

2 Lenten
2 Devotional



Fifth
Avenue
Presbyterian
Church

Lent & Easter Services

March 6

Ash Wednesday | Service & Imposition of Ashes
12 & 6:30 pm • Kirkland Chapel

March 10

First Sunday in Lent
9:30 am • Kirkland Chapel
11 am • Sanctuary

March 17

Second Sunday in Lent
9:30 am • Kirkland Chapel
11 am • Sanctuary

March 20

Midweek Lenten Service
6:30 pm • Kirkland Chapel

March 24

Third Sunday in Lent
9:30 am • Kirkland Chapel
11 am • Sanctuary

March 31

Fourth Sunday in Lent
9:30 am • Kirkland Chapel
11 am • Sanctuary

April 7

Fifth Sunday in Lent
9:30 am • Kirkland Chapel
11 am • Sanctuary

April 14

Palm Sunday
9:30 am • Kirkland Chapel
11 am • Sanctuary

April 18

Maundy Thursday
6:30 pm • Sanctuary

April 19

Good Friday
12-3 pm • Sanctuary

April 21

Easter
9:30 & 11:15 am • Sanctuary

For additional information about our Lent and Holy Week services, visit fapc.org/worship.

Dear Sisters & Brothers in Christ



As Christians, we know that we never walk the spiritual path alone. This is particularly true during Lent.

Lent is a time of quiet introspection as we prepare for the journey to Calvary, where we will remember Christ's suffering and death, then await his triumphal resurrection. For many, this is a season of solitude. For others, worship and prayer in community are more important than ever.

Whatever path you choose, let this Lenten Devotional be your companion on the way.

Once again the pastors, officers and staff of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church have offered reflections and words of prayer for each of the 40 days. It is our hope that you find comfort, inspiration, healing and joy in these pages.

Blessings of peace to you.

The Rev. Kate Dunn
Associate Pastor for Congregational Care & Outreach

These devotionals are available online at fapc.org/devotionals.
To receive the daily devotionals by email, drop us a line at fapc@fapc.org.



Wednesday, March 6 • Ash Wednesday

Dust

Werner Ramirez, Associate Pastor

For dust you are, and to dust you will return. —Genesis 3:19c

Ash Wednesday has always brought about a variety of emotions for me. On this day we contemplate our mortality. We are reminded that we came from dust and to dust we shall return.

It's really morbid, when I think about it. When will I die? How will I die? Who will miss me? How will I be remembered? It is not often that we think about our end. And yet, at times even living life feels like death. There are terrible things all around us.

On Ash Wednesday we acknowledge all the aspects of life and death that are burdensome. In the duo Gungor's song, "Beautiful Things," they sing:

*All this pain
I wonder if I'll ever find my way
I wonder if my life could really change, at all
All this earth
Could all that is lost ever be found?
Could a garden come out from this ground, at all?*

This year our Confirmation Class looked at the question, “What happens to us after we die?” We talked about salvation, resurrection of the dead, heaven and hell. We wrestled with the unknown, but we remembered that, in the end, God is good. God is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love. God is in the business of redeeming all things.



Our conversation then turned to what it means to trust in a good God. Which brings me back to that Gungor song. After lamenting the pain, they sing:

*You make beautiful things
You make beautiful things out of the dust
You make beautiful things out of us*

Friends, as the burdens of life and death become too hard to bear, may God turn them into beautiful things. Remember that from dust you came, and to dust you shall return, yet with Christ we have everlasting life.

Holy God, we know that you make beautiful things out of dust and out of us. Help us to see the ways you are making all things new. Amen.

Thursday, March 7

Get Smart, Get Saved!

Ken Henderson, President, Board of Trustees

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
—Romans 8:38-39

Years ago there was a group, some called it a cult, that made its center of activities near Washington Square Park. Members of this group wore t-shirts that said, “Get Smart, Get Saved!” They would stop people on the sidewalk and in the park and ask them if they were “saved.” You can imagine the reaction from most of the folks in Greenwich Village.

For some reason, one day I stopped to respond to one of these missionaries. When asked whether I had been saved, I said, “Yes, I have.” He beamed broadly (very happy that someone actually responded, and to get this answer) and asked me to recount the details of my conversion. “Well,” I replied, “I grew up in the church and did not have a Paul-type experience with a blinding light or anything like that, so I don’t have much to tell you.” He looked at me oddly, then expressed doubts as to whether or not I was actually saved. He gave me a flyer and invited me to one of his group’s meetings. Ultimately we went in our separate directions.



I think it is remarkable that, four decades later, I still vividly remember this encounter. And just as I knew then, I know now that I have indeed been “saved,” however you want to define it. Maybe not the way the Washington Square missionary meant it, but that does not matter. We did not use this kind of language in my church or my family growing up, but I still know. I have known it all my life. It is why we baptize babies. It is why the words of the Assurance of Pardon are recited every Sunday in worship. I know it because of Easter, because God’s love is there for us, always, just ahead of us and next to us. And nothing can separate us from that love, which we know through Christ.

God, we know that you are with us always and that nothing can separate us from your love and forgiveness. Please give us comfort in this knowledge and strength in facing our challenges every day. We pray this in the name of Jesus, who shows us the way. Amen.

Friday, March 8

Think on These Things, Now and Forever

Amelia Vogler, Elder

Finally, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. –Philippians 4:8

Our world is often described as a dark, scary, uncertain place. Headlines and storylines seem to propagate this notion, made ever-more present by the 24-hour news cycle and boom of social media. But this declaration of “the end of days” is nothing new! And for that, we should be thankful. For that, we should think on these things, the wise words from the Apostle Paul.

Paul and many of the other apostles and early supporters of the Christian Church truly did feel as if “the end of days” was nigh as they continued to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But in Paul’s letter of adoration for those hard workers, we learn what is really important.

Truth. Honesty. Justice. Purity. Love. Kindness. These are virtues that we as Christians should think on, not only during Lent but throughout our lives.

I often get swept up in achieving ambitious goals, caring for others, making sure my projects are perfect, or satisfying my overflowing social commitments calendar. Then I seem to neglect thinking on these things. This Lenten season, I'm asking for prayers to help ground me to keep thinking on these things.



We know Lent can be a dark, scary, uncertain time. The death of Jesus Christ is undoubtedly the darkest, scariest, most uncertain time for Christians, both early believers and followers to present time. But friends, know this, and think on these things, because the resurrection of Jesus Christ is true, honest, just, pure, lovely and of good report, now and forever. That much *is* for certain.

O Lord, please help us think on these things and find hope, light and reflection during this Lenten season and beyond. Amen.

Saturday, March 9 • A Poem for Saturday

Thirst

Another morning and I wake with thirst
for the goodness I do not have. I walk
out to the pond and all the way God has
given us such beautiful lessons. Oh Lord,
I was never a quick scholar but sulked
and hunched over my books past the hour
and the bell; grant me, in your mercy,
a little more time. Love for the earth
and love for you are having such a long
conversation in my heart. Who knows what
will finally happen or where I will be sent,
yet already I have given a great many things
away, expecting to be told to pack nothing,
except the prayers which, with this thirst,
I am slowly learning.

Mary Oliver (1935–2019)



Monday, March 11

Sin and the Red Line

Séamus Campbell, Director of Outreach Ministries

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. —Psalm 51:10

When I lived in Boston, one of my co-workers was excited to find an apartment close by our workplace downtown. Soon after moving in, Cindy invited the regular after-work crowd to come hang out in her new place. We arrived around midnight and eagerly began popping bottles of champagne to celebrate her new home. All of a sudden we felt a deep rumbling, seeming to come from the building itself. It became so loud that the entire place was vibrating. For a moment we were afraid that we were experiencing an earthquake. The only person who seemed to be unbothered was Cindy, who quickly explained that it was nothing. It was just the Red Line.

We were incredulous. So Cindy took us to her bedroom window, pulled up the shade and revealed the mystery. Her window was directly over the subway tracks that led to a station just a few hundred feet away. We couldn't understand how anyone could possibly live with this. But Cindy said, "I've gotten so used to it that I don't even hear it."

As our after-work gatherings continued, something interesting occurred. Like Cindy, we got used to the sound of the Red Line screeching out of Park Street toward the MGH/Charles station. The once-deafening sound no longer had any effect on us.

Sin is like the subway train barreling out of the tunnel. And by "sin" I mean not only our personal transgressions—"what we have done, and what we have left undone," as we say in the Prayer of Confession—but also communal sin, the systemic injustices that pervade our society. At first, sin stands loud and bold and is very much "in our face." However, the more we do it, sin becomes so diminished that we no longer pay attention to it. It becomes commonplace, almost to the point of acceptance.

Lent is an opportunity to listen, and to hear. I challenge you every night before you go to bed to take an inventory. *Have I offended another person? Have I turned away from human suffering? Have I been dishonest?* For it is only in naming sin, in owning it, that we can begin to change and amend our lives.

O God of abundant mercy, give us the ability to see and hear you in our busy lives. Grant us the strength and courage to look inward, to look and listen for your abiding love. Open our eyes and ears so that we may better show Jesus to all those we meet. Amen.

Tuesday, March 12

A God for All Seasons

Macie Lynne Sweet, Seminarian



Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! —Luke 12:27-28

We are at the point in the winter when I am ready for the leaves to be back on the bare and gangly trees. I've never been the biggest fan of this season, but I love the burst of life and color that comes in the spring. This makes the long, cold months worth it to me... well, almost. There are no lilies outside right now, but I know with certainty that when the seasons change, they will be sprouting anew and looking more beautiful than "Solomon in all his glory."

I find this verse a great comfort in its description of God as the caretaker of all creation, from the immense to the mundane. We go through many seasons of life, and when we are in a particularly cold and wintry season, it can seem never-ending. But Jesus asks us in this verse to consider the flowers and how they bloom every spring under God's care. If God so nurtures the trees and flowers, how much more will God grow and renew your life? No matter what season we are in, we are never separated from the love and tending of God. While we do not know how long our seasons in life will last, we can have confidence in a faithful caretaker who is continually working our lives for good and glory.

Lord God, you know the depths of my worries and fears. Help me look to creation as a sign of your great care for my life and a reminder that you are growing and shaping me in all seasons of my life. Amen.

Wednesday, March 13

Love Unlimited

Al Picallo, Trustee

Give thanks to the God of gods. His love endures forever. —Psalm 136:2

By the time our son Harrison was born, my wife, Kellie, and I were the proud parents of a beautiful and healthy little girl named Isabella. With all the love that I felt for my daughter, I was worried about how it was possible to love anyone else with the same unconstrained, complete giving-over of one's self to another. I mean—that's a lot to give!



We live in a world of limits. A finite world. We are taught in science that matter can neither be created nor destroyed. In economics, we know of zero-sum games. We live among vast income inequalities: the “haves” and “have-nots.”

So how is it possible to have enough love for two, or three, or four?

The day came, and Harrison entered the world. I discovered immediately that, despite my fears, upon laying eyes on him, a wellspring of love as strong as I’d ever felt burst forth. I knew at that moment there was enough.

I realize now that love is limitless. And for something to be limitless, it not only has to be never-ending in the moment, it has to be never-ending over time. It has to be eternal.

The sermon series this past Advent visited the homes of the gospel writers and examined their different versions of the birth narrative. It was a powerful lesson of God’s love for the world, and a reminder that we each have our own versions of experiencing the same God. For me it recalled the moment I held a tiny baby and began a journey toward two realities: God is love, and God’s love endures forever.

Dear God, we too often get distracted by the rules we set for ourselves and each other, and we overlook your constant presence in our lives. We pray for the awareness to find your abundant love in the places, faces and spaces of our everyday, so that we can be reminded to give you thanks and strive to make earth a little more like heaven. Amen.

Thursday, March 14

‘Cause Soon Enough We’ll Die

Stephanie Kelley, Executive Assistant to the Senior Pastor

... and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it. —Ecclesiastes 12:7

My cousin Kyra was 16 years old when she died unexpectedly in 2016. Kyra had a strong faith in God, wanted to go to medical school so she could provide care in impoverished countries, and had a giant pot-bellied pig as a pet. Her entire essence was an act of worship as she lived with such presence, motivation and love for the world around her. She had a promising future; it ended abruptly when another individual decided to text and drive.



Kyra's short existence transformed my understanding of life and death. Since her death, the reality of my own fate constantly lingers in the back of my head. *I am going to die!* And what's even crazier is I have very little control over when and how it's going to happen. This reality, a reality we all share, is both terrifying and mysteriously beautiful.

One of my favorite songs is “We Might Be Dead by Tomorrow,” by Soko. Morbid as it may sound, Soko draws insight into the significance of living with a conscious acknowledgment of our mortality—an acknowledgement that can inspire us to live a bit bolder. She sings:

*So let's love fully
& let's love loud
let's love now
'Cause soon enough we'll die*

I reflect on my own eventual death for a few moments each day. My eventual death encourages me to live a bit louder. It motivates me to love unconditionally. It inspires me to see the Divine in each day.

God of life and death, may the mystery of our own inevitable death inspire us to live a life full of the love that was taught by your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Friday, March 15

A Mother's Strength

Matt Roush, Clerk of Session

The joy of the Lord is your strength. —Nehemiah 8:10

I first noticed this familiar Bible verse—which in her version reads, “The Joy of the Lord is My Strength”—on my mother's refrigerator during my annual Christmas visit last year. Nestled amid the fading cartoons, family photos and (a newer addition) a whiteboard listing a month's worth of doctor's appointments and reminders, this modest magnet stood out with unusual force. The passage rings unusually true as my mom—call her “Miss Wanda,” everyone does—approaches her 90th birthday in June.

Strength bolstered by faith, and joy in the love of the Lord, has rarely been more evident than this winter, as my mom diligently and successfully worked to get back on her feet after an emergency hip replacement—coming a year and a half after another fall fractured her pelvis. She recovered well enough from that injury to start driving again, and to resume “Silver Sneakers” workouts at the nearby Y and her volunteer work at church, where she helps



prepare hundreds of Sunday bulletins and envelopes.

My mother's story is one of sustained resilience through love and joy in the Lord. Widowed in her early 30s, raising three children (I was the youngest) in a small Indiana town with relatives on every other block, she never lost faith or showed despair—at least not to me. The church I was brought up in was filled with family, always there for Wanda and her kids. And now as her world inevitably shrinks, a new church (in suburban Kentucky) rallies to her needs: friends and staff calling amid a deep freeze to make sure she has what she needs, cards in her mailbox wishing her well and hoping to see her again soon.

Her views on religion and society don't always align with mine, but my mom's example never fails to inspire me in moments of doubt. For her, church is family, and how the ladies in the church office beam when Miss Wanda pays a visit. We expect she'll be back on a regular basis before long. Praise the Lord!

Dear Heavenly Father, we give thanks for your love and joy in your creation, which gives us the strength we need to face our challenges. Amen.

Saturday, March 16 • A Poem for Saturday

God's Grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889)

Monday, March 18

God the Mother Hen

Erin Collier, Elder



How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. —Matthew 23:37

Like most people, I imagine, I'm accustomed to powerful, masculine representations of God. So the first time I recall hearing a vision of her as a hen fiercely defending her brood from attack, it stuck with me.

I needed to feel that protective, motherly love in October 2017. The Harvey Weinstein news had just broken, and #MeToo, a term and movement coined a decade earlier by Tarana Burke, roared through social media. Women from all parts of my life—college friends, mom friends, journalist friends, women and men I didn't know but whose stories rang painfully familiar—were collectively processing sexual assaults, abuse and harassment. Would our church see us, would it listen to our pleas for justice and change? Did people understand the depth of despair and anger this news and this movement would unearth?

Did God the Mother Hen care?

On Oct. 22, Charlene Han Powell offered the Prayers of the People during worship, part of which read:

“We lift up those who are living in the aftermath of abuse, whether it be sexual, physical or mental. For those who have held their stories of assault out of fear of shame or rebuke, for those whose truths have been lost in systems that have too long looked the other way, we ask for your healing. Finally, we lift up those who are living in the aftermath of doubt. For those who have lost their faith in their communities and their loved ones, for those who have lost their faith in themselves, for those who have lost their faith in you, for anyone who is tempted to believe that we are in this alone, we ask for your courage.”

The Mother Hen did see us, she did hear us, and she gathered us together.

God, please help us to remember that you are not only a father, a judge, a warrior, a king, or a fortress... you're also our mother hen. Amen.



Tuesday, March 19

Lend an Ear

Morgan King, Director of Engagement

Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And immediately the ears of the deaf man were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. —Mark 7:34-35

What was the first thing you did the last time you witnessed a miracle? You told someone. Heck, it probably doesn't even need to be a miracle—for most of us, we'd talk about anything as miraculous as an oddly shaped potato just to have a reason to talk. I often say something and realize that it was just useless noise. The words I choose, the content of my speech, clearly aren't the point. I talk because I want someone to listen.

I'm not the only one who needs to talk. On the train, walking in the park or standing in line at the store, I frequently get the sense that someone nearby is looking for their chance to talk. Maybe you've experienced this, too. Someone eyes you apprehensively, waiting to see if you'll glance back and give them an opportunity to drum up a conversation. The lonely young adult on the Q train, the dog walker with the Chow, the elderly lady at Gristedes with the shopping bag of rutabagas and Special K, they all want to talk. They want anyone in shouting distance to hear what they have to say.

Sometimes, following Jesus means shutting our mouths so that others may speak. Listening to the Savior means listening to the lost, the lonely, the last. Sometimes, witnessing the Miracle means our words will always fall short. But in our listening, we offer healing. In simply lending our ear to someone else, we offer the Gospel without saying a word.

To the one who is always listening, we ask for the patience to listen. Amen.

Wednesday, March 20

Grace Abounds

Constance Hubbard, Elder

So in Christ we, though many, form one body and each member belongs to all the others. —Romans 12:5

I am grateful for the faith community of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. It is a haven of safety, respect, joy and love. In this vibrant community, abundant opportunities to “breathe in” and “breathe out” God's love flourish. Over the

decades, both inspiration and expiration have come my way.



More than a decade ago, as a Deacon, I was given the gift of a visitee, a church member who was finding difficulty navigating the city. It continues to be my honor to nurture this relationship, walking with our Savior. Several weeks ago, I received notice that this sister in Christ, Eunice, had fallen and was in the hospital. Details were uncertain. I saw a ray of grace: I had scheduled a visit to her two days later.

Shortly after I arrived in her room, someone came to read a document to her and get her signature. Eunice has a hearing impairment. I suggested we call her niece, her nearest relative. I had her e-address in my contact list, but had not saved her phone number. Not to worry: Siri dredged it up. I called; she answered. On speaker phone, the document was read. With the agreement of Eunice's niece, I signed the document. I took a picture of it and sent it on to her. Although I consider myself to be technologically challenged, through my iPhone grace was even more present. Many moments of grace were present.

Eunice is back at the nursing home where she lives. No serious damage had come from the accident. God's generous love can be apparent in all life's moments, whether they appear larger or smaller.

Heavenly Father, I am grateful for your majesty, grateful that you are Love. Thank you, Lord, for the gift of connecting one to another in precious opportunities, with the guidance of your Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Thursday, March 21

Belonging to One Another

Gary McKoy, Deacon

Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

—Romans 12:10

One of the Ancestry.com commercials makes an absurd point. The man in the commercial states that he grew up German. He danced in German dance groups, wore lederhosen... all German. But his DNA showed he wasn't German at all. He was 52% Scotch-Irish. So he traded in his lederhosen for a kilt!

The revolutionary breakthrough of decoding and mapping the human genome, and the industry it created, has raised more questions than it has answered. What is race? What is ethnicity? What is a "nationality"? If each human is as different genetically from the next as snowflakes are from each other, then who are we? Any definition we give ourselves is made up. One



minute all German, the next minute all Scotch. One drop of African blood makes you black. You're not a Cherokee because we said so.

We like to be in groups, because the sense of belonging is enjoyable. It makes us feel less lonely when other people “get” us. Eating your grandmother's cooking, the smell of your Thanksgiving, being with friends from the old neighborhood are all very special and personal. The ways we dance, and sing, and dress, and talk, and pray are also special, and we want to share them.

But let's not persecute those who are not in our group along the way. Most atrocities in history were based on groups competing with each other, when we decided that one group had the divine right to triumph over another. Each of us can decide to make a difference in our own lives, and in the lives of the people we touch every day, by providing and caring for them, understanding and forgiving them just as we provide and care for, understand and love our own friends and families. Without explanation, reason, justification or apology.

Thank you, Lord, for the gift of each and every one of our lives. Amen.

Friday, March 22

Wilderness Wandering

Chaz Jackson, Elder

Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go... I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. —Genesis 28:15

The sermon series this past fall on the matriachs and patriarchs of the Old Testament reminded me that I'm always drawn to stories of people wandering in a wilderness. Many times their circumstances are extreme. Hagar, mid-pregnancy, fled for her life. Moses ran away from his life of privilege because he had murdered. Jacob has two wilderness stories: first he fled a wrathful brother; years later, that brother's army.

Our characters finds themselves in a terrain as dangerous as the situation that drove them there. And then, when things seem most desperate, most bleak, when it would take a miracle to set things right... that's exactly what happens. That's when they encounter the Divine. God assures Hagar that she and her son will be protected. Jacob has a dream of heaven. And I think we all remember Moses' fiery shrubbery.

As it is for many people, moving to New York for me was like journeying to a faraway land, leaving behind my family and everything I knew and loved. And while I didn't flee here for my life, there have been difficult times along the

way. There have been bleak, rock-bottom moments when I asked, “How could things get worse?” And afterward, those are the moments I saw God at work most clearly.



One thing I’ve learned about wilderness encounters: God doesn’t magically make troubles go away, like they never happened. God certainly doesn’t put things back the way they were. Life looks different after an encounter with the Divine. Consider Jacob’s second wilderness moment: he grapples with an angel and walks away a changed man—with a limp and a new name, yet with a fresh reassurance of God’s bigger picture.

Divine Protector, when we find ourselves in uncertain times, on uncharted terrain or with bleak outlooks, remind us that you are there. You have always been there, and you always will be. Help us to remember that you have a larger plan at work, and that you “make all things new,” including our lives. Amen.

Saturday, March 23 • A Poem for Saturday

Sympathy for Lazarus

He didn’t ask to be a magic trick like some dead rabbit
pulled out of a stone hat with a hocus pocus incantation

he didn’t want to be resuscitated in full decrepit stink
for his mother to see him shambling down the cemetery road

he was resting in peace after taking the dark plunge once
no one should stomach it twice, that long black falling

so Jesus, when I die and I’m put down to earthen solace
or after my ashes are scattered into entropic chaos irreversible

do not force me to go through it again like brother Lazarus
raised to face more time in suffering and second death

let your tears be so you may let me go as we all must do
grieve your best friend fully and without recourse to power

raise me then beyond time to your un-nameable dimension
where decay has died with all fear of losing myself and you

has been buried in that old entombed world where I still walk
like Lazarus already dead yet alive and yet to die and rise

Michael Coffey (b. 1966)



Monday, March 25

The Monsters Under My Bed

Kirsten Aiello, Elder

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. —Romans 8:28

I do not struggle with prayer or doubt God... until it's dark outside and time for bed. As a kid, my mother always told me worry was a sin, and my biggest sin was the way I worried at night about things that might not even happen. Through the years my struggle at night has gone from my little secret to people saying, "Hey, I got an email from you at 3:30 am. Were you really up at that time?"

I've tried all the tricks. "Put a notebook by your bed, and as soon as something worries you, write it down." Good suggestion, except that the task of writing down the worry only triggers more worries.

The remarkable part of my struggle is how completely opposite I feel when the sun comes up and my day is in motion. The moment the clock hits 5:30 am, I'm up making tea and thinking of all the positive things I can rattle off throughout the day to fill myself and others with feelings of joy!

My strategies have changed throughout the years, but what works now is listing in my head all of the many things I am thankful for and all of the events in my life that have proven God cares for me and pays attention to every little detail. Being a Christian and trusting in my Lord and Savior is what has saved me from my fretful nights.

Along with telling me my biggest sin, my mother also shared with me her favorite verse. She knew Romans 8:28 would bring me comfort and assurance. I cannot say I've conquered my nightly worries, but my list of blessings keeps getting longer, and the 3:30 am emails have become fewer.

Thank you, Lord God, for blessing me daily and for giving me the ultimate gift of your son, Jesus Christ. Help me to stay focused on my blessings, so that worries can fade into the darkness of the night. Amen.

Tuesday, March 26

Becoming Friends With Time

Chris Romine, Evangelist



It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

—Lamentations 3:25

Recently I've been anxiously waiting for a number of dominoes to fall that are largely out of my control. It's one thing not to know how and when they'll fall; it's another for it to cause delay. As I've waited, I've grown increasingly frustrated with God.

While out to lunch with another pastor I lamented, "I know God's at work, but I just don't get why there's no movement. It's getting to be crunch time." The pastor laughed and retorted, "That can basically be said by anyone, about anything, at any moment in time. Keep that in context, and be patient."

Time is one of the most fundamental ways we try to understand, construct and make sense of the world. Anxiety abounds because of the way it moves. At times, it's downright oppressive! Some things never end, and other things (read: vacations and weekends) end too quickly. We can't control it, and yet from scheduling, to alarms, to reminders, to calendar invites, we try desperately to manage it. And yet, time just keeps moving.

As God sits at the helm of all this, God's deliverance may just be a divine invitation to submit to this mysterious force we can't control. Despite my timelines, deadlines and expectations, God's going to do what God's going to do, in God's perfect timing.

If I'm honest, the missing pieces to the equation of waiting on God are usually faith, patience and humility. If I'm even more honest, I've done ok so far and, really, I can be pretty impatient. I wonder if God seeks to reorient me with how I engage this mysterious motion, so that I can grow to more deeply trust that God is guiding time for cosmic goodness. Perhaps God is helping me build a greater divine dependence as I earnestly await resolution. Whether it comes according to my schedule or not, to God be the glory... just don't take too long.

God of all seconds and seasons, help us see our limitations not as punishment but as blessings. Thank you for your perfect timing, and may we grow accustomed to trusting your timeline as all things are reconciled. Amen.



Wednesday, March 27

Made for More than a Hallmark Story

Meghan Shea, Deacon

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” –Jeremiah 29:11

When I watch movies, I am that person who reads the Wikipedia page to see what happens next. The suspense, drama and conflict are too stressful for me. I am much more comfortable with the Hallmark movie trope—little complexity in characters, little conflict, predictability from start to finish, and a guaranteed Happily Ever After.

I also want my life to look like this. God’s screenplays probably wouldn’t get published by Hallmark, though. God does not want us to live boring, uneventful, safe and comfortable lives that we can prepare for by reading ahead. Only God knows the script of our lives, and God is prepared to take care of us. God can handle the conflict, imperfection and messiness on earth. God can handle our anger when things aren’t going the way we imagined. God doesn’t coddle us and shield us from experiences. As we read in *The Coddling of the American Mind* (during last fall’s congregational book-read), a good parent allows exposure to challenge and difficulty to build resilience and grit, all the while watching over their children. That’s the kind of parent God is.

God promises a happily ever after, but he doesn’t guarantee a conflict-free beginning and middle of the story. God keeps his promises, but he does not always guarantee clarity, predictability or that things will go our way. God knows better than we do what is best for us, which for me as been a hard pill to swallow. So now, instead of asking God, “Please let me have an easy, perfect, calm day at work,” and then later getting angry and frustrated with him for a chaotic, stressful and overwhelming day, I ask God to be with me, to equip me with what I need, and to help me stay calm and hopeful through the chaos. I remind myself that God is in control, not I, and that’s a good thing.

God, please be with me throughout this day. Equip me with what I need to do your work today. Help me to keep calm through difficult times, knowing that you are in control and you know what is best. Amen.

Thursday, March 28



Singing My Way on the Faith Journey

Susan Steele, Elder

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. —2 Corinthians 4:17-18

Every Lenten season I reflect on the lifelong path to strengthening my Christian faith. My faith seeds were planted very early in my life, by my mother and her love of Christian choral music. From as early as I can remember, I was singing in the children's choir, playing the hand bells, spending summer breaks in our church's choir camp and enthusiastically attending Sunday School at our local Presbyterian church in central Pennsylvania. Although my faith journey has had many twists and turns, I have been profoundly grateful for my Christian upbringing in the Presbyterian Church, for the comfort of prayer and for the Christian fellowship, warmth and kindness I find wherever in the world I walk into a church.

When my mother suddenly died five years ago, I realized that her gift of Christian faith had prepared me for that heart-wrenching moment when, in the words of 2 Corinthians, "What is seen is temporary and what is unseen is eternal." Although I no longer have my mother to join me in singing our favorite hymns, I have her eternal love, her legacy of Christian belief, and her inspiring example of having led a meaningful, purposeful life.

Heavenly Father, as we journey through Lent to the joy of Easter, let us remember all the unseen, eternal blessings you bestow on us. Guide us to strengthen our faith. And through our thoughts, words and actions enable us to help those who question their Christian beliefs and doubt your glory. This Lenten season, comfort those who are grieving the loss of family and friends, equip them to accept the grace of what has become unseen, and support them in finding the comfort of your eternal love. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.



Friday, March 29

It Is Not Right

Helen Harris, Deacon

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? —Micah 6:8

“How did over 200 children get from Texas to East Harlem without their mothers? Who could do such a thing?”

I asked myself these questions as I read an article about immigrant children separated from their families at the Texas border. I went to school in Texas and know how long the drive is. How many people knew this was happening and said nothing? How could this happen in the first place? Did not one person in the entire process step up and say this was wrong?

How did some men in the media and entertainment industries get away with using their power to subjugate and exploit women with less power? How could we allow our tax dollars to pay to develop torture tactics at Guantánamo? What were we doing torturing people in the first place? Was it fear, or merely apathy, that prevented people from telling the truth and putting a stop to these things?

It is just not right.

The past two years, as I have endured lengthy divorce proceedings, have been the most difficult of my life. I have been consistently worn down—emotionally, financially and spiritually. During those times and now, I try to follow the words of Scripture: to act justly, love kindness and walk humbly with God.

Unfortunately, we do not live in a world that adheres to that ethic always, and many are complicit in stirring up strife for others. In a world where it sometimes seems as though everyone is in it for themselves, I hold to the belief that God knows the truth. God knows what is right. There is goodness and kindness out there, and the good spirit that resides in those who believe in God, and know what is right, is something that cannot be taken away.

Gracious God, please give us the courage not to stand idle while atrocities happen. Embolden us to speak Truth to Power. Let us not be discouraged, but keep our faith in you. Let compassion and love guide us, not fear and anger. Amen.

Saturday, March 30 • A Poem for Saturday

Thou Hast Searched Me and Known Me †

Psalm 139:1

In all places

Where I have dallied in joyous abandon,
Where I have responded to ancient desires and yielded to impulses old as life,
blinded like things that move without sight;
Where chores have remained chores, unfulfilled by laziness of spirit
and sluggishness of mind;
Where work has been stripped of joy by the ruthless pruning of
vagrant ambition;
Where the task has been betrayed by slovenly effort;
Where the response to human need has been halfhearted and weak;
Where the surge of strength has spent itself in great concentration
and I have been left a shaking reed in the wind;
Where hope has mounted until from its quivering height I have
seen the glory and wonder of the new dawn of a great awakening;
Where the quiet hush of utter surrender envelops me in the great
silence of intimate commitment;

Thou hast known me!

When I have lost my way, and thick fog has shrouded from my view
the familiar path and the lights of home;
When with deliberate intent I have turned my back on truth and peace;
When in the midst of the crowd I have sought refuge among the strangers;
When things to do have peopled my days with mounting anxiety and
ever-deepening frustration;
When in loneliness I have sat in the thicket of despair too weak to move,
to lift my head;

Thou has searched for and found me!

I cannot escape Thy Scrutiny!

I would not escape Thy Love!

Howard Thurman (1889–1981)



Monday, April 1

Even If He Does Not...

Jaime Staehle, Director of Christian Education

"If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it.... But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." –Daniel 3:7-18

I grew up in a Christian home. We attended worship weekly, and I went to church camp and vacation Bible school and youth group. I had a great life. I don't think I was ever told explicitly that if I did the right thing, God would bless my life. I don't think anyone ever said that if I followed Jesus, my life would continue down this path of ease. And yet, I guess it's what I believed.

When I was 19 my family dramatically fell apart, and my faith was rocked. How could this happen? I had done everything right. As I patched my life back together and hobbled off to Bible school, I was re-introduced to this story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Living as exiles in Babylon, they were ordered to bow down and worship a statue. They refused, despite the threat of being thrown into a fiery furnace. I knew this story well, but as I continued reading, verse 18 stopped me. These men would not bow down *even if* God did not save them from the fiery furnace.

This was not the faith I had. My faith led me to expect that I would be rescued from that furnace. My faith said, "I will worship you as long as my life continues to go well." What does it mean to say that we will serve and worship God *even if* God does not give us what we want in return? How hard it is when things go wrong in our lives to say, "I will praise you in the midst of this darkness"?

Dear God, help me to remember that you are God, worthy to be praised no matter what is happening in my life. Amen.

Tuesday, April 2

I Will Call on Him as Long as I Live

Reg McQuay, Elder

I love the Lord, for he heard my voice, he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. –Psalm 116:1-2



When I was among the young people participating in confirmation classes, we were asked to select a verse of Scripture that represented an expression of our faith. I chose Psalm 116, which is a psalm of thanksgiving. This psalm recalls a prayer for help, along with the Lord's saving response. For me, it is somewhat of a covenant with God. Lord, you are always there and hear my petitions. I will call on you as long as I shall live. And in return, "I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people."

This verse has continued through the years to represent and remind me of my relationship with God. When we are young, we try to understand and define our relationship with God without a lot of life experiences. However, as life unfolds, we are faced with many challenges—the loss of a loved parent, disappointment with a relationship or a major illness. As I reflect over the years, it has been so comforting to know that I could lay my burdens at the feet of Christ. He was the rock, and continues to be very day.

Lord, we give you all praise, honor and glory. Thank you for hearing our prayers and petitions. Amen.

Wednesday, April 3

Comfort

Maureen Daly, Deacon

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. —Psalm 23:1-3a

Psalm 23 always comforts me, especially when I am distressed or upset. Two recent examples come to mind.

As a Deacon I visit a woman with many physical ailments that have affected her quality of life. As a result she struggles with depression, understandably. It is hard to see someone going through such a hard time. After we talk, I say Psalm 23 with her, and I find that it does help her, and me, very much.

Recently when a friend choked at dinner and could not breathe, I stepped aside and said Psalm 23. It helped me remain calm as she received mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, and I am grateful that she recovered from this scary ordeal.

I am reading the Bible more every day and learning so much about Jesus and his time on earth. When I go to church on Sunday, I thank God for my faith and how I am a happier and more compassionate person. God truly "restores my soul."

In this troubled world, may God bring peace and serenity to the homeless and the sick, and guide them. Amen.



Thursday, April 4

Persistent Prayer

Laura Di Panfilo, Seminarian

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. —Luke 18:1

Two years ago a dream of mine was snuffed out and the door was slammed in my face. After sulking for several weeks, I read the story of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8), and my attitude quickly changed.

I love this parable, because it is one of the few that tells us exactly what it means. A widow annoys an unjust judge until he finally gives into her need so that she will leave him alone. In reading about the widow's actions, we are forced to reflect: how do we wait? How do we respond to periods of uncertainty? From this passage we learn from Jesus that we are called to persist in prayer and not lose heart.

Often times persistence is a struggle. I wanted to give up on my dream but instead committed myself to prayer. Just because things had not worked out did not mean that God was finished working in my life. Through prayer, I eventually saw God work in ways I did not imagine were possible. A season of disappointment turned into one in which I experienced the nearness and power of Christ.

My prayer for all of us this Lent is that we would become people who are persistent in prayer. People who do not lose faith when we are tested, but instead return to Christ, who is our deliverance and our peace. God help us, Amen.

Friday, April 5

God Is With Us

Meg Sheehan, Moderator, Board of Deacons

I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. —Psalm 121:1-2

This was one of my grandmother's favorite Bible verses. It was so important to her that it's engraved on her gravestone! Although we never really got a chance to talk about it, I imagine she loved it so much because it reminded her that she is not alone and God is always with her, particularly during difficult portions of her life.

I thought about this a lot when I first moved to New York City many years ago. The paradoxical nature of this city is that it is easy to feel alone despite being in the midst of millions of people. I had accepted a job that turned out to be very challenging, in a city where I knew almost no one. It was so easy to get caught up in the mindset of striving for perfection and thinking that asking for help is a sign of weakness.



But this psalm tells us the opposite! God is with us—our protector and our keeper. What a comfort and relief to fully know this: that I am not alone, and I can ask for help. Just as God was with my grandmother, God is also with me, every step of the way, as I navigate this journey of life.

God of comfort, help us to realize that you are there, eagerly waiting for us to ask for help. Continue to remind us that we are created in your image and that we are a part of your heaven and earth. Your presence is a relief. Amen.

Saturday, April 6 • A Poem for Saturday

Just Like Job

My Lord, my Lord,
Long have I cried out to Thee
In the heat of the sun,
The cool of the moon,
My screams searched the heavens for Thee.
My God,
When my blanket was nothing but dew,
Rags and bones
Were all I owned,
I chanted Your name
Just like Job.
Father, Father,
My life give I gladly to Thee
Deep rivers ahead
High mountains above
My soul wants only Your love
But fears gather round like wolves in the dark.
Have You forgotten my name?
O Lord, come to Your child.
O Lord, forget me not.
You said to lean on Your arm
And I'm leaning
You said to trust in Your love
And I'm trusting



You said to call on Your name
And I'm calling
I'm stepping out on Your word.
You said You'd be my protection,
My only and glorious saviour,
My beautiful Rose of Sharon,
And I'm stepping out on Your word.
Joy, joy
Your word.
Joy, joy
The wonderful word of the Son of God.
You said that You would take me to glory
To sit down at the welcome table
Rejoice with my mother in heaven
And I'm stepping out on Your word.
Into the alleys
Into the byways
Into the streets
And the roads
And the highways
Past rumor mongers
And midnight ramblers
Past the liars and the cheaters and the gamblers.
On Your word
On Your word.
On the wonderful word of the Son of God.
I'm stepping out on Your word.

Maya Angelou (1928–2014)

Monday, April 8

Speak

Lance Hurst, Congregational Life Coordinator

The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. —Genesis 1:2-3

Have you ever been in a room full of people who were having lively conversation and you just didn't know what to say? Maybe you felt that you were ignorant of the topics discussed, possibly the personalities of the people

intimidated you, or perhaps you were feeling anxious about the conflict that your words might create.



My voice is something I have struggled with for years. In school my teachers constantly gave feedback on the volume of my voice. Outside the classroom, I was given feedback on the style of my voice—it was “too feminine” or “too gay.” What could my voice possibly accomplish in the world if no one could hear me and no one liked the way I sounded?

The writer of Genesis 1 describes God’s voice as having the power to create light where there had only been darkness. This divine voice continues to make things happen in this creation story. And finally, “God saw everything that she had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31a). God says this after having created people like me and like you. And people like you and like me, the writer argues, are made in God’s image and likeness.

So I wonder, then, if God’s voice had the power to bring light into darkness and create beauty and goodness in the world, what can my voice do? Even when it’s uncomfortable, even when I am afraid, even when I feel ignorant, I’m working to remember that I have been privileged with a voice to bring light, create beauty and show goodness in God’s world.

God who spoke light, beauty, grace and truth, use our communication, whether that be our voices, our writing, or any other medium, to be a conduit of your goodness in the world. Amen.

Tuesday, April 9

In the Moment

Julia Ward, Deacon

You will seek me and find me when you search for me with all your heart.

—Jeremiah 29:13

Maybe it is NYC, or maybe it is the modern era, or maybe it is human nature, but I find that, more often than not, whenever my mind wanders it finds deep focus on what is coming up, on what do I do for the unknown future. I’ve tried to stop this, to improve on “staying in the moment” and deep breathing. But ultimately, it’s been my time at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church that has been the most help.

The first sermon I ever heard at this church was from Reverend Scott. It was called “Wash Your Hands Before You Touch the Baby.” It was Advent, and the sermon encouraged us to take moments to pause and think about the season



in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the holiday. As someone with a history of over-planning holiday events and missing moments in the process of worry, of fretting over croquebouche that failed before it ever was, rather than enjoying time with loved ones, this message hit home.

It wasn't that first Sunday but several Sundays later that I fully appreciated taking moments during times of fear or stress, and pausing to pray and survey. My time spent volunteering, visiting and participating in this wonderful community has not convinced me to stop thinking about the unknown future, but rather to stop worrying, to put my life into God's hands and trust that while the future is still a mystery, acting in faith in the moment is the best I can do.

Gracious God, we thank you for this world and the love you have filled it with. Help us to seek you in moments of calm and moments of frenzy, and to work to bring your peace and love to the world around us. Amen.

Wednesday, April 10

Jesus in the Face of Others

Bob Henn, Trustee

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. —Matthew 22:39

Not having been lucky enough to win the lottery and see the show live, I recently watched “Springsteen on Broadway” on Netflix. Toward the end, Springsteen sings “The Ghost of Tom Joad.” In the song Tom provides examples of people who are struggling, such as a hungry baby crying or someone fighting for a decent job or a helping hand, and he says, “Look in their eyes, Ma, and you’ll see me.”

This reminded me of a recent sermon that asked us to see Jesus in the faces of others. As I travel about the city and encounter a diversity of people, I often try to do exactly that. To be honest, seeing Jesus in the faces of others can be challenging. Easier to do when you see a homeless person, but more difficult with the rude person who just pushed past you to get on the subway. And even more difficult with those we strongly disagree with on a range of issues.

Every year my wife, Jane, and I spend January in Naples, Florida. There's a fitness center where we stay where all the TVs are tuned to a cable news channel with a particular political perspective I do not share. I tell myself it is always good to hear things from another angle, so I listen. As I listen, I wonder what those around me (who chose this station) are thinking.

As the days go on I learn their names, and we greet each other warmly every

morning. In our conversations they show concern for one another, share jokes, plan parties and cheer on the teams from their hometowns up north. They also make comments regarding the news they are hearing that can be jarring. But in spite of that, as I spend time in the gym with them the challenge of seeing Jesus in their faces lessens.



Each Sunday in our corporate Prayer of Confession, I confess that I have not loved my neighbors as myself, and I ask God's help to change. Sometimes it is easy, and other times more difficult, but I am hopeful as I look for Jesus in the faces of others.

Gracious and loving God, give me the strength to continue to search the faces of others so that I may find you there. Amen.

Thursday, April 11

Action Cures Fear

Lori Lauman, Deacon

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. —Philippians 4:13

I'm an only child and lost my dad shortly before moving to New York in 1993. Once in the city, I began church hopping. When I visited Fifth Avenue, I was quickly drawn to the sermons, the vibrancy of the congregation and the outreach opportunities. A few years later, my mom (whom I was very close to) was diagnosed with cancer. I was very concerned. How would I manage, how would I deal with her illness, what would I do at Christmas, how could I go on without her? A dear friend said, "Lori, you can make this a self-fulfilling prophecy, or you can take action and do something about it. Action cures fear."

Right about that time, I was reviewing the Adult Education classes available at the church and found something I didn't expect: classes on Death & Dying, and Spirituality & Healing. I promptly signed up, despite being worried I'd embarrass myself and not be able to keep my composure. These courses were transformative. They gave me a constructive framework to process my mom's illness and my grief. When my mom did pass away, it was the most difficult thing I've ever been through, but I felt as though I had tools and resources (and my future husband, Andy Craven) to help me through.

That experience kindled my interest in becoming a Stephen Minister and eventually to serve as a Deacon. At each stage I had concerns, but remembering that "action cures fear" and that "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" has provided me with the courage and strength to take on new challenges, spiritual and otherwise.



Dear good and gracious Lord, I am grateful for my loving family, friends and spiritual family. Thank you for resiliency, Lord. Please help us weather the storms of life by looking for your blessings that may be hidden in our circumstances. Please let us be aware that our seemingly simple words and actions can be transformative to others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Friday, April 12

To Move Beyond Opposition

Harrison Picallo, Youth Elder

For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise. —Galatians 3:27-29

It seems that in this increasingly divided time we are defined by our opposition. Democrat or Republican, man or woman, black or white. Everywhere we go, our only tools for identifying what we believe in are by describing what we are not.

This thinking even eclipses the way we see Scripture. So often we as Christians are forced to confront the sad reality that many use the Bible, a book of peace, to wage war on those seen as deviant or scary. We are taught to fear the other and eliminate them so that our way of life can be preserved. This divide between the self and the other permeates our culture, and it often seems inescapable. But just when it seems that we are trapped, when it seems we are beings born into binaries, God offers us another perspective.

Within God we are freed from the chains of identification and offered the ability to be one with something greater. The concept of “freedom” can only be articulated because of slavery, as we can only know that we are free if we are not in bondage. Within God we are something more than free, as God is beyond both slavery and freedom. God is beyond nation, beyond status, beyond gender, beyond race, beyond all material things. If we move beyond these things that separate us, we see that we are all connected by the cloth of Christ, akin to a thread that weaves its way through all things and unites us in a common promise.

Dear God, help us move beyond opposition and instead learn to see how we are all connected in you and your love. Amen.

Saturday, April 12 • A Poem for Saturday



Christ Has No Body

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

St. Teresa of Avila (1515–1582)

Monday, April 15

Light in the Darkness

Jeanne Lehman French, Elder

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." –John 8:12

Early in my career, while I was performing at the Goodspeed Opera House in Connecticut, the Grace and Light of God made a special appearance. I was sitting in our artist's residence with my "theatre family," enjoying, and needing, their friendship and laughter. Our beliefs were vastly different. They were into séances and chanting, while I would merely sit, quietly and uncomfortably. Looking around I thought to myself, "Is God here?" In the next second, I thought, "Of course he is, because I am!"

God in me! I have known from the depths of my being that God is my Light and Salvation, and that I am deeply, eternally loved, no matter how lonely, difficult or stressful the situations I find myself in; no matter the temptations, how lost I feel at times, the moments of profound grief; no matter how unforgiving I am of myself; no matter how many exhilarating successes I have been blessed with. To acknowledge that God is always with us, as Jesus promised



at his resurrection, we merely need stop for a moment, listen for God's still, small voice (not our own), and reflect on his word, his sacrifice and the forgiveness, grace, peace and joy that fill our hearts.

That day long ago, as I sat with my friends, feeling very alone, I closed my eyes, tuned out of their worldly focus, and repeated over and over, "GOD IS." Soon, all was quiet. I opened my eyes to see that everyone was gone except my closest friend, who sat staring at me, agape. "Where did everyone go?" I asked. She replied, "They had to leave. They couldn't stay because of the light around you." She was staring at me, because I was still glowing—glowing in the presence of God's light radiating through me. Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

Lord, in this Lenten season of reflection and hope, meet us in the stillness of our souls and infuse the light of your presence into every area of our lives and into the hearts of others. Then let us boldly proclaim, "Christ is risen, indeed." Amen.

Tuesday, April 16

Facing Jesus

Casey Aldridge, Seminarian

Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"
—Mark 15:37-39

Seminary is the most overwhelmingly Christian community I've ever belonged to. I grew up in public schools, and my experience of church was largely relegated to Sundays, a day that even church had to share with Carolina Panthers football. Many of my closest friends in college were Muslim, Jewish or agnostic. But in this exclusively Christian community called seminary, I found my sense of call thrown into crisis. Here were people who experienced God in profoundly different ways than I did: neighbors who hear God's voice audibly, friends who speak in tongues.

I started to worry: had I been pretending to hear a call this entire time? Was I only fooling myself? Why hasn't God spoken to me in the same, unambiguous ways that God has spoken to others?

These anxieties subsided as I learned to emulate the centurion of Mark 15. Even when the temple curtain is torn dramatically in two, the centurion keeps

his eyes fixed upon Jesus. He seems unfazed by the spectacular; it is not the tearing of the curtain that reveals Jesus' divinity, but the way in which the crucified Jesus "breathes his last."



The lead character in the TV series "How I Met Your Mother," Ted Mosby, once said, "You can ask the universe for signs all you want, but ultimately, we only see what we want to see, when we're ready to see it." The curtain will not always miraculously tear, God will not always appear as a visible pillar of fire before us. But if we turn ourselves toward the cross, we will know the truth: "Truly this man was God's Son!"

God, turn our attention toward your crucified body. Have us seek you not in signs, but in solidarity with the crucified people of our day and age. Amen.

Wednesday, April 17

Just As I Am?

Pattie Kitchen, Parish Associate

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come into you and eat with you, and you with me. —Revelation 3:20

Many years ago I walked into the bedroom of my then-13-year-old to kiss him goodnight. I entered during a song by Alanis Morissette, whose Philadelphia concert had sold out within 15 minutes. Her lyrics were searing. The song was entitled "Perfect":

*Sometimes is never quite enough
If you're flawless then you'll win my love
Don't forget to keep that smile on your face
Be a good boy, try a little harder
You've got to measure up...
Compared to him, Compared to her
I'm doing this for your own damn good
What's the problem, why are you crying?
We'll love you just the way you are
If you're perfect.*

I sat on the side of the bed feeling the pressure, fear and shame behind the lyrics, realizing those words are the antithesis of the nature of God.

A great conundrum of God is that Jesus came to earth to befriend—and to transform through love—difficult, stubborn, mean and unpleasant people, arrogant and kind people, cynics and solid citizens alike. Jesus said, "Behold I stand at the door and knock, if anyone hears my voice and opens the door,



I will come into him and eat with him, and he with me...” Jesus did not say, “Polish the silver, organize your closets and freshen up before you open the door. No, just open the door. Come as you are. Meet me in reality. I simply long for you to be present in an honest relationship with me. Come bruised, scarred. Just as you are.”

I finally believe it is true: God has set the table. The candles are lit. And God doesn't even expect us to wash our hands first.

O God of grace and humor, when we are at our most unlovable, you reach into our lives and say, “Come as you are!” I believe you. Amen.

Thursday, April 18 • Maundy Thursday

Christ's Bucket List

Scott Black Johnston, Senior Pastor

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. —John 13:1-5

In the story of Maundy Thursday, heaven and earth whirl together in startling and poignant ways. Consider the way the Gospel of John describes the scene: Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.

Knowing that he had come from God, and was going to God, Jesus decides to wash people's feet!? Does that seem right? Normal? This is Christ's last meal. He will soon “return to God.” Aren't there more important things for him to be doing? Are callous removal and the fuzz between the disciples' toes really his priorities?

In recent years, it has become common for people to reference their “bucket list”—a list of activities they would like to accomplish (experiences they would like to have) before they die. What's on your bucket list? A safari in South Africa? A cappuccino at a café in Florence? A spin around the track at Daytona? A zip-line through a rainforest canopy?



Maundy Thursday puts the “bucket list” question to Jesus. Knowing that you are about to “return to God,” how would you like to spend your final hours?

Jesus picks up a towel.

What do we see in this moment? Surely, Christ’s actions are symbolic. We all need to be washed by God. Right? We need to be cleansed of the hatreds, resentments, prejudices and bitterness that coat our souls. God is going to save us by making sure that we are clean!

Maybe. Or maybe, something simpler—infinately simpler—is happening here. Simple and beautiful. Maybe the top item on Jesus’ bucket list is the same thing he pursued every other day of his life.

“Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

Gracious God, wash me with your love this precious day. Amen.



Friday, April 19 • Good Friday

Last Lines

Kate Dunn, Associate Pastor

Give ear to my prayer, O God; do not hide yourself from my supplication. My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me. —Psalm 55:4-5

About a year ago, I stood by the bed of a church member on one of her last days. In her moments of consciousness she recited poem after poem: “In Xanadu did Kubla Khan, A stately pleasure dome decree” in one breath, and in the next, “James James/ Morrison Morrison/ Weatherby George Dupree/ Took great Care of his Mother / Though he was only three.”

Many years earlier, my family members sat with my maternal grandmother as she was dying. As her mind wandered to places we couldn’t follow, words fluttered out of her mouth, beautiful fragments of sentences whose source we could never identify, though we knew it was poetry.

My paternal grandmother died of Alzheimer’s. When almost all other memories had left her, songs of her childhood remained, and she could join my young children in singing, “Mary had a little lamb, little lamb, little lamb, Mary had a little lamb, its fleece was white as snow.”

Familiar words, memorized, engraved on the heart, words passed on through a beloved book or at an elder’s knee, songs sung in childhood, with family, at school, in church, in the car: we all have songs, poems, nursery rhymes, hymns imprinted somewhere in the depths of our being.

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

As a practicing Jew, Jesus would have sung or chanted Psalm 22, in his individual or communal worship, throughout his life. He likely knew this psalm by heart. In his last moments, these are the words that rose to his lips, giving voice to anguish and despair and a terrifying sense of abandonment by God in his moment of greatest need.

What must it have cost God the Creator to hear this desperate plea from God’s own beloved child, and say nothing? What must it have cost the Holy Spirit to hear this anguished cry and offer no breath of comfort, no promise of peace? What did it cost Jesus to end his life, knowing the worst that humanity can inflict and fearing the worst about God?



Today, on Good Friday, I ponder this mystery: God's choice to experience death on a cross, God's choice to be a helpless witness to a beloved child's anguish and death, God's choice to be in absolute solidarity with the depth of human suffering.

“What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul?”

Gracious and loving God, on this day we remember that you chose to experience humanity's greatest fear, as voiced by the psalmist: a terrifying death, and abandonment by you at the time we need you most. We thank you for the knowledge that, wherever your children know terror, suffering, loss or death, you are fully present with them in their suffering, having been there yourself. Amen.



Saturday, April 20 • Holy Saturday

The Great Sabbath

Charlene Han Powell, Executive Pastor

Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. —Luke 23:50-56

On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

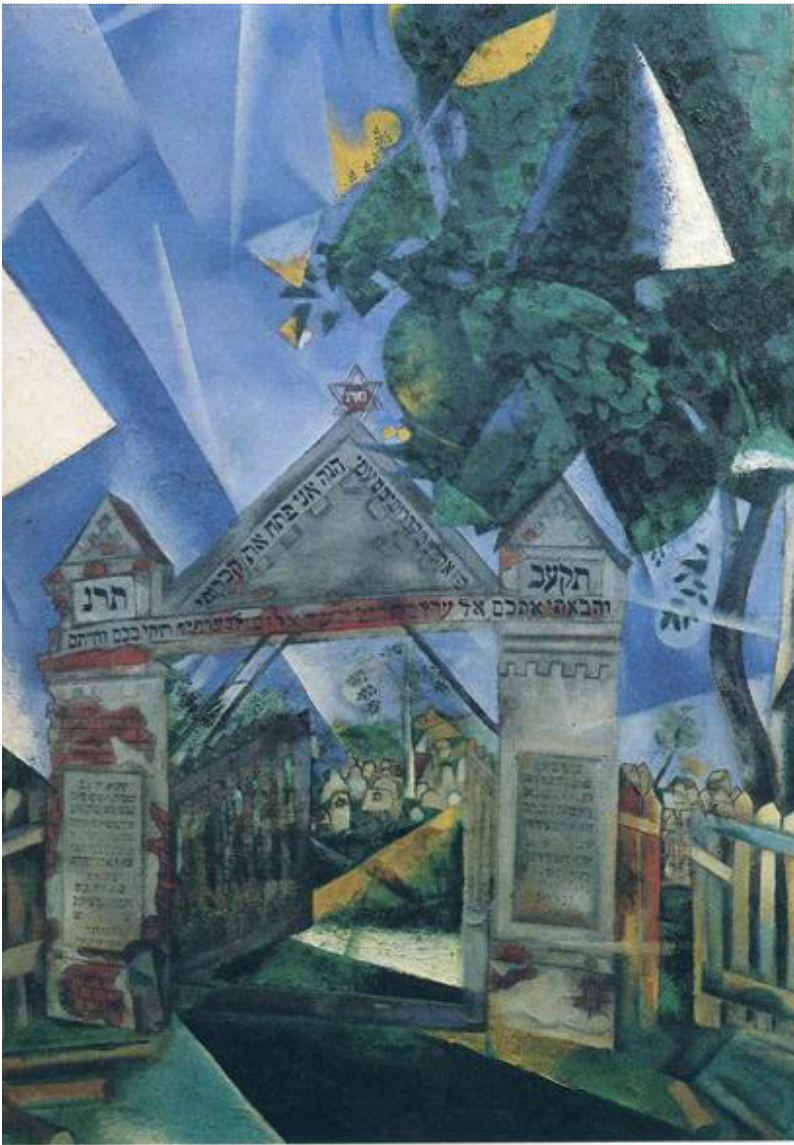
For weeks we have traveled the journey of Lent, and now we are finally near the end. From acknowledging our human finitude on Ash Wednesday to mourning Jesus' crucifixion on Good Friday, the Lenten journey is not for the faint of heart. It can be a dark and winding road, full of sorrowful twists and humbling turns.

The path to Easter is not easy one to travel. But the part of this journey I find the most difficult to observe is Holy Saturday. There will be no services at church on this day. No liturgies to describe what I am feeling or rituals to busy myself with. In place of ceremonial activity is sabbath rest—the last thing I would ever want to do after the death of a loved one.

Yet that is exactly what happened. Mere hours after the spectacle of Jesus' death, a man named Joseph of Arimathea quietly asked for Jesus' broken body to prepare it for burial by wrapping it in linen cloths and gently laying it in the tomb. Then Jesus' beloved friends prepared spices and ointments. And after all of that, because it was sabbath, they rested.

I guess it makes sense. In the face of the finality of death, what can mere mortals do but rest? Unlike so many things in our lives that we can control, death stops us where we are and forces us into a place of submission, an act of stillness, a time of sabbath. Even as we mourn and remember the loss of loved ones, there is ultimately nothing we can do to change the fact that death spares no one, not even Jesus Christ, our Lord.

But on Holy Saturday, we rest in the knowledge that death is only near the end of our journey, while abundant and eternal life are the end of our journey. On this Great Sabbath, as we mourn the death of our Savior, let us also rest. Rest



in the goodness of a God who died for our sins. Rest in the greatness of a God who rises again in glory.

God of holy rest, as we stand at the end of our Lenten journey, we cease our striving and laboring and rest in your abundant goodness. Even in death, we can rest in the knowledge that your faithfulness, power and love carry us beyond this life, beyond the grave, and into blissful union with you. Amen.

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Art

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Page 37: Jyoti Sahi, *Washing Feet*, 2011.

Page 41: Marc Chagall, *Cemetery Gates*, 1917.

Poetry

“Thirst,” by Mary Oliver.

From *Thirst: Poems by Mary Oliver* (Beacon Press). © 2006 Mary Oliver.

“God’s Grandeur,” by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

From *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose* (Penguin Classics, 1985).

“Sympathy for Lazarus,” by Michael Coffey.

From *Mystery without Rhyme or Reason: Poetic Reflections on the Revised Common Lectionary* (Wipf & Stock Publishers). © 2015 Michael Coffey.

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“Thou Hast Searched Me and Known Me,” by Howard Thurman.

From *The Inward Journey* (Friends United Press). © 1961 Howard Thurman.

“Just Like Job,” by Maya Angelou.

From *And Still I Rise: A Book of Poems* (Random House). © 1978 Maya Angelou.



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*We must be ready to allow ourselves
to be interrupted by God.*

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

