

Lent 2023

Sharing the Story

The Congregational Church of Brookfield

Lenten Devotional Guide

Offered to you by:
The Deacons of CCB

“Sharing the Story”

It’s ironic that George Stevens’ 1965 film version of the life of Jesus, “*The Greatest Story Ever Told*,” definitely was *not* one of the greatest movies ever made. However, it was one of the *longest* biblical epics ever put on screen. And why not? They had 6 million feet of film to work with – some 1 136 miles – enough to stretch 12 times over the distance Mary and Joseph had to hike from Nazareth to Bethlehem!

With a running time of 4 hours and 20 minutes (plus an intermission!) this plodding and solemn retelling of various Gospel stories was so full of long pauses and superfluous cinematic shots of the American Southwest that the filmmakers were able to cut 28 minutes from the movie after the premiere without losing any scenes or dialogue!

While many Christians who bought tickets were probably unwilling to confess any negative thoughts, film critics were unafraid of speaking their minds. In the old *Life* magazine, Shana Alexander wrote: “The pace was so stupefying that I felt not uplifted – but sandbagged!” And John Simon of *New York* magazine quipped, “God is unlucky in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. His only begotten son turns out to be a bore.”

But the Good News of God’s love that Jesus shared *is* uplifting, isn’t it? And it is *not* boring, is it? Which raises the question: How are *we* sharing “the greatest story ever told” with people in our world today?

For this Lenten devotional guide, we have invited our Deacons and other writers to answer the question for themselves: Who is Jesus to us? Where have we had moments of fresh vision or inspiration on our own life journeys with Christ? And considering how much our faith (and our church) means to us, how do we share the story with others?

We thank those who wrote or contributed to this year’s Lenten guide, those of you who were willing to wrestle with some of those questions and share with us your stories. In our Lenten reading, reflection and prayer this year, may we all be inspired with new insights and arrive at Easter more willing and able to share with the world “the greatest story ever told,” through our own lens and in our own words.

May your journey through Lent be blessed,

Rev. Bryn Smallwood-Garcia

Draw Closer to God

“Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the Lord your God for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.

~ Joel 2:12-13

This week, Christians around the world will be celebrating Ash Wednesday and the start of Lent. Lent takes place over the forty days before Easter (not counting Sundays), and is traditionally a time of repentance and preparation for the celebration of Easter.

The goal of the Lenten season is to draw closer to God. There are many traditions surrounding this season, but whatever you do, it’s great to start by reflecting on your life, and the parts of your life where you feel disconnected from God and his people. For example, you may have heard about people giving something up for Lent—often things that bring pleasure, like sweets, alcohol or TV. When I was in college, I tried to give up sugar for Lent. It didn’t last long (I have an epic sweet tooth), and one of the reasons I did it is that I was hoping to lose a few pounds. It didn’t have much to do with my relationship to Jesus!

If you plan to give up something, I encourage you to take a different approach. If you are giving something up, do it as an intentional act of worship and sacrifice to God. This year, I am going to try to put away my phone when I get up in the morning, and take that time for intentional prayer. We will see if it is more meaningful than my ineffective sugar fast!

Giving something up is just one way to observe Lent. Maybe, like me, you hope to add something into your life—a time of prayer, or Bible reading. Some believers take these forty days to read through one of the gospels. Another way of observing Lent is through giving—time, money, or talents. Again, your goal should be to see this an act of worship and sacrifice, not just as a good thing to do.

Source: *Words of Hope* by Christy Prins

Submitted by John Pondiccio

Everybody Has a Story

Light your candle. Get calm. Take a few deep breaths. When you exhale, imagine that you were letting go of all the normal things you think about. Now read the scripture passage for today, John 8:1-11, slowly.

8:1 Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. 3 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, 4 they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. 5 Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" 6 They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. 9 When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. 10 Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

Do you get the picture? A woman had an affair. The Jewish law (the law of Moses) dictated a mandatory minimum sentence: death by stoning. A group of by the book a literalists (scribes and Pharisees) tried to trick Jesus by saying, "Jesus, the Bible says she should be stoned but what do you think?" Perhaps they thought he'd say not to punish her. Then they could hold press conferences accusing him of being soft on crime. Jesus didn't answer directly. He acknowledged the punishment. In essence, he said "go ahead, stone her. She earned it. Anyone who hasn't sinned can throw the first stone."

Look what happened. They all had a story, too – hidden or forgotten for a moment, but right there, on their consciences, in their pasts. They left. Jesus looked directly at the woman and told her he didn't condemn her. Now – don't do it again.

I heard a man say, "We need to be gentle with each other. Everybody's got a story." What's yours? What is the one thing in your life you'd love to take back, to undo? The thing that might get people palming rocks to throw at you? Which memory makes you flinch? We all have one.

Would you be willing to whisper right now to Jesus? Tell him about the memory in your mind, even if you don't really believe he's there. He sees your sin for exactly what it is, unvarnished. He sees it even more clearly than you do. He won't condemn you. Tell him how sorry you are. See if you can feel his hand on your head, blessing you, taking the pain and the guilt away. Now go into your day. Start fresh.

Source: *Unbinding your Soul* by Martha Grace Reese

Submitted by Carol Ford Eagan

Where Do I Begin?

"Dear friends, let us love one another. For love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God."

~ 1 John 4:7

Starting off with my thoughts that I was a good Christian... I began to wonder about that when my first husband was dying of cancer. I thought all I had to do was pray to God and ask for a miracle to save him. I did that several times a day. My husband was not saved by my daily prayers to God. I was not angry...but I wondered why God did not save him.

That worry/concern stuck with me for several years until I met my second husband. That is when I joined the Congregational Church in Norwalk and left my Catholic church behind. During that time I became a Stephen Minister and a Deacon. With all of that going on, I still thought something was missing...why are my prayers not answered? Is there a right way or wrong way to pray?

My church in Norwalk invited my husband and me to participate in a Tres Dias weekend in Ridgefield. My husband was gung-ho but I was very skeptical. I thought it was a scam, but I went anyway. I went on this weekend thinking it would not be a good experience for me. How wrong I was. I experienced the abundance of love that poured in from so very many people...even people that I did not know. The wall that I had put around myself, and one I did not know that I was building to keep out God's love, had started crumbling.

By the end of that weekend, something wonderful had come over me. At the end of the Tres Dias weekend, each person that had attended could stand up in front of the crowd and tell them about their experience. You would never think/see Ruth stand up in front of any group and talk about her experience. But that all changed. I was such a new person, and excited to share my joy of knowing that God loved me, that I could not wait to jump up and tell everyone my story.

When I did, my husband told me later that he did not recognize me. He said that there was such a glow around me that I looked like a different person. Because I let the wall fall down and let God come in, I was born again. God lifted me from sadness I did not know I had, to a joy of feeling His love all around me. It also taught me that life's changes may not come immediately, but with God by our side... and taking one day at a time... He will lead us down the right path.

Prayer: God, grant me the courage to open my heart to you. And give me the wisdom to let you continue to set my paths straight. Amen.

Written by Ruth Allen

Sharing the Light of Jesus

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

~ John 1:5

“When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

~ John 8:12

I remember times when I was in a place of complete darkness. Once it was during a tour of a cavern deep in the earth. The guide turned off the lights so we could experience complete lack of light. We were all relieved to have the lights turned back on even though the lights were quite dim. That dim light glowed bright in that dark place.

Another time it was during a storm when our community lost power. Suddenly there was no light from the streetlights or in my house. My eyes were scanning the room looking for the pinpoints of light that are power indicators on the TV and other appliances.

I kept searching for light in the darkness.

Jesus tells us He is the light of the world. We do not need to walk in darkness. So when we feel like our lives are in a dark place, we can look to find the light of Jesus. When others are experiencing darkness in their lives, we can share the light of Jesus with them to get a light glowing in their darkness.

Keep the light of Jesus shining to overcome darkness!

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for your light that shines in the dark places of our lives. Give us wisdom to share your light with those in need of your guidance and love.

Written by Ruth Reda

Sharing the Story: *What Do We Know?*

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-13

^{2:15}The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

^{3:1}Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” ²The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

⁶So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

⁸They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

⁹But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” ¹⁰He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”

¹¹He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” ¹²The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” ¹³Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.”

At the Home of Martha and Mary

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

~ Luke 10:38-42

This was the scripture reading our family chose for my sister Maggie's funeral service, a rather unusual passage for a funeral but appropriate for who my sister was, and it also illustrated the dichotomy of temperaments between Maggie and her twin. As similar as my sisters were, they were uniquely different, especially at family and social gatherings with their interactions.

Related to this scripture passage Maggie would be Mary sitting at the Lord's feet, and her twin sister would be Martha distracted by all the preparations. For so many years I had empathized with Martha; perhaps it was in my own sense of hospitality and servitude attending to guests. But it wasn't until the pastor at the funeral service during his sermon pointed out the importance of being present and listening which prompted Jesus to respond, "Mary has chosen the better," that I appreciated Mary's choice of action and saw my own sister as a hero for her skills at mingling and making people feel special by her attention to them.

How often do we get distracted by the worries of the world and caught up doing things we feel need to get done? Do we take time to slow down and be present with the Lord and quiet ourselves to listen to His still-speaking voice? Do we sometimes even feel worthy to enter into God's presence or invite Him into our lives?

Submitted by Richard Nyers

God Reaches In

The death of a loved one is a profound experience and can bring up many emotions and many questions. Yet, through any pain and suffering, trials and tribulations, God reaches in. While planning a tribute to my sister's life a song was suggested that rings truth in its lyrics and I offer this as a prayer of hope while we prepare for Easter:

<p><i>"Beloved,"</i> by Jordan Feliz</p> <p>Head full of questions, how can you measure up? To deserve affection, to ever be enough For this existence When did it get so hard? Your heart is beating, alive and breathing And there's a reason why You are essential, not accidental And you should realize</p> <p>Chorus: You are beloved I wanted you to know You are beloved Let it soak into your soul Oh, forget the lies you heard Rise above the hurt And listen to these words You are beloved I want you to know You are beloved You-ou-ou, you-ou-ou, you, you are beloved</p> <p>Sometimes a heart can feel like a heavy weight It pulls you under and you just fall away Is anybody gonna hear you call? (Oh oh)</p>	<p>But there's a purpose Under the surface And you don't have to drown Let me remind you That love will find you Let it lift you out</p> <p>(Chorus)</p> <p>Don't be afraid Don't let hope fade Keep your eyes fixed on the light above In the heartbreak, in your mistakes Nothing can separate you from love Don't be afraid Don't let hope fade Keep your eyes fixed on the light above In the heartbreak, in your mistakes Nothing can separate you from love</p> <p>(Chorus)</p> <p>You-ou-ou, you-ou-ou, you, you are beloved You-ou-ou, you-ou-ou, you, you are beloved (yeah) Don't be afraid Don't let hope fade Keep your eyes fixed on the light above (you are beloved) In the heartbreak, in your mistakes Nothing can separate you from love You are beloved</p>
---	---

Submitted by Richard Nyers

Being Patient

“They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!’ Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, ‘We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people. The LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.’”

~ Numbers 21:4-8

I read the scripture and commentary on how in Numbers 21:4-8 the Israelites, yet again, were growing impatient and speaking against God and Moses. God sent venomous snakes among the people. Many people were bitten and died. God instructed Moses to fashion a replica of a snake and put it on a pole. The remaining people who were bitten by the venomous snakes were told to look at the snake on the pole and they would not die from the snake venom.

The commentary was saying how in the New Testament, in much the same way looking towards Jesus on the cross is meant to heal or save people. For days I could not get what I read out of my head, because it seemed so unrelated to me.

I reread the text. It still seemed to be so unrelated. I asked myself, “What significance do the two stories share?” OK, Think! It seems to me the two stories are both trying to make people realize that they are implicated in the situation at hand. OK, I can accept that. But why is this piece of scripture becoming an obsession with me? Then I remembered something.

I have always wished for scripture that I could interpret as directly validating being a clown or using humor in a Christian context. Those two scriptures aren’t funny, so I asked God, “God are you really communicating with me or am I just convincing myself that you are?” When I rephrased my own question a bit, it started to make more sense. What I realized was that the stories and their lessons are far from funny but they are arguably absurd. How does this help anyone to consider a replica of what poisoned them with a snake bite while looking at their savior on a cross? So I asked God again, “If this is coming from you, God, and it’s meant for me to receive and understand, can you speak in a way that I understand?”

Then it occurred to me: the scripture wants to tell either the participants in the stories and/or the reader to see what they’ve done... to consider what they’ve done... to FACE what they’ve done. I imagined Jesus himself elbowing me in my side and asking “Get it? Get it? You can use your clown face to help people understand a moral lesson, even though it may on the face of it may seem absurd. And yet somehow you convey a message.” Really God? You speak my language by using a bad pun? I knew God was speaking to me at that moment by making me laugh!

I have learned something doing my clown magic shows. I learned that if I share with kids my wide clown gestures and splash a few drops of water on them carelessly that, once in a blue moon, a kid will lose control laughing. That’s the closest to heaven that I’ve ever been.

Prayer: *May we laugh with joy, God, when we find you among our favorite things! Amen.*

Submitted by Pete Lane

My Father's Story

"But in your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

~ 1 Peter 3:15

I will always remember one Easter following my father's passing of a stroke in 1999. My father, Anthony Zaccara, passed away on March 7, 1999, at the age of 66. It was difficult for me to walk into church following his death. I was 36 years old, my children were still young – the youngest was just 3 years old. Every time I entered our church, the tears just flowed as I missed him so. If a hymn was sung in a service that we sang at his funeral, I could not contain my tears.

However, my siblings and I were SO blessed by a gift that my father gave to us. A gift he gave 11 years before his passing. One he probably never realized would make such an impact on me. Immediately after he passed, I searched through my memorabilia box and dug it out. You see, he wrote a letter dated May 18, 1988, and mailed it to my siblings and me. It began....

To my beautiful daughters & sons...

In this letter my father spoke of wanting to reach out to us about his faith.

A **few paragraphs** read as follows:

...At any rate, what I really want to talk about is faith and God – that kind of stuff. I guess the reason I'm writing this instead of talking to each of you is that faith has always been a private thing to me. I feel it's difficult to talk about. But I truly believe in a life hereafter and a merciful (thank goodness) God who sits in judgement. I have found him in my own way, which started with my parents and their faith. In those precious moments before sleep arrives and after sleep has left, I still pray for all I have loved, love still, and myself.

I pass this on to you in this manner because I doubt I'd find a way to talk about it honestly. When I think of the time I spent with each of you on ball fields, academics and behavior modification sessions, I realize that the most important gift to you or message was given little attention. At any rate, there is. I pray that somehow you have discovered Christ or will consider searching for him. He isn't hard to find.

Continued on next page

Thank God I saved this letter and was able to pull it out when he passed away. For THEN it spoke to me.

Easter that year brought a sense of such hope for me. I decided to immerse myself in the events of Easter week in a way that I had never done before. I attended the Maundy Thursday service. I went to the Good Friday morning stations of the cross walk (each of us taking turns carrying the large heavy wooden cross) that began at our church and meandered across the street to St. Joseph's Church lawn, Center School, St. Paul's, the Library lawn, and to Williams Park, where we laid the large cross on the ground and took turns hammering nails into the cross. I had never witnessed or felt anything like that before. It was so powerful, many were crying. I still ponder on that experience to this day.

Then on Easter morning, I attended the Sunrise Service up on Weighart's Hill for the first time in my life. It happened to be an amazingly gorgeous sunrise that year.

On my way home from that service, as I drove up Mountain Road towards Candlewood Lake, everything looked so different. So alive. The trees, the way the air smelled, signs of Spring approaching. Something felt different in me.

I bought a Life Application Study Bible that year, one that I use regularly now. In that Bible, the "food for thought," as I like to call it, at the bottom of each page states this about 1 Peter 3:15:

Some Christians believe that faith is a personal matter that should be kept to oneself. It is true that we shouldn't be boisterous or obnoxious in sharing our faith, but we should always be ready to give an answer, gently and respectfully, when asked about our faith, our life-style, or our Christian perspective. Can others see your hope in Christ? Are you prepared to tell them what Christ has done in your life?

I love to share my father's story, his letter to my siblings and me, and how my faith grew that Easter, from the gift of a letter from a father to his children. Thank you, Dad!

Prayer: *Dear Lord, help us to always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope we have in Jesus. Amen.*

Written by Leslie Sands

Sharing the Climb

The climb was long. The day was hot. Tom had thought ahead and had frozen his water bottle, so his water would stay cold. But once he drank what had melted, he was left with a small chunk of ice rattling in a plastic bottle. That was when Bill, another climber who hadn't thought ahead, asked Tom to share his ice. Bill had plenty of water, but it was hot from their climb in the sun.

Tom was glad to share his ice, and try to break the chunk up so he could pass ice chips into Bill's bottle. After a long frustration, it occurred to Tom to let Bill pour his hot water over the ice and to let Bill drink from his bottle. This moment changed Tom's life. He suddenly realized that if he let things in, he could share more easily than if he kept breaking things down in order to get them out.

As he came back down into the world, he understood the three mysteries of sharing: First, if there's time, let the cold things thaw. But if there is no time, let the warm things in and when necessary, break the hard things remaining and pray like hell you can pass that.

Center yourself, and as you breathe, open your hands, letting the warm things around you in.

As you inhale, let the energy of life thaw your preparations, making you drinkable.

Source: *The Book of Awakening* by Mark Nepo

Submitted by Carol Ford Eagan

The Best Seed

There once was a farmer who grew the most excellent wheat. Every season he won the award for the best wheat in his county.

A woman from a nearby town came to ask him about his success.

He told her that the key was sharing his best seed with his neighbors so they could plant the seed as well.

The woman asked, "How can you share your best wheat seed with your neighbors when they compete with you every year?"

"That's simple," the farmer replied. "The wind spreads the pollen from everyone's wheat and carries it from field to field. If my neighbors grew inferior wheat, cross-pollination would degrade everyone's wheat, including mine. If I'm to grow the best wheat, I must help my neighbors grow the best wheat as well."

This is not only excellent advice for growing the best crops, but also great advice for how to live your life.

If you want to live a meaningful and happy life, help others find happiness.

Remember: The value of your life is measured by the lives you touch with love, kindness, respect, and hope.

Source: *My Incredible Website*, story by John Kremer

Submitted by Jim Eagan

Sharing the Story: *Dazzling Visions*

Matthew 17:1-13

^{17:1}Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.

²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

⁵While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."

⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

¹⁰And the disciples asked him, "Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" ¹¹He replied, "Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; ¹²but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands." ¹³Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.

The Little Children and Jesus

“Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them. Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’”

~ Matthew 19:13-14

We often look at this scripture passage and focus on the disciples rebuking the children from coming to Jesus, annoying Him, and perhaps distracting Him from greater works and teachings, and then hearing Jesus reprimanding the disciples saying, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” We can imagine a warm and fuzzy picture of children gathering around Jesus and seeing Him light up with glee.

We are reminded of this scripture passage with every baptism at church. It’s always a joy to welcome a new little child into the congregation and a faith-life of getting to know Jesus. There is such pride and happiness beaming from the parents in presenting their child, with all their hopes for a bright and blessed future for their child. If we look more closely at verse 13, we see that children weren’t just running up to Jesus, they were being brought to Jesus for Him to place His hands on them and pray for them. There was intention in bringing the children forward – not necessarily for any miracles of healing, but for blessing. Jesus saw this act of love and recognized something in the children.

What is Jesus really trying to tell the disciples? Jesus calls us to come to Him and to the Father with the innocence of a child, this is how we will attain the kingdom of heaven. Can we return to that innocence and that purity with reflection on our lives?

Prayer: *Jesus, help us to recognize our inner child with a desire to be pleasing to you. May we find a way to return to innocence and purity of heart with your help, through prayer and following your teachings, and accepting that you died to wash our sins away. May we be open to rely on the care of a faith community to help lead us to you, just as the people brought little children to you in this scripture passage, that we may be welcomed and embraced by your love. Amen.*

Written by Richard Nyers

Sharing the Story Through Prayer

I didn't grow up in a church. My parents shared Bible stories with me and my sister. I had a children's Bible that I read on my own. But we did not attend church regularly. I did not grow up thinking that you told other people about your beliefs. I had my beliefs. You had yours. I was respectful of other people's beliefs and hoped they were respectful of mine. But we didn't talk about it.

Fast forward many years. I found myself at our church. I remember the first time I heard "joys and concerns" and I thought "this is interesting." I thought maybe it only happened once in a while. But the following week it happened again – people were verbally asking for prayers for other people. I was taken aback. Folks were not only asking for prayers for others, but they were praying for people they didn't know too!

I have always believed in the power of prayer. I have always believed that God is listening. I don't think I ever thought about how many prayers were being heard – how many types of requests and hopes and dreams and prayers of gratitude were coming in every day, every hour, every minute. But this was proof. Just in our church there were dozens, if not hundreds of prayers. I personally began to pray more. I prayed my normal prayers but also prayed for all the other people's prayers too. There was power in this. We were sharing prayer. We were lifting up our issues and concerns and thanks together.

Around this time, a friend at work told me about his sick mother. I said, "What is her name? I will pray for her." A look came upon his face of genuine gratitude. He said, "Thank you so much for that. It means a lot to me, and it will mean a lot to her too." I always knew the power of prayer, but this was when I began to realize the power of sharing our beliefs, the power of sharing the burden, the power of sharing the grief and sorrow – and also sharing the love and joy.

I have told many people that I would pray for them. No one has ever said, "No thanks. I don't believe in that." Many times I had no idea if they were Christian or not. It did not matter. What did matter is that in that moment, we shared a common faith. We shared in God's love. And really – that is all that matters.

Written by Carol Ford Eagan

And so I choose...

“If you are guided by the Spirit, you won't obey your selfish desires. The Spirit and your desires are enemies of each other. They are always fighting each other and keeping you from doing what you feel you should.

“People's desires make them give in to immoral ways, filthy thoughts, and shameful deeds. They worship idols, practice witchcraft, hate others, and are hard to get along with. People become jealous, angry, and selfish. They not only argue and cause trouble, but they are envious. I told you before, and I am telling you again: No one who does these things will share in the blessings of God's kingdom.

“But God's Spirit makes us loving, happy, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled. There is no law against behaving in any of these ways.”

~ Galatians 5:16-17, 19-23 (selected verses)

It's quiet. It's early. My coffee is hot. The sky is still black. The world is still asleep. The day is coming.

In a few moments the day will arrive. It will roar down the track with the rising of the sun. The stillness of the dawn will be exchanged for the noise of the day. The calm of solitude will be replaced by the pounding pace of the human race. The refuge of the early morning will be invaded by decisions to be made and deadlines to be met.

For the next 12 hours I will be exposed to the day's demands. It is now that I must make a choice. And so I choose...

I choose love...

No occasion justifies hatred; no injustice warrants bitterness. I choose love. Today I will love God and what God loves.

I choose joy...

I will invite my God to be the God of circumstance. I will refuse the temptation to be cynical...the tool of the lazy thinker. I will refuse to see people as anything less than human beings, created by God. I will refuse to see any problem as anything less than an opportunity to see God.

Continued on next page

I choose peace...

I will live forgiven. I will forgive so that I may live.

I choose patience...

I will overlook the inconveniences of the world. Rather than complain that the wait is too long, I will thank God for a moment to pray. Instead of clenching my fist at new assignments, I will face them with joy and courage.

I choose kindness...

I will be kind to the poor, for they are alone. Kind to the rich, for they are afraid. And kind to the unkind, for such is how God has treated me.

I choose goodness...

I will go without a dollar before I take a dishonest one. I will be overlooked before I boast. I will confess before I will accuse. I choose goodness.

I choose faithfulness...

Today I will keep my promises. My debtors will not regret their trust. My associates will not question my word. My family and friends will not question my love.

I choose gentleness...

Nothing is won by force. I choose to be gentle. If I raise my voice, may it be only in praise. If I clench my fist, may it be only in prayer. If I make a demand, may it be only of myself.

I choose self-control...

I am a spiritual being. After this body is gone, my spirit will soar. I refuse to let what will pass, rule the eternal. I choose self-control. I will be drunk only by joy. I will be impassioned only by my faith. I will be influenced only by God and taught only by Christ. I choose self-control.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. To these I commit my day. If I succeed, I will give thanks. If I fail, I will see God's grace. And then, when the day is done, I will place my head on my pillow and rest in God's love.

Amen.

Source: *The Choice* by Max Lucado

Submitted by The Rev. Jennifer Whipple

Sharing the Food of Life

“The Twelve came to him and said, “Send the crowd away so they can . . . find food and lodging, because we are in a remote place here.””

~ Luke 9:12

The story of Jesus feeding a crowd of thousands of people weaves together themes from throughout his ministry. These include compassion, power over creation, the ability to sustain life, and involving others in responding to human needs. We also see God’s grace and providence intertwine as Jesus sends the disciples out “to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.”

It is important to realize that the people who heard the gospel and who were healed and fed were not saved and sanctified saints; they were not fully committed disciples who were ready to follow Jesus. Yet when Jesus saw their hurts and needs, he responded with love, knowing that many of them would abandon and even turn against him later. Even so, Jesus was moved with compassion, seeing their need. In the same way, he has compassion today when he sees the hurts and needs of anyone created in the image of God.

We have daily opportunities to come alongside the people around us. It could mean dropping by the hospital or the nursing home for a visit. Perhaps it involves cooking a meal for someone. Maybe it includes simply listening to another person’s story. When we seek to provide what Jesus -offers, we reflect a beautiful picture of God’s compassion and care for others.

Source Unknown

Submitted by Jim Eagan

Don't Worry

“Don't worry about anything: instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Jesus Christ.

~ Philippians 4:6-7

“Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares what happens to you.”

~ 1 Peter 5:7

To look at me you might not guess that I tend to worry about things. I have been called by some a...worrywart. Not a particularly attractive descriptor, but definitely accurate. I think I have worried about stuff all my life. However, the verses above help me through those times when I get lost in my thinking and the worry factor takes over.

Worrying does not accomplish anything. In fact, I once gave advice to a friend waiting for test results: don't worry because if you do and it turns out to be okay... you have worried for nothing; and if it turns out otherwise, then you have worried twice. We need to remember that God loves us and cares for us.

I need to think of these verses and find space to have a conversation with God in prayer. The words need not be formal, but they do need to be honest and from the heart. They must be words that are thankful for the blessings in my life and words to turn over my worry to God.

I find it most often helps if I go for a walk. I am surrounded by God's creation...the sunshine on my face, or raindrops, the cool breezes, being surrounded by an artist's palette of colors, the sound of a trickling stream or birds singing, enveloped as it were by God's love for us. I let myself release the fears, the anxieties, the stress, the worries...I leave myself open for His peace. I speak as if in conversation...knowing that he hears me. Sometimes there are no words at all...but my heart speaks volumes. And as I let myself give over to God all that hangs heavy on my mind and heart...I begin to feel a sense of peace. That peace that passes beyond my understanding...that peace which I may not be able to describe, but can feel its calming throughout my being.

Prayer: *God, we know you care for us, to carry us when we stumble, to surround us with your love and peace. It is our faith in your promises which gives us hope in the tomorrows to come knowing that you are always there for us as we live in the ways of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Written by Marie Immohr

Listen

“Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future.”

~ Proverbs 19:20 ESV

Now he speaks to hundreds if not thousands of people regularly but before that, he said yes to being at an Emmaus Walk weekend where he would hear Christian men talk. He had predetermined that none of the answers that he needed to hear was going to come from a well-dressed, stable minded, smooth talker. INSTEAD he got me.

A group previewed and approved the words that I was going to say, but on the fly, I added just a few more words. I remember them. They were, “I don’t have anything you want. I don’t have money, a house or a wife but I do have a sense of humor and a fierce sense of loyalty to my friends.”

During my talk a disruption broke out in my small audience. Someone went to the man (who I would later befriend) and it wasn’t long before the disruption settled down. He spent the rest of my talk staring at me. A couple more encounters came and went where he remained at a distance. I could feel his eyes on me. We gradually talked and became friends. In time we both were to give talks, so I got to hear his.

During his talk he explained that the answer to his personal struggle came through listening. He claims that the few words that I added to my Christian talk made the difference to his attentive listening, choosing life (when he was considering suicide) and taking to heart the Christian message that I was talking about.

No, I don’t take credit for anything that happened that day. I just had an idea and went with it. Did God put those words on my heart to say? I think so. All that concerns me now is that this big-hearted wonderful guy, whose name is Tom, is in a better place in his mind.

Prayer: *Dear God, there are so many times when I didn’t listen to you and got it wrong. Thank you for second and third chances. Thank you for when I got it right. Thank you for never giving up on me. Please help me with clarity in knowing your message to me. Thank you. Amen.*

Written by Pete Lane

Sharing the Story: *Hearing Is Believing*

John 4:5-42

^{4:5}So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. ⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." ¹⁵The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." ¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." ¹⁷The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" ¹⁹The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." ²⁵The woman said to him, "I know that the Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." ²⁶Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." ²⁷Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" ²⁸Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" ³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him. ³¹Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." ³²But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." ³³So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" ³⁴Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest?' But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' ³⁸I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." ³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word. ⁴²They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

“I Love to Tell the Story”

Hymn by Katherine Hankey and William G. Fischer

I have forever found this song to be so beautiful. Many of you may have never known The Rev. Al Miller, but when he sang with our choir, or sat in the pews, you knew he was “in the house” when he began to sing a hymn. His voice was so moving that it brought me to tears. As I would listen, the words he sang almost came to life. I would close my eyes and get lost. Especially when he sang this song.

I was intrigued to learn of the hymn’s history. In short, “I Love to Tell the Story,” was part of a lengthy, 50-stanza two-part poem, “The Old, Old Story,” written by Katherine Hankey in 1866. In its simplicity, it declares her faith in Jesus. She first put the words to music herself, but it gained a following in 1867 after it was read at a large YMCA gathering in Montreal. The tune and refrain as we know them today are credited to William G. Fisher, in 1869.

Katherine was born in England, the daughter of a wealthy London banker and devoted Christian. Her devotion to her faith and tireless work for the Lord took a turn in her early 30s when she became severely ill. During her long recovery period she wrote a two-part poem. Its first part, “The Story Wanted,” asks who Jesus was. “I Love to Tell the Story” derives from the answer within the second part, “The Story Told.” Her zeal for telling others about Jesus in word and deed was a driving force in her life. The heart of the gospel is “good news.” She proclaimed the good news of salvation in her actions, writing, and music.

Katherine’s life and the hymn she wrote can still instruct us today. The title begs us to examine, “Do we love to tell the story?” The simple story of Jesus’ love for us overflows to declare the true gospel to the world.

I invite you to sing the song or read the words as your prayer today. Think about ways that you might be able to share “the greatest story ever told.” Throughout your day today, find one way to speak or show your love to someone. In doing so, you will be sharing the story of Jesus and his love.

Source: Scripted in parts from Sylvia Schroeder: *Christianity.com* June 2022

Submitted by Leslie Sands

I Love To Tell The Story

Katherine Hankey

William G. Fischer

F F/A B \flat F

I love to tell the sto - ry of un - seen things a - bove, of
 I love to tell the sto - ry: more won - der ful_ it seems than
 I love to tell the sto - ry; 'tis plea - sant to_ re - peat what
 I love to tell the sto - ry, for those who know it best seem

5 C 7 Am/C F C

Je - sus and His glo - ry, of_ Je - sus and_ His love. I
 all the gol - den fan - cies of_ all our gold - en dreams. I
 seems, each time I tell it, more won - der ful - ly sweet. I
 hun - ger - ing and thirst - ing to_ hear it like_ the rest. And

9 F Dm A A 7

love to tell the sto - ry, be - cause I know 'tis_ true: it
 love to tell the sto - ry, it did so much for_ me; and
 love to tell the sto - ry, for some have ne - ver_ heard the
 when, in scenes of glo - ry, I sing the new, new_ song, 'twill

13 B \flat F C 7 F/C C 7 F

sat - tis - fies my long - ings as noth - ing else can do. I
 that is just the rea - son I tell it now to thee.
 mes - sage of sal - va - tion from God's own ho - ly Word.
 be the old, old sto - ry that I have loved so long.

17 C F F/A B \flat F

love to tell the sto - ry, 'twill be my theme in glo - ry, to

21 F/A B \flat F/C C 7 F

tell the old, _ old sto - ry of Je - sus and His love.

Sharing Your Burdens

[Jesus said] “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”
~ Matthew 11:28-30

Are you weary and burdened by life’s challenges? There are so many ways we can get bogged down by different circumstances that it is hard to see a way to keep going. In this scripture, Jesus is inviting us to be yoked to him. As a yoked team, he would share the burden and teach us the way to find rest for your soul.

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson uses contemporary language to help us understand the meaning of this saying from Jesus.

*“Are you tired?
Worn out?
Burned out on religion?
Come to me.
Get away with me and you’ll recover your life.
I’ll show you how to take a real rest.
Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it.
Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.
I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you.
Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”*

If you look to Jesus for guidance in life, he will lead you in a gentle way to discover grace in the hard places.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, thank you for your gentle guidance in managing life’s struggles.
Your way of grace benefits all. Amen.*

Written by: Ruth Reda

Why Should I Keep Persevering When Life Is Hard?

“Then the Lord God called to Adam and said to him, ‘Where are you?’”

~ Genesis 3:9

Do you ever have the sense of being lost, overwhelmed, confused, disoriented... wandering, searching, but not finding your way or perhaps not even sure what the goal or final destination is?

My mom would say when we were lost driving somewhere, “We were not lost, just temporarily misplaced.” You might ask how I might have known that? Well, when she stopped to ask directions from the same police officer on the same corner three times... that was a strong indication!

Some of us go through times in our lives feeling “temporarily misplaced.” I know I do, probably more times than I care to admit or acknowledge.

But there is someone who always has my back even if I haven’t asked for help yet or know just how lost I am. You know who this is right? Yes, God! He knows even without us asking. Although we can ask – through prayer, even as if in conversation. He is ready to listen...ready to help...ready to comfort...ready!

I found these passages from a favorite book of devotions: “Our prayers, we think, send out a signal to let God know how things are going, but, in fact, we have nothing to announce that He isn't aware of. We pray to acknowledge God, petition Him, and yes, commune with Him. God pursues us whether we believe Him, believe in Him, or don't believe at all. He desires the connection: we, sometimes unknowingly, are starved for it. Our prayers, then, do not alert Him to our presence but, rather, alert us to His....remember that He is always looking for us, searching us out, just as He did with Adam so long ago -no matter how lost we are. Whatever messages we send in our prayers, we have a God who will find us, and meet us, and carry us back into His light.”

Prayer: *God, how blessed we are to have you in our lives ready to support us with your light and love...leading us when we are lost...carrying us when we stumble, even if we are not aware of our needs. You generously provide for and protect us. Thank you for being a presence in our lives and for your love.*

Source: Passages taken from *DEVOTIONS for the BEACH* by Miriam Drennan

Written in part by Marie Immohr

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."

~ Luke 15: 1-7

People don't always look the way they feel. They may look put together on the outside, but underneath they may be broken. It is not always easy to find these people in our busy world.

It has been my experience that the happiest people on the outside are all too often holding in their true feelings. Or the people who are always there for others, are the ones that are not getting their needs met. I was a resident assistant in college – I was the person everyone ran to with their problems. There was a time that life wasn't going so well for me, but nobody noticed. Then one day the reverend of my college stopped me and asked me what was going on. I'll never forget that act of kindness, and looking back at it now... I think I was that lost sheep.

But I challenge you to stop and really talk to someone. Don't settle for the surface answers to the questions: How are you? How is your day? Look for the lost sheep. Take the time to have coffee with a friend or take a nice walk together.

Prayer: *Jesus, open my eyes to care for all God's people. Direct me to those who need me most so I can care for them and love them like you do. Amen.*

Written by Linae Wutzl

Where are you, God?

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. For the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

~ Joshua 1:9

There was a time in my life that I was under a lot of stress. There is no reason to go into the details of what caused that stress to share with my God moment. Because of the stressful situation I was dealing with, I had not been able to sleep. My mind was spinning with many different problems and now I could manage them all while caring of my children. All I wanted was a good night's sleep.

Then one evening I called out “Where are you, God?”

The next thing I knew I was waking up!! I had slept!! I was refreshed and had a clear idea about what my next steps would be to manage the stress in my life.

Although I felt abandoned by God, when I called out for help. It was given to me in the form I needed most at that time. SLEEP.

When I acknowledged my need for God, he provided what I needed. I am confident that my life and the lives of my children were impacted by that gift of a good night's sleep.

Trust God with your problems and acknowledge your need for help. That help will come in unexpected ways.

Prayer: *Lord God, I give thanks for your guiding presence in my life. The reassurance that you are always there to meet the needs of those who call on you, is a welcome blessing. Amen.*

Written by Ruth Reda

Accepting Change

“I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

~ Romans 8:39-39

When I was younger, I welcomed change. That was probably because I either instigated the change in my life or at least seemed to have control over them. Life was full of new possibilities as I went off to college, learned new things and made new friends. Change was everywhere, encouraged and embraced.

Now that I am older, I realize that life sometimes leads me to places I don't want to go. I have become resistant to change and often try to cling to the status quo. My head knows that this is impossible, but my heart remains stubborn.

We often don't see the “big picture” in life; only God does. Change can bring about anxiety and fear, until we recognize that God is with us in the midst of all change. Letting go of fear begins when we trust in God. When change comes, we can ask what we may learn from the situation. We can look for what God might be trying to teach us, which can lessen our resistance to change. And we can pray that we will be able to cope with the change and allow God to guide us through it.

Prayer: *O God, walk with us today and be our guide through whatever changes may come. Amen.*

Source: Michael Arnum in *The Upper Room*, February 28, 2018

Submitted by Steve Waschak

Sharing the Story: *Seeing and Knowing*

John 9:1-25

⁹As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

⁸The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹Some were saying, “It is he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” ¹⁰But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.” ¹²They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.” ¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided.

¹⁷So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.” ¹⁸The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” ²⁰His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” ²²His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. ²³Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

²⁴So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.” ²⁵He answered, “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

Devotional Journey: Book of James

On our journey to Heaven, it's clear in Scripture that we'll encounter trouble along the way. We may not always understand why God allows it or makes use of it, but He does. Could it be that He's more concerned with the inside of us rather than the outside circumstances? While on our journey here on this earth, one of the best tests of Christian growth and maturity is difficulties.

This Lenten season, what issues are you facing? If you're like most of us – something is probably going on in your life where you need a miracle. Sometimes celebrating a holiday becomes a day of drudgery rather than celebration. Bringing our problems to God provides Him with opportunities to do His work of grace and healing in our lives and families.

When a Christian goes through personal trials, they discover the kind of courage and faith they really possess. James wrote to his audience to show that God wants to produce in us the kind of faith that overcomes – even when it seems impossible. Peter agreed with James that trials not only reveal our faith, but they also help develop our character – by fire.

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

~ James 1:2-8.

We must have a positive attitude towards trials. By “welcoming” trials we look beyond the immediate experience of discomfort to, by faith, foresee a positive result. As it says in James 1:12, *“Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.”*

Like James, we must understand that God allows tests to show the validity, not the weakness of our faith. God is NOT out to harm us. When we look beyond the present and see the product God intends to produce through trials, we will experience His joy. But in order to embrace the process willingly, we must embrace these two principles: 1) Seek character above pleasure, and 2) Place eternity's rewards above our present moment of difficulties.

Prayer: *God, we know that whatever trials we face, they are but pathways to the discovery of our faith and courage. Help us to keep a positive attitude, knowing that Your grace and healing ways are abundant. Amen.*

Submitted by Jeanine Hanewicz

My Thank You Note to God

“We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers.”

~ 1 Thessalonians 1:2

“We live way too quickly. We race to meetings, blast horns, prioritize and multitask. Very few of us write thank you notes. Few of us slow down enough to see the blessings of our lives, or God’s presence in our lives.”

(from Martha Grace Reese’s book *Unbinding Your Heart*, page 122)

Dear God,

Thank you for always being with me. I have had both high points and low points in my life, but the one constant has been you. I have felt you on my wedding day, on bumpy plane rides, at the birth of my boys, during the death of my dog, and I feel you when I am writing in my daily Gratitude Journal. Thank you for being that constant presence in my life. I appreciate you and am grateful that you are there for me.

Love,
Linae

Prayer: I invite you to take time to write your own thank you note to God:

*Dear God,
Thank you for....*

Love,

Submitted by Linae Wutzl

Do Not Worry

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?”

~ Matthew 6:25-27

I am a worrier, always have been. Letting go and letting God does not come naturally to me. Back in 1981, I bicycled 1,900 miles of a 4,000 mile plus journey that my two CCB church friends Lincoln Shirley and Rob Gerowe went on. I was a bit out of my league as they were athletes and towered over me. Oh, how sweet it was when my ability allowed me to pass Rob and Lincoln on a stretch of road, sparking Rob to say, “Pete, what are you on?”

The Shirley, Gerowe, Lane (and Burdick as my parents were remarried) and Vodra families gave us a very loving send off. I am sorry if I left anyone out. The Desmond and Miesner families gave us tremendous support, but I don’t remember them being at our official send-off. We followed a combination of the Bike-centennial trail and a route and timetable that Lincoln put a whole lot of effort in preparing. Lincoln’s planning proved indispensable, though his timetable we had to let go of.

It wasn’t that I worried about our safety. We had a problem in the very first night with a shadowy human figure that did not seem willing to respond to us. This was at a closed campsite, so we just left and spent the night alongside the road. The rest of the nights, somebody always knew we were spending the night in a particular location. Which brings to mind what I did quietly worry about: Where were we going to spend the night? It was a futile worry, because as soon as I woke up in one place not knowing where we were spending the next night, it would just keep bugging me. Like our timetable, I had to let it go.

I was so naïve, but I learned as we went. I learned what kumquats are. I learned that the term “honky” was derogatory, and I should not stop and ask what it means. I learned that the way I clutched my bag, combined with my youth, falsely gave the impression that I was selling drugs. Nonetheless, it was a trip I would not trade for the world. So many stories, so many memories. Whenever I am with Lincoln and Rob, we tease each other as we share our stories, memories and anecdotes, just loving on each other.

Lincoln’s mother was Margaret Shirley. She was our huge encourager. Perhaps you knew her? In the spirit and memory of Margaret, and out of my love for God, Lincoln and Rob, I want to encourage you to do something that makes you feel alive and helps you to worry less. Take in all the richness that God has to offer.

Written by Pete Lane

Brighten the Corner Where You Are

Pinned to a bulletin board behind my desk is a tiny sun disc with a smiley face; an “emoji” that predates emojis by three decades. I unearthed this artifact while excavating my childhood home in preparation for sale following my mother’s death. These golden lapel pins were handed out to family and friends by my Uncle Andy on Easter weekend in 1968. He proffered them as a reminder of his favorite platitude:

*“If your goal is to change the world in one fell swoop, you will fail.
But, if you brighten the corner where you are, you will succeed.”*

I’m not certain if he was motivated by hope or despair, because those were turbulent times. In January, The Tet Offensive killed or wounded 7,000 American soldiers and 39,000 Vietnamese. In reaction, the temperature of the anti-war movement rose from simmer to boil. Martin Luther King Jr. had just been assassinated. Riots broke out in Chicago. At the holiday table, and in the community at large, Americans were arguing, self-righteously, that THEY were morally superior concerning issues of war, peace, class, race, age, civil rights, policing, international aid, ecology and the nascent women’s movement.

Sadly, some 55 years later, while the labels may have changed, (e.g., “Red vs. Blue” instead of “The Establishment vs. The Hippies”) the lack of real dialogue remains the same. Sometimes, feeling assaulted and depressed by “the news” now offered across a multitude of media, I feel powerless to affect any change at all. And then, from my corkboard, God whispers, “Brighten the corner where you are.”

So, when a friend loses her husband, give her a hug, a prayer shawl, and tell her “I’m here to listen when you are ready to talk.” Hold the door for the elderly African American man at the post office, making eye contact and saying, “Take your time.” Volunteer at a soup kitchen and have a real conversation with one of the guests. Give your employee, a first-time father, a few extra days off to bond with his new family. Spend some time with our family from Ukraine and be reminded that cuisine, computers and basketball are all international languages. At the grocery store, allow the young mother in a hijab with three items and a fussy infant to “cut in line.” Instead of buying produce that has been shipped 3,000 miles, take a ten-minute trip to the Farmer’s Market and enjoy the deliciousness of just-picked seasonal fruits and vegetables: It’s good for your health, your community, and the planet too!

So often, we are inclined to think of “abundance” in terms of possessions. However, if we’ve learned anything from three years of “Life in the Time of Covid,” it’s that plenitude is not about mansions, yachts, private jets, or even golden thrones. It’s about community. It’s about having enough to share and doing so with a glad heart, with the full faith that we will, in turn, be cared for. It’s about reaching out to those we agree with, and those we don’t. To folks who look like us, and act like us, and to those who don’t.

As Jesus says (Matthew 17:20), “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.”

Written by Susan Brothers

Inner Strength

“I pray that out of his glorious riches, he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.”

~ Ephesians 3:16

On my first trip to New York city, I was greatly impressed by the tall skyscrapers that form the Manhattan skyline. However, the exteriors of these structures conceal much more than they reveal. The buildings can reach so high only because of what is inside them. They are fortified inside with steel, concrete, and wire mesh. This reinforcement allows the building to rise upward and remain stable and strong, even when storms come and winds blow. Each structure is a marvel of engineering and construction – both the outside and the inside.

Our Christian lives resemble these tall buildings more than we realize. Only when we look to God – the ultimate architect and engineer – are we best equipped to weather the storms of life. God is our inner strength when this world throws difficult and demanding situations at us. Prayer, Bible study and worship are to our Christian lives what concrete and steel are to tall buildings. We can remain strong and stable with the assurance that God will always give us inner strength to meet whatever challenges come our way.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, help us to seek the power of your unfailing strength in our lives. Lead us and guide us safely through the storms of life. Amen.*

Source: James Townsend, Published in *The Upper Room*, January 20, 2020

Submitted by Steve Waschak

Inner Strength

Note: As I worked on writing devotions for this year's Lenten Devotional, my husband Larry watched my struggles, listened to my concerns, and read my testimonies, offering constructive feedback. He also shared with me a story of his own encounter with a faith moment which he wanted to share with you. Thank you, Larry. ~ Marie Immohr

Before my fortieth birthday I suffered a back injury that laid me up for nine months. I had ruptured a disc in my back. I couldn't go to work and spent a majority of my time horizontally either in bed or on the floor or else standing up... any other position was too painful. I have known pain before in my lifetime... falling off a bicycle, a soccer injury in college, slicing off a finger tip with my table saw, but none of them touched the pain level of a ruptured disc. Mentally, I would think of my doctor's query about my pain level... thinking that I could only respond "10"; nothing higher.

To fill the waking hours, I would lie on the floor in front of the television which helped distract me from the pain. Although getting there was not an easy task either, once there I was good for a while. There were painkillers which helped some in the beginning, but there was a constant level of pain which the medications did not touch. Every day was spent much the same way.

One day when the pain was exceptional, I questioned why pain existed. "Why me?" "Why was God letting me suffer?" "Was I being punished?" At that exact moment, a documentary on leprosy came on the TV. The narrator explained that leprosy is not a skin disease, but one that affects the nerves. I watched carefully as he explained that not having sensitivity to pain frequently caused lepers to injure themselves. I was fascinated by these facts which I had not realized before.

I thought about Jesus who in several stories in the Bible had healed lepers who called out for His healing grace. That led to the revelation that pain existed to keep us from hurting ourselves. It was not because God was punishing me, but rather that pain existed to limit the damage we might cause to our physical being. I was able to deal with pain considerably better ever since that day.

God put me in the right place at the right time to speak to me through that program, so that I knew the pain was serving a purpose, not a punishment. Had the pain not existed, I might have moved about further damaging the ruptured disc or worse yet, not giving me proper time to heal. Nine months seemed like a long time, but it was but a moment in comparison to the rest of my life with a functioning back. The pain was not a punishment, but a gift ensuring that in time I would heal... and I did.

Prayer: *God, our trials are a test of our faith and courage not a punishment. Thank you for your loving grace and healing. Amen.*

Written by Larry Immohr

Sharing the Story: *Love and Death*

John 11:1-45

^{11:1}Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹²The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." ²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Continued on next page

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

On Gratitude: Count Your Blessings

“I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart; I will recount all of your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High “

~ Psalm 9:1-2

GRATITUDE –

“The quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for, and to return a kindness.”

Gratitude may be the most highly underestimated virtue. We think of love, hope, faith and the power of prayer and forgiveness. But how often do we stop each day and give thanks for all the blessings in our lives? Are we too focused on what we lack, what we don't have, don't want, don't need? By opening the heart and mind to focus on gratitude, we unleash a treasure of unceasing good that's just waiting to overflow into our lives. A grateful person knows that by giving thanks, they're given even more to be thankful for.

Prayer: Lord, my heart is uplifted as I think of the special gift you have given me: a community of faith. I thank you for my church and for the dear people who have become part of my support system. I thank you for the invitation to spend time with you. I thank you for the blessings you offer through church attendance: the fellowship and care of other believers; the refreshment of the words of Scripture, and the feeling as the power of prayer washes over us. I need to experience your presence, Lord, in your house, and become involved in your work. Amen.

Source: *Publications International, Ltd.*

The message of those devotionals really stood out to me.

Ten years ago while looking for a church to have my two granddaughters baptized at I discovered our church. This ended up being truly life changing for my husband and me.

We found a real church family. A family who accepts who you are, as you are, and surrounds you with care, comfort and love. A family who does not judge or make you feel less important than another. I have received love, hope and support, making many true friends who have been there for me at all times. I have been given the opportunity to participate in activities and events, serve on many committees and the honor to become a Deacon and give back to our wonderful church family.

We truly are a church who lives up to our promise –

“No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!”

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord, for the blessings you have bestowed on my life. You have provided me with more than I could ever have imagined. You have surrounded me with people who always look out for me. You have given me family and friends who bless me every day with kind words and actions. Amen.*

Written by Carol Ryan

Do Good Turns

“Few people get dizzy from doing good turns.”

~ Anonymous

“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people....”

~ Galatians 6:10

True confession here: I am mildly addicted... to videos of cow hoof trimmers. (Yes, that is really a thing! Who knew?!). There is something satisfying about watching these guys, a couple of them in the Midwest and a couple in Scotland, do their work. The one thing that they all have in common is their love and respect for their bovine charges. They want to keep their cows' hooves healthy and relieve them of any discomfort or pain when they encounter abscesses, lesions, or injuries that make it difficult for their four-legged friends to walk and get them on the road to recovery. Yes, they get paid for this work, but their oh-so-obvious genuine care for these animals means they're also doing good and right by them.

Paul's letter to the Galatians compels us to do good and right by our fellow man. And Lord knows there are so many abscesses and lesions in the world that need some attention: war in Ukraine, earthquake in Turkey, starvation in Sudan, the working poor right here in the good old USA, hate mongering online, and so much more.

As individuals we can't even begin to address these huge issues. But together we can make a difference either through the work of our hands and/or with our wallets. We, as a group, already do so much good in an incredible variety of ways. And we've discovered that it's kind of addicting... And we don't get dizzy!

A cynic once put it, “We are all in this together, alone.” You have made life’s greatest decision, taken the greatest gamble, and answered the greatest question of our time if you choose to live without God.

Written by Olivia Quinsland

Telling It Like It Is

“Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering. Prove me, O LORD, and try me; test my heart and my mind. For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in your faithfulness. I do not sit with men of falsehood, nor do I consort with hypocrites. I hate the assembly of evildoers, and I will not sit with the wicked. I wash my hands in innocence and go around your altar, O LORD, proclaiming thanksgiving aloud, and telling all your wondrous deeds.”

~ Psalm 26: 1-7

Most of us have heard testimonies of believers who were saved from a lifestyle of horrendous sin. After listening to such accounts, have you ever felt that your less dramatic testimony is somehow not as valuable? In reality, the salvation God has worked for each one of His children is equally extraordinary. No matter how good or bad one's life appears, every person is born sinful and in dire need of a Savior.

Psalm 26 is a testimony from David about his integrity and trust in the Lord. He walked in God's truth, avoided the company of evildoers, and proclaimed His delight in the Lord. We would hardly call this psalm unimpressive. Few people can speak so honestly and confidently about their walk with the Lord, and it's a great encouragement for us to hear from a lifelong believer.

David's testimony reminds us to express what God has done and is doing in our life. A personal faith story is a powerful tool, both for arousing an unbeliever's curiosity about spiritual matters and for motivating a believer to pursue holiness. No matter how commonplace our words may sound compared to someone else's, the Lord can use them to impact listeners. You have no idea how far-reaching your "ordinary" testimony can be.

Source: *The Daily Devotion – In Touch Ministries*, May 13, 2022

Submitted by John Pondiccio

Neo-Beatitudes

Blessed be little children crying.

Blessed be men looking for a place to get warm.

Blessed be the tunnel guard.

Blessed be old people who sit on folding chairs in front of apartment houses.

Blessed be mothers-in-law.

Blessed be the country boy, dreaming of what lies over the hill. May he find it.

Blessed be shuffling messengers.

Blessed be all cleaning ladies, who wear dark anklets.

Blessed be all children who can't see, can't walk, or can't talk. Especially bless them.

Blessed be the hopeless.

Blessed be the copywriter. May he write his novel.

Blessed be every man who's ever failed. Let him know it is only temporary.

Blessed be mothers of young children who see no end to their drudgery.
It will come all too soon.

Blessed be successful people. May they know the value of their prize.

Blessed be old soldiers who cry at parades.

Blessed be the Panthers. They are far closer than they think to Jefferson's ideals.

Blessed be drunks and junkies.

Blessed are those who sing off-key.

Blessed be you, and blessed be me, for we are likely to be one of the above.

Source: Poem by Edward J. Gallagher

Submitted by Susan Brothers

Go and Preach the Good News

*“And then Jesus told them,
‘Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone.’”*

~ Mark 16:15

Our lives can get so filled up with busyness, entertainment, family life, responsibilities, and on the list goes. We get so distracted that we forget to pursue one of the most central commands of our faith: to share the Good News of Jesus with everyone! The world is lost, hurt, broken, confused, and searching. Believers hold the truth, the answer, and only hope for our dying world.

This passage in Mark is known as the “great commission” from Jesus. Jesus speaks to his disciples from his resurrected body, offering them a parting charge to share God’s story of love with the world. Jesus’ work was complete and now it was up to his followers to share the events they had witnessed with the world.

God has always desired to partner with humanity to complete His good work. But the commission from Jesus greatly expanded who this message was for. The disciples and subsequent Jesus-followers were now authorized to go into all the world to preach the gospel to all of humanity.

The message the disciples were commissioned to share was the history of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. Telling others the meaning of these events and inviting whoever would listen to accept Jesus into their hearts so they can enjoy the benefits of being a part of God’s family. As the disciples shared with others, they made more disciples who could reach more and more people with the story of Jesus. Today that same mission endures. Believers are charged by Christ to share his story, heart, love, and the message of his generous offer of salvation with the world.

How can you be intentional about sharing the “Good News” of Jesus?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, show me how I can “branch out” and serve You in new ventures. Help me not to be afraid. Help me remember that I am anchored in You and in Your power. Amen.*

Source: from *Go and Preach the Good News* on [Crosswalk.com](https://www.crosswalk.com) by Amanda Idleman

Submitted by John Pondiccio

When God Is Doing Something New, and We're Still Stuck in the Old

*"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."*

~ Isaiah 43:18-19

Sometimes God is wanting to do something "new" and yet we're still stuck in the "old." It's hard at times. To let go of what's familiar, and what we know. It seems easier to stay "comfortable," to just keep going with the flow, not to mess anything up. But then "new" happens, and often sends us spiraling on one big, long loop.

For those who like change – "new" is mostly exciting. For those who don't like change – "new" is mostly stressful. Your family, if you're like most, is probably a mix of those two traits.

But here's what I love about God. He thinks and works outside our own box of thinking. He doesn't always work in ways that we would have chosen for our "new." If we had to have a "new." He sees the big picture. He knows what He's doing. He works behind the scenes of life that unfolds every day, in the places where we can't always see or understand all the "why's."

So we can trust that He has our best in mind. That He's got our back. He's with us right now. And He's secured our future, too. Sometimes our "new" comes out of great blessing, new opportunities. And sometimes it comes through great pain, huge loss.

People move, life happens, decisions are made, many change jobs, kids grow up, and there are times we might go through some tough struggles. We may even start to feel cheated. Like life is unfair.

But it still breathes this truth: God is not finished with our lives yet. You're still here. And He has great purpose in all that you walk through, even in every life change and season. Whether we recognize it or not, we're rubbing shoulders everyday with people that we need to meet in our "new," however hard that new thing may be.

We can rest in His care for us. He knows. He sees. He works in ways we don't always "get," but there's peace in knowing we don't have to try to control it all. We can let go - of the need to figure it all out, and the striving to make things happen. We can trust Him. Our future awaits, and there's still good around the bend. God has more in store.

Prayer: *God, we thank you for always providing, protecting, and overseeing our lives. We may not always be ready for the "new," or see it, or understand it, or accept it. We may even fear it. However, with faith in You we can face the "new," confident that You are always with us. Amen.*

Source: Debbie McDaniel, Crosswalk.com Writer

Submitted by Marie Immohr

Sharing the Story: *The Lord Needs Them*

Matthew 21:1-11

^{21:1}When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” ⁴This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ⁵“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” ¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” ¹¹The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Sharing the Story of Your Life

“You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts...”

~ 2 Corinthians 3:2

Each of us has a life story. Our stories include all our experiences and all of the people who have been a part of our lives. Certainly, along the pages of our lives, there are people who for better or for worse, have had a significant influence on us.

Like all stories, the pages that make up our lives are not just meant to be written, but to be read by others. The life and art of Christ-following are passed on, down the line, from person to person, from generation to generation. Discipleship is founded upon the content of the Bible. Yet the application of that content is experienced in the trenches of everyday living. Someone has talked to you and shared the story of their life and how Jesus is a part of it. Others have actively role-modeled the Christian life to you.

The Apostle Paul said (1 Thessalonians 2:8), “We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.” Paul demonstrated that it is through our lives that the truth of the Gospel is made known to others, even as it has been made known to us.

While the stories of our lives are still being written, we are called to share them and invite others to become a part of what God is doing in our lives and world. We are called to role model Christ-following to others—to the people who make up our world, to our friends, to our sons and daughters, to those in our community, and to other Christians in our church.

Take a look: there are people all around you, some believers and some who are not believers yet, who are looking for authentic relationships and for what it means to live as a Christian. Through your friendship, you can be a tool in the hand of God to make an eternal difference in the life of someone else, to become part of the story of their lives, even as others are part of your own.

None of us has it all together in terms of our Christian life and none of us will, this side of heaven. The good news is that this is OK. God is still at work in our lives, despite all our weaknesses, and wants to use us in the life of someone else. He just needs our willingness to share our lives with others.

Prayer: *Gracious God, may your spirit flow through those parts of us that we have given up on. Help us to look for the blessings in others that they may not see. Amen.*

Source: *Crosswalk Devotionals*, Feb 25, 2022, by Jim Liebelt

Submitted by: John Pondiccio

Focusing on Rocks

“I love you, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.”

~ Psalm 18:1-2

Thank you, God, for the vast beauty of nature – Yes, thank you and amen – but today I want to give praise and say thanks for one specific piece within the splendor of your creation: rocks.

Thank you for the rocks.

For pointed rocks that I dug up from the cornfields as a child, in search of arrowheads.

For climbable boulders on the island of Maine where lupines bloom in abundance.

For rainbow layers of geological history exposed to travelers where hills have been cut open for roads to pass.

For smooth rocks, perfect for skipping across the river, scaring geese that idle in the water.

For rocks, (and seashells) worn down by centuries of waves to become grains of sand that invite wiggling toes.

For the Steadfast and Holy Rock that I claim beneath my feet, which is more beautiful than all other rocks.

Thank you for rocks.

The natural beauty of God is all around you. Choose an aspect of nature that you particularly love: the wind moving through tree branches, the sound of a waterfall, the birds gathered at the birdbath in your backyard... Write or speak a prayer of praise to God for this natural gift.

Prayer: *O Lord, my rock, my fortress. I give thanks to you today for the beauty all around me. Help me to slow my steps, slow my mind, and open my eyes that I might see, feel, and know the gift of nature that you have given. Amen.*

Source: *Writing to God: 40 Days of praying with my pen*, by Rachel G. Hackenberg

Submitted by Leslie Sands

My Faith Journey

I have had several church affiliations during my life. I was raised as a Catholic... Baptized, Holy Communion, and Confirmed. However, I never felt satisfied and stepped away from the church. My next church experience came as I was about to be married. Since Larry was a Lutheran, I joined the church, too. But again I was not satisfied or fulfilled... something was missing, and I stepped away again.

When we moved to Bridgewater and knew we wanted to start a family, we joined the Episcopal Church in town. We wanted our children to have a hometown church experience. We were members and attended regularly for quite a few years. However, as before, I stepped away. Perhaps, it was that I never felt a closeness or personal connection to the church or the people in the congregations. Sunday morning services were repetitive and there lacked a personal connection, a humanity, or closeness, no sense of community or a faith family or on my part the sense of the presence of God. Most likely it was me... lost!

Then my life turned upside down. I hit an emotional wall that sent me into deep anxiety and depression. I was on medication and not feeling any improvement. It was summer break; and I feared not being able to return to work. And then an angel entered my life, a real live angel... her name, Dianne Mariano, my sister. She took me to church on a Sunday morning, to CCB's Outdoor Chapel.

My life changed that morning. I felt a calmness I hadn't felt in a while. I felt comforted. There were faces of people I did not know, but they were smiling and welcoming. They accepted me where I was on life's journey with no questions asked... only kind words of welcome and well-being. I returned on Sunday mornings, sometimes staying after the service was over just to sit in that space. I could feel God's presence and love. I even visited through the week feeling myself getting stronger. In the fall, I returned to school. When services moved indoors, so did I.

When there was a Visitor's Gathering to join the church, I went, knowing that the spiritual home I had been seeking I had finally found. My life was opened with God's love for me. This was where I found my heart and spirit filling. This was where I could be in God's service – being His hands, sharing His love for us. There were so many opportunities, SERRV, Deacons, Worship, the Yankee Fair, Serendippers, Women's Fellowship. Dining for Women/ Together Women Rise, pie making and the Women's Mission trip, the Monday Morning Book Group, an outdoor nativity. Twelve years later, I am still exploring my possibilities... so many ways to serve and be in fellowship... to be in a faith community. I found my place on my life's faith journey where I am welcome.

Prayer: *Thank you, God, for this remarkable place. It is true that... "No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey...you are welcome here." Amen.*

Written by Marie Immohr

Scripture is God's Voice Speaking to Me

"The word of God is alive and active."

~ Hebrews 4:12

"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:

for thou art with me; Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:

Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:

And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

~ Psalm 23

When I was in the fifth grade I attended a one-room country school. Once a year we had Achievement Day with contests for spelling and penmanship, among others. To prepare for the penmanship contest, we were given a poem to practice writing. That year it was Psalm 23. I wrote it over and over, hoping to earn a prize ribbon – but actually gaining something more important.

Years later I was married and expecting my first child. The closer my due date came, the more anxious I felt. I asked God to be with me and for my child to be safe. The night I went into labor I felt a surprising peace. At the hospital Psalm 23 suddenly came to me in its entirety, even though I hadn't read it in years. I had written it so many times back in fifth grade it was in my memory! Now God was using those words to bring me assurance and peace. In that moment I felt God's presence strongly. I knew whether I lived or died that I was in God's care and that everything would be all right.

This experience and Psalm 23 have stayed with me all my life, giving me assurance time and time again. Through the years I have memorized other scriptures, giving God the opportunity to speak through them too.

Prayer: *Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for speaking to us through scripture so that we can feel your presence, guidance, and love. Amen.*

Source: *"Remembering God's Word,"* by Monica Canida-Brauer in The Upper Room July/August 2022

Submitted by John Pondiccio

Resuscitation and Resurrection

“Jesus said to [Martha], ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.’”

~ John 11:25-26

When Jesus brought Lazarus back to life, he knew Lazarus would one day have to die again. What Jesus said was more like resuscitation – restoring life to the way it was. We want God to bring a loved one back, repair a relationship or return a job, etc. We pray: “God, just restore my life to the way it used to be.” Yet, the dialogue between Jesus and Lazarus’s sisters reveals that this is a story for those who have to live with death. To them, Jesus promises resurrection. There is a difference.

A friend of mine told me about an experience he had 7 months after his wife died following a bout with cancer. He sensed God wanting to give him peace, but he was resistant. He wanted his wife back. How could he have peace? Several months later he felt God telling him, “It’s okay to have peace.” He lowered his resistance and soon found new possibilities emerging. He said, “As long as I was in resistance, I couldn’t discover new possibilities God had for me.”

It’s easy to crave resuscitation – to want God to return life to the way it was before – but Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.” He doesn’t just restore, He transforms. Death can take away, but God gives new life. Christ is resurrection and life!

Prayer: *Living God, thank you for the gift of resurrection.
Help us to embrace the new life you offer us. Amen.*

Source: Rob Fuquay, in *The Upper Room*, April 5, 2015

Submitted by Steve Waschak

Faith is a Superpower

Imagine, for a moment, that it is April 1970. Earlier in the year, following a cataclysmic oil spill off the Santa Barbara coast, a diverse group of scientists, activists and politicians work together to promote the first Earth Day, on April 22nd. Many universities and approximately 10,000 K-12 schools around the nation: mine, in Montclair, NJ is one of them.

In Mrs. Palent's science class we study "ecology": in Language Arts, Mrs. Porter assigns a paper asking us to detail how we participate and what we learn. The task I undertake is simple: two friends and I join a group cleaning up the area around the commuter train station. Wearing our mother's gardening gloves, we gather up litter and separate it into two categories: "trash" (paper, cigarette butts and the odd bit of plastic) and "treasure" (glass that can be returned to bottling facilities).

At dinner, I proudly recount the day's activities to my family. My mother scoffs, commenting that such a limited endeavor will make little difference and adding "If you are so concerned about the environment, why don't you start with your room." As is the case with most adolescents, this rebuke did not have the desired effect. I was not going to be deterred or silenced. Instead, I was determined to find ways to become more involved with ecological preservation. I was just one kid, but when many like-minded people banded together, a movement was born. In December of that same year, the Environmental Protection Agency was founded.

Over half a century later, a new generation of climate activists, from Zero Hour, The Sunrise Movement and, especially, Fridays for Future are scoffed at... by many powerful adults. The best-known of these young leaders, Greta Thunberg, will not be deterred or silenced, either. In fact, she considers her autism spectrum diagnosis her "superpower" because it causes her to see the world differently than most people.

As a Christian, I believe that our faith is our "superpower" for the exact same reason: we see the world differently than most people. We know that there is something greater than ourselves or any singular man or woman. We know that we are loved by an ever-present God, even in times where our partners, parents, children or neighbors leave us in the lurch. Although our vision extends beyond the "here and now," we know that it is our responsibility to care for "the least of these," and all of God's creation, in the here and now. So, never underestimate the power of faith and community: when we work together to make God's world a better place, miracles can, and do, happen!

Written by Susan Brothers

John 20:1-18

^{20:1}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. ²So 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.” ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.