Preface

These Lenten devotionals and meditations are offered to the glory of God and in humility from members of The Episcopal Community, women who are participating in The Episcopal Community study and clergy who support the Community. The authors for each day’s contribution come from varied backgrounds, levels of education, occupations and journeys of faith, but all are bound by a common belief in the depth and breadth of God’s grace and love for us.

Prayers were offered for those who wrote these devotions and are being offered for all who read the scriptures and meditations with the hope that God will touch hearts and cause blessings to be received throughout this Lenten season and beyond. Each day’s scripture readings follow the Daily Office of *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979 Edition.

This booklet would not be possible without the support of The Episcopal Community's Circle of Leadership or Patti Joy Posan and her contact skills. Thanks also go to John Ogden for converting the format of the booklet to make the daily devotionals available on The Episcopal Community’s website. The heart of this undertaking, however, is with those who committed to write the meditations. A complete list of those participating is found at the back of the booklet.*

*A glossary of Lenten terms is also found at the back of the booklet.*

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"There is nothing sadder than a self-made man." (or Woman) 

I grew up listening to old sayings like this one, and they surface in my mind at interesting times. This one flashed clearly upon my mind’s eye while reading today’s lessons, followed closely by these quotes from The Book of Common Prayer, 1979. "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust" (BCP, page 501, Ash Wednesday Liturgy). "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (BCP, page 265, Burial II).

It is so very easy to forget whence we came and wither we go in the hustle and bustle of daily life. The Pharisee in our Luke reading had become so immersed in his role as a religious leader that he had lost touch with the reality of being human—created in God's image, not an immortal deserving the blessings of his privileged life. His role in organized religion had blinded him to his need of the Grace of God.

The day to day nastiness of the Tax Collector’s trade never let him forget the huge gap between himself and Almighty God. He was blessed with the knowledge that only with the Grace of God could he hope to obtain the promises of heaven. Talk about a blessing in disguise!

Another old saying, "There but for the Grace of God go I," seems to fit.

_God be merciful to me, a sinner._
Thursday, February 23

Habakkuk 3:1-10(11-15)16-18  Philippians 3:12-21  John 17:1-8

How often have I asked God for a sign? Have I ever given something to God and then taken it back, only to repeat this over and over? Habakkuk is a reading with such human expression. The timeline is about 610 BC; the time of the exile of King Jechoniah and eleven years before the destruction of the first temple, which was built during the time of King Solomon (son of King David). It is believed that Habakkuk may have been a Levite and a singer in the Temple. Perhaps this is why this passage appears to be a poem or a hymn. Habakkuk speaks of the battle between the Chaldeans and Jerusalem. “Teman” is translated from the Hebrew in reference to the south area where the Yemenite Jews lived in Yemen or Siberia. This area was noted for the wisdom of its inhabitants. Habakkuk closes with a confession of faith and trust. He is worried that he will be judged for the actions in Judea (that whole region of conflict). In this reading, Habakkuk asks for a new expression of God’s wrath and mercy, as God had demonstrated so powerfully in the past. Habakkuk acknowledges that he has heard of God's great saving acts. He pleads that when God judges, he will also be merciful. Habakkuk vows to praise God in the midst of all the chaos of war.

Paul wrote this letter while under house arrest in Rome to update the people of Philippi about his trial and to strengthen them in the hope and joy that was theirs in Christ. About 61 AD, Paul had arrived in Philippi to pursue his mission of planting new churches. Philippi is the only church used in the New Testament as a model for the churches that will follow. Philippi had a Roman colony where retired army veterans were given a grant of land as a reward for their years of service and were settled there. This located loyal Roman citizen/soldiers at this strategic location along Egnatian Way, which was the main road constructed in 2 BC that connected Rome with the Roman provinces in the east. In this book, Paul has an urgency to express that one cannot achieve the kingdom of God through any other means but through a deep relationship with God. Paul is passionate about spreading the word of God.

The Gospel of John was probably written between 70-85 AD.

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, ‘Father, the hour has come: glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life—that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. John 17:1-8

I have heard this prayer referred to as “the dying man's prayer.” When we are the furthest from human ego, we are the closest to God's love. Perhaps I need to die to myself every day. Jesus' whole life had been an experience of the Father. He came to show us the heart of a true servant. His prayers in this reference are to completely surrender to God’s will. Jesus gives an account of his mission on earth. In this scripture, Jesus prays for himself, and then for his disciples. Jesus offers prayers of intercession for his disciples. Through Christ we are promised eternal life, the Father's word, the Kingdom of Glory. How can I turn my Christian walk into action?

Sometimes the most important things in life are also the most simple. If I live in the moment and surrender to God’s will (not my own will), perhaps all will be well. How can I show the face of Christ to those whom I encounter every day? Am I able to get up each day and ‘begin again’? Possibly, it is in the showing of God's love that the glory of God will find us. Trust this Holy mystery!
Friday, February 24


And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:7 (RSV)

To have this peace of mind in today’s world, dear Lord, help me to fight passionately for “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious....” (Philippians 4:8).

There are so many forces in our culture fighting against us. We need your help through prayer, supplications and thanksgiving. Help us better understand your love and lead us to the true passion you desire of us.
And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:19 (Harper Study Bible, NRSV)

How easy it is for me to forget Paul’s promise—and it echoes through all of today’s readings. When I start my day putting all of my concerns for health, money, work and other people in God’s hands and ask for His direction, I have a great day. So why do I forget and try to control and manipulate the community around me to do things my way?

I saw a t-shirt for another church recently—“Don’t just GO to church” and on the back it said “BE the church,” and it struck me how well it paraphrases our readings today. God has continuously shown us: Forgiveness, Restoration and Faithfulness. But do I show it to others when I am away from the church? Do I show it when the bank makes a mistake in my account? Do I show it when I hear over 120 elementary children at our school have no permanent address? Do I show it when a stranger has a drug or alcohol addiction and asks for a handout? Usually not. I forget they are part of my community.

How can I live out John’s action plan? “... So that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:23, 26).

I will pray the Prayer attributed to St. Francis (The Book of Common Prayer, page 833) daily to help me be a channel for God’s love. I am also promised that God can change my mind and heart and direct my actions today. Fully Rely on God.

May God’s Forgiveness, Faithfulness and Restoration be shown in our lives and our communities.
Today’s Gospel is the story of a family, God’s family, and particularly a Father and His Son. As a boy Jesus was obedient and faithful, as He went about His daily life; however, somewhere, somehow, He knew that He had a very special relationship with His God, and because of that He would one day be required to give something in return. Most definitely the life of Jesus was a “process, not an event”! Jesus’ life unfolded over centuries, for like ours, it began long before His birth, and as we know has continued on long after His death. We can only imagine how His heart leapt when His Father finally acknowledged him as His Son, to the entire world. Our identity, our personhood, is a most precious thing as we see clearly when people who have been adopted are finally reunited with their biological parents. It is startling when we read that immediately after this affirmation of identity His Father sends him into the wilderness to be tested. We may well ask, what does all this say to you and to me? One thing we know beyond doubt is that Jesus taught by modeling behavior. So, if He were tested and passed that test, then we had better learn something from that exercise too. Learning to accept the process of testing one’s behavior, as a method of helping one see the core of the work to be done, is extremely important. There is nothing sadder than someone who is so self-centered that they are totally unable to learn from a life experience, but only spend precious time moping and feeling sorry for themselves. Jesus needs disciples who know how to step out in the sureness of His love and empowerment, to take their part in transforming their corner of the world for God. The most effective way to transform our society is to allow ourselves to be transparent, so that others are able to see Jesus in us. Lent is a special six weeks when we are asked to center on methods available to us to make some huge changes in how we live our daily lives. These very short six weeks ask us to make some important changes in how we live and move among those with whom we share our island home. If we are willing to make these six weeks all about Jesus and the sacrifices He made for us and not all about us, we will rise on Easter Morning, stronger in our renewed faith having come through our yearly time of testing and having reached the other side, and be able to claim our crown from the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Amen.
Now after that John was put in prison. Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God. And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel. Mark 1:14-15 (KJV)

Usually when I’m getting ready for a trip, I am busy packing, deciding what I will need for the journey. This journey requires unpacking, putting aside everything but my love for God. There will be no packed suitcases on this trip.

During Lent is a good time for thinking about what we don’t need and most importantly, what we do need. We do need time, quality time listening for God’s word for us. I’m sure that God quite often gets a “busy signal” when He’s trying to give me guidance.

So what am I striving for during this Lenten season? My desire during this Lent is to create a habit of spending more quiet time listening for His words of guidance for me, and most important of all, following them.
A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!”  Mark 1:40-41 (NRSV)

Some choices are so easy. Shall I have a donut or a few cookies with my coffee after church? Will I sit with my friends from the Women’s Spirituality Group or with the couples further down the table? Some choices are harder, like having no cookies because it’s Lent or sitting with the person that’s a little crabby and unfocused. I’ll miss out on all the fun, but I think I know what Jesus would have me choose. And maybe I can make this a better time for that isolated person so he doesn’t have to miss out.

And what about during the service? I can sit in the front or the middle, kneel or stand during Eucharist, just feel closer to God or actually empower myself, with God’s help, to go serve. I can listen to the rector’s message and smile back at her (so she knows I’m listening) or I can actually hear what she’s saying. What’s this about our choices during Lent? We could give up something, like those cookies, or we could choose to take something on, something big. All I have to do is choose, listen to that still small voice, and choose.

Dear Lord, I do choose. I choose to reach out. Please help me to know what it is You would have me do, and give me the courage to accomplish it, in Your name. Amen.
Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

So he said to the man, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. Mark 2:3-5, 10b-11 (NIV)

In whatever way and at whatever time we come to Jesus, it is the right way and the right time. Jesus meets us with love and healing. The paralyzed man on the mat was unable to come on his own. He needed the support of friends. Unable to get to the door, he is lowered through the roof. He meets Jesus flat on his back, unable to move. He does not speak or ask aloud for healing; perhaps he does not have the words or feels unworthy to say them.

In this time period, physical infirmity was regarded as punishment for personal sin or for the sins of one’s parents or ancestors. Perhaps the paralyzed man felt unworthy to even be in Jesus’ presence, but Jesus reads his heart and knows his need. In love, Jesus first heals the broken spirit, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Although these words serve as a demonstration to the priests and the people of His divinity and power to forgive sins, I believe Jesus’ first concern was to meet the needs of the man before Him. He gives a hurting man love and heals the man’s spirit before he heals the body. Jesus wants us to be not just physically well, but also emotionally and spiritually well. He wants us to be whole.

Jesus meets each of us where we are, in whatever way we are able to approach Him. He sees Zaccheus hiding in a tree and welcomes him; He meets the Samaritan woman as she draws water alone because she is ashamed to be at the well with the other women; He meets Nicodemus in secret in the middle of the night. He waits patiently and lovingly for us to look His way or move into His presence. And when we do, He en-folds us in His healing love as we are able to receive it. And we are home.

Breath Prayer: I come to you, Lord.
Friday, March 2

No one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins. Mark 2:22 (RSV)

A week of Lent has passed, and my old ways are starting to pinch the new resolve that I so sincerely made on Ash Wednesday. Perhaps I am being made aware of the need for new wineskins—a different way of looking and acting—not merely placing the new on the top where there is no mixture of the new and the old (like vinegar and oil).

As Lent proceeds and I am attempting to put new practices into my life to draw me closer to God . . . I must remember that the new practices (like new wine) must be put into new wineskins (a new, more open body and mind) in order for there to be a permanent, lasting change. I cannot expect to merely patch up the holes in my journey to become whole—I must spring clean the old habits—to make room and time for the new spirit to come in. My challenge is to open up myself to Christian love and to pass on the kindness of others that have shown me the love of Christ.

In Genesis, Joseph asks to be remembered when it is well with the wine steward. However, as soon as the wine steward’s fortune was restored, he forgot about Joseph. It is easy to get caught up in the routine so that there is not time nor energy to allow new ways of serving to be tested, new friendships formed.

Mark reminds us how Matthew followed the call of Jesus without hesitation. I forget my Baptismal call and often fail to allow the love of Christ which is within me to be visible to others. I hesitate to find new opportunities to serve and new self-improvement challenges.

In Corinthians, I am reminded that I am God’s temple and that God’s spirit dwells within me. The Temple of God that is within me needs to be awakened with new wine. I need new eyes which see the opportunities for different service. I need a willing heart to sit and listen and to be aware of what I am reading; that serving God is not always doing but also a renewing of myself.

This Lent, may I remember that the Baptismal service marks us as Christ’s own forever . . . I am Christ’s and a worthy vessel for the new wine. May I continue allowing the old to be transformed so that there are new wineskins to receive the new.
This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. 1 Corinthians 4:1

What is the true nature of apostleship? The word apostle comes from the Greek word apostolos, which simply means, "a sent one." An apostle is a messenger, an ambassador, a minister, a servant. This is Paul’s definition of a true minister of Christ. Here Paul speaks of the ability of everyone in the Church, who by the gift of the Spirit was a minister or a teacher of the Word of God. Every Christian is in the ministry.

At this time Corinth was a prosperous commercial center as well as the capitol of the Roman province of Achaia. The people of Corinth included wealthy and dignified aristocracy with the larger population being slaves and the poor. Paul had been successful in converting a small group of Jews and pagans about five years earlier. He wrote this letter to the church in Corinth around 56 or 57 AD while in Ephesus on his missionary journey. Paul is responding to the turmoil felt in Corinth since his last visit. There is much quarrelling going on and Paul makes an appeal for unity in the Christian faith in a sanctified doctrine and practice. Paul defines the boundaries of the Gospels to end the bickering. Paul explains apostleship: have faithful leadership; that Christian leadership involves serving and guarding; to have trust through faithfulness in God; to trust the mystery; to trust God to handle the Judgment; and to learn from their leaders.

God has gifted different people and different leaders in different ways. These gifts are from God, by God and for God. Brothers and sisters are the heart of church. Each Christian is gifted. Together the Christian community has ALL the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This is why community is so powerful.

You and I are called as apostles, as servants, to go into our world and make a difference.

Christ has no body but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world, Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.  St. Teresa of Avila
God has plans for each life, and His plans are always to prosper us (Jeremiah 29:11) and not to harm us. What God allows in each life may not be the smooth and easy road through the journey but bumps and peaks and valleys—to strengthen and show us that He is always with us, and when we truly trust Him with our whole being, the journey will be exciting.

Joseph, the son of Jacob, experienced many bumps and peaks as he traveled through life. Joseph’s father favored him and gave him a wonderful gift, a coat of many colors which Joseph had to show to his brothers, igniting envy and jealousy. They got even with Joseph, or so they believed, by unsavory means and then lying to their father about what happened to him. God, though, lived in Joseph’s heart and showed Joseph that continued faith and perseverance are rewarded. At 30 years of age Joseph became the “chief executive officer” for Pharaoh, the King of Egypt.

Joseph proved wise in his powerful position and had control over the food supplies, accumulating so much that many new warehouses needed building to store everything. Life was good and to this good life were born two sons, the first one named Manasseh (forget) because Joseph with God’s love was able to forget his past troubles; a second son was named Ephraim (fruitful) because “God has made me fruitful in the land of suffering” (Genesis 41:51-52). A heart of gratitude for the good of life and not a heart turned sour because of the suffering Joseph experienced—“God has plans to prosper not to harm”—a heart of gratitude.

To truly understand all that Joseph experienced before we meet him at 30 years of age, it is truly necessary to read his life story from the beginning. Unfortunately we do not have the space, but we can look into our own lives and review our experiences, the good and the bad, because none of us, even though we are the apple of God’s eye and created in His image, live the smooth and easy life, for a reason. Joseph had a heart of gratitude, not letting his past unhappy moments define his whole person.

The questions we need to explore are simple: Do I trust God completely with my life? Do I give in to my troubling times? Do I talk to God openly and honestly about how I am feeling spiritually? Do I walk with others in their troubles or avoid the painful emotions of my friends? Do I see the good and let the bad truly live in the past (forget as Joseph did)? These are tough questions to ponder but very necessary for a grateful and peace filled life in this life.

Gracious Lord, empower us to always follow the light, Your Light, even when we are in the valley of darkness and to never forget your promise to us that Your plans for us are for good and not for harm.
Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother.  
Mark 3:35 (The Jerusalem Bible)

I am in the season of thankfulness at the moment. The Rule of Benedict, as well as a book titled One Thousand Gifts by Ann Voskamp, has led me to this place. I find that searching out things in the moment that I am thankful for is leading me down a path of gratefulness and joy. My list in a journal is lengthening and by writing each item down, I have begun to realize how blessed I am. Part of this blessing is being part of a community of women, a community that is searching, at all times, the will of God. It has not been easy. Decisions have been slow in coming. We have become short-circuited at times. But our path has been created with prayer and discernment.

One afternoon, sitting in my comfortable chair, I found myself disillusioned. Communication with my sisters had not been easy that day. Discernment of the will of God did not have consensus. The path did not seem clear. I was ready to give it all up! Oh, one of little faith, I was not seeing God’s picture, only my limited vision. Yet I could see that God had gathered a group of women together for a purpose. Each woman joining this community was bringing unbelievable gifts as well as the desire to follow the will of God. I realized that I needed to look at the big picture, not the restlessness of the moment. It was time to be thankful, not despairing. It was time to rejoice, not quit. And it was time to realize that following the will of God would take time, patience and perseverance.

Today, I am thankful for my Sisters that I have joined on this path. Today, I am thankful for our Sisters and Brothers who have patiently accompanied us along the way. And I am thankful for the God-given gifts that each member of the community brings as our pilgrimage continues into the future.

Dear Lord, I am so thankful for all you have created, for all the small things in life that are part of the fabric of the moment. I especially thank you for bringing into my life those individuals that I can call my Brother, Sister and Mother, knowing full well that it is your will that is working in the world, if only I stop, listen and rejoice. Amen.
Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word and accept it, and produce a crop — thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown. Mark 4:20 (NIV Study Bible)

Imagine the feeling of dismay that Joseph’s brothers experienced when they realized they were about to pay the price for betraying their brother, Joseph. His acts of forgiveness and reconciliation were not even in their thoughts! But these were in Joseph’s plan all along.....no small “random act of kindness.”

We all have seen the ads on TV where a small act of kindness is enacted, only to be multiplied numerous times by people who observed it. This heartwarming ad reinforces the words of Jesus when He spoke the parable of sowing seed in good soil. Thus we pray that our eyes will be open and our ears will hear, and that we will be sensitive to the needs of others and have the courage to carry out what needs to be done. These random acts of kindness are easily seen as living examples of Christian living.

During this Lenten season, let us pray to the Spirit to let us not only sow good seeds but to be open to receive good seeds and provide a healthy environment for them to grow.
He said to them, “Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed, is meant to be brought out into the open.” Mark 4:21-22 (Life Application Bible)

My first thought after reading this Scripture refers to the song “This Little Light of Mine.” It is probably familiar to you as well. The chorus goes like this:

This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.
Every day, every day, every day, every way,
Gonna let my little light shine.

Where do you keep your lamp? Is it put away with the “good” china and crystal; only brought out for special occasions? Do you have to blow the dust from it, which accumulates from lack of use, prior to each use? Or is your lamp burnished to a soft patina from frequent handling and use? Does it guide your daily steps and light the way for others to walk with you?

What “bowls” inhibit your light and prevent you from attaining maximum wattage? Have you asked God’s help to remove those obstacles? Maintaining a close relationship with Him has proven to be the most effective way for me to shine for Him. Surrounding myself with friends, sisters, and Episcopal Community members who nurture me, strengthen me, and encourage me in my spiritual journey are also beacons of light for me. I am graced with glimpses of Christ through their actions and am motivated to do likewise for others. As another song goes...It only takes a spark, to get a fire going...

Gracious God, pour Your blessings upon us, fill us with a heart full of love and light in order that we can become more effective “torch bearers” for You. Give us a spirit of servanthood and eagerness in our efforts to lead others to You. We thank you for the gift of this sisterhood through The Episcopal Community and for making us members of the great Body of Christ. Use us for your purposes and to Your great glory. May all that we do be pleasing in Your sight. Amen.
A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. Mark 4:37-39

Feeling God’s grace and presence in the middle of the storms in my life is something I hope for on a daily basis. I have felt a lot like Job these past months. My Spirit knows that God is with me, but I would be happier if I could see God lying on a cushion next to me in the chaos that envelops my life. I need my Savior, and I don’t like waiting. This chaos will pass, but why can’t it be over now. My gut feels like I’m on Space Mountain riding in the dark, getting jerked around and pushed side-to-side with job cut backs, financial concerns, betrayals, humiliation, and threats at every side. I want to blink and open my eyes to “…it’s a small world after all, it’s a small, small world.” That would be God’s grace My way, but I am not in control of all these changes. I can control my response though—my thoughts, my words, my deeds—to these changes. “If it be Thy will, please take it from me, Lord; no really, Lord, take it from me. I don’t think I can take another hit. I am letting go!”

In no time a friend shows up and helps clean the kitchen, another comes and patches the holes in the ceiling, and another says, “Use my car while yours is being repaired.” Discretionary support comes from the ECW or the rector, and I am assured that these gifts are God’s gifts to calm me. When I cry out, “Do you not care that I am perishing?” the answer comes quickly. “Yes, you know that I care, we care, your sisters and brothers around you care. You are not alone in this chaos. Stay close to me, listen to me, follow me, rest in me and all shall be well; all manner of things shall be well.”

Today, I feel like I’m drowning, but the water is clean. I can see the light at the surface. Listening to the still voice within me, I can battle back to the light. Sometimes God lets the storm rage and calms His child.
We live in a time that requires most of us to have very busy lives. Sometimes it is almost impossible for us to manage with a 24 hour day. Then Lent comes along, and we need to make time for Lenten Devotionals. How are we going to do that? Maybe we need to rethink, what are we doing anyway? I read a book called Loving Your Home, (Preston and Showalter, 2010) that changed a lot of things for me.

With the help of the book, I began to donate a lot of “stuff” to the Thrift Store. The result of that is I have a lot less material things to look after. I no longer have to care for them and dust them as tables and chairs have a lot fewer things on them. I can find things in the closets as there are fewer things in the closet. Everything fits with room for more.

Part of the outgrowth of having less is that I have more. I really have some time for my spiritual self that is not stolen from other things that I feel I “must do.” The reward has been that, “God ... has given treasure.” I did not fill up the time saved from housekeeping with other harried chores, but that time I gave over to the Lord and to myself.

There is more time for Our Savior, for me, for real relationships, and to enjoy friends, children and grandchildren. The perspective about what is important in my life has changed dramatically. I see more beauty in and have more compassion for others. In Mark, Jesus says, “Go home to your friends and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you.”

For me, the season of Lent is becoming about not just what I can give up for a few weeks, but rather, what I can eliminate completely to have more time for what is really important. “Keeping the commandments of God is what matters.”
He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” Mark 5:34 (The New Oxford Annotated Bible)

This passage speaks of a woman who has been bleeding for twelve years. She has tried many physicians and has not been cured. She felt that if she went to Jesus he could cure her. He was her last hope.

In the huge crowd she approaches Jesus and touches his robe, feeling that that would be sufficient to cure her. Imagine her surprise when Jesus turns around and asked who touched him! Would you be brave enough to confess that it was you? The woman fell at his feet and told him that she had done it. Imagine her relief when he replied, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease.”

Disease can be of the body, of the mind, of the soul or all three. How often have you talked to Jesus and asked him to help heal you? In our family there was a very emotionally stressful situation in which two of my family members were at odds with each other. Because of my love for both of them I was in a great deal of distress. For two years I prayed daily for a resolution to the problem which would bring them back together. It was through another adversity that the situation was resolved, and we are again a whole family.

Jesus helps us through our disease in body, mind, and soul. Persistence and faith are necessary to help us reach the resolution.

Dear Lord, help me to be persistent in all my works, so that I can do thy will and serve thee in all aspects of my life. AMEN.
They were speechless—they couldn’t believe what they were hearing and seeing.
Genesis 45:3 (The Message)

This is a difficult set of passages to discern. But as I touched them with my eyes, a pattern of themes began to spin a strong thread. There are three sturdy strands to grasp and with which to construct beauty: Jesus is rejected in Mark by his very kinsmen and women; Paul instructs on godly inspiration in one’s <ahem> personal life; Joseph shows compassion toward his brothers who are penitent.


Isn’t that the flow of life sometimes? I feel rejection often and reject God more often than I should. I find if I can humble myself enough and ask forgiveness, I often find inspiration to pick myself up, usually feeling grateful and a little ashamed, but able to cheerfully return to my gifts. Like Joseph’s brothers though, I don’t believe my heart’s eye at seeing forgiveness. It is the inspiration though in itself where I find comfort and a way back to my path.

I’m a preschool teacher; I go through this process several times a day some days. I’m also a mother to two <amazing> teenagers; I go through this process with them several times an hour some days!

I pray if you find yourself stuck in a rut, you’ll talk with God, the generous three in one. Open your heart, and let it pour out. With God’s help, you will grasp your strands and weave a beautiful braid of Inspiration.
These three scriptures gave me a great deal of trouble. After several attempts at meditation nothing came to me; ready to throw down the pen, I tried one more time. What I was failing to see was a faint thread woven into all three scriptures. It is love that binds us together, not only in community but with strangers.

Joseph was able to forgive his brothers and allow God’s plan to take place. When the process of forgiveness takes place … peace … takes over allowing love to fulfill us.

Paul’s letter to the Corinthians talks about those that believe it was okay to eat the meat left over from sacrifices to the pagan idols and those that did not. This reminded me of society today and how we have a tendency to separate into various groups and try to encourage others to do what we believe is right, in so doing encouraging others to do what they believe is wrong. When love binds us together, our concern for others should take precedence over our individual desires. We should care for harmony and reconciliation to be able to see Christ in the face of those we see every day.

Herod is a good example of allowing his love for his daughter to encourage the beheading of John the Baptist. Herod was more concerned with regards to the promise he made to his daughter in front of his guest than in what he believed. How many times as individuals do we allow our head and not our heart and soul to direct our actions?

Love saw a guilt of sin, and sought a basis of pardon.
Love saw the defilement of sin, and sought a way of cleansing.
Love saw the depravity of sin, and sought a means of restoration.
Love saw the condemnation of sin, and sought a method of justification.
Love saw the death of sin, and sought a way of life.
Love sought---Love found!    Author Unknown
“I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph’s own hand will close your eyes.” Genesis 46:4 (NIV)

As I read this verse I think of three things: a journey into the unknown, a reunion, and a promise.

Have you ever taken a journey into an unknown area? It can be frightening. In November of 1961 my husband received orders to relocate from Texas to Alaska. We decided to take a leave, go to Pennsylvania, see family and drive to Alaska. My husband, two children, ages 4 and 5, and I, in our Ford Falcon, began a journey into the unknown. Across the USA, into western Canada, up the Alcan Highway to Alaska in January of 1962, we drove between storms. And in the ten days it took us to reach Anchorage, we encountered some snow plows and a few cars, an oil tanker and the weekly “Safeway” grocery truck. Most traffic was going in the opposite direction. Many days we could not even tune in any radio stations. One day we heard a station from Del Rio, Texas. It was music to our ears as we felt small and alone in the white world of the northland—both exciting and scary. A new adventure in our lives, but we knew God was with us.

In verse 4 we have Joseph, asking his father and family to leave their homeland and come to the unknown. We are on a journey into the unknown—life. Today we are in a shorter one—Lent—a time for reflection, introspection, and prayer. But God, as with Joseph, tells us not to be worried. “I will go down with you.”

Joseph and his father had a reunion in Egypt, and we had a reunion in Alaska with friends. How joyous it was. This Easter after our Lenten journey, we will have a reunion with our Lord and Savior and the promise for eternal life. He is with us always.

The promise given in verse 4 was for Joseph’s hand to close his father’s eyes. God tells us He will be with us throughout life’s journey and will bring us back again when it is finished. Home to Him, a reunion with our Lord and Savior, where He will close our eyes.

Be not afraid as He is with us no matter where we go.

*The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.* Psalm 121
At our wedding my friend sang a song with the line, “Walk hand and hand with me, through all eternity, with God as our guide.” These readings reminded me of that song. Their stories share the importance of walking with God:

Joseph’s brothers and father walked into the palace to be presented to Pharaoh and answered Pharaoh. They were Shepherds and boldly ask for the land of Goshen.

Paul, compelled to preach, shared himself with all men, whomever his pathway crossed. Paul boldly expressed the message of Jesus in ways that it touched their souls.

Jesus comforted his disciples while walking on the lake. We know man cannot walk on water, yet here was Jesus. While reading this passage again, for the first time I noticed the words “He was about to pass them by.”

Where has God led your footsteps? On an Alaska trip to two villages in the Arctic, the plane was so small, fear gripped every part of my being. I was frozen in so much fear that I almost missed a pivotal walk in my spiritual journey.

Recently a phone message asked me to call a sales lady for an event at our time share. My head said why bother but something inside me said to call. I almost walked away from an opportunity to love and help a troubled stranger.

Little moments in our lives can place our footsteps where God can instruct us and use us to grow in grace and share His love. “Jesus almost passed them by,” but he climbed in the boat, he calmed the sea and comforted his disciples.

Reflect on a circumstance where you were afraid to step out of your comfort zone but did anyway? How did your faith compel you to go forward? How did the experience strengthen your faith?

What is God calling you to do? Maybe fear is keeping you from stepping forward. If fear is in your way, petition God for the faith to overcome your fears. And walk with Him as your guide.

*God please direct my daily steps and help me to be still so I may know the Spirit within. Awaken my Spirit, refresh me each day so my steps will journey along the pathway you have provided. Thank you, God, for walking with me on my journey. Amen.*
Promises, promises, promises—we all make them to our families, friends and business associates. How good are we at keeping them?

One could say that The Scriptures represent God’s promises to mankind, and we take great comfort in knowing that God keeps his promises. In Genesis we read about Jacob and Joseph and see evidence of God fulfilling his promise to “to make you (Jacob) fruitful and increase your numbers” (Genesis 48:3-4).

As Jacob is nearing the end of his life he asks Joseph “to swear” to him that he will carry him out of Egypt and bury him in their burial place. I don’t know about you, but when someone asks me “to swear,” it gets my attention. But why?

Wikipedia puts it this way: “to swear” refers to “an oath” as a promise calling upon something or someone that the oath maker considers sacred, usually God, as a witness to the binding nature of the promise or the truth of the statement of fact.

Many of us have been sworn under oath “to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.” Many have vowed to “have and to hold someone until death do us part.” Some have made special vows to God in ordained ministries. During our Baptismal Services we join with those who are committing themselves to Christ and renew our own baptismal covenant (vow). As parents and god parents we stand before God and our fellow Christians and vow that we “turn to Christ and accept him as our Savior.”

Reading on in today’s scriptures we hear another promise from God in 1 Corinthians 10:13:

No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

No matter what we are facing, we aren’t alone, and it’s not the first time that someone has had to deal with this situation. Perhaps our greatest test is in remembering this “promise” from God and having faith that He always keeps his promises. We will be challenged, but He will give us strength to endure.

Lastly, in Mark’s Gospel Jesus tells the Pharisees “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Mark 7:6). “Whatever goes into a person cannot defile, for it is from within, from the human heart that evil intentions come” (Mark 7:18).

During this season of Lent may we be mindful that God doesn’t want our “lip service.” He wants our “heart service.” He wants our promise, our oath, and our sacred vow to take Him into our hearts so that His word “may be fruitful and multiply.”
Monday, March 19

Jesus took the man aside...and put his fingers into the man’s ears, and he spat and touched the man’s tongue....Immediately, the man’s ears were opened, his tongue released, and he spoke plainly. Mark 7:33-35 (NRSV)

Jesus healed many people during his ministry. What I like about the second healing we read today is its physicality: fingers in ears and on the tongue. Unlike the long-distance healing of the Syrophoenician woman’s daughter that we also read today, the healing of the deaf man is skin-to-skin. While I like the second healing, I admit that it makes me uncomfortable. Jesus’ “mystical” healings somehow seem more spiritual and easier to handle.

As a society, we have mixed feelings about bodies—our own as well as others’. Not only do we have to deal with mass media telling us what we should or shouldn’t look like, but many of us are also wrestling with the anti-body messages of our faith traditions. (Maybe we heard those messages ourselves; maybe our parents and grandparents heard them, and then passed them on to us). Some of us also are dealing with abuse concerns that further alienate us from our bodies.

The story of Jesus healing someone with his hands is a powerful reminder of the blessedness of the human body. A body heals. A body is healed. I don’t think it is a coincidence that we Christians are the body of Christ.

Take a moment to reflect. Imagine you are the deaf man. How do you need to be healed? Where does your life need to be healed? Imagine you are Jesus. How can you be Jesus’ hands and voice in the world? How can you be an instrument of healing in the world? How is God calling you to be in your everyday life?

I am writing this reflection during the first week of Advent. Lent is almost three months away. Perhaps my Lenten reflection will be to allow God to remind me of the blessedness of my physical self: the blessing I can be for others, and the blessings I receive from others.

Loving God, you want nothing less for us than fullness of life—fullness of our entire lives, including our bodies. Open our hearts to our need for healing, as well as our blessedness and your call to us to be a blessing to others. You have no hands on this earth but ours, so we ask for your continuous guidance, through Jesus Christ, our healer. Amen.
“Oh, what’s the bottom line?” It’s easy to approach even our spirit-building readings in this manner in this so hectic, over-bearing world. Our parishes are filled with questions, disagreements on the most simplistic matters, as well as matters of great theology. Why can’t we all agree? Why in the world don’t you understand my point of view? Why can’t I see yours? Are we really listening?

1 Corinthians 11:18-19 (The New Oxford Annotated Bible) reads, “For, in the first place, when you assemble as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and I partly believe it, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.”

I believe that we grow in compassion, in understanding, and in love by the sincere and deliberate search for the love and understanding that dwells in those around us. The Savior made this love available to everyone willing to make the effort. The seamstress who will never in her lifetime leave the community in which she was born, has available to her in the lives of the people she meets, the same opportunity to understand love and live into that gift as an ambassador who travels the world and engages the best educated of all on this planet.

The more diverse the opinions of our parish members, the greater the opportunity to find among us all the genuine. The challenge for this Lenten day, and for all of our Seasons, is to search out “the genuine” who are placed in our lives—and to become genuine ourselves.

I believe God wants us to be real, the genuine love article. This is an opportunity available to every person in every parish: to find the love and live it.

First and above all else compassionate God, we thank you for your love. Guide us in finding those who exemplify those traits of genuine love and compassion which we may lack. Teach us to listen to their love and let it become our own. Help us to find ways to show our love to those seeking to be genuine as well. In all things, let us be true to the person you need us to be. Caress our fears, make us bold in love, and bring us joyfully ever closer to your light. Amen.
In the reading for today from Mark, Jesus expressed his frustration with his disciples: “Why can’t they see and hear and understand what I am trying to tell them?” They were with him every day, and yet it was the blind man who “saw” Jesus and was healed. His heart was opened, and he understood!

Isn’t this true with us? We see God’s mighty creation all around us; we witness miraculous signs of Jesus’ love every day. But so often the eyes and ears of our hearts cannot see and hear what He is doing and saying to us.

God had made a promise to Joseph in the reading from Genesis that He would care for His people. Joseph believed this with all his heart. He forgave his brothers who had betrayed him, and he even cared for their families. He understood and believed in his heart that God would be with them.

The human heart is a miraculous organ without which we would not have life. The heart is also where physical realities are transformed into spiritual “miracles”; it is where hate becomes love, doubt becomes faith, and sadness becomes joy. It is where the Holy Spirit enables us to hear, see and understand the awesome love of God. I recently witnessed this transformation of the lives of 32 women on a Kairos weekend as their hearts were opened. They “saw,” “heard,” and “understood,” many for the first time in their lives. We who are not incarcerated often let the worries and busyness of our lives close our eyes and ears and minds.

During this Lenten season, may the heart that beats within us be opened to what God is doing in our lives and in the world around us. Then may we with truly thankful hearts respond: “Yes, Lord, I see, I hear and I understand!”
He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Mark 8:34

Denying myself means for me to be willing to give up something that I really, really want or to not seek something that hinders me doing God’s will. Wanting and seeking are not bad in themselves but are problems if I put them before doing what I know in my heart is God’s will. I must be willing to give up anything in life in order to please God.

Hearts are beloved objects to me. Shortly after I married, I found a heart-shaped cutting board and bought it for my husband because the shape and beautiful wood spoke to me of the love that we were sharing and of the hope I had for beauty in our relationship. From that purchase grew an incredible collection of heart-shaped objects —some I purchased but most were received as gifts from family and friends. It became easy for people to give me gifts. I was obsessed with not leaving the house without wearing some item of clothing, earrings, necklace, or bracelet with hearts on it.

One day I was brought up short with the realization that I was worshipping my heart objects and thinking more about them than I was about God. So I immediately stopped obsessing about hearts. I cleared items out of my closet and jewelry box and just kept a few things that I could wear on special occasions. Wow! I was denying myself and not seeking something that was hindering me from doing God’s will. I felt good that I was following God’s will for my life.

I had told my husband for years that the only diamond I wanted other that my wedding ring was a heart-shaped diamond. For my birthday a couple of years ago he bought me my necklace. It was beautiful, just the right size, and I was thrilled. I put it around my neck and seldom took it off. Recently, my husband commented that my heart was not shining very much. I started cleaning the diamond every day and thinking about if it were sparkling and if people would notice my beautiful heart diamond. Again I was obsessed.

In a quiet time one morning a couple of weeks ago, I was again brought up short. I realized then that I had not denied myself. I took off my necklace and put it in a safe place. The Rule of Benedict tells me to be moderate in all things. I want to follow Jesus, so I will find an appropriate time and hopefully a good market in which to sell the diamond necklace and be led to an appropriate place for its proceeds.

O God, guide me to daily deny myself, take up my cross and follow you.
Today is a journey of believing and obedience. Starting in Exodus we learn that in God’s plan a life is saved for a reason. During Pharaoh’s reign males were to be killed. One woman loved her son so much that she risked her own life to save his. As the story goes she puts the baby boy in a basket and sets it in the river where the Pharaoh’s daughter would go down to bathe. One of her slaves finds the basket and the princess thinks that he is a Hebrew and offers to pay one of her maidens to nurse and raise him. When this child was older, he was returned to the princess, and she named him Moses, stating that she drew him out of the river. As Moses grew he became very conflicted at how his people were being treated as slaves and watching them work until they died. This made Moses so angry that he killed an Egyptian and buried him in the sand. But the news of the murder got to Pharaoh and he wanted Moses killed. Moses fled to Midian where he was well received. In time, the family of Reuel offered a daughter named Zipporah, and he married her. They had a child named Gershom for he said, “I have been a stranger in a foreign land.”

Later in the Book of Mark, Moses and Elijah appeared while Jesus was with his closest disciples: Peter, James and John. Moses and Elijah began talking to Jesus and after they finished talking, Moses and Elijah were gone and this surprised the other three. Jesus explained to his disciples not to talk to anyone about his meeting with Moses and Elijah until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they did as they were told; but, they often asked each other what Jesus meant by “risen from the dead.”

At this time, they could not understand that the values of God’s eternal Kingdom were different from the values of the world. They wanted relief from their present problems. But deliverance from sin is far more important than deliverance from physical suffering or political oppression. Our understanding and appreciation of Jesus must go beyond what he can do for us here and now.

Always remember, together we are Christ’s body, and each one of us is a separate and necessary part of it. What are the three things that will endure always? Faith, hope and love; but, of the three, the greatest one is and always will be love.
Saturday, March 24

Exodus 2:23—3:15  
1 Corinthians 13:1-13  
Mark 9:14-29

...faith, hope, love...the greatest of these is love. 1 Corinthians 13:13 (NKJV)

In the reading from Exodus God speaks with Moses. God “remembers” the covenant with the people of God and promises to be with them continually and by extension us. “Remember” is a powerful word. As Christians we are a story formed community. Should we forget so goes the community, thus, we are called to continually share the story of our salvation history. God gives God’s name to Moses, “I AM,” saying that it is God’s name forever and a memorial to all generations. The message in Exodus is one of assurance providing us with a secure foundation to bring life to the words we proclaim. Words spoken without actions are often hollow.

Often people have asked “Can’t you just recycle your sermons?” My response is that the only reason I keep a sermon file is to be certain I don’t use the same anecdotal stories and examples. Every time we read or hear the scriptures we are at a different place in our life experiences, since life is rarely stagnant. The scriptures speak to us constantly, giving us new insights and renewed energy on our journey of faith, no matter where we are or how strong or weak our faith may be, helping us to become more fully the people God prays us to be.

The reading from 1 Corinthians directly follows Paul’s teaching on the variety of gifts that come from the Spirit and their uniqueness to each of us. The reading is often used at weddings; however, it’s actually referring to the gifts of the Spirit and agape’, an unconditional love that loves for love’s sake. Without agape’ the gifts are meaningless. With it the gifts of the Spirit are amplified, taking on a life of their own, and are mutually beneficial to all undergirded by belief and deeds.

In the Gospel of Mark Jesus says to the father of the epileptic boy, “If you can believe, all things are possible.” “All things” are those things which God has provided to give us, e.g., peace and joy. The verse is not saying that we will get everything that we “want.” The word “believe” refers to knowing that God loves us unconditionally and in the certainty that God provides us with what we “need.”

The boy’s father asks for help in his unbelief, meaning that he doesn’t have much faith, but he has a little and because of it Jesus cures his son. God does not wait until we are perfect (which will never happen on earth) before hearing our prayers, and even the teeniest bit of faith is enough. It is through the gifts of the Spirit, of faith, hope, and love being the greatest of all, that we are empowered and strengthened through continually sharing them with all we meet.

Let us Pray: Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; then use us, we pray, as you will and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. (The Book of Common Prayer, A Prayer for Self-Dedication, page 832)
Moses was a leader. He had already demonstrated his faith and character. He was already aware of the plight of his people in bondage in Egypt, and he had intervened. Yet when God communicated with him directly and told him what He wanted him to do, Moses said “not me, I am not qualified, I am not articulate enough.” In Exodus 4:10 his reply to God was, “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.”

God told him much like he told Job, “Who made you? Who gave you speech? I will give you the words. All I want you to do is have faith and trust in Me. It will be My words you speak.”

As God directed him Moses performed the acts to demonstrate his power. Together they chose Aaron to speak (the words of God) for Moses as he performed the signs and wonders God directed. Moses must have continuously been in awe of the amazing things he was able to accomplish with God’s help. Who knows what we could do if we listened, trusted, and acted on God’s guidance in our lives? Surely this is worthy of our prayerful reflection at this Lenten Season. All of us remember the times we have been operating way beyond our own capabilities when we knew God was with us as we did His will.

Then we are reminded in 1 Corinthians that God gives us all unique and special gifts and He expects us to use them. In 1 Corinthians 14:12 Paul tells the Corinthians to…. “strive to excel in them for the building up of the church.” Developing our gifts and talents God has given us should never be a distraction to others or used only for our own selfish goals. Rather our gifts are to be used to build up others—to encourage and build up the Church (the body of Christ). Surely we can use this time at Lent to seek how we can use our unique gifts to build up the Church.

Christ had to remind even his disciples in Mark 9:35, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” He explained to them that no act of love, no simple kindness would go unnoticed. He reminded them that to be great in His Kingdom, they must seek and serve those in need.

*Lord Jesus: We pray that we may remain close to you this Lenten Season. May we listen to your guidance in our lives and use all the gifts you have given us to love and serve others.*
Tuesday, March 27

Exodus 5:1—6:1  1 Corinthians 14:20-33a, 39-40  Mark 9:42-50

Reflections about Lent bring temptation, sin, and consequences into sharper focus. Sometimes the temptation is to just ignore a situation you recognize as wrong but at the moment it might appear to be the easier choice to make. Such was not the case when “Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, ‘Thus, says the Lord, the God of Israel: Let my people go, that they may celebrate a feast to me in the desert’” (Exodus 5:1). Their intention was honorable, but Pharaoh’s wrath over a challenge to his authority brought devastating consequences to the Israelites, to the point that Moses regretted his action—“Lord, why do you treat this people so badly. And why did you send me on such a mission? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has maltreated this people of yours and you have done nothing to rescue them” (Exodus 5:22-23). But the Lord did respond positively to Moses and brought about the exodus.

That questioning by Moses reminds me of my own impatience when things don’t go the way I want them to go, or I am not treated like I felt I should have been. That temptation to blame someone or something else for a disappointment is again an easier thing to do. Given time for self reflection, I realize I have just been given another opportunity to practice patience, as we are reminded: “Keep salt in yourselves and you will have peace with one another” (Mark 9:50)...and peace with yourself, I would add.

Just as Moses’ intent was to lead the Israelites on a 3-day journey into the desert to offer sacrifice, (Exodus 5:3) so too are we reminded to sacrifice at Lent, to grow spiritually—“In respect to evil be like infants, but in your thinking be mature” (1 Corinthians 14:20) —and as believers, to prophesy to make believers of nonbelievers (1 Corinthians 14:22-25, The New American Bible, St. Joseph Edition).

Praise God for his blessings and grace each day.
Everywhere we go, people breathe in the exquisite fragrance. Because of Christ, we give off a sweet scent rising to God, which is recognized by those on the way to salvation—an aroma redolent with life. But those on the way to destruction treat us more like the stench from a rotting corpse. 2 Corinthians 2:14-16 (The Message)

In the scriptures appointed for today, the words “heart” and “fragrances” appear often. Pharaoh’s heart was hardened more than once as Moses and Aaron attempted to convince Pharaoh to let God’s people go into the wilderness to worship Him. In the gospel of Mark, when the Pharisees questioned Jesus about divorce, Jesus remarked it was because of their hardness of heart that Moses wrote that commandment for them. The gospel then told the story of people bringing little children to Jesus, whom Jesus welcomed and blessed in spite of the disciples’ protests. That contrasting story to the ones before goes along with Paul’s comments to the Corinthians on how they lived their lives as Christians, a good change in their hearts received from the Spirit of the Living God, as the only letter of recommendation needed.

If you look to your life, how is your fragrance or heart most of the time? Is your scent such that all would know from it that you were a follower of Christ? Does your scent change or is your heart hardened when you do not get your way or when you feel hurt, betrayed, lonely or unloved? Do you work to change both, at those times, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to bring about “an aroma redolent with life” and feelings of trust, joy, acceptance, wonder, and love? I imagine Jesus recognized all of these things in the hearts of the children who came to him and is expecting the same of us when he tells the disciples, “Unless you accept God’s kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you’ll never get in” (Mark 10:15).

I received a slightly revised version of the Prayer of Cardinal Newman in the 1980's. I have re-read and shared it many times, always keeping the message close to my heart. I pray you can bring it into your lives and continue to make a difference in our world with a Christ-like heart and scent.

Dear Jesus, Help us to spread your fragrance everywhere we go. Flood our souls with your spirit and life. Penetrate and possess our whole being so utterly that our lives may only be a radiance of yours. Shine through us and be so in us that every soul we come in contact with may feel your presence in our soul. Let them look up and see no longer us but only Jesus. Stay with us and then we shall begin to shine as you shine, to shine so as to be light to others. The light, Oh Jesus, will be all from you. None of it will be ours. It will be you shining on others through us. Let us praise you in the way you love best, by shining on those around us. Let us preach you without preaching—not by words, but by our example, by the catching force, the sympathetic influence of what we do, the evident fullness of the love our hearts bear to you. Amen.
But we Christians have no veil over our faces; we can be mirrors that brightly reflect the glory of the Lord. And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him. 2 Corinthians 3:18 (The Living Bible)

My youngest daughter majored in musical theater in college, and in one of the shows in which she had a part, she performed a song called “Reflect the Light.” Being a proud parent, I was overwhelmed by her wonderful singing, but I was also incredibly touched by how the director, near the end of the song, had each of the cast members pull from their pockets hand-held mirrors to reflect the stage lights throughout the small theater. Now, whenever I remember this part of the performance or even see light reflecting from a shiny object, questions form in my mind, such as: Do I, as a Christian, even cracked and sometimes broken, always reflect His light as the mirrors did in the show? Or, do I shine His light in all places, always radiating His glory and grace and love wherever I go? The answers, of course, are no.

Though we are made in God’s image, I am the first to admit that I am fully human—one who falls short in my efforts every day. What is comforting to know is that we all are still God’s beloved children and qualified with our imperfections to serve Him and to spread the Gospel. It is even more comforting to know that we only have to look to God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—to be changed into a being more like Him. Then, when the brightness of His image is seen in us, it reflects on others too.

Heavenly Father, please polish us daily, so that we may always reflect Your glory. Amen.
“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” Mark 10:45 (NRSV)

One of my favorite Twilight Zone episodes involves a bunch of big-headed aliens who come to earth toting an impressive reference book. At first, everyone is terrified, but after a little diligent Alien-to-English work, one of the scientists declares that the title of the book is *To Serve Man*. The earthlings are thrilled and start crowding onto space ships headed for the alien planet. Alas, after a little more translation work, the scientist tries to stop people from leaving earth with the cry, “Wait! *To Serve Man* is a *cookbook*!”

That Twilight Zone episode bears some similarities to the Gospel reading in Mark. Zebedee’s boys, James and John, are trying to fight their way onto Jesus’ heavenly space ship by crawling over the other disciples and asking not only to board, but to be given seats in First Class, with Jesus in the middle seat.

Don’t you just know that Jesus got tired of this kind of silly stuff? I picture him sighing before he continues. First he tells them that they have no idea what they’re asking. “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink? Be baptized with my baptism?” Like children, or anyone who doesn’t have or understand the whole story, James and John eagerly boast that, yes, of course, whatever.

By this time the other ten guys are steaming with indignation, thinking James and John have crossed the line with their demands. But Jesus gathers them together, and then switches things around, turning logic and reason upside-down.

“First of all, I’m not the one with authority to give out seats in First Class,” Jesus explains. “And by the way, all the great and rich people who think they can buy their way up front are in for a surprise.” And here’s the twist: Jesus tells them that whoever wants First Class seats will have to become a servant to everyone else on board. Just like him. Jesus lets them know that he did not come to sit in First Class. He did not come to be served. He truly came to serve man, and not in the Twilight Zone cookbook-sense.

When reflecting on our place in this kingdom and the next, we would be wise to stop clamoring for the First Class seats and consider our true purpose as people who serve Christ in the world.

*Lord, show us how to become better servants. Help us remember that our earthly bodies contain the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in Christ, granting us the tools we need to serve you in the world.*
From today’s reading, we find a strand of the oft-repeated theme of light and darkness, both literal and figurative. So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was thick darkness in all of Egypt for three days; they did not see one another...but all the people of Israel had light where they dwelt (Exodus 10:22-23, RSV). The literal darkness enveloping the Egyptians is juxtaposed against the light among the Hebrews; likewise, the divine light in the hearts of His people today shines in bright contrast to the darkness enveloping those who have not come to know Him.

And the Lord gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians (Exodus 11:3). As God prepared the Israelites for their departure from Egypt, God’s favor spread even into the homes and hearts of those who did not know Him. They esteemed Moses and listened to him; they even gave their best silver and gold to the Hebrews just because they asked. The Divine Presence was so strong that it permeated even these heathen hearts, and helped the Israelites prepare to follow his will into the unknown wilderness.

...because we look not to the things that are seen but to things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18). Paul reminds us in verse 17, that heaven, that place of the divine presence, is so much more an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. Anything here looks like the Egyptian camp in contrast.

Finally, blind Bartimaeus the beggar could have asked for riches, for delivery from the poverty and the life of begging for food just to survive. But he didn’t. Jesus seemed to offer a free ticket, for anything. And the blind man said to Him, “Master, let me receive my sight.” And Jesus said to him, “Go your way; your faith has made you well” (Mark 10: 51-52). The darkness of a lifetime suddenly vanished, and was replaced by a whole new world of sight, color and depth. Oh, that we would be so wise! Oh, that we could trust the Yahweh who delivered the Hebrews, the Christ that Paul reminded us “will raise us up and bring us into His presence,” (2 Corinthians 4:14) and the light of wholeness that He offers us as He did Bartimaeus.

Father God, thank you that you shine your light to guide our every step. Help us to choose the light and receive your healing presence.
All of us at some point or another in our lives have experienced great hurt, great pain and great sorrow. As much as we would like to be, we are not immune from pain and grief. As a young boy I experienced this pain and grief firsthand. At the age of 18 or so, I lost my mother due to complications from HIV/AIDS. You see, as a child, my sister and I lived in the ghettos. There were often nights when there was not a whole lot of food to go around. And because my mother was an illiterate, uneducated woman, she could not maintain a job. So to provide for my sister and me, my mother turned to prostitution; to ease her broken heart and numb the hurt, she turned to crack cocaine.

As a young adult I often wondered where God was in all of the pain and heartache. There were times that I even cursed the name of God. I did not deserve to have a mother who was strung out. There were times I wondered if I had done something to upset God. I said my prayers, I was kind, and I did all those good Christian things; yet my family life was awful. I am certain that many of you have faced some of the same problems. Maybe you are like me in that you have prayed and yet, the health problems that plagued us before are still present. Though you prayed and prayed, the financial difficulties did not end. Perhaps you have tried and tried and prayed and prayed and done all the good Christian things to mend that estranged relationship, but it was not mended. And no matter how many times you have attended that healing service and sought the best medical treatment, your loved one is still ill.

The writer of Lamentations must have felt the same way. Imagine that these words were written today. Many of us can reflect the words, “[I have] no one to comfort [me].” Some of us have been sad for so long that we have forgotten what happiness is. The writer of Lamentations is encountering a season just as this and has forgotten what happiness is; his expectation about God has been crushed.

My friends, if we are not careful, we can find ourselves in these dark valleys of life, unable to move because of fear. We can be down so long that it has become comfortable, and we don’t have the courage to get up. We can be in the dark so long that the light feels like daggers in our eyes. If we aren’t careful, our anger calcifies into bitterness and ferments into malice, cynicism and gloom.

It is most helpful in times of pain to remember the words of Lamentations 3:20-24, “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” This will help us realize that God is with us even in the midst of what we are going through. St. Paul said, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” Even though life has presented us with unforeseen challenges, God is walking right beside us. It is because God is with us that we can have HOPE!

Oh God, you have promised that you would never leave us or forsake us. Come, oh God of grace, and fulfill that promise. Give me and those I love that peace which surpasses all understanding. Amen.
Authority. Where does it come from? When Jesus reentered the temple he was approached by the chief priests and scribes who demanded to know who gave him the authority to do the things he was doing (Mark 11:27). The scribes and Pharisees considered themselves to be the absolute authority and did not want to consider any alternative.

In our current society we are surrounded by authority—it can be respected, obeyed, ignored, circumvented or questioned. When my children were small I would often hear the youngest one say to his older sister, “You are not the boss of me!” He was really not questioning her authority or who gave it to her, he just wanted to do whatever he wanted to do without interference from her. To be told that the Bible tells us to obey our parents and she was doing what her parents had told her to do didn’t make much of an impression—at least not at the time.

The elders knew where Jesus’ authority came from. He did not need to tell them, for the works he did told them plainly he had authority from God since no man could do the miracles which he did unless God were with him. When Jesus asked them, “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” (Mark 11:30) they knew the answer but also knew that if they answered correctly their perceived authority and esteem would be lost. They really did not want the truth but just wanted to undermine Jesus’ authority.

The Lenten season is a time of reflection—a special time for us to reflect on spiritual things and examine how they are shown in our daily lives. A lot of people give up something for Lent: e.g. candy, alcohol, gossiping, etc. I have found it more meaningful to “take on something.” The something can be a habit, a person, a situation or whatever stands out as needing special time and attention in my life. This year I am planning on examining my reaction to authority and how I make decisions. In other words, how do I look for answers—by praying, seeking spiritual help, reading books or by just making snap decisions?

Jesus’ answer to the chief priests and elders was brilliant. By giving them a question to answer he forced them to accept the truth about who he was and who gave him his authority, but they chose to not answer. I hope that I will be able to recognize answers and respond accordingly.

Lord, give us the strength and courage to seek answers from you and accept them. Help us to look to you for the ultimate authority. Amen.
Wednesday, April 4


How the Lord in his anger has humiliated daughter Zion! Lamentations 2:1

...I wrote to you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears... 2 Corinthians 2:4

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants: “This is the heir; come, let us kill him...” Mark 12:7 (Holy Bible, NRSV)

What negative readings we have for today! God is angry with the Chosen People; Paul has had a hard time with the people of Corinth and they, with him; Jesus is reproaching the temple authorities for their rejection of him, the Messiah, and they are angry and fearful. What are we to make of such painful and difficult passages, especially when grouped together? But then, this is the middle of Holy Week, and the climax of the Passion is approaching; even the psalms for the day are “dark.”

These are very human emotions, feelings with which we can all identify. Perhaps it is appropriate that we stop to consider that the human condition has always been troublesome, even for the Son of God in human form. He’s had a very bad week since he entered Jerusalem, and it will get worse. He has cursed a fig tree (hard to see what that bit’s about!), driven the animal-sellers from the Temple, overturned the tables of the money-changers, and lectured the disciples about asking for forgiveness when they pray, even as their prayers are answered. The chief priests, scribes, and elders have confronted him, and the Pharisees and Herodians will be next, then the Sadducees. He must realize that there is no way to avoid a violent outcome to his ministry on earth. There’s no happy ending for this week!

I think we have to look at these readings as people who know how the story comes out. The bad times will be eclipsed by the glory and joy of the Resurrection—but not quite yet. We must still wrestle with some very intense lessons about pain and suffering and where the Kingdom of God is to be found.

Holy God, source of all wisdom, creator of all that is, guide your children in all things, that we may learn the lessons to which you have set us and be refined by the times of trial that life will bring us. Help us to be obedient and cheerful, seeking your guidance in all circumstances, that we may be strengthened to fulfill your purposes and bring glory to your name. Amen.
Maundy Thursday, April 5

Lamentations 2:10-18  1 Corinthians 10:14-17; 11:27-32  Matthew 14:12-25

And he took a cup and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many.” (The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha, RSV)

In the movie, Dead Man Walking, (based on Sister Helen Prejean’s book of the same title) both the swaggering, macho, posturing of the condemned murderer Matthew Poncelet, and the cold, arrogant power of the law and politicians and prison officials come up short. The quiet spiritual power of an inexperienced Catholic nun’s unconditional love for both Poncelet and the parents of his victims, make manifest the power of God’s weakness in the cross of Jesus. At the end of the movie, Matthew, through the love of Sister Helen, is finally able to confess to what he has done, and to acknowledge the wrongness of it. “You have dignity, now,” she tells him. “You are a child of God.” “No one ever called me a child of God before,” Matthew responds. “Isn’t it funny, I had to die to find love?”

What Jesus wants the disciples and us to realize is that in Jesus’ kingdom, a great reversal of values has taken place. His teaching and life cut through all the normal and conventional definitions of power and status. In this kingdom, power and status are radically redefined as suffering, submission, and service. In God’s kingdom, that which was insignificant becomes significant. A tomb...death...leads to triumph. That which has no status is given status; that which is weak in the eyes of the world confounds the strong; that which is sinful, is declared righteous...and while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

To be a disciple is to be a servant and a “slave of all.” And to be a servant is to be delivered into the hands of humanity, to drink the cup Jesus drank, and to be baptized with the baptism with which he was baptized. We hear Christ speak, “The cup I must drink, you shall drink, the baptism with which I must be baptized, you must be baptized.” Our baptismal vows call us to seek Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves; striving for justice and respecting the dignity of every human being. This is the motivation for our mission, not our power. The sole purpose of the church is to minister to God’s people. When we seek Christ in others, we find that humanity is a mosaic —showing us the very face of God. It is urgent that we be about —and remember who we are called to be...the compassionate sons and daughters of a loving God, baptized into the mission and servant-hood to which Christ calls us.
In Lamentations, Jeremiah tells of his anguish, struggles, and trials and the feeling that God has put him in very trying situations. He has felt so down trodden, YET he kept his vision and hope in the Lord, because he recalled the great love of the Lord and His compassion.

Sometimes, we are in such a hurry and so impatient we try to rush past the steps that God has prepared for us that truly ready us for the trials ahead—for I believe that with each step we are strengthened and when it comes to that time when it seems we can take no more—we can lean on the everlasting arms and know that God will not forsake us.

As I read verses 19-33, the hymn “Great is Thy Faithfulness” came to mind as did the words from the 1982 HYMNAL, #646, “The King of love my shepherd is whose goodness faileth never, I nothing lack if I am His and He is mine forever.”

Dear God, make us ever mindful of the sacrifice that you made for us in Jesus, your son dying on the cross for our sins, that we never despair, for we know that you are here when we call.

In 1 Peter, Lord, you remind us constantly that we are not serving ourselves, but you, when we help others. In these days and times you ask us to prepare our minds, be self-controlled, be holy and not conform to the evil desires. As I look at it—the evil desires are the “wanting” of material things that continually invade our lives and take our hearts and minds away from you. You ask us to live our lives in reverent fear because we now know the cost. The price was paid by the precious blood of Jesus. LET US NOT FORGET!

In John 13, Peter says, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for your sake.” Yet we know what happened. How often do we say things that we believe wholeheartedly only to revise it and say that wasn’t exactly what I meant. Peter says it, but when confronted to claim Jesus, what does he do but deny knowing Him at all.

Do we often claim knowledge of Jesus in the good times—at church, in Bible Study, etc., but fail to acknowledge Him in the work place among our friends or people we don’t know?

Help us to be true to you, Lord, and stand up as true Christians and acknowledge you in all that we think, do, or say.

In John 19, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took Jesus' body to prepare it for burial—several things jumped out at me—Nicodemus brought myrrh and aloes. I immediately recalled the gifts of the wise men which were brought when he was born—gold, frankincense and myrrh. How interesting that this spice was given at his coming in and going out. The other was “tearing the linen strips and binding Jesus for burial”—this act seems very deliberate and a very reverent act. As I envision this act I wonder if we are willing to be bound in Jesus’ words and being?

Oh Lord, let us be bound in the “linen,” the fabric of our faith to honor and glorify thy Holy name, ever mindful of the price you paid for us. We are eternally thankful.
Holy Saturday, April 7

Lamentations 3:37-58  Hebrews 4:1-16 (am)  Romans 8:1-11 (pm)

...so we may await with him the coming on the third day, and rise with him to newness of life;... Collect of the Day for Holy Saturday (The Book of Common Prayer, page 283)

This prayer and the Scriptures which are appointed for Holy Saturday, point to the need we have to wait, to be still and to reflect upon what has happened throughout Lent. What has happened during Holy Week. What took place yesterday on Good Friday. I need to hear this “be still and know that I am God” from that quiet, soft inner voice as I hear the unspoken, “and Philip, you are NOT God!” How do we get ourselves out of the center of this drama and into the place where we are able to receive what God has done for us? How do we accept becoming Sons and Daughters of The Lord God? How do we receive His Son Jesus as gift? Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Day, The Great Triduum, are all one moment and movement within the drama of our salvation. It is here that God acts in Jesus and the singularity of God’s love is focused in the Christ with the Doors of Grace opened to us. We are loved into relationship with God in Christ Jesus, and I need time to grasp this with the impact of the empty tomb and the risen Lord. Wait just a little longer and experience our Risen Savior in the Glory of God who is making all things new.
Glossary of Terms

**Lent** is the period of the liturgical year from Ash Wednesday to Easter in the Christian tradition. The traditional purpose of Lent is the preparation of the believer—through prayer, repentance, almsgiving and self-denial—for the annual commemoration during Holy Week of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, which recalls the events linked to the Passion of Christ (Christian theological term used for the events and suffering—physical, spiritual, and mental—of Jesus in the hours before and including his trial and execution) and culminates in Easter, the celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. There are traditionally forty days in Lent. The six Sundays in this period are not counted because each one represents a "mini-Easter," a celebration of Jesus' victory over sin and death. Lent, which comes from the Teutonic (Germanic) word for springtime, can be viewed as a spiritual spring cleaning: a time for taking spiritual inventory and then cleaning out those things which hinder our corporate and personal relationships with Jesus Christ and our service to him. However, we must remember that our Lenten disciplines are supposed to ultimately transform our entire person: body, soul, and spirit, and help us become more like Christ.

**Ash Wednesday** is the first day of Lent and occurs 46 days before Easter. It is a moveable fast, falling on a different date each year because it is dependent on the date of Easter. It can occur as early as February 4 or as late as March 10. According to the Canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus spent forty days fasting in the desert before the beginning of his public ministry, during which he endured temptation by Satan. Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of this forty day liturgical period of prayer and fasting. Ash Wednesday derives its name from the practice of placing ashes on the foreheads of adherents as a sign of mourning and repentance to God. The ashes used are typically gathered after the palms from the previous year's Palm Sunday are burned.

**Palm Sunday** is the Sunday before Easter. It commemorates Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and in many Christian churches, Palm Sunday is marked by the distribution of palm leaves (often tied into crosses) to the assembled worshipers.

**Maundy Thursday** is the Thursday before Easter that commemorates the Last Supper of Jesus Christ with the Apostles. Most scholars agree that the English word Maundy is derived through Middle English and Old French mandé, from the Latin mandatum, the first word of the phrase "Mandatum novum do vobis ut diligatis invicem sicut dilexi vos" ("A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you"), the statement made by Jesus in the Gospel of John (13:34) by which Jesus explained to the Apostles the significance of his action of washing their feet.

**Good Friday** ("good" meaning pious or holy) is the Friday of Holy Week, observed primarily by Christians commemorating the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and his death at Calvary.

**Holy Saturday** is the day before Easter and the last day of Holy Week in which Christians prepare for Easter. It commemorates the day that Jesus Christ's body lay in the tomb. Liturgically speaking, Holy Saturday lasts until 6pm or dusk, after which the Easter Vigil is celebrated, marking the official start of the Easter season. The service may start with a fire and the lighting of the new Paschal candle. The flame of the Paschal candle symbolizes Christ as light of the world and his presence in the midst of his people.

**Triduum** (TRID.uh.wum) is the period of three days that begins the evening of Maundy Thursday and ends the evening of Easter Sunday. It recalls the passion, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.
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