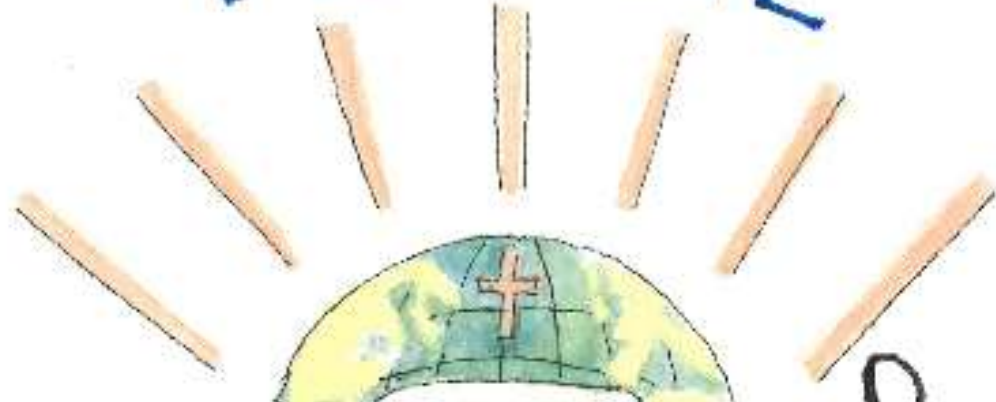




FUTURE



2012-2017

2020-2025

2020

Cover design by Arlene Langdon

Introduction

We are all in need of HOPE, now more than ever, so I'm so glad you have a copy of this devotional with the theme of "A Future with Hope".

In keeping with this year's theme, which is from the book of Jeremiah, we chose only a handful of texts from both the Old and New testament (12 to be exact) that speak directly to Hope. We thought it would be interesting to see/read a number of different perspectives on the same text, just as it is for scholarship, sermons or bible studies on the same texts.

Many people immediately jumped to choose the Jeremiah slots, as one of their favorite texts. Others were happy to have a new challenge of writing on a text they have never worked with before. There are also some new 'exercises' on a few days which offer more freedom and creativity.

It does appear, however that writing on Hope is extremely challenging for some, so where there were gaps of submissions, we have used previous devotions that were written on the selected texts from a previous year. These writers include youth. Reading those authors is particularly inspiring and humbling.

I want to thank all of the authors for their efforts in this year (and/or in previous years). I also want to thank the Skinners for editorial and organizational assistance, and Sandy who not only tracks and manages all the submissions but has the stressful job of printing this booklet which is a difficult and complicated enterprise. Arlene Langdon again shared her talents by creating this year's cover. All four of these people also wrote devotions. What a beautiful model of stewardship!

Lastly, I do hope that you will not only remain faithful to the daily practice of devotion and prayer, but that you will take additional devotionals to give to family, co-workers, neighbors and friends, or direct them to Facebook and our website www.FPCBoonton.org where they will be posted every day.

Hope is not an easy topic to write about, but it is central to our faith as Christians, and the world relies upon us to spread that message. Regardless of what you're facing as you begin this path into Lent, remember: "*hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*" Rom 5:5.

May you grow in your hope of what God is doing, and will do in your life, and all lives this Lenten season 'til kingdom come.

Rev Jen

¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart,

Daily Reflection

Over the years I have collected many Bibles. Eight of them sit within the view of my chair as I ponder this text. From King James to RSV, to NIV and now The Message; they are all a part of my collection. One was a gift from my grandmother, and another was given to me by my childhood church. Others were gifts from my brother, (some of which have my name(s) in gold lettering embossed on the covers), who always included either an index card or a book plate with a passage for me to read, ponder and pray with. There are a number of different passages that he shared with me over the years. One of those passages quickly became my favorite, Jeremiah 29:11-13.

Often throughout my life, and mostly in reference to my career, I turned to Jeremiah, trusting that God had a plan for my future. During the past year this passage has meant even **more** to me, because it was that promise of hope and a future that I needed to help me through a very difficult time in my personal life. God's plan isn't always what we thought it was going to be, but God's plan is always best, even if we don't understand it at the time. We know that God is working through every event in our lives. We need to realize that God's plan is not always the easiest in our eyes, but it is always the best.

If God has a plan for our future and has promised to be with us through the journey, then all we really need to do is to *trust* in his assurance of hope and a future by seeking Him with all our hearts. We can then fully embrace His promise and a future filled with hope!

Daily Prayer

Loving God, give us faith during the times we're weary, discouraged, confused and uncertain. Inspire us to trust in your great hope-filled promise. Please give us courage when our faith wavers. Thank you for giving us this gift of hope and a bright future in Jesus. Amen.

~Ellen Scardena

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters; ³He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for His name's sake. ⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me. ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

Daily Reflection

Being CEO to several companies I was expected to be their best salesperson and I typically sold clients products and services we didn't offer. I had total faith in my own capabilities and never doubted my ability to reinvent our companies and keep my client promises. Our companies flourished and as a naive young man, I thought it was all me. As I matured and faced challenges that were completely out of my control, I realized having faith in myself just wasn't enough and spiritually foolish. So, I began reciting Psalm 23 every morning. It reminds me God is always present and that I'm truly never alone. Through prayer I can feel the Holy Spirit guiding me, and I seek God's influence in helping me to make decisions. Sensing the presence of Jesus Christ is especially important when my judgements will impact people's lives. Knowing I can connect with God at any time and seek His guidance is comforting and leads me to make smarter, better decisions.

During the most difficult of times, God is there listening to my prayers. His answers convert monumental challenges into manageable actions; transfer doubt into hope; replace fear with reassurance; and turn stress into relief. God provided David the poetic talent to pen Psalm 23 providing each of us the security to know that even in death, God will be there to comfort us. God's hand touches everything in my life including my business activities and competitive negotiations. Once I surrendered my old ego to God, I began to truly believe He will always provide for me.

Daily Prayer

God You have blessed me, my family and friends beyond my wildest dreams and aspirations. Thank you for placing Your mercy and grace upon my head no matter where I am, or where I go ... I am forever in Your house. Amen.

¹⁵ I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”

Daily Reflection

This scripture speaks to me of three distinctly different themes wrapped up in one story, and those themes are the importance of promises, signs, and relationships. How many times do we make a promise that we are unable or unwilling to keep, and don't consider the consequences? How many times are we presented with a sign, and yet we are unwilling or unable to embrace it? And how many times do we behave in a way that puts a relationship in harm's way, and yet we are unwilling or are unable to make amends?

Let's dig into promises. God makes over 7000 promises throughout the bible to man, and yet this tends to be the story we learn in Sunday School very early on. And it is a pretty scary tale. God purposely destroying the earth! Yikes. So why do we gravitate toward it? I believe because the promise to never flood our world again encompasses faith, love, and hope, so important to learn in our formative years.

I'm going to go out on a limb and say there are a few "signs" that most of us really pay attention to, and a Rainbow ranks really high. When we see one, we often stop in our tracks. We admire. We take pictures. We say prayers of thanks. It's the symbol that visually connects us to our faith, love, and hope. What an amazing gift from God. These verses cover important pillars of a relationship, and those are understanding and agreement. The everlasting covenant God makes with us after the flood shows His love for us as He provides partners for every species: one of the best demonstrations of hope for a better future built on faith. Praise God!

Daily Prayer

Dear Lord, thank you for keeping us in your everlasting care and for giving us the gifts of faith, love, and hope. Help us keep our promises, see the signs and practice understanding in our relationships as you have taught us. In your blessed name we pray, Amen.

~Kim Robbins

³And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Daily Reflection

Lent is a time for reflection, but reflecting inwards on yourself can be a daunting task, especially when you know that you have not been the best that you can be. When faced with suffering and tragedy, it can be difficult to remain steadfast in your faith and strong in spirit.

Nearly eight years ago, I came face-to-face with possibly the hardest thing I will ever have to deal with: I was diagnosed with Type I diabetes. For a long time, I struggled to come to terms with the fact that I would be burdened with this disease for my whole life. I felt that God had turned his back on me, forgotten about me in my hour of need. I resented Him, frequently asking what I did to deserve the punishment that I was given.

I am now able to look back and know that God was with me in my time of suffering. I finally understand that He was not punishing me, but simply allowing me to learn on my own that I am strong enough to live the life I was given. Like it is written in the scripture, "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character." What seemed like a tragedy at the time became one of the most important factors that shaped me into the person I am today.

Perseverance is essential to any journey, be it a faith journey, or simply a journey in your life. In this Lenten season, I implore you to be strong and be brave and be not afraid to turn to God in times of suffering.

Daily Prayer

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." (Reinhold Niebuhr)

~Emily George

⁵ I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; ⁶ my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.

Daily Reflection

How much of our lives are spent waiting? Waiting for the traffic light, waiting for spring, waiting for a text or email response, waiting for answers to our questions, waiting on medical results, waiting for an answer to prayer. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates it this way: *"I pray to God -- my life a prayer -- and wait for what he'll say and do. My life's on the line before God, my Lord, waiting and watching till morning, waiting and watching till morning."*

To wait in the sense mentioned here is to live expectantly, with awareness of how God has acted in the past and with keen anticipation of what God is about to do. Waiting is thus the opposite of despair and hopelessness. Verse 6 restates this waiting with a poignant metaphor. Waiting for the Lord is like the work of the anxious watchman on the city wall who, fearing the attack of an enemy, finds relief in the arrival of dawn. The certainty of the coming light makes clear that the waiting is not delusional or unrealistic. Such is the nature of the psalmist's waiting for the Lord.

But when I was going through a difficult time in my life, feeling as though God was absent, I had no certainty or awareness of God's action in my life. I prayed this Psalm each morning and waited, and waited, and waited. It was a dark time. But now, this scripture is so familiar to me, it feels like an old friend. At some point I discovered a new translation: *"I trust in you, God, my soul trusts in your word. My soul waits for you God, more than sentinels wait for the dawn."* Hope and trust in God gradually returned. I learned that life is full of waiting but God does not disappoint. God's love and presence in our lives is deeper and more far reaching than we can imagine and I've learned to wait with longing, anticipation, expectation, and yes, hope.

Daily Prayer

"I wait for you, my soul waits, for in your Love I would live; my soul awaits the Beloved as one awaits the birth of a child, or as one awaits the fulfillment of their destiny." (Psalms for Praying)

~Lorrie Skinner

³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Daily Reflection

There are those among us (and only you and I, and the Almighty know who we are) who sometimes doubt that God still loves us despite our sinning ways and our faults, foibles and frailties. This biblical verse is my go-to whenever the abhorrent forces of “neither death, nor life, ... nor things present, nor things to come” attack, and seem to be about to take over my psyche. Multitudes of first century Romans, and Christians ever since, must have relied on this passage for support and guidance during times of crisis and chaos. Knowing that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” is a mighty bulwark that can equip us all to cope when bad things happen to good people.

Daily Prayer

Cleanse me, O Love, from
all my hidden faults.
Keep me from boldly acting in
error; let my fears
and illusions not have dominion
over me!
Then shall I become a beneficial
presence,
freely and fully surrendered
to your love.
Amen.

From Psalm 19, *Psalms for Praying*, Nan C. Merrill

~Doug Langdon

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

Daily Reflection

In 1992 my youngest daughter attended the Youth Triennium at Perdue University in Indiana. She had such a powerful experience out there. Her most impressive memory was having over 650 young people at one of the rallies where everyone was on fire for Jesus. She was so moved by this experience.

The verse for the conference was Isaiah 43:1-2. She came home wearing a tee shirt displaying that verse. I was at a very low point along my journey of life and this verse touched me deeply. I adopted it as my verse. I really needed to cling to it at that time and it brought me through a lot of unhappiness.

As I concentrated on those verses I realized it said, “When you pass through dark waters” ...not maybe or if — it said when! We will all go through deep, dark waters throughout our walk in life. This verse has carried me in my life journey. I have had ups and downs as much as many others, but I always have reflected back to this scripture knowing I would get through anything life threw at me because Jesus has redeemed me.

I feel honored to have used this scripture many times to encourage friends, family and those God has put in my path.

Daily Prayer

Loving God, thank you for always loving me and caring for me in any situation life puts me in. I pray we can all find scripture that has meaning for us to carry us through the ups and downs of life. Please continue to put people out there that we can encourage with the help of your word. I pray that we can be conduits of hope through you. Amen.

~Betty Tilli

³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?' ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?' ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Daily Reflection

This passage in Matthew is one of the best known and often quoted parts of the bible. It provides a clear instruction directly from Jesus to all his disciples, including all of us, to be about the business of caring for the hungry, thirsty, poor and oppressed of the world. It also provides a ray of hope for those who are in need, sick or oppressed that someone out there will care for them and provide aid in their time of need. Remarkably, it provides the same comfort to us that should bad things befall us, we can count on Jesus to bring others to our aid in His name.

This is the same spirit that has pervaded our congregation and resulted in the plan to form a food pantry ministry. It is the spirit that launched the Loaves and Fishes ministry at the Methodist church and brought us together with them to enhance the ability to care for the hungry and thirsty in our community. It is the same spirit that drives our annual coat drive to help clothe the needy and keep their kids warm all winter long. It is the same spirit that takes us to the Firemen's Home every month to lead worship and provide comfort to those in need. That same spirit pervades all the loving activities of our congregation and helps supply hope to a needy and broken world. As we do unto the least of them, we do unto our Lord, our Savior and our King.

Daily Prayer

Lord Jesus, you have called us to minister to your world and to care for the needy, afflicted and oppressed. Send your Holy Spirit to dwell within us to make us good and loving disciples so that we can 'Do unto the least of these,' Amen.

~John Crozier

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Daily Reflection

To return a positive gesture or comment to a person who has just given a negative gesture or comment to us can be very challenging at times. Different emotions are entered into our mind: rage, anger, and jealousy. As children of God, we should all make an effort to not give in to these emotions, and bless the ones that persecute us.

It is easy to give in to these negative emotions, and slip into this trap. But God wants us to choose love over hate, and joy over fear. It takes mental toughness and will, but with faith in God's love and trust in ourselves, we can achieve the ability to bless the ones who persecute us.

When we focus on returning love and joy instead of hate and sadness, we are brought together and are united. While we do this, we must stay humble and consistently return love to others, because that is God's hope for us.

Daily Prayer

Dear Lord,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity and the ability to give and receive love, even when sadness surrounds us. Please give me the strength and will to combat hate with love, and to stay humble in my daily life. Amen.

~CJ Arena

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Daily Reflection

These words were addressed to a dispirited people who lacked hope as they lived through a time filled with doubt, fear, and inertia; for they were refugees in a strange land, taken captive and forced there by a foreign power. In 587 BCE Jerusalem fell to Babylon, and a portion of Jerusalem's population went into exile. Now, circa 540 BCE, on the other side of this experience, a new word comes - a word of comfort and hope for a new future. Once more the people would follow their God out of captivity to a Promised Land. Anyone who had doubted God's devotion and love would see this and know that God had not only spoken a redeeming word but also had the power to fulfill it. They would learn that exile is not the last word but that there is an immediacy in God's message. God, who is free and active in the present, is doing something new and different.

How do we hear these words today - in these days of unending wars, of uncertainty, of harshness in public discourse - when a culture of outrage confronts us on a daily basis? Isaiah's message is a joyful refrain, one filled with hope. The exiles, and we who would hear this word with them, are invited to reimagine the world on the basis of this proclaimed, poetic vision, a world that is transformed from the wilderness of despondency and desolation into a future in which the power of God is at work, providing, protecting and guiding. "The glory of the Lord shall be revealed... for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." Words of reassurance and hope so vibrant and so alive they are brought back to us again by all four of the Gospel writers as they tell of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Daily Prayer - Oh Lord, keep us mindful of your promises and your power in our lives and in our world. Guide us into a future with hope and help us to imagine a transformed world in which your love reigns supreme. Amen.

~Lorrie Skinner

¹⁶ “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

Who hasn't been driving around on a highway and seen a tractor trailer pass with the words “John 3:16” written on the back of the trailer? I know I have many times. You see the words on signs in trees or on buildings. It's even popular in songs. Take for example the song by Country music star, Keith Urban, “John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16” ... “And I learned everything I needed to know from John Cougar, John Deere, and John 3:16...”

Sadly, I must admit I did not recall this verse and had to look it up.... “for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life”. This is pretty powerful stuff, if you really sit and think about it. But sometimes we don't feel like God loves us, because why is life so difficult and unfair? Why do people suffer? Why is there so much hate and misery in this world?

Years ago, when things were in the toilet for me, it was super easy to cast blame and be angry with God. It was just not fair. But as I grew and listened, it became clearer that God does love us. Life is not perfect and there will always be challenges. And when the going gets tough, we just need to stop, take a few deep breaths, and listen to the words of God... that he does love us and the world so much, that he gave us his only Son. And that, when it is our time, we will not perish, but have eternal life. So do not fear and fret, it will be okay. So stop and enjoy the little things that matter. Live. Laugh. Love.

Daily Prayer

God, thank you for loving us so much that you gave us your only son. Continue to send us the signs of your love, whether it be in trees, on buildings, or on tractor trailers. May we all grow in peace, now and forever. Amen.

~Natalie Pisarcik

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

Daily Reflection

After considering this verse, I thought: how dated. A woman getting ready for her husband was difficult to wrap my head around. I have not been married and have worked since 12. Having spent a year wearing work boots for my job at Costco, beautifying for a husband is far from my mind.

Yet, in the TV Show, "What Not to Wear", a person is made to stand in front of 3-part mirror in their favorite casual outfits for work and defend them. The hosts and audience see videos made surreptitiously. In comments, we learn how the outfits do not fit the career the person has. Encouraged, they throw their old wardrobe in the garbage in exchange for a \$5,000 coached shopping spree. Thus, a New Exterior is created. Just as the verse describes an outdated bride getting beautiful for her husband, the world has become outdated. Wars have been waged since Cain and Abel, we have horrifying diseases, and seas are drying up. All appears chaos.

The verse is hopeful for a future where Heaven and Earth renew - a New Jerusalem will come down to re-dress the earth. The Earth will be beautiful again; sadness will be gone because there will be no death or sin. The world will be transformed to a better version - the old world discarded like old clothes. Coached by God, we will heal once and for all. The wrongs will be gone, the creative being who built the world, has re-built it to live with us forevermore.

Daily Prayer

We pray and hope for new and better humans and earth. May we be healed of our ills. May we live in Peace, Natural Beauty, and Love for each other, with God. Amen.

~Shavaun Pizar

¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart,

Daily Reflection

I love this verse. I call it my 'life verse' as I have been reminded of this verse at various points in my life when I really needed to hear it. Most of those times were when I was at the point of making a decision, or when things were not going well for me. I would say things like – “Lord, why am I going through this?” or “Why am I suffering?” or “Why do I have to endure such pain?” And God said, “Because I love you and I want the best for you and even though you are broken, you can be rebuilt into something new, something stronger, something more bold.”

Perhaps many times in our lives, we experience pain or suffering or things don't go the way we planned, but our plans are not always God's plans. His plans are higher than ours. Sometimes our plans end up harming us, putting us deeper into debt or putting us around people that are not a good influence on us. Sometimes God's plans bring us to places we don't want to go like Jonah! He was so reluctant to go where God wanted him to go because I believe that he was scared. The Ninevites needed to hear about God and were very wicked and God wanted Jonah to go and tell them about God. Questions probably came up like “Why me? What if I get hurt or if people don't like me? What if it is not safe there?” So Jonah ran away and took the easy way out, but God didn't let him go.... Most of you know the story. He went on a boat in the opposite direction trying to run away, and a big storm came and Jonah was thrown from the boat and the deep surrounded him, and he sank. But God sent a big fish to swallow him and it coughed him up onto dry land.

Jonah then kept his promise and went to Ninevah to proclaim God's message and they believed God and proclaimed a fast and gave up their evil ways. God gave Ninevah hope and a future through Jonah! The point is, allow yourself to be used by God and know that God's plans are not for our harm but to give us HOPE!

Daily Prayer - God, thank you for nudging us to do more. Remind us that your plans are to better us and make us stronger. Help us to accept the plans you have for us. Amen.

~Sandy DiCarlo

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters; ³He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for His name's sake. ⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me. ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

Daily Reflection

This is certainly the best known and most often quoted of the psalms and is rich in both imagery and meaning. My earliest recollection of this psalm was singing a version of this when I was a choir boy in my hometown of Paisley, Scotland at about eight years old as part of the Paisley Abbey Boys Choir. The abbey was a former Roman Catholic church that had been turned over to the Scottish Presbyterian church during Reformation and was still quite “high church” even still. The echoing of our music in the chancel gave a very special almost ethereal quality to our singing. I loved this song so much that my parents had me record it in on an old 45 rpm 7 inch single at our local record store.

As I reflect back on those days I can see that God has indeed guided me along the way with his rod and staff and during dark times through loss of family and friends, his presence in my life comforted me and helped restore my soul. The table of my life so far has been a banquet of blessings that God has laid out for me and he has surely anointed my head with his love. I trust in the psalm that his goodness and mercy shall indeed follow me all the days of my life and I know that I shall indeed dwell in his house forever.

Daily Prayer

Lord Jesus, you are our good shepherd. Hear us now as we pray Psalm 23 and let us hear the reassuring words anew and have our faith refreshed. Amen.

~John Crozier

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 along in my faith journey, but the class and I really disassembled this piece, and I really began to understand what 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 really helped to 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 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

³And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Daily Reflection

We plan our futures, but God always has a better plan for us. I spent years looking for a business successor and several times thought I had the perfect suitor. While a frustrating challenge, I never lost hope. I surrendered my destiny to God and waited patiently to have my prayers answered. During an awards ceremony, I sat next to Beverly Barnes, a woman who worked for SGW, the company I was praying for. I typically count things in a room like lights, ceiling tiles and number of people. Turning to Beverly I asked if she noticed anything peculiar in the room of over 500 people. She looked over the crowd and said "No, not really." So, I asked, "Didn't you notice that besides a waiter and three college interns, you're the only other person of color in this entire ballroom?" She laughed and replied "Oh, I'm used to that." I immediately felt the Holy Spirit and I knew God was about to change my life, Beverly's life, and SGW's future forever.

I knew nothing of Beverly's background, but quickly learned her extraordinary life's journey. She came from humble beginnings in East Orange, NJ; transferred from Clifford J. Scott High School to Citadel of Hope Academy; cared for an ill mother and sister with special needs; worked to pay her own tuition; was Valedictorian of her class; at Berkley College served as President of Phi Beta Lambda, (America's future business leaders); before SGW she worked at Prudential and KPMG; lost her first daughter after a complicated pregnancy; feels blessed to have given birth to a son and daughter; adopted her sister's son and more. Every challenge made her stronger and helped develop her righteous character. Successful succession plans take years of planning and vetting, but sometimes it just takes a unique event or what I believe is God's intervention. On 9/17/19 Beverly became President, CEO and majority shareholder of SGW. By 10/30/19, SGW received its Minority Women Business Enterprise (MWBE) Certification from NJ's Department of Treasury.

Daily Prayer

God thank you for giving me the ability to feel the Holy Spirit and for opening my eyes, heart and mind to Your presence, direction and guiding hand. You never disappoint. Amen.

~Dave Scelba

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. (Presbyterian Hymnal #370, V. 2, Charlotte Elliott)

~Diane Kearney

³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Daily Reflection

Several months ago, my mother passed from this world and I was searching for bible passages that would be suitable to read at her memorial service. The passage above came up on almost every list of suggested verses for funerals and was often the top choice. Indeed, I did select this as a reading and reflecting upon this passage, it occurred to me that perhaps this is not such an obvious choice. Many other passages speak of the resurrection of the spirit and the glory of existing with God in the heavenly realm, which can certainly be comforting when grieving for those departed. Why then does this text, which speaks to the invincibility of God's love, bring such consolation in a time of pain and sorrow?

Many people experience pain and suffering during their last days, and sometimes years, on earth. While Paul admonishes us to bear our sufferings gladly, this is very hard to do at the end of a terminal illness. Nevertheless, God's love is present even at those times. It is like the electricity that runs the lights, the bedside monitors and scanning equipment. It is an unseen power that is essential although not necessarily felt in moments of great distress. I have heard passing from this life to the next described as passing into the light and that seems right to me. It's as if God's love is then fully exposed, like a powerful solar flare, not constrained by the restrictions of this mortal realm. How delightful it is to think of our departed loved ones being totally enveloped by the light and warmth of that experience! Yet, the beauty of the passage is that it also speaks to the mourner, with the certain assurance that the power of God's love continues to pulse through the complex weaving of our own lives. Our emotions and courage may be shattered, but the deep electrical current will continue to fill us with amperes of love.

Daily Prayer

Loving God, bless me with the strength to plug into your current of endless love to illuminate and heal my heart. Grant me grace to be a candle that brings your light into this world. Amen.

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

Daily Reflection

This verse is SO comforting to me; I believe it means that **no matter** what trials and tribulations you're going through right now, God will always "have your back". As everyone ages, we have things we go through – but God is always there, like reading a good book while snuggling under a warm blanket on a snowy day. He'll help you as you struggle through the scary times, the devastating times, the oh-my-God-is-this-really-happening times. Maybe you want to talk? He's a really good listener. Maybe you want to sit quietly? He's a comforting being.

Sometimes all a person needs
is a hand to hold
and a heart to understand.

God is calming, consoling, relieving, soothing – whatever you need to get you through those trials of yours. Talk to Him – He'll listen!

Daily Prayer

This is from our Hymnal that makes me feel very comforted....

O, for a closer walk with God,
A calm and heavenly frame,
A light to shine upon the road
That leads me to the Lord!

~Betsey Papp

³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?' ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?' ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Daily Reflection

In this scripture, Jesus tells the righteous, they are looking for him in all the wrong places. They were looking for a king and that's not where Jesus is to be found. Look for him instead among the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the strangers, the sick and the prisoners. These righteous people to whom he spoke were incredulous.

Today, he might suggest we look for him among the poor, standing up with a bullied child, crying with a reviled immigrant, holding the hands of a person suffering with depression, loneliness or grief. These are certainly not the places where we would expect to find a king, but Jesus was not your usual kind of king. He requires us to minister to these marginalized people in his name, not because we are good people or great humanitarians but because he is our God and we are to obey him.

May we realize that wherever we find him is the right place to be, and whomever we see him with is the person we are to serve in his name. What counts with Jesus is whether we acted with loving care for his people. It's not an "extra credit thing", it's a requirement.

Daily Prayer

Loving Lord, help us to see the hungry, hurting, suffering people through your eyes. Help us to be your hands to raise them up. Amen.

~Marilyn Ward

²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Daily Reflection

Who is Christ to us? This is the question we must raise with ourselves upon reading these words. What do we really know of Jesus, the Christ? Do we really believe that He is resurrection and life? What do we understand about life and death, about believing in Jesus, about eternal life?

So we must ask: What is Jesus saying here? Instead of the resurrection being an event that occurred 2,000 years ago, He shows us that resurrection is embraced in a person. Jesus teaches that knowledge of eternal life is a personal relationship with God and He shows that victory over death is a present reality. It would seem that to locate the resurrection in the future, near or distant, is to misunderstand what it means that in Christ "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Jesus taught us how to live and here He teaches us how to live *and* how to die. Does that mean that if we are children of God, then we also are resurrection and life? Perhaps, this is not about some future event or consideration of what happens when we die, but about the here and now. This is the new reality in Christ and a whole new foundation for life.

"You don't have to wait for the End. I am, right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live. "And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all. Do you believe this?" (The Message) This is about hope for our lives today, hope for whatever decisions we make this day, hope for God's presence and action in every moment - today. Someone once said "The heart is God's living room." God is not limited to a being in the great beyond but is immanent, living in us, speaking through us, acting within us. Yes, it's a mystery that we can only hold in faith.

Daily Prayer

Loving and ever present God, help me understand the immediacy of Jesus' message and enable me to see in myself what I see in Jesus. Help me live this day as Jesus would live it and trust your way for my life. Amen.

~Lorrie Skinner

¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart,

Daily Reflection

My senior year of high school was difficult. It was a time of identity searching in which I felt lost and insecure in my plans for the next four years and the rest of my life. I had put an immense amount of pressure on myself to find the perfect college, so much so that I ultimately became disappointed about where I ended up. I picked out every flaw and regretted my decision. This was a destructive pattern of thinking that I think many of us have experienced. So often we lose sight of God's plans for us and forget to call upon him. It took a semester of negativity and doubt for me to be drawn to a yellow sticky note tucked inside the cover of my Bible. Rev Jen had given me the note during the college admissions process that said "Jer. 29:11-13." Finding this sticky note was God's way of responding to my prayers. I could feel God's presence while reading this verse. It brought me comfort and reassurance that my choice of college and career path was the right one.

It is so easy to lose sight of God's plans for us. We are so quick to assume that God does not hear our prayers when we do not see immediate results in our lives. But Jeremiah 29 reminds us that he is always there for us to seek. His plans for your future may not be the perfection that you are seeking or the outcome you are expecting, but they will put you on the right path and provide you with a future with hope.

I challenge you to think of a time that you felt lost and uncertain of God's plans for you. Now consider how God's presence in your life changed your perspective and gave you hope for your future.

Daily Prayer

Loving God, we ask that you help us seek you with all of our hearts. May you continue to hear our calls in times of uncertainty. Help us to feel secure in your plans for us and let our futures be grounded in hope and love. Amen.

~Amanda Roberts

¹⁶ “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

Like some of you, I can remember a time when, at any public event—a parade, a baseball or football game, a road race, a speech—someone would be shown in the background with a sign that simply read: “John 3:16.” I guess they hoped that we viewers would then be motivated to look up that verse and explore how we could get on board and be saved. I’ve often wondered how well that worked but you have to hand it to them, they persisted.

Our good news is that we are saved by the grace of God and in the belief that Jesus died for us. Imagine having such hope in the human race that you would be willing to make such a sacrifice.

I imagine God filled with the hope that we would embrace the teachings of love and forgiveness so completely that we would end our bickering, be more tolerant of one another, and practice love in any way we can.

Because God loved us so much that he sent His only Son for us, we persist in our faith. We read the word, we do good works, we pray for guidance, forgiveness, and strength, and we worship in community.

We are hopeful that our prayers will be answered and our sins always forgiven and that we will find strength in one another. We are hopeful that together we can create a world that embraces Jesus and his teachings. And when we falter, we need only to look to God’s light to know we are saved.

Daily Prayer

Today, I live in hope. I look toward the light and I thank God with all my heart for giving me his most precious Son. Amen.

~*Connie Kelly*

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

Daily Reflection

What a great vision that is! There’s something compelling about it that draws us. It speaks a deeply relevant word of hope to our sisters and brothers in 3rd World countries all over the globe, and it speaks to our own deepest longings. Is there anyone on earth who wouldn’t like an end to death and pain and sorrow? We live in a world where pain is a universal fact, where tears come to everyone, where the mortality rate is exactly 100%. We know that fear and sorrow are major themes, that death and pain are here to stay, and that human life is a profound mixture of joy and sadness. Still we can’t help dreaming, dreaming of a day when everything will be good and right and glad and beautiful. “A new heaven and a new earth” — that’s the dream.

In Joyce Carey’s novel, The Horse’s Mouth, there’s a marvelous picture of a half-mad artist, swinging from a high scaffold, trying to paint a picture of the Creation on the walls of a condemned building. What a wonderful image of our Christian hope and vocation: painting the new creation on a condemned world, knowing that even if the world were to pass away, the image would live, by the power of God. “I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away....And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down...from God....and I heard a loud voice saying, “See, I am making all things new...!” (vs. 5) We are called to live in the world with that kind of vision, seeing our world in the light of God’s new creation, living in the faith and hope that says, “Yes! Our God IS making all things new, even now!”

Daily Prayer

Lord, may it be so, and may we live in that hope. Amen.

~Sherm Skinner

¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart,

Daily Reflection

The choir has an anthem that we have sung many times based on this passage. It was written by Craig Courtney in memory of a young woman who was shot and killed 3 months before she was to be married. Her family took great solace in Jeremiah's words.

I have read many points of view on what these verses mean for Christians today and I think many people think it means God will always fulfill our wishes and dreams. What I take from these passages is that we will continue to have both successes and failures in life; good times and bad; but if we reach out to God at all times He will sustain us. God wants us to seek him in all things and at all times as we live our lives to his glory.

A particularly meaningful part of the anthem I referred to says, "I will bring you out of bondage, to the land I have prepared; I will bring you out of bondage, I will bring you home to me". I feel a great sense of peace knowing that I can reach out to God at each stage of my life. May that be true for each and every one of us.

Daily Prayer

Heavenly Father; each day brings challenges in our lives. How we handle them makes all the difference. Thank you for being the guiding light that helps us find our way and gives us hope and a future. We need only seek you with all our heart and you will bring us home to you. Amen.

~Lisa Hordnes

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters; ³He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for His name's sake. ⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me. ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

Daily Reflection

The Psalm tells me that God takes care of me just as a shepherd takes care of his flock. He protects, corrects and guides. He provides rest and refreshment. He comforts and gives me inner peace and hope. He will always be with me.

I worked with two people to create and build a successful start-up business, and after 18 years they showed me the door. I was VERY angry with them. But a really good friend prayed with me and reminded me that God was in this. It took me a few days to calm down, and a few more days to realize that God had rescued me from a very toxic environment. Finally, after about ten days, I had an inner peace and an inner knowing that God was indeed in this.

Two weeks later I woke up thinking about a website. I went to the website where I found a job listing that I just knew was meant for me at this stage in my life. I have been thriving there ever since. God is truly amazing and proved to me that I should never lose hope. He does indeed protect, correct, guide, comfort, give inner peace, and provide everything I need.

It is awesome to think that Jesus also prayed this psalm. He put his hope in His Father because He knew He was with him, even when he went to the cross.

Daily Prayer

Loving God, remind me to never lose hope and to remember every day that you are my shepherd. Amen.

~Evelyn Thiel

³And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Daily Reflection

I fully believe God knows how many trials and tribulations one can humanly handle, whether this be on a given day or in a lifetime. When those trials and tribulations present themselves, hope can seem to be the farthest away from our minds. Reading this scripture passage brings to light key words that continue to help me: endurance, character, hope, and love. God is accessible to us and can be a constant in our lives if we open our hearts and minds to the power of the Holy Spirit. With God's presence, I have endured many unexpected tribulations in the past few years in some of which my endurance and character were questioned and abused. It was with the strength from God, my supportive family, friends, and church family, which in the past few months enabled me to finally have, see, and feel true hope. God's love and the new love from others in my life has poured into my heart in the best way possible. Hope certainly does not disappoint – I now put hope in front of me.

~Sarah Jane Berta

Hope in Front of Me by Danny Gokey <https://youtu.be/O5GFiDdGGGM>

I've been running through rain
That I thought would never end
Trying to make it on faith
In a struggle against the wind
I've seen the dark and the broken places
But I know in my soul
No matter how bad it gets
I'll be alright

Refrain: *There's hope in front of me
There's a light, I still see it
There's a hand still holding me
Even when I don't believe it
I might be down but I'm not dead
There's better days still up ahead
Even after all I've seen
There's hope in front of me*

There's a place at the end of the storm

You finally find
Where the hurt and the tears and the pain
All fall behind You
open up your eyes and up ahead
There's a big sun shining
Right then and there you realize,
You'll be alright

Refrain

There's a hope still burning
I can feel it rising through the night
And my world's still turning
I can feel your love here by my side

You're my hope, You're the light,
I still see it, Your hands are holding me
Even when I don't believe it
I've got to believe, I still have hope
You are my hope.

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 H.S., 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

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

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

Daily Reflection

In this passage, what popped out for me first, is “Do not fear,” a common theme throughout Scripture. God says it; Jesus says it, time and time again. It must be important to them, and therefore, important for us to hear, to really take to heart. And then, “I have redeemed you,” rescued you, saved you - for the Israelites, liberated you from captivity. It suggests freedom, salvation, newness.

“I have called you by name, you are mine.” One’s name is very important. God refused to give Moses his name, because once you know a person’s name, there’s a sense in which that person belongs to you. “I have called you by name, you are mine.” You belong to me. That’s us. God knows our name, knows who we are, and we belong to him.

And then, “I will be with you,”—through floods and fire. Sounds very much like what our world and its people are going through right now; the promise of God’s presence with us—through whatever happens to us. Notice: the promise is “presence”, “being with”, not fixing or changing things. A friend of ours talked about “moments of shalom,” moments when, days or years later, we look back at an event or an encounter and realize, “Hey, God was there!” God is always there, a part of everything in our lives, and we don’t realize it, we block it. But every now and then, like a flash of lightning, we recognize that God was there—that’s shalom, wholeness, completeness. That’s the promise: “I will be with you.”

Daily Prayer

So, Lord, help us to be more aware of your presence. You, who have called us by name, are active in all of creation, and in all of our lives, working toward shalom, peace, wholeness. May we be a part of this great work with you. Amen.

~Sherm Skinner

¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart,

Daily Reflection

There was a time in my life where I was on the bottom. I cannot even describe how hard and difficult that time was. Only those who have been there know how it feels. Years of struggle, disappointment, and being bullied allowed the devil to seep into my soul and eat away at whatever was good in my life. It's amazing how this can happen and how you can be so blinded by darkness. My sophomore year in college is when it all came crashing down and I had finally hit my lowest point. It was at this point that I was fully prepared to end and remove all the pain, suffering and struggling I was enduring. On that fateful day, I went for a walk in a wooded area where I kept repeating over and over in my wounded brain how I would end the pain. As I walked, I came across a field, which oddly seemed to call to me. I walked over to it and as I walked into the field, a beam of warm sunlight hit my face. It was at this exact moment that I realized I had made a terrible mistake, the terrible mistake of wanting to end it all. I then fell to my knees, sobbing and begging God for forgiveness for what I had done, a forgiveness which I did receive.

Years later, reflecting on what had happened, I realized that this bright warm beam of sunlight was God calling to me; that he had plans for me... what they were, I did not know, but I DO HAVE A PURPOSE on this earth.

I wish I could end this devotional by saying my life has been perfect since that fateful day. It has not. But I am now a stronger person. When the darkness tries to set in, as the devil often tries to do, I now step back and take a moment and remember, that God has plans for me and for us all.

Daily Prayer - I hope and pray often that all who are suffering find their bright warm sunbeam and listen for the words of God.

~Natalie Pisarcik

¹⁰See the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Daily Reflection

Each night when we say grace at dinner my husband and I include our prayers for the people. We begin though in this way:

“Dear God,
We thank you Lord for this food and for all the gifts and blessings that you give us. We thank you for watching over us, guiding us, and protecting us.”

His recompense is available for us if we have tried to be the best followers of his Word that we can be. We often fail.

In this time of Lent, perhaps you can think of times in this young year that you have already failed to be as good a parent, friend, colleague, spouse, or child as God has tried to teach you to be. Do not distress yourself with imaginings of how you have failed. God loves you. As John Greenleaf Whittier reminds us in the anthem, "The Silent Sea," based on his poem, "The Eternal Goodness:"

"I only know I cannot drift beyond His love and care, beyond His love and care."

Daily Prayer

Christ,

Help us to remember that we are God's children. Keep us humble, but not so humble that we do not acknowledge that your light is in each of us. As we let that light shine we give others permission to see their own light and to share it, And in so doing God's manifest presence is brought to all and the divine is everywhere.

Amen

~Lynn Ware

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 who came 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

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

Daily Reflection

Every time I pray the Lord's Prayer, I am especially drawn to the stanza "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on EARTH as it is in heaven". (I emphasize EARTH). Contemplating how wonderful and joyous the world will be when the Earth's new kingdom is at last finalized, may have been this writer's (John) motivation. He seems to revel in this new future with Hope, mentioning a new Heaven, a new Jerusalem, and God dwelling right here on Earth with men (not just in Heaven). Wiping away every tear from their eyes completes the magnificent new future with a Hope. May it be so!

Since this passage is almost the final chapter of the classical New Testament, it certainly fits my vision of the new Kingdom coming. Over the last twenty plus centuries we have been getting closer and closer to this Kingdom where the dwelling of God is with men, and "God himself will be with them and be their God": this is the epitome of "A Future with Hope".

Daily Prayer

Our Heavenly Father, please motivate us, guide us, inspire us, and invite us to make your Kingdom come and your will be done here, as it is in Heaven. Amen

~Doug Langdon

¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart,

Daily Reflection

The Lord has plans for us that I was not even aware of; plans to give me HOPE for the future. Plans to overcome despairs, fears, and anxieties over what the future might bring. I searched for his wisdom through prayer, for His guidance, and realized He was always there and with me. I was never alone, and now I know He will be with me forevermore.

Without Hope and a future, I found myself lost in a deep black hole that enveloped me and I could not climb out and see the light again; paralyzing thoughts and images, but very real. I felt completely devastated, consumed and overshadowed by the evil that had surrounded me. I worried about loved ones, their needs, and selfishly my own needs. I called on His help over and over again. When I stopped to really listen, I heard and felt His presence. He made me realize that there is always HOPE and with HOPE, a FUTURE. All we need to do is look and seek.

Daily Prayer

Dear Lord, I have passed another day, and thank you for your care. As darkness deepens, help me see the Hope and Future yet to come. Amen.

~Arlene Langdon

⁴¹ Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, ⁴² "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done."

Daily Reflection

Jesus's actions are really interesting in our reading today. He made a point of having the disciples accompany him to the Mount of Olives to pray. But upon reaching their destination he removes himself from them and then drops to his knees to offer up his prayer. Why bother bringing the disciples if he was going to pray alone? He needed the isolation to have a singular focus on the Father. The distraction of others can sometimes weaken our prayers.

Also, this passage is the only place in the gospels where Jesus lowers himself in supplication to pray. We can find him praying by standing with the disciples, or seated with them at a meal, or seated in a boat, or standing before a crowd, but here before Gethsemane, Jesus lowers himself. Our own prayer life should be so varied. Sometimes we pray with others, sometimes alone. Standing, sitting, riding in a bus; those are all times for prayer. In Jesus' example here kneeling should be reserved for special times.

We can say that God answers all prayers, but Jesus' hope or desire in this prayer isn't answered. The cup of sacrifice was not taken from him. He's still on the path to the cross. Jesus submits himself to the will of the Father – physically by lowering his body, and willfully, by offering his will to serve the Father. And it is this portion of the prayer to which God responds; in the next verse he sends an angel to strengthen Jesus for the trials ahead. Our lesson: Jesus was mentally anguished – tormented. He understood the difficult path ahead, but he lowered himself before the Father and prayed, not for himself but to do God's will.

The basis of all Christian faith is submitting ourselves to Christ and the Father– Let God's will be done.

Daily Prayer

Christ, let your sacrifice inspire us to be like you and fully submit to the will of the Father for our lives. In your name we pray.

~Dan Keoppel

April 10
Good Friday

Today You Will Be With Me in Paradise

Psalm 22:1-2

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? ² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

Luke 23:39-43

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹ And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

On this holiest and darkest of days, we can actually find solidarity in these two texts; one from the Old Testament that Jesus himself cries out at his darkest hour. This is a pain that we will never know. Yet, for all of us, it is a lament that we can also cry when we are in our darkest hour. We can cry out the SAME words that Christ did; hoping and trusting that God is still with us in our pain, desolation, suffering and loss.

The HOPE that is foreshadowed in the second text is a gift because it is both a vision and a promise; that Christ promises our future, because he not only promises paradise (freedom from all pain, crying, and desolation) but that he precedes us to that paradise and will greet us there. Further, he will also be with us in between our current suffering and the future, which is a promised arrival in spite of our brokenness.

May you find the courage to pray Psalm 22 in your most honest voice as you also cling honestly to a promise already made for you by the prayers and promises of our Saviour.

Daily Prayer - Suffering God, give me the strength to sit at the base of the cross and seek to comprehend the suffering you made on my behalf so that I, and the world, may have the HOPE you promise us. Amen.

~Rev Jen

⁵⁰ Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, ⁵¹ had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. ⁵² This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁵³ Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. ⁵⁴ It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning.

Final Reflection

Why did Joseph ask Pilate for Jesus' body? The four Gospels supply us with many thoughts, musings and possible answers to that question but, why don't we enter Joseph's inner debate as he seeks to answer that question. Joseph is pondering...

"I'm taking a big risk, asking Pilate for the body of Jesus, a convicted criminal. I'm well aware that Jewish law prohibits executed criminals in family tombs, but I own a new, unused tomb in a garden near-by that would not violate any of our laws if used.

This is the Day of Preparation and our rabbinic tradition teaches that a body should not be allowed to remain unburied beyond the day of death. I feel I should hurry to bury Jesus' body as sundown is near. Perhaps I owe this to him since I was not in agreement with the action taken by the Sanhedrin in condemning Jesus.

For a long time, I have been looking for the Kingdom of God, and Jesus did say he is the dawning of that kingdom. My friends, Jesus' disciples, certainly believe he is innocent and is sent from God. John the Baptist also called him, the Kingdom of Heaven."

In the end, Joseph of Arimathea went to Pilate and asked to be given the body of Jesus. Mark, in his Gospel, even said he went boldly. Why do you think Joseph asked for Jesus' body? Could you or I find the courage to do the same?

Daily Prayer:

God of Discernment, guide us as we seek answers to things that trouble us and then help us find courage to take action favorable in your sight. Amen.

~Marilyn Ward

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