

From Ashes to Easter



God's Faithfulness

Lutheran Church of the Reformation

Lent 2023

Cover Art by Gloria Kenyon

Description: *This is a sunrise, reminding us that God continues to make the sun rise each day and care for us in other ways. The trees are an allusion to the 3 crosses at Calvary.*

From Ashes to Easter

The Meditations of Our Hearts

By Members & Friends of this Community

LUTHERAN CHURCH OF THE REFORMATION

212 East Capitol Street, Washington DC, 20003

202.543.4200

www.reformationdc.org

Worship Times at
Lutheran Church of the Reformation

For details and links for the Worship services,
visit: www.ReformationDC.org/worship

Ash Wednesday

February 22

Ashes to Go (Outside): 9am-12p.m.

Ash Wednesday Service - 7:00 p.m.

**Wednesday Noonday Meditation
& Prayer**

Available online each week during Lent
(beginning March 1st) at noon on
Facebook and live on Zoom (link in Weekly
Word)

Holy Week Services

Maundy Thursday, April 6 - 7:00 p.m.

Good Friday, April 7 - 7:00 p.m.

Easter Morning

April 9 - 8:30 a.m. & 11:00 a.m.

Easter Morning Brunch at 10am

We give thanks for all of the saints who have journeyed before us and all those who have crafted this annual devotion throughout its 30+ years.

FROM OUR COUNCIL PRESIDENT

Lent is a time that requires us to reflect in order to grow our faith and relationships with God. When I reflect on this past year, I am so grateful for our church community. I am truly amazed by the way that each of you volunteered your time, talents and gifts to sustain Reformation through a significant pastoral transition. It is because of you that we have been able to continue the important and meaningful work we do here; thank you! I will admit, however, that there were times this past year that I doubted. Would we find a pastor who shared our values? Would they help to nurture our spiritual lives while pushing us to grow and develop as a community? Even though I sometimes doubted, God had faith in us. God led us to Pastor Kevin and Pastor Kevin to us. It is such a joy to watch our community grow, in numbers and in faith, with his arrival. What a blessing from the Lord to have Pastor Kevin and his family here at Reformation!

Many Christians think of Lent as a time to “give something up”, but I prefer to find something I can add to my daily life during this season. A dedication to pray every day, the addition of a weekly community service project, listening to a new faith-based podcast, or perhaps making an effort to read the devotionals that have been created by the members of our faith community every day this Lenten season. I invite you to lean into this time of reflection and to consider ways that we can bring God’s faith in us to life, both personally and as a church community.

In Peace,
Emily Andre

One Way to Use this Booklet:

Opening: Trace a small cross on your forehead to remind yourself of the ashes that you received,

*Today, let my heart be good soil,
open to the seed of your word.*

Scripture: Find the Scripture passage for the appropriate day. You will find this located at the top right of each page. Some authors have also included a specific ‘focus verse’, as well, before their devotion.

Reflection & Pray: After reading the assigned Scripture passage, read the words from the author of the daily reflection. Pray with the author at the end.

Closing: Take a moment to reflect, breathe, and then go in peace.

Why Do the Trumpets Sound?

“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others.” Matthew 6:1-2

On Ash Wednesday, I can't help but read this text in the context of the phrase that kick starts our Lenten journey: “remember you are dust, and to dust you will return.” Maybe it's the trumpet in this verse that started me thinking of an instrument within an orchestra. Just like an instrument, we cannot make music, speak, or express ourselves without the force of life coursing through us. We exist only so long as we host the breath of life given from God. So what do we do once we start making music? We take for granted our creator who gave us the gift to play. Instead we hone our technicality, we jockey for attention from the conductor for first position, we boast about the calluses we have built from hours of practice. We do not think of the audience member who hears our melody and is able to unlock grief stored in their heart or the child who hears the harmony of an orchestra and is inspired to create art. We cannot know how God is moving through us, how the gifts that he has given us are touching other people, how us working with others towards a common goal is advancing the will of God. We can only trust that since our lives are a gift from God, he has a higher purpose for them besides the myopic, self-congratulating airs we can take on when we lose that perspective.

Dear Creator, thank you for forming us from dust and giving us the breath of life. During this season of Lent, let us turn to you instead of magnifying our earthly efforts and give thanks for all that you make possible through us, your humble instruments.

February 23

Thursday

Jonah 3:1-10

City of Sin... and Faith

“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed God’s mind about the calamity that God had said he would bring upon them; and God did not do it.” Jonah 3:10

I once participated in a three-day charity walk to raise money for breast cancer research. We walked 20 miles per day, going from Chantilly, VA, to the Mall in Downtown Washington, DC. The effort to conduct this walk was enormous; volunteers, permits, parade routes, tents, and portapotties, not to mention the personal commitment to train for the distance and to fundraise. I was one of hundreds sharing our message of awareness about breast cancer, yet most people never knew we were there.

In today’s text, Jonah walks ALONE for three days, SHOUTING a message for the people of Nineveh to repent or immediately face destruction. He does not have friends cheering along his route, motorcycle guides, or a balloon arch at the finish. How incredible then that people listened, repented, put on sackcloth, and began to fast. How incredible that once Jonah’s message reached the King, he repented, sat in ash, and ordered the people to do the same. How did the people hear the message so clearly? How did an entrenched leader make this change when that is the hardest thing for people in power to do?

God was faithful to Jonah and the people of Nineveh. God intended the people to hear his message. God is also with us.

Dear God, as I walk with you today, allow me to feel your presence and abiding love.

Judgmental Jonah

Prologue: God does not destroy Nineveh for its wickedness because its inhabitants repented

Jonah was very unhappy the Lord did not destroy Nineveh and became angry. The Lord said to him, 'This plant grew up in one night and disappeared the next; you didn't do anything for it and you didn't make it grow – yet you feel sorry for it! How much more, then, should I have pity on Nineveh, that great city. After all, it has more than 120,000 innocent children in it, as well as many animals. Jonah 4:1-3, 10-11

Jonah praises God's love, kindness and mercy; however, he really only wants these blessings for himself and is angered when God chooses not to punish the inhabitants of Nineveh because they repented. He is selfish and judgmental, even though he was just the recipient of God's grace when he was freed from the belly of the whale after initially disobeying God's order to go to Nineveh. In fact, he is so mad that he concludes his praise of God with a wish for death: "I am better off dead than alive." He repeats this wish for death after God destroys the plant God grew for him.

While I think/hope I'm less dramatic than Jonah, I can unfortunately recognize this petty instinct. I sometimes find myself fixated on small annoyances in my life or maybe hoping God would have a whale swallow up other people. I want *my* God to be the beautiful and loving presence that Jonah extols, but in lower moments, I wouldn't mind if He sheds that grace and brings his wrath down on people I have judged unworthy. However, in this passage God reminds us to forgive, as we have been forgiven, and to exercise compassion for others who are also struggling to do the right thing. I think we can all benefit from taking on God's grace and shining it on others.

Lord, you are loving and merciful and forgive us when we let you down. Help us to exercise that same love and kindness towards others and teach us to leave the judging to you. Amen.

February 25

Saturday

Isaiah 58:1-12

Self-Serving Sacrifices

I chuckled when I was assigned this passage. I grew up in a mega-church. The radically non-denominational, Hawaiian-shirts-and-sandals-wearing-pastor kind of church. We didn't observe Lent let alone fasts. Indeed, it wasn't until college that someone asked what I was giving up for Lent. I still don't know the answer because I have never given up anything for Lent.

Why would I do that? Who cares? What do I gain? Sure, I would (in theory at least) lose a few pounds if I gave up bread or a few dollars if I gave up buying clothes. But these sacrifices are self-serving, and if I don't keep to them, I'm only hurting myself. That, I think, is the point of this passage.

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter[?]"

It's not about the weight I'd lose if I gave up bread, it's about what I do for those who can't afford bread. It's not about the money I'd save if I stopped buying clothes, it's about what I do for those who cannot clothe themselves. It's not about what I sacrifice; it's about how I serve.

Let us pray,

Dear God,

Thank you for reminding us that Your calls to sacrifice are calls to serve. Amen.

February 26

Sunday

Matthew 4:1-11

The Dark Night of the Soul

“Kneel before the Lord your God and worship only him. At once the accuser left him, and angels suddenly gathered around Jesus to minister to his needs.”

Matthew 4:10b-11

Jesus was clearly suffering in his time in the desert. I look at his time in the desert as searching his soul for his calling. The dark night of the soul Jesus experienced was not unlike the suffering we have experienced as we try to figure out our path in life. Sometimes human suffering is dramatic and horrifying, but often it is ordinary, humble, and quiet. The role of God is to be present with us in the joys and suffering and to lead us to ever more freedom and compassion for ourselves and others. Often my dark nights (for there are many for most of us) began twice with a physical/health situation that stopped my erratic forward movement and forced me to be still and reflect. As I quiet myself, I am reminded that God is goodness, an encouraging energy. Often I am delighted by solutions that surprise me. I am left in awe and wonder at God's graciousness to be present if we only invite him into our hearts.

Holy Spirit, remind me to ask you into my daily frustrations to help me see light in the darkness. Help me to be more compassionate, caring for others in their suffering. Remind me to be with the suffering and work through it, not avoid it. In your holy name, Amen.

Elijah. Now. What. Have. You. Done.

This prophet's future seems utterly bleak. A powerful queen condemns him for destroying pagan prophets who paid her allegiance. Elijah publicly humiliated them at Mount Carmel and executed them at the Wadi Kishon. He's running for his life, a fugitive with a price on his head, even leaving his servant behind during his escape. He mourns that Israelites disavow the Lord's covenant, crush His altars, and put His prophets to death. He asks the Lord for a lonely end before his adversaries find him.

It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.

Spoiler alert. The Lord has a surprisingly different future planned. Much more powerful, much more spectacular.

I imagine Elijah as a legendary character in a folk tale or a graphic novel. A figure from a parallel universe who can summon divine fire, wreak vengeance on the unworthy and survive a six-week journey without food or water. No ordinary mortal could meet such challenges.

Or Raising a new generation of responsible world citizens with complementary aspirations might rank significantly. Easing the burdens of deeply rooted poverty, hunger, oppression, inequality might count over time. Fostering opportunities for fellow humans to learn and build in synergy, to prosper in harmony with creation, might matter.

When the future seems utterly bleak, do we expect to receive enough bread, water, and faith to continue travelling and pass the milestones ahead?

Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.

Here we will take the wine and the water
 Here we will take the bread of new birth
 Here you shall call your sons and your daughters
 Call us anew to be salt for the earth.

– Gather Us In, ELW 532

Throughout All Time and Space

Then the Lord said to him, "Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance." And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. Genesis 4:15, NRSV

What does the story of Cain killing Abel have to do with the salvation arc of Lent and Easter? I had to sit with this one for a long time. So long that I was late turning this in – sorry Ivy! I swear I was focused only on my FATE articles, and not at all on binging the last season of Doctor Who in anticipation of David Tennant's return! (Spoilers!) I would never!

All at once, though, it hit me.

Hit me like a rock, you might say.

Cain did a Big Dumb. He killed his brother. The Lord could have given up on him. The Lord could have turned him out and let him be preyed upon by others. Instead, God marks Cain with his sign forever, telling even his worst enemies that they had no power over him.

He let the world know that, as the Doctor might say: he is protected.

We do Big Dumbs all the time. We constantly try to kill our relationship with the Lord by believing the Devil's lies. We tell ourselves that we are unloved and unwanted. We tell ourselves that God's love is meant for someone else, that the generous invitation to wrap our arms around God and bury our face in his grace, is somehow, despite that simplicity, simply out of our reach.

God could give up on us. God could turn us out and let the Devil prey on us. Instead, God marks us with his sign forever, telling even our worst enemies – the Devil and the lies he leads us to believe – that they have no power over us.

He lets the world know that we are protected.

March 1

Wednesday

Exodus 34:1-9, 27-28

Lent Prayer for Strength and Guidance

Lord God Almighty, shaper and ruler of all creatures, we pray for your great mercy, that you guide us towards you, for we cannot find our way.

And guide us to your will, to the need of our soul, for we cannot do it ourselves. And make our mind steadfast in your will and aware of our soul's need.

Strengthen us against the temptations of the devil, and remove from us all lust and every unrighteousness, and shield us against our foes, seen and unseen.

Teach us to do your will, that we may inwardly love you before all things with a pure mind. For you are our maker and our redeemer, our help, our comfort, our trust, our hope; praise and glory be to you now and forever.

Source: Alfred the Great, 9th century

March 2

Thursday

Isaiah 51:1-3

From Exile to New Life

The prophet is speaking God's word to the Israelites who are in a very difficult position. They have been defeated in battle and forced to leave home and live as exiles in Babylon.

And in this maelstrom of dislocation, suffering, and pain God has a word of hope and comfort. God speaks of change

<u>from</u>	<u>to</u>
loneliness	community
a pile of ruins	comfort in the Lord
dead ground	garden of Eden
a barren moonscape	the garden of God
despair	hope

Even if I am not in such desperate straits, how do I want to change my life? But even more importantly – how does God want to change me?

Lord God, help me to be open to change that will lead to a more faithful journey.

March 3

Friday

Micah 7:18-20

God's Compassion and Clemency

"Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy." Micah 7:18

At first blush, this passage seems to have a simple and positive message. How nice it is to have a merciful God! But digging a little deeper, it demonstrates the bond of faithfulness and forgiveness in our relationship with God.

This passage follows a description of a society in decay, fallen into faithlessness. Corruption, greed, contempt, violence and evil run amok in Israel and Judea. Micah is delivering bad news to this faithless flock. They will be stripped of their power, ashamed; and afraid of the mighty God they have forsaken in their wantonness.

After this stern reprimand, we are given a message of hope. God is indeed mighty, but merciful as well. Faith flows between God and us, and that is the basis of forgiveness.

For us humans, forgiveness is often easier said than done. I'm not referring to just a minor misunderstanding or small annoyance, where human pettiness or foolishness might make one a bit stubborn and withhold clemency. A serious offense, a major betrayal, can be extremely difficult to forgive. Sometimes the sin is so big we are unable to pardon the sinner. And that is the time to pray, to give it to God. God is stronger, more intelligent, and more compassionate than we can manage. God's forgiveness and faithfulness is a truly incredible thing, epitomized through Jesus Christ.

Dear God, we are grateful for your compassion and faithfulness. Forgive us when we fail, help us to renew our faith. And help us to forgive others and follow the example of Jesus Christ, to be people of faith, mercy, and peace. Amen.

March 4

Saturday

Isaiah 51:4-8

Forever and a Day

Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look upon the earth beneath: for the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment, and they that dwell therein shall die in like manner: but my salvation shall be forever, and my righteousness shall not be abolished. Isaiah 51:6

As I first began to read these words, I was a bit confused. “Look up!” “Look down!” “Doesn’t matter, it’s all going to decay and rot (us too!)” Well that’s rather depressing I thought. But then I realized that God was only saying all of this to remind us--challenge us--to believe that the salvation being promised would be forever. A few years ago as one of my younger brothers was dying, I told him how sad and scared I was. This brother, who had struggled for so many years with mental illness and troubles, comforted me! “Monica, no one who was born 130 years ago is alive today. And everyone alive today will be dead within 130 years. Dying is not really an optional thing, it’s a required part of living.” My brother *had* cast his eyes to the heavens--*had* experienced the earth beneath. For all his struggles, he’d always been so intelligent and a deep thinker as well. I like to think that he felt peace knowing that Emmanuel “God with us” was going to stay with him as his time on this waxing old planet ended.

My prayer for all of us is “look to the heavens, look upon the earth, but mostly look to God and believe that salvation is yours, because it truly is.”

March 5

Sunday

John 3:1-7

What Is Born of the Spirit is Spirit

In this passage, Nicodemus catches Jesus in a quiet nighttime moment to clarify something very important – that he was of God? And Jesus answers him that no one can see the Kingdom of God, unless they are born from above. This passage is a good reminder that not only are we born of this earth; we are also born from above. In addition to the things both good and bad that make us human, our baptism bestows on us a second birth – that of the spirit. In the daily grind that can be life sometimes, this spiritual side of our lives can get lost. But even when our spirit is drowned out by more immediate concerns, we are still born of it.

Dear Lord, please guide me to delight in all of the ways that I am born of the spirit on this day. Amen.

How Relatable

“They set out from Mount Hor along the Red Sea Road, a detour around the land of Edom. The people became irritable and cross as they traveled. They spoke out against God and Moses: ‘Why did you drag us out of Egypt to die in this godforsaken country? No decent food; no water—we can’t stomach this stuff any longer.’ So God sent poisonous snakes among the people; they bit them and many in Israel died.” Numbers 21:4-6

What strikes me most about this passage is the relatability, both to the Israelites and to God. The Israelites have been traversing the desert for ages. Now as they near the Promised Land they are denied passage through Edom and forced to go the long way round. Think about how disgruntling it is when someone or something makes you take a detour, especially when you see the direct path to your destination. On top of that, you are hungry, tired, and extremely eager to reach the respite promised when you arrive. Who among us wouldn’t be “hangry” and start to complain?

While you can likely relate to the Israelites, you’ve probably been in God’s position too, on the hurtful receiving end of a loved one’s angst. The Israelites, who’ve received water and manna from heaven, complain, *“No decent food; no water- we can’t stomach this stuff any longer.”* One translation I read put it, *“our souls loathe this worthless, unappetizing bread.”* Worthless? Unappetizing!? Anyone who’s poured love and thoughtfulness into a meal for a loved one knows what a gut punch that reception is like. Their careless words and rejection sting, not unlike the bite of a venomous serpent.

As you read on, despite their frustration the Israelites repent and despite the hurt God does forgive them and heal them yet again. The Lenten (and life) practices I’m taking away from this passage are: cultivate an attitude of gratitude, guard your tongue (especially when hangry), and practice grace.

Dear Lord, grant me humility to apologize and acknowledge when I mess up, especially when it hurts those around me. Grant me Your grace and forgiveness when I am wronged. Thank You for Your mercy and the endless opportunities to do better granted to us through Jesus Christ. Amen.

March 7

Tuesday

Isaiah 65:17-25

A Lifetime

*No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days,
Or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;
For one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,
And one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.*
Isaiah 65:20

This passage presents such a beautiful picture of a peaceful place—no one is crying, everyone gets to live past 100 years old, and even predator animals have stopped killing their prey. Is this a prophecy for the future of earth? Is it a description of heaven? Will we ever get to see it? And if so, how long do we have to wait?

We're certainly not there now.

I'm thinking a lot about the lives that people don't get to live.

This January (like all of our Januaries, like all of our months now) our country suffered through a lot of gun violence, including multiple mass shootings. In California, where I have both family and friends whom I consider family, two shooters murdered over twenty people in Monterey Park and Half Moon Bay. In both shootings, male elders attacked and killed members of their own community. The dead did not get to live out their lifetimes.

January 22 marked the beginning of the new lunar year. It should have been a time of joy—of celebration and community. Instead, we grieve. We bear witness to the dead who did not live out their lifetimes.

This is not the world that God envisioned for us.

God, release us from violence, both personal and systemic. Give us the peace and longevity we see in Isaiah 65. And until we see your kingdom, give us space to grieve with you. We grieve and bear witness for those who died in Monterey Park and Half Moon Bay.

Transforming Our Hearts of Stone

The people of Israel have been scattered to other nations because, although they were called to be shepherds, they have been feeding themselves and not the sheep. “You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them” (Ezekiel 34:4).

This picture of inhumanity is not unfamiliar to us in these times of violence, injustice, disregard for our neighbors, and indifference to the survival of our planet.

But here in Ezekiel 36, God says that, for the sake of God’s own holy name, “I will ...gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land.... I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes.”

When I dig down in my own heart, I find these to be words of truly freeing grace. How liberating to know that God is working in and through us in our world to change our hardened hearts and the terrible trajectories of our human history!

In contrast to the rocky hearts of those shepherds, God’s gift is Jesus’ heart of human flesh and his words: Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness sake...

Beloved Shepherd of all, use our eyes to see and our hands to feed the poor, house the refugee, feed the hungry, comfort the sick and dying. To tend the sheep.

Kindness Isn't a Transaction.

In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death." Then the Lord said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you..."

Exodus 16:2-4a

In this passage the Israelites are hungry in the desert, grumbling to the point of wishing they'd died by God's hands in Egypt, because at least there they had as much to eat as they wanted. God hears their grumbling and answers by raining down food from heaven.

It's easy to chafe at people for not being sufficiently grateful, and just about as easy to react badly and lash out at them for their lack of gratitude. But here we see the God of the Old Testament, the one we as kids were all taught could be a vengeful deity, reacting not by dealing the Israelites what would have been a wholly unsurprisingly smiting. Instead, God responds with kindness (albeit with a few strings attached).

This passage is a poignant reminder to me that I want to teach my kids to both be grateful and show gratitude when people do things for them or show kindness to them, but I also want to remind them that their kindness isn't a transaction. So if God can rain down manna from heaven for people who literally wished they were back in Egypt, they can let it go when someone doesn't say "thank you" to them or otherwise act sufficiently grateful. And the best way I can teach them that is to live that lesson with them day to day.

Lord, help us always remember to be grateful to you and to people who show us love and kindness, and help us also remember that our love and kindness don't come with a price tag.

March 10

Friday

Exodus 16:9-21

A Parent Provides

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

The Israelites are God's chosen people, and they sure seem to know it in this text. They know that God will give them what they want, even when they "complain" about not having it, rather than asking God in a more appropriate way that expresses their gratitude for all God has done for them up until this point.

And God is still faithful to them. He provides miraculous food (manna) in the desert.

As a new parent myself, I see God's role as our father even more clearly in this text than I have before. What parent wouldn't give their children what they need, even as the children whine and complain and are generally annoying?

It may not be exactly what we want, and it may not come on our terms, but God remains faithful to us, his children—no matter how difficult we can be.

Father, strengthen our faith in your faithfulness. Help us always to be grateful and never doubt your love for us. When we whine and complain, forgive us and help us do better. Amen.

See! The LORD Has Given You the Sabbath.

See! The LORD has given you the sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days; each of you stay where you are; do not leave your place on the seventh day." So the people rested on the seventh day. The house of Israel called it manna..." Exodus 16:29-31

We've been talking about bread in this story. Manna. "What-is-it?" stuff. Luther explains that our daily bread is "everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes... health, decency, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like." God provides this every day for six days, with plenty left over for the seventh. Suddenly we're talking about the Sabbath.

Remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy is the ignored commandment. Society pulls us into the busy world every day. Buy this, pay your bills, spruce up your house, deal with the mess, get this nice car, organize your closets.

Lately Ted and I have been trying to do no work on Sundays. We worship. We have a meal, we might go to a museum or a concert, or stay home with the paper and maybe watch some football. With rested bodies and cleared minds, we find we are freed to ponder and give thanks to God. What a wonderful gift – a space in time when we can give thanks for bread.

The late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: "On the Sabbath it is given us to share in the holiness that is in the heart of time. Even when the soul is seared, even when no prayer can come out of our tightened throats, the clean, silent rest of the Sabbath leads us to a realm of endless peace, or to the beginning of an awareness of what eternity means."¹

¹Heschel, *The Sabbath, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, p. 101*

Loving God, thank you for your gifts of bread, rest, and peace.

March 12

Sunday

John 4:5-42

In a World of Plenty, Still Not Enough

Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." John 4:13-14

That sounds great. Except when the water you actually drink is poisoned and you cannot afford healthy food, or no food at all. In Jesus' time, and still today for many people in this country and around the world, clean water and plentiful food are out of reach.

Fortunately, I never had to worry about that, but if I had been in that situation, I doubt I would have been receptive to someone telling me "everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again" and "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." And yet, that is what Jesus told the Samaritan woman, despite knowing how deprived and marginalized she was. And the Samaritan woman, instead of ignoring his nonsensical talk, went and told everybody to come and see this man who might be the Messiah.

It was quite an act of faith by both. They didn't ignore the basic need for food and water, but they understood that inequality and injustice could only be overcome by trusting in the sustenance coming from God and by sharing freely of God's gifts given to all.

Lord, help us work for equality and justice for all. Amen.

March 13

Monday

Genesis 24:1-27

An Arranged Marriage

Genesis 24 illustrates the parental practice of arranging marriages for one's children. The story includes an oath, a fabulous road trip, and fulfilled promises.

So, imagine a noisy caravan of ten braying camels with harness bells ringing, carrying precious gold cargo packed under colored rugs and driven by a wealthy man's oath-bound servant—all led by an angel of God. Their divinely inspired mission: find a wife for the wealthy man's son from among the father's distant kin.

Now the wealthy man was Abraham, blessed by God with descendants numbering like stars in the sky. But old Abraham and his wife Sarah were childless until the miraculous birth of their only child Isaac—as God had promised.

When Isaac grew up, Abraham sent the caravan on their search. After traveling some distance, they stopped at a village well. The servant prayed for God to reveal if the woman destined for Isaac was there.

God brought her forth as she was drawing water. She offered water to Abraham's servant and drew more for the camels. It was a divine flood of life-giving hospitality.

Her actions convinced the servant that this woman, Rebekah, was God's choice. He offered her Abraham's gold betrothal gifts that convinced her to accept the proposal. With her parents' blessing, she rode with the caravan to Abraham's household to marry Isaac. Arranged by their parents and by our Heavenly Father, the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah produced a lineage of forty-two generations resulting in Jesus' birth.

God fulfilled His promises to Abraham and to us with the gift of His promised Messiah. God keeps His promises and is our Faithful Father at all times and in all things.

*Heavenly Father, open our hearts to trust your steadfast love and faithfulness.
Amen.*

March 14

Tuesday

Genesis 29:1-14

God of Sorrows: A Lenten Prayer

God of Sorrows,

We cry holy for a God who is moved to tears when met with the conditions of this world. We are grateful that You are not a God who drags us out of our pain before we are ready— one who is not threatened by our tears but beholds them as holy. This Lent, help us to make space for a faithful examination of injustice, death, and decay in this world. We confess that we so often reduce salvation to the personal; let ours be a salvation tethered to the liberation of the world. And so form us into people who truly see the world, in all of its beauty and depravity. And when we find ourselves tempted to look away, steady us, that we may see with clarity our most desperate need for a Christ.

As we prepare for the memory of God hung from the cross, let us bear witness to all that requires it. Oppression, famine, war, neglect, loss, exclusion, loneliness, grief— all suspended by sin itself— let us resolve to see and name it all. That we would daily apprehend the breach between what we were created for and the distortion we see in the systems and powers of this world today. Let us grieve the chasm. And as we allow ourselves to weep with you, let us hope with you in the coming restoration of all things.

*Glory to the One who met the cross with tears on his face. We look to You.
Amen.*

By Cole Arthur Riley

<https://thewitnessbcc.com/god-of-sorrows-a-lenten-prayer>

March 15

Wednesday

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Lamentation

“And I brought you into a plentiful land, to enjoy its fruits and its good things. But when you came in you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination.” Jeremiah 2:7

Today’s reflection voices Jeremiah’s anger and lament over Israel’s departure from God’s commandments and God’s will.

Another translation of verse 7 says “I brought you into a garden land where you could eat lush fruit. But you barged in and polluted my land, trashed and defiled my dear land.” Is God speaking directly to us in the twenty-first century?

“Two sins have my people committed: they have forsaken me, a spring of living water, and they have hewn out for themselves ... cracked cisterns that can hold no water.” (The symbolism of water here is contemporary, as we note the serious problems with access to water throughout the world today.)

Where is God’s faithfulness in this account of Israel’s behavior after the exodus? God is still with God’s disobedient people! God still scolds and admonishes them; God still cares for them and speaks to them through the prophets.

God speaks to us, also. Earnest committees and groups form, publicize, sponsor and run recycling efforts. Some politicians work at changing policy concerning the use of fossil fuels. Scientists publicize the effects of climate change and offer solutions. Volunteers help educate us and teach us about caring for each other.

Above all God gives us hope through the gifts promised through our faith. God remains faithful to us, even when we stray from God.

Faithful God, we thank you for Your Word which speaks to us through the ages, and for the understanding it brings us in our contemporary times.

Saul Disobeys God and Spares Agag

When Samuel came to Saul, Saul said to him, 'May you be blessed by the Lord; I have carried out the command of the Lord.' But Samuel said, 'What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears, and the lowing of cattle that I hear?'
1 Samuel 15:13-14

When I was in middle school, there was a sign in one of my classrooms that read "What is popular isn't always right. What is right isn't always popular." That was a tough pill to swallow as a teenager and even as an adult! It's tempting to follow the crowd, even when the path is going the wrong way. In reading this text, I wondered if perhaps Saul fell into the trap of listening to the crowds rather than following the path God laid for him. The Lord asked him to carry out a task (one that I won't dive into because let's be honest, it's not super awesome) but when Saul comes back with the spoils of war, he blames the people for pressuring him into saving the best cattle for a sacrifice. The Lord doesn't want empty sacrifices from Saul. The Lord wants Saul to ignore the popular crowd and keep on the right path. We too can fall into this same trap. We think what we're doing is the right thing but we're just following the crowd. Today I invite you to reflect on ways you can break from what is popular and go for what is right.

*Dear Lord,
Help us to follow what is right, even if it isn't popular.*

*Love,
The non-popular crowd*

God Doesn't Change God's Mind

The Preeminent One of Israel does not go back on his word or change his mind, for he is not a human being who changes his mind." Saul again replied, "I have sinned. But please honor me before the elders of my people and before Israel. Go back with me so I may worship the Lord your God." So Samuel followed Saul back, and Saul worshiped the Lord. 1 Samuel 15:29-31

My sister and I joke that our favorite words to hear are "You were right." I bet for many of us, those are precious and savored words. But what does it mean to be right when you're God, who basically can't make a mistake. How does grace work when the "Preeminent One" isn't human. How do we as fallible humans feel in the presence of that?

Here, Saul acknowledges his sin and his failure, and Samuel isn't so gracious. But Saul persists. He knows what he needs to do and after some badgering, Samuel relents. God shows faithfulness and Saul is allowed to return and worship. Spoiler alert: the rest of this passage isn't exactly hopeful, but it is the trusting in God, even when the future seems unclear, that allows us to glimpse the grace and beauty of God's love.

Dear God, give us the wisdom and understanding to better understand your world through your eyes. Allow us the grace and faithfulness to work with your people even when we have sinned. Grant us pardon that we may continue in our work that it may always glorify you. In Christ's name, Amen.

March 18

Saturday

1 Samuel 15:32-34

Lenten Prayer for Early Morning Reflection

I give thanks to you, my heavenly Father,
through Jesus Christ your dear Son,
that you have protected me through the night
from all harm and danger
and I ask that you also protect me today from sin and every danger,
so that my life and actions may please you.
Into your hands I commend myself: my body, my soul, and all that
is mine.
Let your holy angel be with me,
so that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.

Luther's morning prayer

March 19

Sunday

John 9:1-41

Jesus Heals a Blind Man

"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"
John 9:2

Oh do I relate to the disciples. I'm so glad they are portrayed as being so flawed. When they say things like this, I think my reaction used to be judgmental...sort of a "dude you watch Jesus perform miracles, why aren't you holier?" But as I have slowly refamiliarized myself with the liturgy over the last four years (once I started teaching Sunday School and realized I didn't know most of these stories), I'm so thankful to read about the disciples as real people. In this passage about Jesus healing a blind man (taken from Matthew Chapter 9, verse 9-41), the disciples are trying to come to terms with misfortune by finding someone or something to blame. I do this all the time. It makes me feel less vulnerable if I can understand the cause of the misfortune, because that might help me avoid it. That misfortune might strike randomly is terrifying, so I suppose it's natural. And therefore natural that the disciples should inquire about the cause of the blind man's blindness.

"Neither did this man sin, nor his parents; but, that the works of God might be revealed in him." So it's no one's fault. Misfortune exists. But the crazy part is that the blind man's situation provides an opportunity for Jesus to heal the man, therefore revealing God's works. I need to remember that God's works are often revealed through adversity. And then that hardest part...to be faithful in and during adversity and to draw strength from it.

My devotion is this: May we remain faithful in adversity and help those we can.

God Brings Justice

So justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him. He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak. Isaiah 59:9, 15b-17

Before God sent Jesus to die for our sins, there was only shadows and darkness. God saw that the only path to justice for His people was to intervene on our behalf after we turn from transgression and repent. As I reflect on this passage and my interpretation of it, I think about how I sometimes forget that I cannot do everything alone. I need God's help - a kind of help that only He can provide. I was most recently reminded of this when our son was hospitalized. I felt so afraid and everything seemed very dark, until I remembered to pray and ask for help.

March 21

Tuesday

Isaiah 42:14-21

Run Away, Return, Repeat

Hear, you deaf; look, you blind, and see. Isaiah 42:18

This passage is not for the faint of heart. Here comes God, doing all kinds of God stuff, and there's no way to pretend this is business as usual. The verses right before our reading are a song of praise to God. "Sing to the Lord a new song!" Lovely, let's do that! But then God jumps in and screams in verse 14, at which time mountains and hills get blown up, plants die, and pools of water become deserts. Okay, where might that have come from? And then God promises to lead the blind and light their paths, unless of course they trust in idols in which case they are very much on their own. God pleads with the deaf to hear and begs the blind to see because it turns out that it is God's own servant who is deaf and blind. They very people God longs to lead and love have plugged their ears and closed their eyes and God has had enough.

Our reading today is a sort of summary of the entire Bible when you think about it. God reaching out, the people turning away, and then God doing something attention-getting so that the people return again. Floods, plagues, exiles, miracles, more exiles, etc. Finally, when you think things could not possibly get any weirder, God says "Right you. Watch this!" And then God becomes one of us, lives with us, blesses us, heals us and finally really right in front of our very eyes dies with us on a cross that we nailed God to. What the actual actual. So here is Lent in a nutshell, slapping us in the face and saying, one more God-blessed time, "Open your eyes! Unstop your ears! God aches to love you if you would simply pay attention and allow it."

We seem to be slow learners, don't we? Let's use this Lenten time to listen and be loved.

Ever patient God, we thank you that you never seem to get bored with having to come back for us when we turn away from you, neglect you, or simply even forget that you are there. We certainly don't deserve your persistence. Thank you especially now for Lent, that time when we try to sit quietly and ponder the lengths you go to to make sure we can always return to you. Amen.

March 22

Wednesday

Isaiah 60:17-22

Lenten Prayer for Evening Reflection

O Lord, support us all the day long of this troubled life, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes and the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, in your mercy, grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work or watch or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, comfort the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. Amen.

I give thanks to you, heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ your dear Son, that you have graciously protected me today. I ask you to forgive me all my sins, where I have done wrong, and graciously protect me tonight. Into your hands I commend myself: my body, my soul, and all that is mine. Let your holy angel be with me, so that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.

Luther's evening prayer

March 23

Thursday

Ezekiel 1:1-3, 2:8-3:3

Unexpected Offerings

“But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious people; open your mouth and eat what I give you.” Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. Ezekiel 2:8-9

If you're not familiar with this passage, Ezekiel ends up eating the scroll God hands down to him, and it tastes 'as sweet as honey'. Pretty odd! It reminds me of trying to eat the cupcake wrappers when I was a young child. (Don't ask me why or where I learned this, I just have memories of my mother chastising me every time I tried to chew on them.)

In my adult life, I've stopped trying to gnaw on the wrappers, but I am certainly familiar with this feeling of confusion Ezekiel must have felt when God gave him some ... *paper? to eat. While I would not suggest chowing down on a pack of cardstock, I think this is an excellent metaphor for faith.*

God knows what we need, and I think God does Their best not to leave us high and dry. Sometimes what God has to offer us is going to look ... odd ... but who are we to judge!? It might end up tasting wonderful. Try to lean into God's offerings for you, even when they might look a little ~ dry and tasteless ~.

Dear God, help us to trust in your wisdom, take the leap, and follow your lead. Amen.

Hope and Despair and Ultimately, Hope?

And you, mortal, say to your people: The righteousness of the righteous shall not save them when they transgress, and as for the wickedness of the wicked, it shall not make them stumble when they turn from their wickedness. Ezekiel 33:12

Hard as I try to be otherwise, I'm imperfect. I sin, I fall short, I let myself and worse, others down time and again. The duality in this passage doesn't provide much comfort to a perfectionist like me. Don't get me wrong, I'm thankful that God has "no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live." Through God's words to Ezekiel he provides a much needed path to redemption. Awesome, this sounds promising.

Unfortunately, God doesn't stop there. As thankful as I am for being shown the path to redemption, it's not exactly comforting when God tells us how easy it is to lose that redemption again. And oh, then you die. This just seems so Sisyphean. Remember, I'm far from perfect Am I supposed to spend my whole life yo-yoing back and forth, finding redemption just to lose it again. That sounds exhausting! And more than a little discouraging.

As unsatisfying as I found this passage, it did seem like the perfect Lenten passage because it left me wanting more, wanting a better way. It left me wanting Jesus. He takes that stone from me and lets me rest. He wants me to repent, but reminds me it's OK if I fall, I'm OK in my imperfection.

Lord, thank you that your love for me is so deep that you don't write me off when I fall short, again and again and again. Help me to always want to work for your redemption, but thank you for giving me Jesus so I don't have to.

The Renewal of Israel

But you, mountains of Israel, will produce branches and fruit for my people Israel for they will soon come home. Ezekiel 36:8

In this chapter, Ezekiel prophesies to the mountains and the land of Israel rather than directly to the exiled people of Israel. My initial reaction was OF COURSE! He is talking to the mountains – after all, Revelation has nothing on Ezekiel when it comes to bizarre, hallucinogenic visions and fantasies, aka “parts of the Bible I would just rather not think about too much.”

Anyway, back to the assignment. God is saying that the land, destroyed and plundered, will yet again provide sustenance for people. God will bring people back to the land, and they will increase and be fruitful.

The address to the mountains is not merely a hallucination or a literary device but shows that God’s vision for the land incorporates all peoples, not only the Israelites mentioned in the first verse. In all of the translations I read, God promises to “increase” or “multiply” people on the land in addition to promising that the returned people themselves would “multiply” or be “fruitful.” Thus, God is promising the land it will receive not only the original inhabitants and their descendants, but also people from elsewhere.

In 2022, the UNHCR estimates that there were more than 100 million people displaced due to war, famine, violence, or natural disasters, with over 32 million of them, like the ancient Israelites, refugees in another country. How can we who live in places with more safety and opportunity help our land be welcoming and nurturing?

Dear God,

We know your vision for the world is that all people will live in lands that nurture and support them. Thank you for Good Neighbors Capitol Hill and others working to support refugees and migrants. Lead us to implement your vision that all lands and countries will welcome all peoples.

March 26

Sunday

Luke 1:26-38

Announcing Our Salvation

You are Mary. You are ready to marry an ordinary man in Nazareth. You are excited for your impending wedding but expecting to settle down, have a family, and live a typical life.

Suddenly, you hear a voice: "Do not be afraid," the gentle angel Gabriel tells you, "for you have found favor with God."

"Favored? Me?" you ask yourself. "I am just a simple person destined for a simple life. I must be in shock."

"You will conceive in your womb and bear a son... the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David," Gabriel gently foretells.

With every word, you get more and more scared, so terrified you blurt out, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?"

The angel looks kindly upon you, smiles, envelops you in sweet, warm light, and says simply, "For nothing is impossible with God." And he leaves just as suddenly as he arrives.

God comes to us in sudden moments. He asks us to be brave, to undertake the seemingly impossible, to act with love. He asked Mary to nurture his son. She accepted. He asks us to listen to a grieving friend, to lend a struggling friend a place to sleep, to bring a smile to a child's face. In all of those moments, the ask is fundamentally the same: To love each other and ourselves. That is what God asked Mary and what God asks us.

Dear God, help us open ourselves to your challenges, just like Mary opened herself to you. Amen.

March 27

Monday

1 Kings 17:17-24

Service to Others

The Lord heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived.
1 Kings 17:22

In the midst of a drought declared by the prophet Elijah at God's direction, a starving widow opens her family home to Elijah though her food supply is nearly exhausted. Nevertheless, she prepares food for him. Elijah told her that God would provide the flour and oil, which was miraculously replenished each day. But then her son fell ill and died. Elijah cried out three times to the Lord to let this child's soul come back to him, and the child was revived.

God chose the desperately poor widow for service. She did not know this stranger she was to feed, but she did as she was commanded by God's prophet Elijah.

I cannot fathom the depth of her faith, and yet that is exactly how we are to believe, to trust God's promise. Faith is the step between promise and assurance. Every miracle, large or small, begins with an act of obedience.

Lord, during this Lenten Season, I pray that you will humble my heart so that I may be obedient in service to you. Amen.

Elisha and the Shunammite Woman

“The child has not awaked.” 2 Kings 4:31b

Is there anything more terrible – or difficult to comprehend – than the sudden, unexpected death of a loved one? Having experienced such a tragedy myself, I empathize with the feelings of shock and urgency expressed by the Shunammite Woman, whose son has just died in her lap. She does not fall into despair, however, but immediately travels to see the prophet Elisha to ask for his help. Earlier, Elisha, to repay the woman’s kindness and generosity, blessed her to conceive and give birth to the boy who has now died. The Shunammite Woman confronts Elisha with the words: “Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, Do not deceive me?” Her outrage is apparent, yet Elisha, far from offended by the woman’s directness, is moved by the woman’s distress and travels to the child, where he revives the boy.

What moves me in this passage is not the actual miracle of the child’s resurrection – as moving and tempting as that would be – but the allegorical idea that through God we can move on from death. It would be miraculous if we could resurrect a dead loved one, but it is also reassuring to know that God is with us when we must confront death; that God hears our distress and knows our grief.

*Lord, comfort those who grieve,
and guide us in the knowledge that
you are with us always, in life and in death.*

Jeremiah buys the field at Anathoth

Jeremiah's one of my favorite prophets. The man loved annoying people. He was a born contrarian. If you said up, he'd say down, if you said white, he'd say black. Ever known anybody like that? They can be exhausting! King Zedekiah certainly was exhausted, and that's why he threw Jeremiah in jail. "We're under attack by the Babylonians, and you're prophesying 'we're gonna lose'?! I'm trying to defend Jerusalem right now, I don't need to hear that!"

But I have respect for contrarians who put their money where their mouth is. Jeremiah literally does that. In what seems like a Biblical non-sequitur, Jeremiah tells the king he was obligated to buy a field in Anathoth from his cousin, after God told him to in a dream. Why is this contrarian talking about a family real estate transaction? "Jerusalem may fall! We don't have time for this!"

Anathoth was in the war zone. At that moment, it was occupied territory. It's your cousin coming to you and saying "our enemies have overrun Anathoth, but still you must buy it from me." And then you pay him, and plant your flag there, on God's command.

This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: "I will surely gather them from all the lands where I banish them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to [Anathoth] and let them live in safety. They will be my people, and I will be their God."

Contrarians run out when everyone else is running in. You may be besieged on all sides, but you must run out and invest your time, money, or effort. Righteously plant your flag in occupied territory, and in time God's faithfulness will prevail and win it back for you and your people.

March 30

Thursday

1 Samuel 16:11-13

Between the Head and the Hands

Just prior to these verses we learn that “the Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” Fair enough. But we *are people, and we look at the things people look at.*

[H]e asked Jesse, “Are these all the sons you have?” “There is still the youngest,” Jesse answered. “He is tending the sheep.”

It’s no surprise that Jesse brings his older sons to Samuel as prospective kings before acknowledging even the existence of David. No Kingly characteristics are found in a scrawny shepherd boy armed with little more than a slingshot and budding interest in song-writing.

He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features. Fine traits, but certainly not sufficient qualifications for kingship. Maybe someday, kid. Now back to the pasture.

Then the Lord said, “Rise and anoint him; this is the one.”

Or not.

I’m not sure what these versus are supposed to teach us about Lent. Perhaps it’s that God frequently places front-and-center those whom we tend to look past. Maybe it’s that a group of disheveled fishermen led by a carpenter’s son riding a donkey into Jerusalem are worthy of our attention.

Let us pray,

Father,

We thank You for reminding us that Your ways are not our ways. Help us to remember that it is not the head or the hands, but the heart that matters in Your sight. Amen.

March 31

Friday

Job 13:13-19

Job Entreats the Lord

Okay, I need everybody to take a whole seat and calm down; I'll be doing the talking here.

I bet you're asking why: why would I do the absolutely ludicrous thing that I'm about to do? Why on God's green earth am I taking my life into my own hands?

Look. So, I'm pretty sure God is about to end me – actually, no. One hundred percent he's going to end me. You know why? 'Cause I'm about to speak my truth to power, right up in his stupid “look how holy and shiny I bet you can't look at me” face.

Listen, I'm about to prove to you once and for all that I am a fine, upstanding, God-fearing man. How? Because if I was some impertinent, godless hypocrite like you all, he'd smack me back to Christmas before I could even open my mouth.

So shut up, and listen very closely to what I'm about to say. For once in your life, try to keep up, because I will not be repeating myself.

You all: you can stay all the way over there, because I'm about to handle my own business. Because I am completely, one hundred percent certain that I am completely, one hundred percent innocent, full stop.

Now. Which one of you mental giants wants to try me? I swear to God, if any of you can prove I'm wrong about anything I've said here, I will quite literally, straight up die right where I'm standing.

April 1

Saturday

Lamentations 3:55-66

1-800-CALL-GOD

“I called on your name, Lord, from the depths of the pit. You heard my plea... You, Lord, took up my case; you have seen the wrong done to me. Uphold my cause!” Lamentations 3:55, 58-59

As a member of the legal profession, this passage reminds me of one aspect of God’s faithfulness: That of Defender; Attorney (*attourne, one who is turned to*). *We turn to the Lord from the depths of the pit, whether dug by an “enemy” or one of our own making. God, in His mercy, upholds our cause. He is our Proponent when all others decline a hopeless case.*

Throughout the Bible, the triune Godhead champions the cause of the marginalized. When Leah looks down her unlovely nose at her rival sister wife, Jehovah provides for the barren Rachel: “God has vindicated me; He has listened to my plea and given me a son” (Gen. 30). Likewise, the Psalmist pleads, “Ruthless witnesses come forward. Awake, and rise to my defense! Contend for me, my God and Lord. Vindicate me in your righteousness” (Ps. 35).

The Son follows suit, taking up the cause of the oppressed. When representing a client caught *in flagrante delicto*, *Jesus delivers one of history’s most compelling closing arguments: “He that is without sin among you, let him be the first to cast a stone at her”* (John 8), leaving the pharisaical jurors *slack-jawed*.

Pastor Kevin reminded us on RIC Sunday that the third Person of the Trinity serves as our Advocate (John 14). “Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry..., for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit” (Mark 13).

Thank you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for advocating on my behalf, as a gift, pro bono (for the good), for Your Name’s sake.

April 2

Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11

Hero Worship

I am writing this on February 5, two days after the Pope's four-day visit to Kinshasa. The image of Christ riding into Jerusalem came to mind as I saw multitudes of people walk for miles for a chance to wave at the Pope. The people's joy seeing this beloved man of God was palpable and moving, and his message of peace and tolerance was sorely needed. But I also remember other examples of "hero" worship, like when frenzied crowds rally for politicians. In all of these cases, crowds are responding to a sense of promise - that the person they cheer will make their lives better, deliver them from poverty, or bring them closer to God.

What makes Jesus's procession distinct? I can assure you - he didn't shut down a city of 15 million and enjoy heavily armed protection. Authorities didn't halt air traffic so he could lead worship. Entire neighborhoods weren't shut down to provide a safe "bubble" in which Jesus could travel. Jesus went into Jerusalem on a donkey. Did he know he would be greeted with hosannas? Probably - he had already been attracting crowds by this time in his journey. The big difference is that our current heroes take extraordinary safety measures, even at the risk of separating themselves from the people who adore them. Not so, Jesus. He knew he was on a journey toward crucifixion, he knew those very crowds would eventually turn against him. Yet he went into the midst of them anyway. He trusted his people more than they trusted him. He sacrificed himself more than anyone would sacrifice for him. He kept a promise people didn't know he made. At a time when people invest so much emotion and belief in their heroes' promises, it's important to remember that only Christ has really delivered on his promises of love, peace, and mercy.

Dear God - Thank you for the gifts you gave to us through your son, Jesus Christ. Remind us that we can always trust in his promises kept, regardless of whether or not we deserve them. Amen.

April 3

Monday

John 12:1-11

Layered Meanings

“... why was this anointment not sold... and given to the poor?”

This seems a simple passage with a simple question. Yet, as with all the verses where Jesus is quoted, one needs to ask about the intended audience. First, to who was Jesus speaking, then to whom were the words directed when they were written down, and, finally, how do they fit into our present world. Combined, this analytical process could make for a good sermon, but few of us are skilled enough to do this. Such analysis could not ignore the real and symbolic presence of Lazarus. Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead, and his sister Mary is showing her devotion to Jesus for this act. We know that Jesus will soon face the cross. So, death is a guest at the table. One could go in many directions in seeking meaning here, probably resulting in complex and alternate nuances. For those interested in intellectual entertainment, this would be fine, but my advice would be to rather interpret all this within the context of the command Jesus gave to love one another.

Love is the unifying theme in the message of Jesus. Love enables us to deal with death, love guides us to share with one another at meals around tables and at altar railings. Love shows us the path to anoint the poor. With love verbal debate is minimized and charity abounds.

Jesus, bear our prayer, enable our hearts to do as you have said, to love one another as you first have done. Amen

April 4

Tuesday

John 12:20-36

Dying to Live

Philip and Andrew are asked by the Greeks (non-Jews) if they can see Jesus, but they are vetting who can see Jesus. They ask Jesus if the Greeks can see Him, but Jesus does not provide a “Yes or No” answer, but rather provides a sermon on dying to oneself to find a new life in Him.

Can we all agree that God is perfect? Therefore, all that God does and makes is perfect. I am perfectly made by God; You are perfectly made by God.

Life gets in the way and chisels down on this “inborn perfection.” We become blinded by fear, the need to be right or in control; guilt and past disappointments; anger and resentment; attachment to power, wealth, and reputation; obsessions and agendas. All of this damages our relationships and separates us from one another, and Christ.

Dying to yourself is a transformation of our acquired life imperfections back to the perfectness of God. By dying to ourselves we are able to take on a new life in Christ. We can be that grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies so that we can bear much fruit. Those that love their lives and their imperfect ways will lose their lives, and those that die to their lives will keep it for eternal life. We are participants in the new life. As Jesus said (v.26), “Whoever serves me must (not a suggestion!) follow me, and where I am, there will by servant be also”.

Dear Lord, make me brave to die to myself so that I can serve you.

April 5

Wednesday

John 13:21-32

Great Is Thy Faithfulness?

And after Judas took the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are about to do, do quickly." John 13:27

When I was assigned this passage, I was talking it over with my husband (who is an atheist, but was raised in a very Bible-intense family) and said "How would I explain this to Ben [our 6 year old] to show God's faithfulness?" As we talked it over, I realized that through our free will, God has shown that God will trust and love us, even when God knows we will make bad decisions. Jesus knows what Judas will do, and yet, in love and faith, Jesus does not stop Judas. In fact, Jesus basically says "go ahead, get it over with." It is this deep knowledge of us that shows God's care and love for us. That Jesus allows us to betray him, and still shows love and care for us, that is the ultimate of faithfulness. Further in this chapter, Peter's denial is predicted, much to Peter's dismay. Where are we in this journey? Are we the Judas, actively putting ourselves and our desires first, or the Peter's, denying that we would ever do such a thing because Jesus always comes first in our lives?

Dear God, thank you for your faithfulness, even when we lack faith and trust. Grant us grace and wisdom to know the right choices we should make that will bring glory to you. Give us the strength to be honest about where we are in our journey and trust in you as we go. Amen.

April 6

Maundy Thursday

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Love Wins

Jesus said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know you are my disciples if you love one another." Also, when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, he stated, "I have given you an example that you should do as I have done to you." To act and live with the heart of a servant is to be blessed and a blessing.

This passage reminds me of an interaction I had with a community leader in the supermarket. He and I both visited this supermarket frequently. He was wearing his proper business clothes and looked quite official. I was wearing an old t-shirt and shorts. As we talked, I felt a certain anxiety that he was dressed so nicely, while I wore what could have been mistaken for pajamas. During our brief conversation, we were interrupted several times by store employees saying "Hello Jennifer!" The community leader was surprised that so many staff members knew my name. He asked how this could be possible as I was a customer and they were employees. I explained that I am naturally friendly and outgoing, but made a particular effort with people working in customer service as I could only imagine how hard their jobs were!

The community leader walked away shaking his head. Just as Jesus had commanded at The Last Supper that people should love one another, I have tried to let love guide my interactions with all.

April 7

Good Friday

John 18:1—19:42

The Sharp Knife of Betrayal

“... shall I not drink this cup that the Father has given me?” John 18:11

This passage is set in the story of betrayal. Here the betrayal is especially poignant because it leads to death on the cross for one who is so unworthy of such an experience. Betrayal is always a sharp knife, cutting deeply in our hearts and minds. Here we see that Jesus knows that he is to be betrayed and lets the betrayer know that. Those who watch their fellow brother commit the betrayal are also wounded by the betrayal. Ultimately the betrayer as well is to know the sharpness of what he has done. We, as if a fine Shakespearean play, watch the betrayal of the Jewish leadership for the long-awaited messiah. The chain of Jewish-Roman collaboration and resistance is also a betrayal. What mortal in this play is free from sin and the pain betrayal brings?

AND God seems a watcher as well as an instigator of the betrayal plan, father selecting this route for his son and not to step in at the last moment no matter how we wish it, or He for that matter.

There is no real intermission for this betrayal, it just proceeds step by step, cutting deep and deeper. The veil is rent and darkness descends. The betrayal has cut so deep. What will the third day bring?

Return from the passage to whatever is the time of the reader offers no escape from the pain of the betrayal.

Jesus, hear our prayer, your passion on the cross is inflicted by betrayal. No lament is enough to quell the pain. We await the third day. Amen

April 8

Easter Vigil

John 19:38-42

. . . And Was Buried

They took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. John 19:40

Jesus' burial is reported in each of the four Gospels. Why is the burial of Jesus so important?

Jesus' burial is important to our understanding and faith because it reinforces his identity as an historical person. His body was bound with linen cloths and spices, "as is the burial custom of the Jews." Jesus was truly human: he was a Jewish man, buried as Jews were buried during that time of Roman rule over Judea. The burial also affixes Jesus within a geographical context. His body was placed in a new tomb which was located close to the place of crucifixion and owned by Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin.

John's Gospel names Nicodemus, another member of the Sanhedrin, as aiding in the burial. Nicodemus brought 100 pounds of a mixture of myrrh and aloe to prepare Jesus' body prior to burial. Think about the quantity of a hundred pounds of spices! Even if the pounds were Roman pounds – approximately 12 ounces each instead of 16 ounces – the quantity is surprisingly extravagant. Nicodemus honored Jesus with his extravagance of spices, an extravagance normally bestowed upon the very rich, the famous, or royalty. Jesus was not buried as an itinerant preacher who came from the unsophisticated town of Nazareth. John's Gospel quietly tells us Jesus was not buried as a criminal but was honored as royalty.

Crucified, died, and was buried: without the burial, Jesus' death would be suspect as fiction; without the burial, the resurrection would be suspect as a magician's trick. But Jesus was real. He had a human body. He suffered a torturous death and was buried. Let us cry with grief over the awful truth of it.

Lord Jesus, we honor you and praise you. You suffered a terrible, torturous death by crucifixion. Help us to grieve over and honor the people who today suffer torture, pain, and death under the guises of war or political necessity. Empower our grieving with resolve to serve you as you have called us to do. Amen.

April 9

Easter Sunday

Matthew 28:1-10

Calling All Preachers

To preach is to proclaim; to tell of some news that one has heard. Usually, one would hope that there is some kind of connection between the preacher and the material which they are preaching. Some kind of experience. It makes proclamation much more authentic that way.

The first preachers, who were women, did not have theological degrees from this place or that. They'd only had an experience which connected them to Jesus at the tomb.

Not only were Mary Magdalene and the "other" Mary overwhelmed by the otherworldly spectre of an angel descending to them from on high when they arrived at the tomb, but after acclimating themselves to this reality, they literally ran smack-dab into the Risen Lord! Jesus reaffirms the connection that he had had with the Preachers before he had died, and showed them in that moment that he was who he said he was all along. Christ the Lord is Risen Today!

On Easter and beyond, let us pray for a true experience of the Risen Lord. We don't need theological degrees, or special pedigrees, or any other licensure for us to have this experience. All we need is to go to places where Jesus would be. In the case with the Marys, it was at the tomb, in our case, it is in and among us, at our very own local Galilee on the Hill: in the Word and sacraments. In communal life together—both in tragedy and triumph.

An experience of and with the Risen Lord cuts through the mundane, propelling us toward an awe-inspiring connection and experience, where we have no choice but to all become Preachers. Ambassadors. Disciples. Once we have this experience, mutual proclamation of the Good News of the Risen Lord becomes the "easy" part.

So after you have your own experience, go to your local Galilee this day, my friends, and tell our siblings to come, where they, too, can see Jesus.

ABOUT OUR AUTHORS

February 22 MEGHAN QUIRK-HERRERA lived in DC for 7 years before moving to Columbia, MD in 2021. During her time in DC, the community at Reformation was a constant source of connection and growth. Despite being a less active member since moving, Meghan still considers Reformation a home away from home and is grateful to Ivy Finkenstadt and the Spiritual Growth Committee for continuing to include her in the development of From Ashes to Easter.

February 23 IVY FINKENSTADT serves as the vice president of the Congregation Council and helped to edit From Ashes to Easter. She has been a member of Reformation since 1999.

February 24 DINA FINKEL joined Reformation in 2019 and just joined the church council. She lawyers by day and spends nights and weekends exploring with her dog Fitz in search of delicious food. As a child, she was in a church play about Jonah and now has the jazzy tune “Nineveh Nineveh City of Sin” stuck in her head.

February 25 EVAN SCHRAGE is a lawyer living in Northeast Washington, D.C. He became a member of Reformation in 2019 and currently serves as the Secretary of the church council.

February 26 LIZ TUCKERMANTY has been at reformation since 1980. She is active in the Altar Guild. She enjoys her daughters, Kijja and Gwynne’s families with 3 grandchildren from 6 – 9 years who all live nearby in Cheverly, MD. Dale Manty is related by marriage.

February 27 JUDITH MANGUBAT is a long-time Reformation member and career federal employee. When not engaged in church-related activities, she enjoys furry animals, crossword puzzles, and food.

February 28 JARROD JABRE is *still* stoked to be your Director of Operations.

March 1 ALFRED THE GREAT

March 2 AL SWINGLE is a retired ELCA pastor living on Capitol Hill with his wife Nancy of 62+ years. The community of Reformation is a very important part of their faith journey.

March 3 CHRISTINE GOEPFERT lives in Washington, DC. She became a member of Reformation in 2019 and served as Community Host for almost three years. She works at the MLK Memorial location of the DC Public Libraries, and enjoys being involved in the local theater scene.

March 4 MONICA FITZGERALD was one of seven children, so grew up learning that life isn't always fair (since most things come in boxes of six). After starting her career as a teacher she worked in Central America and later segued into work in federal IT. She is musical, athletic and extroverted. Her greatest joys are her marriage to Susanne, and being mom to Danny (15) and Benji (13).

March 5 KIMBERLY BENOIT has been a member of Reformation for a decade. She's married to Evan Benoit and mom to Ramona and Brooks. Her favorite things are building a sense of community, road trips, outer space, and boy and girl scouts. Oh, and she hosts a dang good fellowship hour.

March 6 BRIANNA WIDNER recently moved from Washington, DC to Washington state. She continues to worship with Reformation remotely while she discerns which church family to join on the west coast. She's sending prayers for you all on your new adventures ahead and is so proud of the ways Reformation is growing! ♥☐

March 7 MOLLY HIGGINS joined Reformation five years ago and is part of the Wednesday Night Bible Study. She's one of a few Reformation members who lives in Columbia Heights, and is always happy to connect with other people who live in NW. Outside of church she is a librarian with the USDA. She spends a lot of her free time cooking.

March 8 KATHRYN TOBIAS, a Reformation member since 1977, loves writing, assisting refugees through Good Neighbors of Capitol Hill, singing with the Reformation choir and Arioso, traveling, and gathering with family and with friends in nearby Cheverly and beyond.

March 9 MATT FUEHRMEYER has been a member of Reformation since 2010. He lives in Silver Spring with his wife, Liz Baden, and their children, Hannah (6) and Andrew (3). You can find them in “chaos corner” in the back of the sanctuary during the 11 o’clock service, and if they’re not in the Parish Hall during coffee hour, at least some of them are probably in the nursery making a ruckus.

March 10 CAITLIN JACOBS has been part of the Reformation community since 2005. She is a member of the choir, even as motherhood has made the position more honorary than active. She lives in Wheaton with her husband Paul Staunton, daughter Clíodhna and cat Molly.

March 11 EVA STEEGE, a native of Minnesota, and her husband, Ted, got married at Reformation (via Prince William Forest Park) in 1995, and Eva was parish administrator at Reformation for three years. She left to attend Gettysburg Seminary (now part of United Lutheran Seminary), was ordained at Reformation, and then pastored two consecutive congregations in the New England Synod and four more as an interim pastor here in the Metro DC Synod before more or less retiring after the start of the pandemic. She and Ted live in College Park and have been delighted to rejoin Reformation.

March 12 CHRISTINE POMMERENING BERRY was born and raised in Germany, and has been a member of Reformation since 2005. She and her husband Todd were married here in 2010 and live in Arlington, VA. They enjoy driving their various antique vehicles around town, and playing with their dogs Max Dieter and Lexie Dagmar. Christine works at the Logistics Management Institute and teaches at George Mason University.

March 13 JULIETTE JONES and her husband Marvin have been members of Reformation forever and are looking forward to the new era with our new pastor Kevin. The Jones’ four children were baptized and confirmed at Reformation. They have two grandchildren.

March 14 COLE ARTHUR RILEY is a writer and liturgist who serves as the Content and Spiritual Formation Manager for a

Center for Christian Studies at Cornell University called Chesterton House. She is the creator and writer of Black Liturgies, a project seeking to integrate the truths of Black dignity, lament, justice, and liberation into written prayer. Her debut book This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us was published in 2022.

March 15 HELEN STAUDERMAN is a retired librarian who has lived on Capitol Hill since 2017.

March 16 KATIE OSWEILER is an ELCA pastor working in Belgium at an Episcopal Church. She's a big fan of Reformation and loves being part of FATE since she was an intern a few years back. But she's convinced that they always assign her the hardest texts!

March 17 GLORIA KENYON realized this year that she's been a member of Reformation for over a decade. In that time she's gotten married to her husband, Greg, had a kid, Ben, and moved to her home in Silver Spring. She enjoys reading romance novels and trying new recipes.

March 18 MARTIN LUTHER

March 19 JESSICA (SNOWDEN) PAYNE is blessed to lead Reformation's Sunday School Program. You will find her most Sundays on the 2nd floor reveling in the joyous company of our Sunday Schoolers. She and her husband, James, have one son Charlie (8). Jess specializes in public relations and communications for the Defense Department and started coming to Reformation as a visitor in 2003 when she was young, broke, and single. Reformation came back into her life when she and James returned from an assignment in Germany and thought Sunday School might be a great place to get an hour of free childcare for then 3-yr-old Charlie. They've been active members ever since.

March 20 KATIE LEESMAN lives with her husband, Mike Ly, and two children, Olivia (age 5) and Vinh (age 1) in Northeast DC.

March 21 CRAIG HAAS is a scientist at the Environmental Protection Agency and a regular attendee of the 8:30 service. He marvels that he has been a member of Reformation for more than

half his life now. He expresses his nonconformity by sitting at the front of the church. Yep, a real rebel.

March 22 MARTIN LUTHER

March 23 KIRI NICHOLSON lives in Arlington with her cat, Tillie, and her wonderful roommate. Most Sundays you can catch her trying not to spill the tiny cup of grape juice while she's going to take communion.

March 24 MATT AVILES is a Fairfax native, a resident of Capitol Hill, and a lifelong Lutheran. A member of Reformation for over five years, Matt is involved with the Youth Group and the Finance Committee. He is a huge sports fan, particularly of the Caps, Duke basketball, and whatever soccer match is playing at the time. Matt loves to explore new places in the city, so if you have any good tips send them his way.

March 25 ELIZABETH WIRICK joined Reformation in 2019. She lives in Arlington with her husband; they are learning to be empty nesters now that their daughter is at college. Elizabeth is an attorney at a small government agency. In her spare time she volunteers with the migrant solidarity mutual aid network and her neighborhood's distribution sites for Food for Others, dotes on her curmudgeonly canine Charley and watches too much Netflix.

March 26 WILL ANDERSON teaches Sunday School at Reformation. Our littlest members remind him that we are all children of God.

March 27 JULIE HASLER has been a member of Reformation since 1991. She works in Government Affairs for a medical device company and is a member of the Capitol Hill Tennis Club.

March 28 CRAIG MIDDLEBROOK has been a member of Reformation since 1990. He has served as Council President and has been active on various committees over the years. Both of his children, Ella and Henry, were baptized and confirmed at Reformation. He lives in Falls Church, Virginia, with his wife, Stacey Helberg.

March 29 EVAN BENOIT has the lowest voice in both the adult choir and the children's choir!

March 30 EVAN SCHRAGE is a lawyer living in Northeast Washington, D.C. He became a member of Reformation in 2019 and currently serves as the Secretary of the church council.

March 31 JARROD JABRE is *still* stoked to be your Director of Operations.

April 1 PETER POON and his husband Marcos Dacruz have been members of Reformation since 2021, and live in the DC neighborhood of Brookland, NE. When not toiling away at the US Department of Veterans Affairs, Peter enjoys reading, collecting and listening to vinyl records of all genres, baking, traveling, hanging with friends and family, and otherwise engaging in intellectual, spiritual, cultural, and creative pursuits.

April 2 DIANE KOHN is a Foreign Service Officer currently posted in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo. She has been a member of Reformation for 22 years, served on the Congregation Council, and sings in the choir whenever she is in Washington. She normally resides on Capital Hill with her cat, Moses, and takes every opportunity possible to cheer on the Washington Capitals.

April 3 PHILIP W. MOELLER, PhD., the son of a Lutheran Pastor, graduated from St. Olaf College and has a MA and PhD. In International Relations and Development. He has specialized in institutional dynamics as a key to sustainable development, addressing governance, public ownership, ethics, social and environmental impact, and inclusivity for the State Department, USAID, UNDP, the Asian Development Bank, and the World Bank. He has served on the Board of the Global Mission Division of the ELCA, and in 2017 was awarded a bronze medal for 50 years of International Service by Johns Hopkins University. He served on the Board of ReconcilingWorks as Director of International Programs. He chairs the Worship, Music and Arts Committee at Reformation.

April 4 KAREN CARLSON is still imperfect as she journeys daily in her attempts to “die to herself.” Karen has been a member of Reformation for over 30 years.

April 5 GLORIA KENYON realized this year that she’s been a member of Reformation for over a decade. In that time she’s

gotten married to her husband, Greg, had a kid, Ben, and moved to her home in Silver Spring. She enjoys reading romance novels and trying new recipes.

April 6 JENNIFER NOVAK is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker working for an Employee Assistance Program. Baptized at Reformation as an adult, she attends the 11am service regularly. Jennifer serves as a member of the Engagement and Communication committee and was recently elected to the Church Council. She enjoys living on Capitol Hill, visiting neighborhood coffee shops, eating sushi and reading.

April 7 PHILIP W. MOELLER, PhD., the son of a Lutheran Pastor, graduated from St. Olaf College and has a MA and PhD. In International Relations and Development. He has specialized in institutional dynamics as a key to sustainable development, addressing governance, public ownership, ethics, social and environmental impact, and inclusivity for the State Department, USAID, UNDP, the Asian Development Bank, and the World Bank. He has served on the Board of the Global Mission Division of the ELCA, and in 2017 was awarded a bronze medal for 50 years of International Service by Johns Hopkins University. He served on the Board of ReconcilingWorks as Director of International Programs. He chairs the Worship, Music and Arts Committee at Reformation.

April 8 VALERIE ANNA PLATZ is a long-time member of Church of the Reformation. She is a member of the choir. She finds the writing of FATE reflections to be a spiritual exercise. Valerie lives in Arlington, Virginia.

April 9 PASTOR KEVIN VANDIVER is the Senior Pastor at LCOR.

LUTHERAN CHURCH OF THE REFORMATION

212 East Capitol Street NE
Washington, DC 20003
202-543-4200

www.ReformationDC.org
#FATE2023 | @ReformationDC

