



Promises, Promises

2021 🌱 LENT DEVOTIONAL

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	1	<i>Tell It!</i>	28
<i>Ashes to Action</i>	3	<i>Ordinal Promises</i>	29
<i>(Dis)Obedience</i>	4	<i>Staring at Statues</i>	30
<i>The Thief in the Mirror</i>	5	<i>God-Relying Grumbling</i>	31
<i>The Place to Begin</i>	6	<i>Living Up to the Hype</i>	34
<i>Waiting</i>	7	<i>Overseer</i>	35
<i>Powerful Questions</i>	8	<i>Fresh-Squeezed</i>	36
<i>What Not to Say</i>	9	<i>False Positives, False Negatives,</i> <i>False Promises</i>	37
<i>Walking Through Water</i>	11	<i>We Want Promises</i>	38
<i>Promises Delayed</i>	12	<i>Write It On Our Hearts</i>	39
<i>Making Reparations</i>	13	<i>Failure</i>	40
<i>The God Who Sees</i>	14	<i>Generous Grace</i>	41
<i>Some Things Can't Do Some Things</i>	15	<i>Jesus Shouted</i>	42
<i>No Matter Who</i>	16	<i>Wonder</i>	43
<i>Telos</i>	17	<i>Jesus Take the Wheel</i>	44
<i>Judgment</i>	18	<i>Memory Omission</i>	45
<i>My Country Broke My Heart</i>	19	<i>Operatives, Standing By</i>	46
<i>Freed Up</i>	20	<i>When Worms Rule</i>	48
<i>When We Don't Know What to Say</i>	22	<i>Getting Real</i>	49
<i>Creation on the Cross</i>	23	<i>The Promise of Joy</i>	50
<i>A New Lens</i>	24	<i>Eat and Run</i>	51
<i>Under Inflated</i>	25	<i>Good Friday</i>	52
<i>The All-Important P.S. to John 3:16</i>	26	<i>To Be Human</i>	53
<i>From the East and the West and the North</i> <i>and the South</i>	27	<i>Promise of Eternal Life</i>	54



Introduction

Has God's steadfast love forever ceased? Are God's promises at an end for all time?

—Psalm 77:8 (NRSV)

QUINN CALDWELL ❖ We know, we know. You've been burned before. Your trust has been bent to the limit, then snapped. Politicians. Lovers. Broadband providers. That very expensive eye cream. Western civilization. The church. They promised so much, and it hardly matters whether they simply tried and failed, or never intended to honor their promises in the first place. The result is the same: a smaller capacity to trust, a larger cynicism. We know. Us too.

They say God isn't like the ones who let you down, is bigger than the pressures and failings that make us fail each other, is trustworthy. But when it seems like you've been let down by everyone and everything you used to trust, such claims can be hard to buy. It's hard not to look at God with the same jaded eye you've begun to cast on everything else. "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age," the creator of heaven and earth croons, and you roll your eyes. "Promises, promises," you sneer, and resume doom scrolling.

If that is—or has ever been—you, then come join the rest of us. We've all been there ourselves, even the authors of these devotions. Some of us are still there. Some of us go back and forth from day to day, or within a day. You're not alone.

But we also think the ancestors may have been right when they said what they said about God's trustworthiness. We've caught a glimpse of it ourselves, and we're trying to let that glimpse turn into a whole new vision for the future. Want to come with? Bring your cynicism. Bring your burn scars. But be sure you bring, too, that little bit of hope you still have, that despite everything you've been through, someday you might still meet a gorgeous, sweet-talking god who won't let you down.

We might be deluding ourselves. But there's only one way to find out for sure. So what do you say? One more try?



Ashes to Action

You humble yourselves by going through the motions of penance . . . and cover yourselves with ashes. Is this what you call fasting? No, this is the kind of fasting I want: Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people.

—Isaiah 58:5-6 excerpts (NLT)

KENNETH L. SAMUEL ❖ Many Americans take great pride in our national symbols. We pledge allegiance to our flag. We stand for the singing of the Star-Spangled Banner. We salute our military personnel and we honor our military veterans. Our Fourth of July Independence Celebration is always one of the most festive and spectacular events of the year.

Christians are pretty big on symbols as well. We hold the Cross of Calvary in sacred esteem. We worship in churches and cathedrals that invite our eyes to look vertically toward the celestial majesty of God. And today, many Christians will mark the holy day with ashes on their foreheads, remembering that we are dust, in need of redemption.

Symbols are wondrously inspiring, but symbols are essentially empty, if they don't point to an actual substance of action.

Standing for our National Anthem is symbolically appropriate, but those who take a knee during our National Anthem point to the contradiction of “Land of the free” and police brutality in black communities.

Honoring our military is wonderful, but those who declare war against voter suppression are fighting for the very freedoms for which our military men and women risk their lives.

Holding the Cross in high reverence is glorious, but it means nothing if we are unwilling to make individual sacrifices for the common good.

And today, our ashes remain nothing more than ashes, without a commitment to repent for our sins of selfishness and live anew in the Spirit of God's All-Encompassing Love.

PRAYER *Ashes to Action. Dust to Determination. Amen.*

(Dis)Obedience

I prayed to the Lord my God and made confession, saying,
 “. . . To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled
 against him, and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God.”

—Daniel 9:4 and 9-10a (NRSV)

RACHEL HACKENBERG ❖ I've been thinking about getting a dog. I grew up in a house that had dogs—at least one and as many as three—and usually one cat. Full disclosure: I'm actually a cat person. The stoic nature, the coy affection, the quick offense. Nevertheless I'm considering a dog, a friendly personality to draw me out and to inconvenience life with unnecessarily abundant affection.

There are logistical considerations, of course. A fenced yard. An abundance of poop bags. Pet health insurance. Because I no longer live next to a cornfield where fences and poop are not critical issues, where a pet could be buried without a permit. These are considerations, but they are not my biggest concern.

My biggest concern is training.

A well-trained dog is the sign of a well-trained owner, and I don't train well. Sit. Stay. Heel. Obedience isn't my strong suit. Give me a rule, an assignment, a path, and I'm going to step just slightly out of line—just to prove I can.

Obedience is a promise—an allegiance—that is consistently practiced until it becomes a habit. Obedience is a set of boundaries, a realm of authority within which we agree to reside.

Until we don't. Until we don't agree with the boundaries and we disavow the faithful habits.

At which point, the poop bags are needed in the house, the leash flails owner-less behind a sprinting dog, the joy of recklessness turns to panic, greed breaks the boundaries of generosity, violence chews its way through the corner of well-being, and the name of God is dragged through the mud of slander.

PRAYER *Dear God, toeing the line isn't my nature. I'm so grateful that mercy is yours.*

The Thief in the Mirror

Jesus said, “Anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate,
but climbs in by another way, is a thief and a bandit.”

—John 10:1 (NRSV)

MATT LANEY ❖ I’m writing this in November, a week after the presidential election. It wasn’t close, yet the losing candidate has yet to concede. Instead, he and his surrogates are spewing lies about voting fraud and election irregularities, launching dozens of bogus lawsuits to delay states from certifying results. It could all be theatrics to appeal to his base. It might also be a desperate, but shockingly well-supported, attempt to hold onto power despite the will of the people and electoral votes. That would be a coup.

As you’re reading this today, February 19, 2021, we most likely know how it turned out. I pray there was no violence and that America’s tradition of peaceful, dignified transfers of power was upheld.

Jesus saw it coming. Jesus did not envisage democracy and exploiting presidential election loopholes, yet he was an expert on the machinations of the human heart. He knew the appropriate path is easily and frequently subverted.

The season of Lent is an invitation to get honest and acknowledge our own habit of subverting tradition and best practices, and doing an end-run instead. Bandits come in all shapes, sizes, professions, and political stripes. There’s one in your mirror and in mine. That’s the bad news. The good news is the bad news does not have the last word.

PRAYER *God, I can be a sneaky and devious thief.
Thanks for doing an end-run of grace on me.*

The Place to Begin

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

—Psalm 25:1 (NRSV)

TALITHA ARNOLD ❖ I wonder how long the psalmist lingered over that opening line: “To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.” Perhaps the writer moved quickly to the next verse: “O my God, in thee I trust.” But maybe it took a while before he could pen those words of faith.

The psalmist wasn’t feeling much trust in those around him: “Let me not be put to shame, let not my enemies exult over me,” the psalmist asked. Feeling besieged by the malevolence of others can make it hard to trust the Almighty. Moreover, the psalmist’s anxiety wasn’t limited to outside forces. “Remember not the sins of my youth, or my transgressions,” the writer prayed and reminded God, “according to thy steadfast love, remember me.”

To be sure, by the tenth verse, the psalmist affirmed God’s goodness and proclaimed that “all the paths of Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness.” But I’m not sure that’s where the writer began. Maybe he simply took the first step on that path by lifting up his soul to the Lord.

Perhaps this Lent, that’s where some of us begin our journey, too. Not with songs of praise or affirmations of deep trust, but simply lifting our souls to God. Maybe we do it with fingers crossed and rubbing a rabbit’s foot, hoping something good will come of it. The important thing is to *do* it, to join with the ancient psalmist and say, “Here’s my soul, Lord, in whatever shape it’s in. I lift it to you.” That’s the first step of Lent’s journey. May God grant us the courage to take it.

PRAYER *To you, O Lord, we lift our souls. In you, O Lord, may we find ourselves. With you, O Lord, may we find our way. Amen.*

Waiting

At once the Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among the wild animals, and the angels took care of him.

—Mark 1:12-13 (CEB)

MARTHA SPONG ❖ Mark doesn't describe what happened when Jesus was tempted by Satan. Maybe we remember the longer versions of the story found in other Gospels, in which three temptations are offered and rejected. Mark keeps it simple and leaves the details to our imaginations. Jesus waited through those forty days; there is so much empty space for our questions in this scant description.

I close my eyes and picture Jesus, driven into the wilderness by the Spirit of God. I imagine the dry heat, and the bright sun, and the desert plants. I imagine a search for shelter, and a growing hunger, and a thirst for something, anything, to drink in a place where water in streams appeared and disappeared with the seasons.

I imagine Jesus, emptied out, waiting.

I imagine Satan, waiting for the moment when hunger and thirst and watchfulness made Jesus most vulnerable.

There has been a lot of waiting for all of us in the past year. Waiting for things to get back to normal. Waiting for mail to be delivered. Waiting for ballots to be counted. Waiting for the inevitable escalation in numbers of positive diagnoses, in numbers of deaths. Waiting for someone to make things right.

I imagine Jesus feeling far from God, yet closer, too. We have learned this—are learning this—in the wilderness of an unsettled world, wondering if God is busy elsewhere, or simply waiting for us on the other side of time.

PRAYER *Holy One, we are waiting for you.
We pray you are waiting for us, too. Amen.*

Powerful Questions

Will the Lord reject forever? Will God never show favor again? Has God's unfailing love vanished forever? Has God's promise failed for all time? Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has God in anger withheld compassion?

—Psalm 77:7-9 (NIV)

MARILYN PAGÁN-BANKS ❖ I am currently training as a certified professional coach, and one of the main competencies taught is the asking of powerful questions. As a coach, we are not to provide the answers that our client is seeking to find, but to ask the types of questions that will allow them to uncover and discover the answers they are seeking for themselves and to gain clarity on next steps. Coaches accompany clients as they do their own work.

While it doesn't appear that the psalmist had a coach, it is clear they remembered how God has always accompanied them. In their despair and pain, they remembered all that God had done over the years. The cries became questions, and the questions led to deeper clarity and a renewed conviction: that if God did it before, God can do it again.

Perhaps this is why the seasons of the church are so important. We don't all have coaches, but we do have the story of a love so profound that God wrapped it in flesh and dwelled among us. A love so magic that death could not destroy it. A love that is present and possible for all creation to experience.

The season of Lent is an opportunity for us to turn back to God, again. To recall the story of God's liberative love as modeled in the life and ministry of Jesus. To have the courage and humility to ask powerful questions of ourselves as followers of Jesus and as the church, with the intention of living truly transformed lives and to be the church.

PRAYER *Gracious God, when we don't have all the answers, please help us to ask the right questions. Amen.*

What Not to Say

Blessed is the one whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty.
For God wounds but also binds up; God injures, but those same hands also heal.

—Job 5:17-18 (NIV)

JOHN EDGERTON ❖ Oh, Eliphaz the Temanite, you really stuck your foot in it this time. In the beginning of the book of Job, a righteous person loses everything that mattered and winds up miserable. Now here comes Eliphaz—supposedly Job’s friend—saying there must be an explanation. “You must have done something wrong. If you confess then God will give you back everything.”

Yikes.

Blaming the victim while also offering empty promises that the irreparable will be repaired? Eliphaz is dead wrong. God even says so.

Bad things do, in fact, happen to good people. There is no simple moral arithmetic that explains why some people get all the breaks and others have nothing but heartbreak. Living a moral life is not a divine insurance policy to fend off disaster. That’s not how fate and fortune work, I’m sorry to say. Don’t take my word for it, though. That is the whole argument of the book of Job.

Here is what God promises in the face of heartbreak and loss, here is the truth about God revealed in the book of Job: God listens to our heartbreak.

God heard every word that Job had to say. When Job fumed with anger, God was listening. When Job cried out in grief and despair, God was listening. When Job did his utmost to blaspheme against God, hurt God’s feelings and throw God’s promises right back in the divine countenance, God was listening.

God will listen when we are angry. When we scream in God’s face in pain and grief, God is wise enough and good enough not to offer explanations. Because grieving people don’t need answers. We need the comfort of knowing we aren’t alone, that someone is listening.

PRAYER *God, hear now these prayers of your people,
as we lay our heartbreaks before you. . .*



Walking Through Water

Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters;
yet your footprints were unseen.

—Psalm 77:19 (NRSV)

VINCE AMLIN ❖ The last two miles of St. Cuthbert's Way cross the floor of the North Sea. You have to time it, of course, for the two windows each day when the path between the Northumbrian coastline and Holy Island dries out (relatively).

Kyle and I started the day 15 miles from the water, woke early, and kept a dogged pace all morning to make sure we got there on schedule. I had studied the route for months, plotting out our journey with precision so we didn't get stranded on one side or the other (let alone in the middle!).

Even with tide tables, guidebooks, and poles stuck deep in the seafloor to mark our path, it felt like an act of faith to hike into the middle of the ocean, to find myself a mile in either direction from dry land.

How much more so for the Israelites, who simply saw their opportunity and had to take it? Who had Pharaoh's army at their backs and no time to ask when the Red Sea might come crashing in again?

In my experience, that's often how it feels to be led by God. A way opens, and I'm invited to take it. Not a moment to consider my options until I'm already a mile out to sea, wondering whether I can make it across.

Starting a church. Having a child with special needs. Pastoring through a pandemic.

Seeing the mighty waters surging around me. Trying to trust that the one who brought me this far will guide me safely to the far shore.

PRAYER *Pathmaker, open a way and bring me through.*

Promises Delayed

Abram said [to God], “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.” Then the word of the Lord came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” God took Abram outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be.” Abram believed the Lord.

—Genesis 15:3-6 (NIV)

MOLLY BASKETTE ❖ It could be that your faith is not the kind that thinks God owes you anything. Lucky you! God will never disappoint.

But Abram was of the other sort. God promised him—more than once—that he would have a son to carry on his name. In our age of a million ways of leaving a legacy after our passing (The Internet Is Forever), it might be hard for us to understand why childbearing was so important for Abram. But it was everything.

And then God, despite those very clear promises, failed to deliver. For decades. Until long past Sarai’s procreative years. It must have seemed that God was toying with them—either distracted with a million other concerns, or worse: teasing and never intending to follow through.

What does it mean when we think God has made a promise to us that is not kept. . . at least for a very long time? Does God have a short attention span? Is God prevented by other forces—perhaps malevolent ones—from acting sooner? Is God waiting for something in us to finally be receptive, the combination lock of our hearts to click open? Or does God, who lives in the past-present-future, know exactly the right timing?

PRAYER *God, give us the courage to ask you for what we really want. To listen for your answer, perhaps even make us a promise. And then give us the patience to wait as long as it takes for you to make good. Amen.*

Making Reparations

But Abram said to Sarai, “Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please.”
Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and Hagar ran away from Sarai.

—Genesis 16:6 (NRSV)

JENNIFER BROWNELL ❖ When my great-grandparents died, the house they’d built remained home base for my single grandmother and her young children. The home was sold when I was a child, but some of my earliest memories are from there—the seeming acres of grass, the artfully carved bannister, the intoxicating scent of hairspray mixed with cigarette smoke wafting from the bedrooms.

Recently I came across a 1938 map on which I located the street where my grandmother’s house was built. Her street on the map was in a “green” neighborhood, which meant it was “First Grade.” According to the 92-page guide that accompanied the map, First Grade properties were considered good lending risks for mortgage companies, while Fourth Grade properties (in red on the map), with their mix of “Negroes,” “Foreign Born” and other “Undesirable” residents were considered poor ones.

I was not there when Sarai, my grandmother in faith, beat Hagar. I was not there when my white ancestors tortured and enslaved people of African descent. I was not there when mortgage companies used racial bias and xenophobia to decide which properties they would lend money to in most American cities. I was not there when my family built a stable home in a “pleasant” neighborhood, a home they were able to mortgage because their skin was white.

I was not there. And yet the economic and emotional impact of those times ripple into this time. So when I hear calls to make amends or reparations, I listen.

PRAYER *Dear God, give us the wisdom and the courage to make amends and reparations. Amen.*

The God Who Sees

An angel of God found Hagar beside a spring in the desert.
He said, “Hagar, maid of Sarai, what are you doing here?” She said,
“I’m running away from Sarai my mistress.” The angel of God said,
“Go back to your mistress. Put up with her abuse.”

—Genesis 16:7-10 (MSG)

VICKI KEMPER ❖ Of all the Bible stories that reveal humanity’s alarming capacity for cruelty and exploitation, the story of Hagar, Sarah, and Abraham is among the worst. A woman of color is used, abused, and exiled by God’s chosen ones, and though God helps Hagar and her son to survive, God does not change their oppressive circumstances.

People of power and privilege have long used this disturbing tale to justify the separate and unequal treatment of genders, races, and religions. They have read it as the story of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac, relegating Hagar and Ishmael to minor and irrelevant roles.

But Hagar lives her own story. She discovers God is with her in the wilderness. And as the only woman in all the Bible to name the Holy One, she becomes part of the divine story, calling God “the Living One who sees me.”

This is not to discount the crushing realities of racism and sexism, the untold suffering of those we fail to see, or the many ways our actions and inaction tell others to endure injustice. This is not to tie a pretty bow on an explosive package and go merrily on our way.

This is to remind you that God sees you, too. This is to encourage you to see others with God’s eyes.

PRAYER *We don’t understand why liberation takes so long.
But we thank you for seeing us and making a way out of no way.*

Some Things Can't Do Some Things

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

—Romans 4:13 (NRSV)

QUINN G. CALDWELL ❖ We love the things we build, us humans. Like parents with their children, we're just so enamored with the works of our hands: our products, our relationships, our institutions, our religions. But parents who rely on their offspring for the wrong things—fulfilling their parents' emotional needs, giving meaning to their parents' lives, saving their marriages—find that their children always ultimately fail in these tasks. Such tasks are beyond children's powers, and it is unfair to ask them of children.

This is Paul's point, too. No human creations, no matter how mighty the inspiration that created or sustains them, can do what God can. They may be shot through with love and power, but they are not God. If we ask them to do things beyond their powers, they will fail at them.

Many of us spent a lot of time over the last year fighting for political parties and candidates. This is good; we should do that. Nevertheless, there are things they will never be able to do.

Many of us spend a lot of time throughout our lives on our religions. This is good; we should do that. Nevertheless, there are things they will never be able to do.

They may be able to fulfill short-term promises—but not eternal ones. They may love us—but that love will always be conditional, imperfect. They may tell us about salvation—they may even be able to point to it—but the things we create will never be the things that finally save us.

PRAYER *For your promises beyond our abilities, and for having the power to keep them, thank you. Amen.*

No Matter Who

The Lord stood beside Jacob and said, “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised.”

—Genesis 28:13–15 abridged (NRSV)

MARY LUTI ♦ Jacob was born into the biblical family that started it all. It was his grandfather Abraham with whom God made the covenant, promising to bless him and his descendants forever.

But Jacob, whose name means, roughly, “con man,” was not big on promises. He was a double-dealer from the womb. He even stole the blessing that would’ve made his older twin, Esau, the family head and bearer of the covenant. That was brazen, even for Jacob.

Esau’s enraged, so Jacob runs. One night he camps in a strange land. Tucking a .22 under his pillow—well, a rock, but the biggest rock he can find—he sleeps the fitful sleep of a bad conscience. He dreams of an escalator to heaven, angels riding up and down, God at the top. The God he cheated and deceived.

But God’s faithfulness is stronger than patriarchal dysfunction. “I keep the covenant no matter who bears it,” God tells him. “That would be you, Jacob. It’ll take you 20 more years to grow up, but I’ll be with you until we have a wrestling match, and you decide to have some integrity. I’ll still be with you when you change your name to Israel, and finally get a life that does somebody some good.”

Lent’s a time for examining our souls. If, as you examine yours, you worry that you’ll never straighten out, never do anyone any good, that God can’t love or use you because you’re a hot mess of needs and wounds—take heart! The God who turned a Jacob into an Israel isn’t going to have any trouble with you. No trouble at all.

PRAYER *It might take 20 more years, Faithful One, but you can do it. You can make me yours. Even me.*

Telos

**“I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.
Be perfect, therefore, as your Abba in heaven is perfect.**

—Matthew 5:44 and 48 adapted (NRSV)

KAJI DOUŠA ❖ “You had me at hello.”

It’s one of the most iconic scenes of [cis-het] romantic cinema. She says, “You had me at hello,” after he soliloquizes: “You complete me.” What a lovely phrase to utter.

So many of us walk around with this feeling that we are incomplete. That we have this emptiness that only the right other person can fill. That if we could just find that person—or find someone and turn them into this person—we can fill that void. But another person will never make us complete. In a lasting way, anyway. So what does?

First: a good Greek word. Telos. It’s a goal, an aim. An ideological end. And in this passage, the telos, the goal, the end, is:

Completion.

Here, Jesus gives you the end. And he always gives some ways to get there. I start at the end of the passage: Jesus said, “Be perfect, as your Abba in heaven is perfect.” And perfect is just a troublesome translation of the Greek, which is. . .

Teleios.

Must we pray for our enemies? Must we love them? Jesus sees the void. He’s listened to the prayers. He knows about the hatred, the enmity. And he wants to offer a path to completion.

Love is the end. It is the means. It is where we begin and where we end. Love is the Alpha and the Omega. God. Is. Love.

So there’s your telos. There’s your goal. Your end. You call God into your conflicts. Your emptiness. Your anger and your resentments. And with God as the ends, you have the means.

PRAYER *God, make the path to my end clear in my sight. Amen.*

Judgment

This is the Lord our God, whose judgments are in all the earth.
God is always mindful of the holy promise, of the word that
God commanded, for a thousand generations.

—Psalm 105:7-8 (NRSV adapted)

RACHEL HACKENBERG ❖ It can be hard to exorcise harmful theology from our psyches. Bad things happen, injustices cycle with violence, and (for some of us) the knee-jerk reaction is to wonder why God has it in for us. “God isn’t always mindful of God’s promises,” our psyches mutter. “Otherwise, why do we hurt so much, suffer so much, weep and rage and gnash our teeth so much?” Too many of us then turn toward the mirror and victim-blame: “It’s my fault. I’m not good enough, faithful enough, or superbly human enough in God’s judgment.”

The psalmist’s proclamation (à la the NRSV) that God’s judgments are in all the earth challenges that theological paddle of the inner voice, raising the question: “If God’s judgment is in the earth, and if I (we) believe God’s judgment to be a cause of harm and punishment, then am I prepared to believe that God’s punishment is embedded in the earth? Are the trees rooted in victim-blaming soil? Does the river mutter angrily? Do the clouds count God’s failed promises—and their own?”

If, on the other hand, God’s judgment in the earth is why there are beautifully diverse flora and fauna, if it generates new life with every season, if it glimmers with starry guides and swells the oceans on a faithful rhythm—then might I too, with all my dusty ashes and errors, be a beautiful result of God’s wise and discerning judgment?

PRAYER *Just as your judgment is in the earth, O God,
your judgment lives within me too—
not to cause harm but to multiply life,
not to condemn but to discern,
not to validate injustices
but to hold out eternal promises.
Thanks be!*

My Country Broke My Heart

If we see hope, it's not really hope.

—Romans 8:24 (adapted)

DONNA SCHAPER ♦ I hoped that my country was as good as the teachers said. I hoped that my homeland was exceptional.

Then I started figuring out the math about Native Peoples and how we stole their land. Maybe it was the cellphone that showed me how much violence there always has been against black men, in particular, as well as queer people. I had always known domestic violence. It lived in the “master” bedroom in my house. I had followed my mother’s lead in making sure nobody knew how bad it was in our house, only to discover, as a pastor, that incest joined domestic violence to are fairly commonplace in our country.

These truth-filled looks at my country started a long time ago. They have matured into a great-type twisting. The great national reckoning of Spring 2020 resulted in my losing what little innocence I had left. Somebody should write a growing up novel about a seventy-year-old.

I am learning to take not just the one knee of protest. Now I am learning how to take two knees. The ones of personal repentance as well as its public partner.

Clarinetist Andrew McGill plays a rendition of “America the Beautiful.” He doesn’t let the music end. He leaves it unfinished. He leaves it open. What else is there to do with a broken heart? Hope that you can see isn’t hope. You have to hope for it, on your knees. From there you have a pretty good picture of God’s future, instead of yours alone. That hope begins the process of repairing your past and making reparations forward, for a truly exceptional future.

PRAYER *Unfinished Spirit, twist us into pretzels of prayer. Amen.*

Freed Up

But can anyone know what they've accidentally done wrong? Clear me of any unknown sin and save your servant from willful sins. Don't let them rule me.

—Psalm 19:12-13 (CEB)

PHIWA LANGENI ❖ This psalm snippet is a wonderful catch-all for the things I'm sure I'm doing wrong that I'm not consciously aware I'm doing. It also has space to release my mind from fretting over trying to determine what those things may or may not be. Those of us who are professional overthinkers can appreciate that. While there's much comfort in the freedom embedded in these verses, they can also be extremely dangerous.

In a Post-Information Age where vast amounts of knowledge can be uncovered within seconds, ignorance is only blissful for those who are privileged enough to enjoy it. Everyone else ends up having to pay the immense cost of that benefit, often in dehumanizing and deadly ways. One could argue that it's willful to not see how our own seemingly small decisions can literally strip someone else of theirs.

Instead of telling anyone who they are or where they need to be, I invite you to choose your own Lenten adventure in this time of introspection and of preparation for what is yet ahead in this season. If you find yourself afflicted or anxious, let this psalmist's words be your prayer—and don't let any of it rule you.

However, if you relate to the blissful ignorance of your relative privileges, may these words wrest your spirit and purposefully guide you away from your comfortable coves and into the places where God's collaborators are most needed.

If we do this adventure thoroughly, it's likely we'll find we're a bit of both.

PRAYER *Disrupt our comfort and eliminate the weighty burdens that aren't ours to carry, so we can freely bask in your blessings. Amen.*



When We Don't Know What to Say

Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here;
let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”
He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

—Mark 9:5-6 (NRSV)

MARTHA SPONG ❖ When Jesus took Peter and James and John up the mountain with him on the fateful day of his Transfiguration, they had no prior experience of mountaintop meetings with the spirits of faith ancestors or the overshadowing of the Spirit of God. I cringe a little when Peter blurts out his desire to hold onto the moment. His reflection on the situation is exactly the kind we might offer ourselves when we don't know what to say but feel the internal conversational pressure to say something, anything, anyway.

It makes me think of times I have tried to say words that are sympathetic, or friendly, or even wise, and instead said something insulting or clueless or not-so-bright sounding. It happens when we are in deeper than we realized, or in this case, up higher than we imagined. I think of Peter and remember the times I later wished I had said nothing or had waited for clearer understanding.

I love this story, because it points to God's understanding, which is so much deeper than ours. Peter had an important part to play, yet to unfold, and beyond his imagining. Surely that time on the mountaintop came back to him in his ministry after the Resurrection. Even when we don't understand yet, God gives us moments of connection to remember later—moments when we say, “Oh! Now I get it. Now I know what to say.”

PRAYER *Holy One, thank you for the understanding you give that comes with time. Amen.*

Creation on the Cross

But we proclaim Christ crucified.

—1 Corinthians 1:23 (NRSV)

TALITHA ARNOLD ♦ Years ago in Santa Fe, a local artist created a stir with her painting of the Crucifixion. In place of Jesus on the cross, the artist put a gorilla. Rather than Roman soldiers or Mary and the other women bearing witness below, the artist included animals of all kinds. Like their human counterparts, some turned their heads away, others stared with sorrow at what was happening above them.

For weeks, the local paper was filled with letters about the painting. Many devout Christians saw the artist's depiction as sacrilegious and mocking of Jesus' passion. They felt their faith was ridiculed and their Savior denigrated. Other people used the controversy to paint (no pun intended) all Christians as close-minded sticks-in-the-mud opposed to freedom of expression. Few people seemed to get the artist's message—that just as the powers and principalities of Jesus' time had nailed him to the cross, we modern humans were killing off the rest of creation.

Climate change and other environmental crises make that long-ago painting even more relevant. Jesus' crucifixion certainly demonstrates what we human beings are capable of doing to one another. Yet as Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians, the cross also proclaimed God's power of life over our ways of death. For Paul, the cross called the early Christians to turn away from death to trust God's promise of new life, not just for themselves but for others.

I doubt Paul ever saw a gorilla, much less one on a cross. Yet had the apostle lived in our time of deforestation, global warming, and other ways we crucify creation, I think he would understand the artist's message. Do we have the courage to face the cross of creation and acknowledge what we've done to this earth? Can Lent's hard journey to Easter lead us to new ways of living so that the rest of life on this planet can live?

PRAYER *Forgive us, Lord, for crucifying your creation.*

Give us the courage to repent and turn to your ways of life. Amen.

A New Lens

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?

—1 Corinthians 3:16 (NIV)

MARILYN PAGÁN-BANKS ❖ After a year of living under the cloud of a global pandemic while finding creative and meaningful ways to do church and be church, some of us would answer Paul's question with a loud "Duh!"

But just like the church leaders of Corinth, sometimes we too need to be reminded. Sometimes our behavior does not align with what we say we know to be true about God. We forget what is truly sacred and get caught up in what separates us from one another—instead of remembering the common Source of our very being. We assign worthiness to particular communities while stripping away the very humanity of others. We victim-blame and scapegoat. We ignore oppressive systems that don't directly impact us. We retraumatize those who have been harmed with bad theology, and reduce our mission to simply being nice and respectable.

Too often, we can't recognize God in our neighbor let alone in ourselves.

Fortunately for us, Lent provides us the space to remember and the opportunity to re-adjust our lenses—or get us some new ones. An anti-racist lens. A decolonial lens. An intergenerational lens. An anti-sexist lens. An LGBTQIA+ affirming lens.

Now go ahead, stand in the mirror and recognize God, and—in the words of Ntozake Shange—"Love her fiercely!"

Then go out and notice God in the man collecting your garbage. Recognize God in the young man shot down by the police. Celebrate God in the grandmother raising children. . . again. Notice God in the woman sleeping under the bridge. Acknowledge God in the youth standing on the corner. Know God in the stranger living with mental illness.

God is dwelling in our midst.

PRAYER *Enlighten the eyes of my heart, Lord.*

(Ephesians 1:18, adapted)

Under Inflated

May God give you the desire of your heart
and make all your plans succeed.

—Psalm 20:4 (NIV)

LILLIAN DANIEL ❖ This year, I added an inflatable stand-up paddle board to an existing armada of inflatable kayaks. But before you picture me floating down the Mississippi on a pool toy, let me assure you these are tough little crafts. Made with drop stitch technology, when inflated properly they feel as hard as a traditional surfboard and you can drag them over river rocks. In other words, not one of these is shaped like a giant swan or pink flamingo.

My paddling pal makes fun of how much time I spend obsessing over my paddling gear for a couple of hours on the water. I need my two bottles of ice water, bungee cords so I don't lose my shoes, a first-aid kit, life jacket, and a small safety knife in case I am ever attacked by an aggressive eagle who tries to tie me up.

"Stop puttering and let's just get out there," she says, "because as usual, we're heading out like a herd of turtles!" She's right. I need the nudge.

And yet on a recent trip, I saw her inflatable board sink a bit in the middle, suddenly a bit wobbly and wiggly as her paddling started to look a lot harder than mine. In her enthusiasm to "just get out there," she had under inflated her board. Next trip, I'll pull her back to patience and planning, and that time, I will be right.

I love the wisdom in Psalm 20, where our heart's desires and our plans are not at odds with one another but linked together by a God who wants the best for us.

PRAYER *May your plans be adventurous
and may your adventures be safe. Amen.*

The All-Important P.S. to John 3:16

“For God so loved the world that God gave God’s beloved Child,
so that everyone who believes may not perish but may have eternal life.
Indeed, God did not send their Child into the world to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

—John 3:16-17 (NRSV)

MATT LANEY ❖ This passage includes one of the most well-known verses in the Bible, John 3:16. “John 3:16” can be found on t-shirts, memes, bumper stickers, signs at sporting events, even on the eye-black of an NFL quarterback!

John 3:16 is often used as a litmus test. If you believe in Jesus (which is code for “if you believe what I believe about Jesus”), then you will be saved from eternal damnation. If not, your ultimate destination is bleak. The verse is used and abused as a pretext for condemning people to hell.

I think the writer of John saw that coming as he first penned 3:16, so he included an addendum—a postscript—as a safeguard: “Indeed, God did not send their Child into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17).

When John talks about the world being saved through Jesus, he’s not envisioning a luxurious post-mortem retirement in the clouds for those who “accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior,” a phrase which occurs exactly zero times in the Bible.

For John, salvation begins now by checking the impulse to condemn, and committing instead to the Jesus way of love, forgiveness, nonviolence, doing justice, showing mercy, walking humbly. In short, to love the world as God loves it.

Jesus did not come to condemn. For that, we should be eternally grateful. Jesus came to love and serve and thereby to save.

PRAYER *World Lover, help me check the impulse
to condemn others and to love as Jesus loves.*

From the East and the West and the North and the South

Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those God redeemed
from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east
and from the west, from the north and from the south.

—Psalm 107:2-3 (NRSV)

JENNIFER BROWNELL ❖ I was raised in the far north, the it's-not-Canada-but-you-can-see-it-from-here north. In young adulthood, I traveled to Georgia for the first time on a work trip.

“My, what lovely homes!” I enthused to my hostess as she drove me around town. “Yes,” she drawled. “Of course, when Sherman marched to the sea, he missed us.”

I honestly had to think for a moment before I even knew what she was talking about. To a northern girl, Sherman's march to the sea was ancient history. To my southern hostess, the devastation of the Civil War was part of her daily lived experience.

Where we come from forms us differently, and those differences are often exploited by people in power to keep us separate from one another. The Southern Strategy, for example—a ploy to keep the poor of all races fighting each other instead of the system that disempowers them—continues to mold our thinking and our actions.

In many churches, we are called to the communion table “from the east and the west and the north and the south.” The differences we bring are not erased. We are still from wherever we are from. But gathered at Christ's table, our differences strengthen us instead of dividing us.

PRAYER *Brother Christ, Thank you for redeeming us from trouble
and gathering us in from all the directions
for the feast you prepare for us. Amen.*

Tell It!

Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story—
those God redeemed from the hand of the foe.

—Psalm 107:2 (NIV)

KENNETH L. SAMUEL ❖ The Lenten Season is a season of expectancy. Forty days of sacrifice in expectation of the glorious resurrection celebration. We wait for the realization of deliverance as we muddle through the drudgeries of wilderness existence.

While waiting for wonderful things to unfold, we are tempted to forget that our God is not just the God of glorious outcomes. Our God is also the God of purposeful processes and meaningful struggles. Celebrating a good product is hollow without fully understanding the value of the input. Anthems of victory are far less inspiring without listening to the rhythm and blues of those who extract deep melody out of deep misery.

How Jesus sustained his devotion in the wilderness is even more relevant for us right now than the final triumph of the empty tomb.

There are those among us who face ominous challenges, but still rely on the sufficiency of God's amazing grace. We need them to tell their stories.

There are those suffering through chasms of personal pain, but still refuse to relinquish their duties of service and sacrifice for others in need. We need to hear their testimonies.

There are those bludgeoned by the bitter confrontations between justice and bigotry. . . truth and fallacy. . . self-centered interests and conscientious commitment. . . but who steadfastly continue to fight the good fight. We need their expressions of insight.

According to Maya Angelou, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside of you."

These days of crucial testing call for the witness of those in crisis, but who are yet redeemed.

PRAYER *"This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long."*

(Fanny Crosby's "Blessed Assurance")

Ordinal Promises

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God.”

—John 3:1-2 (NIV)

MOLLY BASKETTE ♦ When I was (more of) a workaholic young minister, a clergy friend changed my life with the following words: “Your marriage promises, and the promises you made to your children when they were baptized, come before your ordination promises. Indeed, they are what will enable you to keep your ordination promises.” With that one proclamation he gave me a way of radically reorienting my life that allowed me to more or less keep my mojo as minister (a notoriously high-burnout career), stabilized my marriage through hard times, and kept me from meltdown levels of mommy guilt when pulled between church and my children.

All of us, including Nicodemus, stand at the crossroads of conflicting promises we have made. Whether the promises were explicit oaths or implied commitments, we can feel drawn and quartered by them in a confounding civilization that wants to extract ever more—not just from the earth but from the creatures living on it.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, which doesn’t mean he was necessarily a vowed priest. But it gave him a primary allegiance to the ruling council, which probably precluded collaborating with the likes of Jesus. Then again, one of the guiding principles of the Pharisees’ study was to be open to fresh interpretations of scripture. So in betraying his brethren by going to Jesus for new teaching, he was actually keeping their primary pledge: to stay open.

PRAYER *God, how would you have us order the promises we have made as we move through life? How would you have us keep our commitments—or break them because you offer us new and better ones?*

Staring at Statues

Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people,
and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. . . And the LORD
said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone
who is bitten shall look at it and live.” So Moses made a serpent of bronze,
and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone,
that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

—Numbers 21:6-9 (NRSV)

JOHN EDGERTON ❖ God’s gift of a snakebite-curing bronze serpent is just a little bit suspect, if I may be so bold. After all, it’s God’s fault that there are all these snakes in the first place! True, the Israelites talked back to God. And, true, whenever someone looks at this bronze serpent they’re cured of snakebites. But it’s kind of like someone smashing a jar of gumballs before declaring, “I’m giving you a gift, a gift of sweeping up the floor. I eagerly anticipate a thank-you note.”

Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to check under my desk for blasphemy-seeking serpents.

But inside this odd text is a deep truth—deadly problems must be engaged straight on. Unless we really, truly, plainly recognize the extent of a problem we can never solve it. In the recovery community, admitting the problem is quite literally step one.

The Israelites must look straight at a bronze statue of a serpent to make their snakebite problem go away. If only we had a bronze statue of a coal-fired power plant to look at to make the climate crisis go away! If only we had a bronze statue of a slave-catcher patrol to look at to make the crisis of police killings of black people go away!

God doesn’t promise us any more supernatural statues, certainly not for problems of our own creation. But God has given us the truth. And the truth is we can solve any deadly problems facing us, but only if we look at them straight on.

PRAYER *God, help us to be honest as we admit and asses the problems we face.*

God-Relying Grumbling

So Moses cried out in prayer to God. God pointed him to a stick of wood.
Moses threw it into the water and the water turned sweet.

—Exodus 15:25 (MSG)

PHIWA LANGENI ❖ As we still navigate the effects of 2020's wide range of unbelievable bizarreness, the stories of the ancient Israelites are oddly comforting. Their action-packed escape from Pharaoh's oppressive rule had plenty of bizarreness, including a series of pandemics plagues and a miraculous maneuvering of the parted Red Sea.

Adrenaline at an all-time high, the people were finally free. . .

. . .to begin a yet-to-be-realized four decades of wandering in the wilderness. On this side of liberation, the water they encountered to quench thirst and hydrate overly exerted bodies was bitter and unpotable. Moses carried the concerns to God, who regularly makes a mockery of impossible. Moses took the wood God showed him, tossed it into the water, and just like that—the water became sweet.

This was the first of several divine interventions Moses initiated on behalf of the people who, before 2020, might be considered chronic whiners. With 2020 behind us, it turns out their grumbling is one of the most God-relying things they could do. When everything comes crashing down and no way forward feels feasible, uttering their grievances relies on the faith and trust in a God who cares enough to hear them.

More than that, when the Israelites grew anxious and decided to take matters into their own hands (e.g. the golden calf fiasco in Exodus 32), God did not abandon them.

Or us.

PRAYER *Loving God, hear our grumbles and prayers.
Even as we human ourselves out of covenant with you,
thank you for faithfully choosing, rescuing,
and caring for us anyway. Amen.*





*Loving God,
hear our grumbles
and prayers.
Amen.*

Living Up to the Hype

The people quarreled with Moses and said. . . “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to bring us to this wretched place? There is no water to drink.” The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Take the staff. . . and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water.”

—Numbers 20:3-8 excerpted (NRSV)

VINCE AMLIN ❖ In his poem, “Security,” William Stafford uses the metaphor of islands that appear each day to give us solid ground on which to venture further into the unknown. The trick, he says, is, “you have to know they are there before they exist.”

As a pastor, I sometimes feel like a tour guide for one of those islands.

Describing the congregation to itself, I tell the story of a church that I know is there, even if it doesn't yet exist. It's a church that reliably shows up when we step forward in faith. But at other moments, we lose sight of it completely and wonder if we made it up.

Like the Israelites in the desert, that can be painful for the people I lead.

“You said you were taking us to a land of milk and honey, but all we see is rocks!”

“You said this was a community of love, but no one has even learned my name!”

They're not wrong. It's never the paradise that we promised (that God promised!) Or it is, but it doesn't exist yet. Looking at all those rocks, we have to know there are unquenchable springs inside them. Looking at all those imperfect strangers, we have to know it is the actual Body of Christ.

And then, through the cracks, it comes streaming forth.

PRAYER *Our Rock and Our Security, make us into the people of love you know we are.*

Overseer

Joseph said to his brothers, “Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf.” His brothers said to him, “Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?”
So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.

—Genesis 37:7-8 (NRSV)

KAJI DOUŠA ❖ Jacob has a favorite son, Joseph. In this story, he’s 17. That’s 17 years of showing that favor. Seventeen years of his brothers building up resentment.

Why? His brothers hated him so much that they began to plot his murder. Obviously, they perceived Joseph to be an existential threat, enough to evince that kind of bloodlust.

So let’s be clear: In this story, the sons who were “mismanaging” the flock were the children of the enslaved women Zilpah and Bilhah. Clearly they weren’t bought into this whole enterprise.

Joseph cared ore about following Daddy’s rules than the others. And then? He had a dream that they all bowed down to him. Which, presumably, they’d been expected to do all their lives. What, then, are we to learn from Jacob and his family?

A leader cares for the flock. Every body, every soul.

Favor that harms another is poisonous on every level. Jacob was poisoned. Joseph was, too. When Joseph dreamt, he envisioned the same ol’ same ol’. Overseer to enslaved. Brother over brother.

God provided the dreams, the vision, and the prophecy. And Joseph had to hold on to it. He couldn’t understand it from his high horse. But humbled? Aware of perspectives beyond his own? Joseph understood anew.

You may be in a ditch, too. You may be in the ditch, parched as hell. And in the ditch, it very well could be that all you can hold on to is: Your dreams. They may stick you in a ditch to dry up “like a raisin in the sun.” But God has other plans.

Receive the vision.

PRAYER *Let God’s will be done. Amen.*

Fresh-Squeezed

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do,
do everything for the glory of God.

—1 Corinthians 10:31 (NRSV)

LILLIAN DANIEL ❖ Where I live, you cannot buy fresh-squeezed orange juice anywhere. So I buy it 90 minutes away, in Iowa City, five small bottles at a time, and freeze them. Later in my kayak, I'll treasure a tiny frozen bottle as it slowly thaws during the hours of the trip, so that at just the right moment, when my forearms are fatigued, I will sip it, half-melted, and God's sweet sugar will rush through my body like a scurvy-suppressing superfood.

Could I simply squeeze the juice myself? Of course, but it's not pretty. I angrily fling orange rinds around the kitchen to punish them for getting stuck in the cheap machine I purchased to replace the better juicer a friend bought me. I broke that good juicer due to not reading the instructions because I knew better. I have come to the conclusion that I am not a natural juicer.

Back when I lived in Chicagoland, I could buy fresh-squeezed orange juice at twelve stops along any ten minutes of highway. But there were times when the juice just sat in my fridge, sadly ignored. These days, I treat my orange juice like a fine wine produced 90 minutes away at a mystical college town food co-op where I imagine juice artisans meditating on each orange's inner loving-kindness and sweetness.

Who am I kidding? Work is work. And I appreciate theirs. The juicers, the growers, the trees, the dirt, and most of all the Creator who came up with the crazy idea of an orange in the first place.

PRAYER *For what we are about to receive,
may the Lord make us truly thankful. Amen.*

False Positives, False Negatives, False Promises

To be sure of the things we hope for.
To be certain of the things we cannot see.

—Hebrews 11:1-2 (adapted)

DONNA SCHAPER ❖ Suffering sometimes wears a silver lining. The reverse is also true. A good new job sometimes results in disappointment. “It was what I always wanted and yet. . .” Also, a bad virus can have positive coattails. “Without the pandemic, I would never have finished that photo album or become a friend of my daughter-in-law.”

There are false negatives and false positives, and not just in tests.

We bought a whole new house so my husband wouldn’t have to commute. Along comes the virus, and he is teaching remotely. My kids left Brooklyn to get their three kids enrolled in school in the fall last year. The school in Brooklyn opened up and the school in Massachusetts closed. Make plans, they say, if you want to make God laugh. Congregations have lost some regulars who moved away and gained a lot of their diaspora who now worship with them.

There are false negatives and false positives. Really excellent planning is a good idea, except that it doesn’t always control the future.

Uncertainty is a sure thing. Therefore: Take aim. Have direction. Beware confusion and fragmentation. Increase your personal executive authority over your hopes and dreams and direction. Be sure of the things for which you hope. Be certain there are things you can’t see.

Aim for God’s time, commonwealth, kingdom, shalom, salvation. The rest is adiaphora, Luther’s word for the non-essential. You can aim there no matter what school opens or close, houses sell or churches grow or not. You can avoid false promises from anywhere. You can receive true promises from anywhere, as well.

PRAYER *Help us take aim, O God, for and with you. Amen.*

We Want Promises

And Jesus answered them, “Go tell John what you have seen and heard:
the blind receive sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear,
the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.”

—Luke 7:22 (NRSV)

MARY LUTI ❖ We believe that action is the proof of faith. We follow Jesus who healed the sick, fed the hungry, and confronted the powers. And when John’s followers asked about his identity, he responded with a litany of deeds: “The blind see, the lame walk. . .and the poor have good news preached to them.”

Wait, what? The poor get a sermon? Shouldn’t they get something more useful than words?

For Jesus, it seems, deeds are necessary, but not enough. People need inspiration, too. Heart-raising horizons. Affirmations of dignity and worth. Revolutionary assurances of a new world coming, and a new way of being in it. They need good news.

Without imagination to reveal the impossible and promises to galvanize the spirit, you can feed people all day and still not satisfy their hunger. You can heal them all day, but still not cure what ails them. Bodies need help; beleaguered hearts do, too.

Colombian author and journalist, Gabriel García Márquez, once reported on an election in northern Mexico where the entrenched ruling party was again poised for victory. Operatives had paid people to attend a rally and listen to the customary catalogue of party accomplishments: new sewers, community centers, streetlights.

Of course, rampant graft meant everything was badly built. Things broke down with depressing regularity. Still, the crowd applauded on cue as speakers touted each achievement. But way in back, a man raised a placard on which he’d scrawled a massively subversive message: Basta ya de realizaciones. Queremos promesas! Enough already with accomplishments. We want promises!

Yes. Yes, we do.

PRAYER *Give us promises as well as health, O God, hope along with bread.
Make us whole with the good news of love.*

Write It On Our Hearts

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

—Jeremiah 31:33 (NRSV)

MARTHA SPONG ❖ Jeremiah's first missives to the exiles in Babylon were a little depressing. "You caused your own problems, and no wonder God is mad at you, so please do suffer while you're in that strange place, out of reach of God, who is—have I mentioned it?—out of sorts with you." His words for the crowd left behind under Babylonian occupation were no more cheerful. "You never listen to what I tell you. What can you expect but more trouble?"

But wait!

Time went by, and God came around with another message for Jeremiah, the promise of a new covenant. God wants to work things out with us. We are saved by our relationship with God—not just from slavery in Egypt, or captivity in Babylon, but also from isolation and sin, and despair over the state of the world.

Which message about God are we supposed to believe?

In the many months we did not worship in person, I grappled with these extremes. Sometimes my head had to talk my heart back into believing, because the cues I depended on in every other difficult season of life were missing: the familiar rituals and the voices raised in song.

Said my head to my heart: look for what is written inside. God has put it there. God is there. We are God's people. If we grasp nothing else from the totality of scripture, may we hold onto this.

PRAYER *God of Love, help us to know what you have written on our hearts. Amen.*

Failure

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God.
Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as
coming from us; our competence is from God.

—2 Corinthians 3:4-5 (NRSV)

RACHEL HACKENBERG ❖ Competent. Is that a high bar or a low one?

For all the competence that comes from God, I still fail with high-but-not-surprising frequency. My capacity for competence is limited. Some days, it's a task I fail to accomplish. Some days, it's a relationship I disappoint. Some days, getting out of bed and facing the day is beyond my capacity. Some days, trusting love and extending grace in a world consumed by ego is too high a bar.

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," wrote Paul in a different letter to the good people of Philippi.

But what if I can't?

"Can't" is a difficult, painful spiral of the spirit, a desolate place where the failures of life and the failures of faith are ghosts whispering, "It's not possible." Redemption isn't possible. Grace isn't possible. Fulfillment isn't possible. Like death and taxes, the only thing those haunting voices are certain of is failure.

It's lovely that Paul can do all things through Christ, but many of us can't do *all* things or even *most* things. Especially when a sense of failure weighs us down.

And yet, even when Paul's confidence irritates and exacerbates those haunting choruses of "I can't," Paul knows something that our worst ghosts don't: the world's valuation of failure and God's valuation of competence exist on two completely different scales. The bootstrap by which I judge myself as a failure is not the love by which God knows me to be capable.

PRAYER *Even when I fail, still I will rejoice.*

Generous Grace

But God raised Jesus from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death,
because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

—Acts 2:24 (NIV)

MARILYN PAGÁN-BANKS ❖ Peter is my favorite disciple (aside from Mary Magdalene, of course!), because his behavior throughout the Gospels reminds me that God can and will use anybody for the building of God's kin-dom.

Peter wasn't afraid to ask questions, to take chances or to risk sounding dumb. He spoke up—sometimes out of turn and way too soon. He was ambitious, curious, and sometimes unclear. At times he was brave and protective (remember that guard's ear?), and other times he was afraid and chose his own safety. All the while, Peter never gave up trying, working, and seeking to be true to his calling.

Peter loved Jesus deeply. It is on this love, faithfulness, and determination that the church was founded.

And so, it is no surprise to me that on that Pentecost holiday, Peter was not about to let the naysayers gaslight those who had decided to follow Jesus. The Holy Spirit filled the hearts of the people and had allowed them to connect and to understand and to hear one another.

Peter did not allow his journey to diminish his conviction. His past trauma did not take away from his testimony. Peter did not shrink in the presence of the "devout" (Acts 2:5, NRSV). He stood on what he knew, controlling the narrative.

And when asked, "What shall we do?" Peter invited them into the community of faith. Because just as death could not keep its hold on Jesus, Peter had learned that it is impossible to hold onto and withhold God's grace.

PRAYER *Thank you, God, for your generous grace. It is our prayer that we, too, boldly and lovingly bear witness in a world that seems determined to squash your story of love and new life. Amen.*

Jesus Shouted

They believed in him, but they loved human praise more than praise from God. Jesus shouted, “Whoever believes in me doesn’t believe in me but in the one who sent me. Whoever sees me sees the one who sent me.”

—John 12:43-45 (NIV)

VICKI KEMPER ❖ It has become something of a hallmark of progressive Christianity to waffle on what we think and believe about Jesus. Social justice? Absolutely! Black Lives Matter? Take me to the next protest. Charity? I’ll see your soup kitchen and raise you a shelter.

But Jesus? Um, well, you know, we don’t want to offend anyone. We don’t want people to think we’re unsophisticated or, God forbid, orthodox in our faith. We don’t want the popular kids to ghost us or the powerful people to knock us off the ladder to self-realization and success.

It’s enough to make an exasperated Jesus shout. Not because he doesn’t understand our fears. Not because he doesn’t appreciate the real cost of discipleship. But because he knows the glorious freedom and new life that speaking our faith can bring. Because he knows that faith in him boils down to trust in a Love that holds no good thing back from us. Because he wants us to know the fullness of life in God.

Many of us have made courageous and risky decisions to speak our truth—about our sexuality or gender identity, our struggles, our disagreements, our need for space or respect. And in doing so, we have discovered empowerment, healing, and happiness.

What amazing things might happen if we speak our faith?

PRAYER *Give us, O God, the courage to come out as Christian.
And when we do, may we shout for joy.*

Wonder

Jesus emptied himself.

—Philippians 2:7a (NRSV)

TALITHA ARNOLD ❖ I wonder if our churches will be fully open by today, this Thursday before Maundy Thursday. I wonder if, in the months between when I write this (November 2020) and when you read it (March 2021), the possibility of a vaccine in the spring will be a reality. As we Christians start Holy Week and our Jewish siblings also begin their holiest of weeks (Palm Sunday is the first day of Passover this year), will it finally be safe to be together again?

I wonder what Easter will be like at the church I serve. How full will we be—or how empty? Perhaps you wonder, too.

I wonder about other things, too. Even if we have a full house, who will be missing? Who has died since last we gathered—a year ago? Who has moved away to be closer to family? Who has left because we couldn't meet their expectations or needs in this troubled time? Who has felt abandoned by us or angry at God? What chairs or pews will still be empty?

But one thing I don't wonder about in the Holy Week ahead is the story we'll share, especially the part about what the disciples did. I don't wonder at all why, when the love and faith they once had ran out, they couldn't keep from betraying or denying him, or simply vanishing into the night and abandoning him.

I don't wonder about any of that because I know what it's like to run on empty—empty of hope, of faith, of love—when all one wants to do is run away. Perhaps you do, too.

The other thing I don't wonder about is that somehow, and for some reason, this Christ Jesus whom Paul wrote about from his prison cell, chose to “empty himself” so he could enter fully into our human life. I don't wonder about it, because what else could a truly loving God do?

PRAYER *Thank you, God. Amen.*

Jesus Take the Wheel

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me,
not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your
own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you,
enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure.

—Philippians 2:12-13 (NRSV)

JOHN EDGERTON ❖ Have you ever heard the phrase, “Jesus, take the wheel”? If you have not, allow me to elucidate this particular pop culture bon mot. Akin to taking our hands off the metaphorical steering wheel of life, “Jesus take the wheel” means, roughly, “God I give up, it’s your problem now!”

I am guilty of looking down on such theology. I tend to cluck my tongue. Jesus take the wheel? Proper road safety dictates keeping my hands firmly on the wheel at 10 and 2, thank you very much. I want to rely on my own careful action to keep me safe. If God chooses to breeze in and bless me with a little extra on top, I’m not going to complain. That’s God’s business.

I want to be in charge of my own life, relying on my own wisdom to steer me on the right course.

Philippians 2 points to a deeper truth. The prudence I pride myself on to solve hard problems? That is a gift from God. The faith I rely on in difficult times? That is a gift from God. Even my desire to do what is right instead of wrong, that too is a gift from God. I am radically, totally, utterly dependent upon God even when I think I am taking care of myself.

This is what God promises to you. That God is and will always remain inextricably bound up in your life. Every choice, every moment, every part of your life is shot through with the presence of God. Your lowest low finds God at your right hand. Your highest high sings glory to God. Thanks be to God!

PRAYER *God—you’re in charge!*
May I both will and work for your good pleasure.

Memory Omission

Jesus said, “They will ridicule him, spit on him, torture him,
and kill him. After three days, he will rise up.”

—Mark 10:34 (CEB)

PHIWA LANGENI ❖ Am I the only one who’s afflicted with Memory Omission? Don’t consult Dr. Internet because I just made up the term. Nonetheless, I’m quite familiar with it as I regularly (un)intentionally forget things that are otherwise easily remembered. This is especially true when there’s a looming undesirable ahead that’s persistently awaiting my attention.

The omission works temporarily as I go about my business having elected to block space in my brain for what I’m avoiding. Then when the thing can no longer be ignored, my omitted memories resurface, and all the previously neglected moments retrospectively illuminate my affliction. The replay also heightens my anxiety and regret for the now-shortened time to respond.

If the disciples were anything like me in this regard, their Memory Omission would’ve actively begun scrubbing away as Jesus listed the upcoming violence leading up to his death. The erasure would have been both subtle and too loud to hear the promise in that last sentence: that he would rise again after the longest three days of their lives.

Even now as we navigate the violence and death-dealing around us during this Lenten season, perhaps even omitting memories as an act of survival, let’s pause long enough to catch Jesus’ embedded promises of life overcoming death. Let us also know with our whole selves that we are never alone in the struggles we face. Feel that truth all the way down to the blood traveling through your body.

Lest we omit, it is the same God-bearing blood that will soon bleed out onto the cross.

PRAYER *Give us the audacity and strength to withstand
what is undesirable so we can hear and embrace
your life-giving promises on the other side. Amen.*

Operatives, Standing By

They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street.

As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them,
 “What are you doing, untying the colt?” They told them what Jesus
 had said; and they allowed them to take it.

—Mark 11:4-6 (NRSV)

QUINN G. CALDWELL ❖ What are we to make of these bystanders? They see someone steal someone else’s ride, and they do the right thing. “What are you doing?!” they yell, running over to intervene. They know how expensive donkeys are. They know it’s our job to watch out for each other.

“No, it’s fine!” these two strangers say. “The Lord needs it and is gonna send it right back; Scout’s honor.”

“Cool cool cool,” the bystanders say, and wander off.

What in the world? Why intervene with sketchy characters behaving sketchily, only to be put off by the flimsiest of explanations? Were the bystanders only interested in protecting their own consciences, not in getting too involved?

Were the two disciples just really scary looking? Were the bystanders that milquetoast?

Or was it planned? Maybe it was all set up ahead of time: the by-standing operatives, having procured the donkey, wait for the disciples and then give the password “Jesus,” and the two disciples give the countersign. Maybe it’s a story about how effective action requires effective organizations, careful planning, and many many people beside the one who seems to be responsible. Maybe it’s a story about how, for every named player in a movement, there are scores of nameless ones, performing small essential tasks faithfully.

PRAYER *Give me the discipline to be part not just of your revolution, but of your organization too, because I know somebody has to be willing to watch the donkey till you’re ready to ride it. Amen.*



When Worms Rule

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said,
“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them,
“What is it you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit,
one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”

—Mark 10: 35-37 (NRSV)

MATT LANEY ❖ I love to eat fish, but I never much liked fishing. I was that kid who struggled putting the worm on the hook. I could think of a thousand other ways to spend the afternoon than sitting in a boat, lamenting my worm’s untimely demise.

Fishing, in Jesus’ time, was no picnic for more significant reasons. Rome controlled all waters and any resources collected from them. Fisherfolk like James and John, the sons of Zebedee, had to pay for the right to fish whether or not the fishing was successful. Heavy taxation, along with the costs of boats and nets, kept Galilean fishers at a subsistence level. In short, they were treated like dirt. . . or like worms.

With that in mind, James and John’s request for top positions in the “Jesus Christ in Glory Corporation” makes a little more sense. Jesus preached a dramatic reversal of fortunes and power. The worms of today would be world rulers of tomorrow. James and John wanted saved seats!

Jesus demurred. Such appointments were above his paygrade, he said. Besides that, James and John obviously needed a little more humility on their resume.

The gospel is about leveling. It’s not only about the lowly being lifted. It’s also about the lofty being lowered until we are all in the same boat.

PRAYER *Thank you, leveling God, for making us more than worms
and less than monarchs for the good of all.*

Getting Real

Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, saying,
“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But Jesus turned and
said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me.”

—Matthew 16:22-23 (NRSV)

MARY LUTI ❖ A friend once got into big trouble at work. She hadn’t set out to cross a line, but she did, and her boss came down hard on her. When she told us about it, she said, “I got what I deserved.” On cue, we protested, “Don’t be so hard on yourself! You didn’t mean it. You’re not a bad person!” We were all very supportive.

Later she said that she’d felt disrespected. We’d declared her incapable of doing anything bad, and she knew that wasn’t true. She’d needed us to take her seriously and bear with her the cross of new self-knowledge. Instead, we’d dismissed her with a few glib words of nonjudgmental support.

Peter was being supportive, too. Jesus had been saying depressing things about getting killed, so Peter hurried to reassure him, “That’s just not going to happen, Jesus. Not to someone like you!” As if nothing bad could ever happen to a good person. Peter was channeling Satan, who’s always encouraging convenient fantasies, imaginary worlds, and unreal relationships.

Jesus slapped Peter down, “To hell with your support!” He wasn’t interested in being someone nothing bad could ever happen to, someone who couldn’t possibly end up like that. He didn’t need Peter’s bogus assurance of invulnerability. He needed companions to share the worst, friends willing to risk complicating their lives in real relationship, followers prepared to face his death squarely, and their own.

We’ve been taught that there’s nothing more important than being supportive. But maybe there is. Maybe it’s getting real.

PRAYER *Face us with the worst, good Jesus.
Break through our illusions. Help us get real.*

The Promise of Joy

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses,
let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.
And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus,
the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross,
scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

—Hebrews 12:1-2 (NIV)

MOLLY BASKETTE ❖ It must be the Puritan still trapped inside of me, but even though I don't believe in a ferocious taskmaster God who is constantly disappointed in us, whenever I read scriptures like this one, I somehow hear it with all the happy words taken out. It's like listening to a grumpy version of Henrietta Pussycat from Mr. Roger's Neighborhood, "Meow meow meow meow hinders, meow sin that entangles, meow meow perseverance, meow meow cross, meow shame."

What if instead my inner redactor skimmed over the difficult words and went straight to the promise of joy?

"For the joy set before him," the author of Hebrews says, Jesus waded through everything else that came with being human, being a prophet and an iconoclast, being a scapegoat. He had his own moments of doubt, fear and terror, but he always ended with his eyes on the prize, the glimmer in the distance.

Beloved: eyes up.

PRAYER *Holy One, we can't skip the roller coaster that is coming:
the pain, the sorrow, the sin, the grief and the unavoidable death
that is part and parcel of being human. But neither do we have
to linger there. Keep our eyes fixed on the horizon, on the promise
of joy that follows every deep night of the soul.*

Eat and Run

“These are your instructions for eating this meal: Be fully dressed, wear your sandals, and carry your walking stick in your hand. Eat the meal with urgency, for this is the Lord’s Passover.”

—Exodus 12:11 (NLT)

KENNETH L SAMUEL ❖ We hate to eat and run. . .especially when the food is delectable and those at the table are convivial. A good meal in a relaxed atmosphere is definitely among the sensual highlights in our lives.

But the Passover and the Eucharist are different kinds of table gatherings. They were never intended to satiate us. These meals are intended to prepare and strengthen us for the difficult journeys ahead of us.

When the Israelites gathered for the first Passover Feast, they were instructed to come to their tables fully outfitted and prepared to embark upon the challenging freedom march out of Egypt to Canaan.

When Harriet Tubman and runaway slaves gathered around the tables of the Underground Railroad, they ate not to be comforted, but to be strengthened for the hazardous trek northward towards emancipation.

When Jesus gathered his disciples at the table for the Last Supper, the meal was not intended to relax them but to commission them as witnesses of his solemn pilgrimage to Calvary.

Every true Communion celebration must be accompanied with a sense of urgency regarding the mission that immediately succeeds the meal. We are never to become so relaxed at the Lord’s table that we miss the Lord’s mandate to “lay aside every weight, and the sin that so easily besets us, and run with patience that is set before us.”

The urgency of the Lord’s mission beyond the Lord’s meal reminds us that we do not live to eat; we really do eat to live.

PRAYER *Lord feed us at your Table. Then free us to do your work. Amen.*

Good Friday

“Abba, into your hands I commend my spirit.”
Having said this, Jesus breathed his last.

—Luke 23:46 (NRSV)

KAJI DOUŠA ❖ I once walked into a church that I found viscerally revolting. Not because it didn’t serve God—the church’s heart was clear. But the spirit was heavy in this church. In this tiny chapel in a tiny town in the Mexican province of Michoacán, every single image was of Jesus on the cross.

Throughout the ages, churches have used art to tell biblical stories so that the people could know the Word even if they couldn’t read it. But in this church, the only Word was the Cross.

I asked our guide, “Why did you bring us here?”

She explained that, in this town, there were only women and children. For generations, when boys came of age to work, they would leave, migrating north, with the promise to send money back home. Everyone left but the women and the children. And everyone mourned while they lived.

And when they would enter their parish chapel—they saw the story of a God who knew their pain, intimately.

This church didn’t catapult from Good Friday to Easter. This church lived with its people on the verge of death.

On this Good Friday, I think we have to observe at the cross. Observe closely. Don’t look away. I think we have to look at the road to the cross. Stay with Jesus the whole way through. Stay the way. And you’ll notice: Those nails. That tree. That noose. The torches. The guns. But that’s not all you’ll notice.

Stay the way, and you’ll see the women who stuck with him. Stay the way, and you’ll see the most remarkable thing we can easily forget. Lynched on that tree, with the crown of thorns they’d put on his head, Jesus looked at them. And he said: “Father. Forgive them. For they know not what they do.”

PRAYER *Show us the cross we need to see, O God. Amen.*

To Be Human

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

—Matthew 27:57-60 (NRSV)

VINCE AMLIN ❖ In Skhul Cave, near Nazareth in lower Galilee, archaeologists discovered the oldest undisputed burial of Homo sapiens. One of the bodies, labeled “Skhul V,” was placed in a small oval grave, hewn in the rock, tucked tightly into a fetal position, the lower jaw of a wild boar placed on top. All of that, some 90,000-100,000 years ago.

Our ancient tendency toward burial has led some to suggest that the Latin root of the word “humanity” is drawn from humando, meaning “burying.” To be human is to bury and to be buried.

Certainly both words (and all of us) are drawn from humus.

Today we reflect on Jesus’ final act of humanity: being laid lovingly in Joseph’s family plot. Wrapped in cloths and placed in a niche carved into the stone to protect his body from scavengers. Just the way people there had been doing for tens of thousands of years. Just the way they had been doing since they were people.

Today the promise of Christmas is kept. The promise of Emmanuel, God with us, in this final act of solidarity. Laid in the ground as we have laid so many down. Returning to the earth as we ourselves will return.

PRAYER *Jesus, we grieve, and we thank you.*

Promise of Eternal Life

Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first,
also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not
understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

—John 20:8-9 (NRSV)

DONNA SCHAPER ❖ A 4-year-old child made a complaint to his father who was reading him Charlotte's Web. "If you had told me he was going to die at the end, I wouldn't have listened all this time. Why didn't you tell me?"

A 4-year-old can ask that question. An adult shouldn't. We all know we are going to die. Pass. Transition. Go to the other side. Finish. End. Cross over. Be complete. Some of us also know that we don't know what happens next—but we do know the promise of eternal life and therefore we sniff it, even at the biological genomic end of our bodies.

Jesus lived well while knowing he was going to die. How? By being so secure in his relationship with his parent and creator. He didn't think he was the whole deal. He knew about death and his divine humanity and didn't bother to be afraid.

Recently we had the resignation of a key lay leader at our congregation. She was burned out, fed up, and the first "younger" leader to be allowed to have big responsibilities in our elder-driven system. She had managed these responsibilities beautifully. She got involved in a power struggle which disgusted her. She was mature enough to say no scapegoating, no blaming, no singling out. She was Jesus like. She was secure. She wasn't worried about death but instead about life and living well. She kept her promises, like Jesus, even when others didn't keep theirs.

Genuine adults don't know how the story is going to end. They do know that it is going to end. Moreover, they know that God is still promising.

PRAYER *You have made promises with us, O God, that we may live forever,
starting tomorrow and continuing through the weekend.
Let us read to the end of your story.*



Let us read to the end of your story.

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