



Lent 2023

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Lent

Lent is a 40-day period beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending on Easter. It symbolizes the 40 days that Jesus spent wandering the desert fasting and resisting Satan's temptation. Christians practice Lent to show discipline and penance to God. Though Lent is not mentioned in the Bible, it is a tradition long accepted in the Christian church. Sundays are not counted in Lent since the primary focus of all Sundays in the Christian faith should be the celebration of Christ's resurrection.

Lent remains a prominent part of the Christian faith. It is still characterized by sacrificing something for the Lord and focusing on spiritual growth. This includes not only fasting and prayer but partaking in new practices and acts of service that draw us closer to Christ. It is a time for Christians to repent of sin, renew their faith, and prepare to celebrate the resurrection of their Savior. It is our prayer that the words on these pages will be used by the Holy Spirit to identify changes that need to take place in our lives to draw closer to Christ. If one person's life is opened to God's grace in Jesus Christ then contributors to this devotional will have the greater reward.

T.S. Eliot and “Ash Wednesday”

“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” Isaiah 41:10

T.S. Eliot wrote his poem “Ash Wednesday” in 1927.

The theme is about Eliot’s struggles as he, who had lacked faith, began to turn to Christianity. He was exhausted, tired of trying to understand the world, which had been for him a world of uncertainty.

The poem illustrates stages in faith. At first, the narrator is hopeless and sure that he can’t accept God. He is just beginning to wonder about faith. As the poem progresses, he makes himself climb up a staircase away from the past. This image helps him leave behind his mistakes. When he gets to the sixth stanza of “Ash Wednesday” he has changed. Human salvation now seems possible, and the hopelessness has left. Moving into belief took courage.

At the beginning of Lent for us, on our Ash Wednesday, we often can doubt the possibility for our redemption. Traditionally, it’s a time for repentance for past sins, and like Eliot, we can feel abandoned and discouraged. He saw humanity as empty. Through religion, Eliot found a way to restore that meaning, and this is what ‘Ash-Wednesday’ is about. When he begins with talk of “turning” (“Because I do not hope to turn again”), he is referring to this act of turning from the world and towards God, towards the spiritual. The world is the desert, and God is the garden: the modern world is an empty space, as he wrote in *The Waste Land*, while the garden – a world of growth and life – is the world of God.

by Rev. Mary Donovan

Prayer

Dear God, let me during Lent walk up the staircase away from past doubts into the certainty of your love. Amen.

Ponders: Past and Future

“Your people will volunteer freely in the day of Your power; In holy array, from the womb of the dawn, Your youth are to You as the dew.” Psalm 110:3

This year I have little time to worry about giving up something for Lent. I feel really busy and kinda stressed! The semester started with a shortage of students willing to serve in faith programming. Since COVID came to visit, youth are not seeming as ‘freely drawn, like dewdrops’, to be leaders--for chapels or youthworking; joyfulnoisemaking or bible study. I am going through old notes from my programming past, both here and in earlier assignments, worrying and wondering what I can do to better recruit or more dynamically engage. Last week, I rediscovered “Sarah.” Not the Biblical Matriarch (Gen 20:12) who was sister and wife to Abraham and the mother of Isaac, what I recalled was the “SARAH model curve of change,” from my pre-chaplain work. I found this tool, designed by J. Nicholas, extremely helpful when I worked as Human Resources Manager at a large, for-profit company. This SARAH change model is an adaption of an emotional-acceptance model for dealing with ‘death and dying’ designed by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. SARAH is an acronym for **Shock, Anger, Rejection, Acceptance, Hope**. In my Human Resource world, back then, change seemed to be a nearly-every-day occurrence, so you kept your expectations pretty low and your hopes and prayers really high.

By mid- January, I had bypassed ‘anger’ but was stuck in ‘rejection’ when informed that a few student-leaders from last semester felt they would be too busy for leadership roles in this term’s campus faith programming. Plus, I needed to go to an out of state faith-conference at the end of January. After that, how could we stretch to hit all the goals in this semester faith plan? I was, as my mom would say, more surprised than pleased. This is when mom would recommend some ‘knee time.’

As I prayed, I realized I had set my expectations high and my hopes and praying low. I assumed I would have the same leaders as last year. I even sensed that, with COVID now more manageable, new leaders would ‘flock’ to spreading His word and works. We would have a volunteer army rivaling David’s ‘freely called dew drops.’ So, I had allowed no room in my action planning for the realities of the loads of others. I didn’t think there was any need to “let go and let God” in planning and scheming the programming load. In Lenten knee-time reflection, it has become clear that I should have gone all the way through those stages of SARAH. I needed to move on to hope and then pray more and worry less.

I have begun examining all aspects of my life to see if/where my expectations are stronger than my prayers. The more I pray and focus on ‘letting God,’ the more it seems I am actually giving up worrying for Lent, this year. I share my Lenten prayer, for those on a similar journey.

by Chaplain John Holzhüter

Prayer

God, I have become overconfident in the comfortable ruts of what had been. Unwilling to evolve, I have begun to mutate—myopic in how things were and stuck in waiting for a return to what was. Help me focus towards Your call in Your time. You as Alpha--my God who was and is and as Omega--my God of what things will become.

Return to Me and I'll Return to you!

Lent is a time of penitential preparation for Easter, the Encyclopedia Britannica describes it aptly as an “imitation of Christ’s 40 days in the desert.”

The history of Lent is a long one. The first council of Nicaea (325 AD) recognized and defined it as a time of preparation for candidates of baptism and a time of penance for grievous sinners preparing for restoration. A part of this preparation was to walk around wearing sackcloth and ashes - a very public display of repentance!

I think most Americans would not be willing to walk around for 40 days in public declaring their repentance. It would be a difficult and deeply humiliating thing to do. One day with a cross of ashes, yes. But this doesn't minimize the need to think and act humbly before the One True Living God and the community of faith.

About 30 years ago (c) 1995, I wrote a little praise chorus with these thoughts in mind for our church during a time of revival. On my heart were two Scriptures: Malachi 3:7 and 1 Peter 2:9 - the song is literally a combination of those Scripture verses:

*Return to Me
And I'll return to you, says the Lord
Return to Me
And I will to You!*

*For you are a chosen people
A royal priesthood, A holy nation
People belonging to God*

*That you may declare the praises
That you may declare the praises
That you may declare the praises of Him
Who brought you out of darkness into light!*

I think this may be a good Lenten reminder. We are the Lord's. We all stray away from time to time. It's time to return to His open arms. It's time to sing His praises because we are His and that's our calling!

by Rev. Dr. Kevin Walden

Prayer

Dearest Heavenly Father, forgive my wandering from Your holiness. And teach me anew what it means to be a chosen child, a royal priest, holy member of Your kingdom on earth. Give me the boldness to declare Your praises for bringing me out of darkness into the Light of Christ! AMEN!!!

Name Dropping

“They shouted back, ‘No, not him! Give us Barabbas!’” John 18:40

There are many names associated with the last hours of Jesus’ life on earth. The ones that come to mind are Jesus and Pontius Pilate, as well as Peter, Caiaphas the high priest, and Judas. But what about Barabbas, the condemned prisoner set free at Jesus’ trial? This story is mentioned in all four Gospels (Matthew 27:15-26; Mark 15:6-15; Luke 23:13-25; John 18:39-19:16). This criminal benefitted from Pilate’s “Passover pardon,” the custom of the Roman governor releasing a prisoner according to the wishes of the people in Jerusalem celebrating the Passover feast.

The Gospel writers are clear about why Barabbas was in custody. He participated in an insurrection, which included murder. Matthew adds that he was a notorious prisoner (27:16), a note referring to the fact that the Roman government considered Barabbas a hated enemy though he would have been a hero to the common people of Israel. It is likely that Barabbas was a member of the Zealots, a group of freedom fighters dedicated to ousting Rome as rulers of Israel. Three Zealots were scheduled to die on Good Friday; two were crucified with Jesus while the third had his death sentence pardoned (Luke 23:32-33).

When you analyze the name of Barabbas, you discover some interesting details. The familiar term “bar” means “son of” and “abba” means “father.” Thus, a translation of Barabbas is “son of the father.” It is thought that his father was of some importance, possibly a well-known rabbi. Another interesting point is that in some Greek manuscripts, we discover that Barabbas was called “Jesus Barabbas” (Matthew 27:16-17; see the New Revised Standard Version). The name Jesus was not uncommon, for it meant “God saves.” It may have been that when Pilate asked the crowd which prisoner to release, he was asking the people to choose between Jesus the one called the Messiah, and Jesus Barabbas.

Tim Keller points out the importance of the two Jesuses in our story. Both were a “son of the father,” and yet they could not have been more different. This is what I hope to articulate in three subsequent devotions, for the Son of the Heavenly Father, who is innocent, will go to his death, but the son who deserved to die will go free. Was the wrong son set free? In attempting to answer this question, we should consider that though the conclusion of Jesus’ trial appears to be a great injustice, it was part of the Father’s plan all along. The crowd chose “the wrong man, but the Lord put forward the right one. That’s the gospel!” (Dave Furman).

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Dear Savior, we can only imagine Your thoughts about Barabbas. While we want to protest and shout “that is so unfair,” You would have simply loved him and said “Father, Your will be done.” In the Name of the true Son, amen.

The Small

“Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations. The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does.” Psalm 145:13

For holiday giving, we decided this would be a year of “something homemade” and so I thought cross-stitch, maybe I could do that. It is such detailed work and yet it is just string and a needle. Even better, I found the ones with a blue-ink pattern to follow. It was a task to remind myself of the impact of the little things, one stitch out of place was easily seen; the bright stitches on white cloth were small, yet they made all the difference.

Lent offers 40 days for small steps. We might choose a little thing to do. For example, pick a special cup for your morning coffee and say a prayer each time you use it; choose a new route to work or school and determine the prayer, scripture or intention you will set during that time. Make a point of a small change; a shift of perspective or a mix up of your current pattern.

Where is there room for God in these little things? What tiny detail might you offer to turn your thoughts toward this journey to Easter?

by Trish Dowd Kelne

Prayer

God of all things small and infinite, bring our heart to you in each small step. May these little bits, become part of your grand gift of Easter.

Answer When You Call

“Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.” Jeremiah 29:12

Prayer in my mind has always been like a phone call. A strange one-way phone call that you don't necessarily hear anyone responding to on the other end. What I have found growing older is that this phone is never unanswered, and the other end is usually speaking back.

What constitutes relationship is reciprocation. We easily get caught up thinking God is like Santa Claus who we send a letter to, full of gift ideas but never expect him to ask anything of us. But is that relationship? Is that real?

by Keith Shrimpton

Prayer

LORD, we pray for eyes to see and ears to hear. It is so easy to get caught up in our lives and get stuck in send but not receive. Help us not to misunderstand our role in our relationship with you. Amen.

Listening to God's Call

“... I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven...But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. ...” Acts 26:19, 22

This was the final passage quoted in a book* I recently read that I hope to use as my guide this Lenten season. The book written by an adoptive mother, describes her family's journey adopting a handicapped child from Romania. Starting with a dream and being open and receptive to signs and promises from God, she and her husband follow their calling to adopt a special needs son from a foreign land and bring him home to our local community of Fondu Lac, Wisconsin.

Through trusting in the Lord, they were able to provide him with prosthetics and rehabilitative care. With every chapter and story, this woman linked everything she did to a calling from God. As I read the story, I found myself jealous of her faith and willingness to follow God's calling, no matter what the cost.

Instead of responding with jealousy of those with a greater faith than I, my Lenten prayer and hope this season is to strive to strengthen my own faith to open my heart to God's will for me. I know this woman is not the only one God reaches out to and I can continue to pray to be open enough and willing to listen to hear his words for me.

Prayer:

Please Lord help me remember this commitment to listen with my whole heart during this blessed season and throughout the coming year.

by Mary Alice Grosser

Prayer

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.” Matthew 7:7,8

**Standby for God: Fearless Flight into a Faithful Calling* by Barbara Kuhls

Bearing Good Fruit

“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings out the evil things stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.” Luke 6:43-45

Many summer days were spent out at my grandparent’s farm helping pick the delicious fruits and vegetables that grew in that rich Kansas soil. It was hot and tedious work some days, but the reward was worth the effort. There was nothing like heading to grandpa’s orchard, picking a juicy peach and eating it right on the spot! Those trees produced years of good fruit, but one year a disease attacked every one of those trees causing them to bear only bitter peaches until finally the trees just gave up producing fruit at all.

Can’t the same also happen to each of us? We find ourselves bearing bitter fruits in our lives? Like the trees on my grandparent’s farm, we are made to bear good fruits. Galatians 5:22-23 reminds us of the good fruits that come from a spiritually healthy life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. However, the stresses of the world can leave us weary and lacking. We find ourselves being impatient and unkind, our words being sharp and hurtful. So what are we to do?

In Matthew 13, Jesus tells the parable of the Sower, where the seed that falls on good soil, yields a crop far more than what was planted. Are we planted in good soil? Have we made God the master gardener of our lives, spending time in prayer with Him and in His Word? If so, we will find strength to weather the storms of life and learn to ‘clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience’ in all circumstances (Colossians 3:12). We will begin producing joy not just for our lives, but for others, and ultimately for God’s glory.

by Shelby Greemore

Prayer

In this Lenten season may we continue to seek God’s guidance as we “bear fruits” for His kingdom! Amen.

Can I Really Be Like Jesus?

It's a tall order, this becoming like Jesus. "Follow Me" is not a light and easy command like a game of "Follow the Leader" where we can flap our arms or do a duck walk while imitating the person at the head of the line. We are not to just walk like Jesus, but to think like Him, respond like Him, and act like Him. The perfect One. Some give up saying it's useless to even try. Many try and get overwhelmed.

During Lent, my prayer of self-reflection is often to make me more like Jesus, but being one of those who can get overwhelmed, at some point I usually pray that it could be in just one specific way. I know God is in the business of total transformation, but I also believe in baby steps.

I'm not sure it qualifies as a baby step, but I often find myself praying to be humble like Jesus.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied [humbled] himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

(Philippians 2:5-8 ESV)

He is God, yet willingly took the form of a lowly human. Though He did not commit any wrong, He took the blame for everyone else and died as a criminal on a cross. The trait of humility seems so rare in our competitive, achievement-oriented culture. Promotion of self is expected. Humility is seen as weakness. It is surprising that there is actually a "Be Humble Day," which in 2023 lands on Ash Wednesday of all days.

If I could become one baby step of being more humble like Jesus, I would count it a great day. Look what it did for all those who would believe. In what way do you desire – or need – to be more like Jesus?

by Rev. Melody d. Walden

Prayer

Lord, beyond my desire to spend eternity with you, I ask that you find my faith real, genuine, and authentic. Where I fall short, transform me into who you want me to be. Give me the courage to set Christ above all other priorities.

I Am Barabbas

“Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.”
Luke 23:19

When we think about the major players in the trial of Jesus, what are our reactions? We probably have a low opinion of Judas; express disappointment in Peter; suffer shock and distress over the actions of the high priest Caiaphas and the crowds; and come away confused about Pilate. But what about when we think of Barabbas? It’s difficult not to picture him as the one who should have died on Good Friday while Jesus should have been set free.

There is nothing in the Gospel accounts to suggest any degree of goodness in Barabbas. He participated in an attack on Roman soldiers as well as any Jewish person sympathetic to Rome’s cause. He epitomized the kind of behaviour Jesus was against, for our Lord said we “should turn the other cheek” and “volunteer to go the second mile” (Matthew 5:38-42). Instead, Barabbas followed the “eye for an eye” way of life and would have never considered loving his enemy.

However, before we say that he deserved to suffer an excruciating death on the cross, we must remember, we were in that same position before coming to Christ. We were lost and under condemnation for our sin (Ephesians 2:1-3). And while we may not have acted in such a violent manner as Barabbas, we were under a death sentence as was he (Romans 6:23).

If we are open to the title of this devotion, then we can see what Luke was driving at. Barabbas represents those whose hearts are evil and actions are sinful. We rebel against God and harbor resentment and even hatred in our hearts towards those who have hurt us or who simply don’t agree with us, even in our families and our churches! Romans 3:23 reminds us that “all have sinned.” We are more like Barabbas than we want to admit!

It has been suggested that we should identify with both Jesus and Barabbas. With Jesus because we have been united with Him in faith, and with Barabbas because we are guilty as charged, having broken God’s law—even His heart! We harbor sin in our heart and in short “we’re just as bad as Barabbas” (David Mathis). Yet, through nothing on our part, we have found freedom from God’s judgment.

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Dear Lord, we remember that Paul teaches that the saved need to hear the gospel as well as the lost (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). We must recall that though we are unworthy of Your grace, we have always been of infinite worth to You. We are sinners, yet thankfully, Jesus came “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). In His great Name, amen.

Remember Hope

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” John 16:33

At this point, Jesus was preparing his disciples for his death, resurrection and ascension into heaven. Because he was a hundred percent God and a hundred percent human, he knew the future that was ahead for his followers but also felt for them at the same time. Therefore, he encouraged them that even though they would pass through hard and difficult times, they shouldn't lose hope. Rather, they should know and remember that Christ has already overcome the world.

The same applies to us today. While we're approaching Easter, it is important for us to know and remember that Jesus did not only die, but he also conquered death and rose from the grave, defeating all the powers and principalities of the world! So, no matter what you are going through, hold on to the hope that he has already overcome the world. He is with you through it all and will see you through it.

Jesus does not only want you to have hope in him but experience peace in and through him too. It can be hard to experience peace when the world around you is in evident chaos, however, He promises to be with us and that the victory has already been won. We will then experience his peace that is beyond all understanding when we allow ourselves to connect with him, bask in his presence and promises and in the hope he has given us. We can do this through prayer, his word or through songs of praise and worship to Him.

by Wanangwa Mgala

Prayer

Lord, thank you for your promises and faithfulness. During this time of Lent, remind us that you have already overcome the world, no matter what troubles we may face. Give us the strength to hold on to this hope in you. In Jesus's name, Amen.

What Is in Your Sky?

“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” John 3: 8

When my daughter was little we used a simple and a bit silly tool to help us share the joys and challenges of the day, something we gleaned from a long forgotten magazine or blog post. We called it Rose and Thorn Moments—what was the rose of your day; what was the thorn?

As time has passed, we started seeking a bit of a different approach- not so distinct and literal; and maybe a bit more focused on our own spheres and what ways we contribute, mitigate and move through the day.

We landed on one we have just started to explore. It grew from a meditation we heard by the Buddhist nun, Pema Chödrön that included her often quoted wisdom, “You are the sky. Everything else, it’s just the weather.” She instructs that our minds are vast as the sky and the weather exemplifies all that blows through, or gets stuck. Yet, the sky remains the sky and we choose our response. We might prepare, we might let it pass through, we might pause and be still.

So we ask each other, “What is in your sky today and what’s the weather like?” We hope to be open to the vastness of the sky and to allow grace to come through us, to let go of the things we cannot control and to offer some sunshine in the places that might be in shadow. We pause to be present, knowing this too will pass, sunshine or grey, storm or calm, God is good all the time.

“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.” Psalm 46: 1-3

by Trish Dowd Kelne

Prayer

Creator God, we lift our eyes to your skies and trust in you; we offer our work and our prayer; in this Lenten season, may our hearts rest in you and may our efforts align with your Will. Amen.

8

– Wednesday –

When Imposter Syndrome Strikes

“So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.’
But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’
And God said, ‘I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.’” Exodus 3:10-12

Moses was called by God to do something he didn’t think was possible. God told him that he, Moses, was the one specifically chosen to lead the people out of Egypt. No small task. Moses threw every excuse he had at God, believing God had chosen the wrong guy. He knew that when he had tried to help his people in the past, everything went wrong. He wasn’t capable, wasn’t equipped. Certainly God had chosen the wrong guy. In short, Moses was focusing on himself, not on God.

God answered each of Moses’s questions and concerns. Assuring him repeatedly that He would be with him, God patiently explained the plan to Moses. And then one of the most heartbreaking verses in the Bible: “But Moses said, ‘Pardon your servant, Lord. Please send someone else.’” Exodus 4:13

Has God ever called you to do something you didn’t believe you could possibly do? Have you ever found yourself in a situation that feels so far out of your abilities that you feel like an imposter?

It’s easy to feel alone when you don’t feel equipped. When God called Moses, Moses focused on all of his deficits instead of all of the possibilities; on the circumstances, instead of the one *controlling* the circumstances. God told him that he would be with him, that he would give him the words to say, that Moses *would* succeed. Yet Moses couldn’t see past his own crippling fear. He wouldn’t consider the fact that the creator of all things couldn’t get it wrong. God was with Moses, and He is with you too.

Next time you feel as though things are too big to handle, remember that you are not alone. Remember that you are cared for and equipped with a purpose. There’s a popular saying that goes, “If God brings you to it, He will bring you through it.” Even in the midst of the sorrows of this life, you are standing with God, and He will sustain you. Focus on God and watch Him work the wonders of His plan in your life.

by Sydney Shrimpton

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, Thank you that you have equipped us. Thank you that we have the ability to say with certainty that you are here. That even when we are called to do bigger things than we think we are capable, that Your strong and capable right hand is holding us up. May we not lose heart. Thank you for these truths, Amen.

What is Patience?

“A person’s wisdom yields patience; it is to one’s glory to overlook an offense.” Proverbs 19:11

Patience is one of the hardest things to practice. How many times have you ordered something online and have groaned that it will take two days to arrive? I fall short of this because I want some of my materialistic things immediately. I think one thing that this verse reminds me of is how our wisdom and patience are tied together. Usually, I like to think I will have more patience if I have more situations to test it.

For example, if I am a teacher and students are constantly interrupting, I should have unlimited patience as this happens every few seconds—patience is practiced continually. However, I think I forget how this is actually tied to my wisdom. I am not always more patient because I have practiced it over and over, but instead, I have learned from previous situations. Take the example we used earlier. If I am able to learn why students are feeling the urge to blurt out random things, I might understand more about why it’s happening. This understanding then leads to learning about the situation. Through this, we develop more of a pattern of observation to be looking at why this is happening. Maybe the student hasn’t been able to share an exciting event. Or maybe the students learned something new and were excited to share it out loud for all to hear. These are situations that make us wiser as they happen.

Throughout our life, we are able to learn and create new mindsets to use. I think the other part of this verse is how we overlook the offenses that are cast on us. We have to learn to be patient with other people as they are with us. We can’t expect patience to be given to us daily. Instead, we have to be the example. Imagine a world where everyone on the highway was patient. We would have a whole lot fewer accidents! Instead, let’s take the first step and choose forgiveness first. Let us remind ourselves, what would Jesus do in this situation? Let’s use today as a stepping stone in our patience journey.

by Kurt Hamilton

Prayer

God thank you for giving us life. We are so thankful for your words and wisdom as we learn from our situations and develop our minds. Let us challenge ourselves to think differently. To learn your words and to put them into action. We are grateful for your love. Thank you for letting us experience this world, and continue to show us what amazing things lie ahead. God, we say all these things in your name, Amen.

Saying Yes and Saying No

“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness,” Luke 4:1

I recently took a trip west into the Flint Hills, where my breath was taken away by their expansive beauty. As I looked across miles of splendor, it felt like there was no end, no edge, no boundary to the awe-inspiring wildness. The sight drew connections for me to the Bible passage of Jesus’ testing, often read during the first days of Lent.

Jesus, too, found himself in the edgeless wildness, as he emerged from his baptism in the Jordan River. A voice from heaven had just proclaimed that he was God’s son, full of power and potential with no boundary. And yet, in this boundless wildness, Jesus was pushed to ask if there were, in fact, boundaries to his power. Would he use it for simple magic tricks, to amass political supremacy, to manipulate time and space? To each of these temptations, his answer was simple: “no.” Where there were no boundaries, Jesus created them. Where there seemed endless possibilities, Jesus stopped short. And because he said “no,” he was able to say “yes,” to his true calling and purpose.

Perhaps we might learn this Lent from Jesus’ yes and no. As we grow in faith and maturity, we create for ourselves limits and boundaries. We cannot stay out all night and function the next day. We ascertain what subject we do NOT want to major in. We discover there are some folks that might not make the best roommates for us. We learn to say no...which allows us to say yes to our true calling and purpose. The Lenten practice of saying no is a yearly reminder that even the one who had boundless power chose to create limits to that power, and in the process taught us how to say yes to our true selves.

by Rev. Matt Sturtevant

Prayer

Lord, teach us when to say no, so we can say yes to the purpose you have for us. Amen.

“You’ve Got the Wrong Guy!”

“Crucify him!” they shouted. “Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate. Mark 15:13-14

Luke’s account of Jesus’ trial emphasizes that our Lord was innocent. Three times during the trial, Pilate is reported as claiming Jesus has done nothing deserving death and should be released (23:15, 20, 22). Pilate’s claim of Jesus’ innocence is confirmed by the repentant thief on the cross (23:41), as well as the centurion near the cross when Jesus died (23:47). But just where is Luke taking us? Why emphasize that Jesus was not guilty as charged?

The third Gospel writer is providing more than history for us; he is also pointing us to the biblical truth that Jesus is the sinless Savior. We must remember that both Barabbas and Jesus were determined to achieve victory for Israel by defeating Israel’s greatest enemy and ushering in a new kingdom. In both instances, freedom for Israel was the primary goal; the contrast lies in how all this was to be achieved.

Pope Benedict XVI concludes that in choosing Barabbas, the crowd chose a savior who “leads an armed struggle, promises freedom and a kingdom of one’s own” over a Savior “who proclaims that losing oneself is the way to life.” This thought becomes clearer when we identify the perceived enemy; was it Rome or sin? While the popular hope in Jesus’ day was a Messiah to lead an armed revolt against Rome and drive it from Israel, Luke understood that Israel needed to be rescued from sin. That is, he was convinced that the Messiah was the key to defeating sin and achieving ultimate victory and freedom for Israel. But the Gospel writer was also certain that such a Messiah must be sinless. Luke made that clear from the outset by reporting the fact of the virgin conception (1:26-38). In addition, he shows that Jesus defeats Satan in the wilderness of temptation (4:1-13), preserving His sinlessness.

For Pilate to declare that Jesus is innocent is to state the obvious. But the contrast, set up by the presence of Barabbas at Jesus’ trial, highlights the clash of how God will achieve His victory. Although it appears that Barabbas is the winner in this showdown, Luke is writing with certainty that the ultimate Messiah and victor is Jesus.

Luke wanted to show his readers that Jesus was innocent in the eyes of Pilate. But more importantly, Luke was sharing that Jesus was the sinless Son of God (Hebrew 4:15), for a sinless Savior is the only possible means for forgiveness of sin (1 Peter 1:19) and ultimate victory for God’s people (1 Corinthians 15:57). In historical terms, Jesus is declared innocent by the Roman governor only to be handed over to be crucified because the crowd backed Barabbas, a proven soldier and warrior in opposition to Rome. But in terms of biblical truth, Jesus is the sinless Son of God, destined to die instead of a murderer, as part of God’s plan (Acts 3:14), a plan that brings us forgiveness and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Dear God, though the crowds (and eventually Pilate) preferred the wrong man, we now know that indeed this “choice” was part of Your plan all along. Thank you! Amen.

Walk in the Wilderness

“Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness...” Matthew 4.1

The early days of Lent fall in the cold and grey season, at least in Kansas. It is an exemplary landscape for imagining a bleak wilderness; yet in Lent we think not only on the world around us, but within ourselves too.

This Lent let us wander with Jesus, being led by the Spirit to a wilderness that asks us to be present, to consider what behaviors, what thoughts, habits bring us into relationship with Christ and what ones separate us.

As an exercise, take a walk sometime during Lent. Listen to the world around you, to your breath, to your heartbeat. Take this time to choose one thing that you can do to grow in your relationship with Christ and your community. May we mark the landscape with choices of renewal, with pathways toward our God.

by Fredrikson Center Team

Prayer

Guiding God, bring us close to you, grant us courage to walk with you and stamina to stay the course. We step into the wilderness, trusting in you. Guide us home Lord; in your name we pray, Amen.

Forgiveness

“Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” Colossians 3: 13

I don't do a lot of sewing anymore by machine or by hand, but when I do, I have a seam ripper handy. A seam ripper is a handy little sewing tool. The sharp point goes under a stitch easily and the razor edge cuts the thread. Taking out a faulty seam and sewing it correctly is a good way to get a garment to fit correctly.

Forgiveness is a handy tool to have in our spiritual bag. People do and say things that can be hurtful. Forgiveness helps to heal the relationship and the hurt that may result. When we do or say something we shouldn't, we need to go to our loving God and ask for forgiveness in addition to asking the person we've hurt for forgiveness.

by Jan Lee

Prayer

Loving God, I am thankful for the forgiveness you extend to me. May I also extend it to those who hurt me. Amen.

The Power of a Winter Coat

As an elementary school teacher at this time of year, I can count on hearing three little words almost daily: “It’s not cold!” No matter how frigid the temperatures are at recess and how much I insist students must wear all their winter gear, I will have to fight with at least one student to keep on their coat. I’ve learned that the cool kids are, ironically, never cold. We can laugh at the fact that students can be so stubborn and won’t easily accept what is best for them, but sometimes as adults, we’re not much better.

This reminds me of Psalm 46:1 “God is our shelter and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble.” The language of this verse implies that God is at the sidelines ready to jump in at any time, but the key is whether or not we ask for help. I envision God’s shelter and strength as a coat. The harsh outside challenges of life never change, but if we allow God to wrap around us like a thick winter coat, we are not nearly as battered-down by our surroundings. As a flawed individual, I often forget this, and when life gets hard, I usually do one of three options.

One, I pretend I don’t need the coat because I’m capable all by myself, so I stand there shivering in the cold. Two, I shy away from any challenges and change and try to avoid the bitter air altogether. Three, I embrace that the biting air is uncomfortable and even painful at times, but with my strong winter coat, I know I can get through the hard times and come out stronger than before. Option one and two are not sustainable and delay the shelter and comfort I eventually always find from option three.

Today, I encourage you to skip option one and two, if you’re anything like me, and accept the coat that God willingly and freely hands us because it truly is a gift.

by Nicole Hamilton

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,

We are so grateful for your strong embrace of comfort and warmth. This world would be so frigid without you. Open our eyes when we stubbornly refuse your help and remind us that we are not alone. Help us to be an example and reminder to others of your support.

In your name, we pray,

Amen

Do You Hear the Trumpet of the Lord?

“You shall count off seven weeks of years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded aloud; on the tenth day of the seventh month – on the Day of Atonement – you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.” Leviticus 25: 8-10 EVS

My daughter learned to play the trumpet. We enjoyed listening to her play familiar melodies on her rented brass instrument now that she is past practicing “Hot Crossed Buns” for the one-thousandth time. Winter concerts became enjoyable, too. However, her insatiable desire to wake the family from our winter slumber with a trumpet blast was something we had not grown to love.

The blast of a ram’s horn (Hebrew: *yobhel*, meaning jubilee) was essential to Israel’s worship. The piercing sound proclaimed the onset of sacred time (time set apart for God). God ordained the Sabbath – seventh day (Exodus 20:8-11), sabbatical rest – seventh year (Leviticus 25:1-7), and the Jubilee year – seven times seven years (Leviticus 25:8-55). These festivals (along with other *appointed festivals* and *at the beginning of your months*) started with a trumpet call for all people – free and enslaved, rich and poor, male and female, Jew and non-Jew – to rejoice in the Lord who provides for human needs, protects God’s people, establishes justice, frees the prisoner, and stresses ownership of all things (Numbers 10:10). This practice was to continue in perpetuity until the Last Trumpet sounds for Christ’s Second Coming as the ultimate, unending Jubilee (Revelation 11:14-19).

Do you hear the ram’s horn blowing for you? It summons you to lay down your weapons against God and surrender to the truth of sacred time: you are a bankrupt sinner whom God yearns to set free through forgiving love. You were an enemy of God by your rebellious will, but the trumpet proclaims God’s festival celebration among the angels at the moment you repent (Luke 15:1-7). It is a trumpet of warning telling you that time is drawing nigh – “For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). Don’t miss the ram’s horn for the ultimate jubilee because you are asleep!

by Rev. Dr. Ivan E. Greuter

Prayer

God our Father, you call us to wake up in Jesus Christ by stirring your Holy Spirit. Open our ears to hear the Jubilee call by the blast of your trumpet in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Pushes and Pauses!

This Lent I have been reflecting on how many of my partners and peers have/are/will retire in the now and near. We have done much together to invite and host any and all guests to join at God's large, well-set table of blessing. My co-workers have spoken towards 'now is the time' and 'next steps and chapters.' I find I am reflecting on how to gauge these things at a personal level. I am praying for an awareness of the duration of duty of truly trusty servant. When do we know that Christ's love is finally contagious, and table invitations are no longer necessary? I am hoping for discernment to ensure legacy and burning-bush clarity on my true fit, in the incomprehensible master plan of a loving God. How can we trust the spontaneity of modern-day loaves and fish miracles, over the certainty of a commitment to just serve the soul food ourselves?

I try then to engage the Spirit in present applications: to keep me immune, for example, to flashes of road rage, even when following those swerving, texting or both; to ensure my disapproval doesn't impede me from sending prayers their way; to graciously invite in the Holy Spirit to help and occasionally honk towards them, but in peace and not frustration. I truly want to do some good and hope my horn might keep them from driving off the road or into someone or something. "They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it." 1Peter 3:11

When I was a younger version of me, I recall reading the story in, Acts 9, where Peter brings a disciple named Tabitha back from death. "41 He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive." After that, I thought I remembered a following, 'happy ending passage,' where the legacy of this miracle caused city-church groups to flourish in the strength and grace of the Holy Spirit. The message that had set in my heart, back then, was not that bold miracles were required to do your best. It was more that you were required not just to serve as God's hands and feet, but to also inspire and motivate folk to join in doing the same.

But when is that happy ending feeling a marker, to ensure I recognize it is time for change, for next steps or next chapters? I went back to check Acts 9. There was a happy ending passage, but it was not in the order I had assembled in my mind and it proved to be more of a happy pause; "31 Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers."

This 'pause' was BEFORE the raising up of Tabitha and at the close in an early chapter of dangerous and difficult God-work by Peter. Well done in his Divine assignment, he needed to get out of town for his own safety. In my Lenten reflections then, I think I will focus on the 'going too' of next assignments and not 'retiring from' service to His call to tend the big table. It does make the doing of things on earth and in heaven a tangible sensical progression of God's happy ending for me (and us all).

by Chaplain John Holzhüter

Prayer

My God, as I turn to you, I set my mind to know and heed your voice. There is only your plan, for earth and for heaven. Through the myriad ways you call me to serve You and the needs of your flock, help me stay committed to Your true path for salvation. Amen.

Who Is First in Your Life?

“Jesus answered, ‘It is written, Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.’” Luke 4:8

Are you majoring in minors? Don't major in minors. How many times have we heard and said these words? But have you and I really stopped to think of their meaning? How often do we say one thing and do just the opposite? In this scripture, Jesus is telling us the importance of God in our life. God should be first and foremost. Remember, God tells us He is a jealous God in Exodus 34:14.

Your next question may be, “How will I know who is first in my life?” So glad you asked. A very sure way to know who or what is first in your life is to examine where and on what do you give your time and your money. You will only invest your time and money on what is valuable to you. You don't waste your time or money on what is second best. This matter is so serious that people brag about having the best in their life.

Do you brag about Jesus? Do you brag about Jesus or only mention Him in passing? Your reply may be “I go to church on Sunday.” Do you only eat on Sunday? Psalm 34:8 tells us, “Oh taste and see that the Lord is good, blessed is the one who takes refuge in Him.” So, let's get back to basics. Put nothing and no one in front of your relationship with God and then, watch your life change for the better.

by Dr. Dorothy L. Smith

Prayer

Lord God, I ask you to forgive me for taking you for granted. Help me to put you in your proper place. Help me to keep you first and foremost in my life and value my relationship with you. In Jesus's name I pray. Amen.

By His Stripes We are Healed

And by His stripes, we are healed.” John 15:13, Isaiah 53:5

Once as a small child I followed my Dad as he was setting out rose bushes. Picking up a moist lump of soil, I squeezed it experimentally. To my surprise, something dropped down to the ground, long and cold and wet. It was an earth worm, pinkish brown and striped; my father explained that it would go back into the ground and make the black soil rich and fertile and make our roses beautiful. But, he said, we would have to wait.

It was many years to high school Biology, when I again viewed the little creature which made the black soil produce a beautiful thing. The students had to take its life. It was helpless.

“My God, my God, Why have you forsaken me? The words of my groaning do nothing to save me...I call by day but You do not answer, at night but I find no respite...But, I am a worm not a man, scorn of mankind, contempt of the people” (Psalm 22)

Like the little worm, the Lord was helpless; but unlike the tiny creature, HE KNEW. And as His strength was ebbing away, the words He spoke to his apostles became fulfilled...

”Greater love no one has than to give his life for his friends”
...And by His stripes, we are healed.”

“Jesus died outside the gate, to sanctify the people by his own blood bearing the insult that He bore...through Him let us continually offer God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips which acknowledge His Name.” Hebrews 13: 12-15

by Rosemary Holzbuter, 1938-2022 (Submitted 2014)

Prayer

In your name, we pray, Amen.

The Good and Bad Alike

“The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him;” Lamentations 3:25

When I read this verse, I think of how a mindset can often determine an outcome; how a positive attitude can be the difference in winning or losing. It doesn't change just our perspective; it changes others perspective of us as well. In that way, it feels as though the LORD is attracted to in some ways a positive outlook. It reminds me of the old Cherokee story about two men having a conversation about internal emotions, with each side, positive and negative, are represented by two wolves. The conversation between the two men goes like this:

“I have a fight going on in me,” the old man said. “It's taking place between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.”

The grandfather looked at the grandson and went on. “The other embodies positive emotions. He is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. Both wolves are fighting to the death. The same fight is going on inside you and every other person, too.”

The grandson took a moment to reflect on this. At last, he looked up at his grandfather and asked, “Which wolf will win?”

The old Cherokee gave a simple reply, “The one you feed.”

To me, this tale beautifully illustrates the power of mindset and what God attempts to teach us through this passage and through the Old and New Testaments time and time again. This is not to say that all outcomes will be positive if you will it to be so. It does indicate that there is truth in the idea of keeping in positive thought or prayer, God manifests more profoundly in our lives.

by Keith Shrimpton

Prayer

LORD, we ask for your help in feeding the emotions of positivity within us. We thank you for your support in those times that we can't help but feel and feed those darker aspects of ourselves. Amen.

Not Forgotten

“But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. ‘Here comes that dreamer!’ they said to each other. ‘Come now, let’s kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we’ll see what comes of his dreams.’”

Genesis 37:18-20

Joseph was only a boy when he was cast out by his family and trafficked into Egypt. A teenager, who, until then, had a pretty great life. Everything changed when his brothers decided to take action against him, trafficking him to the Egyptians in cold blood. The story of Joseph is quite famous, but when you take a step back to really look at it, it is really quite astonishing. Astonishing because, through all the trials of his life, Joseph showed himself to be a man of character, a man who served God with humility and honor.

When bad things happened to him, Joseph didn’t collapse on the ground, shaking his fist at God. He continued to work hard, continued to do the best he could. After Joseph was sold into slavery and working at Potiphar’s house, his master’s wife took notice of him. He respectfully denied her advances, she accused him of rape and he was thrown into the dungeon. Joseph was doing everything right. And yet he was in the dungeon.

Do you ever feel like you’re doing everything right? Like you’re following the rules, working hard, doing everything you’re supposed to do, yet things keep going wrong? Joseph could have thrown in the towel. He could have quit, wallowed in self-pity. But he didn’t. He made do with what he had. And God remembered him. God was there with Joseph in the dungeon. He was not lost or abandoned. Horrible things had happened to him, but God makes the best of all horrible things, uses them for good. God made Joseph favorable in the eyes of the prison warden and was responsible for everything that happened there. Joseph was in the dungeon for a very long time. After over two years passed, Joseph was remembered and called to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams. Joseph was then able to save many as his status was elevated and Egypt suffered through seven years of famine.

Through it all, God was faithful to Joseph and Joseph never gave up on God. It would have been so easy for Joseph to fold in on himself, to shake his fist in anger at God, to question the purpose of all the suffering. But he maintained perspective. And when his brothers entered back into the story, Joseph forgave them. “For it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.” Gen 45:5. What Joseph’s brothers meant for harm, God used for good.

If you feel like God is punishing you, like you’re doing everything right and bad things continue to happen, take heart. God will not forget you. You are created for purpose. Keep your eyes fixed on him, do not give up, and trust that God uses all things for good.

by Sydney Shrimpton

Prayer

Father in Heaven, Thank you that we can have faith in you, that we are not afraid of the storms of life. Thank you that You have overcome, that you have not forgotten us. Thank you that we can continue to trust that you will come for us, that you will rescue us. Thank you that we are not alone. Amen.

The Cross Did Not Change God by A.W. Tozer

“I the Lord do not change.”

Malachi 3:6

The work of Christ on the cross did not influence God to love us, did not increase that love by one degree, did not open any fount of grace or mercy in His heart. He had loved us from old eternity and needed nothing to stimulate that love. The cross is not responsible for God’s love; rather it was His love that conceived the cross as the one method by which we could be saved.

God felt no different toward us after Christ had died for us, for in the mind of God Christ had already died before the foundation of the world. God never saw us except through atonement. The human race could not have existed one day in its fallen state had not Christ spread His mantle of atonement over it. And this He did in eternal purpose long ages before they led Him out to die on the hill above Jerusalem. All God’s dealings with man have been conditioned upon the cross....

The Scriptures never represent the persons of the Trinity as opposed to or in disagreement with each other. The Holy Three have ever been and will forever be one in essence, in love, in purpose.

We have been redeemed not by one person of the Trinity putting Himself against another, but by the three persons working in the ancient and glorious harmony of the Godhead.

Submitted by Dr. Paula Artac

Prayer

Father thank You for loving me with an everlasting love. I pray that I would always see Your unchanging love and extend it to those around me. Amen.

Taken from: Tozer, A. W. (2017). Meditations on the Trinity. Moody Publishers.

Passing To New Life

We are in the season of Lent which culminates in the commemoration of the resurrection of our Lord. It is also the season during which we are invited to contemplate our inevitable death, both the daily deaths and the final, in a positive way. The scripture offers us a great insight in this regard.

“And this is the will of the one who sent me that I should not lose anything of what he gave me, but that I should raise it [on] the last day. For this is the will of my Father that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him [on] the last day.” John 6: 39-40 EVS

Reflection and reflection questions: Two things: Firstly, there really is no such thing as death, just new life. Is it that the caterpillar dies or is it that the butterfly is born? This life is often like that of a cocoon. We often feel we're in the dark, isolated, restricted, afraid, stifled and powerless life. But in those times God is doing His best work. As the larva struggles to get out of the cocoon, he is building his muscles and eventually flies free and in beautiful, colorful form. At death, our spirits are set free because Our Lord resurrects us. Life continues and this is part of His plan and will. What we see around is just temporary and evanescent but life is permanent. We are then well prepared to face any adversities including death with hope and joy. Death is a stepping stone to Heaven which the Lord has prepared for us.

Secondly, our Lord is not interested in sending anyone to hell. He loves us, his children, too much. The people in hell are there by their own choosing. They are too proud to admit they've done wrong and too proud to ask forgiveness. Envision your last few moments on earth. Envision people gathering at your wake. What would you hope they would be saying about you? Envision yourself, right after your death, standing before a merciful, all-loving God who flashes your entire life before you. Envision His asking you in a kind forgiving way: “What did you do with your life?” Who/ what are you thankful for? What are you sorry for? What have you learned from your mistakes and peccadilloes? Are you willing to ask forgiveness?

Does the above Scripture from John 6 offer you any consolation or hope or challenge?

by Rev. Justin Diraviyam, C.S.C.

Prayer

Father, help us to be drawn to You as we ask and answer. May we rest in You. Amen

GIVE HER LIFE

“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Ephesians 5:25

The day our daughter was born was our most joyous and terrifying day. We arrived at the hospital, were escorted to the delivery room, and prepared for another bundle of blessings to arrive. We knew there could be complications, but we were not ready for the heart-wrenching surprise. Macy had the cord around her neck and was unable to breathe. The doctor placed our blue baby on the incubator table for the nurses to work with her. I kept praying and saying to myself, “everything will be fine.” Then, the nurse screamed, “I need help in here. She’s not breathing.” We panicked! Were we watching our little one die in front of our eyes?

I prayed: “O God, don’t let her die! Don’t let her die.” The doctor was visibly shaken. The nurses scrambled around like bees tending a wounded warrior while defending a hive. “Come on, Macy,” I cried out, “Breathe!” One minute passed, then two. Emotions exploded in me like a pyrotechnic display on the Fourth of July. My wife and I held hands to pray: “Give her life, Lord. Give her life.” I silently prayed, “God, I’ll give up my life for her to live.” Miraculously, the room resounded with the crying of our child. “Thank God,” I said. Everything was fine! It was the worst three minutes of my life! Did Jesus have the same thoughts when he died on the cross of Calvary? While he was in the garden, on the cross, and giving up his final breaths as the “cords of death entangled” [Psalm 18:4 and 116:3], was he praying to the Father: “Give her life! Give my Church life!?” Jesus loved the people who disowned and betrayed him. The Son of God came into the world to give the Body of Christ abundant life in his Spirit! He came to give spiritual, eternal life to the dying souls who became the church on earth. Christ willingly gave up his life for the church because he loved her! Would we do the same thing?

Do we love the church of Jesus Christ enough to give up our lives for the Body of Christ? Do we love the local fellowship of believers enough to pray: “Give her life, Lord! Give her life!?” Would we be willing to sacrifice our lives on earth for the church to live on as testimony to the power of God in Christ? Tertullian said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” Do you love her enough to make the ultimate sacrifice?

by Rev. Dr. Ivan E. Greuter

Prayer

God our Father in Jesus Christ, we ask that you give your church on earth life. Fill her with the Holy Spirit. Wake her up. Breathe life in your Body on Earth so that all nations may know you are the God of the universe. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

– Monday –

Sighs and Moans

“Listen to my words, Lord,
consider my lament.
Hear my cry for help,
my King and my God,
for to you I pray.
In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice;
in the morning I lay my requests before you
and wait expectantly.
For you are not a God who is pleased with wickedness;
with you, evil people are not welcome.

...

But let all who take refuge in you be glad;
let them ever sing for joy.
Spread your protection over them,
that those who love your name may rejoice in you.”

Psalm 5:1-4; 11

Do you remember what it is like to be a teenager? For some of us, that means stretching our memory quite a ways, for others, not so much. There is a saying that goes, “Living with a teenager is like living with a ghost. There’s lots of sighing and moaning and doors slamming.”

In those teenage years, when the world is in transition, all that was known is becoming new. It makes sense (and science agrees) that one might cry out more often, be filled to brimming with emotion that is quick to stomp or slam. Let’s take that time of transition as a Lenten example. All will be new come Easter, when we greet each other, “Christ is Risen!” Let us put to prayer our moans and sighs. Let us be filled with emotion in the possibility of all things new at Easter morn. We are not teens, but we are in development of our relationship with God; let us make use of this transition and grow closer to our God.

by Community Contributor

Prayer

Lord, give us ears to hear our own voices longing for you, let us take this Lenten time to be present with you in prayer, in service and in refuge. May we find ourselves renewed in our efforts, closer to you by Easter’s dawn. We are yours. In your name we pray, Amen

Not Guilty?

“There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree.” 1 John 5:7

The details of the court proceedings buzzed around the coffee shop like a bee searching for the first flower of the morning. Employees passed the latest sound bites over their desks as if they were sharing the latest gossip. Church members rehashed the latest evidence and testimony during church suppers. Everyone in America was mesmerized by their televisions during the murder trial. I did not know what was happening until the verdict: “not guilty.”

The fiery reaction of the community to the jury’s decision raced through our town like wildfire through dry western country. The whole town was stunned and outraged by the decision. “Who could have decided that after hearing the testimony and seeing all the evidence?” members of my congregation kept asking. Passionately, they declared, “She was guilty!”

This decision by the jury should not have surprised us because people have made questionable verdicts for over two thousand years. Did the crowds believe the evidence that Jesus was the Messiah during his lifetime? Did people believe the eyewitness testimony and evidence that Jesus had been raised from the dead after he appeared to hundreds of people? Do people today believe Jesus is the Christ after considering the overwhelming facts that He was, is, and will always be, Alive?

The Apostle wrote, “There are three that testify” that Jesus was the Messiah. This text confirms what the Apostle Paul wrote, “Two or three witnesses must verify every accusation” (2 Corinthians 13:1). First, *the Spirit of God* testified that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah by the miraculous works he performed (John 14:11). Second, *the waters of baptism* confirmed Jesus was God’s only begotten Son by the voice from heaven (Matthew 3:17, Matthew 8:23-27, Matthew 14:22-33). Third, Jesus’ blood proved he was the vicarious one as he died on the Cross of Calvary as humanity’s substitutionary sacrifice. And John tells us, “these three agree.” Like the Trinity, the Spirit, water, and blood were in perfect agreement, harmony, and focus: Jesus was the One! Who could question this testimony?

Yet, people question their testimony every day when they turn away from Jesus. We must be convinced that worldly courts and juries can make misguided decisions. However, the Heavenly Court will be perfect in its judgments! Every person who denies the testimony of God in the Spirit, water, and blood – and now the Church – will not hear the same outrageous verdict: “not guilty.”

by CRev. Dr. Ivan E. Greuter

Prayer

God, you have shown yourself trustworthy, accurate, and valid in all you say and do through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Change hearts and minds to the truth by the testimony of the Spirit, water, and blood for the glory of your name. Amen.

–Wednesday–

The Battle

“Then the Lord said to Satan, ‘Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.’

‘Does Job fear God for nothing?’ Satan replied. ‘Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.’

The Lord said to Satan, ‘Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man, himself do not lay a finger.’” Job 1:8-12

Do you sometimes feel like everything is coming down on you? Almost like you have this crushing feeling that you don't know how to relieve? In our scripture today, we are analyzing a conversation between God and Satan. These two are having a spirited debate on how there is no one like him. Nothing like challenging God. This is where Job is introduced, as the man who can stand up to any challenge, test, or situation that is thrown at him.

Over the course of this book, we will find that Job is going to experience a variety of emotions. This is what I like to think of as an internal battle. The classic good versus evil dilemma. Which side are you on? At first, I am tempted to say that I am on the power of good. Then I think about the story of Job and I realize quickly that my faith is different. Mine is one that isn't tested, at least not the intense testing as Job faced. However, do I live as I should? Do I live a life, where if God choose me as an example, I would stand up to the test? I think that the answer is simple for most of us, no.

However, what it did give me was perspective. It reminded me that I need to read scripture more. That I need to seek his guidance in times of challenges. Job reminds me that none of us are perfect, but if we follow God's teachings, we can find hope in any situation. 2023 is a crazy world. As we continue through our challenges my hope is this; I want to remind you to seek God first. When you are about to start your battle, begin it in prayer. Ask God for guidance before you go off to fight. Ask yourself how this is going to bring glory to God. Fight battles for God to make new disciples, to share the good word with strangers and friends. Use your gifts to make an impact on the world. Fight your battle with the enemy and win. Celebrate the victories with God. Today we are reminded that the battle is already won.

by Kurt Hamilton

Prayer

Let us pray together. God thank you for fighting for us. Thank you for teaching us that life is more than what we are going through now. That you have a plan for us. That you God are always looking out for us. We don't need to see our full battle plan to know that you are on our side. You always side with your children. God remind us that you defeated the enemy. Each day you give us gives us another chance to fight for you and to make the world a better place. We are grateful for your vision and life. We say all these things in your son's name. Amen.

Rend Your Heart

“Even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.’ Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing— grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God.” Joel 2:12-14

This passage in Joel centers the soul and brings a sobriety to the reverence one may need for difficult issues. When you are about to take on an enormous task, turn from destructive behaviors, or simply decide how to move forward, it is always wise to respect the process. Oftentimes, we search for a quick fix or simple solution.

“Rend your hearts and not your garment” speaks of the depth required. Just like there is such a thing as beauty that is only skin-deep, which has little to do with personality, character, wit, or morality. Anything that applies to how things appear or seem is not a reliable guide to any of their other qualities.

In the same way, if we do not decide to make a marrow deep change or decision within ourselves, often the grooves do not set and we return to past behavior, or we lose heart in a long-drawn-out struggle, or simply the change we seek does not come to fruition.

by Keith Shrimpton

Prayer

LORD, thank you. Thank you for the wisdom shared. Thank you for giving us the blueprints on how to make lasting and tangible change in our personal lives and in the lives of those we love. Continue to guide each of us as we face difficult decisions, difficult tasks, and dark times. Give us the wisdom and fortitude to make deep change in ourselves and in our world. Amen.

Our Relationships Target

“Jesus replied: ‘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.’” Matthew 22:37, 39

In both Greek and Hebrew archery terms, the word “sin” means “missing the mark,” that is—missing the target. Jesus said that the target is the Greatest Commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” The “target” is our relationship to God and to other people (and even nature). When we sin, we break relationships.

In this Lenten time of self-examination and reflection we remember why Jesus came. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor. 5:19 NKJV). “All this was done by God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into his friends and gave us the task of making others his friends also.” (2 Cor. 5:18 TEV)

by Chaplain John Grummon, Retired

Prayer

Lord, forgive us for the relationships we break, and thank you for restoring them through Christ.

From Transfiguration to Golgotha

“As they were coming down the mountain,…” Mark 9:9

“Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha,……and they crucified him…” Mark 15:22-24

The majestic, holy and revelatory event of the Transfiguration connects Epiphany, the season of light, to Lent, the season of repentant reflection upon Jesus’ suffering via crucifixion. Throughout Epiphany we celebrate the arrival of the light of the world through the visit of the wise men who after seeing Jesus, the light of the world, went “home by another way.”

As the spotlight transitions from Epiphany to Lent, we find ourselves on the Mount of Transfiguration with Peter, James, John, Moses, Elijah and of course Jesus. And Jesus appears in dazzling white, the light shining fully and radiantly upon him. Then God speaks, “This is my son, whom I love. Listen to him!” Epiphany indeed! Peter is so inspired by the “light show” that he wants to build booths and stay. But they can’t stay because there is a desperate father of a sick and seemingly possessed boy in the valley below. They can’t stay because the fullest revelation of the light of God’s love will not be on this mountain of transfiguration but on a hill called Golgotha.

I wonder how often we unconsciously or even consciously desire a “Lentless” faith. It is, after all, quite human to seek to avoid suffering. And the way of the cross, the season of Lent, leads us into epicenter of suffering. I suspect all of us, much like Peter, want to build booths and stay on the mountain because awaiting us is suffering in the valley and a cross on a hill far away. Too often, if we are honest, we would prefer jumping from the mount of Transfiguration straight to the empty tomb and Easter. Yet the truth is, if we avoid the suffering themes inherent in the Lenten season and avoid seeing, emphasizing and meditating upon the crucifixion, we end up with a sugar coated, detached, cotton candy faith incapable of accompanying us in our own suffering. Only through an unflinching Lenten journey culminating in seeing Jesus upon the cross do we discover a faith that addresses our deepest fears, demonstrates divine love, dispenses amazing grace, offers radical forgiveness and achieves victory over the principalities and powers.

Here is the beautiful and perhaps paradoxical mystery. Peter, James and John likely thought they would never see a brighter spiritual light than what they witnessed as Jesus appeared in dazzling, blinding light on the mount of Transfiguration. Yet the light of God’s redemptive love, mercy and forgiveness actually shines brightest while darkness covered the earth at 3:00 in the afternoon as Jesus breathed his last and declared, “It is finished.” The greatest suffering reveals and displays the greatest love and the greatest love shines the brightest light.

by Rev. Tiger Pennington

Prayer

Eternal and loving God, grant us courageous, unflinching faith to look upon the crucified Christ. May the transfiguration moments in our lives lead us to serve in the valley below. Forgive us for wanting to remain where things are easy, exciting and detached. Continually shepherd us on the way of the cross. Amen.

Golden Repair

“My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.”

Psalm 51: 17

My husband is an art teacher for an elementary school. Recently, he chose the Japanese pottery method of Kintsugi for a lesson; and it is inspiring. This method originated in late 16th Century Japan, when it is said, the ruler of the time broke his favorite tea pot. The standard method of repair was metal staples, which would not be functional nor aesthetically pleasing. Thus, the ruler’s artisans developed the Kintsugi method of using gold to join the broken piece together and create a wholly new, beautiful and functional tea pot (some examples at this site: artincontext.org/kintsugi).

Kintsugi can be poetically translated as “golden repair.” This method also embodies the philosophy that from brokenness comes beauty. Professor Ella Tennant of Keeley University, UK describes it this way “*Kintsugi* makes something new from a broken pot, which is transformed to possess a different sort of beauty. The imperfection, the golden cracks, are what make the new object unique. They are there every time you look at it and they welcome contemplation of the object’s past and of the moment of “failure” that it and its owner has overcome.”

In Chapter 58, Isaiah draws our attention to the manner in which we are to repair and return to God; we are to tend to the brokenness within ourselves and our community; through that form of fasting we renew ourselves, as we renew another and we find ourselves once again beautiful in the site of God.

This Lent, what pieces will you mend; what ways can you offer aid to your neighbors, even those most broken and difficult to piece together? In answering this question, take time in prayer, or seek out a friend to share the service. Is there a ministry you could participate in together; a study group you could lead together; a hospital or shelter you could visit? Take the first step and ask a friend to serve with you this Lent. Mend together and greet our God joyfully at Easter.

by Trish Dowd Kelne

Prayer

Let us pray together. God of All Things, broken and repaired, bring us into your ways of healing, help us to reach out and be together with our community as we seek to build anew. We ask for courage, we come broken, we have faith in the work of your spirit to heal and repair our hearts and our community. In your name, we pray, Amen.

Tennant, Ella. “How The Philosophy Behind the Japanese Art Form of *Kintsugi* Can Help Us Navigate Failure.” *The Conversation*, November 18, 2022, www.theconversation.com

Materialistic Attraction

“Those who heard this asked, ‘Who then can be saved?’
 Jesus replied, ‘What is impossible with man is possible with God.’
 Peter said to him, ‘We have left all we had to follow you!’
 ‘Truly I tell you,’ Jesus said to them, ‘no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.’” Luke 18: 26-30

Oh, the feeling to be rich. As we examine this parable together, we look at another example of how greed affects our life. Earlier in this passage, you will find that Jesus is talking with a man showing him how to enter the kingdom of heaven. However, the answer was not well received by the man. He asked Jesus how could he give up all these material items that he worked hard to obtain? In our scripture here, Peter responds, “we have left all we had to follow you.” Now that the scene is set, let’s examine the different pieces.

First, we have a man that wants to enter the kingdom of heaven. He is curious, he wants to know more. But when Jesus tells the man to sell all his earthly possessions, he is shocked. How would you feel if someone told you to sell your house, leave your family and follow me? It’s a big ask and one that Peter reminds us that he and the other 11 disciples executed.

I don’t think the first step of Christianity has to be this big of a leap of faith. However, this passage is a great reminder that we have to trust in God for everything. Trust is not something that is installed in us from the items around us. Memories and symbolism can be in items, but we can’t let it attract our full attention. Instead, we must remind ourselves that everything we do is for God. Every item we possess is because of his grace.

This scripture ends with sharing that no one that leaves his family or children for God’s grace will not receive more in their eternal life. A great reminder that our time here is temporary, but with him it’s eternal. Let us go out and make a difference for him with the minutes that he has shared with us. Together, we can make a greater impact and point all things back to him.

by Kurt Hamilton

Prayer

God reminds us today that we are your family. That no matter what situation we leave and choose to follow, it’s for you. God, you are our light, the one we choose to follow. Nothing we buy in this world will be able to come with us. So God remind us not to be greedy, but to give. Let our lives be an opportunity to make a difference for you. We are grateful for each day and opportunity you share with us, and it’s in all this we say in your son’s name, Amen.

Calling Us, Again and Again

“Father, all those you gave me, I would have with me where I am, to see my glory, which is your gift to me because of the love you bore me before the world began. Just Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you, and all those have known that you sent me. To them I have revealed Your Name and I will continue to reveal it so that your love for me may live in them and I may live in them.” John 17:24-26

Valentine’s Day this year was a snowy slushie mess. Unknown to me and all in the family, school was out because of teacher-in-service. So it was, that my 7-year-old grandson was delivered to my door, bright and bushy tailed at 6:30 in the morning. After a few cartoons and a quickly eaten breakfast, the sweets from the previous day began to kick-in, along with the proverbial boredom.

My grandson informed me that he was going outside. I informed him that he was NOT! So he opened the door to let the dog out, but forgot the leash! As the lightning flashes “from the East to the West” so went the white labrador; straight through town, followed by a boy without a coat, yelling at the top of his lungs, “Grandma, call the Police!!” tears streaming down his face.

Using a “granny” trick, I ran out, chipped the car free from the ice and honked the horn about 15 times, “Time for a ride!” Gabriel came barreling back, ready for a ride and was caught forthwith. But as John 17:24 has it: “... All those you gave me; I would have with me...”

I hope this wonderful grandson of mine will know how very much his God loves him and wishes only joy and happiness, to be with him, here and hereafter.

by Rosemary Holzbuter, 1938-2022 (reprinted, 2014)

Prayer

May we in our everyday boredom and in the clamor of our everyday emergencies, open the door of our hearts to take in the messiness of life and to hear God’s wisdom calling us again and again to return, to be with God.

Make an Altar of Repose

“My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” Psalm 73:26

Wherever you have space in your home, for this Lenten season, make an altar of repose. Building and maintaining an altar at home is a powerful way to cultivate a little sacred space in your everyday life. Over time, your altar may become a reminder and a tool to practice regular self-care through a spiritual recharge. You may include on your altar that which burdens or troubles your body, mind and soul, written on pieces of paper. Add candles, flowers of joy, and objects and images that are sacred symbols for you. Here is a meditation written by The Reverend Marie Louise Webner, in *Women’s Uncommon Prayers*, 2000, Morehouse Publishing:

When the Blessed Sacrament is placed on the Altar of Repose on Maundy Thursday, keep watch there. Watch and listen. Listen for God’s voice in that holy place, for God speaks to those who listen.

Last year in my parish church, the Altar of Repose was like a pathway to heaven. The path cut through clusters of lovely, living flowers – daffodils, geraniums, lilies, petunias, wild carnations, and peace lilies – ending at the altar. Flanking the tabernacle was a basket of white, pink, and yellow blossoms and a solitary aloe vera plant springing from a cluster of ragweed. A burning votive candle honored the Real Presence of Christ within the tabernacle, but the healing aloe stretching heavenward from the weed-strewn earth evoked the vision of Jesus the Christ in the agony of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

At the Altar of Repose, we can be led through the beauty of God’s created world, to the agony of the human condition, to the mystery of the Word made flesh, into the embrace of our Creator God. Listen. Whatever the circumstances of your present life, God will speak to your need. From the flowers of joy, from the agonized Christ, from the mystery of the Incarnate Word, or from the glory of heaven, God will speak to who you are and where you are. Sometimes God speaks in thunder, but more often God’s voice is still and small.

On Maundy Thursday evening or Good Friday morning, keep watch with Jesus at the Altar of Repose. Listen for God’s voice there. If you hear no voice, don’t stop listening, God will be with you. By resting silently in God’s arms, you can hear the heartbeat of God’s unfailing love for you.

by Dr. Paula Artac

Prayer

Please, Lord, be with me at every moment and in every place. Give me the strength and the courage to live this season faithfully, so that, when Easter comes, I will be able to taste with joy the new life that You have prepared for me. Amen.

April

7

Good Friday

– Friday –

Matthew 27:50-51a; Mark 15:37-38

Torn in Two

“And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.” Matthew 27:50-51a

“With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.” Mark 15:37-38

One part of the crucifixion story that has always fascinated me is the temple curtain being torn in two as Jesus took his last breath. I wish I could have been a fly on the wall and watched it happen. It is such a powerful visual of how the sacrifice of Jesus' blood provided full access to God. It was the definitive statement of Jesus as the High Priest and how the sacrifice of his blood was the ultimate atonement for sin. There was no more need for the High Priest to enter into the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement to sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice for the sins of the people - Jesus' blood paid the price once and for all!

It also makes me think of the Psalmists who so desired to have that access. David in Psalm 27:4 tells us, “One thing I have asked of the LORD; this is what I seek: to dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and seek Him in His temple.”

In Psalm 84 the sons of Korah have the same desire, “How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.” (vv 1-2) “Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you.” (v 4) “Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.” (v 10)

As much as the psalmists desired that access to God, I believe that God desired it for them even more. I love the fact that our God desires relationship with us. He created us for that relationship. He never wanted that curtain of separation; he never wanted any type of barrier between us and him.

I not only wish I could have been in the Temple when the curtain was torn, I also wish I could have seen the look on God's face when he was finally able to tear that curtain from top to bottom!

by Janice Trigg

Prayer

Dear God, Thank you for providing the way of access for us; for sending Jesus to the cross and for giving us the visual of tearing the curtain from top to bottom and allowing us to enter into your presence. Amen.

Theology 101

“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities... and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” Isaiah 53:5-6

When you compare the four Gospel accounts of the events surrounding the trial of Jesus, it is surprising how some Gospel writers omit what others include. For instance, only Matthew includes the incident where Pilate’s wife sends him a message concerning a troublesome dream she had about Jesus (27:19). Or only Luke describes when Pilate sent Jesus to see Herod Antipas in hopes of bringing this troublesome case to conclusion (23:6-12). But this is not so with the story of Barabbas. This story is front and center in the description of the trial of Jesus.

And this is no accident.

The message of this story is easy for all to see. The man deserving of death is given freedom while the innocent Son of God is sentenced to die on the cross. This is clearly a picture of what is called atonement, God’s remedy for the sin which has destroyed our relationship with Him. As our scripture for today teaches, Jesus was our substitute, taking the punishment that was due us. This is summed up well in what may be described as the most stunning verse in the Bible: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The Gospel writers—especially Luke—have set the contrast, the guilty Barabbas and the innocent Jesus. The grace extended to Barabbas was a preview of the grace that would be ours:

“Not only did Jesus take Barabbas’ place, **he also took ours**. He died on the cross for our sins. Barabbas is a visual representation of what Christ did on our behalf. He took the place of a wicked sinner so that he might live. In like manner, Jesus bore the penalty for our sin so that we might live to God and walk in newness of life” (Olive Tree Blog).

Paul’s teaching on sin would not be far from the mind of the Gospel writers as they composed their Gospels. We all have sinned (Romans 3:23) and earned the wages of sin, which is death (6:23). The Gospel writers were writing of their own experience and knew the depth of God’s love, as represented in this story of Barabbas. As you ponder the work of Christ this Lenten season, may you remember the story of Barabbas and how Jesus not only took his place, but yours as well. “That is the point of the cross. That is the point of Barabbas. This is the beauty of the gospel!” (Olive Tree Blog).

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Dear God, thank You for sending Your Son to die for our sins and raising Him to life so that we may spend eternity with You. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

John 1:14

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank those who contributed to this devotional booklet. First, a heartfelt thanks to those who shared their thoughts in word, so that all may be blessed. Thanks to Lee Stadler for his design work. And finally a special thank you to Trish Dowd Kelne, who also generously gave her time to help make this devotional a reality.

May our great God and Savior use these devotionals to minister to one and all.

Dr. Richard Menninger

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Lent 2023