



Lenten Devotional



2026

The Spirit of Reverence

Psalm 130:4

For someone who occasionally jokes about being a “recovering Catholic,” I’ve come to realize that growing up Catholic created a solid foundation on which my faith was built—and where it remains anchored. I attended Catholic school through the fourth grade and went to Mass daily, often hearing the liturgy chanted in Latin.

Recently, I attended Mass with my sister Kathy, who is a devout Catholic. The experience was heartwarming. Listening to the familiar liturgy and watching people make the sign of the cross with holy water, genuflect, kneel, and bow brought back memories of my early formative years. There has always been a reverence in a Catholic church that I deeply appreciate.

Over the years, I’ve felt drawn to occasionally participate in Catholic services, especially during the Lenten season. These visits have a way of leading me into quiet worship—reverent worship directed toward the one true God, who is deserving of all our thanks and praise. The stillness itself often creates a deeper sense of connection with the Father.

While I don’t believe we need a confessional or a priest to absolve our sins, I do appreciate the practice of examining and cleansing one’s conscience before communion. That reflective preparation remains a meaningful part of communion for me to this day.

Lent, in particular, draws me back to certain Catholic traditions—the ashes on the forehead on Ash Wednesday and the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday. And of course, the season culminates in the great celebration of Easter, joyfully singing, “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today.”

I suppose this recovering Catholic is still taking life “one day at a time,” grounded in a foundation formed during a difficult season of my childhood—when our family endured divorce and the death of our mother when I was just nine years old. We were shaken, but not destroyed. The church, through caring nuns, priests, and a loving community, helped carry us through.

Though I don’t agree with all Catholic doctrine, I know where I first learned about Jesus—and for that, I am deeply grateful.

**But with you there is
forgiveness, so that we can,
with reverence, serve you.**

Psalm 130:4

As we journey through this Lenten season, may we remember the passion of Christ and the glory of His resurrection. And perhaps this year, we can all seek a little more reverence.

He is worthy of our thanks and praise.

Meals are familiar territory for Jesus and there are lots of stories in the gospels that happened during and around meals. He fed crowds of thousands; ate with tax collectors, sinners, fisherman, women and men, and religious leaders; and he offered instruction on those who should be welcomed to the table (Luke 14:13). In his book, *Table Life: An Invitation to Everyday Discipleship*, my friend Greg Mamula writes, “Meals were such a significant part of how Jesus went about his mission that of all the symbolic acts Jesus could have given his followers that encompassed his identity, teaching, and mission, he chose a meal.”

The metaphor of table, meals and banquets is a rich and powerful one in Christian faith and practice, rooted in Isaiah 25:6-8, “**...the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food...he will swallow up death forever.**” And our beloved 23rd Psalm includes the words, “**...you prepare a table before me...**” Even the Last Supper figures prominently in all four gospels. Later, following the resurrection, various disciples encountered the risen Christ in settings that included food: Luke 24:36-42 and John 21:9-13.

Christ's gracious hospitality throughout his earthly ministry reveals his desire to provide spiritual and physical nourishment to all and welcomes all, with no preconditions. When Jesus is the host, there is an abundance – more than enough for everyone – and there is always room for another at the table.

As we celebrate the Lord's Supper during Lent and beyond, let's truly remember Jesus' sacrifice as we receive the elements of bread and cup. Let's also not neglect to recognize Jesus' continuous presence at the more ordinary tables at which we find ourselves every day. And let's scooch over, making room for others, as we extend God's grace and hospitality to those God brings into our presence.

Gracious God, at our tables may we recognize you as host, eagerly welcoming whomever you bring into our midst. Amen.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Romans 12:1-2

Offer our bodies as a living sacrifice: This is our way of responding to the overwhelming Mercy, Grace, and Salvation that he gives us daily! Our sacrifice is saying, here I am Lord, send me, use me, shape me to what you desire. It's also a continual offering, it's living and a posture of our heart.

Transformed by the renewing of your mind: This is in my belief the most important part! Renewing our mind starts with God's word. If you read his word. You understand more clearly his heart, what he is calling you to and out of! If you read his word, the Holy Spirit begins to change your perspective, you see God's children differently, through a lens of empathy and the lost needing a savior! When you renew your mind - you renew your life and can begin to see God's good and perfect will for your life!

My prayer is that each of us can intentionally offer up our bodies as living sacrifices to God, for this is our true and proper worship!

Holding Space for Darkness and Light *John 1:5*

I tend to be a (sometimes annoyingly) positive person. One of my top ten Strengths on the StrengthsFinder Assessment is “Positivity.” This means that I tend to see the glass half full and am regularly looking for the silver lining. I celebrate this as one of my strengths and the way God has wired me. So, moving into Lent with its emphasis on darkness, suffering, and a somber appraisal of the evil in the world is not an easy thing for me. But I know that the light shines brightest in the darkest season. I must embrace the dark in order to be able to fully receive the light that is coming on Resurrection Sunday! In this Lenten Season, I commit to hold space for both grief and joy, limitations and hope, sadness and celebration, darkness and light. Would you join me in this season of reflection?

**The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness
can never extinguish it.**

John 1:5

God, help me to embrace the darkness knowing that it is in the darkest night that your light shines the brightest. Help me to sit in the grief, limitations and sadness that are part of Lent and a part of our world, with the belief that joy, hope and RESURRECTION are coming!

Preparing for Life and Ministry

Matthew 4:1-11

What would you be willing to give up to spend quality time with God? During the season of Lent some Christian traditions encourage their members to give up something good as a way of focusing on God. The focus is to be prepared to celebrate Easter and how the story of Easter has changed our lives.

This passage talks about Jesus going into the desert after he was baptized by John for 40 days and nights. It says that he fasted and prayed during this time. Fasting is connected to prayer. Fasting is a way of giving something up for a period of time to be focused on our relationship with Christ.

Fasting is not meant to be forever and the giving up something good like food is not to be forever either. It is a way of saying that nothing comes before God and it opens us up to what God has for us in life and ministry.

Jesus begins his public ministry after this time of baptism, fasting and temptation. Luke 4 says that Jesus went into the desert full of the Holy Spirit and was filled with the Spirit as he comes out of the desert.

Whether you fast during Lent or not, Lent is a time of preparation. Not only for Easter but for how God will lead us in Jesus to a world that needs his love and grace. Where is your focus in this season?

Trusting in God's Goodness

Romans 8:28

When we say, "All things work together for good," we need to realize that God uses ALL things both good and bad to bring about His plan for our lives. We can't see the future or understand what God is doing but we can trust His plan. We are never left to face our difficulties alone. God has promised to guide our steps and uphold us even when we falter and can't see that He is shaping us for His purpose.

Challenges strengthen our faith and character and, in time, teach us patience and trust in God's unfailing love for us. Through all of this, we can seek joy and contentment rather than simply happiness.

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.

Romans 8:28

Stand Still and Watch the Lord Rescue Exodus 14:5-31

Have you ever felt like the Israelites - trapped between their pursuing captors and an impassable, chaotic sea? Perhaps you're experiencing debilitating health challenges, the death of someone close, the loss of a job, a relationship that didn't work out, or maybe the consequences of your own poor decisions. Do you feel trapped and hopeless?

This was likely how Jesus' disciples felt during his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Here's the man for whom they had left everything to follow in hopes that they could serve as Jesus' inner-circle when he was hailed as the true King of the Jews and win their freedom against the oppressive Romans. And now all their dreams of power and success are nailed to a cross and laid in a tomb. They bet their entire lives on a failed Messiah. Imagine the humiliation, embarrassment, shame, and fear of what was next for them.

I like the way the NLT translates Exodus 4:13-14—But Moses told the people, **“Don’t be afraid. Just stand still and watch the Lord rescue you today. The Egyptians you see today will never be seen again. The Lord himself will fight for you. Just stay calm.”** In the midst of all of the legitimately frightening circumstances, what are Moses' words? **“Don’t be afraid...stand still...stay calm.”**

Why? Because **“The Lord himself will fight for you...the Lord will rescue you.”** And sure enough, the unimaginable happens. God parts the Red Sea, the Israelites pass on dry land, and their fearsome captors are swallowed up in the sea behind them. And many years later, Jesus is resurrected from the dead, and our freedom and future is secured.

Do we believe that God can defeat the powers of darkness and rescue us despite how hopeless we feel in the moment? How would your life be different if you could stop being afraid, just stand still, stay calm, and watch the Lord fight for and rescue you? May the Spirit release you from the need to try to control your circumstances, and fill you with confidence in the power of God to make all things right in his time.

**And so I tell you, keep on asking,
and you will receive what you ask for.**

Luke 11:9

Hello Heavenly Father. We gaze with our soul's eyes upon You today. Your attributes are beyond our earthly comprehension and yet we have experienced them through Your Holy Spirit. We have experienced your mercy and compassion, forgiveness and love.

Our conversation with You is alive. We talk to You as we would a deepest confident or trusted friend. Maybe for some you are their only confidant. You understand. Our relationship reaches to the highest level of generosity for You have told us to "ask"...to simply "ask".

We ask for ourselves, we ask for others.

We ask in the impatient moments of doubt.

We ask within the groaning and cries of our spirit.

We ask. We simply ask.

And You hear... You see... You take notice... You answer...

And so we ask Merciful God, God of all Hope, for healing within the deep crevasses of division in the Christian church. We ask for justice and mercy to rule the earth. We ask for those ravaged by war and hate, revenge and cruelty. May Your Kingdom come to earth as it is in heaven.

These are not "asks that are simple"...but we "simply ask" for we know You are the God who has no limits. From the tiniest ask for ourselves to the gigantic cry for our world and all creation, Oh God, we simply ask believing that You hear, see, take notice and answer.

What did you fail at today?

Hebrews 12:2

What did you fail at today?

Most of us resist that question because failure awakens a deeply embedded sense of shame. That shame reaches back to the very beginning—to the moment Adam and Eve failed the one command God gave them. Ever since, human history has unfolded as a story marked by failure, hiding, and fear.

Lent often becomes a sobering reflection on sin and failure—but when shame dominates our imagination, it traps us instead of freeing us. Shame convinces us to hide, to protect ourselves, and to play it safe. Like Adam and Eve, we preserve ourselves through concealment rather than trust.

This same internal shame fuels our eagerness to punish and judge the failures of others—spouses, children, coworkers, supervisors. In a hostile and risky environment, self-protection feels wise. Full commitment feels dangerous.

**We fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.
For the joy set before him, he endured the cross,
disregarding its shame.**

Hebrews 12:2

Lent is not meant awaken our shame; it is meant to heal and transform it. Jesus did not deny shame—he carried it, endured it, and stripped it of its power. Perfection has already been accomplished. There is no pressure left for you or me to prove ourselves.

But there is room to risk everything by following the One who removed our shame.

May this Lenten season awaken your joy and renew your commitment to follow Jesus—openly, honestly, and without fear. When failure becomes safe, commitment becomes possible. And when commitment becomes possible, real growth begins.

Lord Jesus, we confess our failure and our pride in pretending to be perfect. Thank you for enduring the cross and despising its shame, so that we might live in your perfect love and grace. Give us courage to follow you fully and without fear today.

In everything, set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness, and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.

Titus 2:7-8

It sounds so simple—yet how often do we fall short? We know how to talk the talk, but walking the walk can be a daily struggle.

Jesus is our perfect example of both word and action. Through His Word, He reveals truth, and through His life, He demonstrates love in action. When we strive to live rooted in both truth and love, we find freedom from the weight of others' judgment and experience the joy of relationships that flourish in authenticity.

There are days when I don't speak or live according to that perfect example, but there is hope. I am grounded in a foundation of truth and love—one that continually guides me forward and reminds me that better days are always ahead.

Washed Clean

Psalm 51:2-7

When I was growing up on the family farm we raised pigs. We had specific buildings where our sows (mother pigs) would have their babies and stay with them until they were old enough to stop drinking milk and start eating the feed we made for them. The young pigs would stay in these buildings until they were big enough to be moved to another barn, then the process would start over again with a new group of sows. Between each group, the buildings needed to be pressure washed and disinfected to prevent the spread of disease. This was by far the dirtiest job on the farm and it was mine to do once I was old enough and strong enough to handle the pressure washer. I don't mean to be disgusting but when I was done, I would literally be covered head to toe in pig manure, and it didn't smell like roses. I'd go to the house at the end of the day and get directly into the shower to clean up but there was always a faint lingering smell that would last for a while no matter how hard I scrubbed or how clean I was.

In my opinion, this is a perfect illustration of how my sin sticks to me and makes me feel disgusting and unworthy of love or acceptance from God or anyone else. When I try to cover up my sins, it's like putting a coat on over my filthy clothes after I've washed the pig barns. It doesn't remove the mess or the smell; at best it masks them. But the beautiful part of this illustration is that no matter how dirty I am, with one good shower I can wash all the disgusting muck away and I'm clean. That's what Jesus' sacrifice on the cross has done for us. Our Heavenly Father is perfect and good, there is no darkness in Him. We have to be perfectly clean to have fellowship with Him and the only way we can be clean is through the atoning blood of Jesus. No matter what sins we've committed in our lives and how filthy our souls are, if we admit our sins to ourselves and to God, accept responsibility for the choices we've made and turn away from our sinful desires and habits, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us. Our sins will try to linger and stay with us but if we turn to Christ for strength and protection in our times of temptation, we can overcome our sinful tendencies and be conquerors.

So the question I pose is this: will we try to cover our sins and lie to God about our "purity" when He already knows us better than we could ever know ourselves? Or will we come clean, admit our faults, flaws and failures and rely on Jesus, the only one who can wash us white as snow?

God is Faithful

John 15:5

I experienced one of the most difficult and challenging months of my life in February of 2025 as I watched my Mom become weaker and weaker to heart disease and leave our earthly world. She was the very best Mom and human being. I miss her terribly. I have had many conversations with God and have sought to understand and seek his comfort and direction in my loss.

What could God do with my suffering that He couldn't do if I didn't suffer? How do I accept adversity?

He's taught me:

- We sometimes can't understand the reasoning of God, but there is more in God's eyes.
- To pray for courage – all this pain can be used to glorify God. If we can see this in the storm, we show God to others.
- God is loving and supportive and is a hope giver. He restores our joy.

In heartache, I have found a deeper relationship with God and He has shown me more of Himself. Losing Mom was not a choice I would have ever chosen – but He is showing me new ways. God is faithful.

I am the vine, ye are the branches. He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.

John 15:5

Confronting our Wounds *Psalm 51:1-17, James 1:17*

The season of Lent can get an ugly reputation due to its themes of sin, repentance, and interior examination. I wonder if we squirm at these themes because we've unknowingly allowed shame to be a companion in our lives.

Every good and perfect gift comes from above (James 1:17), and shame loves to prevent us from experiencing all that is good.

Psalm 51 serves as a guiding prayer, leading us to the good and beautiful gifts that repentance and interior examination bring. This ancient prayer exposes our hearts, moves us toward the real hope that we can be made new, and invites us to give our hearts to God as they are, not where we want them to be. This is a difficult prayer to bring ourselves to if shame is leading our life, if what's wrong in the world is always because of them, or if we're navigating our pain by avoiding, numbing, and denying it. Psalm 51 confronts those wounded parts of us (which is quite uncomfortable) with the reality of God's healing love (which is often unbelievable)! In other words, we need to open our wounds to be healed. Again, and again, and again.

If the themes of Lent are difficult for you, that's okay—God is more kind than you could ever imagine. God often does His best work of love through the love of others. The more you practice vulnerability with God and with safe people who follow Jesus, the more these uncomfortable themes will shift from threats to invitations.

Read through each section of the Psalm slowly and let the questions serve as a prayer prompt in whatever way you'd like to pray.

Psalm 51:1-9

The invitation: allow the Spirit to expose your heart as you give access to the deepest parts of you.

The question: what parts of you are you withholding from God?

Psalm 51:10-15

The invitation: the enemy wants you stuck, but God invites you to remain hopeful in His power that is making you new

The question: in what ways do you feel stuck? Why is it difficult for you to believe that God can make you new?

Psalm 51:16-17

The invitation: offer your heart as is, not where you want it to be.

The question: What version of yourself are you projecting to God and others? Why is it scary to offer yourself as you are?

May you experience the release of shame's power over your life as you walk with God's presence each day as you are—trusting that the Spirit is making you new and holding you in His love when you can't seem to hold yourself.

Peace,

Ryan Pennington

Recently, my Mom turned 101. I wanted to make the day special for her so I began preparing for her big day. I sent out text messages to my family, spent time planning what we would have to eat, made one of Mom's favorite cakes and made sure we had enough chairs to seat everyone. All the planning and preparations were well worth it, as the day was perfect for Mom, surrounded by family and lots of love! Yet, at the end of the day, I regretted that I was not able to spend personal time with each guest.

I was reminded of Martha in Luke 6:38. Martha was distracted with all her preparations for Jesus' visit while Mary sat at Jesus' feet listening to His every word. Martha was upset and bothered that her sister wasn't helping her, yet she was the one who missed out on spending special time with Jesus.

Jesus, in Mark 10:32-37, tried to prepare His disciples for what was going to happen to Him in the days ahead. What He had to say was painful, but, two of His closest disciples were distracted and didn't even seem to hear what Jesus said. They were thinking about themselves.

The season of Lent is meant to be a time of drawing near to God and reflecting on what Jesus went through so that we could be made right with God. Yet, how much time do we actually spend preparing our hearts and minds to take all of this in – not only the pain, suffering, rejection, separation but also Jesus' obedience and joy in accomplishing the will of His Father so we could be forgiven and spend eternity with Him.

So, whatever you do to prepare for Easter – whether it's giving up social media or chocolate, serving, or spending time in prayer and Scripture, my prayer is that you take time to be still, and in the quietness, may you experience, through the power of the Holy Spirit, how wide and long and high and deep is the love that Jesus has for us.

Sweet Like Honey

Psalm 119:103, Exodus 3

One day I was playing basketball on the driveway with my daughter, Chloe, who at the time was in early grade school. As dads often do, I started reminiscing about a bygone era when I was able to dunk a ball through the basketball hoop. Chloe asked me if I could dunk a ball now and I truthfully admitted that I could not. She proceeded to ask me, "Why not, Daddy?" I paused momentarily trying to think about the best way to answer the question. Before I could answer, she said, "Too much candy?" I started laughing and said, "Yes, too much candy!"

Candy is not mentioned specifically in the Bible, but the closest substance to compare is honey. In Psalm 119:103 we read, **"How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth."** Unlike candy we can't go wrong consuming more of God's word in our lives.

When I was in middle school my pastor challenged us all to start reading the Bible for 10 minutes a day. I hate to admit it, but had he said an hour or even 30 minutes I don't think I would have accepted the challenge. Although there are days I miss reading God's word, I have been blessed by making it a regular practice in my life.

In Exodus chapter 3 God told Moses he was going to rescue the Israelites from Egypt and lead them to a land of milk and honey. Honey here represents God's sweet abundance that He has in store for us if by faith we follow Him. It reminds me of the following hymn:

*'Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus,
Just to take Him at His word;
Just to rest upon His promise;
Just to know, Thus saith the Lord.*

*Jesus, Jesus, how I trust Him,
How I've proved Him o'er and o'er,
Jesus, Jesus, Precious Jesus!
O for grace to trust Him more.*

(Louisa M.R. Stead and William James Kirkpatrick)

*Dear Lord, help us experience the sweet abundance of trusting Jesus
and getting to know Him better by reading the Bible.*

The Power of Trust

Proverbs 3:5-6

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge to him, and he will make your paths straight.

Proverbs 3:5-6

Friends, I believe most of us can admit that we like to be in control. We want to make sense of what's going on around us and when things are challenging we'd like to fix the circumstance as soon as we can. It's human nature! But the Bible tells us to trust in the Lord with all our heart! And do not lean on our own understanding. Our own thoughts and limited perspective can lead to frustration, anxiety and weariness. But God knows our way and He has a plan!

What area of your life do you need to trust God with? Tell God today that you are handing that situation over to Him. This Lenten season, surrender the need to control situations and stop relying solely on your limited perspective. Ask Him to help you genuinely trust His timing, provision, and wisdom.

Lord, today I choose to trust You with all my heart. I surrender my fears, my plans, and my uncertainties to You. Teach me to walk in Your wisdom and trust that You are directing my path. Amen.

I believe God is asking each of us to focus on Jesus all the days of our lives. I also believe that certain times of the Christian year ask us to dedicate special times to focus on who Christ was, what He has done for us through His saving power, His acts of forgiveness, love, and mercy, His sanctifying grace, and in His promise that **“blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.”** (Revelation 14:13)

I am so glad that Pastor Joel so biblically and strongly emphasizes Jesus Christ as the beating heart AND the Rock in our lives. Our Lord tells His followers, in the passage on His being the vine and our being the branches, **“Apart from me you can do nothing.”** (John 15:5) But how can we find that wonderful state of union with Jesus?

At Trail Ridge Senior Living Community, where I serve as chaplain, we sing a hymn I didn't grow up with but one that helps to answer that question. Here are the words. I hope they are helpful to you as you center on Jesus in this season of Lent:

*May the mind of Christ, my Savior, live in me from day to day,
By His love and power controlling all I do and say.*

*May the Word of God dwell richly in my heart from hour to hour,
So that all may see I triumph only through His power.*

*May the peace of God my Father rule my life in everything
That I may be calm to comfort the sick and sorrowing.*

*May the love of Jesus fill me as the waters fill the sea;
Him exalting, self abasing --- this is victory!*

*May I run the race before me, strong and brave to face the foe,
Looking only unto Jesus as I onward go.*

*May His beauty rest upon me as I seek the lost to win;
And may they forget the channel, seeing only Him.*

Those words were written a hundred years ago by a woman named Kate Wilkinson, but they are as relevant now to our faith as they were then. In this special season of Lent, may we all be formed by Jesus, so that when people see how we live for our Lord and Savior, they will “see only Him.” Amen

Preparing for Something New

James 1:12

Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

James 1:12

Do you know what Moses' time on Mt. Sinai, Goliath taunting David and Jesus' time of temptation by the devil have in common? Not only are these all examples of trial, hardship and even testing, but they also lasted 40 days (the same as Lent).

When experiencing times of trial, we often are so focused on the trial we can not see the work God is doing in us - the molding, fine tuning and preparation. In fact, we are often so focused on the hardship, we don't even realize God is working on us through it. It is typically only after the trial, we can see the work God was doing and what He was preparing us for.

Think of our examples - Moses on Mt. Sinai prepared Moses to be the leader Israel needed. David defeating Goliath solidified David's reputation which prepared him for eventual kingship. Jesus' temptation fulfilled Scripture and prepared the way for his ministry.

What is a trial you have experienced in your life? Can you see how God used that time to work on you - to prepare you for something new?

Could I have some Good News Today? 2 Timothy 3:16-17

As I have gone through life it was impressed on me to think about these two statements:

- 1) The way I treat others is the way I treat God.
- 2) At the base of the Cross is level ground.

Sometimes when I watch TV news, I find myself saying “That is the most stupid thing I have heard.” Or “Is there any Good News today?” If you are getting your news from TikTok, or some other A.I. source, listen up! There is Good News to be found in the Word of God.

The word Gospel means “Good News” – we need to learn the stories and the ideas presented in the Scriptures and apply them to our lives. How do I treat new people I am meeting? How do I treat friends? I try to respect everyone and share the Love of Christ. Sometimes I fail. But I will not stop trying. God is not done with me.

The other statement refers to God’s Love for all. Christ’s death on the cross was for all. It is also very personal – I need to remind myself I need to be forgiving as Christ was, and at the same time share the Good News. Plus, the level ground is that we are all the same – no one is better than anyone else.

Christ died for everyone and we now can all come to the Cross this Easter and receive God’s Mercy. For He is our Savior.

Embracing the Gift of God

Ephesians 2:8

A friend of mine was raised as an atheist and had not been a believer throughout her life. However, a couple of years ago we were talking about our faith. I said I was Christian, and she asked me what type. I told her I was afraid to tell her. Sometimes people think Baptists are extreme and (jokingly, I hope) think we're snake handlers. But I finally said I was Baptist.

"Oh my gosh," she said. "I just started attending a Baptist church!" As we talked, she said that this was so new for her. She hadn't been raised in a Christian household, so she didn't know anything about the Bible, the music, the teachings. But she said something that I embraced. She said, "Not being a believer is unsustainable." We aren't supposed to live without God, she said. And she added how wonderful prayer is, being able to talk to God, that it made her feel better about life.

This renewed my faith. I felt freer to embrace my own faith, to appreciate what I had, rather than pulling away from faith with my questioning nature. It was a turning toward God because of my friend's words.

This Lenten season, think about embracing what God is offering you—His love, His care, a community of believers, a sense of belonging, a sense of meaning, and the gift of Jesus.

Instead, let there be a flood of justice Amos 5:21-25

I hate all your show and pretense—the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies. I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings. I won't even notice all your choice peace offerings. Away with your noisy hymns of praise! I will not listen to the music of your harps. Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living.

Amos 5:21-25

Lent is a season of reflecting on where we've gotten off the path of **"being conformed into the image of Christ"** (Romans 8:29). Christians in America are at a crossroads. Political parties, leaders, talking heads vie for our allegiance, loyalty, and omission of injustice being perpetuated and overlooked for the benefit of their gain and felt power.

The prophet Amos gives us rebuke that's unsettling. What do our worship gatherings, festivals, offerings, hymns of praise, music mean in the context of what God wants from His people? Amos paints a picture that they mean nothing without us having heart bent and action towards seeing justice and righteous living.

What is justice and righteous living? Jesus points us to loving the least of these as a great place to start. **"For whatever you do to the least of these, you do for me"** (Matt 25:40). Who are the least of these around you today? How can channel your desire for praise, worship, hymns into living in a way that loves those that are powerless, looked down upon, judged, and written off? Who are those around you at disadvantage of because of the family they were born into, the country they were born into? Who are those seen as outsiders? How can we bring them in?

Instead of being overwhelmed by all the global change needed, identify just one person in your life or one action you can take to fight for someone who's enduring injustice today. Singing worship songs is my number one pathway to feel close to God, so this is challenging to me.

Join me this Lenten season by asking God for one thing you could do for the least of these, before you sing your next worship or praise song. Watch him transform your heart with love for your neighbor and the least. Remember, you're not just loving them, this is how Jesus has commanded us to love Him. Grace and Peace!

Almost two decades ago, my dear friend Betty's granddaughter was stillborn. During the funeral lunch, I asked Betty how her heart could bear the pain of watching her son and daughter-in-law grieve the loss of their daughter and see her lowered into the ground in that tiny casket. Through tears and a quivering voice, she simply replied, "God doesn't give you the ticket until it's time to get on the bus."

The wisdom in that one sentence has stayed with me all these many years. We never have to live in fear and worry about the "what ifs" of tomorrow. We can rest assured that God will supply the perfect ticket at the perfect time no matter what kind of bus life's circumstances have sent our way.

Deuteronomy 33:25: **"...your strength will equal your days."**

**The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves
those who are crushed in spirit.**

Psalm 34:18

Hatred of Sin

Romans 7:21; James 4:7-8

I feel I've been too kind towards sin. In fact, I know I have. Sin lingers and loiters when we don't take it as seriously as we should, and it likes to meddle with our relationship with God. Charles Spurgeon said in a sermon, "Consider how precious a soul must be, when both God and the devil are chasing after it".

I fear I'm not fleeing sin with the same intensity that sin is pursuing me. By lingering near sin and its ever-present traps, I'm unable to draw any nearer to a holy God. Romans 7:21 says, **"So I find it to be law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand"**. I admit that I first found some comfort when reading that Paul experienced the same things I do, but I must be careful to not let the devil twist that feeling of comfort into apathy.

We must actively fight, resist, and flee sin when it wants you to lower your guard. James 4:7-8 says, **"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you"**. Let us submit and draw near to a holy God, and resist and run from the evil one. Let us, above all, desire holiness and abhor sin.

Scripture is clear when it comes to sin and how we should approach it. **"O you who love the Lord, hate evil"** (Psalm 97:10). **"The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil"** (Proverbs 8:13). **"Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good"** (Romans 12:9). We must not tolerate sin or be mildly inconvenienced or bothered by it. We are called to hate and detest sin, and called to cling to the one sin wants to separate us from. We will always sin, but our attitude about it matters, and by God's grace we don't fight it alone.

Lastly, we must be careful not to abuse that grace, to pervert the indescribable gift of Jesus' finishing work on the cross. In Jerry Bridges' book *The Pursuit of Holiness*, he states, "We abuse grace when we think we can sin and then receive forgiveness by claiming 1 John 1:9. We abuse grace when, after sinning, we dwell on the compassion and mercy of God to the exclusion of His holiness and hatred of sin".

I Speak Jesus

John 16:33

The first time I heard the song *I Speak Jesus*, it brought tears to my eyes. The words were an affirmation that Jesus is our strength, our hope, and our peace. The song brought me comfort and reminded me to put my trust in Jesus. The song begins with these words:

*I just wanna speak the name of Jesus
Over every heart and every mind
'Cause I know there is peace within Your presence
I speak Jesus*

These words bring me hope as I struggle with the heaviness of our world today. Each day brings new worries: family members dealing with major health issues, church friends dealing with sickness, political division like we have never seen before, chaos in Minneapolis. Some days the weight feels unbearable and my heart feels heavy. That's when I ask myself, "How does God want me to respond?" And that's when things begin to change because I know in my heart that God is in control. He is greater than all our struggles and He sent a Savior to give us comfort and healing and peace. The song says, 'cause I know there is peace within your presence – I speak Jesus!

During this season of Lent, speak Jesus. Know that the Savior came to Earth for you. He suffered for you. He died on the cross for you. He rose from the dead for you. He is our hope. He is our peace. I speak Jesus.

I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.

John 16:33

God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

Matthew 5:3

This is the very first teaching of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount that He gave to His disciples. We see throughout the Bible that Jesus was very intentional with His life and His teachings. If we believe that Jesus did everything for a reason, we should pay extra close attention to this first teaching, as it serves as the foundation for anyone who wants to follow Him.

When you are poor (especially back then), you are completely and utterly dependent on the generosity of others. If you cannot walk by yourself, you must be carried. If you cannot see, you must be led. If you have no money to buy food, you need others to feed you. Being poor means that your life is sustained only by the grace and kindness of others. Of course, these are all examples of what being physically poor looks like. But Jesus is not talking about being poor in this way—rather, He is talking about being poor in spirit.

Most of the time, when we use the word spirit, we use it to mean attitude. If we say that someone is “in good spirits,” we mean that they are cheerful or happy. If someone is in low spirits, they are said to be sad or depressed. But when Jesus uses the word spirit here, He is talking about something far different from our attitude. He's talking about our very being—our souls.

Jesus is saying that the very first step to following Him is to have a soul that has no merit or power of its own, but rather one that is sustained only by the love and mercy of Christ. It is humility to the highest degree. In order to be one of His disciples, this must be the foundation of our way of life—that our souls be completely and utterly dependent on Him for life.

For it is written, “Be holy, because I am holy.”

1 Peter 1:15

It can sound daunting for holiness to be the standard when all we see is our brokenness and that of the world around us. And yet, this is what we as Christ followers are called to live out. Set apart. In the world but not of it.

It's the “striving” that well intended Christians find exhausting. However, we won't become followers of Christ by accident. To walk the sanctifying road to holiness, we must submit to rest. Resting in our inadequacies with fruits worthy of repentance, acknowledging that Christ alone and our submission to him is where we find forgiveness, covering, righteousness and holiness.

As Peter wrote in verses 13-15, **“Therefore with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at His coming. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you holy is holy, so be holy in all you do. For it is written, ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’”**

So, may we do more than give a casual nod to the penitence (deep sorrow for our sin) of Lent but “set our hope” and bow our heads and hearts to the deeper understanding of what it means to sacrifice ourselves for the gospel.

The root of the word salvation implies that nothing is missing or lacking. Yet sometimes we feel the need to “fill in the gaps.” Salvation is a gift from God. Like any gift, we don’t earn it, we did nothing to deserve it, and we could never have paid for it. Yet this gift keeps on giving: it establishes our true identity in this life and secures our eternal destiny in the next. The truth is that you have been saved, you are being saved, and you will be saved. God saved us by His grace, and all we need to do is respond in faith, accepting what He has already done. We don’t earn heaven with a list of good deeds.

We are invited into a transformation—a new birth in our spirit. Over time, as we grow in Christ, our thoughts, actions, and choices increasingly reflect Him, moving us from darkness into light. Paul calls Jesus the **“firstborn among many brothers and sisters”** (Romans 8:29). The Greek word *proto*—firstborn—means prototype. Jesus is the flawless design we are being shaped to reflect.

Take a moment to rest in this truth: because of Jesus’ death and resurrection, you have been saved. Nothing can change that reality or strip you of your identity. By His grace, God has moved you from the kingdom of darkness into His light. You did nothing to earn this privilege. It is His gift, freely given out of unimaginable, limitless love.

Alan Platt “Salvation” (paraphrased)

I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid. - Jesus

John 14:27

When I was a child, I would often long and dream about the next slumber party that my friends and I would be able to have together! These were huge events! We're talking sometimes up to 8 people at a time! We'd go to the pool, have nerf wars, watch movies, eat snacks and stay up WAY too late! I loved spending time with my friends. However, every time without fail, when the party was over, I would feel sad that very day. I experienced an extreme high and immediately felt the inevitable crash.

Jesus offers us peace...but sometimes when He offers us peace, we hear the promise but it doesn't permeate our bones. We might hear the idea of a promised peace but don't receive it as a gift that is meant for us. While knuckling the outcome of our circumstances too often becomes our norm. We feel a pressure and duty to be the master of our own fate.

Friends, this Lenten season, I strongly encourage us to have our minds shifted. In this moment, evaluate your life. What event, career milestone, or flashy item are you longing and hoping will satisfy the desire for peace in your current season?

Right now, pinpoint and zero in on something that you might be using as a substitute for a temporary joy. Today, we call fool's gold...fool's gold and claim what Jesus offers his disciples...the gift of peace of mind and heart. Jesus tells us to not be troubled or afraid, but to rest in his provisional power. He tells us to not worry about tomorrow! Wow! Talk about a posture of surrender!

Holy Spirit, shape our lives to rest in your finished work and allow us to experience your presence today. Take our trends where we try to establish temporary and momentary substitutes and let them melt before you. Holy Spirit, make us more like Jesus. Amen.

So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.

John 13:34-35

Last year In biology class, while conducting research on the jackal for a biodiversity project, my freshman student read aloud, “Jackals forage food off rubbish piles”. He quickly added, “That has a homeless vibe”.

His comment crushed me.

He is homeless. At the time, the boy resided with his mentally ill mother and six siblings in a Sioux Falls motel room. Earlier in the academic year, the school couldn’t locate the family only to discover they had changed room numbers. My student knew the homeless vibe and, sadly, could relate to a jackal. If classmates had heard his comment, they would’ve laughed because they did not know the burden he carried.

It’s not possible to know the weight people bear, but we can be cognizant that hidden burdens exist. If inconvenienced or frustrated with someone, I try to remind myself that there might be a crisis in their life that I am unaware of. What does that person need? When my son Levi was in elementary school, we enjoyed an afternoon at SkyZone only to discover that his shoes were stolen while we were having fun. Rather than becoming indignant or angry, we decided that person probably needed the shoes more than we did.

It’s not always simple, but as you encounter neighbors, colleagues, and strangers in your layered circle of life, approach them knowing a heaviness might exist in their hearts. Be gracious. Be patient. Be generous. Be Jesus.

Love Thy Neighbor *Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-37*

As I reflect on Lent, the sacrifice that Jesus made, and I think about everything going on in our world, I keep coming back to the theme of love. As we read in the scripture referenced above, we learn that Jesus says the greatest commandment is to love the Lord with all that we are. And the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbors as ourselves. Love. The first and second greatest commandments are to love. **“There is no greater commandment than these”**. Or as the gospel of Matthew phrases it, **“All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments”**. All of the commandments in the Bible are pointing us to love.

In the passage from Luke, Jesus shows us who our neighbor is. The hurt. The broken. The outcast. The person who is different from us. The person that our culture, our society, or even our community says we need to avoid and not interact with. These are the people that we are called to love. We are not called to simply be kind to them, but to love them as ourselves.

So as we go through Lent, I pray that God will open up our hearts to those around us. I pray that God will soften our hearts to those who are different than us. Perhaps that is people from other cultures. Perhaps that is people with other political beliefs. Perhaps that is people from the LGBTQ community. Or perhaps it is a coworker that doesn't seem to have any friends.

I pray that God will break down the walls in our hearts that prevent us from loving like Jesus. All people are God's children and we are called to love them and invite them into a relationship with Christ.

Bonus Thought: What does it look like to love another person as you love yourself? What form does that take in our world? And just as importantly, are we loving ourselves with Christ-like love?

Forgive As You Have Been Forgiven Psalm 130:1-8

Before reading, take a minute to think about this: what is your paradigm about sin and forgiveness? When someone sins against you, do you forgive them because you know you're not perfect and you need forgiveness too? Do you forgive everyone or just most people? Are there certain people you struggle to forgive because they don't seem to care? One way to think about sin is that it is anything that separates us from God.

Sin is like a blockage, separating us from God, the Creator of Life, preventing life from reaching us. BUT, Jesus sacrificed Himself, His own lifeblood, for our sins so that we can be reconnected with God even after we turn away from Him. Jesus created a path for forgiveness and the return of life to an area that was once cut off.

Each and everyone of us has experienced forgiveness thanks to Jesus. The thing is sin, and forgiveness is not a one-time occurrence. I think that's why Jesus encourages His disciples to pray for forgiveness for themselves and those who sin against them. We are fickle. Sometimes we are quick to accept forgiveness, but much slower to give it out. Other times, we easily give forgiveness, but are too stuck in our own sin and shame to receive it. All of this is to say that where there is forgiveness, redemption and new life can enter. The good news is that we've all been forgiven by God. Reflect on this: are you allowing life to return to the areas that were once cut off by sin?

Out of the depths I call to you, LORD! Lord, listen to my voice; let your ears be attentive to my cry for help. Lord, if you kept an account of iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that you may be revered. I wait for the LORD; I wait and put my hope in his word. I wait for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning more than watchmen for the morning. Israel, put your hope in the LORD. For there is faithful love with the LORD, and with him is redemption in abundance. And he will redeem Israel from all of its iniquities

Psalm 130:1-8

Strange Power

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

When you think of power, what comes to mind?

Oftentimes, many people think power is gaining enough strength, status, success, and supplies to impose our way upon others. The primary problem with the world, we tell ourselves, is that the wrong kind of people have this power. "If only the followers of Jesus had this power," we tell ourselves. "Imagine what we could accomplish in the world."

But what if the problem is deeper than who holds the power? What if a bigger problem is that we have a fundamental misunderstanding of what power actually looks like.

That is what Paul claims in his letter to the Corinthian Church. God's power, Paul says, is radically different from what the world calls "power". The fundamental problem is not simply that the wrong people possess the right kind of power, but that God's power is easily overlooked as weak and foolish.

Paul puts it this way,

The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

1 Corinthians 1:18, 22-24

Did you catch that? Power is not the accumulation of strength and status to impose your will on others. That kind of "power" may look wise and strong, but it is actually weak and foolish. For Paul, those who follow Jesus proclaim and live by a different kind of power: the humble and gentle, self-giving, other-serving, love of Jesus Christ displayed on the cross. That is real power! It may seem strange, upside-down and easily overlooked as weakness, but not to us! To those who believe, that is what power looks like.

What might happen if the church stopped chasing flashy signs and the power-grasping "wisdom" of this world, and instead embraced the true power of Christ upon the cross?

Getting to Know the Gardener *John 15:4-5*

When we surrender to the Lord, we are likely to be surprised by what he does. I could give you several examples of places God has taken me or things that have come into my life that I never guessed would be a part of my story. One example is how God brought me to live in Uganda.

The places God takes us and circumstances we find ourselves in after surrendering our will to him often force us into a greater level of dependence on God. Before, we may have gotten by in our daily lives without going to God much, but once you relinquish control of your life, God has a way of keeping you reliant on him.

Living in Uganda was a humbling experience for me. It was impossible for me to avoid making mistakes as I was navigating a completely different environment. I couldn't get by on my own but instead had to learn from and lean on others – especially Jesus. I truly gained a sense for how I can do nothing without being connected to Christ (v. 5). I am merely a branch.

Yet this daily dependence on God drew me into a deeper relationship with him. I came to understand God's character more as I was intimately experiencing it. I became more familiar with God's voice as I entered into more constant conversation with him. I developed a stronger faith as I was continuously reminded of God's faithfulness.

God generated a lot of growth (and performed a lot of pruning) in me during my time in Uganda. Since God is the Master Gardener, my growth didn't pause when he transplanted me back to the United States for this season.

This season is proving to be complex and challenging, but I have found God whispering to my heart a simple directive: "Abide as I guide and provide." I think the Gardener offers the same invitation to you in whatever season you find yourself in. Will you join me in clinging to Christ and trusting in the goodness of the Gardener?

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

John 15:4-5

Recognized and Realized

Luke 24

In Luke 24 we read about Jesus showing up on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection. Even though the two Jesus meets on the road don't recognize Jesus, as the reader we know they are talking and walking with the risen Jesus. It's not just a stranger. It's Jesus himself.

But they are kept from recognizing Him. Why? Is it because He looks different? Because He has somehow impaired their vision or understanding?

Those moments of non-recognition allowed Jesus to walk with the travelers while He walked through the revelation of His life and mission. **“Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.”**

Had they recognized Him, they may not have been as responsive to this lesson. His incognito appearance allowed them to focus more on His words than on His person. This lesson helped them become schooled in the resurrection within the history of Israel and the plan of God.

As they begged Him to stay with Him and share a meal, the full revelation of Jesus – our risen Savior – shone forth. It happened when He broke bread, blessed it, and gave it to them. This was Jesus! This was/is the Lord! Christ is risen! Risen indeed! All these years later, I think we can ask some questions:

1. Has Jesus ever mysteriously appeared in your life? Has He revealed Himself to you – maybe in an unexpected way; through the words of a friend; something you've read; a time of prayer; the whisper of the Holy Spirit?
2. How have you discovered that Jesus' resurrection is the plan of God fulfilled? That's why He went back to Moses and the prophets to help fill in the blanks for them. Don't take my word for it – study how God has brought this plan to fruition.
3. As you finish Luke's gospel, what looks like the end is really just a beginning. How will you continue your journey with Jesus? What is it that you are praying for Him to show or reveal to you?

We are NOT there yet *Philippians 3:20 and others*

Our grandson has always had a quick reply for any question he is asked. As a 3 year old, on a car trip to visit us, his older sister whined, "Are we there yet?" His prompt reply was, "Do you SEE Grandma's house? No! So we are NOT there yet!"

For those of us who believe in Christ Jesus, we are NOT there yet, either. We begin our journey when we believe that Christ died for us and that Christ alone is the way to God. Ephesians 2:8-9 says **"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast."** And Jesus words to his disciples in John 14:6 are **"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."**

We become travelers on the path of life. We are made new by God's power. He calls us new creatures. But the path is not always easy, or straight. Sometimes it is foggy and I don't know which way to go. Sometimes the path is dark and I am afraid to go any farther.

Encouragement comes from Bible verses like Deuteronomy 31:8b: **"He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged."** We are not alone on the journey. God has called us to be together, to belong to Him, and to praise Him. **"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, to proclaim the virtues of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light."** 1 Peter 2:8-9

We are just passing through this world. Philippians 3:20 states **"Our citizenship is in heaven."** So we press on, learning to do what pleases God, caring for others, and rejoicing in the journey ahead.

Because we are NOT there yet!

God can handle your deepest cry. Psalm 55

In the season of Lent, we recognize how broken we are, and how desperately we need someone to piece us back together. I can recognize in my own heart that I'm rather broken in my default approach to my emotions. My core tendency is to ignore them—they get in the way of what I want to accomplish, and I can feel like expressing my emotions is just complaining. However, I'm learning that God actually wants to welcome our messiest feelings.

Look at Psalm 55, David is freaking out. He is praying for the downfall of his enemies, that's pretty dark—even violent. He's using language we would discourage. It seems inappropriate—but it's the Bible, so how is this good and helpful?

Look at who David is talking to. The expression of even the most violent emotions, when given over to God, is an act of peace. God can handle your deepest cry. Not only can he handle it, but he actually wants us to go to him with those feelings of anger and fear. He doesn't just take our anger and fear away; he refines it so that it becomes like what he feels for the world.

What would happen if you didn't go to God with your most difficult emotions? It would certainly come out somehow. Our hearts are more like fishbowls than oceans, we all overflow eventually. If you're walking around with a full fishbowl, you're likely going to spill and make a mess.

Submit your emotions to God. Especially when you feel like smacking somebody, tell God about it, with honesty. In talking to God about it, our violent emotions and fear-based reactions become peace and faith by God's transforming power. I pray you land where David lands, saying, **"But as for me, I trust in you."** Trust God with your hardest emotions and become a person of peace.

Reconnecting with God

Philippians 4:6-7

Each of us is the child of someone. Loree and I are currently in a season of aging parents, young-adult children, and a grandson on the way! There's a gradual shift from being a child who depends on a parent to becoming an adult who feels independent and eventually capable of caring for others. It's all part of the beautiful journey God has for each of us.

Along the way, parents or guardians teach their children how to navigate the world: modeling values, offering guidance, setting boundaries, and quietly protecting them from dangers they don't yet see. Over time, parents allow their children to act independently and make their own choices, hoping they'll make wise decisions, and share what they've learned with others.

When we begin venturing out on our own, we may feel like we don't need help. Yet out of love, parents still make sacrifices to support their adult children, sometimes from behind the scenes. We may resist that support, believing we have everything handled.

Through experience, children begin to see which independent choices are wise and which are not. With time and perspective, we look back and recognize the wisdom in our parents' lessons, boundaries, and protection. What once felt restrictive often reveals itself as loving guidance that leads to real freedom.

Similarly, in our relationship with our Heavenly Father, we may lose sight of the role He plays in our lives. While He fills the gaps of all we need, we might not recognize His protection and provision. Just as parents provide for their children without being asked, God showers us with blessings. And just as children grow to understand the wisdom of their parents, we begin to recognize God's constant presence and eternal wisdom.

Let's reflect on our dependence on God and thank Him for His Peace. Consider both the unexpected blessings and the unanswered requests meant to protect you from the unknown. Our Father knows our fears and desires. We can depend on Him for everything.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6-7

Hope in a Broken World *Genesis 28:15 and others*

We live in a broken world, caught in the tension of the *kingdom to come* and the reality of the *not yet*, where we cling to hope and faith in the God of the impossible. As we enter this season of Lent, a time of preparation, reflection, and renewal, I wonder what brings you hope? As a worship leader and apprentice to Jesus, I find rhythms and melodies throughout Scripture that weave messages into my soul. The promise of God's presence continues to be the melody in my heart.

I know that life is often filled with gut-wrenching sorrow, difficulties never imagined, and darkness so deep we wonder if we will find our way through. We grapple with abandonment and aching loneliness, wondering where God is in our pain and struggle. But the Lord has never left us alone. Like a desperately needed light piercing the murky darkness, He reminds us that He is with us. We have an Advocate, a Father, a Friend — One who loves us and is for us. He is our hope. And this promise echoes throughout Scripture:

I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go

Genesis 28:15

Even though I walk through the darkest valley... you are with me

Psalms 23:4

Do not fear, for I am with you

Isaiah 41:10

"I am with you to deliver you," says the Lord

Jeremiah 1:8

I am with you always, to the end of the age

Matthew 28:20

An Advocate... to be with you forever

John 14:16

So today, take heart. Let the melody of hope guide your response to this broken world during the Lenten season. And may the promise of God's presence be the beacon that lights your way to hope and to the knowledge that His beautiful, power-under kingdom is already here, at work in each of us.

In the Moment

*Matthew 28:20, Psalm 46:1
Deuteronomy 31:8, Joshua 1:5*

Recently we celebrated Cheryl's Mom's 101st birthday. It was a grand afternoon with 15 family members. A year ago, her 100th birthday was a gala affair with over 30 family members. Cheryl's Mom is the sweetest person and she greatly enjoyed both celebrations. Unfortunately, with her short- term memory loss, she couldn't remember a thing. But at those moments, she was "in the moment."

We can learn a lot from this in our relationship with Jesus, especially as we head toward Easter.

As human beings we have a difficult time staying in the present; even for short times, like on Sunday morning. We are "mind wanderers", thinking about lunch plans or the football game or the morning encounter with kids. Maybe it's yesterday's activity or tomorrow's doctor appointment. Perhaps we're concerned about an ongoing difficulty or upcoming challenge. Have you every been praying and wind up planning instead?

Jesus wants to be where we're at and He wants us to be present with Him; and He's promised to be "in the moment" with us. In Matthew 28:20, Jesus says **"I am with you always."** Psalm 46: 1 says that **God is "an ever-present help."** Deuteronomy 31:8 and Joshua 1:5 assure us that **"the Lord will never leave us nor forsake us."** He is always present with us. Are we present with Him?

I've been going over the old hymn, "I Need Thee Every Hour". Each of the 4 verses starts with those words and the chorus starts "I need Thee, O I need Thee; every hour I need Thee!" Lent is a perfect time to lean into this old hymn and to practice being "in the moment" with Jesus, and to do so repeatedly.

The Unending Journey of Forgiveness Luke 23:34 Matthew 18:21-22

When Denise and I lived in Edmonton, we met people with interesting stories. Sometimes those stories were hard to discover. Hans was one of those men. He was quiet, an immigrant from Germany after WWII. Because of his discomfort in speaking English, he chose to faithfully serve the youngest children of the church and the pastoral staff, where his actions spoke louder than words.

It took time to discover he was a stamp collector. His speciality was collecting stamps that had been postmarked to travel on the Zeppelin, the Hindenburg. He and his wife lived a very simple life. But, his stamp collection was worth a fortune and only a few knew about it. One day when he came home with a new truck, his wife asked him where he had found the money to buy it. His response, "I sold a stamp!"

We are all collectors. But unlike Hans our collections may be hurtful instead of helpful. We collect hurts and offenses from people around us. We build a collection of "stamps" – times when we've been hurt – that we carry.

As Jesus hung on the cross, one of the last words he spoke were words of forgiveness. Not for petty offenses, but for taking his life. His words are the culmination of a lifetime of forgiving. When asked in Matthew 18 by Peter how often should I offer forgiveness, Jesus answers, infinitely. We see Jesus offering forgiveness throughout his life. It wasn't a one-time act, it was his way of living out the Good News.

As we move towards Easter, can we be more like Jesus? Can we take time to recall all the dark corners of our hearts where bitterness and hatred are fed by the grudges we hold and collect? Instead of collecting the "stamps" of offenses, could we collect "stamps" of the healing that comes from forgiving those who have hurt us. Let's move beyond a one-time act, and instead offer it over and over again until the hurt and bitterness is forgotten. May we reach Easter with a new heart that is full of love instead of hurt.

The Suffering Songs and a Promise Isaiah 53:5 Isaiah 43:2

Suffering is not a popular product to promote these days. We avoid discomfort and look for ways to eliminate it as quickly as possible. That seems reasonable and sensible—right?

Yet isn't this precisely what the season of Lent calls us to face? The Christian tradition invites us to give up something we value, even something we need—food, water, chocolate—for forty days, echoing Jesus' time of wandering in the wilderness (Matthew 4; Mark 1; Luke 4). In that time of deprivation, Jesus sought God. The hope of Lenten sacrifice is that our discomfort might draw us closer to Christ's sacrifice for our sinful nature and shape us into people more willing to **"lay down our life for a friend"**—even an enemy (John 15:13).

Suffering, however, is not only something we choose. It is something we encounter. I often ask God why a God of mercy, love, and justice allows creation to moan and groan in pain (Romans 8:22–23). As a child, I listened to my mother suffer and die of cancer. Our family suffered her absence, and in honest human terms, I have never found a good reason for her death. Like so many, I have known ongoing loss that takes a lasting toll. As a hospice chaplain, I journey with people of many faiths—and no faith—through their final months and days. Even when pain is managed, suffering persists: physical, spiritual, emotional. Watching prolonged suffering, I cannot help but ask God about its purpose.

Though theology offers explanations, suffering continues to trouble us. Perhaps it should. Scripture tells us that God grieves with us. Jesus wept at the suffering of those he met. Through the Holy Spirit, God meets us in the mud of our lives. **God is close to the broken-hearted** (Psalm 34:18). God wanders with us in our wilderness—the temptations, joys, and sorrows—when we seek him.

I find comfort in knowing that though suffering will continue to perplex me, Jesus understands and does not abandon us in it. Isaiah's Suffering Songs speak of a wounded people and a pierced Messiah who bears our pain. And Isaiah promises: **"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you."** God comforts me through creation, community, and the Spirit. My response is to do the same for others.

Lord of suffering, grant us faith, courage, and strength to trust you and enter fully into this life with others, just as Jesus did.

For more Suffering Songs, see Isaiah 42:1–9, 49:1–6, 50:4–11, 52:13–53:12 or listen to Handel's Messiah, including a contemporary version that I love: *Handel's Messiah: A Soulful Celebration*.

More or Less?

*Matthew 19:16-22; John 15:9-13
Hebrews 12:1-4; Ephesians 3:18-19*

The survey: They asked all kinds of people how much money they would like to make. The overwhelming answer: "More!"

Jesus once had a conversation with a great guy who asked him what he had to do to have eternal life. Jesus' conclusion was for the guy to **"...go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor...."** The man walked away sad because **"he had many possessions."** I think he thought having eternal life sounded like having less—not more.

At the "Last Supper" as Jesus was explaining the importance of his love he said this: **"I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!"** Wow.

The author of Hebrews wrote this about Jesus: **"Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame."**

Following Jesus includes a lot of loving others sacrificially. Jesus connects that loving with experiencing his joy. Sacrifice still often looks like "less" for me even though I've experienced his joy a lot.

Why am I often reluctant? It's because God always has love for me to experience and understand that is more: new, better, richer—IF I'm willing to follow (which always takes some faith). That love, according to the apostle Paul is **"...too great to understand fully."** I don't want to miss this like the guy Jesus talked with.

*Heavenly Father,
Help me keep my eyes on Jesus who initiated my faith and never tires
of "perfecting" my faith.
Forgive me for doubting.
Forgive me for resisting.
Forgive me for thinking I'm too busy.
Forgive me for thinking I'm too tired.
Thank you for creating me the way I am.
Thank you for loving me yesterday and for all tomorrows.
Thank you for the capacity to love you too.
Thank you for the privilege of loving others—
and loving them in your name (whether they know it or not).
I love You. Amen.*

During the Last Supper, Jesus says a particular word that stands out to me: **this**.

And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."

Luke 22:19-20

Now, I'm no theologian, but I've been wondering about what Jesus really meant when he said "do this." What's **this** exactly? Is it eating bread and drinking juice? Or is it more than that?

The words that especially strike me are "broke" and "poured out." I think that's what we're supposed to do with our lives: to remember – and more importantly imitate – Christ's sacrifice. I think we're called to sacrifice – our schedules, our routines, our comforts, our to-do lists – all for Jesus.

A broken and poured out life for others is not easy. It's hard to put others first. It's not always convenient or comfortable. But I think that Jesus meant more than eat this bread and drink this cup. I believe that he was calling us to follow suit of what was about to happen on the cross: selfless sacrifice.

Let's pour out our day-to-day lives. Let's break down whatever plans we have and let God move. Let's refresh others and do **this**.

Jesus, thank you for what you did on the cross for us, for your sacrifice. Help us live with the same sort of selflessness, putting others first, going out of our way to help people and show them your love. Lord, help us reflect you in all we do, think, and say. In Your Name, Amen.

Seeking the Lord in the Mundane

Deuteronomy 4:29

Matthew 7:7-8

Psalms 9:9-10

But from there you will seek the Lord your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul.

Deuteronomy 4:29

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

Matthew 7:7-8

The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you.

Psalms 9:9-10

As I reflect over this past season of life and this upcoming season, it's my prayer that not only myself but each and every one of us can learn to find the Lord in our day-to-day lives.

I feel as though it is so easy to see Him during our "Mountain Top" experiences, but I believe Jesus is calling us to seek Him in the ordinary. Jesus didn't call us into lives where we only experience Him or His presence a handful of times a year or once a week on Sunday mornings. He wants us to have a relationship with Him at all times, and the thing is, folks, He doesn't care where you are with your walk. He meets us no matter what season we are in. Don't compare your spiritual walk and relationship with Jesus to someone else's.

The Lord is called our daily bread...not our weekly, monthly, or yearly bread. So as we move forward, let's not be a body of believers that needs to have the right setting for Jesus to show up. Let us find Him in the small things of life. Let's seek Him in the mundane.

Suffering with Christ

Luke 9:23

Blessing, favor, new mercies each morning, divine appointments, provision, honor, security, glory. These are the things scripture promises to those who walk in righteousness, and, if we are really honest, most of us feel entitled to experience these consistently throughout our lives.

So when real life hits, and we, instead, experience pain, sickness, loss, poverty, setbacks, loneliness, misunderstanding and judgment from the world, and so much more, we tend to ask, "Why Lord?"

When calling us, his disciples, Jesus asks us to leave everything behind, forsaking what lay behind for what would come through a life surrendered to him. He didn't promise our lives would be always easy or convenient or pleasant. In fact, he went out of his way to say we must deny ourselves and take up our cross every single day. Here are some of the things he promised to those who follow him.

1. We will see and touch and taste glory...but we will suffer first.
2. He will offer us all kinds of help...which we will need desperately because we will feel a sense of abandonment in this world.
3. We will experience the fullness of eternal life...but before we can get to that we will endure all kinds of tests and trials.
4. We will stand in victory before our King...after we die.

These themes are found all throughout each of the gospel accounts. There is truly so much good we can anticipate in Christ, but he also promised us a lot of suffering in this life as a result of following him.

There are two comforts we can find in our suffering. The first is that Jesus hasn't asked us to endure anything he was unwilling to endure during his life on earth. The second is that none of our pain or suffering will be wasted. Jesus spent forty days being tempted by Satan. He was despised by many, tortured and sentenced to death, abandoned by his closest friends, and left to die alone, crying out to his Father, "Why have you forsaken me?" Jesus has gone before us in our suffering, and none of his suffering was wasted. Because he also walked in glory and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, he brought the Kingdom of God down to earth, and he won victory over death, bringing life and hope and victory to all who choose to follow him. This was the fruit of his willingness to suffer.

As Christians, suffering is promised to us. But Jesus shows us that much is to be gained in the quiet resolve of following him into all kinds of suffering. We can follow his lead, knowing he has been where we are and that our suffering will not be for nothing.

Elisabeth Elliot once said, "When we cry 'Why Lord?' we should ask instead 'Why not Lord? Shall I not follow my Master in suffering as in everything else?'"

What a beautiful new perspective for us to ponder as we face the suffering of this life.

**Faith shows the reality of what we hope for;
it is the evidence of things we cannot see.**

Hebrews 11:1

Yet: Up until the present or a specified or implied time; by now or then.

I was reflecting on this specific word and the Lord revealed that it's the perfect word to describe faith. Hebrews 11 describes faith as the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see. Which reminded me of the story where Jesus came back to life and revealed himself to his disciples. One of them, Thomas, wasn't with them at time, so when he first heard Jesus was alive, he needed proof. He needed to see Jesus with his own eyes but had to wait 8 days to do so. Jesus then lets Thomas touch his wounds and says **"don't be faithless any longer. Believe."** Thomas and the disciples were able to believe Jesus because they had walked with Him. I find it beautiful in the next verse Jesus says **"You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me."**

Circling back to the word "yet" being the perfect word to describe faith. Sometimes we must wait. Can we believe, even when we can't see? Do we have faith to believe the things we're praying for will actually happen? Shifting our mentality to "yet" allows the Lord to move. If we could see things in His fullness right away, why would we need faith?

Friend, those prayers you've been praying may not have been answered YET.
Keep pressing, keep praying, keep believing.
Keep seeing that healing before it happens.
Keep seeing those chains broken before it happens.
Keep seeing that breakthrough before it happens.
It's only crazy until it happens!
Trust Him.
The best is yet to come!