



Sharing the Journey

Lent 2024
daily reflections

When we think about traditional Lenten spiritual practices like prayer, self-control through fasting or giving up something, reflection, remembrance, and charity, we tend to think of them as solitary practices. And yet, the very nature of our Christian faith is communal; as Christians, we do faith together as the body of Christ, not as individual members. We pray together. We reflect together. We remember together. We share with the world and one another.

So, with this year's Lenten devotional, I invite you to the *communal* practice of Lent. Our congregations have prepared this collection of devotions together, and we have the opportunity to read, reflect, and pray on them *together* with a spirit of Christian unity. There is nothing like having other pilgrims on the journey with us. I pray that through the Scriptures, reflections, and prayers so generously shared by people from our respective congregations, you will find the sustenance and companionship of the community throughout this 40-day pilgrimage.

As we journey together on Lent's path toward the cross and resurrection, may we draw closer to God and to one another. And may it lead us to practice the spiritual discipline and gift that is community.

In hope and faith,

The Rev. Lynette Sparks

Senior Pastor

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Wednesday, February 14

***Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
— Isaiah 58:6-7 (Full text, Isaiah 58:1-12)***

Fasting and almsgiving shouldn't be solely for ourselves, in our own homes, set to our own parameters.

Rather than just skip food, we should look to nourish others. We can let neighbors in, give of our treasures, and create a larger network of love. In addition, fasting doesn't just involve food and drink. We can fast from gossip, hoarding, selfishness, and judgment of others. We can reexamine how we live, who we are including, and how we speak of them. We can focus on welcoming and assisting those who have less.

Lord,

Grant us the eyes to see who is in need and the heart to give. Grant us the fasting of tongue to avoid speaking ill of others. Grant us the openness to accept those who are different. Grant us the patience and consciousness to slow down, notice someone, invite them in, or lend a hand. May our fast reach beyond us and create a wider circle of love and generosity. Amen.

Jenna Jonaitis, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Thursday, February 15

If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. — 1 John 1:9-10 (Full text, 1 John 1:3-10)

Honestly.

I have no other gods.

I honor.

I keep holy.

No murder.

No adultery.

No dishonesty.

No greed.

I have no other gods.

Honestly.

You know that.

You know me.

No unrighteousness.

Honestly.

Dear God,

Forgive me.

Forgive my self-righteousness.

Amen.

Karen Kania, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Friday, February 16

As for you, be sober in everything, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully. — 2 Timothy 4:5 (Full text, 2 Timothy 4:1-5)

Welcome to Lent. Paul is giving Timothy directions about what to do. They also can be directions for us during Lent. “Be sober in everything, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.”

I looked up definitions of sober. The ones that I feel work here: unhurried, calm, temperance, moderation, or seriousness. Be calm and don’t try to make things happen quickly. Stay temperate and serious about what you are being called to do – your ministry. This does not mean becoming a priest or a deacon but listening to the Spirit within your soul and finding out what you are being called to do. Maybe help on Saturday mornings with feeding our homeless neighbors. Maybe volunteering to read during the services on Sunday. Maybe joining the Altar Guild team. Maybe reading a devotion every day during Lent. I am sure there are many more things that the Spirit will tell you about.

So, follow Paul’s directions and find something new to make a ministry of yours.

What can you give up during Lent? What can you take up during Lent?

Dear Father,

You have used Paul to help us become more included in the work of your Faith. May we find something new this year to make us your workers. In Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Doug Karsen, St. Mark’s Episcopal Church

Saturday, February 17

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity and in whose spirit there is no deceit. — Psalm 32:1-2 (Full text, Psalm 32)

Unburden your heart – is your heart as light as a feather?

A heavy heart leads to a heavy mind. The early Jews had a fear of God. The Messiah, the bridge to life everlasting, had not yet come. They lost trust they could come to God for grace. They put their faith in idols at the base of Mt. Sinai and in people asking for leadership from kings such as Saul and David. How are we any different, with modern idols, that hide in plain sight?

Moral relativism makes it easy to say, “Well at least I am better than those people; I deserve this; I earned that.” We deceive ourselves; we listen to the evil whispers in our ears of self-doubt, our eyes become blind to our ability to change, hiding in guilt and shame. We trudge through life. We betray one another when we fail to stand up for truth.

God does not want us to hide in our shame and guilt. We need to listen to God’s word and trust that we can unburden our heavy hearts, to God, to our partners, and to one another, asking for forgiveness.

Merciful loving God,

Give us the courage to confess our shortcomings in our prayers with God and with other people, our partners, family, friends, and co-workers. In so doing, may your Kingdom be built on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Jim Burdick, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Sunday, February 18

God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth." — Genesis 9:12-13 (Full text, Genesis 9:8-17)

I can't remember the last time I saw a rainbow, but I'm sure I wasn't thinking about God when I looked at it. When you ponder today's Scripture, it's cool that God took time to make something beautiful, so that we can think about Him when we see it. Of course, we don't always follow that. At least I don't think about God's amazing promise every time I look at the rainbow.

It makes me wonder how many other God-given signs that we miss daily.

Life can be pretty fast-paced. If we took time to slow down, and see the little (and big) reminders of Him that God has put in our world, we could become people who know God like a true friend, not just someone you see every Sunday.

Dear God,

Help us to take time out of our days to know You. Help us to be willing to do whatever it takes, like Noah, even if it hurts our image, to help make the world a better place. Thank you for always being there for our world, God. You really are amazing! Amen.

Milo Kraegel, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Monday, February 19

For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them. — Ephesians 2:10 (Full text, Ephesians 2:1-10)

Recently, I read that the average American has between four and seven different careers in a lifetime. This kind of statistic would have been somewhat intimidating to college-aged me, but 20-plus years later I've come close to bearing it out by working in a wide variety of roles. It increasingly has become unusual to start a career as a young adult and retire from the same field 50 years later. The true constant is change.

Just as we may traverse new professional roles throughout our lives, we also experience changing personal roles: child, sibling, friend, parent, partner, spouse, grandparent. God, however, assures us that regardless of all else, we are precisely what He has made us – we are God's own workmanship, saved by God's grace. Whatever other roles we have, God is constant and has laid out a path before us so that we may do good in this world. Our paths are as unique as ourselves, prepared by a God who knows each of us and our gifts intimately. We may have many labels, responsibilities, and roles over a lifetime, but the path of doing good works and glorifying God through the best use of God's blessings is ever-present.

Lord,

Help us to find the greatest use of Your gifts so that we may walk a path of righteousness, devotion, and dedication to healing the world. May we strive to do good wherever and whenever possible, and to be as constant in our service as You are in Your mercy. Amen.

Erin Bates, friend of Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Tuesday, February 20

For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all. — 1 Peter 3:17-18a (Full text, 1 Peter 3:8-18)

Our world is too accustomed to suffering. Sometimes it can seem that to live is to suffer, or witness too closely the suffering of others. In the face of this reality, too often our skin becomes thickened against the rough hardships of others; too quickly do we become inured to hatefulness or violence against those outside our circle of friends and family.

To follow Jesus means to follow his example of radical presence. He was not immune to suffering. He knew loss personally, through the deaths of beloved friends, John and Lazarus and others. Rather than turning away, he sought more, approaching the sick, deformed, injured, and outcast – and ministering to them. Jesus calls us to do this too.

In doing this kind of good in our own time, we model Jesus and confront the frailty and sin of human existence. In doing so, we share the burdens of others and feel our own lessened.

Lord Jesus,

Help me today to cultivate a spirit of awareness. Help me to see the needs of others, and give me the courage to reach forward in love. Help me also to ask for the help I need in overcoming my own suffering, loneliness, and fear.

Amen.

Laura Kozminski, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Wednesday, February 21

He (Jesus) fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” — Matthew 4:2-4 (Full text, Matthew 4:1-11)

My personal version of the Lord's Prayer goes like this: “Lead me not into temptation, I can find the way myself.”

Indeed, temptation is not hard to find. Countless opportunities offer a quick fix for physical, emotional, and spiritual cravings. Resisting temptation often gets turned into a willpower challenge, as though withstanding the temptation itself is a virtue. The bigger truth is that forgoing temptation frees us from the false assurances of whatever is promising to fill us in body or spirit. Resistance reveals our true hungers and allows us to pursue what will truly satisfy them.

Immediately after his baptism, Jesus was tempted repeatedly. His responses show what it means to live into our baptisms too, rejecting anything at odds with our fundamental identity as children of God. Jesus knew that he already possessed all he needed. He didn't need to do a magic trick to prove it, or hype his influencer status with showy deeds of strength. He was free of the need to draw attention to himself because he was clear and steadfast in his aim to draw others' attention to the living God who sustained him.

Lent invites us to grow sharply aware of what gets in the way of our wholehearted embrace of God's freedom and love. What in your life is enticing you with satisfaction but leaving you empty and hungering for more?

*Loving God,
May our hunger lead us closer to you. Amen.*

Jessica Bratt Carle, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Thursday, February 22

Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law. — Romans 3:31 (Full text, Romans 3:21-31)

Lent is a season of repentance and self-reflection. This passage invites us to examine our hearts and to repent of any attitudes that can separate us from the rest of the body of Christ. To erase any lines we've drawn that divide us, especially any senses of superiority. Every single person is precious to God, and the sacrifice of Jesus is for all of us.

The love and mercy of God should compel us to act differently. Not out of a sense of obligation, but from the joy at being his sons and daughters.

This calls to mind the hymn "And they'll know we are Christians by our love." It is a beautiful song as much as it is a challenging one. Does our love of Christ change how we live? Does it change how we love others?

*Dear Jesus,
Help us see the world through your eyes.
Let your love for us move our hearts
to take action to serve those around us.
Amen.*

Erin Zacek, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Friday, February 23

You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel! For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me but heard when I cried to him. — Psalm 22:23-24 (Full text, Psalm 22:23-31)

In Holy Week of every year, we pray the words of Psalm 22. The lamentations in the early verses of the psalm may be well known to us:

“But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people ... all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; ... you lay me in the dust of death ... My hands and feet have shriveled; I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me; they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.” (vs. 6,14b,15b,16b-18)

Indeed, Jesus cries out from the cross with the opening verse of this psalm: “My God, why have you forsaken me?” The Gospel writers use this psalm to help in recounting the crucifixion.

Today we read words of praise from later verses of the same psalm. “Glorify Him.” “Praise Him.” “Stand in awe of Him.” How did we get from deep lament to such high praise?

God is to be praised because God sees and notices the despised and lowly ones. Their only source of hope is that God sees them. The world’s rich and powerful are too busy to notice.

Do you hear the cries of lamentation arising from Ukraine, Gaza, Haiti, Sudan, our southern border? God hears. God does not turn away or hide his face.

God acts. Will we?

The psalm concludes with promise. The hungry shall be satisfied. Dominion belongs to the Lord. Future generations will be delivered.

Praise God.

The Rev. Michael Fedewa, friend of Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Saturday, February 24

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” — Mark 8:27 (Full text, Mark 8:27-30)

In this chapter, Jesus performed the miracle of the loaves and fishes. Yet there comes the Pharisees, asking for heavenly signs. Can't you just hear Jesus sighing? "And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, 'Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.'" (Mark 8:12)

For a few days I carried around the question, "Who do people say that I am?" Then I asked it, in a few different places, and here is what I heard, from those willing to pause and consider it:

"Jesus is truth."

"Savior."

"A compassionate figure who wanted to reduce suffering."

"A misunderstood mythical teacher used as a pawn for political gain."

"Love."

"Jesus is someone who represents the best of what humans hope to be."

So here is my prayer: *As we go through our days, help us to pay as much attention to our received miracles and wisdom as we do to our ordinary bread. Help us who define ourselves as Christians, as followers of Christ, continue to show our generation who Jesus is, through us. Strengthen us as vessels of love, truth, and compassion, the best of what humans hope to be. Amen.*

Kate Assarian, along with parishioner and non-parishioner voices, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Sunday, February 25

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. — Romans 4:13 (Full text, Romans 4:13-25)

It was faith, or something close to it, that helped me through years of post-divorce unsettledness about my son. All the reason and planning in the world could not calm me. But a certain faith — and its twin, hope — could.

I can't say my faith-and-hope mixture was spiritual, but I can't say it wasn't either. In a tiny way, that experience was like Abraham. But he had infinitely more at stake: the future of a people and of humankind. What else but the deepest faith could possibly have kept hope alive in Abraham and moved him forward?

Certainly not the law, that shaky and flawed creation of flawed human beings. Those two words, "the law," have all the cold comfort of a jail door slamming behind you. But "faith" comes wrapped in warmth and mystery. It draws you ahead and into the future. Adhering to the law may feel righteous, yet by itself is only a hollow way of avoiding the bad, not a way of moving forward to the good.

Faith has imagination. Faith can see into the future infinitely. The law is of the head, but faith is of the head, body, and soul. Faith can permeate our beings as individuals and as a community. Faith is powerful precisely because it is impossible to contain or measure.

God,
Help ground us every day
in the invisible, uncontainable power of faith.
Amen.

Ted Hartzel, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Monday, February 26

“In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like clothing.” — Hebrews 1:10-11 (Full text, Hebrews 1:8-12)

When we look at the heavens, we see such various scenes as weeks go by. Perhaps blue sky with fluffy white clouds, the gray clouds of winter or fall, a magnificent sunrise or sunset, a rainbow after a storm, an evening of twinkling stars or a bright full moon.

Hopefully all of these draw our wonder and thankfulness to God, our Creator. St. Francis saw God in them so much so that he called them brothers and sisters. But for all the wonder and beauty, they will all disappear one day and so we don't hold on, except to the hope that God has even greater wonders in store for us, beyond the now, into eternity.

Almighty God,

*As we embrace this season of Lent, help us to let go of things that weigh us down. Let us hope for your eternal beauty that we know is coming because of your Son's passion, death, and resurrection. Please accept our gratitude.
Amen.*

Margo Dean, OFS, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Tuesday, February 27

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. — Hebrews 11:1-2 (Full text, Hebrews 11:1-3)

Poet T.S. Eliot had this to say about faith:

“I said to my soul, be still and wait without hope,
for hope would be hope
For the wrong thing; wait without love, for love
Would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.”

I often feel as though I am waiting for true faith, waiting to be struck by faith lightning or overpowered by the faith tsunami. Something as crucial as faith should be huge and obvious and shining. Shouldn't it?

Or perhaps not. Perhaps faith is simply waiting and perhaps I will never know the wholeness of faith, until the end of the waiting. We pray — and wait — for so much: for peace on earth, for our loved ones to be comforted and cured, for salvation. After the minister or priest blesses the bread and wine during the communion service, we acknowledge what we believe and what we are waiting for:

Christ has died,
Christ is risen,
Christ will come again.

I don't think faith is something I can claim and own. Because our journey is not over, I know that faith is something I must *do*, and waiting is the way I must do it.

Dear Lord,
Help me to wait patiently, with love and faith, and thank you for everything you will do for your creation at the end of the waiting. Amen.

Judith Simonson, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Wednesday, February 28

Nevertheless many, even of the authorities, believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue, for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God. — John 12:42-43 (Full text, John 12:36-43)

Jesus attempted over a short span of life to "share his light" and bless others with that "light of life" and love for God that he knew would bring joy and a following of Christ. He quietly and patiently shared that light of love with all those he encountered. Though many desired to believe because they felt his love and care, they feared speaking that belief out loud. They knew they would receive derision or pity for their belief, and might even be banished from their place of worship. They were deeply fearful of "being different," of not being understood, or even being cast out of their society.

Jesus tried to tell others that he was especially sent by God to help "light" each one's way, to share the beauty of God's love, to feel the safety in God's arms and in His pathway. We can all imagine what it must have been like to feel differently, to desire God's pathway of light, but to be timid or frightened of "not being like everyone else," or concerned about not being accepted. Derision is difficult. For many, or even most, it becomes easier "to go along to get along." Yet, we must come out of the darkness and into the light of God's will and God's pathway if we really believe, and if we truly desire to walk in that light.

God in Heaven,

Grant us the courage to walk in your pathway of light, to feel your light in our hearts as it guides us now and into the future, as we prepare on earth for our life of peace in Heaven with you and all who have gone before us. Amen.

Jacqueline D. Taylor, Ph.D., St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Thursday, February 29

So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the Lord had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, “We will do everything the Lord has said.” So Moses brought their answer back to the Lord. — Exodus 19:7-8 (Full text, Exodus 19:1-9a)

I've often been amazed by how the Israelites left Egypt. The amount of faith and trust this scrappy group needed to leave one dire situation for a not much better situation in the desert is awe-inspiring. And yet, God kept his promises time and time again during those years in the desert. Although the Israelites inevitably tried to chart their own course and stray from God's path, they always came back.

So, in 2024, how do we follow God in this way? For me, this has looked like taking the path less taken, often scary and intimidating. I trusted God would provide for me when I went to college in North Carolina when all my friends stayed in Michigan. We all trusted again when COVID upended our lives in 2020. I trusted that I would find community and build a life in Washington D.C. when I moved knowing almost no one. God has continued to care for me through it all.

In turn, my obedience to my faith has come in many forms, namely, by doing the most good I am able. Whether that is caring for my unhoused neighbors, or a kind word to a work colleague having a rough day, or even speaking out on political issues, I work to see and follow God in my mundane daily routines. In uncertain times, I remind myself:

*All I am asked to do is to follow God
and work to make Heaven on earth.*

Madeline Buitendorp, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Friday, March 1

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. — Psalm 19:1 (Full text, Psalm 19)

When was the last time you went somewhere that proclaimed the glory of God's creation? For me, it was last summer in a field in rural Kentucky while on retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani.

Sitting quietly in this field, I tried to listen for God to help me make sense of the direction of my life, but all I heard was buzzing...buzzing that I soon realized was hundreds of bees at work visiting flowers that I hadn't even noticed when I sat down. But they didn't seem to care that I was there. That's when it hit me. The field, the bees, and I all perfectly coexisted at this same moment in time. All of us were part of one interconnected working creation.

We easily can be blinded by the sadness and sin in our world. But if we remember to stop, look, and listen at what's around us, we are reminded that His perfect creation still remains and joyously shouts of His glory.

Dear Lord,

Let us see through the darkness that sin has brought to our world. Help us to remember the glory of your creation every time we look to the landscapes, to the creatures, and to our neighbors with whom we share this world. Let us never forget your infinite wisdom and love in creating a world that you deemed good. Amen.

Gerald Morlidge, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Saturday, March 2

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. — Mark 9:7-8 (Full text, Mark 9:2-8)

Imagine being with Peter, James, and John, climbing the mountain, seeing Moses and Elijah, witnessing the radiance of Jesus. Then the overshadowing cloud and the voice of God. What a mountaintop experience! God had appeared to Moses in a cloud, and later to Elijah as he was transported to heaven before Elisha's eyes. The disciples' first response was terror, and then Peter's wanting to stay in that moment.

Spiritual messages are complex: a moment of blinding light that both frightens and affirms, and a realization that we are beloved sons and daughters of God — being on the mountaintop. We can't hoard the experience as Peter wanted. We are called back into the difficulties of our lives.

The Transfiguration is a reassurance for the disciples. The path of suffering was about to become even more difficult for Jesus and his followers, but this mountaintop experience would help them understand the way the story will end. Jesus prepares his followers, telling them that the cross is the only thing that will transform you, and the journey will not be easy.

And so it is with us: Mountaintop experiences are usually brief, and we can't stay there. We follow Jesus down the mountain to the valley and the wilderness, continuing his journey of love, healing, and suffering, knowing that we, too, are beloved sons and daughters.

Where on your journey have life-changing moments come? Where has your suffering been transformed into something greater?

Transfiguration/transformation is the journey of Lent, of the descent into wilderness, into union with Jesus. And we are not alone; Jesus is with us.

Lord, let us experience the victory of light over darkness, of life over death. Transform us into bearers of that light, and help us see the promise of our resurrection and eternal life. Amen.

Esther Yff-Prins, Two Churches, and friend of Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Sunday, March 3

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." — 1 Corinthians 1:18-19 (Full text, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25)

Baffled by a laptop procedure, I resort to a resident techie. Fortunately, one holds forth in our retirement home. To assemble a kitchen table from a kit purchased at Walmart, I defer to an older son, who's more manually gifted. No one of us makes the grade in all kinds of wisdom. As humans, our supply of "smarts" remains limited.

But according to Paul, one kind of wisdom supersedes them all; and this wisdom takes no PhD to acquire. By "the wisdom of the cross" he means God's reconciling act: the fact that, through Calvary, you and I now belong to the Lord. Whatever highs and lows we may go through on our journey across the years, the eternal presence embraces and sustains us. Knowing this and living it makes all other wisdoms class-B.

Someday I may learn the knack of restoring a vanishing laptop icon, or making sense out of an assembly manual — or even, glory of glories, interpreting one of Paul's rambling passages! But to know that we belong to the Lord, who will never abandon us, compensates for lack of alternative wisdoms.

Lord Christ,

As through your sacrifice you have made us yours completely, instill in us that most important wisdom of all, assurance of your abiding presence, that we may live with gratitude and confidence. Amen.

The Rev. Hugh Dickinson, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Monday, March 4

According to the grace of God given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Let each builder choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. — 1 Corinthians 3:10-11 (Full text, 1 Corinthians 3:10-23)

“Choose with care,” says Paul. These words of warning and wisdom remind us of the sanctity of that which we build in Christ, and that we are building on the legacy of those who came before us. The same will be true for those who come after us, in our lives and in the Church.

“Choose with care” so that we remember our foundation in Jesus.

“Choose with care” so that we build not with eyes of this world, but with those of the heavens. “Choose with care” so that what we build is not for our glory, but for the glory of God.

When we make Christ not only the focus, but the foundation of our lives, then we too are like a wise builder. What we choose to build upon that foundation is ultimately up to us, but it should reflect the merciful love of God, who sent Jesus Christ to die on the cross for our sins, for all to see.

In building upon the foundation of Jesus Christ to shine the love of God, we sanctify our lives and make ourselves beacons for a world desperately in need of hope. Let us pray together:

God,

You are the one who is, who was, and who always will be.

Grant us your wisdom as we build upon the foundation of Jesus Christ,

That we may create that which is good and holy,

That what we build may be a light to the world.

Hallelujah and amen.

Deanna Clark, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Tuesday, March 5

And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. — Hebrews 9:27-28 (Full text, Hebrews 9:23-28)

When we “eagerly wait” for something or someone, we are alert. Awake. We watch for signs pointing to the presence of who or what we’re waiting for.

What does it mean to be awake spiritually? Perhaps it means unplugging from the world each day, snuggling into a favorite corner of home, and being alone with God. Waiting with an open heart. Listening for the voice of love and wisdom to guide us, to lead us.

When we eagerly wait for God, we notice the Divine Presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. We awaken to God’s movement and invitations in our lives and follow the Divine Guidance that God provides and always leads us toward our highest good. We let go of what the world and others might tell us about ourselves and remember who we are: the Divine Image of God in human form called to co-create more love in the world. We embrace the truth that we are the Divine and Pure Essence of God’s Love.

Lord,

Give me the gentle discipline to sit in the quiet with you each day. Give me the grace to unplug from the world’s distractions for a bit and awaken to your Holy Presence so that I might hear your Voice of Love and follow your Divine Guidance in my life. Amen.

Brian J. Plachta, St. Alphonsus Parish, and friend of the Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Wednesday, March 6

Behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed. For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness. — Psalm 84:9-10 (Full text, Psalm 84)

When my child was very small, he had a gecko called George. George was a favorite topic. We'd talk about George's beautifully patterned scales. We'd watch George hunt and eat the crickets and mealworms that were his food. We'd talk about what George liked (his aquarium) and what George didn't like (being held in a certain way). We even talked about how much my child thought that George would like church.

"George loves church, Mama!" my child argued. "Every being wants to be as close to God as possible, and at church we have the Eucharist. We're closest to God at church. George wants to come and see too." How could I argue against that? And what other child, besides the progeny of another such obsessed person, would even think such a thing? Thus, it became so. George started coming to church every Sunday, not in my child's pocket, but in a bag where it was dark and it could be happy.

Every time George came with us, I thought of this verse: "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness." My child knew this.

There is no place I'd rather be. I'd always choose God and God's house. I'd always do it because this is what makes me deeply happy, the one place that is my true home, my true identity, and because being with God is better than being with anyone else. I choose it because God sees me and loves me, and because being close to God is better than being anywhere else. Amen.

The Rev. Molly Bosscher, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, and friend of Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Thursday, March 7

He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. — Ephesians 1:5-6 (Full text, Ephesians 1:5-6)

How beautiful is it that God has chosen us? US? The broken, the messed up, the overwhelmed, the people simply trying our best, day in and day out. Yes, us. We are loved – not *despite* of who we are, but *because* of who we are.

As we go about our days, it is easy to forget the profound ways God's love exists in the world. Yet, Ephesians 1:5-6 reminds us that God has already made a place for each of us in this holy family.

The blessing of belonging that we find in Christ calls us to respond with faithful acts of love for our fellow siblings. What does this look like? How are we to enact our gratitude while caring for one another? One of my favorite quotes is, "You are always in the presence of someone God loves, surrounded by people and alone." How different the world would be if we lived knowing all are loved and chosen.

Recite this breath prayer at least three times through. Take a deep breath, and follow the inhale and exhale pattern. You can also silently say them to yourself. Feel free to put a hand on your heart or your abdomen as you pray.

Inhale: *I am...*

Exhale: *Loved*

Last breath: *Amen.*

The Rev. Kate Van Valkenburg, Director of Ministries at United Campus Christian Fellowship and friend of St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Friday, March 8

Many shall be purified, cleansed, and refined, but the wicked shall continue to act wickedly. None of the wicked shall understand, but those who are wise shall understand. — Daniel 12:10 (Full text, Daniel 12:5-13)

If I were asked to choose a text that reflects the meaning of Lent, I would not choose from the book of Daniel. Daniel experiences God's protection and love in the Exile from his homeland. Children enjoy the stories about Daniel and his friends. As a youngster I sang with gusto, "Dare to be a Daniel; dare to stand alone; dare to have a purpose firm, dare to make it known." But our text is not in the stories; it is located at the end of Daniel in chapter 12 — no longer a story but a prophecy of the Apocalypse.

Daniel's prophecy is in today's Scripture verse: "...those who are wise shall understand." How do these terse words help us live wisely through Lent's 40 days?

Lent is a time of preparation not only for death but also for life after death. Jesus' Resurrection is not the end of Lent but the beginning of our new way to live. "With all wisdom and insight (God) has made known to us the mystery of (God's) will ... in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." (Ephesians 1:8-10).

Theologian and pastor N.T. Wright urges us to move through the 40-day Fast (Lent) to the 40-day Feast (life in Christ). Easter is not the end of Lent but the beginning of life that is lived wisely. The wise Christian does justice, loves mercy, and walks humbly with God. God's new creation emerges as we live and work and play as children of God.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and restore a right spirit within me. Teach me to live wisely in this life even as I look for life after death in my resurrection. Amen.

Linda Male, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Saturday, March 9

If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. — John 3:12-13 (Full text, John 3:1-13)

Nicodemus, a spiritual leader, had just acknowledged physical “signs” performed by Jesus. But he was struggling to bridge that understanding into the spiritual realm. So, when Jesus told him “you must be born from above,” Nicodemus said, “Like, re-enter my mother’s womb and come out again?” Uh, no. Hence, Jesus calling him to task in this verse.

Jesus offered both earthly signs (like healings) and earthly metaphors (like being “born again”) as illuminators of heavenly realities. We have to notice (and believe) what God provides in the physical world in order to notice (and believe) what he provides in the spiritual world.

Jesus cited his own movement between heaven and earth as a symbol of how interconnected they truly are.

Jesus,

You brought up the sun this morning; you are my light, my soul renewal, my new-every-morning mercy. You nourished my body with food and drink; you are my soul’s nourishment in parched times. You displayed beauty in the trees, the birds, and the people around me; you are glorious in your beauty and worthy of my adoration. Help me to see you everywhere, to believe what you show me in both the earthly and the heavenly realms. Amen.

Irene Kraegel, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Sunday, March 10

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. — Ephesians 2:8-9 (Full text, Ephesians 2:1-10)

Saving grace! My understanding has come a long way since childhood when I believed we were saved by faith and works. When works were kicked out of the salvation equation, I thought grace was a free, one-time only thing through faith; boom, you get it, and you're good for the afterlife. But now, I think God gives us grace every day to help sustain us in addition to giving us saving grace.

I believe a more expansive view of grace helps make us “alive together with Christ.” (Ephesians 2:5) And grace is there to help me in everyday temptations.

When I am kind to someone who insults me, that is the grace of God.

When a motorist cuts me off and I do not try to get even, that is the grace of God.

When I forgive someone or someone forgives me, that is the grace of God.

When I listen patiently to one who is grieving, that is the grace of God.

However, there is another side: We can ignore or walk away from grace. Like the times I hurled an insult in return or withheld forgiveness.

Examine your beliefs. What is grace? Have you missed opportunities to use it? How can we spread grace with our empathy, love, patience, and other grace-filled virtues?

For our prayer, let us rely on Hebrews 4:16:

“Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Amen.

Mike McCarty, friend of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Cathedral of Saint Andrew, St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Monday, March 11

Yet Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) — 1 Hebrews 3:3-4 (Full text, Hebrews 3:1-6)

The author of Hebrews is explaining how the person and mission of Jesus are both far superior to those of Moses. This is not to diminish Moses at all. Rather, the point is that those who see Moses as a worthy example ought to feel even *more* inclined to follow Jesus.

As the son of a carpenter – the builder of houses – I appreciate the skill and honor required to build a physical dwelling place. I also appreciate how Jesus, as a carpenter and a builder of physical things, was more importantly the builder of all things spiritual and otherwise that dwell in the Lord and are the foundation of our Christian life.

Dear Loving Father,

Please help me to show you honor by building upon the teachings and sacrifice of your son, our savior, Jesus Christ. Also, let me not forget that all worthy things are of and from you. Amen.

Mike Armour, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Tuesday, March 12

No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it. — 1 Corinthians 10:13 (Full text, 1 Corinthians 10:6-13)

“God is faithful.” Really? Just prior to reading this Scripture passage, I clicked off the television after seeing faces of despair, hopelessness and suffering in Gaza. It would be easy to see a people struggling to find that faithfulness and coming up empty. A people standing alone in the uniqueness of their suffering. A people abandoned by God’s promise of faithful presence.

In our Scripture passage, Paul tells us to look again. He tells us that temptations are common to all of us, and that it is in the midst of these temptations that we see the face of the faithful God. The people of Gaza and of Corinth are not experiencing some kind of unique suffering but, rather, are experiencing the suffering that is common to humankind.

What is unique is our invitation to allow God to use our temptation and suffering for good. We must not equate God’s faithfulness with a promise to fix our suffering. The faithful God does not allow us to be taken over by temptation but, rather, God gives us the power to endure it and overcome it. Along with the people of Corinth, Gaza, and all people around the globe, we must face and endure temptation. The power to endure comes not from our efforts but from the strength of the faithful God.

“God is faithful.” Really!!

Come to us, O faithful One. Amen.

Nancy Taylor, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Wednesday, March 13

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” Then the Pharisees said to him, “You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid.” — John 8:12-13 (Full text, John 8:12-20)

The Festival of Lights was the backdrop when Christ was teaching "I am the light of the world." Those who believed in Jesus and His message were in the light. Unbelievers were in darkness. The Pharisees were in darkness and could not see the light. Living in darkness was accompanied with misery and "gnashing of teeth."

It is interesting to note that the Festival of Lights celebrated the Maccabees' cleansing of the Temple of foreign idols, and Jesus is offering us the true life, cleansing us from sin.

The season of Lent is looking forward to the light. It is a time of renewal, of personal change. How am I living my life right now? Am I truly following Christ, living according to His teachings and those of His Church? The wilderness of Lent corresponds to the wilderness of Israel, of Christ. It is a period of testing and answers, ultimately preparing us for our Lord's supreme sacrifice.

Lord,
*Prepare us to celebrate Your supreme sacrifice.
May we advance Your Light to the world.
May our witness be how we live our lives. Amen.*

William Wildschut, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Thursday, March 14

Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him. — Isaiah 30:18 (Full text, Isaiah 30:15-18)

More than halfway through Lent is a good time for some encouragement about where we stand with the Almighty God of the Universe. Many of us are practicing a Lenten observance. (Fast. Pray. Give. You know the drill, right?) And maybe it's going well. Maybe not so much. The point isn't perfection so much as focus. As with any spiritual practice, the goal is persistence, trusting that God's love for us doesn't depend on what we do. Even in Lent.

But wait! What's on the other side of that first "therefore" in verse 18? Look back a few verses and we see God is trying hard to save the rebellious people. God is waiting for them with grace, mercy, justice, and blessing — and they just aren't ready yet to turn away from their idols to the Holy One of Israel. We too may not be ready to see that it is "in returning and rest you shall be saved, in quietness and in trust shall be your strength." (v. 15)

They refused but God was patient. And God is patient with us, too. May we be as patient with ourselves and each other.

*Gracious God,
You call us to hold out our hands as you offer us your grace, mercy, justice, and blessing. As Lent continues to unfold, help us to find you in quietness and trust. In Christ's name, Amen.*

The Rev. Helen Havlik, Pastor Emerita, North Park Presbyterian Church, and friend of Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Friday, March 15

Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.
— Hebrews 4:16 (Full text, Hebrews 4:14-5:4)

The word “boldness” captured my attention. I thought of the “Star Trek” TV series of the 1960s. The mission was “to boldly go where no one has gone before.”

I did not become a Trekkie, but I was intrigued by how each crew member used his or her talents and skills to help accomplish the mission. They boldly sought out new adventures and were eager to explore, learn, and grow as a crew and as individuals. They required a sturdy, well-maintained Starship Enterprise to protect them and keep them safe. The committed crew supported each other to accomplish their mission. This storyline can describe our own spiritual adventures.

We require a strong starship of faith and a supportive crew to accompany us as we navigate obstacles on our mission to love God, and our neighbor as ourselves. Our ship of faith requires constant maintenance through prayer, study, service, and other meaningful spiritual practices. We need a community of kindred spirits to encourage us and sometimes be an agent of reality. Our spiritual journeys begin with consenting to God’s presence and action within us as found in our baptismal covenant. This consent opens us to the grace of the Spirit. This grace is essential to help us boldly confront the personal obstacles preventing us from developing a closer relationship with the Divine.

I encourage you to develop a meditative practice during Lent to help create a quiet space to listen for the Spirit’s guidance and sense God’s loving presence.

May this season of Lent be a time for us to boldly go where we have spiritually never gone before. May the Spirit help us feel God’s presence, healing, and peace in our lives, and grant us the strength to be bold in discerning God’s will for us. Amen.

Jim Lozer, St. Mark’s Episcopal Church

Saturday, March 16

O Lord, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work. In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known; in wrath may you remember mercy. — Habakkuk 3:2 (Full text, Habakkuk 3:2-13)

Habakkuk is a troubled soul. With the Babylonians crushing their opponents and threatening Judah, the prophet wonders what God is up to. If God cares about justice and peace, why do violence and suffering prevail? When will God's promises of blessing be fulfilled?

Habakkuk raises these questions in a dramatic dialogue with God (chapters 1 and 2). He doesn't conclude with answers, however, but with a hymn of praise, which the words of our text begin. He both worships God and asks God to prove worthy of worship. And he trembles as he waits for the powerful perpetrators of violence to be undone.

The God that Habakkuk worships is not for the faint of heart. This is an angry God whom poverty and oppression deeply offend. Yet the anger arises from God's love for creation and human society. That's why Habakkuk dares to ask God to come through once more: "in wrath may you remember mercy." (Habakkuk 3:2)

We live in a world wracked by warfare and conflict. So many people suffer injustice and oppression. It's enough to drive one to despair. But let us not lose hope. The God we worship wants, through us, to make things right, even though that can take generations to unfold.

Let the modified words of this ancient prophet be our prayer:

Dear God,

We've heard you are faithful to your promises. Please revive them in our own time. In your anger over the violence that we help perpetuate, may you remember mercy. Amen.

Lambert Zuidervaat, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Sunday, March 17

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. — Hebrews 5:7-8 (Full text, Hebrews 5:5-10)

In Hebrews 5:5-6: “You are my Son today I have begotten you... You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.” This is a requirement of the priesthood of Melchizedek. God appoints Jesus and the men who are priests, mediators between Himself and the laity.

What makes Hebrews 5:7-10 so great is that, in a few words, it describes how Jesus fulfills his role as a priest and demonstrates Faith, Hope, and Love. To be a priest, he must be human, to understand why we are prone to make transgressions against God, become emotional wrecks, and find it so hard to follow God’s Ten Commandments. Jesus had feelings, emotions, and he also was tempted by the Devil.

As a representative of God’s people, Jesus offered prayers, supplications, and sacrifices to atone for people’s sins. Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice – his own life – so our relationship with God could be restored.

By dying on the cross, the broken bridge between man and God had been mended. “It was about the sixth hour and there was darkness over the land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed; the curtain to the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus crying in a loud voice, said ‘Father, into your hands, I commit, my spirit.’” (St. John 44:46)

Act of Hope prayer

Good Jesus, In You alone I place all my hope. You are my salvation and my strength, the Source of all good. Through Your mercy, through Your Passion and Death, I hope to obtain the pardon of my sins, and grace of final perseverance and a happy eternity. Amen.

Cynthia Smith, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Monday, March 18

You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. — Isaiah 43:10 (Full text, Isaiah 43:8-13)

Isaiah, one of 16 prophets who wrote in the Old Testament, is considered by many authorities to stand at the head of the four major prophets. He and the others wrote during a time of Israel's decline, the exile and return to their homeland. He knew his words would fall on deaf ears, but he prophesied for more than 40 years, through the reigns of some of Judah's worst kings. Isaiah preached God's righteousness, warned of the judgment on sin, and comforted his people with the knowledge of God's love and his longing to forgive.

In verse 10, Isaiah calls on his people, and today, us, to be witnesses and servants of the Lord. While we are often still blind and deaf and struggle with times of disbelief, through our faith – our “Wholehearted Faith” as in Rachel Held Evans' book of the same title – we can still witness.

How? Through kindness, care, and compassion for our neighbors. We don't have to confront them as if on a witness stand or on a street corner shouting “Repent.” All we have to do is see the needs of our neighbors, our families, our spouses; and listen to them, comfort them, respect them, forgive them, and show them love.

For our prayer, let us ponder the words of Muhammad Ali:

“We all have the same God; we just serve him differently. Rivers, ponds, lakes, and streams, they all have different names, but they all contain water. Just as religions do, they all contain truths, expressed in different ways, forms, and times. It doesn't matter whether you're a Muslim, a Christian, or a Jew. When you believe in God, you should believe that all people are part of one family. If you love God, you can't only love some of his children.”

Kirby Hanson, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Tuesday, March 19

***"In your statutes I take delight; I will never forget your word." —
Psalm 119:16 (Full text, Psalm 119:9-16)***

Make your bed. Clean your room. Mow the grass. Help your sister. Do the dishes. Do your homework. Stop fighting. Wash your face. Brush your teeth. When we were young, there were so many rules, precepts, and statutes that mom and dad put upon us. Play nice with the neighbor kid. Help the old man next door with his yard work. I don't know about you, but I would complain, argue, and fight against the imposition of having to do these things. I had better things to do.

It was when I was about 18 that I began to recognize a change in my perspective. I realized that the many rules were about healthy relationship with oneself, my folks, family, friends, and neighbors. My attitude began to change from "doing the rules" to being in a loving relationship.

The Law for the Hebrew people had 613 of these precepts. How can the young or even adults keep all of these? Jesus calls us to a grown-up understanding. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength," and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:30-31)

Lord Jesus,

I thank you for your lesson in mature simplicity. In this Lenten season, reform my heart for a loving relationship with you, my family, and my neighbor near and far. With your help I can take delight in your precepts. Amen.

Fred Johnson, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Wednesday, March 20

Then Jesus cried aloud: “Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. ... I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world but to save the world.” — John 12:44-45,47 (Full text, John 12:34-50)

When I was a child, God was an old man on a throne, somewhere “up there.” God did not seem to have much to do with my messy, boring, beautiful, hard life down here. It took time in my journey of faith to internalize that Jesus is who God chose to show who God is.

In today’s Scripture, Jesus stresses that, when we look at him, we are seeing the One who sent him. When we believe in him, we are believing in the One who sent him. And when he speaks, his words are God’s words. When we know who Jesus is we know who God is. And God is not a distant judge. God is part of our messy, boring, hard, beautiful lives. God chose both to create us and to spend time with us on earth. He spent time with the humble, the poor, and those rejected by society. Those with the messiest lives.

During this Lenten season, as we set aside time to reflect on Jesus and consider his life, death, burial, and resurrection, let us remember that he was and is God With Us in all our seasons. Life is beautiful and life is hard. Both are true. And God experiences both with us as close as our own breath.

*Lord,
Help us to feel your presence this season.
Bless our lives as they are and help us
authentically live them. Amen.*

Ameila Grayson, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Thursday, March 21

Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. — Philippians 2:3-5 (Full text, Philippians 2:1-11)

None of the above-mentioned virtues spoken of by St. Paul are natural to us “Westerners.” Paul was a man of his time and the Middle East, where looking inward first is the way to move forward in life.

I have experienced many situations in life recently where the solution to a problem seemed to be charging in, doing whatever I had to do outwardly. And I was sure I was right, and my solutions would work. Of course, they didn't. I had charged in on my own, not seeking spiritual guidance first or praying about the situation. And I wondered why things didn't work out!

When we are facing difficult situations, we need to give them to God first. We can trust God. He always has our best interests in Divine Mind, where all solutions and guidance are found. We need to find the courage inside ourselves to let go and let God do his perfect work in us, through us, and for us.

*This Lent, let us ponder the wonderful gifts
God has given us, and give thanks
for His love and forgiveness. Amen.*

Jean Malone, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Friday, March 22

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. — Psalm 118:22-24 (Full text, Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29)

Something about a stone captivates my soul. When I am out walking, I tend to look down, deep in thought. While my mind might be untangling a problem or teasing out an idea for a homily, my eyes are fixated on the earth beneath me. Such grounded focus has brought to my attention some amazing stones.

On paths of dirt, I have found jagged stones with sharp edges. These usually find a place between my fingers for a time as I reflect on the cliffs and crags that comprise the larger whole from which such small stones came. I think, too, about my own rough edges — some strong and useful, many in need of polishing and refinement.

On paths of sand on the shores of Lake Michigan and Lake Superior, I have found stones of brilliant color and banded beauty with story lines that go on and on. These smooth stones are polished by the waves. Again and again, my mind goes to the larger whole, a kind of cornerstone, from which these tiny treasures emerged.

More than 2,000 years ago, our Lord, our rock and refuge, showed His first disciples how to walk in the way of the cross. This “stone that the builders rejected” was forging a path of love and wholeness to draw all people and all creation back to God and right relationship with one another.

As our Lenten journey winds down and we prepare to participate in the sacred mysteries of Holy Week, let's keep focused on our rock and refuge, Jesus Christ.

*Jesus,
Help me to keep my eyes on You, and trust in the purifying work of grace that brings beauty and new life out of what once was fragmented and broken.
Amen.*

The Rev. BJ Heyboer, Rector, St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Newaygo, and friend of Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Saturday, March 23

A blind beggar was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." — Mark 10:46b-49a (Full text, Mark 10:32-34,46-52)

Today is the day before Palm Sunday, when our Lord will make his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and we as Christians begin our journey through Holy Week. Today's passage is appropriate because this encounter with Bartimaeus is Jesus' last miracle as he makes his way through Jericho to the Holy City.

What is special about this story is that Bartimaeus, a blind beggar who calls out to Jesus for his mercy and forgiveness, recognizes that Jesus is the Son of God. It is his faith in Jesus that gives him his sight. It is interesting that we know Bartimaeus' name. This is because after his sight is regained, he throws off his cloak and follows Jesus along the road. He becomes one of the faithful disciples and a recognized leader in the early church.

In this last week of Lent, we may ask how this affects us. Bartimaeus represents all of us who believe and have faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, and we also learn about the importance of having the courage to ask for help even when others try to discourage it. By giving Bartimaeus his sight, the beggar was able to "see" the road to salvation by following in Jesus' footsteps and walking the way to the cross and finally to Jesus' glorious resurrection on Easter!

Dear and gracious Father,

We ask for the gift of sight like our brother, Bartimaeus, who was able to "see" our Lord as the Son of God and the expiation for our sins. Shower us this Holy Week with your innumerable blessings and forgive us for our blindness to your Truth. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Aleta Wells, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Palm Sunday, March 24

"Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" — Mark 11:2-3 (Full text, Mark 11:1-11)

Why a colt (or donkey)? Animals were involved with Jesus' arrival in a lowly stable. A donkey was a symbol of peace in the Bible. Jesus entered this last "battle" not victorious on a white horse fit for a king, but unarmed, on a peaceful animal. A borrowed animal. (I wonder, who else rode that colt throughout its life? How many other peacemakers did it deliver to disrupt dreadful systems? How many more times did the colt's keeper follow directions and usher in the peace of Christ to the world?)

But this isn't really about the animal. It's about prophecy. Jesus' prediction of the events that would unfold proves that Jesus was not a victim of an uncontrollable sequence of events. Jesus knew he was the fulfillment of prophecy – a greater plan set in motion before he arrived on the scene. It proves that the powers that sought to destroy him were not beyond divine intervention; rather, they were a part of the story. Everyone played their part. Including the colt.

I wonder if it felt satisfying to the two disciples that the scenario played out exactly as Jesus foretold? I wonder if it gave them confidence to trust that they were a part of a grander fulfillment of prophecy? I wonder if I can find satisfaction when I follow God's leading, even if I cannot see the end results?

God,
Grant me satisfaction in knowing
that I can be a part of your story of peace. Amen.

Rachel Hyde, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Monday, March 25

He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. — Isaiah 42:2-3 (Full text, Isaiah 42:1-9)

Isaiah tells us in today's reading that God would send His chosen one to bring justice to His people: to heal the blind, release prisoners, and bring light to those in darkness. But the one sent to deliver God's people was to be a beloved *servant* – not a king or a commander, but a servant who brought about God's justice with a spirit of compassion, a servant who didn't call attention to himself but to the needs of others.

When God's people are weakened and bruised, when we feel burned out and diminished, He does not turn away from us. Instead, Isaiah tells us, He grasps us by the hand. He enters into relationship with us and forms us into the people He knows we can become.

So, this Holy Week let us ask ourselves how we will take up Jesus' mission once the Alleluias of Easter have faded away. How will we bring justice to a world that cries out for connection? We can begin by becoming servants ourselves: supporting those who are buffeted by life's storms, holding the hand of those who suffer, and entering into relationship with those we serve. Just like Jesus did.

God of justice and compassion,

Open my servant-heart so that I may touch the lives of people around me with the same mercy that your Son Jesus offered to me. Teach me how to bring Your light to those in darkness and Your comfort to those who suffer. In the name of Your beloved Son, Amen.

Laurie Larson, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Tuesday, March 26

Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." — John 12:23-24 (Full text, John 12:20-36)

This passage describes what occurred in Bethany (Lazarus' home) where Jesus was preparing for His triumphal entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey's back. This is all in preparation for Jesus' crucifixion (alluded to in verse 23, and resurrection, verse 24). In my opinion, these subtle verses are of profound significance to the Gospel of Matthew, and our entire faith, because they provide early indications that Jesus knew the true purpose of His mission on earth.

At the same time the crowd was coming to see Jesus and worship him. They understood that Jesus remains forever (vs. 34-35), but He rebuked them, and said He would be with them only a short time.

The outcome, of course, was Jesus' death and resurrection, and the eventual establishment of Christianity.

Lord,

*Teach us to understand that you desire that each of us should do our part to fulfill Jesus' command to produce much fruit and fulfill your commandments.
Amen.*

Bob Swanborg, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Wednesday, March 27

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. — Hebrews 12:1 (Full text, Hebrews 12:1-3)

Lent is a time of spiritual reflection and meditation. A race seems out of place, evoking images of frenetic activity in front of a noisy crowd. A year ago, my son began preparing for his first marathon, changing my understanding of races and our lifelong journeys of becoming more Christ-like.

Marathons usually are not about winning, but about meeting a challenging, personal goal. Preparation requires learning from those who ran before you and months of disciplined conditioning. Runners cannot carry unnecessary weight. “Find the lightest shoes with the greatest kick!” Marathoners need mental discipline to stay focused and keep a constant pace, even when the body says “stop” or “I can go faster.” Energizing and hydrating gels are strategically placed within tiny pockets. Volunteers keep an eye out for safety and well-being.

In our own faith journeys, we rely on the saints who have come before us for inspiration and instruction. As we grow into the lightness of grace, we throw off old resentments, feelings of inadequacy, and wasteful distractions. During Lent we are invited to fill our pockets with energizing and sustaining nourishment of prayer, worship, and community. And we do not run alone, but with our church families and the Holy Spirit.

Dear Lord,

We thank thee for the clouds of witnesses who have run the race with perseverance before us. Be with us during this Lenten season so our strength is renewed, and we may faithfully complete the course you have set for us. Amen.

Anne Hiskes, St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Maundy Thursday, March 28

“Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” — John 13:33-34 (Full text, John 13:1-17,31b-35)

Toward the end of Holy Week, Jesus gathered his disciples into the upper room. Jesus chose this time to be with this small group knowing the time of his death was drawing near. Maundy Thursday was his opportunity to show his love to his disciples and command them to love fully – to be servants to one another, to wash each other’s feet, to love one another as he had loved them – showing compassion for them even though, at times, they probably exasperated him!

My late sister is on my mind as I write this devotion; her birthday is March 28. Four months prior to her death, we met for one last time in the Smoky Mountains. Joan knew her time to leave this world was coming soon, knowing she would be with us “just a little longer” as she was losing the battle with cancer.

We may not have the privilege of knowing if our time here will be long or short, but that does not dull the imperative of the command to love and serve one another. As we attempt to live out Christ’s command, our intentions are good but our actions fall short. May it help us to ask ourselves:

Who has loved you enough to be a servant to you?

Who have you loved enough to be a servant to them?

Dearest Jesus,

Grant us the strength daily to love one another as you have loved us, so that others will know we are Christians by our love. Amen.

Karen Meyers, Westminster Presbyterian Church

Good Friday, March 29

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. — John 18:28-30 (Full text, John 18:1-19:42)

I have been blessed in past years to have been a reader of the Passion of Jesus Christ both on Palm Sundays and Good Fridays. The reading of the Passion brings on such a deep, and humbling experience for me of the purpose of Jesus' life on Earth. A culmination of humility, sacrifice, and grace.

The above Scripture in John 19:30, is the only time during the Passion when we all kneel in silence. "It is finished." These last three words represent both *acknowledgment* and *segue*. Acknowledgement that Jesus accomplished all His Earthly work. His life of teaching, stories, and parables is complete. And a segue into His death and resurrection, leading us all in faith and the promise of eternal life.

Last words – whether from a loved one or a friend – are always etched in our hearts and our memory of that person's life. Just as those last words of Jesus: "It is finished." Those words remind us of His time on Earth and, His love for all of us.

Lord,

Let these last words portrayed in John's Passion of Christ remind us always of Jesus' humility, sacrifice, and grace; His gifts of love for each of us. Amen.

Rob Frans, Cathedral of Saint Andrew

Saturday, March 30

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." — Lamentations 3:22-24 (Full text, Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24)

Lamentations.

Love. Mercy. Faithfulness. Hope. In your
lamentations, Jeremiah.
Paradox, Jeremiah.

And "they are new every morning." Yes,
every day is a beginning.

And then it unfolds.

What gift will we need most?

Love?

Mercy?

Faithfulness?

Hope?

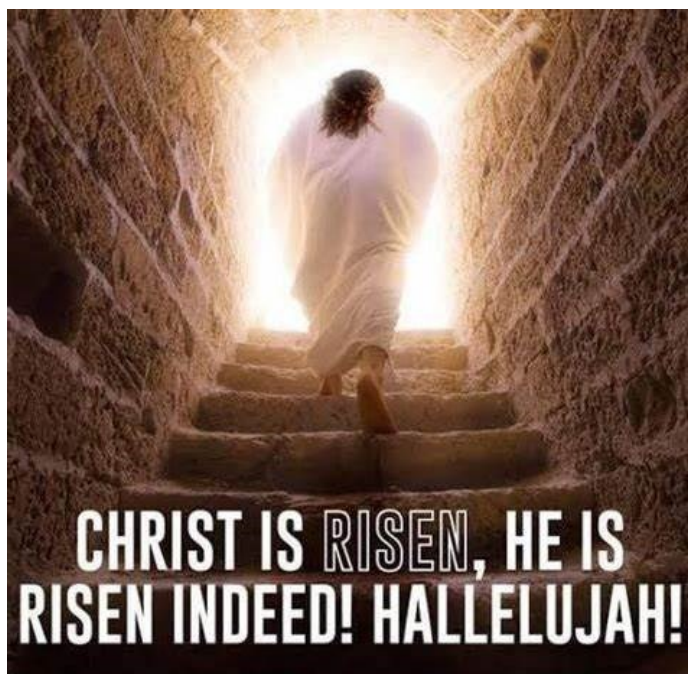
After all, which of us knows this morning what will happen tonight? But
this we do know:

The Lord is my portion, therefore...

Karen Kania, Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Easter Sunday, March 31

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. — Mark 16:1-8



**CHRIST IS RISEN, HE IS
RISEN INDEED! HALLELUJAH!**

An Ecumenical Offering from

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**Cathedral of Saint Andrew
215 Sheldon Blvd. SE**

**St. Mark's Episcopal Church
134 N. Division Ave.**

**Westminster Presbyterian Church
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