



The *Long*
and
Winding
Road

Following Jesus When
the Path is Rough

Lent 2022

A devotional written by members and friends of
St. John's United Methodist Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

The Long and Winding Road: Following Jesus When the Path is Rough

When we think of Lent, we often think of what we will give up or go without. But Lent is not simply about trying to suffer in order to align ourselves with Christ's suffering. Instead it is about trying to align our life with the life of Christ - to live more like Jesus and to follow more closely in his footsteps.

The season of Lent has long been called a journey. It is a journey we take with Jesus, even when the road he walks is rough. Along the way, we are reminded that the journey we take as Christians is not always an easy one. In fact, our faith often faces struggles and challenges along the way. To follow Jesus is to be a person of the long and winding road.

The reflections, poetry, and prose within this devotional invite us to explore the challenges of the Christian life and find the grace powerful enough to see us through. I am in awe of the beauty and vulnerability contained within these pages. The paradoxes of life and faith spring forth as we read of hope and despair, death and new life. I know you will be fed spiritually by these original writings by our St. John's family and friends.

We have provided a Reflection Guide each Sunday during Lent for both small group and personal use, which coincides with the scripture from the worship services on the Sundays of Lent. Our Lent worship series, "The Long and Winding Road: Following Jesus When the Path is Rough," is based on the Revised Common Lectionary gospel readings for Lent 2022 (Year C). This weekly Reflection Guide invites us to look deeper into the challenges our faith may face along the path of following Jesus.

I invite you to take your time on this journey. Faith is slow, hard and challenging work. But taking the long and winding road is the only way to walk, step by step, with Jesus.

Blessings on the journey,
Pastor Lane

Rev. Lane Cotton Winn
Lead Pastor, St. John's United Methodist Church

The Long and Winding Road: Following Jesus When the Path is Rough

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Wednesday, March 2

Ash Wednesday

So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ... When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

—Matthew 6:2-4 and 16-18 (NIV)

What is Ash Wednesday? What is the reason we celebrate this event? Why should we never stop remembering this season?

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, which lasts 40 days (not including Sundays). It is described as a time of preparation and an opportunity to go deeper with God. It is a period of personal reflection that prepares people's hearts and minds for Good Friday and Easter. This day is also marked by service of penitence and turning away from our sins. The three main things we focus on are fasting, praying and doing.

The reason we celebrate is to pray and focus on our need for forgiveness from God. The ashes on our foreheads symbolize our grief for the things we have done wrong and the differences between imperfect people and a perfect God.

The reason Ash Wednesday should be honored every year is to slow us down and make more room for Jesus in our lives.

To me, these Scriptures represent that God knows everything we do, and we need not prove what we do to our fellow man.

Holy and Loving God, thank you for this season. Be with us today and throughout Lent as we prepare our hearts and minds for Good Friday and Easter. Amen.

Kathleen Adams

Speaking of Empathy

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

—Ephesians 4:2

For the past year I have been part of a group studying Jesus in the Gospels. Last week our lesson centered around the women who went to the tomb only to discover Jesus was not there. They encountered angels who told them not to be afraid. We shared about the angels who have touched our lives.

Memories took me back 45 years. My two sons were in elementary school and I was blessed to be a stay-at-home mom. Suddenly our world was turned upside down when my husband of 12 years, their father, decided he no longer wanted to be married. He moved away to begin his new life, and I was left a single mom to raise my two children.

I was crushed, devastated, worried about how we would survive. It took all I had to just put one foot in front of the other and to make it through one day at a time. In the silence of my worry I kept hearing, “Be still and know that I am God.” He knew what I needed.

Over the next days, weeks and months my life was filled with angels – Lynn, Pat, Rose, Judy, Marilyn and others whose names I do not recall – some just for a moment and others for a while. They were there to listen, hug and hold my hand – to be the footprints in the sand. I remember Lynn when she took us to her house the day my husband packed up his belongings and drove away. And Pat – I was at her house after my son’s swim lesson – it was one of the darkest days. She would not let me leave until she was assured I was OK.

They were the hands and feet of Jesus. Years have gone by, and I no longer have contact but my life is much richer because of them. I wish I could have told them how much their very presence meant. I only hope that I have been that angel in someone else’s life.

Gracious Lord. Thank you for loving me and sending angels in my time of need. Open my eyes and ears to know when someone needs me to listen, care, and show your love. Amen.

Lenni Stickles

Friday, March 4

My Holy Spirit Experience

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of the water and the spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, You must be born again. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

—John 3:5-7

I had married again when my sons were teenagers, and with my new husband came three young adult daughters. I was blessed to finally have my girls. The oldest daughter, Debbie, is bipolar and at that time her condition was under control with medication. As time went by, life with her became an emotional roller coaster. She was always in need of money, and my husband gave it to her – for rent, buying and repairing a parade of cars – and soon there were three children, different fathers, no marriage and not a lot of support. The problem was that he would give her whatever she asked for and then tell me about it after the fact. I was never part of the decision and felt like I always came in second. This led to resentment, which hurt me far more than either my husband or Debbie. God does work in mysterious ways though, which I learned one December night.

I had attended my Cursillo weekend several years before my marriage and had worked on a couple of teams, which richly blessed me. That December my name was submitted for an upcoming team, but I was not chosen. I was disappointed, but life went on. A few days after Christmas another Debbie incident occurred that deeply upset me. In the middle of the night I awoke and could not go back to sleep. In desperation I began praying, and God and I had several hours of conversation.

A day or two later I got the call that I was on the team, thank you God! When it came time for team assignments, it turned out that there was one too many on the team, so I was assigned to give a "rollo," a talk, with another person; not sure that had ever happened before. They paired me with Marilyn having no idea that we had a history. We had gone through our divorces together and were each other's support system, caring for one another, spending many hours together, shedding tears and sharing joys. It is no coincidence that our talk was "Being Christ in Our Environment." We closed with the song "They'll Know We are Christians by Our Love." Those not in the rollo room filled the hallways to hear our witness. If I ever had any doubts, I knew the Holy Spirit was alive and well that day. My problems were not solved, but that experience made my journey lighter.

Dear Lord, help me to remember the times when the Holy Spirit touched my life in very special ways and is with me always. Amen.

Lenni Stuckles

The Life and Challenges of a Long-Ago Christian, Part 1

See what love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

—1 John 3:1

Brother Andrew Speaks

Northwestern Greece, 62 AD

Peace be with you, my friend. I am Brother Andrew. For the last three years, my friend Sylvan and I have been going from town to town here in Greece sharing the Good News of the Lord Jesus. In each town, we stay while we are welcome and then move on. Many reject our message, but many believe. One young man in particular, Markos, stands out in my memory. He was an orphan, alone in the world, doing odd jobs for neighbors to get by. He was good natured and cheerful, bright and helpful. One of the first to hear us speak in that town, he was the first to be baptized there. He told us his new faith had changed him forever. Markos asked to join Sylvan and me in spreading God's word. I told him there would be dangers and challenges to his faith if he followed that path, but he was steadfast.

He soon learned about danger. One morning in the town square, he was surrounded by an angry mob of townspeople who wanted the Christians out of their town. He was cursed and rocks were thrown. He had a hard time escaping them but finally made his way to us. I told him it was time for us to leave his town. Sylvan and I could handle the crowd (we had experience), but to be safe he should go ahead to our next destination. Markos didn't want to leave us but finally agreed. "You have had your faith challenged here by a mob," I said. "You will meet many more challenges as you follow the Way." "I will not be afraid," Markos assured us as he set out. "My faith is my shield."

Sometimes the path is easy, Lord, and all goes well. Sometimes the path is hard when difficult challenges come our way. Give us the strength and courage to face the challenges and with your help overcome them. Amen.

Guy Johnson

Lent 1 Reflection Guide – When We Are Offered Shortcuts

Opening

Today we read the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. What do you think are the "Top 5" temptations that people would get challenged with today if they found themselves in a time of trial like Jesus was in this passage?

Scripture

Luke 4:1-13

While reading the passage, listen for all the things Jesus is tempted by and ask yourself how you would react to these temptations.

Scripture Reflection

While we often think of the temptations that Jesus faced in the wilderness as earthly pleasures or frivolous desires, what Jesus is tempted by are the very tools he could use to help carry out the mission God gave him – feeding the hungry, ruling the nations, trusting in God. On their own, these temptations are not bad things, yet Satan offers a shortcut to each of them. While these shortcuts to fulfilling his mission would enable Jesus to skip the long journey ahead, accepting the temptations would also keep Jesus from the people he has been sent to serve. Jesus is called to work with and among people to bring God's kingdom about authentically - one beloved person at a time. Jesus isn't called to a life where things are handed to him. In this scripture, we see that true faithfulness says "No" to shortcuts and "Yes" to following God's pathway, even when the road is rough.

Moment of Silent Reflection

Spend one full minute in silence as you consider the scripture and reflection.

Turn to Wonder

- What stuck out to you the most from today's scripture reading?
- Why might it be important that the devil adds the conditional "If you are the Son of God..." to begin his temptations?¹
- We believe that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. Thus, these were actual temptations for Jesus (otherwise, Jesus would not fully understand temptation and be able to empathize with us). How are these three scenarios actual temptations for Jesus?
- What might it mean that the devil tempts Jesus using Scripture passages?
- Read Luke 4:1 and Luke 4:14. How did what happened in verses 1-13 enable Jesus to return "filled with the power of the Spirit"?

Closing

Close your time together in a manner that is typical for you. Consider sharing joys and prayer concerns, then close in prayer.

*Holy One,
When the journey is long and winding, guide us.
When there are dangers along the way, guard us.
When we are tempted to lose faith, give us strength,
so that today and every day,
we can praise your name. Amen.*

¹The devil tempts Jesus at the heart of his identity.

Monday, March 7

Daphne

*Those who go to God most high for safety will be protected by the Almighty! I will say to the Lord, "You are my place of safety and protection. You are my God and I trust you."
—Psalm 91:1-2*

My mother was born to a nineteen-year-old mother and a father not much older than that. She weighed three and a half pounds when she was born, and she fit into a cigar box, so I have been told.

When she was in the fourth or fifth grade she went from going to 4-month school to 9-month school, so she had to repeat a grade. In high school she played basketball and stayed an extra year to play and to finish up her business classes.

While she was in high school taking Latin classes, she learned how to spell her name correctly. She was named Daphne from a book my grandmother read. Having grown up in Mississippi, her name was always pronounced Daphna, so that is how she spelled her name. She was upset that the teacher told her she was spelling her name incorrectly. When she approached her mother, she was told that Daphne was the correct spelling of her name.

After high school, my mother used her business classes to find a job. She met Harold Dutch and wanted to get married. Her parents thought she was too young, but they were reminded that Mother was older than they were when they married. Mother and Harold lived in Shreveport quite happily until Harold was killed in an automobile accident. He only had a swollen lip, and the other man in the car walked away. Because she was away from her Mississippi home, she had to do everything for the funeral by herself.

The Long & Winding Road

She went back to Mississippi and was staying at my grandparents' home. They were away for the evening and came home to find the house destroyed by a fire. They were all left with the clothes on their backs.

Mother met Harvey Grady and married him. They got married in September before Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Daddy enlisted in the Army Air Corps. He was stationed overseas in Alaska. It was not a state then. Daddy was injured in a fall and re-injured in an airplane bump. He suffered the rest of their 54-year marriage. Their plan was to have three children, with the first being born after three years of marriage. At the point they were about to consider adoption, Mother became pregnant. They had three children eventually, but we are not three years apart as they wanted. We are ten years apart.

My parents were not money rich but were rich in other ways. I can remember my mother being so embarrassed because she had to ask for credit for groceries so we could eat. My dad made only \$400 a month, and every other month \$125 had to go pay for my paternal grandfather's nursing home care.

When my mother got into her seventies, she was diagnosed with non-smoker's lung cancer. She was put into hospice care, and we all took turns being her caregiver. One day she said she wanted to cry. My sister got all ready to have a really good cry. My mother cried about three tears, and she was done. Then my sister had to quickly change her frame of mind. Another time I heard Mother say, "Lord have Mercy!" I asked her, "Lord have Mercy about what?" She said, "Just Lord Have Mercy!"

My Mother was resilient, and she knew that the Lord would have mercy on her as he always had in all of the rough paths of her life. She never gave up her belief in a true and loving God even when she knew she was dying.

Loving and Faithful God: Thank you for mothers who are resilient and always believe in your safety and protection no matter how many challenges they face. Help us all to remember that when challenges occur, you are right there crying with us and watching over us. We are so grateful for your love and grace. Amen.

Daphne G. Grady

Looking for Easy

Jesus returned from the Jordan River full of the Holy Spirit, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. There he was tempted for forty days by the devil. He ate nothing during those days and afterward Jesus was starving.

—Luke 4:1-2

I don't like to go 40 minutes without a little nosh, but 40 days without nutrition?! When I listened to the K-2 Sunday school class ponder this story of Jesus' temptation during a recent Zoom meeting, they too were drawn to the physical improbability.

Can you really go that long without eating? What about water?! They know, like we do, that Jesus lived in a human body just like ours, and he would have literally been starving without food for so long. (The kids decided he did get to drink water!)

I'm never at my best when I'm hungry and tired, but even if not at his physical best, Jesus stood firm against temptation as the devil offered solutions: food, power, glory.

Hungry, tired or even at my best, I often look for solutions of my own, shortcuts, or better yet efficiencies, ways to do my work or my life faster. Crock pot meals, Target Drive-up, Shipt, Amazon Prime, talk-to-text, email folders and filters, calendar reminders—I use them all. I'm always on the hunt for easy, or at least easier.

We're not promised easy, no matter how much we want or feel like we deserve it. Sometimes doing hard things is exactly the right thing. I've done a lot of hard things over the last couple of years, from the minor, like ziplining and overnight camping with Jane's Girl Scout troop, to the life-changing, like going back to professional, full-time work. Just living these last two years through the pandemic has been HARD, with capital letters, on us all.

Through it all, God is faithful, God's love never changes. My awareness and understanding of that love is stronger because of the hard.

I'll still look for and accept shortcuts in some areas of my life, but with my faith and my family, I will never settle for less than a fully embodied, rich and engaging love leading to deep, lasting joy. Joy isn't always easy, but it's here, even on the hard road.

Loving God, gather us in when things are hard. Embrace us, holding us close. Give us strength, give us mercy, give us love. Amen.

Mari Walker

Wednesday, March 9

God Prepares Us

“For I know the plans I have for you” - this is the LORD’S declaration - “plans for your welfare, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. You will call to Me and come and pray to Me, and I will answer you. You will seek Me and find me when you search for Me with all of your heart.

—Jeremiah 29: 11-13 (CSB)

There is a song by Daryl Coley called “He’s Preparing Me.” The words simply say: “He’s preparing me for something I cannot handle right now. He’s making me ready just because He cares. He’s providing me with what I need to carry out the next matter in my life.” When I look at my son Devin, I see how God had prepared me to be the mother of a child with autism. How, you might ask?

I worked as a substitute teacher for years in the East Baton Rouge Parish School System. The majority of the time I worked in Special Education Classes. One particular class had children on the autism spectrum. Administration had a hard time getting a substitute teacher for them mainly because the kids didn’t adjust well to change. Plus, substitutes refused to come back because of the behavior problems. However, for some reason the kids and I got along great together.

I learned how to deal with meltdowns as well as how to prevent them. I took the time to learn their daily routine and I did my best not to waver from it. I even learned each child’s quirks, likes and dislikes. If their teacher was out and I was there, the principal would pull me from whatever class I was assigned to and put me with my little friends.

My son Devin was born in November 2004. I knew from the day we brought him home from the hospital this child would be a challenge. He screamed from the time we put him in the car seat until we took him out of it. As a matter of fact, this happened every single time we put him in it. I dreaded having to go anywhere with that child.

As time went on I started noticing little things about Devin that scared me. They were things that reminded me of my little friends: (1) He loved the ceiling fan and anything that spun. (2) He didn’t play with toys; he’d just line them up in neat rows according to shape, size and color. (3) He had meltdowns if you took him out of the bathtub, turned the ceiling fan off, or for any number of strange reasons. Once he was playing with a yellow balloon, but the balloon fell into the neighbor’s yard. They weren’t home, so I told Devin I had a whole bag of yellow balloons. He wasn’t having it. My baby boy had a meltdown that lasted over three hours because he wanted the balloon that fell in the yard next door.

I would look up autism on the internet. Signs of autism: Do not look at you. (Look at me Devin!) Does not smile, (Not my kid, he smiles.) Lines toys up in neat rows. (Aww, what do they know!) I was living in the land of Egypt sitting by the Nile River! I could see the signs clear as day, but I refused to accept them. Devin's doctor referred us to have his hearing screened, and I was told his hearing was excellent but he had "red flags."

"Excuse me Mrs. Dickson, but does Devin always flap his hands?" she asked.

"Why yes he does. We call it "the Devin" – it's his little dance." I smile.

"I see," checking off a box on her clipboard.

Red flags are signs of autism, but of course I wasn't hearing that. Besides, what did she know? She wasn't a doctor. The words "signs of autism" kept swirling around my head. I decided to shut them all up, so I asked our doctor for a neurology referral. I was determined to prove them all wrong.

The day we went to the neurologist was a Thursday, and on Thursdays Devin saw his speech therapist, Miss Courtney, at Charlie Thomas Head Start Center. That was a big mistake. He screamed the whole ride to the doctor's office, as I got him out of the van and carried him into the building, while we waited in the waiting area, and when it was time to see the doctor. I looked at her and apologized while explaining. She smiled and reassured me. She asked many questions, and I did my best to answer. To make a long story short, my beautiful boy has autism. It was a hard pill to swallow as I drove home in tears.

God is so awesome because even though it was hard to accept, He prepared me for Devin. Devin has exceeded all my expectations. As a seventeen-year-old young man with autism he has dreams and aspirations of his own. Yes, he still loves ceiling fans, but he's turning that love into a career. He wants to be an electrician. God had a plan for me, and he has a plan for Devin. My dear friends, God has a plan for each of you, too. The road may be rough but God is preparing the way.

Dear God, you have a plan for each and every one of us. Help us to trust you even when times are hard. Thank you for giving us hope and a future. In Jesus name, amen.

L. Darlene Dickson

Thursday, March 10

Hope

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

—Matthew 25:37-40

HOPE

"Like a seed dropped by a sky bird in a distant wood."

It's too windy and I have no control, but to fall without effort.

Feeling like I have been here before, recognizing the void,
fighting despair.

The earth is first a rustling of leaves and then a firmer landing.

I can't do this again! I have nothing to give!

The rain is gentle, the sun is nourishing, the earth becomes
softer.

I feel parts of me reaching out that I didn't think possible.

The shade of the trees, the songs of the birds, the moonlight at
night

Shelter my vulnerable efforts.

There is hope!

Thank you, God, for the community you lead us to, where we can know your presence. Amen.

Jean Clark

#TheLentiestLentThatEverLented

Then Daniel answered the king: "Long live the king! My God sent his messenger, who shut the lions' mouths. They haven't touched me because I was judged innocent before my God. I haven't done anything wrong to you either, Your Majesty."

—Daniel 6:21-22

Lent is a journey of struggle, suffering, and reflection. Some people choose to either give up something or adopt a new practice during Lent as a way of connecting our modern, physical selves to Christ's suffering journey some 2000 years ago.

However, sometimes we find ways to shortcut the process ("Sundays don't count") or even minimize the symbolic suffering ("I can't possibly give up that, so I'll do this easy one instead").

But this Lent, I'm not sure that I get to choose the method of my "suffering." These days already feel like I'm living in a dark place. Some spiritual practices and counselors call it "a dark night of the soul." Many of you might be there with me; not necessarily "with" as in communion and support, but "with" as in also experiencing similar darkness.

I look to my coffee pot for many metaphors. Imagine adding water to the back of your coffee pot in preparation for it to siphon water up from the holding tank to drip through the grinds and make a delicious cup of coffee. Now, consider filling the tank as quickly as you can while the dripping siphon is also running, just as quickly, or quicker, than you can fill the back tank. (If you are a swimming pool rather than coffee person, imagine having a crack in the bottom of your pool.)

In this instance, the tank never reaches its full-point, as it is constantly being drained even as it is being filled. Thus, it is much more likely to hit the empty bone-dry mark than to ever be fully filled.

With a pandemic stretching on, sociopolitical divides rifting relationships, stressful working conditions, growing to-do lists which gather more dust than scratch-out marks, and so much more, I am exhausted. Pandemic fatigue. Decision fatigue. Empathy fatigue. Fatigue fatigue.

A short while back, I came across a bit of research that helped put some of my fatigue in perspective: the average person makes approximately 60,000 decisions each day. These decisions range from the smallest, subconscious ones ("Should I pick up my fork to take this bite?") to even largest, life-changing ones ("How do I tell my partner I'm quitting my job and going back to school?").

The Long & Winding Road

Researchers in another study quantified a job-stress index. In this study, “stress” was determined by the number of quick, substantial decisions that a person needed to make in a brief amount of time. Some of the most stressful jobs listed were: ER physicians & nurses, air traffic controllers, schoolteachers, CEOs, child/family social workers.

I have one of the most stressful careers out there. Maybe you do, too. By the way, that “work-life-balance” people speak of is just a bunch of hooey. There is no such thing. No wonder I feel like a constantly dripping, never-filled coffee maker.

Tandem this insight with how we attempt to refill ourselves. What satisfies the need for you? What life-giving moments refill and satisfy your soul? Imagine if we struggle to define what those fulfilling/refueling moments would be. What if our go-to strategies don’t really “do the trick”?

That’s where we teeter today, standing on the precipice between life-giving or life-draining experiences. And this teetering is exhausting! Despite the various life-giving/refilling moments we try to steal away, the continuous drip...drip...drip.... saps away the energy of the attempted results. It seems we can’t ever get back to a moment of being able to claim “Fullness.” Instead, no matter how much we try to refill and recharge, the constant draining of energy, emotion, and low-grade anxiety permeates the daily experiences of life. No matter how many naps I take on the weekend, it is not enough. I still find myself short tempered with coworkers, lacking patience with my family, and frustrated at myself, all in spite of my best attempts at “balancing” life and work. You see, no matter how I attempt to refill, it never fully suffices. I still feel drained, passionless, lost, and frustrated.

Around town, there are many “job opening” and “help-wanted” signs...everywhere seems to be hiring. What would it be like to wander around with a “help wanted” sign dangling around our necks? We need the help, although asking for it can be really hard. Additionally, when someone offers to be of assistance, often we are at a loss for the words to articulate the problem or even identify tangible ways that another could help.

This is the darkness... Feeling the hard of life, and struggling to articulate the hard, ask for help, or accept it. We are called to sit in the darkness of Lent, so that the light of Easter’s Resurrection is all the brighter. May we have the courage and strength to endure this darkness, so that we may bask in the light of Christ. For we commune with the God of the darkness and of the light.

Adapted from “Small Enough” lyrics by Nichole Nordeman: Oh, great God, Be small enough to hear me now. There are times when I am crying from the dark of Daniel’s den. I had asked you once or twice if you would part the sea again. Tonight I do not need a fiery pillar in the sky. Just want to know you’re gonna hold me if I start to cry. Oh great God, Be small enough to hear me now. Be close enough to feel you now. Amen.

Ben Hartman

The Life and Challenges of a Long-Ago Christian, Part 2

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

—Matthew 5:10

Zeno speaks

A Port Town, 62 AD

Hi! My name is Zeno. Let me tell you about my friend Markos. One time, after picking up a load of wood for my boss, Fabro the carpenter, I was about to unload it in our shed when I saw this guy curled up asleep in one corner. When I woke him, he jumped up to apologize. His name was Markos, he said. He had come to town to meet friends, but they had missed each other, and he was out of money with no place to go. Then he offered to help unload the wood. He was about my age and seemed like an OK guy, so I agreed. When Fabro saw how well we did, he offered Markos a job. So, Markos and I worked together and got to be friends. Markos was a Christian, and I was his first convert.

One day Fabro told us he wanted us to do a job for the priest of Apollo, rebuilding his personal shrine. "Wait," said Markos. "Does that mean we have to work with idols?" "What are idols? He has statues," said Fabro. "I can't work with idols; they are false gods!" said Markos. "I'm a Christian!" "You can't work for me if you're one of those atheist Christians!" Fabro shouted, "Get out of my shop!"

That night Markos and I packed up and left. Markos told me to stay and keep my job, but I told him I was a Christian, too. It was a dark rainy night. To get to the highway we had to go through the rough part of town by the waterfront which wasn't safe when the sun was up. "Don't worry," said Markos as we started out. "Our faith is our shield."

Help us, Lord, to be true to our hearts and consciences when others pressure us to change our course toward you. Amen.

Guy Johnson

Lent 2 Reflection Guide – When Our Shelter is Torn Away

Opening

Who do you know that you would identify as having a comforting presence? How does that person demonstrate comfort?

Scripture

Luke 13:31-35

Scripture Reflection

For many of us, God is our safety and security, so when our safety is ripped away, it can feel like it rips God away from us in the process. Whether our homes, our churches, our communities, or our relationships have been made unsafe by violence or betrayal, feeling God's presence can be a challenge. But we are assured that God also knows intimately that same struggle. When Jesus returned to Jerusalem, which should have been the safest and most welcoming place to the son of God, he faced suspicion, aggression, and eventually, crucifixion. Yet even in the least safe place, Jesus longs to create safety for us, gathering us in like a mother hen under her wings.

Moment of Silent Reflection

Spend one full minute in silence as you consider the scripture and reflection.

Turn to Wonder

- When the Pharisees suggest that Jesus should leave, how does Jesus' response indicate that he does not feel threatened? What does this reveal about Jesus' mission?
- Re-read Luke 13:34; Read: Isaiah 31:5, Psalm 91:4. What do we learn about Jesus' mission and desire from these verses? What does this reveal about God's nature?¹
- Read Jeremiah 22:1-5 and Psalm 118. How does Luke 13:35 seem to contain both a threat and a promise?²
- How does it make you feel that no matter how much you believe you have failed or messed up, God still desires to gather you up for your protection and care?

Closing

Close your time together in a manner that is typical for you. Consider sharing joys and prayer concerns, then close in prayer.

God of Hope,

We give you thanks that you promise to never leave us or forsake us.

Help us run to you in our weakness.

*Empower us to repent as people of hope
that you will redeem all situations for good.
Amen.*

¹Even to the wrong and unwilling, God desires to extend to them relief, protection, and care.

²The Jeremiah passage indicates a threat of desolation if there is no repentance. Psalm 118 is a psalm of victory, trusting in God's steadfast love.

Monday, March 14

Where Do I Put My Rose-Colored Glasses?

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.
—Hebrews 11:1*

Having always been the eternal optimist, it has been extremely difficult for me to watch and experience some of the negative events of the past two years. COVID-19, with its offspring mutations, killed and sickened large numbers of our country. Numerous hurricanes have physically devastated our state, leaving thousands homeless and hopeless, while flooding, tornadoes and other disasters took aim at other parts of the U.S.

These medical and natural disasters sometimes paled in comparison to the psychological devastation that was taking aim at our cultural values. Truth was distorted, families and communities were divided over political issues such as elections and vaccinations, and vile and crude language was spewed regularly by our media. Social media outlets were having unparalleled effects on the population. Watching television during that time was like watching a horror movie.

My rose-colored glasses were often stained with tears, and my usual optimism turned to depression.

So how does one get past this constant negativity? Each morning I read a meditation in Sarah Young's book, "Jesus Calling." My 'God moment' today included these words: "I am with you and for you. You face nothing alone - nothing! When you feel anxious, know that you are focusing on the visual world and leaving me out of the picture."

Beautiful and encouraging words! Words that will carry us through.

Father, I put my heavy heart into your hands knowing you will lead us out of these perilous times. Our faith in you reminds us of your ultimate power, and it assures us it is your time we follow, not our own. Amen.

Bobbi Marino

Tuesday, March 15

Patience

The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

—Lamentations 3:25-26

In this world today, now more than ever, so many are short of patience. Technological advances have helped to exacerbate a strong desire for instant gratification. I have been guilty of this impatience as well as a witness to it. The unwillingness to wait in our society can so easily breed doubt, anger, animosity, and tragedy. Our faith in the Lord not only requires strength, it also requires patience.

In Exodus chapter 32, the Israelites' faith began to wane when Moses was up on the mountain with the Lord. They asked Aaron to create a false god. They had endured hard labors under the Pharaoh's rule and had been enslaved and overworked. However, the Lord had freed them of their shackles, and they set out with Moses. The sea had been parted for them to cross through it, and it washed over the Pharaoh's men, sweeping them asunder. Even after all of that glory from our God on high, they lost their way because of their impatience.

Life is a long and winding road, one that can, and ultimately will, take good and bad turns. Remember to never let your faith in the Lord waver.

In my personal experience, setting timers for applications on my phone have assisted me tremendously in having more time to build in my foundation with the Lord. In doing such a simple task, it has helped me be more present in my fellowship and allotted me the patience the Lord seeks from his children.

Dear Lord, please grant me the strength of patience and endurance in my faith. Guide me through the darkness of uncertainty and doubt. You are my Lord, my God, and I am forever grateful. Lead me along the path of life. I give my faith and all the glory to you, God. I pray for those around me who may feel the pain of doubt creeping in. I pray that they may open their hearts to you, Lord, and allow your love to fill their cups. May all the Lord's children rejoice in exultation as they praise your name. Amen.

Chris Golmon

Love Extended

There is surely a future hope for you and your hope will not be cut off.

—Proverbs 23:18

Larrion was just six when my family “adopted” him in the turbulent aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. His mother was serving time in prison, his father was a well-known drug dealer in town, and Larrion was living with Miss Ruth, an eighty-something-year-old relative of very limited means. Even after my husband’s death and son’s departure for college, I continued the weekend ritual of sharing trips to the park, museums and movies with Larrion. I took him to his basketball games and watched him experience his first taste of Chinese food. We played imaginative word games in the car as we were driving to the zoo or miniature golf. My heart soared as we talked about the future for Larrion, his hopes of a stable home and his fervent dream of playing basketball for LSU or some other college. And then one day my heart shattered to hear him say, after contemplating that potential future joy, “it probably won’t happen because I will be shot by then.”

In recognizing the hopelessness that Larrion’s life experience was presenting to him, I doubled down on my prayers for him and worked more diligently to show him the good and beauty that life offers. Ultimately, I lost Larrion, not to a bullet but to a sudden and unannounced move to another city with no forwarding information.

Larrion still resides in my heart. I pray that he is a strong, healthy young man with the love of God in his heart and that he is still playing basketball.

God of love and hope and futures, help us lavish our love on those who need it. Give us the strength to hold hope in our hearts in spite of all obstacles and to live in the conviction that love is never ever wasted. Amen.

Betty Schroeder

Thursday, March 17

The New Normal

I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

—Philippians 4:13

Throughout the pandemic, I have heard people express their frustrations: they are tired of staying home, sick of wearing a mask, confused by vaccine news and changing protocols, and frustrated by social distancing. I understand these feelings. For me, life never seemed to pause. We continued our work without a break, we just changed how we delivered our university courses. Students were more needy, and I still had to write, research, and perform my service work while helping my own child learn from home. I was working more than ever.

Like others, we missed seeing friends, going to movies, taking vacations, dining out. Yet I was cognizant of opportunities to develop new behaviors. I started doing yoga each day, made changes to our home, and focused on my son's education. We cooked more, talked more, and committed more energy to our homelife. And, although we worked more, we also played more. We rode bikes together, we went for hikes, and we read together. We also prayed diligently.

We practiced gratitude daily. I noticed that, more than ever before in my life, thankfulness poured out of me. And the more we practiced appreciation for the smallest things, the more we noticed how many things there were to give God thanks for. I was often touched at how many things our son, six years old at the time the pandemic began, could identify as things he was grateful for each night. I often listened to him and took a deep breath, drinking in how refreshingly beautiful it was to hear a little boy lift his gratitude to the Lord. I have found prayer, reflection, meditation, and deep breath work to all come easier during this time of isolation.

Moving forward, I hope dining out remains a rarity and cooking together remains our family normal. I hope Lego-building days and game nights are here to stay. Most importantly, I hope I never forget the importance of daily gratitude, reflection, and prayer.

Thank you God for showing us opportunities to grow closer to you even when our world seems upside down. We know our strength comes from you. We give thanks to you for all the gifts you bestow on us including our food, our shelter, and the love of friends and family. We pray that we will see and use opportunities to grow closer to you during Lent and throughout the year. Amen.

Jen Curry Csaszar

When My Faith is Challenged

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

—James 1:2-4 (NRSV)

I am always amazed at the perseverance shown by individuals impacted by disasters. Statements are usually given on camera by victims standing amongst the rubble of what was once their home. Following the December 2021 tornadoes that ravaged Kentucky, not one person that I saw interviewed expressed hopelessness or despair. Quite the contrary. Their conversations were filled with expressions of faith, hope and gratitude. There was much sadness and frustration, but so many openly expressed their faith in God and hope for a brighter day; gratitude that they (and family/friends) had been spared, that their material losses did not matter in the big picture and that God had been good. They were eager to get back to work and onto the road to recovery.

As I marveled at their resilience, I was forced to think about how I would respond to such a trial in my life. Would I be able to say how grateful I was if my home and all my material things were literally blown away by a hurricane or tornado and/or a family member or friend was killed? Would my faith be strong enough to produce the kind of endurance that James speaks of? Would that sustain me as I was faced with that long, rough road ahead?

How would you respond?

We might also think about how friends and family of Jesus responded following His crucifixion. Some acted immediately. Joseph of Arimathea boldly asked for, and received from Pilate, Jesus' body. He then placed Him in his own personal tomb. Though distraught, Mary Magdalene and the other women wasted no time in returning to the tomb to care for Jesus' body. On a broader scale, we know that the remaining 11 disciples followed Jesus' directive to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Dear Heavenly Father, as I face trials in my life, let my faith in You produce patience and endurance so that I can respond in a manner that will allow me to grow from the experience. AMEN.

Claudia Fowler

Saturday, March 19

The Life and Challenges of a Long-Ago Christian, Part 3

When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone, but the righteous stand firm forever.

—Proverbs 10:25

Simon the Shark Speaks

in Port and at Sea 62 AD

I've sailed these waters for fifteen years, delivering cargo fast and safe. They call me Simon the Shark. I run a tight ship and make money, lots of it. Last time out, though, nothing worked out. The hold was full; the weather was good. But just before time to sail, I lost two of the crew. I was short two men and nobody on the docks needed work. About midnight I sent my mate out to grab two bodies, any bodies would do. He brought back a couple of young kids he found wandering out late. One of them, Zeno, was a sturdy lad. But the other, Markos, looked like a dreamer. They were both scared but trying not to show it. I told them they would work for me and work hard or get chucked overboard when we were at sea. Well, they were tougher than they looked and learned the ropes in a hurry. I thought we were in for a good voyage.

Then the storm struck. It was wild. The roughest I'd ever seen. We had to jettison the cargo, but the ship was still drawing water, ready to break. A couple of the crew were washed overboard. Finally, the only thing we could do was pray to the Baal of storms. Zeno and Markos refused. "We're Christians," they cried out over the storm, "There is one God, our Lord. We only pray to him." "This is our last chance. Pray with us to Baal or over the side you go," I roared. Zeno was terrified and agreed to join us but not the dreamer. I picked Markos up to hurl him overboard, shouting, "See if your God will save you, then!" As the raging waters were closing around him, Markos called back, "My faith is my shield."

Help us to keep faith, Lord, however fearsome the challenges facing us may be. We know you are at our side supporting us. Amen.

Guy Johnson

Lent 3 Reflection Guide – When Bad Things Happen

Opening

If you could ask God one question, what would it be?

Scripture

Luke 13:1-9

Scripture Reflection

To be a Christian does not mean we are vaccinated against bad things ever happening to us. However, whether we consciously or subconsciously believe that what happens to us is dependent on our own goodness, a challenging life experience can obliterate our faith. In our scripture, Jesus faces questions about two such crises: one being a violent human act, the other was a tragic accident. Underneath these questions, is another: “How do we get it ‘right,’ so this won’t happen to us?” Those asking want to be able to keep bad things from happening. They want control - just like most of us do, too. Jesus then calls for repentance, urging them to turn away from the drive for moral righteousness and need for control and turn towards God. Neither good things or bad can be taken as proof of God; only God’s presence with us through good and bad. He follows up with a parable about a fig tree, which reminds us that God continues to wait, continues to tend, continues to bear with us, all the while encouraging us to turn from our desire for control, order, and security and live into the potential we have to love each other.

Moment of Silent Reflection

Spend one full minute in silence as you consider the scripture and reflection.

Turn to Wonder

- At least part of what’s going on in the question of verse 2 is an age-old question: “Did they die because of their own fault?” It might be a question we too have contemplated. It would certainly make life simpler if we could clearly know the cause of every effect. What tragedy or difficult circumstances have you struggled to comprehend?
- What is your understanding of the word “repent”?¹
- Why do you think Jesus repeats verse 3 in verse 5? How might repentance lead to a life of abundance?
- Read Isaiah 5:1-7. There are numerous times in the Old Testament, as in this Isaiah passage, where the people of Israel are compared to a vineyard. How is there both a threat and a promise in this parable?²

The Long & Winding Road

- How does the parable relate to the previous story?
- What might it look like to be a “fruitful” Christian where you live?

Closing

Close your time together in a manner that is typical for you. Consider sharing joys and prayer concerns, then close in prayer.

Dear God,

We regularly fall short of your desire and intentions.

*Invite us, therefore, to turn in repentance, sorrow, and gratitude
that we may use the time you have given us to love others
as you have loved us. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

¹This question can have many answers based on personal experiences and tradition. The basic concept is for a person to recognize and turn away from the things that separate him/her from God.

²There is a threat that judgment will occur for the unfruitful; there is a promise that there will be mercy and not hasty judgment.

Monday, March 21

From Jaded to Hopeful

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

—James 1:5

The sound of my pager broke my sleep. The familiar, disturbing shriek was an unwelcome disruption; it alerted me that someone had done something egregious to a child. For five years I investigated crimes against children, and after five years the calls were only getting harder. My soul was crushed by the weight of brutality I had witnessed. I turned the pager off. But the familiar pounding in my chest and head returned; anxiety was my constant companion.

I got dressed. It was two o'clock in the morning and I had a sense of overwhelming dread. Over those five years I had developed a type of cynicism, a general distrust of others. My optimism was replaced with burnout, helplessness, and despair. No matter what I did, there seemed no way to save children from the inexplicable acts of exploitation and abuse I had seen and I wondered: How could a loving God allow atrocities to happen to innocent children? I could not reconcile it.

I answered the call on the pager and was sent to a hospital to meet a 5-year-old boy named Orlando. Orlando had multiple injuries including a broken arm, scalp lacerations, and a concussion. His mother told me she “couldn’t deal with him any

longer.” I filed an affidavit for a court hearing and wondered, “*Where are you, God?*” Orlando and his mother lived at a homeless shelter so when he was released from the hospital three days later to go to court, he had his few possessions in a trash bag: a few worn shirts and pants. I stopped at Walmart and bought him two new outfits, new shoes, socks, and underwear. I asked if he would like a new toy and Orlando chose a dump truck. As we stood in the checkout line, he looked up at me with hopeful eyes and whispered tentatively, “Maybe, when we go to court, you could be my new mama.”

I swallowed back the huge lump in my throat. I looked at Orlando in his thread-bare clothes, his tiny arm in a sling, stitches on his scalp. He was bruised and beaten, but not broken. He was hurt and homeless, but hopeful. I was ashamed of my own self-absorbed sadness. I knelt and hugged Orlando. I explained that I wouldn't be able to be his mother, but we would be friends, and I promised to help find him a home with people who would love him.

That day, something in me woke up. I knew I needed help. I was focused on things that were wrong in the world but had failed to see things that were right. I blamed God for the bad choices of humans and the consequences of their behaviors. I was struggling with faith.

I sought counseling and returned to church. I prayed and read Scripture. I asked questions. I read books by Phillip Yancy and Harold Kushner. And I found that I could ask God difficult questions and He would provide answers. Twenty-two years have passed since the night I met Orlando. I am thankful God used the wisdom of that small child to awaken my heart. Who has God placed in your path to give you guidance?

God, we pray that you will give us wisdom and grace this day. Send us friends with insight and messages of your kingdom that we may be reminded of your grace and glory. Help us to be messengers of your goodness and of your good news to others. When we are discouraged, help us find peace in your word, solace and comfort in your spirit, and wisdom in your light. Amen.

Jen Curry Csaszar

Angels All Around

There are angels all around, messengers from God about,
sweeping by with gentle whispers from above.

Listen closely to your heart, for it's there the angels start
when they're sent to show the depths, show the depths of God's love.

They whisper 'God calls your name.'

They counsel 'Walk without fear.'

They sing out "You are God's precious child. Remember He is near.'

Angels kneel each time you pray. They help you know just what to say
when you're faced with situations that confound.

Heed that quietness in your soul. It reveals treasures untold –
words of hope and promises, promises of love profound.

They whisper 'God calls your name.'

They counsel 'Walk without fear.'

They sing out "You are God's precious child. Remember He is near.'

Betty Schroeder

When Bad Things Happen

Be still and know that I am God.

—Psalm 46:10

I am so thankful that I grew up in the church. Those memories of Bible verses memorized, songs sung and feelings of peace and certainty give me solace when bad things happen.

The last two years have presented you and me with many challenges. How comforting it is to know in my heart and soul that just as the hymn says, “God will Take Care of You.” He will. How interesting that childhood memories carry such weight into adulthood and older age. As challenges present themselves, hymns from my youth come into my thoughts and prayers. “On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand” and “His Eye Is on the Sparrow” are two favorites that undeniably attest to God’s love and sacrifice for each of us. “He Lives” reminds us that Christ is alive, and we are not alone in adversities.

Frequently Psalm 46 guides me when I am not sure of what to do. “Be still and know that I am God” reminds me to quieten myself of worry and fear and listen to what my Lord and Savior has to say to me. This means freeing myself of busyness by being present with God. As verse 1 says, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” Quietness and solitude allow us to focus on the Lord’s voice with full assurance of his loving guidance. Jesus, you take care of it. I’ve tried, and it’s not working out. O Jesus, I surrender myself to You.

Let’s use those scriptures and songs we learned as young people to help us through these turbulent times remembering

Because He lives, I can face tomorrow.

Because He lives, all fear is gone.

Because I know he holds the future

And life is worth the living just because He lives.

Harriet Walters

Thursday, March 24

Joy in Hard Times

You reveal the path of life to me; in Your presence is abundant joy; in Your right hand are eternal pleasures.
—Psalm 16:11 (CSB)

Have you ever prayed for something and God answers your prayer but not the way you wanted it answered? Christmas was only a week away, and I was missing seeing my son Kevin and spending time with him. Kevin had been working a lot and hadn't been around as much. So what did I do? I prayed and asked God to help me spend more time with Kevin.

I had just gotten out of the shower when my phone rang. It was Kevin.

"What's wrong, Kevin?" I asked.

"My car broke down; the clutch is not working. I'm stuck in the middle of Staring Lane," he replied.

"Give me five minutes, and I'll be there," I said as I hurried to get dressed.

As of today Kevin's car has been in the shop for over a month. I've had to take him to work, pick him up, or sometimes both. I came to the realization that this was God's answer to my prayer. I got to see Kevin at least once a day and spend a little quality time with him. One night Mariah Carey's "Always Be My Baby" played on the radio. I couldn't help but smile, as I reminisced about holding Kevin and singing this song to him as we danced around the room. After a minute or two into the song I looked at Kevin and said, "This is so funny. I used to sing this to you when you were little."

"Mom, I remember," he said, looking at me.

"Really?" I said, shocked beyond belief.

"Yes, as well as all the other songs," he said.

My heart was so full I choked up. God didn't answer my prayer in the way I would have wanted. We had car problems, and I was tired of taking my son to and from work. Yet He allowed us to experience a special moment together. Even in hard times God provides just a little bit of joy to keep us going. I hope we get Kevin's car back soon but until then, I'll enjoy the ride.

Dear God, thank you for allowing us to have joy even when things aren't going well. Thank you for small moments and special times with family and friends. We love you and praise you for the work you're doing on the inside of each of us. In Jesus name, amen.

L. Darlene Dickson

Don't Be a Mule

I will instruct you and teach you about the direction you should go. I'll advise you and keep my eye on you. Don't be like some senseless horse or mule, whose movement must be controlled with a bit and a bridle. Don't be anything like that! —Psalm 32:8-9

That line about mules in Psalm 32 made me curious – so I did a little research about mules. Mules are stubborn animals. They function out of a personality that desires to be in complete control. They think independently of their masters, so they are hard to train and are not good at following directions. They fight for control because of their fear of danger. They trust themselves more than their masters and care only about self-preservation. Mules refuse to do anything until they are absolutely sure they will be forced to do it.

When we behave like mules, when we don't trust God to lead us, we, too, are driven by our need for control. We go into self-preservation mode and we function out of fear. We rebel against God's love and grace and only cave when we hit rock bottom. Until then, we try to fix things on our own. And when we behave like mules, we are not able to spread God's love and grace to others, because we aren't really receiving it ourselves.

I can't tell you the number of times in life I have behaved like a mule. Frankly, I still fall into mule-like behavior from time to time, but God desires for us to set our mule-like behavior aside. If you read all of Psalm 32, we hear about the weight that is lifted when we turn our sins over to God through confession. In taking that leap of faith, we can find healing, wholeness and, according to Psalm 32, even happiness. In turning to God, we can learn how to trust and following Jesus, rather than walking on our own, burdened by the weight of it all.

“Faithful love surrounds the one who trusts the Lord.” (Psalm 32:10b) In telling God about the things we've done that we're not proud of or the things we've left undone, we will discover forgiveness and grace.

God's love and forgiveness is real. “The one whose wrongdoing is forgiven, whose sin is covered over, is truly happy!” (Psalm 32:1) In Christ, we are no longer defined by the mistakes we have made. We are offered a new possibility for living. Free from the burden of guilt and sin, we can live into the joy and peace God longs for us.

Gracious Master, for too long we have tried to make our way in life on our own. We confess we have been like mules. Forgive us, and free us. May we take up the yoke of Christ and allow him to lead us down a pathway paved in love and grace. In his name we pray. Amen.

Rev. Lane Cotton Winn

Saturday, March 26

The Life and Challenges of a Long-Ago Christian, Part 4

For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone.

—Romans 14:7

Markos

An Island 62-63 AD

I woke up with my face in the sand. Dazed, I sat up and looked around. I was on a beach, the sea stretching in front of me, a grassy hillside with a few trees behind me. “Where am I?” I wondered. “How did I get here?” Then I remembered the storm, the ship tossed on the waves like a cork, being thrown into the water, grabbing at a floating barrel. I said a long prayer of thanks for the miracle that had saved my life. I stood up and began to examine my surroundings. There were a few pieces of wreckage from the ship on the beach and the unbroken barrel. It was full of the hardtack we ate on shipboard. “At least I won’t starve,” I thought. And I dragged it up past the tide line for a quick meal. I spent the next few days exploring. I was on an island. There was no trace of people living there and few signs of wildlife. I found fresh water to drink and berries to eat with the bread. I settled in for a lonely life.

At first, I was happy enough. I had plenty to think about. I remembered Brother Andrew and how much I had learned from him. I thought of how much more I needed to learn. But I wanted to work with people, too. I wanted someone to talk to. As time went by, my spirits sank. I became more and more depressed. I wondered, “Is this life worth living?”

One morning I woke up feeling sick. I didn’t have the strength to get up. I grew weaker by the day until at last I could do no more than whisper softly to myself, “My faith is my shield.”

When the cares of life seem too much to bear, Lord, and we feel too weak to go on, your words and your presence give me hope and lift my spirits. Amen.

Guy Johnson

Lent 4 Reflection Guide – When It Goes to Waste

Opening

What is the most reckless thing you've ever done?

Scripture

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Scripture Reflection

This story is generally referred to as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but could just as easily be called the Parable of the Prodigal Father – the father who “wastes” his love, his joy, his hope, his money, even his food on his wayward child. In this parable, God models for us how to love lavishly and to make that kind of loving a spiritual practice. For in God, no love is ever truly wasted.

Moment of Silent Reflection

Spend one full minute in silence as you consider the scripture and reflection.

Turn to Wonder

- Why does Jesus tell this parable? Who is the main audience?
- What does the word “prodigal” mean?¹
- How is the younger son reckless? How is the older son reckless? How is the father reckless?
- Sometimes this story is told as if it is about returning. How is the story more about searching and finding? (Hint: Read verses 4-10 for further confirmation – the shepherd finds the lost sheep and the woman finds the lost coin.)
- What do you think happens next in the parable? Do you think the older son learns to accept the actions of the father? Do you think the older son leaves the father and the brother?
- Why do you think the parable ends open-ended?
- How might the Pharisees and scribes be like the older son? How might we be like the older son?
- What do we learn about God from this passage? What does this passage tell us about ourselves?
- How might this parable be calling us to live? What might this parable be calling us to do?

Closing

Close your time together in a manner that is typical for you. Consider sharing joys and prayer concerns, then close in prayer.

*Prodigal God,
We thank you that you continue searching for us
and that there is no land too distant for us
to wander outside the reaches of your love.
Help us accept our identity as those who have been found by your love.
May we learn to be as gracious to others as you have been to us.
Amen.*

*Many assume "prodigal" has to do with acceptance or returning, however the word prodigal means "reckless."

Monday, March 28

Tested Faith

Consider it great joy, my brothers, whenever you experience various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. But endurance must do its complete work, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.

—James 1:2-4 (CSB)

The phone rang. I didn't want to answer it. The only thing they could possibly call me about was money, and I certainly didn't have much of that. I almost let it go to voicemail, but for some reason I answered. That was the first time I found out I had breast cancer, and in October of 2014, I had a lumpectomy followed by radiation treatment.

Fast forward to June 2019; everything that could go wrong went wrong. I could not get Devin in the high school of my choice; they said it was because of his autism. A friendship of many years went sour for no good reason at all. Things didn't work out quite the way I imagined for VBS, and I felt I was of no use to the church. I was in a downward spiral, and I fell into depression.

In July of the same year I went for my six-month mammogram. When the nurse told me that they needed to take another picture, I knew it was not going to be good, and it wasn't. I was diagnosed with breast cancer for the second time in the same spot. Are you kidding me?

This time it was going to be simple. I would have a mastectomy of the left breast as well as a reduction of the right one. The plastic surgeon would be there to install the implant. Voila, we're all good. If only it were that simple. Since I had had radiation treatment the first time, my skin was severely damaged. I developed an infection, ran a fever, was extremely weak and suffered from vertigo. Therefore, the implant had to be removed.

The whole process took longer and was rougher than expected. January 2020 arrived and with it came a worldwide pandemic. By March of that year everything had shut down,

and I was due to restart the implant process again in May. To be honest I didn't think it was going to happen, but God had it all in control. Things began to reopen just in time for me to have my surgery. This time no infection from the implant. Praise God!

In November of the same year I was able to get the permanent implant put in with no complications. By this time my whole outlook on the situation had changed. My faith and trust in God had increased; I saw even in my suffering that God was there with me. As Christians we may have to suffer and this suffering will test our faith, but if we trust in God, our faith will be complete.

Dear God, You are so wonderful! Even though we suffer and go through hard trials you are there with us. Thank you for carrying us through. In Jesus name, amen.

L. Darlene Dickson

Tuesday, March 29

Headlines

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

—*Philippians 4:13*

Headlines from the Baton Rouge Advocate, Monday-Thursday before Christmas, 2021

Death toll in Pakistan sewer gas blast up to 17

Typhoon death toll tops 140, Greater devastation likely in Philippines

Islamic world pitches aid for desperately poor Afghans

Baton Rouge father of 4 gunned down

Woman seeks help in face of loss, 3 siblings killed, mom injured in 'absolute tragedy'

Man killed in motorcycle crash

Two injured in Sunday afternoon shooting

U.N.: Over 160 migrants drown in wrecks off Libya

Woman crashes through post office

ICE center called 'unfit to house human beings'

Phillips 66 refinery closure looms

Not a 'fairy-tale' story

BR dad gunned down days before Christmas is 145th killing this year

La. Firefighter killed after truck tire explodes

More than 50 still missing in wake of powerful Typhoon Rai

Gunmen kill 47 in latest Nigeria attacks

Church agency: Captive missionaries escaped

Man dies in Bogalusa police custody

9 days after tornado, cat found in building rubble

7 in Minn. die from carbon monoxide

'The police just grabbed me and started punching me'

LSU Law professor regrets defending student

The Long & Winding Road

In the National Alliance on Mental Illness support groups I attend and facilitate, one of our principles of support states: "We won't judge anyone's pain as less than our own." I can only imagine what the people who have walked the rough roads in the headlines must feel, and I am quite certain that some of them have had their faith severely challenged. To me their pain is much worse than anything I have ever suffered.

What a challenge to be captured by enemies. How devastating to drown while attempting to reach freedom. How terrible to lose a father through gunfire or an entire family due to an automobile accident. On and on the challenges go.

Yes, there have been times when I did not get an expected job or was told that my services were not needed any longer. In the course of his career my husband did not work for four years. That is why he did not retire at 65. We never went hungry. I believed in "give us this day our daily bread," and it was daily fulfilled.

Yes, my son fought in a war and came home not the same as when he left, but he came home. His faith was challenged in ways that I can never know because he does not share all of the bad times. His faith is very much intact.

His house has flooded several times, but he and his roommates were not hurt and most of their belongings were salvaged. The first things they grabbed were their Bibles.

Life has not always given me roses, but it is not God who left me or my family. It is usually I who am not praying without ceasing or I who am not reading the Word. There have been rough roads to walk, but I have known that God is always faithful. God is good, always. Always, God is good no matter what the rough road holds or what challenges are to be faced.

When that rough road comes to meet me, all I have to do is read the headlines, or talk to another NAMI caregiver or to another VA caregiver. My road is not nearly as rough as theirs and through Christ, I can do ALL things. I can overcome all adversities and hope that others can see HIS LIGHT shining through me in the challenge.

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

Daphne G. Grady

Finding the Way

How great is your goodness, Lord, which you have stored up for those who fear you, which you bestow in the sight of men on those who take refuge in you.

—*Psalms 31:19*

Lost! I was lost. And frightened. I had ventured out for a long hike in a beautiful old-growth forest in Virginia with Mac, my Scottish terrier. Somehow the trail had faded, darkness was setting in, and I had lost all sense of direction. The only thing I knew to do was to pray.

As I knelt in the fragrant fallen leaves on the forest floor and closed my eyes, an amazing sense of peace fell over me. I knew that somehow God would help me. When I stood up and wiped the tears off my face, I spoke gently to Mac, assuring him that we would be okay. Without hesitation Mac began to energetically walk deeper into the woods. He stopped and turned back to look at me, as I was still standing frozen in my tracks. Then, remembering that comforting sense of peace, I began to follow my dog.

After about thirty minutes of determined hiking, Mac and I emerged onto the trail and were able to find our way out of the woods.

How amazing is our God! How surprising are his ways! I know that He stands watching us at every minute, through every challenge, in all that we experience in this precious life both good and bad.

God of refuge and comfort, every day of living brings a new sense of your awesome presence. Help us to spend our days in gratitude for your goodness and mercy and to be your ambassadors of love to the people whose paths cross our own. Amen.

Betty Schroeder

Thursday, March 31

He's Singing Over Me

He will take great delight in you, He will quiet you with His Love, He will rejoice over you with singing.

—Zephaniah 3:17

The Jesus I first met as a child and the Jesus I am best friends with today are exactly the same. He has always been the kind, loving Savior who loves me unconditionally. I have been blessed to have had so many wonderful things happen to me in my life, but there have also been some very challenging, hard and scary times as well. I have grown as a result of these hard times, learning so much along the way. Jesus never changed, but He was changing me.

It was during those times that I clung so hard to the Lord and prayed without ceasing from a point of raw hurt, pain and, yes, real fear. The Holy Spirit led me to scriptures of hope, comfort, and encouragement that I felt were written just for me.

I've learned to deliberately and intentionally fix my eyes on Jesus as being above whatever situation I'm going through. Jesus is already in my tomorrows and even in my next heartbeats. What a beautiful and comforting thought! This realization that He transcends time as we know it is truly a supernatural occurrence. I believe that Jesus uses these hard times in my life for the good so that I can minister to others with true empathy.

Following Jesus doesn't mean your entire life will be all bluebirds and happiness. I never dreamed I would experience infertility, miscarriages, parental difficulties and abuse on an unimaginable scale, and a child who almost died at birth and who has been through so very much just to stay alive. But His promises are real and He will give you exactly what you need to get through your hard time.

Dear Lord, thank you for walking with me through this day. May I honor you and glorify you in all that I do and say, each and every day. Thank you for calling me to be your child and revealing yourself to me through good times and in not so good times. I love you, Lord. Amen.

Lynn Lohmann

Wandering

Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.

—Deuteronomy 8:2

There should be a Bible verse that says, “Blessed are those who wander through life looking for their purpose and calling like Israelites wandering through the wilderness.” There must have been days when the Israelites looked around and thought, “I know we have passed this place before; when are we going to stop walking in circles?” Sometimes the road isn’t a narrow, rocky, rough path that is difficult to move forward on. Sometimes the path is wide, very wide, Sahara Desert wide. With no struggles to provide boundaries, there can be endless options, distractions, opportunities. It is in those times when we can lose our focus. We forget to listen for the voice of God as it is drowned out by the busyness. The urgency to reach out to God can wane, unlike when the road is rough and we are in need. We wait for a sign.

I struggled for many years looking for God’s purpose in my life. I worked full time but felt that was just something I was doing until He made known His purpose for me. I was waiting for a sign. I mentioned this to a friend at work one day and he asked, “How do you know that this isn’t your purpose? That your work isn’t your mission field?” I was stunned. I had been “wandering” around for years looking for God’s path for me. I had not realized that I was already on it until God sent a message to me through a friend. I have come to realize that wandering is ok. What we think of as going forward, backward and sideways may just be the road we are guided to take – not the straight path to the end but a curvy, winding tour through many God-filled moments. God is with us when we are on the rough parts of our life journey and on the smooth winding ones.

Dear God, please help us to wake each day and look to You for guidance. Though the path is sometimes unclear, remind us that you are with us, that Jesus gave his life for our salvation, and that the Holy Spirit moves in our hearts. Amen.

Susan Lambert

Saturday, April 2

The Life and Challenges of a Long-Ago Christian, Part 5

Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting with strife.

—Proverbs 17:1

Melissa

A Villa, 63 AD

The fishers don't usually visit the island, but that day Iskander did and found a young man unconscious on the shore. He brought him to Milady's villa close to the beach. When Milady saw him, she took a fancy to him at once—he was very handsome. "We must save him, Melissa," she said. "He has the look of a prince." As Milady's personal maid, I supervised his care. When he became well enough to sit up, we spent hours talking to one another and soon became friends. His name was Markos, and he was no prince but a poor young Christian. He told me about his faith and made me want to become Christian, also. When Markos was well enough, Milady took over his care. She made quite a pet of him. She gave him expensive new clothes and had a feast prepared for him every day. She even gave him her Arabian stallion. "I never knew people lived like this," Markos said to me. "This is really nice." I was afraid he was enjoying himself too much for a poor Christian boy. I hoped he wasn't forgetting his faith.

One day for lunch Milady ordered a bottle of her most expensive wine. "You will love this, my pet," she cooed. I was holding the bottle. When Markos reached out to take it, it fell to the floor and shattered. Milady, jumped up, furious. "You useless girl!" she screamed. "That was worth a fortune! Tomorrow, you go to the slave market!" Markos defended me, taking the blame, begging forgiveness. "You ungrateful wretch!" Milady turned on him. "Defend her, will you? Then join her! There will be two at the slave market tomorrow!" As Milady's guards dragged us away, Markos whispered, "Don't be afraid, Melissa. Our faith is our shield."

Don't let us become too comfortable, Lord, to remember the needs of others. Amen.

Guy Johnson

Lent 5 Reflection Guide – When There’s Not One Right Answer

Opening

What is the best gift you’ve ever given or received?

Scripture

John 12:1-8

Scripture Reflection

From a very young age, children are conditioned to believe there is always one right answer, one best answer, in any situation. But life and faith is messier and more complicated than that. This story poses an either/or question: is it better to lavishly care for Jesus, or to feed the poor? Jesus cuts through this false dichotomy with a reminder that there is time for both. How would our journey of faith be different if we discerned how to give the most beautiful within us to God, rather than fight and stress over what the one “right” choice is?

Moment of Silent Reflection

Spend one full minute in silence as you consider the scripture and reflection.

Turn to Wonder

- What is the importance of noting, “six days before the Passover” in verse one?¹
- Imagine you were in the room when this event happened? What did it smell like? What would have been your reaction?
- Why might Judas Iscariot have raised a good point in verse 5?
- What might Mary’s motivation for this action have been? How is Mary’s action a prefiguring of Jesus’ death?²
- Considering Mary’s action shown to be exemplary, what might Jesus mean in verse 8?
- What might this passage be calling us to do?

Closing

Close your time together in a manner that is typical for you. Consider sharing joys and prayer concerns, then close in prayer.

*God of Extravagance,
We acknowledge that our ways are not always your ways.
We acknowledge that in your economy,
love and service are more precious than the costliness of any item.
Reshape our desires and values that they would come more in line
with the values of your kingdom. Amen.*

¹We are nearing the death of Jesus.

²Both are acts of selfless, loving service.

Monday, April 4

Billy

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

—Psalm 23:1

I would like to tell you about a Marine buddy of mine. Let me call him Billy. Let me give you a little back history of Billy. Billy had the morals of an alley cat, and his morals would make an alley cat blush.

Lt. Dan, but angrier. Faith in Marines on left or right. Faith in M-16s. Faith in physical things. Billy was scuzzy. I wouldn't bring him home for Christmas dinner. But he had good qualities, honest and loyal. You know the type.

He would razz people. I have had a Bible since Confirmation that goes with me everywhere. He would stop before it got to be hurtful. He did it to everybody who had a symbol of faith.

Billy and I were on convoys. We did a lot of convoys. It had been a bad week; it had been a bad convoy so far. Let's just say the news media had a very lucrative week.

As we were driving I heard and saw a thunderstorm. Off on the right. Just the fact that I was seeing and hearing thunder made me think of south LA. On the left I saw a rolling, boiling wall, and I thought, "Oh I am going to experience my first major sand storm." Visibility ceased to exist. You had to grab your buddy next to you to make sure he was still there because the sand was so thick. Billy is just cussing and fussing because we can't do our job to protect our Marines.

Going through the sandstorm, rain catches up and now it's flying mud with less visibility. You can't see your hand in front of your face. Billy just knows something bad is about to happen.

We get to our destination, and the sandstorm and rain-storm finally stop. We are getting ready to bed down, and we actually get to sleep inside. We come under fire that night. Next day we get ready to come back and I felt a sense of peace, because you are always on edge. I felt today we would have no problems. Everything just felt scoured and peaceful. I had gotten up and was reading my Bible. Billy asked me what I was doing, and I told him I was finding peace for today.

Billy was quiet again which was kind of unusual for Billy. We get back early to the base. So Billy and I and our friend Roger decide to go to the theater building to get some snacks and lay back. We leave the theater and are walking back. As we are walking, Billy stops and looks up. I stop and look up as well. Before me, I see the mosque and the sun is setting. Around the mosque and through the windows you see the purples and oranges of the sunset. It was one of the most beautiful sunsets I have ever seen. I hear crying. I look to the left and there is no one there. I look to the right and Billy is on the ground sobbing his eyes out. My friend is crying, and I have no idea what is wrong. I put my hand on his shoulder and shake him. "What is wrong? Talk to me."

Billy says, "I need a Bible and a cross. I need one now." "I have my little Bible; will that do?" "I need something." "I have my warrior's cross." He is crying and sobbing eyes out. "What's the prayer you do with? I need the prayer. The one where you take the ..." I had an epiphany. The prayer when you take communion. Roger and I fell to our knees and said "Our Father who art in Heaven". Billy repeated after us. All of us were sobbing and crying saying the Lord's Prayer in the dirt. Billy said, "I have found God. God is real. GOD IS REAL."

We get up, and you can tell we have been crying. Billy will not let go of my Bible. Somebody looks like they are going to say something to us and then they decide that maybe they do not want to mess with three Marines that have been crying,

We walk back to the barracks and go to our room. Billy is holding my Bible so tightly. He asks if he can keep it. I tell him he can have it to the next convoy.

Before lights out, Billy asks me to do a favor. "Will you go with me to a chaplain?" "Which one?" Billy stops and thinks for a while and says, "The one that wears a cross."

Next day we sign out and go to the chaplain. Billy has a death grip on my bullet-proof Bible. Billy tells the chaplain, "I really want to talk to you about faith," and starts to tell what had been going through his mind. Chaplain asks if he wants to share it with a friend or alone. Billy says "His faith is pretty good. Could we work on mine?"

I wait outside, and the Chaplain's Aide is going to chow hall. "Would you like to go with me and get food and bring back their meals?"

I go with him and we get chow. Billy is outside and is content and finally at peace. He says "You can have this back now," handing me my bullet-proof Bible. I say, "You can never have too many of these." "But look here, this one is mine." The chaplain had calligraphied Billy's name in the front of the Bible.

The Billy I deployed with is not the Billy I returned to the states with. Billy finished his hitch in the Marine Corps and went into seminary. I am sad to say that I lost contact with Billy, but he sent me one letter. How's the faith? I'm still tuning mine.

God is always with you. Amen.

Paul Grady Madden

Tuesday, April 5

Recalculating the Path

Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you; I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

—Isaiah 41:10 (NRSV)

A road trip many years ago to visit our son outside of Hot Springs was interrupted a few miles from our destination by a detour. Our new GARMIN GPS quickly “recalculated” our route, directing us onto a narrow, muddy, back road, indicating that we would reach our destination in 12 minutes. After some 25 minutes of multiple turns, recalculations, and literally “wandering in the wilderness,” we realized that the trusted technology had given us inaccurate information; furthermore, it was getting late, there were no road signs for reference, no houses at which to stop for direction, no street lights to help us stay on the dirt road, and no cell service to call for assistance. It was beginning to be a time of concern and apprehension.

We agreed that what we needed to do was to put away the distraction of the GPS and to rely on our own sense of direction and knowledge. By observing the position of the setting sun we realized that we had been going **away** from the general direction of our son’s house. This led us to “recalculate” our own path. We turned around and after some time, we eventually found our way back to a main road that took us on to our waiting family.

Let us be reminded once again at this Lenten season that traveling the road to Christianity is not always easy. There are detours along the way, challenges to face and hard decisions to be made. Sometimes we unknowingly take the wrong path, other times we take a wrong turn by our own choice or from the advice of others. We need to stop often and recalculate our position in order to stay on the right path so that in the end, we are reunited with our heavenly family.

Dear Lord, give me the foresight to know when I am lost and the courage to recalculate my path as I travel the sometimes difficult road to Christian discipleship. Keep me on the path of righteousness during my journey. AMEN.

Claudia Fowler

Glory Awaits Us

In the same hour I was invited to write this devotional, I was having a discussion with a friend about why some feel that God isn't with us in every aspect of our lives, guiding us to positive outcomes, preventing hardships, even preventing death. I can assure you I don't have answers and find it difficult to answer those questions for someone else. I am perhaps not qualified to answer those questions of a friend who has suffered in their life in various ways. It seems as though, compared to most in this world, I have not endured much adversity.

But I do have faith and want to find those answers because of my faith. At least partly, I also do not need all the answers. Isn't that what faith is anyway? But, for my questioning side, I went searching. And here are just a few things, among countless others from the Bible, that my search revealed.

And not only that, but we also rejoice in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces character, and proven character produces hope. This hope will not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

—Romans 5:3-5 (CSB)

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness." Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may reside in me. So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

—2 Corinthians 12: 9-10 (CSB)

As he was passing by, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," Jesus answered. "This came about so that God's works might be displayed in him."

—John 9:1-3 (CSB)

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us.

—Romans 8:18 (CSB)

During this time of Lent, we focus more on Jesus' suffering. Yes, even Jesus suffered and not just in the end. His life (and his disciples' lives) was filled with adversity from what I gather in reading the Bible stories. Jesus kept his eye on his Father, taking plenty of time to be with his Father. Jesus, more than anything, wanted to do his Father's will, even knowing it would bring suffering. Jesus knew that our suffering on earth is a small price to pay for the vast riches and glory that await us.

Holy and Loving God, help us keep our eyes on you. Amen.

Kathy King

Thursday, April 7

About War

When you go to war against your enemies and see horses and chariots and an army greater than yours, do not be afraid of them, because the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, will be with you. When you are about to go into battle, the priest shall come forward and address the army. He shall say: "Hear, Israel: Today you are going into battle against your enemies. Do not be fainthearted or afraid; do not panic or be terrified by them. For the LORD your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory."

—Deuteronomy 20:1-4

As a relative of those who have gone to war to ensure my freedoms, I am especially thankful for those who have served and those who are currently serving. They are willing to walk the rough road and face challenges of faith daily.

A couple of my relatives fought in World War II. One is still alive at 96 years old and has a very sharp memory of what the war was like. He fought in France and earned the French Legion of Merit, the Bronze star, and two purple hearts. His feet are damaged due to being frozen, as the war of a very hard winter raged in the midst of a more devastating war between nations. While standing in a doorway talking to a friend, a shell went off. The friend died. My relative did not. Another time an artillery shell came in and spun around and around. Thankfully, it was a dud. He and a number of his infantrymen were cut off from the rest of the unit for three days. The Germans were all around. Many in the unit perished.

Yet this relative went on to live a full life and served God by singing in the church choir for close to seventy years. He also was a servant to others by working at the Centenary Library book barn until he became too weak to lift books. His faith was challenged by rough roads, but he knew God and taught his children to know God as well.

I am thankful that his faith challenges were met and he never gave up on God. Without his faithfulness and without the love of God, I would not have my husband and my son.

Dear Faithful and Loving God: Many have faced the challenges of war and come out still being faithful. Thank you that I have not had to be in a war between nations and had to face those devastations. Thank you for always being with us no matter what the circumstances are and carrying us when we can no longer walk, for the road is rough. Your son faced so many challenges and bore them graciously. Help each of us to do the same when the road gets too challenging. Amen.

Daphne G. Grady

Keep Walking

Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

—*Philippians 3:13-14*

I can't imagine how Jesus put one foot in front of the other as the Passover approached. Sure, Palm Sunday was a joyous time with the crowds chanting and cheering as He entered the city, but Jesus knew what lay ahead. He kept walking – one foot in front of the other. He knew the disciples were struggling with what the kingdom of God would be. The people dreamed for a king to rid them of Roman rule. Their king would end up crucified by the end of the week - a king that knew His fate. He kept walking – one foot in front of the other. But that last week, Jesus had work to do. He cleansed the temple, he taught, he ate a final meal with His disciples. He kept putting one foot in front of the other.

I, like Jesus, have work to do. Though I don't know what the end of the week will bring, I do ultimately know my fate. The wages of sin is death, and I am a sinner. That can't stop me from serving where God leads – one foot in front of the other. There is temptation to look back on past struggles and wallow. Wallow like a pig in mud, enjoying the moment, reveling in past disappointments. Jesus doesn't tell a parable about a pig wallowing in mud, but if he did, I suspect the pig who wallowed missed the bridegroom or its lamp went dim or it was easy prey for the robbers. The pig lost an opportunity to do something amazing. Jesus knew that by returning to Jerusalem he was going to do something amazing. He was going to suffer and die. He was going to give salvation to His people. He just needed to put one foot in front of the other. I need to be reminded that Jesus wants us to be amazing, simply amazing. He wants us to wipe off the mud and start walking – one foot in front of the other. Simple is the key. Jesus didn't ride into Jerusalem on a golden chariot pulled by a team of horses. He rode a simple donkey. My challenge, our challenge, is to be simply amazing – serving others, sharing a smile, providing a meal, loving ourselves. The list is amazingly endless. All we have to do is start walking – one foot in front of the other.

Dear God, thank you for Your love which drove you to send Jesus to be our salvation. Remind us that you want us to share that salvation with others in amazingly simple ways. Amen.

Susan Lambert

Saturday, April 9

The Life and Challenges of a Long-Ago Christian, Part 6

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation.

—2 Corinthians 10:7a

Zeno Speaks

Tullio's Repair Shop, 63 AD

When the storm finally died down, the ship was a wreck, but we were alive. There was nothing to be happy about though. I had lost my friend and betrayed my faith. I made a few trips with the Shark, but I was no seaman. I came ashore at a town where I was a stranger, banked my back pay, and set about looking for work. The first shop I went into was Tullio's Fine Furniture Repair Shop. A beautiful girl met me at the door. The shop was closed, she told me; her father had just had an accident and could not work. I told her I was a carpenter and asked if I could help. There was an important job due to be finished that day. I was able to step in and do it. So Tullio got paid. Now, Tullio needed an assistant, and I needed a job and a room. What could be better? I moved in that day. It was a happy time. I enjoyed the work repairing fine old furniture and making new pieces. I loved getting to know Tullio's daughter Priscilla, who was as good as she was beautiful. She and her father were Christians. They belonged to a church which met in the house of their friend Jason. When she asked me to go with them, I had to confess I had been a Christian but had broken faith. Priscilla convinced me that I could be forgiven, and I began attending meetings. The church family was friendly and accepting. We were at home there. One morning we received bad news. Jason had borrowed money to help needy friends and could not repay it. He had been seized and sent to the slave market to be sold. Priscilla was distraught, but I remembered my back pay money. We could use it to save Jason, I told her. We rushed to the bank and then the slave market where Jason was being held.

Guide us, Lord, as we review each day's experiences. Let us recognize and rejoice at the good, and acknowledge and repent our failings. Amen.

Guy Johnson

Lent 6 Reflection Guide – When God Needs Us

Palm Sunday

Opening

Share a memorable parade experience of yours.

Scripture

Luke 19:28-40

Scripture Reflection

Palm Sunday is the beginning of the highest and holiest week of the Christian year. It is a time when we remember the central event of our faith – Christ’s death and resurrection. Though Jesus had been telling the disciples what was coming, they were not ready for what was about to unfold. In order for things to work out the way God intended, Jesus needed help from the disciples. They were the ones sent to get the colt, they were the ones sent to secure a room for Passover and what would become the Last Supper, they were the ones who would turn him over to the authorities and later deny knowing him. Just as Jesus needed his disciples to help live out God’s plans, he needs us to carry on his work today. When we offer what we have, we join our voices with those from all ages proclaiming, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”

Moment of Silent Reflection

Spend one full minute in silence as you consider the scripture and reflection.

Turn to Wonder

- Place yourself in the story of Palm Sunday. What do you notice? What would you tell the crowd shouting “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord”? What would you like to tell the group of Pharisees trying to calm the crowds? What would you say to Jesus?
- Kings and Caesars would ride warhorses into cities as signs of victory. What point is Luke emphasizing by noting that Jesus rode into town on a colt?¹
- What point is Luke emphasizing by observing that the people placed cloaks before Jesus (and not waving palm branches as in other gospel accounts)?²
- What spiritual gifts, skills, and/or talents might God be needing from you? How might God be calling you to share those gifts within the church and in the world?
- How has this Lenten journey impacted you? What are you looking forward to during the coming Holy Week? How will you prepare for crucifixion? The Resurrection?

Closing

Close your time together in a manner that is typical for you. Consider sharing joys and prayer concerns, then close in prayer.

The Long & Winding Road

Lord,

We remember the journey you have taken as we commit ourselves to walking in the same way. Give us the strength, hope, and joy we need as we follow. Amen.

¹It emphasizes that Jesus is a different kind of Messiah.

²Deemphasizing the joyous nature of Jesus' arrival, it gives a more sacrificial and humble tone to the story. It also asks what we are willing to lay down for this Messiah.

Monday, April 11

When We Choose Silence

Even if these [the crowds] are silent, the very stones will cry out. —Luke 19:40

What does Jesus mean, “the very stones will cry out”?

I've been wondering how our Lenten theme of a long and winding road relates to rocks and stones crying out. Could it be that because Jesus is riding a colt on a road, he used the stones alongside the road to emphasize how all of creation points to his power and authority?

Jesus defended people who were powerless and oppressed. Those very people are cheering and praising while the religious leaders are criticizing and complaining. Jesus declared that one day his authority will be made known and the structures of oppressive societies will come crashing down. Then all of creation will join together to proclaim Jesus as Lord of all.

Whether we acknowledge the truth of God and how he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ or we choose to remain silent, the truth still stands. The truth is not dependent on anyone's acknowledgment.

So when Jesus says, “the very stones will cry out,” I believe he is conveying the idea that, whether you acknowledge the truth about Jesus or not, it does not change what is actually true. The people of God should always acknowledge the truth of who Jesus is, whether anyone else does or not.

Let us be stones! Let us always cheer and loudly proclaim the truth as we navigate the long and winding roads throughout each of our life's journeys.

Lord and Savior, all power and authority belong to you. Bring down evil, and let justice prevail. We loudly praise your name. Amen.

Theresa Sandifer

The Harvest

*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, **“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore to send out workers into his harvest field.”***

—Matthew 9:36-38 (NIV Study Bible)

While growing up, I went to a Catholic school until the start of the 6th grade – which meant I went to mass every day except Saturday. Even after I moved to the public schools, most of the school calendars and events were influenced by the Christian faith. As far as I knew, all of my friends and neighbors were Christians and attended church on Sunday. I actually didn't have a conversation with someone who stated they were not a Christian until I had been working for a couple of years. So when these verses were preached on or discussed in a Bible study, I always thought that they didn't apply to me since almost all of the folks that I knew were already Christian, and I had no plans on being a missionary.

When Lane mentioned that the Lenten Devotions would be based on “The Long and Winding Road: Following Jesus When the Path is Rough,” I got a light tap on my shoulder but figured I would ignore it and it would go away. Well it didn't go away. It kept reminding me that during my work career, my family and I relocated to Thailand to work for a few years. Now, Thailand is a great place, it is very “exotic,” the people are very friendly, the food is fantastic and we loved living there. However, one thing that quickly became obvious was that Thailand had very few Christians – less than half a percent of the country.

It was now plain to see that “the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.” We were fortunate enough to be introduced to a couple of missionary families and were able to keep our connection with the Christian faith while in Thailand. One of the missionaries was fond of asking our small community of faith, “did we believe that God was still active in the world today, and if so, we should open our eyes, find out where He was active and go join Him in His work.”

If we fast-forward to now, we find that the number of folks active in their Christian faith continues to decline. Our community is no longer like it was when I was growing up. In the not too distant future, we may find that less than half of the people are active in the Christian faith. So now when I read or hear this Scripture, I have come to better understand that indeed, **“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore to send out workers into his harvest field.”**

Dear Lord, open our eyes to where you are active in the world that we might go and join you in your work so that we too can help with the harvest! We pray these things in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

grace, john toney

Wednesday, April 13

Courage

Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.

—Deuteronomy 31:6

I live in awe of those people of past and modern times whose rock-solid faith has been tested and proven in the harshest of ways – those who have professed their love of God or Jesus while faced with literal life or death choices. I think of Christians practicing their faith in countries whose regimes seek to destroy them, prisoners of concentration camps or prisoners of war, missionaries martyred by those they seek to serve, and the many others like the young Columbine High School student who professed to her faith in God even while knowing that she would be gunned down for her words.

In our community, we live in relative peace and security, not called to face life or death situations engendered by our faith. How courageous are we? How courageous am I?

Every day I rely on the Holy Spirit to guide me. The Spirit fills me with love and compassion for my neighbor, helps channel my thoughts to the good, and suffuses me with grateful joy when I am surrounded by the magnificence of God's creation. But, I don't know if courage resides in me. I pray that it does, that it will. I want to stand for God as He has always stood for me. I think, however, that I will never truly know until I am profoundly tested.

Merciful God, hear my prayer for steadfast courage. Let my love for you always be the foundation of all that I do. I live in deep gratitude for the ever-present guidance of the Holy Spirit, your heaven-sent gift to each of us. Thank you, gracious Father! Amen.

Betty Schroeder

Where Does It Hurt?

Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone cheerful? He should sing praises. Is anyone among you sick? He should call for the elders of the church, and they should pray over him after anointing him with olive oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will restore him to health; if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

—James 5:13-15 (CSB)

As I sat in church one Sunday, I was amazed by the title of the sermon, “Where does it hurt?” As a matter of fact I almost laughed out loud. You see, the week before I was in excruciating pain. I had pain in my legs, right hip, lower back and my left heel. It hurt when I walked, sat, or even slept. I was so frustrated by the pain in my body that I wrote four poems about my pain. I prayed and cried out to God and begged him for some relief.

God is so awesome! He led me straight to Amazon. I found a posture belt to help with lower back, leg pain and sciatica. I also found compression socks. At this point I would have tried anything. I even started seeing a chiropractor for the pain in my right hip. He also told me what was wrong with my heel and told me what brace to get. I got so unstable on my feet that not one, but three coworkers told me to get a cane. So I did, and I never leave home without my new little friend.

Yes, I still have pain, but God is helping me through it, and allowing me to experience moments free from pain. I’m also in the process of getting the right diagnosis for my right hip. Yes, it hurts, but I believe that God is healing me. In time I will see a significant difference, so I will remain faithful and patient.

Dear God, Thank you for your healing power. Thank you for braces and medications that ease the pain. Thank you for the doctors who help diagnose what’s wrong. Thank you for healing us from each of our ailments. In Jesus name, amen.

L. Darlene Dickson

Good Friday, April 15

Compassion of God

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

—Psalm 34:18

The long season of Lent can bring a deep sense of loneliness and longing in those who have lost a dear one. Sometimes God has surprising ways to comfort us. Although it has been thirteen years since losing my husband and best friend Chris, that grief still overwhelms me at times. I make an annual visit to his gravesite in November. After this year's visit, I wrote the following meditation:

The beautiful November morning reminded me of the day of his funeral – crisp air, clear sky of Carolina blue, autumn leaves drifting in the light breeze. The young girl silently and reverently helped remove the hanger from the basket of lavender and lemon petunias I had chosen when she understood that they would rest on my husband's grave. She gently sent me off with compassionate words, unexpected from a stranger, especially one so young.

At the gravesite, mockingbirds flashed wings in territorial posturing while chattering blue jays rooted for nourishing tidbits in the manicured grass. After nestling the basket of petunias by the grave marker, I sat on some other grieving family's memorial bench of marble and, instead of praying, began to talk to Chris.

The sun on my back was warm, the clean air felt like food for my lungs, and I could almost hear the echo of the bagpipes playing Amazing Grace. As I reminisced about days now long ago, joy flowed from my eyes down my cheeks. I knew Chris was listening as I regaled him with my little stories of baby box turtles and soaring pelicans and sugar snap peas pushing up through the garden dirt.

While I talked a lot and sang a little, I looked around at the hundreds of graves so lovingly decorated with colorful flowers of silk and plastic. Then, turning back to the humble pot of petunias, I smiled as a beautiful painted lady butterfly rested on a yellow blossom and blessed the day's reunion.

God of healing and hope, we rest in the promise of life everlasting that you have given each of us through the life, death and resurrection of your precious son. Help us to live with joy each day and reach for your comfort in times of sorrow. Amen.

Betty Schroeder

Live in Hope

Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near.

—Luke 21:29-30

Live in hope, in wild expectation.
Our holy God is working a miracle!
The cross yields to resurrection,
defying all logic,
challenging man's mind.

Winter slowly succumbs to verdant spring.
Robins return, hawks are nesting,
confident in new life to come.
Japanese maples offer their Lenten-colored blooms
as yellow wildflowers peek from the fields.

Life, renewed, exuberant, un-denied
springs forward with reassurance.
Creation rebounds, men's hearts quicken
to know the miracle of everlasting life.

Easter morning is on the way!
Live in hope.

God of miracles, we need help to stay hopeful in these turbulent times. Be with us as we contemplate the promise of the resurrection and the hope we find in your merciful and abiding love.

Betty Schroeder

The Life and Challenges of a Long-Ago Christian, Part 7

The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?

—Psalm 27:1

Markos Speaks

Market and Shop, 63 AD

The slave market was grim and foreboding. Melissa was shaking with fear as we entered the holding area. I tried to comfort her, but I knew I couldn't help. Ruffo the building manager pushed us into a narrow cell. Jason, an elderly man with unpaid debts, was already in the cell. Jason was Christian, too, and we talked and prayed

together. A young woman came to bring Jason encouragement. He introduced us to her (her name was Priscilla), and we told her our story. She seemed very interested to hear it. Not long after Priscilla left, two of Ruffo's helpers came in, bound our hands, and blindfolded us. They led us out to a covered wagon. After a long ride, the wagon stopped, and we were ushered into a building. When our bonds were removed, we saw we were in a large room that looked like part of a carpentry shop. Priscilla ran laughing into the room. "You are free!" she said, "And here is the man who managed it!" I could hardly believe my eyes when Zeno followed her into the room. It was a joyful reunion. Jason was overjoyed to be returned to his flock. I was more than grateful that Zeno had gotten Melissa and me released. Zeno was happy that his seaman's pay had been put to good use. "Now after all these adventures, what challenges lie ahead?" we asked. "There are challenges everywhere. Our faith will be our shield. I want to stay right here," Zeno began. "If she agrees, Priscilla and I will be married; I'll be a carpenter and serve at Jason's church." "Long ago Brother Alexander told me that John, the disciple Jesus loved, is at Ephesus," said Markos. "I want to go there and learn from him. I hope Melissa will come with me." The four friends joined hands and prayed for guidance.

Lord Jesus, we cannot see the way ahead or know the challenges we will face. We do know you are always at our side loving and supporting us. Give us the strength we will need and the wisdom to make wise choices. Amen.

Guy Johnson

Easter Sunday, April 17

New Life Out of Death

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

—John 20:1, 15-18

I'm a plant killer.

I kill plants. I don't mean to. I just have a remarkable ability to make sure plants do not live. I either over water them or under water them. I either smother them with love or neglect them for too long.

So it should come as no surprise to you that I am not the gardener in our family. Ben and Julian maintain a little herb garden in our backyard, and I do my best to stay out of the way.

It was in a garden that Mary Magdalene meets Jesus on Easter morning. The Gospel of John even tells us that Mary thought Jesus was the gardener.

What an apt place to experience resurrection – in a garden. What an appropriate place to meet our resurrected Lord. In the garden, a place where things that had once seemed dead in the winter, that had once seemed dead on Good Friday, now explode with life. The garden is a place where seeds are buried in the ground, in the hope and faith that they will rise.

But if we didn't know better, we might think that digging down, and placing the seed in the ground would be burying it - not planting it. If we didn't know better, we might think that that seed – that potential for life – was gone permanently.

Certainly that is what the disciples must of have thought when Jesus was crucified and his body was placed in the tomb. And then...Boom! Somewhere out of nowhere pops a bit of green through the soil...and then a bit more...then a flower...then a fruit. New life springs forth!

And just like that – RESURRECTION!

From the “death” of the seed will come new life. Transformation. Life from death. From the darkness of the grave, a stone rolled away. Resurrection! Life from death.

There may be times we feel like we are being buried...buried in too much work, a schedule too full, in a mountain of grief, in pain, loneliness, or loss...but the transformation is happening, the green shoot of the plant is forming and resurrection is coming.

Today we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord. There is new life out of death! There is hope for all of us. Resurrection is here!

Lord of Life, Open us to the power of your resurrection as we celebrate it anew this day, that we too might rise to new life in you. Amen.

Rev. Lane Cotton Winn

Lead Pastor, St. John's United Methodist Church

Thank You

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Layout by Mari Walker

Holy Week 2022 at St. John's UMC

Our Holy Week worship experiences commemorate Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Join Jesus in his triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, his last gathering with his disciples on Maundy Thursday, his sacrifice and sorrow on Good Friday, and his glorious resurrection on Easter Sunday. As you journey through Holy Week with St. John's UMC, may you discover a richer, joy-filled Easter.

Palm Sunday Worship *April 10, 2022, 8:30 and 11 am in the Sanctuary*

Celebrate Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Children and the young at heart are invited to arrive early to line up for the Palm Processional which will happen at the beginning of both services.

Maundy Thursday *April 14, 2022, 6 pm in the Sanctuary*

On Maundy Thursday we will remember Jesus' last supper with his disciples, the evening before his crucifixion, and will partake in a night of blessing and Holy Communion. Join us for this engaging worship service at 6pm in our sanctuary and online.

Good Friday *April 15, 2022, 6 pm in the Sanctuary*

Our Good Friday worship service, "The Long and Winding Road to the Cross" will weave together the traditional Good Friday readings about Jesus' final hours, his crucifixion, and his death, along with time for reflection and prayer. Join us for this solemn worship service at 6pm in our sanctuary and online.

Easter Sunday Worship *April 17, 2022, 8:30 and 11 am in the Sanctuary*

Celebrate the glory of Christ's resurrection on Easter at our regular worship times in the sanctuary and online.



ST. JOHN'S
United Methodist Church

Glorifying God. Feeding People. Making Disciples.

St. John's United Methodist Church

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Join us for Sunday worship at 8:30 or 11 a.m.

In person and Livestream on Facebook, YouTube and Vimeo @stjohnsbr

St. John's Writers' Group meets the second Sunday of each month at 4 p.m. on Zoom.

Email media@stjohnsbr.org to learn more or join the group that made this devotional possible.