

2026

Lenten

Devo

tional

Fifth Avenue
Presbyterian
Church

Lent & Easter Services

February 18 | Ash Wednesday | Service & Imposition of Ashes
12 & 6:30 pm • Sanctuary

February 22 | First Sunday in Lent

March 1 | Second Sunday in Lent

March 8 | Third Sunday in Lent

March 15 | Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 22 | Fifth Sunday in Lent

March 29 | Palm Sunday

April 2 | Maundy Thursday
6:30 pm • Sanctuary & Livestream

April 3 | Good Friday
12-3 pm • Sanctuary & Livestream

April 5 | Easter
9:30 & 11:15 am • Sanctuary

Sunday worship is at 9:30 am in Jones Auditorium and 11 am in the Sanctuary. All 11 am services are also available on fapc.org.

Dear Family of Faith

One of my favorite lines from a song comes from a song called “Snails” by The Format. In the song, Nate Reus sings about his mother’s love for him: “I want to pay her back, but love is nothing you can tax.”

We often talk about “giving back” to our church community, but The Format is right: how can you tax love? In these Lent devotionals, you will read stories of grace, faith, hope, and even pain, but ultimately, these are love letters written by some of your officers, staff, and clergy. They share their stories and insights to journey with you in this season of Lent to remind you that you are not alone.

May God bless you on this journey of Lent!

Peace,
Werner

To receive the daily reflections by email, drop us a line at fapc@fapc.org. You can download this devotional at fapc.org/lent.



Declaring Repentance

ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 18


Rev. Werner Ramirez

Associate Pastor for Congregational Care & Family Ministries

*“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”
—Psalm 51*

Today is Ash Wednesday. We begin Lent marked with ashes and with words that are both honest and holy: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Ash Wednesday does not rush us toward resurrection. It invites us to slow down, to tell the truth about our lives, and to remember our limits. The ashes remind us that we are fragile and finite—and deeply in need of grace. Before new life, we sit with what is worn down, broken, or tired within us.

Life is hard. Complicated, exhausting, and often overwhelming. That’s not a lack of faith; it’s just the truth. As we look at the world around us and listen to the stories people carry—grief, illness, racism, political divisions, and fractured relationships—we feel the pain of the world in our bones. Our hearts long for hope, and for something strong enough to hold us when hope feels thin.



What we need is resilience, not the glossy, power through kind, but the kind that slowly transforms heartbreak. And in Lent, we learn that this kind of resilience often begins with repentance.

Repentance isn't just saying the right words. You can't just yell, "I declare repentance!" and expect everything to change (Yes, this is a reference to *The Office*). Repentance is movement. It's turning. It's letting go of what harms us and trusting God with what remains. Repentance strangely looks a lot like death; those same ashes we have on our foreheads today.

Years ago, I learned about death from the lens of a compost pile on a farm called the Farminary (one of our mission partners). Compost is made of dead things: rotting produce, leaves, scraps that smell awful and look useless. My job was to shovel it, mix it, and turn it over. It was sweaty, stinky work. But over time, something miraculous happened. The heat rose, and the worms in the compost pile got to work doing things that science can explain but looks like divine work. What was once dead became rich soil that would eventually grow lettuce, flowers, tomatoes, and so much more.

Here's the thing: New life didn't come by skipping over the rot. It came because of it.

Psalm 51 says it simply: "*Create in me a clean heart, O God.*" So here is Ash Wednesday's question: What needs to die in you so something more resilient can live?

Whatever it is, throw it into the compost pile. God is not afraid of the mess. God works in dust and ashes, turning death into soil and slowly growing something new.

Prayer from Psalm 51:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit. Amen.



Life as a Work of Art

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 19

Rachel Brenner, Elder

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” — Genesis 1:1

As I was looking down and out into a field of brightly colored wildflowers along the South of France, I turned to my close friend and travel companion, Lucy, and said, “When I see beauty like this, I think God is an artist.”

Throughout the Bible, God is called by many names, but the one that resonates the most with me alludes to His artistic nature, Creator. In fact, it has always struck me that the opening line of the Bible tells us exactly about His character – a creative, who brought everything into existence. As part of His creation, we are in relationship with this great artist because we are His masterpiece that He calls good.

Much like a potter or a sculptor with His clay, we craft our lives with God through the choices we make, the relationships we build and the gifts we share with others. After all, living life is really a creative act.

Yet, we do not have to go to the South of France to experience God’s artistry. We can all take a moment to appreciate the beauty God has given us to enjoy the laughter of a child, a warm hug from a caring friend or a multi-color sunrise right outside our window. These living works of art from God’s hands, invite us to wonder and to delight in God’s glory and point us back to Him.

Creator of the Universe, thank you for this day. Though we are all facing challenges, help us to see the beauty you bring into our lives in the most ordinary of moments. Guide us to create a life with you artfully that is filled with meaningful relationships, gratitude, and your purpose. As you send us out this week to do the work that only we can do, inspire us to approach each task or interaction with a fellow human being with creativity. Amen.



Victors in the Midst of Strife

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 20


Chrissy Badger, Deacon

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

This verse has been a guidepost for me through many difficult times in my life. The acknowledgement of fear and bewilderment when the path is unclear, combined with the knowledge that God is truly with us, solidified by the incredible creation that surrounds us, speaks deeply to what I’ve experienced.

In 2020, our adoption was stalled and could have failed, keeping my son separated from us for almost two years after first being together in person (after months of waiting). There was lots of work that had to be done, including an appeal to a foreign Supreme Court that I personally drafted, but there was not much that our family, friends, or church community could do to help. Our physical needs were met, and processes take time. Despite that, our Fifth Avenue family was able to support us and walk with me through that difficult time; with pastors calling to talk, deacons praying for us daily, and friends checking in whenever they were able.

This past September, our loving dog, Duck, passed away. As my son is now in second grade, this has led to many conversations about death, heaven, and what it all means. The grief of this loss is very real for both of us, as is the grief and fear felt throughout our country right now. I’ve found that these conversations have been very grounding for me, and I find my belief even more solidified. What Jesus taught is still true: we can learn to do better, the sick can be healed, we can learn to live in love.



This verse reminds me that, however difficult the storm may be, we have not been abandoned, and we never will be. We can hope freely because we know Who is in charge; and that, in the end, love, peace, and joy will prevail. In a line from my favorite hymn, “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee,” we are “victors in the midst of strife.”

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 21

Oscar Wilde

...And thus we rust Life's iron chain
Degraded and alone:
And some men curse, and some men weep,
And some men make no moan:
But God's eternal Laws are kind
And break the heart of stone.
And every human heart that breaks,
In prison-cell or yard,
Is as that broken box that gave
Its treasure to the Lord,
And filled the unclean leper's house
With the scent of costliest nard.
Ah! happy they whose hearts can break
And peace of pardon win!
How else may man make straight his plan
And cleanse his soul from Sin?
How else but through a broken heart
May Lord Christ enter in?

from The Ballad of Reading Gaol



An Unlikely Prayer: Indiana Jones and Me

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 23


Christine Boyle, Director of Outreach

“...because your heart was penitent and you humbled yourself before God when you heard his words...” —2 Chronicles 34:27

I am a child of the 1980s and as such have been formed by many movies from the greatest cinematic era of modern time. Well, to be clear, this is in the eyes of my ten-year-old self as I revert back to my youth, watching movie classics. One movie that I absolutely adore is *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), starring Harrison Ford. As a child, I appreciated the plot as it rapidly jumped from country to country, lending pace and urgency to finding Indy’s father, Henry Jones Sr., and ultimately the Holy Grail. I appreciated, for the first time in my then-young life, the centering of a movie on God. What has stuck with me in the thirty-seven years since its debut has been the simple, yet powerful line (or invitation as I would call it) to examine myself as forgiven and worthy. As Indiana Jones is in the Temple of the Sun in pursuit of the Holy Grail, he finds himself being put to the test of faith. Approaching the pathway to the grail dwelling, he cites repeatedly, “The penitent man shall pass.” Indiana kneels in humility to God (and to save his head from the booby traps!). I appreciated what this prayer was asking, humility before God, or a gentleness before God to say “I am not perfect. Please help me.”

I have adopted and adapted this mantra as my own, reciting “The penitent woman shall pass.” It is a prayer that sustains me. It paces perfectly with my running cadence, and gives me courage, calm, and confidence when exhausted from my runs (and imperfections). Most importantly, it is a channel to reflect on and talk to God about my own ways.

As I matured in my faith and embraced a healthy image of a loving and forgiving God, my mantra continues to create a life-giving litany flooding



my simple prayer. Synonyms and new adjectives to penitent, such as meek, humble, kind, generous, and just, expanded my mantra and my own understanding of who I am before God. In this season of Lent, perhaps that is the sincerest gift we can give ourselves and God.

Hope That Cannot Be Crushed

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 24

Amelia Vogler Topping, Deacon


“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

—John 16:33

Lent invites us to sit with discomfort—and this Lenten season in the Year of our Lord 2026 feels incredibly uncomfortable, given the near-constant turmoil in the world. It does not rush us past suffering or ask us to pretend that the world is not heavy. We live under systems and powers that can feel overwhelming—governments that exploit, silence, divide, or drain hope from the most vulnerable. Human authority, when misused, has a way of crushing the spirit and dimming the light of compassion, justice, and truth. In seasons like these, optimism can feel naïve, and hope can feel fragile.

And yet, Jesus does not deny the reality of tribulation. He names it plainly. *“In the world you will have tribulation.”* Lent reminds us that Christ spoke these words on the eve of his betrayal, arrest, and execution—at the hands of political and religious powers working together to preserve control. Jesus knew exactly how destructive earthly power could be. Still, he offers something radical: peace that does not depend on who governs, who rules, or who threatens.

“Take heart,” he says. Not because the world will suddenly become just, but because its brokenness does not have the final word. Christ’s overcoming is not loud or forceful by human standards. It is revealed



through obedience, sacrificial love, and resurrection. The cross—Rome’s ultimate symbol of dominance—becomes the very place where God exposes the limits of human power.

Lenten hope is not blind optimism: It is disciplined trust. It is choosing to believe that even when institutions fail and leaders harm, God remains active, present, and faithful. It is holding fast to the truth that no government can extinguish the light of Christ, because that light does not originate from human authority—it comes from God alone. Who among us doesn’t need this reminder?

As we walk through Lent together, may we resist despair without denying reality. May we grieve what is broken while anchoring ourselves in Christ’s promise. And may we remember: the world may wound us, but it has already been overcome.

Who is this Guy Jesus?

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25

Dennis Bushe, Elder

Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.” —Isaiah 30:21

After having two children in New York City, Ann and I moved to a community in New Jersey and enrolled our son Alex in a preschool that happened to be Presbyterian. As the holidays were approaching, the whole preschool was involved in the preparation for the church’s Christmas pageant. One day after we had just picked him up and settled him in his car seat his voice suddenly came from the backseat asking, “Hey, who is this guy Jesus?”

We had been looking around for a church to join but when we heard this message we knew it was time to settle on a church community to help us raise this kid, and our daughter! Since then, church has been foundational to our lives. Whatever and wherever the call comes from, listen to it.


And by the way, he was cast as one of the three kings.



THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 26

John of the Cross

On a dark night,
Inflamed by love-longing
O exquisite risk!
Undetected I slipped away.
My house, at last, grown still.
Secure in the darkness,
I climbed the secret ladder in disguise
O exquisite risk!
Concealed by the darkness.
My house, at last, grown still.
That sweet night: a secret.
Nobody saw me;
I did not see a thing.
No other light, no other guide
Than the one burning in my heart.
This light led the way
More clearly than the risen sun
To where he was waiting for me
The one I knew so intimately
In a place where no one could find us.
O night, that guided me!
O night, sweeter than sunrise!
O night, that joined lover with Beloved!
Lover transformed in Beloved!
Upon my blossoming breast,
Which I cultivated just for him,
He drifted into sleep,
And while I caressed him,
A cedar breeze touched the air.
Wind blew down from the tower,



Parting the locks of his hair.
With his gentle hand
He wounded my neck
And all my senses were suspended.

I lost myself. Forgot myself.
I lay my face against the Beloved's face.
Everything fell away and I left myself behind,
Abandoning my cares
Among the lilies, forgotten.

from Dark Night of the Soul

Strange Mercy

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 27

Katherine Ellis, Communications Manager


But he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." —Luke 7:50

"You cannot conceive, nor can I, of the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God." —Graham Greene

I spent a year after college working at a small church in Scotland. Each week on my day off I took the train to Edinburgh and sat on a bench to admire Nicolas Poussin's Seven Sacraments. Housed at the National Galleries of Scotland in Edinburgh, the seven paintings fill a small octagonal room.

My favorite of the seven is the *Sacrament of Baptism II*. Clouds break to reveal blue skies. The baptized are in various states of undress. A dove, the Holy Spirit, floats above Jesus. The composition is cheery.

Poussin's *Sacrament of Penance II*, on the other hand, conveys a different mood. Poussin relies on the artistic trope of Mary Magdalene as a repentant harlot. A lively dinner party is interrupted. A woman stoops. The chiaroscuro accentuates her head, lowered as her hair washes the feet of Jesus. His right arm is raised, offering a blessing. Supper guests stare. A man in the corner, taken aback, points.



The Latin roots of “penitence” and “penance” stretch to *paene*, meaning “almost” or “nearly.” Almost good enough. Nearly there. It is why we say the Confession each week in worship.

Repentance, fasting, and self-denial all are Lenten practices. All can sound rather dour.

According to the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, Lent is “not about feeling gloomy for forty days.” Instead of indulging in morose contrition or revisiting my dusty New Year’s resolutions, Lent invites a different kind of interruption. The word “Lent” means springtime. It is a season of life.

Lent, with its strange language of penitence, humility, and fasting, does not first remind us of lack. Instead, there is a presence—a fullness toward whom we journey.


I look at the painting again. Christ with his strange, abundant mercy, raises his hand in blessing and says to her, and says to you, and says to me, “Go in peace.”

God of strange mercy, breathe new life upon our dusty bodies. Bless us with your peace and abundant presence.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28

“Just Like Job”

My Lord, my Lord,
Long have I cried out to Thee
In the heat of the sun,
The cool of the moon,
My screams searched the heavens for Thee.
My God,
When my blanket was nothing but dew,
Rags and bones
Were all I owned,
I chanted Your name
Just like Job.



Father, Father,
My life give I gladly to Thee
Deep rivers ahead
High mountains above
My soul wants only Your love
But fears gather round like wolves in the dark.
Have You forgotten my name?
O Lord, come to Your child.
O Lord, forget me not.


You said to lean on Your arm
And I'm leaning
You said to trust in Your love
And I'm trusting
You said to call on Your name
And I'm calling
I'm stepping out on Your word.

You said You'd be my
protection,
My only and glorious saviour,
My beautiful Rose of Sharon, And I'm stepping out on Your word.
Joy Joy
Your word.

Joy Joy
The wonderful word of the Son of God.

You said that You would take me to glory
To sit down at the welcome table
Rejoice with my mother in heaven
And I'm stepping out on Your word.

Into the alleys
Into the byways
Into the streets
And the roads
And the highways



Past rumor mongers
And midnight ramblers
Past the liars and the cheaters and the gamblers
On Your word
On Your word.
On the wonderful word of the Son of God.
I'm stepping out on Your word.

Maya Angelou

MONDAY, MARCH 2

Anselm of Canterbury

You alone, Lord, are mighty;
you alone are merciful;
whatever you make me desire for my enemies,
give it to them and give the same back to me,
and if what I ask for them at any time
is outside the rule of charity,
whether through weakness, ignorance, or malice,
good Lord, do not give it to them
and do not give it back to me.
You who are the true light, lighten their darkness;
you who are the whole truth, correct their errors;
you who are the true life, give life to their souls.
For you have said to your beloved disciple
that he who loves not remains dead.

from "A Prayer for Enemies"



Fear to Courage

TUESDAY, MARCH 3

Roseanne Lind, Elder

“Do not fear anything, for I am with you; Do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, be assured, I will help you.” —Isaiah 41:10

One thing I know for sure, fear prevents anyone from growing and knowing their true value in life. Sometimes we must find courage to work through our fears and trust our faith in God to walk us through it.

God held my hand when I thought my family and friends would abandon me when I made the decision to leave my job after 22 years, and now the company I left is filing for bankruptcy. I did the right thing by the grace of God.

God held my hand after granting my mom’s wishes to spread her ashes in Alaska. I had to wait 13 years for it to happen, but I did it, after painful rejections from family members. I did the right thing by the grace of God.


No matter what words of fear you hear in your ear, always remember to leave it all to God. We all know that “God is good” and the response is always “....all the time!”

Staying Centered in These Times

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4

Nate Mahrer, Elder

If you missed the sermon by Minneapolis native Natalie Owens-Pike, it was a great blend of the Bible, the Bill of Rights, and perspectives from her hometown. It made me think about how we can stay grounded in these times given all the news as well as the potentially polarizing



reactions of those at work and other aspects of our lives. Romans 12:2 says “... be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” I think it’s important to find time each day to turn out the news, the noise, and the stress. If you’re reading this, please take thirty seconds to just breathe.

Now please join me in prayer, Merciful God, thank you for providing the guidance to help us live our lives according to your word and helping us find the joy in life each and every day. Amen.

The Bands of Orion

THURSDAY, MARCH 5

Sean McAvoy, Director of Communications and Development

*“Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion?”
– Job 38:31*

Near the end of G.K. Chesterton’s *The Man Who Was Thursday*; we witness the following exchange:

*“I am not happy;” said the Professor with his head in his hands,
“because I do not understand. You let me stray a little too near to hell.”*


And then Gogol said, with the absolute simplicity of a child—

“I wish I knew why I was hurt so much.”

*Still Sunday said nothing, but only sat with his mighty chin upon his hand,
and gazed at the distance.*

Sunday here is the God-figure, the creative force who separates the light from the darkness. His ways are unknowable, his reactions inscrutable. The main character and his cohort endure the unexpected turns and illogical twists that Sunday (at times literally) hurls at them. This novel reads like a tense dream gone wrong; its subtitle is, aptly, *A Nightmare*.

It is one of my absolute favorite things. In making no sense, it makes all the sense in the world.



Life deals blows to everyone. Each of us fights a thousand unseen battles. Each feels countless invisible cuts. We may understand some of our trials, but not many.

I recently stood outside at midnight. There were no clouds. The untrammled stars and planets shone. Jupiter hung overhead. Orion arced across the frozen Hudson River.

Many things had brought me to that point. Many anxieties and concerns accompanied me. I will never be free from some of them. I will never understand others. At times I have strayed a little too near to hell. But I also cannot lose the bands of Orion or bind the blessings of the Pleiades. I am but one infinitesimally small part of a much larger story. I pray to meet this story with mystery, wonder, and faith that, like those in Chesterton's tale, we will reach the end and find all we know and endure transformed.


Humble

FRIDAY, MARCH 6

Brian McLendon, Elder

“For this reason, ever since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you. We ask God that you may receive from him all wisdom and spiritual understanding for full insight into his will, so that your manner of life may be worthy of the Lord and entirely pleasing to him.” — Colossians 1:9-10

It was late one summer night just before the new school year started and I was with friends doing what unsupervised fifteen-year-olds do: loudly causing mischief. Things got a little out of hand and we took off behind some houses. Before I understood what was happening, suddenly wham! I was on the ground screaming from the most intense pain imaginable. After what seemed like hours to my teenage brain, an ambulance arrived. I spent a week in the hospital and more than two months at home before I was able to go back to school. What I remember most from that time was lying in the darkness with one of my friends by my side waiting for help to arrive and thinking, “What did I



do to get here?” I was a good kid. I got decent grades. I never got in real trouble. We weren’t hurting anyone. It was the first time I understood what it meant to be humble, to know a world with its own plans and that there are things out of my control. My scars healed. With physical therapy, my limp eventually disappeared, but that moment where my world view was flipped on its head has stayed with me and guides me to this day. It would have been nice to learn that lesson in a less dramatic fashion, but that is not for me to question.

Dear Lord, thank you for all you have given me and my loved ones. I pray that the thoughts in my head, the emotions in my heart, and my actions in our world are pleasing in your sight. Amen.

SATURDAY, MARCH 7
“For Lent, 1966”

It is my Lent to break my Lent,
To eat when I would fast,
To know when slender strength is spent,
Take shelter from the blast
When I would run with wind and rain,
To sleep when I would watch.
It is my Lent to smile at pain
But not ignore its touch.

It is my Lent to listen well
When I would be alone,
To talk when I would rather dwell
In silence, turn from none
Who call on me, to try to see
That what is truly meant
Is not my choice. If Christ’s I’d be
It’s thus I’ll keep my Lent.

Madeleine L’Engle



God Who Knows the Story

MONDAY, MARCH 9

Julia Ward, Deacon

“You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence” —Psalm 16:11

I’ve been wracking my brain to remember, and I’m certain in there is a good story to share here. It’s a perfect anecdote—equal parts hilarious, heartbreaking, reflective, and powerful. Yet, over the past few days as I’ve been searching for it, all that comes to mind as I reflect on my own personal faith is quite a beautiful pastiche of small moments, some I’m surprised I still have in my memory.

Sunsets and landscapes whose beauty literally took my breath away. Moments when something seemingly ordinary became so funny that the laughter wouldn’t stop. Times of real fear, and times of deep heartache. Split seconds that, when I look at them as a whole, remind me of God—who is there in the good times and the bad, the ordinary and the extraordinary.

While memories may fade and shift, the through line of faith remains a constant, reminding me to take the time to reflect on the wonders that are, and to root my actions in the love that God has for all of us.

God of Grace, though sometimes the right words do not come at the right time, may our actions reflect your love and your peace. Amen.



Walking Through the Thunderstorms

TUESDAY, MARCH 10

Louisa Raitt, Elder

“Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” —Mark 10:49

On an all too warm summer night, I was seated on the front steps of the St. Marguerite’s Retreat House. Two of my closest friends were beside me watching a thunderstorm roll through, wine glasses in hand. It had been a wonderful women’s retreat with shared meals, Bible study, and time spent building new relationships over some very competitive puzzling, but something was stirring inside of me that I just couldn’t shake.

As we watched fireflies seek refuge under the trees from the gathering storm, I broke the silence like a crack of thunder, “I think if I don’t go to seminary, I’m going to explode!” My friends turned to me with sympathy and care, both had been with me on a long journey of discernment and were not the least bit surprised to hear my sudden confession. “I’m just so scared,” I whispered, tears welling. A deluge of worry poured out: could I really just give up being an art historian? Would I throw away all I had worked for? Could I tackle three more years of graduate school? Even if I decided to go, how would I pay for it? The rain was torrential now, but the harder it rained and the more I spoke, the suffocating heat – both literal and internal- was released.

After listening to my tirade, both women put their hands on my shoulders saying, “You know, you don’t have to figure it all out today. But, it is clear God is calling you. What if you just open the door a crack to see what could be on the other side?”

God doesn’t expect us to have a plan or to have all the answers; we are asked to trust. Whether God is calling you toward a big change or a slow transformation, God is always moving and working in our midst. It is our job to listen and act and remember that we don’t walk alone.

Lord, help us listen to your call and walk boldly ahead. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11

John Calvin

We bow ourselves before the majesty of our good God, in acknowledgment of our offenses, asking that God may make us feel them more and more, to be grieved over them and so to renounce them, in order to be re clothed with God's graces, and to be made participants of the good things we have heard that God promises to his faithful people. And when God presents himself to be our guide, let us not doubt that God always has a mighty hand to keep us steady; and God will not allow us to fail, but in God's power we will rise above all the difficulties that would hinder us from coming to God. And however we may now have cause to be sorrowful about many things — and some are afflicted in body and others in spirit that nevertheless this good God will always give us the grace to be led under God's hand until, enjoying the fruit of the victory God has promised us, we may rejoice fully, singing God's praises with the angels of paradise, when we have been brought forth out of all weeping. May God give this grace not only to us but also to all peoples and nations on earth...


My Struggles with Prayer

THURSDAY, MARCH 12

Betsy Ross, Deacon

As an adult, I tend to struggle with prayer. This is difficult to write, let alone, accept as a reality. I had a perfect religious upbringing in a small Presbyterian church in West Virginia. My hometown is Buckhannon and is the home of West Virginia Wesleyan College; so, naturally, the largest population of Christians is Methodist.

I was in our children's choir and, when not singing, I sat between my grandmother and my father, often drawing pictures during the Sunday sermon. I was taught to bow my head when praying, and I was taught the



Lord's Prayer early on, and of course using “debts” and “debtors” instead of our Methodist friends, who stressed “trespasses” “as we forgive those who trespass against us.” My older brother may have been asked to say our daily prayer before dinner, but not me. I shook my head “no” as I stared at my Daddy.

Even with undergraduate and master's degrees in acting, theatre, speech, and drama, I still did not enjoy praying aloud. One reason was that, as I listened to others, they had this vocabulary using sophisticated words as they put sentences together. Well, I had no idea how they did that!

The first time I served as a deacon, Rev. Jan Ammon offered a few sessions on how to pray aloud, and many volunteered, so I found out, at least, that I was not the only one. Rev. Werner Ramirez, since then, has been most helpful with us deacons.

I have to admit that I still really like knowing ahead of time if I am to offer a prayer and which kind it is. Yes, I learned there are all sorts of categories into which most prayers fit into.

I smile as I write this. As a deacon, I intentionally signed up to be on the prayer committee. I am not giving up!

Recently, my assignment was the after-service prayer, where a deacon stands at the front of the sanctuary wearing the shawl to show that he or she is available for anyone to come forward and ask for specific prayer or even just a prayer for him or herself.

A few weeks ago, I was “that” deacon. A lovely woman who I vaguely knew, came forward and told me about a family member and her feelings and asked me to pray for him. I took a deep breath and began. It dawned on me that this wasn't about me. I had been asked to help someone, so I began. My words started flowing. I mentioned her and her family member by name to God and asked Him to be with them at this time, etc. Yes, I forgot about me and the words came.

I received a handwritten note – snail mail – from the woman I prayed with, thanking me. Even seeing her in person, she repeated how lovely my prayer was. Maybe I will have the opportunity to do this again. It isn't about me. It's about God.



The Bright Morning Star

FRIDAY, MARCH 13

Jaime Staehle, Director of Christian Education

“It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.”
—Revelation 22:16

Last Christmas, I purchased a set of beautiful wooden ornaments with the names of Jesus printed on them. As I placed them on the tree, I noted the familiar Messiah, Lamb of God, Redeemer, and many more. The last one I picked up stated in beautiful text, “Bright Morning Star.”

I’ve never seen a bright morning star. Several factors explain this. First, I am no longer at an age when staying up all night to see something shortly before sunrise is possible, much less appealing. Second, living in the Northeast, light pollution limits our view of the night sky. Third, I’ve never thought to look for this particular celestial object. And I say celestial object because what we often call the morning star is most likely a planet, Venus. Aligning with our own planet at just the right angle and time before dawn, it can be so bright that train conductors have mistaken it for an oncoming train’s light.

For millennia, this bright object, second only to the moon in the pre-dawn sky, has symbolized the hope that darkness will soon give way to light. And it is this hope for which Jesus is called the bright morning star in the book of Revelation, the one who appears at the end of the night to announce that the long darkness is not the final word and that God’s promised day is about to dawn. In that light, even the darkest hours can stir us to move, to live, and to shine, guided by the promise that morning is coming.

So maybe I’ll get up early one morning, and I’ll invite you to come too. We’ll bundle up and step out into the dark, and together we can look



God, Are You Calling... Me?

MONDAY, MARCH 16

Brendan Birth, Deacon

“Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy; to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.” —Romans 12:7-11

When I got an email three years ago saying that I had been nominated to be a deacon, my first question in response was, “Am I even eligible to be a deacon, or any officer?”

Because, you see, I wasn’t even a member quite yet. I took a membership class and was on the road to becoming a member, but I was not one yet.

And internally, I wondered whether I would be completely out of my depth since I was not only not a member, but not even Presbyterian yet.

But, upon reflection, the thing about me, and about many of us, is that God can call us to use gifts we might not even see in ourselves yet.

Sometimes, I think God may even call us to certain things precisely so that we can learn more about our own gifts.

We may not always believe in our own gifts. But God does. And God is not afraid to help show us gifts we don’t yet see in ourselves. And for that, I say, “Thanks be to God.”

God, help further reveal to me the gifts you gave me, so that I can use those gifts to make this world better. May you give me the resolve to say more “yeses” to the opportunities in life that allow me to use my God-given gifts, and the ability to use them more fully. I pray this in your name, Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 17

Julian of Norwich

But I saw not sin: for I believe it hath no manner of substance nor no part of being, nor could it be known but by the pain it is cause of. And thus pain, it is something, as to my sight, for a time; for it purgeth, and maketh us to know ourselves and to ask mercy. For the Passion of our Lord is comfort to us against all this, and so is His blessed will. And for the tender love that our good Lord hath to all that shall be saved, He comforteth readily and sweetly, signifying thus: It is sooth that sin is cause of all this pain; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

from Revelations of Divine Love

And They...

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 18

Erica Moffett, Elder

“Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they cast lots to divide his clothing.” —Luke 23:34

And they murdered her

(this could be Renee Nicole Good. Or it could be another mother...)

And they murdered him

(this could be Alex Pretti. Or it could be another man...)

And they detained him and sent him far away

(this could be Liam Cornejo Ramos. Or it could be another five year old...)

And they bound him and sent him to El Salvador

(this could be Kilmer Abrego Garcia. Or it could be another father...)

And they sent bombs raining down

(this could be Gaza City. Or it could be another city...)

And they raped the women and took the land



(this could be Sudan. Or it could be somewhere else...)

And they put fire to the church and shot all the worshipers as they ran out (this could be Korea. Or it could be somewhere else...)

And they marked the Jews and sent them to concentration camps (this could be WWII. Or it could be somewhere else...)

And they crusaded and killed indiscriminately (this could be the Siege of Jerusalem. Or it could be somewhere else...)

Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.

Father, forgive us all.

Jesus Christ on the cross, how unbearable is the pain of this world?

Jesus Christ on the cross, we need you in our lives. We kneel down and pray for mercy, peace, kindness, and love.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, hear our prayers.

THURSDAY, MARCH 19

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Cheap grace is not the kind of forgiveness of sin which frees us from the toils of sin. Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble, it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him. Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ.

from The Cost of Discipleship



Who Do We Say that I Am?

FRIDAY, MARCH 20

Austin Applebach, Director of Engagement


“Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, ‘Who do the crowds say that I am?’ They answered, ‘John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.’ Then he said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered, ‘The Messiah of God.’” —Luke 9:18-20

I have always been drawn to these moments of Jesus’s private inner spiritual life. I think it’s the same curiosity that draws me to reading published diaries and autobiographies of historical figures. And in this case, I really want to know what he was praying about that prompted this question: “Who do you say I am?”

In the past I’ve thought of this as a kind of test Jesus is putting to the Twelve: have you studied? Are you brave enough to speak the truth? Are you paying attention better than the crowds? Have you figured it out yet? And Peter passes! He knows Jesus is the Messiah. Good work, Pete!

But reflecting on this event afresh, I can’t help but wonder if in his moment of solitary prayer Jesus found himself in a place of deep vulnerability, questioning his work, his mission, maybe even his identity. A kind of dark night of the soul for the Savior. And in this moment the Master opens his inner reflection up to those who live most closely with him: “Who am I?”

In my own life it has so often been the holy community around me that has spoken the most clearly to me about the core of my identity. It can be so hard to see myself clearly, but I know I can trust the voices of those who love me, and whom I love. In this season of reflection I pray that we would have the wisdom in times of doubt to turn to our beloved community for the answer—and to trust the love and care we find there.




Jesus, we are so grateful for the people around us who help us to see ourselves clearly and root us in our identities. May we be a community that shines your love and grace, so that all may come to truly know themselves and you.

SATURDAY, MARCH 21

“In Blackwater Woods”

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars
of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,
the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders
of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is
nameless now.
Every year
everything
I have ever learned
in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side



is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it
go,
to let it go.

Mary Oliver

I Will Love


MONDAY, MARCH 23

Susan Roberson, Deacon

I have a lot to be thankful for in my life. Family, friends, faith, community, a sound heart and a sound mind. Put more lyrically by singer Zac Brown, “I got everything I need and nothing that I don’t.”

Yet these days, I am experiencing some form of anger almost all the time. It is kind of like the pesky tinnitus in my ears. Sometimes it is just a low humming in the background, hardly noticeable. But if I pause to think about it, it starts to thump like a heartbeat, and I start to obsess, and I can’t stop hearing it. And sometimes it is utterly debilitating, triggered by something that sends it squealing like a tea kettle.

I want to ignore the news headlines, but I am unable to. I feel a heavy load of guilt, feeling more helpless with every new headline knowing that I’m fine, but that others are not fine. I’m wallowing in the problem, but I am unable to figure out how to stand up and contribute to a solution.



When I was a teenager, I would get “down and out” and my parents would say, “Stop sitting around thinking yourself into a frenzy and do something. Go outside. Go for a run. Give me a hug!” That was good advice. And it worked. I said it to my kids, and it worked for them. But I try to take this advice for myself these days, and often I come up short.

But there is this one thing. It is the one thing that I left out on my list of all the things I’m thankful for above that both encompasses and enhances all of the others at the same time. And that thing is love.

“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

So, amen, the Bible tells us so. I will hope. I will endure. I will rejoice. I will believe. And, indeed, I will love and love and love.

TUESDAY, MARCH 24

“Via Negativa”

Why no! I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars. His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left. We put our hands in
His side hoping to find
It warm. We look at people
And places as though he had looked
At them, too; but miss the reflection.

R. S. Thomas



The Least of These

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25

Vasheena Brisbane

Associate Director of Visual Design & Communications


“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”—Matthew 25:40

A couple of years ago, while walking home from church one Sunday afternoon, Sophia tagging along and chattering as she usually does, we passed a woman whom I assumed was homeless. She was calling out loudly, asking for help. As we walked by, Sophia glanced back at her and something transformational happened. Before I get to that moment, though, let me offer a bit of context.

We live in a neighborhood that was once a place where a family could get everything they needed. As my mother often recalls, you could stop by Gabby’s Record Store to listen to the latest album, then head over to Richmond Dry Goods or Alberta’s Stockings and Hosiery to pick out your Sunday best, and cap the day with a visit to Daniel Rehmas’s Ice Cream Parlor. It was a neighborhood rich with different cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds, and above all, care. Today, the neighborhood has shifted to include a large migrant population. With the rise of malls and national chains, many small, mom-and-pop shops have disappeared, and the familiar “avenue” model has faded, leaving behind a gap you can feel.

Now back to that sunny Sunday. As we passed the older woman—clearly having a hard time—Sophia looked back again, her face troubled. She slowed, then stopped, visibly trying to understand why this woman needed help. Finally, she asked me, “What happened to the lady, Mommy? Can we help her?”

I asked her in return, “How can we help her?” partly because, in that moment, I realized I genuinely didn’t know the answer myself. Like many people, I wasn’t sure what the right thing to do was. So I let



Sophia lead. I've learned on this parenting journey that children will humble and teach you if you're willing to listen.

She thought for a moment and said, "Can we give her some food?" Of course, I said yes. We walked to one of our favorite spots – Goody's, a local Spanish restaurant – and bought her a plate of food. Sophia skipped down the block, beaming, as she handed it to her. The woman – someone many people might not think twice about – was so kind and grateful for what we could offer. She thanked Sophia and settled down to eat right there. I gently urged Sophia along so the woman could enjoy her meal in peace.

When my mother reflects on the fond memories of her neighborhood, I don't think it's really the stores or the shopping that bring her warmth and joy. It's the people: the ice cream parlor owner who knew the children by name, the butcher her mother would send her to for "a strip of lean and a strip of fat." It's the sense of community she remembers. And in that moment, I think that's exactly what Sophia was creating community – by giving to the least. She was welcoming this woman into something she already knew existed for herself. It was simple. She was hungry, so we gave her food.


Compassionate Father, help us to see our neighbors and our community through the lens of your perfect love. Help us remember that we are all welcome, and that what we do for the least of these, we do unto you. Amen.

Paul's Secular Job

THURSDAY, MARCH 26

Chris Edwards, Trustee

"There [in Corinth] he [Paul] met a Jew named Aquila... who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla... Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them... Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sisters and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila..." —Acts 18:2-3, 18



Although growing up Presbyterian, I knew that God called us to specific vocations, I have worked in very secular fields: law, finance, and technology. Working with few Christians created a disconnect.

Acts 18, however, changed my view of the workplace. In Acts 18, while Paul was in Corinth, he intentionally connected with other believers who had the same career as he had, and they intentionally worked together in their paid jobs. Later in Acts 18, he used the connections and resources from his paid job with them to do mission work together to help build the early church. Acts 18 encourages us to do the same:

1. Listen for God's call in the workplace. The Bible has lots of examples of God calling people when they're at work, such as Matthew 4:18-20.
2. Connect with other Christians to follow God's call together at work. Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila did. Find other Christians in your industry and use your workplace skills to follow God's call together.
3. Get ready for God to take you on the trip of a lifetime! In Acts 18:18, God then sent Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila together, to help build the early church.

I discovered Acts 18:2-4's importance for our jobs thanks to the daily readings at pcusa.org/daily/devotion as I was preparing a meeting for FaithTech, a group for Christians in the tech industry.


Dear God, thank you for the gift of work. Help us hear your call to us, and help us obey your call to us, in the workplace, so that we can use resources from our jobs in order to glorify You.

Trusting the Lord at All Times

FRIDAY, MARCH 27

Jeanne Lehman French, Deacon

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not unto your own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your path.” —Proverbs 3:5-6



Proverbs 3:5-6 has been one of my primary go-to Scripture passages for many years, and has helped me through various life adventures, including COVID episodes. But it isn't always simple to do, is it? Especially in these troubled times. Our emotions can get the best of us. What a difference it makes when we yield to the Presence of God, within where His unfailing Light and Love reside. He is present in every situation, in every troubling circumstance, even in debilitating illness. I'm slowly emerging from physical issues that have made these last six months the worst months of my life. It hasn't been easy, but God's light does, indeed, shine brightly in the darkest moments to those who trust in Him. And I do, with all my heart. During these difficult months, while resting in His everlasting arms, my prayers and Bible study have brought me closer to Him, bringing me comfort, peace, and even joy. A sign in my kitchen reads, "Stop! Let the Light of Christ shine upon you and within you." Christ is my joy, as is my supportive Fifth Avenue family. It's been a lesson in faith and in patience for me to yield to God rather than dwelling on the fact that my life has basically been on hold these past six months. But I trust that God will continue to open doors for me to help others in the same situation, while continuing to direct me in my journey, in His time, for His purpose. And I am deeply grateful!


Creator God, help us to trust that your everlasting Love is at work in every situation in our lives and in our troubled world. Help us to sense your nearness, to feel our burdens lightened, and to joyfully trust the all-knowing guidance of your indwelling Spirit.

SATURDAY, MARCH 28

"The Ballad Of Mary's Son"

It was in the Spring
The Passover had come.
There was feasting in the streets and joy.

But an awful thing
Happened in the Spring
Men who knew not what they did
Killed Mary's Boy.



And the Son of God was He
Sent to bring the whole world joy,
There were some who could not hear;
And some were filled with fear
So they built a cross
For Mary's Boy.

Langston Hughes

Parade of Peace

PALM SUNDAY, MARCH 29

Rev. Natalie Owens-Pike

Associate Pastor for Ministry to the Online Campus

“This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

‘Say to Daughter Zion,

*“See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey;*


and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’ ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’” —Matthew 21:4-5, 8-9

When I lived in rural Mississippi, I would often drive the few hours over to Louisiana and visit friends who were also public school teachers in New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Each spring, we would get together to celebrate the parade season of Mardi Gras.

Despite its pop culture associations with debauchery, parade season in New Orleans is also family friendly, with performances by marching bands of middle and high school students and entire parades dedicated to costumed pups! Parades bring the community together to dance and celebrate before beginning the weeks of Lenten temperance and reflection. One of my favorite parades was dedicated to political satire



floats critiquing hypocrisy in elected leaders, or corruption by those entrusted with state resources. This community catharsis allowed artists to hold up a mirror to those in power, and refute actions they deem unethical or oppressive.

In our Palm Sunday celebrating, we participate in similar catharsis as we worship Jesus who reigns in peace, arriving to Jerusalem under the name King of Kings. On humble donkey, Jesus enacts a parody of the triumphal parades of Roman conquests. Instead of a leader riding a war horse, displaying the spoils of conquest in the streets, Jesus invites the crowd to wave their palms proclaiming peace. By parading the choices of peace over the well-trod streets of war, gentle King Jesus shows us all another way. Jesus does so also to fulfill the messianic prophecies of Zechariah 9 and Psalm 118.

On Palm Sunday, we pause from our Lenten practices of quiet devotion and take up the celebrating cries of “Hosanna, hosanna to the King!” We join Jesus in proclaiming peace to all nations, to pray together for an end to the exploitation and cruelty of violence and war. On Palm Sunday, we rehearse this miracle, in the full knowledge ahead of Jesus on this path lay both the horrors of death and the miracle of Resurrection. In our own lives, let us wave triumphantly the palms of peace, trusting in no king but Jesus, calling out in parody or parade the injustices that the way of Jesus lays bare.

King of Kings, you lead the way on humble donkey, proclaiming the power of peace. Help us follow in your ways and lead by trusting you.


What would

Aunt Dottie do?

MONDAY, MARCH 30

Meredith Fleck, Trustee

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea” —Psalm 46:1-2



I was blessed to have an aunt who was one of the most optimistic, generous, and fun-loving people I have ever known. What made her spirit all the more remarkable was the life she had lived. Dottie endured many heartbreaks: she was widowed three times, her only daughter predeceased her, and both of her grandsons are autistic.

Despite her losses, Dottie built wonderful and loving relationships with her step-daughter and son-in-law. She was an understanding friend who listened fully and without judgment. She never pried, never criticized—she simply offered her presence, comfort, and kindness. She stayed engaged with the world, keeping up with current events, watching tennis, and cheering for her favorite Philadelphia sports teams. And she was a fun and supportive aunt to my sister and me.

Dottie loved life's small pleasures. Planning what to eat for dinner, picking out a pair of earrings to match an outfit, or sharing a funny story—all of these moments brought her joy. One of her favorite stories to tell was the time she was mistaken for Madeleine Albright by policemen outside Fifth Avenue—so convincingly that they stopped an entire parade to let her cross the street.

During difficult times in our lives, my sister and I would often ask each other, “What would Aunt Dottie do?” What was the source of her strength, her optimism, and her peace? I believe it was her faith. She rarely spoke about it, but once she told me that she felt God lifting her up and carrying her through the funeral service for her beloved daughter, Susie.

After Dottie passed away, I was going through her handbag and found a small quilted pocket prayer cross. Inside was a note explaining that it was a reminder of God's love and grace—a tangible symbol of God's peace. That little cross now rests in my own handbag. I carry it with me as a reminder of her faith, her strength, and the love she shared so generously with the world.



God's Co-Pilot

TUESDAY, MARCH 31

Thomas Wesley, Trustee

“Even to your old age I am he, even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.” —Isaiah 46:4

“This is Easyrider Five-Niner. Ops normal. Four souls onboard.”

That’s what I radioed to the Combat Information Center of USS Badger after I left her flight deck in the Sea of Japan. But nothing was normal. The radios were not in sync; the wind was barely within the envelope; there was no horizon; no stars, no moon. And, upon transition to forward flight in my helicopter, I developed “the leans,” a precursor to vertigo which might become catastrophic. Seventy percent of our balance comes through our eyesight. I had none, and my inner ear was rebelling against my brain, screaming that my instruments were lying to me. I was the aircraft commander. I had to fight to regain control; to trust the instruments in my scan. Four souls depended upon me regaining full control of my aircraft and my faculties.

“You play like you practice.” There was still chaos in communication with the ship. Foolishly, I still hoped to complete our practice mission.

“Four souls onboard.” Ops NOT normal. Thirty minutes had passed. I aborted the mission. Now to return to the ship and land, still with “the leans.” White knuckles gripped the controls as I came across the flight deck and slowed to a high hover. Too high. Another two feet and I would be forced to wave off and head back into that black abyss. I still had trust issues that almost prevented me from bringing the aircraft to the deck.

I cannot recall if I beseeched the intervention of the Lord, but I tell you now that the seat to my left was occupied by something divine. Muscle memory landed the aircraft that night. God was not my co-pilot that night. I was His.

Four souls onboard. Secure aboard till morning.

Dear Lord of the dark night and the dark mind. Show me the light that pierces the darkness and leads me home. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, APRIL 1

Augustine

Man's maker was made man,
that He, Ruler of the stars,
might nurse at His mother's breast;
that the Bread might hunger,
the fountain thirst,
the Light sleep,
the Way be tired on its journey;
that the Truth might be accused of false witness,
the Teacher be beaten with whips,
the Foundation be suspended on wood;
that Strength might grow weak;
that the Healer might be wounded;
that Life might die.

Fed to Love


so Love to Feed

MAUNDY THURSDAY, APRIL 2

Rev. Dr. Jonah So, Executive Pastor

“And during supper Jesus...got up from the table...and began to wash the disciples' feet.” —John 13:2-5

During our Communion services, I try to be extra conspicuous when using the hand sanitizer. It is my attempt to clearly convey the message that “my hands are clean” as I handle the holy elements that worshipers will subsequently consume.



However, before the Eucharist, the people hear whose table it is to which they are invited. “This is the Lord’s table.” The invitation goes out to a good amount of people. ALL are welcome to partake of the heavenly feast. At feasts there is abundance, belonging, fellowship, and hospitality.

In the Gospel account of Jesus’s first supper, he took great steps in preparation to feed and encourage his friends. As they supped, Jesus got up and began to wash their feet. Scripture does not report that it happened after the meal had concluded but during. As they were eating, Jesus used the very hands that broke the bread to wash the dusty feet of his friends.

Food and feet make for a queasy pairing. Hopefully Jesus had a good amount of hand sanitizer to supplement a thorough hand washing.

On this Maundy Thursday, I am challenged by Jesus’s action. Jesus commanded his disciples to wash the feet of others saying, “I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done unto you.” Yes, Jesus demonstrated that we should love and serve others. But he also set an example of when – during the meal or as we are eating.

Many of us want to wait until we are “fully ready” to serve others. But how often does that work out? Do we ever have all the answers? Are conditions ever optimal on our end to love or serve others?

While he was still chewing his food, Jesus served others. We should be sure to fill our mouths and hearts but shy away from loving and serving others simultaneously. That is what Jesus shows in getting up from his table at his supper. May we do likewise.

Servants are not greater than their master. Lord, this day you remind us that you lovingly invite us to your table to be fed. Satisfied with our daily bread, help us to not tarry in loving and serving others as you demonstrated for us. Amen.



When Were You Saved?

GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 3

Rev. Chris Palmer

Associate Pastor for Young Adults and Membership

“When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.” —Luke 23:33

“When were you saved?” That’s a question that I got a lot when I lived in Texas. “Saved,” meaning the moment you decided to come down to the altar, hang up your sinful ways, and give your life to Jesus. There’s something very Texan about this question. The rough and ready, do-it-yourself evangelical spirit. In Texas, my neighbors often repaired their homes themselves—fixing windowsills, replacing doors, re-laying chipped brick. They didn’t need a contractor to do it for them. They thought of faith in much the same way. For my neighbors, faith was part of a well-built life. It required work. It required commitment.

Of course, this is part of faith’s story but maybe it’s not the whole story. Today, on Good Friday, faith doesn’t begin with a crowd’s commitment; it begins with their betrayal. It begins with the cowardice of political leaders and the mockery of soldiers. It begins with Jesus pleading for his accusers to be forgiven, even when they would offer him no such quarter.

Today, faith lingers inside the ubiquitous knots that we human beings can create for ourselves. Good Friday remembers a God who is most fully God when residing with the betrayers, the cowards, the criminals, rejects, and failures. Maybe it also means that God is most near to me, not when I’m at my best, but when I find myself amidst that crowd.

A student once asked the Swiss theologian Karl Barth that same question: “Professor, when were you saved?” He apparently responded with a chuckle, “I was saved one Friday at three o’clock on a hillside outside of Jerusalem in 33 A.D.”



Holy Saturday

SATURDAY, APRIL 4

Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, Senior Pastor

“He descended into Hell” —The Apostles’ Creed

The movie *Walk the Line* is the story of Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash. If you have seen this film, or if you are familiar with the story, you will know that Johnny Cash, the enormously talented singer-songwriter, became addicted to amphetamines early in his career. Under the influence of these drugs, his life spiraled out of control. He lost his family. He was kicked off his own musical tour.


At the very bottom of this plunge into the depths, the movie depicts Cash trying to host a Thanksgiving dinner for his parents and the family of June Carter—the woman that he loved. At this meal, Cash gets into a silly and yet terrible argument with his father over the fate of a tractor that is mired in the mud nearby.

Johnny explodes. He runs from the house, and fires up the tractor. He is determined to free it from the muck—determined to prove to his father that he is not a failure. His guests chose this awkward moment to start leaving. Of course, they were leaving. After all, their host looked like a mad man; his red, red eyes were crazy desperate as he sat astride his John Deere—a bucking, smoking, sputtering beast. He was a man possessed.

Sensing that he might flip the tractor and kill himself, June’s mother, Maybelle says to her daughter, “You should go down there to him, June.”

June replies, “I am not goin’ down there.”

Seeing the hurt in her daughter’s face, and knowing the affection that she has for Cash, Maybelle responds, “Honey, you’re already down there.” And with that, June descends. From that moment on, June and her family stuck by Cash’s side as he struggled with the demons that tormented him.



They flushed his pills. They mopped his brow as he swore and lied to try and get more drugs. They drove off a dealer who tried to make a fresh delivery. Years later, Cash would credit them with saving his life. It wasn't easy. It was hell. Is it a wonder that June Carter wrote the lyrics to the song that Johnny would make famous, "Ring of Fire?"

"I fell in to a burning ring of fire
I went down, down, down
and the flames went higher.
And it burns, burns, burns
the ring of fire
the ring of fire."

According to Dante, the gates of hell have an inscription above them that reads: "Abandon all hope ye who enter here."

"Not so!" said June Carter.

"Not so!" say Christians this day – this Holy Saturday. We will not abandon hope. For our Lord stands in the most hopeless of places with us, speaking God's grace and drawing us toward the Easter light.

Saving God, Precious Lord, we know that you seek to reach us even in the midst of our own personal hells to speak words of hope and to extend a loving hand. Give us the courage to grasp your hand and to follow you to new life. Amen.

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We are not to simply
bandage the wounds
of victims beneath
the wheels of injustice,
we are to
drive a spoke
into the wheel itself.

— *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*