

Lenten Readings

2026

For Members & Friends of
Immanuel Lutheran Church
Holden, Massachusetts



Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Matthew 5:7

Introduction to 2026 Lenten Devotions

Blessed are those...

On the cover of this Lenten Devotional, there is a visual interpretation of The Beatitudes from the artist Kelly Latimore. The Beatitudes are a list of blessings found in the Gospel of Matthew, part of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount.

With The Beatitudes, Jesus pronounces unexpected blessing on the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, and those who are reviled. These blessings are as surprising today as they were to those who first heard these words spoken by Jesus.

I believe that for most of us, blessing and gratitude typically go hand-in-hand. I feel blessed by my loving family, a home that shelters me, and meaningful work. These are gifts from God, and I am grateful for them. And yet, if we are only aware of God's blessing in times of plenty and good fortune, then we miss the multitude of ways that God's love finds us in other times. God proclaims blessing in all parts of our messy, complicated lives - bringing light and hope to the darkness.

The Beatitudes remind us that God is present in all times and circumstances. When we are most in need of God's presence, we can trust with absolute certainty that God is with us in those moments. In our challenges, in our weakness, in our vulnerability, there is God who holds it all with loving hands and blesses every part of our human experience.

In the pages of this devotional, your friends from Immanuel will share a thoughtful reflection for each day of the Lenten season. You'll read accounts of feeling embraced by God's love, spiritual insights from unexpected sources, grace felt during difficult times, nudging from the Holy Spirit, and so many other experiences of blessing. Thank you to everyone who contributed to this year's devotional, to editor Fred Borchelt, and to you, dear reader, for taking time to read and bear witness to the reflections shared. Like The Beatitudes, this book of devotions reminds us that God is with us at all times and in all places, constantly surprising us with love outpoured and unexpected grace.

Blessed are you.

Your co-worker in Christ,
Pastor Sarah

Ash Wednesday, February 18

Serving Jesus or Being Jesus?

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.” Matthew 25:40

In November of this past year, my uncle, Roger Livdahl, passed away at the age of 90. Uncle Roger was an ordained Lutheran pastor and a huge influence on me and many of my extended family members. His great passion in life was fighting to end world hunger. In addition to serving a number of congregations, he directed Church World Service's MinnKota hunger program (which began the CROP Walk in North Dakota) and then served in the ELCA's international hunger appeal, during which time he visited 47 countries. Even after retirement he volunteered every week at Global Health Ministries, distributing unused medical supplies around the globe. In spite of his accomplishments, Uncle Roger remained a very humble man dedicated to serving God. The following is a story he wrote that was included in the program at his funeral.

This Man is Jesus - by Roger Livdahl

In the eight years I worked in Chicago for the ELCA World Hunger and Disaster Appeals, I spent between three and six hours a day commuting between the church-wide center and our home in Valparaiso, IN.

One night I had a late start before I entered the Kennedy Expressway, which was like a very slow-moving parking lot. After about 35 minutes I became very hungry. Seeing a Wendy's drive-in along the way, I pulled off the Kennedy hoping that the traffic would diminish while I ate.

While circling in the slow line to the drive-in window, I had watched a man standing by the entrance. I handed a \$10 bill to the window clerk to pay for a hamburger and small drink which came to \$2.84. She handed me \$7.16 in change. The man quietly moved up to my window and asked, "Sir, could you spare a little of your change? I haven't had anything to eat in two days." My first inclination was to think, "What if he is an alcoholic or a drug addict? Do I really want to feed his bad habit?" As I looked at him I saw how thin and haggard he looked and thought, "Maybe he's suffering from AIDS!"

I said, "Sure, take this" as I handed him \$2.16. He looked happy and appreciative. Then I thought, "What if he really hasn't eaten for two days? If so, \$2.16 won't buy him much, even at Wendy's." I called the man back to my window, and pulling the remaining \$5 change out of my pocket, I said, "Sir, would you mind taking this?" Then he did a very surprising thing. He started to dance around and shouted to the woman at the serving window and all the cars lined up behind me, "This man is Jesus! He gave me much more than I expected!" He said it several times to the other people walking into the restaurant. I was embarrassed and wondered, "When is my hamburger going to get here?"

I thought, "This man is really mistaken. I gave him just \$7.16 and he calls me Jesus? Talk about cheap grace!" I have believed that if I give to a hungry person I may be giving to Jesus. It was so much more

difficult to believe others could see me as Jesus, when I was doing something that required so little sacrifice from me.

I guess, as Christians, we are called to reflect Christ to others at unexpected times, unbelievable as that may seem.

"Therefore, be imitators of God as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us, and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Ephesians 5:1-2

Submitted by Bonnie Colon



Thursday, February 19

Rune before Prayer

Here is a haunting and meditative prayer and chant, which we have prayed together in Prayer & Share many times as we open our hearts. The words are from the *Carmina Gadelica*, the archive of Celtic chants and prayers collected 150 years ago:

I am bending my knee

In the eye of the Father who created me.

In the eye of the Son who purchased me.

In friendship and affection.

Through thy own appointed one, O God.

Bestow upon us fullness in our need,

Love towards God,

The affection of God,

The smile of God,

The wisdom of God,

The grace of God,

The fear of God,

And the will of God,

To do on the world of the Three,

As angels and saints do in heaven,

Each shade and light, each day and night.

Each time in kindness,

Give thou us thy Spirit.

Amen...Come Lord Jesus.

Submitted by Karen White

Friday, February 20

A Season For Everything

1 To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

2 A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

3 A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

4 A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

5 A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

6 A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

7 A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

8 A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace. Ecclesiastes 3: 1 – 8

There are many comments written about these first eight verses in Ecclesiastes 3. This beautiful piece of poetry, which is one of my favorites, was written to tell us that God has a plan for our lives.

My personal belief about life is that when one door closes, another door opens. I can see how this belief fits in with Ecclesiastes 3:1 – 8. Can you see this in your own life?

Dear God, I know that our lives are made up of different seasons. I'm praying that You will give us the wisdom, knowledge, guidance and patience that we need as we go through each season on this beautiful place we call Earth. Amen

Submitted by Joan Lane

Saturday, February 21

Nudged by the Spirit

Read Luke 6:31-38

Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, they will pour into your lap. For by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you in return. Luke 6:38

In early December 2025 my daughter Sarah was shopping for groceries in a supermarket. Upon entering the store, she felt a strong feeling of compassion wash over her like a wave. This was not a usual feeling upon entering a grocery store, so she took note of it. When she got to the cashier she was in line behind an elderly man. She felt nudged by the Holy Spirit to purchase his groceries for him. However, as she thought about it further, she began to question her decision, thinking that she could not afford it, so she changed her mind and said nothing. He used his EBT card to pay for the two bags of groceries. However, the cashier told him that his card had been rejected. Sarah spoke up "May I pay for your groceries sir?" He gratefully accepted Sarah's generous offer. It was then Sarah recognized that the compassion she felt entering the store was not a random event but meant for her to help a person in need.

That is just the beginning of the story. One week later I was visiting friends in northern Virginia, and Sarah drove up from her home in Charlottesville, Virginia to meet me. She had purchased several Christmas presents for our family, and I wrote her a reimbursement check. I included an extra \$80 in the check as a thank-you bonus. When she looked at the check, she got a little emotional. I asked her what had happened. She told me the story of the grocery-store man. "Dad, the amount that I paid for his groceries was exactly \$80. In the store I felt nudged by the Spirit to pay for the man's groceries before he went to pay but I ignored it and justified why I couldn't. When his card was declined, I realized that I was being given a second chance to help him."

There is an old saying that goes something like this: "what goes around, comes around." I firmly believe that this is one of the "natural laws of the universe." I don't know how it works but Sarah's experience in the grocery store is an example of it. In Luke 6:31 the gospel says, "and just as you want people to treat you, treat them in the same way." We are not to be loving simply for what we will receive back from "the world." We are to be generous and share with others because that is how God works through us to bless others in the kingdom of God. Sarah did not purchase the man's groceries because she was certain of getting her \$80 back at some point in the future. She did it out of love for him and for the simple joy that she felt by sharing her gifts with another child of God.

Heavenly Father – thank you for your abundant blessings. Please help me to always be generous with the gifts that you have given me. In Jesus name, Amen

Submitted by Fred Borchelt

Sunday, February 22

Words to Live By

While visiting my sister last summer, I noticed this bit of wisdom hanging on a plaque in her kitchen, so I wrote it down because it seemed like good advice. Now that I am into my eighth decade, I am dealing with the revelation that I could be dead soon. I know how I got here, but it does seem like a quick trip.

Life is short and precious, and we do not have much time

to gladden the hearts of those who travel the same way with us.

So be swift to love and make haste to be kind.

And may the blessing of the One who made us and loves us,

and who travels with us, be upon you and those you love

this day and always.

The Reverend Michael V. Dudley

Over the holidays, one of the grandchildren asked what the word “inertia” meant. We were sledding down the hill into the vegetable garden, which had been plowed, but not harrowed, so the furrows were deep. They required an abrupt stop, which mostly dumped the rider into the snow. An object in motion tends to stay in motion until acted upon by an outside force. It was mostly hilarious for all concerned.

I’ve been thinking about life in general as we go along and we go along and then death comes; full stop like the sled when it hits an immovable object. Mostly, we wear out or wear down as the body slowly quits, but sometimes life is over in an instant because of some outside force.

What makes the difference is how we live with the life we have.

A little kinder, a little gentler, a little more forgiving would be good here.

Submitted by Kathy Cranson

Monday, February 23

Radiant Faith

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Isaiah 60:01

During recent years, the mid-week Lenten series has focused on an opportunity to be near/around a plain, wooden cross in the front of the sanctuary. You could come forward at a designated time to stand, sit, kneel, touch the cross, light a candle, or simply be still. It was all personal choice. No expectations, no competition, no judgement - just be yourself with your Lord for as long or as little as you wished.

Last year I experienced a most meaningful moment during that time as a member slowly approached the cross, lit a candle, lifted it in front of her and gazed into it. It appeared as if she was seeing the face of God as she stayed there motionless, staring into the glow of the candle for a considerable length of time. There was an unmistakable radiance surrounding her. Was she praying? Having a silent conversation or merely "being" with her Lord? It brought tears to my eyes to see such a powerful witness.

We never know when something we do will touch another person's heart, impacting them and showing God's love, presence, and total acceptance of them. That was a moment for me which I am very grateful to have experienced.

Lord God,

Your light and love are always present with us and around us, but we often fail to recognize or acknowledge them. Make us more mindful of your presence throughout the everyday moments we encounter, whether alone or with others. In your name I pray. Amen

Submitted by Linda Morse



Tuesday, February 24

Resentments

“Hanging onto resentment is letting someone you despise live rent-free in your head.”

— Ann Landers, advice columnist

When I first heard this, the word was **HATE**, not despise.

The perfect word, HATE. Described just how I felt about a client. Not only did the despicable one dominate my work-day thoughts, he filled my head the rest of the day – and night – as well. He lived inside my head rent-free and was also redecorating it.

I hated him...and his new curtains.

Who he was and why I hated him are not important. What is important is the hatred. It consumed me.

There are about 100 synonyms for hatred in the English language, and it was amazing how many of them I applied to that client: hated, despised, resented, scorned, abhorred and loathed. Not only that, but I felt justified about it.

I was whining about my woes to a good friend one day. After listening patiently for a time, he told me that the client hadn't taken over my life. I had turned it over to him.

He let me fume and deny it for a bit, then asked me if I wanted my life back. Did I want to kick him out of my head? Did I want to be free? Did I want my curtains back?

Of course I did.

He told me to pray for my client; every day for two weeks. Do it, and I will be free.

I told him that was absurd.

He said to tell God you want the client to have everything you want for yourself and the people you love. Ask for his health, his prosperity, his happiness, his serenity.

Do it for two weeks and you will be free.

What I wanted my client to do was go away. Disappear. Die.

My friend said even when I didn't really want it for him and my prayers were only words, do it anyway. Do it. Do it for two weeks. Do it and be free.

But I told him, and did so somewhat sanctimoniously, that would be lying to God.

He said that we all lie when we face something that we are afraid of, that we don't think we really can do. We tell ourselves we can and ask God for the strength to make it true: face that bully, have that difficult

conversation, see the specialist your doctor recommended, go down that dark alley because you hear someone crying.

I didn't want to hate. Hatred is wrong. Hate hurts the hater more than the hated. But I couldn't help myself. My ego wouldn't let me.

It was a moment of despair. So, since I had nothing else to use, I faced despair with prayer. Nothing I had tried had worked, so I turned it over to God.

I prayed for that client. The first prayer was that he be blessed with a painless and peaceful death. NOW! But I did mean it, even the painless and peaceful part.

I worked on it. Every morning and every night – and whenever his contractor was putting in new cabinets – I prayed. After a little more than two weeks I realized I did mean it.

The hatred was gone. Did I like him? Not really. I didn't have to like him. But I did love him. I asked God to give him the same health, prosperity, happiness, and serenity I asked God to give me and mine. I did mean it. That is love.

With God's help I managed to swallow my ego and focus on the finished product. That helped me bring serenity back. I stopped dreading our meetings, his comments, the changes he wanted. We were there to do a job. And we did a good one.

His curtains got pulled down. Mine went back up. (They are Kelly green. His were beige.) My serenity came back, too.

I have followed this "absurd" plan numerous times over the years. It doesn't change any of the people I resent. Changing them is not my job. It changes me and helps me become the man both God and I want me to be.

And when I find it hard to pray for someone I must remember that God loves them as much as he does me. (Surprising, isn't it?) You see, I know who I really am. I am the kid my mother warned me not to play with.

And what happened with that client?

In the play "Fiddler on the Roof," a townsman asks the rabbi if there is a blessing for the Czar. The rabbi thinks a moment and then replies:

"May God bless and keep the Czar... far away from us!"

It worked on that client, too.

Submitted by Stef Donev

Wednesday, February 25

Being Present

“This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” Psalm 118:24

When I was a child, we often sang a song at church that was based on this verse from Psalm 118. It was a fun call and response that always got us all wound up and ended with us running around everywhere (yep, that's where my kids get it from). It served as a reminder that God had made *this* day, and so I should be thankful. That's a good thing for a child to learn.

This past year I turned forty, and I thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to be teased by people I love, and the chance to bemoan my own ancient existence. The truth is that I don't really care about age. It's just a number, and not one that can measure joy or love or the things that really *matter* in life. But I've noticed something peculiar: with each passing year, it feels like time is speeding up.

According to the internet, this is a common experience. While time itself isn't flexible, our *experience* of time can be highly subjective and is impacted by how much information we have to process. As we get older, it can feel like time is speeding up because we have fewer new or novel experiences to process and we become more familiar with our surroundings and our lives involve more routine.

I don't have any idea if this explanation is correct, but I do know that some days I can *feel* time speeding by. Wasn't I in college just a few years ago? How did I get to be this balding forty-year-old? When Penny was young, there were days that felt infinitely long, and now it's like I've *blinked* and she's turning ten. I love my children and the people they are and the people they're becoming, but there are things from their past that I already miss so much. And it's Lent already?!

Psychologist and author Dr. Steve Taylor, has written several books about psychology and spirituality. He says there is one simple (but not easy) way to slow time down. He wrote:

Alternately - and perhaps more effectively – we can also slow down time by living mindfully, paying conscious attention to our day-to-day experiences of seeing, hearing, feeling, and so on. On a more long-term basis, we can cultivate conscious awareness.

In other words, it's all about being *present*. And remembering that old Sunday School song.

This is the day that the Lord has made. God made this day with a sunrise that is different than any other sunrise in history. The combination of events that will take place today are unique, and I will never experience them in the same way again. The most mundane daily tasks can become new with the decision to be present, to really and truly experience them as fully as possible.

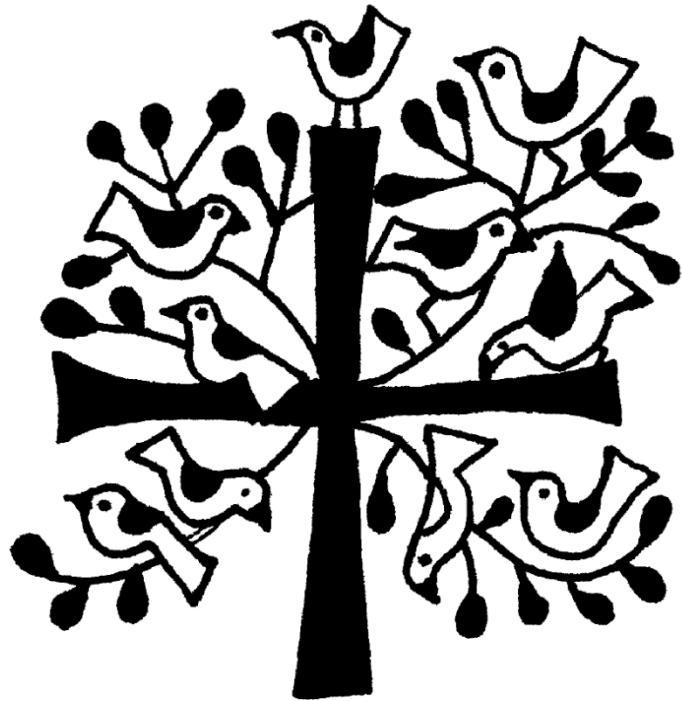
This is the day that the Lord has made. Tomorrow might be too, but I'm not guaranteed tomorrow. None of us are. That means I better live as much as I can today! Soak up every sound, share every expression of

love, say all the words that matter. Play with the Legos, watch the dance routine, and read the bedtime story for the hundredth time.

This is the day that the Lord has made. We can't go backwards in time, and trying to is a trap. We can't leap forward either, to see what the future holds or fast forward to the day we're longing for. All we can do is live in *this* day. *This* day that God has made and in which God meets us.

This is the day.

Submitted by Pastor Josh Ferris



Thursday, February 26

What's God's Line?

Depending on your age, you may or may not have heard of an old TV game show that ran from 1950-1967 called *What's My Line?* On it, a four-person panel tries to guess the occupations of various guests by asking them only “yes” or “no” questions. Sometimes, the panel is blindfolded before trying to guess the identity of celebrity guests with yes or no queries. Relying on information each panel member gleans from the questions the group asks, one person finally solves the mystery.

For years, reading scripture felt like I was living in a world of *What's My Line?* where I had no idea what or who to expect when I cracked opened the Bible. Some sections were clear: “Great! I won the prize for figuring that one out.”

Other passages, such as 1 Kings 13 where a young prophet is killed by a lion for disobeying God, were real head scratchers: “What was the point of *that* story?” I’d have no idea, so I simply tucked them away and ignored them.

Other familiar sections I just skimmed over because: “I already know what this one means. I’ve heard it hundreds of times before in church.” Or perhaps: “I *really* don’t like what I’m reading, so I’m going to try to forget it because otherwise I’m going to start screaming at somebody. And it won’t be pretty.”

I was like the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 that Philip encountered on the road to Gaza. As Philip walked alongside the man’s chariot, Philip heard him reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip asked whether the man understood what he was reading. The man replied: “How can I unless someone explains it to me?” So, Philip explained it to him.

I was looking for just that – someone to walk alongside me so we could wrestle with Scripture together. Then I discovered Immanuel’s *Lectio Divina* group.

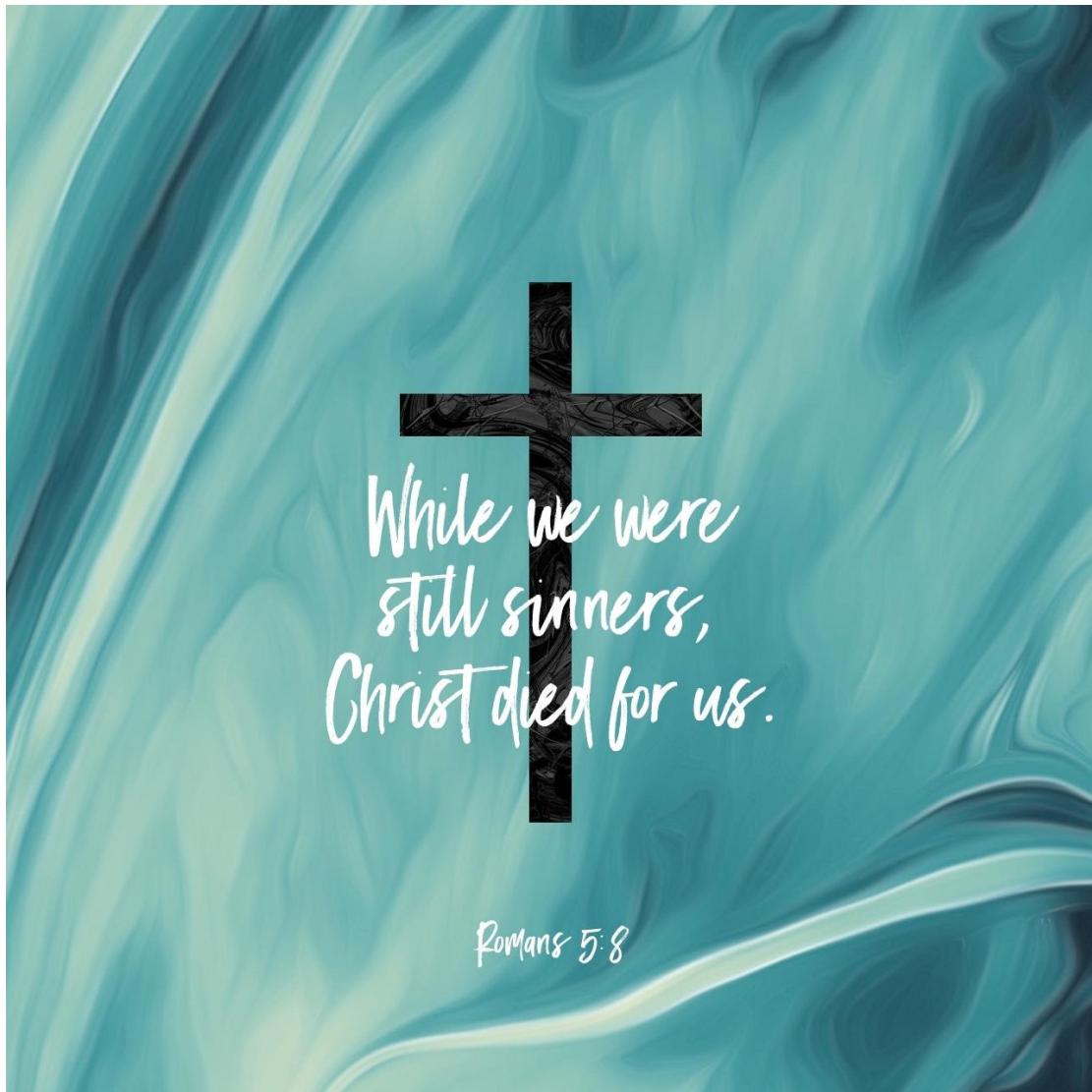
Lectio Divina involves reading and praying the Bible slowly and attentively. We read a short passage of scripture aloud, usually from the upcoming Sunday’s service. The first time we read, we listen for a word or phrase that the Holy Spirit seems to be highlighting for us. We read the same passage again to reflect on what the passage means to us. The third time we read, we pray for insight into how God would have us apply the passage to our lives.

God assures us in Genesis 2:18 that it’s not good for us to be alone; we need helpers. When our *Lectio Divina* group reads the Bible, it comes alive for me. I’m not alone. In that short half hour these beloved friends – *helpers* – share their spiritual insights which give me a fresh perspective on familiar bits, as well as help me as I consider difficult passages. Instead of just one “victor” at the end of the half hour, each person walks away a “winner” having new insight into who God is.

I invite you to join us. We get together on Zoom every Monday from 9:00 until about 9:30 am. Meeting ID: 814 8663 8380, Passcode: scripture. You can also find a direct link on the Immanuel Lutheran website under the menu “Grow – Adults.”

Just like the panel on *What's My Line?* we talk and ask questions. We try to understand a little better just who the biggest Mystery of All is... together.

Submitted by Mary Donev



Friday, February 27

Compassionate Grace

I read this story recently in a magazine. It occurs to me that the true measure of a person is how they treat someone who can do absolutely nothing for them.

A man boarded a New York subway train with three young children. The children ran the length of the car causing chaos with riders that were trying to read or rest. Some people muttered under their breath about the good old days when children were seen but not heard. Suddenly a woman got up and confronted the man, telling him he should be disciplining the children and teaching them how to behave in public.

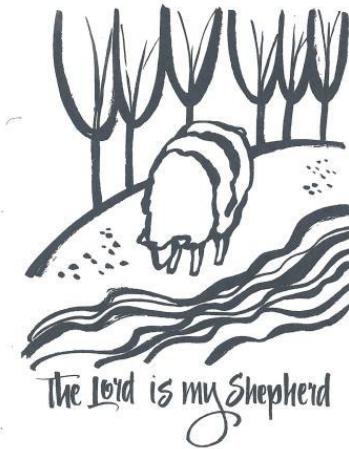
The father replied, "I just came from the hospital where my wife died, and I don't know what to do next." Passengers heard this sad exchange.

A few minutes later the oldest child was sitting with a lady reading the book she had. The middle child was with a rider playing with an action figure. The youngest child was resting and being cuddled by a woman. The father was quietly thinking about what to do next. In a short period of time some angry folks had turned into a beautiful support system.

I can imagine some members of Immanuel Lutheran Church in this story.

Peace be with you.

Submitted by Alan Farmer



Saturday, February 28

Glory

Old Testament prophets liked to speak of God's presence as his "Glory." As they experienced the loving actions of the people in their lives they were made aware of the presence of God. Likewise, the beauty of the world of nature became for them a sign of God's presence.

And their word for all of this was, "Glory."

For the writers of scripture, God's glory is all that makes his presence known. For this they chose an interesting word; they used their word for *weight*, or *heaviness*, to tell of God's presence. It may be something like recognizing that God's presence carries a lot of weight, a lot of influence. And later, the notion of brightness was added to express the quality of God's presence in the world.

And so, the Gospel of John begins by saying, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father"-- as if to say that in Jesus we see the brightness and the weight of God's presence in this world.

But there is evil in the world; and evil has a way of obscuring our vision of God's glory, making it hard to see. We listen to the evening news and so often the events in this land, and this world, have a way of casting a shadow over our vision of God's glory.

Recently I encountered some uplifting words of a theologian, Dr. Lisa Weaver, as she was telling of God's call to Isaiah the prophet. She noted that Isaiah lived during a time of political chaos and cruelty, among people invested in evil because they liked profits more than people, when a kind of nationalism often replaced faith in God, so that God's presence was obscured.

But in Isaiah's call (Isaiah 6) a song was heard to say: "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory." Dr. Weaver went on to say that Isaiah's call may also be a call to us to go looking for God's glory in our world of chaos and cruelty. To quote Dr. Weaver:

As bleak as things might seem--the whole world is full of God's glory! Voter suppression tactics cannot erase God's glory...incompetent cabinet choices cannot erase God's glory...elimination of DEI cannot erase God's glory...immigration restrictions cannot erase God's glory! No legislator, no attorney, no supreme court justice, no governor, no congressman, no president can erase God's glory. You can't hide it, you can't erase it, you can't legislate it away, you can't lie it away, because the whole earth is full of God's glory! But the reality of evil is that it can obscure God's glory and make it hard to see. That's why we have to go out and look for it. We have to intentionally seek it. The whole earth is filled with God's glory.

Submitted by Pastor John Nieman

Sunday, March 1

Guess My Superpower

Read 1 Corinthians 12: 12 – 31

And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly.
Romans 12:6

My grandson Sterling likes to play word games while we eat dinner. Sometimes it is “what animal am I thinking of?” where someone describes a creature and others guess what it is. Other times he likes to play “guess my superpower.” That comes from his interest in having me read Marvel comics to him. He is completely fascinated by The Mighty Thor fighting to prevent Mangog from destroying Asgard. He is captivated by the Fantastic Four as they battle Galactus or The Incredible Hulk as he tries to defeat Umbu the Unliving. Perhaps Sterling is like me when I was five years old and dreamt of having the strength of a thousand men or the power to fly and shoot laser beams from my hands.

The common theme in the Marvel comics and movies is that the superheroes use their superpowers to fight the bad guys and “save the world.” I see many similarities with what God wants us to do as believers in Jesus Christ. Our mission is to share the good news of God’s reconciling love in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross and victory over death. God wants us to do this to build up His Kingdom on Earth. God has done this by blessing each of us with special gifts, spiritual gifts, that we are to use to “bring good news to the afflicted, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners.” (Isaiah 61:1)

I witness members of Immanuel Lutheran Church using their God-given gifts (superpowers) in so many ways. Some use the gift of time by volunteering to count the offering or serve coffee or assist the ministers in worship. Others use their gift of administration to serve on council or manage church finances or supervise Sunday school. Some members use their gift of teaching to lead an adult forum or help with Bible study. There are members who use their gift of mechanical aptitude to keep our building working well and to livestream worship services to YouTube. Some use their gift of healing by serving as Stephen Ministers or their gift of music by singing in the choir. There are those among us who are workers of miracles. There are superheroes all around us, if you take the time to look close enough.

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for blessing me with gifts that I can use to serve others and to glorify you. Please help me to use my gifts to share Your love with others and to make Your Kingdom come. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Submitted by Fred Borchelt

Monday, March 2

Stuff

"Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Luke 12:15.

I do not consider myself a materialistic person. I do not like to shop. I do not like clutter. However, lately I seem to be preoccupied with trying to figure out what to do with lots of stuff that, through no fault of my own, I have acquired. By "stuff" I mean furniture, dishes, decorations, clothing, jewelry, pictures, books, etc. In other words, all types of household items.

Actually, this started a year ago when I had to move my aunt into an assisted living facility. Figuring out what would fit into her new 400 square-foot living space and then deciding what to do with the remaining possessions in her home was a challenge. I spent many hours at my aunt's home sorting, boxing, donating, and selling decades of stuff. Luckily at 101 my aunt still had a very good memory and could help identify where things came from. "Oh, that set of china was a wedding gift from my mother-in-law", she said. The wedding was in 1944, and the dishes had not been used since the 1950s, but they had been carefully wrapped and stored in the dining room closet. I found boxes of match books and swizzle sticks with names of restaurants from all over the country. These prompted laughs and stories about some of the many trips my aunt and uncle took. The hours of shredding were not as much fun. Although it was interesting to look at the documents from the house they bought in 1945, it was tedious to go through decades of utility bills, bank documents, receipts, medical reports, newspaper clippings and souvenirs.

Now a year later I am still sorting, boxing, shredding, selling, and donating many, many things. My mother passed away in November and left us with a house full of stuff. Unlike me, mom loved to shop. It hasn't been too difficult to find homes for the "good" stuff. Grandchildren came and took things they could use, or things that would bring them memories of fun times with Gramma and Grampa. There have been lots of trips to the ReStore, Goodwill, and Abby's House to donate gently used furniture, household goods, tools, and clothing. Some of the clothes even had tags on them because they were being saved for special occasions! I have become a pro at selling things on Facebook Marketplace (anyone looking for a vintage silver tea set?)

Born in the 1920's, my parents survived the Great Depression. This could be why they held onto their possessions. Things were saved because they might be valuable or useful in the future. When I would ask "why are you saving this?" I would usually get an answer such as "someone might need it." Whatever type of value my parents gave to their saved possessions, I had to go through them all carefully. If they thought something was important enough to save for many years, then I had to respect this item. I could either keep it, donate it, or sell it to someone who appreciates it. When I would get frustrated by all the stuff I had to sort through, I would hear "Honor your Father and Mother" in my head. I am not sure if the commandment to "Honor your Father and Mother" necessarily includes honoring their possessions, but I felt I had to try. Respecting their stuff is one way I can continue to respect and honor my parents.

There was stuff packed away in the cellar in dusty, mildewed boxes. At a quick glance it all looked like junk. It would be easy to throw these boxes in a dumpster. But what if there were treasures? What if there were valuable antiques? And dumpsters go against my personal commitment to recycle, repurpose, and reuse as much as I can. So of course, I put on my mask and gloves and went through all those boxes. I have looked through everything and didn't find anything others would consider treasures. But I did find my father's military records from World War II, my mother's junior high report cards, pictures of relatives I never met, many newspaper clippings, and memories. These things have no monetary value, but they are valuable to me. They are tangible reminders of lives well lived. They are a glimpse into what life events were the most important to my parents. I was able to preserve some of these items. There were also scraps of metal and wood, parts of old appliances, every paintbrush that was ever bought since the 1930's (and Dad did a lot of painting). It was more difficult deciding what to do with these things.

There are reasons why cleaning out my parents' house has been especially difficult for me. Besides not being a collector and not being able to understand why anyone needs an entire sunroom ceiling covered with baskets, I am also not a patient person. I had envisioned getting this job done and being ready to sell the house within two weeks. Now after two months I am almost there. My parents' house has been decluttered, depersonalized, and is ready to sell. However, as I look around my house I see my aunt's china on my dining room hutch sitting next to my mother's crystal candlesticks and beloved bell collection. I have difficulty walking in my basement because of all the boxes of my parents' and aunt's stuff waiting for homes. I have too many tools in my garage because half of them were my dad's. I have many memories and life lessons from my parents, which are the most important things. But I also have all this stuff! I ask God to give me the strength and patience to continue to sort through it and find proper homes for all of this stuff, because throwing it away would not honor my parents.

"Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." Exodus 20:12

Submitted by Nancy Chanson

Tuesday, March 3

Musings from Mrs. Pick-A-Pocket

“Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter.”

Mark 10:15

If you have attended any Senior Christmas luncheons here at Immanuel, you know all about Mrs. Pick-A-Pocket. For those others, she is an old woman wearing a man's overcoat with many patch pockets sewed on. She really loves kids, so she comes to the luncheon with little packages in her pockets for children to take. Lately, there have been so many children, the overflow of packages has had to be carried in an old valise.

Mrs. Pick-A-Pocket has begun thinking about gifts and blessings (Pastor Sarah started her mind working). What if instead of wrapped little cars, bracelets, yo-yos, books, magic toys, stickers, etc. there were slips of paper in each pocket? What if these papers listed such things as a warm house, loving parents, a cuddly kitty, brother or sister, gramma or grampa, good food, my church - would the children be as anxious to reach into the pockets?

And wonder if when the satchel was opened a large piece of paper printed “JESUS LOVES YOU” was the only thing in it!

Mrs. Pick-A-Pocket thinks maybe we should talk to our children about the blessings of living in America right here in Holden, Massachusetts, belonging to Immanuel, and most importantly being in the care of a loving God. Maybe these gifts are better than those other little wrapped ones - they will last a lifetime. Surely the children will say, as they always do: *“Thank you, Mrs. Pick-A-Pocket.”*

Submitted by Valeda Schmucki



The lord
takes
pleasure
in those
who hope
in his
steadfast
love

PSALM 147:11

Wednesday, March 4

Be Ready

“For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.” Matthew 24:44

I love to go for a long run on Sunday mornings. At the beginning of mile five, I am drawn to the picnic table and tall maple trees at the Red Barn on Shrewsbury Street. I walk in the dirt entrance catching my breath, lay on the center picnic table under the biggest maple tree, literally mute the outside world, and listen to songs like “Motherland” by Natalie Merchant on my cell phone via my hearing aids. It’s my private “going-to-church” time in a space I feel safe and close to God.



One fall day laying on the table, I looked up and watched the leaves fall downward around me. Most fell way out of reach. Some ventured close. And once in a while, one would fall right near me. I was amazed that they all fell to the ground differently, but more importantly, that they all willingly fell. I noticed that some fell straight down with a vengeance, almost darting to the ground. Others took the long road and fell from way over there but landed way over here. Some took their sweet time and twirled and twirled with intentional grace. Then I imagined them making sounds as they fell, “Ahhhhh!” or “Whoaaaa!” or “Weeeee!” Then of course I imagined hearing all the other leaves cheering, “Charlie did it! He took the leap!” or “You got this, Junior, don’t be scared now!” or “I’ll miss you, Momma, but I’ll see you soon.”

Now the challenge—to catch one. I made the first and only rule: I can’t move from where I’m laying, only my arms. Here goes. Patience, patience. Nope, missed it. Ohhh, so close! Rats, almost had it. One finally came really close, so I lifted my right hand high and I whispered to it “*Come to me....*” AND IT DID! I CAUGHT IT! I couldn’t believe it! I was so happy a tear came to my eye! And I felt like the entire audience above all smiled with me! “*I got you; I got you!*” I told it. Elated, I carried my leaf a mile home with a giant grin on my face that must have made the drivers driving by wonder what was wrong with me. As soon as I got home, I taped it to my kitchen window. It brought me smiles for weeks.

Someday we’ll each be a fall leaf and take the final leap. We will let go and leave this earth. We’ll leave the safety and familiarity of the tree’s branches—our home, our family, and our friends. How will we each fall? With fear, with exhaustion, with peace?

I’ve decided. I’m definitely going to twirl. Twirl with ridiculous confidence that the good Lord will catch me. “*Look out, Jesus, here I come!*” I’ll say.

And He’ll say, “*Come to me child, I got you.*”



Submitted by Jen Langhill

Thursday, March 5

What to Do vs. Who to Be

God gave Moses what we call the Ten Commandments to provide humanity with a solid foundation on how to act. (Later expanded to more than 600 commandments in the Old Testament, but for everyone's sanity we're not going there.) When I was growing up, I learned them as ten black and white negative statements: *Thou shalt not...* that clearly defined what behavior is not acceptable to God. You shall not have any other gods; you shall not take God's name in vain; you shall not murder or steal or bear false witness, and so on.

The New Testament, in typical Jesus style, flips everything on its head. Jesus doesn't drill down on the Big 10. Instead, in Matthew 22:37-40 he gives the Pharisees the Cliff's Notes version: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

In this condensation, Jesus is not being dismissive of the Ten Commandments which tell us **what not to do**, but instead he radically expands and amplifies what it all means under the new covenant, using the Beatitudes, in another passage, to tell us **who to be**.

To illustrate, read the *First Nations Version* (an indigenous Bible translation) of the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-12. This translation by North American native peoples uses new concepts and phrasing to again flip Scripture on its head:

"Creator's blessing rests on the poor, the ones with broken spirits. The good road from above is theirs to walk. Creator's blessing rests on the ones who walk a trail of tears, for he will wipe the tears from their eyes and comfort them. Creator's blessing rests on the ones who walk softly and in a humble manner. The earth, land, and sky will welcome them and always be their home. Creator's blessing rests on the ones who hunger and thirst for wrongs to be made right again. They will eat and drink until they are full. Creator's blessing rests on the ones who are merciful and kind to others. Their kindness will find its way back to them – full circle. Creator's blessing rests on the pure of heart. They are the ones who will see the Great Spirit. Creator's blessing rests on the ones who make peace. It will be said of them, 'They are the children of the Great Spirit!' Creator's blessing rests on the ones who are hunted down and mistreated for doing what is right, for they are walking the good road from above. Others will lie about you, speak against you, and look down on you with scorn and contempt, all because you walk the road with me. This is a sign that Creator's blessing is resting on you. So let your hearts be glad and jump for joy, for you will be honored in the spirit-world above. You are like the prophets of old, who were treated in the same way by your ancestors."

This *positive* way to live the Gospel proves to be harder than just obeying a list of negative commands of what *not* to do. For one thing, I no longer get to dust off my hands in prideful self-satisfaction after completing a simple yes/no checklist. *Didn't do that one today. Or that one. Or that one. Good for me!*

Instead, I discover that in order to have Creator's blessings rest on me, I have to discern what it means to walk softly and in a humble manner; to be merciful and kind; to be pure of heart; to make peace, and more.

Toss out that simple black/white checklist. Alleluia!

The Beatitudes serve as a map for walking Creator's good road.

As my friend Sue, from Immanuel's *Lectio Divina* group, puts it: "The Ten Commandments tell you what to do to be right with God. The Beatitudes tell you who to be. If you know who you are, you do the right thing. No one has to tell you that you shouldn't murder; you shouldn't covet; you shouldn't steal. If you are what the Beatitudes guide you to be then you know what to do."

In other words, you don't have to know what to **do** if you know **who** to be.

Maybe that's why they're called the Be-attitudes.

(P.S. One thought for reflection: Some current-day folks want the Ten Commandments posted on classroom and courtroom walls. Perhaps we should insist the Beatitudes be displayed?)

Submitted by Mary Donev



Friday, March 6

Cast Your Nets Again

Pastor Josh's sermon on February 9, 2025 was about the gospel lesson from Luke 5 concerning the disciples being asked by Jesus after a long night of empty fishing nets to go out again to try one more time. They did and their nets were overflowing with fish. Pastor Josh said that we as a church must continue despite opposition to do our good work of service and support for our world. We are not responsible for the catch, but we must keep on casting our nets. We can cast our nets sharing the light of God through words, actions, presence, possessions like a net cast into the world.

This coincided with a Bible study I had found called "Living Into Our Faith in Action." The author is Christopher Vergara. It begins with the Bible reading from James 2:14-17, verse 17, "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead". Martin Luther wrote, "Being justified by faith, we are sent by God back into the world, into our vocations, to love and serve our neighbor."

Do we individually and as a church love and serve our neighbors? I say a resounding, "Yes". I made a list of our outreach as a church because I think that in recent years, thanks to our pastors and council, we have a very strong commitment of volunteering and community service. I made a list of causes we support and it came to over thirty. That is excellent and remarkable.

When the study also mentioned "advocacy" as well, I was not sure that we as a church are so involved. Advocacy means "public support for or recommendation of a particular cause or policy." It could be raising awareness of social issues through a campaign or by speaking up or taking action to influence policy. It could be using media to promote public policy initiatives. The concern may be that it could get political. Starting a petition, letter writing campaign, lobbying, demonstrations are specific forms of advocacy.

At our Koinonia gathering Bonnie Colon thought that our church's "Reconciling in Christ" commitment to welcoming and affirming people of all sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expression, and to working for racial equality and justice is a form of advocacy. Our ELCA and NE Synod do a lot of advocacy and we support them financially as part of our tithing efforts.

There is a six-question portion of this Bible study. Think about these and how you might answer them. How might we experience the grace of God if we embrace "God's love in Action" in how we interact with others? What does it mean if your faith is described as "static"? How might our actions, guided by faith, impact a society often characterized by division and indifference? How is hope communicated by volunteering, community service, advocacy? What is the strength of our faith community in these terms? Do you have a neighbor who could benefit from this service to others?

Lord, strengthen us as we continue to "cast our net" of help and support to our neighbors near and far in a world crying out for loving action.

Submitted by Bill Rasku

Saturday, March 7

Gift Giving

Since I was very young, I've loved picking a tag off the Christmas giving tree. Whether it was the one at Christ Lutheran Church in West Boylston or the one at the Greendale YMCA or even the tags at Walmart, I loved seeing the ages of the participants and what they wanted that year. That has not changed as I've gotten older and started my own family. I think at my core I am a gift giver and pride myself in being able to think of and give a thoughtful gift.

When I first became a mom, I saw somewhere that another family always grabbed tags of children that were the same or similar ages as their own children. I decided to start doing that. I thought it would be easy because I am familiar with that developmental age of toys and I am immensely fortunate to not know what it feels like to be on the other side of the Christmas tag. This past year I left the sanctuary on the day the tree was up, and with my toddler in tow set out to find the "good" tags - tags for the little baby girl and little toddler that matched my family's 2025 Christmas. I was thrilled when I found a 2-year-old girl who wanted a Mellisa & Doug kitchen set and a 3-month-old baby who wanted a bath set. My daughter Edie has a play kitchen and she loves it. Each morning at about 6am she brings her milk into her kitchen and starts cooking whatever she pleases until it's time to watch the movie *Coco* while I nurse her sister. I often joke that when I became a parent, I didn't realize that I would be cleaning two kitchens multiple times a day. So, when I say I was thrilled to order a little kitchen for another little girl, I was truly thrilled.

As I was finding the tags I wanted, I saw multiple tags for men from Dismas Farm. Almost all of them were requesting hygiene products. That really made me reflect. Dismas Farm serves as an essential support for men who have been incarcerated and need guidance and education as they navigate life after prison. I am a special education teacher and have taught in Title One schools my entire career. I know the statistics around the school to prison pipeline. I am fully aware that there is a very high possibility that many men at Dismas Farm grew up in poverty, struggled to learn to read and quite possibly came from single parent households. How often have these men been able to create a Christmas wish list? How often have they had the opportunity to ask for something they wanted rather than something they needed?

As I took one of the tags, I began thinking how to elevate the gift. Rather than the traditional men's hygiene products I really thought about what would be a luxury. Growing up in my family, our stockings also always had hygiene products such as mouthwash, floss, toothpaste etc. I made sure to include all aspects of hygiene. I spent time researching nicer types of soap, hopefully ones that hydrate rather than dry out their skin. I think about the scents I choose, and I hope that the man who received my gift enjoyed them. While I do wish I could have been able to provide a gift that was more fun and less of a necessity, I hope that the man who received it felt the joy and care that went into organizing it. While Christmas 2026 is months away, I hope next year the Dismas Farm tags are some of the first that are reached for.

Submitted by Emmie Leotsakos

Sunday, March 8

Hope

The following is a text exchange between my friend and I after her dental appointment:

Friend: *"I got Novocain in my mouth, and I now have so much more empathy for stroke patients with numbness. I hate it."*

Me: *"I love/hate when I have something happen to me that makes me understand on a deep level what my patients go through."*

I sent my response at 12:27PM.

At 12:50PM, my mom called. My stepdad's leg surgery was unsuccessful, and the doctors were saying they would have to amputate it. *Amputate*.

Josh doesn't believe me when I talk about the 'universe' hearing me or causing things to happen, but 23 minutes? That must be a record, universe.

When I sent that text to my friend, I was thinking about suffering through long ER waits with my sick and squirming children, sitting for hours with anxiety over their health. I always reflect during those times that this is what my patients go through before I even get to see them, and I try to have a lot more empathy for their exasperation and frustration that is sometimes unloaded on me. But this phone call was something else entirely. It should not have come as a surprise because my stepdad was not that healthy, but it did. It really did. And now I understand why when I tell some families their loved one has had a stroke, they rear back in surprise and horror despite their loved one having all the risky conditions to make stroke a likelihood. I hate understanding what they're feeling emotionally now.

Before this happened, I was working on a Lenten devotion about losing, but thinking how to reframe it into a good thing. We need loss, in a way, to appreciate anything. If you won at everything all the time - games, competitions, life - you might take it all for granted. You would appreciate those things a bit, but losing sharpens the win. Once you've lost, winning a game feels so much more satisfying. Just ask Dave Cranson about that regarding the game *Settlers of Catan*. And times when I have felt the fragility of life very keenly – like when the world feels particularly unstable and scary – those are times that throw the love I feel for my family into sharp relief. I tell my kids and husband I love them more often; I hug them tighter. My love for them feels more palpable. Losing is painful, but it sharpens the good.

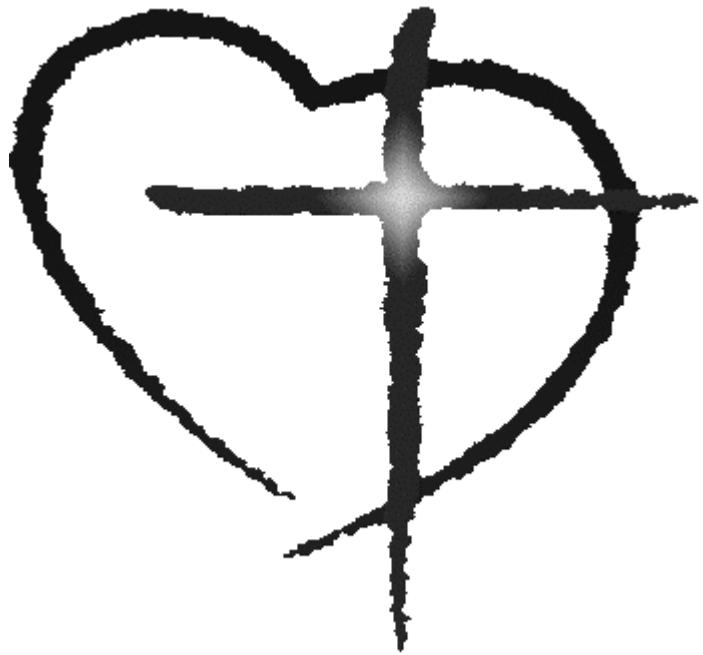
Now that I contemplate my stepdad *losing* his leg (which will cause his life to change irrevocably), the thought of losing as a good thing seems naïve and laughable. My argument feels deflated. Sure, it will make him appreciate his *other* leg more maybe, and none of us around him appreciate *our* legs enough which is why we don't exercise as often as we should. But that doesn't feel like a good thing. No part of losing people or things we love feels like a good thing.

This is what hearing the news of Jesus's death must have felt like for people who knew and loved him. Everyone at that time must have felt the crush of loss. That empty place in your chest where hope once lived. Our savior, killed by the enemy. He was gone, along with the hope and safety and all the good they thought he'd bring. Gone. They gambled on him and lost big time.

...but then they didn't. Because he left the grave and ascended back to God, not dead at all in the most epic final acts of a story ever told. He'd given his earthly life as a sacrifice for us, and even though I don't actually get *why* he had to do that – what cosmic rules are there that demand a sacrifice for the bad crap we do? – I still feel this inexplicable hope rising in my chest that Jesus's rising brings. It's an example we can keep returning to every day if we need it and at least yearly, that there will be loss but it's just one side of a coin. Flip it over, and there's the win. Every time. For everyone. For legs, and *Catan* games, and for people. Losing *sucks*. Full stop. But this Lenten season I'm taking particular comfort in the hope of the big win.

Dear God, please help us endure the losses we suffer in this world, and renew and grow the kernel of hope in us for the world that is to come, through Your son. Amen.

Submitted by Annie Ferris



Monday, March 9

My Lord God

The following is a prayer by Thomas Merton.

I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please You does, in fact, please You. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this You will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust You always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for You are ever with me, and You will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Submitted by Alan Farmer



Tuesday, March 10

A New Bible

How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

Psalm 119:103

At the beginning of the year, I replaced my bible. This was a surprisingly big deal for me. I had been using the same Lutheran Study Bible that was given to me for my confirmation. I liked that my bible was all worn and beat up with over two decades of highlights and notes sprinkled throughout. Just looking at it, you could tell that we had been through a lot together!

That bible accompanied me to college in New York, to Colorado where I spent a summer in a campus ministry leadership program, to divinity school, to Montana for internship and to California for one last semester of seminary. It's been camping about as many times as I have been camping. (I only camp when peer-pressured by church-related camping trips.) The pages are yellowed, the cover is peeling, and the font on the front cover screams 1990s! The whole thing is pretty much held together by faith alone at this point.

With the switch from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) to the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVue), I wanted my bible to match what we were using in worship. There were 12,000 substantive changes and 20,000 total changes in this updated edition. I do not want to accidentally write a sermon about an inn, then find out we say guest room now! (A substantive change to the Christmas narrative in the Gospel of Luke.)

Now I have a new bible and a new issue. I don't think a pastor should have a bible that looks too neat or unread! I have to love and wear this one out too! So, with my shiny new bible, I've committed to reading through the whole bible again. It's a bit intimidating! An 1184 page reading project! There are parts of scripture I visit often, but I know there are whole books of the Old Testament I haven't read since my time in divinity school.

As I write this devotion at the end of January, I'm about a month into this project. I'm using a reading plan, rather than reading the Bible from cover to cover. Each week, I'm reading from different sections of both testaments, which is less intimidating!

Here is what I've noticed so far:

- While I miss my old notes, I love highlighting and writing as I go. The wide, lined margins on my new bible are an invitation to reflect on what I've just read. I try to write something on every page.
- I have the time. I was worried about finding the time to read larger passages of scripture, but so far at least, I've found the time to stay on track to read the whole Bible in a year. (I also find joy in highlighting a little box every time I finish a chapter.)

- I love the moments when scripture connects to other parts of scripture. For example, Paul interprets the story of Abraham in his letter to the Romans and lifts up Abraham as a model of faith. After reading several chapters of Abraham's story, it's clear Abraham's faith included doubts, questions, and even ways he tried to secure his own legacy.
- I'm still learning! I'm making new connections, understanding the larger context, coming up with more questions than I had before, and continuing to see God's grace!

If you've read the Bible in a year or made a similar concentrated commitment to reading all of scripture, I would love to hear what you learned from your experience. Maybe by next year's Lenten Devotional, I'll have a follow-up reflection to share!

I hope that in a year or however long this thorough re-reading takes, my Bible won't look so new anymore. It will be worn in with all the signs of being read and loved, and I'll have learned a whole lot along the way.

Loving God, with the gift of scripture you speak your Word of love into our hearts. Send your Spirit to guide us in our reading and interpretation of scripture. May your Word guide us in faith and open our hearts and minds to your unending love for all people, through Jesus our Lord, Amen.

Submitted by Pastor Sarah Barnes



Wednesday, March 11

Pain & Laughter

One of the maxims of humor is that comedy is tragedy plus time. — Anonymous

“Pain makes laughter necessary; laughter makes pain tolerable.” — Mindy Greenstein

When my mother died...

We were in a Detroit funeral parlor for the first night of her viewing.

We lived in Toronto and had driven down to Detroit after we received the call. I am an only child so funeral arrangements fell on me. I passed them to my wife, Mary. I was too shaken, too shattered, too stunned. I couldn't cope. Mary coped. I drank.

It was near the end of the viewing hours. The priest was there, family, her friends, people she used to work with, our friends, Mary and our two boys: Jason and Luke. I have no idea what was said or even those who showed up. Because she hadn't been found in her apartment for several days, she was in a closed casket. There were the usual awkward conversations punctuated by long and even more awkward pauses. Everyone was sad. Everyone was tired. Jason, 6, was asleep on a chair. Suddenly I heard what sounded like the police breaking down a door.

Pound! Pound! Pound! Then again. Pound! Pound! Pound!

“Gramma! Gramma! Wake up!”

Luke, our 2-year-old, had climbed on top of the closed casket and was straddling it like a pony.

He knew his grandmother was in there and he wanted her out. Now.

As I said, I do not remember how many people were there, but at that point they all seemed to be looking at Luke. I was, too.

Picture this: Mom is in a closed casket in the darkened funeral home viewing room filled with sad, solemn, uncomfortable people whose mood is being even further depressed by having to listen to piped-in, dirge-like elevator music. A 2-year-old climbs on top of Mom's closed casket then starts hammering, pounding, shouting:

“Gramma! Gramma! Wake up!”

For the first time in my life, I understood the meaning of the phrase: “The silence was deafening.”

What would you do?

I was too stunned to keep crying. I stopped. Then, much to my surprise, I smiled. Then laughed. So did Mary. The laughter spread... and got louder. Everyone in the room knew Mom... and knew how she would have laughed, too.

I started crying again; this time my face smeared with tear-wrapped laughter.

I could almost hear Mom laughing, too.

That is my only real clear memory of Mom's death, the only one I want. For years afterward, when the anniversary of Mom's death crept closer, I'd start drinking more heavily than normal, and my normal was pretty heavy.

Years later, I stopped drinking. As the anniversary of her death approached, I was terrified that I would have to drink again. It was the only way I knew how to cope with the memories, memories encapsulated in the epitaph on her tombstone: "A life of love and laughter."

I confessed my fear to a sober friend. He said the problem was that I had not truly grieved her death. I kept running away from the pain by drinking it away.

I wanted to slug him.

I told him I grieved my mom every year. And whenever I thought of her.

"No," he said. "Every year you've tried to drown that pain in a bottle, the pain of grieving, the pain of a loss that would never totally disappear. You cannot run away from that pain. It will never stop chasing you. You have to stand still."

"And how the hell do I do that?" I snarled.

"Let the people who love you, and the God who loves you, hold you up: straight and tall. And do so until the pain goes all the way through and out the other side."

"And will the pain go away... forever?" I asked. "Could it? Would it?"

"No. Never. Not completely. You will always feel it, but you will be able to live with it. You will no longer be afraid of it. You'll be able to remember the good times. And the bad times. You will retell all the old stories, especially the silly ones, and smile, even laugh. You will still feel grief. There will be some tears. That is the price for love. But you will be able to continue to live, to love, and even to laugh again."

So, people held me. God held me.

And I am still standing, straight and tall.

And I am also still laughing; sometimes with my face smeared with laughter-wrapped tears.

And I can close my eyes and still hear Mom laughing.

Submitted by Stef Donev

Thursday, March 12

But

Whenever we are speaking or writing we are always using those little words called conjunctions. Conjunctions join things together in some way. And one of the most frequently used of them is that little word, "but."

That little word, *but*, has a way of changing things. Someone once referred to it as "the disruptive conjunction," because of its power to change the meaning of what is being said. A Bible scholar has noted, "when writers of Scripture insert the word *but* into the sentence you can know something powerful is about to happen." For example:

"the wages of sin is death, *but* the free gift of God is eternal life." (Romans 6)

"even youths shall faint and be weary...*but* those who hope in the Lord shall renew their strength and not grow weary..." (Isaiah 40)

"God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish, *but* have everlasting life. (John 3)

In telling a story Jesus told of a man beaten by robbers, lying helpless along the road, and a priest passed on by him, and a Levite passed by him, "*but* a Samaritan came upon the man..." And the whole story changed.

St. Paul often uses that little word *but* to declare that there is an alternative, that there is another reality than what appears; as when he says, "you are no longer strangers, *but* fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."

That little word, *but* can be a powerful force in helping us to become aware of another reality in our lives. While our daily news is filled with stories of chaos and cruelty, the scriptures' use of the little disruptive conjunction has a way of telling us of another reality. Perhaps that is why Luke does not begin his Easter story with the usual way of introducing a story; instead, after his account of the crucifixion and death, Luke's story simply begins: "But on the first day of the week..." It is as if he is saying, "we know the reality of violence and crucifixion and death *but* there is another story and another reality: Christ is risen."

In this chaotic world, we can know another narrative, and that little defiant conjunction calls us to take notice.

Submitted by Pastor John Nieman

Friday, March 13

The Return of the Prodigal Son



Because Catholic priest Henry Nouwen's name was on a book, I was interested. His encounter with a reproduction of Rembrandt's "The Return of the Prodigal Son" affected him so much that he traveled to the Hermitage in Russia to see the original. His trip became part of a long, personal meditation on the meaning of this parable in his life. So, he wrote a book titled "The Return of the Prodigal Son".

Nouwen was immediately struck by the father's hands on the wayward son's shoulders in the painting. He spent hours and hours in front of the painting. He thought of himself as the prodigal because of his own wayward journey in life, but then a friend said that he may be more like the older brother instead. This shocked him. He had been both.

Finally, as Nouwen began his life's most important work with the mentally challenged in Canada, he knew that he had to become the father. (Looking at this painting might help you to wonder which of the three figures best exemplifies you and the path that you have been on, are now on, or would like to be on).

We all know this passage of scripture. Only after reading about Rembrandt's equally tumultuous life and that of Nouwen's as well, did I gain greater insight into how this parable touches my own life. *"The themes of homecoming, affirmation, and reconciliation will be newly discovered by all who have known loneliness, dejection, jealousy, or anger. The challenge to love as the father and be loved as the son will be seen as the ultimate revelation of the parable known to all Christians throughout time."*

When Pastor Josh told us about being the older brother to his sister, he said, *"At different times in our life, a parable can mean different things."* He said, *"our reward is our life, is our relationship with Jesus."* Grace has been given to us over and over and over again as he saw *"that grace given to his sister from his Mom"*. Could you or I be the prodigal son or daughter, the older brother or sister, the father or mother? Have you evolved from one to another through life's journey?

Lord, as we grow in faith and love, may we become through your grace, our best loving self.

Submitted by Bill Rasku

Saturday, March 14

Singing with Joy

Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all ye lands! Serve the LORD with gladness; come before His presence with singing!

Psalm 100: 1-2

Psalm 100 is one of my favorite scripture passages. It was also one of the first that I had to memorize when I was in my 3rd grade Sunday School class. As part of the requirements for receiving our Bibles, it was expected that we would learn a number of scripture verses...this psalm was one. At that time, however, I never realized how much this scripture would become part of my working life.

During my professional upbringing, I received training from several different choral directors. Some were sticklers for musical details, and some were a bit more relaxed. As I continue to work with volunteer choirs, I find that both teaching styles are needed, but our central focus must be singing with joy.

Have you ever found yourself singing in the shower or singing along with the radio in your car? Most often, these are the times when you are singing without holding back...with great joy! Have you tried singing like this in church? Granted, sometimes the hymn might be new to you, but do you sing out when it is a familiar hymn? Remember...scripture says ***make a joyful noise***. What would it be like if our congregation sang with all the joy that they feel when singing in their comfort zone? Can you imagine the thrill and excitement? Let's try it! Let's come before God's presence with singing!

Dear God,

Help us to shake our feelings of self-consciousness and inadequacy. Please show us what it is like to truly serve you with gladness and to come before you in our songs of worship and praise.

Amen.

Submitted by Claire Paquette

Sunday, March 15

Good Gifts

“Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if a child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him? In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” Matthew 7:9-12

It may be Lent on the Church calendar, but this year it feels more like Advent to me. Our son Greg and his wife Liz are expecting a baby right around Easter, so the mood around our house is all “adventy:” eagerly watching, waiting, expecting, hoping. As with Advent, it’s hard to wait, and difficult to be patient while you do, so I decided to put all of that anticipation-energy to good use by building a crib for my expected granddaughter.

I found plans online – not too easy but also not too hard. I sought the advice of Immanuel’s wood artist and maker of your baptismal font, Duncan Gowdy. I took a trip across New Hampshire to pick out with him the 39 “board feet” of cherry I would need. I signed up for a membership that allows me to use the fine tools at a nearby Makerspace workshop. And then I got started.

By the end of January, I had all of the parts cut and joinery fashioned (and several new tools, jigs and gadgets!). I guess it’s fitting that as Lent draws near, I now face the less exciting, more disciplined (okay, boring) part of sanding the four legs, eight rails, and thirty-six (36!) slats. And I don’t mean just once. As fine woodworkers will tell you (and as Duncan told me), you can’t skip from rough sanding to finish-ready in one step. You start around 120 or 150 grit sandpaper, then step up to 180 grit and then 220 grit before applying the first coat of finish. Then you sand again (320 grit) and apply a second coat, sand again and apply a third. Somewhere in the midst of all that sanding will also come glueing the four sides of the crib together.

So, my Lent discipline this year will be sanding...the same parts...over and over, to smooth out imperfections and scratches, so that when assembled and finished, this crib will be worthy to hold the precious cargo I’m doomed to love with all my heart.

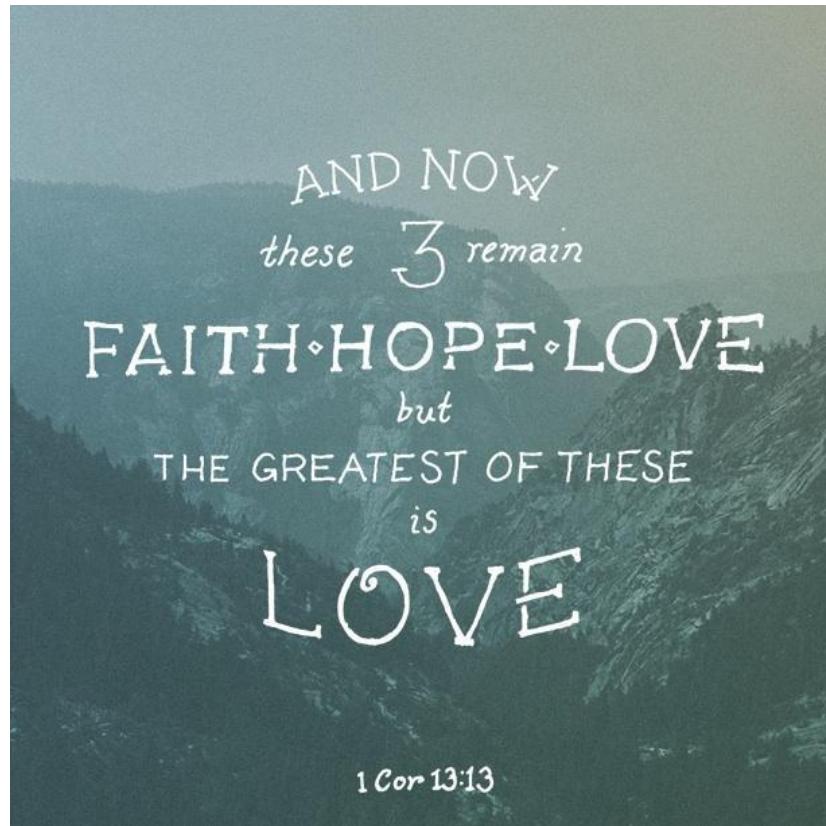
Jesus was right. If Greg and Liz had asked me for bread, I wouldn’t give them a stone. If they asked me for a fish, I couldn’t imagine giving them a snake. They didn’t even ask me for a crib. That was my idea. They were happy to know about it, are always excited to hear about my progress and have already asked for the dimensions so they could plan a space for it. So, if I know how to give good gifts to my children, and find even more joy in giving than they can imagine, how much more does God delight in giving good things to God’s children, even before they ask?

So in these Lenten weeks, as the tiresome sanding becomes my Lenten “dust and ashes” and all those slats become my rosary beads for prayer and contemplation, I’ll count my blessings with each well-smoothed slat, give thanks for the good things God has given this now well-aged child, and pray for a

healthy delivery for this new mother and my new grandchild, and with equal fervor for a saner and safer world for her to grow up in.

Lord Jesus Christ, you shared the pain and uncertainty of human life. Stay with all expectant parents and keep watch with them during their time of pregnancy. May all who wait and watch come to know that the hopes of their hearts and the pains of birth have not been in vain, and may they come to rejoice in the gift of new life. Into the shelter of your arms, we commend them, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Submitted by Pastor Dan Wilfrid



Monday, March 16

In the Bleak Midwinter?

For the past few years, I have been trying to pay more attention to the seasons and learn about the cycles of celebrations and holidays from lots of different nations and cultures. Two things that really seemed strange to me were that Swedish “Midsummer” was on the *first* day of summer. And why is there a Christmas carol called “In the Bleak Midwinter” when Christmas is at the *beginning* of winter?

It turns out that the American way of viewing the seasons -- starting on the solstices and equinoxes -- is not the only (or traditional) way of thinking about the seasons. In many cultures, the longest day of the year marked the middle of summer, and the shortest day the middle of winter. And in that way of thinking, *spring starts at the beginning of February* (which is why we have Groundhog Day on February 2).

One of the byproducts of (mostly) Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, Danish and German Lutherans joining together in American Lutheranism is that we have ended up using the Anglican names for our Christian holidays. In Germany and the Nordic countries, the word they use for lent means “fasting time”: German (*Fastenzeit*), Norwegian (*fastetid*), Swedish (*fasta*), or Finnish (*paastonaika*).

But the English word “Lent” comes from the Old English *lencten*, which refers to lengthening of days and springtime. As part of my learning, I have been reading *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* by Ronald Hutton. He says that fasting in Lent is “appropriate to a season at which flowers, foliage, warmth and light were all increasing and yet food and fuel would also be at their shortest.”

This really hit home as I was out shoveling a path to my dwindling firewood pile this week. There is still a lot of cold weather left ahead of us and my firewood will run out. But the sun was shining and you could tell it was higher in the sky than it had been just a few weeks earlier. Birds were singing and a pileated woodpecker was searching for insects in the trees above me.

It is also appropriate to fast during a period when (if you were a peasant, which most people were) you are likely running out of food. In the modern world, many of us don’t have that problem. Hutton remarks, “The vast majority of the population have been moved out of not only all direct contact with the farming processes but any direct dependency upon their rhythms, as international trade has virtually abolished seasonal limitations on foodstuffs.” We are a nation of instant gratification.

Lent gives us an opportunity to break away from that cycle and slow down and live in the moment and return to a more traditional observance of the seasons and what is going on around us. Fasting serves to remind us that there are people who do not have enough to eat. People all over the world and right here in our back yard. But Lent isn’t just a bleak and miserable period of fasting during the coldest months. It is also an opportunity to observe the lengthening of days and prepare ourselves for Easter and the rebirth of spring. May your Lenten observances help to remind you that the Son and the sun will be returning.

Submitted by Brian Welch

Tuesday, March 17

Follow the Light

My 4-year-old grandson went to his first movie in December.

It was *David*, the story of David and Goliath. He was afraid at times but also engaged.

One month later he sat at our dinner table singing a song...unprompted.

When I asked what song it was, his mom, a beautiful singer herself, said it was "Follow the Light" from the movie.

As I listen to the song, I am struck by the message. "When you are looking for an answer and you are afraid, you need to follow the light. When the shadows come, we won't run from the fight, just follow the light." I realized that I needed to hear this message to be reminded that in these dark times I need to look to Jesus for his comfort and strength.

Listening to my young grandson sing this song gave me hope and so much joy.

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life".

John 8:12

Dear Lord, I pray for the people who live life afraid. May they come to know your word and strength. I pray for the children of the world. Grant them peace and show them the way of love and kindness for they are our future. Amen.

Submitted by Beth Borchelt



Wednesday, March 18

I Wish

The light of the eyes rejoices the heart, and good news refreshes the body.

Proverbs 15:30

One of my sons sent me a picture of his brother Ben and me, both fast asleep, he on his couch and me in one of his easy chairs. This is not an uncommon event for either of us: me, because that is my default position in the late afternoon and for Ben because he was in very late-stage cancer failure. We would take him to the hospital that evening after his brothers left to return to Massachusetts.

What a wonderful day that was, full of games and music and family. I love that picture. We didn't know at the time that he was in his last stage and that was our last picture together. As I look at that picture now, I wish I could go back. I wish I could wake him up and give him a hug. I would like that long conversation reminiscing about our lives; how good the good times were and how meaningless the difficult times were.

We have other sons and daughters-in-law and grandchildren and one day someone will unknowingly snap that last picture. Maybe it is time to sit with each of them, look them straight in the eyes and tell them how much joy they bring to my life and how my life is made complete because they are part of it. Maybe each new picture should be followed by a hug.

Dearest Lord, I pray that there will be a bushel of pictures that capture the love and joy shared with our families and friends. Bless all of us with the love and the strength to have the conversations and hugs that we need before we're saddened to be holding that last picture. Amen.

Submitted by Ken Cranson

Thursday, March 19

Lessons From God

To borrow from the Apostles' Creed, I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth.

As a loving, caring, and nurturing Father, God teaches us because He loves us, and He wants the best for us. He teaches me lessons as I go through my day, often in ways I do not expect.

I believe that God lets us make mistakes in order to teach us what He wants us to learn. When God teaches us, it is always for our own good. God always knows what is best for us.

Mistakes can be a great learning tool, if we allow them to be. I believe that God uses our mistakes to teach us.

Sometimes, God will employ a friend, a loved one, a co-worker, or even a total stranger to give us a lesson, or just a few words to point us in the right direction. I give thanks for my mistakes because they provide a learning opportunity.

God does this for us because He loves us, and because He is our greatest teacher. God wants us to learn, so that we can be the best version of the people He created us to be.

Submitted by Dave Carlson



Friday, March 20

Small Acts of Kindness

He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you

but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8

At the end of January, my family attended a birthday party for my nephew, Austin, who was turning eight. His party included bowling, laser tag, pizza, and cupcakes – a great celebration for anyone turning eight!

This was Madeline and Hannah's first experience bowling. There were other younger siblings at the party, but Hannah was the youngest child. She always jumps in with both feet when it comes to hanging out with big kids. I don't think she realizes she's little!

At the party, there was a staff member assigned to help with our group. I wish I had gotten her name! She did her job with such joy. I have always loved working with kids, but I don't think even I would have had her enthusiasm at 19 or 20 years old to instruct, serve food, and clean up after large groups of kids all weekend long!

Hannah, being small and new to bowling, got her ball stuck twice. Both times the young woman rescued her ball for her - with a smile.

A little bit later, Hannah spilled her cup of pink lemonade all down the front of her shirt, the table and the floor. Her eyes went wide with panic when she saw her big mess. The young woman dashed away to get a big roll of paper towels and cleaning spray, then came back moments later to clean it all up.

Luckily, I had a back-up outfit for Hannah in my bag. I've been carrying around the same back-up outfit since December. Hannah was quickly changed into a red shirt that said, "Merry and Bright." She might have been dressed for Christmas, but at least she was a little less sticky!

The young woman came back over, seeing the Christmas outfit and a sad, recovering toddler. She asked Hannah if she would like stickers. Hannah of course said yes, and the worker dashed away yet again to go grab some stickers. She came back with her treasure, "I found two!" And gave Hannah two unicorn stickers. Hannah put one sticker on her forehead and the other sticker she kindly put on my forehead!

When the young woman started picking up all the forgotten plates and cups and bringing them over to the trash. Hannah picked up a couple of plates and followed her to the trash can, excited to help clean up.

I thought of how Hannah and this young woman had endeared themselves to each other. Over the course of two hours, they had found small ways to care for one another. Hannah created the most work of any kid there, and yet the young woman offered her stickers instead of a scolding. Hannah saw an opportunity to help her, after she had been helped.

When we were back at home, it was past the kids' bedtime, and we went almost immediately to bed. As I tucked Hannah in, I said, "You had such a big day! Bowling, laser tag, arcade games, cupcakes. What was your favorite part?" Of all of those big new things, Hannah answered, "getting stickers!" I was surprised, "The stickers were your favorite part? Well, yes, it was really nice of her to give you those stickers."

Then, I sat in the glider while Hannah tried to fall asleep in her bed. (Hannah likes having someone sit in her room near her as she falls asleep.) After a few quiet minutes, I heard Hannah's little voice,

"Mama, what was your favorite part?"

I answered quickly, "watching you bowl for the first time! Carrying that big ball by yourself! So cute and strong!"

Hannah fell asleep quickly after that- what a big day!

Then I thought, I'd like to change my answer.

My favorite part was seeing all the little kindnesses –

The best party helper, stickers of grace, Hannah cleaning up the cups and plates, the smallest moment of the party being Hannah's favorite, and then as she was drifting off to sleep- asking me in her sweet, little voice, "Mama, what was your favorite part?"

God of wonders big and small, you instruct us to love kindness. Help us to see kindness in an often-unkind world. Help us to celebrate the kindness we see, cultivate it in our children, and show kindness to all of your people - as you have shown kindness to us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Submitted by Pastor Sarah Barnes

Saturday, March 21

Walking With God

The Blackstone River runs through Worcester. While others may have been playing sports, or just playing outside, as a ten year old, I was drawn to the river, for it was a source of endless fascination for me and surely a place to develop a love of nature. It was lively and alive. Simply by walking across the street, I was projected into a different world.

A river is “a living participant in a living world,” writes author Richard Macfarlane in his book *Is A River Alive?* “Goldfish” swam in the pond behind the dam, bullfrogs jumped, birds were diving, and painted turtles sunned themselves, butterflies glittered. It never occurred to me then, at ten, that my walking was somewhat spiritual.

In the Bible, “walking symbolizes a person’s spiritual life, moral direction, relationship with God, encompassing beliefs, attitudes, actions.” In Genesis 5:24, Enoch walked with God; and he was no more, because God took him. In Hebrews 11:5 it says by faith Enoch was taken so he did not experience death; and “he was not found, because God had taken him.” For it was attested before he was taken away that “he had pleased God”.

In the Bible we find many metaphors about walking; walking in the light, walking by faith, walking in obedience, walking in the Spirit, walking humbly with your God, walking in Christ, walking in newness of life, walking according to his commandments. St. Augustine wrote, “As we stretch our legs, we stretch our minds and our souls. Whatever our issue,” he said, “it is solved by walking.”

Pastor Patricia Hughes wrote, “Try to visualize Enoch, walking with God, and draw hope for your own life, taking time to walk with God in the midst of busy times, in the midst of hard times, and in the midst of frightening times. Hold on to hope, friends, and be like Enoch, walking with God.”

Lord, in these most difficult times may we find a way to keep moving forward together with you. Thank you for the grace that you continue to show us.

Submitted by Bill Rasku

Sunday, March 22

Little Prayers

The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. Philippians 4:5b-6

When we first came to Immanuel about 10 years ago, Elaine MacNutt gave an Adult Forum series on prayer. It had a great effect upon me, and I found myself praying often for various situations I encountered in my day to day life. I pray for kids walking to school, couples holding hands, residents of houses in poor repair and myriad others. I feel more connected to others, and to God, as a result.

I don't recall the exact 'formula' we were taught, but this is the one I pray most often; whenever I hear a siren or the Life Flight helicopter, or encounter a police car, ambulance, or fire truck, I say this prayer:

Lord, Eternal and Loving God,

Protect those who care for others.

Guide their hands, sharpen their wits,

and pour out your healing power.

Let Your most Gracious Will be done.

In your mighty name, Amen.

May God's Peace be with you all!

Submitted by Rod Schaffter

*The Lord
takes
pleasure
in those
who hope
in his
steadfast
love*

PSALM 147:11

Monday, March 23

The Whole World in God's Hands

He's got the whole world in his hands, He's got the whole world in his hands,

He's got the whole world in his hands, He's got the whole world in his hands.

The world is a vast place, yet on some levels it is small, even intimate. I am just shy of 90 years "young." I stay connected to Immanuel by reading the monthly Herald newsletter and streaming Sunday worship online.

In the fall, I heard that Immanuel was collecting heart shaped rocks, and I told my son, Tony, who lives in Germany. He took his young grandson, Mika, on a walk and found heart shaped rocks in a nearby field. They even sent me a picture of Mika holding a perfect heart rock, which brought me so much joy. We were able to share this experience even while living on different continents! To think that our congregation's fall project made it all the way to Germany! God is amazing.



I've been working with Albacare Home Health Services and receiving help around my home. Last week, the woman who usually helps me was sick with pneumonia and unable to come. Another woman, Ruth, came instead. I learned that Ruth was from Kenya, and I told her all about the work that our church does to support the Beverly School. Because of the work that Immanuel does, Ruth and I had a connection. I felt like God sent her to me that day.

The other day I was looking out my back window, and a beautiful red cardinal was sitting on the white fence. We see many cardinals where I live, usually in the spring. This was the first cardinal I had seen this year. It stopped and stayed long enough for me to admire it. The cardinal brought me to a standstill. I couldn't stop looking at it. Cardinals always remind me of my Bernie. I still miss him so much.

In each of these moments, I felt God's presence. I am thankful for the people of Immanuel and for the work done together as a congregation. It truly touches the world! I am reminded over and over again that all people and animals share the same planet, and that world is in God's hands.

Submitted by Shirley Rotti

Tuesday, March 24

Strengthening Their Faith

The Bible places responsibility on each generation to teach the next generation about God, focusing on spiritual training, moral instruction, and passing down the faith. In our current day and age, the church offers Confirmation classes. Along with the Bible we use Luther's Small Catechism, viewing Christian education as a holistic, faith-based endeavor. We nurture the mind, body, and spirit through the teaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Children should be taught the commandments and works of God constantly... "*when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.*" (Deuteronomy 6:7)

Proverbs 18:15 says, "An intelligent mind acquires knowledge and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge." Right now, we have some intelligent minds getting together twice a month for Confirmation class! I have the honor of co-teaching with Pastor Sarah and getting to know Eve, James, Avery, Niko, and Carter. These five young people are a pleasure to spend time with. The class is not a lecture; it is a discussion, and they always have something to say.

Recently, we were looking at the Ten Commandments and Martin Luther's thoughts on what they mean. The mentors were on hand that night and we broke into groups to write their own commandments. This is what the group felt God commands of them:

1. Thou shall keep God first.
2. Do not denigrate God's name.
3. Rest with the Lord.
4. Do not judge your neighbors.
5. Do not break societal laws.
6. Demonstrate God's love to others.
7. Treat the world with love and respect.
8. Follow what is right, not what others say is right.
9. Honor your committed relationships.
10. Be grateful for what God has given you.

1. Don't murder.
2. Don't steal.
3. Thou shall be kind to one another.
4. Take care of those who are in need.
5. Keep God first.
6. Cherish all of God' creatures.
7. Be faithful to one another.
8. Make time and space for God.
9. Don't use up all the resources for yourself.
10. Thou shall be grateful for what you have.

This group had a bonus commandment:

11. Thou shall not use God's name to make money for yourself.

Great rules to live by; well thought out. Nelson Mandela said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." These young people are already well-armed. Get to know them, stand behind them, and help them forge their future.

May God bless them.

Submitted by Jim Anderson



Wednesday, March 25

All We Need

As I'm moving into my final course work at Luther Seminary, I've recognized how I read the Bible is dependent on what I am experiencing in daily life. Feeling challenges in meeting the needs of my mind and ideas of "what should be" is weighty on my health and soul. It's hard to give everything to God. I found a sense of peace in these words from "*Wild Geese*" by Wendell Berry.

*Horseback on Sunday morning,
harvest over, we taste persimmon
and wild grape, sharp sweet
of summer's end. In time's maze
over fall fields, we name names
that rest on graves. We open
a persimmon seed to find the tree
that stands in promise,
pale, in the seed's marrow.
Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye,
clear. What we need is here.*

God, grant me the stillness of the "wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief." Help me to come into the peace of still waters, where the wood drake rests in his beauty and the great heron feeds.

As I walk these forty days, teach me to:

- **Release** the "heavy grief" of things I cannot control.
- **Rest** in the "grace of the world" that you have so freely given.
- **Wait** for the "day-blind stars" to reveal their light in your perfect timing.

May I, like the wild geese, find my way home to your rest. Amen.

Submitted by Jed Lindholm

Thursday, March 26

One Verse – Three Versions

The following verses are from the gospel of Mark chapter 9 verse 24. They are taken from three different translations of the Bible.

Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; *help my unbelief!*" (New Revised Standard)

"I do believe," the father cried out right away. "*Help my weak faith.*" (First Nations Version)

Instantly the father of the child exclaimed, "I do trust – *help my lack of trust!*" (Complete Jewish Bible)

A father's anguish over a suffering son is soothed when Jesus cures his little boy. Then anguish is replaced by anxiety when he realizes that his belief, his faith, and his trust are all... uncertain.

Belief. Faith. Trust. Pick one.

Some days I have all three. Really.

Some days – many of them – I don't have even one.

The three are very similar but not identical, and I find it fascinating to see three different cultures use three different words in this verse to focus on, all of them shaped by their history and culture: the Western focus is on belief; Native peoples' tribes and clans, strength; the Messianic Jewish translation, trust.

Three different words based on one common problem, a lack of certainty:

Certainty – The fact, quality, or state of being certain.

Certain – Definite; fixed. Sure to come or happen; inevitable.

I know people who are certain about everything, especially that they are saved. For them, dying and going to heaven is as simple as opening a door to another room and stepping through. They have no doubts whatsoever – quite often about anything.

I also know that I am saved, and I didn't have to do anything to be saved. As a child of God, it is my birthright. Jesus saved me. Saved you, too. But am I always certain? No.

Of the three translations, the First Nations Version resonates the most with me. I do have faith, belief, and trust. But they are weak, all of them.

I am weak. I am human. I also have an ego. I am flawed. I was built that way. It is part of the built-in curse of the gift called free will. I must choose to make the right decisions, the right choices, but they are frequently not nearly as easy, appealing, or as much fun as the wrong ones.

My job is to use my free will to overcome those flaws and make the right decisions and choose to follow the path God marked out for me, even when it means trudging rough trails, wandering through unmapped

and dangerous wildernesses, following confusing maps, ignoring the too-tempting detours, sometimes even going against traffic and completely off road.

At times I envy the completely certain. But only at times.

My life is God's gift to me. What I do with my life is my gift to God.

I believe God expects me to use that free will to weigh my options, all of them, even the ones I know he does not want me to choose. It is all about choices. He knows the choices I can make and that I will make. He wants me to know how much I actually can do when I rely on Him for the strength to do it.

Rabbi Joahanan Sacks, a British theologian and author, wrote: *"I believe faith is not certainty but the courage to live with uncertainty."*

Without free will, I would follow God's will because I had no choice. With free will I follow God's will because I choose to, out of love, gratitude, and a desire to please him. I choose to, even when I am not certain. And when faith, belief, and trust weaken, I look at what God has done for me already.

I look at God's record.

Have I gotten everything I wanted? No.

Have there been disappointments, loss, and pain? Definitely.

But then I look at what I do have, what he has given me, and what his strength has helped me accomplish, overcome, and, at times more importantly, accept and learn to live with – and even make the best of.

I am 81, and most of my major regrets are things undone.

I can sum up much of my life in six words:

Could'a Would'a Should'a
Didn't Didn't Didn't.

Why didn't I do them?

Fear.

My faith was weak.

"I do believe... Help my weak faith."

And He does.

Submitted by Stef Donev

Friday, March 27

Let There Be Peace

Heal me, O Lord, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise.

Jeremiah 17:14

And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.

Matthew 21:22

In these past few months, I have felt the power of prayer in a way I never have before. I had heard others speak of being lifted in prayer—of feeling surrounded by love and support—but this was the first time I truly experienced this myself.

As I tried to wrap my head around a cancer diagnosis, I was overwhelmed by the response of family and friends who reached out in extraordinary ways. Most impactful of all was the response from the congregation here at Immanuel.

I was only a few weeks into my diagnosis and heading into surgery in two days, when Sydney insisted we view the online service together, live. That Sunday morning, I was still trying to process and be strong for what lay ahead. I didn't feel "connected" to reality and honestly, I felt a bit lost and terrified of what was about to happen. Then one of the most incredible things happened and I felt a warm, loving peace come over me. Pastor Sarah concluded the service by mentioning my love for a song at The Boston Pops Holiday Concert and that I would be in surgery and unable to attend the performance with Syd. The Choir came up and sang *Let There Be Peace on Earth* and I was reminded of the deep connection to my faith and my community here at Immanuel. I knew I wasn't alone and that God, my faith, and my church would be on this journey with me. That song has always moved me, but now it will forever remind me of the love within our congregation, the way we show up for one another, and the strength that I will always have because of all of you here at Immanuel.

*Let there be peace on earth
And let it begin with me;
Let there be peace on earth,
The peace that was meant to be.*

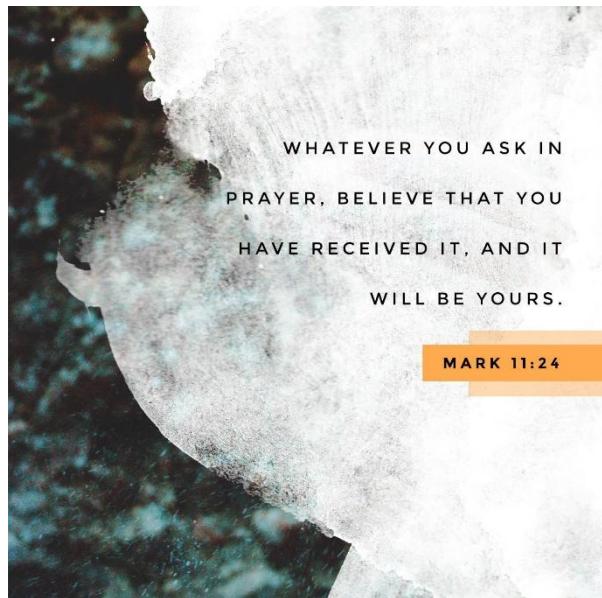
*With God as our Father
Brothers all are we,
Let me walk with my brother
In perfect harmony.*

*Let peace begin with me,
Let this be the moment now;
With every step I take,
Let this be my solemn vow:*

*To take each moment and live each moment
In peace eternally.
Let there be peace on earth
And let it begin with me.*

By Jill Jackson and Sy Miller

Submitted by Lauren Demerjian



Saturday, March 28

An Anonymous Christian

But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.

Matthew 6:3

When I was a young girl, I was horse crazy. I read books about them; regularly begged to be taken to local stables to ride; hung out around anyone and any place where there were horses, even if all I could do was pet them, groom them, or clean out stalls. (At the time, I wrote and sang my first song parody to the strains of the *Sound of Music* – “I fell in love with a horse and her name was Ginger.” Corny, I agree, but I really did that.)

For a long time, I asked my parents – badgered is probably more accurate – about getting a horse. My dad grew up on a Kansas farm with eleven siblings. He knew what owning a horse would involve. Still, after much begging on my part, when I was 14 years old, he agreed.

Dad was a man of strong faith, integrity, and few words. He never made a big deal about anything but once his mind was made up, he set about doing what needed to be done. First, he put in a fence around our four-acre property. He didn’t *hire* anyone. He did it himself (with a little help from me and two of my brothers.) He dug every fence post hole by hand. He strung the fence. He refurbished an old playhouse we had and turned it into a stable. It was far from the house, so he put in electricity. He dug a well and installed a hand pump so we’d have water in the pasture. Then he built another barn to store the feed, a spring wagon, a buggy...and a sleigh.

I don’t remember exactly how it came about, but Dad announced the day before Christmas one year that he, as Santa Claus, would take the sleigh around the neighborhood. My younger brother, Don, and I came along as his elves. We rode around for four hours. Whenever we would spot some young children playing outside or peering at us through a house window, we’d let ‘Santa’ know. He’d pull up in their yard and climb out of the sleigh. The kids’ eyes would be as big as saucers when he handed out candy and wished them Merry Christmas.

Some parents would try to give Dad money when their kids weren’t watching, but he always refused. “Santa Claus doesn’t take any money,” he’d declare firmly. Some would ask his name. He’d answer with a laugh: “I’m Santa Claus. Don’t you know who Santa Claus is?”

I still remember one young boy declaring loudly, “That’s not a reindeer!” to which ‘Santa’ replied: “Shhh! You’ll hurt her feelings! She thinks she’s a reindeer. The reindeer are at home at the North Pole resting so they can go out with me tonight.”

We had the *best* time.

After the first year, Dad expanded his route over two days so he could ride through both the white neighborhood and the black neighborhood. (Back then, they were still separate.) A few years later, the local newspaper discovered what Dad was doing. He didn't want to tell them his name. The same thing when the nearby TV station wanted to do a story about him another year. "Don't you know who Santa Claus is?" he'd always ask the 'ignorant' reporter.

Dad did this year after year for 10 years, until failing health prevented him. The last year he did it, Don and I were away at college, so Mom went along as Mrs. Claus to hold the horse.

Dad didn't want money. He didn't want his name used. All he wanted was to bring joy to those kids.

Dad never said he was "doing this for God." We just knew. That's just who Dad was. Always doing for others without taking credit.

Dad never gave us kids a lecture on being kind to others. Without words, he simply lived his faith. To me, Dad will always be a man who understood what it means *not to let your left hand know what your right hand is doing*.

Submitted by An Anonymous Christian.



Sunday, March 29

Everyday

But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Matthew 6:6

I've been reading an interesting book titled *Ordinary Faith in Polarized Times* by Amy Carr and Christine Helmer. This book applies a Lutheran lens to the contemporary life of conflict in politics, religion, and culture. What grabbed my attention was the title "Ordinary Faith" which caused me to imagine what is extraordinary faith? The authors provide examples of extraordinary faith as Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a "Paragon of Virtue," Martin Luther as a "'Here I Stand' Celebrity," and personal ideas that give a person a view of "Idealized Orthodoxy" that is fixed in doctrine and one way of belief. Instead, the book describes an "ordinary faith" that is based on communal listening, reasoning, and embracing of competing views. Ordinary faith promotes the use of trust in divine grace that embraces the "messiness" of life.

A more helpful icon, according to Carr and Helmer, is the less well-known *The Vineyard of the Lord*, by Lucas Cranach the Younger. In this 1574 oil painting, Luther and other colleagues work together raking, hoeing, watering and tending the vineyard representing the church. For the authors, this image highlights that 'the real work of justice is done in community', alongside other Christians 'likewise dedicated to the everyday work of justice-seeking'.



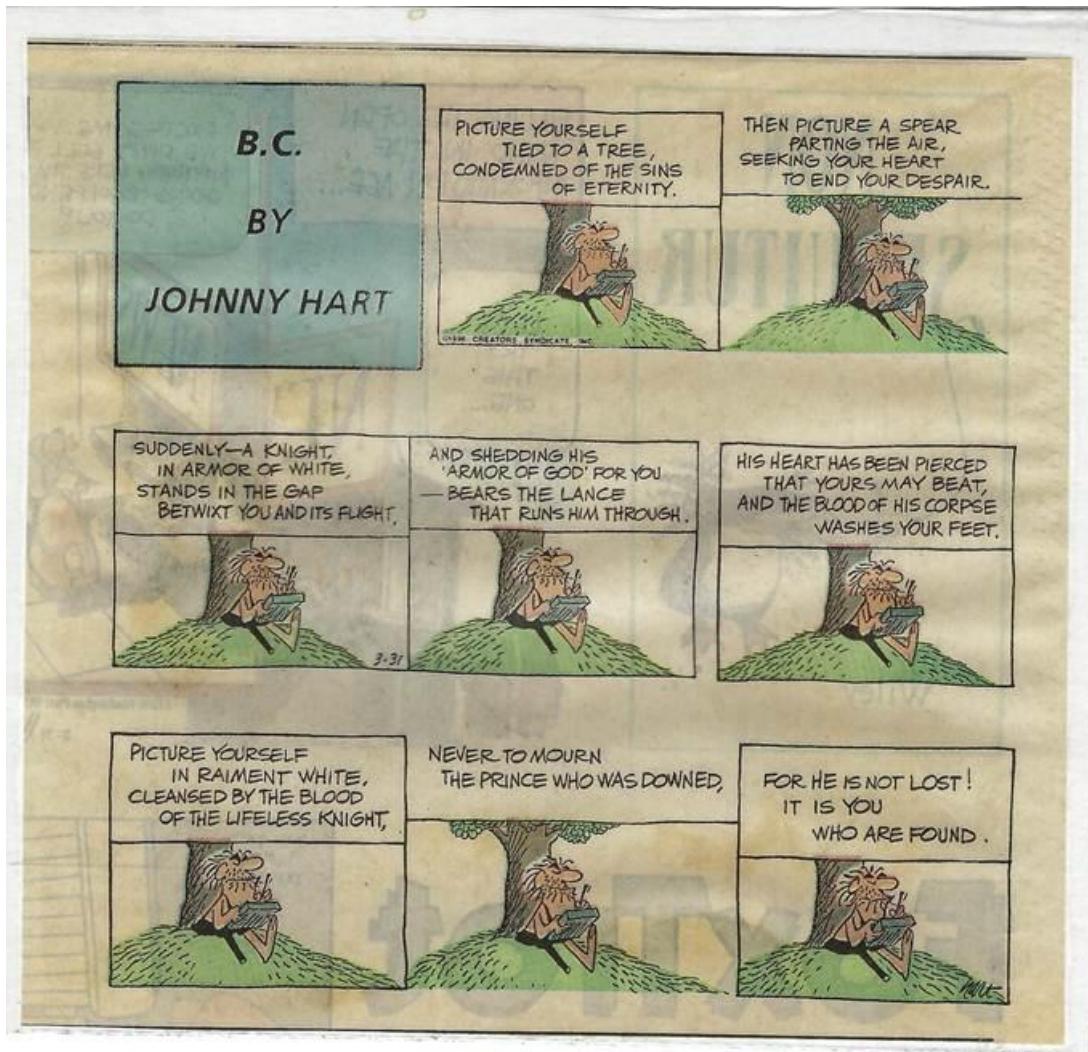
Oh, Great Creator and Divine Vinedresser, help me to be a diligent worker in Your kingdom. Teach me to use the "rake" of discipline to pull out the weeds of sin and the "water" of Your Word to nourish my soul. May Your Holy Spirit prune my branches, even when it is painful, so that I may bear more fruit for Your glory. Amen.

Submitted by Jed Lindholm

Monday, March 30

Picture Yourself...

Johnny Hart died the Saturday before Easter of 2007 of a stroke. He was 76. He died working at his storyboard. We could always count on and looked forward to his Easter comic.



Submitted by Kathy Cranson

Tuesday, March 31

Change

Read John 1:32-42

John the Baptist said, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him [Jesus].... After being baptized Jesus was walking and two of John's disciples followed him and Jesus asked, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They followed him, and they remained with him that day.

John 1:32, 38-39

Change is a challenge; it is a leap of faith. Sometimes it comes because you have carefully planned and are poised and ready for a new direction and everything falls into place. More often your plan goes in a completely different direction. Things do not fall into place and something completely different is presented. You have a choice: do I stay with what is known and comfortable or do I take that leap of faith?

Did Simon and Peter think they would leave everything and follow Jesus? It was not going to be easy, but it was going to be challenging and fulfilling. Recently Pastor Aaron also shared that his carefully thought-out plan did not go as intended, but God brought him a more fulfilling plan. He opened his heart to new beginnings, traveled to new places and realized a greater scope for his talents, achieving a greater connection to the Holy Spirit.

This past year has not been what I had expected but has expanded my experiences, brought challenges, and opened a wider view of possibilities for my career. It has also afforded me time to spend with my mom and time to recharge and renew my energy. God knew I needed a change and that it should be new and sometimes uncomfortable but that it will prepare me for exciting changes ahead.

Merciful God, thank you for giving me the strength to pivot and take on change with grit and grace. I am thankful for the opportunities that you provide and the faith in me to embrace change.

Submitted by Sherilynne Parretti

Wednesday, April 1

The Gift that Keeps on Giving

We have all received gifts in our lives. We have likely given them too. Some are cute or funny, precious or whimsical, useful or 'not so much,' heartfelt or perhaps priceless. Whatever the cost, some of them are more useful than others and some are downright irreplaceable.

I received a very special gift from my daughter AnnMarie. It's a jar of Bible Verses that says "READ ME WHEN...Happy, Thankful, Angry, Anxious, Lonely and Sad." They are color-coded and you just reach into the jar and select one that fits the situation. I keep them on my nightstand next to a cross meant to be held when praying. It's a good reminder of how present the Lord is for me and how important prayer is for our lives. I don't select one every day, but when I do, it is always meaningful to me. I use these verses to reflect on the things in my life, my current circumstances, past or anticipated events. I find a new one each time. Some are old favorite verses and some less well known.



Today I selected 'Happy': "The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in Him, and He helps me. My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise Him." Psalm 28:7

This verse speaks loudly to me of the events this past year, not because it was all happy, but because of my faith in God's presence in my life, I have been able to weather the storms. I lost my big brother Carl to mental illness ending in suicide last February which has been very hard on all of us. My brother-in-law Ray passed away after many years of chronic illness, leaving his wife of 41 years and their children and grandchildren lost. Many of my friends, both at Immanuel and in my personal social circle, have suffered devastating losses or life-changing events that have been difficult to deal with. Both Jim and I have had mobility issues necessitating surgical procedures from which we have both recovered positively. We have also celebrated some very special events like our marriage of 40 years last June. Our children planned and executed a surprise party for us which was joyful and heartwarming.

My point in all this sharing is to say that I am blessed every day by my Lord and using these Bible verses helps me to see that, be grateful for my many blessings, be comforted in my losses, be happy in Him! I may not be singing loud enough for you all to hear me, but He hears my song of praise, loud and clear! Please join me this Lent (and beyond) in remembering each day how blessed we are and thank our Lord for our very lives.

Submitted gratefully by Diana Provencher

Thursday, April 2

Thank God, It's Lent!

Hush. It's dusk. I'm sitting in my living room with SnickerDoodle at my feet, snoring lightly. The dissonance of commercial Christmas starting pre-Halloween with its repetitive music, off-key carols, blow up creches mixed in with Santa and Rudolph is (thankfully), a blur. Somewhere it's buried with the onslaught of Valentine's Day.

It's peaceful, serenely, gloriously quiet. The dusk-ready sky seen from my large windows is a tantalizing palate of merging, flowing shades of scarlet, pale pinks, azure glue, blue-gray - some in vibrant patches - others in more tranquil, warmly muted colors. What a glorious tapestry!

Lent is my favorite time of our Church year. It's a time of calm, time to respond to an invitation to think about, and accept or reject my relationship with Jesus. The operative word - "think." I cannot ignore, minimize, or tiptoe past the nature of Lent and the greatest gift I have: *daily salvation* through the truths of Christmas, and now, Lent: my Lord and Savior.

Looking out my windows, how can I not feel the presence of God, respond to His promise, give thanks to my Savior? The invitation? To "Be Still and Know that I am God!" (Psalm 46:10). I am blessed with a plethora of opportunities, experiences, persons, family, church, life.

So, I am quiet, calm, at peace, cradled in the love and grace of Jesus my Lord, my Savior. For me, Easter is here, daily. And I will gratefully be present through the days of Lent with time to listen, question, think, pray, rejoice.

Day is Done,

Gone the Sun

From the lakes, from the hills, from the skies.

All is well.

Safely rest.

God is nigh.

Submitted by Joy Cohen

Friday, April 3

Shawna

I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Isaiah 41:10

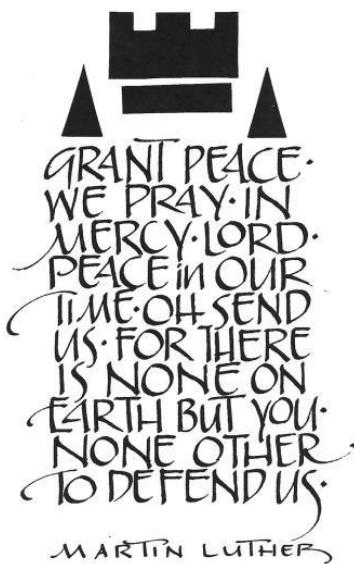
The doctor had just informed me that I needed a knee replacement. My first question was when would I be able to walk my dog Shawna two miles a day? I figured I had plenty of time to find a dog walker for Shawna until I can walk her myself.

I started asking around but I didn't find anyone. Shawna is a Siberian Husky mix. She's about sixty pounds and loves to chase anything that moves. She'll be fine with cars going by until a dog barks at her. She is strong because of her sled dog heritage. I was afraid if I didn't find the right person to walk her, she might cause them to fall.

Then the need for a dog walker became urgent. I was in the hospital for 10 days. Everyone pitched in, including family, friends and neighbors. My neighbor and nephew hired a dog walker for a few days a week. I needed more. While I was in the hospital Pastor Sarah came to visit. I asked her, "Do you know of a dog walker?" She replied she did. His name is Aidan and he loves animals. I called him when I got home. I am blessed by Aidan and his family. Only God would have brought us together.

Dear God, thank you for sending Aidan to me; You are always there for me and supplying all I need. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Submitted by Linda Friedman



Saturday, April 4

"Jesus Loves Me, This I Know, for the Bible Tells Me So..."

Recently I sat wondering how many times in my life I have listened to the story of Christ's Passion. How many times have I heard: "Jesus loved you so much he even died on the cross for you?" As I approach my 63rd birthday, I have to guess it's a pretty big number.

I was a smart, serious little girl, and I sort of knew and understood what love meant. I could conceptualize that Jesus loved me a lot, but something was missing. I needed to find out what that was, which was hard to do when I couldn't really even articulate it! As I grew into a young lady, I valued all my family and faith had taught me but understood that there was still some wisdom that had not yet found me. My journey to find the missing link would wax and wane throughout my life but I always would return to the search.

I looked in various churches and weekend retreats, read countless books intended to enlighten my spiritual journey, volunteered many hours in service teaching religious education and ministering to the sick. All these efforts further developed my relationship and understanding of Jesus but still I knew I was missing something.

Becoming a mother helped me to understand this great love of Jesus in a new way. I would do *anything* asked - including dying - if I knew it would help my Emily and Aidan grow in light and love. I was getting closer to finding that which was missing but echoes of Bono singing "I still haven't found what I'm looking for" rattled in my brain.

In my early forties I began to understand that I had some personal work to do. I was evaluating my life and realized and (was very humbled by) the fact that perhaps I was getting in my own way. Patterns had emerged in my life, and I recognized choices I had made no longer served the higher good for myself or those I loved. I began in earnest a period of transformation working very hard to understand where, why, and how I had gotten myself into this dark place. During this period of my life I began to look at the Passion with different eyes and appreciation. I would often escape the chaos of my life and find peace and a place to reset in trips to the Abbey in Spencer. Sometimes I would sit outside, other days I ventured inside to chat with Jesus, asking him to give me the strength and wisdom I needed.

After a couple of years of staying committed to therapy and surrounding myself with a wonderful group of "Prayer Sisters" I felt I had truly become a new being. My life was no less difficult but my energy and my sense of peace were growing. I was truly grateful and yet I *still* felt something was missing.

The same incompleteness I felt as a child, and carried through my teen years, mothering, and working as a nurse remained. Until one most special and life-changing experience on a visit to the Abbey. I went inside that day and noticed I was alone, which was often the case and why I liked it there so much. I took the far corner, leaning on the stone wall looking at the Crucifix like I usually did.

"Jesus, I feel like I have done the work I have needed to do to be the best version of myself, yet I still feel a pain, a heaviness that I can't seem to figure out. Please help me understand what I need to know." I was crying, my body tense and utterly exhausted from life's varied stressors. "I am not leaving here until you remove this heaviness or guide me as to how I do the work needed."

And then I was quiet, listening for an answer to come back. After several minutes of silent tears, I laid my head down on the wall, feeling somewhat defeated, and in that moment I felt a physical sense of warmth and light surge through my body in my upper back, shoulders and neck. The exact places where my body always holds stress. It felt very surreal, but I instantly knew it was very real. I stood up tall and felt a lightness and release like I had never experienced before. Somehow, I just knew that the reason I couldn't figure out what to do next was because the pain was never mine to carry in the first place.

In that moment of removal, I quite literally felt as if Jesus had my back. It was as if the pain and heaviness removed from my shoulders and upper back opened a pathway for my heart space to grow and the warmth and love I felt radiated so brightly, rising quickly to my crown. I finally understood in a very new, missing-nothing-kind-of-way that Jesus *loves me*. The love in my heart in that moment was so real, so complete. I remember joyfully exclaiming with happy tears flowing, hands tightly clutching my heart, "you LOVE me, you REALLY love me, You really love ME!" and then the Abbey Bells began to chime. My husband would be quick to tell you they always ring at that time of day, but I know that day, at that moment, they were Divinely orchestrated to ring just for me.

With that prayer answered in real time I had found the missing part. "Be still and know that I am," the psalm says. "Mary has chosen the better part," Jesus told the sisters. "For I know the plans I have you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future," declares Jeremiah. "Come to me all ye who are weary and I will give you rest," Jesus proclaimed. All these things I had heard came flooding through me with a new awareness.

I was no longer Martha the "human-doing" having to earn love. I was simply Martha the "human-being," sitting at his feet with my eyes on Jesus, finally coming home to the heart space where all the words and wisdom accumulated through the years made sense. In that moment I became the lamb enfolded in His arms. I am truly a beloved child of God and yes, Jesus loves me! Amen!

Submitted by Martha McCarthy