

## **Lenten Devotionals 2022**



## **Gifts of the Spirit**

Lenten Devotional 2022

First Congregational United Church of Christ

On the day we celebrated Epiphany this year, we were all given a star to help guide us through the season. On that star, was written a word, a fruit of the spirit, as Paul calls it in Galatians. Many of star words came directly from Galatians, which tells us that the “fruits of the spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” But other parts of scripture suggest other fruits of the spirit, such as courage, fortitude, compassion, playfulness, goodness, quietness, rest, and happiness. Throughout the season of Epiphany, we were all invited to meditate upon the word we were given, to see how it might guide us right now, how it might show up in ourselves and others. I then invited you to share your observations with the rest of the congregation, through word, art, music or prayer. This Lenten devotional contains those observations.

The season of Lent lasts 40 days and starts on Ash Wednesday. During this season, in particular, we will be thinking about the gifts that God gives us to help us get through difficult, wilderness times. Perhaps more than last year, this is one of those times. We are still in the midst of a pandemic, we are still struggling with structural racism, but now we are watching with horror as Russia invades Ukraine, while also feeling the rising tide of panic that can come from new reports about the severity of global warming. That does feel like a desert time.

Perhaps we are starting to get a glimpse of what the Israelites felt, as they wandered their desert for 40 years, always wishing and expecting to reach their promised land, but never quite reaching it. And perhaps we, like them, are feeling pretty grumbly. The witness of scripture teaches us that those grumbles are natural. It also teaches us that God stays with us in that wilderness, that God grants spiritual gifts to cope with the wilderness, and that God ultimately brings light in the darkness.

As you read through and consider the art in this devotional, you are invited to think of how God is gifting you at this difficult time, and how you might see those gifts in the world around you. You are encouraged to consider just one reflection a day, starting the day after Ash Wednesday. You’ll see that we didn’t receive quite enough reflections to fill all 40 days. At first, I was disconcerted by this, but prayer led to me to realize that, if we don’t have a reflection for every day, we can use those days to write our own reflection. So when you find empty pages in this booklet, I invite you to write your own reflection or prayer. Feel free to grumble a little, if you need to, or give thanks for an unexpected gift. You might consider writing about one of the words lists above. Or write a prayer about something happening in the world, or a prayer for someone dear to you. Or write a reflection on something you heard in worship that week.

I look forward to going on this journey with you, my Dear Ones.

Many blessings,  
Pastor Laura

**The Fruits of the Spirit**  
Rev. Dr. Laura Miller-Purrenhage

Sometimes, when we hear or read scripture in a different way, through a different translation, we understand it differently. You are invited to meditate today on this different version of Galatians 5:22-23, from the Message.

But what happens when we live God's way? God brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.

Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way. Among those who belong to Christ, everything connected with getting our own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities is killed off for good—crucified.

## **Finding strength**

Virginia Schiefelbein

When I opened the envelope containing my star, I initially groaned when I saw that it read "fortitude". My mental movie immediately played footage of all the patients and families who tell me they can't express fear or sadness because they "have to be strong" or "need to stay positive". In my mind, fortitude equaled stoicism. That was how I had heard it used, but I realized I wasn't really sure what it was supposed to mean.

...Which is why dictionaries were invented. I decided to look up fortitude on dictionary.com and found a definition I could work with: "mental and emotional strength in facing difficulty, adversity, danger, or temptation courageously". That makes room for a lot more responses and actions than I had previously thought. In fact, it reminded me of how the main style in my chaplaincy training emphasized looking for needs, hopes, and resources. I was used to finding resources and strengths in other people. Now I wondered if I could find it in myself. I set the definition on the shelf next to my star.

The pandemic has been hard for most everyone, and my star arrived at a time that I was not feeling especially strong. Once I started looking for my fortitude, though, I found it all over. Didn't want to get out of bed this morning but did it anyway? Fortitude. Sacrificed an in-person visit to a loved one because I needed to keep them safe from any germs I picked up at the hospital? Fortitude. Made a phone call I had been fearing? Fortitude. Resisted the temptation to go back for another handful of M&Ms? Fortitude. Reigned in my inner critic when I was tempted to beat myself up after I did go back for the extra M&Ms? Fortitude.

Strength is not always pretty; when a trying-to-be-strong patient cries, I often tell them that tears are sometimes the strongest thing we have, since water wears away rock. Even tears and anger sometimes help us face what we must deal with.

Over the weeks, I started to feel a bit stronger. Mostly, it was less about getting stronger than the grace I extended myself by recognizing the strength that was already there.

Fortitude is not just in Jesus' setting his face toward Jerusalem, but in his heartfelt prayer in the garden, in his disciples' willingness to try new things (foot-washing, anyone?), and in Mary's vigil at the foot of the cross. In this Lenten season, may you find your own strength, perhaps where you least expect it.

## Quiet

We have all been told to be quiet in one way or another. Why were we told this? What did it really mean. By definition quiet means: making little or no noise, make or become (silent, calm, or still), to speak very little, not disturbed by noise or activity. Other words for quiet are stilled, hushed and peaceful.

Were there noises in the desert when Jesus was fasting for 40 days? We can only assume there were. Did Jesus hear them or even want to hear them?

Today the word "quiet" reminds me of a silent meditation in a quiet place, which can be anywhere. Are there sounds related to quiet / silence?

Paul Simon in his song Sounds of Silence sings:

*Hello darkness, my old friend  
I've come to talk with you again  
Because a vision softly creeping  
Left its seeds while I was sleeping  
And the vision that was planted in my brain  
Still remains  
Within the sound of silence*

*In restless dreams I walked alone  
Narrow streets of cobblestone  
'Neath the halo of a street lamp  
I turned my collar to the cold and damp  
When my eyes were stabbed by the flash of a neon light  
That split the night  
And touched the sound of silence*

*And in the naked light I saw  
Ten thousand people, maybe more  
People talking without speaking  
People hearing without listening  
People writing songs that voices never share  
No one dared  
Disturb the sound of silence*

*Fools" said I, You do not know  
Silence like a cancer grows  
Hear my words that I might teach you  
Take my arms that I might reach you  
But my words like silent raindrops fell  
And echoed in the wells of silence*

*And the people bowed and prayed  
To the neon god they made  
And the sign flashed out its warning  
In the words that it was forming  
And the sign said, The words of the prophets  
Are written on the subway walls  
And tenement halls  
And whispered in the sounds of silence*

There is a certain kind of quietness everywhere if your soul shall seek it.

Peace, Gary Cypher

## **Forbearance**

Lynn Hart

My Book Club and I are reading The Book of Longings right now by Sue Monk Kidd.

In the book, Pamphile says to Ana, “You Galileans have little forbearance.” Ana replies, “Forbearance is all we DO have.”

I guess since we are not Jews, we would be considered Gentiles. But I’m not sure if all we have is forbearance. I have to agree with Pamphile because I myself have worked hard but still have little patience. Oh it’s better now that I’m older. I remember when I was young, I had no patience at all and at the time it cost me a lot. Lost friendships, bad business relationships and no cares at all about my faith.

But now that I’m older, I think I understand my faith better, and with it, patience. Or maybe it’s more like I slowed down and understand love a little more.



## **Self-Control**

Jim Hart

Recently we have been dealing with cleaning and breaking up our parents' homesteads following their deaths. And it's not a pleasant task! Sometimes we laugh, sometimes we cry, sometimes we're angry. All those memories and all that stuff!

On the one hand, every item I pick up has a great story to go with it and I want to bring it home with me. On the other hand, what will I do with it when I get it home? And then one day our kids will go through the same thing we're going through with that same stuff. And by then those memories and stories will probably be long forgotten.

Seems like it would be more pleasurable right now, and for the future, to make some new memories with all that stuff. Dinner served on the china for no special reason; sitting around the campfire on the yard swing.

There are few things we can control. One of them though is being happy right now with what we've already got.

## **Lenten Reflection on the Gift of Self Control**

Leah Horn

“For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with goodness, goodness with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with godliness.”

--2 Peter 1:5-6

Self-control is something we are given as a gift from the Holy Spirit, but also something we work toward in our daily lives and that benefits those around us, a true collaboration of effort between us and God. My first thought after receiving my star was “Yup, self-control is what keeps me from eating the entire carton of ice cream in one sitting...How is in the world will I reflect on THAT for someone’s spiritual journey during Lent?!?” Thank goodness I had a little more time to spend thinking about this gift (and found the scripture I quoted at the beginning of this reflection)!

Self-control is what keeps us moving in the right direction. Few of the things we accomplish in life could happen without self-control. With self-control we find the strength to not say the first thing that pops into our heads when we are angry, we find the strength to just keep going when things get difficult, we find the courage to step out of our comfort zone and try something new, and (on a far less serious note) we are able to put that spoon down when faced with a carton of Chunky Monkey. It is both a spiritual gift we are given and an effort we make at the same time.

It is very important to me to try to live out my faith and the verses I quoted are going on my “list” of verses I turn to regularly for inspiration to do just that. To me, having faith means using that faith to do good, having the knowledge to help discern what IS good, the self-control to not just rush headlong into something that could be dangerous or ineffective, and the endurance to stay the course, even when things become tough. The last phrase in this scripture brings the circle back to completion: Supplement...endurance with godliness. Pray about it and keep God at the center of all that we do.

Prayer:

Dear God,

Thank you for the amazing gift of self-control. Help me to use it wisely as I go about my day and as I continue on this journey to do your work and spread the good news of your unconditional and ongoing love for us.

Amen

## Kindness

Freida Schneeberger



To show Kindness to someone doesn't cost much except maybe some thought and time. But to receive Kindness is priceless and may create hope for a lost or lonely person. The story below illustrates how a little kindness brought joy to a young girl.

### A 4-year-old's letter to God [A True Story](#) — Author unknown

There is a kind [soul](#) working in the dead letter office of the U.S. Postal Service somewhere...

Our 14-year-old dog, Abbey, died last month. The day after she died, my 4-year-old daughter Meredith was crying and talking about how much she missed Abbey. She asked if we could [write](#) a letter to God, so that when Abbey got to heaven, God would recognize her. I told her that I thought we could, so she dictated these words:

Dear God, Will you please take care of my dog? She died yesterday and is with you in heaven. I miss her very much. I am happy that you let me have her as my dog even though she got sick. I hope you will play with her. She likes to play with balls and to swim. I am sending a picture of her so when you see her you will know that she is my dog. I really miss her. Love, Meredith (written by the mother of Meredith Claire)

.....We put the letter in an envelope with a picture of Abbey and Meredith and addressed it to: God in Heaven. We put our return address on it. Then Meredith pasted several stamps on the front of the envelope because she said it would take lots of stamps to get the letter all the way to heaven. That afternoon she dropped it into the letter box at the post office.

A few days later, she asked if God had gotten the letter yet. I told her that I thought He had. Yesterday there was a package wrapped in gold paper on our front porch addressed, "To Meredith" in an unfamiliar hand.

Meredith opened it. Inside was a book by Mr. Rogers, titled, "When a Pet Dies." Taped to the inside front cover was the letter we had written to God in its opened envelope. On the opposite page was the picture of Abbey & Meredith and this note:

Dear Meredith,

Abbey arrived safely in heaven. Having the picture was a big help. I recognized Abbey right away. Abbey isn't sick anymore. Her spirit is here with me just like it stays in your heart. Abbey loved being your dog. Since we don't need our bodies in heaven, I don't have any pockets to keep your picture in, so I am sending it back to you in this little book for you to keep and have something to remember Abbey by.

Thank you for the beautiful letter and thank your mother for helping you write it and sending it to me. What a wonderful mother you have. I picked her especially for you. I send my blessings every day and remember that I love you very much. By the way, I am wherever there is love.

"Love, God"

**Let's all try to be a little more like that postal worker who took a few moments to show kindness. Kindness, after all is a way of showing God's Love.**

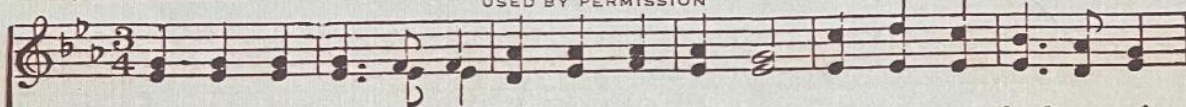


## GREAT IS THY FAITHFULNESS

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T. O. Chisholm

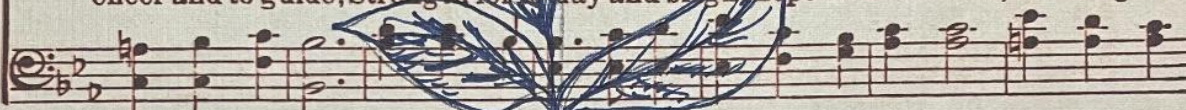
William M. Runyan



1. "Great is Thy faith-ful-ness," O God my Fa-ther, There is no shad-ow of
2. Sum-mer and winter, and spring-time and harvest, Sun, moon and stars in their
3. Par-don for sin and a peace that en-dur-eth, Thine own dear presence to



turning with Thee; Thou change-st not; Thy compassions, they fail not, As Thou hast  
 cours-es a-bove, Join with all na-ture in man-i-fold wit-ness, To Thy great  
 cheer and to guide; Strength for to-day and bright-ness for to-mor-row, Blessings all



## CHORUS



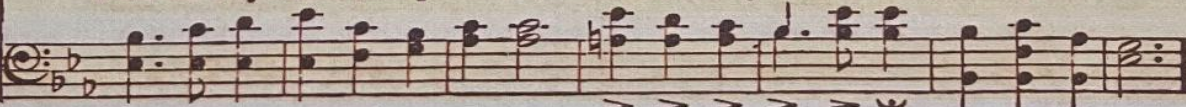
been Thou for-ev-er, O God, my Fa-ther, Great is Thy faith-ful-ness! Great is Thy  
 faith-ful-ness, mine, with Thy com-pan-y, O God, my Fa-ther, Great is Thy faith-ful-ness!



faith-ful-ness! Morn-ing by morn-ing, now mor-ning see; All I have



need-ed Thy hand hath provided,—"Great is Thy faithfulness," Lord, un-to me!



## **Lenten Devotional**

Fay Schroeder

The heart I received had “LOVE” in the center. One of my favorite poems that explains God’s unconditional love for us is “Footprints in the Sand” by Mary Stevenson. She wrote this poem in 1939.

### **FOOTPRINTS IN THE SAND**

One night I had a dream.  
I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord.

Across the sky flashed scenes from my life.  
For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand,  
one belonging to me, and the other to the Lord.

When the last scene of my life flashed before me,  
I looked back at the footprints in the sand.  
I noticed that many times along the path of my life  
there was only one set of footprints.  
I also noticed that it happened at the very lowest  
and saddest times in my life.

This really bothered me, and I questioned the Lord about it:  
"Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way.  
But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life  
there is only one set of footprints.  
I don't understand why when I need you most you would leave me."

The Lord replied:  
"My precious child, I love you and would never leave you.  
During your times of trial and suffering,  
when you see only one set of footprints,  
it was then that I carried you."

by Mary Stevenson

I believe God still speaks these words today.

## **Self-Control**

I really didn't like the words,  
that Pastor sent to me.

But realized quite rapidly,  
God wanted me to see;

That I need work along the line,  
that I previously thought was good and fine.

I wasn't where I ought to be,  
I needed to improve.

Go God showed me some areas  
And things that I should move.

Now, what all did I learn from this,  
Assignment that we had?

I learned God uses many things  
To teach us good and bad.

And we should pay attention  
to what touches us each day.

It might be God just reaching out,  
So see what He will say

Judy Nielsen





**Joy**  
Matilda Oatman



## GOODNESS

I grew up with my G'ma Avery, who lived across the road and down the lane a little, often saying 'my goodness!' when something surprised or offended her. Not wanting to swear, of course. I have such a clear picture of her saying that to my grandfather after he did his annual trimming of many of the beautiful trees in their yard, especially the ones near the road and electric wires...he sometimes got carried away with his 'trimming' and did it ever make my grandmother mad. Though she soon got over it. 😊

But on a more serious note, I want to share with you this article from the UCC Daily Devotional which reflects on God's goodness. ...Charlene Avery

**For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth ... so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. - Isaiah 55:10-11 (NRSV)** I don't believe everything happens for a reason. When someone dies, I don't believe it's because God needed another angel. When bad things happen, I don't believe God is punishing us. I don't believe God dispenses suffering, much less measures it out. I don't believe everything will work out. Most of us prefer certainty over mystery, and the more uncertain things are, the more likely we are to tell stories to make sense of things. Stories like: "Everything happens for a reason." Stories like: "God doesn't give us more than we can handle." Stories about doors closing and windows opening. From whether democracy will survive our national sins, to when our hearts and institutions will reflect the reality that Black lives matter; from how to live with hope as the climate changes, to when we can go back to school and church and travel and please God hugging – it's only natural to want clarity. **I believe there are some things we can count on: God's goodness, for example. God's constant presence. God's transforming love, and Spirit's power to heal and restore. That Love's purpose will be fulfilled. I believe God's word is as sure as the most fundamental cycles of life. I believe God's word is truer than any story we can make up. That we can count on it. We can build our lives on it. We can rejoice in it. Prayer For the best story that ever was, and is, and that you are in it with us, thank you.**

Written by Vicki Kemper, Pastor of First Congregational, UCC, of Amherst, Massachusetts.

## **Hope**

Gary Burt

May the God of HOPE fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in HIM, so that you may overflow with HOPE, by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)

It is easy to get caught up in and weighed down by the negativity prevalent in our world today, but there is still hope. Being hopeful is a more uplifting way to cope with the daily struggles in our lives. Telling ourselves that “we will get through this” (regardless of your individual situations) provides the hope needed to persevere.

When you look around you today and wonder what it is God really wants for you, know that He wants you to have hope. Hope for joy. Hope for peace. Hope for His power working in your life.

## **Rest**

Kathy Burt

I said to myself, Relax and REST, God has showered you with blessings.” (Psalms 116:7)

Laura Bush said, “Taking care of yourself physically really helps emotionally. People who get a lot of sleep, who do things that relieve stress, can withstand a lot of stress.”

In 1998, a doctor informed me that I had breast cancer. I was shocked! I thought, “This can’t be happening to me! This can’t be true! There must be a mistake!” My wonderful life was getting turned upside down. I spent many sleepless nights. I needed some rest.

I turned my thoughts and prayers to God. I knew I was not alone. God slowed me down to recognize and realize the many blessings in my life.

Friends started stopping by for visits. One by one, they shared their problems with me. Each person needed a sounding board, a listening ear. We had some great conversations. God was using me to hear them out, giving them a chance to relieve stress.

God provided these distractions with the opportunity for me to take a rest from my own issues to help others with their concerns.

So, relax, REST, and be blessed!

**Peace**  
Jan Richardson

Reading from the Gospels, Epiphany 4, Year B: Mark 1.21-28

In his brilliant essay “To Retrieve the Lost Art of Blessing,” John O’Donohue writes, “The force of a blessing can penetrate through and alter the inner configuration of identity. When the gift or need of the individual coincides with the incoming force of the blessing, great change can begin.”

This kind of change and reconfiguration means that a blessing is not always a comfortable and cozy thing. Sometimes the blessing most needed is one that involves confrontation and calling out, that requires standing against what is not of God. Such a blessing may be difficult to give—or to receive. It calls us to acknowledge and challenge and grapple with forces that thrive within chaos, forces that often work in ways that are exceedingly subtle and cloaked and require even more wisdom and discernment of us than when such forces take clear and obvious forms.

But, as Jesus shows us in this passage where we see him healing a man in the grip of a destructive spirit, such a blessing—the blessing that comes in facing the chaos rather than turning away from it, the blessing that comes in naming what is contrary to God’s purposes rather than letting it persist unchecked—makes way for the wholeness we crave. It brings release to what has been bound; it invites and enables and calls us to move with the freedom for which God made us.

“The human heart,” writes John O’Donohue in his essay, “continues to dream of a state of wholeness, a place where everything comes together, where loss will be made good, where blindness will transform into vision, where damage will be made whole, where the clenched question will open in the house of surprise, where the travails of a life’s journey will enjoy a homecoming. To invoke a blessing is to call some of that wholeness upon a person now.”

Is there some part of you that has become bound—that recognizes what is holy and craves its blessing, but fears the change that would be involved? Is there a habit, a belief, a relationship, an aspect of your life that has you in its grip, that confines you, that limits the freedom with which you move through this world—perhaps without your even realizing it? Can you imagine what release would look like? Is there a destructive force at work in a person or system or institution you’re connected with, that you might be called to engage? Can you identify a first step that would help you confront what confines you or those around you?

Here is a blessing I’ve written for you. This day, this week, may you give and receive a blessing that will help you and yours enter more deeply into wholeness. Peace to you.

## YOUR OWN REFLECTION

## **Blessing in the Chaos**

To all that is chaotic  
in you,  
let there come silence.

Let there be  
a calming  
of the clamoring,  
a stilling  
of the voices that  
have laid their claim  
on you,  
that have made their  
home in you,  
that go with you  
even to the  
holy places  
but will not  
let you rest,  
will not let you  
hear your life  
with wholeness  
or feel the grace  
that fashioned you.

Let what distracts you  
cease.  
Let what divides you  
cease.  
Let there come an end  
to what diminishes  
and demeans,  
and let depart  
all that keeps you  
in its cage.

Let there be  
an opening  
into the quiet  
that lies beneath  
the chaos,  
where you find  
the peace  
you did not think  
possible  
and see what shimmers  
within the storm.

**Peace**  
**Lead Us from Death to Life**

Text: Refrain Upanishads, Satish Kumar;  
verses, Marty Haugen  
Tune: Marty Haugen © 1985, GIA Publications, Inc.

Lead us from death to life, from falsehood to truth,  
from despair to hope, from fear to trust.  
Lead us from hate to love, from war to peace;  
Let peace fill our hearts, let peace fill our world, let peace fill our universe.

Still all the angry cries, still all the angry guns,  
Still now your people die, earth's sons and daughters.  
Let justice roll, let mercy pour down,  
Come and teach us your way of compassion.

(Refrain)  
So many lonely hearts, so many broken lives,  
Longing for love to break into their darkness.  
Come, teach us love, come, teach us peace,  
Come and teach us your way of compassion.  
(Refrain)

Let justice ever roll, let mercy fill the earth,  
Let us begin to grow into your people.  
We can be love, we can bring peace,  
We can still be your way of compassion.  
(Refrain)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_V5ckytHkI0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_V5ckytHkI0)

## **Spirit Of Gentleness**

James K. Manley, Tune: Spirit, #286 New Century Hymnal

Spirit, Spirit of gentleness,  
blow through the wilderness calling and free,  
Spirit, Spirit of restlessness,  
stir me from placidness,  
wind, wind on the sea.

You moved on the waters,  
you called to the deep,  
then you coaxed up the mountains  
from the valleys of sleep;  
and over the eons you called to each thing:  
"Awake from your slumbers  
and rise on your wings."

You swept through the desert,  
you stung with the sand,  
and you goaded your people with a law and a land;  
and when they were blinded  
with idols and lies,  
then you spoke through your prophets  
to open their eyes.

You sang in a stable,  
you cried from a hill,  
then you whispered in silence  
when the whole world was still;  
and down in the city  
you called once again,  
when you blew through your people  
on the rush of the wind.

You call from tomorrow,  
you break ancient schemes.  
From the bondage of sorrow  
all the captives dream dreams;  
our women see visions,  
our men clear their eyes.  
With bold new decisions  
your people arise.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWbxyPggN20>



## YOUR OWN REFLECTION

**Peace**  
Mary Lou Prevost

The Star I received is “Peace”. Because of the atrocities which are occurring in our world today, in my mind, there are no more appropriate lyrics than those found in one of my favorite songs. If everyone lived these words everyday there would, indeed, be peace on earth.

Let There Be Peace On Earth

Let there be peace on earth  
And let it begin with me  
Let There Be Peace on Earth  
The peace that was meant to be  
With God as our Father  
Brothers all are we  
Let me walk with my brother  
In perfect harmony.  
Let peace begin with me  
Let this be the moment now.  
With ev'ry step I take  
Let this be my solemn vow  
To take each moment and live  
Each moment in peace eternally  
Let there be peace on earth  
And let it begin with me.

Songwriters: Jill Jackson / Sy Miller

## **Goodness During Lent**

Erica Stoll

Lent begins with ashes on the forehead as a symbol of death and repentance. Lent is a time to correct unhealthy habits as we observe ourselves more in Christ's image and sacrifice something meaningful. More than likely, Christ intended us to give up more than just soda, caffeine, chocolate and other tasty and tempting food consumed on "Fat Tuesday." Paul's Letter to the Galatians says: "So, let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith" (6:9-10). To me, this verse means to go out and step up the goodness we put out in the world. I know during the pandemic it has been hard to find opportunities, but I go back to the yard sign so many of us have in our front yards which says, "Choose Kindness." That can mean giving themselves to others (helping a family or friends who are going through a rough patch by cooking them a meal), working on their personal relationship with God by turning off the nose of the world for a little bit and read scripture, meditate, or pray, or just paying it forward in the drive through. It is amazing how something so small can make such a difference in a person's life. I fall into the category of needing to get rid of things that are no longer of use to me but useful to someone else. I intend on finding three things I do not need and donate those items the end of each week. I am also going to focus on keeping a gratitude journal, focusing on three good things that happened to me during the day. I do intend on giving up something that is tempting to me like chocolate, but I want to focus on the bigger picture and spreading more goodness in this world.

## **Romans 5:1-5. In God, In Hope. Lenten Reflection**

Demphna Krikorian

**5** Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we<sup>[a]</sup> have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup>through whom we have obtained access<sup>[b]</sup> to this grace in which we stand; and we<sup>[c]</sup> boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> And not only that, but we<sup>[d]</sup> also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup>and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup>and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

We all want to live a life free from trouble. Not only that, but pain is not something we typically seek out, let alone grief and suffering. But it is a fact that we all will have our share of all of these things. Some of us have more heartache, sadness, and loss than others, but pain and suffering comes as a part of living life. And the truth is, the longer you live, the more loss you will experience.

When bad things happen in our lives, it is not unusual for us to contemplate on God and the question of why—why do these things happen to the faithful? Why do some people die from cancer and others are cured? Why did my child die when other children survived? Why did this terrible thing happen in my life? Anger and increased uncertainty often accompany these questions. Some may even shake their hands at God in anger and shout, “Why did you allow this to happen to me?!”

Christians in the early church were pursued and suffered greatly. Paul himself suffered much for his faith and his work in spreading the good news of Jesus.

It is tempting to say that Paul when writing to the church in Rome in these passages, was trying to tell the church that God allows bad things to happen to make us stronger people—a response like this is too simplistic and often causes more hurt than help.

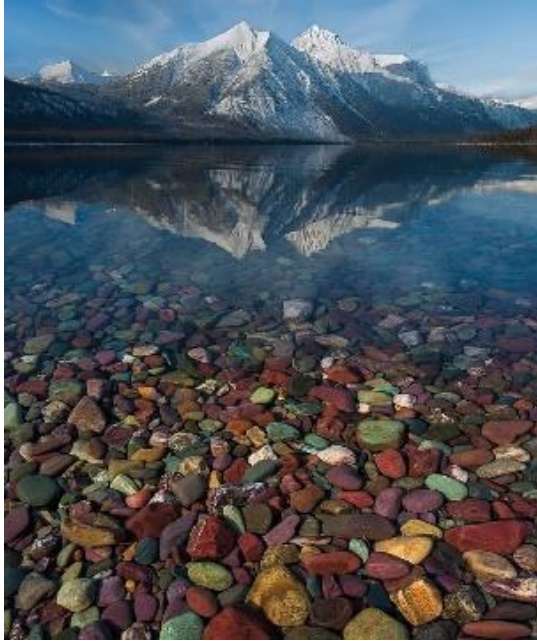
I believe that Paul would rather have us understand these passages in a way that is more healing than hurting. God suffered our pain. God knows our anger at the unfairness of death and the unkindness of loss. But God also gives us a choice. When bad things happen as a result of living in the world, we can allow the pain to embitter us or strengthen our faith. We can blame God, or we can understand that God has joined us in our suffering, not forsaken us. We can let the pain conquer our spirit or allow God's Spirit to grow within us. Because Jesus lived a very real life with very real suffering, we can be assured that God knows our pain and is completely empathetic to our suffering.

Lent is about coming to terms with our own mortality. The imposition of ashes reminds us that it is from dust we come and to dust we shall most certainly return. There is a song about dust, that this is our fate—all of us will be dust one day. But, if we read those words through the lenses of the resurrection, our hope grows because we have faith that death has indeed been conquered. And it is in this we place our hope—a hope that will not disappoint us, a hope in the resurrection that is to come

## YOUR OWN REFLECTION

## Gentleness

Rev. Dr. Laura Miller-Purrenhage



“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness/gentleness, and patience.” (Colossians 3:12)

Before each of my children graduated from high school, we took a family trip. My daughter Katie asked to go hiking in Glacier National Park in Montana. It was an incredible trip with gorgeous mountains, lots of wildlife sightings, and beautiful lakes. One of the things that struck us were the little multi-colored pebbles and stones in the lakes. The variety of color among the pebbles is remarkable and they are so smooth! We learned that the different varieties occurred because of different levels of iron and oxidation that they were exposed to over huge expanses of time. As glaciers passed over the area, those rocks were broken down and eventually rolled

down stream into the lakes. And, again over time, water gently rolled against them, wearing away at the roughness and making them smooth.

When I think of gentleness, I often think of these smooth, colorful stones, changed slowly over hundreds and hundreds of years. So often in our society, gentleness is associated with weakness. We do a great disservice to one another when we think of gentleness as weakness. We all know the movement in our society right now that values arrogance, mockery, and unbending force that grabs and attacks. There are some who praise this kind of behavior. But it’s not what Jesus modeled, our gentle God who would not even fight back against those who took him to crucify him.

In Paul’s letter to the Colossians, when he asks his people to clothe themselves in gentleness, he uses a word that is often translated as meekness (instead of gentleness). According to Strong’s Concordance, this word implies “gentle strength.” It’s a way of expressing power with reserve, of expressing and holding power that is not harsh, overbearing, or even controlling. It is perhaps soft, yet assertive. It’s not weakness. It’s the kind of persistent strength which, like the soft lapping of water, over time, takes a crusty old rock with lots of sharp edges and turns it into a beautiful, bright, smooth stone.

So as we walk our Lenten journey together, wondering how to approach others that anger us, wondering how to cope with our own anger, wondering how to talk to others in such a divided country, let us remember these stones and how they were shaped.

Prayer: Gentle Jesus, who shapes the world into smooth stones of great beauty, help us, we pray, to be that same water that laps with gentle strength among the sharp rocks of our world. Amen.

## Peace

Emily Miller-Purrenhage

I painted this shortly after visiting Lake Michigan with my mom, the week after my cousin Josh passed away. It is a peaceful scene, of someone looking out at the lake.



## **Perseverance**

Frances Miller

(With an introduction by Pastor Laura)

When my grandmother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, my mom made her a tape of music that she remembered from her childhood. My mom then wrote short stories for her children and grandchildren about each song—what each one meant to her and her mother. The following reflection is one of those stories. When I read it this week, I was reminded that, when I was a new mother, my mom often talked about the way that having a new baby made her think of Mary, the mother of Jesus. She said that, for her, holding a baby connected her to Mary. This story helps me understand why.

### **“Frog Went a Courting”**

This was one of mother's favorite songs to sing to babies, I think because it had so many verses. She would sing all the verses and often make up some of her own until the baby finally went to sleep. Mom sang her babies to sleep every night.

When Laura was just little, she cried in the night, and I got up so tired that I could hardly stand. I nursed her, then sat down in the rocker to rock her back to sleep. I tried to sing, but was so tired that all that came out was a hoarse croak. I thought, “I just can't do this.” But then I thought, “this little baby needs to be sung to.” Mother would have said it is a waste of a perfectly good baby not to sing to her. So I tried again and got some ragged words out. Then everything shifted and I was the baby and Momma was rocking and singing to me.

Momma said that when I had babies, I would feel my mother and her mother, and her mother, and all their mothers going back in time. I felt that way that time and was comforted. Since that time, I have been able to call on our mothers when I need their help to get through hard times.



## YOUR OWN REFLECTION

## **Lenten Devotional**

James Robinson

Among the fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5 is kindness. About a week ago I was flying home; we hit a patch of rough air and the pilot came on the intercom asking us to fasten our seatbelts. Fortunately the rough air did not last long and thankfully the rest of the flight was smooth, but now every time I am on a plane, and we hit a bumpy patch I am reminded of a flight some years ago. It was post 9/11 so the heightened security and fear of terrorism already made the experience of flying anxious. We were flying through some extremely rough weather; the plane was bouncing all over the place. I had an aisle seat, sitting in front of me was a mother with a baby on her lap and a young child beside her. I could not see her face, but I could feel her shaking. Sitting across the aisle from her was an elderly woman – from her head covering and complexion I assumed she was Muslim. The elderly woman reached across the aisle and took the young mother's hand. About a minute later she turned to me and asked if I would pray, saying, "This woman is very scared, I could pray but as a Muslim I think your prayer, being of the same faith as her would mean more." (While I had made an assumption about her religion based on her skin and dress, she had made a similar assumption about my religion.) I leaned forward, added my hand to theirs and said a few words of prayer. Our Muslim neighbor continued to hold the young mother's hand for a long time till the turbulence ended. Had she spoken a prayer I am sure her words would have been as comforting or more than mind. Spoken prayer, or not, I will remember always her prayer of kindness in extending her hand to a scared, young mother – and I am reminded how God pours out the Spirit graciously and generously beyond our human made boundaries. To see it and receive it, all we need to do is to open our eyes, hearts and minds.

**Rest**  
**Work Won't Love You Back**  
**Molly Baskette**  
(From the UCC Daily Devotional, Feb 28, 2022)

Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy sabbath of solemn rest to the Lord; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. - Exodus 35:2-3 (NRSV)

“Sobering reminder: If we die our jobs will just post our opening. Don’t let work kill you.”  
(Heather Thompson Day on Twitter)

This is not a leap year. You do not get an extra day tomorrow. If you did—be honest—you would probably just fill it with the same kinds of busy-ness today holds. Mostly work! Too much of it. Paid and unpaid.

Getting an extra day would not be like turning the clock back in autumn: a sneaky sabbath, a gift from God, the afternoon suddenly feeling woozy and lay about and ready for anything. Or better yet: ready for nothing.

Yet that extra day is exactly what God does give us, every week. Actually, God demands it from us—in order to give it back to us.

The sabbath, Rabbi Heschel’s “palace in time,” is a commandment given all the way back when Moses and the Israelites were still manna-gathering and as yet had no civilization to maintain. Before they were really busy, in other words. Jesus later reinforced it when he said, “The sabbath was made for humans and not humans for the sabbath.”

In other words: God craves our rest. So much so that overwork, God told Moses, comes with a death sentence. And God isn’t the executioner (doublecheck the text!). Overwork itself is.

In modern parlance: work will never love you back, and it may even hasten your demise. But God will love you back. So will the friends and family and animal companions and vegetable gardens and books that fill your sabbaths.

Prayer

God, thank you for making sabbath a commandment, something I must do ... almost as if it were my job. Amen.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Molly Baskette pastors at First Church Berkeley (CA) UCC. She is the author of several books about church renewal, parenting & faith, and spirituality. You can connect with her by subscribing to her newsletter, Doomsday Dance Party.

## YOUR OWN REFLECTION

## **Love**

Rev. Dr. Laura Miller-Purrenhage  
1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.



## **Rest**

Rev. Phiwa Langeni

Do not worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. – Philippians 4:6 (CSB)

Unprecedented: a word that tastes sour after the year that recently ended and continues to seep into our now. Lake Superior State University included the word on the 2021 Banished Words List for how it became the (un)warranted refrain for a year full of unanticipated twists and turns.

The reality is that all of life is a long series of unprecedented time units strung together. Last year was as unprecedented as the year before. Every single day of any future or past year is unlike any others you've ever experienced.

In the face of overwhelming unprecedentedness that threatens to derail everything you know: Rest. Rehydrate. Root yourself in prayer and gratitude. Remember that the world already has a savior, *and it isn't you*. Request what you need from God. Return to the you-shaped work God needs you to do. Repeat in perpetuity.

If no one has said it to you recently (or ever!), you are loved. You are enough. You are doing your best even as you're feeling at your worst. With God in every slice of time, we can and must faithfully re-precedent these unusual days, weeks, months, and years ahead. Indeed, God tends to be most active in those uncertain liminal spaces.

### **Prayer**

Lift our worries from our minds and spirits, faithful God. Help us perceive your presence and activity in and all around us. Fling us into a world that's unraveling from the slow sin of normalcy, a privilege most of the world cannot enjoy. Reveal the beautifully diverse possibilities you're inviting into our work and our very selves. Accept our gratitude for being with us through it all. Amen.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

The Rev. Phiwa Langeni is the Ambassador for Innovation & Engagement of the United Church

of Christ. They are also the Founder of Salus Center, the only LGBTQ resource and community center in Lansing, MI.

## YOUR OWN REFLECTION

## **Perseverance**

Prophets of a Future Not Our Own  
By Ken Untener, Bishop of Saginaw

It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view.  
The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,  
It is even beyond our vision.  
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.  
Nothing we do is complete,  
Which is another way of saying that  
The Kingdom always lies beyond us.  
No statement says all that should be said.  
No prayer fully expressed our faith.  
No confession brings perfection.  
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.  
No program accomplishes the church's mission.  
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.  
This is what we are about.  
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.  
We water seeds already planted,  
Knowing that they hold future promise.  
We lay foundations that will need further development.  
We provide yeast that produced effects far beyond our capabilities.  
We cannot do everything,  
And there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.  
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.  
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,  
A step along the way,  
An opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.  
We may never see the end results,  
But that is the difference  
Between the master builder and the worker.  
We are workers, not master builders,  
Ministers, not messiahs.  
We are prophets of a future that is not our own.  
Amen.



## Compassion

Pray for me. I was once like you.  
Be kind and loving to me, that's how I would have treated you.  
Remember I was once someone's parent or spouse,  
I had a life and a dream for the future.

Speak to me. I can hear you even if I don't understand  
what you are saying. Speak to me of things in my past  
of which I can still relate.

Be considerate of me, my days are such a struggle.  
Think of my feelings because I still have them and can feel pain.  
Treat me with respect because I would have treated you that way.  
Think of how I was before I got Alzheimer's; I was full of life,  
I had a life, laughed and loved you.

Think of how I am now. My disease distorts my thinking,  
my feelings, and my ability to respond, but I still love you,  
even if I can't tell you. Think about my future because I used to.

Remember I was full of hope for the future just like you are now.  
Think how it would be to have things locked in your mind and can't let them out.  
I need you to understand and not to blame me, but Alzheimer's.  
I still need the compassion and the touching and most of all  
I still need you to love me.

Keep me in your prayers because I am between life and death.  
The love you give will be a blessing from God  
and both of us will live forever.

How you live and what you do today will always be remembered  
In the heart of the Alzheimer's Patient.

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Carolyn was a full-time caregiver for her husband, Chuck, until he was placed in a facility in  
1999.

## YOUR OWN REFLECTION

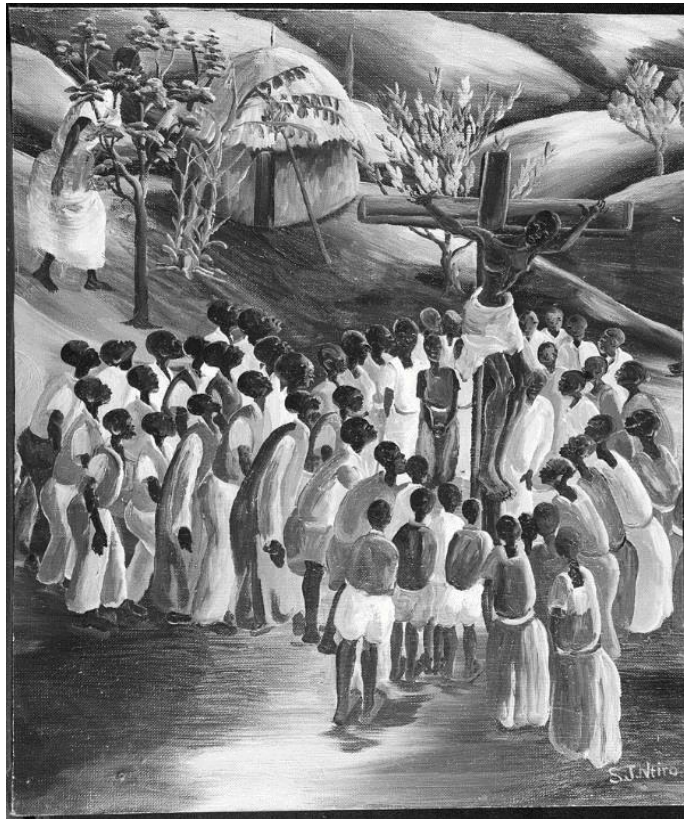
**Maundy Thursday**  
Love



Jesus washes his disciples feet, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=54965> [retrieved February 28, 2022]. Original source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/toddhiestand/2628057856/>.

In a sign of service and love, Jesus washes his disciples' feet on the night of the Last Supper. What would it mean to you to have your feet washed by Jesus?

## Good Friday



Ntiro, Sam J., 1923-1993. Kakindo Crucifixion (photograph of original color work), from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=55704> [retrieved February 28, 2022]. Original source: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%22Kakindo\\_Crucifixion%22\\_-\\_NARA\\_-\\_558948.tif](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%22Kakindo_Crucifixion%22_-_NARA_-_558948.tif).

**Holy Saturday**  
Hope



Le Breton, Jacques ; Gaudin, Jean. Mourning of Jesus, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=51565> [retrieved February 28, 2022]. Creative Commons.  
Lamentations 3:1- & 19-24

I am one who has seen affliction  
under the rod of God's wrath;  
he has driven and brought me  
into darkness without any light;  
against me alone he turns his hand,  
again and again, all day long.

He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,  
and broken my bones;  
he has besieged and enveloped me  
with bitterness and tribulation;  
he has made me sit in darkness  
like the dead of long ago.

He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;  
he has put heavy chains on me;  
though I call and cry for help,  
he shuts out my prayer;  
he has blocked my ways with hewn stones,  
he has made my paths crooked.

The thought of my affliction and my homelessness  
is wormwood and gall!  
My soul continually thinks of it  
and is bowed down within me.  
But this I call to mind,  
and therefore I have hope:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,  
his mercies never come to an end;  
they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.  
“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul,  
“therefore I will hope in him.”



