



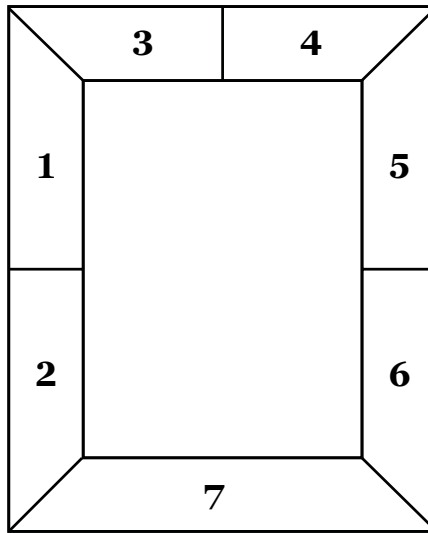
A COLLECTION OF

Lenten devotions

WRITTEN BY THE CLERGY, STAFF,
AND PARISHIONERS OF:
ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
TAMPA, FL



Temptation of Jesus



The Temptation of Jesus - Cover Legend

The cover artwork is inspired by the temptation of Jesus in Matthew chapter 4. Panels 1, 3, and 5 correspond with the three temptations, while panels 2, 4, and 6 correspond with Jesus' refutation.

- 1 Matt. 4:3** *Command these stones to become loaves of bread*
- 2 Matt. 4:4** *One does not live by bread alone...*
- 3 Matt. 4:5-6** *... If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down...*
- 4 Matt. 4:7** *Do not put the Lord your God to the test*
- 5 Matt. 4:8-9** *... All these kingdoms will be yours if you worship me*
- 6 Matt. 4:10** *You shall worship the Lord your God and serve only him*
- 7 Matt. 4:11** *Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him*

Cover by Samantha Van Wormer
Soli Deo Gloria

2025 Lenten Devotional Guide
St. John's Episcopal Church of Tampa, FL

Introduction to Our Lenten Devotional Guide

The period from Ash Wednesday to Easter, known as Lent, is a season for self-examination and repentance. The clergy, staff, and parishioners of St. John's have prepared the devotional readings in this guide for the days from Ash Wednesday through Easter. The guide includes contributions from our youngest parishioners to our seniors, from our newer parishioners and those who have been members for decades. We hope that it will be a blessing to you and help you to deepen your Lenten practice.

*Eternal Lord, of love behold your church
walking once more the pilgrim way of Lent,
Led by your cloud by day, by night your fire,
moved by your love and toward your presence bent:
far off yet here-the goal of all desire.*

*So daily dying to the way of self,
so daily living in your way of love,
we walk the road, Lord Jesus, that you trod,
knowing ourselves baptized into your death:
so, we are dead and live with you in God.*

*If dead in you, so in you, we arise.
you the firstborn of all the faithful dead.
and as through stony ground the green shoots break,
glorious in springtime dress of leaf and flower,
so, in the Father's glory shall we wake.*

Thomas H. Cain, Hymn 149

Blessings,
Marci Thomas
Scott Neumeister
Samantha Van Wormer

ASH WEDNESDAY, March 5, 2025

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil...

Hello, friends! Let's take a moment to reflect on Jesus's story in Luke 4. Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, returns from the Jordan and heads into the wilderness. There, for forty days, he is tempted by the devil. In this passage, Luke highlights three main temptations Jesus faces. The first is about placing oneself first, the second is the desire for power, and the third is testing God. Jesus stands firm each time, choosing love and service to God instead.

Are We All Tempted?—Well, if you ask me, the answer is a resounding yes! Temptation is something we all encounter.

Reflecting During Lent—This time (our own annual "desert") invites us to hit pause, do a little soul-searching, and realign our hearts with God's love. Picture it like an organization doing an inventory check: seeing what's thriving and what needs a little TLC. We can do the same with our spiritual lives.

Questions to Ponder—How is your relationship with God? What might be getting in the way of your connection with God and others? These questions can open doors to deeper understanding.

Conducting a Personal Inventory—A prayerful personal inventory can help us identify both the big and small things that distance us from God and our fellows. Sure, the obvious ones like dishonesty, gluttony and jealousy are easy to spot. But what about gossip, intolerance, desire to control outcomes or impatience? Even small actions can make a big difference. Let's also celebrate the positives: praying for others, helping our neighbors, acts of kindness, empathy, prayers for others, and lending a helping hand. I was once told that two of the most powerful words in any language is to simply acknowledge another's actions, thoughts, or behaviors is to say, "Thank you." In addition, discussing these discoveries with God and a trusted friend can be enlightening. Feedback can shed light on the causes and conditions behind our actions.

Embracing Positive Change—As we reflect, think about the behaviors we aspire to: tolerance, patience, and kindness. Remember, we're all beloved children of God, equal in His eyes. Our aim is to seek and serve the light of God in everyone. I know it

sounds daunting, but trust me, the effort is worth it! As we work through this process, we might find our connection to God and God's will becoming clearer, and life just a bit brighter.

Striving for Our Best—We're all tested in life, and while perfection isn't expected, striving to be our best selves is a worthy goal. When we stumble, see it as a chance to learn and grow, with the Holy Spirit guiding us. Let's support each other on this journey, knowing that together, we can navigate life's challenges with grace and love.

So, be watchful and stand firm in your faith. Show courage and strength. Practice justice and mercy and let everything you do be done in love (1 Corinthians 16:13-14).

The Reverend Tania Wilkes
Deacon

Thursday, March 6, 2025

1 Peter 5:6-7

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

We all struggle, we all fret, we all worry—be it about some negative development that is affecting our career, or a personal matter like a health scare, dependency or significant loss. At times we might feel like there is no light at the end of the tunnel, no chance for improvement, no hope. We might not see any way to make things better. We suffer under the heavy weight of the cross we are bearing.

Our hubristic self-sufficiency stands in the way of making progress. Why can't we realize that so much of our suffering, struggles and worries can be relieved by entrusting our lives to Jesus? He is the key—in his loving kindness and with his enduring mercy, Jesus will bear our burdens, comfort us in difficult times, and instill in us a profound sense of hope and security.

Jesus will carry our cross for us—all we must do is walk alongside him.

Steve Straske

Friday, March 7, 2025

Song of Solomon 8:7

Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it. Love is strong as death.

Whilst organist of Truro Cathedral in the 1990s, I was fortunate to know a lady who had survived the Titanic disaster. Her name was Barbara Dainton, and she and her family were relocating to New York in 1912. Her father, Edwy West, had been a chorister at Truro and is commemorated on a plaque on the wall of the nave. Having always been fascinated by the Titanic story, I had been eager to talk to her about it, but I had been warned that she always resisted any interview on the basis that she lost family and was too young to remember anything clearly. However, she seemed to like me for some reason, and so I plucked up the courage to approach her in the cathedral one day. "Barbara—I know you don't like talking about the Titanic, but can I talk to you about the Titanic?" She smiled and said, "As it's you, yes, and what are you doing at this time tomorrow?" We agreed to meet the next day at noon. She carried with her, among other things, a newspaper from April 16th, 1912, the day after the disaster, together with a very battered, old black hip flask. Here is the point of the story, at which time stood still for me and where the line of scripture above comes into play. She let me handle the flask and said: "My father passed hot milk over the side of the ship in this, to my mother, who was in a lifeboat with me, and he then went down with the ship." I remember distinctly looking at her, not knowing what to say, until the silence was punctuated by her own pragmatism and an "ah well" attitude. However, I will never forget the experience and how it changed me.

Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it. Love is strong as death.

Simon Morley
Organist and Director of Music

Saturday, March 8, 2025

Mark 10:17-22

As he (Jesus) was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not defraud. Honor your father and mother.’” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

When I read a scripture passage from the Bible, I take the opportunity to pray using imaginative prayer. In this scene from Mark, I imagine that I am the person who approached Jesus. I can see myself thinking: I try to lead a fairly virtuous life, I work hard to follow the commandments, be kind to others, and grow in my relationship with God. As a Daughter of the King, who has taken vows of prayer and service, I frequently ask God, “Lord, what would you have me do?”

I am struck that before Jesus asks the young man to do something that will clearly be difficult, Mark prefaces Jesus’ response. Mark writes: “Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him....”. Jesus’ request that the young man sell his possessions, give to the poor, and follow are born out of love. Jesus loves the man, so he invites him into a deeper expression of communion—one that will be difficult but will lead to a fuller life.

I may not feel called to sell everything and give it to the poor, although I strive to give more than I believe is comfortable. I do, however, take this as an opportunity to consider the call to servant leadership.

Carl Frederick Buechner—an American author, Presbyterian minister, preacher, and theologian—once said, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” As I have aged, I find that my call from God has taken different forms. Where earlier in my life my commitment was to family and work, it began to move closer to serving God in pastoral care in my 50s. Lately, I have felt a growing call to outreach. Christ invites me to service and leadership as an expression of God’s love for me and for the world. The world, which is both beautiful

and broken, needs everything I can offer: time, talents, intelligence, and energy.

Henri Nouwen, priest and prolific spiritual author, refers to the following qualities in his book *The Selfless Way of Christ: Downward Mobility and the Spiritual Life*, which I believe are key for me to remember as I strive to be a servant leader.

Sacrificial—servant leaders are sacrificial. Because they follow Jesus, they ask – What is wanted of me, rather than, What do I want? This will likely mean some degree of sacrifice.

Obedient—servant leaders may struggle with asking “Lord, what would you have me do?” rather than doing what they feel would be a good idea to do. They may think they aren’t able to do what God wants. But at the end of the day, they obey what God is asking of them.

Relational—servant leaders see every other person as an image-bearer of God. A true servant leader seeks to draw out, inspire, and develop the best and highest of people from the inside out, accepting them as they are. This, for me, is the most difficult of all.

Open—servant leaders are open to being asked to do something they fear, or something at which they think they will fail. They are open to expecting the unexpected.

During Lent, I am called to reflect on how well I accomplish these things and give with a cheerful heart. I am also called to remember that God’s grace, given in the form of Jesus, is my strength and hope. And, that when I fall short, I can immediately begin again.

Marci Thomas

Sunday, March 9, 2025

Matthew 11:28-30

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

This time last year, I was exhausted. After an intense season of caregiving, I longed for a closer walk with Christ. I longed to journey through Lent with a disciplined focus on Jesus’ suffering and sacrifice in preparation for the celebration of Easter. But, unlike prior years, I had little capacity to do so. In my struggle, Christ met me where I was with an answered prayer—a Lenten Quiet Day hosted by our Saint Clare Chapter of The Order of the Daughters of the King.

From Morning Prayer on the shore of Indian Rocks Beach to Holy Communion in the sanctuary of Calvary Episcopal Church, the day unfolded as a gift of renewal. Father Dale and Deacon Mary Alice each taught a lesson, followed by quiet reflection.

Father Dale’s lesson reminded us that through prayer, confession, fasting, and almsgiving, we deepen our relationship with God, ourselves, and our neighbors. He encouraged us to consider how these practices might change us and how we might incorporate them into our daily lives. Exploring this lesson in more detail brought me to an article by Nathan Foster, the author of *Joy with the Spiritual Disciplines*. In the article “Spiritual Disciplines is an Invitation,” Nathan says, “...disciplines are all about grace, God taking our little offering of time and action and using it to transform us into people we were previously unable to be; people who naturally live lives of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22).”

Deacon Mary Alice’s lesson reminded us that we can live a more Jesus-centered life through prayerful meditation. She emphasized the importance of preparation and offered this simple prayer to begin: “God, guard me as I pray and meditate, and send your holy angels to watch over me.” With this, she asked us to focus on our breath—breathing in something good and exhaling its opposite. For example, breathing in “love” and exhaling “fear.” This quieted our minds and opened our hearts as we placed ourselves in a scene with Jesus where we were an observer. The scene she used to guide our meditation was this: picture yourself in your favorite place and invite Jesus to join you.

Lent is not about achieving a set of spiritual tasks but about encountering Christ anew. In my weariness, I found Jesus in the quiet. He met me where I was—not in my striving, but in my surrender. Where might Christ be waiting to meet you this Lent?

In closing, Father Dale shared this prayer at the Lenten Quiet Day. May it also bring you comfort as you journey through Lent.

Selections from *Rule and Exercises of Holy Living*, A Prayer for the Morning.
Jeremy Taylor, 1650

“Bless me, gracious God, in my calling to such purposes as thou shalt choose for me, or employ me in: relieve me in all my sadnesses; make my bed in my sickness; give me patience in my sorrows, confidence in thee, and grace to call upon thee in all temptations. O be thou my guide in all my actions; my protector in all dangers; give me a healthful body, and a clear understanding; a sanctified and just, a charitable and humble, a religious and a contented spirit; let not my life be miserable and wretched; nor my name stained with sin and shame; nor my condition lifted up to a tempting and dangerous fortune: but let my condition be blessed, my conversation useful to my neighbours, and pleasing to thee; that when my body shall lie down in its bed of darkness, my soul may pass into the regions of light, and live with thee for ever, through Jesus Christ. Amen.”

Melissa Ariss-Menendez

Monday, March 10, 2025

Micah 6:8

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

Last month I was honored to attend a ceremony at which our Hillsborough County State Attorney—my longtime friend and fellow parishioner Suzy Lopez—swore her oath of office as she embarked upon a new term. My brother, Fr. Chip Connelly, gave an invocation that concluded with this rhetorical question from Micah chapter 6, verse 8: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Considering the prosecutor’s role in the criminal justice system, these words seemed especially fitting for that ceremony. But, of course, the message is universal and applies to all of us. It’s a very tall order. I have thought of this passage often since that day, and Lent seems like an especially good time to discern how I might respond in my own life.

I find it helpful to know a little about the broader context of Bible verses that speak to me. Micah was a late eighth century prophet, a younger contemporary of Isaiah. A country dweller, he has nothing but disdain for what is going on in Jerusalem. He condemns the corrupt people and predicts the fall of the city. A particular focus is the iniquity of the rich and powerful who oppress the poor and seize their land and homes simply because they can. With this background, Micah sets up a lawsuit in chapter 6. YHWH sues the unscrupulous and abusive people, plaintively asking, “What have I done to you?” (6:3) and reminding them of his gracious redemptive acts. In response, someone—perhaps a community spokesperson—asks whether the Lord will be pleased with thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil, burnt offerings, or even a firstborn child (6:7). The answer is no; such sacrifices will not suffice. Instead, YHWH provides a deceptively simple prescription: “do justice,” “love kindness,” and “walk humbly.” “In this single sentence, the prophet sums up a century of brilliant prophesy” (from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*).

Through Micah, God is speaking to me today as much as to the people of eighth century Judah. He is not providing a checklist (simply do these three things and all will be well!). Rather, Micah implored the people of his day to drop their selfish, self-centered, prideful behavior and turn back to God and the covenant with the same love that God has for them. In my own life, I’m sometimes too quick to pride myself upon being a basically nice person who sometimes does good things for other people.

But God demands so much more of me. I believe and hope that I might ultimately fulfill God's commandment when I fully open my heart and mind and soul to the loving God who has amazingly saved us all by his grace. It's a lot. I have much to pray about and be thankful for this Lenten season.

Chris McAdams

Tuesday, March 11, 2025

Matthew 5:44-45

"But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven..."

Choosing to do the right thing (including choosing love/prayer) when faced with difficult circumstances is challenging for everyone. Among such circumstances is encountering individuals who hurt, harm, or oppose you (or others that you love) and, despite this, choosing love and forgiveness. Choosing to love your enemies is emblematic of a true commitment unconditional love. And it is a conscious choice—we must choose to do it versus allowing our natural/instinctive reactions to rule. It's not to say that, by loving your enemies, we must abandon our own feelings. Indeed, we may (and are entitled to) believe that someone's actions or behavior is detestable, but loving/forgiving that person is our commitment to God's command. Furthermore, in practice, I've found that loving/praying for those that hurt or harm you will ultimately lead to more peace for yourself.

Beyond this, choosing to love an enemy provides that person the opportunity to change, to repent, to improve. We do not know why someone behaves as they do—they may have endured challenges or circumstances well beyond anything imaginable to us. The love and/or forgiveness we provide to our enemies may be the catalyst for such individuals to alter their ways. It's also true that enemies can become later become friends/brother/sisters in Christ. Moreover, we may unwittingly be viewed by others as an enemy, and we'd hope for the same love and prayer that God has told us to provide others.

Finally, put simply, by choosing to love our enemies, we facilitate good over evil, thereby creating more peace in the world.

Jeff Patenaude

Wednesday, March 12, 2025

Matthew 26:41

“Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

During Lent, we remember and reflect on Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. While it is hard to fully imagine our triumphant savior being tempted, we are presented with the fascinating truth of Jesus being both fully God and fully man. Thankfully we know that means God understands the human condition—not only because Jesus is God, but also because he has felt the same emotions, has been tempted by the same things, and endured the same hardships that we do.

One of the devil’s most effective tactics for luring humanity into sin is through deception. The question is: How can we combat this? The way Jesus countered each of the temptations that Satan threw at him provides us the perfect example. With a scriptural alternative to each temptation Jesus honors God the Father rather than falling into the devil’s trap: when tempted with bread when He was hungry, Jesus quotes scripture referencing the importance of spiritual nourishment over physical gratification. When challenged to assert his divinity, Jesus trusts His Father rather than testing Him. And when tempted with power and prestige, Jesus puts the kingdom of God above the kingdoms of this world.

If we were to have a deep understanding and internalize scriptural examples daily, we too would have the ability to thwart Satan’s lures. As David wrote in Psalm 119, “I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you.” Like David, it’s important for us to meditate on God’s word so that we are able to draw nearer to Him, seek to live as God commands us, and be able to identify temptation so that we may not fall into it. At the crux of this Psalm is the idea that our love of God leads us to value and obey His holy Word. And there’s an important distinction between just knowing scripture and treasuring it. Through the daily discipline of prayer and studying the Bible, we can go beyond simply knowing God’s Word to being changed by it.

As St. Paul says in Ephesians 6, putting on the full armor of God will ready us for spiritual battle against evil. Putting this into practice is so vitally important, because we know all too well that “the spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak.” But by clothing ourselves daily with the armor of God (e.g. prayer, discipline, studying scripture) we are much more able to resist the devil and follow a Godly course instead.

Samantha Van Wormer

Thursday, March 13, 2025

Romans 8:26-27

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

For those of you who remember that commercial for Alka Seltzer jingle “Plop, plop, fizz, fizz, oh, what a relief it is,” this is my all-time, go-to scripture verse when I am at a loss as to just how to pray. This verse always rescues me. It takes the onness out of trying to say just the right words. To come up with the “perfect prayer.” It covers all the bases of my prayer requests. “Come Holy Spirit...” is all I need to begin. The Holy Spirit is a gift that Christ has given me, and I need to rest in the assurance that Christ has got me covered with the precious gift of the Holy Spirit. A quiet pause and peaceful presence will follow. God knows my every need and answers my prayers. Then we also have the Cursillo prayer which invites the Holy Spirit to be with us in our trials and comforts us. This is an excellent meditative prayer.

Cursillo Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit
Fill the hearts of your faithful
And kindle in us the fire of your love.
Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created.
O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit
Did instruct the hearts of His faithful,
Grant that by that same Holy Spirit,
We may be truly wise and enjoy your consolations.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Sharon Stoll

Friday, March 14, 2025

Matthew 25:35

For I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty, and you gave me drink, I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.

As this Lenten season approaches, I have been thinking about my late sister, Alice, and her dedicated work with refugee resettlement through Episcopal Migration Ministries (EMM) and the Lutheran Ministries programs. I have a framed picture of her and some of the Ethiopian refugees honoring her as a member of the Matthew 25 Club, presented to her by the group at St. James House of Prayer. So I am reminded of her good works.

Alice died at the young age of 35, almost 39 years ago. During her final year, she was cared for by Ethiopian refugees from St. James House of Prayer. They were helping her when she could no longer help herself. Although she was never in good health, she reached out to the less fortunate, setting an example we could all aspire to follow.

When Alice was able, she had worked with the Lutheran Ministries program distributing furniture and goods to refugees who had escaped war-torn countries with nothing but the clothes on their backs. I have a fond memory of her carting a mattress on the top of her station wagon to one of the families. The Diocese of Southwest Florida also worked with Episcopal Migration Ministries doing such outreach, and St. James HOP had an active program.

What can we do today? I am saddened by the reading of a letter from our Presiding Bishop, Sean Rowe, as well as President of the House of Deputies, Julia Ayala Harris, which states that the winding down of EMM programs funded by Federal grants will result in the elimination of this ministry. However, the letter states that the Episcopal Church will still stand with migrants and with our congregations who serve vulnerable immigrants and refugees. We are to pray for the refugee families we have served and for the families starting a new life in this country, as well as the dedicated EMM staff who are ending their service to the Episcopal Church. We can also do our part locally and through our diocese.

Bishop Rowe and President Harris further state, "As Christians, our faith is shaped by the biblical story of people whom God led into foreign countries to escape oppression, and no change in political fortunes can dissuade us from God's call to welcome the stranger."

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND – Prayers for refugees and those held in captivity

Almighty and merciful God,
whose Son became a refugee and had no place to call his own;
look with mercy on those who today are fleeing from danger,
homeless and hungry.
Bless those who work to bring them relief;
inspire generosity and compassion in all our hearts;
and guide the nations of the world towards that day when all will rejoice
in your Kingdom of justice and of peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sally Thompson

Saturday, March 15, 2025

2 Timothy 2:20-21

In a large house there are utensils not only of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for special use, some for ordinary. All who cleanse themselves of the things I have mentioned[g] will become special utensils, dedicated and useful to the owner of the house, ready for every good work.

This passage from 2 Timothy is one of my favorites in the Bible, and it's especially poignant during this season of Lent. The verses remind me of the importance of humility and servanthood in my daily life, and to being open to the opportunities that God gives me to help others.

Fun fact: I hate trash. It's ironic because I am an inherently messy person. But being near actual trash (wrappers, discarded food, etc.) makes me anxious. So, when Timothy mentions the possibility of becoming a "waste can" in order to honor God, it really hits home. Can I truly be that selfless, sacrificing my comfort for a greater good? Am I able to live out my faith in such a meaningful way, serving others because that is what God calls us to do?

Mother Teresa once said, "Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love. It's not how much you do, but how much love you put into doing it." Sometimes it's easy for me to forget that statement in my busy, everyday life. It's easy to think that bigger is better ("crystal goblets and silver platters"), and that I need to do something truly great to change the world. But Mother Teresa reminds me that the small decisions and choices that I make every day are forming the person that I am—forming my faith and forming my witness to the world.

Recently, I have been re-reading Shane Claiborne's book *The Irresistible Revolution*. The book is a call to arms for the Church; an inspirational challenge to do things differently. On the topic of 'small faith', Claiborne says, "We live in a world that has lost its appreciation for small things...but amid all the supersizing, many of us feel God doing something new, something small and subtle." Even the smallest actions, done in love, can make a difference in our own personal faith, and in the world. We can all choose to be a container that God can use.

I pray that today we can all have the faith and patience to do something small to serve others—help our neighbor, say 'I love you', forgive someone who has hurt us—and then watch the ways that God transforms our mustard seed of action into something truly extraordinary. Thanks be to God.

Ayana Grady
Director of Children, Youth, and Family Ministries

Sunday, March 16, 2025

Proverbs 3:5-6

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

Philippians 4:6-7

Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Often, I have found myself lost on a figurative island, surrounded by my anxieties and general angst. I know that I am not alone in these feelings. Everyone has their moments of feeling isolated and solitary when met with the problems life throws our way. As the world is never perfect and, in its wonderfully flawed way, always changing, the ability for us to encounter the need to adapt is also always nearby.

This especially happens in times of personal uncertainty about my own future and the future I am trying to prepare for my loved ones. I believe anyone close to me can safely say that I don't do a very good job of sharing those anxieties with anyone. I have an innate sense that I alone have to conquer these problems; I alone have to solve the issues confronting me; I alone have to deal with my confusion and fear. And, as we are often met with a lack of both empathy and sympathy for any ordeal from our neighbor, the sense of being alone to combat these problems truly feels real.

I fight the idea of giving these things up. I have always believed that it is a sign of my own weakness to do so. We feel that everyone is relying on us to be the answer, and when we can't deliver those answers for our loved ones, then we have failed.

However, in those moments of clarity that should happen more often than not, I realize that strength is not in holding onto the problems—the angst of uncertainty. In actuality, true weakness is not trusting God to help, not giving these things to God. Aren't we always told in church that God will take our hands and guide us, comfort us? Yet we do not trust that God actually will, and our human pride gets the best of us.

As a child, I can remember hearing one of my friend's mothers saying to another woman, "Honey, you just have to give it to God." I didn't know what she meant back then and had no idea what the conversation was about. And, frankly, I didn't care at the time. But the phrase always stuck with me. At this moment while writing this,

I can see the room as clearly as if I were standing there today. I hear that woman's voice coming back to me from so long ago. Her voice rings in my head in those times when I have actually forgotten those words and I have let the anxiety of doubt and uncertainty tear me up. "Honey, you just have to give it to God." The absolute simplicity of the message is so powerful to me now as an adult. We just have to trust in God.

Dallas Coffield

Monday, March 17, 2025

John 16:33

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.

1 Peter 5:6-7

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

Both of these verses talk about things that seem particularly relevant to us living in 2025. The mental health epidemic for people from early teens up to senior citizens means peace is hard to come by and anxiety is prevalent. Humility is a rarity, whether from leaders, celebrities, or our own neighbors. Trouble is sadly not a rarity.

But God reminds us that He is in control. He has overcome the world. His hand is mighty. And He also reminds us that He has told us this before, whether we have chosen to hear it or not. And finally, the phrase "in due time" reminds us that things will always unfold on His timeline, not ours. Ultimately, that is truly where peace can be found, when we let go of our false sense of control and trust that He will bring us to where we should be, when we should be there. May we find the strength to be humble enough to accept His gift.

Lee Lowry
Director of Communications

Tuesday, March 18, 2025

St. John's is blessed to have prayerful young adults in the congregation. The two reflections below were written by two of them in response to the question: *What does Lent mean to you?*

To me, Lent is a time to remove something out of your life that you think is keeping you from God. This year I am probably giving up TikTok because that takes up a lot of my time that I could be using to strengthen my relationship with God. Also, I think people can choose to add something to help them with their path. This could be done by setting a specific time for quiet time with the Bible or meditating.

Bailey Turnquist
Junior, Leto High School

Lent is a time to think more deeply about Jesus's ultimate sacrifice for us, and to sacrifice something in our lives that may be difficult, in appreciation. By giving something up we're able to be constantly reminded of the sacrifices Jesus made for us and be more grateful..

Caroline Little
Senior, Plant High School

Wednesday, March 19, 2025

Isaiah 58:1-12

“Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’

“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness[a] will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

Isaiah 58:1-12 really challenges us to think about fasting in a different way. It's not just about giving up food or things for Lent, but about doing things that help others—like standing up against injustice, feeding the hungry, and caring for the homeless. It shows us that true fasting is when we focus on making the world a better place and

showing love to those who need it most.

Looking back at my experiences, especially throughout the Tampa area and on the Mission Trip, I can see how these acts of service have affected my faith. In Tampa, I help feed and provide people with basic necessities through organizations such as Metropolitan ministries, Faith Cafe, and more. It made me realize how lucky I am and how important it is to take care of others. It also made me more compassionate and understanding. I started to see the struggles people face in a new way and really understood the importance of helping when you can.

On the Mission Trip, we worked on building the Dominican community and developing a place where the people could practice their beliefs. We also helped in other ways, and I saw how much even small things can make a big difference. I could feel God working through us, and it made me realize how much He uses us to help others. That made me feel like God was answering my prayers and showing me what my purpose is. Serving others made me feel closer to God, and it deepened my faith in a way I never expected.

This Lent, I'm reminded that fasting isn't just about giving something up, but about serving others and showing love the way God wants us to. When we step up to help, we not only make a difference in other people's lives, but we also strengthen our own faith and grow closer to God. It's an amazing feeling, and it inspires me to keep serving, knowing that every little thing counts.

Chloe Isaacs
Sophomore, Berkley Preparatory School

Thursday, March 20, 2025

Ephesians 4:32

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

I have always tried to live a life rooted in kindness and compassion, guided by my faith and a desire to reflect God's love in my actions. Yet, family conflict and trauma can be some of the heaviest burdens we carry. When hurt comes from those we love the most, the wounds often cut deeper and heal more slowly. It can feel like walking alone through a desert.

This past year, however, I have personally been walking this difficult road. The family conflict I am facing has its roots in trauma that impacted us many years ago. Though time has passed, the echoes of those experiences still ripple through my relationships today.

The pain and complexity of our family discord have weighed heavily on my heart, making me keenly aware of my need for God's guidance and grace. In these times, Lent offers us a unique opportunity to bring our pain to the cross. This season calls us to reflect on Christ's suffering and the radical love He demonstrated in forgiving even those who betrayed and hurt Him. It's a reminder that God understands our pain intimately and invites us to journey with Him toward healing and restoration.

Healing from family discord requires courage and humility. It may mean revisiting painful memories or acknowledging ways we've contributed to the hurt. It certainly means praying for grace—both to extend and to receive forgiveness. It also involves trusting God to work in the hearts of others, even when reconciliation feels impossible.

Jesus' death and resurrection assure us that no pain is beyond redemption. Just as the cross transformed despair into hope, God can transform our broken relationships into something new. While we may not see immediate results, we are called to remain faithful—to pray, to love, and to trust that God is at work, even in the silence.

My Prayer: Gracious Lord, You know the pain of discord and the weight of broken relationships. Help me to trust You with the wounds I carry. Give me the courage to seek forgiveness where I've caused pain and the grace to forgive those who have hurt me. Teach me to rely on Your strength, not my own, as I work toward healing. Let Your love be my guide and Your peace my comfort. Amen.

Donna Gem

Friday, March 21, 2025

John 8:29

“And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.”

The widely known prayer below was written by Thomas Merton, a deeply spiritual Trappist monk. It speaks of a way of being which is deeply dependent on God, trusting that as we strive to do His will, we will not only please Him but find that we are loved beyond measure.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following Your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this You will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, will I trust You always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for You are ever with me and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Thomas Merton
Thoughts in Solitude

Saturday, March 22, 2025

Matthew 16:24

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was an interesting and inspiring German Lutheran pastor, author, and martyr, who was a very powerful spokesman against Adolph Hitler and Nazi Germany. One of his great legacies was to write a book about the Sermon on the Mount, called "The Cost of Discipleship", in which he attacked "cheap grace" as a cover for Christians not seeking out the true virtues of "costly grace". With "cheap grace", one risks absolutely nothing; whereas with "costly grace" one risks everything.

He lived this principle out fully at the end of his own life. Amidst strong personal threats from the Nazis, Bonhoeffer was able to flee Germany and sneak away to America and safety. But he had an immediate change of heart and returned promptly to Germany. He courageously wrote:

I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America this time. I must live through this difficult period in our national history along with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after war, if I do not share the trials of this time with my people ... Christians in Germany will have to face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that a future Christian civilization may survive, or else willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization and any true Christianity. I know which of these alternatives I must choose, but I cannot make that choice from a place of security.

He was indeed arrested after his return to Germany and held in a Nazi prison for over a year and a half. The Nazis then created charges that he was involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler. He was moved to a Berlin prison. They held a kangaroo court against him, during which no witnesses were heard or evidence presented and no defense made. He was judged guilty and hung the next day, on April 9, 1945 (at age 39), just a month before the Germans surrendered and the war ended on May 7, 1945. His dream of helping rebuild a Christian Germany after the war was thus cut short. I would highly recommend doing a Google search of Bonhoeffer to learn more about his amazing, short life, as well as reading his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. There was also a major film about him in 2024, which I have not yet seen.

This Lent I am inspired by Bonhoeffer's concept of "Cheap Grace versus Costly Grace". How much do all of us prefer to lie in the shadows and risk nothing. It is certainly easier and seemingly safer. But real growth in Lent comes from taking a hard look at ourselves and our situation, and then standing up boldly and doing something about it head on. The greatest joy I have experienced on Easter Day has been at the end of those Lenten journeys of hard work. Otherwise, Holy Week comes and goes, with a feeling on the back end of "So what?!"

Peace and blessings to you on your own Lenten pilgrimage this year, wherever it leads you!

Michael Eachon

Sunday, March 23, 2025

1 Peter 5:6-7

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

Motherhood, especially raising boys, often feels like a full-contact sport. One minute, you're breaking up a wrestling match that started as a "hug," and the next, you're marveling at how much dirt can fit into a single pocket. There are scraped knees, endless snack requests, and moments where you wonder if your house will ever be quiet again (spoiler: not any time soon).

In the chaos of parenting, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. We worry about their safety, their future, their faith, and even if they've had enough vegetables this week. Lent is a season that reminds us to step back, humble ourselves, and surrender these anxieties to God. Just as we tell our kids to bring their problems to us instead of trying to handle everything on their own, God invites us to do the same with Him.

Peter tells us to cast our anxieties on God—meaning we aren't meant to hold onto every little fear and stress. Think about how our kids completely trust us. They don't worry about how dinner will get made or if there will be enough snacks (okay, maybe they worry about snacks). They just know we'll take care of them. That's the kind of trust God wants us to have in Him. He cares about every sleepless night, every tantrum in the grocery store, and every moment we wonder if we're doing enough.

This Lent let's practice casting our worries onto God. When we feel the weight of parenting pressing in, let's remember we were never meant to carry it all. Instead of holding tight to our anxieties, let's trust that God, in His perfect timing, will lift us up.

Prayer:

Lord, I know I try to carry more than I should. Help me to trust You with the worries I hold onto so tightly. Thank you for always being there, guiding me and my children, even in the messy, loud, wonderful chaos of parenting. Amen.

Meagan Dorsch (mom to Henry, Leo, Gust, and Felix)

Monday, March 24, 2025

Isaiah 59:1-2

See, the Lord's hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. Rather, your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God.

Writing a piece for Lent is always timely because it forces me to stop and take a breath. This time of reflection has brought to mind immense gratitude for the ways God has walked with me through my painful grief journey since losing my dad in September 2023.

One longstanding provision has been my attendance at the intimate Healing Service in the chapel on Thursdays, where I've felt safe to shed tears among a few close friends. And my participation on the October women's Kairos weekend was healing as well. I was hopeful that all of the energy required would be a good distraction, and in my talk to the inmates and team members I admitted that I'd waited far too long to reap the benefits from joining a hospice support group. Most recently, my husband, John, suggested we join the YMCA. Lo and behold, they offered a Yoga Nidra class which piqued my interest. Once again, I'm learning to slow down and "be present" during this time of deep relaxation and guided imagery.

At this juncture, I believe I am hearing God and seeing His face anew.
Thanks be to God!

MC Jenkins

Tuesday, March 25, 2025

Matthew 19:14

But Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs."

From Our Youngest Parishioners

The following observations on Lent were compiled by Ayana Grady during Children's Chapel.

What is Lent?

"A time when you diet—eat more veggies and less junk food"

"Giving up something"

"Making promises to God"

"Getting ready for Easter"

"When Jesus was in the desert for forty days and was tempted by Satan"

How Do We "Celebrate" Lent?

"By giving up something to become closer to God"

"You respect Jesus with the light in your heart"

"Giving away stuff, like food and toys"

Why is Lent Important in Our Church?

"We have to celebrate it, or we won't be a church"

"It leads to Easter, when Jesus rose again"

"We get to find eggs at church"

Wednesday, March 26, 2025

Luke 22:44

And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

Wikipedia defines courage as the “choice and willingness to confront agony, pain, danger, uncertainty, or intimidation.” I cannot think of a more perfect example of courage than that of Jesus’ agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus certainly knew what was in store for him, and undoubtedly, he was very frightened—so frightened, it seems, that his body showed this intense fear. Luke, a physician, recorded that Jesus’ sweat was like drops of blood.

Although some believe that Luke was simply using a to describe what was happening to Jesus, there is an actual medical condition in which people sweat blood, called “hematidrosis.” With hematidrosis, the sweat glands surrounding tiny blood vessels constrict and then dilate to the point of rupture, causing blood to pour into the sweat glands. This results in the person actually sweating blood; the cause of hematidrosis is extreme anguish. It must be a frightening sight to behold.

Too many people have endured terrible torments that they were powerless to stop. Jesus, however, had the power to end his own ordeal but chose not to do so. Who else but Jesus could show such restraint? He endured all of this because He knew it must be done this way. There simply was no other way to save us.

Matthew 26:53-54

“Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? How then will the Scriptures be fulfilled, which say that it must happen this way?”

Ultimately, Jesus put his trust in God to see him through his horrific punishment and crucifixion, all for the sake of mankind, so that we would be saved.

Psalms 56:3-4

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise—in God I trust and am not afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?

Valerie Hamm

Thursday, March 27, 2025

Psalm 119:105

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

We all understand what a lamp does, especially when it's used to light up a path. But in Psalm 119, the Word of God is described not just as a lamp but as a "lamp unto my feet." Well, why our feet? I found myself wondering.

Perhaps it serves as a reminder. We can use the light to see things far ahead, but also right in front of us. While it seems important to see as much of the path ahead as possible (and God's Truth helps us do that), it's also important, perhaps more important, to see our own feet and to simply keep them moving. We are invited to not just see our path illuminated in front of us, but to boldly step forward into it with our equally illuminated feet.

I believe it also provides us with some comfort that God will not only light the greater path that lies before us, but also our feet so we can see the next step. It shows that His truth and love are here, right next to us, in the immediate present, literally at our feet shining like a lamp in the darkness.

I didn't grow up going to church very much or knowing anything about Lent. In fact, when I joined the choir in March of 2013, it was during Lent (which I didn't realize), and I remember enjoying all the minor key hymns but idly thinking, "Um, where are all the Hallelujahs?"

Fast forward twelve years, and I'm starting to understand the seasons of the church much better. Lent is one I'm still working on though. My appreciation for it grows each year, but in practice I fall short. Perhaps you, like me, can find renewed motivation in observing Lent this year, knowing that the Word of God is right there at our feet as we take the next step.

May we all find the light of the Lord shining like a lamp at our feet this season.

Tori Swilley

Friday, March 28, 2025

2 Timothy 1:6-7

I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you ..., for the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.

The American poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson strongly believed that each person possesses a “spark of divinity” within—the inherent potential for spiritual connection and access to God. He believed that this holy connection gives people an innate capacity to develop both oneness with God and to learn to be aware of each other through virtue in character and action. At the end of his life, St. Paul speaks to Timothy of self-discipline, keeping our eyes open to the needs of others and embodying the ever-present Holy Spirit in our interactions with others.

Queen Elizabeth II put it another way: “Christ’s example helps me to see the value of doing small things with great love.” This is another sort of self-discipline, love and the proper use of one’s power.

I am amazed at how caring people have found small ways to help our neighbors in need, such as establishing Faith Café, Love, Inc., Trinity Café. Even much older organizations that started small and grew exponentially, such as The Salvation Army, Goodwill Industries, Metropolitan Ministries and Feeding Tampa Bay, began with love and self-discipline and grew into organizations with great power to make a difference following the Spirit of God. That is the gift of God that is within us all, if we but dare to try to use it.

Sally Olsson

Saturday, March 29, 2025

Psalm 42:1-2

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?

Most of us are aware of Lent as a season that mirrors Jesus' time of fasting and prayer in the desert. And while the Bible clearly mentions that He was hungry, it makes no mention of thirst. However, clearly the idea of deprivation of any kind that sharpens the spirit falls under the Lenten aegis. I have recently begun the practice of reading the Daily Office, a cycling through of the Psalms on a regular basis, and Psalm 42 continues to strike me with the above words. Admittedly, the Psalmist very regularly speaks of longing for God in various ways, but this particular analogy of deer:water as soul:God particularly calls me.

I think this happens because the type of thirst described happens quite regularly here in the summer months—that craving for water that, when it finally happens, often includes guzzling it down at an incredible speed. When I read this passage from Psalm 42, I ask myself: what does it mean to have that kind of thirst for God? To crave the satisfaction that only God can provide? To feel such joy at encountering God that I “gulp” God down like water on a hot July day in Tampa?

The passage above ends with the question “When can I go and meet with God?” In other words, how can we satisfy our longing? Well, I can think of three primary times and places. The first is when we spend time in the Scripture. Indeed, all who read, meditate, and pray over this collection of devotions are meeting with God in the privacy of their hearts. But even beyond Lent, the more regular the reading, the more often the meeting.

The second is in the time of communal worship, especially in the receiving of the Sacrament of the Eucharist. In fact, the adding of water to the Eucharistic wine is a partly intended as a symbol of Christ as the Water of Life. When we meet as the Body of Christ and receive the Body and Blood of Christ, we are also going and meeting God.

The final place of meeting is in those we serve outside the bounds of the church property. Jesus clearly tells us in Matthew 25:37-40 that our encounters with those we offer assistance to are indeed meetings with Him. If we approach all our caring acts without ego, then that feeling of joy when we have done them is absolutely attributable to encountering “Jesus in disguise,” a term attributed to Mother Teresa.

Of course, any good doctor or nutritionist will tell you that regular hydration is a key to good health, so why not think of continuing to improve your “water” intake after Lent is over for your soul’s health?

Scott Neumeister

Sunday, March 30, 2025

Mark 1:9-12

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

I cannot help thinking that Jesus must have been perplexed when God claimed him to be His Son and called him Beloved. I would guess that Jesus experienced a mix of joy, surprise, bewilderment, and confusion. I suspect this because Jesus was fully human, and that would be a very human response to hearing such a divine proclamation. Clearly Jesus needs time to process this news, and after forty days in the wilderness, He finally reaches a place where he can own his identity as God’s Beloved. How do we know? Because the very next verses tell us that Jesus goes into Galilee “proclaiming the good news of God ... “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:14-15).

For me, Jesus’ process is very good news. I spent a lot of my early life not understanding that I was God’s beloved. When I finally began to hear—really understand—that God loves me, I too needed time to process that message. I had to spend time in the wilderness with the wild beasts, sharing my questions and doubts with God. I had to offer all the reasons I thought I was unlovable and listen for God’s response. But God also sent me many angels in the form of wise friends, mentors, and clergy. They offered themselves up in the beautiful language of poetry, liturgy, song, and story. They welcomed me as a fellow parishioner in the church I now consider my spiritual home.

I emerged from this process with a true understanding that I, like all humankind, was created in the image of God, which means I reflect divine love. And God created me for love and to be love. As Henri Nouwen writes, “Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence.” Love is who we are. It is our truth. And nothing can erase that truth.

In closing, I would like to offer some parting advice to anyone who encounters the wilderness in their own life. May you experience the companionship of Christ who knows the barren places better than we do. May your arduous journey amongst the wild beasts teach you who you really are—the precious and truly loved child of God. And may you listen and believe the angels in all the places and guises you may encounter them who share the good news of God.

Nicholas Nitch

Monday, March 31, 2025

2 Timothy 1-7

For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

This verse is found in a letter from Paul to encourage Timothy through love and power as he goes through hard times.

We were never promised easy, pain-free lives. Life can be hard, life can be downright painful, but if we LEAN into GOD when we are brought to our knees, we find the unconditional love, necessary encouragement, and strength that resides within us as the Light of Christ! I try hard to keep my light lit!

This February 18th, it will be five years since I lost my BEST Friend, my BIGGEST cheerleader and my first Valentine: my FATHER. Our relationship was unlike anything I knew or have ever known since. I admired my father on many levels. He was a brilliant constitutional law scholar, a magnificent cook and most of all he was the most amazing grandfather, PAPA, to my three sons. He gave them style, the love of food, and a caring empathetic heart for all persons, creatures, and plants, and sincere unconditional LOVE! Also, they witnessed that there was never a lonely, poor, or frightened law student that did not find a place at the table in the Baldwin home.

Going through this grief, which is still present daily, GOD has provided me an unprecedented opportunity to forge a magical relationship with my dear mom. She has lived with us for almost two years. It is a sacred season of my life. I have come to realize that my mom was the one behind my dad, meaning she encouraged our close relationship. As a therapist for 27 years before she went to law school at age 59, she knew of the importance of the father/daughter bond, and she made sure I had that special one. As my mom ages and her brain and body change, I sense my father's presence stressing to me the importance of taking care of her, all while allowing her independent nature to continue to bloom.

In life, if we are lucky enough to have the privilege of old age, we all will be faced with significant obstacles and with changes. As a companion, I hope you can understand that there are hard days and hard nights where I fall on my knees with exhaustion and self-doubt, but on those days, I rely on prayer and meditation. Being a companion can be isolating and oh-so-lonely, but I will never regret this gift and this opportunity God has given me to get to know my amazing mom. On those days and nights when I feel so alone or inadequate, I beg for guidance, for patience and, above all, to show the LOVE of Christ to her and to myself. It is imperative that I show love with a

selfless heart. One of my coping mechanisms I use is to exercise every single day. I do NOT miss a day! Self-discipline is part of the fruits of the spirit and is emphasized in this verse as well. Self-care is essential to ensure that I am healthy and able to be the caregiver I need to be—sharing the light of love of Christ above everything.

This Lenten season, may we all try to remind ourselves and others to be encouraged in the knowledge that what we are all seeking is within us! We are ENOUGH. God will not leave us or forsake us!

Leland Baldwin

Tuesday, April 1, 2025

Philippians 4:6

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

I have to remind myself to slow down in a world that moves so fast. More often than not, I find myself longing to just sit and do nothing. My favorite thing to do is to sit with my Littles and snuggle while we talk about what we will be doing that day, or how their day went. I remember one day, we were all home on a Saturday, and for once, we did not have baseball, softball, birthday parties, or an event to attend. We were all playing and laughing when the phone rang. It was my husband's phone. He stepped out to take a call. The kids all got quiet and then went back to normal within minutes.

However, our littlest was quiet and still. A very rare occurrence. I asked her what she was thinking about. She said, "Mommy, why can't we know who Daddy is talking to?" I told her it was not our place or our job, but we could pray for that person. They called Daddy because they needed a friend or someone to talk to. She immediately shut her eyes, folded her hands, and said, "God, I want to pray for the person Daddy is on the phone with. I want them to know they are not alone and they are loved." I gave her a big hug, and she started wiggling away to go for a swim. Later that evening, after a swim and showers, she asked, "Mommy, how do we know God hears us?" I said to her, "That is why we pray. We do it as often as we can because that is how we are able to slow down and listen to what God is saying, and how we get to know him better." She seemed content with that answer, so I told her, "Now go brush your hair, and say a prayer!"

Where can we do a better job of pausing for prayer? I use tools like the Bible App and verse of the day, or leverage time during bedtime routines with kids. Make prayer a part of your morning and evening routines. Pray while you brush your teeth or your hair! Pray while you are on your morning or evening walk. Just pray! It doesn't take long, but it goes a long way in building our relationship with God and our neighbors.

Kate Wood

Wednesday, April 2, 2025

Psalm 51:11-13

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.

Give me the joy of your saving help again and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.

Psalm 43:3-4

Send out your light and your truth, that they may lead me, and bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling; That I may go to the altar of God, to the God of my joy and gladness; and on the harp I will give thanks to you, O God, my God.

As I read Psalm 51, my mind takes me back to when I was first an acolyte. Psalm 51 reminds me of Psalm 43, one of the many Psalms that I use for reflection regularly. As an acolyte in the church, we would recite the “Preparation for Mass” from the St. Vincent’s Guild. Psalm 43 was a part of the Preparation that we prayed each Sunday.

How do Psalm 51 and Psalm 43 relate to Lent? Well, Lent is an invitation for us to rearrange our priorities—to focus on what matters most and leave behind what matters least. “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” I pray that during Lent I will be able to let God renew a right spirit within me. “Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me.” I pray each day that I will not be cast away from God and that the Holy Spirit will be with me. “Give me the joy of your saving help again, and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.” And I pray each day that I will receive the joy of God’s saving grace.

I grew up in an atmosphere of looking for what was wrong and not supporting or lifting up what was good and what was loving. It has taken me years to work on removing that negative mindset. Because of the love and support of my grandmother, my wife Margaret, my Cursillo experience, my Discovery Weekend experience and a whole host of wonderful spiritual leaders in our church, I am now able to look for the light and goodness that God has bestowed in all people. That is why both Psalm 51 and Psalm 43 speak to me and enrich me each time I read and reflect on them. “Send out your light and your truth, that they may lead me, and bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling; That I may go to the altar of God, to the God of my joy and gladness; and on the harp I will give thanks to you, O God my God.”

I end with a prayer from Henri Nouwen:

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 which you have prepared for me. Amen.

Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Show Me the Way*

Paul Brokaw

Thursday, April 3, 2025

Deuteronomy 8:3

People don't live on bread alone. No, they live on whatever comes out of the LORD's mouth.

Having gone to St. John's Episcopal Day School from kindergarten through eighth grade, I was well-versed at an early age about the significance of Lent in the church calendar. We students learned that, just as Christ deprived himself in the desert for forty days, we should imitate His giving up of something dear to us to sharpen our relationship with God. For most of us, that something was food-related: sweets and McDonald's were the two usual targets. And no, giving up broccoli never passed the smell test with my or any of my friends' parents (our parents serving as sort of accountability partners during Lent).

Only when I grew older did I realize the importance of food (and specifically bread as a metaphor) in the story of Jesus's temptation in the desert. At the end of Christ's forty days of giving up eating, the Devil appears and taunts him, "Since you are God's Son, command these stones to become bread." Jesus actually then quotes the above Deuteronomy verse back to the tempter! Himself the Word of God, He uses the Scripture as a reminder to Temptation itself that living—really living, as in "having life and having it more abundantly"—comes from intimacy with God and God's word. Whatever the body is enduring, Jesus knows that "whatever comes out of the LORD's mouth" is the source of true nourishment of our core being.

In the Lord's Prayer, we pray "Give us this day our daily bread," but the Greek word translated as "daily" (epiousion) literally means "super-essential." While we can agree that food is essential for earthly life, the super-essential bread of God's word and guidance is even more what this prayer is calling us to long for—the depth of relationship with both the Word (Jesus) and the word of Scripture. In Lent, our giving up, of "bread" or something else, is meant to enliven our attunement to our need for this super-essential bread.

I am so grateful that part of the ministry of St. John's is this devotional, which—no matter what "bread" you may have given up for Lent—presents daily bread of the kind Jesus highlighted in his battle with the tempter. I hope this Lent brings nourishment of the deepest kind and a life more abundant through it.

Scott Neumeister

Friday, April 4, 2025

Isaiah 58:6-7

“No, this is the kind of fasting I want: Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people. Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help.”

The word grateful is engraved on my paperweight. It was a gift from my mother during a difficult time and sits in plain view on my desk as I tackle deskwork—always drawing me to focus on the bigger picture.

Lent is something we should be grateful for. This season encourages me to reset, to dig deeper and to contemplate God’s word. In Lent we are given the opportunity to reorganize our priorities toward inner spiritual reflection.

Often, I misplace my priorities. I am always looking for time to finish my work, but rarely do I give the same attention to spending time with God in prayer. Lent gives us a chance to break out of this cycle.

Isaiah 58 reminds us of the spirit of Lent. This spirit is one of reflection and replacement. By giving up worldly things, we have more room to reflect on our Holy God. This allows us to replace our focus on worldly things with Holier thoughts and actions. It is a season of spiritual edification—and one we should be immensely grateful for.

Kim Osborne

Saturday, April 5, 2025

Joel 2:12-13

Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.

I came to St. John's on the first Sunday in December of 2020, in the middle of COVID. I was warmly greeted at the door by Michael and Dallas, who invited me to sit with them. The church was sparsely attended, but that in no way diminished the beauty of the building, the celestial sound of the choir, or the heartwarming homily by Fr. Michael. The very next day I received a phone call from Fr. Michael welcoming me to St. John's. We spoke for over an hour and shared stories about our faith journeys.

A few days later I received a call from Deacon Kathleen, who invited me to meet her for coffee and a chat. We connected right away, and she connected me to groups and outreach programs that have helped grow and further my faith in ways I could have never imagined.

Today we are in the season of Lent 2025, and I am reflecting on the words of Joel 2:12-17 and the four gospel stories of John's baptism of Jesus. After having been baptized, Jesus set himself on a solitary journey of prayer, contemplation, and faith.

I admit that I'm not one who is known for fasting and mourning; however, turning to the Lord with all my heart is something I'm drawn to do in the company of the community of St. John's. After many years of ups and downs, feeling welcomed and valued by my faith community, and knowing that God's love is steadfast, gives me strength to do an honest introspection this Lenten season. I remind myself that Jesus used forty days in the wilderness after his baptism to prepare himself for his transforming ministry. What will forty days of setting aside a little bit of time each day to "rend my heart" to the Lord lead me to discover about my continuing walk with Christ and my community of faith?

Shirley Susich

Sunday, April 6, 2025

Romans 15:1-4

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves; let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to edify him. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached thee fell on me." For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

This past year has been incredibly challenging for so many reasons. As we reflect on the collective trauma, illness, devastation, and conflict we've both witnessed and experienced, we know that God is not out to get us. Rather, God has presented us with opportunity, both locally and globally, to lift each other up and embody the commandment to love our neighbors, to serve with gladness and singleness of heart. We see this love in action: doctors caring for patients in war zones, chefs preparing meals for those displaced by natural disasters, and neighbors opening their homes to those in need.

It can be difficult to recognize these acts of love when we're overwhelmed by our challenges—caring for a friend or relative, navigating workplace stress and burnout, or simply meeting our basic needs. Precisely during these times, we should seek to recognize the encouragement, support, and hope that God offers. When we focus on our struggles, we sometimes miss the presence of divine grace. While we often pray for outcomes, God's plan may not align with what we want. Pray for this understanding and acceptance.

We are called to be instruments of God's peace, to extend His love to those in need, to allow that peace to flow through us, and to choose love. By actively living our faith, we can experience personal growth and transformation. As we prepare for Easter through prayer and reflection, the weight of earthly pain is lessened by the hope found in scripture and by recognizing the abundance of goodness in the world around us.

Laura and Hugh Cruse

Monday, April 7, 2025

Matthew 15:10-20

Jesus called the crowd to Him and said, “Listen and understand. What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him ‘unclean,’ but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean.’”

“What did you give up for Lent?” I have always found that funny—presumptuous, but “funny” in a predictable sort of way since we always viewed Lent as a time when we were expected to “quit” something. As well, I’m sure many would echo the sentiment that, as a kid at least, it was usually something you really liked, but it was “bad” for you (and harder to give up)—like candy, or soft drinks, or even “sweets” altogether (Good luck with that...!).

For Lent, my dad always used to give up “snacks” that he insisted were important to him, like celery with Cheez Whiz, or ice cream at night; curiously specific, but once you saw how he handled them on Sundays during Lent, you knew it had to be true...! By contrast, I can’t remember my mom ever enduring such an overt sacrifice, yet somehow, I knew that there was always “something going on inside.”

You see, for me it wasn’t until I was a little older that I was “taught” (told, really, with “the waving finger of lecture” in my face) that self-restraint could apply to more than just “bad” foods: rather, to things like talking back or arguing; using “bad” words; gossiping; misbehaving; or, being disrespectful (to name a few)—and every bit as hard to give up!

Lent is a season of self-examination, repentance, and spiritual renewal. Often, people observe this time by fasting from certain foods or habits, but Jesus reminds us that true purity is not about external practices alone—it is about the condition of our hearts. The Pharisees were all about strictly adhering to religious rules about food and ritual purity, believing these “things” made a person righteous. Here, Matthew reminds us how Jesus redirects the focus: what we say, how we treat others, and what comes from our hearts matter far more. Are our words filled with kindness, truth, and grace? Or do they reveal bitterness, anger, or pride?

During this season of Lent, I pray that, with God’s help, I will not only give up external (superficial) things but also examine what is coming from within. Am I concealing resentment? Am I speaking in a way that uplifts, or tears down? True spiritual transformation begins when we allow God to clean our hearts, making room for love, kindness, and humility.

Heavenly Father, purify my heart this Lenten season. Help me not just to focus on external sacrifices, but to reflect on what truly matters—my words, my thoughts, and my love for others. May everything that flows from me be pleasing in Your sight. Amen.

Today, be mindful of your words. Make a conscientious effort to offer encouragement—to lift others up, avoid gossip, and replace criticism with kindness. If you're holding onto bitterness or negativity, you know who to ask for help! "What did you give up for Lent?!"

Bob Alter

Tuesday, April 8, 2025

1 Peter 5: 6-7

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

Anxiety—worry—unease—troubles—demented with anxiety. There are times I can use these words to describe my state of mind and maybe you can, too. In today's fast-paced and complicated world, many of us suffer from anxiety (not to be confused with the medical diagnosis of clinical anxiety). To find peace, we need *faith, prayer, hope and patience*.

But what if your *faith* is intercepted by doubt? The Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard taught us that belief without doubt is not truly faith...it's just resignation. Doubt is what makes our faith an act of courage, a leap into the unknown. Faith and doubt are not opposing positions; they often exist side by side. The way we cope with doubt will either deepen our relationship with God or pull us away. Through prayer, scripture reading and seeking counsel with other Christians, our relationship with God will be deepened. We will realize that we are not alone in our struggle with anxiety. Also, we will realize that doubt kills our confidence.

We must *pray*. We must ask for wisdom, comfort, and peace. God is always near. God knows our thoughts, so do not be afraid to go to God. We can go to God in prayer at any time.

We must have *hope*. God gives us the ability to hope, and our hope shows our trust in God. Biblical hope can be held on to, and it can be relied on.

We must have *patience*. We must wait patiently because God's timing works outside of our understanding. God's timing is always purposeful, and we cannot understand divine timing.

When we worry—we must have *faith*. We must *pray*. We must have *hope*. We must have *patience*.

Vera Furtick

Wednesday, April 9, 2025

Matthew 5:43–47

“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”

In today’s world, division feels like a constant presence. Families are fractured over politics, friendships dissolve over ideological differences, and neighbors who once shared meals now avoid one another. Social media amplifies outrage, news outlets fuel discord, and the distance between us seems to widen daily.

As we journey through Lent, a season of reflection and repentance, Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:43–47 call us back to a radical way of living: love your enemies. It’s easy to love those who think like us, but Jesus challenges us to go beyond—beyond comfort, beyond pride, beyond the temptation to dehumanize those with whom we disagree.

Loving our enemies does not mean ignoring injustice or compromising truth, but it does mean responding with grace instead of bitterness. When someone angers us—whether it’s a coworker, a social media post, or a family member—this verse offers a guiding light. Instead of reacting with frustration, we can pause, breathe, and pray: “Lord, help me see this person as You do. Soften my heart, and let me be an instrument of Your peace.”

Hate and division are easy paths, but love requires strength. The more we choose love, the more we reflect our Father in heaven, who gives the same sun and rain to all people, regardless of their beliefs. In a world filled with discord, may we be known not for our anger, but for our love.

Lenten Reflection:

Who in your life challenges you to love as Jesus commands?

How can you replace frustration with prayer when encountering someone you disagree with?

Today, make an intentional effort to show kindness to someone with whom you struggle.

Prayer:

Gracious God, in a world of division, let me be a vessel of Your love. When anger rises, remind me to pray. When frustration tempts me, lead me to compassion. Help me to love not just in word, but in action, so that I may reflect Your light in the darkness. Amen.

Roddy Belfatti

Thursday, April 10, 2025

Joel 2:12-13

“Yet even now,” declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning; and rend your hearts, not your garments...

My goal in life is to serve Christ, to share what I have with others, and to treat people with love, respect and kindness. This is who I want to be, and I believe it’s the heart of who I am. But as hard as I try, I am not always a patient person, and as much as it pains me to admit it, I am not always thoughtful and kind. These characteristics generally emerge when one of my many projects is derailed for some reason.

The prophet Joel speaks to a people in crisis, calling them back to God in repentance. His words echo through the centuries, challenging me to examine my heart. Do I take on new projects for God or for some other reason? Why do I get so irritated when something doesn’t go as planned?

I look at Lent as a season set aside for this very purpose—a time to return to the Lord with a deep and sincere desire to change within. Joel tells me to “rend my heart, not my garments.” In ancient Israel, tearing one’s clothes was a symbolic act of grief or repentance. But God makes clear that outward signs, if not accompanied by inward change, are meaningless. And my experience is that they don’t last. My call from God is to turn my heart to Him, to move beyond superficial rituals, and to engage in genuine repentance and self-examination.

When I read “with fasting, weeping, and mourning,” it reminds me that repentance isn’t always easy. It requires vulnerability. I am sad when I consider the ways that I

have turned away from God. And I am grateful because God promises that when we return to Him, He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love (Joel 2:13). This is the mercy we experience, not only in the season of Lent but year-round.

So, how does this work? For me it often means turning away from distractions that take my focus off God. This may be mindless scrolling on social media and other time-sucking diversions. It also involves confessing the ways I have fallen short and seeking to renew my commitment to follow Christ more closely.

The answer for me is not in saying no to commitments where I believe I'm called to serve. I love interesting and challenging things to do where I can make a difference. It's a matter of trusting that the Holy Spirit will give me the guidance and inspiration I need to navigate the twists, turns and potholes that can appear in my life and trust that, even though I make mistakes, I can always repent, return to the Lord, and immediately begin again.

Father God,

We come before You in this season of Lent, acknowledging the ways we have turned away from You. We confess that we often look for comfort and security in places other than You. Help us to rend our hearts, not our garments, and to seek You with sincerity and humility. Give us the courage to face our shortcomings and the grace to trust in Your boundless mercy. We thank You for the promise that when we return to You, You are compassionate and quick to forgive. Draw us near to You during this time of reflection and renewal. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Action: This week, reflect on areas of your life where God may be calling you to return. Is there a habit, relationship, or mindset that you need to surrender to Him? Take intentional steps to deepen your relationship with God through prayer, Scripture reading, and acts of service. Let these actions flow from a heart that longs to be transformed by His love.

Marci Thomas

Friday, April 11, 2025

Psalm 42:1-2

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?

The three primary definitions of *pant*: “to breathe hard and quickly, as after exertion; to gasp, as for air; to long with breathless or intense eagerness.”

I ask myself: do I long for God with intense eagerness? Are my daily exercises in prayer, meditation, worship and service enough? My mind replies: “My efforts never seem enough to repay the immensity of Your Mercy and Compassion for me, Lord!”

Is my faith and trust in God strong enough to continue to make my way through life gracefully, still devotedly to the God Ideal? Through the world’s and life’s increasing challenges, especially for this aging body? Fear makes me gasp! My heart retorts: “Fear keeps you in separation from God. Let it go! Give it back to God, who has the power to transform it and you!” *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.* (John 4:18)

Where is the living God in this world, greedy to satisfy its own desires (mine included)? Lord, where is Your Mercy when mothers, fathers, and children are separated from one another in death of diverse forms through war, deportation, immigration, or simply natural causes? My soul cries out: “Keep my heart tender, keep my mind vigilant, keep my eyes open, Lord. Here I am—show me the way to best help You in Your people!” *On the third day, while I was sitting under an oak, suddenly a voice came out of a bush opposite me and said, “Ezra, Ezra!” And I answered, “Here I am, Lord,” and I rose to my feet.* (2 Esdras 14:1-3)

How often do I, do we, truly experience meeting God?

I meet you, dear Beloved, in the rising and the setting of the glorious sun each day, in the rising and falling of my breath each moment; in the dense fog this morning over the pond, in the fog of mind left behind by Covid.

I meet you, dear Beloved, in the person lying on the cold pavement on the corner near where I live, covered in a Mexican blanket, still sustained (hopefully) by Your breath and in my breath caught in the sadness of my heart as I drive by to work.

I meet you, dear Beloved, in the tears of a baby crying for its dead mother in Gaza, in the tears of a baby being baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and

Holy Ghost at church.

I meet you, dear Beloved, in the blood of my human family shed violently in cities and towns globally, in the sacrament of Your Body and Blood in worship shed for us for eternity.

I meet you, dear Beloved, in joy and sorrow; in beauty and its destruction; in life and life being taken away; in courage and fear; in hope and despair. I meet you in us—we, Your people, thirsting for Your love often in all the wrong places, thirsting for Your life in our daily lives.

Jan De Pinto
Parish Secretary, M.A.M.

Saturday, April 12, 2025

Psalm 103:11-14

For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion for His children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear Him; for He knows how we are formed. He remembers that we are dust.

I find satisfaction in counting and measuring things and always appreciate a good spreadsheet. In the church as in life, there is much to measure. We track Sunday service attendance, baptisms and new members, meals served to the hungry, progress towards a fundraising goal, and much more. All of these things are outward signs of God's love at work in the world, but we can't add them up to measure God's love for His creation. As the Psalmist says, God's love for us is immeasurable.

The second part of today's verse from Psalms considers the magnitude of God's forgiveness of our sins. Jesus addressed forgiveness with the disciples. They didn't have the advantage of spreadsheets but did count things and look for discrete measures. [As an aside, I can relate to them counting how much bread and fish they had available to feed the multitude and finding it lacking.] More on point is Peter trying to get to the bottom of how much forgiveness is really necessary. Thinking of the rabbinical teaching that you have to forgive someone three times, Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" (Matthew 18:21) Jesus responded by explaining that forgiveness must be limitless.

The end of this excerpt from Psalm 103 reminds of us the words from Genesis 3:19 that we hear during the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." As we journey through the season of Lent, may we all rest in God's immeasurable love and unlimited forgiveness as we extend mercy, compassion, and forgiveness to ourselves and others. And we don't need to keep track.

Betsy Graham

Sunday, April 13, 2025

Ezekiel 37:5-6

Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am God.

I have always found this scripture one of the most spiritually uplifting messages in the Bible. While it speaks of the valley of the dry bones, specifically of the Israelites and their state of exile, it certainly relates to our experiences of dry bones and the hope that God will be our source of restoration.

Life doesn't seem to be lived without times when we feel like we are in exile or wandering in the desert. Lent is perhaps when we reflect on these times and ponder how they have transformed our lives.

One of my desert experiences was a health crisis in 2012 with a diagnosis of breast cancer. I recently reread my journal during that time, and this entry most accurately expresses my initial reaction: "I feel like I am trapped in a lion's cage, staring down this huge ferocious animal. Will he eat me, or take a bite out of me? Or will I escape like a little mouse through a hole in the cage?"

While this is an extreme example, there are many other ways in which we may feel we are living in the valley of dry bones: in our culture, our relationships, our prejudices, our life's purpose. We can feel dry and deserted, praying for God to move in our lives.

I did feel his presence and sustaining love during this time. He showed me overwhelming love through my family, my friends, my doctors, and my church family. While my treatment was harsh, akin to wandering in the desert, thanks be to God, I was the little mouse who escaped through the hole in the cage.

This experience and many others have shown me how miraculous, how faithful, how restorative God's love in action can be. For just as God was faithful to the Israelites, he will be faithful to us.

Indeed, He can take the driest of bones, lay on sinews, then flesh, and breathe new life into us.

Margaret Brokaw

Monday, April 14, 2025

Hebrews 9:11

But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

This reading for the Monday of Holy Week is so appropriate and furthers our understanding of God's plan for His people. Hebrews points toward the events in Jesus' life that we will experience with him throughout the week.

We remember that before Christ comes, Israel has the law. The law requires animal sacrifices, "the blood of goats and calves," to be offered repeatedly to cleanse the people of Israel from their sins. The law may not simply be nullified, leaving a void. There must be something to take its place.

When Christ comes the law is no longer needed—it has faded away. The space that it leaves is filled with the coming of Christ as a high priest. His sacrifice on the cross, his blood will take away the sins of the whole world once, for all time. He will make things right between God and us. We will be God's beloved children for eternity. The taking away of sins is like a fog that has been lifted. Because of Jesus and his sacrifice, we can see clearly God's goodness, His mercy, His grace. Now with purer hearts we may worship God more deeply, more fully.

With the knowledge of these "good things" that God has done for us, let us walk with our Lord this Holy Week. May we ponder the greatness of our God and the gift of His son, our savior Jesus Christ. And may we contemplate with full and thankful hearts his eternal, redemptive love.

The Reverend Mary Alice Lopez
Deacon

Tuesday, April 15, 2025

John 16:33

"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."

A friend from another faith tradition once shared how much she loves the way we "pass the peace" at St. John's when she has attended services. Her appreciation made me realize that I take this moment for granted. How incredible it is that, each week, we reconcile with one another and proclaim peace in a world filled with uncertainty and division. After communion, we pray, "Send us now into the world in peace."

Yet if I were one of Jesus' disciples hearing these words in John 16:33, would I have felt at peace? Jesus was about to be arrested. I would surely be plagued by fear and uncertainty. If I'm honest, there are days in my own life when it feels nearly impossible to "take heart" in the face of suffering, loss, and injustice.

But Jesus' words are not just an encouragement; they are a promise. He has overcome the world. His life, death, and resurrection secure a peace that transcends our world.

While we pray in petition for peace for one another and in the world, this passage reminds me to also pray in thanksgiving for the peace that already exists—the peace Christ gives through his sacrifice, a peace that passes all understanding—even in a troubled world.

Anne Williams

Wednesday, April 16, 2025

Matthew 6:1-4

Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

For me, Lent is a time to reflect on Christ's sacrifice on the cross and to really absorb what that sacrifice means to me. Some Christians choose to give up something they really enjoy for Lent or to participate in a particular community service to symbolize the sacrifice Christ made for us and show Him our gratitude; but for me in the bigger picture I ask: how can I show my devotion to Christ for what He has done for me? How can I become a better person, and Christ-like?

I grew up in the early 60's and 70's when women were still the main hostesses, caretakers, and problem-solvers, as well as go-to individuals most days for the children and in the home. When experiencing this nurturing of others, I became a "people pleaser." My mother (bless her soul) was always very self-conscious of what others thought and said about her and her family. Sometimes my act of alms and good intentions, I must admit, were out of guilt or just something we were expected to do—or just to be "liked" more.

Matthew 6: 1-4 says to do good deeds/alms not to be rewarded by others, but in silence and secrecy to be seen by Christ. I have come to understand this scripture much more since my retirement a year ago when I started to give deeper thought into where I can help others and make a difference. Good deeds mean so much more if they are truly given from the heart. I continue to soul-search to be sure I am participating in good deeds for the right reasons—not only because they are the "right thing to do" but because I feel strongly about them and truly choose to do them without praise. And of course, I pray to Christ for help with these choices so I make them selflessly as He did for us when he died on the Cross. My participation as a volunteer in Cornerstone Kids, an at-risk after school program, was one of the recent volunteer deeds which I felt my presence there was truly from the heart. More importantly, Christ knows I am there not for flattery, but because I truly want to be there.

I don't mean to say to stop doing favors for friends and families or being a "people

pleaser.” For most of us, that is a favorable and very kind quality. Just take to the time to pray and see what dedications speak to you this Lenten season as you ponder Christ’s sacrifice for us. And then do them, not only for the ones in need, but for Christ and you.

Trish McKay

MAUNDY THURSDAY, April 17, 2025

John 13:33-34

“My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”

Today, Maundy Thursday, is still very emotional for us, even two thousand years later. As we recall the tragic events that happen after the last meal that the disciples share with Jesus, we can visualize those dramatic moments. Jesus asks his disciples to watch with him for an hour. We see him kneeling and in agony, praying earnestly, so that his sweat becomes as great drops of blood falling to the ground. He rises, and seeing that his disciples are sleeping, he tells them to get up.

A kiss becomes the ironic symbol of betrayal—the most devastating act that one can inflict on another. For Jesus to be given up by one of his twelve disciples, who eats with him, walks with him, learns from him about the love of God—this is very hard for us to grasp. That one action of a kiss sets into motion a sequence of events that becomes a rising tide that no one can stop: the unlawful arrest, the mocking, the trial, the false witness.

What are the other eleven disciples thinking? Are they remembering what has just happened at supper, that Jesus is asking them to eat and remember him? Are they remembering their master on his knees, washing their feet? Can they recall the new commandment that Jesus has given them, to love one another? They might be saying, “What has Judas done? We don’t understand. What can we do? Will we be arrested?” They are fearful and confused. And as the prophet Zechariah writes, they, like sheep when the shepherd is struck, will scatter. And like sheep, the disciples all run away. All but one.

Today we will contemplate what occurs on this night. Jesus assumes the role of the lowest servant of the household, washing the disciples’ feet. After supper he tells them, “Today, I give you a new commandment, that ye love one another.” From the word “commandment,” we get the name Maundy Thursday. We remember Jesus’ fervent prayers, the betrayal with a kiss. We remember all the injustices that Jesus suffers, all for our sake. What wondrous love is ours. Let us be the one who does not run away.

The Reverend Mary Alice Lopez
Deacon

GOOD FRIDAY, April 18, 2025

Hebrews 10:16-25

The Holy Spirit testifies saying, “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds,” then he adds, “I will remember their sins and their misdeeds no more.” Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin. Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Our annual commemoration of the Holy Week, which begins with the Triumphal Entry of our Lord into Jerusalem, finds its climax on what we call Good Friday. The shouts of cheer and welcome from the crowds with their palm branches symbolizing victory thrown on His path have now turned into shouts of hatred and condemnation. The irony is, of course, that a real victory was to be won by Christ from the cross. No, it was not the victory the people of Israel were led to believe they should expect (that of a physical army defeating their nation’s enemies with violence), but then our true adversary is not physical, but spiritual. From the cross, our Blessed Lord entered into a cosmic battle with evil itself. He willingly allowed the worst of both the earthly and spiritual realms surround and encircle him. In the midst of the agony of the cross, all sin—from the moment of the devil’s fall from heaven until the nails were driven into His precious hands and feet and everything in between—was cast onto Him. He allowed it to literally consume His life. When He uttered, “It is finished,” His spiritual foes probably for a moment had hoped that was it, that they had won. Had they been right, it would certainly not be called Good Friday but a terrible and dreadful Friday. Just another good person killed needlessly. A shame.

But that’s not how it ended, is it? The climax does not end with a cliffhanger. From the cross, our Lord indeed took upon himself the weight of all sin past, present, and future, but as that weight took him down to the depths of death itself, from there He broke open the lid of the grave by the blast of the Resurrection. That is why we call it Good. Because from the cross Christ found humanity worthy of God’s forgiveness, worthy even of His own life. Our “great High Priest,” as the author of the Letter to

the Hebrews refers to Him, has offered Himself as a once-and-for-all sacrifice for sin. From that terrible place of torture and death, the cross, Christ now makes it a place of forgiveness and reconciliation. Where death once reigned, our Lord now offers new life.

The liturgy we participate in on this day reflects what we do with that new life. Because we have indeed been “sprinkled clean” and washed with the pure water of Baptism and are welcomed by God into His sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, we are then naturally led to do certain specific Christ-like things, praying for people everywhere according to their needs:

For unity
For our leaders, temporal and spiritual
For the neglected, marginalized, and persecuted
For those who do not know the Gospel

And we ask our most merciful God and Father to let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by Him through whom all things were made: Jesus Christ our Lord.

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Today is indeed Good Friday.

The Reverend Dale W. Van Wormer
Associate Rector

HOLY SATURDAY, April 19, 2025

Matthew 27:57-61

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph, who also was himself a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

Holy Saturday is a day unlike any other in the church year. On this day alone, the celebration of the Holy Eucharist is prohibited. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary sit opposite the sealed tomb as the horribly barbaric reality of the death of Jesus, their dear friend, settles in. Deep grief beyond consolation. Disappointment. Perhaps a sense of betrayal or even anger. Silence.

God made himself known yesterday—the Earth trembled, the curtain was torn, the dead rose. Jesus uttered his last words before dying on the cross; words of anguish at being abandoned but also words of forgiveness. But not today. Today both God and Jesus are silent. Deathly silent.

On Holy Saturday, we allow ourselves to feel the emotions of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. It is that deep sense of loss that makes our celebration on Easter Day, the Sunday of the Resurrection, so magnificently joyful. That is the liturgical purpose of recognizing Holy Saturday, if only briefly, in our prayer lives.

But Holy Saturday is more than that because most of us have lived the experience of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary; those times of deathly silence between the experience of loss, trepidation, or seemingly unconquerable challenge, and the dawn of the new day when all is well once again. Those Saturdays between the prayer and the answer; Saturdays that often last far longer than a day. On those Saturdays in our lives when Jesus and God are silent, we feel the same sense of loss, abandonment, and despair that these two Marys feel on Holy Saturday.

But we are Christians, and so today and on those in-between Saturdays of our lives, we can trust God and wait in hope-filled silence. Unlike Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, we know the rest of the story.

The Reverend Charles E. Connelly
Retired Priest in Residence

EASTER SUNDAY, April 20, 2025

1 Peter 1:3-5

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

This Easter season invites each of us at Saint John's to reflect on the mystery of the empty tomb and the risen Christ. May we embrace the hope that the resurrection brings and find confidence in the truth of the verse above.

During Lent, we focused on the weight of sin and the need for atonement—a burden that was lifted on that first Good Friday. Jesus' miraculous resurrection and the testimonies of His followers remind us that our sins are forgiven and washed away in the pure, life-giving blood of our Savior, Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. What once seemed beyond our reach is now a reality, accessible to us through the Holy Spirit and our personal relationship with God.

As we leave behind the reflective forty days of Lent and enter this vibrant fifty-day season, let us rejoice in the redemption of our lives and our relationships—with God, with one another, and with the world. Though we remain imperfect, we are redeemed by the boundless grace of Jesus Christ. For this transformative love, we join in the joyful cry of “Alleluia! Praise God, whose work in our lives surpasses all we can ask or imagine.” May this praise resound through every generation in the church, now and forevermore. Amen.

The Reverend Christian M. Wood
Rector



ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
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