

Easter Sunday, April 20

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in they did not find the body. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵ The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen. ⁶ Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be handed over to the hands of sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again." ⁸ Then they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹² But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened. Luke 24:1-12

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

The women went to the tomb but were perplexed when they didn't find the body. Then they were terrified when two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. They remembered Jesus words and told all the others what happened. The apostles heard the women but thought it was an idle tale, and they didn't believe them.

What seems unbelievable to you in the Easter story? Jesus was crucified but now his body is gone. In the empty tomb, two men in dazzling clothes appear; who were they? Jesus told them what was going to happen, but nobody seemed to hear him or believe him. The men hear what happened but think it's just a tale and don't believe them.

But Peter ran to the tomb. He ran, he looked, he saw and believed. He was the only one in this gospel text who went home amazed at what had happened. He ran, he looked, he saw and believed. Maybe that's what we need to do when we hear this Easter message: run, look, see and believe.

Risen Savior, Jesus, alleluia! Thank you for overcoming death, sin and the devil for us. We love you so much! Alleluia! In Jesus' name. Amen.

Lenten Devotions 2025

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church

A New Way of Seeing

Written by Pastor Nancy Carlson

Texts from New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE)

**Ash Wednesday
March 5, 2025**

Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and relenting from punishment. Joel 2:12-13

We don't rend much anymore. It means to rip, slash, shred, tear apart or mend. What would it be like for you to rend your hearts this Lent? Is there something you which to shred from your life? Is there something that needs to be ripped apart from you or something you need to mend?

Lent is the time to do these things. Lent is when we are more contemplative; we are more likely to be still and silent. We might be thinking more about returning to the Lord during Lent.

The prophet Joel instructs the people to do such a thing: return to the Lord. Return with all of your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning. It seems to me that the prophet is encouraging us to come to God with all of ourselves, our emotions, our feelings, our whole being – heart, soul and mind.

When we do, we will find that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And, God is relenting from punishment. So, whatever you have done or haven't done, it's time to come to the Lord, who will forgive you, heal you and fill you with grace and peace.

Holy God, you alone are gracious and merciful. Thank you for being slow to anger when we are slow to learn. Abound in steadfast love for us as we return to you with our whole selves. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Holy Saturday, April 19

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus's head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed, ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes. John 20:1-10

Imagine going to bed on Friday night after Jesus was crucified. I imagine the disciples and Mary were scared, sad, upset, unsure of what tomorrow might bring. They waited. They prayed. They didn't know what to do now that Jesus had died. They didn't know the next part of the story like we do, even though Jesus had told them how it would go.

Early in the morning, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. Even though it was dark, she could see that the stone had been rolled away. So, Mary ran. She went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, and they ran. The other disciple sprinted to the tomb and got there first. Peter came and looked in and saw the linen wrappings lying there. The other disciple went in, he saw and believed. Maybe he remembered what Jesus had told him, or he understood anew what the scripture meant.

They returned to their homes, it says. After all the running, it seems kind of anticlimactic, don't you think? I imagine they went home completely changed or in awe and wonder. I imagine they still didn't know the next part of the story. How might we hear the Easter story anew this year?

Holy God, almighty, victorious, magnificent and all-powerful. Thank you for those who run to tell us the good news about you. Help us to hear the Easter message anew this year and run to tell others. Amen.

Good Friday, April 18

So they took Jesus,¹⁷ and carrying the cross by himself he went out to what is called the Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha.¹⁸ There they crucified him and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them.¹⁹ Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."²⁰ Many of the Jews read this inscription because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek.²¹ Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" ²² Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written."²³ When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top.²⁴ So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it but cast lots for it to see who will get it." This was to fulfill what the scripture says, "They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots."²⁵ And that is what the soldiers did. Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son."²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.²⁸ After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty."²⁹ A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.³⁰ When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. John 19:16b-30

For today's devotion, I invite you to meditate on this text. Put yourself in the scene and think about what happened to our beloved Savior. You may want to read it over a few times, maybe even read it aloud. If you have young children at home, you could act it out or take turns reading the various parts. When you are finished, you could sing or listen to "Were You There."

Jesus, Savior of the world, we lament your death on this Good Friday. Forgive us for all the ways we deny you and reject you. Help us to understand anew what a sacrifice you made for us and for all the world. Thank you for giving us the ultimate gift: your life. In your name we pray. Amen.

March 6

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. Psalm 51:1-2

Psalm 51 is a classic Lenten psalm. Every time I read it, I think of Lent. Lent is a time to be washed thoroughly and be cleansed from sin. But perhaps first, we have to admit that we *have* sinned.

The psalmist writes that against the Lord, against God alone has he sinned. I must confess that I have sinned against the Lord, but also against others. I confess that I haven't loved my neighbors as I really would like to. I haven't done all the good things I promised to do. I have been frustrated with someone once or twice... I have done things I shouldn't have done.

When we confess our sins, God wants us to be truthful and honest. Come to God and tell God what you've done. God desires truth in our inward being. When we come clean and tell God what we really have done or haven't done, then God cleanses us from sin and teaches us wisdom. Our hearts are made clean, and we have a new and right spirit within us.

Is there something you are keeping from God? You might use this Lenten season to come clean, to have a chat with God and be honest.

From that place of honesty and truthfulness, we can be washed clean and made new. That new and right spirit will dwell within us so that we might experience the joy of salvation. May it be so.

Have mercy on us, O Lord. Forgive us for all the ways we have sinned against you and against each other. Wash us thoroughly and cleanse us from our sin. Create in us new hearts and put your spirit within us. Sustain in us willing spirits. May it be so. Amen.

March 7

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal,²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Matthew 6:19-21

Where is your treasure these days?

When I was working in stewardship for a church, I heard that one way to see where your treasure is, is to look at your calendar or your checkbook. Where are you spending your time and your money?

If you looked at my checkbook, you might think that my treasure lies in grocery stores or the big warehouse store that will remain unnamed. If you looked at my calendar, you might think that my treasure lies in exercising, work, choir and knitting. Ok, you might think that if you see a few receipts from the knitting shop, too.

But what I don't put on that calendar is the time I spend in prayer or in devotions every morning. It's just something I do every day like breathing. I also write out a monthly check to church instead of a weekly one so it might look like I don't treasure those as much as I do.

We also have treasures in how we were created. We were each created with different gifts and abilities. We can use those treasures to help others, too, just like we do with our checkbooks and calendars. I can assure you that when we use those treasures to help others, we are the ones who are blessed beyond measure.

Creator God, thank you for all the blessings you give us anew every day. Help us to share our treasures with others and to let our checkbooks and calendars reflect your presence in our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Maundy Thursday, April 17

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread,²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”²⁵ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

People sometimes wonder where we get the words to use in our worship services or liturgies. Most, if not all, come from scripture. This text from 1 Corinthians is what is said before we have communion. These words are called the Words of Institution, because these are the words Jesus spoke when he instituted the Last Supper, or Holy Communion.

Holy Communion is one of two sacraments in the Lutheran Church. Can you name the other one? Yep, it's Holy Baptism. Other churches have different numbers of sacraments so why are those the two sacraments in the Lutheran Church? What makes a sacrament in the Lutheran Church is that Jesus told us to do it and we combine his words with an earthly element to make it a sacrament.

Jesus instructs us to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In Holy Communion, we do as he commanded, and we get the bread and wine (earthly elements) with Jesus' words “This is my body and blood, given for you” to make it a sacrament. If we just have bread and wine, it's not Holy Communion. If we just say the words, it's not Holy Communion. We need both. And, because of Martin Luther, we receive both the bread and the wine. That's what Jesus did and we follow him.

Lutherans believe that Jesus is truly present in, under and through the elements of bread and wine. It's not just a remembrance ceremony to remember what he did. Jesus did this for you and he is present in the meal we eat and drink. Thanks be to God!

Jesus, our Lord and Savior, thank you for instituting this holy meal. Thank you for giving us your body and blood to forgive us and save us from our sins. Be present with us as we partake of this holy meal. Amen.

April 16

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:1-2

Have you ever thought about who is in your great cloud of witnesses? I love this text and think about who is surrounding me with their witness, prayers and love today.

I think about my grandparents who prayed for me and supported me through the years. I think about their parents, my great-grandparents who were also praying for future generations.

I think about my parents, my family, my friends and all who have witnessed to me and prayed for me through the years.

I think of pastors, church staff members, Sunday School teachers, confirmation teachers, piano teachers, school teachers, seminary professors, bishops and synod staff members.

I think of all those people I never knew who have prayed for me, either on a prayer chain or because a friend asked them to pray.

I think of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the holy trinity, who are the greatest witnesses of all.

I think of writers of scripture, composers of hymns, songwriters and all the musicians who have inspired my faith.

I think of all the saints who have gone before us, cheering us on from heaven as we continue to run our race to see Jesus, face to face.

Who is in your great cloud of witnesses today?

Holy Spirit, Almighty God, Loving Jesus, thank you for this great cloud of witnesses who inspire us and encourage us to run the race. Amen.

March 8

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: ² a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted; ³ a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up; ⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance; ⁵ a time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing; ⁶ a time to seek and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to throw away; ⁷ a time to tear and a time to sew; a time to keep silent and a time to speak; ⁸ a time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace. Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

My son was listening to The Byrd's song "Turn, Turn, Turn" the other day and he said, "You know this was written in response to the Vietnam War, right?" I said, "Well, did you know that it was originally from scripture, the book of Ecclesiastes?"

He's not quite right on his response, but when Pete Seeger wrote this song in 1959, in response to a request from his publisher, he decided to use parts of scripture, including this reading for today. He added the "Turn, turn, turn" part for a chorus, but otherwise the lyrics are almost entirely from scripture. Pretty cool. It was originally released in 1962 by the folk group The Limelighters. In 1965, The Byrd's version became a #1 hit.

The writer of Ecclesiastes (and Pete Seeger) was right. There is a time for everything, a time for every matter under heaven. We may not like the time we are in, especially if it is a time to weep instead of a time to laugh, or if it is a time to break down and not to build up. But it helps to remember that whatever time and season of life we are in, they don't last forever. There is a time for everything, a season for everything and a time for every matter under heaven.

Holy God, you are the one who created us and creates the times and seasons of our lives. Help us to turn to you time and again as we navigate the changes in our lives. Be with us at every turn. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

1st Sunday in Lent, March 9

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tested by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. Luke 4:1-2

Are you experiencing any kind of testing these days? I'm not sure anyone likes tests but then I think of the contestants on Jeopardy. They must love to be tested on their knowledge! They are given the answers and have to come up with the questions so maybe it doesn't feel much like a test. My husband and I like to watch it regularly and are amazed at how they know the questions to most of the answers.

Perhaps that's how it is with our faith. We want to know the answers before we even truly know what the questions are. As Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, he was shown various things to tempt him. But Jesus not only knew the answers, he knew the questions and how to respond to them using scripture, which I'm sure the devil hated. At the end of the testing, Jesus said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Amen to that.

How can we remain full of the Holy Spirit as Jesus was when we are tested? Perhaps you can have a scripture verse in mind when the testing comes to assure you and to confront whatever test you might be facing. Like what Jesus said in Luke 4 verse 10, "God will command his angels concerning you, to protect you." That's a good one to help you stay focused on God in the midst of testing and to remember that God will protect and watch over you.

This week, look for a Bible verse that you can have in mind when testing comes. Maybe there is a favorite verse from Psalm 23 or John 14. When you find a verse, meditate on it for a few minutes each day. You might write it out and put it up on your computer screen or refrigerator. Put it where you can see it often and think about how God is with you through all the testing and wilderness places in your life, just as God was with Jesus.

O Lord God, you led your people through the wilderness and brought them to the promised land. Guide us now, so that, following your Son, we may walk safely through the wilderness and testing of this world, toward you and the life you alone can give. Help us to resist temptation and count on you alone. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

April 15

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 1 Corinthians 1:18

Do you believe that everything happens for a reason? The Ancient Greeks, especially the Stoics did. They believed that the world was a perfect system of cause and effect. They believed that everything happened for a reason or else they thought they were insulting the great cause of all things, God. People who were rich and powerful particularly liked this because these ideas preserved the social order, with them on top.

Jesus Christ comes on the scene and is crucified on a cross and rises again on the third day. Hmm, is that the natural order of things? Crucifixion was a brutal death, usually saved for the worst criminals. Wait a second, if God is the ruler of all, how and why would his only Son be crucified on a cross? That seems to be just foolishness!

Paul wrote that God chose the foolish and weak precisely to shame the wise and strong. Hmmm, how does that affect their thinking? They relied on being strong and wise in order to be over and above others. No wonder they thought the cross was foolishness.

But to those of us who are being saved, it is here, at the foot of the cross, where we stand. If the cross doesn't matter, then we are fools to be pitied. But if it does matter, then we marvel at the power of God to do such a well, some would say, foolish thing.

The cross is what saves us from sin, death and the devil. The cross is what encourages us when we're going through trials and tribulations. The cross is what reminds us that there is hope for new life even when things look dead. For if Jesus had never died on that cross and rose from the dead three days later, then where would we be? Perishing with the rest of the fools, I suppose.

Savior Jesus, thank you for dying on the cross to save us all. Forgive us when we are foolish and forget to trust in you. Thank you for the message of the cross. May it give us new hope today. In Jesus' name. Amen.

April 14

But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation),¹² he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.¹³ For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified,¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! Hebrews 9:11-14

The law of Moses prescribed animal sacrifices to purify the people. It used to be that the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies with an animal sacrifice, bringing animal blood to make atonement for the peoples' sins. But Jesus offered himself as the sacrifice and died once, for all. He died one time and was raised on the third day to offer forgiveness for all. That means he doesn't have to do it again. It means that the animal sacrifices are no longer necessary since he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He did it once for all, meaning for ALL. Not just for some, but for ALL people, and that includes you and me. That includes your nosy neighbor or annoying relative. Yes, that includes ALL.

The writer of Hebrews goes on to say that if the blood of those animals sanctifies those who were defiled, how much more will the blood of Christ? Christ offered himself as a pure, spotless lamb to purify our conscience from sin so that we can worship the living God. Thanks be to God.

Remember that the Holy of Holies was separated by a curtain or veil, signifying the separation from the Holy God and sinful humanity. When Jesus died, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, signifying that there was no more separating us from God due to our sin. Jesus Christ tore down that barrier with his life, promising us forgiveness of sin and everlasting life.

Wise and powerful God, you are holy and loving. Thank you for all the ways you prove your love to us, especially by sending your only Son, Jesus Christ, to tear down any barriers between us due to our sin. Forgive us all of our sins. Thank you for Jesus, who offered his life so that we would no longer be separated by sin. Help all to know you and love you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

March 10

As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness. Psalm 17:15

When I worked at a long-term care center, I got to know a woman I'll call Donna. She was always so joyful, caring and generous. She seemed to shine her light to everyone she met. She was a delight to know.

One day, she came in her wheelchair to my office and asked, "Pastor, do you have a picture of Jesus I could put in my room? I want to gaze at him when I wake up and when I go to bed." If anyone asks me for a picture of Jesus to gaze at him, I will move heaven and earth to find one for them. It just so happened that there was an old picture of Jesus in my office. You may have seen one like it or have one like it at your home. It was Jesus in white flowing robes, looking like he was walking. I brought it up to her room and when I showed it to her, her face lit up and she said, "Oh, that is perfect!" She had the maintenance staff hang it up for her right above her bed. Sometimes when I would walk into her room she would just be staring at this picture.

When I read the last verse of Psalm 17, it reminds me of Donna and how she was beholding Jesus' face when she woke up each day and throughout her day. She has long since gone from staring at a picture of Jesus to seeing him face to face. I imagine the joy and excitement she felt when she first saw him in real life, or should I say, in eternal life.

In your devotion or meditation time this week, you might find a picture of Jesus to gaze at. There are lots of them online or you might even have one in your Bible or on your wall. Sit for a few minutes enjoying Jesus' face looking back at you. Maybe it will give you satisfaction and excitement like it did for Donna and the psalmist. May it be so.

Holy Jesus, though we see in a mirror dimly, we look forward to that day when we will indeed see you face to face. For now, let us gaze on your beautiful face and see all the love and grace and mercy and peace that streams down to us, your children. Be with all who long to see you soon. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

March 11

"The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim), because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:8b-9

When we gather in worship, we confess our faith using the words of the Apostles' Creed. In it, we confess that Jesus is Lord and that we believe in the resurrection of the dead. Paul writes in Romans 10, that if we do those things we will be saved. Like the other creeds: the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed, they are written documents that originated centuries ago, affirming that God is fully present in Jesus, that Jesus Christ is both human and divine and that Jesus is one part of the Holy Trinity, three in one and one in three. These creeds are affirmed in the Lutheran confessional documents and in the ELCA's governing documents.

For many of us, the creeds have become very near and dear to our hearts. As Paul writes, *"The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart."* Many of us have confessed our faith at baptisms, at festivals like Easter and Christmas, on Trinity Sunday and other times throughout the year.

When we join with Christians around the world to confess our faith using these creeds, we affirm that they are ecumenical, that we are all joined together in our faith in Christ. That's pretty cool when you think about it, that someone in Australia might be reciting this creed when we are going to bed and we are reciting it when they are going to bed. All across the world, people confess their Christian faith using these words.

These confessions of our faith help us when we experience trials and tribulations. It helps when we are burying a loved one to believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. It helps when we are struggling to make sense of our world, to remember that God is the creator of heaven and earth. It helps when we are having doubts about our faith to remember that Jesus Christ was born, crucified and died, for all of us.

Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier, thank you for these creeds affirming our faith in you. Help us to keep them close to our mouths and our hearts and to live our lives according to what we believe. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Palm Sunday, April 13

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹ When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰ saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.' " ³² So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴ They said, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵ Then they brought it to Jesus, and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ Now as he was approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸ saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" ³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." ⁴⁰ He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." Luke 19:28-40

This scripture passage is often titled "Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem." He comes into Jerusalem and the whole crowd was praising God and saying, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" They were spreading their cloaks on the road and waving palm branches as he passed by. Before they got there, he told his disciples how to prepare the Upper Room for his last meal. Even though everyone was cheering as he entered the city, he knew that everyone would soon be jeering as he was hung to die on a cross.

I've always found it interesting that Jesus told the disciples to get a colt and to tell the owner that the Lord needs it and it would be OK. It happened just as he told them it would. I've often wondered, who was the owner of the colt? It could've been that he was generous and knew that the disciples were in need of something, so he let them take it. It could've been that he was a follower of Jesus and was willing to let him have whatever he needed. Either way, he gave Jesus a colt to ride on as he entered Jerusalem. If you would've been there that day, what would your role have been?

Merciful Lord and Savior, thank you for all who have cheered for you and followed you. Help us to be generous and follow you always. Amen.

April 12

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. ¹⁰ For my life is spent with sorrow and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away. Psalm 31:9-10

When people tell me they don't really like the Psalms, I always wonder if they've read them or if they've experienced any troubles in life. The psalmist lays it all out there, sharing feelings, frustrations, hopes and dreams with God. People have asked me if it's ok to pray to God about this or that and I remind them that the psalmist has prayed about everything to God and it's all there in the Bible!

When I read this text from Psalm 31, I am reminded that Jesus knew the psalms, too. He was quoting from Psalm 31:5 when he said, as he hung dying on the cross, "Into your hand I commit my spirit..."

Psalm 31 is a prayer for help from someone who has severe pain and profound trust in God. It turns into a song of thanksgiving in verse 21 where it says, "Blessed be the Lord..."

If you feel like the psalmist did when he wrote this psalm, try praying the psalm like this:

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;

Take three deep breaths

my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also.

Take three deep breaths

For my life is spent with sorrow and my years with sighing;

Take three deep breaths

my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away

Take three deep breaths

Close with the ending of Psalm 31:

Be strong and let your heart take courage,

all you who wait for the Lord.

Take three breaths and close with prayer.

Holy God, be gracious to us. Be with all who are hurting, grieving, in pain or dying. Comfort all who are in misery today. Bring hope and healing to all who need it. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

March 12

Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. ²¹ He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." Job 1:20-21

Job had just lost everything, and I mean everything. All of his sheep, camels, oxen, donkeys and very many servants, along with his sons and daughters were all gone in a matter of minutes. Can you imagine the tragedy? Uffda. I'm not sure my response would be like his was in verse 21. What do you say and do in times of such loss and grief?

Sometimes, it's best to say nothing. As we'll learn later in the book of Job, sometimes the best thing is to just show up and be present to someone in their grief. People often wonder what to say and I encourage them to not worry about that, but to just be there. Sometimes it's better to say nothing as Job's friends realized. Cliches and trite phrases don't work, and they often do more harm than good. People don't usually remember what you say, they remember that you were there for them when all else was lost.

In chaplaincy, we call that the ministry of presence. Just show up and be there for them. You don't have to explain why something happened. You don't have to offer false hope. "They are in a better place" or "God must've needed an angel" can sound harsh to someone who just lost a loved one. They might wonder what was wrong with this place and why does God have to take my loved one?

I once visited with a woman who was not religious and who told me that if I prayed with her, she would kick me out. So, I just showed up and was present. Sometimes I didn't even say anything. She never kicked me out. I'm not sure my presence actually *did* anything, but I wanted to accompany her on her journey and be there for her. Think of someone who is going through a tough time. Maybe you could spend a few minutes just being with them on the phone or in person. Just show up and be present. God is there, too.

Comforting God, be with all those who are grieving this day. Comfort them and wipe away their every tear. Help us to be present to those in need. Guide our words and our thoughts and our deeds. In Jesus' name. Amen.

March 13

The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, ¹⁵ for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. ¹⁶ I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Genesis 13:14-16

When the Lord said this to Abram, he had no children. Notice that his name was still Abram and there was not a child in sight. So, it must have taken a lot of faith to believe that someday he would have so many offspring, they would be as numerous as the dust of the earth. I'm sure I don't want to count the dust of the earth, but that's how many offspring Abram would have. Not to mention that he was 75 years old at the time. I don't think I want to start having children at 75, do you?

Have there been times in your life when God delivered to you something that seemed impossible at the time? Maybe you struggled with infertility and eventually adopted a child or gave birth to a child. Maybe you thought your marriage was completely over and done and somehow it was resurrected to new life. Maybe you were addicted to something and never thought you'd find a way to live without it, but somehow God showed you the way and you've never looked back.

God is the God of promises. God is faithful and true and God always keeps God's promises. Even if we can't see how God is going to do that, God always comes through. Sometimes we don't get to see the fulfillment of that promise in our lifetime, but our children or grandchildren do. So, we can have faith and hope even when it seems like the impossible dream. God is at work, keeping promises and showing us a future filled with hope.

Holy and mighty God, you are amazing, wonderful, almighty and true. Thank you for your promises that are true for us. As you fulfilled your promise to Abram and Sarai with offspring too numerous to count, so fulfill your promises to us. Give us faith and hope that you are at work and present in our lives. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

April 11

This is like the days of Noah to me: Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you. ¹⁰ For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you. Isaiah 54:9-10

I've seen some beautiful rainbows in my lifetime. A favorite was when my husband and I were in New Zealand, at Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park. We were supposed to hike the Hooker Valley Trail, which we heard was magnificent. We started out hiking and it started to rain. The rain came heavier and heavier and pretty soon, we were soaked. There were quite a few people hiking at the same time. Soon, the people coming down the trail outnumbered those of us going up. It was starting to get darker and darker and we had no cell coverage in case of an emergency. We started to ask the people who were walking down the trail how it was at the top. They said they could hardly see anything because it was raining so hard. We decided to turn around and then it was a mad dash to get to the bottom. It seemed that everyone else had decided to turn around as well. Now, it was just getting to the bottom of the trail so we could get dry and warm. It was a bummer that we didn't get to see the trail and all the beauty on it. We were leaving the next day, so our opportunity was over. The next morning, when we were leaving, we saw the most beautiful rainbow, a double rainbow in spots, that stretched over the mountains. It was glorious. It felt like it was a message saying, "Sorry you couldn't make the hike, but how do you like this?" We stopped and took lots of pictures and thanked God for the beautiful rainbow to send us on our way.

Just as God promised Noah, with the sign of a rainbow, that the waters would never again cover the earth, so God promises us that God's steadfast love will never depart from us. For God has compassion on us, too. Seeing that rainbow in the sky after a difficult day was like a sign of God's steadfast love and ever-present compassion on us. May you be blessed with a sign of God's steadfast love and compassion for you today.

Loving God, thank you for your compassion and steadfast love. Thank you for rainbows in the sky that remind us of your presence and faithfulness. Bless us with signs of your presence. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

April 10

Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. Hebrews 2:1

Have you ever driven somewhere and wondered how you got there? Or, maybe you made dinner, while you were talking on the phone and suddenly realized you forgot to add an important ingredient. Sounds like we haven't been paying attention but maybe it's because we were multi-tasking.

Multi-tasking seemed to be all the rage several years ago, but now experts say that it can lead to more harm than good. When we are multi-tasking, we tend to make more mistakes, get more stressed and stop paying attention to what we're doing. Which could be why there are more accidents when people multi-task while driving!

The author of Hebrews is encouraging his readers to pay attention to what they heard. Why? So they don't drift away. Why might it be important to us to pay attention to what we have heard in scripture? Right. So we don't drift away from the faith.

Paying attention has benefits. We are more present, we might see things in a new way, we learn more, we can concentrate, we are less stressed and we might see God at work. I think of the Star Words that we received on Epiphany and how they were reminders to pay attention to how God might reveal Godself to us this year. Paying attention can lead to revelations and insight.

So, for today, how might you pay more attention to just one thing? How might you pay attention to how God is present in your life right now?

Try this: Set a timer for one minute. Try to pay attention to God for one minute. It might help to use a picture of Jesus or a word from scripture. If that is easy for you, try it for two minutes or 10. Throughout your day, you might pause, take a deep breath and ask God to fill you with love and peace. Or, you might stop and think about where you see, hear or feel God.

Good and gracious God, you are holy, merciful, loving and just. Help us to pay attention to you today. No multi-tasking, but just concentrating on you. Remind us of your presence today. Amen.

March 14

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? Psalm 27:1

Let's take a few moments to meditate on Psalm 27. Find a comfortable chair or place to sit. Take a few deep breaths and close your eyes.

Think of anything that you are afraid of, whether it's the little things like snakes or mice, or the big things like climate change or worldwide disasters and war. I can hardly do this because I'm afraid of little mice and trying to think of them is hard for me! Take a few deep breaths.

Ok, enough of the things that scare you. Now, let's focus on the Lord. What qualities can you think of when you think of God? How about Jesus? How about the Holy Spirit?

Now picture the Lord being the light that shines in your darkness, that saves you from whatever it is you fear. Feel that strong light penetrating through any fear and anxiety. Sense that warm, comforting light surrounding you and enveloping you in love and peace.

Sit in that space for a few minutes as you breathe deeply.

Now picture the Lord being a stronghold in your life. Imagine a huge castle with a moat or a beautiful home or log cabin, some sort of structure that will protect you. Think of all the things in that structure that will protect you. Now imagine that the Lord is that structure. That the Lord is the walls, the foundation, the windows, the floors and the ceiling of that structure. The Lord is your stronghold and will protect you from everything.

Sit in that stronghold for a few minutes as you breathe deeply.

Take a few deep breaths and then pray:

Holy Lord, you are my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? You are the stronghold of my life, of what shall I be afraid? Watch over me, protect me and fill me with your spirit of peace and comfort always. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

March 15

*“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁸ See, your house is left to you, desolate.³⁹ For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”
Matthew 23:37-39*

I was in Jerusalem in November of 2022 with a group from my church. It was a wonderful time to be there. We had a great guide and wonderful travels. We learned a lot and went to all of the holiest sites.

But as I sat on the East Wall of the Old City of Jerusalem, overlooking the Mount of Olives and the Kidron Valley, I heard these words of Jesus in my head, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” I had a sense of his despair as he looked at that great city. Little did I know how much more despairing there would be in Jerusalem so soon after we left.

Earlier in this chapter, Jesus had criticized the leaders for not living what they preached. He wanted them and their listeners to not only hear the word, but to also do the word. To let their lives show who they follow. It seemed he was tired of the hypocrisy he witnessed and so he lamented over Jerusalem. Where was their compassion, unity and love for one another?

It might be the same for us. Would Jesus lament over our country and wonder where our compassion, unity and love are? Hopefully, he doesn't watch any of the news or political channels.

How might we be the bearers of compassion, love and unity to a world that so badly needs it? How might we live our lives of faith in the way we act and speak? How might we hear Jesus' words and live according to them?

Holy Jesus, forgive us for our sins and all the ways we don't live out our faith. Help us to be compassionate, loving and unified in how we act towards others. Be with all who live in the Holy Land. Bring peace, unity, mercy and compassion. In your precious name we pray. Amen.

April 9

Then Jesus took the twelve aside and said to them, “Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. ³² For he will be handed over to the Gentiles, and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. ³³ After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again.” ³⁴ But they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said. Luke 18:31-34

Have you ever felt like the disciples? Someone tells you something and you don't understand what was said. Sometimes my husband and I feel that way about a Jeopardy answer. We have no idea what they are even saying and could not come up with the question for anything!

Jesus spoke plainly to the disciples but what was said was hidden from them. They understood nothing about all of it. What was Jesus talking about? No one is going to mock and insult you, Lord. No one is going to flog you or kill you. No, it can't be. And, what is this about rising on the third day? You mean, like Lazarus did? They must have left this conversation shaking their heads trying to figure out what he meant.

Sometimes when we read scripture, we might feel like the disciples did. We read a passage and wonder, what is that supposed to mean? We might read a passage and suddenly something jumps out at us that we never noticed before.

It can help to pray for insight before reading scripture. You might also read it in a different translation or read it aloud. You might talk with a friend or family member to see what they get out of the text. Or, continue to read it each day and see what God reveals to you.

Later in this chapter of Luke, Jesus healed a man who was blind. May we also be healed of whatever gets in the way of understanding scripture. May God give you wisdom and insight as you read the Bible this week.

Wise and loving God, forgive us for our inability to understand your will and your ways. We pray that we would know you more fully every day and that we would come to know what you have in store for us. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

April 8

Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour. ¹⁹ They went out from us, but they did not belong to us, for if they had belonged to us they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us. ²⁰ But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge ²¹ I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and you know that no lie comes from the truth. ²² Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. ²³ No one who denies the Son has the Father; everyone who confesses the Son has the Father also. ²⁴ Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵ And this is what he has promised us, eternal life. 1 John 2:18-25

Hurry up! We're going to be late! It sounds like the writer of 1st John is in a hurry. He's in a hurry to warn people about the antichrists who have come and are coming. What is the antichrist? One who denies that Jesus is the Christ. One who puts themselves in the place of Christ. An antichrist puts themselves at the top of the list, where Christ belongs.

This passage tells the readers that they know better and not to believe in those who deny Christ. The writer wants the readers to keep the faith, to abide in Christ, to believe that Christ did come in the flesh. Another thing that can separate Christ from an antichrist is love, for God is love. His point throughout this letter is that you can't love God without loving your neighbor. That may be another way to distinguish if someone is an antichrist.

We might use the term "antichrist" loosely about a world leader or someone else in power. The important thing for us to believe is that Jesus is the Christ, that Christ came in the flesh and that Christ saves us from sin, death, and the power of the devil. Jesus Christ is the only one who promises us eternal life and delivers on that promise. Thanks be to God.

Loving God, help us to be firm in our faith and trust in your promises. Guide us and lead us only to you, the only true Christ. Amen.

2nd Sunday in Lent, March 16

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." ³² He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.'" Luke 13:31-32

The Pharisees seemed concerned that Herod wanted to kill Jesus. I'm sure Jesus knew about Herod's evil plans. Jesus tells them he has things to do, as if to say this work is more important right now. I'm going to die soon anyway, and it won't be at Herod's hands.

I love when Jesus calls Herod "that fox." He had been again lamenting over Jerusalem, that a ruler was opposing him. He calls him a fox to show that he is cunning and ruthless, while he later likens himself to a hen who gathers her chicks under her wings for safety. Unlike Herod who sneaks around hunting his prey, Jesus is like a mother hen who provides shelter and safety for the vulnerable among us.

These verses also point to Jesus' death. He basically wanted the Pharisees and Herod to know that he was still working: casting out demons and curing people today and tomorrow. Then on the third day, he would finish his work. I imagine no one understood what he meant by that statement, that on the third day he would finish his work. I connect that to the Easter story, that he was raised on the third day to conquer sin and the devil and to give us eternal life. He finished his life's work.

As we journey through this Lenten season, how are you seeing Jesus or God differently? Can you imagine Jesus as a mother hen with her protective wings around you?

Nurturing God, you are always at work. In the mystery of the cross, you promise everlasting life to the world. Gather all peoples into your arms, just as a hen gathers her chicks. Shelter us with your mercy and love, that we may rejoice in the life we share in your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

March 17

¹⁸ *For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 1 Corinthians 1:18*

One of my favorite Lenten hymns is “Beneath the Cross of Jesus.” It was written by Elizabeth C. Clephane, with the music we use by Frederick C. Maker. I like to read about hymns in the books *Then Sings My Soul Book 1* and *Book 2*, by Robert J. Morgan. He writes that Elizabeth was a poet and her poems were published in the Scottish magazine, *The Family Treasury*. This hymn was discovered after her death. The first time it was sung, the preacher changed the topic on what he was going to preach because he was so moved by this hymn.

I especially like verse 2 of this hymn:

*Upon the cross of Jesus my eyes at times can see
The very dying form of one who suffered there for me;
And from my contrite heart, with tears, two wonders I confess:
The wonder of his glorious love, and my unworthiness.*

Well, I like this verse as well:

*I take, O cross, your shadow for my abiding place;
I ask no other sunshine than the sunshine of his face;
Content to let the world go by, to know no gain or loss;
My sinful self my only shame, my glory all the cross.*

Perhaps you could meditate on this hymn or on one of your favorite hymns today. Read the words or sing the hymn and let the words and the music just wash over you. Try to do this a few times to let the words and music really sink in. May you find an abiding place in the cross, where Jesus died for you and for me.

Holy Jesus, you are the Holy One who suffered for us. Forgive us for our sins and save us from temptation. Thank you for being our Savior. Thank you for all the hymnwriters and composers who bring such a depth of meaning to our lives and in our worship. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

April 7

May he grant you your heart’s desire and fulfill all your plans. Psalm 20: 4

Have you ever prayed that prayer from Psalm 20? I haven’t and I think it is lovely. So, we’re going to meditate on that today.

Sit in a comfortable seat. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths.

First, we will pray this prayer for ourselves:

God, please grant that you will give me my heart’s desire and fulfill all of my plans.

Repeat that 3 times.

Now, we will pray this prayer for one other person. I invite you to have that person in your mind as you pray:

God, please grant that you will give to _____ (Name) their heart’s desire and fulfill all of their plans.

Repeat 3 times.

Now, we will pray this prayer for as many people as you like. I invite you to have those people in your mind as you pray:

God, please grant that you will give to _____ (Names) their hearts’ desires and fulfill all of their plans.

Repeat 3 times.

Take a few deep cleansing breaths and close with the Lord’s Prayer.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

5th Sunday in Lent, April 6

Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." John 12:7-8

Mary had just taken a jar of costly perfume and anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. Can you imagine that? She loved him so much that she used all of that expensive perfume on his feet and then wiped his feet with her hair. The whole house was full of the fragrance of this perfume. Judas Iscariot asked, "Why didn't we sell this perfume and give that money to the poor?" Judas didn't seem to care about the beautiful act of anointing that Mary did for Jesus or that she was the only one who washed his feet.

Jesus said, "Leave her alone." I wonder if he yelled or just said it kindly. He knew that she bought it to prepare him for his burial. Perhaps he could still smell this beautiful scent as he lay hanging on the cross. He knew Mary's heart and her intentions were pure, where Judas's were not. Jesus knew that it is good to give things to those who were poor, but he also knew that he wouldn't always be with them in the flesh like he was now. Mary opted for the better part, to anoint Jesus and get him ready for the time of his death.

Soon, Jesus will enter Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, so all of these scripture readings from the Gospels are leading up to that day and his death and resurrection. If you were in that room that night, how would you prepare him for his burial? Would you be willing to wash his feet and wipe them with your hair? It's quite a generous service Mary provided. May we also be generous in our serving to others.

Ah, holy Jesus. You can't even enjoy an anointing without someone finding fault in it. Forgive us for being critical and judgmental like Judas at times. Help us to be more generous and loving like Mary. May our love rise up to you like a beautiful fragrant perfume. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

March 18

¹⁷ And now, therefore, let the power of the LORD be great in the way that you promised when you spoke, saying,¹⁸ 'The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation.' ¹⁹ "Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have pardoned this people, from Egypt even until now." Numbers 14:17-19

Moses was advocating to the Lord for the people. The people of Israel had complained and wept and cried, "Oh, that we had died in Egypt! Why did you bring us here?" The Lord was angry and threatened to strike them with pestilence and disinherit them. Yikes!

Can you imagine talking with God face to face, and even questioning God about the plan? Moses did. Maybe you do too, at times. Moses advocated for the people and reminded God about being slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He asked that the Lord would forgive the sins of the people and pardon them according to the Lord's steadfast love.

When you're advocating for someone or something, it's always a good idea to remind the person of their excellent qualities. Kids do this all the time, especially late at night. "Aw, mom, I love you so much. You make the best cookies!! Did I tell you I need to bring a dessert to school tomorrow for the entire class? I know you can do it, mom!"

Sometimes we do that with God, too. Please forgive me or them for what we did. We didn't know what we were doing. We're sorry! Remember how much you love us!

After Moses spoke, God changed God's mind and didn't bring the pestilence and disinheritance on the people. God hears us and listens. Sometimes God changes God's mind. Amazing!

Holy God, you are the Almighty, the Lord, the ruler of heaven and earth. Thank you for hearing us and changing your mind sometimes. You are slow to anger and abound in steadfast love for us and we thank you for that. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 19

*O give thanks to the Lord; call on his name;
make known his deeds among the peoples. Psalm 105:1*

Today, I invite you to think about all the good things the Lord has done in your life and give thanks. It might be fun to make a list. Sit down for a few minutes or an hour and just write out all the things the Lord has done for you. If you've lived a long life, your list might be really long. Or, if you've just started to know the Lord, your list might be shorter. Who knows? I think once you start writing and giving thanks, you might be there all day.

If you need help getting started, read this psalm. It talks about all the things the Lord has done, from Abraham to Joseph, to Jacob, to Moses and Aaron, ending with bringing his people out with joy and singing.

Or, to be somewhat creative, you might start out with this familiar phrase from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, adjusted for our God: "How do I love thee, O Lord? Let me count the ways." See if you can find 25 ways or reasons you love the Lord. I'll be curious to learn if you can come up with 50 or 100 ways!

I'm thankful the Lord is merciful and forgiving, loving and just. I'm thankful the Lord is a beautiful creator, ever-present guide and Savior. I'm thankful for God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, one in three and three in one. I'm thankful for this season of Lent where we can take time to dwell with the Lord, giving thanks for all of the Lord's blessings in our lives. I'm thankful for family and friends, for health and home. I'm thankful for Shepherd of the Hills. I'm thankful for all who work at Shepherd and all who volunteer there. I'm thankful for our members, visitors, guests and all the ways God is at work in our midst. I'm thankful for you who are reading this today!

Gracious and loving God, you are holy, you are wise, you are faithful, you are just. Forgive us for not pausing often enough to give you thanks. We love you and are so thankful for all of your blessings in our lives. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

April 5

But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all!"⁵⁰ You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed."⁵¹ He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation,⁵² and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. John 11:49-52

Caiaphas was a high priest who went against what the others were saying. The rest of them were concerned about Jesus. Jesus had just brought Lazarus back to life. Many had seen what he did and believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. So, the chief priests and Pharisees called a meeting to figure out what to do with him. They were scared. They didn't know what to do. They were afraid that he would go on and on and everyone would come to believe in him. They were afraid that Rome would come and destroy their whole nation. Caiaphas had prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation and to gather into one the children of God. But they didn't really listen to him or understand what he was saying. So, they planned to put him to death.

Imagine that for a minute. Someone comes and heals people, raises people from the dead, and their solution to "this problem" is to put him to death. Seems odd, doesn't it? They were so afraid of losing their power or losing their nation to the Romans, that they decided to kill him, the one who was saving people and giving them their lives back.

Sometimes that happens with power. People get scared of losing their power and so they squash whatever is threatening them. Are you courageous enough to stand up to power like Caiaphas did? What would you say in this situation?

Caring God, thank you for sending Jesus to save us all. Give us strength and courage to speak up when things aren't right. Inspire us with wisdom and insight. Help our words to speak truth to power when necessary. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

April 4

*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.
2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for
them." 3 The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.
Psalm 126:1-3*

Have you ever felt God speaking to you in a dream? God spoke to people in dreams throughout scripture. Now, granted, they weren't all good dreams. Sometimes the dreams predicted something awful, other times dreams were confusing. But here in Psalm 126, the dreams filled their mouths with laughter and their tongues with shouts of joy! Their fortunes were restored; it was a very good dream.

Several years ago, two of my colleagues at work were dealing with cancer. We prayed for them and we worried about them. We heard them recall their treatments and how they felt. They were tired and felt awful. Both of them worried that they would lose their hair and wondered if they would ever feel good again. We tried to support them as best as we could. One night, I had a dream about one of them. I dreamt that she was coming into a building and she looked radiant. Her hair was blowing in the wind, like a model. She was smiling, looked healthy and beautiful. So, I told her that dream and she was so happy to hear that! It felt like God gave me that dream so that I could remind her that the Lord does good things for us.

Do you have dreams like that? God might be trying to tell you something or be trying to give you a message for someone else. If you have a dream and you're not sure if it was God speaking to you or the pepperoni pizza you had last night, pray about it. Ask God to help you discern. Be willing and open to sharing that message if that's God's desire. You just might make someone's day when you remind them that God does great things for us.

*Glorious God, you are the Lord of heaven and earth, the creator of us all.
Thank you for speaking to us in dreams. Help us to discern the message in
those dreams and if it is something you want us to learn or share with
others. Make us ready messengers to deliver your messages of hope and
good news to others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

March 20

*Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up quickly. He said to
his counselors, "Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?"
They answered the king, "True, O king." 25 He replied, "But I see four men
unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt, and the
fourth has the appearance of a god." Daniel 3:24-25*

King Nebuchadnezzar was so mad at Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that his face was distorted! They had disobeyed his commands to bow down and worship his golden statue. They wouldn't do it. They told him they would not serve his gods. So, he was irate and turned the fiery furnace up to 7 times the normal heat. The men were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace.

That's when things got really interesting. The king asked, "Weren't there three men thrown into the furnace? Because I see four men and one is walking like a god." Hmmm, interesting. Then he commanded them to come out and they had no signs of the fire on them. They didn't even smell like a fire. Then he blessed the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and made a decree that no one can utter any blasphemy against their God.

An experience with God changed the King. Not quite to the level of actual belief in God, perhaps, but he changed his mind about making everyone worship his golden statue. He could see with his eyes and smell with his nose that their God had protected them. Could he say that about his golden statue? Uh, no. Absolutely not.

When you are walking through fire or dealing with a horrible ordeal, who do you trust? Our God is the only one who has promised to be with us always. Our God is the only one who can do amazing things like protect people from fiery furnaces or a lion's den. How has God protected you lately? Give God thanks and praise!

*Amazing God, you are mighty, loving, protective and just. Thank you for
protecting us when we are in danger. Watch over all who put their lives on
the line every day to protect others. Watch over us as well. Help us to
worship and trust in you alone, for you are worthy and holy. In Jesus' name
we pray. Amen.*

March 21

⁶Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Revelation 3:6

The book of Revelation can be a difficult book to read. But some people love this book and find it fascinating and interesting. There is always a lot to learn every time you read this book. You may know that it is the last book in the Bible and note that it is Revelation, not Revelations, even though there are a series of revelations in the book.

Revelation calls readers to be faithful to God and to resist all the forces of evil in our world, confident that God will prevail. John sees a vision that encourages him to write to the seven churches in Asia Minor. They are called to repent and be encouraged.

In verse 3, John is writing to the church in Sardis. They are a faith community in name only. They go through the motions of worship but don't show any real commitment to their faith. Yikes. John tells them to wake up, to remember what they heard from God, obey and repent. He writes that those who conquer will be clothed in white robes, as a sign of purity, and he will confess their name before his Father and the angels.

What would John write about the churches in America? How about the church in Shoreview called Shepherd of the Hills? Would he tell us to also wake up, obey and repent? I'm not sure, but I do know that many of you do exactly as John wrote. You obey, you repent and you remain faithful to God in all you do. Jesus is the center of your faith life. That's what we all can hope for.

For all of us, even in the midst of evil in this world, we can be confident that God will prevail, that he is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, who was and who is and who is to come. Thanks be to God!

Loving Jesus, let our faith begin and end with you, the Alpha and the Omega. Forgive us when we just go through the motions. Help us to repent, obey and put you at the center of our lives. When there seems to be evil all around, remind us that you have conquered all the forces of evil that defy God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

April 3

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel; Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. ²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴Because you are precious in my sight and honored and I love you... Isaiah 43:1-4a

I love this text! It's the only place in scripture where God says specifically, "I love you!" Write this on your hearts, print it out and put it where you can see it daily. This is very important to remember. Plus, we are told not to be afraid, for God has redeemed us. When we walk through the waters, God will be with us. The rivers will not overwhelm us. When we walk through fire, we will not be burned. The flame shall not consume us.

Why? Because we are precious in God's sight. Yes! You and me – we're precious in God's sight. Isn't that amazing?! And God loves us. The Bible tells us so.

Remember the song, "The B-I-B-L-E, yes that's the book for me. I stand alone on the word of God. The B-I-B-L-E!" That B-I-B-L-E tells us that the great God of heaven and earth loves us. We are precious in God's sight and honored and God loves us.

How about this song, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so." It tells us so right in Isaiah 43.

Loving God, thank you for loving us and thinking us precious in your sight. Remind us how much you love us every day. When we are feeling down or unloved, surround us with your loving care. Help us to share your love with everyone we meet today. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

April 2

⁶ When the vessels were full, she said to her son, "Bring me another vessel." But he said to her, "There are no more." Then the oil stopped flowing. ⁷ She came and told the man of God, and he said, "Go sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your children can live on the rest." 2 Kings 4:6-7

This widow was in dire financial trouble. Her husband was dead and a creditor had come to take her children as slaves. She cried to Elisha. All she had left was some olive oil. Elisha told her to gather empty vessels, to borrow from the neighbors and gather as many as she could. Then she was supposed to close the door behind her and her children and start pouring oil into all these vessels. When each jar was full, she set it aside and kept pouring until all the vessels were full. When there were no more vessels, and only then, did the oil stop flowing.

Elisha told her to sell the oil, pay her debts and live on the rest. He saved her and her children from a life of financial and familial ruin. Can you imagine selling your children to pay your debts while you're dealing with the loss of your husband?

The book of 2nd Kings is the history of the kings of Judah and Israel. There are stories of failure and judgement and also stories of miracles showing God's provision in tough times. God provides even when we are down to our last drop.

How has God provided for you recently? Maybe you got a new job or an unexpected check in the mail. Perhaps someone shared a meal with you when your cupboards were empty. Maybe you experienced healing and hope when you thought all was lost.

Like the oil, God's love keeps flowing and flowing into all of our empty vessels. Let that good news fill you up today with joy and hope!

Abundant God, holy Jesus, amazing Spirit, thank you for filling us up when we are empty. Thank you for the miracles you provide every day. Forgive us for looking elsewhere to fill our cups. Help us to knock, ask, and seek only you and what you can give. Thank you for the blessings you give us anew every day. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

March 22

O God, you are my God; I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. ² So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. ³ Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. ⁴ So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name. ⁵ My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips ⁶ when I think of you on my bed and meditate on you in the watches of the night, ⁷ for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. ⁸ My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me. Psalm 63:1-8

Psalm 63 is a trust psalm. Maybe you can tell just by reading these first eight verses. The psalmist recalls being close to God and wanting to find God in that way again. Perhaps that's a good thing to meditate on today. Seeking God.

Find a comfortable chair, take a few deep breaths and close your eyes. Say the following:

<i>O God, you are my God</i>	take a few deep breaths
<i>O God, I seek you</i>	breathe deeply
<i>O God, my soul thirsts for you</i>	breathe deeply
<i>O God, my flesh faints for you</i>	breathe deeply
<i>O, God you are my God</i>	take a few deep breaths

Sit in the silence and repeat as often as you'd like.

Close with this prayer or one of your choosing:

Awesome and wonderful God, you are our God and we seek you with our whole heart. Forgive us when we seek after other things. Draw near to us as we thirst for you. Fill us with your everlasting water so that we will never thirst again. Revive our fainting flesh so that we will have strength to follow you in all that we do. You are our God and we long to be close to you, now and always. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

3rd Sunday in Lent, March 23

At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³ No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish as they did. ⁴ Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the other people living in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish just as they did.” Luke 13:1-5

This is a fun, uplifting text for the 3rd Sunday in Lent, isn't it? The title in my Bible says, “Repent or Perish.” Well, let's see what was going on for them when this was written. Pontius Pilate was the governor and was reportedly a cruel leader who didn't respect Jewish religious practices. We hear more from Pilate later in Lent.

These words were written as a response to stories about people who suffered awful deaths. Pilate might be a cruel governor, but what about the tower of Siloam that randomly killed 18 people when it fell on them? Jesus tells them that they aren't immune to that either if they don't repent. Not much comfort from our Savior here.

Jesus goes on with the parable of the barren fig tree and how it was helped by the gardener so that it might bear fruit the next year. Like their fleeting lives, this fig tree might also be running out of time. So, what should we do with our one life? How should we live with the remaining time we have? Do we live in fear and shrivel up like a dying plant? Or, do we repent and try to bear fruit, even when we might not have much time left?

I think you know the answer to those questions. So, how now shall we live? Jesus invites them to repent and live according to God's will and God's ways. He might also be suggesting to them that there is a holy gardener providing refreshing water, healthy soil, beneficial pruning and necessary sunshine to provide the growth and health every tree needs.

Loving and holy God, forgive us when we sin. Forgive us for worry, doubt, fear and not trusting in you. Please provide for us what we need every day so that we might repent and bear fruit, fruit that will last. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

April 1

Fools say in their hearts, “There is no God.” They are corrupt; they commit abominable acts; there is no one who does good. ² God looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. Psalm 53:1-2

Funny how this verse starts with “Fools” on this April Fools' Day! Have you been fooled by anyone yet? My sister was a master at fooling her husband and children. Every year, she had a special plan on how she was going to fool them. Every year, her husband and children would think they were ready for whatever joke she was going to play on them, but she would always get them!

April Fools jokes might be funny and innocent but the psalmist was writing here about a different kind of fool, some who say “there is no God.” Do you know people who say that? Maybe with their lips or their lives?

The psalmist writes that they are foolish. How can someone not think God exists? Well, people like to have proof. My brother (who loved to debate) wanted proof and my mom would say, “You just have to believe. You have to have faith.” He would argue, “Well, prove it to me.” Round and round they went, debating the existence of God. My brother went through various stages in his faith life, from being a fool (in the psalmist's words) to reading the entire Bible and attending church regularly. Even for someone who wanted proof, he seemed to have found what he was looking for in God.

We also may go through various stages in our faith life, from awe and wonder, to disbelief, to apathy, to zeal, to routine, to renewal and transformation. It can be a struggle to believe at times. That's when the community of faith is there to believe for you. When you can't pray, we pray with and for you. When you have doubts, we listen, we encourage, and we share our faith with you. God is there with you every step of the way, through every stage in your faith journey, leading, guiding, inviting you. And, always welcoming you home, like the welcome the prodigal son received.

Almighty and ever-living God, forgive us when we are fools in our faith life. Help us when we doubt. Intercede for us when we can't pray. Surround us with the community of faith. Draw us close and be present to us always. In your holy and blessed name we pray. Amen.

March 31 The Day of Atonement

²⁶ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ²⁷ "Now, the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement; it shall be a holy convocation for you: you shall humble yourselves and present the Lord's offering by fire, ²⁸ and you shall do no work during that entire day, for it is a Day of Atonement, to make atonement on your behalf before the Lord your God. ²⁹ For those who do not humble themselves during that entire day shall be cut off from the people. ³⁰ And anyone who does any work during that entire day, such a one I will destroy from the midst of the people. ³¹ You shall do no work. This is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your settlements. ³² It shall be to you a Sabbath of complete rest, and you shall humble yourselves, on the ninth day of the month at evening, from evening to evening you shall keep your Sabbath." *Leviticus 23:26-32*

This reading describes the Day of Atonement. In this section of Leviticus, the Lord is giving Moses instructions on how to observe appointed festivals: the Sabbath, the Passover, the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Offering of First Fruits, the Festival of Weeks, the Festival of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Festival of Booths. Leviticus is a book of law, so here God tells Moses how to keep the law and worship practices.

Those who are Jewish celebrate the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur in the fall. It is the holiest day of the year and is a day of cleansing, purification, fasting, worship and asking forgiveness from God and others.

Have you ever noticed that Atonement can be broken down into: At-One-Ment? It is a day to be at one with God and with our neighbor. Why do you think it is important to be at one with God and with our neighbor? Is it easy to do in these days of discord around every corner? No, it is not. But God knew that it would be good for our souls to be at one with God and with our neighbor, hard as it might be.

As I reread this passage, I noticed that being humble and resting were key practices for this Day of Atonement. Maybe that's a good place to start.

Holy God, forgive us for not being one with you and our neighbor. Heal division, give us rest and a humble curiosity about others. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

March 24

Therefore you are without excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others, for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. Romans 2:1

"Yeah, but they cut in front of me. Yeah, but they are doing it that way and that's wrong. Yeah, but they are mean/bad/evil/hurtful/insensitive/cruel." To those Paul writes, "But you have no excuse when you judge others for when you do so, you also condemn yourself because you are doing the same things."

This reading hits close to home for me, perhaps it does for you, too. It's like this: I'm driving in the car minding my own business and then someone cuts right in front of me and I have to slam on my brakes. I judge them for being a bad driver and continue on my way. Guess what happens? A few minutes later, I realize I'm in the wrong lane, cut in front of someone else (but I'm sure I gave them a lot more room!) and make them slow down. You see, I had an excuse for doing what I did. Or, did I?

We often excuse our bad behavior with what we consider a "good reason" but we don't give others the same benefit of the doubt. Paul tells us right here that we can't excuse our bad behavior and continue to judge others. When we do, we condemn ourselves already.

Hmmm. Guess I need to work on that.

What if instead of judging someone for doing something we might find judge-worthy, we give them the benefit of the doubt? What if we considered that they were doing the best they can, or that they had a good reason for doing what they did? Now, that doesn't mean we excuse all forms of evil or bad behavior, we just excuse ourselves from being the judge and jury. Let God be the judge.

Wise and powerful God, your wisdom knows no bounds and your justice brings righteousness and truth. Forgive us for being judge and jury. Forgive us when we do the same things we judge others for doing. Encourage us with your wisdom, truth, grace and mercy. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

March 25 Annunciation of our Lord

The angel (Gabriel) said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God." Luke 1:35

Today we celebrate the Annunciation of our Lord, when the angel Gabriel came to Mary and told her she would become pregnant when the Holy Spirit came upon her and she would give birth to a child who would be the Son of God. Imagine hearing that as a young, poor, unwed mother.

Some things are impossible for us, even to imagine, but nothing is impossible for God. What has been impossible in your life? Was there a situation that you could never have handled without God?

As I write this, I remember that two years ago, my sister died suddenly two days after Christmas. This was the same year that my brother died 8 months prior. He had a long-time illness so it was almost a relief when he went to see Jesus. But my sister seemed alive and well and so it was a complete shock when she died.

The only way, and I mean the only way, I got through that terrible time was with God. On top of the shock of her sudden death, I had influenza, bronchitis and a sinus infection. Those were good times. NOT.

Getting through the planning of her funeral, the visitation, and the funeral itself was brutal. There were so many tears. So much sadness and I felt physically terrible as well. I got through that difficult time with God. I felt God's presence, I felt God's support and encouragement, I felt the peace of Christ pass all my understanding.

Maybe Mary felt the same way. She got through the annunciation, the pregnancy and the birth of her first-born Son all with the help of God. She would need that help as she gazed at him hanging on a cross when he was a young man. How much she needed God's help and presence in her life. We do, too. With God, nothing is impossible.

Loving God, thank you for your abiding presence in those impossible times in our lives. Abide with us always and forever. In your holy name. Amen.

4th Sunday in Lent, March 30

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Luke 15:1-2

My husband and I were flying back from Florida a few years ago. When we got to our seats, there was a young man sitting in the window seat and I had the middle seat and my husband had the aisle seat. This young man was dressed in a crisp white T-shirt and some strange looking pants. I asked him if Florida was home for him or if he was going home to Minnesota. He said, "I just got out of prison, so I'm going home to Minnesota for the first time in several years." Wow.

The only thing he had with him were his discharge papers. He only had the prison-issued "going-home" clothes on his back and the papers in his hand. I asked him if he was hungry and he said, "I'm starving!" So, I gave him the granola bars I had and the snacks we got from the flight attendants. We talked with him the entire ride home. He was probably the most fascinating airline seat-mate I've ever had.

He talked about his sins and the crime he committed and he talked about his dedication to stay clean and out of trouble. I offered prayers for this young man that he would be able to keep his commitments to stay clean and out of trouble. His family was picking him up at the airport and he was excited to see them.

Imagine welcoming sinners and eating with them. It felt like that's what we did in a way, although he was already there so we didn't necessarily welcome him. I think he welcomed us.

The Pharisees and scribes grumbled about Jesus welcoming sinners and even eating with them. Isn't that what he does every week when we receive Holy Communion?

Holy and loving Jesus, thank you for welcoming us sinners to your table every week. Forgive us for thinking we are holier than others, when all have fallen short and sinned. Be with those who are getting a fresh start. Bring repentance, transformation, justice, healing and hope to us all. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 29

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

²*Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity and in whose spirit there is no deceit. Psalm 32:1-2*

When I bring communion to people, I do a short worship service that includes confession and forgiveness. When I tell people all of their sins are forgiven, I sometimes think they might jump up and down and shout “Hallelujah!” Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven!!

Perhaps we’ve heard that we are forgiven so many times that it doesn’t really sink in. ALL of our sins are forgiven. Yes, that one. Yep, that one, too. Yes, even those. They are ALL forgiven!! Isn’t that great news?

I dreamt that I was at church and the pastor was up front telling us our sins are forgiven. Nobody moved so he yelled, “Aren’t you so happy that your sins are forgiven?!! You should be up here dancing and shouting and praising the Lord.” Maybe that’s how the psalmist felt when he wrote these words.

I invite you to pause right now and confess something you’ve been keeping from God. Confess it, be honest and open. Admit your sins and ask for forgiveness. If you need guidance, feel free to use the confession and forgiveness below:

Compassionate One,

You are slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, but our lives do not always reflect you and your love for the world. We do not show others the tender compassion you have shown to us. We do not welcome others with the radical hospitality you grant to all people. We oppress others, even though you have set us free again and again. We squander the abundant gifts of the earth. Transform our lives and guide us again in the way of the cross. Amen.

Beloved in Christ, God’s arms are always stretched open wide to welcome the wandering ones home. In Christ your sins are forgiven. You have a place in God’s house forever. Amen.

March 26

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but a new creation is everything! Galatians 6:14-15

Issac Watts published the hymn “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” in 1707 and it was an instant success. His brother had encouraged him in a letter in 1700 to share with the world his hymns, in hopes of reviving the dying devotion of the age.

In 1698, Isaac Watts preached his first sermon and in 1702 became the first pastor of London’s church at Mark Lane (according to Robert J. Morgan). The church revived and in fact, grew out of its too small building. And this hymn has lived on for years and years, hopefully doing what his brother said it would. Isaac Watts published over 800 hymns.

Today, you might want to meditate on the words to this beloved hymn:

*1 When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.*

*2 Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast save in the death of Christ, my God!
All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them through his blood.*

*3 See, from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down.
Did e’er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown?*

*4 Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.*

Paul wrote in Galatians that we boast of nothing else but the cross of Christ. For it is in the cross of Christ, where sorrow and love flow mingled down, that we become a new creation. May it be so.

Ah, holy Jesus, help us to survey the wondrous cross on which you gave your life for us. We see your head, your hands, your feet, sorrow and love flowing down. Such love and sorrow for us, the whole realm. Your love is so amazing, so divine. May it demand my soul, my life, my all. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

March 27

⁴ Then Joshua summoned the twelve men whom he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe. ⁵ Joshua said to them, "Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, ⁶ so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' ⁷ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever." Joshua 4:4-7

It seems that everyone knows that Moses parted the Red Sea. There are comics about it, jokes about it, mentions of it even in non-religious circles. This crossing of the Jordan River is less well-known, but no less important.

After they had crossed the Jordan once, the Lord told Joshua to take 12 men, one from each tribe and to each carry a stone. Then they were to lay them down where they camped. Then they were to pass by the ark of the Lord into the middle of the Jordan and lay them down. The stones were a memorial for future generations to remind them that when the people crossed over the Jordan River, the waters were cut off.

Just like when the Israelites crossed the Red Sea and the waters were parted, the Jordan River was parted for the entire nation with Joshua. Both times, they were entering the promised land. The Red Sea at the beginning and the Jordan River at the end.

This marks an end of the wilderness period for the people of Israel. The Jordan River is the last boundary before the people reach the promised land. Maybe you've had some wilderness periods in your life. I invite you to tell future generations how God has been present in your life, leading you and guiding you.

Ever-present God and Holy Spirit, thank you for being with us and guiding us through the wilderness places in our lives. Help us to tell others, especially future generations, so that they might know you and your presence forever. Amen.

March 28

⁶ So we are always confident, even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord— ⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸ Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to be pleasing to him. 2 Corinthians 5:6-9

I've read this scripture many times to people who are suffering in the body and to people who are ready to be at home with the Lord. Paul is basically saying here that whether we are at home in our body (on earth) or at home with the Lord (in heaven), we make it our aim to please the Lord.

For Paul, living was good but dying was even better. He wanted to be with the Lord. I've known many people who feel the same way. In fact, some pray every day to be home with the Lord. They feel their bodies giving out; maybe their bodies don't feel quite like home anymore. They know they would feel much more at home with the Lord.

And yet, if you are reading this, you are living in your body on this earth. So how do we become more at home in our bodies, even if they are falling apart?

Along with prayer and breathwork, I like to do yoga because it helps me connect with my breath and my body and it brings calm to my soul and spirit. It's not for everyone but I have found that it works for me to help me be at home in my body. One thing my yoga teacher often says is, "Breathe lots of love in, breathe lots of love out." It's a reminder to connect with our bodies and our breath, to feel the love and share that love with others.

Let's try that right now. Sit in a comfortable seat, close your eyes and relax your shoulders. As you take in a deep breath, say to yourself, "breathe lots of love in" and as you exhale, say "breathe lots of love out." Do this 3 times or as many times as you'd like. Take one cleansing breath and pray this prayer:

Holy Creator, thank you for creating our amazing bodies. Forgive us when we get frustrated with them. We look forward to being at home with you but while we are at home in our bodies, bring healing and comfort. Help us to breathe in your love and share it with others today. In Jesus' name. Amen.