



Artwork by Anne Clausen

# **2026 LENTEN DEVOTIONAL**

Written by members of the  
Good Shepherd Community

## Introduction to the 2026 Good Shepherd Lenten Devotional

Our theme for our 2026 Lenten journey is “*Spirit, Lead Us.*” In our Wednesday evening worship services, we will be hearing stories from the book of Acts and from members of our own community about how the Holy Spirit shines on the path of God’s people, helping them both to know God is with them and to see the next steps on the path. The Spirit compels God’s people to share the light and love of Jesus that we have come to know in an ever broadening and expansive witness of love.

This devotional helps us with that task. It was thoughtfully written by members of our Good Shepherd community. They were assigned texts from the Revised Common Lectionary—the same texts that are given to the whole church for these days of Lent. We walk this road together, and yet the writings are as unique and varied as the people who wrote them. So in a really lovely way, this resource not only encourages each of us on our faith walk, it also helps us to get to know one another better and builds up our community. I am so very thankful for those who said “Yes, I will write one,” and to Lise Kildegaard and Kate Narveson for helping compile and format this resource for us.

Here are some suggestions for how to use this booklet:

1. Pick a brief time each day to spend renewing your relationship with God in scripture and prayer.
2. Turn in the devotional to the reading for the day.
3. BEFORE you read the devotional, first look up the assigned text for the day written on the upper right-hand corner, and read the scripture from your own Bible.
4. THEN read the written reflection. Spend some time thinking of how this touches your own experience.
5. Lastly, pray the prayer at the bottom. Adding your own prayers concerns and thanksgivings. You may wish to conclude with the Lord’s Prayer or some other prayer.

If you want to dig deeper, I encourage you to read the texts around the assigned text, or keep a journal of your thoughts and prayers, or even write notes in the devotional itself. Be open to the Word, and together we’ll let God’s Spirit lead us!

A blessed Lenten journey to you, my friends!

Pastor Kristen Larsen-Schmidt

February 18: Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

*[W]hen you give alms...[let] your alms be done in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Read carefully here! Jesus is not saying it's bad to do something good because of an earthly reward. Giving money to charity and being listed on a donor's plaque is not bad. Being kind to a neighbor and feeling good about it is not bad. Jesus is saying that however good these earthly rewards are, there's something even better. Jesus is letting us in on a big secret, the "good news" he came to proclaim...that God offers everything our hearts truly desire. (3-4)

This is hard to understand. We know how good it feels to get a paycheck or a compliment. We know the earthly satisfaction of achieving a goal or being thanked for something we did. To be honest, we like it a lot. It's really hard to imagine that there could be something even better.

Maybe it helps to think about how it feels to do something kind for someone but do it anonymously. Think about the inner joy you carry around afterwards. Or think about being in love with someone, so much in love there's no way to express it, a love so special you don't want to share it with anyone...you just want to be with this person, to have the kind of closeness that no one else can share. This kind of closeness, and the joy it brings, is what Jesus is saying we can have with God...when we spend time alone with God, in the secret space of our own hearts.

Jesus often left his followers and the crowds to have time alone with his Father. This time grounded him, guided him, sustained him, renewed him, restored him. Jesus invites us to do the same. This Lent, we can take time to be alone with God. In the quiet of our hearts, we find God waiting to meet us, talk with us about all that weighs us down, guide us through hard things, share the love that knows no end. When we know this kind of time with God, all else falls away, and it's easy to move to giving alms—and doing all else that is good—in secret, because we have discovered for ourselves how our relationship with God is better than anything else.

*Jane Jakoubek*

**Dear God, help me to spend time alone with you this Lent, so that I can know the rewards that only you can give.**

*Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.*

It was a beautiful spring morning. Mom had sent me on an errand to the grocery store. Cutting through the back alley on my way downtown, I looked up to see a robin, also enjoying the spectacular morning, sitting and singing on the telephone wire. Absent mindedly, I bent down, picked up a rock from the cinder path and flung it towards the bird. The stone struck squarely on his breast. The robin fluttered downward, landing at my feet. Dead. ...SHAME!

It is the first time I can remember feeling a sense of overwhelming shame. The truth be known, the incident occasionally haunts me to this day.

That must have been how Adam and Eve felt (verse 3:7). That fateful encounter with the snake caused mankind to be banned from the Garden and set us on a course of struggle until the end of time. Our Christian beliefs (In fact, most of the world's religions) strive to show us the path to righteous behavior. We are taught compassion; compassion for ourselves, compassion for our brothers and sisters, and compassion for our planet. Although knowledge is abundant for achieving a better future, people often collectively make the wrong choices.

So, what does that mean for us? We as individuals can strive to live our lives through a Christian lens, making our choices with kindness and compassion. And we can never give up Hope.

*Dave Siefken*

**Father God, help us to live today with kindness and compassion, so that the mark we make might assist in tipping the scales toward good.**

*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.*

Just two days ago we observed Ash Wednesday and began the forty-day journey through the season of Lent to the cross and empty tomb. It is a time where we turn from a way that eventually leads nowhere, a way of ashes, to a way that gives life. It is a time where we have a change of heart, a change of mind. In greek it is called metanoia. It is a time when we turn to God, open our hearts and say, 'You are the Way, the Truth and the Life.' It is a time where we confess the ways we have sinned, strayed, or been distracted. It is a time when in the midst of these messes we have created, we cry out 'Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.'

We do this important work, and then we start a journey which lasts 40 days. We enter, so to speak, a wilderness as we move toward and remember Jesus' death and his resurrection. This is a time when we set aside all of those things that distract us from our relationship with God. We follow a path that Jesus took after his baptism. These next 40 days are a wonderful & important opportunity for us to open more fully to God, to invite him into our lives, to let him touch us deeply.

Each morning then, I invite you to take a moment to quiet yourself, and then turn figuratively or literally and call out 'Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.'

*James Barth*

**Jesus, we call out to you this day, come and touch us deeply. Walk with us these next 40 days as we move toward your death and your resurrection.**

*First, I thank God through Jesus Christ for all of you because your faith is proclaimed in the world.*

I am reminded of my church family. I am blessed to know all of them. I have belonged to the same church since I was 2 years old.

Some of my highest and lowest moments have been celebrated in my church. My Sunday school years, confirmation, my wedding, my husband and my father's funerals are just a few of them.

*Beverly Nelson*

**Thank you, God for the people who love us and are there when we need them.**

*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*

“The Devil made me do it!”

People of a certain age might remember Flip Wilson’s 1970’s variety show character, Geraldine, who excused her bad behavior by using this phrase. Much later the 2021 horror movie, “*Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It*” was based on the real-life 1981 murder trial made famous when a defendant used this same excuse as a defense for murder.

The devil in Matthew’s story is both “testing” and “tempting” Jesus simultaneously (the Biblical commentators say the original Greek word means both). Jesus is in the wilderness, a place of preparation throughout the Bible, fasting for forty days and nights, preparing for the next steps in his ministry. Forty is the frequently used number in Scripture appearing, for example, in the flood narrative, the number of years the Israelites wandered in the desert, and the forty days of the season of Lent which we recently entered on Ash Wednesday.

Jesus resists the temptations put to him by the Devil and concludes with the statement, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only” (Matthew 4:10). But in 2026, what is our attitude toward the temptations of the world? Do we believe literally in a devil, who now shows up around Halloween, typically in a more cartoonish than menacing way? Or are our temptations more grounded, perhaps somewhere in the classification of the ancient seven deadly sins—lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride. Traditionally, the response to counter these broad-based sins is to do the opposite of what they imply. For example, pride can be countered with humility, greed with charity and gluttony with temperance.

But can we resist temptation by ourselves? Practical strategies include distraction, avoiding opportunities for sin, or staying busy. But as Christians we understand the need for something more powerful such as prayer, finding strength in the lessons of the Bible and religious texts, and interacting in community with others via our church. In this faith community, we act together to not only practice our faith through rituals and observances, but are continually reminded of our call to service for others. Especially during this season of Lent, we are urged to consciously resist our temptations as we refocus on our spiritual life and its obligations.

*Jane Kemp*

**Dear Lord, we ask you, who only know the many temptations we face, to help us resist and overcome them.**

*“Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.”*

God sent this message to Elijah when he was so tired that he wanted to die.

The journey of life is long and hard. Lent’s 40 days of fasting allows us to practice this truth as a spiritual discipline. But God gives us nourishment: bread and water (which an angel literally provided for Elijah), kind words and hugs, the Holy Spirit and hope. Nourishment can take many guises.

“Get up and eat,” God twice tells the despairing, sleeping Elijah. We may need to move — physically or mentally — to find this nourishment.

The same day that I was reflecting upon this scripture, I found out that a friend of mine had suddenly and unexpectedly died. I was at work at my computer when I read an email from his wife, my good friend Ruth, giving me this news. I felt dazed. I decided to get up and walk down the hall. I remembered the many times in the past when I was down and had prayed for God to help me.

In the hallway I encountered a colleague from another department who asked, “How are you?” I told her, “I am sad because I just found out that a friend of mine died.” She gave me a big hug and validated my need to get up and take a break. I told her I was going over to the CFL to pray. She said, “I hope you find what you need.”

In the CFL meditation room, I discovered that many people had written prayers on cards. I could write my prayer and pray for others. Then I started reading the prayer journal in the room. I got lost in the prayers of my fellow pray-ers. One had written this poem:

Here’s to a new beginning  
Of finding myself  
Though tattered and torn  
Embracing, listening, grieving  
Seeking solace solo  
In a familiar place  
Surrendering to white noise  
Through waterfalls  
To another day

The spirit of determination, trust, honesty, and hope expressed in this poem buoyed me, as did the many other handwritten prayers and messages I read in the book.

“Get up and eat,” God says to us, “for the journey is too much for you.” The journey is too much, but God provides us with the nourishment we need to take our next steps.

*Laura Barlament*

**Dear God, thank you for the nourishment you send when the journey is too much for us.**

*He is able to bear patiently with the ignorant and the erring, since he too is beset by weakness.*

I was drawn to this verse because of the phrase “the ignorant and the erring,” which sounds like a description of the human condition! That’s sometimes how I feel—and maybe you do too: “ignorant and erring.” Sometimes we just don’t know what’s the right thing to do or why we hurt someone we love.

In the Book of Hebrews Jesus is presented as the new high priest who offers for us “not the blood of goats and calves,” but “his own blood” (Heb. 9:12)—his very life on the cross. And this same Jesus is not “a high priest unable to sympathize with our weakness,” because “he too is beset by weakness,” he too “has been tested in every way as we are” (4:15). It’s the *humanity* of Jesus, who was not only tested by temptation, but also by headaches, sore feet, Scribes and Pharisees, uncomprehending disciples (at times)—it’s his human experience that enables him to “bear patiently” with us when we hurt others—or ourselves. During the season of Lent, we are called to reflect and repent on our “erring” ways, and reassured by a forgiving God who came to be among us “in every way.”

Jesus’s humanity is a source of confidence and consolation, but so too is his divinity. One of the most striking verses about Jesus occurs at the very beginning of the Book of Hebrews: “He is the radiance of God’s glory, the stamp of God’s very being, and he sustains the universe by his word of power” (1:3). That last phrase really speaks to me when I consider what is going on in our country today: “he sustains the universe by his word of power.”

Whatever power the temporal authorities *think* they have, we who believe know that ultimate power rests in God through Christ Jesus, for “the sceptre of his kingdom is the sceptre of *justice*” (1:8, quoting Psalm 45).

As we move through this season of Lent, let us be grateful for the compassion of God who “has been tested in every way as we are,” and for the power of God who “sustains the universe” with justice.

*Martin Klammer*

**Almighty and Gracious God, we praise you for sustaining us with your compassion and power. Amen.**

*If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?*

In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus speaks of a flock that has one hundred sheep and is watched over by one shepherd. Then one of the sheep wanders far from its flock and is lost. The majority of shepherds would leave that sheep because they would be leaving ninety nine sheep unsupervised if they were to do so. Going against reason and against what other shepherds would do he ventures into the world to find the sheep that went astray. When he finds this sheep he “rejoices” as the worth of a faithful sheep is equal to the worth of one hundred faithful sheep.

This parable can be related to people in our world today because God wouldn't want any follower to lose their faith and love, but if one were to do so he would find that one follower because god wants the one that is lost to know that they are loved as the other ninety nine already know the abundance of God's love. This parable gives me a sign of faithfulness and hope because it helps me trust that if I ever find myself astray and lost from my faith that God will find me and help me know that I am as worthy of God's love as ninety nine other people that are safe and found. The same way that the shepherd traveled to the ends of the earth just to find one of his sheep, God would go to unbelievable measures to ensure that our safety and faith can stay healthy throughout our lives.

*Karl Wicks*

**Dear Lord, you seek us out and find us. Thank you for rejoicing in our safety and our faith.**

*“...in you [Abram] all the families of the earth will be blessed.”*

## MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY

These verses begin the story of Abram, whose name God changes to Abraham, “father of a multitude,” in Genesis 17, promising Abraham that he will be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. The remainder of Genesis tells of Abraham’s extended family tree, which in the narrative eventually form nations.

To this day three of the world’s major religions trace their ancestry to Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (note that the writer of the gospel of Matthew begins the genealogy of Jesus with Abraham in Matt 1:1-2). This is demonstrated physically today in the Old City of Jerusalem where the Muslim Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa Mosque are atop the Temple Mount at whose Western Wall Jews come to pray, only a relatively short distance from the Church of the Resurrection (or Holy Sepulchre), which encompasses both Calvary, where Jesus died, and the tomb from which He arose.

This Lent, as we contemplate the meaning of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection for us, let us pray for our sisters and brothers in the family of Abraham. There are too many in the world who suffer because of the inter- or inner-family conflicts that have occupied the news in recent years: in Israel, Gaza, Iran, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Sudan, and other places. Pray for all members of the family, including us, that we may learn to live together in mutual respect and peace.

*Ted and Kristin Swanson*

**Lord God, we pray for that day when there will be “a great number that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...” (Revelation 7:9). Help us to so live in faith active in love that we be among that number. Amen.**

*The Lord is your shade at your right hand.*

*The sun will not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.*

This psalm made me feel protected and reverent. When it's really warm out, it feels very nice to be in the shade, and psalm says that God is like that shade. In other parts of the Bible, people are reminded to stay awake to God's promise, and in the psalm we are reassured that God never slumbers or sleeps. In other words, God will always stay loyal to us, and not shun us from his light.

*Kyle Keegan with Jen Self*

**Dear Lord, thank you for the blessings of your comfort and the assurance of your protection.**

*It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.*

Because I'm in the middle of teaching performance courses in music and theater, I've been thinking a lot about how much we are constrained by fear and anxiety as we worry about how others might judge us. Performing a song or opera or musical theater role requires vulnerability and freedom to make choices that effectively convey the emotional life and objectives of the character. But the judgment of others, either real or perceived, is often an obstacle to inhabiting a role and fully engaging in the expressive power that a performer might otherwise be able to access. Creating an authentic, engaged performance is a matter of letting go of that which constrains us, and knowing that we have the freedom to try, the freedom to play, the freedom to be.

In this passage, Paul is in part addressing the need to release people from the confines of the law and the judgment that was brought upon those believers who came to believe through faith without knowing or understanding the law. Paul argues here that the law itself came to the people and passed through generations because of acts of faith. Faith is therefore the foundation of the promises of God, not the law. Paul says that the law brings wrath, but faith connects us to God through all generations.

How often do our judgmental attitudes confine others, so that we put up barriers? How often do we place limitations on others that cause them to feel constrained rather than free? How often do we judge ourselves as unable or unfit to fulfill a role to which we might be called? How often do we use "law" or "tradition" or "conformity" as an excuse to exclude, judge, or reject others?

In any acting class, the only way to encourage freedom is to create a community of trust that is free from judgment and criticism. The only way to act in faith is to know that others are there to encourage and lift us up and catch us when we fail. It's not that the law isn't there, but it is knowing that we are in this together, and that the faith we share is bigger than the constraints of the law, if we only allow ourselves to let go and trust in God and one another. Only then can we act in faith as our forebears did, not bound, but free.

*Jonathon Struve*

**Dear God, help us to act in faith, to let go of the judgments we place on others and ourselves, and to embody the freedom that leads to action when we hear your call.**

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

This verse comes during a talk between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Nicodemus is asking questions about eternal life and being born again. Jesus asks him: "You are Israel's teacher, and do you not understand these things?" Jesus then proceeds to discuss how people often fail to understand what he says.

My interpretation of this sentence is: "God loves everyone, even the sinners, and to help us out of sin, he gave a pure guiding soul, and the true followers of him will live with God in heaven." The verse and the interpretation both can set us on the right path to Jesus, God, and heaven.

In my life, following Jesus means volunteering for just causes, using my talents to help and sustain the earth, and learning to worship God. Those three parameters have materialized into joining an Environmental Action Group (our group works to make our town's food, buildings, and land more environmentally sustainable) and participating in the Good Shepherd Confirmation classes held on Wednesdays.

What is it that you do to live according to your beliefs?

Jesus wraps up the discussion by talking about how the Son of God (Him) was sent into the world to help end sin and oppression, and not to destroy the world because of the sin of the people. Jesus came to show us love.

*Samuel Bills*

***Jesus, help us know your will in our lives.***

*Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling, consider that Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, was faithful to the one who appointed him.*

The Letter to the Hebrews encourages the first century Hebrew Christians to hold fast to their belief that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. They were living under the threat of persecution for following Christ, the way of love. It was a dangerous and tumultuous time for early Christians. Hebrews chapter 3 begins with an invitation: Consider Jesus.

What might this invitation mean to us during our 2026 lenten journey in a tumultuous world? How do we hold fast to Jesus' way of love in an increasingly unjust world?

I was reminded of Otis Moss III's book, Dancing in the Darkness: Spiritual Lessons for Thriving in Turbulent Times. The pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago and his congregation faced death threats, violent protests and other terror tactics. Moss tells of the spiritual lesson he learned from his then 5 year old daughter. Late one night he was awoken by a noise in his home. Fearing violence, he armed himself with a baseball bat and investigated the origins of the noise. When he found that the main floor of his home was safe, he began up the stairs and heard the noise again- coming from his 5 year old daughter's room. Fearing the intruder was in her room, he opened her bedroom door ready to do battle with the intruder. He discovered his daughter practicing ballet. He realized that by dancing in the dark, she was doing one of the things she most loved. He used this lesson to not let fear consume him and his congregation but to remind them to use what they love to build their faith and douse their fear. Later that week when the Westboro Baptist Church, a known fundamentalist Christian group from Kansas, stood outside Trinity UCC shouting insults and racist epithet as parishioners were trying to enter worship, Pastor Moss accompanied the choir go outside and confronted the protesters boldly singing "This Little Light of Mine" clapping their hands. They were fighting hate and fear with a song of spiritual power.

Consider Jesus. On his journey to Jerusalem, to the Cross, he encountered those that betrayed him, those that jeered at him, those that crowned him with thorns and those that pierced his hands, feet and side. And he did it all with love.

*Sara Hopkins*

**This little light of mine, help me make it shine. This little light of yours, Christ, I'm going to let the light of love shine.**

*Before they call, I will answer; while they are yet speaking, I will hear.*

We seem to be surrounded by chaos in our world today. We have lost our zest for abundant living. It is a struggle to shut out the world and hear what God is telling us to do. The “play” of life is not ours to write; we don’t have the lines or know the plot. Isaiah 65:17-25 literally proclaims what Jesus hopes for us imperfect humans. In a prophetic or everlasting way, Jesus lists ways for us to seek justice and compassion for each other. The wolf and the lamb shall eat together. Former things shall not be remembered. As impossible as it seems now, we can seek peace and justice in our lives. We can pass it on.

Have you lived through a situation or problem in life that felt impossible? Maybe a solution or answer was never found or shown to you in this life. The thing just came at you, and you were inside the problem and could not see past the miracles in your world at that time. You ponder and marvel at how you got through the “whatever”. The Lord works in mysterious ways.

Earlier verses in this third book of Isaiah show how Gods people failed. They worshiped other gods. They fought and killed each other. It was chaos—the people would not listen to Jesus’s calls.

Jesus leaves them for a short time to stew in their mess. He was asking them to repent. He returns and promises everlasting peace. Verses 17-25 show us what to strive for, what to focus on. We are asked to repent. Stop— turn around and go the other way.

Human nature and the world can get in our way. Jesus gives us opportunities for abundant life every hour of every day.

*Cindy Ernst*

**Thank you, Lord, and help me to see what you see today.**

*Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in obedience to him*

Over 30 years ago, my wife Lise and I faced a big decision. Lise went on the job market to become a college English professor. The position she was offered was at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. But we were both Chicagoans. I had made my career as an organizer and economic developer working in inner city neighborhoods. We hadn't heard of Luther College, and I had never spent any time in a small town. Taking the job would mean huge changes for both of us and a scary step away from our comfort zone.

The idea of "fear of the Lord" challenges me. I resist thinking of God as some kind of old man in the sky who punishes us. But I know that I can only see a tiny slice of the universe. I know that I have agency, yes. Yet I know that so much is beyond my comprehension, and I know there's so much that happens around me that I cannot control. Only God sees and knows everything. I know I cannot and should not think too much of myself. I can't see what other people see, and I should be afraid of assuming that my limited perspective is more than it is.

To me, "fear of the Lord" is more like "awe." Awe at all the pieces of creation that fit together. Awe at the immense complexity of creation that seems to boil down to simple truths, like love. In awe, we make our own choices, but trust in the Lord to see a larger whole.

We made the move anyway. Because of that decision, we have met people like you and become friends and built community. We have found the Good Shepherd congregation, where we strengthen each other in faith. Lise found a fit as a professor with Luther College students, and I found a fit as a traveling consultant, grounded in small town experience as well as inner-city wits. We do indeed sense that fear of the Lord, and walking in obedience to the Lord, is a blessing. Thanks be to God.

*Luther Snow*

**Lord, help us to walk in obedience, trusting always in your greater vision.**

*So they quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses replied, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?"*

I have three children; two are in middle school and one is quickly approaching. When at home, they spend a significant amount of time arguing with me and fighting with each other. They clearly know more about the world than I do and they aren't afraid to tell me. If you've ever spent time with a 13 year old, you know what I mean. When I read about Moses arguing with the Israelites, it felt like a scene from my living room. The children are making unreasonable demands and I simply have no answer, nothing they want to hear. I often find myself saying "WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO?!" I can literally hear the exhaustion in Moses's voice. He probably answered the Israelites crazy questions 132 times and told them what to do 328 times. It wasn't until he started screaming that they finally started to listen. That's how it goes at my house anyway. Moses started yelling out to the Lord- "What am I to do with these people?? They are ready to stone me!" Oh Moses, I get you. I FEEL this! Thankfully for Moses, when he was at his wits' end, God answered. God provided. God ended the quarrel. God's children were loved and cared for.

God is our parent. As I love my children with no end, He loves us even more. Parenting is not easy. It is a constant job, never relenting, never ending. All children drive their parents crazy at some point. I'm sure even God rolls his eyes at us from time to time. But God never falters, never waivers. His love for us is boundless and endless. God may not always answer right away, he may not always give the answer we want to hear. But no matter how we might kick and scream, how we may bicker and fight, how we might ask for unreasonable demands, he will take care of us. His love is bigger than anything we could ever imagine. He has promised us everything we could ever need within his eternal home. He will always have an answer. He will always BE the answer.

*Leah Stammeyer*

***Heavenly Father, Thanks so much for your yeses and your noes. Thank you for knowing my heart beyond my words and actions. Thank you for loving me, no matter how ill-behaved I might be. I am blessed to be your child. Amen.***

*“Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.” Ps. 95: 1-2*

My mom Vera was the youngest daughter of Swedish immigrants. Grandpa John had immigrated to Minnesota’s north woods, working as a lumberjack to earn money to purchase NW Iowa farmland. In this Swedish community, with *several* Johan Swansons, he was called “Red John,” for his red hair. Grandma Ida Linnea, a schoolteacher in Sweden, immigrated to become bachelor John’s wife. John’s instructions: work first as cook and housekeeper in the Duluth school superintendent’s home to learn English, before coming to the Swedish community of Aurelia. Their framed, large, decorative marriage license hangs on a wall in our home. They had seasons of blessing. Four children were born to them. They also surely had seasons of testing and quarreling (v. 8) as they worked hard establishing a farm, Grandma contributing physical farm labor with horse teams and cow milking. They held onto the land through the foreclosures of the Great Depression when educated and desperate Ida Linnea took to heart the words she heard from the President of the United States: banks would not foreclose on farmers who were making attempts to pay their mortgages. It is legend that Ida took pen to paper, personally writing President Franklin Roosevelt, White House, Washington DC, to honor his promise and stop the local bank from foreclosing on them. The family held onto the farm.

Grandpa John’s red hair and great sense of humor were passed on to Vera, thence to two of our children, and one grandchild: a great-great-granddaughter. The faith that sustained Grandma Ida was nourished and bolstered through her love of music and singing. Grandma was glued to their old black and white television set, as George Beverly Shea sang “How Great Thou Art” during Billy Graham crusades. She found great comfort from the Swedish hymn “Children of the Heavenly Father,” “*Tryggare Kan Ingen Vara.*” When we’d drive Grandma home to Wisconsin to visit us, she’d ask me to sing both, again and again. My mom, in childhood told by a teacher she could not carry a tune, still loved to sing, always singing on her daily outdoor walks: “God’s Beautiful World;” “This is the day that the Lord has made;” “God has created a new day;” “The B-I-B-L-E.” *These* now are *my* morning litany and practice, as from our cabin I survey the beauty of God’s wooded hills and prairie.

Beloved. Come. Sing with me. In all that life brings. Shout aloud. Sing quietly. Sing silently in your heart. He is our God. We are the people of his pasture, the flock under His care.

*Kris Peterson*

**Let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before Him with thanksgiving and extol Him with music and song. Amen.**

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.*

In Romans, Paul is writing to the Christians in Rome to explain his theology. He sees everything through the cross of Christ. Paul believes that God has reclaimed the world from sin through Jesus and his death on the cross. This message in the book of Romans had a powerful effect on Martin Luther in 1516 (causing his break away from the Catholic Church), Augustine in 386 (converted to Christianity), John Wesley in 1738 (converted) and Karl Barth in 1918 (father of modern theology) by changing how they understood God and their lives. I believe it can have an equally powerful effect on us.

A question I saw in a commentary on these verses was: How does God intend life to be? Verses 1 and 2 respond to this question: Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, **2** through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. This is how God intends life to be. Look at us, standing in grace! And receiving peace by standing in grace. Imagine being at peace in the middle of the chaos of our world. Imagine not being torn apart by anxieties, pain, or worries each day. This standing in grace, totally a gift and undeserved, is what allows us to be fine in God's eyes. We know that we are beloved and are at peace with God. This is not based

on what we have done but on what Jesus has done. I don't know about you, but I am at my best when my mind is calm and not filled with anxieties and worries. That is why I am holding onto these 2 verses in particular. I can hear God better, understand a nudge to do something, say or not say something, care about something.

One of my favorite hymns is "When Peace Like a River" by Horatio G. Spafford. The first two verses go like this:

When peace like a river attendeth my way,  
when sorrows like sea bellows roll,  
whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say,  
it is well, it is well with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet,  
though trials should come,  
Let this blest assurance control, that Christ has regarded my helpless estate,  
and hath shed his own blood for my soul.

*Edith Searles*

**He lives — oh, the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin, not in part, but the whole, is nailed to his cross and I bear it no more, Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul.**

*The Samaritan Woman at the Well*

As I reflect on the woman at the well, I can't help but think of all that are marginalized. This is a time in our own country when the marginalized are targeted directly. This is not a new thing. As I lived with Inupiat People in Nome Alaska, I heard the stories of boarding schools and loss of language and culture in their own place. While visiting Peru, I heard the stories of peoples marginalized again in their own Native and Holy land. Our own Native American peoples have endured marginalization in this, their place of origin, by the People with less color.

Jesus broke through not only the Racial barrier with the Samaritan woman but the gender expectations of HIS time. When challenged as to why he was speaking to a woman, Jesus answered in a way that pointed to normal interaction with another human being – an equal. This was unheard of. A third layer was that this woman was chastised as an immoral person having had many husbands and not being married to the one she was with now. Not only did Jesus know her and her life experiences but he accepted her completely. Jesus was interacting and giving comfort to the lowliest in HIS culture... AS you did it to the least of these so you did it unto me.....

As I was holding space and feeling pain with people of the Whittier community in Minneapolis, it was not lost on me that Alex Pretti was indeed comforting a victim and creating a barrier to try to prevent harm to women who were being targeted. As a Man standing up for Women, as a nurse standing up for the injured, and as a human being who empathized and stood for decency, Alex is an example and a Martyr for the way of Jesus. Fully Human, Fully Respected, and Equal in the sight of God.

As we listened to the speakers at the Vigil for Pretti that evening, they were True leaders. Speakers from communities in the Whittier Neighborhood: Asian, Hispanic and Ethiopian to name a few. Leaders whose cultures are being targeted by our own Government in our name. The message was clear that the violent oppression by the military is not POWER; it is an illusion of power. The true power lives in the LOVE that is universal. It is the INNERSTANDING of love for the other as for oneself. This is a lesson the marginalized have to teach us. The resilience that chooses to Love in the face of hate and to stand up to violence with HONOR. It has been practiced over the millennia in Indigenous cultures.

I am comforted by knowing that my Indigenous Neighbors know what shunning is and what pain accompanies a loss of position. They have been through the fire and still know the Depth of True Real Peace and comfort from the LOVE that passes all Understanding.

*Anne Clausen*

**May it be so, AMEN, AHO**

*His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."*

Last October I received a call from the surgeon who had performed my endoscopy, stating that pathology indicated a diagnosis of esophageal cancer. The conversation ended with a hearty word of advice for me to "have a nice day." Had I just heard the whopper of all oxymorons, I wondered?

Strangely enough, the answer is "no". Because my husband is legally blind, he and a friend began recruiting drivers to transport us 5 days a week to my treatments in LaCrosse. The majority were members of Good Shepherd, several were friends from our gym, and one was a neighbor. And, without exception, we did "have a nice day", getting to know these friends on new- and wonderful - levels.

Jesus and his mother were wedding guests in Cana when the wine gave out. Mary's advice to the servants was to "do whatever he tells you," and the remaining guests became the fortunate recipients of "good wine" and had a nice day. I wonder what the possibilities might be if we combine "do whatever he tells you" with "have a nice day"?

*Ruth Bruce*

**Lord, help us to figure out how to do whatever you tell us in our daily lives.**

*"...our fathers (and mothers) were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea..."*

I spent my teenage years living in Libya, a land with an unfamiliar culture, a different religion, a foreign language with an indecipherable script, and a sandy desert landscape. It was so completely different from my early years as an American of Norwegian descent living in Wisconsin.

This was my introduction to life on the edge of the Sahara Desert. It is vast, and awesome, complete with mirages. It is quite easy to lose one's way without a marked road or a knowledgeable guide. Sometimes we would travel south through the desert, oftentimes to camp, other times to visit Bedouins, or go to the oasis of Ghadames.

I could imagine the ancient Israelites wandering in the wilderness, the desert, and needing God's help to survive. They traveled through foreign lands, losing their way, both physically and spiritually. But God provided them with sustenance and a path through the sea, following the cloud.

Today, I often feel like we are travelling in a 21st century wilderness, needing guidance for the challenges in our lives and our world. We are passing through the sea, with God's direction. We seek God's path for us. We are faced with so many possible choices, when what we need is the faith and trust to find God's way and follow this path. It is our daily journey and calling to walk the way of Jesus.

*Martha Monson Lowe*

**God, please help us to listen to your voice, guiding our lives through our wilderness, and walk the path that you have chosen for us. Amen**

*“Sing for joy to God our strength;” “If my people would only listen to me.”*

IF ONLY...JOY!

As I first read Psalm 81, I was thrilled to read verses 1-4, thinking of the joy I find in music. Music in any form can fill one's heart and nourish one's soul! “Sing for joy...” “Shout aloud...” “Begin the music, strike the timbrel, play...” These are things I can do...we all can do. I mean, after all, it does not say for only those with perfect pitch or who have been trained in music. This is a decree for all...“an ordinance” of God. Wow! We only have to think back on any Sunday service to hear and see and feel the joy we share at Good Shepherd through music...the harmonies we weave for each hymn...the variety of musical choirs sharing their talents...the little children striking the tambourine or shaking an egg or a maraca...JOY! And if we could only stay in that moment of joy...if only.

This psalm does not stop there. It goes on to remind us of what God has done for God's people: lifting burdens, setting free, rescuing US. Okay, so more reason for joy...more reason to sing those songs and play those instruments, right? So why aren't we living in that joy every day? Well, this psalm also answers that question with two words: if only! If only we would listen...if only we would follow...IF ONLY. We are pretty conversant with those two words. Or I am at least. I can hear in my head: “If only my sister would listen to sense...” “If only I felt better...” “If only I could find the time...” “If only I had phrased that better...” “If only.

In verse 8, God cries for us to hear...to listen...to remember what God has asked of us. And yet time and time again, we fail: we stop up our ears with what we WANT to hear; we chain up our stubborn hearts, tethering them to our own desires, rather than God's. But we do not have to stop there. If we but listen, God will break those self-made chains. God promised that, if we but listen, he will subdue our enemies and feed us with finest wheat and honey. God returns us to joy.

And what joy that is!! Joy that overflows...that sounds aloud! The joy of a toddler carrying a maraca through the aisles past our pews. The joy of a teenager choosing to be baptized. The joy of parents watching their children grow in faith. The joy of a caregiver seeing a smile on the one they are helping. The joy of an elder watching younger generations find their joy. Such great joy! Joy that resounds all around us and cannot be silenced...If we only listen.

*Melanie Folkerts*

**Dear Lord, Help me listen to you. Help me find the joy that comes from YOU...not just on a Sunday morning, but every day in every piece of my life. Let me sing for joy loudly with every step I take, knowing that I do not walk alone, but with your hand guiding me...if I but listen. Help me change “if only” to “now.” Lord, I am listening now.**

*The Lord does not look at the things people look at.*

### Choices We Make

I taught a few physical education classes in my teaching career. Early in my career, choosing teams challenged me. Why? No matter what method I used, someone always had to be chosen last! And no matter who it was (of course it was usually the student who was an “outcast” for various reasons) they felt just that, an outcast, looked down upon, ignored!

As God sent Samuel to Jesse of Bethlehem to choose one of his sons to replace Saul as king, it was anything but easy. But Saul comes in peace and makes a sacrifice to the Lord. As Saul met each of Jesse’s sons the Lord told him not to consider appearance or height, but to look at the heart. When the last son was called from shepherding his flock, the Lord said to Samuel, “Rise and anoint him; this is the one!” His name was David.

Yes, the last son, the last student in the class, the one you would least expect to be chosen was chosen! Chosen to be king! So, who might you judge? Who might you choose to be last but ends up being first?

*Tom Buresh*

**Lord, help us see beyond appearances to people's hearts.**

*The Lord is my shepherd, I'll not want*

When people are asked their favorite bible passage, Psalm 23 may be the most common answer, showing up on embroidered pillows or printed onto posters next to photos of calming scenes. Why do we like it so much?

One reason may be that it describes not only the way a shepherd cares for a flock, but also how a parent cares for a child. The psalm reminds us of the parent we had, or the parent we needed and deserved.

Verses 2 and 3 bring to mind the parent who lays a child safely in a crib, humming and staying close until the child falls asleep. Or the parent who walks with a child along the lakeshore, listening intently to everything the child has to say. The parent who hugs us and allows our tears that heal. Or the parent who teaches us so we can make good decisions.

However, because the bible meets us in real life, the psalm doesn't only paint peaceful scenes. The psalmist doesn't say "if" we go through darkness but "even though." We will go through dark valleys, but our parent God is there with us. We may be afraid and we may suffer but God is there with God's fierce love. And in the midst of that darkness, or in the midst of "enemies" regardless of who or what "enemies" are in each of our lives – this fathering God sets a table and provides what we need. This mothering God blesses us and fills us with the belief that goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives.

Perhaps that is why people love Psalm 23. We have a desire to know this side of God and to experience this description of home. And even though this God can feel far away in a world where we see the valley of darkness so clearly, we still yearn for God's presence and for green pastures, still waters and peace. Sometimes we even pray for that for ourselves. And sometimes we pray for that for others as well.

*Jen Kunka*

**May all feel God's gentle hand on their forehead as they try to sleep amidst their worries. May all feel themselves led along the paths God hopes for us and feel the rightness of those paths. May all feel the unconditional, all-encompassing love of our parent God.**

*Live as children of light.*

Lent is a season for the purifying of faith.

That task is clear in the opening chapters of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In a world bitterly divided between Jews and Gentiles, the apostle declares that the love of God came into the world in Christ to make them into ONE people. The things that distinguish us - traditions, cultures, talents - are to be the riches of a shared life, not the making of warring tribes. In our own bitterly divided time, could God's will be any clearer or more imperative?

What, then, to make of Paul's turn in chapter five to viewing God's love in Christ as the coming of LIGHT into the world? This image appears elsewhere in Scripture, but what is its force here? The dark of night can be a time of disturbing dreams or, worse, a time for conspiratorial plotting. But it can also provide rest and renewal, something to be cherished. A setting for intimacy as well. So why, then, imagine Christ's saving work as light breaking into darkness?

What occurs to me now is that it is in the light of day that the tribal conflicts dividing us assert themselves most openly and aggressively. The time, then, when the power of God's love to make us one people, living together in peace, has its best chance to get through to us. When the need is most apparent and we can be empowered to grapple with it. Back to where Paul began.

*Richard Ylvisaker*

**Dear God: Open our eyes to see the need for your unifying love.**

*Jesus said. "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."*

A quick rundown of John 9: 1-41: it involves Jesus with his disciples, running into a blind man. Jesus uses his saliva and dirt and rubs the mixture on the man's eyes. He then tells him to wash in the pool of Siloam. The man does so, then receives his sight. His neighbors are amazed and bring him to the Pharisees who repeatedly question him even though it was Jesus who healed him. Jesus then declares that he came into the world to give sight to the blind and make those who think they can see blind.

From our perspective, this story has many things to take away from it. To start, it has an interesting view on physical and mental blindness. For example, the blind man believed Jesus could save him, and he did. However the neighbors and Pharisees did not believe that it happened. They suffer from mental blindness.

Another powerful point that we notice is God's purpose in suffering. When the disciples asked the man if he or his parents had sinned, Jesus answered "Neither... but that the works of God might be displayed in him," which demonstrates how God can use difficult circumstances for his glory.

Lastly, we want to touch on the stand that Jesus is the light of the world, which is demonstrated by him healing the blind man bringing light into darkness, both literally & spiritually.

*Veda and Hazel Shimek*

**Dear Lord, help us to see your light.**

*“For I will show him what great things he must suffer for My name’s sake.”*

I think it’s safe to say that we all have experienced a change of plans in our lives. Sometimes these plans are initiated by ourselves, but also by others or events. Sometimes we have control of these changes, but sometimes we don’t. ***We know plans don’t always succeed.***

Saul experienced an unplanned change of plans—plans changed by God. In Acts 9: 1-20, Saul went about to satisfy his plan of persecuting Christians. ***We know plans don’t always succeed.*** This was true for Saul. On his way to Damascus, he had a divine encounter with Jesus. A blinding light temporarily blinded him. In Damascus, Saul was met by the disciple Ananias, who had been directed by God to restore his sight. Saul was able to see again and was filled with the Holy Spirit. He was baptized and changed his name to Paul. This was quite a reversal for Saul/Paul! His plans went from being an enemy of the church to becoming a champion of the Gospel.

June 2023, my plans were greatly changed. I had plans to stay with my daughter and her husband for a few days to help them transition from the hospital to home with their baby. I also had plans to fully enjoy the wedding of another daughter. Another big plan was to accompany my daughter on a trip to Banff in Alberta, Canada.

***We know plans don’t always succeed.*** June 10th, I missed a step and tore my Achilles tendon! Plans to stay and help with the baby changed. The wedding was three weeks later. Although everything went well, I was not able to fully enjoy it. I was non-weight bearing and relied on a knee scooter. So much for dancing at the reception! Eight weeks later was the trip. Plans changed, and I wasn’t able to go. It would have been too difficult to get around with a walker, and I was still non-weight bearing.

Did I feel sorry for myself after this mishap? You bet I did! Did I feel as if I let others down? Yes. Did I wonder why this happened to me? Another yes. Did I learn anything from this experience? Yes, again. This was a complete reversal for me. I went from being independent and helping others, to being almost completely dependent on others.

Sometimes it takes a crisis to transform us. I learned to be so appreciative of things I often took for granted. I learned that even the best made plans don’t always succeed, but you do the best you can, and maybe learn something from the diversion.

Although my reversal wasn’t as life changing or faith affirming as Saul’s/Paul’s, it was humbling.

*Kerry Johnson*

**God, help me let go of my plans, trust your direction, and find peace in the change.**

*For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you.*

My Nana is one of my most favorite people. And I know she loves me more than just about anyone. I know that as soon as she heard I was going to be born, she started praying for me. She takes care of me, not like my Mom and Dad but in other ways. My parents make sure I have food to eat and a place to sleep. But my Nana makes sure I'm happy, that I have someone to talk to and someone to listen to me.

My Nana wants me to experience the good in the world, learning about different places and different people. My Nana is always there to encourage me and she is always the first person I want to call when something good happens in my life. My Nana has the most uplifting spirit and she shares it with everyone.

I know I am special and loved and cared for because of my Nana. My Nana has also taught me about Jesus and how He loves me even more than she does. Jesus will never leave me. Jesus will always be there for me. And someday I will get to spend eternity with my Nana and Jesus in Heaven.

*Charlotte Stammeyer*

**Dear Jesus, thank you for taking care of me, loving me and never leaving me.**

*I will sing praises to my God, all my life long*

The main message of this psalm is to praise God and focus on him, not trusting in the fallibility of humans.

The 2nd verse, " I will sing praises to my God, all my life long," reminds me of Weston Noble (Nov. 30, 1922-Dec. 21, 2016), who was nationally known, and locally known for his 57 years tenure on the Luther College music faculty. He was conductor of the Nordic Choir from 1948-2005 and Luther College Concert Band from 1948-1973. He was a guest conductor of over 800 vocal, band, & orchestral festivals spanning over 4 continents.

At the end of every concert, Weston had Nordic Choir perform the song, "OH LORD GOD," composed by Pavel Chesnokov, a Soviet composer, conductor and teacher (1877-1944). He often invited alums to join in. Dr. Andrew Last has continued using this song in his Nordic Choir concerts! This beautiful song features lyrics from this psalm.

In the last three years of Weston's life, my husband David and I were asked to join with 4 other good friends of Weston's (Team Weston), to help him negotiate challenging late life issues. Through this time, we helped him in whatever way we could. During these years, I was reminded time and time again that "I will sing to the Lord for as long as I live" was Weston's theme in life.

Weston H Noble is buried in the Riverside Cemetery, Riceville, Iowa, Mitchell County, not far from the farm he grew up on. Weston's gravestone is engraved with Psalm 146:2, I WILL SING TO THE LORD FOR AS LONG AS I LIVE.

*Gail Judisch*

**SOLI DEO GLORIA**

*...she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.*

Matthew begins by introducing Joseph as being from the lineage of David. In the next passages, we see God coming to Mary and Joseph, a poor young couple deep in their confusion with Mary's pregnancy. God speaks to them and tells them to have faith for this is a big deal of great importance.

No sooner do we read these lines than our thoughts may turn to the great question of the Immaculate Conception, and to all those who have questioned and debated this through the long years. What really happened, and what does it really mean? A few years ago, I was listening to an enthusiastic young Pastor giving a sermon during the season of Lent. At one point he asked the congregation, "How can this be?" And he raised his hands to the sky and exclaimed, "It's a M...!" So, which "M" would it be?

In that instant I thought, "It's a metaphor, a message to us all." God blessing and supporting Mary, as God blesses all young mothers and the miracle of new life. God comes to us and walks with us through our lives as we walk with God.

Of course, the young Pastor exclaimed, "It's a Miracle!"

And there we were, one of us with an earthly interpretation of the message, and the other with a miraculous, spiritual interpretation.

How long have Christians debated these spiritual and the earthly interpretations? We have debated the importance of faith versus works, divided over predestination, argued about creation and evolution, and on it goes. Must we choose one or the other? Is it a miracle or is it a message?

At times, people would visit my Dad, Pastor Paul of Good Shepherd, asking what it all means. He would say, "Not so fast. It is a miracle and it is a message, but it is also a great Mystery."

We are challenged to be mature enough to embrace the Mystery, perhaps the greatest of mysteries, living with faith and service as one. It's a Miracle, a Message, but a great Mystery too.

*Tom and Carol Hasvold*

**Dear Lord, help us to embrace the Mystery.**

*Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord,  
Lord, hear my voice!*

This verse is, for me, a reminder in the power of personal prayer and the endless forgiveness of God.

While I often pray for others: family, friends and people in my life who are struggling with various challenges, I often neglect to confess my own sins, to pray for myself, or to acknowledge the personal despair or hopelessness that I sometimes feel when the World seems to be off-kilter (and that has been happening a lot lately!).

I am reminded that the goodness of God, and personal forgiveness is there for the asking, and that a new day will come... and it is worth waiting for and celebrating.

*Kirk Johnson*

**Dear Lord, thank you for your steadfast, redeeming love.**

*If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.*

The last two plus years of my mom's life forced her to wrestle with matters of the flesh and the Spirit out in the open. As cancer became more and more at home in her flesh, her mortal body became increasingly weak and vulnerable to the world around her. The last six months of her life were a daily struggle to accept and deal with the inevitable reality that her physical body was not going to heal and that she was going to die.

And yet my mom took great comfort in knowing that the Spirit didn't leave her body when she received her terminal diagnosis. Rather, the Spirit remained—providing comfort and presence through the pain. It was a loyal, fierce tenant, choosing to dwell in her and give her hope and peace, until the Spirit raised her to eternal life.

Where is your mindset today? Is it set on matters of the flesh or on matters of the Spirit? This is a daily struggle for me as it is so easy for me to put myself and my selfish desires first. Fortunately, the Spirit is patient and persistent and filled with grace..

*Brian Larsen-Schmidt*

**Holy Spirit, make me your forever home. Amen.**

*“Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’” (John 11:16)*

The reading for today’s devotion is the narration of the resurrection of Lazarus from John’s Gospel. This well-known story has been read as a proof of the power of God over death, or of the love of Jesus for humanity. Some readings in this vein focus on the humanity of Jesus’ experience of grief over the death of his friend Lazarus: how glad must we be that the one with any real power to relieve us of our own grief is He who experienced it himself.

Yet this story follows close on the heels of another one in chapter 10, in which Jews in Judea reject Jesus’ teachings, works, and mission, as blasphemy. The disciples of Jesus, hearing his resolve to return so soon to Judea on behalf of his sick friend’s family, are shocked that Jesus would put himself in danger—again. Jesus eventually makes clear, as does John, that the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead was an exercise to make them—the self-proclaimed disciples—believe.

But why has John put that clunker of a line from Thomas in the middle of this story? He could have accomplished any of the readings mentioned here without it. Does Thomas mean that he hoped to die with Lazarus, so that Jesus would raise him too from the dead, to experience in an immediate and intimate way God’s grace? Or is Thomas doubting the ability of Jesus to even make it safely to Bethany, located so close to Jerusalem, expecting that the disciples should die alongside Jesus, a threat whom he expected the Jewish leaders to hunt down and liquidate?

I don’t offer an authoritative reading. At the beginning of Lent, we are reminded that “to dust we shall return.” We are enjoined to turn away from sin—but toward what? I think this story reminds us to turn towards compassion—for our Teacher, for his friend, for a family member, for someone we might not even know. It reminds us that compassion is a choice, and not always an easy or safe one. The courage to choose compassion proves the courage of our convictions, our understandings of how Jesus taught us to live.

*Brian Caton*

**Lord, help us believe that our choices to act with compassion will bring about your kingdom, no matter the cost.**

*On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "He's alive!" Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted.*

Even the best preachers may go on too long...

Luke, the physician and writer of Acts, uses the term "we" to show that he is present when Paul breaks bread with believers in Troas, a Roman city in the province of Asia near the site of ancient Troy, on the northwest coast of modern-day Turkey. He describes how Paul "talked on and on", putting at least one person to sleep, a young man named Eutychus. Unfortunately, Eutychus is sitting on the edge of a window when this happens, falls 3 stories, and dies from injuries sustained from the fall. Paul rushes to Eutychus' side, embraces him, and brings him back to life. Luke, who as a doctor would know that a fall from that height is unsurvivable, describes how he, along with the others present, are witnesses to a miracle.

A close friend of ours also survived a near-death fall, thanks to the work of first responders, his dad, and the traumatic brain injury specialists who worked with him for two years. They restored him back to life, and his family and friends, as well as many others, witnessed a true miracle of survival. And just like Eutychus' friends and family, who "took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted", we are filled with joy each time we are with him, simply because he is alive, fully alive.

*Kathy Buzza*

**Dear God, help us to see and experience the miracles, both large and small, that surround us as we go about our everyday lives.**

*For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*

I am a walker. My grandpa was the first walker I knew; he walked to the post office nearly every day to mail letters. He lived in Northern North Dakota and weather meant nothing to him. He walked no matter what. I walk because it helps me think. I walk because it makes me feel good. I walk because I can, no matter what. I almost feel like I was made to walk. Even when I don't feel like walking, I walk. Even when it's dark and cold, I walk.

This verse in Ephesians says that we are created in Christ Jesus for good works... that we should walk in them. They should be our way of life. God created us for good works, just like God created us to walk. What does that mean? I think it means that when Jesus says to love God, to love each other, and love our enemy that we were made to do those things. Not so that we're better people, not to earn our way into a better place, not even to make this place a better place, but because God loves us and God made us for good works.

Sounds really simple doesn't it? It's not easy. Anyone who has tried to love God struggles. It's really not that easy to love the people you know best. And loving your enemy - what does that even mean? Loving is difficult. But this verse says we were made for good works. It says they should be our way of life even when we don't feel like it. Even when it's cold and dark.

*Mike Kunka*

**Dear Lord, help us to live as we were made to live, created in Christ Jesus for good works.**

(Birthdays of musicians Sir Elton John, Aretha Franklin, Bela Bartok and Arturo Toscanini)

*The Sadducees test Jesus:* The Sadducees were a very conservative sect of Jews. They recognized only the first five books of the Hebrew Bible written by Moses as the word of God, and they did not believe in the resurrection, angels or other heavenly beings.

In today's passage, they challenge Jesus, perhaps in a mocking way, about the resurrection. In his answer, Jesus compares our heavenly beings in the afterlife to angels who reside with God. He quotes their recognized authority, Moses, account of God speaking to him at the burning bush (Ex. 3:6). God announces to Moses that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as the God of the living. Let's take a look at God's relationship with these three folks. After Adam took a bite out of the apple and was afraid for God to see him as he was, his descendant Abraham developed a personal relationship with God. According to Paul, our faith is exemplified in his, notably when he was ready to offer his only son as offering to God. Isaac watched his father obey God when he was on that sacrificial altar, and watched God speak to his father to spare his life. Jacob wrestled with God, became Israel and the patriarch of the Jews.

If we look for a thread, we might see that these three chose to worship the one God by faith when many of their contemporaries chose fancy idols that they could see, feel and touch. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob proved these imperfect men to be of great faith and belief in the one God. He then encouraged them and gave them all that they needed to become leaders and his greatest of servants.

How does this all relate to those of us here at Good Shepherd? As we walk our daily walk, shall we ask our God to prove us, then encourage us, and provide us all that we need to make a difference in those we touch in our daily walk?

Lately, it seems that politics has become much more of a theme at Good Shepherd than it was when I joined a couple of years back, so let me quote Tip O'Neill who said that all politics is local. I might propose that living out our faith be the same. Next time I see you, I'm going to ask God to encourage imperfect me and give me all that I need to make a difference in your life and the others whom I see, whether you or I espouse politics of red, blue or otherwise.

I invite you to do the same and awaken me (gently, please!) if I miss the mark. Have a blessed day.

*David Schaffer*

**God, prove us, then encourage us, and provide us all that we need to make a difference in those we touch in our daily walk.**

*The Lord God has given me a trained tongue that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.*

The prophet is speaking. But I thought immediately of Moses, Exodus 4:10, “Lord I do not know how to speak.” Moses wasn’t a Prophet, but he became a servant.

I wanted to be a servant. I wanted to be a teacher. The year before I graduated from UNI, the advisor called me in and said, “Marilyn, you can’t spell. How can we put you in front of a class? Take this book home and learn! Well..... but I wanted to be a teacher. Just a few months before graduation the advisor called me in and said, “Marilyn, how can we put you in front of a class? You have a lisp! Go see a speech therapist!”

I taught junior high. I told the students to help me because I couldn’t spell, and they did. They could certainly hear my lisp. But I could teach.

Our lives are always changing. Bad things happen to good people and trauma exists in our world. One day I couldn’t teach anymore, and I thought my life was over.

But life is always turning. It was 1976 and the Vietnam war was over. Refugees were arriving. Some were coming to the Decorah area. NICC recruited me to be an English as a Second Language teacher. I said, “Lord, I don’t know how to speak.” So I became a seeker. I received a great gift when I began walking with strangers, those other people, those other cultures. And they taught me!

There is so much mystery—the great mystery of faith and the mystery of God’s grace.

Sunday, January 11, Veda Mae and Hazel Jane were baptized. Then the entire congregation was invited to introduce themselves to someone nearby using the baptismal name given them by their parents.

I had to watch the service at home that day. But now I have the opportunity to introduce myself and say, “I’m Marilyn Rose, Child of God.” *Marilyn Anderson*

**Dear God, when we are called to endure the wilderness, help us to be seekers, to learn to change through mystery and your final grace.**

*Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.*

As I read this Psalm, I feel the need to rush to these hopeful words in verse 16. Two things drew me to that verse: 1 – the sun shining through the window on a cold day when I needed warmth; and 2 – a song by Psalmist Richard Bruxvoort Colligan.

But the verses before 14 are something I can't ignore, although I'd really like to. They describe life filled with sorrow, grief, and scorn. And uselessness and fear. Not fun.

Somehow this person is able to at least recall having trusted God and recall having said "You are my God." It does seem they are still experiencing their earlier troubles and still wanted to be removed from those troubles.

Finally - in verse 16 I am hearing that God's love shining on us can move us past those horrible, nasty things that are still happening. God's love is shining so much that we can be lifted back to life. Yes!

I like the way Richard Bruxvoort Colligan phrases verse 16:

"Shine on us.

Let your face shine on us now.

Shine on us.

Your love means life.

Life."

(It is even better sung.)

My hope for you and me is that when we are in a time of despair and are having trouble seeing a way forward that we will be able to experience God's presence shining on us and restoring our life. And that at other times we can help reveal this light and life to those who are very much needing it.

*Norm Friedrich*

**O Source of Life, help us to know and experience Your shining love bringing a renewal of life to us. Every day.**

*Your attitude must be the same as that of Christ Jesus.*

At first reading of the assigned devotional text, my initial response was Whoa! “Your attitude must be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” Are you kidding me? Fortunately, the passage rolled along explaining that Christ did not deem equality with God but instead emptied himself to take on, through his embodied self, the woes, joys, frustrations, doubts, life, and death of our humanity. And further reading of the text bubbled up elements like born into, humbled, exalted, obedient, proclaimed. Now I could breathe a bit realizing the passage is not so much a challenge to be Christ like in thought, word, and deed but to look toward his life, death and resurrection as a summation of God’s love in all its manifestations.

Yet, still questions remain as the passage proclaims for us to respond on bended knee and proclaim in every language that Jesus reigns supreme. Aye, there is the rub, bending one’s knee and proclaiming one’s faith. How, where, when?!? What is really required? A bit further on there is also mention of acting without grumbling or arguing. Whoa, here we go again. Maybe, in other words, following and believing in Christ requires hanging on for a life filled with twists and turns, leading to

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Perhaps the reader will have to finish that sentence as the writer continues to muse and reflect.

*Bob Larson*

**Lord: May our questions and actions lead us to daily celebration of the gift of your Son.**

*...Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant . . ."*

Jesus—Jew, Rabbi—anticipating his imminent betrayal and death, hosts a Seder meal with 12 male disciples. By that time, it's a millennium-old custom, marking Pharaoh's release of the Jews from bondage in Egypt. Women probably prepared the food. Jesus lifts the unleavened bread and wine, and distributes them to his disciples.

For centuries thereafter men have reenacted the consecration and distribution. That was my "growing-up" experience. Black-clad nuns prepared the altar. (I never knew their names; we addressed them as "Sister.") But Father Byrnes lifted the host and the wine. I never questioned the roles.

Today women, too—our Pastors—lift the gluten-free bread and wine, consecrating them with the words that Jesus spoke. And I know that Jesus, surrounded by disciples of all genders, smiles.

In Boston, on the second night of Passover, April 2 this year—and Maundy Thursday, my beautiful grandnephew and -niece will help prepare the Seder table for a celebration that is now at least 3000 years old. There will be unleavened bread called matzah, ample wine, veggies dipped in saltwater, bitter herbs, and maybe some gefilte fish. The Goldberg Family will celebrate, and I worry.

*Jane Borelli*

**Jesus, Good Shepherd, gather us all together at your table, so that ALL may be safe and ALL may have bread.**

*He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.*

This section of Isaiah, not written by Isaiah, introduces what some refer to as the Servant Song. Scholars are not clear who wrote it and vacillate on who that “Servant” might be. So maybe that gives me some liberty.

I am not sure what the unknown prophet was thinking. The visions certainly are grandiose. Maybe they suggest the reign of an Israel king, but the language implies something much broader.

Some might think that Servant to be Jesus, and not without some justification; but the assumption that the servant is the Biblical Jesus falls short when the text says of that servant: “he will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth.” We clearly aren’t there with the justice end of things.

Perhaps the concept of The Universal Christ presented by Catholic theologian Richard Rohr allows us to see and embrace the Servant as the ever-present Universal Christ whose presence will persist and live through all of us until “justice is truly established.” Maybe this Isaiah prophet didn’t make everything perfectly clear, but the image of that servant who “will not cry or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street; or break a bruised reed; or quench a dimly burning wick” gives me hope. Hope that all is not lost, and that eventually justice will prevail. And of course, that message also gives me hope that we do not need to burden ourselves with unreasonable expectations (or loud, haughty power plays). It gives us a non-violent and peaceable model for guidance. Here’s to those of us struggling to be our own “dim wicks” that the prophet said will not be quenched.

*Bob Felde*

**Prayer: Dear God, help us to discern where our wicks might shine best in the quest for justice.**

*For you, O Lord, are my hope,  
my trust, O Lord, from my youth.*

This psalm is a lament. The psalmist is letting God know that something isn't right and expecting God to do something about it. This persistent declaration of God's faithfulness, even when things decidedly appear not to be so, is a consistent theme throughout the psalms and the rest of the Hebrew Bible.

In Psalm 71 the psalmist goes back and forth between descriptions of trouble from evil people, both now and as expected in the future, to hope, praise, and declarations of trust in God. This exchange has been going on throughout the psalmist's life.

This psalmist is a "mature" worshiper of God. They have experienced God as a deliverer who is close by and active in the here and now – not just sometime in the future. Just as God has been their hope and trust from their youth (vs. 5), we can peek ahead a few verses to see that they intend to proclaim God's might to all generations to come, even "to old age and gray hairs" (vs. 18).

I love that trust in God permeates this psalm. When we trust someone, we can speak freely with them, even when we are disappointed or angry, without harm to the relationship. A lament psalm leads us from our own complaint, worry, or even tears into a conversation with God. Such conversations can help us get unstuck from our own understanding of the suffering we are lamenting into a deeper understanding of ourselves and our relationship with God.

God holds on to us – from our birth, through our youth, and on into old age. And in our hope and trust and praise – even in times of trauma, injustice, and suffering – we hold on to God as well. Holding hands with God has never been a guarantee that things will always be comfortable, but it does mean we do not face the antagonists of life alone.

*Susan Friedrich*

**God,  
You are my hope, and my trust. As I know you hold me, help me to hold on to  
you too – no matter what.**

*Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary in your souls or lose heart.*

What has amazed me the most during the month of January, watching the events unfold across the border in Minneapolis, is the resilience of the community. In frigid temperatures, against threats of violence, despite uncertainty and fear, thousands of citizens have gathered, mobilized, organized—demonstrated for the nation grand and ongoing acts of solidarity.

They have lit candles, gathered to sing, shuttled groceries to vulnerable neighbors, collected supplies, supported local businesses, shielded school children, moved abandoned cars, marched, and prayed.

Solidarity is breeding solidarity. Solidarity is spurring generosity. Solidarity is opening hearts.

The writer of Hebrews encourages us to consider Jesus's own struggles and sufferings, and to remember that he walked this earth to stand in solidarity with all our broken world. Jesus is with us, and so we do not lose heart. Jesus stands beside us, and so we do not fear. Jesus walks with us, and so we do not grow weary of doing what is good, right, and true. Jesus keeps vigil with us and so we do not lose hope.

Jesus is with us.

God does not abandon us or leave us alone. And when we face the sometimes-unthinkable difficulties or atrocities of evil in our world, or when we know grief deep inside our bones, we take comfort in knowing that our sufferings are not unknown to God. For Jesus stands in solidarity with us and with all creation.

And so we can resolve to maintain our hope, to continue to work for justice, and to continue to lead with love.

*Melissa Bills*

**Thank you, Jesus, for knowing our joy and our pain. Spur us on toward love and good deeds, for your name's sake.**

*So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.*

Several years ago, Cindy made a quilt titled 'Catch A Wave'. Wrapped in the quilt, staring out the window watching it snow, I wondered what kind of wave have I caught and where is it taking me? Dozing off to sleep, I find myself in Southern California hearing the Beach Boys beckon me to "Catch a wave, catch a wave now". As the television hums in the background, I'm startled awake by Ken Jennings announcement of Final Jeopardy and decide it is time to pen my Gospel reflection.

In John's Gospel text, Jesus tells us "A new commandment I give you, love one another". He proceeds to demonstrate this love by washing his disciples' feet. Jesus then tells us the world will know we are his followers if we have love for one another.

This commandment to demonstrate love through service to others stands in stark contrast to what we witness in our daily journeys. Social media is filled with examples of people serving and edifying self. It seems this is the natural human state of affairs; seeking and satisfying our desires at all costs. To consider serving others is off our radar and simply is not a natural human state. Indeed, it must require a supernatural state only occurring when we are in tune with Jesus' commandment to love one another.

Reflecting on this commandment, I realize I must be out of tune with Jesus' will for me. Interestingly enough, the AM radio I listen to on my way to work recently shared a fitting story. It seems there was an isolated old violin playing Shepherd in the 1930's Colorado plains whose violin continually became out of tune. Having no way to tune it, he wrote to the local AM station and asked them to strike the note "C" weekly at a certain time. They accommodated the old fellow and for years would strike the note. His violin thus became tuned and he could fill his house and valley with beautiful music.

Still warmly wrapped in my 'Catch a Wave' quilt I wonder how Jesus can 'tune me' to catch a wave of serving others? In the background the television beckons me to serve self with the latest, greatest new cars of 2026. My eyes wander to the Crucifix on our wall reminding me of history's greatest example of love and grace! I believe Jesus is striking His tuning fork of love for each of us daily. Can we hear it above all the worldly noise? I hope we as individuals and society can be 'tuned' and catch this new wave of serving and loving others. May it be so for each of us! *Jeff Ernst*

**Lord Jesus, please strike your tuning fork of love in each of us, enabling us to look for ways to serve and love our neighbors.**

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

*Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?*

*Karin:* For me, Psalm 22 will always be linked to Maundy Thursday and the stripping of the altar. In my early adult years, we went to church in Iowa City, and the women of the church would strip the altar while two unaccompanied cantors sang this beautiful lament together. The haunting melody of the repeated refrain, “Oh Lord, do not be far away. Oh Lord, do not be far away.” will be with me forever. It brings up feelings of extreme weariness and loneliness- perhaps how Jesus felt in the garden of Gethsemane. And perhaps this is how many of us are feeling right now?

*Mikayla:* My thought is how this Psalm seems very connected to what’s happening in our country now, with all of society lifting up our voices in a plea for help. So many bad things are happening. People are tired. People are angry. They are wondering why all this is happening to them, wondering why our cries for help are not getting answered.

*Karin and Mikayla:* We both feel that the psalmist is in a time of deep despair or crisis of faith, but they still continue to ask for God to be near. This reminds us that even in dark times, our hearts still yearn for a hopeful future.

*Mikayla and Karin Martin-Hiner*

**Oh Lord, do not be far from me; be near to all in their time of need.**

*But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.*

This phrase that stays with me is easy to miss: It is not a triumphant image. It is not even a hopeful one. It is simply an image of someone who has nowhere else to go. Others come, look, and leave, carrying whatever conclusions they can manage. But Mary stays, held in place by love and loss, standing at the edge of what she cannot understand. I recognize that place -- don't you? The space where faith feels thin, where belief has yet to catch up with sorrow, and where all you can do is just keep showing up.

Angels appear, but they do not change Mary's story. Jesus appears, she assumes he is the gardener, which may be John's quiet way of telling us something about resurrection. It does not come through spectacle or certainty, but through relationship. It shows up dressed like ordinary work, manifesting in the everyday work of nurturing life.

When Jesus speaks Mary's name, something opens within her. Not because she now understands, but because she is known. Love is restored.

"Do not hold on to me," Jesus says, and we hear both tenderness and invitation. Love is not meant to freeze a moment in time; it is meant to release us back into the world changed. Resurrection is not about grasping what was lost, but about trusting what is becoming.

Mary leaves the garden carrying no proof, only a story: "I have seen the Lord." And it is enough—not because it explains everything, but because it bears witness to a God who meets us in our weeping, calls us by name, and sends us back into the world with life still unfolding.

*Dave Geenen*

**Lord, thank you for your tenderness and your invitation. Help us trust what is to come.**

*But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you."*

I love living in a place with four real seasons. Each holds its own beauty and magic: the brilliant greens of summer, the blaze of autumn, the deep quiet and darkness of winter, the slow unfurling of spring.

The church has seasons, too. Every year brings us through a full cycle. Every year makes room for festivals, commemorations, celebrations—and lamentations, too.

Every year brings us to the stable door.

And every year brings us here, to the empty tomb.

I like to imagine the wise men knocking on the door of the stable. I imagine an oaken door, splintery and rough. Perhaps they can hear the murmur of the animals inside. Perhaps Mary sings a quiet lullaby. They stand there, holding their wild and lavish gifts in their hands, while a golden light leaks through the frame of the door. And then they enter into the presence.

I like to imagine the women standing at the open mouth of the tomb. They have experienced the terror of the earthquake; the guards lie before them in a dead faint. The women stand there, holding their small collection of spices and linen in their hands, while the blinding light of the angel shines all around them.

And then they enter the tomb, and they see.

*Lise Kildegaard*

**Dear God, help us to know and to feel and to see the astonishing glory of your resurrection.**