

LENTEN

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*I am the Vine
You are the Branches*

JOHN 15-5



DEVOTIONS

Cover design by Arlene Langdon

Introduction

Welcome to our third Lenten Devotional! These 40 offerings have been thoughtfully and lovingly written by our youth, our confirmation class, members, staff and friends of our faith community.

This year's theme is "Abide in My Love" from John 15. This is a deep text filled with powerful metaphors that are easy to understand and very hard to do. The key words of "abiding" "pruning" and "bearing fruit" are words that call us to read, meditate and then act on the gospel for the sake of the whole community, not just ourselves.

It is my hope that even before you begin your Lenten journey with this devotional that you seek out as many people as you can and give them a copy of this booklet. Or...email them links to our Facebook page (FPCBoonton) or our website (www.fpcboonton.org) where the devotions will be posted daily.

While the Lenten journey is different for each one of us, based on what's happening in our lives and faith-story, it is a journey that is meant not to be traveled alone but in community. The contributors are modelling that by offering themselves daily as Jesus and the disciples did. You will notice that there are quite a few scriptures that are written about more than once. This happens every year when the gospel, through the Spirit, speaks to a writer even more than the scripture originally assigned or chosen. Each person's perspective sheds new light!

Lastly, it is hard to imagine how much effort, planning and coordination is needed to produce this devotional. Please join me in thanking: editors Sherm Skinner and Evelyn Thiel, Arlene Langdon for her artwork on the cover and Sandy DiCarlo who managed all the submissions, shored up every detail and printed them all, which is no small feat!

May your Lenten journey be enriched as you seek to Abide in Christ's Love, and be willing to be pruned in order to bear more fruit for the sake Jesus the Christ.

Rev. Jen

⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

Daily Reflection

The text for me is saying that for my faith journey, I need to accept Jesus and his teachings to be able to grow and understand the Church and the scripture. If we do not accept Jesus into our lives, we will not accomplish anything, and we will not fully live our lives. As a church, we need to be devoted to living with Jesus, living life his way, growing up the way he designed because he gives us anything we need.

This verse is incredibly apparent in my life, especially during Confirmation Class. For the first couple of weeks of class, we spent a lot of time dissecting John 15, to help us better understand it. Coming into class, I was not far off in my faith journey, but the class and I really disassembled this piece, I really understood what was needed to happen to set off my faith journey.

As we examine the parts of John 15 and truly understand the chapter, it is clear what needs to be done to help develop our faith journey. For me, it meant spending time listening to the Lord's word and actively looking for his work around me. Once I did this, I could see that I could start accepting Jesus, which was really able to help grow my faith, and it will continue to grow through Jesus and confirmation class.

Looking back a couple of years ago, I can now see a parallel between this verse and an anecdote from my life. I had received a sunflower at an environmental club assembly at school. For the first couple of weeks, my teacher was the one watering the sunflower and for all the other kids too. The thing was, mine wasn't sprouting. Being a kid, I was pretty upset about this, but when I brought the sunflower home things changed. Instead of letting other people care for my sunflower, I was the one who cared and nurtured for it accepting my responsibility. This is like Jesus caring for us and we have to accept Him to grow. If we don't then our sunflower can't grow.

Daily Prayer: Dear God, please help us stay devoted to accepting you and Jesus into our lives to help us and our Faith Journey grow. Amen.

~Nate Keoppel

¹The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. ²He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. ³He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. ⁴Yea, 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. ⁵Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Daily Reflection

About ten years ago, I was caring for my Aunt who was dying from cancer. Anyone who has had to care for a loved one who is dying, knows the struggle and heartache that come with the territory. At that time in my life, I was very busy— dealing with a challenging work environment, personal issues, all while attending fire school. I would help my Aunt when I could, and towards the end, the cancer had entered her brain. On one particular evening, I was staying the night. She thought this was the end and she was so terrified. She kept thinking that the devil would take her because of all the bad things she had done.

At that time in my life, I wasn't really a religious person, but my instinct told me that we could pray and I told her she was going to heaven and that God forgives all who want to be forgiven. She continued to become more and more erratic and I began thinking – do I need to call a priest?! Then she said she knew the 23 Psalm and asked that if we could pray this. Growing up Catholic, I never really knew this prayer, as we always said the “Our Father” or a “Hail Mary” – so I quickly found a bible, found the 23 Psalm, and read it over and over with her. It provided her comfort and she finally appeared to be at peace. In the morning, as I left her, I kissed her good-bye, told her all would be okay and that I would see her in a few days. That was the last time I saw her, as she passed away five days later.

Daily Prayer

Lord, Thank you for giving me this amazing prayer during one of my darkest hours. Since then, it has provided me with such comfort. I hope it does for others as well. Amen.

~Natalie Pisarcik

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: ² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

Daily Reflection

When I was young I would often hear my mother say, “God knew what he was doing when he gave children to the young.” Young parents are given the patience and stamina to handle all the energy it takes to raise their children today. It gave me much thought about the order God puts into our lives. There are things we should do when we are little children to grow into responsible adults. For example: we need to learn to walk before we can run; we need to eat soft foods before we can digest solid food.

In the same way our lives are ordered to handle situations that suit our age. People today are put upon to solve problems that are way beyond their years. Think of all the drug problems and abuse we are facing in society today. Many children see and experience situations they probably are not ready for. The order of experience is all mixed up giving them many emotional and social problems.

I can equate it to my girls when they were in school. They were both very hard workers and would comment on how they were missing out on fun because they chose such demanding fields of study. I would remind them that this was their time to study and fun would come later. They wouldn't want to study later when life had other things for them. Ultimately they listened and studied when they were supposed to, and both became successful in their careers.

I would say the same today. God has a plan for each and every one of us. We need to do things in the order He has prescribed and life will move along easier than for those who don't follow His plan. We all experience hills and valleys in life, but walking with God and following his plan shows us a clearer path.

Daily Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for putting order in our lives. Thank you for a plan that will help us to walk with You daily. Keep us close and under Your care. Guide our steps as we go. Amen.

¹⁵ But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.

Daily Reflection

Patient endurance. What a phrase. I feel like we live in an environment where immediate gratification is the norm. In a world where we can get most anything delivered in 24 hours, talk to our friends and family at any time, thanks to cell phones, texting, and social media, and find an abundance of information on any and every subject, have we forgotten what it is like to patiently do anything? In my case, I'm going to answer in the affirmative.

When I asked if I could take the subject of Seeds in Good Soil, I thought I'd write about gardening and the metaphor for living your best life and producing fruit. But I am stuck on patient endurance.

I did a little research and found that patient endurance is emphasized throughout the bible. Three great illustrations are Jesus patiently enduring his time on the cross and how his death gave us everlasting life. There are a few women in the bible who were seemingly unable to bear a child, and yet did great works in God's name while waiting, like Hannah, Sarah and Rebecca. Also, Joseph patiently endured ridicule from his family and terrible injustice, and yet sustained a deep and abiding love of God, so that he was able to influence a kingdom.

When we find ourselves or a loved one in a situation that requires patient endurance, let's look to these great teachers and understand that we grow when we are surrounded by a strong community (the good soil), and we will bear fruit when we keep a loving and good heart. We need to lean on God and be patient.

Daily Prayer

Be with us so that we can actively and productively be patient and seek you in all your grace, precious Lord, so that we can endure whatever life brings us, and do so with a gracious heart. Amen.

~Kim Robbins

³¹ but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Daily Reflection

Many years ago, this passage changed my life. At a particularly low point, I participated in a retreat and when this passage appeared on the white board, it held me! It gave me hope, it gave me courage. I copied it on an index card and it still serves as a bookmark in my Bible. I have grown to love it more and more over the years. No matter how much we long to soar like an eagle, often we can just barely manage to put one foot in front of the other. These words speak to feeling powerless, to the longing for relief from spiritual, emotional and physical exhaustion, to hopelessness and discouragement. They bring reassurance that God is with us and accompanies us each step of the way.

Ancient Hebrew culture revered eagles as symbols of strength and courage. *Eagle's wings* was a figure of speech often used to attribute these fine characteristics to a person. (See Exodus 19:1-6, a recollection of how God delivered Israel from the Egyptians.) The prophet Isaiah uses *wings like eagles* in the same way, attributing the great characteristics of eagles to those who remain faithful to God.

There is a wonderful hymn found in our Green Hymnal: *On Eagle's Wings*. "For you who dwell in the shelter of the Lord, who abide in his shadow for life, say to the Lord: "My refuge, my rock in whom I trust." "And he will raise you up on eagle's wings, bear you on the breath of dawn, make you to shine like the sun, and hold you in the palm of his hand."

In the famous revelation of Thomas Merton: "There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun. If only they could all see themselves as they really are." We are the people of God, learning to see ourselves as God sees us, shining like the sun, bearing glory and honor, created in the image of God.

Daily Prayer

Meditate on this passage and notice what word or phrase stands out for you. Carry this word or phrase with you as you move through your day.

~Lorrie Skinner

³⁰ He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

Daily Reflection

Lent is a time for reflecting and asking ourselves how we’re doing, spirit-wise. Mark 4 is a particularly good passage for me to reread, as I need to have seeds of faith inside me. I never know when I’ll require them. I have needed them recently in the matter of my husband’s health.

Several years ago, my husband found out that he had serious heart problems. Thank God I stored up seeds of faith then, because I sowed a seed in the cardiologist’s parking lot. Then he had to have open heart surgery roughly six years ago. A number of seeds were sown at Morristown Hospital. We weathered that with God’s help. Boy, was I thankful then! But I would need more seeds. When I drove home from church about five or six years ago, I’d think of my poor husband waiting at home and realized that it was quite possible that he might die. So, a string of seeds went flying out the window of my car. But he was lucky enough to get on the heart transplant list.

Then a little over three years ago, he got a phone call that changed both his life and mine – the hospital had just received a heart that was perfect for him! Now I would need all the seeds I had stored up and more. Oh, he had some setbacks in the hospital after the heart transplant, but after three months of being away he was finally able to come home, which just proves that I needed all those faith seeds...

**PRAYER –
The world’s greatest
wireless connection.**

It really is, isn’t it? It’s comforting to know that SOMEONE is always there and has got your back in the tough times.

**The Lord did not promise
that life would be easy but
He did promise to be with
you every step of the way.**

Fortunately, He has been, because my journey has not been easy, but with a LOT of prayers, it has been successful!

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Daily Reflection

As a student in high school, I walked past a new synagogue each day on my way to school. On the concave, brick facade were metal letters that said:

DO JUSTICE

LOVE MERCY

WALK HUMBLY WITH GOD

I couldn't go by that synagogue without saying those words to myself. I don't believe I've ever thought about the meaning of any group of words as much as I have of those eight.

Do, love, and walk are all action verbs and God's interest is in how we react to them. The words themselves demand action from us.

TO DO JUSTICE calls on all God's people to work for fairness for all, especially the weak and powerless.

TO LOVE MERCY/KINDNESS speaks of the forgiving love with which we relate to others: our children, spouses, friends, strangers, and God.

TO WALK HUMBLY WITH GOD is at his invitation because he wants to have a closer, daily relationship with us. We are humbled by the invitation knowing that God has chosen us to be in his presence.

Daily Prayer

Loving God, may our doing, loving, and walking with You be pleasing in your sight. May we strive be fair, full of mercy and kindness, and always humble in your presence. Amen.

~Marilyn Ward

³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

Daily Reflection

Abiding in Christ, being connected with your Faith all the way down to your roots, is a great metaphor for how we are told to live our lives as Christians. Ultimately, if we are living as good Christian vines, the fruit that we bear would be obvious. When I look at my life, I have had some seasons where the harvest has been plentiful. That meant spending my time helping others, being generous with my time and talents, giving back, loving my family, friends, neighbors and strangers; truly living in the community of Faith.

On the flip side, I have also gone through periods of my life where I have grown weary, cynical, judgmental, and apathetic about feeding my Faith. I have filled my time with streaming videos, internet junk food, shopping for things I do not need, and staying comfortable. These activities do nothing to... grow my faith, bring life meaning, or feed my soul.

The decision to follow Christ is one that we need to make every day. As we go through this Lenten season, it is a perfect time to prune our time and choose what fruits we want to bear. Make a commitment to use your talents to give back and be a blessing to others.

Daily Prayer

Lord, give me the desire to live my life in your abiding presence. Help me to be mindful that you are the vine and I am the branch with the opportunity to bear fruit in your name. Amen.

~Elaine Oussoren

March 15

“Worst Day Ever”

*Today was the absolute worst day ever
And don't try to convince me that
There's something good in every day
Because, when you take a closer look,
This world is a pretty evil place.
Even if
Some goodness does shine through once in a while
Satisfaction and happiness don't last.
And it's not true that
It's all in the mind and heart
Because
True happiness can be attained
Only if one's surroundings are good.
It's not true that good exists
I'm sure you can agree that
The reality
Creates
My attitude
It's all beyond my control
And you'll never in a million years hear me say that
Today was a very good day.*

Now read it again, starting at the bottom and read to the top.
And see what I really feel about my day.

*Written by Chanie Gorkin, for a poetry class when she was sophomore at **Beth Rivkah**,
(a High school for Lubavitch Jews in New York)*

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Daily Reflection

As music speaks to the soul, we reflect on one of the most well-known texts in scripture through the words of a well-known anthem.

Listening Link-YouTube-God So Loved The World (Stainer)-Choir of St John's College, Cambridge



God so loved the world, God so loved the world,
that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoso believeth, believeth in Him
should not perish, should not perish, but have everlasting life.

For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world,
God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world;
But that the world through Him might be saved.

God so loved the world, God so loved the world,
that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoso believeth, believeth in Him
should not perish, should not perish, but have everlasting life,
everlasting life, everlasting, everlasting life.

God so loved the world, God so loved the world, God so loved the world.

Daily Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your great love, in the gift of your Son Jesus not as a judge but as a Saviour promising eternal life through our belief in him. Help us to open our hearts to the joy of your love and let us share that joy with others. Amen.

~Ellen Scardena

¹ As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

Daily Reflection

The image that comes to mind with this line from Psalm 42 is that of a doe running through the forest in search of a stream she knows is nearby. She finally comes upon it and dips her snout into the flowing stream and takes a long, thirst-quenching drink. She trots away feeling satisfied and ready to find a place to bed down for the dark night ahead.

When we are thirsting for the presence and reassurance of God, we too, search for something we know is there. In those times of desperation, when we are at odds with the world, it can be frustrating to know God loves us, yet we can't quite feel it. It often feels like no matter where we turn, we are met with divisiveness and conflict, all the while knowing in our hearts that God will hear our prayers should we reach out. Yet, we resist.

I find that when I pray, really pray—you know, the kind of prayer where you give it all to God and get yourself out of the way? That prayer brings me closer to what I've known has been there all along. I know I've found what I'm thirsting for. And, God offers me that long thirst-quenching reassurance that I am not alone and that no matter what I do or what I think, I am loved like no other. When I drink the waters of salvation, I can then feel satisfied and face another day.

Daily Prayer

Gracious and giving God, grant me the wisdom to seek the flowing stream of your love. Remind me that you are ever-present and ready to fill my soul with your love. Lead me to the flowing streams of your love. Wrap me in the presence of your love. Keep me safe and secure for all my days, in your love. Amen.

~Connie Kelly

²² the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

Daily Reflection

When we visit the apple orchard in the fall to pick apples, we may look first for the low-hanging fruit; the fruit that's closest to the ground, easy to reach. Maybe not as ripe or sweet, but less work in the long run. If we want the higher fruit, closer to the sun, with a special ripeness and flavor, we need to work harder and stretch ourselves further. We need to ramp up our apple-picking commitment.

In this passage, and in a theme that is common to much of his writings to the early church, the Apostle Paul challenges us to reach higher in our spiritual orchards, to dine on the sweet fruit that grows in the Spirit, such as love and joy and peace, to savor the fruits of patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Sadly, I fear that too often in my life, and in the lives of others, we have opted to take that easy road and searched out the low-hanging fruit around us and have been satisfied with less than the finest and sweetest spiritual fruit. Paul says that belonging to Christ and living in Christ requires that we live in the Spirit and be guided by the Spirit.

In this season of Lent, I will strive to be more committed to live out Christ's teachings and to taste more fully of the Fruit of the Spirit. Will you join me?

Daily Prayer

Gracious God and Creator of all that is, guide us in our lives to strive for a higher calling; to be more Christ-like in our daily living. Help us to put aside those thoughts, feelings and actions that separate us from Your love and the love of Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Let us truly taste of the fruits of Your Spirit. Amen.

~Ken Nickel

¹“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

Daily Reflection

I helped Reverend Jen with this year's confirmation class, and we had a wonderful experience discussing and studying John 15: 1 - 2 with the students. To provide a visual reinforcement, Rev Jen asked the class to draw a vine leading to a vineyard filled with grapes. It was a collaborative project and I was delighted to watch the students support each other as they created a vineyard that was flourishing and sprawling with a big vine filled with grapes. It was interesting to hear the different interpretations and see the various types of vines, and it was encouraging to see the students light up when the God's message clicked in. The exercise initially took me back to visiting vineyards in Napa Valley and Tuscany. As the class continued, I realized we were the vine doing God's work. We were pruning the student's branches and providing spiritual guidance to a generation who could strengthen the Christian vine and hopefully keep the vineyard fruitful for future generations.

Good fruit represents a Godly life, filled with noble virtues and possessing a loyal respected character. This is a life we all should aspire to live, but it can be challenging considering the barrage of violence, discrimination, and controversial negative news we're barraged with daily.

To remove all this negative worldly energy, our branches require constant care and pruning. When I need to feel the vine grower's gracious and merciful touch: I read scripture; discuss bible passages with friends; attend service; and pray. I also speak with God and ask Him for blessings at home, in the car, the office, anywhere, and anytime I want to feel His presence and when I need the Holy Spirit to guide me. Life is fruitful when we accept Jesus as the true vine and God as the vine grower.

Daily Prayer: God please place your goodness and grace upon me and let me feel the presence of the Holy Spirit directing and guiding me to do your work. Help me to be the best possible person I can be and an inspirational mentor to all those who want and need my assistance. And God, please give me the wisdom, strength, patience, courage, compassion and endurance to be a good disciple as I do my best to walk in the light of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

~Dave Scelba

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.

⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Daily Reflection

How often do we think we know what is right for us, or that we made a good decision and it turned out wrong? So often I make hasty decisions without consulting my heavenly Father. He is a good Father and has plans for us and a hope and a future! If we consult with Him and wait patiently for His answer He will guide us in all Truth.

God is so big! He is perfect and we are not. He is strong and we are weak. He knows the beginning and the end so why shouldn't we put our trust in Him and let Him guide us through this life?

It is like doing a puzzle...sometimes I do puzzles with my daughter. We get to the end and at the end that last piece is missing! I look everywhere for it, under her bed or in another box and it stresses me out trying to find that last missing piece instead of enjoying the time I was spending with my daughter!

Life is like a puzzle; so easy to focus on the pieces and not keep our eyes on the end result. When things don't seem to come together and life seems hopeless, we get anxious or depressed and our joy is stolen from us.

But God is in control! He puts the pieces together and at the right time He slips that last missing piece into place to complete the puzzle. His ways are not our ways and His plans are much higher than ours. With God there are no missing pieces!

Daily Prayer

Dear Lord, your ways are not my ways always. Sometimes I may think a certain decision is right, but you may have a different plan or goal in mind. Please open my mind to your ways and your plans for my life. Your yoke is easy and your burden is light. If I would only surrender my thoughts and plans to you, my life would be less burdensome. Thank you for your Word which always keeps us on track. Amen.

~Sandy DiCarlo

⁹“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.¹⁰Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.¹¹Give us this day our daily bread.¹²And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.¹³And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.”

Daily Reflection

The Celtic community, Casa del Sol, which meets on the Ghost Ranch property in Northern New Mexico and is led by John Philip Newell, has rephrased and rewritten The Lord's Prayer, calling their rewrite the “Prayer of Jesus.”

“Ground of all being, Mother of life, Father of the Universe

Your name is sacred, beyond speaking.

May we know your presence,

may your longings be our longings in heart and in action.

May there be food for the human family today

and for the whole earth community.

Forgive us for the falseness of what we have done

as we forgive those who are untrue to us.

Do not forsake us in our time of conflict

but lead us into new beginnings.

For the light of life, the vitality of life, and the glory of life

are yours, now and forever. Amen

Daily Prayer

May the vitality of the God of life, the passion of the Christ of love, the wakefulness of the Spirit of justice, be ours this day, that we may be fully alive. Amen.

(based on a prayer by John Philip Newell)

~Sherm Skinner

²⁵ So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶ Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.

Daily Reflection

Paul turns for his case from upright living to the character of upright living. Paul sets this up with a set of contrasts. Paul is describing for us what the renewed mind and new self looks like. We should remember that this is not simply a behavior change: "stop this and do this." These actions come from the renewing of the mind. As our minds are being taken out of the world and into the word, then we will stop certain behaviors and will participate in other behaviors.

The first behavior to put off is all falsehood. We live in a world full of deception. We cannot be anything like the world, therefore, anything that is not true must be removed from our lives. Truth speaking requires a renewal of the mind. We can become such habitual deceivers and so used to not being honest that it becomes our very nature. We must learn to speak truthfully to each other. Otherwise we will not be able to rely on each other or trust each other.

Be angry but do not sin (4:26) - This text is often used to vindicate "righteous indignation." But I do not believe that this was what Paul meant. I think the concept is simply that we all experience emotions, which God created within us. The question is what will we do with these emotions? In particular, what will you do with regard to anger? Do not let anger be mixed with sin. You may feel angry, but that does not authorize you to act in a sinful way. Paul tells us we can control our actions from these feelings. Do not act on your impulses because that is acting like the world.

Further, Paul says to not let the sun go down on our anger. Do not allow your anger to simmer. Festering anger leads to bitterness, outbursts, slander, or malice. Anger is dangerous and becomes the foothold to other sins. Sin can destroy your soul and anger will be its tool. Deal with your anger and set it aside. Deal with it calmly. God has given you the power to do so.

Daily Prayer

Lord, grant me the mindfulness to speak only truth to my neighbor and the strength to turn aside from anger and follow the path of forgiveness and love. Amen.

~John Crozier

¹² “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

Daily Reflection

When I read this scripture I immediately think of our men and women in service and our first responders. These courageous people put their lives on the line every day and they do it for complete strangers. Society often refers to them as heroes, and their typical response is always, “we’re not heroes, we’re just doing our job”.

I’m confident I’d lay my life down for my wife, children, most definitely my grandchildren, and probably my favorite family members and friends. But I’m not sure I could literally lay my life down like Jesus did. Besides our brave men and women in uniform I don’t really know anyone that would honestly die for a stranger. They may say they’d lay their life down for a stranger, but that’s easier said than done. Christ’s love was not only in words, but also in his sacrificial death for all of us. Those he knew, those that knew of Him and for all of us here today and generations to come who will follow His teachings.

There is no greater love than to lay one’s life down for one’s friend. The key and definitive message here is love ... love ... love! And God’s Commandment is simply to love one another as He loves each of us. But He doesn’t want us just to speak of love, because words are meaningless without actions that support the words. Just as Christ didn’t just speak of love, He proved His love with the ultimate act of laying His life down for all of us ... His friends. So, speak of love, but back the words up with true acts of kindness, compassion, forgiveness, patience, and personal sacrifice when a friend is in need.

So, these three things continue forever: faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love. 1 Corinthians 13:13.

Daily Prayer

God please grant me the ability to forgive and forget, and remove any feelings of vengeance, anger or hostility from my heart. Grant me the wisdom to understand what isn’t known and the vision to see what isn’t obvious. Let the Holy Spirit guide me and let me feel your presence so I will be capable of living up to your greatest command of loving others, as you always love me. Amen.

~Dave Scelba

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Daily Reflection

During Lent, we reflect on Christ's suffering, death, and glorious resurrection. I often relate this to my own life journey. I, personally, have experienced many times of great despair, emotional death, and glorious rebirth. Throughout our lives we will endure illness, broken relationships, financial worries, and death of those that we love. Sometimes, we throw up our hands and think "I can't go on!" This is when we call out for God's help. This passage assures us that even though we may not know how to pray, if we are willing and we believe, the Spirit guides us in prayer. It is at these times that God asks us to turn over our lives and trust in God's plan for us. Is this simple to do? No! Look for the Spirit. Listen for the Spirit. Let the Spirit enrich your faith and lead you to God in prayer.

Once we become comfortable with the Spirit leading us to God in prayer, we can begin to feed our soul. We can laugh at ourselves and our lives. We are restored. We can dance around the absurdity of life instead of being squashed by it.

Daily Prayer

Dear Lord, send your Spirit to guide us as we pray. Help us to see and hear your direction. Let us feel your presence in our lives. Amen.

~Denise Nickel

³⁰Again Jesus said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. ³²Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.”

Daily Reflection

Remember the glass charms that held a single mustard seed suspended in water? It represented this parable, yet all I saw was a little seed that was forever locked up in a glass sphere and never allowed to grow. Our Faith can be locked up if it is only safely displayed. God is simply waiting for me to plant the seeds of Faith and knows that through him, my Faith will grow even larger than I can imagine.

So I plant...I lovingly serve in my church on the hill and trust in prayer and look for God's presence in my life and reach out to people in need and ask for help when I have a need. And I feel my Faith growing and take comfort in it!

Are you willing to plant the seeds that have been given to you through Jesus Christ our Lord?

Daily Prayer

Dear Lord, we thank you for your many blessings. Help us to lovingly and courageously plant the seeds of Faith that have been given to us so that through you we can grow and take comfort in the kingdom of God. Amen.

~Leslie Ficaro-Smith

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

Daily Reflection

This is a difficult text to interpret in the context of 21st Century thought, but when Mark wrote this approximately 2,000 years ago it would be understood very clearly. During the Roman occupation of Jerusalem, the practice to deal with political criminals was to crucify them, so anyone seen carrying a cross would be a public display of someone destined soon to die at Golgotha or some other place where crucifixions occurred. Jesus himself experienced this on Good Friday when he was crucified to be the sacrifice for our sins. So the message was obvious. “Bearing one’s cross” was not being inconvenienced, as the phrase is commonly interpreted in modern times, but a death sentence with the gravest of consequences.

When we interpret this Bible passage from the perspective used by its author, it tells us that following Jesus is a process of dying to our old nature and accepting God’s mercy and grace as a process of rebirth, thereby losing our old life and replacing it with a reborn, eternal life. This is not easy despite the preaching of many televangelists and others who espouse “feel good” Christianity. While it’s stimulating to aspire to “gain the whole world”, one soon learns that it’s a task which is never satisfied. On the other hand, the day-by-day following in the footsteps of Jesus gives a new life centered around the love of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 13:4-13).

I accepted Christ as my Savior in 1975, and the paths of service, education and evangelism (the “new life”) have been far more rewarding than the old life. The path is still long and difficult; I need to die to many things; but I am grateful for each new day and what it could bring as I learn more about the Gospel and try to imitate the love of Jesus.

Daily Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for your blessings and mercies each day. Please give us the strength and courage to follow your leadership, dying to our old nature and being reborn in yours with each opportunity you put before us. Amen.

~Don Kearney

¹⁵ Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she had borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you. ¹⁶ See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.

Daily Reflection

When going through a difficult time in my life, this Bible verse has had and still has special meaning to me. It's a promise that no matter what is going on in our lives, God has not forgotten us or abandoned us. He is "engraved on the palms of my hands." We are loved and cherished by God, and nothing can ever take that away or change that fact. What a beautiful expression of God's unconditional love for all of us.

During this Lenten season, remember that you are loved, and that nothing can separate you for an instant from His presence. God never forgets us. We only need to take a moment to remember that he is with us always. Remember that we can talk to Him as we would our best friend. For me, I started writing in a journal in the morning before the day gets busy. I write down what I'm grateful for, and things I am concerned about and need help with. Anything is possible with God's help. He hears our prayers and has "engraved you on the palms of His hands".

Daily Prayer

Father, God, help me to remember that we are all special and cherished by God. Amen.

~Anne Ligertwood

²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?

Daily Reflection

Worrying is an interesting dilemma for someone who was raised by Olympic Worriers!! My wonderful parents worried about everything, inventing things to worry about!! My father was an insurance adjuster and spent his entire career looking at accident cases that happened to other people. He was good at projecting us into each of the scenarios that he investigated and anticipating the worst. Living through the Great Depression also gave them an example of another thing to worry about. It wasn't just our physical well-being but also our material well-being that caused them worry.

In these passages Jesus tells us to simply watch the birds of the air and let them teach us about life. If we learn the lesson that the birds can teach us, it will help to keep us from worry and anxiety. God cares about the birds and He cares about us. When a bird finds something to eat, it is God who provided the food. The bird used its abilities to see and to hunt for food, but it is God who provided it. Similarly, we can be assured that God will help us, when we make an effort to help ourselves and trust in Him. *"God helps those who help themselves."* The saying is true, as long as 'helping oneself' includes trusting in God and asking for His will to be done. We can watch the birds of the air and try not to worry. Worrying is counter-productive. We cannot accomplish anything by worrying. If our goal is to accomplish something, worry will actually keep us from succeeding. Most of the things that we worry about never happen anyway!! Even if they did, to worry would not help. Instead of worrying, we should take action to correct the problem, and we should trust in God who cares and provides for us all.

Daily Prayer

Help me to not worry about tomorrow but instead focus on what You are doing in my life right now. I trust in your promise to take care of every one of my needs. Help me to trust you more and worry less. I pray in Jesus' Name. Amen.

~Ellen Scardena

April 1

- Gen 1:2-2:4 (The creation story)
- Ex 20:1-20 (10 commandments)
- Is 43:1-4 (Do not fear, for I have redeemed you) and Rev 21:1-8 (new heaven and new earth)
- PS 139:1-18 (The ever-present God)

In a recent confirmation class, the students were learning about God the Father/Creator, who is one of the three “persons” of the Trinity. They were paired up and given one of the scriptures/sets above to read, study and then write down “who God is” (i.e., God’s characteristics, personality traits, roles) in their assigned text. Then they shared the traits of God revealed in their text to the rest of the class.

At the end of the class that day we challenged them to collectively compile a list of those personality traits together and see how many they could come up with. We did it in a sort of spelling bee style, each taking a turn with the marker on a HUGE piece of newsprint until they were out of descriptors. In total, they came up with 50!

Look up and read the texts. See how many descriptors and personality traits YOU can come up with and list them below. While this may seem like more effort than you may want to exert, it is a good discipline to both: look up and study/ponder scripture as well as to seek new insight into who God is. Lastly, it gets us out of our comfort zones (and our ruts) of thinking of God in the same way(s) as we always have. It was fun to watch the students think and dig deep to come up with so many words, but it was even more exciting to see their faces as their understanding of who God is expanded, literally before our eyes. May it be so for you today as well.

~Dave Scelba and Rev Jen

Here are the first four they named based on their texts, to help get you started:

1. *Jealous*
2. *Loyal*
3. *Parental*
4. *Guardian*

April 2

Yesterday you were invited to look up some key biblical texts about God's activity and nature in order to garner even deeper insight into the 'person' of God through the texts below and then name as many of God's personality traits as you could.

- Gen 1:2-2:4 (the creation story)
- Ex 20:1-20 (10 commandments)
- Is 43:1-4 (Do not fear, for I have redeemed you), and Rev 21:1-8 (new heaven and new earth)
- PS 139:1-18 (The ever-present God)

It's not easy to do because we get stuck in old language, memories and even our own early Sunday School and church experiences, some of which may not have been entirely helpful!

That said, enjoy the list that Confirmation Class came up with. You may have some duplicates from your own list yesterday and you may see some new and fresh ways to see God from this list below. I invite you to ponder one word that inspires or awakens you and one word that feels uncomfortable. These are the places in which God both meets us and stretches us for growth.

- | | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>1. Jealous</i> | <i>2. Loyal</i> | <i>3. Parental</i> | <i>4. Guardian</i> | <i>5. Creator</i> |
| <i>6. Alpha and Omega</i> | <i>7. Almighty</i> | <i>8. Protector</i> | <i>9. Honorable</i> | <i>10. Loving</i> |
| <i>11. Reasonable</i> | <i>12. Superior</i> | <i>13. Selfless</i> | <i>14. Comforting</i> | <i>15. Generous</i> |
| <i>16. Gracious</i> | <i>17. Pure</i> | <i>18. Kind</i> | <i>19. Supportive</i> | <i>20. Adoring</i> |
| <i>21. Caring</i> | <i>22. Helpful</i> | <i>23. Mighty</i> | <i>24. Authoritative</i> | <i>25. THE answer</i> |
| <i>26. Affable</i> | <i>27. Dedicated</i> | <i>28. Humble</i> | <i>29. Forgiving</i> | <i>30. Providing</i> |
| <i>31. Assuring</i> | <i>32. Passionate</i> | <i>33. Awesome</i> | <i>34. Harmonious</i> | <i>35. Fair</i> |
| <i>36. Holy</i> | <i>37. Accepting</i> | <i>38. Gentle</i> | <i>39. Benevolent</i> | <i>40. Enforcing</i> |
| <i>41. Powerful</i> | <i>42. Trustworthy</i> | <i>43. Amazing</i> | <i>44. Peaceful</i> | <i>45. Moral</i> |
| <i>46. Just</i> | <i>47. Understanding</i> | <i>48. Unique</i> | <i>49. Merciful</i> | <i>50. Cool</i> |

¹My heart is not proud, Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. ²But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content.

³O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore.

Daily Reflection

What does this psalm talk about? It's about being humble, rejecting arrogance (losing the ego), accepting what we have and surrendering to God's will and the journey He has defined for us (basically, letting go and letting God). On the other hand, society drives us to compete, "toot our own horn", progress ahead, make more money, be aggressive; otherwise you will be overlooked and/or pushed to the side. Articles say this type of environment feeds our stress, anxiety and depression...never mind that it pushes us further and further from God and the teachings in the bible.

So, here are two opposing ideologies and we are all trying to figure out "How does this work?", "What path do we follow?" and "Where are we going as a society?" There is a new term that is coming into vogue in business/industry – it's called biomimicry. Derived from the Greek words bios meaning "life" and mimesis meaning "imitate", biomimicry is the design and production of materials and structures that are modeled on nature. For example, velcro was modeled after burrs. I am wondering if we should model our behavior like nature in support of what is in the bible. There is a saying: *A flower does not think of competing with the flower next to it; it just blooms.* It does not think about how it compares to others (no ego, humble); it blooms and does its best with the food, water and light provided; it accepts what it is and what it has. When groups of flowers bloom together, like a cherry tree in spring, the flowers don't look at each other and say "hey, your petals are bigger than mine", or "hey you have more sunlight than me"...they just bloom and create a glorious vision for us to see. I continue to work on learning the balance between what God wants (humility, acceptance) and the demands of society. When I begin to worry and feel stressed, I let it go and give it to God. Sometimes it works and sometimes I need a remedial class.

Daily Prayer: Lord, our daily lives challenge us to remain humble and surrendered to your will. Help us focus on you and to embrace the plans You have for us instead of trying to redesign them. In Your will we trust. Amen.

~Nancy van Dyke

¹⁶ I ask God, from the wealth of his glory, to give you power through his Spirit to be strong in your inner selves, ¹⁷ and I pray that Christ will make his home in your hearts through faith. I pray that you may be rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ so that you, together with all God's people, may have the power to understand what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love. TEV

Daily Reflection

Paul prays for three things in this brief passage: first, that God will give you, the readers, power "to be strong in your inner selves"; inner power and strength. How often is that our prayer... the desire for some deep inner resource to help us face a difficult decision, to endure some pain or suffering, to work through some crushing disappointment, or simply to face life honestly and courageously? At those moments, Paul's prayer becomes our prayer: "God, give me the strength to face this crisis in my life, to see this thing through!"

Secondly, Paul prays "that Christ will make his home in your hearts." Here is the source of the inner power and strength that we need - Christ making his home in our hearts. He **is** the power and strength that can get us through the hard times, that can help us work through our moments of crisis and come out on the other side. So the prayer for inner strength is a prayer for Christ - for Christ to come and dwell in our hearts.

Then Paul prays "that you may be rooted and grounded in love" so that you can understand the amazing dimensions of Christ's love – its' breadth, length, height, and depth. In language that soars with the immensity of it all, Paul prays that his readers may somehow grasp the full scope of God's purpose and the fullness of God's redemptive love in Jesus Christ. You can't miss the magnitude of Paul's vision here - God's purpose and love embracing the whole universe! There is no place, no person, that "falls through the cracks," that is not touched by that all-encompassing love. And Paul prays that we "may have the power to understand" that - in all its fullness.

Daily Prayer: Help us, O Lord, to grasp the extravagance of a love that will never let us go, a love that goes all the way to a cross for us, a love that cares enough to die. Help us to begin to understand a love that loses itself, that denies itself, that empties itself, so that we can live abundantly, and know what it means to be fully human and fully alive. Amen.

~*Sherm Skinner*

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Daily Reflection

It is wonderful to think about being one of God's chosen ones! But, do I always clothe myself with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience?

How many times have I been judgmental instead of compassionate? How many times have I not given any thought to the possibility that others may be experiencing physical or emotional pain? How many times have I let a thoughtless comment slip from my lips instead of being kind? And, once realizing what I've said or done, not acted with humility and apologized? How many times have I not said "thank you", or given a compliment for a job well done? How many times have I held a grudge, not forgiving someone for what I viewed as hurtful and unforgiveable? When I pray the Lord's Prayer I am asking God to forgive my sins as I have forgiven those who have sinned against me. But, HAVE I forgiven? If I have, have I really forgiven in the way God has forgiven me?

I think the key is to invite God's guidance in everything I do and say. If I do that, I will be more compassionate, kind, humble, and patient, and the person God meant for me to be.

Daily Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for continuing to love me in spite of my shortcomings. Help me to walk more closely with you and to always act and speak in ways of love and humility. Amen.

~Evelyn Thiel

¹The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. ²He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. ³He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. ⁴Yea, 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. ⁵Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Daily Reflection

God's presence is not as intriguing as His absence. His voice is not as eloquent as His silence. Who of us has not longed for a word from God, searched for a glimpse of His power, or yearned for the reassurance of His presence, only to feel that He seems absent from the moment? Distant. Preoccupied. Maybe even unconcerned. Yet later, we realize how very present He was all along.

I have always marveled at the many faces of God. He manifests himself in different ways to different people. How do you see God? Is He God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit, or perhaps you see God as female? Bobby McFerrin is a musician that sings the 23rd Psalm using the feminine, and to hear it opens your thoughts to all possibilities.

The Lord is my Shepard-I have all I need. She makes me lie down in Green Meadows-beside the still waters She will lead. She restores my soul, She rights my wrongs-She leads me in a path of good things and fills my heart with songs. Even though I walk through a dark and dreary land, there is nothing that can shake me. She has said She won't forsake me- I am in Her hand. She sets a table before me in the presence of my foes. She anoints my head with oil and my cup overflows. Surely goodness and kindness will follow me all the days of my life; and I will live in Her house forever and ever. Glory be to the Father and Daughter and to the Holy of Holies- as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be- world without end, AMEN.

Daily Prayer: Dear God, help us to recognize you in our lives and listen for that voice within us that is the constant love and support that a parent gives their child. And lo you are with us always - May it be so, Amen.

~Lisa Hordnes

April 8

Disturbing God, your generosity of grace knows no bounds,
it is unfathomable in depth, immeasurable in breadth.
You disturb me, provoke me, challenge me to do the same—
to offer my resources,
my gifts,
my passions
to make right relations,
to feed the hungry,
to resist evil,
to stand for justice,
to work for dignity for all.

I pray that you soften my heart and open me wider to serve You
with energy and imagination.

I pray now for all the brokenness that I am aware of in this world...
(take a moment of silence)

I pray now for those who suffer from illness of all kinds...
(take a moment of silence)

I pray now for the concerns that simmer in my heart...
(take a moment of silence)

I pray now for the prayers that I have no words for...
(take a moment of silence)

I offer these prayers in the name of Jesus, my brother, my teacher and my redeemer, Amen.

²³Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts;
²⁴and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.

Daily Reflection

God knows me best. He knows what is in my heart; my anxious and calming thoughts; my tears and laughter; my joys and sorrows; my selfishness and my loss of control, but still I question: does He really know me and forgive me or is it that I want to believe that He does? Are these sinful thoughts on my part or am I asking too much of God for forgiveness?

I ask Him to show me signs that cause Him pain, so I can do better and walk the path He wants me to walk – the path of righteousness.

I know I have caused much pain in God's eyes for not following His "plan for me" but it is not because I intentionally desire this, but because I become too busy in my own selfish ways.

I believe God has a vision for my life and is involved in every part of this life. I feel Him close and He is continuing to lead me to an everlasting journey. Am I worthy of His (God's) loyalty? Pray that I am!

Daily Prayer

Be near me, O God. Stay close and free me of my sinful ways. Lead me through each day and night, so I may walk with you on this everlasting path to righteousness. Amen.

~Arlene Langdon

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,

Daily Reflection

When I think of a cloud of witnesses, I imagine the massive group of on-lookers at a marathon race, who provide water, great urging, and encouragement for and to the runners as they pass.

We have also been enveloped by family members, friends, colleagues, mentors, and children, who are good people following Christ's teachings and cheering us on in good times, and in our trials and tribulations.

As we struggle forward, we must be willing to drop the weights and sins that stand between us and God. These separate us from Him, so by putting sin aside we can abide with Christ and run a lighter, easier race toward the end that God has meant for us. We're able to do this because we believe in His love for us.

Because my being lives through song, I say:

*Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say
It is well, it is well, with my soul*

Daily Prayer

Dear God, when I am shaken, frightened, confused, or doubtful, please remind me of all the joy, caring, strength, and love you have provided in my life. Remind me that I am never alone or forsaken, and that you are with me wherever I go. Thank you. Amen.

~Lynn Ware

¹Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ²then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.

Daily Reflection

The dynamic of our relationship with God moves between grace and acts. We aren't compelled to act for our salvation, we receive it whether we act or not (we must though, choose to accept it!) But the measure of how much our heart has been moved is demonstrated on how we respond.

First, we receive from God: the Father's Love and through Christ, His Grace. It comes to us with no strings attached. Before we were even born, our Lord knew us. The father moves through our lives, often without us knowing. How then shall we respond?

In this passage from his letter to the Philippians, Paul is preaching to the believers to act humbly and faithfully, just as Christ would.

The bar here is set low, any encouragement, any comfort, any sharing of the Spirit. If we see any of those signs from God's presence, then we have that power to share them with others. Just as Christ spoke about how the faith of a mustard seed was enough to move a mountain, we don't need much to start acting. As members of the faithful, we've already recognized God moving in our lives. Now just remember one of those times, care for it in your heart and share it with another.

In the world, how would our relationships with others change if we took any bit of encouragement from them and responded in kindness and they did the same with us? This divine chase of grace upon grace, where would it lead? God knows.

Be encouraged to act. Don't obsess over your weaknesses, take the strength that comes from God's love or compassion or tenderness and share that with others.

Daily Prayer

Father, give me the insight to see you moving in my life and grant the Spirit to embolden me to share your blessing with others. Amen.

~Dan Keoppel

⁵Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. ⁶In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. ⁷Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.

Daily Reflection

I worry about everything and often create things to worry about. I worry about things I've said to people. I worry about my job. I worry about my kids – even when my kid's lives are seemingly great. My husband has accused me of only being happy when I worry. But how can I be happy when worrying makes me so sad? I still wake up every day, my bills are paid, my kids are fine, we're relatively healthy. On top of all the worries I have at least a little control over, I'm anxious over things I can't control. So what to do? I've been trying to bucket my worries. I have three things that have already happened that I wish I could have done differently: (regrets); things I CAN control; and finally, things I can't control but wish I could. Bucketing only helps a little. How about if I turn my worries over to God? Maybe for a nanosecond that sounds reasonable, but do I really think God is listening to me? Not really, if I'm being honest – although I do pray every night, but I don't think that's turning over my worries to God because I still worry after I pray.

Does submitting to Him and allowing Him to make my path straight mean I shouldn't look at the big picture? Instead just focus on today? Is that realistic? How can I not worry about retirement, my kids, my aging which I'm fighting tooth and nail? Does God not want me to worry at all? Does constant worrying mean I don't trust God? Does it mean that I'm trying to control my own destiny? If I choose to worry about things I can control and turn everything else over to God, what would that look like? I'm not sure, but while I continue to try and turn my worries over to God, I will also try not to overlook all the good things in my life. I'm going to try to be realistic, since I worry a lot about things that probably will never happen and I can't change the past, I will try to relax and take life one day at a time. I will take action on those things that I can control, but I will also try to listen to God's word. I will try to believe that all the problems I face in my life are making me stronger.

Daily Prayer

Lord help me to remember the words of Proverbs and submit to Him who will make my path straight. Amen.

~Donna Keoppel

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

Daily Reflection

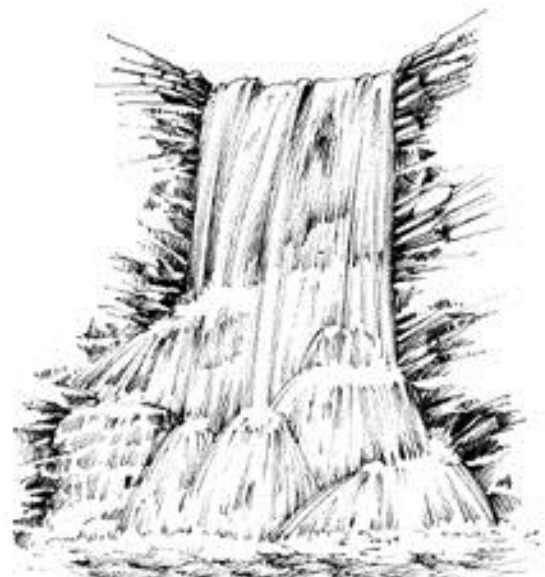
As the deer longs for flowing streams, don't we all yearn for "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"? Daily, sometimes hourly, we all call upon the Almighty to right our (and all mankind's) sins of omission and commission, that we continue to perpetrate non-stop. Sad to say, we all continue to mourn the sometimes horrific, "bad things that happen to good people".

However, Christians, being implacable confirmed optimists, have unshakable HOPE and FAITH in God's will and plan to continue to make "His will be done here on earth, as it is in heaven". It is readily apparent that, at least since AD01 (and long prior to that date), God's world is evolving for the better on all counts. He has been, is, and continues to give us the wonderful fruits of His will to be done here "on earth, as it is in heaven".

As in most families, I have my own special tragedy in that I lost a beautiful daughter at age 11 from Leukemia. My wonderful gift from God since that time is that now at least 90% of children that contract Acute Lymphocytic Leukemia of childhood are long term survivors and hopefully cured. I like to think of this as my proof that yes, God, Your will is being done and your kingdom is coming; it's on its' way right now, as I write this, "as it is in Heaven"!

Daily Prayer

Re-create us, O God
That in our work and play
We may know the new life
Which you give us and all people
In Jesus Christ
-Anonymous



12“Even now”, declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning”. 13 Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.

Daily Reflection

I'm sure that at one time in your life you've felt grief that was crushing and all encompassing. You cry, pray and try to carry on with daily tasks, but feel like you're underwater. Feelings of loss are different for each person you grieve. Therefore, I was stunned that this time my grief turned to anger; anger at the insidious disease you fought against, that separated us in the end; anger that I didn't get to say good bye to the one friend I shared HS, college fun, graduations, weddings, and then each other's children with; anger I'd never hear the reassuring voice of my friend who knew me at my best and still loved me at my worst.

As I held this grief inside it ebbed and flowed much like the tide crashes onto the shore and gently rolls back out to sea. What struck me was that my grief had turned to anger with God. Why had he allowed this person to be taken? Why couldn't he save him? I still needed him in my life, as did his family. I still grab for my phone on Sunday nights for our weekly “life catch up call”, but he's not there and so the anger grows. This anger blurred all I had believed and had been taught about God's comfort in times of hardship and sorrow. So I took my anger and disappointment and turned away from God. I was sad and lonely for a long time. A good friend shared with me that I could keep being angry and alone or let that anger go by giving it to God and letting him carry my grief. I understood in my head what she wanted me to do but my heart still felt hollow.

Later that month my 11 year old son wanted to know why we didn't go to church anymore and why I didn't pray with him at night before bed. When I told him it was because I was angry with God because I had lost my best friend. He looked at me and asked “do you think your friend would want you to lose God too”? Suddenly I knew that although it would not be easy, I must return to God's compassion and abounding love”. I was quick to anger but God is not. He is gracious.

Daily Prayer: Help me today to remember that even in the pain of loss you are there and that I may “return” to you and feel your healing grace. Amen.

~Anonymous

Out of the depths to Thee I raise... the voice of lamentation; Lord, turn a gracious ear to me, and hear my supplication. If thou should count our every sin, each evil deed or thought within, O who could stand before thee?

From a hymn by Martin Luther

Daily Reflection

*O God, tonight I seek for You
out of a heart full of guilt
and a mind full of bewilderment and frustration.
You have heard me before
and responded with grace and mercy.
Now I seek you again.*

*I know I am guilty, O God;
but if You kept account of man's failings and fallings,
no one could ever face You again.
I reach for You because You look with loving mercy
upon my wretched soul. You will accept me
and forgive me and reinstate me in Your purpose.*

*Thus I plead with you to focus your faith on God.
You will find love there—and salvation.
And He will cleanse you of your sin and restore you to His loving heart.*

Leslie Brandt

Daily Prayer

Just as I am, though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt,
Just as I am, thou wilt receive, wilt welcome pardon and relieve
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

~Diane Kearney

²⁵ "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Daily Reflection

These verses mark the end of what is known as Jesus' Great Prayer. In this dark hour, just prior to Jesus' betrayal by Judas, and his arrest, Jesus prays for the disciples as they gathered around him in complete uncertainty and confusion. It is a prayer of intercession for them, and for us.

This "father" language for God in John's Gospel is unique. It conveys a relational vitality and depth between Jesus and God. It's relational. God is Father because Jesus is God's Son; it is the language of intimacy and family. Jesus wants the disciples, and us, to have that same intimate relationship that will result in our knowing the love of God, intimately.

Can you read these verses and feel yourself prayed for by Jesus? Let these words of Jesus just wash over you in love, as he prays that we will be wholly known by God and that the same love that he knows in relationship with God will be known by us. This is not an intangible love, or a love that remains words and thoughts. This is a heart-felt love that expresses itself through Jesus' whole being. As you ponder these words, perhaps you can experience a deeper understanding that you are called into wholeness, a wholeness and a closeness that you have yearned for. So let yourself come into a rich, new understanding of God's unfathomable goodness.

Daily Prayer

Bless me, Lord, in this holiest of weeks, and give me the grace to know your loving presence more intimately. Amen.

~Lorrie Skinner

⁹ “Then Lord,” Simon Peter replied, “not just my feet but my hands and head as well”.

Daily Reflection

Think of a time when you sat down with a friend and shared a cup of coffee and some quiet conversation. The sharing of your time and the enrichment of your relationship were what was important; the coffee was just a means to that end.

Peter misunderstands the value of the foot washing believing it to be used for its cleansing power so he wants his hands and head to be washed, too. But Jesus is using the foot washing as a way to draw his disciples into a closer relationship with him. Jesus shares a loving, supportive relationship with the Father, and he wants to share that type of relationship with his disciples as his “hour” approaches.

Jesus wants each of us to share in the same loving relationship with him. The foot washing is Jesus’ way of inviting you to draw closer to him through a shared love. Will you sit down and share that cup with him?

Daily Prayer

Loving Jesus, may this season we call Lent, especially this week we call Holy, be a time when we seek any opportunity to have a closer walk with you. Amen.

~Marilyn Ward

³³ When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴ At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Daily Reflection

A scream of desolation! Jesus has trusted in God from birth, but now, in this intense time of suffering, he feels despised, scorned, and mocked. Jesus' cry, 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' is surely the most heart-rending and dreaded words in scripture: heart-rending because of the pain of despair that has been added to the physical pain; dreaded because one of our worst fears is that in our time of greatest need we will be abandoned and left alone.

In Mark's Gospel, these are the last words Jesus speaks. Set in the context of Psalm 22, they are part of a prayer for deliverance from immense suffering and intense hostility. "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death." (Ps 22:14-15)

Our hearts and minds are utterly shocked at the cruelty of this form of public terrorism. But we can't let ourselves get stuck there. Since we know what happens next, we can look upon the crucifixion as a dramatic demonstration of God's outpouring love. The story of Good Friday is incomplete without Holy Saturday and Easter when we are turned back toward complete trust and love of our Creator. Then we can see that the free and unconditional love of God brings about deep healing and transformation. This cross on which Jesus died is a freely chosen revelation of Love on God's part. Are we ready to receive and experience this radical outpouring of unearned love? Our loving God transforms all human suffering by identifying completely with the human predicament and standing in full solidarity with it from beginning to end. This is the real meaning of the crucifixion.

Daily Prayer

Lord, in light of this kind of pain and suffering, what can I say to you? How can I respond adequately to your freely given love? Draw me deeper into your heart and help me remember how well you know me and how much you love me. Amen.

⁵⁷ When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. ⁵⁹ So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth ⁶⁰ and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. ⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

Final Reflection

On the surface this text seems like the normal 'finishing touches' as the end of the account of Jesus' death. Yet, hidden in this pithy text, are words worth exploring to further deepen our relationship with Jesus.

Sit in the quiet and try to imagine being one of the people in this scene.

Can you see yourself having the courage to ascertain and transport Jesus to your newly made tomb to prepare His body? What does the gravel sound like under your feet and under the wheels of the wagon as you transport him? As you enter the tomb, what do the incense and spices smell like as you begin your preparation? What do you say to Jesus and pray to God as you carry out the Jewish rituals for death? What does the linen feel like in your hands as you lovingly wrap his body and head? Or...

Maybe you're feeling called to keep the vigil with the Marys. As you sit, what scripture(s) do you choose to pray together? The Psalms Jesus used to share and interpret for you? Or are you softly talking with one another about the precious times you had with Jesus; the meals you had; the walks you had when he kept reminding you how beloved you are to him; that your sins are forgiven; that he is your healer; your companion and now your Savior too?

Sit a while longer. Give thanks for the life and teachings of your friend Jesus; that he welcomed you with open arms and showed you a new way to live and love, so that we may do the same with all others.

Daily Prayer: Loving Lord, I want to be fully present to you this final day as you have been fully present with me every day of my life. Help me to have the courage of Joseph, Mary and Mary; to keep you company to the very end, until the new beginning. Amen.

~Rev Jen

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