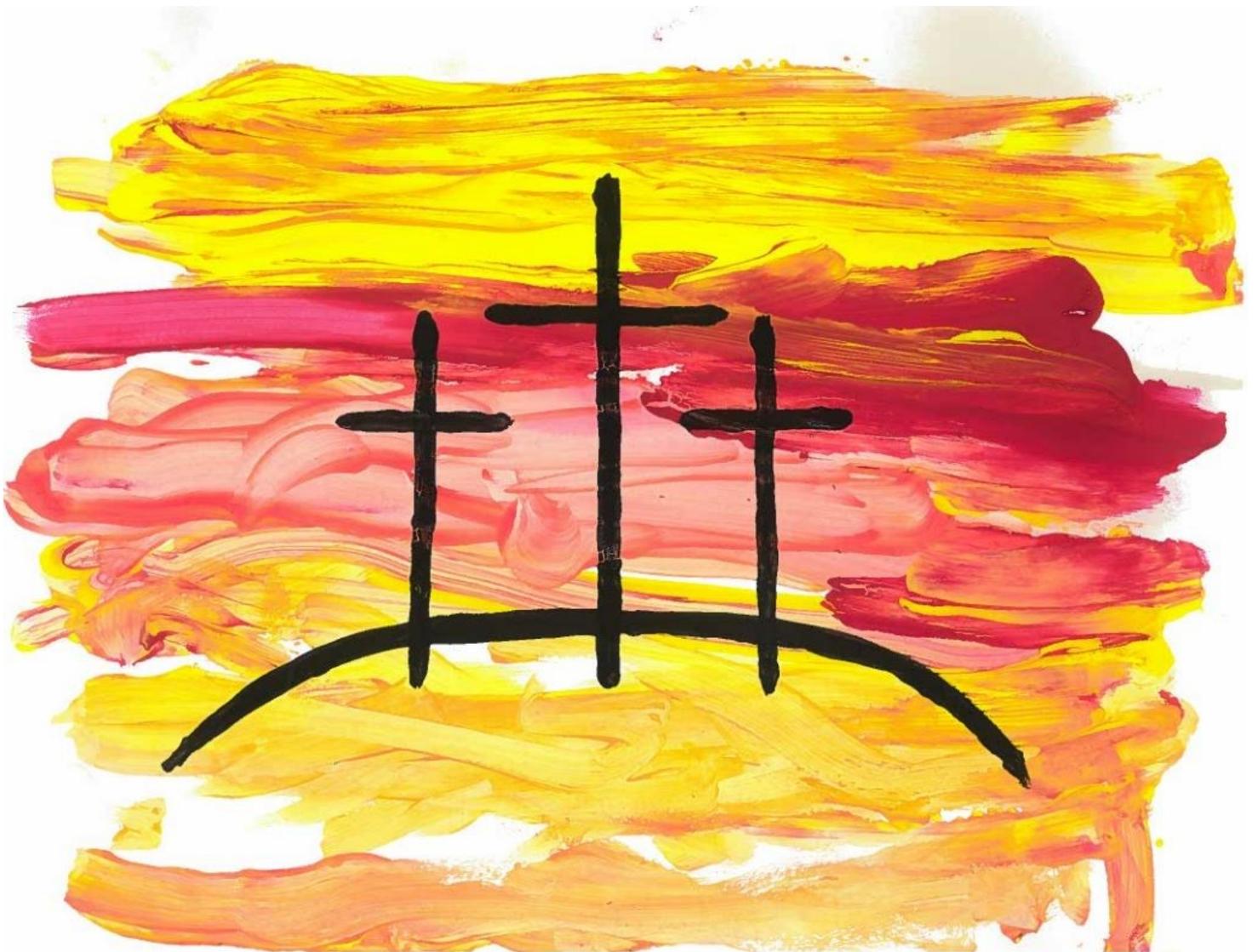


Saginaw UMC
Lenten Devotional
2023

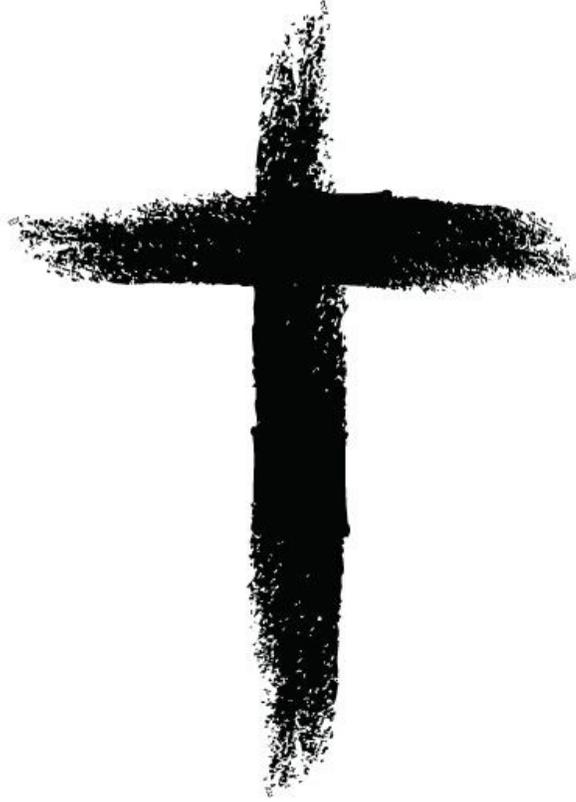


Adult members of Saginaw UMC submitted devotionals to this Lenten guide, and the children of our church family contributed artwork. We are deeply grateful for their contributions, and we pray that these words would speak to your heart and draw you deeper into God's love, grace, and presence.

Editor: Nathaniel Metz

CARSON





Repent and Believe the Gospel



Pray

02-22-23 to 03-04-23



Read

03-06-23 to 03-16-23



Daniel Fast

03-17-23 to 03-28-23



Giving

03-29-23 to 04-08-23



Sofia



Pray

02-22-23 to 03-04-23

Day 1: February 22nd

The Pragmatics of Prayer

by Nathaniel Metz

Scripture: *Meanwhile, [Jesus] would slip away to deserted places and pray.* (Luke 5:16 NRSV)

Key Thought: Prayer is a skill and habit that you can develop this Lenten season.

When I was in college, I ended up attending a small Anglican church. Given that I had not grown up in the Anglican tradition, the liturgical practices felt strange and foreign for the first several weeks. I had what is called a “skill gap.” There was a certain skill of navigating the worship service that I had yet to acquire. However, with repetition and practice, I learned these new spiritual skills and grew in my faith.

Prayer often works in a similar fashion. When it comes to this part of our spiritual lives, many of us (myself included) perhaps feel like I did going to an Anglican service for the first time. How do I pray? Where do I begin? What’s the goal of what I’m doing? What do I say? This is a perfectly acceptable place to be. All we need to do is recognize that there is a skill gap. The good news is that, through practice, we can develop the skills necessary to have thriving prayer lives. Don’t worry about the gap. Instead, focus on how much closer you could be to God once you’ve developed the spiritual skill of prayer.

But how do we go about developing those skills? My first advice is to put it on the calendar. In other words, schedule a specific time to pray. You can set a reminder on your phone, put it on your daily planner, or any other way of managing your time. At first, don’t worry about going “monk mode” and trying to spend hours in prayer each day. Remember: we are developing new spiritual skills, and so we need to take baby steps. If you went to the gym for the first time, you wouldn’t try to bench press 300 pounds. We start small and then work our way up. My personal recommendation is to make a goal of praying for 10 minutes each day. As you develop the skill, you can increase the time, or schedule multiple, ten-minute prayer sessions. Scheduling is a useful tool because it helps us rely more on self-discipline than on motivation. Motivation ebbs and flows, so we ought to seek instead the gentle self-discipline of the Holy Spirit who is there to help make us holy. [...]

Second, set your intention. Plan your prayer session beforehand. For example, you could choose to follow the A.C.T.S. model five times, follow along in a daily prayer book, or even say the Lord's prayer ten times. The ACTS model can be found on our website under the prayer garden tab. If you need a prayer book, I recommend *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*. Related to this notion, it's also helpful to pray before praying, asking that the Holy Spirit be present in our prayer time and help us connect with God.

We might be concerned that having an intention could result in more of a ritual and not actually building a relationship with God. However, we need to remember that, when learning any new skill, you need repetition and structure. You don't improvise a cake recipe when you're just learning to bake. Additionally, good relationships involve planning. When you want to spend time with friends or go on a date night, you probably make a plan to avoid the endless, "So what do you want to do?"

In summary, if you are looking to increase your prayer practices during Lent, I encourage you to schedule around 10 minutes each day, set an intention for how you will pray during that time, and pray before you pray, asking the Holy Spirit to guide you.

Prayer: Lord, we do not know how to pray as we ought. May Your Holy Spirit guide us in prayer and draw us deeper into Your presence. Amen.

Focus: That the Holy Spirit would help us create new habits of discipleship.

Day 2: February 23rd

Bucket List Prayers

by Janet Page

Scripture: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28)

Key Thought: May we draw nearer to Him with a confident and expectant heart through prayer, fasting, Scripture reading and almsgiving this very day.

One of my on and off again prayers was to attend a Walk to Emmaus. The story had always captivated my attention, and I longed for a deeper walk with the Lord and a warmed heart. While it was not always on my mind, it was relegated to a bucket list of desires.

The answer finally and surprisingly came. I was extended an invitation to attend the retreat and was thrilled. It was particularly meaningful as it was to take place during Lent when I intentionally try to draw nearer to God and rest from worldly things.

While this opportunity is an answer to my prayer, some may not be able to attend a weekend away or even want to do so. Many would, however, like a deeper walk and time out to really ponder the life and legacy of God’s love and sacrifice.

God honors the desire of everyone’s heart to come close to Him and rest in Him. He is always whispering, “Come to Me.”

This is possible when we respond with a, “Yes, Lord, I am coming.” We can be led by the Holy Spirit into a deeper understanding of Jesus’ amazing love. He is able to make a way for us to walk with Him and have our hearts warmed as He explains the Scriptures to us on a one-on-one basis.

Like the men on the Road to Emmaus, sometimes our eyes need to be opened to the reality that Jesus Himself is walking in our midst. After this experience, it is our privilege to return to others and tell them this is available for them as well. May we draw nearer to Him with a confident and expectant heart through prayer, fasting, Scripture reading and almsgiving this very day.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, our eyes long to behold You and our hearts long to walk in your welcoming presence which is our true resting place. Help us to be prayerfully intentional about seeking You in our daily walk wherever it may be. Help us to rest in You and share the good news with others.

Focus: For those who are weary and need a fresh word from the LORD.



#sabelle

Day 3: February 24th

Why We Pray

by Ramon F. Smith

Scripture: *After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. (Matthew 6:9-13)*

Key Thought: We pray because God is a good Father who answers prayer, even if it is not our desired answer.

The mass shootings at the elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, the supermarket in Buffalo, New York, and at Michigan State are heartbreaking. In addition, the earthquake in Syria and Turkey has left thousands of people dead, homeless, grieving, and severely injured mentally, emotionally, and physically.

Many of us are asking, WHY? Why would a good and perfect God allow something like this to happen?

Even as a pastor, I wrestle with the same question, why? For some of us, our frustrated curiosity gives way to anger. Yet, I know God is Big Enough to hear our questions, anger, and accusations.

So why pray? What good is prayer at times like this? We pray to express our grief to God. The book of Lamentations and the Psalms are full of angry prayers. God is the only one Big Enough to help us shoulder this burden. Praying is not an opportunity to impress others with the prose and poetry of our prayers. Instead, prayer is a means of understanding ourselves in relation to God. The spiritual practice of prayer reminds us of our humanity, especially when we bring the problems of the human condition to God and lay them upon the altar, acknowledging that we are not God; we approach God with humility. Even the prayer posture of bowing our heads and closing our eyes are outward signs of our humility.

We should pray because God answers prayers. However, we may only sometimes get the expected answer. God can change us even when God does not change the situation. When we keep a prayer journal and spend time in reflection, we begin to see how many prayers our Father is answering. These prayer practices help increase our trust in God.

Prayer: Eternal Loving God, please help me trust you with my prayers' outcome.

Prayer Focus: Praying when tragedy occurs

Day 4: February 25th

Pray without Ceasing

by Londa Pontius

Scripture: *“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”* (1 Thessalonians 5:16 -17)

Key Thought: We should pray without ceasing, keeping our minds always on God. In addition, we must constantly communicate with Him to make every moment of the day as fruitful as possible.

Many of you know I grew up on a farm in Northern Oklahoma. Farming Country! As a little girl old enough to sit in a chair for breakfast, I remember our family morning ritual. Right after we ate, Mom would pick up the devotional book and read that day’s devotional. Then, without a word, we all got down on our knees and leaned on our chairs, and Dad led us in the Lord’s Prayer. After the Amen, we got up and went to work on the farm. I have never forgotten this family memory. We prayed at every meal. Dad said the same prayer every meal. And every prayer ended with “thou save us for Jesus’ sake.” As a child, I had no idea what that meant. But I knew prayer was very important to our family as Grandpa Reese, Dad’s Dad, said it too.

Prayer has always been important to me. When our oldest daughter, Toni, had to have open heart surgery at the age of 5, I became a devoted “prayer.” As she recovered, my mind was in silent prayer constantly. As I reflect on this event, I finally learned the meaning of praying constantly. Now it seems like my mind is always in prayer and thanksgiving mode. I catch myself praying quick prayers all day long with thanksgiving in my heart.

As Jesus went up on the mountain to pray, I also had a sacred place to pray. My family knows that when I go to my sacred place, I don’t bother mom. Praying for others restores my soul. My grandkids often call and ask me to pray for them, but my first question is - have you prayed first? They usually reply, yes, but Grandma, He listens to you better. Deep down, they know my prayers are no better than theirs, but praying together soothes the soul.

I invite you to find a quiet place to sit comfortably with your hands open and let your heart connect with Him.

What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and grief to bear,

What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer....

Prayer: Lord, grant us the grace to pray at all times, and Thou save us for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

Prayer Focus: Those living in difficult circumstances who need constant prayer.

Day 5: February 27th

God Hears Us

by Susie Rhodes

Scripture: *Jesus taught, "Ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you will find."* (Matthew 7:7)

Key Thought: When you are sincerely striving to obey God's commandments, He will give you answers to your prayers and you will be ready to receive them.

After I moved to Texas to live closer to my son, his wife, and my grandchildren, a pastor in my new church invited me to teach a Bible study at a local nursing home. This was a blessing as I taught children about God's love for us for twenty years in my former church. I even had a puppet ministry to help teach. I was blessed to have this privilege for three years.

Then Covid struck and I lost my Mom and best friend within a few weeks of each other. The nursing home ministry also came to a grinding halt. I felt so alone and angry. I was devastated and didn't want to be involved in much of anything anymore. I started complaining to God about how unfair life seemed to be and that I was unsure if I had the strength to serve Him. During my talks with God, He reminded me of the fulfillment in my life that I had experienced while serving Him in the past. So I asked God to give me something to do in my church when I prayed that night.

Three days after I prayed for whatever God wanted me to do, I received a call from a lady in my church. She was calling to see if I would be interested in co-teaching a new women's Sunday School class with her. I almost said, "No!" But God reminded me of my prayer and I immediately said, "Yes, I would love to teach with you." She offered to give me a few days to think about it since I responded so quickly. I explained that I didn't need to think about it because her phone call was an answer to my prayer from God. The Lord had something He wanted me to do.

You see, God gave me a purpose in my life again and I praise His Holy name. He even went the extra mile for me. He also gave me a new best friend. God does, indeed, answer prayer.

Prayer: God, fill our hearts with a desire to serve You. Amen.

Prayer Focus: God is faithful. He hears and answers our prayers.

Day 6: February 28th

Who are We Talking about Here?

by Sandra Young

Scripture: *“My mouth will speak in praise of the Lord. Let every creature praise his Holy name for ever and ever.”* (Psalm 145:12 NIV)

Key Thought: I will focus one entire prayer time on adoration and praise of God.

Have you ever had a conversation with someone that seems to become a little “one sided”? You try to steer toward a concern of yours, but it swings back around to them somehow? It seems that if two people had very many conversations like that, the relationship would not go very deep. It would eventually become a “one sided” relationship with most all of the conversation revolving around the concerns of just one person. Mature relationships should be about two people who enjoy learning about each other.

So what does this have to do with prayer?

Prayer can be a great indicator of the depth or maturity of our relationship with God. God loves to listen to us and hear from us about anything, anytime, anywhere. There’s nothing too big He can’t handle and nothing so small that would cause Him not to care. But our prayers can unintentionally become like one sided relationships, focusing mostly on our personal needs and desires. There can be genuinely good things we pray about, and God loves to bless His children that He loves. And we need to continue telling him about ourselves every day! He longs to hear from us.

But what if we were to talk to God about how we feel about Him? Tell him of His greatness and tell Him what He means to us. Talk to God about all of His creation and His amazing grace. Thank Him for all He has done and how much you treasure your relationship with Him. Sometime try to make your entire prayer all about God and see how amazing it makes you feel.

David did this often in the Psalms. He shared his true feelings, both high and low, with God, and David is known in the Bible as a man after God’s own heart (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22). If you don’t know exactly where to start, I like the hymn “How Great Thou Art.” He is our great God!

Prayer: Father God, You are so patient with your children. You are our Great God. Every moment deserves your praise and adoration. Thank you for pursuing us and being excited to hear from us when we pray. Thank you for answering our prayers in your perfect way. We love you. Amen.

Prayer Focus: The glory and majesty of God.

Day 7: March 1st

Prayer as Encounter and Perseverance

by Nathaniel Metz

Scripture: *At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.* (Matthew 27:51 NRSV)

Key Thought: Through prayer, we can deepen our relationship with God and experience God's love, grace, and peace in our lives.

Karl Barth, a Swiss theologian and pastor, was one of the most influential figures of the 20th century and one of the most influential theologians of all time, which makes him a figure with whom all Christians should be familiar. In his theology, he emphasized the importance of prayer as a means of connecting with God. For Barth, prayer is theology.

According to Barth, prayer is not simply a way of communicating our wants and needs to God, but it is a means of encountering the presence of God in our lives. In his words, "Prayer is the voice of faith, the voice of the child of God." When we pray, we are expressing our trust and dependence on God, and we are acknowledging that our ultimate fulfillment and satisfaction can only be found in God.

Barth also emphasized the role of prayer in the life of the church. He believed that prayer is not just a personal act, but it is also a communal one. When we pray together as a church, we are expressing our solidarity and unity with one another and with God. Through prayer, the church is transformed into a community of faith, hope, and love, where each member can find support and encouragement in their spiritual journey.

In conclusion, for Karl Barth, prayer is a vital aspect of our spiritual lives. It is a means of connecting with God, expressing our dependence on God, and experiencing God's presence and power in the everyday of faith. Through prayer, we can deepen our relationship with God and grow in our understanding of God's love and grace. As we pray, we are also transformed into a community of faith, where we can find support and encouragement in our spiritual journeys.

Prayer: Gracious God, may we continue to pray with perseverance, trusting that You hears our cries and responds in You own time and way.

Prayer Focus: For those waiting on God's response



Jeffrey

Day 8: March 2nd

Prayer as Transformative Worship

by Nathaniel Metz

Scripture: *Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.* (Psalm 103:1 NRSV)

Key Thought: In prayer, we are radically connected to God in a mode of worship that transforms us.

Sergei Bulgakov was a 20th century Russian Orthodox theologian and philosopher, who wrote extensively about the role of prayer in the spiritual life of the believer. According to Bulgakov, prayer is not simply a way for us to ask God for things or to express our thanks, but it is a way for us to enter into a deeper relationship with God. It is a means by which we can participate in the divine life and be transformed by it.

For Bulgakov, prayer is sacramental, a visible expression of the invisible reality of the relationship between God and Creation. Through prayer, we enter into a mystical union with God, in which we are able to experience the love and grace of God in a tangible way. In this way, prayer is a transformative experience that has the power to change our hearts and minds, drawing us closer to God and helping us to grow in our spiritual lives. We are able to experience the love and grace of God in a way that is beyond our understanding, and we are able to be drawn into the eternal life of the Trinity.

One aspect of Bulgakov's theology of prayer that I like is his emphasis that prayer is an act of worship. This means that, when we pray, we are not simply making requests or offering thanks (though that is perfectly acceptable and valid), but we are offering ourselves to God in worship. This is an important aspect of prayer because it helps us to keep our focus on God, rather than on our own needs or desires.

In conclusion, Sergei Bulgakov's theology of prayer is a rich and profound understanding of the role of prayer in the spiritual life of the believer. It emphasizes the transformative power of prayer and the importance of seeing it as an act of worship and a means of participating in the divine life. In prayer, we enter into a deeper relationship with God and become transformed by divine love and grace in a way that is beyond our understanding.

Prayer: Lord, enable our humble prayers to be appropriate worship of Your glory and majesty.

Prayer Focus: To see how all Creation worships God and how we might participate in that continuous worship which happens all around us

Day 9: March 3rd

Pray Continually (And Intentionally)

by Adrian Cardenas

Scripture: *Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.* (1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18)

Key Thought: I will intentionally build prayer into my daily routine.

Not long ago, when someone I knew would open up to tell me about a difficult situation with family, friends, etc. I would find myself saying I would pray for them. Have you ever told yourself, “I need to pray for [a particular situation or person]...but I don’t have time now...I’ll do it later”? Sometimes we do; other times we forget. Life almost always gets in the way, but it doesn’t have to. I noticed that I would make time for things that are important to me (like helping the kids with homework, or working on a project around the house). So, if I believe my prayer life is important, I need to intentionally make time for it. I found that the perfect time for me to pray is during my drive to work. It’s about 20 minutes, which works well for me. I turn off the radio and go through my list, which includes: my family, friends, church, and co-workers. I usually pray for others first, then myself, and conclude with the Lord’s Prayer and the Gloria Patri.

Is it perfect? Who knows? Is it intentional? Absolutely. The key for me was to find a way to build it into something I do most days, so I can get a little closer to “Rejoice always” and “Pray continually.”

Where/when can you be intentional about your prayer life?

Prayer: Father in Heaven, thank you for teaching us how to pray. Please help me to be intentional in my prayer life: to adore you for the many wonderful things you have created; to confess that at times I have forgotten your word; to thank you for the blessings in my life; and to put my life in your hands. Amen

Prayer Focus: Those needing time in prayer.



Day 10: March 4th

Love and Forgiveness

by Karen Ranney

Scripture: *“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. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”* (John 3:16-19 NRSV)

Key Thought: By holding firm your faith through prayer you will see that God knows your desires and will take away the sins of the world.

For many years I had lived with a heaviness in my heart for the loss of my brother, Robert. During the time of my brother's passing, I was angry for what caused his death that I had a difficult time with forgiveness toward others. I now realize I should have focused my life on the fact God did not let the act of my brother's death go unwarranted. I now know that through his grace, mercy, love and forgiveness I have peace in my heart. I think about what act of Love God had to have that allowed the life of his son Jesus to be given up for the sins of the world. This is what finally resonated with me and allowed me to let go of the burden I was carrying. It was then I felt Jesus healed my heart, and now I am forever grateful.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, I pray that we will continue to see the wonders you have shown us through faith and fears. To know you are the answer and are faithful to our needs. In your precious name we pray.
Amen

Prayer Focus: Knowing you are loved and forgiven always.



Read

03-06-23 to 03-16-23

Day 11: March 6th

Being in the Word Every Day

by Belia Thompson

Scripture: *All Scripture is given by God. And all Scripture is useful for teaching and for showing people what is wrong in their lives. It is useful for correcting faults and teaching the right way to live. Using the Scriptures, those who serve God will be prepared and will have everything they need to do every good work.*

(2 Timothy 16–17 ERV)

Key Thought: I will read and meditate on the Bible every day

To show devotion after coming to faith in Christ, read, meditate, understand, enjoy, and share the Scriptures which are essential for the Christian life. We must be in the WORD every day with the aim of meeting God there and letting the glory of His truth fill and transform our lives.

Scripture helps us to defend the faith and is a part of spiritual discipline. Paul says to hold fast to the teaching and thereby save yourself. God saves us daily through Scripture.

Scripture helps us to do God's will, it helps us to obey God and not sin. It is the best defense against Satan. When Satan tempted Christ in the desert, Jesus' response to him was always a scripture, which stopped Satan. That is some powerful Word.

Scripture is a means of grace. If we want to be made peaceful and powerful through divine grace, Peter says it happens "in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord." That knowledge is only found in Scripture.

Jesus prayed to his Father, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." To sanctify is the process of becoming holy, becoming more like Christ and God who are perfectly holy.

The Christian life is a life of many afflictions, but the advantage of being a Christian is we gain encouragement on our walk with Christ through Scripture which can give us hope and joy. If you feel discouraged by current cultural and theological opinions, remember, knowledge in the Scriptures is not about the opinions of people, it is the Word of God which is irrefutable.

The full enjoyment of the truth of Scripture, will be experienced only in heaven. Scripture shows us the hope of heaven, it is a time to spend with the Lord to help serve Him better to set us on that road towards our final joy. [...]

If we know the Scriptures, we will not be misled by false teachers and teachings. Some people will find words to believe to suit their own passions (2 Timothy 4:3). But by knowing God's Word in your heart and mind, you will know the difference.

When you read, meditate, and share Scripture, it pleases God. His Word is eternal. What a wonderful opportunity to please our Lord. Your Spiritual life, your eternal life, just like your physical life needs to be constantly fed, not by bread, but by the Word of God.

To help us to grow as believers, we need to fellowship and share the Scriptures with other believers. You can teach, bear each other's burdens, give advice, see a different interpretation. Join a Sunday School class or Bible studies to learn. Be in fellowship with other believers to know you are not alone.

Prayer: My loving God, open my spiritual eyes to show me the glimpses of glory I cannot see by myself. Let me enjoy learning more about my Savior, Jesus. May the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, enlighten my heart. Have mercy on me, a sinner. Change my life and let me bear fruit in acts of love for others. Make me a more loving person as I read and study your Word. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Prayer focus: Before you read the Bible, ask God to speak to you through His Word.

Day 12: March 7th

God's Word Changes Lives

by Dr. Jay Beavers

Scripture: “I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you must love each other.” (John 13:34)

Key Thought: Scripture can change our lives.

Can a scripture verse or two change the direction of your life? Yes! Absolutely! Here's my story: The letter telling me that I was on scholastic probation and that I had one semester to raise my GPA to a “C” average or be expelled ended my dream of earning a degree in engineering. What could I do? Panic filled me. Someone suggested I talk with the Career Counselling office on campus. I did and discovered that my strengths are in the liberal arts, English, history for example. A fast change in majors and my grades really improved. Probation was removed. I stayed in college. Yet, what would I do with my life and a degree in English?

At that time, I was a member of the College and Career Class at First Methodist Church in Fort Worth. Prayers for help became a familiar part of my life. One answer God gave was to talk with Lamar Smith, our associate pastor working with young adults. In one session, I told Lamar that whatever I did, I wanted to help people. His response blew my mind. “Have you ever considered the ministry?” My response, “You're nuts!”

God works in strange and mysterious ways. God also has a strange sense of humor! Before I realized what was happening, I graduated with my degree in English and entered seminary. In my second year in seminary, I took a course on the Gospel of John, which quickly became my favorite gospel. When we studied John, chapters 13-17, my eyes stopped on John 13, verse 34: “I give you a new commandment: love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you must love each other.” Consider the implications of Jesus' new commandment. They are powerful. All of a sudden, God gave me the reason, the direction, the command and the power to do our Lord's new commandment. To this day, John 13.34 is the definition and direction of my life. Can a verse or two of scripture change your life? Only you can answer that question.

Prayer: Holy and gracious God, the Psalmist said, “Your word is a lamp before my feet and a light for my journey” (Psalm 119:105 CEB). Every day help us to live by your word in all our thoughts, our talking, and our actions. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Prayer Focus: Live by God's Word



Day 13: March 8th

What Should We Do When We Read Unsettling Scripture?

by Nathaniel Metz

Scripture: *[Jesus] said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”* (Matthew 22:37-40 NRSV)

Key Thought: There are spiritual tools to help us find God even when scripture unsettles us.

Reading scripture can produce some of our greatest moments of joy and deepest connection to God. Scripture is one of the core authoritative rules of our faith upon which our doctrines are built. However, there are times in which we might read stories or sections of scripture that are unsettling, troubling, or even disturbing. When I come across such sections, I often feel bad about having this reaction, and I can even beat myself up about it, just telling myself I need more faith. But during my time in church and school, I realized I’m not the only one feels this way. Thankfully, there are some reading strategies taught by theologians both past and present that can help.

First, we should ask ourselves: What is the point of reading scripture? One of the most famous and influential theologians in history, St. Augustine, gave a nice answer to this question. The purpose of scripture is to help edify the church and the individuals within the church so that they can learn what it means to love God with one’s whole self and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Or, as Augustine put it in his Confessions, scripture is all about love, which is “the motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one's self and of one's neighbor for the sake of God.”

In other words, when we are interpreting scripture, we need to ask: How does this teach me to love God and love my neighbor? If our interpretation of scripture would contradict either one of those principles – such as perhaps portraying God as commanding us to do something that would not be loving to our neighbor – then we need to seek an alternative interpretation. Early church theologians often emphasized the importance of analogical and spiritual ways of reading scripture, especially when it concerned disturbing passages. For example, they would read many violent passages of scripture as allegories of spiritual warfare or about how God’s grace defeats the sin within our lives. [...]

Such allegorical and spiritual readings can be helpful in many cases, and they have a long tradition within the church. But sometimes that strategy doesn't work. In such cases, I often find it helpful to ask myself: where is Christ in this? Christ is the ultimate center of our faith, and the words of scripture are meant to point us to the Incarnate Word of God (John 1). Thus, when we read unsettling scripture, it can be helpful to ask how this might point us back to God's redemption in Christ.

The beautiful thing about the Christian faith is its insistence that God is not aloof from the affairs of Creation, but rather that God in Christ enters into the suffering and traumas we face. Jürgen Moltmann, a German theologian (who is still alive as of this writing), emphasizes the significance of Jesus Christ's entry into human suffering. He argues that in his death on the cross, Jesus became the representative of all human suffering, taking on the pain and brokenness of the world. Moltmann sees the cross as a symbol of God's solidarity with humanity, and believes that it demonstrated God's love and commitment to healing and transforming the world. Through the cross, Jesus takes on the brokenness of the world and transforms it into a symbol of hope and new life. The cross shows that God is not distant or uncaring, but is actively involved in the world and working to bring about restoration and healing for all people, bringing the promise of new life and hope to all those who suffer.

We can apply Moltmann's insights to our reading of scripture by asking ourselves: How is Christ entering into the suffering of this story? What would the healing and redemption of Christ look like if it was applied to what troubles me? By doing so, I think we can find that even troubling aspects of scripture hold the potential for drawing us deeper into Christ.

Prayer: Lord, may Your Holy Spirit give us the wisdom to see how Your scriptures bring us deeper into Your love, grace, and redemption. Amen.

Prayer focus: Wisdom and comfort when things unsettle us.

Day 14: March 9th

God's Message

by Dee Griffith

Scripture: *“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.”* Romans 15:4 (ESV)

Key Thought: The importance of reading scripture

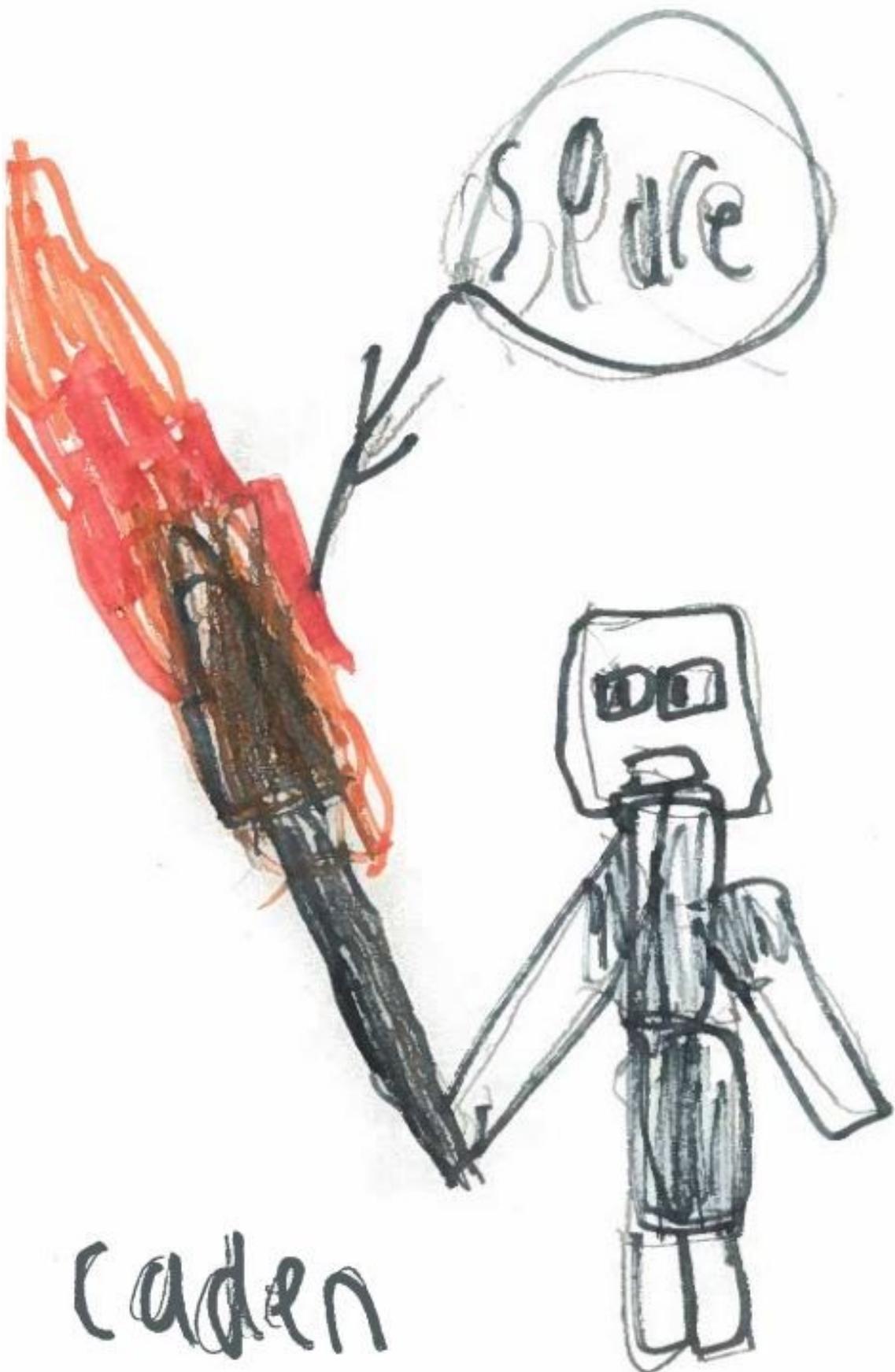
I have used the Upper Room booklet for many years as part of my daily devotion time. But I have to admit that for a long time I rarely read the scripture passages listed . . . just went right to the “story.” Until one day, I noticed at the bottom of the first devotion of the month, a footnote that said: “The Bible readings are selected with great care, and we urge you to include the suggested reading in your devotional time.”

That was a wake-up call for me in how much I was missing by not reading the selected scriptures. After all, this is our primary source of learning how to live a Christian life. Even if I have read the scripture before, my understanding changes and grows. Using different versions of Bible is also enlightening. I often read more than the verses listed to get the whole story, and I especially read more when I use my Archaeology Study Bible (ESV), as reading about the life of the people at that time is so fascinating.

Many times, the story and scripture for that day seem to be exactly what I needed to read, very relatable to my own situation. Reading scripture can provide encouragement to manage your day, comfort when you are sad, hope when discouraged, direction when lost, and joy in the promise of God's unfailing love.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for the gift of your inspired word. May we use it as intended and share it with others. Amen.

Prayer focus: To no longer “skip over” scripture



Caden

Day 15: March 10th

Trust God through the Cruise

by Linda Brown and Grady Frazier

Scripture: *And waking up, [Jesus] rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Be silent! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”* (Mark 4:39-41 NRSV)

Key Thought: Trust the encouraging messages in scripture when life is scary.

In March of 2019, my husband and I decided to take a cruise to the Arctic Circle to see the northern lights. Our ship took off from Bergen, Norway. It was a fascinating trip through the fjords and up to the Arctic Circle. As we were coming into Molde, the winds severely picked up speed. We were eating lunch on deck and we had noticed waves were getting dangerously high and even coming over onto the seventh level of the ship. Startled a bit, we both decided that it was best that we returned to our rooms. As we were walking back, the ship began rocking from side to side, forcing us into the walls with each wave that hit. Once we reached our room, we had only been there for a moment, the ships sirens started to sound—warning “go to safety stations”. We hurriedly left our room and set out for our safety stations while being tossed about on our way there. We finally reached our stations and water was pouring onto the floor of our safety station. The contents of the room were being tossed everywhere like food in a stomach. Glass shattering, tables crashing all throughout our station. We were scared, everyone of us. The staff of the ship was handing out life vests and instructed us to stand in our designated areas. We all moved to our areas with water up to our shins and furniture being vaulted about the room. I was shaking out of fear of what might happen. We were uncertain and in a foreign place which brought even more uncertainty. At one point, I stopped and thought to myself, “Is this the end of my life?”. As soon as this fear came though, so did another thought of faith, “Are you a doubting Thomas or do you have the faith of a mustard seed?” This thought brought upon me a holy peace that I had never before experienced. I had suddenly realized that it was all going to be okay.

[...]

God is in control and He sometimes works in mysterious ways but His power is incredible and his presence is comforting. This experience changed my life and made me realize that God is all powerful and we need to fully trust in Him. God is like the pillar upon which everything stands. When we choose to leave this pillar, the ground beneath us is shaky and we lose the strength of the Lord that comes with his pillar. Trusting in God fully is how we are able to stand upon his pillar. After a while on the ship, we were airlifted to land by a helicopter, leaving behind the broken and scary ship. This helicopter is like God when we cry out to Him for help. He is always at the ready to come rescue us from the broken parts of our sinful selves, we just have to call out to Him. Just like we had to have faith in this situation, think about situations in your life where you had to have faith and God pulled through for you. “He replied, “Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.” Matthew 17:20 “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” Joshua 1:9 NIV Have faith in the Lord and he will deliver you just as he delivered us from the peril of our cruise to safety

Prayer: Dear Lord, We pray and ask You to wrap Your strong hands around us and protect us from the world. We ask Lord, let down a ladder of trust for us to climb to get closer in our relationship with You. We thank you for everything you have done for us and will continue to do for us. In Yeshua’s name we pray, Amen

Prayer focus: That the encouraging words of scripture would speak to our hearts and bring us comfort.

Day 16: March 11th

Transformed Through Scripture

by James Young

Scripture: “*and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free*” (John 8:28 NRSV)

Key Thought: The transformative power of scripture.

I had the misfortune of growing up in an unchurched home. Although I had brief encounters with religion at a Baptist church and a synagogue, nothing took root until I was 16 years old. Jesus got a hold of me down in an orchestra pit while I was performing in a big Christmas pageant downtown. I was baptized, joined a local church, but then, went about doing life my way. I had my “I’m With Jesus” membership card but didn’t do much with it.

I finally found my way to the Methodist church at age 23. I joined a very busy church with a growing music program. Soon thereafter, I was at church 3-4 days a week. I was at church so much, they put me on staff! What could be wrong with a life like that? Eventually, I was working 60+ hours a week! I loved it, but my life became about my work, not the One for whom I was working.

Being so busy doing church work, barely opening a bible, I wasn’t fortifying myself for the mission for which I was serving. Had I been studying God’s Word, I would have seen what sin looks like, how sin affects others, and how much sin offends God. I would have seen sin — all over me.

Jumping to September of 2018, that still, small voice called me to a deep-dive bible study group. I finally arrived where my Casual Christianity never took me, and I had no idea how much I needed it. My first year we studied from Joshua to Solomon — God’s united people entering and flourishing in the promised land. The next year was the book of Acts and letters of the apostles — the powerful preaching of Peter, Paul, and the apostles, fulfilling God’s plan. 2020 was Genesis — God telling us about our beginning, while laying out His eternal plan. 2021 was Matthew’s account of Jesus’ public ministry.

[...]

This year we're in the Old Testament bouncing back and forth between the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah — generations of wayward kings and idolatrous people, living life on their own terms, with rare moments of righteousness. Nevertheless, God never wavered from His plan, and He never will.

The sixty-six books in the Bible were written by some forty authors over a period of 1,500 years. Divided into Old and New Testaments, the Old Testament is the New Testament concealed. The New Testament is the Old Testament revealed. Every name, every place name, every number, every detail is there by design, supernaturally delivered into a singular message system telling God's story. And, on every page, you will find Jesus Christ. With the Bible, you must experience it to believe it.

Digging deep into God's Holy Word has shown me how wrong I have been, and yet, how very loved I am. I have learned that there is a big difference between being a card-carrying church member, and a cross-carrying member of the Body of Christ. And in that, Jesus calls us to live differently.

“Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me.” — Psalm 129:133

Prayer: Father God, we give you praise and glory for your greatness in all the earth. We thank you for recording your amazing story for us to see our lives in your story: convicting us in our sin, redeeming us in your grace. We pray that you fortify us to spread your great story of love, grace, and redemption, through Your Son, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Prayer focus: For the power of Scripture to transform our lives.

Day 17: March 13th

Scripture in Daily Living: Welcoming the Stranger

by Gabrielle Smith

Scripture: *"When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God."* (Leviticus 19: 33-34)

Key Thought: Today, I will welcome someone different from me.

For just under a year, I served as an Immigration Officer with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services- Dallas District Office. My job was to welcome immigrants and give information about navigating our complex and fragmented immigration system.

After a few weeks of this work, I realized some immigrants seemed hesitant or even afraid to talk to me. This was a stressful and anxiety-producing process for them. After talking to them, I realized they feared me because I worked for the government. They had bad experiences with government employees before, and they were afraid of having yet another bad experience. Once I realized this, I did everything I could to be hospitable. I offered Kleenex when I had to tell a lady that her relative couldn't lawfully enter the United States for at least twenty years. I celebrated with another who had waited years to take the oath of citizenship when she returned to thank me for helping her after receiving her citizenship certificate. I joked and laughed with many others as I helped them navigate the system. However, I repeatedly received the comment from customers: "I didn't expect you to be so nice to me." This statement was part compliment, part insult. While I was happy that I was providing satisfactory customer service, I was disappointed that people didn't expect me to be nice. Why shouldn't I be nice? I am a Christian! The Bible is full of passages about welcoming immigrants, aliens, strangers, and foreigners—all names for persons who are not native-born citizens.

We should treat immigrants as we want to be treated. It is our job to love—not to judge.

Prayer: Father God, we thank you for the beauty and depth immigrants bring to our country. No matter the story, no matter the cost, help me to remember that an immigrant is a person, with a family, with dreams, and most of all, with a heart that needs you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayer Focus: Immigrants and immigration advocates



Isabelle



Day 18: March 14th

We are a People of Story

by Chuck Kilgore

Scripture: Re-read the Trial and Passion narrative of Christ found in Mark 14:32 – Mark 15:41

Key Thought: Scripture as an embodied story

This is the Word of God for the people of God. We have heard this statement made setting the Bible apart from other literature. Just remember it is our story. As a friend of mine, Rev. Dr. Jerry Chism, said many times, “We are people of story.” That story comes to us from the Bible.

The Bible is many things, a lamp, a guide, an aid, but fundamentally, it is literature. We need to read as a story not just as a chronology of God. This passage from the Gospel of Mark is the story of the crucifixion of Jesus, the story of the man who is the Son.

What if you had a different background, and I handed you this story to read? After reading it, you would probably tell me that it was dry or boring. Why would you say that? Well, maybe because it lacks the narration we are used to in our modern books or literature.

Let’s investigate some texts from our selected reading:

“Abba Father,” he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” (Mark 14:36)

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34)

In the first section it simply says ‘he said’ and the second it says ‘Jesus cried out in a loud voice’. In modern storytelling, that just would not do because it is ambiguous or lacks color. Some more narration would be included to provide clarity or further insight. A modern narrator may describe the emotional state of Jesus by saying things like, ‘in anger he cried’; ‘defiantly he said’; ‘he begged’; ‘in resolution he said’; ‘in disgust he mocked’; ‘in self-pity he whimpered’; ‘sorrowfully he said’; or finally, ‘sarcastically he said, “Yet not what I will, but what you will.” Does the narration, the voice, matter? I contend it does a great deal, it’s part of the story. As you read this story and you listen with your heart; the story becomes your story, you will [...]

find the narration – His voice in the story. The Word through you provides the narration. That is why the Bible is the Word of God for the people of God.

“A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross” (Mark 15:21)

This statement is easily passed over as simple detail. In the retelling of the story, narrators add that Christ had been beaten so badly that he could not carry the cross. This elevates the passage as an important part of the story. For me, this detail brought a feeling of remorse for the beating of Christ. One day I contemplated how badly Jesus was beaten, and I was guided toward this revelation: It is said Jesus was a carpenter (a wood worker like me). Wood working in Jesus’ time was hard labor (no power tools like I use); it took physical strength. Not only was working the wood laborious, Jesus had to fell the tree, trim it, then haul it home, before he could build anything (there was no Home Depot for lumber nor a handy pickup truck to haul the wood, like I am used to). Yet he could not carry a lowly wooden cross, a normal daily task for Jesus, because he was beaten so badly. This revelation has helped me to connect my story with the story of Jesus.

I picked these 3 passages because they are part of Jesus’s story that show me Jesus’ struggle with his being completely human, which is a very important point in my relationship with the Trinity. The scripture shows me Christ as human: He struggled with his own emotion. His body betrayed him with pain and anguish. He questioned the presence of God.

These things show and comfort me in that God knows and understands through the Son: How we all struggle with our emotions. How all our bodies age and fail us in many ways. How we all have a limited ability to perceive of the presence of God. This is a part of my story in my faith journey. I hope you will remember that in reading the Bible, you can find the Story that can transform your story. The power of the Bible to transform our story is what makes the Bible “The Word of God, for the people of God.”

Prayer: I offer you this prayer, that Rev. Dr. Jerry Chism prayed with the children (and the congregation) after telling a story about living on Vance Road with his best friend Brad Oliverly for children’s time: Dear Jesus who loves us, Help us we pray, To be your good children, And live the right way. Amen

In remembrance of Rev. Dr. Jerry Chism.

Prayer focus: To find ourselves in God’s story.

Day 19: March 15th

The Flowers of Scripture

by Nathaniel Metz

Scripture: *Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers, but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.* (Psalm 1:1-2 NRSV)

Key Thought: We need to meditate deeply on scripture.

Athanasius, is one of the most important theologians of all time and was instrumental in formulating several key doctrines of the Christian faith, such as the Trinity. In his doctrine of scripture, Athanasius believed that the Word of God revealed in Scripture is essential for the Christian life. In his theological works, Athanasius emphasized the importance of reading and meditating on Scripture, and how it is crucial for the spiritual growth and health of believers. Athanasius believed that the Word of God in Scripture is a means of divine communication with humanity. In his view, Scripture is not merely a human text, but the living and active Word of God, which carries the power to transform lives. Athanasius wrote, "The Scriptures were spoken by God and written by men. The words are human, but the voice is divine. If we read the Scriptures with an open heart and mind, we will hear God speaking to us."

Athanasius saw Scripture as a guide for the Christian life. He believed that the Bible provides moral guidance and spiritual direction, and that its teachings should shape the way believers live and interact with others. Athanasius wrote, "The Scriptures teach us how to love God and our neighbors, how to live a holy and virtuous life, and how to grow in faith and grace."

Athanasius believed that reading and meditating on the Bible should be a daily practice for Christians. In his Letter to Marcellinus, Athanasius wrote, "The Bible is like a garden, and every page is a flower. We must not only read the Bible, but also meditate on it, and allow its words to take root in our hearts and transform our lives."

As we read and meditate on the Scriptures, may we hear God speaking to us, and may his Word take root in our hearts and transform our lives.

Prayer: Lord, grant us the peace of mind to meditate deeply on Your Scripture.

Prayer Focus: For the Holy Spirit's illumination

Day 20: March 16th

God is Active

by Nathaniel Metz

Scripture: *He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom and gently lead the mother sheep.* (Isaiah 40:11)

Key Thought: Scripture is alive and by reading it, we can learn how God is active in our lives as well.

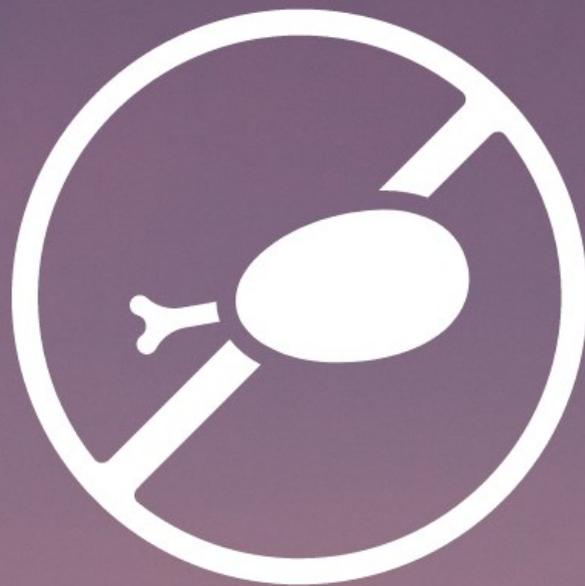
Today, I'd like to introduce you to a theologian who doesn't get the attention that his thinking deserves. John Richardson Illingworth was a 19th-century Anglican theologian, who articulated a more orthodox understanding of the faith when others in his time were radically re-interpreting Christianity. In particular, he was adamant that God is active in the world today. In his teachings about the nature of Scripture, Illingworth testified that reading Scripture is vital for developing a deeper understanding of God's character, will, and activity. He believed that the Bible is not just a historical record, but a living witness to God's ongoing activity in the world, and that it had the power to transform our hearts and minds.

For Illingworth, the act of reading Scripture is a way of entering into a conversation with God, to learn how to see the way in which God is active in our lives. Through the Bible, God speaks to us and reveals God's character and will for the Church. The Bible, he believed, is not only a set of doctrines to be followed, but a testimony and living witness to God's love and mercy — an invitation to enter into a deeper relationship with God. As Illingworth wrote, "Through the Bible, we learn how to live in a way that is pleasing to God, and we gain the strength and courage to face life's challenges." This means that the Bible is, for us, a means of spiritual renewal and transformation. Or, as Illingworth said, "Through the Bible, we can be renewed in the image of God, and we can be transformed into the people that He intended us to be."

In conclusion, Illingworth reminds us that reading Scripture is not simply an intellectual exercise, but a spiritual discipline. The Bible is a living witness to God's ongoing activity in the world, and by reading and studying it, we can deepen our relationship with God, gain moral and spiritual guidance, and be transformed by the power of His love. May we approach the Bible with reverence and humility, and may we seek to be transformed by the power of God's Word.

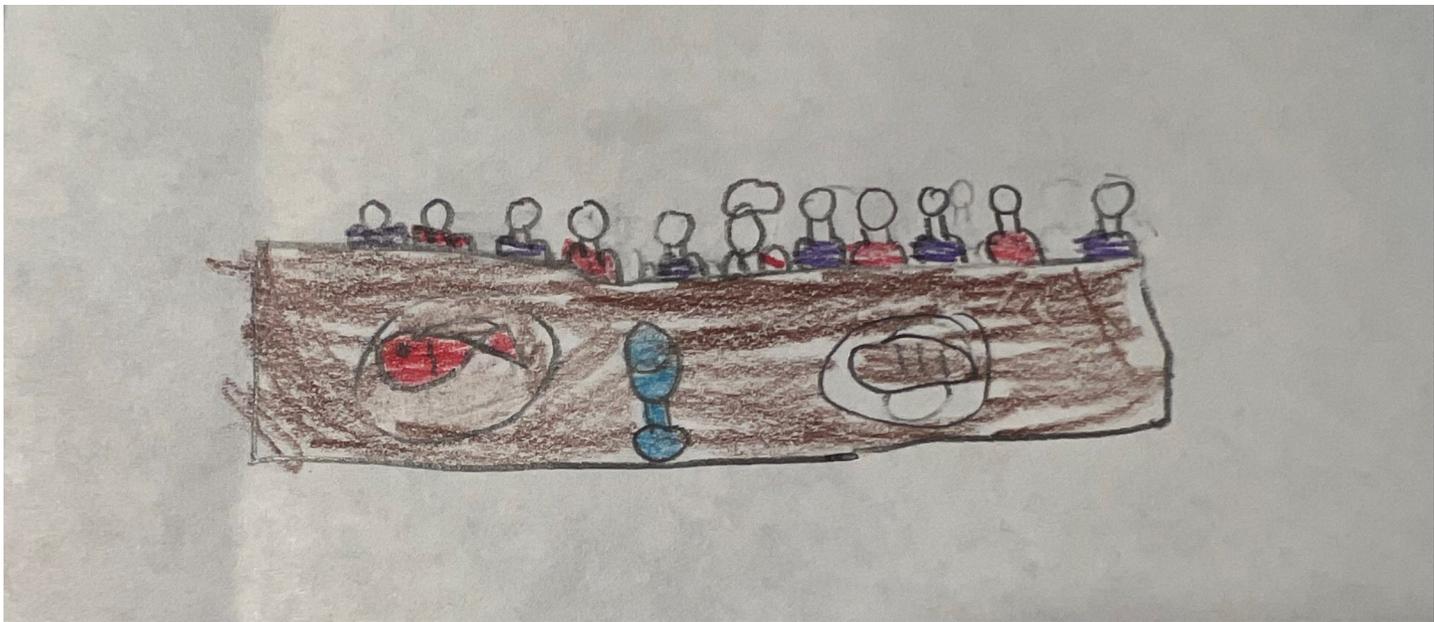
Prayer: Lord, enable us to recognize the ways in which You animate life all around us. Open our spiritual vision to perceive how You are active all around us. Amen.

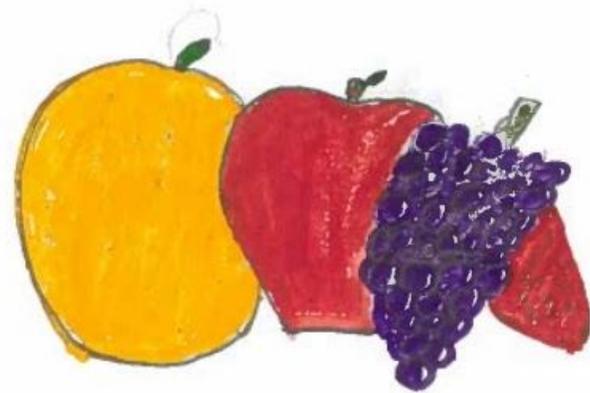
Prayer Focus: For those who struggle to see where God is in their lives.



Fast

03-17-23 to 03-28-23





Day 21: March 17th

The Daniel Fast

by Ramon F. Smith

Scripture: *“During that time, I, Daniel, had been mourning for three weeks. I didn’t eat any rich foods. Neither meat nor wine passed my lips, and I didn’t clean up at all until the three weeks were up.”* (Daniel 10:2-3 Common English Bible)

Key Thought: The Daniel Fast is a Biblical example of fasting

Special Note: if you have health issues, please contact your health professional before committing to any fast, including the Daniel Fast. And importantly, if you have struggled with a food-related disability (including anorexia, bulimia, and related conditions) either in the past or the present, please do not fast from food. Instead, we encourage you to fast from something else, such as social media or television. It is not about the food; it’s about the heart, and God will honor your alternative fast just as much as fasting from food.

Fasting is a means of experiencing God’s grace through abstinence from food or limiting one’s food. Its purpose is to help us submit to God, learn how to resist evils and the spiritual forces of wickedness, prepare us for our mission in the world, and to rely on God rather than our strength. After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, Satan attempted to tempt Jesus into breaking his fast (Matthew 4:1-4). Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3 from the Old Testament when he says in Matthew 4:4, “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” Instead of eating meat and sweets and drinking flavored drinks, we invite you to read the Lenten Devotional, read scripture, pray, and be present for worship, bible study, and Sunday school. All these spiritual disciplines involve feeding on the word.

Like Jesus, we will use an Old Testament text for our foundational scripture for our fast. Rather than a twenty-one-day fast in the Old Testament scripture, we encourage you to fast for ten days.

One of the great things about the Daniel Fast is that you are not limited to any specific amount of food but the kinds of food you can eat. For example, the Daniel Fast is limited to vegetables (including fruits) and water.

How do I participate in a Daniel fast? The simplest version is to avoid meat and sweets. It’s that easy.

If you are on a diet that requires a high-level of protein, helpful meat-alternatives include: seitan, tempeh, tofu, as well as “Beyond” and “Impossible” plant-based ‘meat.’

Prayer: Lord, help me to recognize how I can live by Your Word and not by bread alone.

Prayer Focus: To recognize our absolute dependence on God.

Day 22: March 18th

A Great Feast: Fasting

by Gabrielle Smith

Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:1-5

Key Verse: *“He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”* Deuteronomy 8:3 (Message)

Key Thought: I will try fasting for at least one day during this season of Lent.

One day early in 2007, my husband and I were in church, and he said: “We are going to have a church-wide fast.” I had mixed reactions to the fast. Part of me was curious— I wanted to try it. Of course, as the pastor’s wife, I was expected to participate. The other part of me was not curious. I had never participated in a fast before- I was highly skeptical.

What if I pass out from hunger? I love to cook, and I really love to eat. Fasting for 30 days? I would try, but I wasn’t sure I would make it. What if I fail? During the first few days of the fast, I cringed, knowing I could only eat one meal a day after sundown. I was going to law school full-time, working two part-time jobs, and still learning my responsibilities as a new wife. Between commuting, studying, working, and home-life, there is no way I could continue to lead such a busy lifestyle without eating more than once a day. But I tried it anyway. During the time, I would typically eat, I started to read the Psalms. I began to hunger for lunchtime, not because I was about to eat food, but because I was sure to have a spiritual feast. Can you imagine, filling up on scripture and personally reflecting on the word of God? What lessons will I learn in God’s word, study, and prayer that will sustain me, not just in the near future, but for the rest of my life? I made it through the fast. I didn’t lose any weight; I didn’t get seriously sick. But my soul was delighted. I am now assured that God will discipline and sustain us, even when things of the physical world—such as food- cannot sustain us. Rejoice in the opportunity the Lord gives us to grow stronger in our faith through fasting, meditation, and prayer!

Prayer: Jesus, we praise you for the opportunity to feast on your word every day so that we are satisfied and made whole. We pray that all may recognize that even in today’s fast-paced world, we will not be satisfied unless we know that we cannot live by physical food alone. In the mighty name of Jesus we pray: Amen.

Prayer Focus: Those fasting for the first time.

Day 23: March 20th

Renewed Through Fasting

by Nathaniel Metz

Scripture: *Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.* (Romans 12:2 NRSV)

Key Thought: Fasting is an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to renew our imaginations.

In his book *Being Reconciled*, the theologian John Milbank reflects on the narrative in Genesis 3 that we often call “the Fall.” According to Milbank, the Fall did not start with a particular action, such as eating the fruit. Rather, the Fall began in the imagination, where humanity imagined a world different than God’s grace. As Milbank said, “The bad dream gives birth to a bad reality.” This reflection reminds us of the unfortunate truth that our imaginations are prone to corruption, seeking lesser goods when we should be seeking God’s Supreme Goodness. We are excessively prone to dreaming of tasting the fruit instead of resting totally in God’s grace. Indeed, our minds and imaginations need to be renewed. We must be re-invoked by the divine splendor and majesty of God’s grace, but this isn’t something we can accomplish on our own. We need the Holy Spirit to restore our imagination. This is where fasting comes into play.

By refraining from lesser goods, fasting opens our hearts to the Higher Good of God’s grace. This is why simply giving something up isn’t enough during Lent. Fasting must be accomplished and bolstered by scripture, prayer, and almsgiving. By reading scripture, we are transforming our minds by meditating on God’s word. By spending time in prayer, we open ourselves to the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. By giving to others, we align ourselves with God who freely gives rather than Adam and Eve who take for themselves.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, transform our imaginations so that we might see the world through Your Beauty, Grace, and Majesty. Amen.

Prayer Focus: Having a Christlike mind.

Day 24: March 21st

Fasting From Social Media

by Nathaniel Metz

Scripture:

Key Thought: By fasting from social media, we can find ourselves in God rather than lose ourselves in social media.

Teresa of Avila, a 16th-century Spanish mystic and saint, believed that spiritual growth required discipline and self-denial. In her view, fasting was a powerful spiritual practice that could help individuals detach from their worldly desires and focus on their relationship with God. In our modern era, one of the most significant worldly distractions is social media, which can consume our time and attention and hinder our ability to connect with the divine. Therefore, following Teresa's teachings, it is essential to fast from social media to cultivate a deeper spiritual life.

Fasting from social media involves intentionally abstaining from using platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. This may be for a set period, such as a day or a week, or more extended periods such as a month or even longer. By limiting our exposure to the endless stream of information, entertainment, and distraction that social media provides, we can create space in our lives for prayer, meditation, and reflection.

Teresa of Avila taught that the purpose of fasting was not simply to deny ourselves, but to redirect our focus towards God. By turning away from the things that distract us, we can turn towards the One who truly sustains us. Fasting from social media can help us to be more present to ourselves, to our relationships, and to the world around us. It can create room for deeper connections with those we love and for new encounters with strangers. Above all, it can help us to hear the still, small voice of God, which often gets drowned out by the noise of our daily lives.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, grant us Your gentle strength so that we can commit to intentional periods of social media fasting, so that we may cultivate the interior silence necessary to hear Your voice.

Prayer Focus: For an end to social media fighting.

Day 25: March 22nd

Fasting — A Way to Know God

by Dr. Jay Beavers

Scripture: *“After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving.”* (Matthew 4:2)

Key Thought: Fasting leads us to a deeper understanding of God’s will for us.

Matthew’s gospel tells us that when Jesus began his ministry, the “Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him.” In the wilderness, Jesus fasted for forty days and nights. Then Matthew makes the understatement of the year, “he was starving.” Of course, he was!

Have you ever had a similar experience? Probably not as intense! The nearest I have come to Jesus’ experience has been the few times when the doctor placed me on a medical partial fast. Warm chicken broth and liquid Jell-O can sustain life, but in no way do they taste like a good juicy hamburger. Plus, a sense of hunger lingers after the broth and Jell-O have been consumed. Yet, that is not all bad.

After fasting for a few hours, I have realized that daily distractions begin to disappear. At the same time, I feel more focused on the important things around me or confronting me. Jesus did. When Jesus was at his weakest moment in the wilderness, the tempter chose to test him suggesting, “Since you are God’s Son, command these stones to become bread.” Jesus’ instant response was, “It’s written, ‘People won’t live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God.’” Jesus’ quick response to temptation came as a result of using those forty days and nights of fasting to focus on God, to pray seeking God’s will to be done, and to understand God’s word and how God’s word affected his life and the lives of others.

The point of fasting for me, whether it be a medical fast or a spiritual fast, is to focus more sharply on God and on God’s will for my life. Fasting helps me shut out the distractions and temptations to do something other than really, really focusing on God and what God’s will is for me. During this season of Lent, I commend fasting to you as a spiritual practice. Besides, doing so can take your mind off your hunger!

Prayer: Gracious and Sustainer God, help us not fear the hunger of fasting, but instead help us hunger to know you better and to know your will for our lives. In Jesus’ name, the one who has shown us how to hunger for you, we pray. Amen.

Prayer Focus: People learning to fast.

Day 26: March 23rd

Fasting in the Modern World

by Nathaniel Metz

Scripture: *And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.* (Jonah 3:5 NRSV). Suggested reading: all of Jonah 3

Key Thought: Fasting is a core discipline for the modern world.

Jacques Ellul, a 20th-century French philosopher and theologian, believed that fasting was an important spiritual practice that could help Christians resist the idolatrous tendencies of modern society. For Ellul, fasting was a way to resist the temptation to place our trust in material things and to, instead, cultivate a deeper sense of dependence on God.

Ellul believed that modern society was characterized by a pervasive sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency. We are told that we can control our own destiny and that we can satisfy all our desires through the products and services of the market. Fasting, on the other hand, is a way of acknowledging our dependence on God and our need for spiritual nourishment.

Moreover, Ellul saw fasting as a way to resist the consumerist values of modern society. When we fast, we are intentionally denying ourselves the immediate gratification and convenience that we are accustomed to. In doing so, we become more aware of the ways in which our desires have been shaped by the values of consumer culture. We can then resist the tendency to place our trust in material things and instead turn our hearts and minds toward God.

Finally, Ellul believed that fasting could help us to cultivate a deeper sense of compassion for others. When we fast, we become more aware of the needs of those who suffer from hunger and poverty. We can use our fasting as an opportunity to give generously to those in need and to work for a more just and equitable society.

In conclusion, Jacques Ellul's theology teaches us that fasting is a valuable spiritual practice that can help us to resist the idolatrous tendencies of modern society, to cultivate a deeper sense of dependence on God, and to work for a more just and compassionate world. Let us embrace fasting as a way to resist the values of consumer culture and to turn our hearts and minds toward God.

Prayer: Almighty God, save us from the things that distract us from You.

Prayer Focus: For those who are losing themselves in the trivial distractions of life

Day 27: March 24th

Fast Charge

by Ramon F. Smith

Scripture: *Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him. After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving. The tempter came to him and said, "Since you are God's Son, command these stones to become bread." Jesus replied, "It's written, People won't live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God."* (Matthew 4:1-4 CEB)

Key Thought: Fasting is a means of grace that empowers the people of God to carry out the mission of God.

Like most people, I have a cell phone; of course, I need to recharge the battery when it is low. I have a special cable which enables the phone to charge fast. Likewise, Christians need to recharge their spiritual batteries when running low on power. Fasting is a means of grace that helps us recharge spiritually. Jesus practiced fasting. As Christians, we boldly proclaim that we are followers of Jesus. Therefore, we must be willing to follow Jesus even if it means going into the wilderness. While fasting in the wilderness, Jesus spent his time praying and feasting on the word of God. Fasting is often paired with other spiritual disciplines, such as reading scripture, prayer, and acts of kindness, which draw us closer to God.

In my early twenties, I participated in my first fast. The fast lasted for twenty-one days. It was the Daniel fast, which meant, I excluded sweets and meats from my diet. Unlike my fast-charging cable for my cellphone, it takes a couple of days to adjust to the spiritual discipline of fasting. Over time, you get accustomed to the discomfort. Rather than thinking about a sugary sweet or a juicy steak, my mind, heart, and soul yearned for every opportunity for prayer and scripture reading. The more we fast, pray, read scripture, and help others, the more spiritual strength we gain. We learn how to live according to the spirit rather than be ruled by the desire of our flesh. Therefore, we have the power to resist temptation from the Evil One.

Prayer: Triune Eternal and Loving God, please give me the strength to resist the Evil One and draw me closer to you. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen!

Prayer Focus: Gaining Strength through fasting.

Day 28: March 25th

Spiritual Food: The Bread of Life

by Ramon F. Smith

Scripture: *Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. (John 6:35 CEB)*

Key Thought: Grace is an unmerited gift of God that wakes us from our slumber, imputes Jesus' righteousness to us, cleans us up, and grows us up.

I was fast asleep but suddenly awakened from my slumber by the buttery sweet smell of hot biscuits in the air. Immediately, I felt hunger pains in my stomach and had a decision to make. I could roll over and catch a few more winks or get up and accept the free meal at my grandmother's table. If you know me well, you know I chose the latter. I had done nothing to deserve the meal. My grandmother prepared it for me because she loved me; it was her free gift to me. I didn't have to pay for the ingredients. My grandmother had already paid the cost. Even if she wanted to charge me, I was only eight years old and couldn't afford to pay the price anyway.

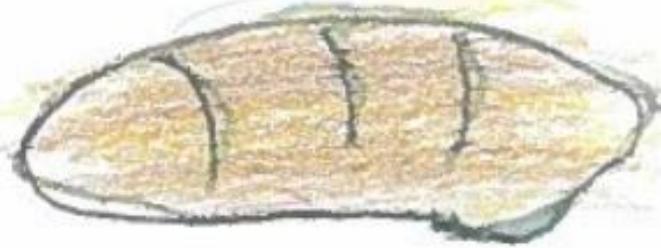
God's grace is like the aroma of my grandmother's biscuits. God's grace wakes us from our slumber of sinfulness and helps us acknowledge the intensity of our hunger pains. We are presented with choices: lay there and choose death or get up and choose life. We respond in faith by getting up and accepting Jesus, the Bread of Life. Jesus promises that we will never go hungry again if we eat his Bread of Life.

God's grace is like the experience of sitting at my grandmother's table alongside my family members. We could sit at the table because of my grandmother's goodness, not ours. So likewise, we do not assume our seat at Jesus' table of fellowship because of our righteousness but due to the righteousness of Jesus Christ. There is no cost to us because Jesus paid the price for us through his salvific work on a Roman cross long ago. We sit at the table of fellowship not as solitary figures but as a fellowship of believers.

God's grace is like the experience of eating from my grandmother's table daily. Daily, we eat the Bread of Life at his table of fellowship. We feed on him through works of piety and works of mercy. These are means of grace that give us strength for the journey and helps us grow in grace alongside other sojourners. By God's grace, sin's power over our lives is broken. By co-laboring with the Spirit of God, we are transformed into people who transform the world.

Prayer: O God, please awaken in us the need for the Bread of Life. By your grace, give us the power to choose life, fill us up with your love, and help us to grow in grace daily.

Prayer Focus: For those who are hungry for change in their lives.



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Day 29: March 27th

Spiritual Food: Communion

by Ramon F. Smith

Scripture: *“Do this in remembrance of me.”* (Luke 22:19 CEB)

Key Thought: Holy Communion is sign-act of the grace that is available to us because of the sacrificial act of Jesus Christ on the cross for the world.

Sometimes, I can be very forgetful. I forget where I put my keys at least three times a week. You would think by now I would have designated a place to put my keys so I wouldn't lose them. My mother even purchased a key ring finder, but I forgot where I put it. Jesus asked us to participate in Holy Communion to remember him.

Jesus does not want us to forget him or his sacrificial act for us. Jesus is the key to the kingdom. If you have him, the Key, in your heart, you will enter the Kingdom of God.

Every first Sunday at Saginaw United Methodist Church, we break bread together and drink wine together on our knees. We kneel in reverence to Jesus Christ, the one who gave his life sacrificially on the Roman cross for our sins. The bread serves as a reminder to us that Jesus gave his body for us. The cup or juice reminds us that Jesus gave us his blood for us. What did we do to deserve this loving action from Jesus? The answer is nothing. Jesus' body and blood were given as a gift, a sacrificial act of love. We don't deserve it, and we cannot earn it. However, we can remember it by breaking bread together and drinking wine together on our knees. While the bread and wine/juice do not change into the body and blood of Jesus, we can be changed by the grace of God when receiving communion.

Please don't forget Jesus and his sacrificial act on our behalf. Unlike my keys, Jesus cannot be lost, but we can. Communion is a means of helping us remember the Key to the kingdom, Jesus Christ. Also, it is a means of experiencing the grace of God anew each time we break bread together and drink wine together on our knees.

Prayer: O Lord, help us remember your acts of sacrificial love for us daily. Fill us up and quench our thirst with your body and cup.

Prayer Focus: For those who forget their keys.

Day 30: March 28th

Solidarity with the Poor

by Nathaniel Metz

Scripture: *Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.* (Proverbs 14:31)

Key Thought: Fasting enables us to embody God's solidarity with those facing poverty

I'm sure you've been asking through this whole period of fasting: But what does Jurgen Moltmann say about the fasting? Funny you should ask because it turns out that fasting fits his theology quite well. Jurgen Moltmann believes that Christian faith is not only about personal piety and individual salvation, but also about participating in God's work of justice and compassion in the world. He emphasizes that fasting can be a powerful spiritual practice that connects us with the plight of the poor and can help us to stand in solidarity with them.

Moltmann suggests that fasting is a way of embodying and participating in God's solidarity with the poor. Fasting reminds us of our dependence on God and our interdependence with others, particularly those who suffer from poverty and hunger. Fasting can awaken our empathy and compassion for the poor, and motivate us to act on their behalf.

In addition to cultivating empathy, fasting can also provide an opportunity for self-examination and repentance. Moltmann suggests that by intentionally denying ourselves, we can become more aware of our own complicity in social and economic injustices. Fasting can help us to recognize and repent of our own greed, gluttony, and indifference to the suffering of others.

In conclusion, Moltmann's theology emphasizes the importance of Christian solidarity with the poor, and fasting can be a way of embodying that solidarity. Through fasting, we can cultivate empathy, self-examination, and repentance, which can motivate us to work for justice and compassion in the world. Let us use our fasts as a way to participate in God's work of justice, and to stand in solidarity with those who suffer from poverty and hunger.

Prayer: Loving Creator, be with all of those who don't have enough food, whose water bill is shut off, and who face the threat of being without adequate housing. Enable us to see how Christ enters into solidarity with their suffering, and give us the strength to follow Christ's example.

Prayer Focus: For our Holy Focus, Helping Hands, and Saginaw Water Project ministries.



Give

03-29-23 to 04-08-23

The following is a suggested list of people or groups we can show kindness towards during our ten days of Intentional Acts of Kindness (March 29th through April 8th). Additionally, we have provided suggestions for acts of kindness. Consider doing some of these acts with a group or Sunday School class. Please remember to include a kindness card with your acts of kindness. Lastly, we would love to hear your stories about how your small act made a big impact. To share your story, please fill out one of our forms, which can be found on our website's home page or as a physical copy in our office.

Saginaw Firefighters

Address: 400 US-287 BUS, Saginaw, TX 76179

Phone: [\(817\) 230-0403](tel:(817)230-0403)

Fort Worth Firefighters

Fire Station 40

Address: 8510 Spring St, Fort Worth, TX 76179

Saginaw Police Officers

Address: 505 W McLeroy Blvd, Saginaw, TX 76179

Phone: [\(817\) 232-0311](tel:(817)232-0311)

The Lodge Nursing Assisted Living Staff

Address: 848 West McLeroy, Saginaw, TX 76179

Phone: 682-900-1210

Saginaw Elementary School Lunch Workers and Custodians

Address: 301 W McLeroy Blvd, Fort Worth, TX 76179

Hours:

Phone: [\(817\) 232-0631](tel:(817)232-0631)

Little Blessings Parents

New Neighbors

Estranged loved one or old friend

Unchurched people

Free or low cost:

Thank you cards or handwritten thank you notes

Welcome Neighbor Box

Invitation to come to Church

Reconnecting with an old friend or a family member

Bags of hot coco mix

Other ideas:

Cookbooks for Firemen

Order Pizza for Firehouse or Police Station

Baskets with snacks (chips, candy bars, jerky, popcorn, etc.)

Cases of Gatorade, Powerade, or Water



Day 31: March 29th

Giving and Receiving

by Karen Sutton

Key Verse: *In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."* (Acts 20:35)

Key Thought: I will perform an act of service during Lent.

Growing up, I was a poor kid. My parents would have never asked for help, that just was not done. When I was older, I had two little girls to take care of and there was nothing extra in my budget. Anything going wrong caused a sense of panic because I didn't believe that there was anyone to ask for help. I can remember thinking "If there was someone who could help me with just one thing, I'd be so grateful." It didn't even matter what the "one thing" was, any help would have made life so much easier.

Time went on and circumstances changed. I had a long career that I loved, but after 30 years I was ready to retire. People kept asking, "What are you going to do?" What a great question to ponder, especially at a time that is life changing. The overriding answer to that question constantly spoke to me. I knew I wanted to help others believe that there was someone who cared and wanted to ease their burden, even if it was just one thing on one day. I have always said that I'm not one that God can gently tap on the shoulder to get my attention, I need more of a shove. That re-evaluation of formative events in my life and trying to answer the question "what are you going to do?" was my shove.

When I was young and thought I had no one to help me, God was there. When I went through some of the darkest times a mom can go through, God walked right beside me and helped me to the other side. When I thought there was no way forward for me, God waited patiently for me to see His way.

Since that time, I have been blessed with opportunities to help others through service. Advocating for foster children, feeding the hungry, or facilitating the payment of water bills...every act of service is a powerful reminder that I was never alone and I always had God guiding and supporting me. My prayer continues to be that each person who receives help knows that God is with them, especially in times of trouble or despair.

Prayer: Lord, we pray for those who are in need. We pray that we can look upon them with compassion and understanding. Help us bring your love to others and see them through your eyes. Allow us to act as the hands and feet of your son, Jesus Christ, as we live every day. By our actions, let others know your presence. Amen.

Prayer Focus: Those performing acts of service.

Day 32: March 30th

A Brother In Need: Almsgiving

by Michelle Burkholder

Scripture: *The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'* (Matthew 25:40 NIV)

Key Thought: I will try to see those in need as my brothers and sisters in Christ.

You know the scene. “Someone” on a corner with a sign, and that awkward moment of trying to decide whether to make eye contact or not. If eye contact is made, then the decision becomes a matter of what to do. If I am being completely honest, I am ashamed to say, most times I avoid eye contact. Maybe it’s fear, or worse, maybe it is my own selfishness. But one afternoon, a few years ago, neither fear nor selfishness got in the way and as a result, I found a “brother” in Christ.

I had just pulled up to the ATM at my bank. It happened to be a cold, rainy, dreary day. Off in the distance was a man, with a little shopping cart, and he was waving at me. For some reason, I didn’t look away from him. I felt a strange warmth and affection for this stranger. I waved back and told him to wait a minute while I finished my bank business. At that moment, I knew without a doubt that God was nudging my heart to help this man. As I pulled my car up beside him, I reached out and held his hand and placed some money in it. I told him that I believed God wanted me to give it to him and that I hoped it would bless him. Right then, he raised his hands up and praised God over and over, saying “Thank you, Jesus!”. He told me he had been praying for some help, when I pulled up and then shared a bit of his life story. He said he had grown up in Youngstown, Ohio. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing! He actually grew up in MY HOMETOWN!! Not only that, but he had gone to school at one of my High School’s rival schools! We both just laughed and cried at the same time, because, how else could two complete strangers cross paths and find out they came from the same place, a thousand miles away? The only answer was God. We both decided that our meeting was not an accident! As I drove away, I could not help but be filled with such love. Love for this new brother I had met and love for my Father in Heaven who brought us together. I have never seen him again, but I will never forget him or the lesson I learned that day. When we take the time to truly look at someone through our Father’s eyes, we may just find a new brother or sister!

Prayer: Loving Father, thank you for loving us that way that you do and for knowing our each and every need. We pray for eyes to see others the way that you do and the courage to trust you as you place people and opportunities in our path. May we never allow our fear or selfishness to get in the way of blessing others. Remind us, that in blessing our brothers and sisters in need, we are also blessing You. In the name of our loving Savior Jesus, Amen.

Prayer Focus: Giving to those who are poor or in need.

Day 33: March 31st

The Testimony of St. Francis

by Nathaniel Metz

Scripture: *Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered.* (Proverbs 21:13)

Key Thought: Ministering to those in need is a way of worshiping God.

St. Francis of Assisi, the 13th-century Catholic friar and founder of the Franciscan Order, believed that almsgiving was an essential part of the Christian life. For Francis, the act of giving to those in need was not just an act of charity, but an expression of love and devotion to God.

Francis saw almsgiving as an opportunity to serve Christ himself, who said, "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25:40). He believed that by giving to those in need, we are giving to Christ himself, and we are expressing our love and gratitude for all that He has done for us.

Moreover, Francis believed that almsgiving was a way of cultivating a spirit of poverty and detachment from material possessions. He believed that by giving to those in need, we are recognizing that all we have comes from God, and that we are called to use our resources in the service of others. Francis wrote, "If we have possessions, let us give alms for the love of God; and if we have none, let us give our service for the love of God."

Finally, Francis believed that almsgiving was a way of living out the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. He saw in the act of giving to those in need a way of building relationships of solidarity and mutual support, and of expressing our interconnectedness with all of God's creation. Francis wrote, "Let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth."

In conclusion, Francis reminds us of the importance of almsgiving as a way of expressing our love and devotion to God, cultivating a spirit of poverty and detachment, and building relationships of solidarity and mutual support. May we be inspired by Francis's example and seek to live lives of radical generosity, following in the footsteps of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Lord, enable us to perceive Your Son in the face of those in need. Amen.

Prayer Focus: For those who face poverty

Day 34: April 1st

Extravagant Generosity

by Ramon F. Smith

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Key verse: *Everyone should give whatever they have decided in their heart. They shouldn't give with hesitation or because of pressure. God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7)*

Key Thought: Giving helps us become whom God wants us to be.

Several years ago, I watched a 60 minutes interview with Jerry Jones. The interviewer wanted to know where Jerry got this big idea to make AT&T Stadium so extravagant. Jerry said he got the idea from his father, who owned a store. Jerry's father believed in putting on a show for his customers. "Give them a show, something that makes them say, 'Wow,' and makes them come back for more." Jerry has sown generously, and he expects to reap generously.

Like Jerry's stadium, our extravagance should make people say "Wow" and make them come back for more. People want to experience signs and wonders. There is one significant difference between the kind of extravagance that God calls us to do from Jerry's kind. Jerry's extravagance makes a profit and enriches himself. However, the church's extravagance transforms and enriches the lives of others. Jerry's extravagance is not cheap either. It costs the recipients something (tickets are not cheap), and it costs the citizens of Arlington roughly 900 million dollars.

We are called to extravagant generosity. Meaning that we should give more than what is justified or deserved. Now, some might say that sounds wasteful, but brothers and sisters, that is the Gospel story. God gives us more than we deserve. If we got what we deserved, all of us would perish. The very definition of grace is the unmerited love and favor of God. This grace is free, but it cost Jesus something, his life.

So many people think their capacity to be extravagant in their generosity is strictly tied to the size of their bank account; nothing could be further from the truth, it is tied to the size of your heart.

Prayer: Dear Loving God, please help me to be generous so that I can make a greater impact on the lives of others.

Prayer Focus: For those who are worried there will not be enough



Caroline
Drees
Nails

Day 35: April 3rd

The Light of Giving

by Nathaniel Metz

Scripture: *“Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for bread, would give a stone? Or if the child asked for a fish, would give a snake? If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”* (Matthew 7:7-11 NRSV)

Key Thought: By giving, we imitate God, who is the Supreme Giver.

Creation itself is a gift of God, where God’s grace, goodness, and love are freely given, even when Creation refuses to accept that gift. Instead of our modern notions of exchange and contract, the reality of gift and gratuity are fundamental to a Christian understanding of the world and central to understanding the nature of God, creation, and human relationships. This is because when we give, we imitate the Supreme Giver.

In relation to this centrality of gift-giving, Christians throughout the tradition have emphasized the motif of “Divine Light.” You can see it, for instance, in the iconography of the ancient church, where solid, golden-color backgrounds were used to emphasize the splendor and majesty of the Divine Light. Indeed, the Divine Light motif is applied to Christ himself in the Nicene Creed, where Christ is said to be the Son of God, “God from God, True Light from True Light.” The eternal processions of the Figures of the Holy Trinity were described using light metaphors. Christ is “eternally begotten, not made” in the way that light rays are begotten or proceed from the Sun. The rays proceed from the Sun, but there is not a time when the rays or the Sun exist without each other.

The Divine Light metaphor was not only chosen because it is useful for explaining complex metaphysics. The Sun is also a central metaphor for God’s grace. The Sun pours out its light that gives life, warmth, and beauty to all Creation. Plants and trees could not survive without light. The Earth would be uninhabitable without the Sun’s heat. We could not rejoice at the beauty of Creation without the light enabling us to see. This is why stained glass quickly became one of the quintessential art forms of the church.

[...]

As my professor, Jonathan Anderson said, “By the images being in the windows rather than painted on the wall, they have to be illumined by a light beyond themselves shining through them. In the traditions of Christian architecture, this speaks to an idea of special revelation—that these biblical narratives are truly perceived only as they are illumined by the light of God.” Stained glass illumined by divine light is a profound symbol of the gracious, gift-giving nature of God.

However, being a light of grace is something we are called to as well. As Matthew 5:14-16 says, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” The Divine Light of God’s freely given grace is not meant to be kept to ourselves, but rather to be shared with the world around us. We are meant to give because God has given to us.

By engaging in almsgiving this Lenten season, we can participate in new ways of relating to others. Giving and receiving engage us in reciprocity and communal bonding, which is the inverse of the violence and vitriol of our society. Instead of an eye for an eye, we have “gift for a gift” and “grace for grace.”

Prayer: Heavenly Father, Your Divine Light permeates our world, filling ever crevice of Creation with the gift of Your grace. Enable us to extend that same unmerited Light to those around us. Amen.

Prayer Focus: To be illumined by God’s gracious Light.

Day 36: April 4th

Giving More Than a Bucket

by Nathaniel Metz

Scripture: *But let justice roll out like waters, And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.* (Amos 5:24)

Key Thought: Almsgiving must be a component in the wider scope of the justice of the Kingdom of God.

Dorothy Day, the 20th-century Catholic activist, believed that almsgiving was an essential component of Christian discipleship. For Day, the act of giving to those in need was not simply a matter of charity, but a way of embodying the love of Christ in the world.

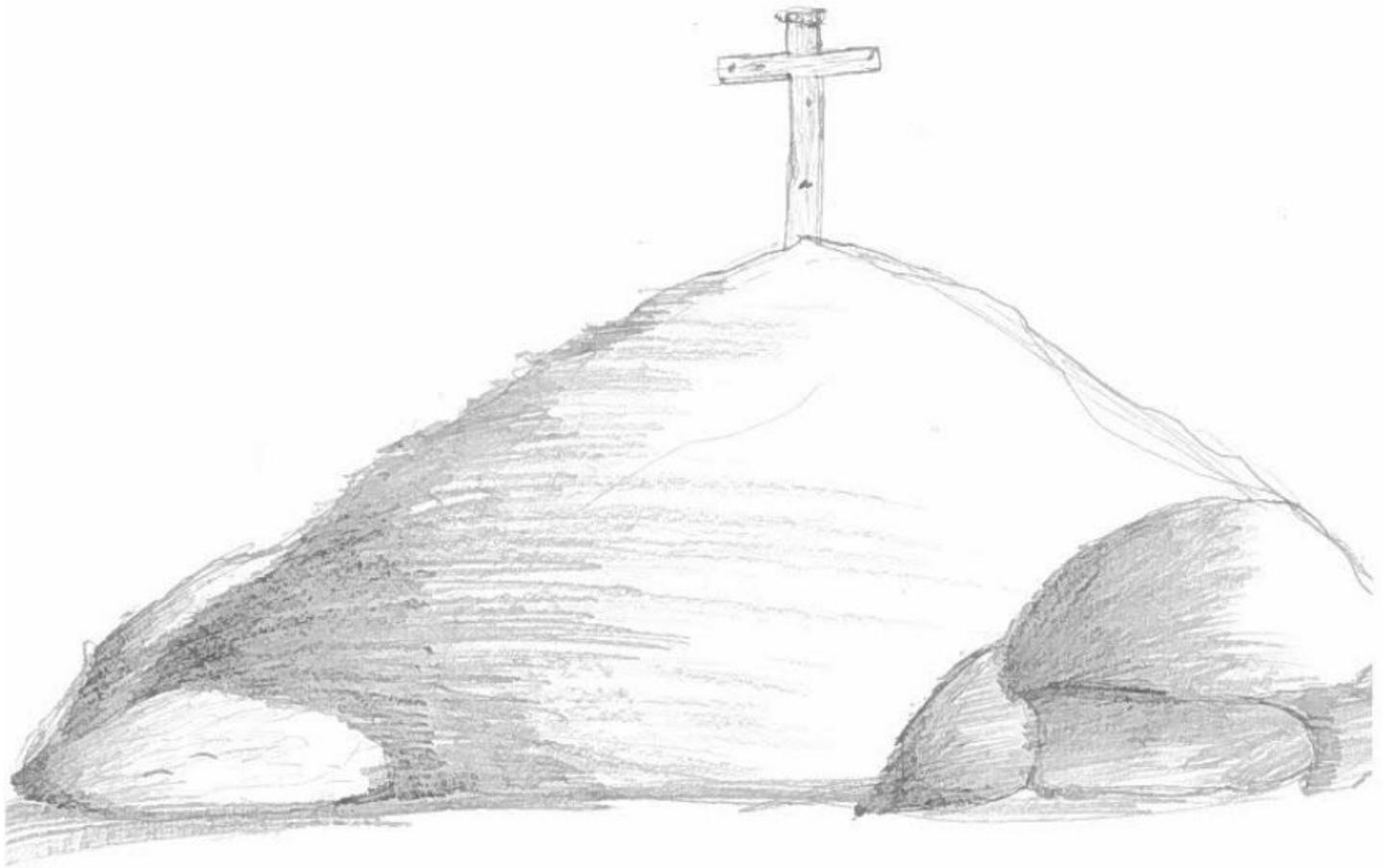
Day believed that almsgiving was a way of expressing solidarity with the poor and marginalized. She saw poverty not as an individual failing, but as a social and structural problem that required collective action. Day wrote, "The issue is not just charity, but justice. We must work to transform the social structures that perpetuate poverty and injustice, and we must stand in solidarity with those who are most affected by them." Or, as Pastor Ramon said in a previous sermon: If you had a leak in your house, you wouldn't be content with only replacing the bucket catching the water. You would figure out how to fix the pipe causing the leak in the first place.

When conjoined with fixing the leaking pipes in our world, Day believed that almsgiving was a way of cultivating a spirit of generosity and selflessness. She believed that giving to those in need was a way of living out the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves, and that it was a means of growing in our love for God. Day wrote, "The act of giving to those in need is not just about meeting their material needs, but about building relationships of solidarity and mutual support. It is a way of becoming more fully human and more fully alive."

Finally, Day believed that almsgiving was a way of bearing witness to the kingdom of God. She saw in the act of giving to those in need a foretaste of the New Heaven and the New Earth, where all will be fed and clothed and no one will be left behind. Day wrote, "Through our acts of generosity and selflessness, we can point to a different way of being in the world, a way that is grounded in love and compassion rather than greed and self-interest. We can bear witness to the kingdom of God, where all are welcome and all are loved."

Prayer: Gracious God, we pray that Your Kingdom would reign on Earth as it does in Heaven. May our giving this season be a small way of allowing others to glimpse that Kingdom. Amen.

Prayer Focus: Those are marginalized and without hope



josh

Day 37: April 5th

Seeing the Sacred Worth of Others

by Shirley Stephens

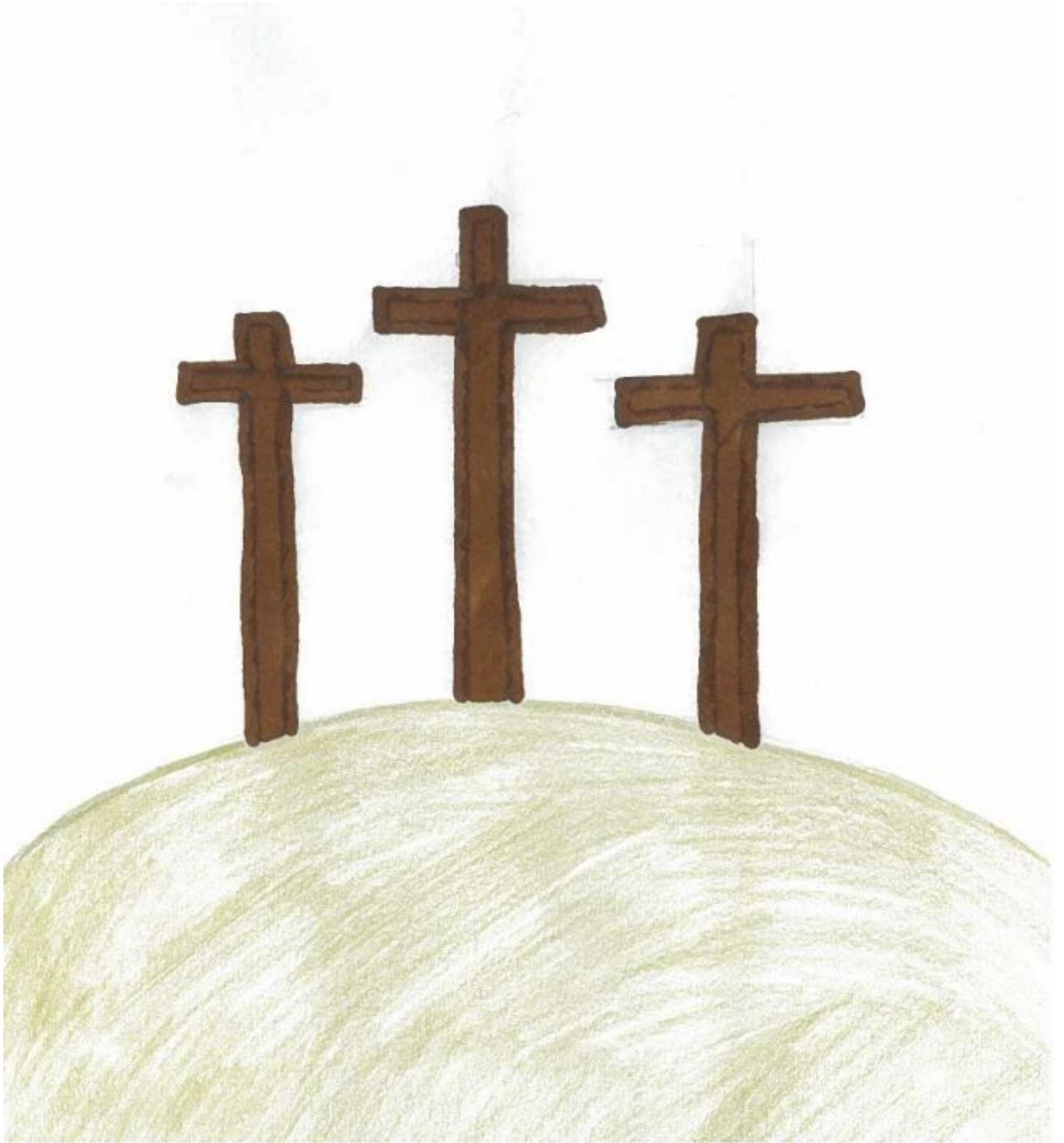
Scripture: Luke 9:13-50

Key Thought: Giving acknowledges the sacred worth of others.

My parents were very poor people and, even though they didn't have much, they welcomed me into their lives. They didn't judge my origins but accepted and loved me. They taught me to have a servant's heart, treat everyone with respect and help others. We lived in a very poor part of town next to the railroad tracks. We had plenty of homeless men riding the rails comes to our door asking for water and food. We didn't have much, but we were always able to share with them. No one was turned away. This reminds me of the time when Jesus was teaching, and the people were hungry but only had two fish and five loaves of bread (Luke 9:13-50). Jesus never turned anyone away. He always provides for us. He didn't ask what their circumstances were, what happened to them, or whether they were "worthy" of his attention. He accepted and loved them. He could see the worth of them. Love and acceptance can change people. It can help them feel worthy. He sees the worth in us.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, please guide us each day as we meet your children and look for the good in them. Help us keep our hearts open to their needs. Please forgive us of our shortcomings and keep our hearts and mind open as we strive to build relationships to grow your Kingdom. I ask this in your most Heavenly name. Amen

Prayer Focus: For those who feel unworthy.



Day 38: April 6th

How to Gain More by Having Less

by Sandra Young

Scripture: *“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”* (Matthew 6:33-34 NKJV)

Key Thought: I will see how faith in God’s provision is allowed to grow when I faithfully give to the church, Christ’s mission, and to others around me who are in need.

As long as I can remember I have had a heart for helping and giving to others in need. When dining at a restaurant with my family as a young child, I would ask my parents if people I noticed dining alone could join us. It seemed to me that no one should have to be alone when they could be sharing a meal with us. I never remember my parents asking anyone. But that was okay because I’d usually sit waving and smiling at the people since they couldn’t join us.

Things didn’t change much as I became a teenager. At this time in my life, I watched my mom work hard as a single parent, and I saw her worry at times about providing for us. But there was one thing she provided that could not be purchased with money. She helped provide the foundation for a strong faith by making sure I had the opportunity to attend church, Sunday school, and all the extras like VBS and Church camp.

This faith meant that I never really worried about the things we needed for daily living. But I knew my mom did worry sometimes, and I now know it’s because she wanted to make sure she could take care of us.

I would often ask my mom if we could help others in need. When I would ask if we could help someone financially, she would be hesitant and not always want to participate. I would convince her that if we gave to help someone else it, would always come back to us because God would bring it back.

There was a song that used to play on the radio when I was young that said, “It’ll come back. It’ll come back. God and the rain will bring it back.”

It was actually about the grass coming back in a father’s well manicured lawn after his daughter ruined it playing in the yard with her friends. But somehow I figured the song could generally apply to anything.

[...]

Most often, Mom would give faithfully and again this showed me that giving in faith is worth much more than material possessions.

I can recall many times where God faithfully brought Mom's giving back to her. One memory was when an unexpected expense had come up that had Mom very concerned. I told her we could pray about it and trust God to help us. That help came as I went to get the mail one afternoon and found an envelope with my her name on it. She opened it and it was full of cash. It contained the exact amount of money she needed. We never learned who placed that envelope in our mailbox, but God definitely grew our faith by leaps and bounds that day. God brings our faithful giving back to us in many ways. Sometimes, it's stronger faith in Him.

The person who gave to us made a choice to bless us financially, but they may not have known the amazing gift of strength they provided to our faith in God to supply our every need.

When we give monetary gifts, it is because we choose to give and to help others. But we are also helping to grow other's faith. The words Jesus spoke in Matthew 6: 25-34 remind us not to worry about what we will need because God will provide.

Prayer: Father God, increase our faith in your love, provision and promises. Give us hearts that are open and ready to give so that we may grow stronger personal faith and show others that you truly care for their every need.

Prayer Focus: For those who are lonely and in need of provision

Day 39: April 7th

The Quality of Being Kind and Generous

by Belia Thompson

Scripture: *And don't forget to do good and to share what you have with others, because sacrifices like these are very pleasing to God (Hebrews 13: 16)*

Key Thought: My eyes will be open to the needs of those around me and see how I can help.

Our home church selected lay leaders to serve for six weeks in the small missions south of Pharr, Texas. My family served in the mission church of El Capote (now known as the Jackson Ranch church). It was a one-room church with 8 pews on each side, a pump organ, and a preaching stand. In warm months, we set pews outside under the mesquite trees for Sunday School. At 12 years old, I taught the 3rd through 6th grade children — 14 of them. The families who would come to the church were farm workers living in the homes provided by the local growers.

Dad had chosen a cycle in the winter. Temperatures in the low 40's is Arctic in the South. Cold wind whipped through every crevice in that church built in 1874. Only one small floor heater could be used, and I got to the closest pew first. The people sat where their Sunday School teachers were to learn the lessons. As my teachers entered and sat, my eyes looked down at their feet. They were all bare footed. They walked 2+ miles down caliche roads to church. Their feet were ashen, covered in white caliche powder, some baring the cuts from stepping on sharp stones. My heart sank. I was covered from head to foot with clothing and was still very cold. But the children sat with full smiles on sun-browned faces without a single complaint. It was difficult giving the lesson.

After church, Dad drove them to their homes while we waited for him to return for us. My mother noticed I was crying. I told her what I saw, and I did not understand why they had no shoes. She told me they saved them for school since they were required to wear them there.

I worked at my dad's pharmacy to earn money. When I got paid, I told my mother that I wanted to buy socks and shoes for the kids. We bought an assortment of children's shoes and socks. Saturday, we drove to the homes of the children and gave them their shoes and socks with the understanding that they were for Church.

[...]

I never have forgotten that experience. As an educator, we looked out for signs of children who were in need. I asked my teachers to do the same. The local neighborhood angels gladly provided when asked. We were never in need of clothing or supplies because the donations were abundant every year to fulfill our needs.

Generosity is tangible. In Matthew 25, Jesus mentions food, water, clothes, and love. We can also volunteer our time, talents, and resources.

Generosity is cheerful. God doesn't want gifts motivated by a sense of duty. He wants us to give out of joy and compassion. God knows generosity. He freely gave His Son, even when He knew we would abuse the gift. Our generosity should be founded in love, not obligation.

Generosity is indiscriminate. The Good Samaritan parable tells us that the world is our neighbor. Giving indiscriminately, we can reflect God's love to people who may not have felt it before. That's what God calls us to do.

Generosity is communal. David gave from the national reserves and his own treasure stores, ultimately motivating other leaders of Israel to do the same. Giving in community can inspire others' generosity, and the ripple effect is endless.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, open the eyes of my heart, Lord, to know Jesus, and as I know Him more, help me to see from his perspective. Help me to see people with eyes of grace. Father, help me to see the beauty, dignity and your image in people, more than I notice their brokenness. When I do see their weaknesses, may I do so with compassion and understanding even with total strangers. Holy Spirit, endow me with the gifts I need to help those in need. In Jesus, our Savior's name. Amen.

Prayer Focus: Let me learn to be more generous.

Day 40: April 8th

Giving to Others in Need — Why Do I Give?

by Sheri Rann

Scripture: “*The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’*” (Matthew 25:40)

Key Thought: We give out of gratitude while recognizing Christ in the face of those who are in need.

I came from humble beginnings as did my parents and their parents. Even though we did not have a lot of material possessions, my Mama seemed to be the first person to arrive at the doorstep of the neighbor or family member that lost a loved one with a casserole dish. My Daddy was always helping neighbors and family members to get their cars back on the road. My parents taught me to treat others the way that I wanted to be treated and to try and put myself in other people’s places before I passed judgement. This environment helped to create in me a heart for giving to others in need.

Sometimes we may think that we are not able to give to others. But here are a couple of interesting statistics to think about:

- If you made \$1500 last year, you’re in the top 20% of the world’s income earners.
- If you have sufficient food, decent clothes, live in a house or apartment, and have a reasonably reliable means of transportation, you are among the top 15% of the world’s wealthy.
- Got \$2200? In this world, you’re rich. Assets (not cash) of \$2200 per adult place a person in the top 50% of the world’s wealthiest.

That really helps to put things in perspective for me. God has richly blessed every aspect of my life and I want to give to others the way that God has blessed me.

I am involved with a ministry called the Friends of Lancaster. Our group serves the homeless people in Ft. Worth. We are serving approximately 150 to 200 people each month. These are people that are not living in Presbyterian Night Shelter but are living on the streets that surround the night shelter. Some are living in their cars, others are living in tents, while others are sleeping on the sidewalks. Sadly, our homeless population seems to be growing. Some of the people that we serve do have mental health issues, some have drug and alcohol issues, some are Vets, while others are just down on their luck.

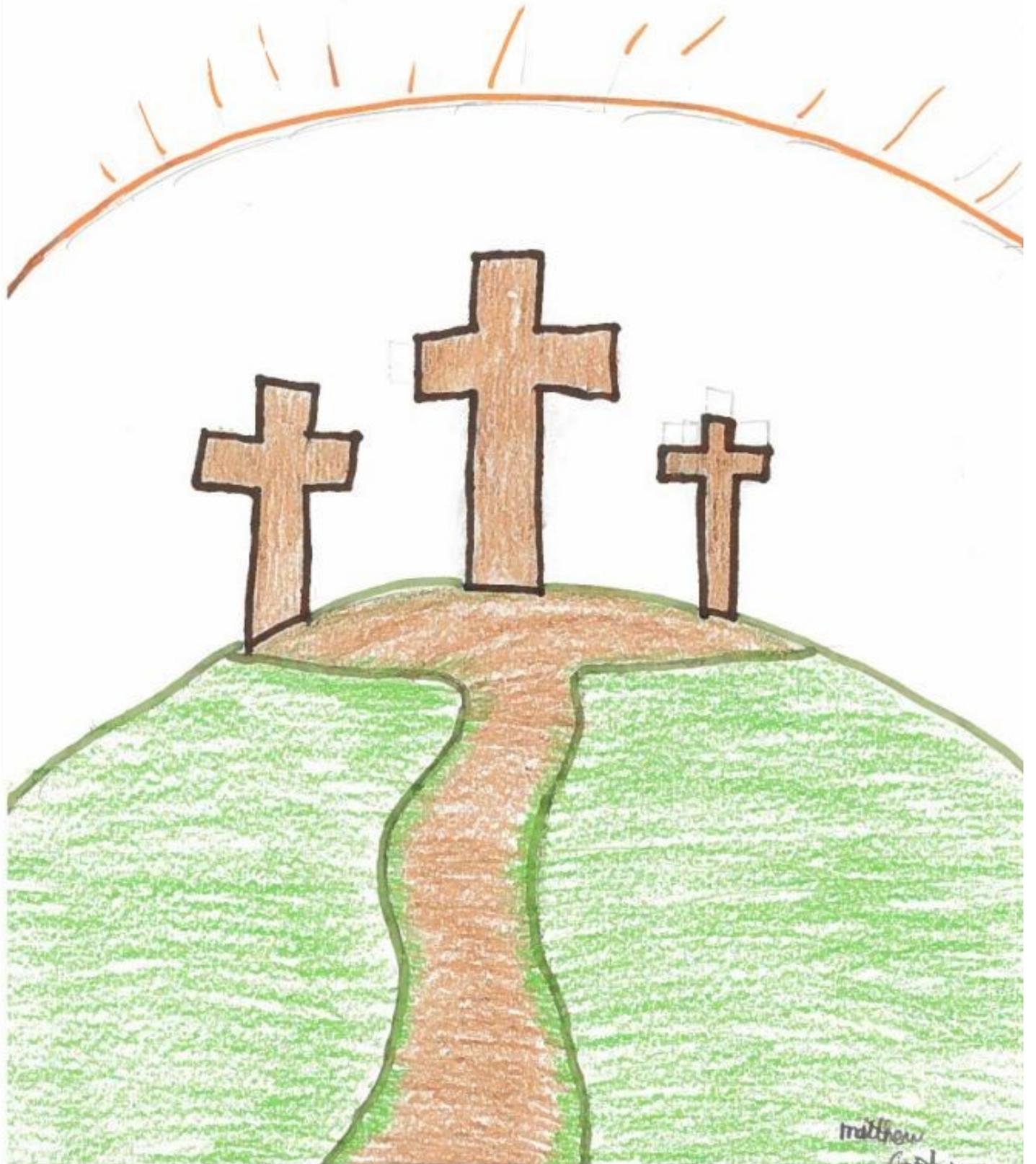
Our group hands out food, water, Gatorade, health kits, socks, underwear, shoes, pillows & blankets each month. We also hand out coats, jackets, scarves, & gloves in the wintertime as well as flip flops and sandals in the summer time.

I see the homeless people as people that want to be seen and heard and have needs just like I do. I cannot imagine sleeping on the sidewalk in all types of weather or not knowing where my next meal was coming from. I am sure that I would have mental health issues as well as if I had to live in this manner.

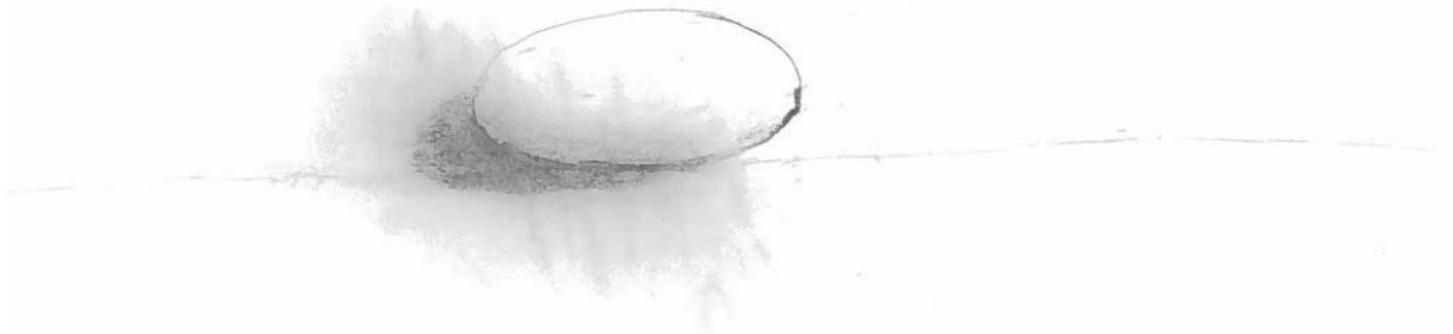
We are tempted to look the other way when we see the homeless. A kind word, or a bottle of water can truly brighten someone's day. The Bible teaches us that whatever we do for the least, we do for Christ.

Prayer: Father God, we thank you for all the bountiful blessing that you have bestowed on our lives. Please help us to see others the way that you see them. Lay it on our hearts to help others in need. Amen.

Prayer Focus: The Presbyterian Night Shelter, Friends of Lancaster, and those without adequate housing.



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