



2020

LENTEN
DEVOTIONAL

FIFTH AVENUE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

LENT

FEB. 26

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

MARCH 1

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

MARCH 8

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

MARCH 15

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

MARCH 22

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

MARCH 29

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

HOLY WEEK

APRIL 5

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

APRIL 9

Maundy Thursday
6:30 pm • Sanctuary

APRIL 10

Good Friday
12–3 pm • Sanctuary

APRIL 12

Easter
9:30 & 11:15 am • Sanctuary

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

DEAR SISTERS & BROTHERS IN CHRIST

It is always fascinating, as we collect the reflections that shape this Lenten Devotional, to witness important themes emerging again and again. As this season of contemplation comes around this year, what concerns are weighing on the hearts of our companions on the road?

In these pages, written by our pastors, officers and staff, you will read stories of commitment to others in need, and stories of courage in the face of death. You will find a yearning for guidance and hope in troubled times. And you will hear, again and again, personal witness to the power of prayer and the unfailing presence of grace.

In this Devotional, we offer Scripture and reflections, and words of poetry and prayer, for the 40 days of Lent. We hope you find meaning in these words as we prepare our hearts and minds for the pain of Calvary, and the miracle of Easter.

Peace be with you.



The Rev. Dr. Charlene Han Powell
Executive Pastor

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



WEDNESDAY, FEB. 26 - ASH WEDNESDAY

OFF WE GO

KATE DUNN

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

—Psalm 51:10

This past Sunday, along with Christians all over the world, we observed the Transfiguration of the Lord, remembering the story of the disciples traveling to a mountaintop, where they witnessed Jesus transfigured. In radiant glory, Jesus appears with Moses on one side of him and the prophet Elijah on the other, and God speaks from the clouds, claiming Jesus as God's beloved son.

Each of the three men took a similar journey. Moses spent 40 days on Mount Sinai, fasting and listening to God's laws. Elijah fasted for 40 days as he journeyed in the wilderness toward Mount Horeb, longing to hear a word from God. And after his baptism, the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, where he fasted and prayed and withstood temptation for 40 days, before he emerged, prepared to begin his earthly ministry.

On Ash Wednesday, we answer a call to follow in their footsteps, to prepare ourselves to take our own 40-day journey, seeking God's presence and guidance in our lives. Our journey will include contemplation and prayer, solitary reflection and communal worship, and opportunities to draw closer to God.

We are choosing to begin this journey today. Why?

We embark on this journey because of a desire in our hearts to look deep within and far beyond ourselves.

We embark on this journey, because we long for sturdy ground beneath our feet, a comforting embrace from something stronger than ourselves, a voice of wisdom to transmit a message of guidance through the static of our minds.

We embark on this journey, because we yearn for a sense of the holy.

And we embark on this journey to be reminded that God created us mortal. We come from dust, and to dust we will return. This is not a punishment. This is simply a truth. We are finite creatures of an infinite God, and one day we will die.

But today we are alive. We may not feel prepared for our 40-day journey in the wilderness this Lent, and yet, here we are. Perhaps the best way we can prepare our hearts is to begin where Jesus began. Before the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, he went to the River Jordan to be baptized by his cousin, John the Baptist. After he was baptized, a voice came from the heavens above, saying, "You are my son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased."

We, too, have been welcomed and claimed as God's beloved children. Today, let us remember our baptisms. Knowing whose beloved children we are, let us step forth on this journey in faith, and follow where God's Spirit leads.

Gracious and loving God, grant us courage to venture into the wilderness. Guide our steps every moment of our journey. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

THURSDAY, FEB. 27

THE DARKNESS

CHRIS ROBERTSON

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.
—John 1:4

We live in an inspiring time, when new and exciting discoveries occur almost daily! Technology has allowed us to automate our interactions, remove people from the process, and make it easier to avoid the people we don't get along with and to find like-minded people to exchange our ideas. We like to forget that it has also allowed those people we don't get along with to do the same thing. This helps everyone to cement their way of thinking, and makes us all less willing to listen to alternative views. This has opened the door even further to darkness, with its ability to surround us in its many forms: hate, depression, pain, distrust and fear.

In a world so filled with darkness, I get frustrated with the iniquities that seem so prevalent today. As a financial analyst, I am always pulling apart a situation looking for a solution, yet the solutions to these problems seem next to impossible. I can plug numbers into a spreadsheet, make endless pro/con lists, even speak with experts on either side, but the answers remain elusive. As a Christian, I feel like I should be well-suited to find the answers, but I can never seem to bridge the gap between the two warring sides. The voices of those with the most extreme views seem to be growing in pitch and frequency.

I recently read a daily meditation by Richard Rohr that says, “The darkness of this world will never totally go away.” These words remind me that sometimes I don’t need to find the solutions in life—just trying to help those who are suffering is enough. Jesus did not promise to remove the darkness, but to be with us along the journey.

Lord, lead us to the light when the darkness surrounds us. Amen.

FRIDAY, FEB. 28

THE VISITATION

DENNIS BUSHE

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. —John 1:5

At one point in my career, I experienced the loss of a job opportunity that was crushing. I believed this was a position that my experience and education had crafted me for. After months of corporate wooing—interviews, meetings abroad, flowers in our hotel room for my wife, Ann, and me, tours of potential homes for us—I thought I was the leading candidate. Alas, I was the second leading candidate.

After getting the news, I returned home to share my disappointment with Ann. She was comforting as always, but I needed to be alone to work this out. I went down to our cellar rec room, turned off the lights and laid on a couch. At some point the front doorbell rang, and I heard the voice of my friend Squire.

“Where’s Dennis, I need his help!” Ann sent him downstairs. “Dennis, I need your assistance in selecting a paint color for my new study. I’m going to Home Depot right now. Get your coat!” He didn’t ask why I was on the couch in my basement, in the dark.

As we drove to Home Depot, we discussed colors for the walls of his study. In the store we inquired about paint, looked at different options, roamed in aisles that had little to do with his supposed project. Finally, Squire picked

out a DIY book on painting, purchased it, and we left. I don't recall what we discussed on our drive back, but when I walked into the house I was no longer consumed with my disappointment.

This story always makes me smile. Squire has passed on, and I think of him often. That night, Squire was the light that brought me out of my darkness.

In our times of darkness, Lord, may you shine a light of hope upon us. Amen.

SATURDAY, FEB. 29 - A POEM FOR SATURDAY

HIGH STEPPIN'

Well it's warfare out there, folks
 You're either working for success
 Or to be rich or, God help us, famous
 Or you're working against the clock just to stay afloat
 Got your nose all scraped up from the grindstone
 You're digging for diamonds and only finding rhinestones
 Meanwhile it's August and the tax man has never heard of summer vacation
 You're either working on yourself or you're lookin' after babies
 Takin' care of your old man or your old lady
 And the direct line to the hospital just says "Leave a message"
 See, you can only live one day at a time
 Only drive one hot rod at a time
 Only say one word at a time
 And only think one thought at a time
 And every soul is alone when the day becomes night
 And there in the dark if you can try to see the light
 In the most pitch black shape of the loneliest shadow
 Well then you ought to sleep well 'cause there's hope for sure
 Well I don't know about all that being true but
 I do know this

The best beggars are choosers
 The best winners are losers
 The best lovers ain't never been loved
 And first place ain't easy
 The hardest part is believing
 The very last word is love

Seth Avett (b. 1980) and Scott Avett (b. 1976)

MONDAY, MARCH 2

PUNK
VASHEENA BRISBANE

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. —1 Peter 4:19

"Mommy! Uncle Will called me punk!" Sophia rushes to tell me, yet again, that her uncle has called her punk.

Frustrated, I say to my brother sternly, "Will. She is three. Do not talk to her that way."

Sensing my frustration, Sophia says to me, "Mommy, Uncle Will didn't mean to call me punk. He's sorry." She then runs back to the scene of the crime and continues whatever conversation they were having.

Sophia doesn't quite grasp the meaning of the word, and she doesn't know the full extent of my frustration. She only knows that it's something he's not supposed to say, and certainly not to her. My brother was in a car accident five years ago and suffered a traumatic brain injury. With that comes a plethora of things you can't quite understand unless you live it. Everyday. Of course, Sophia doesn't know that. She only knows that he says things he isn't supposed to say, and that she can call him out on it. Sometimes to her delight. Afterward, though, they both carry on as if they never hit that bump in the road. All is well and completely forgiven, if not forgotten.

Having Sophia after my brother was hurt was a blessing I'm just beginning to understand. She helps me never to grow weary of forgiving, forgetting and moving forward. Sometimes it feels almost ruthless. Just get over it and move to the next moment. I don't get to be angry or annoyed. There's simply no time in the world of a three-year-old. She's moved on, so I have to as well. She doesn't get tired of her Uncle Will calling her punk. She just expresses her displeasure and moves on, happily.

Abba. Father. Help us to love with patience. Help us to learn to forgive so completely it quells our thirst for anger. Let us be like children in the way we show compassion and give second chances. Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 3

TRUST IN GOD
GREG DOW*I believe; help my unbelief.* —Mark 9:24

In Mark 9:14-29, a father asks Jesus to cast a demon out of his son—if he can. Of course Jesus can, saying, “All things are possible to him who believes.” The father responds, “I believe; help my unbelief.” This anguished response has always struck a chord in me, because it is so applicable to my life.

Our currency is prominently stamped with “In God We Trust” on each bill and coin, but how many of us stop to put our trust in God as we go about our lives, busily seeking to enhance our careers, our social standing, or whatever else modern culture so loudly tells us to pursue?

Do I put my trust in God, really? I don’t doubt the tenets of my faith. It is just that, simply put, my faith is so often inadequate. Jesus tells us repeatedly that all things are possible if we trust in God. I am a faithful Christian with deep religious roots, but I often want to define my own fate, and to use all my powers to achieve the goals I set, without help. In this, I am much like the little boy I once heard brushing off his father’s offer to help steady him on a bicycle: “All by self, Daddy.”

With perseverance, anyone can master riding a bicycle. But what about living out God’s plan for us? Do I even want to know God’s plan for me? What if it would make me seem odd amongst my colleagues and friends? What if God’s plan is not what I want?

Heavenly Father, help me to listen more carefully to your plan for my life. Help me learn to trust you in all things, great and small, so that I might live my life not for my own selfish ends, but to reflect your glory in all that I do. I believe; help my unbelief. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4

iPRESENTE!
SEAMUS CAMPBELL

After being baptized, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. —Matthew 4:1

Back in the days when I was a member of a religious community, we had a practice called “Day in the Desert.” Once a month, in imitation of the early Christian monastics, we observed a day of total silence. In the beginning, this practice was difficult. There was always someone who wanted to engage in mindless chatter, even if you were trying to maintain the silence. This exercise eventually became a comfortable and sanitized experience of the “desert,” both mentally and spiritually.

This past October, I had another experience of the desert when I joined members of the congregation on a pilgrimage into the Sonoran Desert in Mexico. This experience was not so sanitized. The desert scape was rough and raw, with its own unique vegetation. Our day in the desert only gave us a taste of what migrants experience in making their treacherous journeys north. They simply don't see an option; where they are living, drugs, violence, gangs, extortion, poverty and hunger drive them into the wilderness.

Every Tuesday, on the Douglas, Arizona, side of the border, there is a memorial service for those who died making the crossing. A cross is raised with the name of a deceased migrant inscribed on it. When the name is called out, the assembled group responds by saying *presente*. On Jan. 15, folks gathered to mourn a 20-year-old woman from Morelos, Mexico. Leticia Villagrán Flores was with a small group of crossers who left her behind, after she experienced some difficulty that led to her death.

My image of the desert has permanently changed. Despite the terrible beauty, there is terrible pain. This Lent, along with Jesus, I will spiritually go to the desert. I will focus on those who die in the crossing, those who continue to flee danger, and those who live with an undying hope for a future of welcome.

Merciful God, we pray for families and individuals who have fled their homes, seeking safer and better lives. We lift up to you their hopes, fears and needs, that they may be protected on their journeys, their dignity and rights may be honored and upheld, and they may be welcomed with open arms into generous and compassionate communities. Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 5

UNANSWERED PRAYERS

TIFFANY COCHRAN O'BRIEN

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." —Isaiah 55:8-9

When I was younger, I used to believe in and take comfort from the idea that everything happens for a reason. As years passed and I became more aware of tragedy and grief and the general unfairness that the world is capable of serving up, my faith in that idea began to waiver considerably.

I know I'm not alone in struggling with questions like, "How can God let this happen?" or in wishing that prayers had the ability to dial up the outcomes we want. There is a wonderful Garth Brooks song that asserts that "some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers." I think many of us have examples from our lives when, in hindsight, things worked out for the best, even if it wasn't the path we would have chosen. But what about those scenarios where time doesn't heal the illness or the wounds or the disappointment?

A few years ago my husband, Kevin, and I went through a frightening period of uncertainty as we faced a health scare of someone very close to us. It was during this time that Kevin provided me with a new way to frame these sorts of challenges. One afternoon, beside myself with fear, I asked the rhetorical question, "What if it's not okay?" Kevin responded, "It is going to be okay, even if it is not okay." What a statement of faith! Yes. It is.

To be human is to experience pain, but our relationship with God gives us perspective and strength beyond our own. And this beautiful faith community blesses us with the knowledge that we are not alone and offers the gift of companionship on the journey.

Heavenly Father, help us to feel your presence and trust in your wisdom. Help us to understand that we will be okay, even when life does not go as we would have chosen. Help us to remember that, through you, all things are possible. Amen.

FRIDAY, MARCH 6

PRAYER & FAITH

ROSEANNE LIND

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.
—James 1:3-4

My mother and I had always been a tight pair, and when she passed it changed my life forever. I promised her that I would fulfill her last wish, and take her ashes to Alaska and spread them in the Ketchikan Mountains. She knew that, out of all her children, I was going to do this. Financially, I didn't know how I was going to do it, but I knew God was going to grant me this prayer. Even after the taunting of my siblings as I maintained my mom in a temporary urn, I would not be discouraged. I knew I was going to finally lay Vivia Rose King to rest!

It took me 13 years. But here's how it finally happened.

I was working at Saks Fifth Avenue at the time. A client of 10 years told me about a working vacation she had planned in Alaska that summer. *O Magazine* was merging with the Holland America cruise line, and this was their first cruise to initiate the venture. I was so happy to hear this and told her the story of my mom's wishes. She looked at me and couldn't believe what she was hearing. She was stunned that I hadn't been to Alaska to finish my mom's journey. Was this really about my mom, or was it about me letting go?

An hour after she left the store, I received a phone call from my client. She said, "Roseanne, I've decided to take you along. Pack your bags! You're going to Alaska!" I cried to no end. I ran across the street to St. Patrick's to thank God with all my heart for this beautiful gift. I know both God and my mom said enough was enough, and worked through this angel to get me there. You see, God always works in his glory on his own time.

If this is not fate and faith, then I don't know what is. All I know is I never gave up on praying and prayed every day. Until God makes things happen for you, sow your seeds and do good things. Help those who need help, and give them an "Oprah moment" in whatever way you can.

By the way, did I mention that my client's name is Gayle King?

Dear God, thank you for the lessons you give us in prayer, faith and patience. May the peace of Christ be with us always! Amen.

SATURDAY, MARCH 7 - A POEM FOR SATURDAY

EVE REMEMBERING

1

I tore from a limb fruit that had lost its green.
My hands were warmed by the heat of an apple
Fire red and humming.
I bit sweet power to the core.
How can I say what it was like?
The taste! The taste undid my eyes
And led me far from the gardens planted for a child
To wildernesses deeper than any master's call.

2

Now these cool hands guide what they once caressed;
Lips forget what they have kissed.
My eyes now pool their light
Better the summit to see.

3

I would do it all over again:
Be the harbor and set the sail,
Loose the breeze and harness the gale,
Cherish the harvest of what I have been.
Better the summit to scale.
Better the summit to be.

Toni Morrison (1931–2019)

MONDAY, MARCH 9

THE POWER OF PRAYER

ROBERT PAY

And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith. —Matthew 21:22

Like many of us, I suspect, I am not as given to prayer as I should be. I am genuinely amazed at the ability of some of my fellow Deacons to extemporize prayers at our meetings. Many combine faith with use of language that is moving and humbling. So I know the ability to pray with my church family here at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church is strong.

Well, last year a longtime school friend told me that his wife, Lesley, was suffering with fourth-stage cancer. I remember Googling to see if there were stages beyond. Because my friend and his wife are church-goers, I had the confidence to ask if he would like our prayers. He said he would very much appreciate that. I duly sent a request to Lance Hurst at Fifth Avenue, who mobilized the Deacons Prayer Group and the Women's Association Prayer Group. That Sunday, I saw my friend's wife's name appear in the bulletin, which I duly scanned and sent. I received a very moving acknowledgement.

I remember a sermon on prayer when the preacher said that God is not a cosmic slot machine. I remember thinking, despondently, that stage four seemed a late and heavy lift, even with skilled physicians, luck and possible divine intervention (Matthew 8:26 syndrome?).

At the end of the year, Lesley's scan was "as good as can be without being able to say it is all clear." I make no specific claim as to the proportion of the turnaround that is attributable to prayerful intervention, but I do know that the outreach involved was a real example of how this church can touch lives an ocean away. I give a quote from my friend as the last words: "Lesley continues to make fantastic progress, and once again we are reminded of the incredibly important role that prayer, positive thought and messages play in this."

Jesus, we believe that you are our healer and redeemer. Lord, please heal us in every area of our lives. Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 10

PRESSING PAUSE

ELIZABETH GRAMLEY

So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today. —Matthew 6:34

As cliché as it is, there's always value in a reminder to be present. At this time in my life, reminders to be present that I might have earlier dismissed have suddenly taken on meaning. Right now I'm looking at colleges and studying for the SAT, and it's easy to get swept away in a flood of anxiety and doubt. Every once in a while, it's essential to take a deep breath.

When I was in elementary school and middle school, I would go to a yoga class for kids once a week. We would spend all year increasing the amount of time we spent meditating until we could sit silently for three or four minutes—a lot for an eight-year-old. When I got to high school, I started playing sports,

and despite promises to myself that I would continue, my meditation practice quickly disappeared.

This verse is a crucial reminder for all of us. Carving out time to reflect, or meditate, or just turn off our brains is a way to recharge. It's refreshing and invigorating, and it reduces the enormity of everything. For us to be even a little less overwhelmed is instantly reassuring. Being present is incredibly important, and it's something we owe ourselves to think about more.

Meditate silently for just a few minutes. Clear your mind of all thoughts, and take deep breaths.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11

ALWAYS AT WORK

VIJAY WIJESUNDERA

Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. —Matthew 5:16

A couple of years ago, a Deacon finishing her term read the following poem at her last Deacons' meeting:

I shall pass this way but once;
 any good that I can do
 or any kindness I can show
 to any human being;
 let me do it now.
 Let me not defer nor neglect it,
 for I shall not pass this way again.

The poem was written by Étienne de Grellet, a Frenchman who had been handed a death sentence by the French Revolution, who escaped from death row, sailed to America and settled in New Jersey. He would surely have realized that tomorrow is never guaranteed.

As recorded in the gospels, on seven occasions Jesus ignored religious restrictions on the holy days in order to heal someone who was sick. At the healing of the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda, when questioned by the Pharisees on his authority to work on the Sabbath, Jesus declared, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." The lesson for us is that God is always at work to maintain creation, and we are called upon to continue the healing ministry of Jesus by virtue of our baptism. Jesus also recognized

that human needs occur without deference to times and seasons, and for a person in need of mercy, there is no better time than right now.

How I incorporate this teaching into my life is by giving to strangers and friends as they have a need, and not when it would be the most convenient for me. In fact, I try not to wait until Christmas to give gifts.

Creator God, may your Holy Spirit help us discern your will every day during this season, so that we may be Christ's light, leaven and salt to the world that we walk through. Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 12

FINDING A SPIRITUAL HOME

JANEEN A. SARLIN

For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

—Matthew 18:20

I grew up in southern Minnesota. Our family was a member of the Church of The Brethren, a small peace denomination. Church was our touchstone, social life and community. Everyone I knew went to church twice on Sunday, Thursdays and sometimes in between. In subsequent years, I went off to boarding school, college and then moved to New York. Whenever I returned home for vacations and to visit family, the church welcomed me with open arms.

However, I found myself drifting away from my childhood pattern. Living in New York, I attended various churches based on the music during Sunday services. I joined different congregations, but I did not feel a spiritual connection to a community. I thought I was “ok” just saying my prayers at night and dabbling in various spiritual practices.

In 1964, at a personal low point and searching for answers, I arranged a phone consultation with a Canadian spiritual advisor, who told me over and over—seven times, to be exact—“You must find a spiritual home!” I was defensive, indignant, and I expressed my discomfort by saying, “I go to church on Sundays!” But he persisted: “You must find a spiritual home.” His adamant voice echoed in my mind.

A short time later, at a professional caviar tasting, I shared my conversation with a colleague. Immediately she proclaimed, “You must go to Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church!” Being a member, she offered to bring me to church two weeks later. On the next Sunday, I attended Fifth Avenue on my own and signed up for the new members class. I immediately knew I had found my “spiritual home!”

Dear Lord, thank you for the opportunity to find a spiritual home where all are welcome at the table and to worship in a supportive community for spiritual growth. I am grateful for your presence in my life, especially for your grace and acceptance, even after taking a side trip. Amen.

FRIDAY, MARCH 13

MIRACLE ON 48TH STREET

CASEY ALDRIDGE

One of his disciples said to him, 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?' —John 6:8-9

In my first semester at seminary, one of my professors revealed that he did not believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. While he accepted the resurrection in *symbolic* terms, he did not affirm it in a *literal* or *material* sense. There were students who lost their minds at this revelation, who called for the professor's resignation. I, however, was relieved by this professor's honesty and refreshed by his doubt. I believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, but I also recognize that resurrection is an outlandish thing to believe! The claim that "the dead speak!" (as pronounced in the opening text crawl of the most recent *Star Wars* film) is an astonishing allegation that goes against all evidence. It deserves more scrutiny and skepticism than my peers in that theology classroom, or the opening scroll of *The Rise of Skywalker*, allowed.

For me, the conceptual hurdle of the New Testament is not the resurrection, but Jesus' miracles. Last November, I was writing on Jesus' feeding of the 5,000, and wrestling with my doubt around that text. What could it possibly mean that five barley loaves and two fish fed 5,000 people?

I was mulling this text over one evening as I walked to Penn Station. I was near 48th Street when I saw a Jewish man stop, look down at the grocery bags in his hands, and turn to a homeless man hidden behind some scaffolding. He reached into his groceries and started pulling out food, handing it to his neighbor. This miracle on 48th Street wasn't the magical multiplication of elements, but rather one man's interpretation of the goods in his possession as opportunities to feed his neighbor. What are my groceries—what are my resources—among so many hungry New Yorkers?

God, when we doubt that the world can be anything different than what it is, help us to see the resources you have entrusted us with as opportunities to serve. Amen.

SATURDAY, MARCH 14 - A POEM FOR SATURDAY

LIVE WITHOUT THOUGHT OF DYING

We work so hard to fly
and no matter what heights we reach
our wings get folded near a candle,
at the end.

For nothing can enter God but Himself,
our souls are some glorious substance of the divine
that no sentry wants to stop.

Live without thought of dying,
for dying is not a truth.

We have swayed on the sky's limb together,
many years there the same leaves grow.

But then they get that look in their eyes
and bid farewell to what they disdained or cherished.

This life He gave the shell, the daily struggles we know,
sit quiet for a minute, dear, feel the wind,
let Light touch you.

Live without thought of dying,
for dying is not a
truth.

St. Catherine of Siena (1347–1380)

MONDAY, MARCH 16

FALSE BINARIES

BRENDA BERKMAN

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. —Matthew 28:1-2

Ash Wednesday, Lent, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter—every year the calendar forces me to reconsider the most important truths asserted by Christianity. Year after year, believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus has always been a stretch for me. But God seems to smack us over the head sometimes with multiple experiences that pile on to make us “get the point.”

This year, a plethora of experiences, all connected to Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, challenged the boundaries that separate communities: A study trip to the U.S.-Mexico border. Trying to understand and explain the Presbyterian denomination’s Matthew 25 initiative. Reading my queer Episcopal priest friend Liz Edman’s book, *Queer Virtue*. Preparing for the annual Women’s Winter Sabbath by reading stories about women in the Bible. Revisiting Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” in the context of a panel on prison and justice system reform. Everything suddenly became clearly linked in my mind to one message: God broke apart the old human understanding of reality with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Christianity at its core is about challenging false binaries: the separations between human and divine, life and death, and the artificial boundaries of gender, race, sexual identity, nationality and more that divide communities. Jesus disrupted the simplistic ways we think about others and ourselves. God’s world-changing, transgressive, invasive Love shows us the way to live by loving and caring for all.

God, make us brave when facing false binaries and intolerance. Awaken us to greater understanding of and love for others. Help us to act in ways that witness to our Christian faith. Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 17

UNITY
DAVID ROBERSON

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. —1 Corinthians 1:10

I don’t know about everyone else, but I’m tired of feeling the animosity in the world around me. We’ve decided to stay in our own camps and lob Facebook memes and tweets at each other, rather than sitting down to talk. Some of you may read the Scripture I chose and think it makes no sense in this politically charged environment. But I think we’re missing the point if we read this superficially. There are people in my life with whom I disagree strongly, but

I love them all, and I know they love me. I recently had a meal with some of those beloved and realized through conversation that we are unified—at least in the important stuff. In our love for one another, in our desire to walk humbly with our God, and in efforts to make the world around us more welcoming. We don't agree on theology or politics, but we agree that love transcends it all.

I pray that we might all stop focusing on our divisions in life, and that we allow God to manifest through Christ Jesus and help us see our unity with all humankind. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 18

FAMILY OF BELIEVERS

TWALEMA KHONJE

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.

—Roman 12:4,6a

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. —Matthew 25:35

Being a Christian has made a difference in my life. It has given me a sense of community that emphasizes sharing and caring.

I have had the privilege of serving on the Board of Deacons of this church on a couple of occasions. However, some years ago, when I was first approached and asked, I felt that the role of Deacon would be too demanding. I probably would not measure up.

Later, after prayer and consideration, I accepted the call. I realized that an entire family of believers has received the same call. We use different skills to help our neighbors, as pointed out in the 12th chapter of Romans. We feed, clothe and visit our neighbors in need, as Jesus teaches us in the Gospel of Matthew (chapter 25).

We do not receive accolades publicly, and I do not always feel up to the task. But with God's guidance, the family of believers has helped me in working toward improving the quality of life for my neighbors through activities like the annual food and clothing drives and the Christmas Angel Tree Project. I am grateful.

Dear God, thank you for guiding me and leading me to serve friends and neighbors. I thank you for the family of believers with whom I worship and have served. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 19

PRAYER CHANGES THINGS

DIANE CHESNUT

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
—Philippians 4:6-7

In the fall issue of the church magazine, *The VOICE*, Tim Palmer Curl wrote a piece titled “First, You Pray.” This is a lesson I have to learn over and over and over, and I believe it bears repeating.

I am very much a “doer.” The past couple of years have brought a lot of challenges, and my first reaction is always to identify the problem, come up with a solution and then actively implement the solution (generally with a high sense of anxiety). It’s not often that my first solution is to stop and pray. Being still and listening for God’s voice is not my strong suit. I need to fix that.

This past summer, I spent three amazing days in Rwanda. I climbed to new heights (literally) to come within inches of the astonishing and vanishing mountain gorillas and, equally important, with the beautiful people of Rwanda. I cried at the Rwanda Genocide Museum, which shows us the horror of what we are capable of doing to one another. How do you come back from losing 800,000 people in 100 days? How do you forgive your neighbor for killing your family? You pray. You pray. You pray.

Why do I believe in the power of prayer? I believe, because my mother does. I believe, because a dear, old friend has children with serious medical issues, but he is one of the most optimistic and positive people I know. He “high-fived” me when I told him I was writing this, because prayer impacts his life every day. I believe, because a dear friend whom I have known since college has been ill for months, had surgery, and at the young age of 91 is back at home and getting stronger every day.

Dear Lord, forgive us for trying to do it alone. Help us to turn to you in prayer!
Amen.

FRIDAY, MARCH 20

GOOSE POOP

JAME STAEHLE

Make me know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day.

—Psalm 24:4-5

When I was in college I worked at a summer camp that had a large lake with a swimming area. During free time the staff was allowed to swim outside this area, on the other side of the dock. One hot day I took advantage of this perk and dove in for a swim. As I came up from the water I could see a friend waving at me from the dock. As I got closer I heard her yell, “Stop swimming! You’re surrounded!”

You see, this lake, and our dock in particular, was especially popular with the geese. Each morning someone would sweep the piles of goose droppings off the dock into the lake so that the swimming area was clean.

I was surrounded.

Thank goodness for good friends. I stopped where I was and allowed her to navigate me through the minefield of goose droppings to the safety of the dock. The problem was that I couldn’t see what I was surrounded by. I couldn’t see my way out of this bad situation, and I certainly couldn’t get out of it by myself. I needed a guide.

How many times have I been surrounded by yucky things in my life? How many times have I needed a guide? How easy is it for me to try to navigate my way out on my own, instead of turning to the One who is our guide?

Lord, be my guide. Remind me to turn to you in my time of need. Give me the strength to follow wherever you lead. Amen.

SATURDAY, MARCH 21 - A POEM FOR SATURDAY

PROPERTIES OF LIGHT

Mid-October in Central Park, one of the elms
 has changed early, burning with a light
 grown accustomed to its own magnificence,
 imperceptible until this moment when it becomes
 more than itself, more than a ritual
 of self-immolation. I think of sacrifice
 as nourishment, the light feeding bark and veins
 and blood and skin, the tree better off
 for wanting nothing more. I used to imagine
 the chakra like this—a hole in the soul
 from the top of the head, where the light of knowing
 can shimmer through. In the summer of 1979
 I saw that light shoot from my brother's forehead
 as we sat chanting in a temple in Manila.
 He didn't see it pulsing like a bulb in a storm,
 but he said he felt the warmth that wasn't warmth
 but peace. And I, who have never been
 so privileged, since then have wondered
 if we believed everything because not to believe
 was to be unhappy. I've seen that light elsewhere
 —on a river in Bangkok, or pixelated across
 the shattered façades of Prague—but it is here
 where I perceive its keenest rarity, where I know
 it has passed over all the world, has given shape
 to cities, cast glamour over the eyes of the skeptic,
 so that it comes to me informed with the wonder
 of many beings. I can't begin to say how infinite I feel,
 as though I were one of many a weightless absence
 touches, and out of this a strange transformation:
 the soul ringed with changes, as old as a tree,
 as old as light. I am always learning the same thing:
 there is no other way to live than this,
 still, and grateful, and full of longing.

Eric Gamalinda (b. 1956)

MONDAY, MARCH 23

NO QUID PRO QUO

LANCE HURST

Give thanks in all circumstances... —1 Thessalonians 5:17a

Can you remember the first time you were told to say “thank you,” even though you didn’t feel thankful? Maybe it was for the Christmas present your aunt and uncle gave you that wasn’t exactly what you had spent every waking moment daydreaming about. Nevertheless, you were told to be grateful. And there was some important lesson to learn there, right? It was (and is) good to recognize the effort that people put forth to care for us.

While dashed childhood hopes for the right Christmas present may seem trivial in adulthood, I do think there is something important to consider about the ways we experience gratitude today—especially under circumstances of injustice. What does it mean to be grateful when life is unjust?

Let’s not forget that many of our societal structures are built upon a *quid pro quo* model of gratitude. As a benefactor, I do this for you, and you as the beneficiary say thank you and remember that you owe me one. What if we could transition to a *pro bono* model of gratitude, where we recognize that we are not the owners of the goodness that we receive? We are simply stewarding the goodness that comes our way—the life we’ve been given, the love we experience, the joys we know, the air we breathe, the rain that renews the earth, and so much more.

As we come to terms with the goodness that is inherent in our complicated existence, we can more readily see ourselves as flowing through these cycles of receiving and giving. Gratitude becomes less about owing a benefactor who holds power over us, and more about recognizing the goodness we have received. And then sharing it with those in need.

Spirit, wherever we find ourselves today—whether with plenty or with little—we pray that you would help us recognize the abundance you have provided to us in creation. May we freely receive and freely give with open hands today. Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 24

TRUST AND BELIEVE

SYLVIA WINRICH

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. —Jeremiah 29:11-12

Having not worked full time for four years, and unable to secure part-time employment due to health issues (and possibly my age), I finally found a wonderful part-time job two days a week. I never lost hope or believed that God had forgotten or abandoned me. With my faith, love of God and his word—coupled with my amazing church family and their support—I always felt I would be all right. I had never worked in this position before, but I had extensive experience in the industry, and I was hired immediately. The management and staff could not have been more supportive in assisting me with my new duties.

Unfortunately, nine months into my new job, the pain I had been experiencing in my right knee became more intense. I continued to work, determined to at least make a year in my new position. Which I did, barely. Then I resigned. I had to have my knee totally replaced, a surgery and rehabilitation I was all too familiar with, having gone through it before and knowing that the process of healing is between four to six months or longer. My surgeon told me he could not believe what he found when he opened my knee—it was so loose he could take the parts out with his hand. You can only imagine the pain I had been going through. But I was so happy with my new job and being a part of a wonderful group of people that I didn't want to face it.

This passage from Jeremiah gives me the strength and peace to remain calm and wait on the Lord. Who knows, I might be back at that wonderful job someday!

O Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, O Light never failing, who has allowed me to share in your suffering on the Cross, look with mercy on me, for I submit my whole self to your wisdom and love. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25

NO SUN WITHOUT RAIN

RUSTY BREEDLOVE

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. —1 Peter 5:10

“God Hath Not Promised Sun Without Rain.” I remember this song from my grandmother’s funeral in 1979. More recently, Dr. James K.A. Smith (who preached here in January) reminded me that the children of Israel, and we Christians as well, know *whose* we are and *where* we’re headed—to eternal life with Almighty God. But we are not promised a smooth, uncurving road without ditches alongside.

We travel the way, just as everyone does. But I can’t help but notice blessings along my path, glimpses of heaven in nature, people I know and things that happen. Even the desert sees these signs when poppy seeds come out of hibernation to cover the dry, thorny hills with blooms after a fortuitous rain. My father shared this truth with me in a photograph he took near his home in New Mexico. God offers these signs as we travel through Lent. My Creator’s hope and promise for the future lift me up.

God of heaven and earth, we praise you for your glory and ever-present signs of love and salvation that smile upon us, even in our dark or rocky times. Give us the strength and desire to glorify you along our way home. Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 26

COMPELLED TO GIVE BACK

ALYCE ANDREWS

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. —Hebrews 13:2

I was baptized at a Presbyterian church in the Philadelphia suburbs. My family was active in the church, and so was I. But after I left home for college, I stopped attending church. Cold turkey. I didn’t look back.

Many years and many cities later, I moved to New York, not far from Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. I was starting a banking career, and working

was my only activity outside of sleeping. Eventually, I felt the pull to find a community and to give back to society. I attended Fifth Avenue a few Sunday mornings and found its size overwhelming at first. But soon I went to a new members' class, where the guest speaker was Joe Vedella, the director of homeless ministries at the time. That was it! The idea of becoming involved in something real like that overcame my uncertainty about re-engaging in church life. I joined shortly thereafter and have been involved ever since.

Last October, I was privileged to be part of the mission trip to the Mexican border. I work in Latin America and wanted to give back to the region and people I have come to love. In Agua Prieta, Mexico, we worked with Frontera de Cristo, an amazing organization that helps people who are trying to start a new life. The migrants want what we all want and deserve: to be free from poverty, violence and despair. The journey they make just to have a safe life is frightening and awe-inspiring. I am proud that the church is supporting this worthwhile mission.

“What is our response to our brothers and sisters waiting in line for a chance for life?” José Luis Casal, the director of Presbyterian World Mission, once asked. “I saw Jesus lying on the ground when I crossed back into the United States. And I am here to tell you that we are called to make things just and fair. We must be God’s eyes and ears and hands... and heart.”

Lord, help us to bring comfort to those suffering immensely. Let us remember that each day we help someone we are helping you. Amen.

FRIDAY, MARCH 27

MY CHURCH “AHA!” MOMENT

MATT MARTINEZ

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

—James 1:22

I don’t have a single “Aha!” moment, but over the course of sitting in church most Sundays, thinking about why it is important, I realized that a healthy church (or temple or masjid) is where you learn how to “do what [the word] says.” By being an active part of the community, by listening to the sermons and to the opinions of others, and by helping those who are less fortunate than we are, we learn to live in the way that the Lord would live. When we “do what [the word] says,” we are acting to make the world a better place, and to shape the world with love and compassion, rather than cynicism and distrust.

The important thing, though, as James says, is that all of us in this church community actually commit to doing the work of the word, that we commit to making the world a better place, rather than just go through the motions and expect some sort of magical transformation one day. This may be controversial, but I believe “heaven” is not something we’ll get swept up into one day when seven trumpets sound, but rather that heaven is a state of human existence, where everyone on earth has fully and honestly committed themselves to loving their neighbors, and having compassion and respect for every human. And I believe church is the best way we have to get there.

Lord, we thank you for church, where we can learn to make this world a better place. We pray for the strength to commit to being genuine in our pursuit of making this world that place. We don’t always live up to the goal we set for ourselves, but please keep us coming back to try again, and eventually we will help to bring your heaven to this earth. Amen.

SATURDAY, MARCH 28 - A POEM FOR SATURDAY
RUMI, PAY HOMAGE

If God said,

“Rumi, pay homage to everything
that has helped you
enter my
arms,”

There would not be one experience of my life,
not one thought, not one feeling,
not any act, I
would not
bow
to.

Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (1207–1273)

MONDAY, MARCH 30

YEAST

PATRICIA M.B. KITCHEN

He told them another parable: The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.

—Matthew 13:33

At a time when tax returns, work conundrums and college acceptance letters loom, does the compelling power, the yeast, of the Holy Spirit give rise to our duties, our dreams and our beloved relationships?

Soon after my father died at age 70, unexpectedly during heart surgery, a parishioner sent me the following passage from Mark Helprin's novel *Memoir from Antproof Case*:

I was graduated from the finest school, which is that of the love between parent (or grandparent) and child. Though the world is constructed to serve glory, success and strength, one loves one's parents and one's children despite their failings and weaknesses—sometimes even more on account of them. In this school you learn the measure not of power, but of love; not of victory, but of grace; not of triumph, but of forgiveness. You learn as well, and sometimes, as I did, you learn early, that love can overcome death and that what is required of you, in this, is memory and devotion. Memory and devotion. To keep your love alive you must be willing to be obstinate, and irrational, and true, to fashion your entire life as a construct, a metaphor, a fiction, a device for the exercise of faith. Without this, you will live like a beast and have nothing but an aching heart. With it, your heart, though broken, will be full, and you will stay in the fight unto the very last.

Who matters to you? Do they know so?

O God of all questions, of all relations, we are grateful that, in life and in death, you are not still. We are like a bit of flour, and your Holy Spirit is the yeast that quietly works within us and through us to serve and shape the world with your tenacious love. Inspire us, embolden us, to trust the miracle of unexpected rising. Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 31

RENEWAL & REDEMPTION

GLENN HUBBARD

But Jesus called them unto him, and says, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant. Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many. —Matthew 20:25-28

We went to listen—to understand how people felt, and the economic and social forces that shape those feelings. We came back with both sadness and hope.

It was my first trip to Decatur, Alabama, in a long time. I had fond memories of visiting my aunt in Huntsville and Decatur as a kid, but that, as they say, was a while ago. We (a faculty colleague, students and me) arrived for dinner by bus after flying to Nashville. The dinner with local business and political leaders was to explore why so many people in the area felt left behind by whirlwinds from technological change and globalization, while others felt hopeful. The conversation started “big picture”—trends in the local economy and so forth—but quickly got personal. Many things were going wrong—familiar stories in the American heartland. But, over the rich pecan pie at dessert, we heard stories of local, personal action for hope and change.

The next day we visited a steel plant whose leaders were partnering with local colleges to find and train skilled employees who would earn high wages. There were few dry eyes from a visit to the Neighborhood Christian Center, where we heard individual stories of prisoners (from crimes related to drug abuse and its side effects) who had been turned around by volunteers to re-enter work and life. The economic challenges seemed large and abstract, but the one-on-one interventions and solutions offered hope.

On Sunday, after an early-morning discussion of the infamous Scottsboro trial with a local author, a group of students and I went to the First Missionary Baptist Church, a historic African American church in Decatur, to worship. The welcoming and resilient congregation told stories of hope and individual redemption. Some students were Christian, others not. But all saw a sense of renewal if people care enough to bring it about. That sense of Easter’s ultimate renewal, and the potential for each of us to be renewed by helping others, was the lasting message of the journey.

Jesus spoke about servant leadership as he led by example. In Matthew 20:25-28, he is the ultimate leadership guru.

Lord, give us the wisdom of service as you give us the miracle of Easter renewal. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 1

TRISH THE DISH
JOSIE LAWRENCE

Yet, Lord my God, give attention to your servant's prayer and his plea for mercy. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence.

—2 Chronicles 6:19

This is a story about the supportive ministry of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. It's also about my sister-in-law, Trish. Trish the Dish, as she was known. She was always up, in a good mood, a happy, loving person. A good daughter, sister, friend, wife and mother. Trish left this world on her 59th birthday this past Jan. 9. She died from brain cancer, a glioblastoma. The average survival time for this cancer is a year; only a few survive more than five years. Trish survived for seven years! She had no patience with cancer. She would say, "I can't die, I've got children to raise!" God bless her spunk and determination.

This church prayed faithfully and lovingly for Trish. After her surgery to remove the tumor. With thanksgiving when her tumor got smaller after chemo. I would let her and my brother, George, know about those prayers. And while they are not "churched" people, they were always thankful for those prayers. We as a family were so fortunate to have her in our lives, living with cancer for those seven years. Cancer ain't no picnic. That said, I admired Trish for her upbeat spirit. I am thankful that Trish is at peace, and grateful for Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, for our pastors, the staff and friends who surrounded Trish and all who loved her with God's love.

Creator, Son and Spirit, let us be loving, have faith in God's plan for us, be hopeful for what is to come, forgive generously, and walk humbly with our God. Amen.

THURSDAY, APRIL 2

JOY & SORROW

MACIE SWEET

Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. —Romans 12:15

A few years ago, this verse was instrumental for me in making space for the complex emotional life of humanity in the Church. When I was growing up, the message between the lines was that Jesus fixes everything, and a consistent, cheerful grin should be the mark of a Christian. But Paul's words about weeping and rejoicing speak a resounding "No" to this message.

As Christians, we walk in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus, who displayed anger, sadness, anxiety, love, compassion and joy. We are also called to follow Christ in lovingly walking alongside those in various places and stages of life. But recently, I've come to discover that these two lines of rejoicing and weeping are often, if not always, mixed and mingled. I find that a time when I am experiencing joy may be a time of deep sorrow for someone I care about. Or the joy of a loved one is countered with a tragedy in the news. And the flood of woes in our world are met with a persistent, stubborn hope in Christ.

Because the boundaries between weeping and rejoicing aren't so clear-cut, my focus has been to seek and pray for discernment and presence to those around me. In our distracted society, it seems that sincere listening and compassion can be a rarity. But God calls us to this task, and it is a comfort to me to know that weeping and rejoicing are often encountered together. It is reminder that our world is complex, and this was the very world our Savior walked through and continues to walk through with us.

Lord God, give us eyes to see and ears to hear the rejoicing and weeping of those around us. Help us to be present to ourselves and others, and give us the words to speak, or the wisdom of silence, for those who are filled with joy or struck by grief. Let us always be filled with the hope of the resurrection and the hope of redemption, the firm foundation we have in Jesus, who hears and holds all of our joys and sorrows. Amen.

FRIDAY, APRIL 3

DIVINE IN DESPAIR

STEPHANIE KELLEY

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it...

—Psalm 24:1

The first time I felt God's presence was at Bible camp. Our counselor took us to a quiet spot in the woods behind our cabin. We were surrounded by trees, the moon was shining down on us, and crickets sang as we poured out our hearts to one another with the woes and worries that overwhelm most 13-year-olds. We joined together in reciting the Lord's Prayer, and the summer heat could not keep the chills and goose bumps from overwhelming me. It was clear to me that the Divine was present among us.

To this day, I still feel God most when I am surrounded by nature—on top of a mountain, next to a quiet lake, surrounded by trees, in open fields. These environments leave me with an abundance of inner peace and overwhelming awe and wonder for the Divine mystery that has created this earth, this life, this breath. These spaces remind me of the interconnectedness among myself, nature, and that which we call God.

So of course I have become engrossed by the headlines and scientific reports that remind us of earth's fragility and the repercussions that occur when we forget our humble place within creation. While the climate crisis has caused me great anxiety and feelings of despair and hopelessness, it has also affirmed the seriousness of God's desire that we humans be stewards of the earth—to see that all of God's creation is holy, sacred and worthy of thriving. Caring deeply for the earth is a way of worshiping and glorifying God.

So friends, as the sea levels rise, fires burn and coral reefs die, may we join in embracing the awe of creation. And may we respond boldly with care.

Divine mystery, may we recognize the beautiful fragility of creation all around us. And may we be inspired to take care of this earth and all that is in it, because it belongs to you. Amen.

SATURDAY, APRIL 4 - A POEM FOR SATURDAY

TRUTH

And if sun comes
How shall we greet him?
Shall we not dread him,
Shall we not fear him
After so lengthy a
Session with shade?

Though we have wept for him,
Though we have prayed
All through the night-years—
What if we wake one shimmering morning to
Hear the fierce hammering
Of his firm knuckles
Hard on the door?

Shall we not shudder?—
Shall we not flee
Into the shelter, the dear thick shelter
Of the familiar
Propitious haze?

Sweet is it, sweet is it
To sleep in the coolness
Of snug unawareness.

The dark hangs heavily
Over the eyes.

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000)

MONDAY, APRIL 6

AMAZING GRACE

MARGIE WAGERS

For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it. —Ephesians 2:89

For years, one of my least favorite stories in the Bible was the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I identified with the sourpuss, goody two-shoes older brother who (quite justifiably, I thought) resented his dissipated brat of a brother, whom their father had just extravagantly welcomed home. As an adult, my sister—an angry, defiant alcoholic—gave my parents nothing but grief. She blamed our mother for all of life's setbacks and extorted perpetual monetary support. I, on the other hand—the studious, responsible daughter—was expected to toe the line. Yet whenever my sister made the slightest conciliatory gesture, my mother reacted with exuberant fuss. I stewed in resentment.

Over time I have come to understand that I am closer in character to the prodigal son who, through no virtue of his own, was unconditionally forgiven. Alcoholism runs in our family, and I recognize that there but for fortune I might have shared my sister's fate. Why was I able to stop drinking before it was too late? Certainly not through willpower or exemplary character. I know it had to be grace—a gift bestowed upon me for free, with no strings attached.

I recently finished Timothy Egan's excellent *A Pilgrimage to Eternity*, recounting his journey along the Via Francigena, an ancient pilgrimage trail. In his not particularly flattering chronicle of the Catholic Church, he describes the medieval practice of indulgences, whereby the Church knocked years off in Purgatory proportionate to a monetary donation. Indulgences could be commuted to "good works," such as going on a pilgrimage or building a church.

The older brother in the parable felt he had "earned" his father's favor through good works. Yet Paul makes plain that it is God's free gift of grace, not our own efforts, that saves us. C.S. Lewis famously entered late into a discussion of what, among all the world's religions, Christianity uniquely contributes. The participants had dismissed possibilities such as incarnation and resurrection, which have parallels in other religions. Lewis rejoined, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace." He reminded his colleagues that Christianity is the only religion that does not afford a path to *earn* salvation. Lewis wrote, "He loved us not because we are lovable, but because he is love."

Dear Father, I submit myself into your hands. Thank you for giving grace to every human life, and grant me the humility to accept it. Amen.

TUESDAY, APRIL 7

THE THICKNESS OF WATER

MORGAN VALENCIA KING

Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again.

—John 4:13

The gathering was always going to be small, about 40 friends and loved ones, no more than 50. But when it finally came out that, of my blood-relatives, only my cousin had accepted the invitation, I wasn't sure what to think or how I felt. On the most basic level, I was worried that the absence of a few would overshadow the presence of the rest.

When the time arrived, positioned at the front and center of the chapel, I could clearly see everyone. From downtown, uptown, crosstown and out of town (some out of country!), they'd all arrived to show their love and support. And these people weren't just casual friends for a season. Every person in attendance had helped Jorge and me get to that altar. They were our confidants, our support, our inspiration even, as we entered into the covenant of marriage.

As part of our service, the (other) groom and I weren't the only ones who took vows that evening. We asked that those in attendance promise to continue to support us, to lead us, and to remain in relationship with us. If anyone had peeked through the windows in the back of the chapel at that moment, they would have seen that our guests barely filled the front pews. And yet it was in that very moment of the ceremony that I knew we were surrounded by family.

Bound by the Holy Spirit, God calls each of us to families formed of people who don't always share blood or look alike. While the age-old adage, "Blood is thicker than water," may have some truth, I think it's a bit shortsighted. We need blood in our veins to live, yes. But none of us gets very far without water.

God of love, surround us with family when it feels as if we have none, and let us be family to those who fear they have none. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

MAE CHENG-PAVON

She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks.

—Proverbs 31:17

We love because he first loved us. —1 John 4:19

My grandmother found God late in life, after becoming a young widow and raising five children on her own across two continents. But when she finally embraced God, she loved him wholeheartedly.

Martha, like her Biblical namesake, believed in hard work and perseverance. Building her faith was no different. She would wake up early every morning, and though her sight was failing, she nevertheless spent an hour with God, pouring through Bible passages and praying. Similarly, she would go every Sunday to church and sing songs of praise with heartfelt vigor, despite being badly out of tune.

In my formative years, my grandmother was often my most faithful companion when she was in New York. I'd follow her around the house and on outdoor errands. And while I did not have a full understanding then of all she did, those images of her hunched over her Bible and mouthing words with her eyes closed every morning have always stuck with me.

My mother was not as devout as my grandmother, but like my grandmother, she lived the way she believed the world should be, where all people are treated with dignity, where those in power give voice to the voiceless, and where hard work and perseverance win the day. She sacrificed a budding teaching career to immigrate to the United States and take on blue-collar jobs for her children's sake. She worked well into the night to make sure there were presents under the Christmas tree every year. And those who ever worked for her were greeted every morning with an offer of coffee and pastries.

Both my grandmother and my mother were slight in build, but they stood tall in the face of adversity and unwaveringly placed hope in love.

Heavenly Father, during this season of reflection, we pause to thank you for your earth angels. We thank you for those who came before us and nurtured us, who taught us the joys of walking in your light, and who showed us how to love. May we live our lives each day striving to share those gifts with others. Amen.

THURSDAY, APRIL 9 - MAUNDY THURSDAY

THE BEST PART

SCOTT BLACK JOHNSTON

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 13:3-5

John's gospel does not describe a Last Supper the way most people picture it—a Leonardo da Vinci portrait of Jesus bracketed by disciples, breaking the bread and pouring the wine: "This is my body, and this is my blood." There is no such story in John. On that evening, when Jesus gathered with friends, John's attention is on the moment Jesus stood up while at table, tied a towel around his waist, and started washing his friends' feet.

Imagine what worship might look like if John was our only gospel.

Instead of communion tables in churches, we might have basins at the end of every pew. Instead of pastors intoning the words, "On the night of his arrest, he took bread," ministers might invite people to remove their shoes with a new liturgical phrase. My seminary roommate once suggested: "Rub-a-dub-dub, stick your toes in the tub."

If John's gospel was our only guide, we might all engage in regular foot-washing. Some Christians already do. Down through the centuries, Lutherans and Methodists have practiced foot-washing. American Mennonites regularly get out their basins and towels. In the Roman Catholic Church, on Maundy Thursday, the Pope will wash the feet of 12 laypeople. In Waldensian churches, congregants wash the feet of ministers after they return from a journey.

I'm not sure I'm ready for that!

Silliness aside, John thought this was an important part of the story—maybe even the best part of the story. This is the part John wants us to remember. In the midst of a troubled world, Jesus, tenderly, took the feet of his friends, washed them and dried them. Jesus did this, John tells us, because he loved these women and men.

"He loved them," John says, "to the end."

I suppose these words apply to everything that Jesus did (and endures) during Holy Week. He did it because he loved them. He loved them to the end.

Tender God, in this hard-knock world you reach out to people. You even reach out to me. You approach me in a simple manner. You are willing to wash my weary feet. Knowing this makes me feel less tired, more alive, more focused on what matters. I do believe that simple acts of kindness and love can change things. Help me, tender Jesus, to make this real. Help me to extend some simple care to at least one other person this day. Help me to be a conduit of your love. I pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

FRIDAY, APRIL 10 - GOOD FRIDAY

FAILURE OF GOOD FRIDAY

CHARLENE HAN POWELL

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.

—Romans 5:6-10

I was one of those strange children who took to religious observance from an early age. I liked having rules and guidelines to live by. I enjoyed being obedient and righteous. My relationship with God was built on merit, rather than grace. But as I got older, this changed. The foolishness of thinking I could be perfect in the eyes of God dissipated as I realized that I was more than capable of being imperfect, unrighteous, unkind... in other words, sinful. I remember initially feeling like my inadequacies made me unworthy of God's love and affection, but all that changed as I reflected on the cross.

As failures go, Jesus was a big one. Yes, he had built a movement with little to no resources. Sure, he was just a humble carpenter's son who somehow became a rock-star revolutionary. But all of his life's accomplishments meant nothing that Friday he was nailed to the cross, bruised and battered, weak and alone, for all the world to see. Just as the prophet Isaiah predicted, Jesus was "despised and rejected by humanity, a man of suffering, familiar with pain."

Yet that is what makes this day so good. We spend so much of our lives desperately avoiding failure, thinking it will make us less than worthy, less than Christian. But all of that changed on that Good Friday when Jesus Christ, the son of God, failed *for* us, failed *because of* us, failed *with* us. On that day, Jesus

failed spectacularly so that none of our failures would ever stand between us and him, between humanity and the divine. No matter what we do, how imperfect we are, how unrighteous we have become, Jesus' ultimate failure on the cross made it so that grace always awaits us on the other side of our sin. Not because we deserve it, but because we need it.

My relationship with God has changed so much over the years, but the one thing I hope never changes is my understanding that Jesus lived for me, Jesus died for me, and Jesus failed for me. For that reason, I know that I may be unworthy of God's love, but I will always have it.

God of our failures and successes, our imperfections and accomplishments, we thank you for offering us a life built on your grace rather than our merit. On this Good Friday, help us contemplate and accept the amazing sacrifice you made on our behalf. Amen.

SATURDAY, APRIL 11 - HOLY SATURDAY

KOBE
WERNER RAMIREZ

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.

—Psalm 34:18

What do you do the day after a loved one dies? I think the second day is harder than the first. The first day you are in shock, but the following day the realities of loss begin to sink in.

I am writing this on the third day after Los Angeles Lakers superstar Kobe Bryant passed away alongside his 13-year-old daughter and seven other victims in a helicopter crash. I know that, for some, Kobe is a complicated figure; yet for a young, basketball-loving kid who grew up in Southern California, Kobe was a childhood hero. At 34 years old, I still shout "Kobe" whenever I shoot a piece of paper into a trash container.

I couldn't help but cry throughout the day when I found out about his death. For many of us from the greater Los Angeles area, Kobe's death hit us like that of a good friend.

What did we do the day after? I put on a Lakers shirt, my Kobe sneakers and my Lakers jacket and went for a long walk. My friend Wes incorporated Kobe into his lesson plan for his 10th graders. My friend Tim went to the local basketball court and did not leave until he made eight straight free throws and eight straight three pointers. We all mourned in different ways.

Although Kobe inspired me to be a better version of myself, he was not a savior. But for the people in Jesus' time, they thought he just might be a savior! So I wonder how Jesus' friends mourned on that Saturday, the day after he died. Jesus had a local following, too—how did his fans take the news? Do you think some of them went back to the places where Jesus spoke? Did some begin to share stories about him, now that he was gone? Was there a strange feeling around the city, knowing that the Jesus era had ended?

I bet you they were completely devastated. I know that feeling. I bet you many of them lost hope.

Yet the Jesus story did not end there. I wonder how they felt on the third day, when the Jesus era continued?

Holy God, on this Holy Saturday, we pray that you comfort those who mourn the loss of loved ones. May you bring a peace that passes all understanding. As we mourn death, may we remember that tomorrow is coming. Amen.

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ART

Throughout Lent, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church will host a unique, dual exhibition, *Two Roads to Calvary*, featuring the Stations of the Cross as depicted by two New York contemporary artists—Laura Fissinger and Laura James. The exhibit will be on view in the Chesnut Gallery through Easter. The cover of this devotional (*Jesus Takes Up His Cross*) and back cover (*Jesus Is Stripped of His Garments*) are by Laura Fissinger (2019).

POETRY

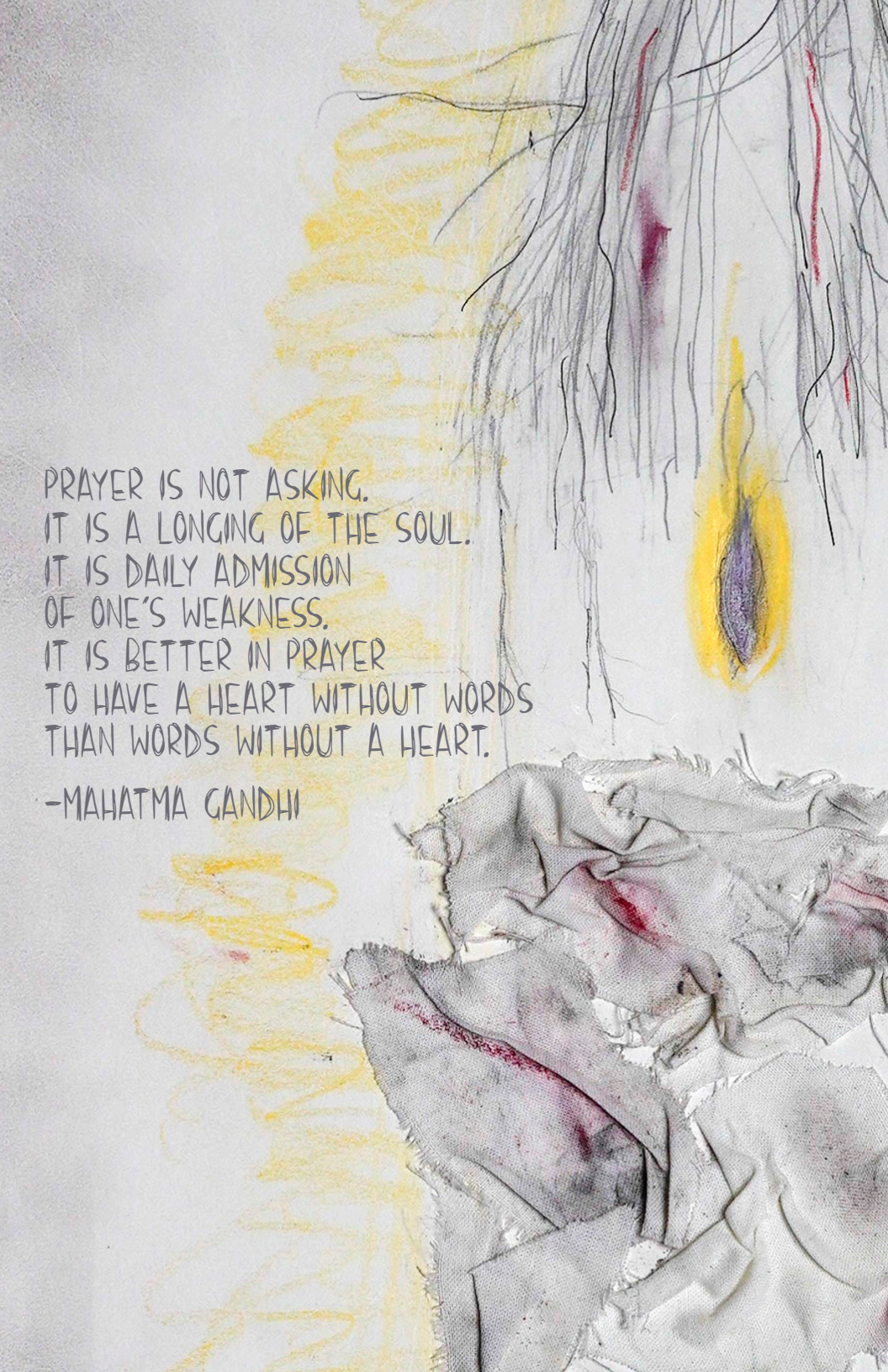
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PRAYER IS NOT ASKING.
IT IS A LONGING OF THE SOUL.
IT IS DAILY ADMISSION
OF ONE'S WEAKNESS.
IT IS BETTER IN PRAYER
TO HAVE A HEART WITHOUT WORDS
THAN WORDS WITHOUT A HEART.

-MAHATMA GANDHI