



Lent 2024

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“We, Like Sheep”
by Dr. Paula Artac



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.

Lent is a Time for Love

“This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you slaves because a master doesn’t confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me. You didn’t choose me. I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask for, using my name. This is my command: Love each other.” John 15:12–17

When I was student teaching during my senior year at Ottawa (1988), my Middle School Music class was learning an old Quaker Song, “Simple Gifts.” It has a beautiful simple melody, which can be sung in a round. The young people loved it. It was their favorite song to sing, and the parents loved it too. I can still see the smiles. For me, and I think for many of them, it was a deeply spiritual experience.

Quakers, like the Amish and Mennonites, value highly the idea of being simple. They hold that simplicity is next to Godliness. I think they are onto something with that belief. Christlike love is not complicated. Jesus’ command to love was straight forward, we are to love like He loved us. He gave his life for us – for our sins. He gave it willingly. His love held nothing back. The Lord God, King of the Universe, gave Himself for us that we might not die, but have eternal life. This is the very heart of our message to a lost and dying world. This is what love looks like.

I think it’s wonderful and a blessing that Ash Wednesday is on Valentine’s Day this year. What could be a better time to repent (turn) from how our sins have complicated our relationship with the Lord and others and renew our commitment to love as we have been loved than on Valentine’s Day? And what a witness this could be to the world of the humility we have learned from Jesus Himself to serve others sacrificially.

I don’t know about you, but when I serve others out of love, I have that same deeply spiritual feeling I had with those young people thirty-five years ago. The joy in my heart is the same. I believe Jesus smiles at these kinds of loving acts of service.

Simple Gifts: 1848 by Elder Joseph Brackett from Alfred Shaker Village, Maine.

‘Tis the gift to be simple, ‘tis the gift to be free, ‘Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be, And when we find ourselves in the place just right, ‘Twill be in the valley of love and delight.

When true simplicity is gain’d, To bow and to bend we will not be asham’d, To turn, turn will be our delight, Till by turning, turning we come round right.

by Rev. Dr. Kevin Walden

Prayer

Heavenly Father, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Help us to love as You taught us to love. Give us the strength to give of ourselves for Your purposes without complaint or fan fair. May our lives glorify You, we ask in the powerful and matchless name of Jesus, amen.

Wholeness of You

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

I was helping friends with some household chores that required more than one set of hands. As I departed, I accidentally left my journal on the top of my car and drove off. When I say journal, I am describing my book that I fill with the commitments of life, the reminders of appointments, the love notes and sweet scribbles, the receipts and post-its of what must be followed up on, and the rag-tag-bits of no longer important but still tucked in, even junk mail yet to be tossed.

That book of things—precious, important, reminders, junk, and clutter—it sat top my car as I got in and drove away. I drove home without a thought to it and its contents, so varied.

Arriving home, I reached for it in the passenger seat. Then, looked for it in the back, on the floor. I felt the drop of dread as realization hit me. I must have left the book on top of the car! I called my friends to see if by chance it was there in the house or maybe just in the driveway. It was nowhere to be found.

Out into the night we went, and before I could tell them no, my friends were there, traipsing around in the dark seeking the book and its lost papers. We discovered the book had made it on top of my car for about a mile and then – I must have stopped at a stoplight and restarted with a jolt—it was spread across the intersection and the lawns nearby. Bit by bit it was returned, the spine of the book mangled, some pages missing— but mostly, it was there.

While we might forget what is in plain sight, God is present and will bring us home—all our scattered bits, become whole in Christ.

by Community Contributor

Prayer

Dear Lord, help us to ask for your help, and to accept the help you send our way. Help us to be humble when our torn and broken selves stumble. May we look to You and find our way home in the wholeness of Your Son. Amen.

Only God Knows How We are Made

“As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. For He knows what we are made of, remembering that we are dust.” Psalm 103:13-14, CSB

Oh the lies we tell ourselves to prop up the false self and the ego! We pridefully delude ourselves with the myth of the self-made, the self-made businessperson, the self-taught athlete or artist, the self-made millionaire or billionaire. Of course, with almost haunting vocals and guitar, the classic rock group Kansas tried to tell us we are only “Dust in the Wind,” singing “nothing lasts forever but the earth and sky, it slips away and all your money won’t another minute buy.” Yet we almost deify the persona of the supposedly self-made even though the wisdom writer of Ecclesiastes articulates such futile pursuits as “chasing after the wind.”

In Psalm 103 we are reminded of God’s steadfast love and mercy, of God’s forgiveness that reaches as far as the east is from the west, of God who heals, redeems, forgives and loves. And in this very Psalm, we are told God has compassion on those who fear him for God knows what we are made of, remembering that we are dust. Yes, indeed, the spirit returns to the Lord who gave it, and the body returns to the dust of the ground from whence it came.

As I reflect upon dust, earth, humanity and Lent, my mind goes to Ash Wednesday. Perhaps as the ashes are imposed on our foreheads in the shape of the cross, we are seeking to agree with what God remembers and knows, that we are dust. And in so agreeing with God, we are disagreeing with the possibility of being self-made. See, God created the heavens and the earth and God created humanity from the dust he made, from “God dust” if you will. Clinging to being self-made is actually refusing that which makes us truly special, and that is that we are God-made and formed into divine image bearers.

Lent is a sojourn where we dare to allow the false self to be revealed and crucified with Christ. That can be painful. Yet the sign of the cross reveals the steadfast, radical love of God and that is beautiful.

by Pastor Tiger Pennington

Prayer

O God, humble us by reminding us that we are dust. Remove from us all delusions of being independent or self-made and instill in us yet again your steadfast love and mercy prominently displayed on the Cross. In the name of the one who loved us and gave his life for us, amen.

How Did I Miss That?

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:8

When one sits down to compose a devotion for Lent, it is natural to begin with the many individuals associated with the suffering and death of Jesus (referred to as the “Passion of the Christ”). I have long regarded the story about the repentant thief on the cross as a definitive prooftext for “deathbed confessions,” a last-minute acceptance of Christ as Savior, thus rendering this narrative as not much use for personal application. But as I was deciding on a topic for Lent, I discovered a perspective that had escaped my thinking all my life.

From examining the account of the repentant or penitent “thief on the cross” (Luke 23:39-43), I soon realized that I had much to learn. Had I simply lost the need to celebrate the amazing grace that was mine? Had I overlooked the beauty of grace because I accepted Christ at an early age, so naturally—when compared to the thief on the cross—I was in less need of grace or less deserving of punishment?

In last year’s Lenten devotional, I focused on Barabbas, a rebel condemned to die with two other rebels on what turned out to be Good Friday. All three were members of the Zealots, a group of freedom fighters dedicated to ousting Rome as rulers of Israel. Three Zealots were scheduled to die on that Good Friday; two were crucified with Jesus while the third was set free.

When the Roman governor Pontius Pilate released Barrabas, he gave orders for Jesus and the two other criminals to be crucified, one on the right of Jesus and the other on His left (Luke 23:32-33). This description reflects our verse for today, for when we look at the three crosses at Calvary what we see is how God’s plan of redemption works: “One man died with guilt in him and on him. A second man died with guilt in him but not on him. The third died with guilt on him but not in him.”¹

I will offer three more devotions highlighting the progression of the repentant thief from a nonbeliever to convicted sinner to one bound for heaven. The story of the repentant thief is a microcosm of a believer’s spiritual journey from enemy of God to child of God. And while the repentant thief experienced all of this at an accelerated pace, in one way or another this scenario applies to all who have accepted Jesus as Savior and Lord. Those who relate to the thief on the cross will be aided in their Lenten walk by those who have contributed their thoughts and insights to this devotional. Our goal is that the reader will better understand the road to God’s mercy and in the process rediscover the beauty of His grace.

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Dear Lord, protect us from the horrible sin of arrogance, an attitude that diminishes our need for You and elevates us to a position of looking down on others who have received the same grace. Amen.

¹ Heather Riggleman, “What We Can Learn from the Thief on the Cross About Repentance.” (crosswalk.com). January 21, 2022 (accessed July 6, 2023).

Love

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” Mathew 5: 43-44

These words are familiar to us; we have heard them many times. This Lent take to heart the direction of Jesus. Love and prayer are what we owe our enemies. And further, listen to the voice that echoes in your own thoughts, speak with love. Dorothy Day, activist and humanitarian says it well, “I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least.”

by Fredrikson Center Team

Prayer

Lord God, we are created to be Your love in this world, give us the strength to do as Your Son directed.
Amen.

Strive

“Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.” Matthew 4:1-2

As we enter Lent, are we led by the Spirit; do we allow ourselves to feel hungry? Have you ever said, “I am starving?” When in fact, it had been only a few hours since your last meal?

Let us accept discomfort this Lent in our practice of fasting, if not food, then from what keeps us from God. Let us bring our hunger to God, allow the Spirit to guide us.

What actions may be uncomfortable that would bring you closer to God? Is there a task that challenges you? Reflect and pray on what God is calling you to this Lent. Talk with a trusted friend or teacher. God is waiting for you.

by Fredrikson Center Team

Prayer

God of Waiting, make swift our feet as we strive to dedicate our uncomfortable moments, our challenges, our curiosity, and our courage to the seeking of a relationship with You and with our brothers and sisters. We pray for your guidance and strength to make this journey. Amen.

A Daily Reminder

“And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.” Romans 13: 11-14

It’s essential to remind ourselves daily of God’s love. My favorite part of this verse is the opening, emphasizing that salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. Think back to your initial encounter with Christ in your life. Maybe it was attending a friend’s church for the first time, or perhaps it happened at your local school while listening to fellow students share their experiences. For me, it was a Christmas visit to the church. The sparkling lights, decorations, and scattered gifts throughout the building left me in awe. I vividly recall my excitement as I strolled through the halls, exploring every corner. We must not only cherish these small moments but make it a daily practice. Sometimes, it’s easy to overlook our blessings. Most of us have jobs, food on our tables, and roofs over our heads, which are all significant blessings. Are we grateful for God’s love and protection?

One profound insight I gleaned from this passage is the idea of clothing ourselves with the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is ever-present, walking with us, and a part of us. As we navigate our daily lives, we can ask ourselves, “How would God act in this situation?” When you find yourself becoming short-tempered, remember that God is with you. When celebrating a major achievement, acknowledge that God is by your side. He accompanies us every day until our last, so let us pray and offer thanks for His unwavering presence in our lives today.

by Kurt Hamilton

Prayer

God thank you for always looking out for us. Thank you for being with us today and each and every day. Today we practice gratitude and hope that you will remind us that we have so much. Food in our stomachs, water in our body, shelter over our head are just the beginning of all that you give to us. God, you are amazing with what you can achieve, and share with us. Let us continue to do the same for our earthly brothers and sisters. We say this in your Son’s name, Amen.

Gazing rather than Glancing

“Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you.” Proverbs 4: 24

In March 2022, Duke University Coach Mike Krzyzewski was coaching his last home game before retiring against their fierce rival, University of North Carolina (UNC). It would have been the ultimate sendoff for Coach K – beating UNC one last time. But North Carolina under first year head coach Hubert Davis ignored all the attention surrounding the final home game for the retiring Hall of Fame coach, as well as the fourth-ranked Duke’s emotionally charged, rowdier-than-usual crowd. Instead, the rival Tar Heels walked into Cameron Indoor Stadium and fearlessly spoiled Coach K’s perfect send-off to the postseason by beating them 94-81. During the post-game press conference, UNC Coach Davis spoke about this unexpected victory. He spoke openly and at length about his faith in God. Davis quoted Proverbs 4:25 in his postgame press conference, “Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you.” This verse was a constant reminder for his team during the 2021-2022 season.

When thinking about how we look at things, two words come to mind—gaze and glance. A gaze is a prolonged look at something or someone with focus. A glance is a momentary visual awareness. As Jesus followers, our gaze is to be on Jesus. We are only to glance at our problems and distractions. When we keep our gaze on Jesus and our glance on the non-Jesus challenges, we’re where we need to be. When our gaze settles on our problems and we only glance at Jesus, we’re in for a struggle.

by Jan Lee

Prayer

Loving God, help me to know that Jesus is always out ahead of me helping me to know how to follow. Amen.

Paid In Full

A young man, who was about to graduate from college, had his heart set on a beautiful sports car that he had been admiring for many months in a dealer's showroom. He knew that his father could afford it, so he told him that it was all he wanted. As Graduation Day approached, the young man eagerly awaited signs that his father had purchased the car. Finally, on the morning of his graduation, his father called him into his private study and expressed how proud he was of his fine son, telling him how much he loved him. He handed the young man a beautifully wrapped gift box. Curious, but somewhat disappointed, the young man opened the box and found a lovely, leather-bound Bible. In anger, he raised his voice at his father, saying, "With all your money, you give me a Bible?" and stormed out of the house, leaving the holy book behind.

Many years passed, and the young man became very successful in business. He had a beautiful home and a wonderful family, but he realized that his father was very old and thought that perhaps he should go to him. He had not seen him since that graduation day. Before he could make a plan, he received a telegram telling him that his father had passed away and willed all his possessions to his son. He needed to come home immediately and take care of things. Suddenly, a wave of sadness and regret filled his heart when he arrived at his father's house. He began to search his father's important papers and came across the still new Bible, just as he had left it years ago.

With tears, he opened the Bible and began to turn the pages. As he read those words, a car key dropped from an envelope taped behind the Bible. It had a tag with the dealer's name, the same dealer with the sports car he desired. On the tag was the date of his graduation and the words...PAID IN FULL.

How often do we miss God's blessings because they are not packaged as expected?

Jesus said to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29).

by Rev. Justin Diraviyam, CSC

Prayer

Heavenly Father, help us to accept Your plan for us, even when unexpected. Amen.

Are You a Sheep or a Goat?

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’” Matthew 25: 44

Jesus is the Son of Man who will come in glory and separate the sheep from the goats, the saints from the sinners, based on their care for the poor, the marginalized, and the vulnerable. Jesus says, “Whatever you did for the least of my brothers, you did for Me” (Matthew 25:40).

The way we love others (especially the “least of these, my brothers”) matters. It matters because it makes us distinct. It matters because this kind of love is how the shepherd distinguishes his or her sheep from the goats. It matters because entrance into the Father’s kingdom is at stake (Matt. 25:34).

I have lately been fascinated with sheep! I’ve drawn them, studying how they group together. And I have read from many sources the reasons why we should know the difference between being a sheep or a goat.

The imagery given in Matthew 25:40-45 establishes that if you look at sheep and goats, one of the things you will notice about the two animals is that they have very different, so to speak, personalities. Sheep are, as a rule, docile to the master. They follow the shepherd, they follow his voice, they flock together, and they are docile creatures. Goats are, as a rule, very stubborn animals. So even with the imagery here of sheep and goats, you can get a sense of what the difference between the righteous and the wicked are. The righteous are those who are obedient to the Lord, who are docile to the will of God. The goats, the wicked, are those who are prideful, who are stubborn and who have refused to do the will of God. Jesus doesn’t make that explicit, but it is implicit in the language and imagery of sheep and goats. So, He puts the sheep on His right hand and the goats on His left hand, and then He begins to pronounce judgment.

Just in case it isn’t clear, you want to be with the sheep, not the goats. You want your faith to be seen in the way you treat others, the way you go out of your way to meet needs and welcome them just as they are. When you refuse to help someone that God has placed in your path, you aren’t just protecting your security and comfort, you are rejecting the image of God in that person.

But you may think, “There are so many needs! I can’t help them all!” God isn’t calling you to help everyone, but He is placing specific people in your life who He is calling you to help. Pray and ask God who that might be and then boldly put your faith into action!

by Dr. Paula Artac

Prayer

Like a sheep, I am clothed in the beauty of Your mercy. Your rod and Your staff comfort me. You surround me with love. So we give thanks to You our Lord and Shepherd, the silly sheep, the resting sheep, the frazzled sheep, the hidden sheep, the exhausted sheep.

Help us to see the sheep who are clothed in grace and the sheep who are jumping at shadows, the sheep who hunger for the kingdom and the sheep who remember to leap in joy. Remind us that there is no wrong kind of sheep, and that we, each and every one of us, belong to the shepherd.

In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Permission to use or adapt this prayer with credit to Pastor Katy Stenta

Process

“I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.
Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.” Psalm 27: 13-14

Have you ever asked a question and then kept talking until you realized you answered your own question?

Our Lenten journey takes us on such a path, by setting aside the time to question, to listen and to respond in prayer, action and again, reflection— we find the process can be the answer. As the Psalm asks: “The LORD is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid?” May we list the things we fear and hear the steady response of our Lord, that all is within the Lord’s plan. We too are part of that plan.

Take time to consider when you will ask, reflect, pray, and do. Put it on your calendar; put it in your phone—a task to accomplish, a needed appointment to commit to once a week? Twice? Find your confidence as this season unfolds and the questions bring forth answers within the process.

by Fredrikson Center Team

Prayer

God of all Answers, as we bring our questions to you, grant that we may embody the faith to seek, find and face the answers with confidence in You.

Press the Start Button

“Blessed be the LORD! For he has heard the voice of my pleas for mercy.
The LORD is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts, and I am helped;
... Oh, save your people and bless your heritage! Be their shepherd and carry them forever.” Psalm 28: 6-9

My daughter and I were headed to a baby shower for my cousin, and we were running late, really late. I had not been to their new home. As we hurried into the car, I gave my daughter the responsibility of entering the address into Google Maps. She had just gotten her first phone and was excited to try it out. Off we went, I got to the highway and expected the “lady” to be telling me where to go next. But nothing...so I asked my daughter if she had pressed the start button.

“What start button?” she asked. I thought she was teasing me and now it was getting dangerously close to our being lost and even later.

“Seriously, just press the start button,” I grew impatient and worried as I sped along the highway.

“There is no start button,” she answered.

“Press the start button,” I directed.

“There is no start button!” she shouted.

I'd like to say I kept calm, but I did not. I finally had to pull over and determined that the settings on her phone would not allow for Google Maps as a navigation tool. So there was no start button to be pressed. Such a fuss and truly, all that was needed was to stop (not start) and take a breath and think it through from another's perspective.

When we get ourselves all wound up in the rush and the “what we know to be right” we forget that there is almost always another way of looking at a situation. Before your voice rises and you declare that you are certain, re-think it, look at it differently. When you start from that perspective, you might find the way through it. On this Lenten journey, what perspectives have you not considered? What paths have you overlooked? What rush and fuss are keeping you from self-awareness and connection with community?

by Trish Dowd Kelne

Prayer

Oh Lord, when we do not hear and we shout out, you hear us. Help us find the way to you – help us pause when we are rushing and caught up in all the mess of this world, help us rest in you. In your name we pray, amen.

Good Ideas and Best Intentions...

“But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, ‘Go and tell my servant David, “Thus says the LORD: Would you build me a house to dwell in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’” 2 Samuel 7: 4-7

King David seemed to be on the right track. He had a neat house himself, solid and cedar-built, and he felt bad that the Ark of the Covenant was still kept in a tent. He decided he should plan to build a temple; eager in his desire to show God and His gifts the appreciation and respect they deserved. Nathan let him know that God had much greater plans and higher expectations. God’s own Son would come through the ranks of David’s family and “sit on the throne forever.” A future much more grand and more humbling than David could have ever fathomed (involving a throne built from the wood of a sacrificial cross.)

We may make some really good plans, but God’s plans are perfect. What grace it is then, that God continues to work out purposes which are well ‘outside of the box’ of human thinking. During Lent, we can ponder if we remain open to the unknowns of higher strategies, or if our own short sightedness muffles Divine direction. We must find humility in our reflections, to assure our sense of confidence does not inadvertently work towards stunting the perfect plans of God.

by Fredrikson Center Team

Prayer

God of knowing and the unknown,
Help me to stay open to your direction and guidance, in things great and small.
Allow me to walk in both the light of your countenance and the shadow of your plan.
Keep me watchful, ready, and humble to Your will. In Christ’s Name, amen.

The Wrestling

“Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he could not defeat him, he struck Jacob’s hip socket as they wrestled and dislocated his hip.

Then he said to Jacob, ‘Let me go, for it is daybreak.’

But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’” Genesis 32:24-26

Every time I read this story, I must take a step back for a moment. It’s just too weird. Surreal, even. Here is God, the creator of all that was and is and is to come, wrestling with this puny human. Why? Why, when He could snap his fingers and return him to dust? Why, when He could so easily bring Jacob to his knees? What did He have to prove?

I think, perhaps, a better question may be: What did Jacob have to prove?

Our time on earth is short, yet it’s packed to the brim with opportunities to make mistakes. It’s also packed with opportunities to learn and to grow. Sometimes, however, it seems like the opportunities become too much. Sometimes it feels easier to curl up in bed, pull the blankets over your head, and decide to simply give up, give in, and feel numb instead.

Have you ever felt like you were going through the motions? Your job growing mundane, struggling to put food on the table, your alarm clock goes off, and you just wash, rinse, repeat. In times like these, it’s easy to wonder what the point of it all is. It’s easy to lose our passion.

In times like these, it’s the most difficult for God to use us for the kingdom. God requires fighters. He requires soldiers who, no matter how many times they are pushed down, will rise again. He needs us to get up and be passionate about something. To make decisions, to live despite the difficulty. He needs us with magma running through our veins, on fire for Jesus and willing to fight for whatever opportunity is thrown our way.

He needed Jacob to fight him back. To prove what he was made of. To show God that, when the hard times came, he wouldn’t give in.

It’s important to rest, of course it is. That’s the reason for the Sabbath. But if your entire life is encapsulated in a state of foggy despair, dread, and inactivity, you’re not truly resting at all. When’s the last time you fought for anything? When’s the last time you felt like there was something worth fighting for?

I’ll tell you what’s worth fighting for. His name is Jesus. His kingdom is coming, and He wants you to be a part of it. If you’re feeling like all the fight has been kicked out of you, pray to Him. Pray to Him and take action. Bake a loaf of bread for your neighbor. Pay for someone’s coffee. Send a letter to an inmate. Show God what you’re made of. You’re not done. You can be used for God. And you will burn as bright as the sun again before you know it.

by Sydney Shrimpton

Prayer

Dear Father, Inspire me. Let me not live a life of passivity, but of passion. Lead me to fight. Lead me to be actively engaged. Help me remember what it’s like to feel like there’s a reason worth fighting at all. I love you, thank you for hearing me and for helping me. Amen.

A Slice of Thanksgiving

In a world seeming especially strained and strident, my Lenten focus, this year, will be lensed through gratefulness and thanksgiving, for God’s many gifts (both large and small). As I reflect on blessings and ‘favorite things’, I am especially thankful for...pie! Historians trace pie’s initial origins to the Greeks, who came up with the pastry shell by combining water and flour into a thin sheet for skilled filling and crisping in their clay ovens. Wealthy Romans used more than just sweet things; savory meats, eggs, cheeses and seafood all peeked out from the early Greek’s golden crusts.

“As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.” 1 Timothy 6:17-19

Most of our annual, stateside Thanksgiving dinners were spent at my parent’s house. Turkey and the standard trimmings and always four types of pie—Sweet Potato, Lemon Merengue, Chocolate, Raisin Cream. While we all got to request ‘preferred size’ of our favorite (to least favorite) type of pie, it was mandatory for each of us to get a sliver of each one. The last bites were the hardest and you were forced to decide whether you ate the big piece of your favorite first, or the small piece of another’s favorite first and thus saved the best for last. When the boys were still young, we did a lot of ‘just try a bite’ or ‘how about a small piece’ of many different foods. I would use this on myself, with my dad’s Thanksgiving favorite of raisin cream. Truth be told, it is an acquired taste which I did not share. But, I enjoyed the bonding with my dad and his best friend (a frequent dinner guest in later years). I would only shudder slightly, when they mourned there wasn’t more raisin cream for extra helpings to all present.

Year’s later, I was preparing to attend an assuredly tense, ‘church finance’ meeting. For motivation or reward, Linda baked me a Lemon Cream pie (my favorite) and the large, pie-piece, smiling from my plate, inspired a church-life strategy I continue to use on myself—if/when pew partners cloy or annoy: when things really matter to us, we have to engage (give or take) in something to support and connect. At regular ‘church suppers’ there will always be four pies... ‘time, talent, treasure and troth (perceived truth)’. We serve and share big and small pieces of each, with one and all. Some we really like, some we have to choke down, but that is the way we build both community and God’s kingdom. I find this strategy helps me focus on what really matters (God), especially in these rather socially charged times. At His bounteous table, we conjoin with strangers and friends for the chance to emerge after sharing pie; all full and grateful with God’s opportunities and grace.

by Chaplain John Holzhueter

Prayer

God, thank you for the breadth and depth of the many tangible blessings you give us. Help us to stay open to opportunities and experiences—unknown, unexpected, or even undesired. Keep us grateful for any chance to share with You. And fuel us with a huge helping of grace—especially when we need it the most. AMEN.

2

– Saturday –

No Thank You!

“One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: ‘Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ But the other criminal rebuked him. ‘Don’t you fear God,’ he said, ‘since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.’” Luke 23:39-41

Jesus was crucified between two thieves, a term used by the Jewish historian Josephus to describe Jewish rebels who sought to overthrow the Roman government. Such a criminal is designated as “one plundering by violence.” This picture of the repentant thief rebuking the other thief serves to highlight the magnitude of his need and the depth of God’s grace. Such a portrayal described our position before we accepted God’s mercy. Romans 5:6-11 reminds us we were ungodly when Jesus died for us; we were God’s enemies. Thanks be to God for His indescribable gifts of forgiveness and eternal life!

What is missing from Luke’s account of the crucifixion is the repentant thief initially joined the other thief in insulting Jesus (Mark 15:32). And why not? If Jesus was the Messiah, surely He had the power to save Himself as well as the two thieves. The three crucified men were dying, and God seemed powerless and absent at this time. So, the question that begs to be answered in all of this is why did the repentant thief change his mind? We know Jesus died before the other two (John 19:32-33), which means that both thieves heard all the words Jesus spoke, none more shocking than His first statement: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23.34). How could one who had been crucified forgive the ones who had crucified him?

I don’t claim to understand the details of how God’s sovereignty works with human free will. But the picture of the two thieves is all too familiar. One person hears these words of Jesus without any impact, leading to a refusal of forgiveness and salvation, whether demonstrated in a vehement rejection of Christ’s offer or a simple “I don’t care.” Much is the pity as such a snub prevents the person from inheriting eternal life; they continue their journey to eternal damnation or hell, a topic we don’t like to talk about.

But the other thief—our thief on the cross—takes note of Jesus’ words. As our passage for today reports, he rebukes the one who continues to insult Jesus by reminding him that they are dying because they are guilty; but Christ—the “man on the middle cross”—is innocent, “He had done nothing wrong.”

Someone or something has convinced (convicted?) the repentant thief that there is something different about Jesus, something inviting that has penetrated his heart. He is sensing that the good he has heard about the “King of the Jews” is true; that is, Jesus represents the life that God desires. In other words, the man in the middle is actually a king and His kingdom is not of this world. It was at this moment that the repentant thief realized a life-changing truth though to him it may have seemed too little too late.

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Dear Lord, may we never think it is too late to discover Your acceptance. In the Name of the One who leaves His arms open for as long as we live. Amen.

4

– Monday –

Efforts

“Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.” Psalm 25:4-5

A week with temperatures below zero and the pipes burst. The cabinet was open, the heater was near, the drips were dripping; and still frozen and then not so frozen. We moved what was soaked, salvaged as we could, called the professionals and our friends too.

Our efforts do not always lead to perfect results, sometimes it all freezes and thaws at the wrong time. After the frustration we return to the sentiment— we are part of God’s plan, we control our responses, our choices, our efforts, and we leave the rest to God. If we forget, nature has a way of reminding us.

by Fredrikson Center Team

Prayer

Lord of All, when the world feels too cold and weighs heavy on us with what we cannot control, may we place our hope in you and follow your ways. In your name, we pray. Amen.

Urgently Mundane

“But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.” Jonah 3:8

Have you ever been with a young child that suddenly cried out, “I have to go” and you knew that it was an urgent request? Yet, as you worked to navigate, the store or the traffic or whatever kept you from the bathroom—some form of distraction emerged and by the time you made it to the destination, somehow that young one no longer had to go. Life sends us messages in urgent form: a friend becomes seriously ill, our finances take a tumble, we are required to make a job change or move to a new town, a relationship crumbles.

As we face these challenges our cries are direct and loud, and we seek fervently for God’s assistance. Yet somehow once calm returns (our friend recovers, the job search succeeds, relationships renew) and mundane sets, our trajectory changes and sometimes falls short. Let us seek God with the urgent need of the young child, with the searching and aching need in our most fragile states. Take every day as that opportunity to be drawn near to God.

This Lent, let not the distractions of every day keep you from the straight path; make urgent the tasks of your Lenten journey—prayer, service, quiet, creativity, giving—what steps can you make today?

What urgent needs do you bring to your God? What will you do today, simple and mundane, to praise and honor God who is with you always—whether in need or not. How might you be present too?

by Fredrikson Center

Prayer

God of the urgent and the mundane, grant us the wisdom to step toward you when in urgent need and in our every day. May we find companions on this path to remind us, and may we be that reminder too. Today we lift our hearts to you in gratitude and seek you in every way. Amen.

Full Circle

“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.” James 4:8 NKJV.

Like many meetings it started with an email, then someone mentioned an issue, then it moved to a Teams thread, and back again, then I lost track. By the time we arrived at the conference table—the reason for the gathering remained in question. There had been one solution tossed out early on – yet no one agreed. So we went round the table.

It was one of those meetings where all folks were agreeable—not one seemed to be pulling the conversation toward conflict for conflict’s sake; no smug remarks, no “caught texting” moments. And after several rounds—we returned to the same initial solution.

This time though everyone had spoken, listened, and further outlined the tasks, timeframes and costs. The team member with that original solution—seemed a bit annoyed, that we’d had to do all this to come back full circle. Yet, the trip around the circle is what brought us together.

Lent finds us at the start of a journey with the solution laid out before us. And we have done this round before—still it is in the process through each step that we come closer to God, closer to each other and discover that solution anew.

What steps will lead you closer to God and your human family? Write down three, share them with three friends, and move toward Easter’s full circle renewal.

by Trish Dowd Kelne

Prayer

God of renewal, be with us as we step toward You. Amen.

Lessons from Job

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.” Job 1:21

Job can be a hard book of the bible to read and understand God’s intentions. At the beginning of the book, we are introduced to Job who “was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil,” (Job 1:1), but as the book progresses, God lets unimaginable hardships happen to his righteous and blameless servant. Throughout the book, he loses everything, including his family, land, animals, and eventually his health. These sufferings would make anyone question God, and that’s exactly what he does, but even with his questioning, he remains faithful.

Job says “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.” (1 :21). Job stays true at heart and praises the Lord through all these horrific events, so God shares some of his wisdom with him. He shows Job how intricate and vast the world is and how his perspective and decisions are infinitely bigger than any of us can comprehend. At the end of the book, we are still left wondering why God allowed bad things to happen to this good person, but we can follow Job’s lead and find a sense of peace in that the weight of orchestrating this complex world with all its decisions, is not on our shoulders.

We can be comforted and humbled by God’s infinite wisdom, and trust that he is still a loving and gracious father. Finally, we learn that God restores everything and more than Job had lost. There are a lot of things we can be unsure about, but through the hard times, we can be sure that God is in control; he will provide, and we will experience bliss with him in heaven one day.

by Nicole Hamilton

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,

We are so thankful for your wisdom and unconditional love. Help us to grow closer to you and your wisdom every day, and trust that you know best. Help us to get through the hard times by reminding us that you will provide, and we will have the gift of heaven.

In your name, we pray, amen.



– Friday –

The Good News Bears

“After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.’”

My first love was baseball. I lived it, played it, dreamed it, loved it. And truth be told, I was pretty good at it. I also remember the movie the “Bad News Bears.” Now while the movie was cute, funny, and ultimately somewhat inspirational, the pathetic baseball playing of the “bad news bears” was anathema to my baseball loving soul. Their baseball playing was bad news and they desperately needed to repent and believe the good news! They needed to believe the good news that they could indeed be better and then repent by practicing new habits of throwing, fielding, pitching, and hitting. Only new beliefs and new practices would transform the bad news bears into good news bearers.

I wonder if God sometimes looks at us and sees bad news bears. People clumsily succumbing to errors of pride, gluttony, greed, racism, homophobia, contempt, nationalism, militarism, divisiveness and so much more. We bumble around and make mockery of the cherished game of life.

Yet God in his great love for us sends us an encourager, a coach, a model player, a teacher, a deliverer and a Savior. He sends Jesus who emerges from the wilderness temptations exhorting us to repent and believe the good news. Repent from limiting beliefs, false narratives destructive ideologies and error producing practices. Believe that life and the world can indeed be better, resembling the life of the kingdom surrounding Jesus. Believe the good news that we are not stuck in endless cycles of bad news, whether internal or external. As we believe in new possibilities, we also practice new thoughts and behaviors. We can live and play differently as we are inspired to trust in the reality of good news.

I’m quite sure we humans are quite like the bumbling bad news bears, but the way things are not the way they have to be. We can heed Jesus’ plea to repent and believe the good news! May it be so!

by Pastor Tiger Pennington

Prayer

Eternal and loving God, forgive us for all the calamitous errors of our own making and inspire us to repent and believe the good news. Forge in us the hope of good news that motivates us to new practices and behavior. For the sake of and in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

9

– Saturday –

Seeking God

“He forgives all your sins, and heals all your infirmities. He redeems your life from the grave and crowns you with mercy and loving kindness.” Psalm 103: 3-4

We have entered Lent. This could be the perfect time for starting some house cleaning, some looking at our souls. How do we look for God to enter Lent in a meaningful way? How do we seek God, as the psalmist implores us to do?

In Psalm 103, we are told in verses 3 and 4: “He forgives all your sins, and heals all your infirmities. He redeems your life from the grave and crowns you with mercy and loving kindness.”

Although we’ve grown up with the impression that Lent is a time of vague sorrow, it also can be much more. It does speak of a mystery, of a time out of ordinary time. That time can be when we give up some worldly indifference and take on some serious thoughts about Jesus Christ. Maybe in the past, in other Lents, we’ve given something up, or we’ve fasted.

This might have been a kind of contest, who can take on the most hardship. It might even have been a contest with oneself, to make tougher sacrifices than last year’s. I look again to Mary Oliver’s poem “Praying” for her suggestions on the search for God.

*Just
pay attention, then patch*

*a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway*

*into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.*

A doorway into thanks and a silence in which another voice may speak. We can search for God in the ordinary and in the everyday. If we are ready, as we look for God, God in return will seek us and find us. AMEN.

by Rev. Mary Donovan

Prayer

God, may we find you whenever we look for you, in our everyday lives.

March 11

– Monday –

Psalm 81: 1-3

Sing

“Sing aloud to God our strength;
shout for joy to the God of Jacob!
Raise a song; sound the tambourine,
the sweet lyre with the harp.
Blow the trumpet at the new moon,
at the full moon, on our feast day.” Psalm 81: 1-3

Cher released a Christmas album this year and was back in the media providing interviews. She mentioned that her love of singing was powerful in that it allowed her to become bigger than herself, to feel fifteen feet tall though she is a woman of small stature. The power of the voice, of music to increase the impact of one person or one instrument and to express our joy, our lament, our praise—is in every book in scripture.

As part of your Lenten journey—experience music—sing at church or in the shower; get out your old instrument or pull up a YouTube favorite. Let the power of song fill you and as you are filled so too are you called to share with your brothers and sisters.

by Fredrikson Center Team

Prayer

Dear Lord, we sing and play in joy and wonder, in request, in thanks, in praise. May our songs be pleasing to you and bring us nearer to you and our brothers and sisters. Amen.

Spirit Filled

“The love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us.”
Romans 5:5

“I can’t do it!” a phrase that rings out when we are faced with a new task; a physical challenge; or when our spirit is low from the wear and tear of life. We lack the motivation to try again.

Lent calls each of us toward the Spirit that has no limit. Do we allow the Spirit to guide us; are our hearts open to receiving the gift given us?

Set aside a few moments to be present and open to the gift of the Spirit. Choose a song that lifts you; or just find a quiet spot, even just for a minute. If there is a prayer that brings you comfort, say it, maybe the Lord’s Prayer.

by Fredrikson Center Team

Prayer

God of Love, grant that we might be open to your Holy Spirit, present with us as we continue to seek to do your will. May your love through the Holy Spirit fill us as we continue in this Lenten journey. In your name and in the example of your Son, we pray. Amen.

Juggle

“For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.” 2 Timothy 1:7

I use the phrase, “it is a bit of a juggle” when faced with a scramble of tasks and schedule. Recently, I saw that in action when my husband was asked to help with a community show. He has juggled as part of leading camps and teaching—but it had been a while. He got to work practicing. He started with two beanbags and then added a third — while he never felt confident about three, his juggling of less improved just by the attempt to add more.

When we add a little more, and put in the effort to stretch ourselves, we grow, we learn, we get stronger, we find new ways to carry the load.

What are you juggling right now? Are there any habits you might let go in order to pick up new practices for this Lenten season? Sometime just a list of what you do every day allows us to see where we might add and where we might let go.

by Trish Dowd Kelne

Prayer

God of the Dance, help us to look at what we are juggling now in our busy lives; may your spirit fill us with the courage to see what things we can set aside in this season and what new practices we can add to our lives. We pray that our efforts lead us through Lent so we might find ourselves stronger, more confident, and ready for whatever you have planned. We thank you. Amen.

Stairway to Heaven

“He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.” Genesis 28:12

Jacob was running for his life after stealing his father’s blessing from his brother Esau. His father commissioned him to find a wife among his own people, so he was on his way to find the woman to marry. After stopping for a night to rest, he dreamed.

Jacob’s dream about the stairway to heaven served as a blessing on, not only Jacob himself, but on the whole of Israel. To truly understand the implications of the stairway to heaven, one must look at the Tower of Babel. This tower was a man-made contraption designed to reach up into heaven. It was humankind’s attempt to climb the heights of heaven and served as a direct look at the pride of mankind, the belief that man could do anything individually, by himself.

The Stairway to Heaven, on the other hand, was built by God. Man wasn’t ascending this ladder. No, the angels were *descending*. Angels of the Lord were coming to live among the people— God was in control of this stairway. He makes the connection.

Our union with God does not stand on a tower of our own good works, each deed piled on top of the other in an attempt to reach God. No, God’s blessing, His oneness with His people, comes directly through His own power and by His own will. Through Jesus, God brought Jacob’s dream to fruition, as Jesus served as the staircase, merging heaven and earth through His sacrifice. Jesus is the gate; He is the way in which Heaven and earth connect. Our good works are a product of His light, and our deeds help our fellow man as we walk this path together.

This Lenten season may the Stairway to Heaven remind you that your salvation does not rest on your shoulders.

by Sydney Shrimpton

Prayer

Dear Jesus, thank You for serving as the gate, the reminder of God’s connection with His people. Forgive me when my pride leads me to stack my deeds, comparing with others in an attempt to reach the top. Remind me daily of Your grace and my total reliance on You. Amen.

True Hunger

“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Matthew 6:16-21

“What are you giving up for Lent?” Maybe you have heard this question recently...on the dorm hall, at the cafeteria table, or down the pew at church. Thanks to pop culture and social media, it has become popular—even expected—to “give something up” during the six weeks leading up to Easter.

The practice comes from the practice of Lenten fasting, a Christian tradition of abstaining from certain foods (or even all food) for a time to sharpen one’s relationship with God. The problem is that we have lost the plot a bit and have turned the practice into a way to break an unhealthy habit, enforce a New Year’s Resolution, or even reinforce some unhealthy perfectionistic expectations about the ways that we are “supposed to” live.

I like the way that Christine Valters Paintner instead approaches this language of fasting, in her new book *A Different Kind of Fast*. Instead of simply skipping the chocolate for a few weeks or blocking social media, she asks us to look at the root causes of our hunger, not just the symptoms. She invites us to think about fasting in broader terms: fasting from consuming, multitasking and inattention, scarcity, anxiety, speed and rushing, from “holding it all together,” planning and deadlines, or certainty. With each fast, she invites us to embrace a new way of being: simplicity, full presence in the moment, radical trust, slowness and pausing, tenderness and vulnerability, unfolding and ripening, mystery and waiting.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus suggests some have lost the plot when it comes to fasting. It had become more about the show than God’s work of quiet and deep transformation. Instead, he invites “store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” This Lent, may we each seek the one who addresses our true needs and meets us at the places of our deepest heart hungers.

by Rev. Dr. Matt Sturtevant

Prayer

Lord, help us to fast from what drains us, and seek what sustains us. Amen.

Don't Forget Me

“Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’” Luke 23:42

Our verse for today informs us of an unexpected turn of events. At this moment during the crucifixion, when all seems lost for the penitent thief, he may be the only person truly believing in Jesus. The crowds and Jewish rulers hurl insults at Jesus (Matthew 27:39-44), as does the other thief. Even most of Jesus’ disciples are absent, revealing a lack of faith in their crucified Teacher. True, John is at the cross, but he is only sensing the end of Jesus’ life and ministry (John 19:25-27). All the while the captivating power of the cross is drawing the penitent thief to take notice of Jesus and His offer of wholeness to all who will place their faith in Him (John 3:14-15).

In his humility, the penitent thief realizes he is unworthy to be in Jesus’ kingdom and simply asks that he remain in Jesus’ thinking. He knows that Jesus is undeserving of His punishment and—in a moment of transformation—the penitent thief realizes he is undeserving of any kindness that our Lord may show him. He sees the perfection of Christ and grasps that He is more than an earthly king. He comprehends that though his life is ending there may be some comfort gained in being considered important to this king.

He is not offering any kind of evidence that he deserves to be part of the new world. He is simply coming to Jesus, acknowledging that anything he receives is a gift. He is modelling for us the fact that salvation is a gift (Ephesians 2:8-9), received by faith alone; this is a point I easily forget. Though God has granted me the privilege to serve Him, I often use this opportunity to justify that I deserve grace as much as anyone, maybe more than anyone else, especially the penitent thief. What this dying man was illustrating is something that should shame us all who claim the name of Christ, for only the heart that knows it is truly unworthy will be truly amazed by grace.

Though the thief on the cross had lived a life opposing God, he could take comfort that at the end he was finally seeing God’s way. And though time was short, all was not lost. In this sense, the story remains a reliable source to cite when another person regrets a wasted and godless life and feels unworthy of God’s grace. May such a person hear the same words that Jesus spoke to the thief in response to his request in Luke 23:42.

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Dear Savior, may this story encourage and capture all those who think they are beyond Your grace, as well as remind those who are Your children that amazing grace challenges us to remember who we are and who You are. Amen.

Unexpected

“Light in a messenger’s eyes brings joy to the heart, and good news gives health to the bones.” Proverbs 15:30

We had a recent change at work; a new software system that required everyone to learn a new process. The whole of the team emanated negativity and resistance. While generally it is a positive group—we were challenged by all the changes, little and big frustrations and real time deadlines to be met.

A colleague popped in from another region and dropped off a fruit basket and cookies. He had been at a partners meeting and just thought we might make use of the extras.

It was so unexpected; our perspectives shifted.

What ways can you offer an unexpected treat to workmates, community members, friends, and family?

Make an effort to be the light, the joy, the good news.

by Community Contributor

Prayer

God of All Good, we welcome this Lenten path and the chance to brighten the way of another; lead us and help us to be open to these opportunities. In gratitude we pray. Amen.

Connected

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’” Matthew 25:40

This parable calls us to serve those in need. As part of our Lenten journey, let us take a close look at those in need of care; folks that we encounter each and every day, working and learning with us. So many are lonely— and without hearing a kind word. Sometimes we just want to do our work or get to class without taking time to greet each other, share conversation or even a meal.

Our worlds have become more and more “connected” in the virtual sense— a text rather than a call; a zoom rather than a gathering; an email rather than a card. Technology has been a true lifesaver in recent years, and it offers versatility and accessibility.

Let us not allow it to be our excuse though; let us still, especially in Lent, make the effort to support our brothers and sisters with our presence, our thoughtfulness, our care. When it is safe to gather, let’s get together. When a voice would truly cheer your friend—call them; they will be surprised. Write the Easter card and actually mail it! If we put ourselves out there, we might find we receive the benefit of connection too.

by Fredrikson Center Team

Prayer

Gracious God, bring us together as you intend; we need each other; help us to care for each other. Amen.

Leftovers

“For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” John 6:33

Leftovers, not quite enough to make a meal? So, add a little of this — a little of that. Sometimes that works, and the meal becomes a whole new experience. Other times we end up with something not quite right, but edible.

In the end, we are fed. Making the most of what we have been given, taking the nourishment and giving thanks— simple practices to incorporate into your Lent. Practice gratitude by including prayer before eating, by appreciating the nourishment of the food and further the hands that made it. Is there a local food pantry where you might donate? Is there a local community kitchen where you might serve?

The following is a prayer for meals during Lent as prayed by those serving at The Joseph House:

*We bless you, Lord, and we praise you, for You have given us this meal to share,
provided by the earth and prepared by human hands.*

Help us to remember those who cannot eat because of poverty or sickness.

Let the brief hunger we feel this Lent make us hunger even more for justice.

May this meal strengthen us to do Your will.

Blessed be God for ever.

by Community Contributor

Prayer

God, we are fed by you; may our lives demonstrate our gratitude. Help us to do as you do and care for our brothers and sisters. Amen.

Prayers for Peace and Unity

“I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one – as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me. I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me.” John 17:20-23 (NLT)

As I have been reflecting on this season, once again I am struck by the discourse all around us, whether in words or violence. I pray for peace. As I began contemplating something to share, I was struck by Jesus’ prayers for his disciples, in particular for unity.

Having been one of many who have watched *The Chosen*, I know I am not alone in being reminded how the portrayal of the disciples highlighted the differences that they had from each other. While each of the disciples brought things to the whole, the show reveals over and over again their differences, their judgements, their belief systems. Revealing how their personalities, families, and experiences shaped them into very different individuals. Also, the show reminds us that they’re just as frail and imperfect as each of us. Maybe I am the only one, but I know when I think of the disciples, I have tended to elevate them, believing that the disciples were of one mind and because they were present with Jesus, better Christians than we could ever be. It is tempting to believe that their experiences were less complicated than ours, in a simpler time, etc. but that is just not the case. And then consider the other witnesses around them, so hopeful, yet their expectations of what and who the Messiah would be or would do, were often impossible to let go of, illustrating our continuing weaknesses. Lastly, many faced challenges to their safety that few today will experience, but that didn’t dissuade them from proclaiming Christ as the Messiah.

Christ’s prayers in John 17—in verse 6 for the disciples and verses 20-22 for the future believers (including us)—were for unity. These prayers reveal Jesus’ primary purpose was to show that God sent His Son into the world (and into each of us), to create unity in the Body of Christ. But, what we see so often in “The Church” is our failure to be unified, or even a desire to be unified. Just as Christ took up his cross to save us, maybe the cross we have to bear for unity as His Followers is to put ourselves aside in order to pray for others, build them up, work in humility, be more open in worship, be generous with time and money, and be certain that we should not get sidetracked by arguing over divisive matters. Then, as we become more like our Savior, we become more unified and show the world His true Spirit.

by Wynndee Shipp Lee

Prayer

Father, Savior, and Holy Spirit, — please hear our prayers for unity and peace. Thank you for Your overwhelming love showing us the Way. We praise You for Your mercy and grace to all of us.

Gifts to Caesar or God

According to the dictionary, affect is usually a verb meaning “to produce an effect upon.”
Effect is usually a noun meaning “a change that results when something is done or happens.”

Once again, an election cycle seems to be affecting the mood of our country.
Modern politics seems to have a toxic effect on the application of ‘brotherly (sisterly) love’.

“If you sin, how does that affect him?
If your sins are many, what does that do to him?
If you are righteous, what do you give to him,
or what does he receive from your hand?
Your wickedness only affects humans like yourself,
and your righteousness only other people.
People cry out under a load of oppression;
they plead for relief from the arm of the powerful.” Job 35: 6-9

This election year, I am praying the Holy Spirit reconnects our beloved country. May we exceed God’s expectation to put other’s needs (friends and foes) ahead of ours (Matthew 5:38-42) and override the current social tones of ‘being truly ourselves’ and fiercely judging others. Some years ago, I worked with a family whose neighbor shot a gun in the air, to celebrate New Year’s Eve. The bullet came back down and went through their roof and killed their youngest daughter, as she lay, sleeping in her bed. All who knew her said she was a tangible blessing...in love with Jesus and her family. It was an accident; in no way intentional. Careless yes, but not wicked or sinful. Still, the tragic consequences scarred the hearts of her family and empathetic folks in the community, at large.

These years later, there are still cries for ‘justice’ and/or a change in the laws around celebratory shots-in-the-air. But Her life and the story has become an ‘issue’ drowned out on TV this year—by the powerful-opinion politics of a ‘big’ election year. Not only are we not our ‘brother’s keeper’—our failure to stay responsible for behavior that can hurt, soul deep, results in a climate which violates God’s decrees to love neighbor as self or to ensure our ambition, pride, and self-focus does not destroy the innocent child (Matthew 18:6-7). May we act in hope, love and with Christian comfort, as conjoined body-parts of Christ and do more good than harm for our brothers and sisters—lest our patriotic thank-you prayers be drowned out, by cries of the oppressed; pleas of relief to our powerful and just God.

by Chaplain John Holzhueter

Prayer

God, may the passion of party and politics not drive dereliction from the loving paths shown us by Jesus. May the ‘fight for Caesar’ never override our confidence for your perfect plan for redemption and salvation. May we build prayerful harmony; with voices tuned toward hope and healing in our country—we ask this in Your holy name.
Amen.

I am Loved, God Loves Me; Jesus Loves Me

“But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:8

Many years ago, there was an old adage that said, “nobody loves me, guess I’ll go and eat worms.” Well, I’ve got good news for you. You don’t have to eat worms because you are loved by God and His beloved Son, Jesus. This is not just lip service but love in action. The scripture tells us, that in the fullness of time God sent His Son to die for our transgressions, our sins Galatians 4:4. To demonstrate the importance of this statement as if once was not enough, God repeated it in Romans 5:8. God wants you and me to stop having a pity party and begin to rejoice in what God has done for us.

You see, because we were in sin, we did not have the capacity to die and redeem ourselves because the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life Romans 6:23. We must remember that this is a gift and you do not pay for a gift but only receive it and say thank you.

So, as we journey through the season of Lent this year, instead of giving up food this year, let us give up sin. This is an individual decision that each of us should make; let’s ask God what we are doing that is not pleasing Him and erase that from our life. Let us practice that which is pleasing to God in our everyday life and make a permanent change not just a seasonal change.

Why not allow Proverbs 3:6 to become our mantra: “In all your ways acknowledge God and He will direct your path.” It will eliminate much of our having to say I’m sorry because if we consult God before we do things, we will not have to ask forgiveness because we will get it right the first time, which will result in fewer do overs; less do overs is wonderful.

by Dr. Dorothy L. Smith

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for allowing your beloved Son Jesus to come and die for us. We want to please you in all our ways. As the Holy Spirit leads us, help us to follow Him. It is in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

– Monday –

We are Yours

“O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem! Which killest the prophets and stonest them that are sent unto thee!

How often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen gathereth her chicks under her wings, and ye would not.”

Luke 13: 34 KJV

Prayer:

O, Father, God, Another covenant? Surely this time we will keep it!

“They will respect my son.” Matthew 21:37

O, make your people worthy of those tears, the breaking heart of the God made man.

“But they dragged him out of the vineyard and killed him...” Matthew 21:10.

O, people of God, bow your heads in shame...Father, have mercy! 21:39

It was almost midday and past time for the eggs to have been deviled. The bounty of family to arrive hungry and many items left unattended on the list; a list longer than I thought, now that the brightness of the day wore on and the early clarity of a 5:00 dawn was not quite so clear and bright as my evening list-making envisioned. But family is coming and friends and this is home still, though they are grown, and we are not so young to bustle so much.

Still the hens had been producing and I'd held back the eggs from our breakfasts all week. They were waiting there in the bowl atop the counter. The water, which I'd just put to the stove, was also waiting for my gentle hand to promptly add each egg (more than 2 dozen) and then to the deviling, but the phone ringing in the other room...

Our labrador was still young, and his given name of Gabriel was more for his whitish gold coloring as a pup than for his angelic disposition. I was in mid-sentence on the phone, when I heard the clamor in the kitchen, mostly the sound of the bowl hitting the ground and the dog skittering about—since eggs shatter quietly.

My week's savings, a yellow mess on my already mopped floor; and the dog—need I mention the mess there. The devil got the eggs that day and God gave me grace to still my hand and quiet my voice until laughter came. Let me call that pup under my wing and wash him clean of his transgressions. He does so love eggs, or a mess anyway. As he tucked his head in shame, I lifted it.

How many eggs do we shatter? And how often may we be washed clean?

by Rosemary Holzbuter, 1938–2022 (Reprinted, 2014)

Prayer

Grant that we might see the goodness You set aside for us and the goodness You place within us. When we shatter all Your gifts, let us, with meek hearts, lift our heads to You and be washed clean in Your abundant grace. Let us go about Your work with strengthened hearts and stronger backs to do all You ask. And when yet again we fail, when we choose to take and spoil the wonders of Your grace, help us find the way unto You. For we are but the hungry and curious in Your kitchen and many messes to be found. Yet we are Yours! O God, let us be grateful for Your wondrous mercy!

Lovingly Letting Go

“There is none holy as the LORD: for there is none beside you: neither is there any rock like our God. Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not arrogance come out of your mouth: for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty men are broken, and they that stumbled are girded with strength.” 1 Samuel 2:2-4

This is from the prayer of a woman (Hannah) who the bible tells us was ‘barren’. In biblical times, the pressure to produce children was intense. It ensured both inheritance and legacy and kept one in good ‘social status.’ For Hannah, her entire world was a shamble. Her grieving had become consumptive and her mourning an ‘affliction’ (1 Samuel 1:11). In her repenting, she vowed that, if she ever had a child, she would dedicate him to God instead of having an extension of herself or a proof to her enemies. When her son was born, she named him Samuel and gave him in apprenticeship to Eli (the priest). Although she had yearned for a child, she understood that she did not own him; his destiny and purpose were of God. She let him go, not easily, but with deep love and a prophetic understanding.

Lent can be a time of wrestling and letting go. Mustering discernment to assess what we truly own versus what God has merely entrusted to our care. Higher purposes propel through action and we are called to respond (easier) or just witness (harder if it involves someone we love and treasure). Physical, emotional and spiritual, God’s power is at work and it is through His plan that all are liberated and perfected. If only letting go was not so hard...

by Fredrikson Center Team

Prayer

Father God, Grant me strength to relinquish power and control in areas ultimately guided by Your grace and purpose. Help me to not confuse the temporary with the permanent. Aid me as I let go of sinful ways in thinking and being. Edit the plans of my heart to best reflect Your will.

What's the Pattern?

“Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Ephesians 5: 1-2

I have a deep love for puzzles, and I greatly admire the painstaking work and intricate detail involved in creating them, as well as the complex thinking required to solve them. To me, spirituality is like one of the most intriguing puzzles available. It is a dynamic, ever-evolving aspect of our lives, adapting and changing as we grow older and wiser, while also evolving with our personal transformations. What makes this spiritual puzzle more manageable is that God provides us with constant examples. God's guidance is not only evident in our daily lives, offering opportunities to hone our skills and nurture our virtues, but it is also found in the words written long ago, meant to serve as a source of guidance during our times of struggle. I liken it to having a reference book with all the answers when we find ourselves stuck. It is a readily available resource, providing support to help us navigate our unique situations.

Beyond scripture, we also have a network of pastors, friends, family, and others who can offer their support during any challenge or phase of our lives. This is one of the most potent aspects of faith — the ability to lean on others as we journey through life's various stages. It's akin to the approach one takes when tackling a complex puzzle; when you're stuck or in need of support, you change your perspective and seek a different angle. As we continue to study, learn, and practice, we become better equipped to handle the next situation. This is the essence of practice and growth. The depth of God's love is exemplified by the ultimate sacrifice — giving up His only Son. It's a move that transcends what we can fathom in the grand puzzle of life. God, with His complexity, remains a mystery we may never fully comprehend, but the excitement lies in the continual pursuit of understanding Him better. We strive to follow in His footsteps, hoping to lead others toward Him. Together, let us work on solving the intricate puzzle of life so that we may become more like Him. Let's offer our prayers.

by Kurt Hamilton

Prayer

God thank you for challenging us. Thank you for giving us opportunities to get better, to learn more about you, and to figure out what's going on in our lives. God, you give us all the tools to figure out the puzzles that are around us. Show us how to take the time to learn how to use them and put them into action. Not only for ourselves, but so we can continue to adapt and learn how to help others. Thank you for the opportunity to serve you and be here each and every day. We love you and thank you. Amen.

The Yoke of Authority

“But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.” Luke 12:48

My parents often reminded us how blessed we were, as a family. They emphasized the importance of, what I would now term, the “giving back and paying forward” of things. My dad’s mantra, when I was feeling unmotivated or put-upon-pouty was “to whom much is given, much is expected.” When I, invariably, rolled my eyes or snorted, my mom would remind me that this was our way of “giving love-gifts to Jesus.” I liked mom’s take on that much better! Predictably, then, the younger version of me was rather fixated on this passage from Luke (and on the ‘Parable of the Talents’, in Matthew 25, as well). The ‘punishment’ angle in both made me pay especially close attention (beatings and/or joining a crew of wailing, teeth-gnashers is a powerful flipside to mom’s ‘love-gift’ angle).

When we were raising our sons, I saw the same wheels turning for them—when Linda or I read this passage aloud. Once, outta the blue, our oldest came to me in tears; he was worried that God would be beating him for not “doing enough for people.” In one of my more brilliant dad-joke moments, I said to him, “Now that’s a bad yoke, huh?!” Then, in one of my more brilliant, Christian-parenting moments, I recited Matthew 11:29-30, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” What I told him next, I have taken to heart since then. “From those God expects much from, he gives and supports much.”

With my kids now grown and Linda, my mom and my dad all in heaven, my ‘yoke-joke’ has become a frequent personal mantra. Especially in dark times or when willing hands and hearts (to assist on a project) are few or far between, it helps me to focus and motivate. To stay childlike in focus, on the “love gifts I work to give to Jesus” and marvel at the exponential support and joy sent back my way, by my ever-mindful, generous and gracious God.

by Chaplain John Holzhüter

Prayer

Jesus, thank you for loving me, even when I’m more childish than child-like. Thank you for trusting me to shine Your light where it’s needed. Thank you for lightening my load, in times when the world’s weight seems heavier than my shoulders can bear.

– Friday –

Check Yourself

As a teenager and early adult, I marched in a drum and bugle corps. It was time to get serious when we went off to our early summer camp. That was our intensive prep time for tour and competitions. Morning to night, eight counts by eight counts we rehearsed our show on the field for a week. Every eight counts, we stopped and were to check our alignment as our instructor shouted, “Check yourself!” Most of us looked around and didn’t budge. This became apparent to our instructor, who then extended his instruction with, “Assume you’re wrong!” To that, more of us corrected ourselves, especially after some specific helps were given.

You may or may not be an observer of Lent, but typical practices might include special focus on prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Some might say they practice those all the time, but just as we have times in our lives when we set certain goals to work on, I find the time before Easter a good time to “check myself.” It’s a time when I especially recall the Lutheran liturgy I grew up with—and only later realized it was Scripture.

“Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.”
Psalm 51:10-12 ESV

Sometimes we forge on through these busy Christian lives without stopping for honest reflection on our Christlikeness. We need to stop and “check ourselves”—perhaps even “assume we’re wrong” so that we can mend a relationship, do some work on a particular sin, and come back in alignment with Christ. As we approach Easter and especially the Passion, maybe Psalm 51:10-12 can be a prayer for reflection and renewal while remembering what Jesus went through for us so that we may experience everlasting life.

by Rev. Melody d. Walden

Prayer

Precious Lord, we are so grateful for your sacrifice for us and mindful of the kind of life You desire for us. May we daily pattern our ways after Your ways. Renew the right spirit within us. Amen.

– Saturday –

He said I Could Come

“Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” Luke 23:43

The main reason I decided on the topic of the repentant thief for Lent was a sermon clip I viewed by a well-known pastor. He was preaching on the cross when he shared that he couldn't wait to get to heaven and interview the repentant thief. He wanted to know how this all happened by asking him, “How did you make it here!?” The pastor imagined that the receiving angel in heaven was frustrated with the thief because when he asked him on what authority he was entering paradise, the thief could only shrug his shoulders and respond, “I have no idea.” When asked by another angel if he fully understood the doctrine of justification by faith, the thief claimed ignorance. Exasperated, the second angel then asked him on what grounds he should be allowed to enter, and the thief humbly replied, “The man on the middle cross said ‘I can come.’” These words convicted me and left me no choice but to examine where my heart was concerning what Christ accomplished for me on the cross.

Jesus' response to the thief's request to be remembered is unforgettable: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). Paradise, which means “garden of God,” is what we call heaven, the place where the souls of believers go after death to be immersed in the presence of the Lord. To the shock of the penitent thief, Jesus essentially said, “There's been a change in plans...you're coming with me!” Even in the thief's state of extreme suffering, such words must have made an impression. And there was more to come.

This remarkable conversation occurred before noon when darkness came over the land and Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:33-34). This cry of Jesus has been called “the most staggering sentence in the gospel record,”¹ and no doubt would have frightened the thief. The most likely interpretation of Jesus' statement is that the Son of God was experiencing the withdrawal of the Father's presence as He became sin on the cross (2 Corinthians 5:21). But such a distressing experience would have been offset by what the thief heard next, as again our Lord spoke, but this time in victory: “It is finished!” (John 19:30). The anguish of feeling the loss of God's presence is replaced by the peace and joy Jesus experienced when He realized He had completed the mission of His Father and was returning to Him, a homecoming signaled by the last words of Jesus from the cross when He again cried out: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). These words would have been the prayer every Jewish girl and boy would have uttered as they went to bed: “Even on the cross Jesus died like a child falling asleep in his father's arms.”²

Thus, the repentant thief, this violent rebel, had been forgiven of all his sins and then promised a place in heaven; he had been reconciled to God as he witnessed God's wrath on His Son; he heard firsthand the words of the redeeming Christ as He completed His task as the Lamb of God; and he witnessed the peaceful death of the One who would shortly welcome him home and then rise again to life as the first fruits of the resurrection.

There are many people associated with the events surrounding the crucifixion of our Lord, some more prominent than others. But as for me, I shall never again ignore the repentant thief on the cross, let alone downplay his importance to me for “learning again” the wonders of grace and the realization that “the man on the middle cross said I can go to heaven.”

¹ William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible* series. Vol.2, Gospel of Matthew (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 368.

² William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible* series. Gospel of Luke (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 288.

by Dr. Rich Menninger

Prayer

Loving Father, when we are asked why we are saved, may we not answer by sharing what we did; instead, may our reply simply be: Because of what He did on the cross. 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.”

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

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