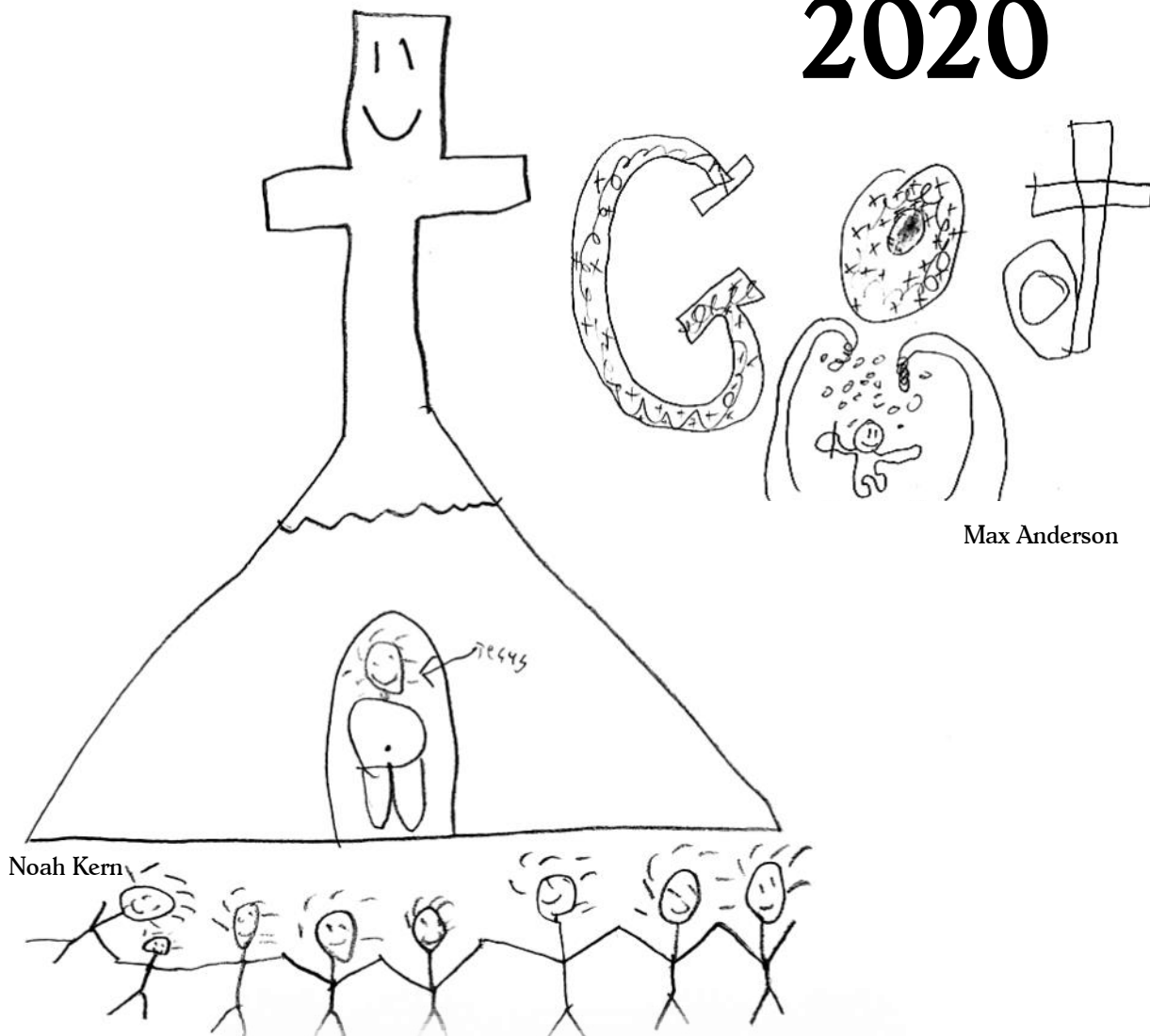


Reflections for Lent 2020



Noah Kern

Max Anderson

by the people of
Hosanna! Lutheran Church

The point of all of this . . .

The season of Lent is traditionally a time when Christians take up any number of disciplines to grow closer to God. Devotional books like this one help us commit to regular reading of scripture, reflection, and prayer. The reflections are offered to get us started thinking about how the scriptures intersect with our own lives.

You might be wondering why we needed to write our own devotional booklet. These reflections mean something to us precisely *because* they are *yours*. Each of us has different experiences, perspectives, and talents, and God is present in all of them. By sharing these stories, we are inviting one another to know God as we do, and into deeper relationship with God and the church. We pray that these holy words will mean something to you also.

Thank you to everyone who opened their hearts and their minds to share their faith. It is not easy for any of us, so try not to compare your devotion to those of others. All are valuable. We pray that sharing your story is as much a blessing as hearing the stories of others.

How to use this devotional . . .

Set aside a time each day to read this devotional--when you get up or go to bed, before a meal, while waiting in the car, or with a loved one. Choose a time you can stick to each day. If you miss a few days, don't beat yourself up. Pick up with today's reflection. Mark the ones you miss and go back to them later.

Although these devotions are meaningful as printed in this booklet, we encourage you to read the full scripture passage listed on each page to hear the full context and weight of God's Word before reading the reflection.

Finish by saying the prayer. Feel free to add anything God has moved you to say, or additional prayers you've learned over the years.

Get this on your phone or tablet . . .

Are you more likely to read these devotions if you have them with you all the time on your phone? Send an e-mail to cathy@hosannalutheranchurch.org and we'll send you a digital copy of this booklet.

NOW IS THE TIME

Wednesday, March 26, 2020 - by Michael Kern

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:20 - 6:10

“See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!” - 2 Cor. 6:2

Many of you know that I’m not exactly the most prompt at getting things done. I think it might be a genetic flaw in the DNA of all Kerns. What this means is that I don’t always say the things I’d like to say or do the things I’d like to do for people when I want to say or do them. Sometimes I don’t tell or show my loved ones how much I love them when I’m thinking about it. Sometimes I want to tell a friend that I admire something they did, or I want to say something meaningful in their moments of pain. I want to do all these things in meaningful ways. The problem is that in my mind I mix that up with wanting to do them perfectly. So instead of doing something right away, I think and agonize over it. Before I ever get around to hatching my wonderful intentions, the big and meaningful gestures become too big to ever accomplish. Before I realize it, they get set aside because there are other pressing things to do. The moment passes and they don’t end up happening. Then, of course, because guilt is also built into the Kern DNA, I feel bad about not doing something meaningful, and it makes me want to make the next gesture that much better. If only I would just say or do something in the moment I am feeling it, the feelings on my heart would be shared more often. *Now* is the right time.

I think that because God is Almighty sometimes we expect God will only produce big and wonderful gestures of love. Thankfully, God is not like me. God isn’t waiting. God acts in the present, not just some future dream. Not everything God does is on a big and magnificent scale. Instead, what God does is real and timely. God whispers words of love, encouragement, and hope every moment or every day. God fills us with life and love right when we need it. God actually does this through people like you and me. I just pray that God will help me get over myself and my need to do things perfectly, so that I can share God’s life and love when it is needed. There is no time like the present.

1. What are you putting off doing that you really want to do for someone else?
2. What gets in your way of speaking love and life to someone else?
3. How is God sending you the same message?

*Gracious God, thank you for your perpetual care. Open my ears to hear your love.
Open my mouth to speak it. Open my heart to show it. Amen.*

GET UP AND GO

Thursday, February 27 - by John Chapman

Scripture Reading: Jonah 3: 1-10

“Get up , Go to Nineveh, So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh” Jonah 3: 2-3

In this verse we see Jonah going where he really didn't want to go. This was the second time the Lord told him to get up and go. We all know how the first time worked out. So God tells Jonah to “get up, don't just sit there, get up and take my message.” This was a scary thing to do to go into a great city and deliver a message that no one wanted to hear. But he did it loudly and boldly. And to his surprise the people believed him and repented. Even the king, the great ruler of Nineveh was affected by what he said, and spread the words of repentance to the whole city. Much to Jonah's surprise, the repentance worked because when they asked for forgiveness, the city was saved.

In our lives we all have to face tough choices and difficult tasks. Some are small ones and some are life changing. And there are some choices that affect not only ourselves but those around us like our friends, coworkers and our families. These are some of the hardest to face.

As a husband of a pastor I have had to change my life quite a few times. When Barb was given a new call to a different congregation this always meant my facing some major changes such as leaving my job, friends and the people of the church I had gotten to know. It was always with a sense that this must be for the best, we faced the move to a new place and direction in our lives.

I viewed the moves as a new page of our lives, so I got up and went. From California to Minnesota to Iowa to Missouri. It was by trusting in God that each move was the right thing to do I gained the bravery to actually go. Each time a change came up, it was with some fear and longing that I faced the challenge of the unknown. I knew I was comfortable with the way things were, and I wanted them to stay just the way they were.

Why did I need to change? Why now? And why did I need to go?

The fear of the unknown and how we would face it is a part of our reluctance to face any change we are faced with. But it is how we face the challenge of changes in our lives that test our faith that God is in control and he knows what is best for us. In all our lives, even little changes can bring out our doubts and fears. It could be a new school, a new job, meeting new people, or even being asked to write a Lenten Devotion when you don't know if you are up to it or have anything to say.

It is when we let go of our fears and trust God that we can be open to the better things in life, and be open to becoming a better self. I feel that God gives us the strength to face the challenges, big and little in our lives, if we are open to his directions and listen to hear his voice.

1. Were there some difficult changes in your life that you had trouble seeing as God's will?
2. How do you summon up the courage to face Changes in your life?

*Good Lord give us the strength and Faith to Face
the Changes in our lives both Big and Small. Amen.*

BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL

Friday, February 28 - by Margaret and Genevieve Grote

Scripture Reading: Jonah 3:10-4:1-11

“Is it right for you to be angry?” – Jonah 4:4

I don't have a filter. I like to make sure things get done the best way possible and that lack of a filter can make me sound harsh when explaining my way of doing things. At home, my husband deals with this flaw daily. It could be about being efficient when taking something to the garage on the way to moving laundry over, packing the car for a trip, etc. Jeremy forgives me daily for these things. Is it the end of the world if he has to make a 2nd trip downstairs or if the tall cup is in the corner of the dishwasher... destined to be handwashed? Nope. Definitely not. He shows me mercy. He tells me it's not mercy. He says it's because he loves me. He shows me forgiveness for my tone of voice. He shows me compassion when I feel like I need to problem solve when he just wants to vent. He loves me through my faults and believes in me. That is mercy.

Words from Genevieve: I sometimes have issues with my temper. One time I punched my sister and she got hurt. I got in trouble and went to my room to cool off. After my parents took care of Melody, she brought a special toy of mine, a triceratops, to me to help ME feel better. I said I was sorry and she forgave me. I cried and told her that I was a bad kid and she told me I wasn't, and that I'm awesome. I needed mercy and she gave it to me even though she was hurt. I couldn't believe it. It made me feel really glad I have her as a sister.

As a mom, I see my kids teach us and each other all the time. Genevieve was taught that she was worthy of that mercy by her sister. We are all given mercy by God because he is invested in our lives just as he was in the people of Ninevah. I think we all have times when we cannot believe the mercy given to others or ourselves. It can be overwhelming. It's times like this that I have to remember that God loves us all. Not just the “perfect”. God teaches Jonah that he has compassion for all. He is Gracious and Merciful! Slow to anger and full of unwavering love, ready to forgive us!.

1. Have you ever been frustrated when someone else received mercy they did not deserve or surprised when you received mercy? How did it make you feel?
2. Why is God so merciful?
3. When have you seen someone show great mercy? How can you be more merciful?

Dear God, thank you for your continued mercy in my life. Help me to show mercy to others and be slow to anger, sharing your love with all those around me. Amen.

CHILDREN AND STUMBLING BLOCKS

Saturday, February 29 - by Margaret Rockhold

Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:1-7

“Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven”
-Matthew 18:4

The best thing about being a mom is watching my daughter discover new things in the world. The worst is watching her struggle to accomplish something she has been working so hard on. I know that there will always be stumbling blocks in her path as she grows up, it's what helps us learn new things.

Even Jesus says there will be stumbling blocks in Matthew 18:7 and that's just part of life. What Jesus reminds us is that we shouldn't be the ones creating stumbling blocks that aren't needed. Instead of pointing out everything my daughter did wrong at her tumbling meet, I try to point out one thing she could improve on and lots of things she did right. I want her to see that yes, she stumbled but she still did well anyway.

In verse 3 Jesus says that unless you become like a child you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Children don't judge people by skin, religion, or abilities, and neither did Jesus. Jesus wants us to welcome everyone regardless of their differences just like a child would. When a child sees a hungry person they want to give them food because they are hungry. It doesn't matter if they are black or white or Muslim or Jewish, all they see is a person who needs food. Don't let a person's differences stop you from feeding them, clothing them, or filling whatever need they have, they are our brothers and sisters in Christ and that is all that matters.

I love kids because they except God's love without question. They hear God's word and except it as is, nothing more. I think as adults we lose the ability to just except what God wants us to do without asking questions and setting rules. We want everything clarified for us into those who can and those who can't, who is right and who is wrong, who is worthy and who isn't. We have this need to point out everything someone did wrong and how we did everything right. But in the end Jesus says “Yes there will be times you stumble that's life, just don't cause others to stumble needlessly. Welcome everyone and take care of everyone just as a child would without judgment.”

1. When have you caused someone to stumble?
2. What stops you from helping others as Jesus wants?
3. How can you be more like a child in your life?

Gracious and Understanding God, thank you for loving us and taking care of us no matter what. Help us to take care of others with open arms and minds. Thank you for reminding us that we all stumble in life and to not cause others to stumble by what we say and do. Amen .

LET'S TRY AGAIN

Sunday, March 1 - by Barb Chapman

Scripture Reading: Genesis 2:15 - 3:7

“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate.”
- Genesis 3:6

When you think of sin, what comes to mind? I often think in terms of Big Bad Evil, something horrible and obvious. Many of the commandments tell us to avoid such things, like when it says, “You shall not kill,” and “You shall not steal.” But other commandments deal with things that we consider not so bad, like taking God’s name in vain or coveting something that belongs to someone else. Here in this first story of sin in the Bible, what Adam and Eve are tempted to do seems like a little thing. A bite of fruit. And maybe that could become a good thing, or so they think. “The tree was good for good, and it was a delight to the eyes,” thinks Eve. What could one bite hurt? And that’s where sin too often enters into my own life. “What’s the big deal? So what would it hurt, really?”

What was God thinking of when God created a garden that included this one tree? Wouldn’t the world have been an easier, kinder place without temptation? If God can do anything, couldn’t God have made us so that we don’t have to face temptation? So much pain and sorrow in this world could have been avoided if we just were not tempted to sin.

But without those choices, how could we choose good? A fish has little choice but to be a fish. It isn’t tempted to try to fly or to harm another. A tree is not good or evil of itself. Good only comes into our world, love only enters when we have choices, when we can do a wide range of things but choose to do good and to share love.

It’s easy to think that I can go it alone, most of the time. I want to think that I will do what is good and right and can call on God when I really really need the help, but the rest of the time, I can make my own way. Eve wanted to go her own way, without calling on God’s help. Adam went along without asking for God’s help. They thought they could do it all by themselves, as do we as well. And that is where sin begins. Thinking that we know better than God, that we don’t need God’s help, that we can make our own way. It takes real strength to give our lives over to God. It takes trust and hope and also the knowledge that, when we fail, God will pick us up and say, “Let’s try again.”

1. What is hardest for you to give over to God?
2. Where do you want to go your own way?
3. What might happen if you gave God the first chance, rather than using God as the last resort?

Oh God, we are stubborn and prideful people. We want to think we don’t need to rely on you for help. We want to save you for the moments when we finally know we’re over our heads. Help us turn first to you, to listen to you, to trust you, and to follow you. Amen.

ACTIONS HAVE CONSEQUENCES

Monday, March 2 - by Michael Kern

Scripture Reading: Genesis 4:1-16

“Cain said to the LORD, ‘My punishment is greater than I can bear!’” - Genesis 4:13

I couldn't even count the number of conversations I've had with my children about consequences. Choices have consequences, some good and some bad. More than once we've advised our children to leave a favorite stuffed animal at home so that it doesn't get lost. If they take it, they are responsible for it. Except that when it gets left behind, it's the parent's problem, too. Any sometimes “their fault.” We didn't remind them to take it. We distracted them. We didn't go back for it.

Cain has a similar conversation with God. Granted, the stakes are a lot higher than leaving a stuffed animal behind. Cain kills his brother. But there are consequences. He'll be a wanderer all his life because people won't trust him. He has to leave his favorite activity (gardening) behind. And maybe if God hasn't “played favorites” with Abel, this wouldn't have happened in the first place. Somehow, the “punishment” is God's fault, even though it's that consequences for being a murderer.

It's tempting to blame God for all the bad things that happen in our lives. As if every single one of them were divine punishments for all our mistakes. As if God loves others more than us. The hard truth that we tell our kids is that actions, good or bad, have consequences. And sometimes, like poor Abel, we're the victim of others' poor choices.

So what does God do? What we parents have to do when our kids lose their stuffed animals. We end up comforting them. More significantly, we end up laying in bed with them that night so that they can fall asleep feeling safe and not alone without their stuffed animal. When Cain learns that actions have consequences, God promises to abide with Cain and protect him. And God does the same every time we relearn that lesson ourselves.

1. What misfortune have you blamed on God that isn't really God's fault?
2. When was the last time you learned the hard way that actions have consequences?
3. How did God offer you comfort during that time?

*Heavenly Father, help me remember that actions have consequences.
Help me make the right decisions. When I inevitably fail, please don't leave me.
Amen.*

HELP IN TIME OF NEED

Tuesday, March 3 - by Marty Berggren

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 4:14 - 5:10

“Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession.” For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.” Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. -

Hebrews 4:14-16

One of my weaknesses is I lack patience. When things tend to go slower than I think they should or in a direction I don't think they should go, I step right in thinking I will just make things happen and get things resolved. This is evident in a number of areas of my life including my husband's recent health issues. It seemed like forever as we selected doctors, went to appointments, but never really felt like progress was being made. It's hard for me to see my husband suffer. When answers weren't coming as fast as I thought they should, sure enough I pushed, but nothing happened. Answers weren't coming. Then, prayer was answered as I was gently reminded that I am not the one in control, God is in control and God's timing is perfect. Prepare less and pray more! God provided the blessing of good sleep which my husband needed, something for which I never prayed. And he knew my husband needed open heart surgery before his upper back surgery because it was critical to his health and God made it happen. Jesus knows what it is like to be tempted and suffer. No one understands my weaknesses and helps me in time of need like Jesus. Jesus already had my husband in his hands.

It is hard to trust, but God proved that God cares and understands. Although it might be hard not to try to be in control in the future, at least I recognize God is full of compassion and mercy. God will give me peace knowing that all will be okay and that God's mercy and grace sustain me, no matter how well I have the trust and prayer parts under control.

1. What did Jesus gain through suffering?
2. What difference does it make that Jesus can sympathize?
3. What does it mean to approach “the throne of grace with boldness”?

*Lord Jesus, my great High Priest, I Praise you. You are perfect in patience and compassion and supreme in mercy and grace. Thank you for interceding for me before the Father. Thank you for being present with me here on earth through the Holy Spirit.
Amen*

LEFT BEHIND

Wednesday, March 4 - by Jeanine Stubbs

Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:10-14

“So, it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.” - Matthew 18:14

Recently, I had dinner with a relatively new friend who I am just starting to get to know. Several months ago, this friend shared with me some issues she has with her feet that causes her to have some trouble walking at times. During dinner I asked how her feet have been and her response really surprised me. She replied by saying they were about the same but then went on to say her labored gait when walking makes her very self-conscious that others are always judging her with the thought “look at that fat woman—if she would just lose weight she would not have such trouble walking.”

Here I sat facing a beautiful woman who is admittedly overweight but few among us are not. When I asked her if she had any idea where that negative self-talk came from, her response has become the foundation for this devotion. She revealed her father was always very critical of her growing up and so she never felt truly accepted by him. Compound that with the fact she has always struggled with her weight and she has vivid memories of being the last child picked for team activities in school because she was “the little fat girl.”

Her words have stayed in my heart and mind far beyond our dinner together a month ago. It saddens me to know this friend has carried so many of these negative images of herself into adulthood which has resulted in her having significant self-image and confidence issues. She admits to always finding herself apologizing to people through the words, I am sorry. A habit she wishes she could break. It makes me wonder if in her heart she is sorry she exists period.

Who among us has not at one point in our lives felt lost, lonely, shunned, isolated, bullied, or simply felt like we did not “fit in?” For those of us who have faith in God, turning to him during these dark times is often the comfort that pulls us through.

1. Who do you know who is currently feeling isolated from society that would benefit from you reaching out to be the face of God?
2. What is preventing you from releasing any negative images you have of yourself in favor of positive ones the Lord has planned for you?

Dear Lord, please help us to realize we do not have to be perfect to come before you in prayer. We ask that you help us to replace any negative self-images we have of ourselves with the beautiful ones you intended for us to possess when you made us your children. Amen

LIVE IN BOLDNESS, FAITHFULNESS AND ACTION

Thursday, March 5 - by Cindy Plesko

Scripture Reading: 2 Timothy 1:3-7

...for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. – 2 Timothy 1:7

Sometimes I feel that what I offer in life is so simple, small and insignificant. I forget that God has given us all gifts that are unique, individual and important. Not everyone will make an impact that will be displayed on TV or remembered in history books and that's okay. The gifts received are exactly what God intended for us to use to share His message, His love, and His works.

Over the years there have been many times that I've questioned what I'm doing with my life. Is it what God intended? Am I using my gifts as He intended? At one particular time, Mike and I were going through a very difficult hardship. A hardship inflicted on us. I remember feeling abandoned by God-hopeless. (I thank God for being brought up in a household where my faith was supported and nurtured. I really needed to dig deep within). I found it so hard to hear God, feel His presence, and to step forward. As I humbled myself completely and surrendered myself...I began to feel His presence, I heard His voice and felt His love. I knew that I was meant to be me, a wife, a mother, a daughter, a friend. I knew others needed me and what I could do for them. I needed to be God's servant and messenger. I needed to use my God given gifts for those around me.

Even today as I have become a caregiver for the past 5 years, I have questioned what I am doing. There are many days that I've had to "pull myself up by the boot straps" and remember to ask for God's guidance. He never fails me. When I feel as though I'm not sure I have the strength to carry on, He miraculously breathes strength, power and love back into my soul. I realize that every small gesture is an act of love. Every kind word is a display of love. Every opportunity to be a better person is a gift from Him.

1. Have you ever been humbled to your knees and then risen with the strength of the Holy Spirit?
2. How have you used some of your special gifts as God's instruments?
3. How do you influence others in strengthening their faith?

God of strength, wisdom and love. Breathe your Holy Spirit into me. Let me open my heart to hear and feel your presence. Let me live my life each and every day with boldness, faithfulness and endurance-sharing your love. Amen.

TRYING TOO HARD

Friday, March 6, 2015 - by Michael Kern

Scripture Reading: Mark 8:31-38

“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” - Mark 8:35

When it comes to bowling, basketball, ping pong, or most other sports, I’m one of those people who tends to start strong and finish weak. It’s not because I get tired. It’s because I start trying too hard.

I hate to lose. I like to impress. And though I may often start strong, it never seems to be good enough. So I try harder. And I do worse. Maybe I just get more tense and I focus entirely on doing well, rather than just letting my body follow the rhythm that comes naturally and leads to better shots. Whatever it is, it makes me do worse, which makes me frustrated, so I try even harder, and do even worse. And it’s not very fun anymore.

It’s not just a problem when it comes to sports, either. When I’m doing art, I want it to be perfect, so I keep reworking things, and often end up making it worse by overdoing it. When it comes to relationships, I try so hard to relate or impress that it just becomes awkward for everyone.

Whatever it is, it seems the harder I try, the worse I do. I’m not advising that we should not try to do our best. But sometimes trying too hard causes us to lose sight of why we are doing it, and to let go of the natural gifts God has given us when we try to control them. We stop being ourselves and try to be God instead.

It’s the same problem Adam and Eve had. They had everything. But they stopped trusting the gifts God had given them, and tried to take control of their own lives. The consequence is they started feeling inadequate. They became ashamed. And life stopped being any fun. It was no longer good.

Sometimes I forget about myself and I do manage to have fun. It’s usually when I’m playing with my kids. I’ve learned it helps me to find non-competitive things to do together with others. But sometimes, even then, I end up trying to make the perfect Lego tower, and I miss out on actually *playing* with my kid. It’s apparently more fun for others when we lose ourselves, too.

I think Jesus is right. Sometimes we just need to lose ourselves. We need to stop trying to win, impress, and be perfect, and to just enjoy playing and being with those we love. I’m not all that great at it, but I hope and pray you manage to lose yourself at least once in a while.

1. In what activities do you find yourself getting lost? When can you just be you, instead of trying to be perfect?

For God’s sake, give me the courage to let go and just play sometimes. Amen.

SEE YOUR REWARDS

Saturday, March 7 - by Marie Summers

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 51:4-8

“for a teaching will go out from me, . . . my salvation to all generations”
- Isaiah 51:4 & 8

The first verse uses the word “teaching” which I chose long ago as my first vocation. I started teaching Sunday School when I was in high school and continued in college when I added many classes to learn about being a teacher. Upon graduation I found that there were many more teachers than positions and returned to teaching Sunday School where I was still needed. About a year after we had moved to Denver, our first son was born and I found a new vocation. I was a parent! I learned much from that little boy and from his brother and sister as they arrived. I remembered many things that my parents had shown me, watched other parents and even read a few books—and prayed! After they were older, I returned to college to learn more about child development and actually spent a few years teaching little people. Finally, I found a position where both of my vocations were combined! I became a Parent Educator with the school’s Parents as Teachers Program. For several years, I had an opportunity to share what I had learned and loved.

But the one drawback teachers find is that they seldom see what all their time and effort has produced. I was blessed to see some of the results of our parenting (oh, yes, there were two of us parenting all along). For example, when I traveled to China with our oldest son, I witnessed the Daddy that he had become as he held, soothed and comforted a sobbing little girl. By the next day, she smiled as he fed her and laughed as he tickled. Our daughter boarded a plane with her one month old in her sling, one hand holding the hand of her bouncing two-year-old and the other holding the hand of her very sober four-year-old. They completed their trip home with no major mishaps. And most recently, I watched as my middle child officially and legally became the father of the 14 year-old that he has “parented” for over 9 years. She smiled broadly as she responded “yes” when the judge asked if she wanted to be adopted. As grandparents, we have witnessed nine baptisms, three confirmations, several nervous acolytes, and lots of off-key Bible songs. Oh, and besides being great parents, all three of our children are “teachers”! I don’t know if this is what Isaiah had in mind when he talked about God’s “salvation to all generations”, but I am confident many parents are doing their best to continue sharing with their children the love and forgiveness that they learned as children.

1. If you are a parent, what is the lesson you hope your children will learn?
2. If you are not a parent, with whom have you shared God’s love?
3. If you were ever a child, what do you remember from your parents’ lessons?

Dear Lord, please bless us as we listen and learn, share and teach your love, hope, justice, deliverance and salvation. Amen.

THE GIFT OF ETERNAL LIFE

Sunday, March 8 - by Joyce Kinney

Scripture Reading: John 3:1-17

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” - John 3:16

How can I be saved? What do I have to do to have eternal life? These questions can haunt us and bring much anguish when we are unsure of the answer. What does the Bible tell us?

These are the words of Jesus: "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit."

To be born of water means we are to be baptized. To become a child of God is a very special and important event in one's life. It is an awesome experience to witness a tiny baby being baptized and know he/she is now a child of God and marked with the sign of the cross forever.

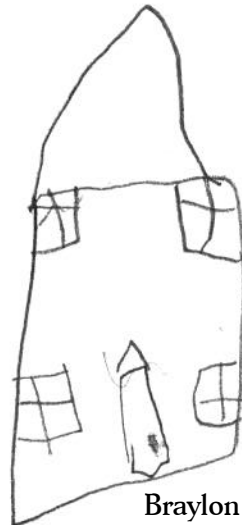
John 3:16 says, "Whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." These two things: through baptism and believing, we shall have eternal life.

At one time I doubted that I was "good enough" to be saved but then the words of John 3:17 come to mind: Jesus came "not to condemn the world but that the world through Him might be saved." In spite of all my misdeeds and sins I know that I am saved through baptism and believing in God's only begotten son, Jesus Christ.

So that's it!! Be baptized and believe in Jesus and you shall have eternal life.

1. What do you remember from the last baptism you witnessed? What did God promise?
2. What do you imagine eternal life will be like?

*Loving God, thank you for giving yourself for me.
Wash me with your grace every day and help me believe
in your love, that I may live as your child each day.
Amen.*



Braylon Williams

YOU GOTTA HAVE FAITH!

Monday, March 9 - by Donna Mason

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 11:1-22

“And without faith, it is impossible to please God..” - Hebrews 11:5

So, don't you have to love a Bible reflection that starts with a quote from George Michael? But you do have to have faith because there is no substitute.

If something sounds too good to be true, it's usually because it is TOO GOOD to be true – but this one isn't. Eternal life, eternal peace, and eternal joy in the presence of God are all waiting for you if you just have faith. The Christian world seems to split itself among those promoting good works as the key to salvation, those promoting pure faith as the key, and those in the middle campaigning for a nice split between the two. Isn't it the ultimate conceit though to think you can do enough good works to merit salvation? That the time and money you donate, that the kind words you speak, that the good things you do for others are enough to counterbalance all of the private dark thoughts, things you should have done but didn't, hands you should have reached out to but ran out of time or energy, the hurtful things you said...

We have all been given so many gifts but perhaps faith is the most valuable one because it is the only one God asks us for, knowing that if we have it, if we embrace it, if we live it, everything else falls in to place. We will do the good works because we have the faith that lets us know there is no other option but to do them, no other choice we want to make at a given opportunity. Those good works will make the world better for someone but our own faith is what will see us through the journey.

But what if you don't feel you were given the gift of faith or that it isn't your fault that you don't have enough of it? Then maybe you pray for it as you've never prayed for anything before partly because it is the key to your own salvation but also partly because building on whatever small kernel of faith you have will open you to all of the blessings that will follow for you and those whose lives you touch.

1. Can you measure your faith?
2. Can you build your faith?
3. Can you help others build their faith?

Father of all Fathers, help me cling to my faith in you when dark clouds gather and when the bright lights of temptation try to lead me down another path. Strengthen my faith that I may help strengthen the faith of others. Amen.

SEEING GOD'S BEAUTY IN YOUR SURROUNDINGS

Tuesday, March 10 - by Kali Bollhoefer

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 65:17-25

“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered.” – Isaiah 65: 17

In the illustration, this verse inspired me to create this picture of the landscape that God created and to be aware and enjoy your surroundings. Our surroundings are constantly changing, old vs new, sometimes we need to slow down and enjoy the work that is done.



1. What do you see in this image that speaks to your heart?
2. What has God made for you to enjoy today?
3. How can you slow down today?

*Awesome and majestic
God, thank you for the
beauty of creation.
Help me see your hand
in all I see around me.
Amen.*

THROWING STONES

Wednesday, March 11 - by Michael Jennings

Scripture Reading: John 7:53 - 8:11

“Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”
- John 8:7

Throwing stones....most of us have heard the term. The meaning is simple.

It had been a method of punishing people by inflicting pain whether the stones are real, verbally, physically or just through thought.

In John 7:53 – 8:11 – Jesus is once more tested by the Scribes and Pharisees who present him a woman who has committed adultery. The woman has broken one of God’s commandments and by Moses law must be stoned.

How can Jesus not comply? Jesus simply asks the crowd “Any of you whom have not committed sin are welcome to throw the first stone.”

We are all guilty, as we have all sinned. No one could have thrown the stone so when Jesus says “Go ahead throw the first stone.” We cannot.

As we walk through life, we are all sinners and yet we all throw stones at colleagues, friends, neighbors and people we do not even know.

Why? Envy, jealousy, ignorance and stupidity?

Instead of throwing stones at everything or everyone, we do not understand, why not look to remember what Jesus has said and begin to be someone who better controls our attitude and make the change to a better person.

It is hard to throw the stones you no longer have.

1. When have you been tempted to throw stones (or harsh words) at another?
2. When you feel like throwing stones, what emotions are behind that temptation?
3. What helps you drop your stones before you lost control of them?

*Lord give us the strength to lose the desire to pick up stones
and if we do to resist throwing them. Amen.*

LET GOD DO THE WORK

Thursday, March 12 - by Kris McArtor

Scripture Reading: Exodus 16:1-8

“...in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because He has heard your complaining against the LORD.” -Exodus 16:7

Complaining seems to be ingrained in our nature. I grew up hearing my parents complain about many things - the lack of money for “nice” things, the job that didn’t pan out, the fact that my sisters and I continued to grow out of things at an alarming rate. As a parent now, I understand the pressures they felt to make things better for us, and where the complaining came from. I complain about the lack of time to spend relaxing, the amount of planning I have to do for my job, and the astonishing rate at which my daughters grow out of things.

And yet, I have enough. I have a wonderful family, both at home and at my school. I have a nice house, plenty of food, and clothes for every season. I go on vacations now that were dreams in my youth. I am appreciated by coworkers, parents, and the learners in my school. And I STILL complain! In the midst of all this, God is working on me. Quietly. Slowly. Beckoning me to come nearer, to hear the plans he has for me, to know my place in this huge universe. I’m starting to listen more, especially as life gets more hectic.

I’m no Moses. I’m no Aaron. But others rely on me to lead them through difficult times to a more hopeful future. And I need to rely on God to be the one to do the leading. The more I give up complaining and appreciate what I have, the more I get in return. And the more I can give to others, modeling the kind of life we all can lead.

God hears my complaints. God hears my requests. And despite what I think should happen, He works in ways that will make me a better, stronger, more reverent person. All I need to do is step away from my own selfish wishes and look for the bigger picture. I need to let God do the work.

1. When are you tempted to complain to God? Does it ever seem hypocritical?
2. What do you appreciate in your life? Who do you appreciate? How can you show that appreciation?
3. What do you need God to provide for you?

*Lord, open my eyes to your tremendous gifts. Allow me to observe without judging, appreciate without complaining, and see the good work you are doing in my life.
Amen.*

TRUST WITHOUT VERIFICATION

Friday, March 13 - by Alison Kern

Scripture Reading: Exodus 16:9-21

The Lord spoke to Moses and said, “I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.’”
- Exodus 16: 11-12

Anyone who’s ever cooked a meal for a child can probably relate to Moses here. “I’m huuuungry!” they complain. A nutritious meal appears in front of them, with no effort on the child’s part. And then—can you picture the grossed-out facial expression?—“What IS it???” I’m not sure what the Hebrew word for “ewwww!” is, but I imagine that may have been in some of the earlier drafts of Exodus.

After some dramatic protests, the child sniffs, pokes, looks sideways and eventually tries a bite and discovers it’s not so bad after all. What a surprise...their loving parent is not trying to poison them! Still, the next time a new recipe hits the table, they’re likely to go through the whole process again.

In a world where human brokenness is rampant, we learn, even as children, to “trust, but verify.” Delegate a task to a coworker, but be prepared to cover it if they don’t do it well. Leave your child with a babysitter, but text every hour to make sure they’re ok. Ask your doctor about that rash, but not before you’ve asked Google and your social media followers to help confirm what the doctor said is correct.

God asks us to do a hard thing: just trust. God shows us time and again that when God promises, God is faithful. We don’t need to sniff suspiciously at the gifts God sets before us—the feast God provides is always exactly what we need, even when it seems at first glance more like brussels sprouts than ice cream.

Try to let go of the need to make your own backup plans for God’s plans for you. Hoarding the extra manna leads to rotten results, but gratefully accepting what God sets before you brings fullness and peace.

1. What were you whining about the last time you found yourself whining?
2. At what (or whom) have you initially turned up your nose, only to find it not so bad after all?
3. What’s your backup plan if God fails you? Do you really need it?

Faithful God, help me trust you more fully. Lead me to try the things you set before me, and be open to new experiences. Amen.

WALKING WITH GOD

Saturday, March 14 - by Melvin Peterson

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2:11-22

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God,” - Ephesians 2:19

The early church at Ephesus was having some relationship difficulties and needed to hear again the gospel of God. The Apostle Paul used the practice of baptism to work through his challenge of growing his faith. Through our baptism we are brought into constant relationship with God and others.

I remember as a little boy the baptism of my sister Joyce. It occurred at my aunt's house. The kitchen table was cleared and a white table cloth was spread. The home setting was warm and close as the afternoon sun shone through the big glass window. A crystal bowl filled with water was placed on the table and the pastor proceeded to baptize. To me, this is a supportive picture of what Apostle Paul used to explain God's saving grace. In our baptism we become a dwelling place for God and we can lean together in our spiritual lives.

1. How can our baptism mark a time of outward actions and receiving God's grace?
2. What does it mean for you to be a dwelling place for God?

*Oh, God, help me to walk with you
and with others. Amen.*



Eva Bruggeman

HOPE

Sunday, March 15 - by Louise Ahrens

Scripture Reading: Romans 5:1-11

"and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." Romans 5:5

Lists. I am the keeper of lists; for work, home, church activities, vacation planning and family reunions. My late sister in law used to tease me about being the "list lady" in the Ahrens family. There are notebooks throughout my house with lists. It helps me remember the details (at least it is an attempt), remain focused and have a sense of accomplishment when the task is done. Sometimes it is fun to go back and look at the lists, especially if it was a huge event like building our house or a fun party.

Throughout all my lists and planning I didn't consider or maybe didn't want to consider "What happens when something unexpected happens that is not on the list?" Every day the unexpected happens. You are baking a birthday cake for a loved one and there are not enough eggs. You must come up with an alternative. The unexpected event I am talking about is huge and stops you still. It could be a family member is that has suddenly taken ill and you are now a fulltime care giver. It could be a diagnosis that you were not expecting.

Are the lists that important now? To some, they still would play an important role in keeping organized. In my case, the lists were pushed aside - the everyday tasks, projects at work, volunteer activities. The Holy Spirit who was been working in the background all along took over, surrounded me with God's love and hope. Not only that God surrounded me with healthcare professionals; those who would pray (and still do), send cards, call, text, bring dinner out of the blue, surprised me with a visit when I was at my lowest. He seems to know what I needed and when. The love of the Holy Spirit is there every day, upholding and giving me hope. God gives us that same love and hope every day to each of us! The question I ask myself is, "were they there all along in my lists?"

1. How is God sending you the message of Hope?
2. Do you recognize the message of Hope in everyday events?

*Dear Lord, thank you for your Holy Spirit
and the Hope that is given to all of us! Amen*

DO YOU REALLY KNOW HOW MUCH GOD LOVE'S YOU?

Monday, March 16 - by Janeen Bollhoefer

Scripture Reading: 1 John 4:7-21

“We love, because he first loved us.” - 1 John 4:19

Receiving and trusting in God's love is a hard concept. We love our grandparents, parents, siblings (for the most part), friends, boyfriends/girlfriends as they are tangible that we can see and feel. God's love is unconditional and is a gift. We don't see God, but does that mean he's not there and he can't express his love to us? I believe that understanding the depth of God's love for us is the essential first step toward fulfilling our destiny. The second is to become a vessel of His love. I did not understand God's love entirely until recently. I was struggling that God's love didn't apply to me.

Four and half years ago, my sister died by suicide. I was very angry at God for allowing my sister to die. I had a lot of pent up feelings that I didn't know how to express. I was struggling more with the Why's and no one could give me answers, one of them being “Why didn't God intervene and prevent her death? It was such a confusing time and now looking back my daily routine, was just that a routine, non-emotional and just going through the motion of everyday life.

Years before I had purchased the book ‘The Shack’, and had attempted many times to read this book, but couldn't stay focused. During the time after my sister's death, I kept getting nudges that I needed to read the book, I would quickly push them aside and move on, but these images of the book would invade my dreams and thoughts throughout the day. One night I decided to give the book a try and I started reading. I couldn't put it down and read about half the book that first night. As I went through that book, I started to realize and understand that God did love us, and he had given my sister peace that she so needed. He gave her peace, but he gave me a bigger message, not only that I am loved, but I also needed to show my love to others. Being able to fully commit to God's love, was like a huge burden had been released. That book taught me so much about myself and gave me that nudge that I needed to participate and be a part of the bigger picture. By being open and sharing ‘My Story’ has allowed me to open my heart and have allowed God to fully consume my being. It has allowed me to fully know and appreciate the love that God has for me.

1. Why is it so hard to receive God's love?
2. What has happened in your life that has caused you to question God's love?
3. What love do you have to share with others?

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for showing and sharing your love. Continue to open my heart to your love and allow my actions to show that love to others. Amen.



GRIEF RECOVERY

Tuesday, March 17 - by Jean Ryerson

Scripture Reading: Psalm 30

“Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning.” - Psalm 30:5

As humans we can't escape emotions--exhilarating joy, deep love, incredible excitement at times balanced with sadness, hopelessness and grief. Been there. Done all of that. Including, of course, grief. Even after the devastating emotions after my parents died at ages 53 and 74, I wasn't ready for this. Traumatic. Sudden. Excruciating. I had no idea grief this intense existed anywhere. All at once, everything I thought was real wasn't. Every memory and plan for the future ruined. I felt lost and alone buffeted every which way by painful emotions. The first moment I could break away from the maelstrom, I ran straight for my church. I had gotten away from regular attendance because of scheduling issues, but I knew to go there for help now. I sat in the back trying to sing the songs with my head down, hair over my face, so others couldn't see the tears streaming down my cheeks. The words to the hymns suddenly meant more to me

with their messages of God's mercy and presence in terrible times. But the thing that made me jerk my head up was when the pastor started her sermon and said, “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning.” Exactly the words I needed to hear when I thought the rest of my life would be only misery and that I would be in the pit of grief forever. I held on to that message, prayed and read my Bible for more help, and was led to the best counselors, books, and other sources of help knowing God was right beside me all the way. I made the changes I needed to get out of that situation and begin the road to recovery never thinking I would find contentment, let alone real happiness, again, but thanks to God leading me and the resources He brought to me, I have found both. Eight years have gone by since that horrible time. The weeping is over and joy is here. Thanks be to God!

1. What messages in the Bible or in sermons have comforted you in difficult times?
2. Are there people in your life who would be comforted by this Bible verse?
3. Have you seen the signs, small and large, that God is helping you every day?

*Dear Lord, I have seen the signs of your presence daily. Thank you for bringing me past the disappointments and sad experiences in my life to find greater contentment and joy.
Amen.*

THE DAY EVERYTHING CHANGED

Wednesday, March 18 - by Sarah Read

Scripture Reading: John 7:14-39

“Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own” - John 7 :17

Hi! I’m Sarah and I am the mom of Maxwell John Anderson (yes you can sing his name) and his birthday is March 18th, 2010. Growing up, I knew that I was a little bit different. Such as, I picked the day of his birthday not the scripture to write my devotional. I always liked to wear dresses, fancy shoes, dance like no one was watching, use my hair brush to sing into the mirror at the top of my lungs...then go outside in my Sunday best and throw a frisbee, play baseball, play football, or shoot some hoops. I knew it was weird to like all of those things combined but couldn’t make sense of it. Why would someone purposely go outside in a pretty dress, when it could be ruined when I slid into home base? Why would I wear the fancy shoes if they were going to get scuffed up or muddy? “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with the right judgement.”

Fast forward to March 2009, where I wore the prettiest, fanciest dress, with a super sparkly tiara to get married in, with flip flops. Oh, and did I mention that I planned my wedding time around the NCAA tournament, so I was sure not to miss the Mizzou playing in the Elite 8 against UCONN? Yep, that happened. Then fast forward again to March 18th, 2010. I was about to have a baby and started to have self-doubt about the lessons that I was now going to be responsible for teaching this innocent. I thought I was a believer always had been, but how was I going to teach the will of God to my son, so he will understand?

The day everything changed was the day he was born. I became a believer, a teacher, a mom. As he grows, I see the teachings of the Lord move through him. He loves music, dancing, to be kind, and gracious. He loves sports, but more importantly to encourage his teammates to be successful. I see him hold the door for someone who clearly needs assistance and I know that it is Jesus teaching me, to teach him. The morale of my story is this, God loves us whether we are in sweatpants on a baseball field, or in our “Easter Gear” (Maxism). “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.” Thanks be to God.

1. When have you felt overwhelmed with responsibility?
2. Who has taught you important lessons about God?
3. What does God love about you?

*Gracious God, thank you for loving me when I struggle to love myself.
Continue to lead me to see and do your will. Amen.*

THE URGE TO SPEAK MEETS THE NEED TO THINK

Thursday, March 19 - by Marjorie Yates

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:25-32

“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.” – Ephesians 4:29

It's amazing how a random choice can result in such a perfect fit. I did not read it before I chose it, but this passage from Ephesians 4:25-32 hit me right between the eyes. It brings to mind some destructive behavior I try to modify in my actions on a daily basis.

One of my vices is the need to always be right. And not just to be right, but to have that acknowledged by other people. This goes back a long way with me! I remember a confrontation in a primary grade Sunday School class in a St Joseph, Missouri church where I was a frequent visitor. I cannot remember the exact topic, but the daughter of the pastor and I were engaged in a heated discussion about some theological issue. I didn't leave the conversation feeling my "absolutely right opinion" had been validated, but I did leave with a sort of sick feeling in my stomach.

As I grew in age and experience, I began to realize that always having the last word or getting in that little zinger to prove my point were destructive to personal relationships. Some of the hurt caused by my words 40 years ago continue to haunt me to this day and to impact relationships with important people in my life. But we are working to resolve the hurt from all sides.

A couple of years ago my daughter suggested maybe I needed to THINK before throwing out some comment. She elaborated:

T - Is it True?
H - Is it Helpful?
I - Is it Inspiring?
N - Is it Necessary?
K - Is it Kind?

I now try to keep this in mind. It only takes a moment to review this short list before opening my mouth. Hopefully it will keep me from speaking hurtful words. And may it also help me to be kind, tenderhearted and forgiving, as God in Christ has forgiven me.

1. How can we learn to forgive ourselves for times we have hurt others through our words or actions?
2. How can we learn to control our anger and to “not let the sun go down” on our anger?
3. How can we learn to let go of bitterness over things that happened in the past so we can move forward on a positive note in our lives?

Dear Loving God, thank you for a new day! Thank you for the many people in my life! Please help me to nurture relationships and to be kind in word and deed. Please help me to let go of past transgressions by myself and others. Please help me to move forward in a positive way to fulfill your mission. Amen.

WE ALL MAKE MISTAKES
Friday, March 20 - by Karen Orrill

Scripture Reading: James 3:1-12

“For all of us make mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.” - James 3:2

Those who know me well know I loved my chosen profession of teaching, something I'd known I wanted to do since I was in second grade. Also, reading is important to me and is a big part of how I spend time. My years in education were almost evenly split between being a classroom teacher and an elementary librarian. So, when I put a bumper sticker on my car several years ago I did not anticipate the way it would negatively affect me. The bumper sticker said, “If you can read this, thank a teacher.” And why did it cause me anxiety? It was because every time, while driving, I did something I felt could be construed in a critical way, I became concerned any observer would think critical or negative thoughts about educators. As time has passed I realize other drivers were probably not paying much attention to me, and I was quite likely giving them power over me that wasn't justified.

One of my favorite sayings is, “The only real mistake is the one from which you learn nothing.” It is my fervent hope that I continue to learn as I age. I am fully aware I cannot live a mistake-free life, and I am thankful God loves each of us no matter how many mistakes we make. We can be sure his grace and forgiveness are bestowed on us regardless of how often and how many errors we make.

1. Are there times you feel inadequate or guilty because of a mistake made?
2. Have you considered that mistakes in life are a way of helping you grow?
3. Are you able to forgive others for actions or beliefs you feel are mistakes just as God does for all of us?

*Gracious God, help me
learn from my mistakes.*

*Help me forgive the
mistakes others make.
Amen.*



Aiden Noel

DOUBLE-SIDED

Saturday, March 21 - by Katharine Fairchild

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 5:8-14

“For once you were in darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of the light... Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” - Eph 5:8,14

Astronaut Michael Collins orbited the moon, alone, fourteen times during the 1969 Apollo 11 mission. Fourteen times he was in the sunlight and could contact Mission Control on earth. Fourteen times he was on the dark side of the moon; no sunlight, no communication abilities. Just Collins, the capsule and the dark of the universe. Collins apparently didn't feel alone or abandoned, but reports that he "...was very much a part of what is taking place on the lunar surface...". Collins wasn't worried. He knew that the sunrise was on the other side.

When Hosanna! has used Godly Play during Sunday School to teach about Jesus' life, the final illustration is double-sided. One side is dark and depicts Jesus dying on the cross. The other side is bright and shows Jesus alive and glorified. We teach the kids that you cannot have the resurrection without the crucifixion and that you cannot have the crucifixion without the resurrection. They are together and cannot be separated. Just like the dark and the light.

I think we all encounter darkness in one way or another. It may seem like we cannot communicate with anyone about our problems or fears, or we believe that there is no hope of ever improving our situation. It's like being on the dark side of the moon, or as if you're in a bad dream and can't wake up: I can't visualize hope, mercy or justice. I am alone in the vast darkness, and God can't hear me.

But there is always another side.

Despite all of the wrong things I do on a daily basis, the light of God is always there, even in the darkness. Maybe it's not visible, but it's not vanquished. I am always loved and forgiven. He is always listening and paying attention to me. I'm still in the dark, or am asleep, but I don't need to worry. I can start to see a glow.

And then suddenly, it's like when you awaken early in the morning and the sky is gray and not the black of night. Then the gray changes to a brown, and instantly, the sky is filled with bright sunlight. It's orange and yellow and white and so very bright. It's Jesus shining on you. You remember all that is good and right in the world and that Jesus is your Lord and Savior, your Shepherd and Redeemer. You can go shine your light because you're on the other side.

Christ did die and suffer on the cross in the dark for us. He went into the dark of hell for us. But His resurrection, for us, was oh so brilliant and full of light.

1. How do you think about the duality of darkness and light?
2. How do you know what is pleasing to God?
3. When have you found light to be healing? When has it given you new life?

*Jesus, help me to remember there is always another side
and help me to shine Your light. Amen.*

BLIND FAITH

Sunday, March 22 - by Julie Scott

Scripture Reading: John 9:1-41

“He answered, ‘I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.’” John 9:25.

I’ve always liked the story about Jesus giving sight to the blind man. Talk about making someone’s day! As a child, I was always puzzled by the reactions of everyone around him. Some claimed that he must not really have been blind since birth. Others said that he must be someone that just looks like the blind man. Really? These people had known this man all of his life. Yet, they all had difficulty accepting the reality that was literally looking them in the face.

I can imagine how those conversations must have gone. Like a television detective show, the man was asked the same questions over and over. And, over and over, he repeated the same things. He’d been blind since birth; a man named Jesus smeared mud on his eyes and told him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. Suddenly, he could see. No, he couldn’t describe Jesus. When they met, he’d been blind.

The man must have been puzzled that everyone was so intent about wanting him to describe Jesus. He’d told them what happened. It wasn’t a magic trick or something that he made up. He could see! It was a miracle! Why not accept that something wonderful had happened?

Everyone probably was glad that the man could see, but they were also a bit scared. Can you imagine seeing something so inexplicable and then realizing that God was physically walking along your street and that you could bump into Him? It would be a bit overwhelming. We might, like the pharisees, try to find some other explanation that better fit with our ideas about how the world is supposed to work.

If they had been asked, everyone that was there likely would have said that they believed in God and meant it. But, as Jesus pointed out, we can’t make everyone and everything fit within our comfort zone. Instead, we need be like the blind man. Trust in Him and have faith.

Questions:

1. Have you ever missed something that was obvious to someone else? How did you react?
2. Have you ever dismissed input from someone because they were less experienced than you or had a different background than you? Have you ever accepted input because it was from someone more like you?
3. If you met Jesus on the street, how would you react?

Gracious God, thank you for sending your Son to teach us. Help me to accept that I don’t need to fully understand the world around me. And, help me to trust and have faith in you . Amen.

IF GOD ASKED YOU TO CARE FOR A TERRORIST

Monday, March 23 - by Craig Lantz

Scripture Reading: Acts 9:1-20

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

- Luke 6: 27-28

The disciple’s name was Ananias. Ananias was frightened. He was very frightened of a man who was literally terrorizing the early Christian communities. Scripture tells us that this terrorist was, “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.”

The terrorist had begun in Jerusalem with the mob that murdered Stephen. He was a young Pharisee consumed by zeal for God. He began a program to purge Jerusalem (and every Jewish community) of any trace of Jesus’ teaching or influence. He led the violent persecution of the young Christian church in Jerusalem. He went from house to house, dragging men and women off to prison. (Acts 8:3) When believers are found guilty of what is considered to be ‘blasphemy’, he calls for them to be stoned to death. (Acts 26:10)

Now this man “went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:1–2). He was willing to travel 140 miles, from Jerusalem to Damascus, by foot or by horse, to round up disciples of Jesus and bring them to the same end as Stephen. Now the terrorist has been brought to Ananias’ city. . . and God wants Ananias to go to the terrorist and heal his blindness!

Try to imagine that God sent you a message and told you that he wanted you to go and care for a terrorist today; someone who is known for murdering innocent people. How would you respond? Probably with fear, the same way Ananias did. “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” The terrorist’s name was Saul.

1. Could you overcome your fear and trust in God and God’s Plan?

*Dear God, help me name fears and overcome them,
so that I might serve you more fully. Amen.*

PLEASING TO HIM

Tuesday, March 24 - by Stacy Dowd

Scripture Reading: Colossians 1:9-14

“so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.” – Col 1:10

I have an ill-defined autoimmune disorder which causes me to fall ill with colds especially quite frequently and lowers my overall stamina. This sometimes gets in the way of my passion for rewarding service work such as my pantry writer position at In As Much food pantry on Thursdays. I get a great deal of satisfaction of talking with the clients, adding their concerns to my prayer list, and, of course, watching them walk out the door with their groceries. Those days at work truly are a blessing to me. I feel as if I have been pleasing to God. I normally suffer from exhaustion for a day or so after working the six-hour shift.

My other, normal days, like many folks, starts off with some period of devotion and scripture study. Then I am off to taking care of myself and my home. Lately I have been asking God to reveal himself more to me in the mundane. I tend to see the shapes of crosses in the oddest of places. I do feel God is pleased with a day's regular work. I try to be salt and light to others at places like the grocery store. Sometimes I let an opportunity to do something for someone else pass me by. I just hesitate, perhaps out of shyness around strangers.

It is my sick days that I tend to get down on myself. This is because I am not very productive on my sick days. What I can often do, still is intercessory prayer. There are lists from In As Much as well as remembering those in need from our church and the community. I believe it pleases God to be our Helper and to answer prayer. I pray for my health, also, that I might make it back to the food pantry to enjoy another day of service there. Being in prayer also has a way of making me feel better about things.

In today's scripture reading, Paul has been praying for the Colossians that they would lead lives worthy of the Lord. In Ephesians 2:10, Paul also writes “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.” This way of life seems to be consistent with Paul. Even though I know I am saved by grace, not by works, I would love to strive for a life of opportunity of good works. Although I don't know about leading a life worthy of the Lord, I would like to think that it is pleasing to God from time to time.

1. What gets in your way most often from bearing fruit in your good works?
2. Do you believe that your prayers are powerful?
3. How important are the little things we do every day to our way of life?

Heavenly Father, thank you for allowing me to serve you in ways that I can. Continue to broaden my opportunities in knowledge and good works towards a better way of life. Amen

FOR THE GLORY OF GOD
Wednesday, March 25 - by Leslie Long

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 10:23-33

“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.”
- 1 Cor. 10:31

As I ‘ve gone through life, I’ve had many desires. I’ve wanted to increase my knowledge and increase my income. I’ve wanted to be married and have children. I’ve wanted to have a new house and new cars. I’ve wanted to eat only the foods that pleased me and to take exciting trips and participate in exciting events. All these things were my desires and I wanted them without any regard for praying about them or including God because I felt these things were all in my control and all I had to do was work hard and “make it happen” and it would happen. This isn’t to say I wasn’t prayerful or that I didn’t pray, but I didn’t pray for these material things because these were MY desires. My prayers were always more general and global. They were always for other people’s health and happiness. I thought I was being a good Christian and not being selfish, because I was not asking God for any of these things.

What I have learned is that God wants to be a part of all our desires and all of our life. Not just those abstract things that are intangible, but in all we think and do. God wants to play a part in my decisions and help guide me to make the right decisions and ultimately make the right choices in life that are for the glory of God. I look back and see the materialistic choices I made and worked for, with disregard for God’s guidance, have not served me well. A failed marriage, an albatross for a house, more cars than I need that cost more money than I should be spending. I even have a career that is currently unsatisfying.

I have looked inward to search for my purpose and for satisfaction. To gain a voice and to look to God for answers to MY issues and MY decisions. To be patient and not “make it happen”, but to let life’s journey reveal itself to me. This is very different for me, but I have found the strength to wait and to pray and to find peace and happiness with myself and my life. I include God in all my decisions as I want them to be to the glory of Him. Glory be to God!

1. Do you include God in all your desires?
2. Is God a part of your everyday decisions?
3. How do you include God in your daily life to do everything to the glory of God?

*Dear God, thank you for being in charge of life’s journey. Keep my heart on the right path to glorify you and to make the right choices. Thank you for keeping me strong.
Amen.*

I CAN DO IT . . . MAYBE
Thursday, March 26 - by Michael Kern

Scripture Reading: Philippians 2:12-18

“It is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will
and to work for his good pleasure.” - Philippians 2:13

Sometimes we underestimate the power of God. It's not that we doubt God could have created the heavens and the earth, or that Jesus rose from the dead . . . We doubt that God could manage to work through us. After all, we aren't perfect, right?

I like to be in control of my life. That means I like to have a plan for everything that is going to happen. If I haven't figured out how to do something, or if I'm unsure I can follow through with it, I tend not to start. I hate to fail. This translates into a lot of things I avoid doing because I'm not confident I can do it, even if I feel I *should* be doing it. In other words, I'm not very trusting of God.

Growing up, I never liked reading and writing, and I certainly didn't like public speaking. Standing in front of people would make my heart race, my body tremble, and words to babble out of my mouth incoherently. After years of doubting my ability to be a pastor and fighting God's call, I started to give in (a little). In college, I took a preaching course and signed up to preach during the daily chapel service on campus. I tried to avoid thinking about it, but I just knew when the time came to stand up, I would be a wreck. The day finally came, and I was nervous. The moment to stand up came . . . and I was at peace. In retrospect, the sermon was pretty terrible, but what I remember was being at total peace. Somehow God managed to overcome my insecurities and flaws. That was one of the first moments I knew that maybe I *could* be a pastor. Just maybe, God could work in spite of me.

I still like to be in control of everything. I still don't like to start things I'm not sure I'm going to finish. However, I am getting better at trusting that those things I feel God is leading me to do are things God will help me finish well, no matter how ill-equipped or unplanned they may be. Even now, sometimes when I don't think I delivered a very good sermon, someone will come up and say how it touched them. God manages to speak in spite of me.

I don't expect any of you to stand up and preach anytime soon (maybe just write a devotional or two). However, I do believe we all have moments we need to be more trusting of God, whether it's speaking a word of grace to someone hurting, trying something new at work, or giving more generously than we're sure we can sustain. Faith involves trusting God, and that involves risk. But God is faithful to us, and despite all the evidence to the contrary, God can even work through us.

1. What do you feel you should be doing that you fear you can't do?
2. How has God helped you to do something you never thought you could do?

*Faithful God, I don't feel as capable as you seem to think I am. Nonetheless,
help me to trust you more fully, and to follow your will more confidently. Amen.*

CAN I GET A WITNESS?

Friday, March 27 - by Sharon Goins

Scripture Reading: Luke 24: 44-53

“You are witnesses of these things.” - Luke 24:48

Witness. What is a witness? In VS 48 it is written "You are witnesses of these things". In life if we witness a crime we are to give a report to the police of what we saw. If we are a maid of honor or a best man in a wedding party we are called to sign a legal document stating that we witnessed the vows taken between the couple who were married. If we are a sponsor at a Baptism, we are to tell the child we were there on the day of their Baptism and we are called to tell them of Christ and his presence in their life. Witnessing takes many forms. It relies on us to give an accurate account of what happened. We are to answer the who, what, when, where, why and how of the event. That is exactly what Jesus told his disciples to do as they witnessed his ascension into heaven. He says to his disciples "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms". Everything in Jesus' life has been accomplished just as it was foretold in the Old Testament. Now it is time for the disciples to go out "clothed with the power from on high" and continue teaching and witnessing. However, before they can begin doing what Jesus taught them, they are called to witnesses one more time. They witness Jesus ascend into heaven because his work on earth is finished. He led them to Bethany. "Lifting his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven". I don't know about you, but I haven't witnessed something that awesome, nothing close. I can't even begin to imagine what I would do if I were to witness something like that. I don't know about you, but I find witnessing intimidating; I would probably just stand there with my mouth open. I don't know that I would have the presence of mind to do as they did and worship God. They were filled with joy. They got it! They really were witnesses. Their minds were opened to understand that Jesus had accomplished his mission. They understood that Jesus had fulfilled the plan his Father had for him. As we go about our lives we can look up and celebrate all that Jesus did for us through his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. We can be filled with joy rather than apprehension and fear. We can be filled with praise and for what Jesus did and continues to do.

1. Who has witnessed to God's love to you?
2. What have you seen God do that you could witness to others?

*Heavenly Father thank you for sending your Son to save us and fulfilling Your Word.
Thank you for the disciples who witnessed Jesus' ascension and were filled with joy!
Amen.*

GIFTED BY GOD

Saturday, March 28 - by Fran Lantz

Scripture Reading: I Corinthians 12:1-13

“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. Now to each one, manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” - 1 Cor. 12: 4, 7

There was an older lady in the congregation that spoke to the Holy Spirit and said, “What gifts do I have? I am just a housewife and mother with a high school education. I worked in the world until I was married. Since then I only do housework.” The Spirit answered her, “All of God’s children have been gifted. Look around and see. You too have been blessed with gifts.”

The old, gray-haired man stoked the furnace to warm the church building that cold, winter morning.

The flower chart had every space filled after long hours of talking with people.

A small child took the hand of his aging grandmother and walked her across the street.

A teen age boy made a balloon dog for an elderly nursing home woman who hadn’t open her eyes or smiled in months. She opened her eyes and smiled at him. Her husband, seated beside her, cried.

A woman called a shut-in to wish her a happy birthday.

A man cleared the walk and driveway of snow for an elderly couple.

A woman read the lessons in worship one Sunday. She was shy and had a slight stutter. She read the lesson with a smile on her face.

A family was unable to contribute financially to the work of the congregation. They came twice a month to clean the building.

1. Pray that God’s gift(s) of the Spirit may be disclosed to you. Then listen and seek.
2. Look at your life prayerfully. See those acts of kindness and sharing that you share
3. with those you come into contact. Large acts of giving are not always the better ones.

Heavenly Father, help me to see that you have gifted me through the Holy Spirit. Help me to realize that my gift does not have to be “big” and “flashy” in order to do your work. In Your Holy name, I pray. Amen.

BACK TO LIFE

Sunday, March 29 - by Cathy Baker

Scripture Reading: Ezekiel 37:1-14

“I will put breath into you, and you will come to life.
Then you will know that I am the Lord.” - Ezekiel 37:6

There are at least ten times in the Bible that people have been brought back to life. From stone cold death. Men, women, children, young, old. They all died for various reasons. But the one thing they had in common was what brought them back to life - the breath of God.

Through Ezekiel, God breathed life back into this pile of bones! Dry bones! No life what so ever! He breathed NEW life back into them. And also new hope. The land of Israel was devastated. They felt cut off. They thought that God had just left them for dead. They had lost all hope.

How many times I have in life I have felt like a pile of dry bones. Hopeless, helpless, no life, abandoned and cut off. But somehow, God would breath new life into me.

Sometimes through a parent or friend, sometimes through a sunrise or sunset. Sometimes through the cold, wet, slobbery kiss of my dog. He would breath new life and new hope into me. Reminding me of his promise that He would NEVER abandoned me or cut me off. Ever!

No matter how dry those bones get, how dark or deep that hole we're in might feel, no matter how lonely we are, God's promise is that he will never leave us. Sometimes we just need to be willing to receive His breath of life. We need to trust and know that He is God. And in that, we have our hope.

1. Like Ezekiel, when has God worked through you to breath new life into someone else?
2. What does your boneyard look like? What did it look like after new life?
3. Are you willing to look for hope in the most unlikely places?

Heavenly Father, breath new life into me daily so that I may know you better and do your will. Let others see through me that you are Lord. Amen.

RUN THE RACE

Monday, March 30 - by Pam Schmidt

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 12:1-3

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,” - Hebrews 12:1

As I sit here trying to write this devotion, so many thoughts are filling my head. The main thought is, “Why on Earth did I agree to do this?” This is so far out of my comfort zone that I don’t even know where to begin. So, as in every race, I sit here with my nerves getting the best of me at the start line. I have always heard the phrase “ran the good race” when someone is referring to a loved one that has passed away. I like this analogy and hope that when it’s my time to go Home, God feels the same about my time here on Earth. It is hard to imagine sometimes that He would think that of me though. Sins weigh heavily on my heart. I’m not going to list them all out for you because we are supposed to limit this to 1 page. Do I live up to God’s expectations? Am I good enough? Am I running the good race? Even thinking of these questions brings guilty feelings on. I am not worthy. I do not live up to God’s expectations. I think of these sins as the hurdles of the race that, if you know me at all, you know I will trip over every last one of them instead of soaring effortlessly over! Grace is NOT my middle name. Luckily for me and for you, we have God in our corner. He sent his only son to Earth to suffer for our sins so that we may have hope to carry on and get over those hurdles. He is running this race right along side of us. Not only that, as if that’s not enough, he sends witnesses to us in the form of family, friends, co-workers, etc. I hit a major hurdle a couple of years ago when my dad passed away. I was amazed by the outpouring of love and support we received. It was as if God was picking me up himself and guiding me back to a good place. He was telling me Dad’s race was over but mine was still going on. Get back in there and finish the race! I hope that I am a witness to someone else who can see God through me.

So, if you need to hear this today, run your race well! Jump those hurdles! If at first you hit every one and trip like I do, picture God running there with you. He’s got this and He’s got you! Make this your best race possible. Look around and see your cheerleaders. Be a cheerleader to others..

1. What do you want your race to look like?
2. What are those hurdles that are in your way?
3. Who, besides God, is running beside you and helping you overcome your hurdles?

Gracious God, thank you for running this race with me. Help me to trust that you will get me over my hurdles. Show me how to run the best race and to be that cheerleading witness to others. Amen.

FINDING GRACE IN A "PINTEREST FAIL"

Tuesday, March 31 - by Alison Kern

Scripture Reading: Romans 3:21-31

“For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”
- Romans 3:22-23

It's easy to fall into the trap of comparing ourselves to other people. Whether it's how our house looks, what clothes we wear, how we're raising our kids, or something else, we all tend to cycle between thinking we have it all figured out (for one brief moment) and despairing that we'll never live up to someone else's standard.

Social media sites like Facebook and the online craft and decorating idea board Pinterest don't do much to help with this endless comparing. Scrolling through pictures of your friend's perfectly decorated homemade birthday cupcakes or a coworker's dream vacation to Hawaii can easily lead us to assume that it's possible to have a picture-perfect life, if only we try hard enough.

However, what we usually *don't* see are the photos that didn't make the cut--the first three batches of cupcakes that flopped, or the blistering sunburn our vacationing coworker suffered from falling asleep on the beach. Personally, I enjoy seeing--and sharing my own!--"Pinterest fails" (craft projects gone awry) just as much as the successes. But it's also tempting to want to put forth only the best image of ourselves, and hide the messy parts where no one can see them.

It's clear that this is not just a 21st-century problem, since Paul brings a similar message to the Romans: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (v. 23). In other words, nobody is perfect--in the little things, like cupcakes, or the big things, like following God's laws. We are all just doing our best, which will never be perfect, but will always be good enough for God, who "justifies the one who has faith in Jesus" (v.26).

That grace is an amazing gift, and one we can honor and appreciate by sharing our honest experiences with others and admitting that we do fall short sometimes. Who knows...your next "Pinterest fail" could be an opportunity for showcasing God's amazing grace.

1. Is there a person who you thought was picture perfect...until you learned about a huge struggle hidden behind their exterior? How did that change your opinion of them?
2. What might happen if you were more honest with yourself and others when you make a mistake or fall short? What opportunities can you see for sharing how God's grace has impacted your own life?

*Gracious God, you have mercy on us even though we continually fall short.
Help us to see others through your eyes, celebrating in their
successes and empathizing with their failures. Amen.*

YOUR GOOD NAME

Wednesday, April 1 - by John Canuteson

Scripture Reading: Proverbs 22:1-16

The RSV, Verse Reference Edition, identifies Solomon as the author of about sixteen chapters of Proverbs, including 22:1, “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.” Solomon is regarded as the wealthy and wise King of Israel during its Golden Age, the tenth century BC.

A good name, honor, is important in the Bible. Honor is mentioned 211 times; by comparison, mother is mentioned 320 times.

In Exodus 28:2 and 28:40, Moses is commanded to make clothing for Aaron and Aaron’s sons to give them “glory and beauty,” otherwise translated as “honor.”

In Ecclesiastes 7 we hear, perhaps in the words of Solomon, “A good name is better than fine perfume.”

In Psalm 52:9, Solomon’s son David puts his faith in God: “I will hope in your name, for your name is good.”

Authors also acknowledge people with good names. The author of Acts mentions a man named Gamaliel in 5:34 as one “honored by all the people.” In Galatians 2:2 Paul, to make sure his message was being received, checked with people widely respected:

Meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders, I presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain.

So a good name, one’s reputation, is important in the Bible. We started with a wealthy man in the Bible, King Solomon. Let’s hear from one of the wealthiest men of the twentieth century J P Morgan.

The first thing (in credit) is character... before money or anything else. Money cannot buy it.

Morgan says that all success begins with your reputation:

Money equals business which equals power, all of which come from character and trust.

He says conversely without a good reputation, you couldn’t get a loan from him in spite of your most earnest promises:

A man I do not trust could not get money from me on all the bonds in Christendom.

We attended an LCA church in Wausau, Wisconsin, about a hundred miles from Green Bay during the reign of Vince Lombardi. The legendary coach famously said, “Winning isn’t everything. It’s the only thing.”

Solomon might adapt Vince’s words: “Your good name isn’t everything. It’s the only thing.”

1. What does honor look like to you?
2. How can you demonstrate honor to others?

Good God, help me honor you in all that I do, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

LOVE OVERFLOWING

Thursday, April 2 - by Karen Bruns

Scripture Reading: Philippians 1:1-11

“This is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight” - Philippians 1:9

Leading a Bible study years ago, Philippians seem to be the most positive book to read for encouragement and love for life. As a former teacher I understand the tremendous need for developing relationships of love. And yet as I think about this section in the Bible I find this passage causes me to doubt myself, feel guilty or inadequate. Paul certainly challenges us. Yet during Lent I feel the weight of this challenge more than at any other time for truly this was Jesus' great gift to us.

I have felt truly blessed my entire life. Raised by a family who loved me; parents who were married 72 years, a brother who teased the heck out of me, but always looked out for me, a much older sister who shared so much that helped me get through many stages of life and to this day continues to mean the world to me. I attended a Lutheran college, about two weeks after I had lost my faith and so was spared years of anguish. Devotions during that time often cleared the events of the day I had just experienced. I was never really sure what career I wanted, but discovered that teaching was the perfect answer and I was able to obtain meaningful teaching positions. I was often blessed by great joy in all of the churches in which I have been active. Despite all this I have made so many mistakes, and God has always helped me find a way through them.

NOW, life is quite different as I am much older, have difficulty getting around, few good friends, and a great deal of what I'll call 'empty' time. Paul is praying for me that my love will overflow. The Spirit also prays for me. I have the source of life and love. God is with me and will help me exceed my expectations.

This Lent is a glorious time to set goals for ourselves and to develop the love that God encourages us to give to others.

1. Who are the people you might include in your list of those who need your love?
2. What are ways you can show a stranger that you care?
3. Will you include your desire to show love in your prayers?

*Heavenly Father, thank you for the love you have shown me
and remind me to show love for the people you have placed in my life. Amen.*

WHY DO YOU LIVE?

Friday, April 3 - by Mike Plesko

Scripture Reading: Citation

“For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer.” – Phil. 1:21-22

While I understand what Paul is saying here, I have not usually seen this as my choice. While it is not obvious, I was a soldier once, and young (and skinny). Death was close enough, often enough, that I thought about it. Driving cars and flying in planes have created more such opportunities. My conclusion was that it was up to me to keep going, and up to God if I would be called to home to Christ.

However, you do wonder what the purpose was behind God’s choice to have you continue to live. Paul understood that his fruitful labor was spreading the gospel here on earth. That was a pretty powerful reason to keep going. Enough that it made him wonder about the choice. It is hard to find something that strong in our lives at any given moment.

For me, and I suspect for many of you, our families are a very strong reason, at least for ourselves personally. But, there are other ways that we contribute to God’s plans in this life. One benefit of getting old is that you can look back and see better where there were reasons why you had been left here. Sometimes, again, you see this in your family. Sometimes you see other things too. One example for me is Hosanna Lutheran Church. It has been a privilege to contribute to the foundation and growth of our church. I was fortunate to be able to participate in many key events over the past 20 years, and I think of them when I think of this issue. I could hardly have imagined any of that when bullets were snapping by me in my youth. But God did.

There is also, of course, a good deal of pain involved in living. Whether it is emotional, for example the loss of friends and family members, or physical, that is part of the deal. Paul knew that too. In another place, he talks about the thorn that Christ had placed in his side. Here again, getting old brings a lot more pain with it, in both senses. While not afraid of death, I can better relate to Paul’s yearning as that pain accumulates. But I also have faith that there is purpose for me to continue, some clear to me and some that may not yet be clear.

1. Why do you think you continue to live?
2. Looking back, can you see any purpose that God had for your life?

Lord, those who ask for guidance will be given an answer. I ask for your guidance in understanding your purpose for my life. Touch my mind that I may understand, and give me the strength to follow your lead.

Amen.

OPENED EAR

Saturday, April 4 - by Jeremy and Melody Grote

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 50:4-9

“The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious,” – Isaiah 50:5

A friend and co-worker of mine is getting close to retirement and he sits at a desk right next to me. He had started becoming loud and agitated, to the point of unacceptable comments. Lots of co-workers were starting to notice and complain, but no one could figure out the reason. Not only did his work start to deteriorate, but the work around him started declining also. I spent a few days sitting next to him with head phones in my ears to try and distance myself from him and his struggles. What I should have been doing is trying to find a way for him to open up about his change in attitude. The headphones were the exact opposite of this verse. I had hid my ear.

One sunny day, he finally opened up to me about his struggles. All I did was listen. There was no reason for me try and comfort him, or try to problem solve the situation, or insult him back. I just listened as he talked through everything that was hurting him on the inside and let him get it on the outside. Around halfway through his opening up, I could see his body language soften, shoulders relax, speaking not so loud, and his general mood seemed lifted. He knew everything that was happening and why, he just didn't like it or want it to happen. After that, all went back to normal. No more screaming profanities and the work deteriorating reversed itself.

If I had interrupted him in anyway during this conversation, it would have made things worse. Instead, they have gotten much better. He has opened up to others and his general mood is much better.

Words from Melody: The 4th verse is what sticks out to me. One day I was sad, my dad made me happy by telling me jokes.

Melody was able to open her ears and be sustained by my jokes, instead of turning her back. My initial reaction to my friend and co-worker's mood change was rebellious, but I'm glad I was finally able to open up to what God had been trying to tell me before. Listen to Him!

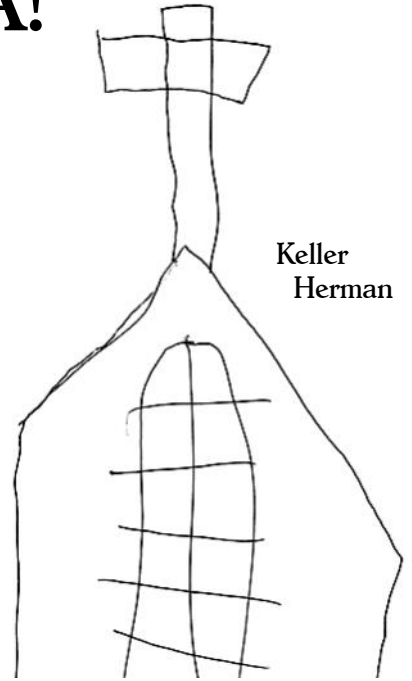
1. How do you know when GOD is speaking to you? And how does he speak to you?
2. How do you deal with being bullied, insulted and disgraced?
3. Who helps give you the strength you need to continue forward?

Dear God, please help me hear your voice, listen to your words and share your teachings so that I might be sustained and help sustain others. Amen.

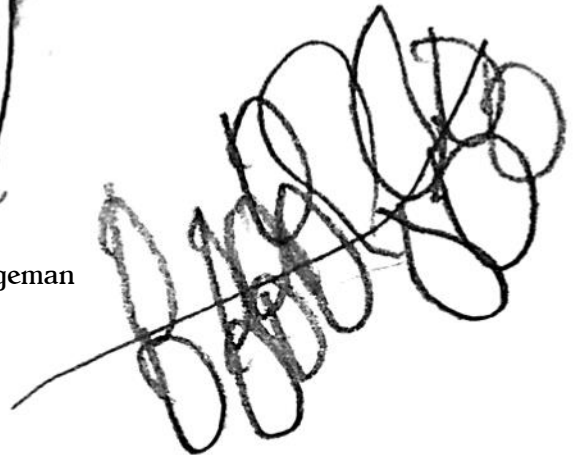
Blessed is the one who comes
in the name of the Lord.
HOSANNA!



Eva Bruggeman



Keller
Herman



THE POWER OF OUR NAME

Palm Sunday, April 5 - by Boyd Ahrens

Scripture Reading: Philippians 2:5-11

“so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,” Phil. 2:10

We all have a name, and most all of us have a number. There is great power in our name, as it separates us from all other people on earth. You may quickly note that sometimes people have names that are like other names. I couldn't believe it, but one time my neighbor next door was John Smith! I looked in the phone book and there were 26 men named John Smith in Kansas City back then. At that point one would have to use middle names, too! I think our name is a powerful identity.

On Palm Sunday we think of the crowds in Jerusalem who were told that Jesus was the promised savior of their nation. He was to be their King! To their understanding he was going to free them from the Romans! His name represented great power to them!

Really powerful names and titles get our attention. If you met Queen Elizabeth, you would probably try to make some subservient gesture like a bow or at least bow your head. She really is just a normal person – with a title to her name. Jesus merely rode a donkey through Jerusalem and people threw down their garments, cheered and shouted “Hosanna!” He didn't look powerful at the time....but they thought he was going have it in ways they needed!

St. Paul writes that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bend.” Yet Jesus came with a name that we take to mean peace and salvation. Those are powerful tools to our being! In the hymn we sing that “I am Jesus little lamb” and he “even calls me by my name.” He calls us by OUR name, to lead and comfort us, protect us, and deliver us. That Is the Power of our Name, that Jesus knows it and he is our Shepherd.

1. How does Jesus bless you by your name?
2. Jesus is God and took the form and name of a man. What are ways that Jesus was God, and other ways that he was human?
3. Names often have an associated meaning. Do you know what your name means, or how you got it?

Dear Jesus, you took on human form with a name to come among us, teach us, to know us and to save us. Give us strength by the power of your name to be your little lambs of peace on earth. Thank you for the blessings of your sacrifice for us. Amen.

EXTRAVAGANCE

Tuesday, April 6 - by Barb Chapman

Scripture Reading: John 12: 1-11

“Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” - John 12:3

What Mary does here is incredibly extravagant. A whole pound of perfume is a huge amount. Judas notes that it could have cost about three hundred denarii. That's about a year's worth of wages for the average laborer. And she uses all this on Jesus, not a few drops at a time, but in one grand gesture. The disciples must have been surprised and even embarrassed. Judas is appalled. And Jesus? He understands, even if they don't, even if Mary does not, that she needed to do this for her sake, for his, and because of what is to come.

Have you ever been tempted to make a grand gesture for Jesus' sake? One year while I was in college, I was working part time on evenings and weekends. I wanted to be able to buy a telescope. I was an astronomy major at the time and wanted to be able to study the stars and planets. I also wanted to buy Christmas gifts for my family. I saved and set aside enough to buy my telescope and the gifts I wanted. On Christmas Eve, I went to worship with my family, my final paycheck cashed and in my wallet, about \$40. When it came time for the offering, I was overwhelmed with gratitude for all I had been able to do and put that money into the offering plate. I hoped no one saw. My mother caught it, but I wouldn't say anything when she raised her eyebrows at my extravagance. It felt right.

Doing the right thing, being blessed to make a grand gesture, feels right and good when those rare opportunities come along. And still, it is in the day to day, the smaller moments, when our generosity and trust in God is truly tested. God's extravagance with us can be seen in our day to day lives. I see God's blessing in a glimpse of sunshine after a string of cloudy days, in the beauty of a sunrise or sunset, in the flash of bright cardinal wings at our bird feeder. When we gather for worship and I see and hear all the children in church, I know we are blessed. When we have coffee afterwards and you greet me with smiles and a sense that we are glad to be together again, I feel God's blessings. We are given so many opportunities to share those blessings with one another and with others around us, and I am grateful when I am able to do that. Extravagance. It's what God gives us. It's what we can share with one another and with the world. Isn't God good?

1. Have you ever been blessed to be able to give extravagantly? How did it feel?
2. How does it feel to share with those around you in the everyday? What is God calling you to give to another?
3. Where do you see the face of Jesus in those you meet?

God, we thank you for all the wonderful blessings you shower upon us today and every day. Help us to see your hand in the joys that we find. Help us to see your face in the faces of those around us. Give us opportunities to be extravagant with one another. Amen.

GOD'S PLAN FOR ME

Monday, April 7 - by Jane Gibbs

Scripture Reading: Jeremiah 29: 1-14

“For I know the plans I have for you, “declares the Lord,” plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” - Jeremiah 29:11

We are taught that even today God has a plan for us. He knows our future and we trust that His plans for us are good and full of hope. How do we know God's plans for us? Looking back on the decisions I have made in my life I wonder how many of them were based on what God wanted for me or just what I wanted for myself. As we make our decisions how do we know they are in line with God's plans for us. In my experience I have found the first step is connecting with God. If we trust Him and surrender ourselves to Him, I believe He will show us the way to fulfill the plan He has for us. Then we need to ask Him what He wants for us. Mathew 7: 7 tells us “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” We must be patient. For me, waiting is one of the hardest parts of understanding God's plan for me. I've come to learn that perhaps the waiting is designed to give me time to think, pray and listen to what God has to say to me. Once I am confident that I understand God's plan for me, the next step is to pray to learn what I need to do to bring about the fulfillment of His plan.

One of the biggest decisions of my life was to retire. What did God have planned for me in my “golden years”? I had questions like: 1) was I financially secure enough; 2) where would I live; and 3) did I really want to leave my home of 18 years, including family and friends and start over again. I must admit that I challenged God. I said “God this is what I want if you want this for me then show me”. I then gave Him a list of things that I thought needed to happen if it was His plan and not just mine. Long story short, He answered each of my challenges and I retired. Am I confident that I am living God's plan for me as I could not ask for anything better than the life I currently live.

1. Living in a society looking for instant gratification, how long are we willing to wait to know God's plan for us?
2. We say we trust God, however do we really trust our lives to Him?

Almighty God, clue me in to your plans for my life. If that's not what I need right now, at least help me trust your goodness and faithfulness. Amen.

THE DARKNESS AND THE LIGHT

Wednesday, April 8 - by Lona Ristine

Scripture Reading: John 12:20-36

“While you have the light believe in the light so that you may be children of the light.”
- John 12:36

I grew up on a farm so I know that if grain sits in a bin or lays on concrete, it just lays there. If, however, it dies and is in the ground, it will come alive and bear more grain. To me that means that Jesus died for us so that we might live. What a glorious revelation!

I lost my parents, two husbands, a brother and a very dear friend to death. I got through the grief and suffering by turning everything over to God. I went from extreme darkness to see the light. People sometimes wondered how I could see the light so quickly. I told them that with my parents it was a little easier because my dad was 85 years old and he had dementia. My mother was 93 years old and she did quite well until she had several strokes. One day she asked me why the Lord was having her live so long. I told her that the Lord must have a purpose for her and she told me that she wished God would tell her what her purpose was. I thought that was rather cute!

When my first husband died of cancer at 61 years old, I had been in denial. After all I had prayed diligently and I kept thinking that he would get well. One day when our pastor visited, he prayed and said, “Thy will be done.” and all of a sudden it dawned on me that this was not my will, but God’s will and that helped me see the light. Even though I went through darkness for a while, a light came through and helped me so much.

When my second husband at age 84 was in poor health, I was more prepared for his death. He kept fighting even though he lived with excruciating pain. Finally I gave him permission to let go and he was at peace and so was I.

My brother had Parkinson's disease and fought for many years through all the stages of this dreadful disease. Again, he was so sick that I knew that he was better off, but that was hard for me to see the light. He had given up on God and that was what made me more sad than anything.

I lost a very dear friend of 45 years just last year. We were neighbors in Nebraska and again in Liberty. She was the sister I never had. Even though I knew she would never get well, it was hard to accept her death. There was darkness again in my life, but God let the light shine through again.

I think of all these people almost every day. It is not of sadness, but of happiness and thankfulness for having had all of them be an important part of my life. I feel if I had not seen the darkness, I would not have seen the beautiful light of Jesus. It helps me look forward to eternal life for which am now prepared.

1. When has death touched your life? How has God given you new life in the midst of that?
2. What do you have now that you might take for granted, but for which you can be thankful?

Gracious God, thank you for helping me see the light through my darkest hours. Amen.

DO THIS IS REMEMBRANCE

Maundy Thursday, April 9 - by Sarah Oprinovich

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

“This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me”
– 1 Corinthians 11: 24

When I hear these words every Sunday to prepare for communion, it's easy to let them blow right past. They're routine. Let's be honest, one of my kids is likely misbehaving, so I miss them fairly often. But when I think on them, the first thing that comes to mind is the communion server calling my children by name to bless them. This blessing, this wafer, it's specifically for you. It's something that makes you feel special, and it's a nice reminder of Jesus letting us know he did this for us. I don't think my kids quite have all those concepts down, but I know my most shy kid, who really hates being touched, has never shied away from her blessing at communion. Then the remarkable thing I've seen work in her – she BEGS to be the “blesser” for communion. The kid, who has a hard time talking to anyone but those closest to her, can't wait to trace a cross on everyone's hand and tell them God loves them. While she may not conceptualize “I did this for you”, that love is passed through her and gives her whatever it is she needs to overcome her normal shyness. It reminds me to feel special in that moment and let that love give me courage to show that love and sacrifice to others.

But then, after letting us know the gift He is giving, there is a call. Remember me. I don't think He meant it like having pleasant memories of lost loved ones, or ugly crying at the end of the Disney movie “Coco” when they sing “Remember Me”. It's the action verb in the statement that gets me, “Do this”. It's another gentle reminder that Jesus is more than a memory, more than a story. I think, perhaps, what Jesus was getting at was remembering his life and sacrifices through our actions. Maybe it's intentional like choosing a Lenten practice to remind us of the sacrifice Jesus made. Maybe it's unintentional like randomly going out of your way to help a friend just because. Whatever it is, I hope feeling that love from Jesus that's for each of us strengthens us to go out and “do this in remembrance of me.”

1. What is an example of a time when you felt that individual love of Jesus through another's actions?
2. What is something you're not sure where the courage or ability to do something for others came from?

Thank you God for making us feel special during communion. Help us to use that to remember the life of Christ with our actions for others.

Amen.

“They took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him.”



FORGIVE AND FORGET

Good Friday, April 10 - by Phyllis Anderson

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 10:16-25

...He also adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawlessness deeds no more."

Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin. –

Hebrews 10:17-18

This verse brings back thoughts and feelings about an incident with a co-worker of mine. She was someone I thought I knew fairly well. One day we were working with some other women on a project. We left the office to go to lunch.

My purse was sitting there when I got up to go to the salad bar. One of the woman observed co-worker going through my purse, which I did not know. The other women that were with us at lunch, left directly to catch a plane. My co-worker and I finished lunch and went back to the office to pack up our project.

I put my purse on the conference table. I left the room for a minute and when I came back in, my co-worker was in my purse (again). She said to me, "Oh, your purse fell on the floor and I picked it up". I knew differently and felt violated and left the room immediately because I didn't know how to handle it. I returned back to finish our task. When I got to the car, I went through my purse and knew she had taken \$ 200.

I left the office and went home-not knowing what to do next. I talked to my husband about it and he encouraged me to call the office and discuss it with her boss. I found out then that things had been missing from other people. I had already completed the work with her, so I was able to return to my own office and avoid her.

As time went on, I had a hard time forgetting and forgiving the incident. I have forgiven the incident, but I do still remember it. I am grateful that God forgives AND forgets. As the saying goes-Forgive and Forget!

1. When have you been able to erase marks left by your mistakes?
2. What grudges might you be carrying against someone you know?
3. How have others helped you to forgive and forget?

Thank you God for forgiving and forgetting our sins. Help me follow your example and forgive others and myself. Help me to forget those sins and go forward.

CONFESSIONS OF A PASTOR
Saturday, April 11 - by Michael Kern

Scripture Reading: John 18:15-27

“You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?”
Peter said, ‘I am not.’” - John 18:17

I’ll admit it. Sometimes I’m ashamed to be a Christian. (Don’t tell anyone your pastor said that--I’m ashamed of that, too.) It’s not that I would ever lie and tell people I’m not a Christian if asked. But sometimes I am happy to let people draw their own conclusions, or just avoid the topic. Don’t ask, don’t tell.

I don’t think being a Christian is a bad thing. I’m also not afraid my life is in danger like Peter’s might have been. It’s just that sometimes I think people will judge me unfairly, and write me off as being overly-idealistic or unintelligent.

With so many religions in our world that claim different things, it sounds kind of ridiculous to believe in this invisible God who doesn’t seem to be concerned with making His presence known in scientifically provable ways. Not only that, but there are a lot of people out there who kind of give Christians a bad name, and I’m not excited to be lumped into the same category as them. They make Christians look unreasonable, just living in our own self-deluded existence, denying all facts, clinging to beliefs that make no sense, and worse of all--judgmental.

However, I can’t blame my shame solely on others. The truth is that I have my own doubts. But those issues are about me, not about God. I want to have all the answers. I want to fit in. I want other people to think well of me. When I get on this train, it’s all about me, and I don’t leave much room for God. Peter wasn’t leaving room for God either. And yet, God still managed to reveal Himself through Peter. He became a leader, a rock of the church, and one of its most faithful witnesses. Though he had fears, he had seen the power and love of God at work in Jesus. Even when we doubt, there’s no denying we have seen God at work in our own lives, and that is why we believe.

Admittedly, Peter *was* killed for his faith. But I can confidently say I don’t expect that to happen to me. Maybe some people will write me off because of my faith. I can handle that; God’s still working in me. However, it’s also possible (and likely) God’s grace and love will be revealed through me when people recognize that someone as intelligent, rational, kind, and charitable as I am can believe (even if I’m not very humble). I don’t have to be ashamed of who I am or who God is, because God made me this way. If God is for me, who can be against me?

1. Are you ever ashamed of being a Christian (or do you at least avoid mentioning it)?
2. How might your faith be a sign that you actually are

Merciful God, forgive my unbelief. Help me not be ashamed of your love. Lead me to witness to your grace so that others may know you as I do. Amen.

JESUS CALLS YOU BY NAME

Easter Sunday, April 12 - by Alison Kern

Scripture Reading: John 20:1-18

“Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher).” - John 20: 16

Grief has a way of narrowing our vision. Sometimes, the darkness is so much that we can't even see our own hand in front of our face. Things that once were clear become blurred as we look through the lens of our tears.

“Woman, why are you weeping?” the angels ask Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb. “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him,” she replies. Mary is utterly lost without Jesus. Her teacher, her beloved friend, the center of her world, is gone—she can't even sit with his lifeless body and weep.

Have you felt the gut-wrenching agony of that kind of loss? Can you imagine—or recall—the paralyzing feeling of being separated from the person who was your guiding light?

Jesus knew that kind of loss. He wept bitterly at the death of his friend Lazarus. He knew in the Upper Room that it would be his last meal with his friends. He knew at the cross when he entrusted his beloved disciple with the care of his mother that they would need each other to cling to in his absence.

And Jesus knew that Mary Magdalene would come to look for him. Why didn't he just sit at the tomb himself and talk to her when she came looking for him? Why leave her in the dark longer as she discovered the empty tomb, ran to tell the others, and was left alone again in the burial place?

I think Jesus also knew that Mary wouldn't be ready to bear witness to the resurrection until she had experienced the depth of grief that comes from a loss of that magnitude. Even when she first hears Jesus speaking to her and turns to look at him, she doesn't recognize him right away, “supposing him to be the gardener...” (v15).

It is only when Jesus speaks her name—“Mary!”—that her vision is cleared. Jesus calls her by name for the work she will do for him: “go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” (v17). Jesus' first act after the resurrection is to wipe the tears from Mary's eyes and give her a new purpose for living. The darkness overwhelmed her for a time, but she was named, called and chosen by God, and he did not leave her hopeless in her grief.

Perhaps you are in a season of darkness right now, or can remember a time when you were. Jesus knows that feeling. Even when you can't see or hear him clearly because the tears cloud your eyes, the risen Lord is there beside you, by an empty tomb.

Easter is our reminder that death does not get the last word. Darkness does not win. Jesus calls you by name: you are chosen, beloved, and precious in his sight. Alleluia! Christ is risen!

1. How would you feel if you heard Jesus say your name?
2. What kind of loss have you experienced that God knows and understands?

Almighty God, fill me with new life each day. Amen.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

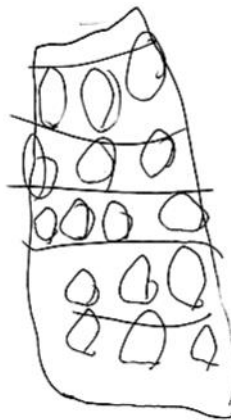


Sarah Kern



Risen Jesus
by Eva Bledsoe

Happy
Easter!



Easter eggs,
by Olivia Noel



Baby chick
by Rosalyn Rockhold