

Lent 2014



Devotions by members of
Grace Lutheran Church
Davenport, Iowa

Thank you to those who shared themselves in the writing of these devotions. We pray that each person using this devotional will be touch by the spirit of Christ. We pray that it will open you more to the grace of God.

We suggest that you also use the following prayer each day as you come to God with openness for a deeper relationship and a desire to shape your life in ways that are pleasing to God.

God bless your journey.

Prayer of the Optina Elders

*Grant to me, O Lord, that with peace of mind
I may face all that this new day is to bring.*

*Grant me grace to surrender myself completely
to Your holy will.*

In every hour of the day reveal Your will to me.

Bless my dealings with all who surround me.

*Whatever news comes to me this day,
teach me to accept it with peace of soul,
and the firm conviction that your will governs all.*

In all my words and actions, direct my thoughts and feelings.

*When the unexpected happens
let me not forget your love
or that you are in control.*

*Grant that I may deal
straightforwardly and wisely with others,
neither confusing nor grieving anyone.*

*Give me strength to endure the fatigue
of the coming day and all it shall bring.*

*Direct my will and teach me to pray,
to believe, to hope, to suffer,
to forgive, and to love. Amen*

March 5 - Isaiah 26:3-4

Connie Lannan

Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace—in peace because they trust in you. Trust in the LORD forever, for in the LORD GOD you have an everlasting rock.

Trusting in God is so easy when life is going well. That scenario can change dramatically when we experience challenges. Illness, financial uncertainty, death: All can rock us to our core.

Many challenges evoke grief and fear. Both need to be acknowledged and honored, but life's curveballs also provide us opportunities to go within and confront God with our questions, hear what God is trying to tell us and to be assured that God is walking with us, crying with us, comforting us and showing us a way to cope and get through this trying time. If we keep going within and trusting God, we can learn about ourselves, our purpose, our capacity to love and our ability to be compassionate with ourselves and others.

Trusting also opens a doorway within that invites us to walk through and experience God's love and peace that passes all understanding. It is a gift that is available to all of us. We just have to choose trust again and again — even when it seems like the most impossible thing to do.

March 6 - Zechariah 8:16-17

Lindsay Spies

These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace, do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, says the LORD.

I just had a recent event happen in my life that fits this passage perfectly. I lost someone that was very special to me; she was a friend, mentor, and my balance. The thing is I didn't lose her to death; I lost her because of my judgment. I judged her for being someone that took care of so many people but never taking care of herself. She always was there for everyone else's happiness but never her own. Her family was very important to her and they were very close, she was one of seven, and they hardly did anything without each other. However, the bad thing was her family seemed to

interrupt her life all the time. There were so many time of 15 years that she had cancelled things with me because of them and finally I had had enough. I thought very poorly of her and didn't have my nice things to say. I had harsh judgments against and I swore her off. As with anything that you lose close to your heart you go through the 5 stages of grief.

First, the denial, I could swear that I had absolutely no involvement on what happen between us. This issue was all hers and she needed to grow up and apologize to ME. That was denial and a little bit of self-righteousness, you think?

Then came the full on anger, how could she just walk away? After all the laughs, ideas, discussion and being good friends, she walked away. I was angry; I had some of the deepest judgments against her. She not only walked away from me but my family also. I was hurt.

Next was the bargaining, how I could have done things differently, been more understanding or accepting. Maybe I should have been the one to patch things up or apologize. Maybe I should do something to fix this.

Then after that was the depression, it was very silent, but I had it. I lost my friend, mentor, and my balance and I missed her. That depression was really felt when things were happening in my life and she wasn't there for me to share them.

At this point, I have done everything God hates.

However, it took me about a year and a half to find acceptance. I started speaking the trust to myself and opened my eye, gave in my gates of judgment and found peace. Think about being in her shoes and not what I thought her shoes should look like. Started finding the peace my heart needed and no longer let the evil take control of my thoughts. I came along way but I'm in a great place now.

March 7 - Romans 5:1-5

Brooke Lee

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and

endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Hope is the action of living through Jesus, no matter what we are facing in our lives.

If we live in hope through our suffering, it will give us endurance; strength. With this strength it will define who we are through Christ, our character will emulate our faith and our hope. We can share God's love through our actions and through the celebration of hope, because we now have a new perspective of the situation at hand. It is much clearer. It is the view point that God does have our life under control.

March 8 - Romans 8:35, 37-39

Jodi Becker

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Guilt. If I am not careful, it consumes me. Did I do too much? Did I do too little? Am I supposed to do anything? Will he/she still love/like me even if I...? Before I was actively working on my faith, I believed that God was a punishing God. One who, if I did the wrong thing, would inflict some type of punishment on me and the big one would be going to hell. As one who didn't belong to a church as a child I took my cues from others. Family members, friends, televangelists, and the media all shaped my vision of God including whether or not I was worthy of God's love. So the outcome was guilt. I didn't know how to repent exactly, aside from what my Catholic friends had to do. So, I assumed if I felt guilty that would help my standing with God.

Thankfully, I have done a "360" on that concept. Despite hearing passages like the one in Romans I actually had to verbally ask a pastor if God truly forgives...no matter what. And when he said, "yes" an incredible weight was lifted. It seemed too easy. But once I un-

derstood that between my faith and God's promise I was "covered," I began to rejoice in being a beloved child of God. One who will fail, who will disappoint, who will not be perfect, but one who will never be separated from God's love.

March 9 - Philippians 4:4-7

Susan McVay

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

I like a plan. I like to make a list and check off completed tasks. I like the feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction that comes with a job well done. However, life is not predictable, and some days "plan A" works quickly through the alphabet. The worry and anxiety that can accompany changes to my routine leave me feeling out of control.

It is at those times that I need to be reminded that I am not in this alone. How comforting to know that the Lord is near. I can share my worries and concerns and know He will always listen. I can pray for strength and know that He will provide. I can whisper my pleas for patience and understanding and feel His calming presence.

I think it may be time for a new format for the daily plan. Start and end the list with prayer and throw in a healthy sprinkling of reminders that God is near.

March 10 - Hebrews 13:1-6

Jane Krumwiede

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." So we can say with confidence,

“The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?”

Although these instructions in Hebrews 13:1-6 appear to be somewhat disconnected, I think there is a connection and a common theme. These verses give us instruction for wise living. These instructions are about good discipline in relationships, discipline we are able to have because of our relationship with Jesus Christ, our Savior. My relationship with other Christians, my relationship with people who need help, my relationship with my spouse and other family members, my relationships with strangers I meet, and my relationship with material things on earth can be enhanced and put into perspective through my faith in Christ. God promises to help us apply these instructions in our lives, so we can enjoy good discipline in our daily living. During this Lenten season, my prayer for our Grace family is that we come to know how blessed we are, that we come to know that good discipline in our relationships is completely within our reach because God loves us, and promises to be with us and help us every day. Let us all take time today to say a prayer to thank God for his love and guidance in our relationships."

March 11 - Psalms 103:13-17

Claudia Wood

As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust. As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children.

Everlasting and steadfast love. What a wonderful and comforting thing this is for us! Nothing else that we know or have is as everlasting and steadfast as God's love for us. Fads and technology and gadgets seem to change faster than we can keep up. Even our most profound and deep relationships end at some point. How comforting to us to know that God's love and compassion for us will never end.

Dear Lord, thank you for the incredible gift of your steadfast love for us. Help us to walk in your ways and never forget how much you love us.

March 12 - Hebrews 13:20-21**Tadd Ruetenik**

Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

The Bible contains accounts of many miracles, some involving wine, water, sudden healing, and even the bringing of people back to life. In Hebrews, there is reference to the miracle of Jesus himself being brought back to life, which is the most extraordinary miracle. If one wanted to reject all other miracles, this one would have to stay.

What makes it so remarkable is that, if we take seriously the idea of Jesus being God, we have a situation of someone bringing oneself back to life. This doesn't make sense. For example, If a house gets destroyed, people have to rebuild it for it to exist again. The house cannot bring itself into existence. But this is exactly what happens with Jesus, even though it is nearly impossible to understand how this can happen.

What does this mean for us? It means that life is possible even in the most impossible of situations. It means that whenever there seems to be no hope for anything good to come out of a situation, good can still come out of a situation. With God, all things are possible--even the impossible.

March 13 - Psalm 40:5-8**Vickie Miller-Liebe**

You have multiplied, O LORD my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you. Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted. Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, "Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."

Our relationship with God is a treasure. All relationships benefit from good communication and good communication starts with listening. Do you think God is a good listener? This text reminds us that God has given us an open ear; He hears our prayers. He hears our praises.

Do you think you are a good listener when God speaks? We can certainly learn more from God by listening. He tells us to trust in Him, to offer genuine acts of worship and praise, and to delight in doing His will.

When God speaks, listen. Engage in active listening at worship by maintaining eye contact during the sermon and perhaps nod in agreement when hearing the scriptures. If you become distracted refocus by silently repeating the spoken words. Allow your ears to be opened by hearing the words of the Lord.

March 14 - Romans 12:1-2

Hollie Swain

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

During this time of Lent, what a special moment to pull out of one's self – a clean heart – to present to the one who gave his all for us. This isn't as easy as it seems. Moment by moment I feel bombarded by feelings, thoughts, ideas, news stories, etc., about all types of "bad" behavior in this world. It takes those really "worked at" moments to get past the bad and quietly go to the good, wrap them around me to snuggle into "good." I want to use my 40 days to become more thankful, satisfied, and prepared to meet my Savior and Lord.

March 15 - Colossians 3:14-15

Debbie Alejo

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

The sun is pouring on me now as I wake to a new day- a day full of choices and opportunities. I reflect and ask myself, "How does God want me to live and grow his love this day?" As I struggle and try to become the person God wants me to be, I am ever mindful of my baptismal gift and my responsibility to "spend" God's love. I can wrap my life, working with great energy to supply my own needs.

Or, I can also live and love more abundantly helping Grace, my neighbors, my friends, my students, my enemies, the lonely, those rejected by society with acts of kindness and service. I know that helping others brings me a grand peace and joy in my heart.

Modeling our lives in Jesus, we are united as one body. That is one the many things I love about our congregation- how selfless and giving Grace members are. I feel united in love, joined in our common efforts to bring basic needs and comforts to those who need. Jesus has taught me that more I love, the more I am able to love. I feel great joy in growing and spending God's love together.

May I encourage each one of us to clothes ourselves with God's love this Lenten time and add one more act of love to our lives each week as we try to live the life Jesus modeled for us. Let us hand in hand bring God's love to all his people with a truly thankful heart for the gift of life we have been given. In God's name I pray for us to let the peace of Christ rule our hearts.

March 16 - Romans 6:1-4

The Swarm Family

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

"What will you do with the temptation of sin?"

Some of our circumstances or life's consequences may be a key factor or cause us to sin. Even though as God's people we know that when we sin it brings us death & many steps away from Christ. Whether it be our feelings of guilt, judgment, or sadness we start to make excuses for our sins. We start to feel as though we don't measure up or we don't feel worthy of His love in the midst of our sin. We need to acknowledge & take responsibility for our sins & recognize these negative thoughts are from the ultimate deceiver.

"What then are we to say?"

A successful way to eliminate sin is to replace our thoughts of ourselves & our sins with the thoughts, prayers & exalt our God. Just as Christ died & was crucified so shall our sins with God's love, mercy, grace & Christ's resurrection we too might have a peaceful heart & walk with him in newness of life.

March 17 - 1 Peter 1:3

Andrea Pruismann

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

As I read this passage I think of all of the changes that have happened in my life up to this point. Some have been chosen, some have not. Some have been exciting, some have not. However, in looking back it seems that the instances where I grew the most and in the end found the most joy was in the struggles. In the middle of a situation it doesn't always feel that way and you don't always want to hear it but it is important to keep our eyes on God.

As I think of the people in my life who are struggling with loss of a loved one, the pain of waiting for a son to receive a new heart, divorce, illness, and the list goes on; all I can think is thank God each day is a new day and a new opportunity to grow and learn. Thank God the pain isn't our end and at the end it will all be wonderful. Amen.

March 18 - Philippians 2:13

Cheryl Kritsch

For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

One of my favorite authors, Iyanla Vanzant, writes devotions that almost always resonate with me--I think, "Yeah, that's it! That's how I feel; What I should do; Where I am today." Philippians 2:13 brought these thoughts to my mind...the Spirit Within is my partner--we have both human and divine in each of us--God works in us and through us AND on us each and every day IF we open our minds and our hearts. Surrendering takes courage; it takes a lot more courage to let go and accept than it does to fear, resist or struggle for control.

During Lent I pray to let go of all the "stuff" of my life that keeps all of me from experiencing "God's good pleasure." You cannot come to God with your hands full. You cannot expect Spirit to lift you up if you come with clenched fists!

God, open me; empty me of everything but you! Throw out all the preconceived notions; fixed ideas and opinions; judgments and criticisms of others; very structured demands of what I need; how I want it, and what I am willing to do or not do to get it. God, I come to you empty, ready to be filled! Amen

March 19 - Colossians 3:12-17

Amy Wenzel

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

What makes a Christian? Someone who attends worship every weekend? Someone who doesn't drink? Someone who only has friends who are Christian? These all make up what some people see as being a Christian, but in Colossians 3 Paul writes about what is a Christian. Paul is telling us that Christians are compassionate, kind, humble, patient, but most of all forgiving. These traits make up who we are as a Christian Community and they make up us. Yes we do mess up and yes others mess up around us, but that is why we are called to forgive just like God has forgiven us.

Paul also calls us to do whatever we do; whether it is volunteering through various service projects or being a listening ear for someone going through struggle, Paul calls us to do it while giving thanks to God. We do not do it to get in better standing with God, we do it because we want to give thanks to God for what God has given us and showing others that we are Christians by our actions, love, and compassion.

March 20 - Luke 6:27–35

Joel Lorentzen

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

For me, this passage is scary because it is so much more specific than just “do to others as you would have them do to you”. We might be good people; faithful in love with our families and loyal to our friends – but is this more than any sinner would do? That isn’t what makes us worthy of the Kingdom. It reminds me how far we are from God’s intent for humanity; and just how human we really are.

This passage challenges my loyalties and my sense of fair play. Most importantly, it challenges my belief in the strength of my own faith. Sure, I can say “I love my enemies” out loud, but can I really be kind to someone who may have brought ruinous hurt to my family?... am I praying for them?... am I lending to them expecting nothing in return? This passage shows how difficult it can be to live that love.

Aside from the rhetorical questions this passage raises, it helps me understand that we should love God so much that it overwhelms any fear, suspicion, or hatred we may have for others. After all, we are all sinners, and there are those who may hate us for our sins. Wouldn’t we rather they love us? To be a child of God, we are called to express our love for Him unconditionally to everyone.

March 21 - Romans 12:3, 9-18

Colleen Willman

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

In thinking about writing this devotion, I know this verse came to me for a reason. It is my belief that everyone is placed in our paths for a reason. The reasons might not always be readily clear to us. We are all tied together. We should never judge lest we be judged.

I want to share a story from my life that really brought this way of thinking home to me recently. I work in a building where many homeless, mentally ill and downtrodden people come to during the day to seek comfort. They come for a variety of different needs. One woman who recently came across my path was Candy. When Candy first began showing up at our building she was living in her car, was off her medications for her mental health issues and dealing with physical health issues too. Most mornings when we arrived to unlock the building for the day she would be waiting in her car. Every day for several months she would be in the building wanting attention. Some days were full of smiles but most days were fraught with weeping, anger, depression and endless attention seeking behaviors. Candy was a challenge for all of us because of her overwhelming needs. I wish I could tell you that every day I was patient and asked God why Candy was in my path, however I was often consumed with my own agenda and carrying my own burdens when greeting her. One day it hit me, how dare I? Her burdens were far heavier than anything I might fathom. There for the Grace

of God go I. From that day I on I made a pact with myself that I would make a point to greet Candy every day, smile and give her a few moments of my time to listen. It was something I could consciously do every day that was easy, concrete and hopefully would make some difference to her. Overtime and with assistance Candy found a small apartment, became stable on her medications and became more of an occasional “visitor” in the building.

Christmas time was approaching when Candy met me one day at my car with an envelope in her hand for me. She said she wanted to give me a Christmas card to wish me a Happy Holiday. Inside the card was a note. She thanked me for always being kind to her, for taking the time to smile and listen to her. At that moment God and Candy taught me humility. The lessons she taught to me went far beyond what I gave to her. In my human way of thinking I was the one giving but God had other plans, I was the one being taught. We never know what might be the lesson we are learning, what we might be giving to someone or how small of an act can make the biggest difference. Those who cross our paths do so for a reason.

March 22 - Luke 6:41–42

Leah White

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

As a child, I remember my Dad telling me that if I spent less time worrying about what other people were doing and instead focused that energy on improving myself, I would be far better off. I think that's what this message says to me. We are each responsible for our own sins and our own relationships with God. All too often, it's easy to become critical and compare ourselves with why we might be superior in God's eyes. This passage is reminder to try to steadfastly focus on atoning and correcting our own shortcomings.

It's also a reminder to me that God's grace isn't dependent on what anyone else is or is not doing. It's about what I am doing or not doing. It's so easy to make excuses for my own bad behaviors, yet magnify them in others. I also believe this is becoming a cultural

epidemic, magnified by technology. While hiding behind it, we can comment, condemn and decry the behaviors of our fellow man—even as we commit the same sins in our own lives. But there is no hiding from God. Our sins and hypocrisies are all known him. With the help of his great mercy, I will continue to do my best to purify my judgmental heart. Instead of perpetuating critical condemnations of others, I will focus on improving myself and asking for forgiveness when I fall short.

Dear God, Please forgive me for my critical heart and my readiness to find faults in others. Help me reflect on the ways I can improve my life to your service, and to offer unconditional love to others. Please help me as I focus not on the short comings of others, but the deep faults in my own life. Lord thank you for your mercy and for shining your love into my critical heart. Thank you for your mercy and grace, despite my being a continual work in progress. I owe all things to you lord. Amen

March 23 - Philippians 2:1-4

Gary Rowe

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

In all likelihood, Paul wrote this while he was in prison. He was encouraging the Christians in Phillip to stick together against persecution they faced from the outside, and from conflict within their own ranks. Paul encourages them to show unity, humility and love for one another.

Think about this as the basis for relationships in our congregation, our workplaces, and our families. What if we express humility by putting the needs of others ahead of our own? We do not need to establish hierarchies of “who is better than whom.” but rather use this model by trying to understand and meet the needs of others.

Time after time we see references to Jesus ministering to “the least among them”—the poor, the sick, the outcasts. That offers a great

example for us to follow ourselves; acting in humility, each of us putting the interests of others ahead of our own, rather than constantly looking at the other to supply our needs.

We can only show Christ's love to the world if we first show it to one another. Charity—and love—really do begin at home.

March 24 - Matthew 25:37-40

Denny Boehme

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Lutheran Services in Iowa is the largest agency in the state providing services to over 40,000 children and adults. As an Advancement Officer with Lutheran Services in Iowa, I received a call asking me to go to a small rural Lutheran church to pick up quilts from their quilting group. When I was new to the position, I didn't know how all of those quilts would be used.

I soon realized the importance of the quilts to our clients. Many are young children who are being placed at our Residential Centers in Ames and Waverly. These children ages 4 to 18 are taken away from their parents for health and safety reasons for up to 18 months. They come with nothing. So after they are settled, they get to pick out a quilt that they can keep forever. Many have said it was the only warmth and comfort that they had, especially in the beginning. Lutheran Services distributes over 500 quilts every year.

I also saw a group of teenage girls that came to our office with their caseworker and got to pick out a quilt for themselves. It was interesting to watch and listen to them as they went through a big stack looking for just the right one.

As it says in Matthew, "welcomed me as a stranger and gave me clothing." The young people we work with come with nothing and Lutheran Services and the many quilting groups in the congregations help to welcome and clothe them.

As members of Grace Lutheran, we all share in the work of Lutheran Service in Iowa in caring for all of God's family.

March 25 - 1 John 4:7-12

John Grebner

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

From cradle to the grave, "I love you," are such wonderful words to hear. They build us up, encourage us, fill us full. This is especially true when the words are accompanied with action, with the giving of self. This is the center of love, to give one's self, to put others before you, to do what the other needs.

This is the love God has shown us. First, God values us. God sees us to be people of infinite value. God sees each of us as special. God desires the best for us. And God acts on our behalf. God sent Jesus to remove the barriers between us and God. Jesus brings forgiveness and the reinstating of relationship.

We are called to so value one another. We are urged to see one another as individuals of infinite worth. We are summoned to treat one another as God treats us; to give ourselves, to put others first, to do what is needed. This day how will you love your neighbor?

March 26 - Matthew 6:25-34

Leon Lagerstam

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I

tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

Don't worry, be happy, once sang Bobby McFerrin in the late 1980s. Yet, it looks like it may have been first recorded by the group "Jesus and The Disciples," according to our Matthew 6:25-34 devotion reading for this day.

"Do not worry about your life," Jesus says. "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

Compare that to Mr. McFerrin's lyrics -- "In every life we have some trouble. When you worry, you make it double. Don't worry, be happy." He goes on to sing: "'Cause when you worry, your face will frown, and that will bring everybody down. So don't worry, be happy."

Jesus agrees. "Do not worry, saying 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'" he said in Matthew 6. "And can any of by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?"

A story once was told about "Death" walking into a city saying he was there to kill 10,000 people. Yet, 70,000 people lost their lives that day. "Don't get mad at me," Death said. "I only took 10,000. Worry killed all the rest."

Is there reason to worry these days? Most people, of course, say "yes," citing high energy costs, poor economic conditions, terrorism threats, unemployment, hunger, homelessness and family estrangements, to name a few. Worry, though, according to Jesus, is an exercise in futility, because God has promised to care for you and meet the needs of all people. So if you're looking for something to

give up for Lent, try giving up worrying as Jesus suggests, and try whistling a "Don't worry, be happy" tune instead. And turn that frown upside down.

March 27 - Romans 8:26-28

Lori & Dan Haugen

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

This passage reminds me of teenagers as they're growing out of childhood, and climb upon the bottom step on the stairway of adult life. Many teenagers, as most parents know, largely exist in the dichotomy of having rather low self-esteem while trying to achieve social status among their peers. Yet, while in this struggle, have somehow still found a way to know everything about life. We try to guide our children onto the best path possible and give them what they need to make decisions that will positively affect their lives.

We are all guilty of thinking that we know exactly what we need to fix the problems of our lives. Just like the teenager, we know exactly what to pray for in order for God's love to come into our lives. God's knowledge is greater than our own understanding, and He knows that what we pray for is not always what will be the best for us. God knows the hearts of those who pray, and knows we truly want to do His will. This passage from Romans reminds us that God will grant wisdom and blessings to those who seek and love Him, but we may have to be patient. God has a masterful plan for each of us. Simply put, a good life is waiting for those who seek God. And God is good!

March 28 - Psalm 62:5-8

Sally Meier

For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.

The benefits of exercise include not only a healthier body, but a healthier mind. As we exercise, the body becomes stronger, stress levels tend to go down, and a sense of well-being emerges. As a result, we have more energy during the day, and we sleep better at night.

I enjoy many forms of exercise, but a brisk walk also affords me quality time with God. I love talking to God for there is so much on my mind. Yet, it has taken me a while, and a few nudges from God, to understand that the psalmist had a bit of insight into the idea of “quality time” with God.

Silence...Wait for God in silence. It works beautifully! When I open my soul, stop talking and wait, I hear God in my heart teaching, supporting and helping me in simple ways to deal with life’s joys and challenges. What a comfort, knowing that God is our solid rock and our refuge, who leads us if we just wait.

Now is a great time to build a healthier you. Start moving to exercise your body and mind, and then be silent and wait to exercise your faith.

March 29 - Isaiah 43:1-3a

Ken Krumwiede

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Don't Worry – Be Happy!

The title of this devotion was also a fun song title from back in the 1980's. The writer of this piece of music must have read Isaiah 43!

Because we have the ability to think, we also have the ability to worry. Even if we are very faithful Christians, we may be plagued by occasional periods of discouragement, doubt and fear. Even though we trust God's promise of salvation – even though we believe in God's love and protection – we may find ourselves upset by the countless details of everyday life.

When it comes to the job of fighting worry, we should be relentless. And just how can we overcome our worries? By taking them to God. Take your troubles to Him; take your fears to Him; take your doubts to Him; take your weaknesses to Him; take your sorrows to Him....and leave them all there. Seek protection from the One who offers us eternal salvation.

Perhaps you are concerned about your future, your relationships, or your finances. Or perhaps you are simply a “worrier” by nature. If so, choose to make *Isaiah 43* a regular part of your daily Bible reading. These beautiful passages remind us that God still sits in His heaven and you are His beloved child. Oh yes, and you may also want to sing the tune – *Don't Worry, Be Happy!*

Question to Think About: Am I willing to trust God in this Lenten season and every season of my life, in good and hard times?

March 30 - 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Nancy Boehme

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

After reading this passage, I took a look around at what I could see. It quickly became apparent that everything that we see is temporary. Everything wears out and needs replacing like appliances, carpeting, cars, and all the things in our homes. In looking outside, the same thing was true with roads, bridges, and other man-made structures. However, it also holds true for trees, bushes, flowers, and all of nature. Next was a look in the mirror and sure enough my body is starting to show signs of wear and tear like gray adult highlights in my hair, wrinkles here and there, and skin starting to sag. This is a sign that my physical body is also temporary.

The second thought was how fleeting all of this is in comparison to the span of history. As I have grown older, time seems to go faster. However, time is constant.

Finally is the idea of looking at what cannot be seen. Hmmm... If

I can't see it, how do I look at it? Ahhhhh! Memories are something I see in my mind's eye. There are birthday celebrations, confirmations, first communions, graduations, weddings, births of children and grandchildren, and other mountain top experiences. It is important to focus on making memories to cherish that bring joy into our lives. What about joy? What brings joy to you? I find joy in others as well as the joyous time spent with family and friends that I love and cherish. And of course, there is love? God's love comes to me, and I am given the privilege of sharing it with everyone that I meet. We can't see memories, joy, or love, but it is human nature to long for them. Feel the love that surrounds you and bless those you meet with your love, and you will make joyous memories to see in your mind's eye forever.

March 31 - Matthew 7:24-27

Joy Larsen

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

This parable is a metaphor for building your house on a solid spiritual foundation. Matthew is asking us to evaluate our personal faith foundation. In life we tend to gravitate towards what is easy, to the things that can be seen and what can it do for us. Often we focus on the visible and ignore what cannot be seen. Seldom do we evaluate what is happening beneath the surface. He is asking us to dig deep and look below the surface of our inner workings. Building a house on rock takes much work, time, and energy. Jesus is like our real estate agent. However, rather than focusing on location and curb appeal, He is asking us to strengthen our foundation by following the Bible's blueprint.

But how do we put this into practice? We need to solidify our foundation by focusing on the little things. Being a homeowner means constant upkeep and repairs. We can stabilize a weak foundation by hearing His word, truly listening and acting to form a closer

relationship with God. Notice verse 25 says “the rain fell” not IF the rain falls. The storms WILL come. Financial stress, illness, family issues, death, and simply being caught up the business of life WILL happen. These storms reveal the strengths and weaknesses in our own foundation. These storms will show neglect and lack of upkeep. A cold winter’s breeze can remind us to complete necessary maintenance. It is easy to show up to church one hour a week and stick to our normal routines. But we need to ask ourselves if we are listening, acting, helping others to deepen our spiritual roots? Are my actions reflecting God’s work?

Just like Jesus, we are all carpenters. Each one of us is building our own spiritual home. We are responsible for building a strong faith foundation.

Please help us build and strengthen a strong relationship with God’s word. Help us accept difficulties, misfortune, and the unexpected to deepen our faith. Help us dig deep when it is easier to take a short cut. Help us fully commit time to the church body in actions that serve Him. Help us make necessary repairs to our support beams by loving all people, spending more time in prayer, and reading the Bible. Help us not to become apathetic and to truly be present in thought and action. Help us to hear, believe, and practice your word. Amen.

April 1 - Psalms 139:1–10

Luanne Taylor

O LORD, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

In several movies about alien invasion, the characters are shown wearing hats made of aluminum foil to keep the aliens from reading their minds. Those of us watching the movie smile at the notion that

a hat made from foil will actually protect us from mind control and keep our thoughts to ourselves. In other movies, humans are able to hide by covering themselves in mud (Predator), or standing still (Jurassic Park), or wearing a ring (Lord of the Rings) or a magic cloak (Harry Potter).

We dream of many ways to hide ourselves and our thoughts from others, but we can't hide from God. He can find us no matter where we are, what we are doing, what we are thinking, or what we are wearing. He finds us and stays with us. He is with us, beside us, behind us, and ahead of us. He provides us companionship and support.

Not only is he with us, he also knows our thoughts – even before we do. He knows us, and yet, he still loves us. He willingly advises us, and leads us on a straight path, if we are only willing to be lead.

So put away the aluminum foil, and don't look for mud or magic rings or invisibility cloaks. God will still find us, be with us, and guide us.

April 2 - Matthew 11:28-30

Janice Gibbs

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Yoke, a devise used to join two animals together – oxen.

A yoke was often used to join an older and younger animal together. The older animal would lead the younger to learn the path. The older animal would pull the full weight of the load, while the younger animal grew to learn the path and carry the load. Who was Jesus talking about? The people of Israel had to follow 365 prohibitions and 250 commandments to find true spirituality and receive God's blessing. Some of us might remember when Catholics could not eat any meat on Fridays. The Church told people what not to do instead of telling people what they needed to do to find a relationship with God. The Lord is offering us an invitation to take his yoke and let him lead us.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Trust him to carry the burden of the relationship. Let him show us the path, and join with him on our journey of faith.

April 3 - Psalm 23:1-6

Sam Wince

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

In reading the twenty-third Psalm I understand it to mean that the Lord is my leader and he will provide me with everything I need in life. If I follow in his footsteps he will protect me and guide to live a Godly life and when my days are done he will make a place in heaven for me. Thank you Lord for all you have blessed me with.

April 4 - Ezekiel 37:11-14

Becky Wiese

Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on

your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.”

This is a rather familiar story; between Sunday School pictures of valleys of bones and songs about attaching anatomical parts, you probably remember what happens. Many of us would agree that the message proclaims God’s ability to make old –or dead-things new and alive.

Ezekiel even tells us how God does that – “I will put my spirit within you,” says God to those dry bones. The word “spirit” is translated “breath” in some places. So God breathes on the dead bones and they live - pretty powerful stuff, vivid imagery.

Breathing into dead people is something I can relate to as a doc; many of you have heard me promote the CPR – cardiopulmonary resuscitation - classes, and tell stories about CPR. I first learned about CPR not in medical school but in the swimming classes that I took as a kid. Every new level of swimming classes included sessions to teach CPR and lifesaving techniques to use to help a drowning person.

A vitally important component of lifesaving practice was the admonition that the drowning person had to want rescue; if they just continued to thrash wildly in the water, nobody could save them, it would be impossible to get them out of the water.

Which is the answer to the unspoken question, how do we get God to breathe into dry bones, be they ours or someone else’s. Ezekiel puts a confession from the mouths of the House of Israel; *“Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.”* The House of Israel folks certainly seem to recognize their difficult situation – describing oneself as being hopeless and “dried up” doesn’t exactly very flattering. I think the House of Israel is confessing their empty, sin-soaked existence and then God promises to make all things new. Confess our sin – let God rescue us from drowning – and God can enter our lives, breathe the Spirit into us, give us life.

We are so surrounded by things and events and “busy-ness,” that letting go of all of that stuff to confess is very difficult; most of us do not know any other way to “be.” We are so busy, we do not

recognize our loneliness and lack of purpose. We need to confess our own emptiness, our separation from God in order for God to breathe life into us. Maybe Lent is a good time to practice letting God's spirit enter into us. Spend a few extra minutes each day, listening to God as you say thank you for the blessings in your life. That means taking a few minutes from something else; that requires intention and planning. Start small, I am pretty sure the time with God will grow as your soul recognizes the joy in communion with God. As you feel God breath.....

April 5 - Psalms 33:16–22

Donita Grebner

A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save. Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and shield. Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you.

Can a stool stand on 1 leg? How about 2 legs? The 3rd leg is often the missing leg in our lives.

This scripture reminds me of a 3 legged stool. "The king is not saved by...great army...great strength of war horses...and great might." A scenario of brawn and intelligence could not save the king.

We can build up our body to be strong, fit, and "well". Which often carries with it a hefty ego and self pride (one of the legs of the stool).

There is also the mind, the knowledge and intellectual pride of our accomplishments in school, work and in life, which also feeds the ego (another leg of the stool).

We feed and care for our physical body daily. We maintain mental awareness and learning in search of wisdom, in the search for peace and health.

Our spiritual body cries to be connected to God. We remain incomplete when we partially or completely neglect our spiritual relationship with God (the 3rd leg). "*Our soul waits for the LORD;*

he is our help and shield. Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you.”

April 6 - Hebrews 12:1-3

Jane Montford

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

I once heard a sermon on this text. The pastor talked about how all the followers of God who have went ahead of us were now with us on our own journey cheering us on. There is something comforting and encouraging about that to me. I did a little research on “the great cloud of witnesses.” One website listed some of the witnesses who have gone before us. There were some pretty impressive names. Noah, Abraham, Moses and Joseph to name a few. I believe it also refers to the lesser known or unknown people of faith who lived their lives for God.

And then there is Jesus. He was born for us. He lived for us. He died for us. He is now seated with God. This passage calls Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. The writer tells us that he endured shame and hostility from sinners. He endured the cross... all for our sake so we would not grow weary of our journey or lose heart.

I am thankful for this cloud of witnesses and especially Jesus. Who could be better to have on our side than those who have lived and died before us?

April 7 - Isaiah 40:28-31

Bob Manasco

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up

with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

I hate waiting. Waiting is tough. I can work on many areas my life and polish many aspects of my personality without complaint, but working on patience? Waiting with serenity and stoicism? Keeping faith during times of uncertainty, when I don't have all the details and don't know what's going on? That's really hard! It was even difficult for people back in the Old Testament to wait on God. King Saul ran out of patience (and with it, his kingdom's future) in 1 Samuel 13. Abram and Sarai (before their rebranding as Abraham and Sarah) lost patience waiting on God's promise of a child, too, in Genesis 16. How much more difficult is it for us to wait in today's age of instant movie streaming, instant loan applications, and instant oatmeal?

God's planning is perfect and His timing is never late. When we look at a situation, we view it as narrow beings, with a limited imagination. God's vision is infinite. Not just big, or even really-really-really-super-plus-sized huge, but INFINITE. His best ideas are far beyond what we can even fathom. Just like old King Saul, Abraham, and Sarah, when we do not wait for the Lord, that impatience is merely a manifestation of our lack of faith. How pompous to think that we mortal beings can handle things better than God!

The Lord does not withhold that which is good from us, nor does He make us wait for no reason. During these times of patience-building, if we trust in Him and pay attention, He is renewing our strength, intensifying our faith, and drawing us nearer to Him. Be encouraged and practice waiting on God with an excited spirit during these times. It is not a time a stagnation; He is busy at work in us, making us who He needs us to be to do His works!

April 8 - Psalm 1:1-3

Linda Smith-Kortemeyer

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

We were out of town recently and found ourselves humbled by the positive attitude displayed by the people we met in Rochester. It seemed as if no matter what work people were doing, they seemed genuinely happy. Individuals went out of the way to be considerate. They offered help even if we didn't ask for assistance. Their upbeat and friendly demeanor put us at ease in a difficult situation. They seemed to sense how their behavior affected others around them. They seemed to enjoy their responsibilities and delighted in representing a larger community. We asked some of them if they liked their work. They replied the jobs they did were important, their employers treated them fairly, and they didn't feel the need to compete with others because they all played a role in making people better.

Such an uplifting experience made me reflect on the text where we receive simple instructions for happiness and prosperity. The people God presented us with during the week followed the advice of good counsel, they believed their actions positively impacted others, and they avoided being negative when people complained. Their manners showed gentleness, attention to details, and they were filled with a light spirit of humor. It was like resting near a grove of trees planted next to flowing waters. When we looked up instead of down, we could see blossoms and fruit on the branches. We felt protected from things that could hurt us and could concentrate on healing.

It is easy to become hardened by circumstances and difficult to stay positive when you hurt or are scared. But since negativity drains our energy and makes it harder to heal, hopefully going on the path marked out by God will give us strength to meet our challenges. Psalms gives us a renewed outlook on what we can do to remain happy and prosper. All we have to do is follow the instructions in the recipe and keep God in our lives day and night.

April 9 - Joshua 24:14-15

Karen Cornish

Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

I never liked Lent; I always associated it with dark, cold, loneliness. It comes at a tough time of the year, and it means sacrifice or extra work in the form of added, intentional spiritual practice. Lent used to leave me cold. Now, though, I find that I *need* Lent. For me, it has become one of those designated “time-outs” to help me get closer to God, to take my spiritual temperature and work on aligning my actions with intentions.

It’s easy to get sidetracked in this media-driven world where information is ready and sometimes overwhelming. It’s easy to get casual about faith and sloppy in our faith practices when there’s so much else to think about and to do. It’s easy to forget moorings when life is going along pretty well. It’s also pretty easy to unconsciously give importance to things that really aren’t that valuable.

Who or what become the masters we serve? Our schedules, work deadlines and decisions, social engagement, image, technology, compulsions, the “must-haves”... manage us sometimes much better than we manage them. Our lives are filled with distractions; we need to take some quiet time to access where we are; we need seasons like Lent. Lent helps us to put things into perspective, because we want to serve the Lord and keep other would-be masters in their place. This proclamation of Joshua’s has long meant a lot to me, because here we are, thousands of years later, and we, too, can say it for ourselves. It’s a good affirmation for Lent and a good cornerstone for life.

God has been faithful to me in countless ways over many decades of life. He has richly poured His grace upon and around me. I want to respond by consciously choosing God and being faithful to Him – that also means not unconsciously choosing other things over Him. As for me and my house, may we serve the Lord.

April 10 - Romans 8:14-17

Steve Hopewell

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

We as Christians believe in the Triune God, who comes to us through the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I believe that it is the Holy Spirit that works its way into our lives from the first time we hear the stories of God, His creation, His people, and His Son; who comes to live on earth and suffers for our redemption. As we accept the Holy Spirit, we grow in faith and develop our relationship with God. As the Spirit becomes a stronger influence in our lives we more clearly understand what God has given us through his Son.

The Holy Spirit helps us to understand that we are members of God's special family. Through our acceptance of God as our Father, we share in the wonderful gifts of love He gives. As members of God's family, we know our responsibility is to share this love by serving others, following in the examples set by the life of Christ. We also know that when we accept God as our Father, our reward will be eternal life through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

April 11 - Micah 6:8

Bud Johnson

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

To do justice means everyone gets what they deserve. Not in men's eyes, but according to God's will.

For example, to give God what He deserves we can look to the first commandment: "love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength".

God justly deserves our adoration. To give our neighbor what he deserves the second commandment applies: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself". To give ourselves what we deserve is to be good stewards of our bodies, mentally, physically and spiritually.

To love kindness is to love mercy. What's required here is to be kind, be benevolent, and be charitable. Serve the poor, hungry and homeless. Forgive the sins of others as God has forgiven us.

To walk humbly with God we must be aware of both our sins and God's forgiveness. It is only through a humbling of ourselves that we will be allowed to walk with Him. Our humility can be discovered through prayer, contrition, and service.

April 12 - Galatians 2:19b-20**Ruth Naber**

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

When I first read this verse, I thought how can I do a devotional on this verse. I have never been crucified! Then I remembered my baptism. I was marked with the cross of Christ and claimed by God just as Christ was claimed by God. I have not died, I have not been buried, and I have not risen. But I am a sinner. So when I have sinned; I have died. When I have sinned; I have been buried.

Christ lived in the flesh so that he could experience all the joys, sorrows, trials, and tribulations that we all experience in life. That way he can intercede for us with God so that we may be forgiven and loved. So that we may rise and spend eternity with Christ and with God. I am a sinner but my faith also makes me a saint. I am connected by faith to all who have gone before me and to all who will come after me.

I hope that my words and my actions will let others realize this for themselves as well.

April 13 - 1 Peter 2:21**John McVay**

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

Bad things can and do happen in life. Sometimes we suffer as direct result of a decision we've made or an action we've taken. But sometimes our suffering seems to come out of the blue and for no apparent reason. When that happens we may ask ourselves, "why me Lord?" Or perhaps we find ourselves angry that God let it happen. We sometimes drift away from our faith when it is needed most.

I don't believe that God sends suffering to us. I don't believe he wants us to suffer. But I do believe that he observes how we react to it. I believe it is an opportunity for us to show and grow our faith. God *calls us* look to Christ as an example. Christ suffered greatly and unjustly yet remained strong in His faith. When suffering enters our lives, even though it may not be easy, we need to remain strong in our faith. We need to pray. We need to reach out to God. He will always be there for us.

April 14 - John 10:27-28**Kathy Miller**

My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.

The sheep in this passage remind me of my many kindergarten students. They are the sheep and I am their shepherd. I navigate them through the new world called school, provide for their needs and protect them from harm. Before the school year is over, I know my lambs well - their strengths, their joys, their sorrows and often, their secrets. Within our relationship, they learn to trust that I will keep them safe and that I will always be near to comfort them. The lambs's needs become my needs. Their joys are my joys, just as their successes are my successes and their heartaches become mine. Although they are never "my" kids, they count on me and know that I will love them long after their school years are over.

The Lord is as near to us as the shepherd keeping watch over his sheep. He knows our needs and shortcomings before we speak them. He is always with us, steering us to a joyous life with him. Let us remember to trust our shepherd as he walks with us on our journeys, today, tomorrow, and in the life to come. Amen.

April 15 - Philippians 3:12-15

Sharon Varallo

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you.

This passage started out as a mystery to me. In fact, the first few weeks of reflection I had only two comments: "I don't get it" and "I still don't get it." After setting it aside for a while, I revisited, and discovered that my confusion might in fact have been a good part of the point. Maybe the passage is about not quite getting it – it is about not quite being where I hope my faith would be. I have not obtained the goal but I am committed to trying, to looking forward trusting that God's purpose will be revealed even when I don't understand where I'm going or even where I have been.

Let go, the passage says to me. Forgive. Being “of the same mind,” in community, we can try our best, together, to have faith in God, faith in each other, and press on.

This passage says to me that we aren’t there yet, that I am not there yet. And that’s okay.

April 16 - Ephesians 4:11-16

Kathy Eberlein

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.

It was the year of the winter Olympics where Team USA went for gold! I have to admit, I had a bit of chronic tiredness watching the DVR’s day’s competitions with all the triumphs and heartbreaks. In many minds, the Olympics epitomize team spirit. Most of us are part of some kind of group that can be considered a team that collaborates together to reach a common goal. This could be at work, at home with our families, or at church with one of our many groups. I can recall my two years playing basketball on a junior college team as a unique team experience. The team consisted of those who start, those who see a bit of playing time and the benchwarmers that play for a minute at the end of a lopsided game. I fell in the next to last category, got just enough time in to do some damage before pulled out and seated back on the bench. Many of our team members had roles and unique talents, but not all members got to play in the game.

This passage in Ephesians congers to mind a vast team, really the ultimate team, the Body of Christ. Unfortunately, we can also be benchwarmers on this team, not by God’s design, but by our own design. We often sit and wait to get into the game of life, stagnating

a bit in our faith and failing to use our gifts and follow the path God has chosen. It is not because Jesus does not put us in the game. We are all players of equal value on the team. We are all given gifts, our purpose ordained by an adoring Father. By prioritizing our lives around God and others we can revitalize our team. We can work in unison, our hearts beating as one, with strength in numbers to withstand the world's influence that would take us away from our purpose. Our team and individual player strategy is to read our playbook, the bible; listen to our coach Jesus through prayer; and be cheered on by our fans, which can be each other as well as God and the angels above. Strive to know your player purpose, get involved, and reach to each other for comfort and to receive strength. So listen closely, because God is calling your name to build the body of Christ, so get off the bench and get in the game!

April 17 - 1 Timothy 4:11-16

Chrissy Hartman

These are the things you must insist on and teach. Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders. Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; continue in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers.

Don't you just love it when someone sends you a "random" scripture and when the gift arrives, you feel God right in the middle saying, "Pay attention...this is who you are"? This scripture tells us to live as people who are examples to others in what we say and do. We are reminded that we all have God given gifts and talents that we can use to show our love and friendship to others. "Put these things (your gifts) into practice, devote yourself to them so that all may see your progress" are the words that encourage us to step forward every day into the joys and challenges that we all face.

I spend most days teaching elementary vocal music. It is amazing to me that I am in my 34th year of this wonderful career. The lyrics of the songs we sing in my classroom most certainly have meaning to

both me and my students. Two of my standard favorites are the HOKEY POKEY and THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE. I feel God encouraging us to put our left foot, our right foot and all of our body parts including our hearts into loving and serving others. I feel God encouraging us to show his love and let it shine, let it shine through us.

Thank you God for the message you send us through your word,

April 18 - 1 Peter 2:2-5

Katie Zitzow

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

The soft but insistent cry of an infant comes from the nursery as a sleepy eyed mother enters the room. The baby instantly soothes as he begins to drink from the bottle and in minutes is contently back to sleep again in the comforting arms of his mother.

As this child longs for his midnight feeding, we are to desire after the spiritual milk that is the truths found within the Holy Word of God. These teachings are necessary in order for us to increase in faith and grow into salvation through Jesus Christ. Hebrews shows us our current state by saying, “In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!”(5:12). We have only had a taste of the goodness and mercy that is God the Father. His awesomeness is yet a mystery to us in so many ways. God promises that He will provide us with the milk and, when we are ready, solid food we need to find salvation within His Holy Word. Spending time reading and studying the precious Word of God will allow us to grow in Salvation and become the people He desires us to be.

Graciously, God invites us to be, “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20). Not only does He promise to give us all of

the spiritual food we need to find Salvation, but also to claim as His own. Jesus Christ will be the stability we need to continue in the faith and set a path for our lives that is pleasing to God. Through Jesus Christ, God uses us, broken and in need of repair, to build a spiritual house that will last forever. What a gracious and merciful God we serve that he cares for our every need!

Find a way, today, to show the goodness of God to those who may still be longing for spiritual milk.

April 19 - Hebrews 10:23

John Campbell

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.

What makes you hopeful?

I feel hopeful on that first warm spring day when the maple trees are just leafing out.

I feel hopeful when I watch my two older granddaughters go to their first day of school the fall.

I feel hopeful when I watch my youngest granddaughter just toddle around and be amazed to see anything new like feeder goldfish at the pet store and try to get my attention without words look, look grandpa aren't the goldfish just get great.

All these hopeful moments have promises in them.

A warm summer day is coming, new skills and friends made at school or just the wonders of seeing the world's stuff for the first time like a toddler.

That hopeful feeling usually fades into a let's just get through the day mood for me as the busyness of day invades my awareness.

This verse points to a hope that does not fade.

I think of the cross.

The Roman's used the cross as a weapon of terror for control. If you do not what the Roman's wanted, you were crucified, dead, end of the story.

Jesus changed the cross into promise of every lasting life, so I should hold fast to my hope.

