn slightly off the ground. Then everyone picked up Ostery’s barn and moved it 110 feet. Each person carried an estimated fifty pounds.

The Protestant idea of the priesthood of the believers, with an s on the end of believers, is that we are priests to one another, taking care of each other. The misleading version—the priesthood of the believer—leaves off the s and claims that we don’t need a priest or anyone else. It’s just me and God. But that’s not true. We’re in this together. When we recognize, even cherish, our dependence on others, we become church.

Selfishness keeps us from seeing how much we need each other. Paul tells the church to stop complaining. Stop dwelling on how we think we’ve been slighted. Stop ignoring, fearing, or merely tolerating one another.

At its best the Church moves past selfishness. A complaining person becomes grateful. A lonely person is welcomed. A hurting person is brought back from despair. A selfish person is invited to care. Church happens through warm handshakes and surprising smiles, through relinquishing our stubbornness and helping to lift.



Consider

When have you seen the church do the equivalent of moving a barn? What similar thing could you do in the near future?

Pray

God, use us to renew your church. Help us to recognize our need for one another and the possibilities you create for us when we see that truth. Amen.

Friday, July 17

Philippians 2:5-11

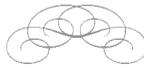
An eighty year old makes a twenty-mile journey every day to be with his wife in a nursing home. The trip takes about two hours round-trip on the bus, but he doesn't mind. He is warm and outgoing and has struck up friendships with the bus driver and some of the other passengers.

One evening the man is standing at the bus stop in a downpour when a Volkswagen pulls up. The driver calls out, "I've come to take you home. The bus has broken down and the driver, a friend of mine, phoned to ask me to go to the bus stop at the nursing home and see that you get home safely."

If we are the church, then we are the ones who need help, the ones who decide to help, and the ones who are sent to help. When we are the church, we find ourselves in the middle of remarkable stories worth telling, because God is constantly working through us, enabling the church to do the good that brings God pleasure. Paul reminds us to adopt Christ's attitude, emptying and humbling ourselves, serving, and becoming obedient (vv. 5-8). This posture that Christ shows us makes us available for God's purposes.

Aeschylus said, "Whenever anyone makes an effort, God also lends a hand." We do not work for goodness in our own power. We work in the power of goodness. Spirituality is not an accomplishment, but the work of God's love.

As you look at the day ahead, how available are you to do the surprising, shining work that brings God pleasure?



Consider

Do something for God today that you consider a humbling act. Think about Christ's example as you offer God this form of service.

Pray

God, sometimes we do humble acts without Christ's attitude. Show us the difference it makes to live with the humility Jesus shows us. Free us to explore the deeper life God intends for us. Amen.

Saturday, July 18

Psalm 94:16-19

Sometimes we talk about faith as though it's an idea to debate, an opinion we have, or a gem we hold up to the light and slowly turn over, observing all its facets. Like faith is something to own, protect, and keep on a shelf. But if we reduce faith to an opinion or an object we hold, it's easy to put it aside. We could outgrow a faith like that.

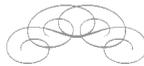
We need the faith that the psalmist sings about, that reflects a relationship with One whose life is much larger than our own and who will walk with us as we face those realities we fear. The faith we need surrounds us as we confront those problems we can't solve alone.

Faith brings the psalmist into a conversation. *If the LORD hadn't helped me, I would live instantly in total silence* (v. 17, CEB). Instead the poet finds an audience with God who receives all the words, praises, questions, and concerns poured onto the page, then offers new thoughts and visions the writer may have overlooked.

Faith gives the psalmist sure footing. *Whenever I feel my foot slipping, your faithful love steadies me, LORD* (v. 18, CEB). We know what it's like to fall, to unexpectedly lose our balance. But step by step God guides us and lifts us when we fall.

Faith provides peace when the psalmist is anxious. *When my anxieties multiply, your comforting calms me down* (v. 19, CEB). God offers the vision we need when our view is distorted. When concerns overwhelm us, God comforts us with a peace that passes understanding.

The psalmist assures us that the faith we need embraces God's presence as God embraces us.



Consider

What does God's active presence bring you?

Pray

God, we're grateful for the ways you meet us with so many gifts. Help us see that your courage makes us braver, your wisdom teaches us to think, your faithfulness keeps us moving forward, and your assurance gives us peace. Amen.

Sunday, July 19

2 Corinthians 1:21-2:4

I hated those times when my parents got onto me about something I did or didn't do. Those painful moments always left me feeling disconnected from them. I felt that I'd missed the mark of their expectations and didn't measure up. Letting go of the disappointment I had in myself and reconnecting with my parents after disappointing them was even harder than hearing what they had to say.

Years later, when I became a mother, I experienced the other side of such experiences. The genuine love we feel for those in our care often leads us into conversations we would prefer to avoid. But the depth of our feeling for those we love makes us desire that they will fully become the person God created them to be. Hopefully those who receive our words will recognize love as the motive and the tone of those words.

When we're young and learning to relate to authority figures, it takes time to understand that love often motivates correction. We hear disdain and disappointment and want to distance ourselves from the people and actions that might be helpful to us. As Paul writes his letter to the church at Corinth, I imagine him approaching his task with the attitude my parents did when they instructed me. Paul's chastisement wasn't disdainful; it was loving. God's Spirit gave Paul a vision for what the Corinthian church could become. They could be more than a divided community; they could be the body of Christ. Though Paul's words may have been uncomfortable to read, they came from a place of genuine love.



Consider

When has love led you to initiate a tough conversation? What did you learn from the experience? When have you received tough love that changed you for the better?

Pray

Loving God, help us remember that love covers a multitude of sins. Thank you for loving us beyond our mistakes and help us remember that love never fails. Amen.

Monday, July 20

2 Corinthians 2:5-11

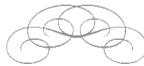
When it came to being punished for something, many of us have heard a parent say, “This is going to hurt me more than it does you.” I always wanted to scream, “No, it’s not!”

What I didn’t understand was how my actions affected others, including those who loved me most. What we do matters, not only personally, but to the larger community as well.

We try to pretend that our lives can be self-contained. As life gets more complicated, we may be tempted to think that narrowing our circle of friends to those who think, look, and act like we do will make life easier.

Remembering that we are part of a larger body is tough. If I stub my toe, that pain radiates up my leg and may necessitate my bending over or sitting down until the pain subsides. If I burn my finger, it may be days before I can use my hand as effectively as before.

We always work, live, speak, and act within a larger context. What we do and say ripples throughout the body, and this is the point Paul is trying to make. Instead of getting rid of the stubbed toe or removing the burned finger, we console those parts of our body until the pain eases, then goes away. If we can do this for the finger or toe, how much more should we do this for the human beings who are part of our world?



Consider

When was the last time you cut off a member of your community instead of caring for that relationship until the painful tension eases, then goes away?

Pray

God who makes a way, help us kindly forgive those who offend us instead of removing them from our presence. Thank you for your grace and mercy that nurtures rather than removes us when we offend you. Amen.

Tuesday, July 21

2 Corinthians 2:12-17

I absolutely adore fragrant candles, air fresheners, and all things that smell yummy. We can enjoy the scents of vanilla, pumpkin, lemon meringue, and cinnamon coffee cake without taking on the calories. We can breathe in a bouquet of roses, lavender, and lily of the valley without a trip to the florist. Even my car has those scented plug-ins over the air vents so that turning on the air conditioner or heat releases some heavenly fragrance.

I'm not alone in this love for scented air. Market analyses for the aroma industry predicts steady growth as companies continue promoting scents that promise health benefits.

Writing teachers often encourage students to engage their readers' sense of smell when they describe scenes or provide details about places and people. Scents have the power to trigger memories for us and create impressions that linger. We enter a kitchen, inhale the promise of freshly baked cookies, and think about the beloved grandparent who taught us to bake.

Paul must have understood the power of scent, as he uses fragrance and *aroma* to describe the scent of a life in Christ. After someone has been in our company, will our presence be appealing to them, or will some opposite description come to mind? What lingering memory will they have of us? More importantly, will we remind them of the fragrance of God's love, the *life-giving perfume... to those who are being saved* (v. 16, NLT)?



Consider

Does your life in Christ leave an appealing aroma? Explain why it does or doesn't, and how it could.

Pray

God, help us follow you closely so that others may sense how near you are to all of us. Amen.

Wednesday, July 22

2 Corinthians 3:1-6

“May the work I’ve done speak for me.” We hear this phrase quoted most often at funerals as we remember and celebrate the life of the deceased. The phrase reminds us that we measure our lives by our actions more than our words. As poet Maya Angelou said, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

Angelou’s words are a powerful lesson in discovering what matters most. Words certainly mattered to this gifted wordsmith who also knew the importance of acting compassionately. But she understood that the highest purpose for our words and actions is to love one another.

God’s people forgot all that God said and created to form and maintain a relationship with them. Though they broke their promises to God, the Creator would not give up on loving them. The relationship God wants cannot be contained in words or actions alone. God draws even closer to them, offering a new covenant that becomes more personal, that they will remember to feel. “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will place my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.... I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more” (Heb 10:16-17). Paul celebrates the unforgettable effect that God’s work on human hearts has on the lives of those that encounter believers. *You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts* (vv. 2-3).

When God writes on our hearts, we may become the only Bible that some people will read. We may become a letter of recommendation for Christ, that offers the hope and love that someone else needs to feel.



Consider

What is God writing on your heart that needs to be read?

Pray

God, help us value the work that you are doing in our lives. Help us become open books, willing to introduce others to you. Amen.

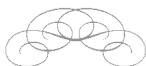
Thursday, July 23

Matthew 18:21-22

Last year a video emerged of Brandt Jean, forgiving the former police officer who shot and killed his unarmed older brother Botham Jean. The astounding forgiveness that the 18-year-old offered was both widely praised and vehemently protested. Violence like that against Botham Jean is repeatedly committed by white people without any admission of guilt, remorse, or true repentance by the attackers. Many empathized with Brandt as a grieving family member who sought to honor his brother's Christian faith by offering forgiveness to the shooter. Yet many were frustrated by the way his individual forgiveness was used to try to guilt black people who have not offered forgiveness to the white individuals and institutions which oppress and abuse them.

Are those who protested Jean's act of forgiveness, or the way that moment was used, wrong to feel angry? I think not. Bonhoeffer wrote, "forgiveness without repentance is cheap grace." The parallel text of today's Scripture in Luke 17:4 says that when a person repents, we must forgive: "Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive." The question I want to ask is what should we do when the offender does not repent? Can true forgiveness exist without repentance? Is repentance genuine without sincere, humble efforts to make amends to those we wronged?

I can't answer those questions for us. But I'm so glad that we have a Savior who forgives, who died for all though we sin repeatedly, and even fail at times to repent.



Consider

Do we forgive as Christ forgives us? How does God help us when we're unsure how to respond? Who have I hurt and need to make amends with?

Pray

God, thank you for forgiving our many sins. Teach us your love. Amen.

Friday, July 24

Matthew 18:23-30

Each time we pray what Jesus taught his disciples to pray, we ask God to, “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Mt 6:12). We’re so familiar with this prayer that we may pray that line quickly, not considering how much forgiveness we need.

Confession is rarely our favorite part of the worship service, and it’s tempting to gloss over that line of the prayer. Isaac Watts wanted us to think hard about the forgiveness we ask for when he wrote this verse in the favorite hymn, *Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed*: “But drops of grief can ne’er repay the debt of love I owe.”

The very things God asks us to do, particularly offering forgiveness, can be so difficult. But we don’t do these things in our own strength. In order to forgive, we draw on the forgiveness that God provides for us.

Forgiveness flows from one part of the sentence to the next. As we forgive, we experience forgiveness. As we receive God’s grace, we learn to share it. We learn to turn the other cheek, share what we have, and love those who do not love us by walking with Christ, who shows us how to do those things.

When I think of the life that Christ lived for us, those difficult tasks of following Jesus feel more doable.

By forgiving us, God equips us to forgive. As Jesus says, “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded” (Luke 12:48). By forgiving us, God equips us to forgive.



Consider

When you find forgiveness difficult, what Scripture or hymn helps you to look past the offense and move towards forgiveness?

Pray

God, help us to see how much grace you have given to us, so that we will share what we’ve received from you. Amen.

Saturday, July 25

Matthew 18:31-35

Pastors are privy to all sorts of situations. I remember a pair of siblings who were engaged in a long-time squabble that began when their parents died. One sibling felt cheated out of portions of their inheritance and was full of anger. Years passed and the siblings did not speak, although one made several attempts to reconcile. When that sibling died, the angry brother felt riddled with grief because of his unwillingness to forgive and the weight of those years he didn't get to share with his brother. In the end, it was clear that holding onto his anger was not worth the time he lost with his sibling.

I've often heard the phrase, "No one said forgiveness would be easy, but forgiveness is worth it." Aside from the fact that being unforgiving can keep us from receiving God's forgiveness, once an individual is gone from our life, there are no do-overs. The time for second chances is gone. Refusing to forgive is not worth the agony it breeds. It only leads to a place of more torture and anguish.

This is not a place I want any of us to have to endure. If there is unforgiveness in your heart, I pray with you for it to be healed and the pain taken away. Don't spend another day in agony and without the peace of God in your heart and mind.



Consider

What offense do you need to forgive in order to have peace with yourself and with God?

Pray

God, may you repair the broken places in our hearts so that we can forgive others as you forgive us. Amen.

Sunday, July 26

2 Corinthians 4:1-4

Shame is such a powerful but useless emotion. Most of us feel it from some past transgression and it burns the heart and tears at the soul. Did we hit our sister, humiliate a co-worker or wet our bed? Maybe we stole a wallet or jumped the subway turnstile. Did we buy drugs or drink too much and wreck the car? Maybe we ignored a barefoot homeless woman on Fifth Avenue begging for a dollar or rejected a family member reaching for a lifeline. Felony or misdemeanor or civil slight: the size of the crime rarely matters. The pain of shame is mostly the same.

And it's not just self-inflicted. Shaming is now a verb. We sit at our keyboards and watch it appear on Facebook and Twitter. Cut off on the highway? Want petty revenge? No problem. Tweet it. Within minutes, perfect strangers pile on. It doesn't matter that the driver was suffering from low blood sugar or rushing to his mother's hospital bed. Politicians pillory youngsters or the weak and infirm. Use the wrong word choice? The crowd will correct you quickly and brutally.

Most often, the shaming is crueler and ruder than the original slight. No time for facts or truth. No room for forgiveness or mercy. Only time to judge. I feel pain sometimes watching humans turn on each other for the smallest blunder, consumed by bitterness and insulated from the impact of their wounds by the airwaves. Merciless. Unconscionable.

This passage reminds me that God is watching. Our task is to lift the veil and find the light. We need to take our cues from God and those people who work in God's image and share God's grace. Consciously quiet the voices of those consumed by shame and rage. Do not lose heart.



Consider

When have you shamed another, even without meaning to do so?

Pray

Lord, help me share your gospel and your grace through my deeds and my words, free of judgment. Amen.

Monday, July 27

2 Corinthians 4:5-6

I often sit in church and pray to use the gifts that God gave me here on earth and not to waste them. I sometimes pray for others to do the same. The way I see it, if you can write, write for good. If you can cook, cook to show love to others. Healers should show up. Kind people should speak out. If you can make art, what are you waiting for? I pray for God to show us how.

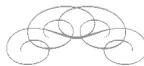
Sometimes we do the thing we prayed about—write the story, cook the meal, pay the visit, show up, speak out. Bravo!

But then can we talk about it, share it, post it? And if we do, does it inspire others or just look like bragging?

Maybe we do what my kids call the “humble brag,” which may be even worse than outright bragging.

Where is humility in all of this? Do we sometimes cross the line between glorifying God and glorifying ourselves? I know I do.

I think Paul is saying that we can do good works and proclaim them if we acknowledge their Giver, maintain a pure heart, and focus more on the deed than the doing, more on the good work than the good tweet. For ourselves as partners in the Gospel, yes, but for Jesus' sake above all.



Consider

What gifts do you have that can be used to humbly glorify God? How do you use them?

Pray

Gracious God, help me to use the gifts that you gave me to let light shine out of darkness. Amen.

Tuesday, July 28

2 Corinthians 4:7-10

I recently discovered that my face is dramatically unbalanced. I was going on television and a public relations executive explained this fact to me. Hours later, a makeup artist said the same thing, followed by, “Everyone has it. It’s what makes you, you.” One added, “Some—like you—more than others, but the flaws are there in everyone. You still look beautiful.” She shrugged, “It’s God’s way.” They were nonplussed as they swept a little hair to one side, added extra blush to balance me out, and told me to sit up straight and smile. It was an unexpected moment of grace on a Manhattan soundstage.

At 53, what was obvious to them was a shocking revelation to me. I flashed back to years of squinting at cameras and mirrors and shifting to my “good side.” How many thousands of school pictures and iPhone photos had I rejected in a quest for the perfect view? Feeling good one moment, then catching the wrong angle in the mirror and feeling flawed again. I don’t measure up to DaVinci’s Vitruvian Man drawings or the Greek golden ratio of beauty. How much makeup did I buy to cure this? How much soft lighting did I seek? Then two women explained it, embraced it, gave God credit, and moved on. How refreshing to have my imperfection become at once so clear and so meaningless. It’s just you, they said...amazing you.

Perhaps behind these imperfections are God’s treasures that, in God’s eyes, are not imperfections at all. But without the struggle, there can be no joy. There’s no beholding beauty without grasping flaws. We can’t find love without knowing its absence. We can’t live without the sacrifice of death. We are perplexed, maybe awakened, but not despairing. There’s no you without all that is within you. This is the treasure that God put there. We must unlock it. That’s what makes it precious and rare.



Consider

What flaws do you have that don’t matter than much? How can you see them as gifts from God?

Pray

God, may I recognize your treasures within me when I see them. Amen.

Wednesday, July 29

2 Corinthians 4:11-12

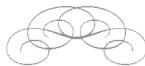
Abraham Lincoln was like a saint in our house in Anchorage, Kentucky. He was my father's hero, whose study resembled a Lincoln museum, filled with countless books on the Civil War and Lincoln's speeches and writings. The room featured a broadside of the Gettysburg Address, copper busts and portraits, and a painting of Appomattox Courthouse. Lincoln was born in a one room cabin in Kentucky and my father, the son of an Appalachian coal miner, must have felt a connection.

Dad later became a football coach, teacher, and founder of a vocational education program that trained thousands of students. They both used education to pull themselves out of poverty. They both spent their lives dedicated to doing right, pursuing God's work, and seeking justice.

Dad has been gone for eight years now, but I still think of him reading the Bible. He attended the same Sunday school class for 50 years and, when it was his turn to teach the class, he buried himself in that study, next to all of those Lincolns, for hours.

Sure, Lincoln was a great man and died what I consider a martyr's death. My dad was a smaller man, living a full life in his part of the world and making a big difference for a smaller group than Lincoln. Both were inspired by Jesus, his death at work in them.

Maybe we can't all be like Abraham Lincoln, or even my dad. But we can strive to spend more days living like Jesus, letting Jesus be alive in us. Maybe we can just practice that today, moment by moment.



Consider

Who inspires you to live a better life, making a difference even on the smallest scale?

Pray

God, show us how to let Jesus be alive in us. Amen.

Thursday, July 30

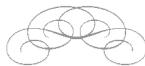
2 Corinthians 4:13-15

I usually take the highway. But the second week in September, when the United Nations General Assembly is in session, New York City shuts down. The highway exit near the U.N. headquarters at 42nd Street and the East River is sealed off. The area near the building is clogged with garbage truck armadas and Jersey barriers. These precautions may protect the global diplomats, but they snarl traffic and enrage New Yorkers. 1010WINS radio warns us: "It's UN week. Prepare yourselves."

But I forget, of course. I see the closed exit too late and have to grouchy instruct the cab driver toward the next exit. We crawl along, not on the elevated path, but on the side streets. I frantically type instructions on my phone, searching for alternatives. But Waze is red all the way to work. Resigned, I put away my phone and settle in.

Soon I begin to notice the New Yorkers on this sunny morning. A burly crossing guard greets children with a hug. I pass a park with a half dozen Chinese grandparents gracefully practicing tai chi. There's a dog walker with several leashes, convening his own canine assembly. A beat cop laughs with a businesswoman who gestures with her morning coffee. Women in hijabs serve bagels and Boston creams from carts. I see parents clutching tiny backpacks, escorting kindergarteners to class, the kids whizzing past my slow cab on scooters. I watch sweaty yoga ladies chatting with fruit vendors near the subway entrances.

This visit to the cross streets reminds me that human connection is evidence of God's grace, the source of thanksgiving. I watch this grace extend to more and more people from my perch in the back of that cab. I sense God's presence here. I am grateful for the detour. I'll try to extend that grace of God today.



Consider

How can you find grace in a detour? How could you change up your daily path to find thanksgiving?

Pray

*God, bring me into your presence and connect me to others doing the same.
Amen.*

Friday, July 31

Philippians 1:3-6

I usually find joy in completion. For me the simple act of ticking off a box is a virtue, a frantic goal, a religion all its own.

Last July, I tried to make the flag cake featured in the *New York Times* cooking section. In the photo, there were stripes of red berries on a whipped cream field and glorious blueberry stars tucked into a perfect chiffon rectangle. I could almost see them twinkling.

For my cake, I gathered first class ingredients. My blueberries were ripe and juicy, my raspberries plump and firm. My cream was organic. My beaters were cold.

But in my own kitchen, the recipe (or maybe the cook!) failed. My chiffon drooped like an old wedding dress, stained with berry juice where crisp white stripes should have been. My red was pink. My berries slumped. The cake was complete, but the work was far from done. Completed, yes, but a kitchen failure.

Horror turned to humor and I Instagrammed my work, showing the dramatic comparison of the impossible ideal next to my droopy reality. “Nailed it,” typed one friend. “Cake boss,” said another. “Close your eyes and eat it,” counseled a third. It remains my most popular post to date. (And it was delicious!)

Maybe the gospel of completion is not the finished task but the opportunity for joy in the sharing of our failures. Perhaps in the flaws, Jesus can come in.



Consider

Where have you found joy in unexpected places? How can you find it more often?

Pray

Lord, help me bring my good works to you and find joy in them, for me and for others. Amen.

Saturday, August 1

Isaiah 64:7-9

I like characters and New York City has its share of colorful, flamboyant humans. There's the lady who sings off-key in church. The know-it-all with a booming voice who fantasizes aloud about connecting with the rich and famous he reads about in the *New York Post*. The kooky teller of tall tales at work. There's the temperamental preparer, who stashes a decade's worth of canned goods in her Brooklyn brownstone. The one who constantly shows off her skill with complicated algorithms but who can't make change in the checkout line. I can introduce you to bold dressers, big talkers, picky eaters, and the one reading Joan Didion's *The White Album* for the dozenth time.

I enjoy them all, because I'm one too. I'm always making weird household proclamations, then violating them the next day. I come up with silly meals in a quest to clean out the cabinets and freezer. I'm always forwarding editorials my children won't read. I rarely switch purses or shoes. I own way too many pieces of black clothing.

I celebrate those that are not poseurs, quacks, or fakers, but who are authentic in their quirkiness. I do better when I embrace God's creation of me in my own eccentricities, not trying too hard to change myself but trusting that God's hand did mold me. I imagine God as the potter, cutting, shaping, and tweaking each of us. A handle here, an abrasion there, smooth sides and bumps, laugh lines, intentional creases and good strong connections from the handle to the bowl. Some spots brittle, some smooth, but all works of God's hand. I like to think that God knows this when we disappoint and that God's joy in our quirkiness is what gives us our second chance.



Consider

Who among your people has God made from a different mold? How can you see them as God does?

Pray

Have mercy on me, Lord. I am one of your people. Guide me when I fail you and let me try again. Amen.

Sunday, August 2

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

I recently took a walk while traveling and found myself lost. When I say lost, I mean that I had no phone or water with me and couldn't make sense of my whereabouts. I felt completely turned around and upside down. I kept following a path, but I sensed that I wasn't making a circle or heading back to where I'd begun.

In a desperate moment, I left the trail to forge my own way. When I encountered a barricade that stretched across my newfound path and read "No Trespassing," I felt completely lost.

As I walked, I kept hoping to make sense of where I was or at least find someone to guide me. An hour and a half later I finally made it to a road where I could ask for directions. My determination kept me from losing heart.

Paul writes the Corinthians to urge this church that he loves to not lose heart. The congregation is arguing about where they are headed, and everyone seems to point in a different direction.

We can feel lost so often.

When our path is unfamiliar or full of obstacles, moving forward is challenging. It's hard to know which way to go or where to turn. Uncertainty may lead us to stop completely. It's all too easy to reflect on the worries of today and overlook the One who travels with us to show us the way.

We have a Guide who will not leave us, who offers us a steadfast spirit of hope. As we walk through this day, God is our path. Both now and in the world to come.



Consider

Reflect on a time when you felt lost. How did you find your way? Who helped you?

Pray

Ever-present God, thank you for walking with me and being my guide so that I don't lose heart. Amen.

Monday, August 3

2 Corinthians 5:1-5

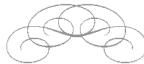
One summer I walked 500 miles across Spain. Each day the landscape varied: rolling hills, mountains, city streets, small towns, poppy fields, vineyards. My destination was the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela that houses the relics of the apostle James.

I walked to pray and to think. I walked to connect to the earth. I walked to connect with God. Every step I took was an act of faith, a step forward in learning about Christ, who is the way, the life, and the truth. Every time I put one foot in front of the other, I prayed that the Spirit would be with me and would guide me on my way.

Every day brought its own challenges, whether that was a sore knee, some blisters, fatigue, loneliness, or uncertainty. Yet, I continued to walk, trusting that the way would provide. My fellow pilgrims strengthened me. The prayers of those at home reminded me that I was not alone. My own prayers overflowed to give me peace.

Walking the pilgrimage route for a month reminded me that I can live my life in the day-to-day in much the same way I did when walking those 500 miles. I can trust in the truth that I don't walk alone. I can believe in Christ as the way in life, death, and resurrection. Jesus walked this earth knowing that this very ground beneath his sandals was the one his followers would walk.

As we face trials, setbacks, and pain in this world, God provides the assurance that we are not alone in our suffering. God walks with us. Christ bears our pain and brings us to new life.



Consider

What pain are you experiencing in your life right now? Who is walking with you to bring you comfort?

Pray

God of all, walk with me this day and every day. Amen.

Tuesday, August 4

2 Corinthians 5:6-10

The first few days as a new parent feel much like walking blindfolded into an unfamiliar room. Everything is new and all your senses are heightened. There's often a dance between parent and baby. It's the process of their getting to know each other through touch and sound and smell. It's the way they figure out who each one is in relation to the other and open their hearts to love.

Babies work on instinct. When they're hungry or tired or in pain, they cry. The job of new parents is to listen to those cries and attend to their baby. My experience of being a new parent brought a rush of emotions and worries. I worked slowly as I changed the first few diapers. I worried about how much food was too much or too little for our infant. I delicately held my child as not to hurt her. Yet over time, the two of us learned to be together. Almost as if we were one. Together we learned to trust that we were both being held.

The lessons of becoming a parent are lessons I carry with me in my faith. Sometimes I need to be careful about what I say or do. I need to read and learn and talk with others about my faith. Yet, many times, this life of discipleship is best learned and lived in the day-to-day experiences we have in community. When we come together to sing, pray, and hear God's word, we open ourselves to the gifts of others and the experience of God's presence. We get to open our hands to the One who goes with us, forever leaning into Christ.



Consider

At what times in your life have you had to rely on the help of others? What did you feel during those experiences? What did you learn?

Pray

*God, teach me to lean into your love and grace in all that I do and say today.
Amen.*

Wednesday, August 5

2 Corinthians 5:11-15

I have a friend who loves to write as much as I do. We support one another in our passion for telling stories by sharing our writings weekly. We cheer each other on with encouragement and provide a safe space for honest conversation.

We write everything from prayers and poems to the lessons we're learning about life and faith. Something about being known by this friend allows me to write more honestly. We've created a safe space to trust each other with our most sacred stories. Together, we are becoming better writers, storytellers, and friends.

If I can be this open with a friend, how much more can I open myself up to God? Through relationships with friends and family, I get a glimpse of God's love for me. A love that values me for who I am: God's beloved child. We are well known by God, who is familiar with all of our desires, wants, beliefs, and doubts. And we are loved beyond measure. Christ lovingly urges us to know the saving grace found in him and to see others as equally loved and valued. Through prayer, study, and worship we can know better the God found in Jesus Christ. We can then share our hearts with God. And through our relationships we can encourage others in their faith as well as our own.



Consider

Spend some time today sharing your deepest dreams and hopes with God.

Pray

Gracious God, thank you for knowing me and loving me. Amen.

Thursday, August 6

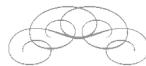
2 Corinthians 5:16-17

“Look, Mama, look!”

Both kids cheer in delight as we walk around our neighborhood. Whether it’s a squirrel climbing a tree, the blue sky, a friend passing by, or a puddle to be jumped in, my children marvel at their surroundings. Their eyes light up when an eagle flies overhead or a friend’s car drives by. They bear witness to creation by really seeing what’s in front of them and by naming it for others to see as well. They want to invite their friends to see what they see and celebrate with them.

When I’m with my children I am forced to slow down and take my time. I can’t help but smile and see the beauty found in the green leaves or a white, fluffy cloud. It’s in this slowing down that I am able to catch my breath and open my eyes to Christ’s presence.

The new creation, if I have eyes to see and ears to hear, is all around me. God’s presence shines in the beauty of a sunset, a conversation with neighbors, a smile from a friend, and the laughter of a child. This is what it looks like to know that Christ is in us, that we too, are a new creation. We are full of beauty and worth, marvels of God’s handiwork. As God’s creations we are gifts, precious and loved, testaments to the boundless grace of God.



Consider

Take time today to go outside and marvel at God’s creation. What do you notice?

Pray

God, help me to see your presence everywhere I go. Amen.

Friday, August 7

2 Corinthians 5:18-19

Walk into our house on any day and you'll be greeted by trains, blocks, and tracks. The train table, their rightful home, tends to be the last place you'll find any trains. A long line of trains sits perched on top of our piano. Blocks surround them, making bridges and roads. The photos and books on our shelves have been pushed back to make room for yet another line of trains. They're in our bedroom, on the bathroom sink, in the kitchen cupboards. Trains everywhere.

It never fails that whatever train my younger son is playing with at any given moment is precisely the train my daughter wants. Numerous times throughout the day, screams erupt as the trains are taken from one another and someone's feelings are hurt. It takes a lot of patience to talk with my children about sharing and what it means to say you're sorry when you push or hit another person.

If I can model and teach my children what it means to reconcile at home, they'll be ready to put reconciliation in action as they grow older and find themselves in trickier situations. We keep practicing forgiveness over and over again. We keep remembering that Christ is in each of us and we give thanks for the ways Christ forgives us. Knowing Christ's power to reconcile himself to us refreshes my spirit as I attempt to bring about reconciliation among my children and as I model reconciliation for them.



Consider

Reflect on a time when you offered someone forgiveness.

Pray

Gracious God, thank you for Christ's gift of reconciliation and for the ministry of hope and healing that you call me to share with others. Amen.

Saturday, August 8

2 Corinthians 5:20-21

Every year at our church we host an event called The Gathering. It's a time to gather with the community and nearby churches for a day of faith formation, fun, food, and inspiration. It's an all-day event, one that we hope remains meaningful for attendees long after they leave. We share information about The Gathering on social media, in the church bulletin, and in our newsletter, but the best way we get people to come is through a personal invitation. We've found that once someone has experienced this event, they're excited and ready to share it with others. This is also true for worship, Bible study, and any other activity at church: people come when they're personally invited. Taking the time to look someone in the eye and wholeheartedly say, "You are welcome here—and we'd love to see you" is effective communication. This has been true since Paul started writing his letters. Each day we have opportunities to be Christ's ambassadors and offer a word of hope.

When we're ambassadors for Christ, we're willing to stake our lives on the claim that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection matter, that a life rooted in Christ is one worth living. A life in Christ transforms the way we see the world: the way we speak to others, talk about our faith over coffee, share our offering, comfort a friend, and speak against injustice. Every day we get to practice living out our faith in ways that attest to the peace found in Christ. Every day someone needs to know that Christ's love extends to them. Some days those words are for us, and other days they're for our neighbors.



Consider

Recall a time when someone invited you to get to know God in a deeper way. What made the experience meaningful or what would have made it more effective?

Pray

God, keep me attentive to the ways I could share your love with others. Help me to always be an ambassador for Christ. Amen.

Sunday, August 9

2 Corinthians 8:1-4

One of the most precious Father's Day gifts I ever received was a simple envelope that contained slips of paper with various chores written on them. I was to "cash in" the slips like currency, and my children would readily and happily perform the task. My children were young at the time, and money was not easy for them to come by. So, they gave out of what they had: time and effort.

It's been my experience that gifts emerge from one of two sources: money or creativity. When you have money, your giving is easier because you have fewer restrictions on what you might give. A few clicks on the internet, and your gift is on its way. But when you have limited resources, you must be creative. It takes thought, effort, and time to give when you don't have money. As with my children's chore coupons, the most precious gifts are not measured in dollars but in minutes.

As Paul comes to the end of his second correspondence to the church at Corinth, he is encouraging them to be generous in giving to the church at Jerusalem. Their need is great, and he attempts to motivate the relatively wealthy Corinthians to give by letting them know how much the relatively poor Macedonian believers have given. He says *their abundant joy and extreme poverty have overflowed* (v. 2). This oxymoron contains the profound truth that their gift was more meaningful because it came from a place of hardship. Despite their *severe ordeal of affliction*, the Macedonian gift contained the essential ingredient of all good gifts—joy.



Consider

What hardship that you are currently facing might produce a joyful gift?

Pray

Holy God, teach me to give like the Macedonians, out of my ordeals and poverty, with abundant joy. Amen.

Monday, August 10

2 Corinthians 8:5-6

Fundraising can be a complicated enterprise. Approaching people and asking them to give can range from the simple—shaking a plastic cup with change that indicates that you need and would appreciate any amount of money—to the complicated—cultivating donors with visits, meals, and events; presenting them with a case statement for making a gift to a particular cause; and securing a pledge for a specific amount through a written commitment. Having spent nearly 20 years of my career working in higher education and non-profit communications, I'm very familiar with the latter. The problem with the pledge model is that it's easier to make a pledge than it is to fulfill it.

The believers in Jerusalem are in severe need. Paul is seeking an offering for them from the churches he founded or served. He sends Titus to Corinth to collect on the pledge that the believers there made to support the Christians in the Jerusalem church.

Making a pledge feels good. In the fundraising world, it garners you attention and special recognition. Fulfilling a pledge should feel even better. You are not only keeping your word, you are meeting a need and letting go of your money to benefit someone else. We have many opportunities for *generous undertakings* in our lives. The real test of our commitment is in completing them.



Consider

What are the generous undertakings in my life and which ones have I neglected to fulfill?

Pray

Generous God, bring to my mind all of the pledges I've made and help me to fulfill them, just as you have kept your pledges to me. Amen.

Tuesday, August 11

2 Corinthians 8:7-8

As a senior in high school, I was invited to participate in a scholarship competition at a small private college in South Carolina. It was a tremendous growth opportunity and a nerve-wracking experience. The competition required travel from my home in central Florida for at least two visits. Each visit consisted of interviews, information sessions, and fancy meals with our evaluators. They were looking for students who could excel in everything. I played sports, had good grades and a decent SAT score, and participated in many extracurricular activities. Ultimately, though, I didn't excel in enough areas to win the full scholarship. When the winners were announced, I saw the distinguishing characteristic they had that I didn't: musical talent. They truly excelled in everything.

Paul acknowledges that the Corinthians do a lot of things well as a church. They excel *in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you* (v. 7). He urges them to support the impoverished believers in Jerusalem by also excelling in their generosity. On the surface it sounds like flattery, but it can also be read as a challenge. He seems to be saying, "You're good, but if you want to truly excel in everything, be generous with this special offering also."

We can wear ourselves out trying to excel in everything as individuals or as a church. Paul wants to remind us that what may be most important is excelling in whatever *generous undertaking* comes our way.



Consider

What would it look like for you to excel in generosity?

Pray

God of grace and calling, you have high expectations for your children. Help us today to excel in everything important: faith, speech, knowledge, eagerness, love, and generosity. Amen.

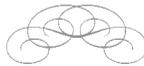
Wednesday, August 12

2 Corinthians 8:9-11

Writing about the incarnation of God in human form is typically reserved for Advent and Christmas, but Paul reminds the Corinthian believers just how selfless and radical Jesus was by taking on human form. We don't often see that kind of sacrifice today.

Chuck Feeney, founder of Duty Free Shoppers Group, is one such example. He and his wife, Helga, gave away more than \$8 billion, signing over all his assets to their self-created Atlantic Philanthropies Foundation on Thanksgiving Day, 1984. What makes this giving even more remarkable is that he managed to keep it quiet for many years, living with Helga in a modest apartment in San Francisco and continuing to give away most of their income. In a 2018 interview with the *Irish Times*, Feeney said, "It is their call what the rich do with their money, but they will get more satisfaction giving it when living than when dead. Besides, it's a lot more fun."

While admirable, Feeney didn't quite go as far as Jesus, who not only gave up heaven but lived in poverty with nothing more than the clothes on his back. Jesus also ultimately gave up his life. Hopefully, we will never be faced with that decision, but we can choose to model our generosity after Christ. As in all our attempts to follow in his footsteps, our generosity will not match our Lord's, but God continually inspires and offers us opportunities to practice the kind of generosity that will affect others and make our lives joyful.



Consider

If we modeled the generosity of Jesus, what would we give up and what joy would we experience?

Pray

Selfless God, your life in human form reminds us how to live and how to give. Help us give all of ourselves away so that you may be glorified and your work on earth accomplished. Amen.

Thursday, August 13

2 Corinthians 8:12-15

We're two-and-a-half months away from Halloween, but my three boys always started plotting their costumes and trick-or-treating logistics about this time of the year. It was one of their favorite holidays, mostly because of the great haul of candy they brought in. They would feast on it that night, then ration it until the next candy-filled holiday. My favorite moment of Halloween night was when they came home, dumped the candy out of their bags, and began sorting and trading it among themselves. It was weird how they could all three go together and come back with such a different assortment. Each had his favorite and would sometimes be willing to trade in order to get more of it. Occasionally the negotiations would get tense if one of them was being unreasonable, but because each son had his own favorites and piles of candy to trade with, there was usually harmonious passing back and forth of Reese's cups, Snickers, Kit Kats, and more. In the end, they would count their piles, achieve a balance of quantity among the three of them, and feel satisfied with their accumulations.

What made Halloween such an easy sharing experience? Their *present abundance* (v. 14). Chocolate was no longer a scarce resource. It was plentiful in all its varieties. Sharing was not threatening because he who had many Twix could trade for Reese's cups so that everyone had what they needed. It hints at the kind of fair balance I think Paul is talking about in his letter to the Corinthian believers. In asking them to give to the church at Jerusalem, he reminds them that they have more than enough and the Jerusalem Christians have too little. Giving, Paul says, is about achieving that fair balance. Once we've sorted our resources into piles of our favorites, perhaps we too will have an abundance from which to give.



Consider

What can you give from your abundance and how might God use it?

Pray

God, thank you for providing abundant resources. Help us share so that those resources are balanced fairly, and everyone has what they need. Amen.

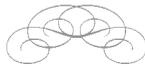
Friday, August 14

2 Corinthians 8:16-21

Churches receive their offerings in multiple ways. Some congregations have members come to the front to place their gifts in a basket. Some have a pouch attached to a rod that ushers extend to each person sitting on a pew. Many of us have passed an offering plate.

My wife and I recently settled an offering plate dispute that erupted between our two younger sons. Our middle son dutifully put his offering envelope in the plate with the writing facing down so his gift amount wasn't visible. Our youngest placed his envelope in the plate facing up, and consequentially everyone who received the plate after us could see the amount he gave. Our older son chastised our youngest for not living by the standard Matthew 6:3 set, which says your giving should be so private that not even your left hand knows what the right hand is doing. Our youngest said he wasn't trying to make the amount visible, he was just putting it in the plate. No big deal.

Paul's encouragement for the Corinthians to be generous toward the Jerusalem believers seems to be appealing more to the public display of giving rather than the private worship Matthew 6:3 describes. Paul wants everyone to know about the gifts and how they are disbursed, saying, *We intend that no one should blame us about this generous gift that we are administering, for we intend to do what is right not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of others* (vv. 20-21). In this case, at least, how the money is collected and how it is distributed must hold up to public scrutiny. Accountability in how we give and how it is spent in the Lord's service matters, no matter which way your envelope faces when you put it in the plate.



Consider

Is my giving right in God's sight? Are my gifts being used in a way that is right in the people's sight?

Pray

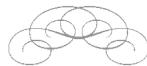
Righteous God, you know the heart of every giver. May I give generously and may you be pleased with my gift and how it is used to further your kingdom. Amen.

Saturday, August 15

2 Corinthians 8:22-24

John W. Hammes was a tinkerer and inventor. This Wisconsin architect and contractor enjoyed using his basement workshop to bring to life his ideas for making household chores more convenient. Legend has it that in 1927, Hammes committed himself to inventing a better way of disposing of food waste after watching his wife carefully wrap their food scraps into newspaper before discarding them in the trash can. By 1933, Hammes had created the garbage disposal and filed a patent for the In-Sink-Erator, a product and company that still exists today. His love for his wife was so powerful that it motivated him to pour years of his life into perfecting a device that would make her nightly chore of washing up the dinner dishes easier. It could be argued that simply helping his wife clean up after supper would have been a greater act of love, but to each his own.

In closing out his appeal for financial support from the wealthy Corinthian believers for the impoverished Jerusalem church, Paul suggests they show *proof of [their] love* (v. 24). Certainly, we can be similarly challenged, particularly around stewardship emphases, capital campaigns, or mission offerings. It can feel manipulative to quantify our love in dollars and cents, and our modern, cynical, overly-marketed-to brains mistrust such appeals. Let the truth, though, of Paul's transactional suggestion sink in. We give time, attention, and money to what we care about. If we say we love God, giving what we have to God's work in the world should be the easiest display of commitment possible. And when your money falls short, you can take up a dry cloth and help with the dishes.



Consider

How can you prove your love for God today through giving or service?

Pray

Loving God, you need no proof of our love, but we often do. Help us to recognize the ways we can respond to your love for us by giving and serving. Amen.

Sunday, August 16

Psalm 67

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us (v. 1, NIV).

“*Make his face shine on us*” is the third part of a prayer trio.

We have people in our lives who somehow reflect light. They radiate. When someone radiates, it feels like the light from nature, from above. We need that light like the moon needs the sun’s light in order to glow.

When we lived in Fort Worth, my daughter and I often served at our congregation’s Agape Meal, a weekly family-style dinner hosted by members of the church. Our guests were primarily homeless, transitional, and the working poor. I quickly learned that “normal” small talk often didn’t go as expected. Questions like “Where do you live?” and “What do you do?” generally led to surprisingly bare personal information. “Last night I slept under 7th St. overpass. Just tryin’ to stay clean.” Each week, I found myself schooled in the art of conversational truth from these folks who were living at life’s edge.

One week, I found myself sitting with a woman who was radiant. Every comment she made was about the blessings in her life in spite of some horrendous challenges. “I’ve been sleeping on the streets, but I was able to get a bed in the shelter this week. [Huge smile] And I was able to call my sister. I think we’ll be able to see each other soon. [Huge smile] I’m so grateful to be here tonight.” When my daughter, who was in elementary school then, came over with a pitcher of tea. I introduced her to our guest and they immediately connected, their two faces radiant from God’s shining face.

The psalmist doesn’t pray, “May God’s face shine on *me*.” He prays for God’s face to shine on *us*. The plural is intentional, so our less-than-pure faces will reflect that pure light to those around us. Just as the moon reflects the sun on dark nights and lights our way.



Consider

Who will cross my path today who needs the light of God’s face?

Pray

God, thank you for the light you give. Help us do our part to shine it. Amen.

Monday, August 17

Psalm 130

I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits (v. 5, NIV).

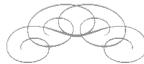
The psalmist starts by crying for mercy, pleading for forgiveness. Something has gone wrong. Some poor judgment led to something that may be overtly harmful. The psalmist pens this urgent desire for God to redeem this situation, then grows quiet. *I wait... my whole being waits.*

You can feel the writer's pain.

In my 30s and 40s, I spent a number of years doing standup, which is a brutally honest discipline—and a brutal way to perform. Every attempted punchline provides immediate audience feedback: they either laugh or they don't. It doesn't take long to find out which it will be; there's no waiting. The old adage of Tragedy plus Time equals Comedy is constantly in motion. When something awful happens and a comic sees the absurdity in the situation and makes a joke that falls flat, the rhetorical comeback is often, "Too soon?" It's a half-hearted request for forgiveness.

But when I've done something that has inflicted pain on someone else, the notion of "too soon?" also comes into play. Is it too soon to ask for forgiveness? No—not from God. Because of our ability to hold on to our mistakes, we feel that we must wait, and wait, and wait for forgiveness. When God "shows up" with a bucketful of mercy, we realize the bucket was there all along.

I wait for the LORD; my whole being waits.... But God doesn't wait. God is already present. It's never "too soon" for God.



Consider

What mistakes am I still holding onto? Is it time to let go of the question "too soon?" and ask for forgiveness right now?

Pray

God, if you kept a record, I could never stand. Thank you for your unfailing love. Amen.

Tuesday, August 18

Psalm 87

As they make music they will sing, “All my fountains are in you” (v. 7, NIV).

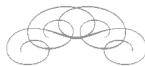
Consider the bookends of this psalm: *He has founded his city...* (v. 1, NIV) and *“All my fountains are in you”* (v. 7). In other versions of this text, the fountains are called “springs”—those naturally occurring places where water comes to the surface.

A city with plenty of springs is a fortunate city indeed. The NIV uses fountains, which immediately brings to mind all those human-made versions of springs, those wonderful dancing waters for which so many cities are known. We love fountains—even (or perhaps especially) the big, over-the-top ones like the Trevi Fountain in Rome. We are drawn to them. The psalmist suggests that God likes them, too.

Springs and fountains offer the unending, gushing, unrelenting gift of water—indeed, they are an infinite stream of life itself. Perhaps this is why humans build so many.

For a time, my wife and I lived in southeast Pennsylvania where we often visited Longwood Gardens to be transfixed by the Gardens’ many fountains, which are often choreographed to music. If the psalmist had written, “And there is music in those fountains,” that line would also be right.

Springs and fountains offer the infinite gift of water that leads to life. What a joy to finally recognize the Source of our living and sing with those who proclaim, *“All my fountains are in you.”*



Consider

How can my life be a fountain of God’s gifts?

Pray

God, thank you for springs, for fountains, for water, for the unending, infinite gift of your love. Amen.

Wednesday, August 19

Isaiah 66:18-24

For I know their works and their thoughts...and they shall come and shall see my glory (v. 18).

Isaiah's writings conclude with this passage. It's fair to say that the prophet doesn't pull punches with his thoughts. His book has more than a little doom and gloom. To paraphrase: "A lot of corrupt people in power are taking the world to hell in a handbasket; I know it, you know it, and if you don't know it, I'm going to set you straight." And he does.

In the sentences just before this chapter, though, Isaiah describes God as a caring mother, comforting and nursing her child at her breast. It's a (rare) tender description that leads up to this imperative: *they shall come and shall see my glory*.

Isaiah makes this sound like a forced march into church. At the risk of diminishing the impact here, the scene takes me back to my childhood when my mom would offer a similar directive: "you *will* sit quietly in church and you *will* worship and God *will* be ashamed of you if you don't." Not exactly the compelling motto to pack all God's children into the church house.

But as Christians, we can choose to see God's glory. We choose to come and worship. God knows our works and our thoughts and wants to see us anyway. "See my Glory," God invites.



Consider

*How often do I feel like I'm doing God a favor by showing up to worship?
What would it take to reframe that perspective?*

Pray

*God, thank you for showing us your glory, even when we don't want to see it.
Amen.*

Thursday, August 20

Psalm 124

“Our help is the LORD” (v. 8, NIV).

This passage has a number of near-misses: people attacked us; a flood came; we were trapped. But we weren't overcome. We didn't drown, we escaped. Our help is the Lord.

This is one of the biblical precepts that I struggle with most. I had a problem, but God blessed me and solved it (in spite of my stupidity). I survived a wreck. I got sick and was healed. My car was caught in a flood, but the water pushed me onto higher ground and I drove away safely. But also, my college buddy was gunned down because he dated the wrong girl. My mother got sick and died at 59. This morning's news reported that people died in floods and fires they couldn't escape. So where was *their* help? Where was the Lord when their crises showed up?

I don't know. And before you write to the *Reflections* editor to complain about including this doubting Thomas, let me posit this as well: you don't know either. When I hear “I've been blessed” in a religious sense, it often sounds like, “I've been lucky because I got something I don't really deserve.”

Perhaps that is where “*Our help is the LORD*” makes sense. When good things happen, we must be grateful because we don't often deserve them. We must be thankful to those around us who enabled those good things to occur. And when bad things happen that we don't deserve, the same is true. We must be grateful when the Lord's help shows up in the loving care of those around us.

We are God's eyes, ears, hands and feet on this earth. Our help is in the Lord who made us in God's image. The Lord's help can also be us.



Consider

Who around me needs God's help?

Pray

Forgive me for believing I am solely responsible for my good fortune.

Forgive me for believing I must carry the burden of life's challenges alone.

Forgive me for ignoring those who need help.

Friday, August 21

Psalm 138

When I called, you answered me (v. 3, NIV).

In the early 1980s, I got my first telephone answering machine. In that era of landlines and no caller ID, the answering machine that captured the caller's information automatically was such a gift.

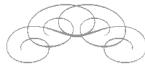
But there was another great feature that we all quickly learned to love: it allowed us to screen our calls. This was heady, irritation-avoiding stuff. During a visit with my parents, I made the mistake of extolling the call-screening feature of this device. My mom's response: "You mean, when I call and the machine picks up, you might actually be there? You might *not* answer me? What if I have something important to tell you?"

Awkward.

But truly, don't we often wonder the same about God? When we "call," does God let it go to voicemail? King David thinks differently: *When I called, you answered me*. What a gift.

Perhaps the intention of our call makes a difference. Perhaps, like my mother calling me, we call God because we need to convey something important and want assurance that God will respond. But what if God is trying to call us (that's something important) and we're letting it go to voicemail?

At the risk of running out this answering machine metaphor to absurdity, perhaps the imperative here is not about calling and having God answer. Perhaps the imperative here is that we need to take the calls from our family, and friends, and neighbors. Take those calls and listen to what needs to be said. It's important.



Consider

How can I "take the call" more effectively in my life?

Pray

God, thanks for never sending my calls to voicemail. Help me have the willingness to do likewise with those who need it. Amen.

Saturday, August 22

Matthew 16:5-12

“Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (v. 12, NIV).

“Ooooh...*now* I understand!” How many times have I said that? Now I get it. Now it’s clear.

You have to admit, the disciples seem a bit clueless, even a little stupid here. They’ve just gotten to the far side of the lake, and Bartholomew says, “Oh man...we forgot to bring bread for lunch.” And Jesus, always one for a real-time teachable moment, says “Watch out for the yeast that grows in the teaching of these self-serving religious leaders” (v. 5, paraphrase). Brilliant.

And then the disciples say: “Yeah, Jesus—sorry we forgot to bring lunch” (v. 8), and Jesus answers, “Guys, guys—don’t you remember? The miracles I just performed using bread? All those people who were fed? But the ‘yeast’ knife cuts both ways; be on guard with religious hypocrites” (vv. 9-10).

It’s perhaps notable that Jesus saves his harshest criticisms for the religious leaders of his day. They use the Scriptures as a cudgel for their own purposes. Jesus calls them on it and patiently cautions his followers to understand what was happening. “Okay, *now* I understand.”

When we see contemporary religious leaders weaponizing the gospel for their own purposes, we would do well to heed Jesus’s admonitions. Anne Lamott writes, “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”



Consider

When do I use my faith as a weapon against others?

Pray

God, let me see my own faith-based hypocrisy. And help me have the courage to challenge it when it surfaces in today’s Pharisees and Sadducees. Amen.

Sunday, August 23

Isaiah 51:1-6

Listen to me (v. 1).

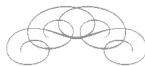
We say forms of this with frustration, panic, or desperation in our voice. “Psst!” “Hey!” “Listen up!”

Whether we’re teaching Vacation Bible School to an unruly class of third graders, warning someone of danger ahead, or telling a pet to stop scratching the furniture, these words mean “pay attention,” “watch out,” and “listen intently.”

The prophet Isaiah cries out for people to pay attention. The Almighty is reminding God’s people of who they are and who their Creator is. *Look to the rock from which you were hewn*, Isaiah says (v. 1). Remember who you are. Remember what you’re made of. As God’s people face crisis and uncertainty, their fear starts to erode their sense of identity.

One of the biggest threats to my spiritual life is my frequent inability to pay attention. If God’s messages to me are like signs along the highway, I pass by them without even realizing they are there. What do I miss as I drive on autocruise, so focused on getting to my destination that I don’t notice the lessons along the way?

Listening is a spiritual practice. Growing attuned to God’s voice in a noisy world requires a willingness to stop and hear. Heeding Isaiah’s words is a good place to begin. Remember who you are and whose you are. The God you worship is the One who will comfort your *waste places* (v. 3) and make your wilderness an Eden (v. 3). *Lift up your eyes to the heavens* (v. 6). See what God is doing in your life.



Consider

What are ways you could improve your ability to pay attention?

Pray

Gracious God, help me to hear your saving voice in a world full of hopelessness and doubt. Strengthen my ability to pay attention to you. Amen.

Monday, August 24

Psalm 8

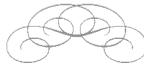
How majestic is your name (v. 1).

I'm a thirty-year-old woman without children, but the zoo is one of my favorite places to visit. I'm not a big fan of keeping animals in cages, but I find the zoo to be the one place where I'm sure to see God's creativity on full display. I love observing the lions, the gorillas, the bird sanctuary, and my very favorite, the elephants. I feel more connected to God's handiwork when I'm near all of these species.

In my daily life, my interaction with God's creation feels so limited and routine. I see an occasional bunny or squirrel, I look up at the sky, or I feel a cool breeze on my face. Even though I live in Denver next to the Rocky Mountains, where the full majesty of God's handiwork is certainly on display, it's easy to miss those gifts. When I remember what it's possible to see, I make the effort to drive into the mountains. There I find mountain goats, elk, falcons, and eagles. If I drive two and a half hours south to Westcliffe, Colorado, I will see the Milky Way in all its breathtaking glory.

On Sundays we show up in church sanctuaries to worship there, but I've always thought that the most magnificent chapels were ones without walls that God created with divine hands. How truly majestic is the Lord who crafted and fashioned all of these creatures and such wondrous backdrops on which creation dwells.

Whether we are praying indoors or taking our seat outside, the psalmist wants us to see that there is always more of God's majesty waiting for us to recognize.



Consider

What is one way you could stop and notice the divine majesty of God's creation today?

Pray

Creator God, give me new vision to see your wondrous work in the world around me. May my surroundings inspire me to worship your majesty. Amen.

Tuesday, August 25

Psalm 18:1-3

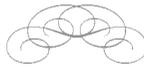
My stronghold (v. 2).

As a millennial, I've grown up with the evolution of the cell phone. When I was ten, I watched businessmen use cell phones that were the size of bricks. When I was fifteen, my friends had flip phones. And when I was twenty, students started to get smartphones that accessed the internet, had GPS capabilities, and took decent pictures.

Ten years later, the technology has transformed by leaps and bounds. Home phones, considered targets for telemarketers, are being phased out. But oddly enough, despite all the advances in technology, our fancy cell phones fail us from time to time. We may lose the signal. Our devices can break easily—especially their screens. Our data is more accessible to thieves than ever before.

When you are in turmoil who are you calling upon? How do you do so? Our phones can be essential instruments when it comes to sending out a cry for help.

But these rectangular pieces of metal that we rely on in times of distress have their limitations. Sometimes if I am in trouble, I submerge myself further into the world instead of retreating from it to find the Divine. When I do this repeatedly, I find myself only more frustrated with the inevitable limits of human solutions. But when I take the time to remember my true strength, my refuge, and my shield, I find that a wellspring of peace never runs dry.



Consider

How can you practice the psalmist's claim that God is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer (v. 2)? In what ways do you need to retreat from the world in order to find strength from the Lord? How is God your stronghold in the middle of chaos?

Pray

Stronghold, remind us of your unfailing love and boundless peace in times of distress. Help us feel your presence and strength. Amen.

Wednesday, August 26

Psalm 18:20-32

Leap over a wall (v. 29).

Our faith journey is often marked by liminal spaces, those specific moments in time when it feels like heaven and earth meet. A rare feeling that we just experienced God's presence often accompanies those times. Sometimes it's a moment when we recognize that God is leading us to something new. Sometimes it comes when we witness a spirit passing from this life to the next. Sometimes it's a simple but strong gut feeling that God is near.

I hope and believe that those liminal moments are much more frequent than we realize. Giving us the strength we need to meet our challenges is one way that God is present with us and intercedes in our lives. Think about your life. How many times have you achieved a physical feat that you thought impossible, or gotten through a number of days, weeks, or months that felt unbearable? How many times did you accomplish something that looked unlikely from your perspective? How many times did you climb over an obstacle that seemed insurmountable?

Our small stature will always make large obstacles seem impossible to overcome. We encounter the limits of our bodies and minds. We know our frailties. But we also know those moments of success that rose out of doubt, moments girded by God's strength. Our challenge is to see the obstacles we face through God's eyes, trusting that God will give us the strength to take each step, then leap.



Consider

What obstacles in your life seem insurmountable to you right now? How is God strengthening you for these challenges?

Pray

God who helps us leap, give us strength for this day. Gird us with your love and divine power to complete impossible tasks. Amen.

Thursday, August 27

Psalm 105:1-6

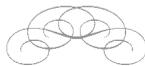
Seek [God's] presence (v. 4).

I've lost count of how many times in my life I've lost valuable items. That panic of not knowing where I last left the item, and the sheer frustration of turning over everything to find it, are my least favorite feelings. I've lost my ID, my wallet, house keys, my wedding ring a week before my wedding, my birth certificate, and my social security card. You name it and I've probably lost it. I lose things so often that my best friend, who is Catholic, gave me her medal of St. Anthony, the patron of lost items. At least I haven't lost that yet.

I've found most of my lost items because, once I lose something, I look for it ferociously. I put all other tasks on hold and don't stop searching and worrying until I find it. This makes me wonder why I only possess this ferocity when trying to recover a lost possession.

Our psalmist says to seek the Lord's presence continually. But I have to admit with some shame that I can count on one hand the times I've searched for the Lord as aggressively as I have for a lost item. Usually those kinds of searches only happen when my life hits rock-bottom, which thankfully hasn't been that often. Usually I feel like I don't need to look very far to find God. What requires more effort is setting aside time to be present with God.

What would it take for us to put more effort into seeking God's presence when our lives are going well? Our faith journey is often comprised of the same day-to-day steps of setting aside distractions and spending time with God. Perhaps if we looked more earnestly for God's presence, we could see the Divine all around us.



Consider

What distractions could you set aside today in order to seek God's presence and spend time with the Divine?

Pray

Wonderful God, forgive me when I search half-heartedly for you. Remind me that in you our true lives are found. Amen.

Friday, August 28

Psalm 26:1-8

Walk in faithfulness (v. 3).

Perhaps one of the most frustrating aspects of living faithfully is the reality that bad things happen. No matter how many good deeds we do, our actions don't shield us from tragedy, bad luck, or poor timing. Acknowledging that fact, but choosing to have faith anyway, is difficult.

Our psalmist, who seems to be in the midst of suffering, begs for relief. Oftentimes when we're experiencing anguish or distress, we try to use our good deeds as bargaining chips. It's almost like offering a bribe to the Almighty, reminding God of how faithful we have been.

Isn't it ironic to remind the all-knowing Creator of the Universe of all the good we've done? But we do it anyway, hoping this will sway God to help us out. Maybe sometimes we say our litany of good deeds to convince ourselves that we're indeed worthy of being saved.

But part of walking in faithfulness is having the benefit of the doubt and remembering that God is not a vending machine. Part of being faithful is not using good deeds as an exchange for divine intervention.

The bargaining we use as an attempt to get what we desire goes against the very idea of what faith is. God's love doesn't require a good report card. Faithfulness requires trust: trust that God hears our prayers, trust that God suffers with us when we suffer, and trust that God loves us.



Consider

How can you be more faithful in your walk with God today?

Pray

Faithful, loving God, help me put worry aside and trust that you are working in my life. Amen.

Saturday, August 29

Exodus 4:1-9

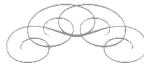
So that they may believe (v. 5).

I marvel at those biblical stories that include physical signs from God. I'd love to see one of those in my life! Faith without signs can be so difficult. Wouldn't our belief be stronger with some irrefutable proof?

Proof seems essential everywhere else in our society. Scientists certainly can't show their findings without lots of it. You can't enter a courtroom and convict the guilty without proof. Insurance companies require it to assign blame in accident cases. Everything in the world runs on proof, except faith. No wonder humanity has struggled with faith for so long. But running the world only on the basis of what can be seen and counted comes at a cost. Limiting life to the already visible and verifiable fails to account for the ways God inspires and nurtures brave imagination in people of faith. Human wellbeing and new possibilities are often dismissed in favor of the facts and what already is.

Moses got not just one, but three physical signs to use against the Egyptians in case his words failed him. It was perfect ammunition to combat a system of proof and a society whose desire for productivity was never satisfied and never adequately concerned with human wellbeing.

Part of our faith journey is stepping back from the need for proof and instead living for the liberation of belief. The Egyptians were unable to step out of that cycle, and it came at a cost. Walking through the world as we practice our faith is tough. But if we stay on that path, it leads to a rewarding freedom.



Consider

*What parts of your life dictated by facts do you wish were shaped by faith?
How could you begin to change those aspects?*

Pray

God of Moses and the Israelites, help me to step back from the world of proof I live in. Help me see your priorities for this world instead of my own. Amen.

Sunday, August 30

Exodus 3:1-15

When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him... (v. 4).

In “Sometimes,” poet Mary Oliver offers this wisdom:

Instructions for living a life.

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

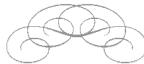
Her poem gives us a rhythm for our days rather than a timetable. Exactly how long should we spend paying attention if we want to be astonished? We often prefer a schedule to a wise guide. Maybe that’s because we have a deadline for the “tell about it” step and we need something to say. So we skip to that third sentence and get to work.

But what makes Oliver’s instructions so wise is their order. Words born out of astonishment have the power to move us.

The story of Moses and the burning bush has a wonderful sentence that Oliver would likely appreciate. When God notices Moses turning aside to see, God calls to him. In her poem, “Praying,” Oliver writes:

It doesn’t have to be / the blue iris, it could be / weeds in a vacant lot,
or a few / small stones; just / pay attention, then patch / a few words
together and don’t try / to make them elaborate, this isn’t / a contest
but the doorway / into thanks, and a silence in which / another voice
may speak.

Paying attention is a prelude to being astonished and receiving the message we need.



Consider

Spend enough time paying attention today to notice something astonishing.

Pray

God, too often we pass by the gifts you abundantly offer without noticing them or you. Nudge us to draw closer, look, listen, and tell about it. Amen.

Monday, August 31

Exodus 4:10-31

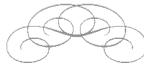
Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak (v. 12).

As you read Scripture, do you ever want to pull a character aside for some quick counseling? Take Moses, for example. He's just encountered God, who reaches out to him through a burning bush, gives him signs to use against Pharaoh, and offers every possible assurance that the Divine will be with him wherever he goes. But despite such awe-inspiring experiences, Moses can't take his eyes off of his own insecurities.

God equips him for an extraordinary adventure, but Moses tries to equip God with a list of reasons why the Almighty chose the wrong person for this mission. Shouldn't the kind of astonishing experiences that God gave Moses make him a brand new individual who is ready for anything? Why doesn't Moses see that if God has elaborate plans for liberating the Israelites, God could certainly help Moses give a speech?

It's the "*Now go*" command that makes Moses more than nervous. God gives him all kinds of promises and assurances, but it's the required leap of faith on his part that Moses struggles with. Advising Moses to trust God at this point in the story seems obvious to us.

What might be less apparent is how often we borrow his response when God equips us for extraordinary adventure. Do the characters in the biblical cast ever want to pull us aside for some quick counseling when they view our stories?



Consider

What might Moses say to you today about your life with God?

Pray

God, help us take a leap of faith instead of dwelling on all those things we feel unable to do. Keep us focused on your assurance that you will be with us. Amen.