

2021

LENTEN

DEVO
TIONAL

Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church



Dear Family in Christ,

LAST YEAR, Lent began just as we realized that the next year would be different. In fact, the day before Ash Wednesday our church staff met about changing protocols around the building. Just a few weeks later, we began working remotely.

During this time last year, my wife, April and I began to read the 2020 Lenten Devotionals together at the end of the night. We related to the stories of pain, loss, and hope. Many of the devotionals seemed to arrive at just the right time. It was truly an honor to follow alongside these beautiful reflections written by church colleagues and officers.

One year later, I hope these 2021 devotions and scripture passages will again inspire us during the contemplative time of Lent. As you read along, our prayer for you is that the Holy Spirit will be at work in your heart. May you be comforted when you need to be comforted. May you be challenged when you need to be challenged. May you be encouraged when you need to be encouraged. May you find hope when everything feels hopeless.

May you see Christ in these stories, reflections, and scripture.

Grace and Peace,
Rev. Werner Ramirez



WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 17 • ASH WEDNESDAY

ASHES ON FIFTH AVENUE

REV. WERNER RAMIREZ

...then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. Genesis 2:7

On Ash Wednesday 2019, I was privileged enough to stand on Fifth Avenue and ask people passing by if they would like ashes for Ash Wednesday. Many said yes. I'm still having trouble to put into words how holy that moment felt for me. I put ashes on the foreheads and gave blessings to tourists, delivery people, homeless neighbors, police officers, bus drivers, business people—and one person who said “No, thank you,” and then took a couple of steps, turned around and said, “Actually I better should.” I felt like I was putting ashes on the city itself.

Ash Wednesday can be somber because, on this day, we remember our mortality. We recognize that our time on earth can be taken at any time. The year 2020 made this clear. Many of us lost loved ones, and we continue to lose people to this pandemic. As we remember our mortality, we are often told on this day, “From dust, you came and to dust you shall return, but in Christ, you have everlasting life.”

Now, I do not want to jump straight into Easter and instead want to pause to think about how creative God is with dust. Out of the dust, out of the ashes, God creates. So yes, to dust we shall return, but the story does not end there.

I think this is why so many people stopped in the middle of the street that day to get ashes. They wanted a blessing that reminded them that their story continues. They wanted a reminder of something holy that can impact them in creative and fruitful ways. They wanted to be seen and known, even if it was for a moment.

Friends, know that the God who created you out of dust sees you and loves you. God takes the dust, the ashes, and continues to work in you. Your story is not over.

God of creation, lift us up from the ashes and help us see, hear, and feel your creative love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 18 • A PRAYER FOR THE DAY

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.
Grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

Franciscan Friar, St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226)

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 19

HOW TO LET GOD FIGHT LIFE'S BATTLES FOR YOU

CHRISTOPHER EDWARDS, TRUSTEE

All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give all of you into our hands. 1 Samuel 17:47

Among the most useful practical guidance that I've received at church is from a sermon that I heard about a decade ago at First Presbyterian in Greenville, South Carolina. Richard Gibbons, the senior pastor, used the story of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17 to explain how we can obtain God-given tools to prevail in the battles of life that we all face.

He explained that David's victory over Goliath was attributable to David's daily walk with God, which prepared David for the battle. If we, like David, spend time, day by day, building our faith by spending time with God, particularly by reading the Bible every day, then when any battle in life comes, we will be prepared, and "the battle [will be] the Lord's" to fight, not ours.

Since then, I've tried to read the Bible every morning. The Presbyterian Church (USA) lectionary (available at presbyterianmission.org/devotion/daily) is quite useful. Many days, the verses leap off the page and are right on point for what the day ahead will bring. Fifth Avenue's Monday night Bible study is also excellent and has taught me more about the Bible than I would discover on my own.

Spending time with the Bible, day by day, has been one of the greatest gifts from church for me, and I hope that it will be for you.

Thank you, Lord, for your faithfulness. May we put our trust in you as we surrender our battles to you. The world must know that you are indeed the Almighty. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FEBRUARY 20 • A POEM FOR SATURDAY

WILD GEESE

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

American Poet, Mary Oliver (1935 – 2019)

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 22

THE FAMILIAR BRINGS COMFORT

MARY JANE GOODE, TRUSTEE

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

At a recent memorial, this passage was the focal point. Mostly used for weddings, my own included, it was just as perfect for a memorial. We encounter many forms of love in life, but regardless of the type of love we are always comforted by it.

This past year the most familiar scripture has brought me comfort. This one in particular reminds us of the most simple truth—love never fails.

Gracious and loving God, be with us in all that we do today and let us be an instrument of your Word. Amen.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 23

ANXIOUS, WHO ME?

CHARLOTTE SMITH FRANKOWSKI, TRUSTEE

And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. And he said unto them, Why are ye so fearful? How is it that ye have no faith? Matthew 5:39-40

I worked hard in graduate school and did not have much of a social life as a result. I moved to New York afterwards and was excited to make new friends and hopefully to meet someone. While I made some wonderful friends through Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, I started to think I would be forever single. I was lonely.

After several years like this, I met a really nice guy who made me laugh. But not long into our dating, he lost his job and had to return to Europe. That was a hard time in my life, but I felt firmly our future was together. I looked to my faith during those years and was able to keep my anxiety about the future mostly at bay. I had faith the Lord would

take care of me. Over time, we made the decision to marry. We did so, and he was able to move back to the United States.

This past year has brought us challenges, and it has been a dark year for many in this country and worldwide. But I thank God for our blessings, particularly our second daughter who was born in November. I still have anxiety about the future. I think it is normal to the human condition, but I am reminded when I look at my budding family to try to put aside my worries. It may not always be the path I want or think is best for me, but God will provide.

Lord, please bless this country as we move forward through this pandemic. Grant us kindness to each other and faith that things will improve soon. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 24

THE PURPOSE OF LENT

JANE HONG, CLERK OF SESSION

Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. Joel 2:12-13

Every year, I ask myself about the purpose of Lent. Growing up, I definitely fast forwarded to the “fun part.” Holy Week—from Palm Sunday to the Easter egg hunt in my Easter best—was really what the season is about, right? As I grew older and started to learn about other traditions, I learned to appreciate participating in the full forty days of Lent. It is to actively, prayerfully consider and discern what God’s will is for us. I have always made that a solitary confession, and have always thought this is something I should do on my own.

This has been a rough season. We left 2020 behind only to run straight into a national insurrection at the beginning of 2021. These past four years have been filled with cruelty and vitriol, with calls to fear “the other” and to ignore the social, economic, racial, and moral injustice that is around us.

Because I have been doing a lot of work on the Anti-Racism Response Team this year, I have been thinking a lot about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He shares that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” I’ve never thought through the “how” of that statement. Will it bend naturally? What work do we, collectively, have to do to work towards the kingdom of God here on earth?

Lent is the time for us to confess, repent, and listen to God’s call to see as God sees. God loved us all enough “to send God’s only Son” to redeem us. Can we but do the same?



This Lenten season, I repent of my willful blindness and complacency, urge us to confess our collective sin of remaining silent in the face of injustice, and pray that we might be able to see our fellow neighbors as God sees them.

As the prophet Isaiah exhorted, may we “cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” Let us renew ourselves to be your instruments of peace and justice. Amen.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 25 • A PRAYER FOR THE DAY

God grant that as we go out and face life with all of its decisions, as we face the bitter cup which we will inevitably face from day to day, God grant that we will learn this one thing and that is, to make the transition from “this cup” to “nevertheless.”

*American pastor and social rights activist,
The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929 – 1968)*

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 26

ALWAYS CONNECTED

SALOME NOUFELE, YOUTH ELDER

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

On March 4, 2018, I was baptized then confirmed in the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church Sanctuary. Surrounded by friends and family, I was overwhelmed with joy and pride. As water poured down my head, I could see my parents in the front pews with smiles from ear-to-ear, and I could hear the shutter click of my brother's camera. My godparents, who had flown over the Atlantic just to be with me on my special day, stood behind me as I deepened my connection with God. Some might say that I experienced baptism late, but to me it felt like I was right on time—I was mature enough to understand and appreciate my relationship with God. I was confirmed after the baptism, making me an official member of the Church.

The day had revolved around me, but what made it so special were my guests. Specifically, very close family friends of mine who had attended the service and reached out to me expressing how much the sermon had touched them. These friends were not religious; but something about the sermon that Sunday had resonated with them. I felt like God was speaking to us, showing us that no matter if we believe in Him, He believes in us.

In the connection my friends had made with faith, I was a bridge. They weren't converted by any means, but they were able to foster a miniscule relationship with God, and I helped that happen. Reflecting on that day, I realize that the kingdom of God works in inexplicable ways, for even those who seem the most distanced from religion find solace through Him. It felt almost like fate: on a day where I had taken such a big step forward in my journey of faith, a loved one had also been touched by God.

Loving God, help us seek your love, strength and care as we experience transformative moments in our lives. Amen.

FEBRUARY 27 • A POEM FOR SATURDAY

THE MIRACLE OF MORNING

I thought I'd awoken to a world in mourning.
Heavy clouds crowding, a society storming.
But there's something different on this golden morning.
Something magical in the sunlight, wide and warming.

I see a dad with a stroller taking a jog.
Across the street, a bright-eyed girl chases her dog.
A grandma on a porch fingers her rosaries.
She grins as her young neighbor brings her groceries.

While we might feel small, separate, and all alone,
Our people have never been more closely tethered.
The question isn't if we will weather this unknown,
But how we will weather this unknown together.

So on this meaningful morn, we mourn and we mend.
Like light, we can't be broken, even when we bend.

As one, we will defeat both despair and disease.
We stand with healthcare heroes and all employees;
With families, libraries, schools, waiters, artists;
Businesses, restaurants, and hospitals hit hardest.

We ignite not in the light, but in lack thereof,
For it is in loss that we truly learn to love.
In this chaos, we will discover clarity.
In suffering, we must find solidarity.

For it's our grief that gives us our gratitude,
Shows us how to find hope, if we ever lose it.
So ensure that this ache wasn't endured in vain:
Do not ignore the pain. Give it purpose. Use it.

Read children's books, dance alone to DJ music.
Know that this distance will make our hearts grow fonder.
From a wave of woes our world will emerge stronger.

We'll observe how the burdens braved by humankind
Are also the moments that make us humans kind;
Let every dawn find us courageous, brought closer;
Heeding the light before the fight is over.
When this ends, we'll smile sweetly, finally seeing
In testing times, we became the best of beings.

Youth Poet Laureate, Amanda Gorman (b. 1998)

MONDAY, MARCH 1

GRATITUDE

KALEN STRICKLAND, ELDER

*Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you,
I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand. Isaiah 41:10*

I am so grateful for the support and kind words from Werner, Scott and Kate after the passing of my father in October, 2020. They lifted me up in prayer and strength during this very difficult time. This passage reminds me of this. I am forever grateful.

They reminded me I am not alone; my faith and my parents' spirits will lead my family through these days.

Dear God, thank you for giving me and my family the strength to endure life's up and downs. And thank you for my church family for reminding me in many beautiful ways of God's love. Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 2

INTENTIONS & ENVISIONING

KRISTIA TOLEDE

CONGREGATIONAL CARE & OUTREACH COORDINATOR

*So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.
Isaiah 55:11*

During my first year of graduate school, I was having a hard time balancing having a full-time job and being a full-time student. I had a full work schedule of 7:30 am – 5 pm and would attend classes from 6 – 9 pm.

I was constantly feeling exhausted, because it felt like there were not enough hours in the day to allow me to excel at both my job and my education. I remember feeling confused in my Economics class one evening because I had fallen behind on my homework and reading assignments. Every day I would wake up with a defeating attitude, already foreseeing a stressful and exhausting day. I'd say things like "It's going to be a long day today," or "I am so over this day already." Subconsciously, I was speaking stress into my day—and every hardship I encountered that day was because I used my very tongue and spoke against myself.

When I first read this verse, I had dropped out of my Economics class and was contemplating quitting my job at the time as well. After pondering on this passage, I realized that there is power in the word. And every word that is spoken creates a flow of energy that comes back to us. It was up to me to decide how the rest of my year was going to play out, and that starts with speaking positivity into my day. Intentionally speaking happiness, understanding and peace into my life.

I decided to write down my intentions for myself on how I envisioned my time in graduate school and the work-life balance that would make me the happiest. Instead of saying "It's going to be a long day," I'd say "It's going to be an amazing day, full of opportunities and excellence." Once I began speaking positivity into my life, things surely turned around for me for the better. I left my job and found another with a better work schedule to accommodate school, and re-enrolled in my Economics class the following semester. This verse among others, has been one of the many gems the Bible has left me with.

May we be able to sift through all that we have learned so that we can walk in the ways of the Lord. In Jesus name we believe and pray. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 3

SURRENDERING MY FEAR

DEBBIE MULLINS, DEACON

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is in the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by the water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. Jeremiah 17:7-8

Last winter, when the pandemic overwhelmed New York City, I remember feeling fearful and uncertain. Would I get sick? Would my friends get sick? How long will this

last? The constant wail of sirens, images of overburdened hospitals and the dreadful economic consequences of the lockdown were difficult to take in.

But in the midst of all this, I found my mind going to one of my favorite Taize songs. The Taize Community is an ecumenical monastic fraternity in Taize, France that uses repetitive sung prayer as the basis for its worship. The short songs, repeated over and over, take on a meditative quality that I have always found mystical and deeply moving. This is the song that I couldn't get out of my head in those dark days.

*In the Lord I'll be ever thankful,
In the Lord I will rejoice.
Look to God, do not be afraid.
Lift up your voices, the Lord is near.
Lift up your voices, the Lord is near.*

As I sang I felt myself surrendering my fear and anxiety to God. These simple words remind us that God is always close to us and will sustain us through times of adversity.

Gracious God, We confess that we do not always turn to you in times of trouble. Sometimes our independent "can do" attitudes keep us from relying on you, our hope and salvation. Help us trust that you are always with us and will always uphold us. Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 4 • A THURSDAY PRAYER

God, of thy goodness, give me Thyself;
for Thou art enough for me,
and I can ask for nothing less
that can be full honor to Thee.
And if I ask anything that is less,
ever Shall I be in want,
for only in Thee have I all.

English anchoress and mystic, Julian of Norwich (1342 – 1416)

FRIDAY, MARCH 5

"MARTHA, MARTHA"

LISA GINCELLI, DEACON

This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it, but in truth, in my life, there is another scripture that needs to accompany the first. Psalm 118:24

In honor of my mother's mother, this is the Bible passage she said first thing every morning. Despite the positive feeling of grace at the beginning of each day—and I

do repeat Psalm 118:24 each morning when my feet touch the floor—my days usually dissolve quickly into fractured elements of time trying to balance the needs and wants of work, family, and life in general.

I then say out loud, “Martha, Martha”, usually with a smile, to corral the day, slow down the moment, and to remember Jesus saying to his friend Martha, whose nerves and expectations are frayed preparing for guests as her sister Mary sits to listen to Jesus’s teachings in their home.

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” Luke 10:38-42

Thanks be to God.

Dear Lord, In all hours of the day and night, give me strength and hear my prayer.
Amen.

MARCH 6 • A POEM FOR SATURDAY

We need no barbarous words nor solemn spell
To raise the unknown. It lies before our feet;
There have been men who sank down into Hell
In some suburban street,
And some there are that in their daily walks
Have met archangels fresh from sight of God,
Or watched how in their beans and cabbage-stalks
Long files of faerie trod.
Often me too the Living voices call
In many a vulgar and habitual place,
I catch a sight of lands beyond the wall,
I see a strange god’s face.
And some day this work will work upon me so
I shall arise and leave both friends and home
And over many lands a pilgrim go
Through alien woods and foam,
Seeking the last steep edges of the earth
Whence I may leap into that gulf of light
Wherein, before my narrowing Self had birth,
Part of me lived aright.

Poet and Author, C.S. Lewis (1898 – 1963)

MONDAY, MARCH 8

THE SCHOOL BUS

VASHEENA BRISBANE, SENIOR GRAPHIC DESIGNER

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. 1 Corinthians 3:10

“Building is hard! I can’t do this by myself!” The words of a four-year-old, who is, in her words, “almost 5.”

Last week my daughter Sophia was given a school project: Build your favorite form of transportation for the class museum. When I asked her what she wanted to build, she enthusiastically said, “A school bus!” In my new role as a mom-designer-pre-k-teacher-project-manager, I started to think about what we would need to pull this off. I was overwhelmed and a little annoyed at the audacity of a teacher to assign a project! A multi-day project, during a global pandemic given to a four-year-old. This is going to put me over the edge.

Then I stopped and wondered why Sophia had chosen a school bus. She has never ridden one, and likely won’t for a while still. So I asked her, and she said, “Because that’s how you get to school.” My heart broke. Sophia loves to learn and misses school terribly. This pandemic has taken so much from us and the thought of that loss can be all consuming. But this little girl is building her school bus because “that’s the way you get to school.” She is a precocious little human and when she wants something, nothing will stop her from her goal. Not even a pandemic. Once I saw the project through her determined and matter-of-fact eyes, I realized she had just laid the foundation and I was going to build on that with the utmost care and respect.

Yes, we can build a school bus, and yes, it will take you to school.

Dear God, Help me to see as Sophia does, like every mountain is a molehill and every canyon is a crack, because with you, big things are made small and small things are made big. Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 9

FINDING UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

HANNAH BELL, DEACON

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. John 15:12

I am drawn to the challenge of this verse. I consider myself all American because I've literally lived all over America. I was born in Wisconsin, raised in North Dakota and went to college in Fargo. I spent those vague post college years in Hawaii. My military service brought me to Texas and Mississippi for training, and I've lived in New York City for almost a decade.

To add to the rich tapestry of my life, I've worked in a lot of different jobs. In high school I was a babysitter and telemarketer. I went to college for Theatre with a minor in Music. In Hawaii I was a substitute teacher, an airfield System's Maintainer, and on good days a paid actor. In New York City I worked almost every food service position from Hostess to Event Captain. I've consulted/taught for nonprofits, managed a comedy theatre, walked dogs and been a caregiver for older adults and children.

As you can imagine from all of this, I've seen and experienced a wide variety of interactions and relationships. Along the way I've formed bonds of love that I cherish and hope to keep for the rest of my life. That's easy. The challenge has been finding unconditional love for those whom I disagree with, and an added challenge for those who have discounted or discriminated against me because of my gender, race, or class. And this is my prayer.

Creator, Show us how to be love. Irrevocable, indestructible, unconditional love. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 10

A FAITHFUL FAMILY

JEANNE PAPE, ELDER

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Colossians 3:12-13

For more than a decade, I've shared the print version of the Lenten brochure with my delightful luddite sister-in-law, Jean McDowell. As we entered the 2020 Pandemic, she thanked me and shared that her eyesight had deteriorated such that she could not read it. I brightly answered "Then I'll read it to you!" And so we did each day, reading the

scripture passage, the message and the prayer... and the goings on of our daily lives whether joyful, exciting, stressful or sad. While we did not always agree, we ended with prayer and greeted each daily encounter with eagerness and love.

After Easter we continued our growing camaraderie by reading from Ken Jones' book, *Lean Back on the Everlasting Arms*. We've both served as Deacons and Elders in our Presbyterian churches—hers with less than 100 members in the suburbs of New Jersey, me with over 2,000 members at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. There are differences to be sure, but it's remarkable how similar our experiences have been in growing our faith. I asked Jean to share a story about her faith for this writing.

Jean says, "At the time of this story, I was a wife, mother of two and a new Elder in our church. One afternoon, I received a call from the church office, asking me to go to our local hospital to pray with a dying woman who was new to our area. She was frightened and crying. I held her hand and we prayed. She died quietly and I was so thankful for God's guidance."

Father, we thank you for a community of faithful family and friends to go through life with. Some are local. Some are distant. An abundant number know how to reach out and be with those in need and encourage us to share our faith in challenging times. And, Lord, may I be patient with my friends and family as they are with me and forgive freely as you have forgiven me. In thy name we pray. Amen.

MARCH 11 • A THURSDAY PRAYER

O Lord my God,

I thank Thee that Thou hast brought this day to a close;
I thank thee that Thou hast giv'n me peace in body and in soul.
Thy hand has been over me and has protected and preserved me.
Forgive my puny faith, the ill that I this day have done,
And help me to forgive all who have wronged me.

O Lord my God, Grant me a quiet night's sleep
beneath Thy tendercare,
And defend me from all the temptations of darkness.

Into Thy hands I commend my loved ones
and all who dwell in this house:
I commend my body and soul: O God, Thy holy name be praised.

*German pastor, theologian and anti-Nazi dissident,
The Rev. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906 – 1945)*

FRIDAY, MARCH 12

WHERE WOULD I BE?

MARC LOVCI, ELDER

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. John 14:26

Navigating day to day, from one appointment to the next, physically, or phone call or video-link, letter, or email—it is easy to accept that the world is within our control. Each achievement is solely ours, and every reward is by our doing. But when the burden is heavy, stress overwhelming, and pain excruciating—it is not us that has failed, but an outside assault on our course and perfect plan.

But is the path of our design truly the right one, and why do we believe our plan is all that perfect? And even when it is, why do we believe it should be unequivocally easy?

The path of life will be interrupted—others will disagree, our intentions will be misguided, plans will not be perfect, our bodies will fail us, and even WiFi will go out at inopportune times.

But Jesus knew all this when he shared with his disciples that God instilled deep within each of us “The Helper,” the “Holy Spirit,” the most powerful resource to keep our feet grounded on the path of life.

Where would I be as a parent, a brother, a friend, a colleague and part of the community, without the Holy Spirit encouraging me to follow Christ?

Dear Lord of Heaven and Earth, Thank you for loving me individually, within the intricate embroidery and majesty of your kingdom. Please be with me and intertwine your word within my every decision, today and every day. Amen.

MARCH 13 • A POEM FOR SATURDAY

PSALM 12

The saint's safety and hope in evil times.

Lord, if thou dost not soon appear,
Virtue and truth will fly away;
A faithful man amongst us here
Will scarce be found, if thou delay.

The whole discourse, when neighbors meet,
Is filled with trifles loose and vain;
Their lips are flattery and deceit,
And their proud language is profane.

But lips that with deceit abound
Shall not maintain their triumph long;
The God of vengeance will confound
The flattering and blaspheming tongue.

“Yet shall our words be free,” they cry;
“Our tongues shall be controlled by none:
Where is the Lord will ask us why?
Or say our lips are not our own?”

The Lord, who sees the poor oppressed,
And hears th’ oppressor’s haughty strain,
Will rise to give his children rest,
Nor shall they trust his word in vain.

Thy word, O Lord, though often tried,
Void of deceit shall still appear;
Not silver, sev’n times purified
From dross and mixture, shines so clear.

Thy grace shall in the darkest hour
Defend the holy soul from harm;
Though when the vilest men have power,
On every side will sinners swarm.

American Poet, Emily Dickinson (1830 – 1886)

MONDAY, MARCH 15

THANK YOU NOTE

MEREDITH FLECK, ELDER

For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.

2 Timothy 1:7

Advent is the season of waiting, but for many years it has also been a stressful slog for me. I work for an off-price retail chain and the stress of adjusting sales and inventory plans to trends builds over time. Vacation is not allowed and by mid-December, I am cranky and exhausted.

This year was even stranger, with concerns about stores closing, changing consumer preferences and coordinating everything through Microsoft Teams.

Advent is the time of year I pull the letter out of my planner. My grandfather Cyrus, who lived to be 101, saved lots of correspondence during his long life, but one letter from his mother Annie (my great-grandmother) feels like it was written to me as well.

When Cyrus was around my current age during a dinner with his mother, he complained about all the pressures he felt at work. I love the advice she wrote as part of her thank you note:

“Every morning when you wake up, let your first thought be of God, of his care and love and ask him to guide you through the day. Then often during the day, when you go about your work, lift up your heart in prayer for guidance and wisdom. This will give you strength and quietness of mind. Try it not once but every day. This is my strength.”

2 Timothy 1:7

I never met my great-grandmother but her advice has helped me stay calm during difficult times and I have tried to follow her advice many times over the past year.

Dear God, Thank you for always being by my side. Please share your guidance, wisdom and love with me to help me quiet my mind and give me peace. Amen

TUESDAY, MARCH 16

COMMUNITY OF CHRIST

**STEPHANIE KELLEY,
EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT TO THE SENIOR PASTOR**

So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

Romans 12:5

Growing up, I was fortunate to have a very active childhood and the opportunity to explore many interests—karate, piano lessons, volleyball, violin lessons, forensics. I had an abundance of interests but nothing stuck long term. By the time I started getting good at something, I'd get bored and want to move onto the next thing (sorry mom and dad).

The one thing that did stick was church. I loved my childhood church! I wish I could flatter myself and say it was because of the compelling sermons and the opportunity to memorize Bible verses but most of my memories of that church aren't centered around theology or the bible. My love for Rush River Lutheran Church (ELCA) came from the deep rooted, intergenerational community and the bonds that were created in the most Christ-like ways.

It was the place where I felt that sense of unconditional love from people outside of my family. It was the place where, at a very young age, I felt empowered and supported to take action and make change for causes I felt passionate about. It was a safe space where I could be vulnerable and explore my doubts about religion without fear of judgement.

Most impactful of all, the church was a place where we joined in collective communal joy and grief. It is in this community that I learned that other people's pain and sorrow became my pain and sorrow. Other families' joys and celebrations became my joy and celebration. And in return, my pain, my loss, my joys were embraced by the church family.

I didn't realize it then, but it was a community with Christ. It was present in the mundane and every day, in the potlucks, overnight retreats, bake sales, and service projects. Christ was not forced upon us but welcomed amongst us.

Divine Love, we welcome you amongst us in the mundane and every day. We give thanks for the gift of community and the ability to see you amongst our siblings in Christ. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 17

A LAMP TO MY FEET

AMANDA DEMEOLA, ELDER

I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Psalm 119:11, 105

One of my most treasured possessions is my first Bible, which I received in Sunday school when I was six years old. In order to receive a Bible, each child in the class was required to memorize and recite John 3:16 and Psalm 23. I worked so hard to get the words just right, excited at the prospect of receiving my very own Bible. I still remember the day I stood up in front of my class, in my fancy Sunday dress and patent-leather shoes, and recited those time-honored words.

My Sunday school teacher wrote an inscription in the front of the Bible, which ends as follows: "We pray that you will hide the words of this book deep within your heart and that you will allow them to guide you throughout all your days." I carried and read that Bible for many years, often rereading that inscription. While I have acquired several other Bibles over the years, this one is still very precious to me and has accompanied me to college, law school and now my apartment in New York City.

I have tried to take my Sunday school teacher's words to heart and turn to the Bible when I have questions, when I am feeling sad or angry, or when I simply want to feel connected to the countless believers who have read the same words, the same promises, throughout history. Those words have given me hope, comfort, peace and guidance at all stages of my life. I continue to turn to the Bible as a light in dark places.

Lord, I thank you for the gift of your word, as given to us in the Holy Bible. I pray that it will continue to be a bright light to me as I walk the road of life. Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 18 • A PRAYER FOR THE DAY

O Lord God—who has given the night for rest, as you have created the day in which he may employ himself in labor—grant, I pray, that my body may so rest during this night that my mind cease not to be awake to you, nor my heart faint or be overcome with torpor, preventing it from adhering steadfastly to the love of you.

While laying aside my cares to relax and relieve my mind, may I not, in the meanwhile, forget you, nor may the remembrance of your goodness and grace, which ought always to be deeply engraven on my mind, escape my memory.

In like manner, also, as the body rests may my conscience enjoy rest.

Grant, moreover, that in taking sleep I may not give indulgence to the flesh, but only allow myself as much as the weakness of this natural state requires, to my being enabled thereafter to be more alert in your service.

Be pleased to keep me so chaste and unpolluted, not less in mind than in body, and safe from all dangers, that my sleep itself may turn to the glory of your name.

But since this day has not passed away without my having in many ways offended you through my proneness to evil, in like manner as all things are now covered by the darkness of the night, so let everything that is sinful in me lie buried in your mercy.

Hear me, O God, Father and Preserver, through Jesus Christ your Son. Amen.

*French theologian and leader in the Protestant Reformation,
John Calvin (1509 – 1564)*

FRIDAY, MARCH 19

THIS IS WHY WE SING. THIS IS WHAT WE BELIEVE.

REBECCA TARBY, DEACON

Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Romans 8:34

We are shaped so clearly by many factors in our lives: our parents, our teachers, our friends, our faith community, and of course the music we listen to and perform.

Although my parents are extremely inclusive and raised me not to condemn, messaging from somewhere stuck with me: Christians are the one and only true good people.

I have no idea where this messaging came from, but I believed it going into choir camp the summer before 8th grade. I was chosen as the narrator for our director's arrangement of the song "Ani Ma'amin." I was elated! Little did I know, memorizing that narration would alter my view of God, history, empathy, and my faith. "Ani Ma'amin," translated as "I believe" is a Hebrew affirmation of faith. Singing it was a wonderful musical experience but speaking the narration became a sacred prayer. The translated prayer: "I believe that the Messiah will come, and he will find me waiting." became my prayer. Though I believe my Messiah has come, I empathized with past singers, especially those who sang "Ani Ma'amin" even as they entered the gas chambers during the Holocaust.

The final words of the narration, though, have become my ultimate prayer and the final words are tattooed on my body: "If we join hands and heart and voices and sing the songs of those who suffer, we will learn that while me may be different, we are all truly beautiful. And if we, the children of the world, value all other children as beautiful people, we can prevent such atrocities from happening again in our lifetime. THIS is why we sing. THIS is what we believe." I do believe in my Messiah, but I also know all God's children have a place in the choir, no matter their beliefs or background.

Precious Lord, may we show our Christianity through our love of all. Amen.

MARCH 20 • A POEM FOR SATURDAY

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.
These are the words we dimly hear:
You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.
Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.
Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.
Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.
Give me your hand.

Austrian Poet, Rainer Maria Rilke (1875 – 1926)

MONDAY, MARCH 22

THE FOUNDATIONS OF WORSHIP

JESSE ALLEN, ELDER

*I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.*

*Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Amos 5:21–24*

The summer after my freshman year in college, I spent six weeks teaching first and second graders at Lawndale Community Church on the West Side of Chicago. The Book of Amos was central to our Bible study as volunteers.

Soon after returning home, as I drove up to my very suburban church, I found myself praying and pondering if I ought to find a church home closer to the front lines in the fight against systemic injustice. That was the day we were installing our associate pastor. What scripture had he chosen for his first official sermon? Amos. I cried as I listened to God's answer to my prayer. After the sermon, we sang a song with a chorus pulled from Amos: "Where justice rolls down like a mighty water / And righteousness grows like an ever-flowing stream / And mercy resounds like the waves on the ocean / Let praises rise high on the songs of the redeemed." The music to this song is as corny as one might expect from mid-'90s worship, yet I found myself weeping for the first time in my life.

This expression of worship rooted in justice has become central to my understanding of doing church well. It is why I am so grateful to call Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church home.

Dear Lord, we ask that you continue to build our worship on your foundation of justice and righteousness so that when we next join with the organ and the choir at 5th and 55th, our music will be as beautiful to you as it is to us. Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 23

GOD'S CARE

DORA DEPUGH, DEACON

Aren't two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father... And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. Matthew 10:29-31

In February 2020 my father needed emergency surgery. He had been complaining for a while about his hands and arms being numb and tingling. My father has Alzheimers, so getting to the bottom of the real issue is a problem. He had some discs in his neck that were disintegrating and compressing the nerves. My parents live in Pendleton Oregon. This is a small town, so they had to go to a hospital in Washington state, an hour and a half away, to do the surgery.

The surgery went well and my father was moved to a rehab facility. This again is a problem because of my fathers Alzheimers. He does not like to be alone. He would not stay in bed. The staff would put a lazy boy chair by their station just so he would sleep at night. During the day he would start asking for my mother and get upset when she was not there. My mother would get calls on her cell phone from the staff everyday asking about her e.t.a. to the rehab center. My mother drove the hour and half each way so she could stay with my father during the day the entire time he was there. My father did very well with rehab and was discharged just days before we went into lockdown for the pandemic.

With my father being in rehab, my mother did not realize that toilet paper had become a hot commodity and there was none to be found. All the shelves were empty. I told her I could send her some or maybe my sister had some to spare. But what could she do in the meantime? Mom needed to do laundry and my parents have never had a dryer. They always go to the same laundromat to dry their clothes. The owner of the laundromat knows them and knew that my Dad had had surgery and was in rehab for a while. He asked my mother if she needed toilet paper and produced a 6-pack from his supply closet. He refused to take any money.

God knows our needs big or small—even when it comes to toilet paper.

Thank you God for always showing us how much you care and how important we are to you. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 24

BLESSINGS NOTICED & UNNOTICED

EDGAR PECK, TRUSTEE

Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. John 16:22

In June 2014, I sat in the front row of Kirkland Chapel.

I was a new widower attending the memorial service for my wife of 32 years. I was a refugee from a joyful place that was destroyed by years of an incurable disease. My faith was at a low ebb. I could not see a way forward and felt little purpose in my life. While I plodded along, I was missing evidence of God's love pouring into my life day after day.

Looking back, I remember the EMTs and Police that responded within minutes. I remember the geyser of love and support from family and friends.

And I remember the beginning of my time at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church.

When my wife died, I wanted a memorial service in New York. The pastor of our church in New Jersey, the Rev. Dr. Tom Peters, and I called Presbyterian churches in Manhattan to host the memorial service. Church after church declined. Then we contacted Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. What a welcome response! The Rev. Kate Dunn flung open the doors and welcomed us with warmth, compassion, and encouragement. What a relief. Tom led the service and Ryan provided the music. The service was a great comfort to all.

I returned to work and life resumed on a somber basis. Still no direction for me other than getting through each day.

I began attending services at Fifth Avenue and found them quite calming. They let me have private time with myself and with God. I was angry and depressed, but God was welcoming. The Church was welcoming. The congregation was welcoming. The Church became a place to moor myself while the storm raged.

I mentioned to my sisters that the church was offering a trip to Scotland. They latched onto that in a heartbeat and told me that it was time to "air myself out."

A lovely trip to be sure. New friends made, great and historic sites seen. And I met Micki. Or perhaps I should say God sent Micki because that is what I believe. The foundation for my new life was emerging.

In January 2020 I stood at the front of Kirkland Chapel.

Micki and I were married by the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston. Leaving the chancel, I glanced at the front row where I sat six years earlier and thanked God for all the blessings showered on me, noticed and unnoticed.

Lord, make us always aware of blessings arriving everyday.

THURSDAY, MARCH 25 • A PRAYER FOR THE DAY

May we who are merely inconvenienced remember those whose lives are at stake. May we who have no risk factors remember those most vulnerable. May we have the necessary righteous indignation in this moment to fight for transformation. May we who have the luxury of working from home remember those who must choose between preserving their health or making their rent. May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools are closed remember those who have no option.

May we who have to cancel our trips remember those who have no safe place to go. May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the economic market remember those who have no margins at all. May we who settle in for a quarantine at home remember those who have no home. As fear grips our country, may we be the kind of people who stand up and who refuse to lay down. May we choose love.

During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each other, let us yet find ways to be the loving embrace of God for our neighbors. And let us recognize that we cannot give up in this moment, and no matter what it takes; let it at least be written down in history that with our last breaths we fought for the world that ought to be.

*American pastor and Co-Chair of the Poor People's Movement,
The Rev. Dr. William Barber II (B. 1963)*

FRIDAY, MARCH 26

MY PATH TO FIFTH AVENUE'S MIGHTY AUSTIN

DR. PATRICK KREEGER, ASSOCIATE ORGANIST

We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance... endurance produces character... character produces hope... With life's tribulations, one must rejoice, for we will grow from them. Romans 5:3-4

When I joined the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church staff in 2015, I was asked to contribute an article about my path to the organ bench of Fifth Avenue's "Mighty Austin" for *The Voice*. Those who remember the story will recall that two years prior to coming to New York City, I was involved in a serious accident causing a broken leg and a questionable future as a musician. My independent, fast-paced life as a graduate student at Yale slowed to a crawl, and I was mad at the world for my dysfunctional state.

My graduation recital, which was over a year away, became my Mt. Everest. I remember laying in my hospital bed one evening thinking about my one functioning leg (at the time) and the organ works I may never get to play with this limitation. One piece in particular, Max Reger's Symphonic Fantasy & Fugue, op. 57, occupied my thoughts as it was the only piece I ever abandoned due to its immense difficulty. Although I knew God had not abandoned me (Hebrews 13:5), I did wonder why He put this immense trial before me. One scripture that I cherish is Romans 5:3-4: "We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance... endurance produces character... character produces hope..." With life's tribulations, one must rejoice, for we will grow from them. Over the next year, I labored on the Reger composition and with God's grace, performed this personal "Everest" with two functioning legs.

Through this difficult year, I grew. I became more patient, more focused, and more perseverant. God's timing was perfect as these three qualities were necessary for me to be able to handle the many demands required in Juilliard's doctoral (and Fifth Ave's Associate Organist!) audition procedure.

Dear God, as we wrestle with the global hardship and trauma brought on by the pandemic, let us look to the future with hope and one day, and that we emerge stronger, more empathetic, and more thankful for things we often take for granted. Amen.

MARCH 27 • A POEM FOR SATURDAY

THE SECOND COMING

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi

Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Irish writer and poet, William Butler Yeats (1865 – 1939)

MONDAY, MARCH 29

REMEMBER THEM BY NAME

JAIME STAEHLE, DIRECTOR OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. 2 Timothy 1:5

Women aren't often named in the Bible and so when they are we should sit up and take notice. In this letter to Timothy the author says that Timothy's mother and grandmother have done a good job passing down their faith to him! These women, named for their faith, have surely supported Timothy and helped make him the man he was to become. Lois and Eunice.

Two months ago we watched the first female vice president be sworn into office. As I watched the inauguration I wondered, did Kamala Harris have strong women behind her, supporting her and helping make her the woman she was to become? She did. She often invoked her mother and sister as her inspiration and support. Shyamala and Maya.

As we walk through Holy Week, I think of the women who followed Jesus. Not many are named, but we know they were there—washing Jesus' feet and preparing spices for his burial. These women were honored by him, as they gave him all they had. Mary and Mary. Lois and Eunice. Shyamala and Maya. The women who uplift, who support, who help make us the people we are today.

Who are these women in your life? Will you remember them by name?

Dear God, As we look toward Easter, help us to pause, and remember the women who have come before us. Help us remember those who have struggled through a lifetime of ashes in order that we might rise. Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 30

ARE YOU THE ONE WE'VE BEEN WAITING FOR?

MORGAN VALENCIA KING, DIRECTOR OF ENGAGEMENT

When John heard in prison what Jesus was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another? Matthew 11:2-4

1998 was quite a year. Google was brand new, Celine Dion was at the height of popularity, and Judge Judy was one of the most loved shows on Television. That was the year 8-year-old me was baptized in the freezing cold depths of the baptismal font at West Cleveland Baptist Church in Tennessee. The Pastor said I was young to make such a public declaration of faith, but I had "asked all the right questions:"

"Will I go to Hell?"

"How can I go to Heaven?"

"Does God love me?"

As a child, I wanted the Jesus they talked about at church to take away my fears of dying and spending eternity away from friends and family. I had hoped that the Jesus from the stories in Sunday School could take away my fear of the dark. Although I wasn't quite sure what it meant, I prayed that Jesus would save me.

20 years later, with anxieties a bit more profound, I find comfort in John the Baptist's asking a simple question from jail. It's from that place of uncertainty, of doubt, of pain when John dares to approach the Divine in all sincerity, asking: are you the one we've been waiting for? Do you care that I am suffering? Have you forgotten me?

In Lent, our faith gives utterance to questions and doubting. This season of reflection makes space for sincerity even if it's not pretty. We smear our foreheads with ashes and face our all-too-real mortality. We wait and watch and wonder these long forty days of fasting: Jesus, are you who I have been waiting for? And often, there's no simple answers or quick sense of relief, at least not this side of the Cross. Instead, in Lent, we simply encounter a Savior, wandering alongside us in the wilderness, accompanying us into the heart of darkness, who doesn't seem particularly interested in answering even one of those questions we once found so important.

And yet, at least in these five final days before Easter, the simple presence of a savior in our wilderness is more than enough.

Lord, when there's no reason to explain our grief, no answer to dismiss our doubts, no comfort to heal our pain, accompany us, be with us, guide us as we journey from this side of the Cross to the other. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 31

RISE TO THE OCCASION

PHIL MA, ELDER

I can do all this through him who gives me strength. Philippians 4:13

When I first heard of COVID-19 early last year, I could not have imagined such severe impact on a global scale. I'm certain most of us could not have predicted this COVID-19 world into which we were thrown, with words like masks and social distancing becoming our everyday language still almost a year after the virus first started to spread in the United States.

COVID-19 turned my life upside down. In April, I was laid off from my marketing job in the hospitality industry, as customers stopped traveling altogether. It was devastating not only professionally, but I felt that I had truly lost my personal identity. During that initial shock, I read an article that encapsulated my feelings: "...the unemployed are denied full participation in social life because others view them with suspicion." What further made things challenging was trying to juggle life between a full-time daddy daycare, loving husband, caring son and attentive brother, all on top of of course, trying to keep our family safe. It really felt like an impossible feat. As the weeks passed by with outpouring of solemn news more grim than the week prior, my anxiety, fear and helplessness began to grow.

But something gave me the strength to start to turn things around. It started out with a small thought while in prayer—if I am going through this, then a lot of other people are going through this in our Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church community. We are in this together. This gave me an idea to start the Employment Support Group, where we helped people with career advice and job-search skills, coupled with listening and emotional support. Next, I landed a few consultant roles at start-ups that provided me the flexibility to be a dad during the day and marketing, brand strategic advisor in the evening. While I have not landed my full-time role yet, there is hope that this will happen soon.

Throughout all of this there are certainly good days and bad days. What I have learned is life throws you both many challenges and many opportunities. It will seem impossible, but somehow you will find the strength to rise to the occasion because in Him, all things are possible.

Dear Heavenly Father, please be our companion and walk beside us in this journey of life. Please help us heal and find unity, as we come out of this dark period of time. We need your more than ever. Help us realize and cherish the importance of family, friends and community. Continue to guide us in mind, body and spirit. Amen.

MAUNDY THURSDAY • APRIL 1

IKE AND FEET OF PEACE

THE REV. DR. PATRICIA KITCHEN

*How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace.
Isaiah 52:7*

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 and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. John 13:3-5

French philosopher Simone Weil described forms of the implicit love of God: [When] God is not present to the soul and has never yet been so, it must then have another object. Yet it is destined to become the love of God... three things here below in which God is really though secretly present: religious ceremonies, the beauty of the world, and our neighbor. Weil shed light on why countless people connect with the reality of God in mountains and by the sea; why churches swell on Christmas Eve and Easter; why an encounter with a stranger, our neighbor, can reshape us.

I knew a man in Atlanta named Ike, who loved books and Christmas. His life was an unwitting nod to Weil's description of God's veiled love. He attended services, taught Sunday School, at Central Presbyterian Church, Atlanta; never officially joined. A healthy skeptic he washed the feet of the men in the Central Night Shelter each week for twenty five years. Ike listened to the shelter guests. He washed their feet. And more.

And then he quietly took the used towels home to launder each week.

And returned week after week after week after week after week after week.

The night Jesus broke bread and washed feet is all we need to know about how to live our faith. Simply. Humbly. Boldly. To be feet of peace. To seek feet to wash, mouths to feed, bodies to clothe, and unjust systems to change with love's power.

*Jesu, Jesu fill us with your love,
show us how to serve the neighbors we have from you.
Kneels at the feet of his friends, silently washes their feet...
Neighbors are wealthy and poor, varied in color and race...
Loving puts us on our knees, willing to wash others' feet...
The Presbyterian Hymnal, No. 203*

O Christ I pray, make my hands ready to wash, to touch, to clothe, to feed, to sacrifice, to give more than I think possible, to love more than I have the capacity. Come, O Holy Spirit and fill me with humility, fearlessness and irrational love. Amen.

GOOD FRIDAY • APRIL 2

THEY WILL LOOK ON THE ONE WHOM THEY HAVE PIERCED

THE REV. DR. SCOTT BLACK JOHNSTON

Since it was the day of Preparation, the crowds did not want the bodies left on the cross during the Sabbath, especially because that Sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So, they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.) These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, 'None of his bones shall be broken.' And again another passage of scripture says, 'They will look on the one whom they have pierced.' John 19:31-37

And looking on this one, what do we see?

The biography of Francis of Assisi, entitled *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, tells the story of Friar Ruffino, a student of St. Francis. Friar Ruffino was not a good preacher. Still, Francis asked him to go and proclaim the gospel in the church in Assisi. Ruffino beseeched Francis not to send him, saying, "I am a simple man and ignorant and have not the gift for preaching."

Francis, seeking to teach his student a lesson, replied, "Since you have not immediately departed to preach, I command thee, by holy obedience, to enter the church naked as thou was born, and to preach to the people in that unencumbered manner."

And this, Friar Ruffino did.

He stripped himself naked, walked into the church in Assisi, bowed to the altar, ascended to the pulpit and began to preach. The people of Assisi began to laugh. "You see," they said, "this is what happens when people do too much penance, they make fools of themselves." The people laughed and laughed.

Meanwhile, Francis felt guilty. Why had he done this to poor, loyal Ruffino? In remorse and penance, Francis also stripped naked, walked through the streets of Assisi, entered the church, bowed to the altar, and climbed into the pulpit alongside Friar Ruffino. He also began to preach. And as the two men preached together, the people in the church began to weep.

Now, I have no doubt that if the clergy of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church were to engage in this sort of activity, there would be congregational weeping.

Why, though, did the folk in Assisi weep? According to *The Little Flowers*, the people wept because Francis and Ruffino were unashamed, and they wept because the subject of their sermon was the nakedness of Jesus Christ on the cross and the utter vulnerability he experienced in his passion.

In general, we don't like to think of Christ being vulnerable. We really do not like to think of God as being vulnerable. Yet, this is the message of Good Friday. God became utterly vulnerable, on the cross, for us.

I don't pretend to completely understand this sacrificial act, but (on this sacred day) I do reflect on the deep love that lies behind Christ's vulnerability. And like parishioners watching Ruffino and Francis preach, it makes me weep. It makes me weep in awe and gratitude.

Holy God, who in the person of Jesus Christ, stands alongside us to endure the worst of what the world has to offer, give us the strength, the courage and the faith to stand alongside you this day. Help us not turn away, run away, or ignore this hard moment in our faith. Help us to see, in the midst of your suffering, your love for this world. Help us to feel, this day, your deep love for us. Amen.

HOLY SATURDAY • APRIL 3

IT'S HOLY SATURDAY MOST OF THE TIME

THE REV. KATE DUNN

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for the one who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:23-25

While suffering is not equally distributed in this world, most of us will at some point experience days that feel excruciating, our own Good Fridays, when our only comfort comes from remembering that God knows, God really knows, everything there is to know about human suffering, and walks beside us during those times.

And we may, on occasion, also experience our own Easter Sundays, moments of transcendent joy, when despair turns to hope, or love conquers fear, or when our eyes are opened to the miraculous gift of life.

But, as Father James Martin writes, “Most of our lives are spent in Holy Saturday... Some days are indeed times of great pain and some are of great joy, but most are... in between.”

How do we spend these in-between days?

On Holy Saturday, we remember that human suffering is real, and that the world can be cruel.

On Holy Saturday, we sometimes wonder where God is because we cannot see God.

On Holy Saturday, we wait, sometimes in anxiety, sometimes in pain, sometimes in doubt, sometimes in expectation, sometimes in hope.

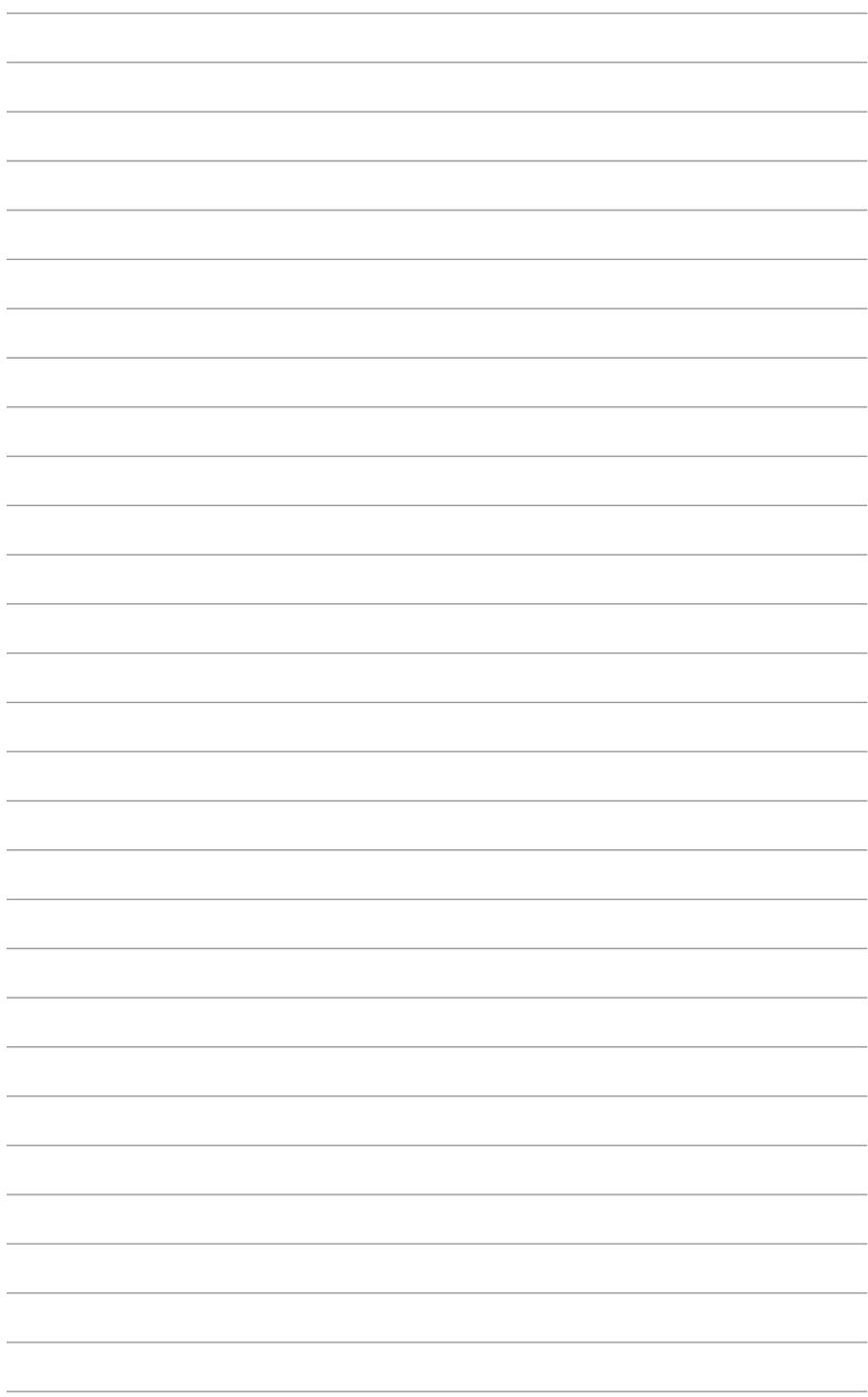
On Holy Saturday, we contemplate what it means to live in a world that holds both anguish and joy, fear and hope, death and life.

On Holy Saturday, we remember that God created us for community, and that whatever the challenges this day may bring, God does not intend or want us to face these challenges alone, but has given us the blessing of companions for this journey of life.

On Holy Saturday, we trust in God's promise that love never ends and that nothing in life or death can separate us from the love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gracious and loving God, thank you for the gift of life, the gift of your love and presence in our lives, and the gift of our communities. Teach us, we pray, to provoke one another to love and good deeds, support us that we may be present to each other, and inspire us to encourage each other as we wait together for that glorious day to dawn when your will is done on earth as it is heaven. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.





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**WE ALL SUFFER
FOR EACH OTHER,
AND GAIN**

**BY EACH OTHER'S SUFFERING;
FOR MAN NEVER STANDS ALONE HERE,**

**THOUGH HE WILL
STAND ALONE HEREAFTER;
BUT HERE IS HE
A SOCIAL BEING,
AND GOES FORWARD TO HIS LONG HOME**

**AS ONE
OF A LARGE COMPANY.”**

—CARDINAL JOHN HENRY NEWMAN