

*Through the  
Night:*

A Lenten Devotional  
-2021-

Written by members of the  
Sequoia Association  
of the  
Northern California Nevada Conference,  
United Church of Christ

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# *Introduction*

Dearest friends,

This book has been lovingly written by many among us, members, clergy, church leadership, and seekers. As I put the finishing touches on this Lenten devotional, I was moved to tears by the touching, beautiful, vulnerable work that so many people put into their written contributions. I don't know everyone who has sent in words to guide our daily meditations, but I really want to sit down with every one of them at some point with a cup of tea and talk.

The devotional is divided into thematic sections that take us from twilight to dawn in this span of forty days. Read the scripture and then see what our writers have written in response to the text of the day.

I know that this Lent comes to us after a year of feeling like we've already given something up—a lot of somethings. I invite you to instead take on a Lenten discipline, to take on the daily practice of spending time with this devotional. I hope it challenges you and offers you a deeper connection to God, and I especially hope that it becomes a meaningful part of your practice during this holy season of reflection.

Blessings,

Kim Williams—Editor  
Authorized Lay Minister, Grace Community Church  
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## *Many Thanks*

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# Twilight

Wednesday, February 17

Ash Wednesday

Psalm 90

Rev. Ara Guekguezian

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Lent, a time to refresh, even reset the soul.

The ninetieth psalm helps me to enter into the season where I might get things into their proper place.

My focus has been on the conclusion of the song: O prosper the work of our hands!

I am not a member of a humble tribe. I am an American, an exceptional tribe. I am Presbyterian and very connected to the United Church of Christ, some of my best friends are UCC. As Congregationalists, we know that I matter. My voice and your voice has value and needs to be heard. Two more exceptional tribes. I am Armenian. Every great Soviet leader, thinker, inventor, artist, musician and poet had an Armenian grandmother. And so do I. In fact, I have two Armenian grandmothers. Another exceptional tribe.

At the end of the day, at dusk, ready for refreshment and rest, I sing the psalm: Before the mountains were brought forth...from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

and I begin to fall back into place.

You turn us back to dust...I am a fragile creature, as evanescence as grass. In the evening it fades and withers, in the morning it flourishes and is renewed.

Before my head hits the pillow, I consider all I have left undone, and I remember—I am grass, exceptional grass, but God is great and good. And if I flourish and am renewed by a good night's sleep, thanks be to God. I sleep and things fall back into their rightful place in dreaming and in simple sleep.

If I rise, I sing the same song in a new way, with full and confident voice:

Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for the work of our hands—

O prosper the work of our hands.

Not mine alone, and not for me, the prosperity. But for us all.

**O God, create and maintain a humble spirit within me, that I may always move within us and that our work may prosper for the life and love of all your creation. Amen.**

## Thursday, February 18

Ecclesiastes 9:7-12  
Kim Williams  
Grace Community Church  
& Big Red Church of Fresno

Over the last year, when people have asked “How are you doing?” the only answer I’ve known how to *honestly* give has been, “Well, okay, considering...you know...” and then wildly gesturing at everything around me. It has felt weird, and maybe even a little bit rude to be *too* happy, *too* okay, *too* thriving. Luckily (unluckily?) those moments haven’t been often—this pandemic has taken its toll on most of us in one way or another. But still, it has been difficult to truly have a good day when everything seems to be falling apart around us.

This selection from Ecclesiastes was a jolt to my under-enthused heart. It was something I needed to hear as we are in what feels like the season finale of *An Unanticipated Time of Disaster*. Vaccines are beginning to roll out and hospitals aren’t completely overflowing!

*But*, says the snarky voice in my head that likes to keep me grounded, *but* new variants of COVID are popping up, we are supposed to wear two masks now, this is clearly not over yet.

And yet, we are reminded that because *we gesture wildly*: all of *this* is around us, we should not waste our time putting limits on our joy just because it feels weird to be *\*gulp\** *happy* in a pandemic. We should not force ourselves to wallow, but instead throw ourselves into whatever it is we can do to keep moving toward happiness and fulfillment, because our days are numbered.

Okay, I’ll admit, kind of a macabre twist, but also, it’s nothing we don’t already know. We just sat with our mortality on Ash Wednesday and we know that *to dust we shall return*.

**But we aren’t dust yet!**

May blessings of joy find you, and when joy does appear, may you fully embrace such abundance of Spirit as a gift from God, even when everything else reminds us that we are mortals, snared in a time of calamity.

## Friday, February 19

Jeremiah 13:15-16  
Akiko Miyake-Stoner  
United Japanese Christian Church

In the olden days, Cynicism was a philosophy began by Socrates' students. Their way of living was focused on elevating the goodness and virtues of human beings in the 5th Century. Cynics rejected "worldly" living, meaning they rejected fancy and decadent lifestyles. This early movement influenced early Christian movements and ways of interacting with the world.

Cynicism defined today is pretty different: "an inclination to believe that people are motivated purely by self-interest." Cynicism shares its root with "canine," literally meaning "to bite the ankle." It's easy to be cynical today; cynicism can take the form of self-righteousness or superiority, kind of like "I possess knowledge that's different and better than what you've got." Cynicism cuts short any further discussion and possibilities for problem-solving or group brainstorming.

Then there's what's called "positive cynicism" as seen in the phrases, "She's in a better place" when someone dies or "Everything happens for a reason." This branch of cynicism tries to keep things at a distance. It's a shield that keeps us protected from facing reality.

At its core, cynicism is a response to feeling helpless. We once were ready to take on anything, but now will anything I do any good?

Cynicism at its worst closes the door to hope: it closes the door on Christ. It keeps us from the possibilities and energies God wants to release in our lives. It stands in the way of being able to see God's goodness and the wonders that God creates and sustains. It keeps us from knowing the heart of God.

Believing that God will only bring gloom and will make our feet stumble may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Jeremiah encourages us to "heed and give ear" to the glories of what God is doing.

As responsible religious people, we are called to stand fully present to whatever faces us. Following Jesus has something to do with being vulnerable and this is sometimes one of the hardest things we can do. In this season of Lent, God calls us to take a long, deep look within and take stock of our relationships, human and divine. May we take off our cynicism lens to see ourselves and our world as they really are. In this process, may we be blessed to worship God more fully, as Jeremiah calls us. It's not an easy process. However, anything worthwhile takes commitment...Our growth is worth it!

## Saturday, February 20

Job 42:1-6

Rev. Dr. Norman Broadbent  
Big Red Church of Fresno

In chapter 42, Job, after having been questioned by God, responds. Instead of demanding more answers from God, instead of questioning God further, Job answers the only way a person can who has seen the living God face to face: with awe and repentance.

Eugene Peterson in *The Message* captures Job's thoughts well in Job:

**I'm convinced: You can do anything and everything. Nothing and no one can upset your plans. You asked, 'Who is this muddying the water, ignorantly confusing the issue, second-guessing my purposes?' I admit it. I was the one. I babbled on about things far beyond me, made small talk about wonders way over my head. You told me, 'Listen, and let me do the talking. Let me ask the questions. You give the answers.' I admit I once lived by rumors of you; now I have it all firsthand—from my own eyes and ears! I'm sorry—forgive me. I'll never do that again, I promise! I'll never again live on crusts of hearsay, crumbs of rumor.**

So how did God answer Job's questions about the justice of Job's suffering? God showed Job Godself. There is no greater answer to any question a human could have than coming face to face with God. Once we understand that, our questions vanish into thin air because we realize that our doubts about God's justice, knowledge, wisdom, and goodness are preposterous. As the Creator of everything, the heartbeat of the universe, can we really stand in judgment over God? No, and that is what Job ultimately came to accept.

# *Sundown*

Sunday, February 21

# Monday, February 22

Psalm 29  
Mary Jo Renner  
Grace Community Church

## The Voice of God

How often do we find ourselves praying, asking God for help, for love, for support? We just need to know that God is present and listening. Why? Do we not believe that God is ever-present in our lives? Have we forgotten that God hears the groanings of our hearts? Do we doubt God's promises of protection and guidance? Even though we might not want to admit it, the answer is probably "Yes." For at least a moment, we forgot, we doubted, we did not believe that God was present or listening...and certainly God was not speaking clearly enough, loudly enough, or timely enough for our liking.

...and we panic!

Remember God's whispering voice to Samuel? The psalmist with today's Scripture refers to the thunderous, mighty, powerful, flashing, shaking strength of God's voice. Can that be the SAME voice? The voice of the SAME God? Ponder a moment the gentle, whispering tune of a lullaby sung to a child in a parent's arms. That same parent can be heard screaming out for traffic to stop or a child to step back from the street. We witness the parent on the sidelines of a recreational sporting event cheering on their child, knowing that it's a voice of encouragement, but maybe embarrassment all wrapped into one loud reassurance for that young athlete. Do not forget that every parent holds a certain power in "that LOOK" that requires not a sound to be uttered, but every child knows the meaning of "that LOOK." It took no voice, but was understood loudly and clearly.

The issue that needs to be resolved is not the volume, clarity or promptness of God's voice; the issue is ours, the issue of our ability to listen. God speaks in different ways and maybe not always at a volume we can readily detect, but God ALWAYS speaks volumes. Practice listening.

## Tuesday, February 23

Ecclesiastes 12:1-8

Norma Uragami

United Japanese Christian Church

Now that I'm nearing the winter of my life, I sometimes reminisce of those carefree days of youth. Honestly the "fear of God" was not on my priority list in those blossoming days. Looking back, I realize a definite pattern to His master plan for me. All the heartaches and disappointments...all the wonderful joys of love and happiness...were all a special plan to mold me into what I am today. Through my most vulnerable journeys, Jesus was guiding me in His own way. Hindsight it was Him looking out for me all along and keeping me safe from harm's way. Lucky for me! Once things that were so incredibly important are now just unpretentious thoughts. With Jesus securely in my heart and soul, I find a more meaningful reason for my existence. Especially during this Lenten season, let us all focus on Jesus' enormous sacrifice and love for us.

Now that I'm retired, the days seem to fly by so quickly. Living on a farm and caring for our 32 furry/feathery family, my husband Ron and I stay quite busy and relatively in good health. Nevertheless, my memory and physical state are slowly failing, my vision requiring bifocals, my once black hair turning white, physical appearance and lust desires are fading; but my inner spirit remains still in love with my dear Lord first and foremost. Never thought I'd ever say those words and truly believe them. He is my "rock"! God gives us the freedom to make choices in life. Hopefully they are ones that will please and honor Him.

Ironically the biblical verses in Ecclesiastes 12:1-8 were actually geared for the young... as foresights of what to expect as we age.

Speaking for myself, when I was young such thoughts of life never really crossed my mind. Guess I thought I was invincible or something.

Oddly, I can relate to life's changes through having horses in my youth to present day. The fearlessness of youth riding bareback on my galloping horse through my dad's plum orchard....to today's fear of falling off and injuring myself with unpredictable equine hazards. I don't have as much strength or determination anymore. It's difficult just mounting my large horse without help... the old bones aren't what they used to be! Being the ripe old age of 71, I now depend on Jesus more than ever.

With the pandemic, catastrophes, and utter chaos in today's world, trusting in a higher power makes sense. Through prayer and faith, a safety shield has been woven to catch us when we fall. He'll save us when our time on earth ends. Ashes to ashes...dust to dust. Our Creator has prepared an eternal home for us so we may rejoice as we someday join Jesus in heaven.

Thanks be to God.

## Wednesday, February 24

Luke 17:22-37  
Christopher Williams  
Big Red Church of Fresno

This passage is filled with incredibly frightening imagery. Jesus is telling his disciples that before He returns, that things will go from bad to worse. He tells His disciples that things will be akin to many famous apocalyptic events throughout Jewish writings such as Noah and the flood, and Sodom and Gomorrah. The message is clear: when the Son of Man returns, there will be unparalleled suffering on the planet. His return will not be on the heels of glad tidings.

Throughout most generations there have been those that say that we are at the end of times. Many look to the Heavens throughout the various destruction that is endemic in life. Plagues, droughts, fires, famines, political unrest. There has never been in the history of Mankind any shortage of disasters. It is enough to keep one eye on the Heavens searching for this triumphant return, 'round the clock.

But central to His message and perhaps lost with all the following apocalyptic imagery is the fact that we will not know when He returns. He tells us that when those that say, "look there!" or "look here" do not go. We cannot know when He returns so let us not waste any time worrying about it. What we can do instead, is put forth the effort and find ways to build the kind of world that Jesus would want us to. We cannot wait for the Son of Man to build it for us but must instead lead in its construction. Do we wait for our supervisors at a job site to come down and do the job for which we were hired ourselves? When Jesus does make his return who wants to be on the sidelines? In other words, "Jesus is coming, try to look busy".

## Thursday, February 25

Mark 14:3-9  
Chris Takeda  
United Japanese Christian Church

A dear friend who taught first grade for many years created, now a nationally adopted program, the "Kindness Club". She recognized the need to teach and practice the values of respect and consideration while combating the act of bullying. We witness these acts of bullying not only on the playground but the many arenas within our local communities, nationally, and internationally.

In today's scripture, I am reminded that Jesus too taught us the lessons of acceptance, love, and kindness through words and actions. Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, displays her devotion to Jesus by anointing him with the expensive perfume. Simon and the Pharisees, witness to this act, hastily reprimand Mary's actions as a waste of resources. Jesus, however, quickly comes to Mary's defense and reminds the disciples that what she did was significantly wonderful and it was a true sacrifice of love. I too have been guilty of misjudging others decisions or choices and haven't always practiced kindness. I suppose it is never too late, regardless of age, to join the "Kindness Club."

**Dear Lord our Father,**

**We thank you for the values of kindness taught in your Word and message. You have provided people in our lives who demonstrate by example. I pray for your guidance and wisdom to live my life in honor of you. Amen**

## Friday, February 26

Ruth 1:16-17  
Kim Williams  
Grace Community Church  
& Big Red Church of Fresno

We are entering the end of the “Sundown” portion of this Lenten devotional. As the sun dips below the horizon and our eyes are still adjusting to the waning light, I invite you to read today’s selection from Ruth with me:

But Ruth said,

“Do not press me to leave you  
or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go;  
where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.

Where you die, I will die—  
there will I be buried.

May the Lord do thus and so to me,  
and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you!”

It is easy to make such devoted promises during daylight when we can see everything in our path and we can easily avoid every obstacle. As the sun begins to set, however, shadows are thrown over everything. What was easy to navigate becomes a more challenging, and we know that the deeper the sun sinks past the horizon, the more we’ll have to carefully study the ground immediately ahead of us for potentially hazardous terrain. As we fix our eyes on the immediate, the far-away future is only in our periphery as it is obscured by ever-deepening velvety night. Is it so easy to be as steadfast as Ruth under these conditions?

God, help me to be as faithful and steadfast during the nighttime (when my path forward is obscured) as I am during the daylight hours (when everything is going according to plan). Amen.

## Saturday, February 27

Mark 10:32-45  
Rev. Raygan Baker  
Big Red Church of Fresno

Here's one of the shortest summaries of the Gospels: The Disciples don't get it. While they left everything behind to follow Jesus, who loves them dearly and places the future of the church in their hands, they just don't have any of the right answers, especially in Mark. In the stories as we have them, the disciples often serve as the foil for Jesus to show that there is a different way. Before we get too critical of the disciples, however, we should appreciate that the disciples are in the story for us. The disciples so often miss the point in the same way that is too easy for all of us to "miss the point," or to try and find or make a point, when what would be most helpful is perspective. This perspective is what Jesus hopes the view from his "Kingdom of Heaven" will afford us; but this only works if we admit that we need it.

James and John are caught in the classic battle for second place. Peter is undoubtedly the favorite disciple who interacts with Jesus most directly and often (and is notably the one who is "wrong" most often). When Jesus goes off with just a few disciples, such as at 9:2 and following, it is with Peter, James, and John. While it's always these three, neither James nor John will ever be as prominent as Peter.

So, once this maneuvering for positions of favor produced anger and mistrust within the community (as jockeying for favor or access to limited resources always does), Jesus brings the real issue into perspective. It is no accident that this account begins with Jesus's third (of three!) and most graphic prediction of his death (and resurrection); as Jesus and the disciples approach Jerusalem, they've missed the entire point, that if "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45), then this Kingdom of Heaven is so different from what we know that it reshapes what greatness looks like. In this new and renewing community, the one that incorporates each one of us, tyrants are not revered as "great ones" and the powerful do not hold their power over other people. Instead, we are drawn back to the Crucifixion: where God's glory and power are revealed in God's own self-emptying. Following in these footsteps requires our own emptying(s), but when we look at the alternatives, what do we really have to lose?

**Prayer: Holy God, help us clear our minds and hearts, so that we might more fully catch sight of yours. Amen.**

*Dusk*

Sunday, February 28

# Monday, March 1

Psalm 113

Carol Yamashita

United Japanese Christian Church

## Always Be Thankful and Praise the Lord

### Joys

Last year in the midst of COVID 19 my husband was in need of Kleenex for his practice. We went to many places and of course the shelves were empty. We were at our last destination in hopes of at least one box of Kleenex. Hoping and Praying as we walked into the store... what do you think we saw? EMPTY SHELVES. Now what are we going to do? We needed some other things so we started going down the aisles. We went down the beverage aisle and guess what we found in the soda section...a package of 3 boxes of Kleenex – YAY!

We were grateful with this simple joy given to us from God of finding not only 1 box but 3 boxes of Kleenex.

Reflection – What are your great and simple everyday joys that you Praise the Lord for?

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### Trials and Tribulations

In 2017 I was going through menopause. I was excited that my monthly friend would not be visiting anymore. But at the end of the year I started to have a little spotting and was tired more than usual. Nobody likes to hear the word Cancer. In 2018 my Gynecologist told me that I had endometrial cancer.

When I heard those words I was surprisingly calm and at peace. At that moment I was thankful that I had my Faith in God and knew that He was going to be with me through it all. But you can't help but think about how this could affect your life and the unknown of what could happen. I started to think about things... my husband and kids and all the things I would miss (being there when our kids get married and for the birth of our future grandchildren, spending retirement with my

husband and traveling, etc.) and chemotherapy, etc...

We found out after the surgery to remove the cancer that it was a Grade 1 (cancer cells that resemble normal cells and aren't growing rapidly) and Stage 1 (the cancer is small and hasn't spread anywhere else) which meant that the surgery will take care of it and I didn't need chemotherapy. HALLELUJAH!

My recovery period went well and during this time I was able to create a book of memory verses and lyrics from Christian Songs that spoke to me, encouraged me and lifted me up. I was grateful for the time God had given me to be still and knew that He was caring for me physically and spiritually!

Reflection: When has God shown you Grace, Goodness, and Care during your Trials and Tribulations?

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### Faith Journey

Our Joys, Trials and Tribulations are part of Gods plan. God allows us to go through it all to help us be the people God wants us to be. It makes our Faith stronger as we learn to fully rely on our Heavenly Father. All we need to do is to ask Him to keep our hearts and soul open to what the Holy Spirit is showing us. Whatever we go through we should have confidence and peace that God will equips us with all that we need. God is like no other and He is in control! Trust and Praise Him.

Reflection: After reading and meditating upon the words in Psalm 113 what are your thoughts?

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“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus” 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-1

## Tuesday, March 2

Genesis 7:17-23  
Rev. Dr. Norman Broadbent  
Big Red Church of Fresno

The character of this narrative of the flood has long been argued as both historical and as unhistorical. Some have endeavored to trace an analogy between the flood of Noah and a destructive inundation of the Nile, both subject to the season of the year, the vernal equinox, when the deluge often occurred; and so the manner in which the waters rose, as well as to the height they attained. Others have maintained that it was nothing more than an unusual fall of rain, followed by the necessary melting of the snows on the Armenian mountains, which, overspreading the adjacent country to a wide extent, occasioned an immense destruction to life and property. Thus, this overflow of waters, exaggerated by the excited imaginations of the inhabitants, who fled in terror from the overwhelming torrent, was afterward magnified in the popular traditions into a flood, which destroyed all humankind, except for a small remnant who saved themselves in a boat. So is the narrative of the flood a fable or legendary tale, or a sacred memory? And if a sacred memory, what is the lesson to be taken from it?

It is perhaps useful to allow ourselves to think in metaphor, as this portion of Genesis implies a necessity to prepare for catastrophic elements within nature that have the potential to overwhelm both human and non-human living forms. Past and current environmental changes bring drought that kills plants, trees, and all sorts of vegetation. Fire in our forests, like a flood, destroys everything in its un-contained path. Likewise, we have a running count of animal species that have forever disappeared from our planet due to both natural and human-induced causes. Viral pandemic has been forewarned for more than a decade, yet our best efforts to store up resources and to engage safety measures (think of metaphorical ark) have been widely discounted. The result? Unparalleled loss of life. A “flood” of deaths, destruction, and a world forever changed.

Is it God’s judgment? Or perhaps God’s creative plan was that where intelligence, compassion, faith, and true justice flourish- there will always be the remnant to survive and generate a new day. What thoughts come flooding to you in pondering all this? And what lesson(s) do you direct into safe harbor?

## Wednesday, March 3

John 11:32-37

Peter Wall

Big Red Church of Fresno

Lent is a perfect time to linger on this part of the story. Take away everything else that you know, and what you remember about how the story continues. Read the passage again, and then imagine yourself into this moment, with all of these people.

Mary has lost her brother. She is weeping. The people around her are weeping. Jesus begins to weep. Almost everyone is weeping. Imagine yourself in this moment of shared mourning over the death of a beloved friend. Imagine yourself as Mary, or as one of the people around her. You have seen the things that Jesus has done before. Or imagine yourself as Jesus, if you can.

How do you feel?

What do you see?

Where is the sun?

How does all of that weeping sound?

Now take a moment and remember that some people are saying, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Imagine yourself as one of those people. Imagine wondering not at the miracles performed by Jesus before, but at the absence of a miracle now. Someone is dead. What do you feel as you speak those words of critique?

Take another moment. Now ask yourself: Is there anyone in this story that you cannot feel compassion for?

And what about the people that you encounter today?

## Thursday, March 4

Ecclesiastes 8:10-17  
Rev. Raygan Baker  
Big Red Church of Fresno

From the esteemed stage of the Beacon Theatre in New York City, Jerry Seinfeld begins his recent Netflix Comedy Special “23 Hours to Kill” by stating what an accomplishment it is to be there— for the audience. He goes through all the minor frustrations (and the humor they hold) that go along with all the places we used to go in pre-pandemic life. While this may evoke a real sense of loss for us today, his observations remind me that our pre-disrupted lives weren’t always that happy either. Of course, for Jerry Seinfeld one more standup special isn’t necessarily a jewel that will replace any others in his career’s crown. He could literally be anywhere in the world. It’s actually a little absurd for him to keep doing standup comedy, but he continues to enjoy pointing out the absurdities that we live through everyday, and by now we should know he will never run out of material.

But the sage of Ecclesiastes was paying close attention to life’s absurdity long before Seinfeld. Life is “absurd” (an alternative translation of “vanity”: lit. “a mist, vapor, breath”— life is absurd, fragile, and fleeting. It is the sage that gives us our annual Ash Wednesday memo: everyone was made from dust, and to dust everyone will return (3:20). And yet, God is Creator of us and all life, who crafted the world with order and who rules it justly. Life with God inside this apparent paradox means that we have to contend with absurdity.

The sage gives us many sayings and signposts to help us find our path through our own absurdities. In the moments when all hope is lost and life escapes our best meaning-making efforts, we are in good, even wise, company. Of all that the Sage considers, only one thing rises in true contention with life’s absurdity: all of our usual human efforts, achievements, abilities, or other potential solutions are ultimately absurd. Only joy contends with absurdity. Only joy holds the possibility of finding and appreciating the abundance of grace, goodness, and loving community around us, and holds them lightly enough; even the eating and drinking in which we take our enjoyment (as the sage prescribes in 8:15) are momentary, even if their joy is not. Participating in life with God is an art, and our joy comes from living it beautifully.

**Prayer: Holy One, pry our hands from all that we hold onto too tightly, and free us for Wisdom’s path.**

## Friday, March 5

John 11:38-45

Rev. Dr. Diane Weible

Conference Minister, NCNC-UCC

The thing that trips me up the most is thinking (or believing) that I have to do everything myself. Success or failure is all about me.

In this passage, Jesus simplifies this misguided notion for us. Jesus tells Martha to remove the stone from Lazarus' tomb. She doesn't want to. She believes she already knows what is there and what will happen if she does what Jesus' says.

Jesus puts it right out there: "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" (vs. 40)

As people of faith, we say we believe in the power of God. We say we turn to Spirit when we are trying to do something really hard. But do we really? Are we willing to let go of the notion that if anything is going to happen it is up to us to make it happen? Are we able to let go of our need to control the situation and the outcome in order to let Spirit work?

After Martha moves the stone, Jesus doesn't move in and take control of the situation. Instead, he turns to God and asks for help. Jesus needs God's help.

What is it that you are struggling with? What is it that you believe is your success and your success alone? Ask yourself if that is true. Did you really get that degree or succeed at that job or raise those children all by yourself? Who helped you? When was the last time you thanked a parent or a sibling or a teacher or a boss or God for helping you make something succeed? When was the last time you knew you were in over your head and you needed help to do something really hard? What role has God played in your successes? In your failures?

When we say "Beloved Community" we are witnessing to the important reality that we are Community—through it all. We are people bound together by our faith in God and we are people who never again have to do something alone, even if we want to or think we should.

**Prayer: God, when I sing, "Won't you let me be your servant?" may I be willing to live those words by allowing others and You into my life to share in the work—successes and failures—nothing is too big for You and nothing is too big for us. Amen.**

## Saturday, March 6

Ephesians 6:10-18

Ellie Dote

City Church of Long Beach

When my children were smaller, one of the things we enrolled our kids in was a local AWANA program, which sought to teach them the Bible and expose them to the Gospel and what they would need to grow in their relationship with God. On one particular evening, I remember them spending time learning about the “full armor of God,” as written about in today’s passage. Of course, teaching this to kids in an AWANA program wouldn’t be complete without the play armor that made one poor volunteer child look like King Arthur in the Disney version of “Sword and the Stone.” Nevertheless, the point was made about the importance of putting on the FULL armor of God in order to withstand the attacks from the Devil. Yet, for all of that importance, the emphasis for the entire program was on giving these children the only bit of offense that the passage describes – the “sword of the Spirit,” or the Word of God. Mind you, it was only giving it to them in bits of memory verses – not training them to use it.

Every so often, the news will run a story of an accidental death or injury because of a gun, and while the arguments for and against gun ownership are still a hot topic of debate here in the United States, there is much agreement on the front of the need to be properly educated and trained as to how to use and safely store these deadly weapons. Soldiers and police officers go through intensive training to make sure that they know how to use their weapons in different situations, and I can only imagine the amount of training that would go into the proper techniques for swordfighting. After all, I’ve seen “The Princess Bride.” The point is, though, that these weapons are just that – something to be revered and handled with care, as they have the ability to bring death and injury, both to other people or to ourselves. Case in point – we wouldn’t simply give an automatic machine gun to a classroom of kindergarteners and hope for the best, right? Then why, I wonder, is that what we do with the “sword of the Spirit”?

During this Lenten season, I feel that it is important to remember what Jesus told Peter, who valiantly stepped forward to use his sword to defend Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.” (Matthew 26:52, NIV)

As a queer person of faith, I can tell you that there have been several times when the Bible has been weaponized against me, not only because of my belief that the LGBTQ+ community is holy, but because of my progressive reading of the Scriptures. Verses memorized and drawn against me in an attempt to cut out the very parts of the identity that God had created within me.

The Bible in the wrong hands is a dangerous weapon – and too many times, it’s wielded against the very ones that Jesus spent so much of ministry loving: the marginalized. Perhaps it is time to take a deeper look at the armor of God, recognizing the power of God’s Word, and that we are never called to use it for destruction and death, but for justice and love.

*Night*

Sunday, March 7

## Monday, March 8

Psalm 22

Jean Yang

United Japanese Christian Church

Alzheimer's is a wicked disease. It robs one of precious memories and normal functioning. To witness it from the outside is frightening. It is hard to imagine living with it. Yet my mother lived with it for 15-20 years. I can only imagine the confusion, struggles and fears she experienced.

Though mom had Alzheimer's, we tried to keep her connected with Church as much as possible and as long as possible. Church and faith were always important to my mom. When circumstances brought my parents to live with me, I was privy to mom's nighttime rituals. At night when I lay her down to sleep, she would roll her fingers together and say things in Japanese. She prayed to God at night. I took comfort in that relationship.

Over the next several years, she became increasingly distant; falling further into her Alzheimer's world. My constant prayers for my mom always revolved around her being able to feel God's love and comfort; to know His presence and that she was not alone. However, I felt mom was crying out in silence, "God why have you forsaken me?" Her earthly journey seemed marred with such difficulty.

COVID became another layer of that difficulty during the last few months. Prior to the lockdown, I would take her on walks in her wheelchair in the neighborhood. We delighted at beautiful flowers. I held her hands. I rubbed/massaged her tired muscles and helped feed her meals. COVID quarantine added isolationism (another layer of deprivation) to her life. I was not able to visit and spend time with mom. I felt mom was crying out in silence, "God why have you forsaken me?"

As Alzheimer's took her memories, her mind and her body, I would wonder if mom continued to pray? Was she in a place of anger/resentment? Or in a place of peace and acceptance?

Our family was finally able to visit during her last week. We showered her with love. I asked that the Holy Spirit fill mom's very being and allow her to feel God's love and presence. Heavenly Father gave her rest and peace. It was an early Thursday morning when she entered heaven's gates. She was not forsaken. It was God who came to her and carried her home. She was the beautiful rose that needed to be planted in God's garden.

## Tuesday, March 9

Genesis 32:24-31  
Journal

Read today's scripture and draw or write about what this story brings up for you.

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

## Wednesday, March 10

Lamentations 3:1-21

Kim Williams

Grace Community Church  
& Big Red Church of Fresno

Today's scripture reading is mean. It ends right as it is about to get good! Did you read it? I'm asking this because I know that I sometimes have a tendency to skip the assigned readings if I think I can make sense of something without all that extra work. No judgment from me. Go pick up your Bible and read Lamentations 3:1-21. Don't read on, though! Just that little bit. It's okay. I'll wait.

...

*OKAY, SERIOUSLY THOUGH.* Am I right? It just ends like *THAT?* After all of that skin-wasting-away, torn-to-pieces-by-lions, laughingstock-of-my-people, bereft-of-peace, wormwood-and-gall, and today's reading ends on "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:" AND THAT'S WHERE TODAY'S READING ENDS. WHAT HOPE? *WHAT DO YOU CALL TO MIND?!*

I mean, sure, as the reader, we can choose to read the very next verse, and then the verses after, and not end on a cliffhanger. But what does this cliffhanger say to us, here in this dark night of the Lenten wilderness?

Something I've had to learn is to sit with the bad stuff, because sometimes it sits with us longer than we like. And we can either minimize its existence and repress the heck out of it, or we can lean into it and know what we're working with, for better or worse. **Sometimes that requires a trained professional to help guide us through those memories and thoughts, and that's okay too—especially when the bad stuff is the stuff of trauma and nightmares.** The "repress it" option only works for so long, unfortunately. We'll have to sit with our stuff eventually.

This non-ending, this messy interruption to hope that we just were subjected to in today's reading is an invitation to not have to repress, or move past, or ignore the things that really suck the life out of us. The amazing thing about lament is that when we catalog our sorrows, when we allow ourselves to acutely feel the way that we're feeling (instead of letting it drain the energy from us in the background) it releases those hard to process things into the air, it dislodges them from our throats and into God's hands. We may not have been given the message of hope that happens the exact second after this selection ends, but we are given a template for working through our own grief and grievances—and after a year in quarantine I know mine are many. In this abrupt pre-hope ending, we are not required to find a quick fix to complicated emotional, physical, or spiritual pain, but instead we can honor what we are feeling—no minimizing, no negating. There is always hope, but for anyone living with unlamented pain, it is hard to access when the hurt is so acute yet so ignored. What do you need to lament today, while we have the luxury of waiting thanks to that unfinished business of the ":" at the end there? Give it to God. Wail. This is an invitation.

# Thursday, March 11

Daniel 6:10-24  
Journal

## Lectio Divina

Open up your Bible to today's reading. You're going to read through it three times, so make sure you don't close it after the first read-through.

On your first reading, read it out loud. What words or phrases jump out. Jot them down here:

Now, on your second reading, read the story of Daniel in the lion's den and write down anything that raises an eyebrow. What questions do you have?

On your last reading, pay attention to how you feel as you move through the text. You *\*can\** do this in your head, but sometimes as we hear the words when we read they produce a different effect. How does it feel physically? Is there a word that made you stiffen your shoulders, is there a moment your heart opened wide? Write it all down!

Did anything change for you over the course of the three readings? What was revealed? What are you still wrestling with?

## Friday, March 12

Job 33:14-18  
Mary Jo Renner  
Grace Community Church

These lyrics were written in 1973...before the days of non-gender identification for God. I was 16.

It's So Beautiful to Be Loved by the Lord  
When you see God, don't you turn away.  
He's much too beautiful to ignore.  
It is wondrous to see Him clothed in light.  
He's a man, yet God in our sight.  
When He looks at you, don't you fear Him.  
It's so beautiful to be loved by the Lord.  
When you hear God, don't turn your ear away.  
His voice is much too soft to ignore.  
It is wondrous to hear Him speak to you.  
Listen carefully; He speaks in different ways.  
When He speaks to you, don't you fear Him.  
It's so beautiful to be loved by the Lord.  
When you feel God, don't you pull away.  
His touch is much too warm to ignore.  
It is wondrous to feel Him comfort you.  
He is God and friend to all.  
When He touches you, don't you fear Him.  
It's so beautiful to be loved by the Lord.  
When you know God, then you don't turn away.  
God's power is just too much to ignore.  
It is wondrous to have God within You.  
He's your Father and you are His child.  
When you know Him, then you trust Him.  
It's so beautiful to be loved by the Lord.

## Saturday, March 13

Joel 2:28-29

Peter Wall

Big Red Church of Fresno

Today's passage begins: "Then afterward..."

But what came before? Darkness, gloom, destruction, fire, desolation, violence, battle, earthquake, fasting, weeping, mourning, shame—then a solemn assembly, sanctification, a pause, heavy rain, a great harvest, repayment for losses, plenty, feasting.

Then afterward? What can possibly be left to experience? After all of that, maybe everyone should just lie down to rest. Maybe some good old-fashioned boredom is in order?

But no. This is the moment when we all take a new breath together.

What are your dreams? What are your visions? What are your prophecies?

Sunday, March 14

## Monday, March 15

Psalm 88

Rev. Dr. Norman Broadbent  
Big Red Church of Fresno

According to Martin Marty, a distinguished professor of church history at the University of Chicago, Psalm 88 is "a wintry landscape of unrelieved bleakness." I first came across this Psalm in my attempt to understand certain dimension of depression and was introduced to what is referred to as Liminal Theology. Liminal Theology orients us toward the ever-changing now—the state of continual transition. Whether it's joy or sadness, pleasure or pain, courage or fear, there's something immensely relatable in how the biblical writers expressed emotion.

Despite the emotional range we find in Scripture, I find that we do a better job of acknowledging the highs than we do the lows. Psalm 88, for example, offers a negative sentiment that some might find difficult, perhaps even off-putting. Thus, like the depression it conveys, we find that we don't know how to respond to it.

What I appreciate most about this psalm is the honesty it conveys about emotion. It's the honesty that not everything in life is going to be joyful or even pleasant. Rather life is often full of troubles that we carry like a burden, a suffering darkness that lingers within the soul. And this suffering darkness stays with us, often for a very long time. It becomes a filter through which we might see all life.

The psalm doesn't end on a happy note. Did the psalmist find a way out of the darkness? We'll never know for sure. And yet, perhaps the lack of a resolution makes this psalm all the more relevant and powerful. Depression isn't cured overnight.

To close, I'm reminded of the below quote from Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest and theologian who notably and openly struggled with depression. Nouwen reminds us that even depression can become a place of renewal, blessing, and communion: "Even a small burden, perceived as a sign of our worthlessness, can lead us to deep depression—even suicide. However, great and heavy burdens become light and easy when they are lived in the light of the blessing. What seemed intolerable becomes a challenge. What seemed a reason for depression becomes a source of purification. What seemed punishment becomes a gentle pruning. What seemed rejection becomes a way to a deeper communion." [Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (The Crossroad Publishing Company), 98. Kindle Edition].

Our own brokenness can give way toward a full acceptance of ourselves as beautiful and worthy people. Darkness leads us toward the light, for God works in both darkness and light.

## Tuesday, March 16

Isaiah 45:18-19  
Mary Jo Renner  
Grace Community Church

### CHAOS, Not God's Creation

God created the heavens and formed the earth. Here in Isaiah, we hear God, who created this world, this universe, tell us that there is no other God, no other Lord. We hear God declare openly that God speaks truth. God wants no confusion. God's words are, "I did NOT say to seek me in chaos. I did NOT speak in secret or in darkness."

Chaos, by definition, is complete disorder, and confusion. This term, chaos, has taken on new meaning, or maybe has come to be understood by many in a new way within the last couple years. Our world seemingly has turned upside down and some often have felt as though they were spinning out of control in a chaotic, confusing whirlpool of darkness, deceit and dread. The world has been full of sickness, poisonous thoughts and dangerous influences.

In the chaos is NOT where to look for God. It's not the PLACE to find God. God speaks truth, speaks in the light and declares what is right. God will hold us close and protect us, will lead and sustain us through the danger and chaos. God IS NOT chaos, but rather the beacon of light and hope in the darkness.

## Wednesday, March 17

Matthew 26:36-46

Kim Williams

Grace Community Church  
& Big Red Church of Fresno

When I was 12 years old my whole world changed. That was the year my parents introduced me to the rock opera “Jesus Christ Superstar”. My dad was co-leading a study at the church comparing the lyrics and all the different Gospel accounts, tracing where Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Weber drew inspiration from, where they inferred, what they completely made up—that sort of thing. As my dad was preparing for this, the 1970 concept album starring Ian Gillan and Murray Head was spinning nonstop in our household. I would go to school singing “What’s the Buzz” while all of my actually cool classmates were singing Mariah Carey. On one memorable occasion I found myself in a two-person kickline with my teacher Mr. Kanzler as we belted out “King Herod’s Song” during recess. It didn’t make me many friends, but adults thought I was awesome.

The one song that didn’t take on any meaning for me until much later was “Gethsemane.”

The junior high Sunday school class was doing a super-short version of Jesus Christ Superstar as a passion play for the congregation. I was in high school—a junior—and I had been jealously watching my little sister and her friends get fitted for their angel costumes with long arm tassels for the big “superstar” scene. When the day of the performance arrived, I sat in my seat in the fellowship hall, arms crossed because I didn’t get to have any fun. I watched as they read through the Holy Week scriptures and then they would sing a few verses of a song. It was cute, it was fun. It was middle-schoolers in the late nineties doing their best to keep up with the heavy seventies vibe of Jesus Christ Superstar.

But then the program came to “Gethsemane.” I don’t even remember which kid (now in his mid thirties, mind you) was given the big sandals to fill as Jesus, but I would be lying if I told you I didn’t start weeping. By the time he finished the musical imagining of what was said, that struggle that Jesus experienced that night as he begged his friends to stay awake with him while he prayed, all of the adults had a glimmer of tears in their eyes, too.

Nowadays, this song is my favorite, as is this part of the story of Jesus’ last week. The account of Jesus asking God to “let this cup pass from me,” gives the most intimate and vulnerable view into Jesus’ experience. It’s easy enough to forget that God sent us Jesus in human form because he is also divine. But he is divine in this fleshy, confused, and emotional form. When we read that Jesus had to go in for a second round of prayer because the first time wasn’t enough to steel his nerves against what had to happen, we witness an exhausted man who had to accept that in order to complete his work here to liberate all of God’s creation, he had to face what was ahead of him. Even when his disciples couldn’t stay awake with him. Our savior is someone who grappled within this skin-and-bones framework, and still chose to fulfil his purpose because his love for us is so deep.

Even though it’s a harder song to dance to and there are no fancy costumes with tassels, I will always return to Gethsemane to accompany Jesus in those tender moments before his arrest.

## Thursday, March 18

Romans 6:3-8

Peter Wall

Big Red Church of Fresno

In this passage, Paul reimagines death. It is not just something that happens at the end of life. It happens in the moment of baptism. “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him.” “We know that our old self was crucified with him.”

I am tempted to ask, “What does that even mean?”

But Paul is not describing material reality here. Baptism is not literally death. You and I were not actually crucified. Instead, these words are an invitation to spiritual exercise. That means their purpose is not to engage our inner lawyers and accountants, but to prompt our inner children so that their forgotten imaginations well up again. This is a way of prayer.

If you remember your baptism, then dive into that memory. (If not, then imagine your baptism, or think of a time when you were covered in water.) What if it were a memory of death and burial with Jesus? What if you were there in Gethsemane with Jesus, as we read about in Matthew yesterday? What if you were on the cross with Jesus?

Can you see anything? What do you see?

Can you hear anything? What do you hear?

Can you feel anything? What do you feel?

Can you taste anything? What do you taste?

Can you smell anything? What do you smell?

And then imagine resurrection as a memory, too, and let it begin to work into you. This is an opportunity to be surprised.

## Friday, March 19

Lamentations 3:22-39  
Rev. Dr. Norman Broadbent  
Big Red Church of Fresno

Ancient Israel's faith life included a rich tradition whereby the integrity and character of God were held up as reasons for God to act on behalf of the petitioner. One thinks, for example, of Abraham's intercession on behalf of the citizens of Sodom [Genesis 18:25] By acknowledging Yahweh's sovereignty as Judge, Abraham pleads that above all else, whatever God the Judge might do, God must act justly.

The poet's lament in the first twenty verses of chapter 3 pauses in verse 21 where the poet is resolved to "hope," better translated as "cause myself to adopt an expectant attitude." While he waits, however, the poet marshals a series of well-placed adjectives calculated to impel the LORD to act on his behalf. By characterizing God as merciful and possessing steadfast love (verse 22) as well as faithful (verse 23), the poet evokes a "credo of adjectives" that intends to remind God of God's own identity and character. That is, this is an expectation of a God who by God's own nature has previously demonstrated these characteristics and who ought now, in the poet's distress, act as his redeemer rather than as his enemy [see 3:1-19]. The poet is left without answers, without a divine response — as often are we. The brave words of faith soon dissolve once more into lament. The poem and the book end with divine silence.

Think, then, of the phrase as found in both Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34: "And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?'- that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" Forsake means to turn away from or withdraw from; leaving a profound silence.

In the fullness of Scripture, of course, we Christians proclaim a God who knows the anguish that inspires lamentation. This God, through Jesus, has suffered and taken death God into God's own life. Moreover, we know through the resurrection of Christ that life, newly-defined life, not lament, is God's answer to our disappointment, pain, and despair.

But that is not yet. We do not yet experience the joy of resurrection; we have only its promise. We have faith, not certitude. Any preacher should tell the truth about that; tell that truth and the absolutely human dimension of this poet's lamentation. His lament proceeds as lamentation does for all of us: a cry in the enveloping darkness, at the beginning of the watches (Lamentations 2:19) and continuing until we are met, at long last, with the joy arising in the first rays of an Easter dawn.

## Saturday, March 20

Luke 17:20-21  
Mary Jo Renner  
Grace Community Church

The coming of the kingdom of God...what a power-packed vision! For thousands of years people have awaited the coming of the kingdom of God...just look at the Pharisees in Luke's gospel asking Jesus when it would happen. People TODAY still ask the same question...

Well, wait just a minute. Did we fail to read or listen to Jesus' answer? "It's not coming with things that can be observed. The kingdom of God is among you." What?!?!

I'm a believer, a follower of Jesus, a part of the body of His church...so I guess I need to re-read that passage and think about His answer to the Pharisees. Just what did He mean? The kingdom won't be coming with things that can be "observed."

Observation...to me that's looking at something outside of myself. I observe the changing of the seasons, the actions of others, maybe even rules and regulations that are posted. All of those seem to be things outside of and apart from myself. So, Jesus tells us that it's not coming from something outside of us. That must mean that it's coming from INSIDE of us.

I think it makes sense to me now...I'm a believer, a part of the body. I'm part of God's church, a part of His kingdom...and I'm right here...and YOU'RE right here. How many believers surround us? The kingdom IS among us!

The coming of the kingdom of God...what a power-packed vision! Yes, it IS a power-packed vision...it's an AWAKENING that needs to happen!

Check out Michael Jackson's song, "Man in the Mirror" and wake up to a new you and the kingdom within!

Sunday, March 21

# Monday, March 22

Psalm 137  
Mary Jo Renner  
Grace Community Church

## Lament over the Destruction of Jerusalem

Centuries ago, the Jewish people lamented over the destruction of Jerusalem. It was the heart of home, their center for religion and administration, and had survived conquests and destruction since the rule of King David. The people were devastated, angry, sad. Their captors/ conquerors seemed to chide and mock them, calling for them to pick up their spirits, laugh, sing, entertain. Those who were defeated, struggled to remain loyal, to stand firm in their faith. They were not giving in to their captors, nor singing the captors' praises. They held in their hearts and minds the memories of the shouts, "Tear it down! Tear it down!" The Jews knew the day would come when their oppressors would be paid back. How horrible and overwhelming, how demeaning and humiliating, how embarrassing, how...

Jerusalem did rebuild. It still carries the scars of attacks and oppression. The HEART of Jerusalem survived.

Hmmm...sounds, or feels somewhat familiar...to me...

I guess history DOES repeat itself...

## Tuesday, March 23

Zephaniah 1:14-18  
Journal

The imagery in this passage from Zephaniah is vivid, and not just a little distressing. What is the prophet saying, and how, here in the night of Lent — so near dawn yet still so dark — does this speak to you? If the darkest hour is just before the dawn, then what does this mean for what is ahead?

## Wednesday, March 24

John 17:6-19  
Christopher Williams  
Big Red Church of Fresno

The Last Supper. At this point in the scripture, things are fairly bleak. Jesus has been betrayed. He knows that His ministry is coming to an end. He is about to make the ultimate sacrifice. Yet still He is not thinking so much of Himself as He is about the fate of his people. He takes the time to pray for those that are His, asking them to be protected and sanctified in the truth.

As Christians it is easy to be secure in the knowledge that Jesus sacrificed himself for our sakes. We likewise feel secure when we ask someone to pray for us. Prayer is a powerful ritual and of course Jesus understands this. He knows dark times are ahead for His people, so He prays for them.

We often pray for one another, but how often do we pray for those unbidden? We see the prayer requests but what about those that are suffering silently? Those that are facing demons we can only guess at. Just as Jesus prayed for The Church that was just forming at the time, we too can take the time to pray for the needs of others. Even if we cannot understand their struggles it is not too much to send out a line to the Almighty on someone's behalf. As a congregation I think that it would be wonderful for each of us to know that we are kept in the thoughts and prayers of those we share communion with.

Jesus tells us in the passage that while He is no longer going to be in the world, that we are going to be in the world, and it is now up to us to love the world and take up the mantle. Praying for each other is one way we could make it the kind of world that Jesus would want us to.

## Thursday, March 25

Lamentations 3:40-58  
Mary Jo Renner  
Grace Community Church

### Just One Step Away

I've followed the path, stuck close to the truth.  
Well, that's what I thought throughout my youth.  
I blindly followed the directions of some,  
But had to see for myself when the day was done.  
The rebel within wanted to be in charge;  
I would face life's trials, small or large.  
Not wanting to say I'd gone astray,  
Just who was I fooling? Me, you say?  
I'd not admit that I wasn't right.  
Deceiving myself, "Don't give up!" I'd fight.  
Taking the "scenic route" to follow God's way...  
A dangerous journey for me to take.  
Seeking love...to give and receive...  
I just wanted love to rescue me.  
I found myself so far off-track,  
There certainly was no sure way back.  
How did I get so far from my beliefs?  
My thoughts were twisted; I could not see.  
My intentions were good. Was it God's path that I chose?  
So how did life get to be dark and so low?  
It was an ego within me, needing to be right...  
I hadn't realized that I'd lost sight  
Of God's path, of the way, of my goal.  
I found myself drowning in a bottomless hole.  
"Help me, Lord! Hear my plea.  
I need you again to rescue me!"  
The Lord reached out with grace to say,  
"Turn around, my child. You're just one step away."  
...and in that turn God's lesson was clear:  
However far you may wander, God ALWAYS is near.

# Friday, March 26

1 John 4:7-21

## Lectio Divina

Open your Bible to 1 John 4:7-21. You will read this three times in a practice called Lectio Divina. You may read silently or out loud. Pause between readings for reflection.

On your first reading, just make note of the words that stand out to you. Write them here:

For the second read through, note any questions that come up. What is unanswered in this? What would you like to explore further? This is a great reference point for you to dig deeper later, either into research or into prayer—or both.

Finally, as you slowly read this scripture the third time, how do you feel? Write how it sits with you, how you're emotionally and physically reacting to it. Write this down.

Once you have finished the three readings, what did you notice? Did the way you understood the scripture change throughout the process? What questions are still unanswered? What insight did it give you?

# Saturday, March 27

Philippians 2:5-8  
Mary Wall  
Big Red Church of Fresno

## **New Revised Standard Version**

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

## **New Life Version**

Think as Christ Jesus thought. Jesus has always been as God is. But He did not hold to His rights as God. He put aside everything that belonged to Him and made Himself the same as a servant who is owned by someone. He became human by being born as a man. After He became a man, He gave up His important place and obeyed by dying on a cross.

News stories and headlines highlight people screaming, fighting, and demanding certain “rights” because of their positions, or their beliefs about their positions. “I do not need to wear a mask. I never get sick.” “I want to travel/shop/dine in the manner I choose. Not letting me do so is violating my rights.”

Even if we are not in that particular group, it’s not hard to see how we have a similar mindset: annoyed when we are kept waiting, irritated that things we want are not available, angered when we do not receive a satisfactory response or when emails and phone calls not returned, and feeling entitled to better service or treatment.

If anyone was ever justified to use his position for preferential treatment, it was Jesus. He could have chosen violence, anger, and revenge, but time and time again, He choose humility and obedience, even when it meant paying the ultimate price.

Are we willing to follow Jesus’ example? Not because of some payoff we expect in the future. Not because we are better, more deserving, or trying to prove anything to anyone. But simply because it is our weekly, daily, and maybe hourly active choice to follow in his footsteps.

**Prayer: Lord, give me your thoughts, your attitudes, and your mindset as I encounter others and situations today, that I may instead choose the path of humility and obedience in all I do.**

# *Dawn*

**Sunday, March 28**

Palm Sunday

# Monday, March 29

Psalm 23  
Rev. Raygan Baker  
Big Red Church of Fresno

There's a very recent commercial that doesn't have to finish the phrase "When life gives you lemons..." in order to play off of our collective "lemon of a year," nor to sell their (spiked) lemonade. Which shows us, I like to think, that sometimes clichés become cliché for a reason. This ad only worked because the phrase is cliché.

Psalm 23 is another cliché that just keeps working. Many pastors, including myself, call Psalm 23 the "cliché funeral psalm;" but that's only because it has been an abundant source of comfort for generations of grieverers. This classic prayer illustrates the poet's (and poetry's) powerful use of imagery (pun intended). This Psalm is not just a comfort and assurance of God's provision, but it's that comfort and assurance from the middle of those moments of greatest struggle, even "in the presence of my enemies" (v.5).

The poet begins invoking the faithful presence and provision of God with the original pastoral image; the shepherd who faithfully provides for every need of his sheep (intended again), but that is just the starting place for finding the metaphors we need to hold onto our memories of God's faithful provision thus far, and enough hope so that we continue on this journey.

Wherever you are in your own journey, and from the middle of whichever crisis is most urgent for you right now, this ancient and oft-repeated prayer holds something for you, too. Read through the Psalm yourself, and pick an image that captures your attention, in either the beauty, mystery, questions, or wonder it evokes. If one does not present itself, read the Psalm again; more slowly and out loud, until your image comes into view. Then, simply focus on that image in silent meditative prayer. Your mind will wander, just gently bring it back to your image and sit with it, and pay attention to the presence of God for as little as a few minutes, or as long as you like. Repeat often, but don't expect the same image to present itself each time.

**Prayer: Holy One, calm our restless minds and hearts, so that we might hear your voice.**

## Tuesday, March 30

Revelation 22:1-5  
Rene Horton  
Grace Community Church

### The River of Life

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His servants will worship Him; they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

The Book of Revelation is filled with vivid imagery as provided by the visions of its author, John of Patmos. While the Book of Revelation presents terrifying images including the Battle of Armageddon and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, not all of its pages are filled with dark, foreboding images. Note the beauty and peace conveyed with the scripture of Revelation 22:1–5. Take a moment to mentally visualize the symbology in the verses. While the river of the water of life is thought to represent the Holy Spirit, the tree of life is thought to represent Jesus. But envision the scriptures literally for just a moment. Imagine the joy of a shimmering pristine city, bright with the light of God’s love where we as His servants will worship Him forever with peace and joy.

As I think of this reading, I must relay its significance to me through a very personal experience. In 2003, I was deployed with the US Army in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. During my deployment, I felt a deep desire to be baptized in the Persian Gulf. While I had been baptized years ago in my hometown church, the thought of being baptized in the waters of an area so relevant to the Bible thrilled me while also allowing me to express my own Christian beliefs in a very personal and private way.

When the day arrived, my Chaplain and I waded into the Persian Gulf waters. As he recited a prayer, he then submerged me underwater. I had no expectation of anything other than the joy of the baptism itself. What happened next was life changing. As I surfaced from the water, I experienced what I can only describe as “peace as in Heaven.” I was stunned as it felt as though I had been allowed to revel in the light and peace of Heaven if only for a “nanosecond!” I had never experienced anything like it and words fail to adequately describe what I felt and saw. I felt a peace and calm I have never known and I immediately sensed that Jesus had allowed me to “sample” the “kind” of peace that can only be accessed in our heavenly home. I did not want it to end! How was this even possible? I am the most imperfect, struggling Christian you will ever meet—yet Jesus blessed me with this gift? I was so overcome with emotion after I re-surfaced that I burst into tears—tears of joy! So, whenever I read a biblical passage that vividly describes the beauty of Heaven, I am reminded of that fateful day in the waters of the Persian Gulf and of the gift from Christ our Savior. During our time of Lent Devotional readings and reflections, I wanted to share my story. May God bless you all.

## Wednesday, March 31

John 17:20-24  
Mary Beth Harrison  
Grace Community Church

**“I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father...”**

How do you feel when someone prays for you? Cherished, humbled, awkward, loved, honored, unsure? I wonder if the disciples felt these things as they overheard Jesus praying for them. It reminded me of a guest speaker I had in my classroom of teenage parents several years ago. She mentioned that kids will sometimes tune out the words of their parents but will **tune in** at a high level when they hear their name brought up in a conversation between adults that was not meant for their ears. A child who overhears her parent say to another adult, “I am so proud of how well Maya is caring for our new puppy” is likely to take that compliment to heart more so than if told directly and will take great pride in future puppy care. Did the disciples swell with pride when they heard Jesus talking to our Father about them?

The disciples heard Jesus praying for unity in all believers and all *believers yet to come!* That’s us! Jesus *prayed for us* and asked, “...that they may be one as we are one...and the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” Those are powerful words to overhear! Do we live out this prayer, fulfilling Jesus’ hope for us?

Let us think about our own words to each other and the people we meet. If we were overheard, would our words unite people and make them feel cherished? Would others hear by our words and see by our actions that they are also loved by God?

# Thursday, April 1

## Maundy Thursday

Luke 22:54-62

Kymerly Lindsey

Big Red Church of Fresno

...And the Lord turned and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, now he had said unto him, **Before the cock crows, thou shalt deny me thrice.**

Maundy Thursday commemorates the Last Supper of Christ and his disciples and Christ's washing of the feet of his disciples.

These events are symbolic of our times. In March of 2020, First Congregational Church of Fresno held its last in-house service with its last coffee hour. Although, the Lenten season had already begun, we were faced with another "maundy" day, albeit on a Sunday. We ate a last meal together (although, in separate households), uncertain of our future, unknowing of the price in sacrifice some of us would pay. We held fast in faith and trust that God would see us to the end of this most heavy burden.

Some chose to "wash" the feet of many whom society has deemed unworthy. Metaphorically and with great humility many kneeled before their less fortunate brethren and washed away their hunger and granted them dignity and grace, if for just a moment in their lives, as Jesus kneeled before his disciples and washed their feet.

There were some that chose to deny the reality of our present truth. Walking in the darkness, in the shadows, knowing full well the truth. We are all guilty of this. As Peter denied his Lord, we deny Him also. When we deny ourselves of our life's truths, we are denying the truth of God's existence in our lives, of Jesus' sacrifice and of our commitment to His teachings. When Peter came to understand his denial, there was a light, dawn had come. Peter wept bitterly, for shame, guilt, confusion, anger or realization of his truth? Three times we deny, three opportunities to acknowledge, accept and embrace.

We choose to wash the feet of the unclean or to step around them; theirs is not our truth. We choose to hold fast to our faith or to deny it; God still speaks, but why isn't He speaking to me? We choose to live in the shadows of our true selves or to embrace said true and walk in the light, with the Light of Christ as our beacon.

This is a time for renewal, reflection and rebirth. Let us renew our faith. Let us reflect on our challenges and our triumphs. Let us be reborn in the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Amen

# Friday, April 2

## Good Friday

Colossians 1:15-20

Ellie Dote

City Church of Long Beach

One of the things I loved most about having a job at Disneyland was watching the parents with their kids. Seeing the little children, wide-eyed and taking in the very characters they had watched on their mother's iPhone or on the TV come to life brought a new level of reality to their world that could only be described as "magic." For me, the magic was in their eyes, and it was a reminder of how blessed I was to work at a place where I could constantly be reminded of the reality of the way I viewed and experienced God in my own life.

In today's passage from Colossians, we read about all of the amazing things that God is. The imagery and grandeur that it paints of God gives us just a glimpse of who God is – but have we really experienced Him in the way that those little children experienced Disneyland for the first time? To realize that this isn't a bedtime story that we can tell each other to feel better, but rather a reminder to us that the God who made the universe – the One who has existed beyond time and space – knows us. And not only does God know us, but that same image dwells in each of us.

It was Richard Rohr who once tweeted, "Jesus did not come to change God's mind about humanity. Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God." That profound statement tells us so much about God, and yet also challenges what many of us have thought about God. That we were so bad that God needed to punish Jesus on Good Friday so that God could even consider allowing us into Heaven. But John's Gospel tells us differently – "For God so LOVED the world..." (John 3:16) How much does God love you? He wanted to show us. And the love – a sacrificial love – is what we are called to remember today.

In his podcast about boundaries, Rob Bell reminds us that the image of God dwells within us, and that with that realization we need to ask ourselves how we are caring for that image. "When we fail to uphold our boundaries and protect ourselves," he says, "we fail to protect the image of God that dwells within us."

In a few short days, we'll be celebrating the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and I wonder if the reality of that has sunken in. For me, I still look back on my early days at Disneyland and the sense of awe and wonder that I experienced as I stepped through those turnstiles and onto Main Street, USA. That feeling is harder to get to now that I'm grown, but there is wonder around. I find it in the children I see, holding the hands of their parents as I watch from my vantage spot by the entrance to "it's a small world." I find it in my own children when they would watch and wave at their favorite Disney and Pixar characters would process by during the parades. The magic is still there – all you have to do is look around.

# Saturday, April 3

## Holy Saturday

Psalm 103  
Journal

Read today's scripture and draw or free-write a response to this psalm of thanksgiving. Perhaps write your own psalm proclaiming God's goodness in your life, based on your experiences, or choose a word or phrase to write in the center of the page, and write what this means for you today, on Holy Saturday, as you spiral your response around the word. This is your time with God as the season of Lent draws to a close.