Re*Form

Lenten Devotions for Reflection and Renewal

Cross of Hope Lutheran Church & Schools
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Lent 2017
2017 marks 500 years of the Lutheran Reformation Movement. Throughout the year there are many ways in which the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) will commemorate this milestone year. As we engage our story of faith over the last half of a millennium, we take time to engage in prayer and reflection that moves toward a deeper unity with our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers as we reclaim our call to proclaim Christ crucified and risen as central to our life together.

Cross of Hope Lutheran Church and Schools offers this Lent Devotion, Re*Form, as a humble part of this commemoration and dialogue as we pray together, reflect together, and are renewed in Christ together.

From our youngest to our most experienced writers, this devotion encompasses many lifetimes of faith and experience and each offers a lens for reflection and prayer on the way. Journey together this Lent as we experience God’s transforming and saving love in Christ to renew and reform.

Continued blessings on the journey!

R. Adam Berndt
Lead Pastor
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This year we reflect on the 500-year anniversary of the Reformation. I really liked the thought of “re-form.” It is an opportunity to re-think, re-new all we do, particularly what we do on our journey of faith. I hope these devotions will help you on your way.

I always feel privileged and blessed to be the first to read the devotions you have written. This year is no different. The analogies that have been made to re-form our lives with God’s never-ending love and guidance are thought provoking and inspiring. Thank you to all our wonderful writers.

Thank you to Nancy Brunson, our organizer who gets everyone signed up and follows up with our writers.

Nancy Morrison does the final check and John Lacher, our printer-man – along with those who compile the booklet, thank you.

May God bless, keep and guide you on your journey to re-form.

Mary Bresnahan, Editor
"I made a New Year's resolution to eat broccoli. If I can't stand it, I'll give it up for Lent."
Marked by Generosity and Prayer

...pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (v. 6:6)

Our Lenten journey together begins today, Ash Wednesday, a day in which we gather as a community to confess our need for God in our lives and in our world. We mark ourselves in ashes with the cross of Jesus on our foreheads and say, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” There is a rich Biblical tradition in the symbolism of ashes we use — judgment for sin (Genesis 3:19), human frailty/our complete dependence upon God for life (Psalm 104:29), humility (Genesis 18:27), repentance (Jonah 3:6), and finally cleansing and renewal.

Today’s reading comes from the Sermon on the Mount. He gives us practical teaching on how to practice our faith as we begin our shared journey during Lent. Jesus proclaims God’s values as it relates to giving money, prayer, fasting, or refraining from food for spiritual purposes, and finally the accumulation of possessions. Jesus promises that as we re-orient our lives with respect to giving and prayer, away from the values of the world around us and towards God’s goodness, we will be marked and changed.

Just as the ashes are visible on our foreheads after Ash Wednesday worship, so our lives of faith will be visibly altered with respect to generosity and conversation with God. How will God change us during this shared Lenten journey? How will God move us towards a more abundant faith and closer connection with Him through prayer? Will you share this Lenten journey with your Cross of Hope community and others in your life? Will you share what God is doing in your Lenten journey?

Lord, mark and change us daily to be Your abundant word of grace to the world. Amen

Prayer concern: For open hearts as God leads us.

Pastor Matt Powell
Give Up Your Evil Ways

Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. (v. 3)

Well, let’s see — Jonah just spent three days and nights in a large fish, and was then spit back on the land. Talk about the “fear of God” knocked into you! (Are we all so stubborn that we cannot trust God with the outcome of His plan?) Jonah must have sounded convincing to the people of Nineveh. At his announcement, even the king gave orders for all to reform from their wicked ways. Do not let people or animals, herd or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let the people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from His fierce anger so that we will not perish. (v. 7-9)

Reform and repent! God’s word is for everyone. Open your heart to God’s message. If we simply reform and proclaim what we know about God, we may be surprised at how many people will listen.

Lord, open our hearts to all, so they may hear Your word.

Prayer concern: Those who will not reform.

Debbie Bokan
Grace and Peace from Above

And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. (v. 6)

Paul writes to the Romans telling them how God has given them His most precious gift, His son, and that He was resurrected from the dead. He wants the Romans to know they need to have faith that God will be with them, through His grace and peace that come from His love.

I find it amazing, God loves us that much and wants the best for us even when we think we do not deserve His love.

When I attended Pierce Junior College, I met Carol Ann Lada. She would have me involved in all the school activities I would not have even thought about attempting. She had me help with the yearbook, school government and go to parties the school sponsored. She helped me grow into the person I am today.

God wants what is best for us. Sometimes He puts a special person in our life to steer us in the right direction.

To all of you in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. — Romans 1:7

Lord, thank You for loving us and giving us Your son, Jesus.

Prayer concern: Those who don’t know the Lord and need His love.

Julia Ann Hawkins
Transformation

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. (v. 10)

The story happened here in Albuquerque; told through the Albuquerque Rescue Mission. “Santana never had a chance.” That’s what people would say. Before she was five, her father died of a heroin overdose. The stepdad that followed was an abuser. Her mom, though she loved her, was addicted to drugs. This was the life she knew. When she was old enough, she wanted to get away from that environment. She started working to support herself. But she yielded to the lure of drugs. The life of crime landed her before the judge and she faced an 8-year sentence. In despair, she cried out, “God, I want a second chance!” The judge gave her an option: enroll in a recovery program — ABQ Rescue Mission. There, with the help of caring people, she found a loving God who forgives and gives second chances. Gradually, she recreated herself; to be made new; to be a child of God.

Every one of us is God’s child. Jesus, our Savior, revealed the Father to us by His word and example. He will always walk beside us, whether things go right or wrong, especially when we are burdened, have made a mess of our life, and feel alone. God is with us in the fog of despair. All we need to do is reach out and ask God for help. Then we will receive abundantly. Only God can create a new heart in us and give our life new direction. Then, suddenly or gradually, joy returns and we understand Salvation.

Loving, forgiving God, make us new and eager to follow where You lead us, through Christ. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who seek refuge in difficult circumstances.

Ruth Hinkel
Lent Reforming our Hearts

He ate nothing... and in the end, he was hungry.

Lent: a time to prepare ourselves for the kingdom; a time of reformation. But why 40 days? Jesus was called into the wilderness for 40 days. He was following the example of Moses. Following their examples, if we sacrifice, fast and give up some luxury, that will be a great work of good, right?

Martin Luther, on the first Sunday in Lent, wrote to the contrary. He writes that Lent has become a “mere mockery.” In his words:

“But the worst of all is that we have adopted and practiced fasting as a good work: not to bring our flesh into subjection; but, as a meritorious work before God, to atone for our sins and obtain grace. And it is this that has made our fasting a stench and so blasphemous and shameful, so that no drinking and eating, no gluttony and drunkenness, could have been as bad and foul.

This Gospel is sweet consolation and power against the unbelief and infamy of the stomach, to awaken and strengthen the conscience, that we may not be anxious about the nourishment of our bodies, but be assured that he can and will give us our daily bread.”

The answer seems to be we are to pray and focus on the word of God and less on the “rules of Lent.” Sounds like Martin Luther was right about fasting for Lent having become a perversion.

Lord, thank You for always providing for us in our every need, both spiritually and physically.

Prayer concern: Those who struggle with how to prepare and reform through Lent.

Karen Schwartz
But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die ...

After all the amazing things Elijah was a part of, what made him want to die? Here was this influential man confidently doing what God had created him to do. One set back and he wanted to run away! God had revealed Himself so often Elijah had no reason to doubt or be afraid. And, yet, he was afraid and discouraged.

The reality is that even when loving what God has called us to do, be it parenting or whatever, we occasionally succumb to discouragement. We run full tilt and then exhaustion hits. We suddenly doubt our self-worth and sense of purpose. We moan loudly, “Will it ever get better?”

Though Elijah cried for the pain to go away God did not scold him. Discouragement happens! God never told him to stop acting like a toddler. God displayed His understanding of the human condition. He knew he was exhausted. In compassion, He let Elijah sleep and, after he was rested, gave him something to eat. Sometimes rest is a miracle in itself. After regaining our strength, then we are able to hear the “still small voice” calling us back. God encourages us to reach out again. Even though it can be challenging at times there is nothing more life giving than doing what God has called us to do. And what might that be? It is not easy, though simple. Jesus once said (I paraphrase), “Love God with all that you are, every ounce of your being, and love everyone else by all that you do!” (Matt. 22:37-40).

Holy Spirit, empower us to love as we go about our day. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who are discouraged.

Chris Morgan
Redemption

...we have a High Priest who was tempted in every way that we are, but did not sin. Let us have confidence, then, and approach God’s throne, where there is grace.

Jesus, though being perfect in the sight of God and sinless, could understand human suffering as He Himself experienced all that is human. Being made a High Priest for the atonement of Sin by God the Father, He did not take glory in His position as a priest but gave honor to God the Father who created Him. He was also asked to give us redemption and forgiveness for our sins.

Aaron, who was also a High Priest, found through supplication and weeping to God, was granted redemption from death. Aaron was given the ability to grant eternal salvation to those in his order. By being obedient, he became a source to aid others in the forgiveness of sin. Because of these acts of forgiveness, we should not be afraid to ask the Lord our God, for redemption, forgiveness of our sin or eternal life. Rather, we should ask to receive mercy through Jesus Christ in our time of need. The Lord does not want us to have barriers to seeking redemption and forgiveness from our sins or to receiving the gift of eternal salvation. All we need to do is ask for forgiveness or mercy in our time of need.

Lord, let me turn to You in my time of need and ask not only for the forgiveness of my sins but also for the gift of eternal life though our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those struggling to find God’s Grace and for the Redemption of Sin.

Elisa Mclellan
A Mountain Top Experience, Then and Now

(Moses’) face glowed because he had spoken to the Lord. (v. 29)

It’s easy for me to believe the expression “A mountain top experience.” It could have originated from Moses’ experience with God on Mount Sinai. After that meeting, all those who saw him could tell he was different. His face “glowed” signifying his inner transformation, and he projected a clear purpose and a stronger sense of authority than before. His message was from God and those around him paid attention and changed their ways.

I see evidence of those that have had “mountain top” experiences all around me. It’s possible their experiences weren’t as dramatic as Moses’, but I see God’s hand at work in their lives.

I see them everywhere, especially at church on Sunday. There’s the person who greets me and expresses a true interest in how I’m doing. There’s those who reach out to our homeless neighbors, providing love, support and shelter. There are others who live their God given purpose contributing to the education of girls on the other side of the world. And others who use their talents and energy to share the love of God with our youth and children.

In the process, I find that not only are their lives transformed, but they invite me on this journey as well. While it’s impossible to participate in all these ministries, I find when I listen to my inner voice, I know when God is calling me to join in. I’m sure if you listen closely, you will know when you are being called.

Lord, may I listen to Your small, still voice inside me, and have the courage to follow where You lead.

Prayer concern: Those reaching out to bring God’s love to a broken and hurting world.

Patty Westerfield
Isaiah 51:1-3

Remembering Where We Came From

Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the Lord: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn. (v. 1b)

Isaiah is talking to the Jews who follow God and “pursue righteousness.” God chose Abraham and Sarah to be the start of a great nation, and they had faith in what God told them. Their faith was tested far beyond what seemed reasonable, and yet they believed God, and this pleased God.

Hebrews 11:6 says without faith it is impossible to please God, and God rewards those who seek Him.

For me, it helps to remember the saints who have gone before us — those in the Bible, throughout history, in our own acquaintance, and our own families.

Last year, Jane and I had our last parent die. For us, our parents, in many ways, set good examples of living simple godly lives. What a blessing to remember.

This reminds me of another verse, Hebrews 13:7: Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider their way of life and imitate their faith.

Dear God, thank You for so many people in our past who have followed You and lived lives which are worth imitating.

Prayer concern: We all remember the saints who lived before us and had such an impact on who we are today.

Charlie Anderson
Re-New

... a person is put right with God only through faith...

Know that the Lord is God. It is He who made us and we are His; We are his people, the sheep of his pasture. (Psalm 100:3)

This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1:9-11)

You gave me life and showed me kindness O Lord and in your providence watched over my spirit. (Job 10:12)

Every day may I live the way God would like me to, through Christ Jesus.

Prayer concern: Those who do not do the will of God.

Stanley Socha
Psalm 121

My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. (v.2)

How often do we need to be reminded the Lord is always with us? This Psalm assures us we have God’s never-ending protection.

I do not question that my help always comes from the Lord. I constantly receive the Lord’s blessings. How can I question when and how? As a child of God, I look to heaven in prayer, sometimes with urgency, and wonder if help is on its way. Have my prayers been heard? Have they been answered and I’ve not seen them? I’m anxious sometimes — Can help come more quickly. Did God temporarily leave my side? Ultimately, I know the Lord will help. How can I be so impatient and self-important?

We receive help and protection from God in His time, not ours. Psalm 121 is a reminder. The Lord assures us He is our constant keeper. He promises to always be there and keep us from evil. The Lord never sleeps; He watches over all His people. The Lord is our keeper day and night. He will keep your life now and forevermore. The Lord God never leaves your side. We don’t need to question from where our help will come or when. We have a guarantee God always keeps His promises. The Lord is protecting and helping us. This is our assurance of the Lord’s love. We need to be patient, knowing the Lord is with us.

In Deuteronomy 31:6 Moses says, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you: He will never leave you nor forsake you.”

Lord, thank You for always helping and protecting us.

Prayer concern: Those who need help and assurance God is with them.

Dee Gutierrez
God’s Love

For God so loved the world. (v. 16)

Over the years, I’ve thought a lot about Jesus’ teaching that I am to love God with all my heart and my neighbor as myself. This is such a difficult thing for me to do because I’m human. I find I only want to love others when certain conditions are met — they are like me, or are kind to me, or I believe I will get something in return.

God’s love isn’t like that at all. William Barclay, the biblical commentator, says this phrase tells us of the “width of God’s love.” He goes on to say, “It was the World that God so loved. It was not a nation; it was not the good people; it was not only the people that loved him. It was the world. The unlovable and the unlovely, the lonely who have no one else to love them, those who love God and those who never think of him, those who rest in the love of God and those who spurn it — all are included in this vast inclusive love of God.”

As St. Augustine said, “God loves each one of us as if there was only one of us to love.” Once we come to realize the depth of God’s love for each of us, we are presented with the opportunity to love others as God does — unconditionally. It’s not something we can easily do on our own, but God doesn’t ask us to. As we invite Him into our heart, He will show all the ways we can reach out to others with His love.

Lord, thank You for loving me with all Your heart, so I can share Your love with others.

Prayer concern: Those close to us, and those far, far away — may they come to live in the light of God’s transforming love.

Patty Westerfield
Complaint Department

*But the people grew impatient with the long journey and they began to speak against God and Moses. (v.4)*

In today’s devotion, we read about the Israelites travelling through the wilderness to the promised land. God had already dealt with their many complaints and that was why they were wandering around. They started complaining again about their journey and their food. They grumbled about the horrible manna God provided every morning for them to eat. They complained about their journey — it was too long. They were impatient.

God’s response: He sent poisonous snakes. Many were bitten and died. Instead of continuing to complain, the Israelites made the connection between their complaints and the consequences. They repented and asked Moses to pray the snakes be taken away. He spoke to God who told him to make a replica of the snake and attach it to the pole. Anyone who was bitten could look at the snake and be healed. God was asking the Israelites to act on faith and they would be healed.

How many times have we complained about our circumstances? The weather is so cold. I can’t stand waiting in this line any longer. Will this meeting ever be over? I hate my job. Sound familiar?

Yes, we may complain. We are not a lot different than the Israelites. We too run the risk of losing our lives. For the wages of sin is death, but our God is merciful. He offers us a way out just like He did for the Israelites. We must confess our sins, repent, and act on faith, looking to the one (Jesus) who was “raised up” like the bronze serpent. And we will be saved.

**Lord, please remind us not to complain and to look to You for our redemption.**

Prayer concern: Those who cannot see the bountiful riches God has given us.

Nancy Lacher
Righteousness, Law or Faith

It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. (v. 13)

Romans has always been one of my favorite books in the Bible, possibly because when I returned from Europe and a lack of Bible study, it was what the women’s circle I joined was studying. It also holds many of the passages I memorized in Catechism classes that Luther found so life-changing. This passage is one of them — we don’t rely on good works (or law) to be right with God and receive His blessings; He restores us to Himself if we put our trust and faith in Jesus, our Savior. I cling to this reassurance! It is one of the foundations of the Reformation.

We do rely on the law to show us how God wants us to obey Him. I fail over and over to live how God wants me to live, so I am overjoyed that Jesus did it for me. His works make me righteous, not mine. So, I continue to try to live rightly for Him, but I trust when I screw up, He loves me and forgives me. His amazing grace and love overcome my failures and cover me with His righteousness, if I ask for forgiveness and trust His promises. Wow! What an amazing Lord we have. What hope fills my heart because His promises are sure. My works (law) can now be used to show my thankfulness and praise God and show others God’s love for them. Amazing grace!

Lord, I have faith in Your promise to make me right with You because of Your love, not by what I do. Remind me my works are to show You my thankfulness and show others Your love.

Prayer concern: Those who believe they are not good enough for God to love them.

Janet Wormwood
Cleaning Hearts

*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.* (v.26)

Through the years, Christians are led off God’s path of Faith by sin, doubtfulness, and hate. This passage shows how God led the Israelites back onto His path. The Israelites fell away from the Lord many times, but God always showed them the way back. God led them through times like these, so why not now? He still leads us through troubling times, and He won’t stop. God led the cold-hearted Israelites and is still able to lead us through times of faith, doubt, and sin. All you have to do is ask Him to clean and turn your heart back to Him.

When I first read these verses, I thought it said to be guilty and not forgive ourselves. Later, I realized it meant God wants us to tell the world about Him. He wanted the Israelites to use His name in holy ways. Holy means set apart. God wants to use us to lead others to Him. It is our purpose. What we are made to do. It also says, "Follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws." By following His laws, we show others His laws. When you are scared to ask someone to go to church with you or pray for your friend in need, just think, "It's what God wants me to do. It's my calling."

**God, thank You for leading us through all, and remind us to turn our hearts towards You in times of doubt. Please help us remember to keep our eyes on You, and teach others how to follow You. Thank You for taking us back when we go astray.**

Prayer concern: Those who’ve turned away from You and have not yet turned back.

Kaley McClain and Carly Adams
MHY
Re-forming our Minds: Trusting the Lord with our Sustenance.

Then the Lord said to Moses, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you.” (v.4)

I find myself judging the Israelites of the Old Testament for their selfishness and distrust. When I read passages such as these I say, “Can you believe these guys? The Lord just saved them from the tyranny and oppression of Egypt. But because they don’t have meat they want to go back!” I can just imagine how overwhelmed Moses must have felt by the “grumbling of the whole community.” However, God does not react with harsh words and condemnation. Rather, “The Lord said to Moses, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you.” (v.4). The Lord’s response says to me, He listens to even my most self-centered and short-sighted prayers. He understands and loves the human condition so much that He responds gently to our most misguided requests.

Although the Lord accommodated the grumblings of Israel, He was, and still is, interested in creating a holy dependence upon Him. Unlike a parent who quells a temperamental child by granting their every wish, the Lord desires a holy reliance on Him. He wants to “see whether they will follow my instructions” (v.4) as we attempt to store His blessing for a later date. It is not to say that storing one’s wealth is a sin but rather one should ask why they are storing it. Is it because you want to be a good steward (1 Peter 4:10) or is it our disbelief in God’s provision for our lives?

Dear Heavenly Father, I contemplate the areas of my life that I do not rely on Your holy sustenance. I unjustly judge the Israelites for their disbelief, complaints and season of change. Help me see and rely on Your provisions for my life.

Prayer concern: Help us realize and appreciate Your provision for our lives.

Gavin Leach
Division Conquered

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility... (v. 14)

Before I became Lutheran, I was Catholic. I always appreciate the ritual and reverence I experienced in the Catholic Church. In my late teens, I began pulling away from church, though I always believed in God. Several years into my marriage, my husband and I began searching for a church. He being raised Baptist and I Catholic, neither of us was particularly interested in each other’s religion of origin. We found Cross of Hope Lutheran (going back to 1991!), finding the Lutheran religion an agreeable match.

In Lutheranism, I remember being drawn to the concept of a direct relationship with God, instead of a priest as intercessor, and all members of the church considered ministers in their own right. Yet, I appreciated some of the Catholic-seeming rituals and the sacredness of the sanctuary, complete with a cross against stained glass, an altar, and communion with bread and wine.

As a Catholic, I experienced religious prejudice; the worst being that Catholics aren’t true Christians. I felt misunderstood and hurt. As a kid, I recall arguments with my best friend about which of us belonged to the “true” religion: mine or hers. Looking back, I see how divisions begin: with fear or misunderstanding of something foreign or different. Someone assumes the worst of the other without trying to learn or understand. Misunderstanding can turn to judgment, labeling, intolerance, and eventually, hate.

We have witnessed this phenomenon and it continues today, in religion, politics, etc. Ultimately, we are all legitimate children of God, thanks to Jesus Christ, who interceded for all.

Thank You, Father for seeing each of us clearly and fairly.

Prayer concern: Those feeling afraid and hopeless for religious or political reasons.

Kathy Albin
A Joyful (?) Noise

*Oh, come, let us sing to the Lord.* (v. 1)

I can’t sing! Oh, I try. But it doesn’t sound very good. I envy people like my husband, David, who has a good voice. However, I feel music is such an important part of our service. Martin Luther has blessed us with such hymns as, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” and “To Shepherds as They Watched by Night.” I will continue to sing these with gusto (but maybe a little off key!).

**May we always continue to praise You with music.**

Prayer concern: Those who sing and those who try to sing!

Diane Pressel
The Drink of Living Water

...but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. (v. 14)

Jesus demonstrates through the metaphor of water that baptism/salvation is for everyone ~ from the holiest of all beings, Jesus, to the lowliest of sinners, the Samaritan woman.

Water’s/God’s miraculous life giving properties are not just for the holiest or wealthiest or cleanest. God/water quenches the thirst of everyone equally.

Because of this metaphor, Jesus has given us a daily reminder of the importance of our baptism. Every time we turn on the faucet, take a drink from our water bottle, sit by a stream, watch the raindrops hit the window we are reminded of the life-giving importance of water/God in our lives. In everything we do, every day of our lives, many times a day, we can be reminded of our baptism and the miracle of our Christian birth.

Let us not take water for granted. Let us be thankful for every drop. For in every drop we find a reminder of Christ Jesus - the source of all life.

Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for the sacrament of baptism. Help me keep my baptism and what it means fresh in my mind and heart, and live a life dedicated to You.

Prayer concern: Those who have yet to drink of the water that will give them eternal life.

Lisa Fields
Faithful Servant

_Lord, God of my master Abraham, make me successful today._ (v. 12)

How often have we prayed to God to show us where to go, what to do, or as this faithful non-believing servant of Abraham asked, “Reveal God’s pick to be Isaac’s wife.” What a responsibility thrust on a servant! As the story continued, the servant asked God to reveal His pick by having God’s selected woman respond to specific questions he, the servant, would ask. (Could there be anything easier?) He did not have to wait long — the first woman that came to the well gave the needed responses. That woman was Rebekah, the future mother of Jacob!

God knows what is in our hearts — and that we are very stubborn. Scripture says God knew us before we were born. He also knows what is best — even if we may think otherwise. Often we don’t have to ask but just be patient and God will provide; whether you are ready (in your mind) or not. God’s timing is always perfect!

While attending college, I never thought about getting married. I wanted to get an education and play basketball, but God had other plans. The very first time I met this young lady, I knew in my heart she was the one for me; the one I would marry. I didn’t know God was showing His pick for me. I thought I had good taste. Like Abraham’s servant, I knew this was the one! Now, after 41 years, God has blessed Debbie and me with a loving family, and a wonderful extended family. God made sure I had the best “partner in life” for me. Do we always hear God, or respond to what He has provided for us? Do we think we know better? Do we allow God to direct our lives without interference? Let go, and let God.

_Lord, thank You for loving us and providing all we need._

_Help us to always give You thanks!

Prayer concern: Those who do not have the patience to hear and listen to God’s word.

Geoff Bokan
Seeking and Finding a Place

I don’t want you to forget, dear brothers and sisters, what happened to our ancestors in the wilderness long ago. (v. 1)

As Paul was reminding the Corinthians they should remember the fate of their ancestors in the wilderness, we too should not forget lessons learned from our ancestors. Many of us had grandparents who left their native land to seek a new beginning in what was, to them, a strange wilderness. They had to re-form their identities in a new country different from what they had known. To make this journey, they had faith God would guide them and keep them safe. Even as they settled into their new lives they always remembered from where they came. They told stories about the past but reminded us of the blessings they, and we, had and to be grateful.

I, too, had to leave my familiar life in a small town in Pennsylvania to relocate to Alaska. All I knew was it is a vast wilderness – “The Last Frontier.” Flying there that first time, I was in awe at miles that stretched below of snow and ice covered mountains and glaciers. It was foreboding and unwelcoming. I knew this would require a major adjustment. I thought of my grandparents. I knew, like them, I could rely on my faith, trust in God, and build a new life. I adapted to the many changes and thrived for nearly 30 years.

During this Lenten season, we may find ourselves facing our own personal wilderness. It may be physical or emotional — the loss of a loved one, of financial stability, or a loss of hope. With God to guide us, and a strong faith, we can adjust our lives no matter what obstacles and challenges come our way.

Thank You, God, for providing us with a spiritual road map to help guide us through whatever wilderness we face.

Prayer concern: Refugees seeking a new home.

Lois Casto
Sin Sickness

Jesus heard them and answered, “Healthy people don’t need a doctor, but sick people do. Go and learn what the Scriptures mean when they say, ‘Instead of offering sacrifices to me, I want you to be merciful to others.’ I didn’t come to invite good people to be my followers. I came to invite sinners.” (v. 12-13)

Sickness and sin are connected. They both start with – si. When you’re sick a germ invades your body and tries to take over. When you sin, the devil invades and tries to take over your life. When you’re sick you need a doctor to get better. When you sin you need God.

I’m a sinner, you’re a sinner. We all have sin sickness inside us. We need God to cure us. He’s the only one who can. Jesus wants to heal everyone. He isn’t snobby. He loves everyone, not just the perfect people. No one’s perfect. Everyone sins, so don’t be judgy. Don’t waste time worrying about being better than someone else. Share God’s grace. Forgive, be nice. Do good things for everyone. Be like Jesus.

Awesome God,
We love that You created this world. We hope everyone gets to go to heaven by choosing You. Please help us not get so angry and yell at people when they don’t agree with us. Help us forgive and see them with Your eyes.
Your child,

Prayer concern: People who are sick and the doctors and nurses who help them get better. We especially ask for a cure for cancer.

Cross of Hope Lutheran Elementary, The 2nd Grade Cheerful Chihuahuas
Truth Be Told

_I did obey the voice of the Lord, and went on the mission on which the Lord sent me._ (v. 20)

As some know, we have a little person living with us. One of his daily responsibilities is to make his bed. He thinks if he pulls the bedspread over the rumpled sheets, blankets and stuffed animals, nobody sees underneath. But if the truth be told, he didn't make his bed. Not to grandma's standards anyway. He thinks he hides his half-truth with the bedspread.

Saul didn't obey God either. If there is one thing we learn from Saul's excuses, we can't hide the truth from God. However, we dress up our outside, God sees right through us to our hearts. There is no room nor reason for pretense in our relationship with God. He sees not as man sees, which is at our outward appearance, but looks at the heart.

Obedience to God changes the outcome in our decision making. Had we not obeyed God's will four years ago, our little person not making his bed wouldn't have ever happened nor the teaching of what obedience means. Being obedient is hard at times, but God's will is always God's best, even when we don't understand. I'm not sure our boy will ever understand bed making but I can use this example to teach him God's truths.

_Lord, thank You for teaching us Your will for us is always Your best, even if we don't understand it._

Prayer concern: Those who try to hide what is on the inside.

Susan McWilliam
Daily Redo

*Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us... (v.1-2)*

I try to wake up with this thought every day. I tell myself, “Yesterday has passed, let it go. Today is a new day; start it off with a smile.” I feel right now this verse is very important. I may not agree with what you believe or the things you do but I can love you and live in peace. I often tell my kids, “It is not my job to judge others, it is God’s. That leaves me a lot of room to love others.” I am not saying it is easy, because it is not. I often forget and must recenter myself in this thought.

The other verse that caught my eye in this passage is, “Therefore do not be associated with them.” (v. 7) This is referring to those who would be disobedient to God. My parents told me when I was a child, “Your friends speak to your character. Just because you may not be doing bad, the fact that you are associated with friends that are, means you will be seen as a bad kid too.” I have started to tell my kids the same thing. If they don’t agree with the things their “friends” are doing, maybe my boys should reevaluate their “friends.”

I hope in the future my kids will love those as God loves them, so they can inherit the Kingdom of God.

**Lord, help us to love all.**

Prayer concern: Those who do not know His love.

Nicole Bencomo
The Lord is My Shepherd

_I know that your goodness and love will be with me all my life._

The Lord is my shepherd… — I experienced His presence last week as I spent many hours in urgent care waiting to see the doctor. Jesus was shepherding not only me but all those sick people in the room.

There was a couple whose two children were feverish, still active, pulling at their masks. Their mother was in the last stages of pregnancy and needed help. Yes, help from our Good Shepherd.

A young man was experiencing the most extreme pain and had to scream. The Good Shepherd heard his cry.

Our family nighttime prayer has always been the song:

“I am Jesus’ little lamb, ever glad at heart I am. For my shepherd gently guides me, knows my needs and will provide for me, loves me every day the same, even calls me by my name.”

Prayer concern: Those who don’t know You, Jesus. Help us reach them so they too can recognize You as their Shepherd.

Ruth Franz
**Spiritual Blindness**

*Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." (v. 30)*

A Man blind from birth has been given sight by Jesus! No time to celebrate, he must appear before the hardened hearts of the Pharisees. The healed man shared his experience as best he could but the Pharisees, in spiritual blindness, threw him out.

Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther, excited to share his revelations from the Holy Spirit, encountered spiritual blindness from the Catholic Church.

For me, spiritual blindness comes when I don't follow up on the insights the Holy Spirit gives me. I see spiritual blindness in those who will not open their hearts to the Holy Spirit. Instead they keep God in a box. Where do you see spiritual blindness?

**Gracious Father, thank You for Your gift of the Holy Spirit who blesses us with Your insights.**

Prayer concern: Those who, because of Spiritual Blindness, cannot see God working in their lives.

Beth Cretsinger
Justice

So those in the west shall fear the name of the Lord, and those in the east, his glory; for he will come like a pent-up stream that the wind of the Lord drives on. (v. 19)

Some teaching years are harder than others. This has been the year of cars stolen from school parking lots; stolen cars dumped in school parking lots; students setting fire to paper towels in the bathroom; criminals being bodily apprehended in front of 5-year old’s during fire drills; students with such poverty and trauma happening at home they can hardly focus on the purpose of school. And, sadly, this has now become the year parents ask me what the future holds for their families with our new president.

Teaching children of immigrants has been a privilege. Teaching in a Dual Language program has become synonymous with striving for social justice. I do my best to teach students how to embrace two different cultures and use what they have learned about each to move forward. It is an attempt to even the playing field and positively enrich the lives of children, families, and community.

Currently, there are huge political pressures weighing us down that would destroy this opportunity for children, rip families apart, and prolong the disparity that exists between people whose home language is English and peoples whose home language is not. Justice could not come soon enough, but seems to be slipping into isolationism. It breaks my heart. What is the point of this narrative? My point is, I haven’t given up hope. If no one else can get it done, God can. Keep on striving until the time is right, and don’t give up hope! Don’t forget the shining light that is our Jesus.

Please give us the strength and presence of mind to fight for what we know in our hearts is truly right for all people.

Prayer concern: Those who seek social justice for themselves or others.

Amy Ellis
A Mama’s Prayer

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God. (v. 9-10)

This reminds me of my daughter who started college this year. She is more than seven hours away. We are in frequent contact but it’s not the same as having her at home. It involves a lot of trust and sometimes worry. Sometimes prayer is all I can do. It doesn’t feel like enough. It is everything. Prayer is powerful!

This passage reminds me love should begin with prayer, like the prayers of thanksgiving when a child is born; it should be a continuous prayer from cradle to grave. Paul wrote it but it echoes the desires in my mama heart. It is a prayer for all of us.

Sweet child: Since the moment I learned of you I have not stopped praying for you. I ask God will always let you know what He wants you to do with your life. I pray you will hear Him and be smart enough to listen. I pray the Holy Spirit surrounds you with people and experiences that draw you closer to God so you may see and feel Him in all you do. I pray you will continue to make the world a better place using your many gifts and talents. Above all, I pray you will know God and you will make Him the center of your life.

With Love Always,

Mama

Prayer concern: Loved ones far away.

Rosalie Hipple
Dying and Rising With Christ

Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (v. 4)

We were tearfully reminded of the joy of baptism on Sunday when six young people were baptized into Christ. Surely, the angels in heaven were rejoicing at this blessed event.

Being reminded of our baptism also brought with it the realization that we always fall short of our promise to be ‘dead to sin.’ Being good is sometimes hard. It’s too easy to live a marginal life and take for granted the sacrifice God made for us.

Being a witness to baptism can be a rejuvenating experience; a reminder of God’s promise to us. How can we purposely act in sin when we remember the ultimate sacrifice Jesus paid? Jesus has suffered enough for us; let us remember our baptism and ‘walk in newness of life.’

Heavenly Father, thank You for the sacrament of baptism. Please help me truly die to a life of sin and live a life reborn in Your image. Help me keep my baptism and what it means fresh in my mind and heart and live a life dedicated to You.

Prayer concern: Those who have not been buried with Christ in baptism.

Lisa Fields and 3rd grade class
Spiritual Nutrition

So I opened my mouth and he gave me the scroll to eat. (v. 3: 2)

The Bible talks many times about God being our Father and providing us with what we need to grow spiritually. When you watch a mother feed her child, she is loving, kind, and patient. She does not force her child to eat more than needed, but she uses a firm hand to make sure the child gets the needed amount. This provides the child with the needed nutrition to grow.

Just like a mother feeding her child, God provides us with the needed things to grow spiritually. God provides us with His word to let us expand our spiritual understanding of Him. Without His word our spiritual nutrition would become malnourished.

God, help me see that Your word is essential to my spiritual nutrition as food is to my body. Amen.

Pray concern: Anyone who is spiritually or physically malnourished.

Adelle Adams
MHY

"FOOD THAT ENDURES TO eternal life."
Never Ending Hope

The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.

The never-ending hope for Christians is to be united with Christ at the time of His return. We know our name in the book of life allows us to enjoy God’s kingdom here on earth. It is our responsibility to share this news with all we meet. Our society is riddled with crime, violence and greed. We tend to look inward instead of outward as society continually changes. We are blessed by God to avail the Good News to all, identifying the path to a relationship with His son, Jesus Christ. We pray God will allow us to see His coming kingdom and that there will be uncountable numbers of followers with us. The great gift of Hope must be shared with all and the consequences of unbelief must be known. We must continue to share with the non-believers that God’s Kingdom is all that matters. There is not a path to God that does not go through the Son.

We pray all will recognize the Kingdom of Christ when the time comes.

Prayer concern: Father, we lift up those who have not heard Your Son’s word. We pray they will enjoy Your kingdom right now where they are.

Chuck Montano
Waiting

*I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope.* (v. 5)

Waiting is one of the most difficult things we do. Waiting is an inescapable part of life. It is difficult, whether we are waiting for the restoration of a relationship, the healing from a physical or emotional condition, or for answers to any other of life’s trials. Most of us become impatient if we must wait too long for an answer. I have become impatient if things did not happen on my timetable; it made me feel powerless. I am reminded only God is in control, and I must put my trust and hope in Him.

For me, the key to waiting is how I wait. This psalm teaches us we “...wait for the Lord.” The word “wait” implies both patient waiting and hopeful trusting. The psalm tells us the Lord will deliver in His time and in His way. It states, “...in his word I put my hope.” When I place my hope in God, He never fails me. If we trust in God’s word, we receive His promise of hope, guidance and salvation.

Martin Luther’s hymn (#329 in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, Concordia Publishing House) “From Depths of Woe I Cry To Thee” is based on Psalm 130.

“Therefore my hope is in the Lord
And not in mine own merit;
It rests upon his faithful Word
To them of contrite spirit
That He is merciful and just:
This is my comfort and my trust.
His help I wait with patience.”

What are you “waiting” for? I hope God will grant you the patience to wait with faith, and to see His promise fulfilled.

**Lord we wait for You, and in Your word we trust and hope.**

Prayer concern: Those needing patience while they wait.

Deborah Rivera
I am the Resurrection and the Life

…and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.

If someone asks us if we believe in God, we quickly reply, “Of course.” It’s easy to believe when things are going our way. Our health is good, we have a good job, and things are going well with our friends and family. Yes, then it’s easy to believe. But, what about those times when things aren’t going so well? Maybe our health isn’t so good, or we’ve lost our job, gotten a divorce or even a family member or good friend has died. Then, is it easy to believe?

I had a very good friend back in our small rural church in Illinois. Mary Ellen is almost 90. She’s a short little lady with a mass of curly white hair. Her husband died many years ago. Over the years, she’s lost a friend or two and since she was from a very large family, she might have even lost a family member. In the last ten years, however, she has lost several good friends, two sisters, two brothers, a son, a daughter and her oldest grandson was killed in Afghanistan. When I saw her a year or so ago, her health was failing, but she still had a smile on her face. I asked how she was doing. Her response was, “I get up every day and I know the Lord is with me.” She doesn’t just say those words, she believes them and lives them.

Bringing people like Lazarus back from the dead was definitely one of the Lord’s miracles. We don’t have miracles like that, but we always know the Lord is there, walking next to us, and holding our hand if we need it. No matter what, He doesn’t let us down.

Thank You Lord for always being by my side.

Prayer concern: Those suffering the loss of a family member or friend.

Diane Carrico
On a Global Missions (of Sorts)

Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth. (v. 24)

A weary traveler, Elijah, from Israel crossed into Phoenician territory, a nation in an uneasy relationship with Israel. God sent him to find a widow who will care for him during a severe drought. He recognizes her picking up sticks, and asks for a bit of water and bread. She stops, faces him and recognizes him as an Israelite. “Sir, as sure as your God lives, I have only a handful of flour and a few drops of oil. I am about to make one last meal for my little son and me, and then we will die of starvation.” “Go, make me a little cake first, and then you and your son eat.” He adds, “Don’t be afraid, the Lord, the God of Israel will provide for you until there is a new harvest.” And so, it was. He stayed in her house for a while and she showed him hospitality. Then her son became severely ill, to the point of death. In desperation, she cries out: “Man of God, what have I done wrong? You are convicting me of my sin! My only son, my only hope in widowhood, is dead!” Elijah carries the limp body to his room. There he pleads with God to restore breath and life to this lifeless body. Life returns. The mother breaks out into the confession: “Now I know you are a man of God, and the word of the Lord that is in your mouth is truth.”

Elijah trusted God when he was sent into a foreign land to seek refuge from the wrath of his country’s ruler, King Ahab. The foreign woman shows him hospitality and is rewarded with life-giving food. When the power of Israel's God is manifested through Elijah, and the dead son is alive again, she understands that with God is life and forgiveness, and she believes.

Israel’s God is our God, still. He is newly revealed to us in Jesus Christ. If we but believe, we too, have abundant life, no matter our circumstances. (John 10:10)

Lord Jesus, let us see light in all our dark days. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who doubt that God is REAL.

Ruth Hinkel
Grace Alone, Faith Alone, Word Alone

For it is by grace you have been saved through faith - And this is not of yourselves, it is The Gift of God.
...not by works, so that no one can boast. (v. 8, 9)

Paul wrote to the poor and prosperous people of Ephesus, a large trading center in the region now known as Turkey. It is still applicable today as it was for Martin Luther in the 1500's. As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of the world... (v. 1) ...gratifying the cravings of the flesh. (v.3)

Paul goes on to say that God made us ALIVE with CHRIST, because He loved us so very much. Through His mercy, He has shown us all Grace beyond measure expressed in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus. (v.7)

Fifty years ago, I sat in Catechism class for two hours on Saturday mornings in Fremont, Michigan at Redeemer Lutheran Church, with three others and Pastor Strelow. (Our congregation numbered about 65). There, we memorized these very verses and were taught that scripture was inspired by God. It was written for all people so all might Believe. That is the setting in which I learned of Martin Luther and his translation work to bring this message to the people in their native German language. Through that effort (and others posted as 95 thesis), Martin Luther demonstrated his faith in the Word of God and brought attention to its Truth. The people could then experience a direct relationship with God and Christ through reading scripture.

How Blessed we are through our faith in Christ, the Word made flesh, and our Gift from God.

Prayer concern: Help us Lord to become Alive in Christ that we may notice that which will help our brothers and sisters and then, Do It.

Jan Anderson
The Start of Forgiveness

This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (v.28)

I have only been doing communion for two years, but I have learned a lot. I have learned that the Last Supper was a very important time for the disciples. This was right before Jesus was betrayed and arrested.

Reading this passage told me that even before Jesus was hung on the cross, He was giving forgiveness for all, through Him. Even though Jesus was going to be betrayed, there was forgiveness.

The Lord is the greatest. We often forget that, but we are forgiven, though we don’t deserve such a thing.

Thank You, Lord, for forgiving us even when we don’t deserve it.

Prayer concern: Those who don’t think they can be forgiven.

Xander Bencomo
MHY
As I read this passage, I can’t help thinking how simple it is. How nice it would be to live “the simple life.” Samuel has it figured out, and I think we can too.

Samuel had a job to do and it was NOT to pick Saul’s replacement from Jesse’s sons. In v.1 God told him to “fill your horn with oil and go...I have chosen...”(emphasis is mine). Saul’s job was to wait until the Lord revealed His plan, and then take the next step when he’s told. He tells Jesse “send for your last son; we’ll wait right here until I’ve met all your kids, like God told us.” (my paraphrase)

Once David showed up, God gave Samuel the next step – “Rise and anoint him.” Samuel poured some oil, and went (home) to Ramah. Simple, doing God’s work. Following Samuel’s example, we just need to listen for instructions, and do one thing at a time. He didn’t ask God for a itinerary, travel plans, per diem pay... He simply went on a road trip when he was told, met new people when he was told, poured some oil when he was told, then home for dinner and another day’s work was done. He (and we) didn’t have to fill out an application, send a resume, go for interviews, etc. He didn’t have to fight his way to the top of the corporate ladder to earn this “gravy train” job; all he did was wait, listen and respond when the Lord revealed His plan. I hope to be as faithful.

Gracious God, thank You for making things easy. Thanks for laying out a plan, and not giving it to us all at once. Please help us trust in Your goodness and mercy, so we can relax and enjoy the life you’ve blessed us with. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those experiencing anxiety because they can’t see the whole picture.

Kevin Perkins
At age sixty-seven my mother learned pancreatic cancer would soon take her home to heaven. She was a faith-filled Christian all her life. Realizing her time with her family on earth would soon be over, she called us together. After we gathered around her bed she said in a calm, steady and joyful voice, “For many years I’ve shown you how to live like a Christian. Now I want to show you how to die like one. I am ready to finally go home!”

Life after life was important to Paul. He planned for it, prepared for it and looked forward to when he would be with his Lord. From the day he met Jesus on the way to Damascus, his values changed and his view of things was different. Not only did he see life from an eternal perspective but all he wanted others to do was see life the way he did: through the eyes of the risen Christ.

His faith enabled him to confidently say dying would be better than living. He knew those who were ready to die could face life confidently and fearlessly. He realized in death he would be removed from the problems and pains of this life and finally be with his beloved Lord forever.

Reading his words is a testimony to his faith: he wanted others to see what he looked and longed for after his earthly life: For me, living is living for Christ and dying is even better.

Heavenly Father, we look to You for faith for today, hope for tomorrow and purpose in between. Fill us with love for You and the lost whose lives are in our hands. Amen.

Prayer concern: I pray we can wake up each day, free from worry about when or how we’ll die, and instead prayerfully ask for opportunities to share the gift of salvation through Jesus with others before their life ends.

Sheri Phillips
God is in Control

But I trust in you O Lord; I say, “You are my God.”

In the Psalm, David describes the helplessness and hopelessness we feel when we are hated or rejected. Adversity is easier to accept when we recognize our true relationship with God. Although David’s enemies may seem to have the upper hand, they are ultimately the helpless and hopeless ones. Those who know God will be victorious in the end.

I cannot say I have had experiences in life quite as bleak as those described by David, but I have experienced difficult times. During those times, I have found comfort when I turned to God. I find comfort in the belief that all of life’s circumstances are under God’s control. It is important to maintain a close relationship with God so He is there for you when the bad things happen.

I pray that I am able to Re-Form this year by keeping God as a part of my everyday life.

Prayer concern: Those who are experiencing strife in their life, but have not turned to God for help.

Sam Jones
And when he entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, “Who is this?” (v. 10)

Isaiah prophesied Jesus’ birth 700 years before it happened (Is.62:11). When Jesus arrived near Jerusalem, he directed his disciples to borrow an ass, fulfilling another prophecy: Tell the daughter of Zion, “Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on an ass, and on a colt, the foal of an ass.” (v. 5)

As Jesus entered Jerusalem, most of the crowd spread their garments on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. Crowds shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” The city was stirred by His arrival, asking, “Who is this? And the crowds said, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee.” (v. 9-11)

Against all odds, Jesus’ coming fulfilled multiple prophecies. Many were expecting His arrival and believed. They knew, “Who is this?” Many heard His teachings and witnessed His knowledge and understanding. Still many had questions and doubts (even after witnessing His miracles) of “Who is this?” As Christians, we have the responsibility to read the Bible and learn, “Who is this?” We need to seek Jesus and God through the Bible, daily prayer, and church involvement. We need to share and witness to each other and nonbelievers. We need to learn how to live like Jesus so others may wonder: who we are. Life is truly amazing knowing it is not random, but guided and foretold by God. Jesus, the King of Peace, humble in His ways, came to this world to suffer death for our sins and reconnect us to God, the maker of this world.

Lord, thank You for coming to this world for our sake.

Prayer concern: Let us seek to understand and know, “Who is this?”

Nancy Umbreit
Love Freely Given

Then Mary took...nard, an expensive perfume, poured it on Jesus feet and wiped them with her hair. (v. 3)

I choose a birthday date for one of our family members for the date to write my devotion. Then I see what the passage is about — I find they are always connected to that family member.

April 10 is the birthday of the mother of four of our grandchildren and 6 — soon to be 7! — great-grandchildren. Susie is a nurse who works with small children through the scariness of surgery and recovery. She is a mom who raised her four children to trust in the Lord and find goodness in other people, to serve and love as Christ loves us.

In John 12, Jesus tells those at the table not to criticize Mary because with love and goodness and service, she chooses to pour the pint of pure nard on His feet to honor Him — the expense of her gift was not her focus — it was her love for her Lord and her desire to serve Him. Jesus says it is love that is the gift and if we concentrate on the cost of things and relate that to the poor, we will miss the opportunities God places before us to love and serve. Love as a gift is a powerful way to draw people to Jesus, and it costs nothing in dollars but it is priceless.

Happy birthday, Susie, and thanks for the beauty and love you give the world around you. Love like that of Mary given to Christ her Lord — and that of Christ given to each of us each day.

Lord, may we always offer Your love to those You lead us among that we may reflect Your love to them. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who need the love of Christ in their lives.

Carolyn Bye
Light

Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light. (v.36)

As a little boy, I had trouble going into my dark bedroom at night. Fear drove me to scramble for my American Revolutionary War Soldier lamp. Sometimes I couldn’t find the switch right away but eventually I did. What relief I felt when the room became bathed with light and there were no monsters ready to pounce.

That’s the thing with darkness. The foreboding sense that something bad is going to happen or the loss of control because we cannot see; that overwhelming feeling of dread. It comes in many forms; death of a friend or a loved one, divorce, abandonment, betrayal, being a crime victim, losing a job. Even when we know there is light, we are still apprehensive.

Whatever the circumstances, Jesus tells us to trust in the light. He says in John, to walk while we have the light because we will experience darkness. Because we have walked with the light, when darkness and fear and sorrow take hold, we at least know where we are going. Jesus lets us know He will be there for us.

Because we have walked with Him, we are comforted by the thought that He will be there always. We may not hear a voice from above or voices from angels like the crowd did at the feast but we have His promise. He gives us the opportunity to share the light with others so they can be helped through dark times.

“This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine...”

Lord, help me be a shining light to others so they may see You.

Prayer concern: Those who are in a dark place and have not yet been introduced to the Lord.

David & Toni Kovarik
John 13:21-32

The Better Path

As soon as Judas took the bread Satan entered into him. (v.27)

Jesus knew Judas was the disciple who was going to betray Him. When asked who it would be, Jesus said, “It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I dip it into the dish.” Jesus gave the dipped bread to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. Then Judas left. He didn’t hesitate or say, “Why did you give me the bread?” He didn’t argue or suggest the betrayer could be one of the other disciples. Judas had agreed to be part of the greater plan. Turning back could have been an option, but “…Satan entered into him.”

When I was a child, I remember my grandparents talking about older neighborhood kids who were up to mischief or no good. They said they were “full of the devil” or “possessed.” As I grew older, those words were used to describe me too. Because of good role models and loving parents, most of those neighborhood kids chose to rid themselves of their “devilish” behaviors and develop into mature adults and role models themselves.

In my work, I encounter individuals from a broad spectrum of society which I find difficult not to categorize. I meet people who did not grow up with loving parents and in homes that barely provided the basics of life. Unfortunately, the cycle they are born into often repeats itself. Yet some in this group, by the grace of God, are unscathed by their lot in life and accomplish amazing things. The other group has had excellent parenting, the benefit of a good education and material abundance. Despite those benefits, they make the deliberate choice to go down the wrong path. I often wonder whether they are in control of their destinies or if, like Judas, Satan has entered in and forced them from the better path.

Dear Lord, help us make choices that lead to the better path.

Prayer concern: Those who have too little and those who have too much.

Rich Neely
Re*Form: Foot Washing as an Act of Love

Jesus said: So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. (v. 14)

Holy Week in the church ends with what is called: The Great Three Days. We are being reformed through the reclamation of these ancient liturgies as we are invited to embody and experience God’s grace in new/old ways. Maundy Thursday invites us to gather around God’s word of service, care and love.

Before Jesus gave the reforming command to love one another, He takes off His outer robe, ties a towel around Himself and washes the feet of His disciples. This act was counter to the expectations of His disciples and was met with offense and confusion (vv. 6, 9). Washing the feet of another can still feel offensive and confusing yet it is this humble act to which Jesus invites His disciples. As He continues and gave the new commandment of love, I wonder how foot washing, as an act of love, would reform our experience of this commandment.

I have ugly feet (probably from all those basketball victories over Mr. Richard). My feet are not a source of pride so, foot washing on Maundy Thursday was not a source of excitement. One year at the Maundy Thursday liturgy at the Institute of Liturgical Studies at Valparaiso University, I contemplated the invitation to this experiential part of the liturgy and was moved to participate. As the stranger at the station washed my feet, I remember feeling not embarrassment and shame but rather a sense of the love and care Jesus embodied for His disciples and invited us to experience in this and similar radical acts of love and care.

We all are welcome to come and experience this act of love as we begin our worship over these great three days. Come tonight at 6:30 pm and be reformed by the love of God in Christ.

Almighty God, as we journey into the passion of Christ in these great three days, reform us in Your love to go in service and love to our neighbor. In Jesus name, we pray. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who long to know God’s love.

Pastor R. Adam Berndt
And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. (v. 19:42)

On the darkest night of the church year, the central part of the Great Three Days, the image I’m left with is of the breaking dawn. The brilliant orange and yellow that splashes above the cold, rocky Sandia Mountains moments before the blinding brilliance of the sun makes its way into a new day. This breathtaking beauty doesn’t take away from the darkness of the night just as the darkness of Good Friday is not tempered by the brilliance of the resurrection. Both are necessary for the power and wonder of the other. The magnificent sunrise needs a dark canvas from which to emerge and similarly the power of the resurrection needs the stark finality of death. And so, Jesus is laid in a new, empty tomb according to Jewish custom. The image of the breaking dawn comes for me as they lay Jesus in the tomb because I know what is coming. I believe what is coming. I can see the light begin to peek into the darkness.

We are invited to come to the cross tonight at 6:30 pm and contemplate the death of Jesus. Our lives are reformed by being still before the cross, knowing the real death of Jesus, and believing this is not the end of the story. We know what comes next. So, we find in the stillness of those moments before the cross that in faith, even in death, life is proclaimed. This is the saving grace of God in Christ. Life from death. One does not exist without the other. There is always light to come from the darkness. Thanks be to God!

Holy God, open our eyes to see Your light breaking through the darkness even today. The victory is won. You promise life beyond death. May this truth reform us always. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who feel an endless darkness.

Pastor R. Adam Berndt
I Have Seen the Lord

Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and He had said these things to her. (v. 18)

What an extraordinary scene this must have been that Sunday morning after Jesus’ crucifixion. There are four accounts of the empty tomb: Matthew 28:1-10, Mark 16:1-11, Luke 24:1-12 and John 20:1-18. Each of these narratives differ in the details of that morning. It can be difficult to reconcile these differences but not impossible. I can barely imagine the state of mind of the women as they were on their way to finish preparing the body of the dead Jesus only to find the tomb empty. I would have probably gotten the details mixed up too. Professional investigators will tell you it is very common to encounter differences in stories when they interview witnesses to a crime. There are a few points, however, that remain the same and they are important. Mary Magdalene was the first person to see the risen Lord Jesus. Jesus chose her to be the first to “Go tell” the disciples and the world. Mary was the very first to tell the good news about Jesus Christ.

Father God, Lord Jesus, Holy Spirit what an amazing thing You have done for us. Thank You.

Prayer concern: Those who have not heard the Good News, “He is Risen!”

Pete Wormwood
Come and See; Go and Tell

...Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples... (v.6-7)

I love how Matthew tells the story of the resurrection of Jesus! In Mark’s gospel, the stone has already been rolled away when the women arrive at the tomb on that first Easter morning. However, in Matthew’s gospel a messenger from God rolls the stone away from the tomb in front of the women. In Matthew’s gospel, this is not so the resurrected Jesus can get out (he has already been raised), rather it is so the women present, and you and I as hearers of the gospel today, are drawn in to the tomb to come and see! Matthew uses the word “see” four times in this short reading. It reminds us of the promise you and I will indeed see the resurrected Jesus in our everyday lives and journeys of faith this very day.

Those women become the first evangelists; the first to share the good news of what this resurrection can mean for our lives... However, they are not perfect. They are just like you and me! “So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell the disciples.” (v. 8) With fear on many days, as well as great joy, the resurrected Jesus shows up in our lives through community, prayer, scripture, worship, and service to others. With fear on many days, as well as great joy, God uses us to “go quickly and tell” others of the difference the resurrected Jesus makes in our lives.

How will the risen Jesus bring resurrection to your life today? Will you share the story and power of that resurrection with someone?

Risen Lord, as we are fearful, fill us also with the great joy of resurrection power in our daily lives, and use us to go quickly and tell others. Amen

Prayer concern: Anyone who needs resurrection of some sort in their lives this day.

Pastor Matt Powell
May God, the source of hope, fill you with all joy and peace by means of your faith in him, so that your hope will continue to grow by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:13