

# Lent & Saster Services

**February 22** | Ash Wednesday | Service & Imposition of Ashes 12 & 6:30 pm • Kirkland Chapel

February 26 | First Sunday in Lent 9:30 am • Kirkland Chapel 11 am • Sanctuary

March 5 | Second Sunday in Lent 9:30 am • Kirkland Chapel 11 am • Sanctuary

March 12 | Third Sunday in Lent 9:30 am • Kirkland Chapel 11 am • Sanctuary

March 19 | Fourth Sunday in Lent 9:30 am • Kirkland Chapel 11 am • Sanctuary

March 26 | Fifth Sunday in Lent 9:30 am • Kirkland Chapel 11 am • Sanctuary

April 2 | Palm Sunday 9:30 am • Kirkland Chapel 11 am • Sanctuary

April 6 | Maundy Thursday 6:30 pm • Sanctuary

April 7 | Good Friday 12–3 pm • Sanctuary

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

All services (except for 9:30 am on Sundays) are available on livestream. See *fapc.org/live* for details.

# Dear Siblings in Shrist,

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

For some, Lent is 40 days of solitude and contemplation, a time when we turn to God in quiet prayer as we follow Christ's path. For others, worship and prayer in community are more important than ever. Whatever path you choose, let this Lenten Devotional be your companion on the way.

Here, the pastors, officers and staff of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church offer reflections and prayers for every weekday of the season. On Saturdays, you will find a Lenten message wrapped in poetry. I hope you discover something in these pages every day that will bring hope to your days and comfort to your nights.

Wishing you a blessed Lenten season,

The Rev. Werner Ramirez Associate Pastor for Congregational Care & Family Ministries

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





### ASH WEDNESDAY • FEBRUARY 22

Jonah So, Executive Pastor

#### Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes. —Job 42:6

Throughout our married life, Jennifer and I have utilized furniture that was handed down from our parents. Last year, we decided to purchase our first, brand-new living room set. Despite having elementary-school-aged children, we opted for the beautiful light beige leather. We also purchased the insurance that would replace any damage the kids might do.

One day our couch was covered in black smudges. We had no idea what caused it, but a damp paper towel took care of it. A couple of days later, I noticed it again. This time, when I looked closer, there were little black dots. When I wiped them with my finger, they smeared the same way as when I mark the sign of the cross on foreheads on Ash Wednesday. Soot from the fireplace had somehow ended up on our light-colored sofa and made it unclean.

Ash Wednesday marks the start of Lent, a season of repentance. It is a time that allows us to recall that, as clean or as innocent as we may think we are, sin, like the soot from the fireplace, stains us. We remember, too, that water alone does not suffice to cleanse us; blood is required—Christ's blood.

We give thanks for the cleansing sacrifice. It humbles us. The ash reminds us that from dust we came and to dust we shall return. Rather than becoming despondent, those who hope in Christ find meaning in the precious time we are given on earth to live, love and serve in community. Such power comes from faith—in believing that death is not the end, but the beginning of life eternal.

Although ash is a by-product of fire and destruction, it is also a nutrient that helps to fertilize soil. How apt that God would bring forth life from death. Likewise, just as Christ's death brought us life, may our self-giving and service this Lent bring forth life in us and others.

Redeeming God, though our sins are as scarlet, make us pure as snow. In gratitude for your love demonstrated to us on the cross, help us to faithfully follow in the footsteps of our Lord, who came not to be served but to serve. Amen.





**THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 23** Emily Sytsma, Elder

### The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. —Psalm 51:16b–17

In my mid-20s, I took a study trip to Israel. On an unbelievably hot day, our group climbed a mountain in the Negev desert to think about what it meant for the Israelites to depend on God in the wilderness. At the top, we were invited to write a message to God on a stone and add the stone to a towering pile of messages left by other travelers.

That year I felt like I had been holding secrets. I was in the middle of pretending I knew how to do a job that I really didn't know how to do. And I was too young to realize how normal that is. I was also a little lonely. I did not feel that I was on a path that I understood. With the Sharpie I had been handed, I wrote what came to mind—mostly phrases from Psalm 51, etched into my memory from annual Lenten readings: "Create in me a clean heart, O God… Wash me with hyssop… Let the bones you have crushed rejoice." Looking at the stone, I wondered why the prayer I was leaving in the desert was so lamenting.

The renowned English preacher Charles Spurgeon said that a broken heart can't keep secrets. On that mountain, I think I hoped for some brokenness that would allow all I was holding in secret to leak out. I could feel that carrying my anxieties and confusion inside was creating a kind of wilderness. I wanted to break open those wilderness parts, confess my worry and weakness, and let God scrub some of it away.

Coming down from the mountain, I understood how letting your heart break a little and honestly lamenting before God can open up space for hope and gladness and growth.

Thank you, God, that we can depend on your love in our wilderness places and in our secret hearts. Draw us in, that we may lay down the things we carry that separate us from you. Amen.



### 27 Church for 2711 279es

#### FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 24

Matt Roush, Moderator, Board of Deacons

#### With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation. —Psalm 91:16

You're never too old to find a church to call home. This was certainly true for me, when at a time some might generously call middle age I found myself welcomed into the vibrant body of Christ that is Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. This was something I never expected, having become estranged from "organized religion" because of my sexual orientation and the growing politicization of faith. (Thanks to my husband, Porter, for helping me see the light.) It has now been a decade since I joined this church, during which time I have been honored to serve in many ways, blessed to be in the presence of so many devoted and joy-filled saints.

In a year when I have somehow caught up to the Beatles classic "When I'm Sixty-Four," I am rejuvenated anew by the recent experience of walking into a most unexpected church space that is providing an anchor for my mother. In her mid-90s, she has found sanctuary and support in an assisted-living facility, where she resides in a cozy apartment. This is the woman who, widowed at 33, grounded her three children (I'm the youngest) in a church where it seemed thats all of my uncles were the Elders. When she remarried many years later (nearing 70!), she found an entirely new church community, who rallied around her when she was widowed again.

On the weekend before Christmas this year, when my siblings and I visited Mom on Sunday morning, I realized she had found yet another church home, in the small chapel on the facility's ground floor. We interrupted that week's service about the Nativity and were invited in. As I watched my mom participate, her well-worn Bible in the basket of her walker, surrounded by others clinging to faith in their twilight years, I felt comforted in the knowledge that church is always there for you, regardless of age and circumstance.

O Lord, we praise you with gratitude for caring for the youngest and oldest among us, sustaining us with ever-abiding love. Amen.

### <mark>а роем for the day • saturday, february 25</mark> At the Start

Is this the fast I choose? Will I wake with the sun each morning? Will I start with thank you? Will I peel back the cage around my frame to let you in or will I get too busy? Will my Bible collect dust on the shelf, along with my journal, along with my sense of self, or will I roll back the stone and wade in? Every new season beckons something of usattention, beauty, the chance to create. This season is no different. So, like moths to the light, will we find our way toward God, or will we hover, circling fake suns? I am seeking something deeper. I am kicking off my shoes. I am starting this season on holy ground. —Sarah A. Speed (b. 1992)



# 24Sindow Seats

**MONDAY, FEBRUARY 27** Allison Muenzer, Seminarian

For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. —1 Corinthians 13:12

I study a lot in the Princeton Seminary library. I always choose the same spot, because I am a creature of habit. The same comfortable chair in the corner on the second floor calls my name. This study spot is surrounded by floor-to-ceiling windows, and this is where my favorite window seat calls home.

This window seat is the perfect place to watch the morning unfold, giving me the best view of people on their way to the first notification on their calendar app. I wonder if they remembered to brush their teeth this morning. I watch a group of friends allow the black squirrels to cross their path, bad luck or not. I notice someone flipping through a book as if they can't quite soak in the material fast enough. The slowness of the morning soon picks up; it always does. The pace grows faster, but I ask God what would happen if I sat here in the window seat a few minutes longer.

This seat of mine gives me a new view, a new perspective. And this change in perspective changes me. I recognize just how many morning routines I am surrounded by. I see stories I would not have noticed otherwise. The window seat turns into a holy corner. And this holy corner turns into a sacred space, where God is revealed in the seemingly mundane, yet overwhelmingly diverse lives of God's people. We are fully known by this God, just as much as those around us. Sometimes we just need to sit in the window seat a few minutes longer.

God of our Wonderings, come and meet us in our window seats this Lenten season. Delight in our everydays, and teach us to take notice of the stories around us. Amen.



**TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 28** Glenda Moreland, Deacon

As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience... over all these virtues put on love. —Colossians 3:12

Sometimes life is very hard. You are so angry at God and wonder how he could let this happen. At the same time, you are so scared that all you can do is pray and ask God to help.

When our twin boys were five years old, one of them was diagnosed with cancer. The treatment would be three and a half years, and if there was no relapse in the three years following treatment, he would be considered cured.

Those years were terrible. There were countless hospitalizations, painful injections, mouth sores and oh, so much more. Was I angry at God for having to treat my child with these toxic drugs in order to try and save his life? Yes! Was I so scared that I could not stop praying that God would save his life? Yes!

The three and a half years of chemo happened. Three more years passed with no relapse. We felt relief that our son's body was recovering. Life went back to normal, and my life probably looked pretty easy.

We assume a lot about the people around us, thinking everything is good in their life or that they have had an easy life. It's probably not true. Everyone has challenges. When you are going through a tough time, it is normal to feel that everyone else is okay and their lives are good. We often hide our hurt or weakness because we think no one understands.

When you are in a tough place, tell someone. They really do care and have probably been through difficult times themselves. When you see people who are on the other side of what you are facing, it gives you hope. We need to be open about our lives in order to give that hope and help to others.

Dear God, give us compassion and kindness to share the burdens of those around us. And thank you for those who share our burdens. Amen.



## Wisdom to Anow the Difference

#### WEDNESDAY, MARCH 1

Emily Dombroff, Videographer and Director of Livestream

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved. —Ephesians 2:4-5

If you'd told me a year ago I would be in Africa talking Bible with a bunch of Christians, I never would have believed you. Yet in late January I was part of a group from Fifth Avenue who traveled to Africa to visit our mission partner Ministry of Hope Lesotho. I was there primarily to shoot video that the organization will use in its communications and fundraising. But I also helped with many of the home improvements the group was there to do. I even attended each evening's Bible study and time of reflection. As a Jewish agnostic, I didn't think I would have much to contribute to the discussion of Paul's letter to the Ephesians—until the third night, when the conversation turned to mercy.

I shared with the group what I have learned as a proud member of Al-Anon for a little over a year. I could relate to the idea of mercy, having learned a lot about the power of compassion and the simple beauty in bearing witness to others' struggles and truths, without judgment or the need to respond. At Ministry of Hope I realized that, when I didn't have my camera in hand, I could still pitch in on whatever projects needed doing. Being there and getting to know the children was enough, but finding tangible ways where I could make a difference was also deeply fulfilling.

Back in the early months of the pandemic, I came to the church every Friday to film the Sunday service. Through that work, I felt grounded when the world was groundless. I was able to contribute something to this community and fulfill a specific need. My work in Lesotho felt the same way, and I am grateful now to be part of these two communities. At times when things can seem difficult to understand, I am grounded by what I can do to help, in whatever corner of the world I occupy.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.



# Frow Did I End Ap Stere?

**THURSDAY, MARCH 2** Marco Michael, Deacon

But Jesus looked at them and said, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible." —Mark 10:27

He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also he has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end. —Ecclesiastes 3:11

I have this fear that, sometime in the future, someone will expose me as a fraud. This irrational doubt of one's competence is called impostor syndrome, and it resurfaces in my moments of weakness. During this time, the verse from Mark gives me strength.

Every immigrant has their American dream; mine was to practice medicine after graduating medical school abroad. The younger me had no idea how to achieve this back then! Nevertheless, I refused to give up. I let God be God, and I turned studying into a profession. I studied the heck out of those medical board exams. Day after day, week after week, the process of studying became a form of worship, an offering to the Lord above. Memorizing another biochemistry pathway became less of a burden. I said to myself, "I am going to use this information to help people as an extension of God's healing hand."

Once I switched the mindset of what I could do into what God could do with my offerings, everything seemed within reach. Challenge after challenge became less taxing and more motivating, as I felt God's presence as I advanced. It was not until I stopped looking forward that I saw where I am, and what I have achieved, these past seven years. With God, I am living my dream, which has turned into reality in its time.

Lord of possibilities, we often question our worth or capabilities. It is true that we reach a dead end without your guidance. As our heart wavers toward resignation, help us remember: God has made everything beautiful in its time; and with God, all things are possible. Amen.





#### FRIDAY, MARCH 3

Jaime Staehle, Director of Christian Education

#### Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life. —Psalm 143:8

On the nightstand next to my bed lives a small picture frame. It is only two inches by two inches, and doesn't look very expensive. The hinge on the little wooden stand is wobbly and sometimes doesn't hold the frame up very well. The corners are chipped, probably from being moved from home to home, state to state, country to country. The glass is a bit foggy, even when I dust it.

The frame holds a Bible verse: Psalm 143:8.

When I received the frame as a gift, it sat on my nightstand at camp along with my flashlight and Bible. From there it came home to my childhood bedroom, and then a dorm room. In my rebellious college years, it was a bit embarrassing to me, so the frame lay face down on my dresser.

After my parents' divorce I moved to Idaho to care for my mom during a dark time of depression and anxiety. The words in the frame mocked me. Working two jobs and coming home at night to care for her, alone and lonely, in a city where I knew no one, I could see no truth in these words.

So I ran away, taking the frame around the world with me—first to England, and then to New Jersey. My heart began to heal. I reclaimed my faith, and the words on this frame.

I look at it now, amongst the many books scattered over my nightstand. The ink has faded, but by now I know the verse by heart. And when I wake up and see this little frame, I am reminded that, through all of these years, God's love has been unfailing, even when I didn't know it.

Dear God, help me to remember your unfailing love each and every morning. Amen.



### a poem for the day • saturday, march 4 God Would Kneel Down

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I think God might be a little prejudiced. For once he asked me to join him on a walk through this world,

and we gazed into every heart on this earth, and I noticed he lingered a bit longer before any face that was weeping,

and before any eyes that were laughing,

and sometimes when we passed a soul in worship

God too would kneel down.

I have come to learn: God adores his creation.

—Francis of Assisi (1182–1226)



## Praying Twice

**MONDAY, MARCH 6** Janet Nettleton Otto, Trustee

### Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing. —Psalm 100:1–2

Music was a big part of my life growing up. Piano lessons, church choir, school band, summer music camp, I loved it all! In college I studied music and sang with several excellent choral groups, performing beautiful sacred and secular choral masterpieces.

After graduation the real world beckoned, and my focus turned to my career and graduate school. Other than a brief stint with a prominent choral group in Boston, music moved to the back burner while I focused on married life, my career and an active New York City social life. It was all wonderful, but eventually I realized how much I missed being part of a music ensemble.

In 2017 my work responsibilities increased, requiring even more time in the office. My husband had passed the prior year after a long illness, and I no longer had the grueling, heartbreaking responsibility of being his caregiver. I knew it was time to reconnect with my passion for music. So I joined the Fifth Avenue Community Choir. Under the direction of our brilliant musicians, Dr. Ryan Jackson and Dr. Patrick Kreeger, we sing, we laugh, we learn new musical terms, we sing some more, and we laugh a lot. We love singing in Sunday worship (with the professional choir as back up!), raising our voices in prayer and praise, and sharing our love of music. It is church community at its very best.

It has been said that "he who sings, prays twice." Whether this quote is attributed to St. Augustine, Martin Luther or others, it is a good reminder to us all—those of us who sing in the Community Choir, those who sing hymns in church and those who just follow along in the hymn book—that God is listening to our songs and prayers, once, twice and always.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of beautiful music and a community with whom to share it. Amen.



## The Paradox of Christian Anity

### TUESDAY, MARCH 7

Séamus Campbell, Director of Homeless Ministries

### Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. —Isaiah 1:17

The idea of Christian unity presents a paradox. It seems to be one thing to pray about Christian unity, and yet another to act on Christian unity. I see these actions all around me.

Locally, the response to the migrant crisis in New York City has been epic. In July, when migrants first started appearing at our lunch program A Place at the Table, many were without shoes. We knew that few would be prepared for their first New York winter. We immediately reached out to our neighboring congregations, asking them to collect clothes, shoes, coats and backpacks. The response was overwhelming! Volunteers from our local churches stepped in to sort the donations and act as translators for our Spanish-speaking guests. They embodied the real presence of unconditional love as they welcomed and embraced people who have been through hell.

Meanwhile, the ministry of the Madison Square Park congregation, where I serve as pastor, has been resuscitated after an almost three-year hiatus. Since its founding in 2007, this congregation serving the homeless and other vulnerable New Yorkers has worked with Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Old/Independent Catholic, American Baptist and Jewish congregations.

Fifth Avenue and our partnering congregations are a living witness to Christian unity, acting as one to serve the poor and marginalized, gathering us all at the table. This gives me so much hope and optimism. We certainly don't have to look alike, sound alike or worship alike, but we do have the privilege of acting as one, just as our Lord hoped and prayed.

May this familiar hymn be our prayer today: "We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord, and we pray that all unity may one day be restored. We will work with each other, we will work side by side, and we'll guard human dignity and save human pride. And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love." Amen.



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 8 Claire S. Kedeshian, Elder

For thou didst form my inward parts, thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise thee, for thou art fearful and wonderful. Wonderful are thy works! —Psalm 139:13–14

Because of my Armenian ancestry, Oriental carpets have been a fixture in every home I have ever lived in. The following poem, penned by an unnamed author, was printed in the bulletin of the Armenian Evangelical Church of New York (on East 34th Street) and has been on my fridge for many years. It echoes how much our lives are like a magic carpet:

My life is but a weaving, Between my Lord and me, I cannot choose the colors He worketh steadily. Ofttimes he weaveth sorrow, And I in foolish pride Forgets he sees the upper And I. the underside. Not till the loom is silent And the shuttles cease to fly Shall God unroll the canvas And explain the reason why. The dark threads are as needful In the Weaver's skillful hand As the threads of gold and silver In the pattern he has planned.

Precious God, guide us to remain resilient as we decipher the patterns you have crafted for us each day. Amen.



## God's Anexpected Blessings

THURSDAY, MARCH 9 Lori Lauman, Deacon

### Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known. —Jeremiah 33:3

When my mother passed away in South Carolina in the fall of 2002, I needed to make arrangements for her dog. Pepper, a 14-year-old Brittany Spaniel mix, had first been my father's dog in Indiana before he passed away nine years earlier. After my mother's death, her friend and neighbor agreed to take Pepper. I was grateful, as I didn't feel it was good to bring an older dog who only knew suburban life to my studio apartment in Greenwich Village.

A month later, my mom's friend contacted me to say it wasn't working out with Pepper. I was distraught at first, but deep down I knew that I needed to bring Pepper to New York. Because I was an only child with both parents deceased, Pepper was my last surviving link to family.

The hurdles seemed daunting at first. I was in a new job and traveling a lot, so I needed someone to take care of Pepper when I was away. Also, my building didn't allow pets. But here is where I first felt God's hand at work. A friend (and dog owner) who lived in the neighborhood gave me referrals for all of Pepper's care needs. Then, after I approached the landlord with my situation, he met Pepper and made an exception. He allowed me to keep her.

On Christmas Eve that year, Pepper and I spent the evening with a woman I'd befriended while delivering Meals on Heels to her over the past year. Walking back to my apartment with Pepper in the falling snow, I distinctly felt God's blessing in a way I'd never have expected. And I was so grateful that Pepper was with me, both to grieve and to help heal.

Pepper stayed with me for another year. She attended my wedding and our honeymoon in November 2003 before passing away just before Christmas. The unexpected blessings of caring for Pepper during that time stay with me today.

Dear Heavenly Father, the maker of all living creatures, we thank you for your divine guidance and the unexpected blessings in our lives. Amen.



**FRIDAY, MARCH 10** Caroline Grindrod, Seminarian

#### Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. —Psalm 119:105

On the first day of my seminary class "Introduction to New Testament," our professor invited us to ponder this question: What metaphor would you use to describe the Bible? We took a minute or two in silence, all 70 of us aspiring pastors and theologians. A few raised their hands and said: a *library*, because the Bible is full of stories; an *ancient map*, because it offers cryptic instruction; a *stained glass window*, because the pieces all fit together.

I found the Bible to be like the ocean. It's deep, and somewhat calming in its vastness. So many people depend on it for their lives, but we use it in different ways. It can be overwhelming and harm people if they don't have the right tools or get caught in a storm. Or it can be life-giving and joyful, a place of connection to God and to other people.

I called my mom later that day and asked her the same question. She described the Bible as an old woman sitting on a three-legged stool, wearing an egg apron with little pieces of paper stuck inside. She said this woman would talk to you and offer up these little pieces of paper with stories on them as you needed them. She was grandmotherly and kind, warm in her tone and jovial in her speech.

I've seen the letters of Paul used like a locked door to keep people out, and those same letters used as a key to unlock the door. She's seen Leviticus used as a sword and the Psalms as a balm for wounded hearts.

This is my invitation to you today: What is your metaphor for the Bible? Could you call someone you love and ask them the same question?

God, you offer us this holy text, in all its nuance and complexity. We invite the Holy Spirit to be here among us as we consider what we read and how we approach it. Be near to us as we keep coming back to these sacred stories all the days of our lives. Amen.



### а роем for the day • saturday, максн 11 The Threads in My Hand

Only one end of the threads, I hold in my hand. The threads go many ways, linking my life with other lives.

One thread comes from a life that is sick; it is taut with anguish And always there is the lurking fear that the life will snap. I hold it tenderly. I must not let it go...

One thread comes from a high-flying kite; It quivers with the mighty current of fierce and holy dreaming Invading the common day with far-off places and visions bright...

One thread comes from the failing hands of an old, old friend. Hardly am I aware of the moment when the tight line slackened and there was nothing at all—nothing...

One thread is but a tangled mass that won't come right; Mistakes, false starts, lost battles, angry words—a tangled mass; I have tried so hard, but it won't come right...

One thread is a strange thread—it is my steadying thread;

When I am lost, I pull it hard and find my way.

When I am saddened I tighten my grip and gladness glides along its quivering path; When the waste spaces of my spirit appear in arid confusion,

the thread becomes a channel of newness of life.

One thread is a strange thread—it is my steadying thread; God's hand holds the other end...

—Howard Thurman (1900–1981)





#### MONDAY, MARCH 13

Timothy Palmer Curl, Director of Communications & Development

### 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

Two years ago my husband and I retired and moved to central Virginia, where I became enamored of the sky. Maybe it was all those years of the Manhattan cityscape blocking the view, but the Virginia sky presented a vast new canvas to me just about every day. The winter sky in particular. Every day at about five o'clock I would glimpse new colors seeping through the blinds—oranges and purples, indigo and hot pink. I started posting Instagram photos of the most spectacular sunsets and ended up with two dozen of them.

A Judy Collins song from the early '6os, "Winter Sky," kept coming to mind and, frankly, dragging me down. "Out under the winter sky," she sings, "and I feel like someone's gonna die." It's a mournful tune, in a minor key, that strikes the saddest notes of winter. Retirement, and my recent 65th birthday, tell me that I am in the winter of my life. At some point, there will be no more springs.

Aging can feel hopeless that way. Grief and loss can feel hopeless that way. Sad, dreary winter. Winter is the Lenten season, six unhappy weeks with only the dim hope of resurrection to keep us going.

But the winter sky, my winter sky, rebuffs these despairing thoughts. Winter's pale daylight may dissipate early, but it sends up fireworks before it goes. It tells us that we don't need to spend these days pining for spring, not when there is so much beauty in the winter sky, so much new life to be found in the winter days. In the last verse of "Winter Sky," Collins reveals this wisdom. "I feel like someone's being born," she sings. "Tells my soul not to moan."

God of the heavens and the earth, help us to glimpse the beauty and the promise of life that you offer to us even on our darkest days. May we feel ourselves carried along in your loving arms. Amen.



### **Wisiting** Wise Friends

#### **TUESDAY, MARCH 14**

Veronica Ota, Seminarian

### Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding, for her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold. —Proverbs 3:13–14

I'm getting married this June and have been thinking about the wedding tradition of having something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue. I read that it's good to borrow an item from someone who has had a long and happy marriage. While we were home for winter vacation, my fiancé and I made a special visit to a couple from my home church to borrow a piece of jewelry for our ceremony.

The couple's names are Tom and Tsuru, and they are 98 and 96 years old. They will celebrate their 74th wedding anniversary this year. We went to their house to pick up jewelry, but we ended up visiting with them for almost three hours. As we sipped green tea and enjoyed the delicious cake their daughter had made, Tom and Tsuru shared decades' worth of photos and stories with us.

We learned that Tsuru survived bombings in Yokohama during World War II by hiding in a shelter. As a Japanese American, Tom was incarcerated at Tule Lake until he was drafted into the army. After the war, he took a civil service job in Yokohama, where he met Tsuru. Most of the photos we flipped through were of Japanese dolls that Tsuru had sewn and crafted over the years, but we could occasionally see Tom reflected in the glass doll cases, photographing his wife's creations. I picked a gold ring to borrow, but we will forever treasure the beautiful experience of simply being with a couple who have seen and done so much in their lives together.

Would we have met them if not for the church? Christ brings us together as one family, and churches are places where we can grow closer to our siblings. How might we share wisdom with one another and grow closer in faith, hope and love as a church community this Lenten season?

God of Wisdom, grant us the courage to cultivate deeper relationships with one another so that we can share, receive and experience the unifying power of Christ's redemptive love. Amen.

### What We Pray For

#### WEDNESDAY, MARCH 15

Ashley Gonzalez, Director of Engagement

When we have reached the end of our rope, what do we ask God to give us? Normally I pray for what I want to happen, but only if it is God's will. Which, honestly, seems pretty decent to me. I do want to live in a way that is in line with God's will. But I also think that, as we grow in our faith, what we pray for matters.

That's why this prayer by the child-king Solomon feels so mature. Rather than praying for people to listen to him or for his legacy to carry on throughout history, Solomon prays for an understanding mind. As someone in our Wednesday night Bible study commented, "Solomon did what Adam and Eve failed to do, which was ask for the ability to discern between good and evil." And God is pleased with Solomon's request.

This can be challenging for anyone who has spent a lot of time in discernment. Rarely are prayers immediately answered in a way that feels concrete. Still, the comfort of knowing that God hears those who cry out in impossible situations, and answers them, is evidence that God is always with us. Perhaps just that amount of faith, which may not seem all that extraordinary, is all we need for today.

Lord, may you give us an understanding mind like Solomon, for this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. Amen.



## Garing for God's Greation

**THURSDAY, MARCH 16** Carolyn Ferguson, Deacon

## We don't have to know how to respond to the climate crisis perfectly, but we do have to plant our seeds, we have to try, we have to do the good that is ours to do and trust that God is and can work with that.

-The Rev. Sarah A. Speed, "Planting Seeds" (Sermon, Oct. 16, 2022)

I began my sustainability journey several years ago when I moved to New York City. My journey began with simple acts of recycling more and carrying a reusable tote bag with my water bottle. It has grown to purchasing thrifted clothing and using plastic-free home products. I started out of curiosity after seeing an influencer going zero-waste to the point of fitting almost five years of trash into one glass jar.

At first, being sustainable to the point of zero-waste was overwhelming. There was so much information on how to be more sustainable, and I felt the pressure to be perfect. On top of that, how could I, an ordinary person, make a difference? Yet despite my doubts, I started my sustainable journey.

This past fall, Fifth Avenue's outstanding clergy team had a sermon series called "Holy Ground," about the importance of caring for God's creation. The Rev. Sarah Speed's sermon, "Planting Seeds," about the parable of the sower who throws seeds on different terrains (Matthew 13:1-9) stayed with me for weeks. Sustainability has been important to me, but it was her sermon and others that broadened my perspective on why sustainability matters. We are caring for God's creation.

I am always learning, as with any journey of personal growth. But now I have shifted my focus to progress rather than perfection, remembering that every small act of sustainability cares for God's creation and trusting that God can work with that. As Pastor Sarah shared, "I wonder if Jesus knew that we would need a story about an ordinary person who does the good that is theirs to do, and with God's help makes a difference."

Heavenly God, we can do the good that is ours to do to care for your creation. Amen.



FRIDAY, MARCH 17 Patrick Obeng-Frimpong, Elder

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. —Hebrews 12:1–2

In the Greek games, a judge would stand at the finish line, holding in plain sight the laurel leaves that would be rewarded to the victor. As runners came down the final stretch, they were exhausted, tired and feeling as though they could not go another step. But suddenly there was a prize in sight, and a new burst of energy would kick in.

This is the picture behind the phrase "looking unto Jesus" in Hebrews 12:2. We must keep our eyes on Jesus Christ. And our prize is the privilege of standing before him and receiving the crown of righteousness he will give us.

That is why we live the Christian life, why we try to live godly lives and why we try to reach people for him. It is not for earthly riches, or applause, or notoriety. It is so we can hear Jesus say to us on that final day, "Well done, good and faithful servant." It is not to earn God's approval, because as believers, we have already found it. But it is to ultimately say, "Lord, I took the life you gave me and tried to make a difference."

Life is full of challenges. I get discouraged at times. Looking unto Jesus is what keeps me going when the going gets tough. That is when I remind myself that, as a Christian, I am running for the Lord until I see his face.

We look to you, Lord, our strength, the author and finisher of our faith. Amen.



### POEMS FOR THE DAY • SATURDAY, MARCH 18 Being walkers with the dawn and morning

Walkers with the sun and morning, We are not afraid of night, Nor days of gloom, Nor darkness, Being walkers with the sun and morning.

Langston Hughes (1901–1967)

### Let Evening Come

Let the light of late afternoon shine through chinks in the barn, moving up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the cricket take up chafing as a woman takes up her needles and her yarn. Let evening come.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned in long grass. Let the stars appear and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den. Let the wind die down. Let the shed go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop in the oats, to air in the lung let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't be afraid. God does not leave us comfortless, so let evening come.

Jane Kenyon (1947–1995)

# R Prayer for Spring

#### MONDAY, MARCH 20

Kenneth O. Jones, Associate Minister (1963–1996)

### But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. —James 3:17

O God of winter snows and summer heat, we worship you as a God of infinite variety. We see your handiwork in the multitude of flowers in nature, of fish in the seas, of insects and birds in the air. And we praise your name also for the variety within the human family.

We say thank you, O God, that everyone is not monotonously the same. Give us the grace to appreciate this variety, and give us the wisdom to make use of the gifts each adds to our life together.

Help us to confess with the Apostle of old that there are many things we wish we had not done, and also many good things we have meant to do but have not. Help us to fill the vast gap between our professions of intent and our failure in our performance.

For we know that the world is not impressed with words, so much as the demonstrations of love, compassion and service. Forgive us for our failures as people who profess faith, and empower us to greater witness.

Continue the redemptive work of Christ through each of us, O God, through each of us!

Amen.



### 27 Continuing Presence

**TUESDAY, MARCH 21** David Clark, Trustee

For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. —Romans 8:38–39

God is always present, every day with a presence unbearable to face and easy to turn from, tolerable only due to ever-proffered Grace that asks nothing but acceptance.

Grace offers joy but also brings inescapable knowledge of fallenness, moral ignorance, personal disorder and constant error. Deeper, however, it offers repose—not freedom from ordinary physical fear or practical worry, nor from pain or grief, but certainty of the love from which Grace flows.

The grass withers, the flower fades; All things pass away; you remain. Beginning and End, eternal. You made me; you save me; you love me. May your presence never leave me. Amen.



## Slow Prayers & Love Stories

**WEDNESDAY, MARCH 22** Jama Toung, 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

Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. —Psalm 62:8

I haven't always been able to pray. I could recite and read prayers, but I had a lot of trouble accessing my own words. Even now, when prayer in my own words has become semi-comfortable, there are times when I rush right through the words. Sometimes it's when I'm hungry, along with the others gathered around the table. Sometimes it's when I'm tired and just want to close my eyes and call it a day. But most times it's when the prayer won't come—when it's a struggle to say anything. The prayers are there, swirling around in my head, but there is no poetic elegance. In those moments, I pray words of gratitude, as slowly as I can, while breathing deeply and trusting God to help.

Trusting God to help is also something that has taken me some time. I was raised on hard work and hard knocks, where, as the saying goes, "you get what you deserve." It was difficult to believe that I could pour out my heart before God and find refuge and strength. During the pandemic, I had the unique opportunity to hear "love stories" from my church family. Each Sunday our community group gathered on Zoom, and our guest storyteller told their "family love story." These stories ranged from grandparent nuptials to in-law love language to families created and sealed in love. All of these stories, strengthened by the presence of a loving God, were told by trusting storytellers, pouring out their hearts before God and one another.

Dear God, thank you for another day in the company of friends and family. Thank you for being my refuge, my strength and my shield. Amen.





### THURSDAY, MARCH 23

Bryan Rombot, Deacon

#### When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. —Psalm 56:3

On Sept. I, 2019, a mysterious skin infection sent me to the hospital, producing rashes and unexplained effects on my body. That September would be difficult for my family and me; we had never had a crisis of this magnitude before. It disrupted my studies, and I couldn't return to college. My family spent countless days with me, but we couldn't understand why I succumbed to this infection. Worse, it wasn't over once I left the hospital. Before that month was out, I visited two other hospitals. We felt that nothing was working and that there was no end. So with no options and no answers, we turned to God. Our family prayed, sang hymns and read Bible verses. Come Thanksgiving, the crisis ended, and we celebrated Christmas with friends and family.

Through it all, I learned to fall back on faith when things get rough. When others couldn't deliver, God delivered. We didn't waste time on tears; we turned to God. God knows this world is imperfect, but he finds ways to help his children. God's answers are always "Yes" and "Amen." Similar to how God sent his son to free us from sin, God helped us during our crisis and guided us through the dark. God has shown us time and time again that when crisis abounds, God responds. God hears us; he knows of our suffering and provides a lifeline for us. So when all else fails, turn to God and trust in what God does.

Dear God, we thank you for providing us with a guiding hand when crisis abounds. We thank you for reassuring us that you are always near when the worst happens. Lord, remind us that you are close; and that there's nothing to fear when you are near. Bless us when we smile or cry, but know that when we turn to you, we trust you. All these prayers we lift in your name. Amen.



## The Spirit Romony 21s

#### FRIDAY, MARCH 24

Carol Kenney, President, Board of Trustees

### For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. —Matthew 18:20

As a child growing up in the Midwest during the 1950s and early 1960s, I went to church every Sunday. I remember coloring Moses in a basket floating down the Nile, but otherwise I remember very little from these early Sunday School years. How could stories of people in sandals walking dusty roads have anything to do with *me*? By my teens, church was the center of my social life and included senior high choir, social service and a teen fellowship group. But Bible study was no longer part of my focus.

Fast forward to fall 2018 and the Fifth Avenue sermon series on the matriarchs and patriarchs of the Bible. With Scott's sermon about Melchizedek, I realized how little I knew about the Bible, especially the Old Testament. During the summer of 2020, and the doldrums of Covid isolation, I joined an online Bible study led by Rachel Brenner and Kristy Reed. Since then, as we have studied 13 books, we have also lost a member to cancer, supported many through hardships, and expanded our group, both through more people joining and the birth of a baby!

We are a diverse group, by every definition of the word—age, race, ethnicity, geography, background. When we meet, we feel Christ's presence among us. Each week we end in prayer, which includes asking that we might be the answer to someone else's prayer.

Joining this group has been incredibly meaningful and rewarding. Our Bible study group has transformed our 2,000+ member church into something small and intimate, a setting to support others and especially to feel Christ's presence, for which I am extremely grateful.

Gracious God, in this Lenten season, we are especially thankful for your Word preserved in the Bible, for anchoring and placing us in your story and your history, and for filling us with Christ's presence and Christ's peace. Amen.

### <mark>а роем for the day • saturday, максн 25</mark> In Praise of Fire

In the beginning The Word was red, |And the sound was thunder, And the wound in the unseen Spilled forth the red weather of being.

In the name of the Fire, The Flame And the Light: Praise the pure presence of fire That burns from within Without thought of time.

The hunger of Fire has no need For the reliquary of the future; It adores the eros of now, Where the memory of the earth In flames that lick and drink the air Is made to release

Its long-enduring forms In a powder of ashes Left for the wind to decipher. As air intensifies the hunger of fire, May the thought of death Breathe new urgency Into our love of life.

As fire cleanses dross, May the flame of passion Burn away what is false.

As short as the time From spark to flame, So brief may the distance be Between heart and being.

May we discover Beneath our fear Embers of anger To kindle justice.

May courage Cause our lives to flame, In the name of the Fire, And the Flame And the Light.

John O'Donohue (1956–2008)



# Deep in the Save

#### MONDAY, MARCH 27

Christine Boyle, Director of Outreach & Missions

#### Then Jesus shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" —John 11:43

In 2017 I had the opportunity to travel to Israel on pilgrimage. Truth be told, I had no desire to go to the Holy Land. However, an all-expenses-paid trip did persuade my "no desire" into a willingness to go. With my departure hours away, I called my family. The messages relayed to me centered on being open to the experience, including pushing myself into uncomfortable places.

On Ash Wednesday, outside of Jerusalem, in the town of al-Eizariya (Bethany), we stopped at the site believed to be the tomb of Lazarus. I do not like restrictive, small spaces. Thus, a visit to a tomb was a push into a very uncomfortable place. As the prospect of descending a deep cave pathway loomed, I found my heart pounding. I was fearful of being confined. I was fearful of not knowing what was on the other side. What if there wasn't enough air to breathe?

Entering the tomb felt like an ask too much for me. Nonetheless I found myself in the queue. It was amazing how deafening the cave was, blocking out the ambient street noise, yet animating the noise from within. Whispers were loud and clear enough to wake the dead! Of course Lazarus heard the Lord calling his name. As pilgrims ascended the stone pathway, I nervously asked, "How was it?"—not from a place of sacred encounter, but out of self-interest, to determine if I could really enter the tomb. My turn neared, and I watched my fellow pilgrims drop to their knees and crawl through a small rock cutout. Meanwhile, I was silently suffocating. But soon enough, I dropped to my knees, clamped my eyes shut, inhaled my "last" breath and exploded into that tomb.

Peace and stillness greeted me. Life was in this tomb and was called forth from this tomb, a new creation in Christ. That night, in reflection, I realized that caves are good places to silently discern and encounter the Lord. It is okay to go "interior" and to be in a state of waiting, like Lazarus. Because soon enough, we will each hear the Lord calling us forth.

Lord, may I rise like Lazarus with the courage, joy and conviction that only you call me by name. Amen.

### On the Sommunion Trail

**TUESDAY, MARCH 28** Vijay Wijesundera, Deacon

And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. —Acts 2:46–47

On the first Sunday of 2023, instead of gathering in the Sanctuary, we gathered around tables in Bonnell Hall for breakfast, communion and hymns. The idea of communion as a meal has always fascinated me, ever since it was first described to me by the late Brother Thomas Draney, a Roman Catholic religious who was an educator and a social worker.

At the time of Jesus, whom one ate with seems to have been more significant socially than whom one slept with; the Pharisees were scandalized when Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus used meals as a means of building community and teaching. The Last Supper was followed by the First Breakfast. When Jesus appeared to the disciples at the Sea of Galilee after the resurrection, he called them to a lakeside breakfast he had prepared.

The first disciples were Jews; they went to the temple for ritual sacrifice and broke bread in their homes. The eucharist, for them, was a meal. Remembering that the eucharist is an action, not an object, the atmosphere of a meal encourages congregants to share their hopes, struggles and details of their faith journeys in ways that are not possible at a liturgy, where they are mere observers.

The breakfast church we shared on Jan. 1 was a returning to our roots, because the eucharist was a meal before it was a liturgy. This returning may be analogous to a spiral staircase, which covers the same ground but higher up at a later time.

The church that eats together and prays together will grow together and stay together. May the Holy Spirit guide us in this endeavor!

Creator God, send down your Spirit on this community of disciples so that we may be refreshed, enlightened and nourished on our journey to you! Amen.

### Fearful & Wonderful 21s!

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 29 Porter Binks, Clerk of Session

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. —Psalm 139:13–15

One of my favorite photos is displayed on the "About Us" page of the church website. It shows our senior pastor, arms outstretched, bidding us to hear the good news. In it I see the diversity of our congregation and visitors. It mirrors our declaration that "All Are Welcome."

At Fifth Avenue we believe that diversity and inclusion are healthy for a vibrant church. That's why I read Psalm 139 as an affirmation that God made me who I am. His hand was shaping me before my birth. I was not offered choices about how I would come into this world; not asked if I wanted to be straight or gay, white or black, rich or poor. The psalm reassures me that, as Pastor Werner often says, I am enough. I wish someone had told me that at 15.

For many of our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters, church has not always been a safe haven. Some nasty things have been said from pulpits. And some Christians use certain Bible verses to condemn us. "Love the sinner and hate the sin" is an oft-repeated phrase. If that is the belief, are we selling God short? All of us sin from time to time, and that displeases God. When we confess, we ask God to amend what we are, so that we may walk in the ways of Christ and through him be forgiven. Love is paramount in forgiveness. For me to think otherwise would presume that God made a mistake, that God didn't love his creation.

I don't think I sinned by being born who I am. Am I choosing a verse to fit my preconceptions? Perhaps. Maybe we all do a little of that when interpreting Scripture. But to find comforting words that bring you peace, that spread the love of Christ, where all can be welcomed? That may actually be okay.

Dear God, Help us accept who you made us to be, serving you and others with a welcoming spirit and generosity of heart. Amen.



## Itymns of Praise

**THURSDAY, MARCH 30** Bryn Hartzell, Elder

And our eyes at last shall see him, Through his own redeeming love; For that Child so dear and gentle Is our Lord in heaven above, And he leads his children on To the place where he is gone. —from "Once in Royal David's City"

I grew up Presbyterian in a church outside of Philadelphia singing in the choir from pre-school through high school. We had a strong music program, and over the years we took many tours, singing all over the Northeast and Canada. Those experiences nurtured my earliest memories of fellowship and were instrumental in my lifelong love of singing hymns. I always felt the Holy Spirit the most through song.

It's now over 30 years later, and I'll never forget the way that "Once In Royal David's City" was arranged every year at the Christmas concert. It started as a solo, then the choir joined in, and finally the whole congregation. Still to this day it is my favorite Christmas hymn, and the way it was arranged is a great illustration of being a part of a welcoming community of faith. The voice of one person can be beautiful, but with hundreds true magic can be made.

That carol, along with so many hymns, really resonate with me. They remind me that Jesus was like us and that he will lead us home again.

Lord, thank you for song, for the hymns that help us feel closer to you, and for the memories that your music brings to the lives of all who love you. In your holy name we pray. Amen.



# What Poes God Do?

FRIDAY, MARCH 31 Spencer Roberson, Youth Elder

### I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world! —John 16:33

It is a frequently asked question, and one which has caused many to lose faith: If God is real, why do bad things still happen? Recently it was Holocaust Remembrance Day at my school, and one of the two speakers, Bernie, was asked this question. He couldn't give an answer. He said that he struggles every day with why God would allow his family and friends and all Jewish people to be persecuted and killed, and why God chose to spare him over others.

Bernie said that many horrible events are thought to be "tests" from God, but no heavenly figure would ever be that cruel to subject someone to a test of that magnitude. He thought that it was really the absence of faith and light, and God would be overstepping his bounds to influence the conscious thinking of people who have lost faith. He instead thought that God called upon all of the faithful people to take action in response, just like God does numerous times in the Bible. He likened his responsibility to that of Moses leading the Jews out of Egypt. Though so much had been lost, the possibility of eliminating hatred toward his people was enough to take action.

Personally, I have never experienced such a large-scale tragedy, nor have I received an overt message from God. However, I maintain my faith, because I feel God in my subconscious.

In January I volunteered with some people from my school at an organization in Yonkers that collects unused medical supplies and sends them to countries in medical crises. In a small warehouse, our group of 30 sorted, counted and packaged 1,500 pounds of medical supplies, all donated out of the kindness of the hearts of doctors all over the country. I see God in the hearts of those medical professionals who, already working long shifts, collected supplies that had been thrown away and delivered them to the organization.
God can't make people do good, or make people believe. If God had the power to do that, people would never improve. God does have the power, however, to be the voice in one's head that encourages us to do good, even without any personal benefit.

Dear God, please keep guiding us in the right direction, and keep trusting in us to do the right thing. Be with us in our difficult decisions and our easy ones, and help those of us who are heading down the wrong path. Be in our hearts in times of grief and struggle, and be in our minds to help us to take action. Amen.

## а роем for the day • saturday, april 1 For everyone who tried on the slipper before Cinderella

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For those making tea in the soft light of Saturday morning in the peaceful kitchen in the cool house For those with shrunken hearts still trying to love For those with large hearts trying to forget For those with terrors they cannot name upset stomachs and too tight pants For those who get cut off in traffic For those who spend all day making an elaborate meal that turns out mediocre For those who could not leave even when they knew they had to For those who never win the lottery or become famous For those getting groceries on Friday nights There is something you know about living that you guard with your life your one fragile, wonderful life wonder, as in, awe, as in. I had no idea I would be here now.



For those who make plans and those who don't For those driving across the country to a highway that knows them For the routes we take in the dark, trusting For the roads for the woods for the dead humming in prayer For an old record and a strong sun For teeth bared to the wind a pulse in the chest a body making love to itself

There is every reason to hate it here There is a list of things making it bearable: your friend's shoulder Texas barbecue a new book a loud song a strong song a highway that knows you sweet tea an orange cat a helping hand an unforgettable dinner

a laugh that escapes you and deflates you like a pink balloon left soft with room for goodness to take hold

For those who have looked in the mirror and begged For those with weak knees and an attitude For those called "sensitive" or "too much" For those not called enough For the times you needed and went without For the photo of you as a child quietly icing cupcakes your hair a crackling thunderstorm

Love is coming. It's on its way. Look—

Ariana Brown (b. 1993)





### **MONDAY, APRIL 3** Vasheena Brisbane, Senior Graphic Designer

#### You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly. — James 4:3

This year is the first time I read (well, listened to) *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein. My six-year-old daughter, Sophia, was assigned this book as a YouTube read-along. Since I had never read the book myself, I was excited to sit and enjoy it with her.

The book starts off simple and innocent enough. A boy loves a tree. The tree does what it does: provide. Over the course of the book, the boy's asks get bigger and bigger, and ultimately result in the tree sacrificing itself. As we sat there, the story unfolding, unapologetic and unabashedly frank in its indictment of humanity, I wondered how anyone could promote this as a children's book. Surely the authors of children's books know that parents are trying to raise the opposite of this character. Right? I was so surprised by the ending that I listened again, in hopes that I had missed something.

Finally, I said to Sophia, "What did you think of this book?" Her answer was true and innocent, as children's responses often are. "That tree really loved him," she said. I was shocked, heartbroken and a little embarrassed. I was so focused on the boy and his actions—what I perceived as his selfishness for taking and never giving, or even stopping to say thank you—that I missed the other part. The sacrificial part that the tree plays in this story.

How many acts of true sacrifice do we miss because we are focused on the wrong things? Because our first instinct is to point out the wrong we see in others, instead of the sacrifice and the beauty? The boy was sure enough in the tree's love for him that he was never ashamed or embarrassed to ask for what he needed. So often we feel like we don't have the right to ask for what we need. As we get older we lose our reckless trust in God, the kind of trust that empowers you to ask for the most.

After a beat, I responded to Sophia. "She sure did."

Dear God, help me to be reckless in my trust in you and confident in my ask, knowing that you have sacrificed it all already. Amen.

# Ghristmas Lights in the Alidst of Lent

#### **TUESDAY, APRIL 4**

Patricia Kitchen, Parish Associate

And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. —Matthew 28:2–3

Thoughtful friends unwittingly wooed our spirits with candles lit in all of their windows in preparation for Christmas. They were plugged in the first night of Advent and unplugged the eve of Ash Wednesday, in preparation for Lent. Others of us followed suit. Light multiplied. One year, following the death of a grown child, the dark, candle-less air that descended on Ash Wednesday night felt too thick to breathe. Lent became a confusing season for me, written in a solemn, minor key.

It struck me that Advent and Christmas had made peace alongside one another in December. But I did not see the same resonance between Lent and Easter. It was All Lent, all the time, until sunrise Easter morning. As a child we even purchased our new Easter clothes with a sense of quiet purpose, not revelry.

Gradually I took seriously the decree of Pope Gregory I that Lent would not include Sundays, as they were festival days year-round. So candles of all sizes were lit on Sundays. White Christmas lights filled large glass bowls. Light was carried to exhausted or hungry souls. The lights of Lent helped hold grief, regrets, forgiveness and the heaviness of absence. And then one year we lit the candles and bowls daily until Good Friday. And so it is to this day.

In time I saw again, at the end of Lent's tunnel, a tomb. Empty. And the possibility of angels. Luminous.

Be thou our Vision, O Christ of Light that blinds and heals, illumines and multiplies. How and to whom would you have me carry light this Lent? Amen.



# Shosen in Weakness

#### WEDNESDAY, APRIL 5

Kate Dunn, Parish Visitor

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.... as it is written, `Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'" -1 Corinthians 1:27-31

Like many Christians, I grew up hearing the conventional wisdom that it's better to give than to receive. In the Book of Acts, the apostle Paul ascribes these words to Jesus himself.

In the church world, we've absorbed the lessons about the importance of generosity, service and volunteering. And who doesn't enjoy the "helper's high," those endorphins our brains release when we focus on giving rather than receiving? Having spent my entire working life in helping professions, I know full well how wonderful it feels to be a helper. So why do I feel so uneasy when I hear "it's better to give than to receive"? Perhaps because, more and more, I think it's *easier* to give than to receive. Our egos take a lot of pride in all the ways we're able to support others through the work of our own hands. Givers have a lot more to boast about than receivers do.

In my ministry, I'm inspired to see how generously people give, and I'm humbled to witness with what grace people receive. Of the two, I think receiving is harder, especially for people used to being givers and helpers. People like me. I wonder, will I have the faith to trust that I am as beloved and valuable to God if my life circumstances make me a receiver instead of a giver?

Paul's words in his letter to the Corinthians speak comfort to my soul: "God chose what is weak in the world.... God chose what is low and despised in the world.... 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.""

God, you honor what the world despises and choose what has been overlooked. When I am weak, when I need help, when I depend on the support and generosity of others, grant me the ability to receive these gifts with grace, knowing that I am your beloved and chosen child, and that you love me just as I am. Amen.



**MAUNDY THURSDAY, APRIL 6** Sarah A. Speed, Associate Pastor

## While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." —Matthew 26:26

I had my appendix removed in college. I called my parents from the hospital in the middle of the night to let them know the doctors were rolling me into surgery. When HIPAA rules prevented my parents from getting an update, my dad did what any desperate dad would do: He called the Presbyterian church near me, introduced himself, and begged the head of staff to "go check on my kid."

I don't remember Rev. Evans visiting me, but I know he was there. I know he talked with the nurses. I know he prayed for a quick recovery, and I know that he called my parents to let them know that I would be "just fine." What I do remember is that the day I was discharged Rev. Evans and his wife, Ginger, showed up at my apartment with bags full of food. They had meal-prepped soups and muffins, mashed potatoes and fruit cups. They filled my fridge, and all I could do was cry and say thank you.

I think one of the most loving things we can do on this Earth is feed each other. That is what I see Jesus do on Maundy Thursday. Just hours before his arrest, he sits down with his disciples, and he feeds them. Maybe he knew their grief would be exhausting. Maybe he knew they would lose their appetites in the coming days. Or maybe he knew that when we eat together we don't feel so alone.

The next time you find yourself at coffee hour, at the holy interruption, or coming forward to receive communion, may you remember: We can survive our worst days if we remember to eat together. *You are not alone*. That was the truth I learned in college, and it's the truth I see on Maundy Thursday. So come to the table. This feast is for you.

Jesus of Nazareth, everyone was invited to your table. The tax collectors, Judas, the Pharisees. No one was turned away. On our hardest days, may we remember that. May we remember that our invitation to the table never expires. We are never alone. Thanks be to God for a love like that. Amen.



# From Dusk to Dawn

## GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 7

Scott Black Johnston, Senior Pastor

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

And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. —Luke 23:48

Good Friday concludes at a place called the Skull. Following Jesus, beautiful Jesus, gentle Jesus, eventually brings us to a hillside named after the shell of a human head, after the fleshless remnant of a face, after a bony pate that signifies death the world over.

Of course we end up at the Skull—a place where hopes shrivel and the reality of our common destiny comes home to roost. Sooner or later, humans always end up here, in the shadow of a skull.

Surprisingly, though, it is here, here at the foot of the cross, under the gaze of the Grim Reaper's hollowed-out eyes and rattling teeth, that Good Friday offers its most powerful testimony and hope.

Somehow, amid these awful circumstances, as spears chip bone, as bodies heave and wheeze, on this hillside where humans have chosen to put their slaughterhouse artistry on gruesome display, somehow, even here, the good refuses to die.

You can see it when Jesus forgives those wielding hammers and pounding the nails—people so caught up in their lust for blood that "they know not what they are doing."

You can see it in the criminal who speaks up for Jesus, asserting Christ's innocence with his final breath.

You can see it in the centurion who, Luke tells us, praises God in the midst of this horror show and declares Jesus to be blameless.

You can see it in the crowds who depart the Skull "beating their breasts."



In the midst of the crucifixion's awfulness, some people retain their humanity, their sense of what is right and what is wrong. There are those whose hearts cry out, "This is tragic, broken, messed-up beyond all reckoning!" There are those who walk away from the cross thumping their chests, grieving and weeping buckets of tears.

Strangely, this painful lament strikes me as a good thing. It is a sign that the light has not gone out for humanity—not entirely. It is testimony to the fact that, even hanging on the cross, Christ continues to teach, to offer hope, to point us toward a better way. He is not done. Not done teaching, not done inspiring, not done challenging, not done calling us to embrace life.

Who else but this innocent One, who has endured the tortures of the Skull "for us and for our sake," can point us away from these violent hilltops and toward the dawn?

Precious Jesus, give us the courage to follow you on this day, this most difficult day. Give us the wisdom to see all that is wrong and awful and painfully true in the shadow of the Skull. Help us to cling to our humanity, to beat our breasts, and to yearn with every fiber of our being for the dawn of a new day. Amen.

The Mess of Itoly Saturday

**HOLY SATURDAY, APRIL 8** Werner Ramirez, Associate Pastor

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## For there is hope for a tree, if it is cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its shoots will not cease. —Job 14:7

I have been serving as the pastor for Congregational Care for a little over a year and a half now. In that role, one of my greatest privileges is to journey with people in grief. I've sat in offices, restaurants and hospital rooms listening to stories of pain, loss of relationships, loss of loved ones. It's heartbreaking, complex... and *holy*.

Grief always reminds me of Holy Saturday. Yes, it reminds me of Good Friday as well, but it hits me most on Holy Saturday. Holy Saturday reminds me of the days when the text messages stop coming and people forget to check in. The



whole world seems to have gone back into place, and you are left wondering, "What the hell? Nothing is back in place. I'm still hurting." So we pretend that everything is all right.

Many of you know that I had a rough summer last year. An infected pacemaker led to two surgeries, 21 days in the hospital and two months of recovery. Wound care nurses came three times a week to my home, and my amazing wife cleaned and disinfected the wound on the other days. It was physically rough, but I did not realize how much of a toll it was taking on me mentally.

Around the time that I started pretending that everything was okay, my wife reminded me that it was time to look for a therapist, and so I did. It was healing and meaningful. The therapy didn't make the pain go away, but I learned not to judge my feelings. And it reminded me that there were better days ahead.

As I have heard others' stories of grief and pain, I have also heard stories of healing and redemption. I love hearing about many of you who, alongside pastoral counseling, have sought out bereavement groups, therapists, community groups and other things that bring joy to your midst. They remind you that better days are ahead.

Death never has the last word. Hope, redemption and resurrection are just around the corner.

Holy God, we know that on Holy Saturday you grieved the death of Jesus Christ. We find comfort that you know our pain of loss and that you share in our grief. Comfort the hurting and bring the hope of resurrection to our lives. Amen.



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It can be a pretty Sepressing business all in all, but if sackcloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end.

- FREDERICK BUECHNER