

Lenten Reflections 2025
St. John's UMC Santa Fe, NM

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*Based on Phil Ressler’s book, 40 Things **NOT** to Give Up for Lent*

Introduction

By Wendy Russel

This 2025 Lenten devotional is a congregational project of St. John’s United Methodist Church in Santa Fe, New Mexico. It started in 2024 when we used Phil Ressler’s first book, *40 Things to Give Up for Lent and Beyond*, as our congregational devotional. That year, I wrote a daily reflection on each chapter and posted it on my blog every day. You can visit it at www.encompassthespirit.com. People posted responses, and we had some great conversations.

But I knew there was a greater opportunity for community engagement, so this year, I took Ressler’s second book, *40 Things to NOT Give Up for Lent*, and asked people to volunteer to write their reflections on each of his chapters. I randomly chose their “word” and gave them their assignment. This devotional booklet is a compilation of reflections by twenty-nine authors who generously covered forty topics. They are thought-filled, personal and full of blessings. I hope you will enjoy reading these and getting to know your church family more fully through the stories and insights they share about what not to give up for Lent.

Wednesday, March 5

Day 1: Don't Give Up FAITH by Lynn Tafoya

Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" He said to them, "Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there', and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. (Matthew 17:19-21, NRSV)

Author Phil Ressler begins his Lenten devotional with this scripture about the qualities of faith and how faith differs from knowledge and belief. He asks us to consider a number of questions, such as: How is faith in God evident in your life? Where do you lack faith? What builds faith? Where is God inviting you to jump? Here are my personal answers. I hope they will inspire you to answer them for yourself.

Usually, I trust things will be okay and God will always be there to help me no matter what happens. The evidence for me is in attending worship and being in community with other people—seeing and hearing their faith and being the recipient of their faithful actions. I sometimes demonstrate my lack of faith by staying in my comfort zone and thinking I am in charge. My mantra should be “Let go and let God.”

Another saying comes to my mind: “Feel the fear and do it anyway.” Life is full of scary and unexpected events, and *enduring* these events over and over (ugh) builds faith. At the time, I experienced fear and other tough emotions, but once I am on the other side, I can see that things came out OK—not always what I expected, but sometimes I am pleasantly surprised.

God is asking me to get out of my comfort zone and connect with people, known and unknown, inside and outside the church community.

Thursday, March 6

Day 2: Don't Give Up HOPE by Matt Bridges

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1, ESV)

You know, this chapter really resonates with me right now when it comes to hope and Ressler's take on healing and hope together. I am currently dealing with an Ulcerative Colitis flare up, which attacks my energy, hope, and sense of healing. I'm sure that by the time you're reading this, I will be well on my way to treatment (haha, I hope!). Still, as I sit here typing this in early February, I'm just coming out of the “frustration-anger-tired-anxious-hopeful” spiral that I experience in flare-ups. Now, the healing, I trust, is inevitable, even though there doesn't seem to be a cure yet for this disease. I know they will be able to take care of symptoms and help move me toward remission again. Like other flare-ups I've had, no matter the severity, healing happens.

This was a great chapter to remind me to put more stock in hope in the process of my healing. What in your life is attacking your hope in God right now? There's a difference between having some hope in God and living with the certainty of God as Provider and God as Healer. In this season of Lent, how can you move toward that certainty of not giving up? We know how the story ends with Easter, but how are you embodying that story of hope and promise in your life right now? Don't give up hope for Lent!

Friday, March 7

Day 3: Don't Give Up LOVE by Wendy Russel

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16, ESV)

During this first week of Lent, Ressler has focused on 1 Corinthians 13:13, which provides the framework for God's great work in Jesus: faith, hope, and love. On Day 1, our faith was called into action. On Day 2, we were told to hope so greatly that we should jump and leap into knowledge, believing and trusting that God will show up in ways we cannot begin to imagine.

Today is Day 3 of this Lenten journey, and we are told not to give up love. Ressler asks us to broaden our concept of love by embracing God's unconditional love for us and for all of God's creations, regardless of our perceived notion of the recipient's value. But there is a catch to this unconditional love. We are reminded in Ephesians 4:15 that "Love does not look past sin nor accept it", and since God doesn't condemn the sinner, neither can we. (John 3:17).

Now, wait a minute...there are a few people that I am currently pretty furious with and (possibly...maybe) have delighted in thinking about what they truly deserve for all of their inhumane treatment of people and institutions that are near and dear to me. Surely, I don't have to extend unconditional love to *those* people!! Well, yes I do!

You are probably familiar with the phrase, "Love the sinner, hate the sin." It is a great saying and is good advice, but it seems impossible for me right now amid such strife and anguish, but that is what I am called to do: speak truth to power, evil, and wickedness and rely on God to show me how to love the sinner unconditionally, without condemnation.

I readily admit that is a tall order, considering that is not my automatic response right now. Just as I was wrestling with how to write a reflection on something I could not actually practice, I got an email challenge from a colleague that stopped me dead in my tracks.

She called it "Operation Bubble of Light". Every night at 8:30, for just five minutes, she invited me (and a bunch of other friends) to take the person or persons with whom we have such a strident disconnect and envision them in a big bubble of brilliant, white light. She called that light "The Light of God's Love." With it, we are to hold it "with the intention of opening their heart to God's Sacred Love, Goodness, Compassion and Mercy."

That was not what my angry heart wanted to do! Immediately, a list of justifiable exceptions shot into my brain. "But she was so cruel to him...But he is hurting so many innocent people...But that group was thoughtless in their actions...But they are just wrong in all kinds of ways!"

Nope. I was not going to be let off the hook for extending God's unconditional love to others, regardless of my personal evaluation of their actions. There were no excuses for me holding onto those negative, destructive feelings. I would have to learn to trust in God's unconditional, healing, restoring love, even if it meant imagining a (stupid) bright bubble.

God gave me a path forward, out of the darkness of anger and retribution and into the Light of God's unconditional, accepting love. A funny thing happened. As I prayed for my set of "bubble" persons, ***I changed!*** I started trusting deeper, looking wider, holding people closer, and acknowledging that the real power of profound change rests in the work of the Holy Spirit, but it needs to start with me!

So, join me for Bubble Time! Hold your person/s in the brilliant light bubble of God's love and watch the miracle and power of God's unconditional love unfold. Just don't be surprised when the miracle happens within you first!

Saturday, March 8

Day 4: Don't Give Up JESUS by Anna Adams

*Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.
(1 John 4:8, ESV)*

Give up Jesus for Lent? Give up Jesus for any reason? Just the thought is awful! Sure, just recently, I fleetingly had that idea go through my head, but then, in came what was spoken by Peter in John 6 when Jesus asked the disciples if they, too, want to go away. Here is John 6:66-69.

Because of this, many of the disciples turned back and no longer went with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe that you are the Holy One of God."

I am going through a very challenging period in my life. I haven't really known how to look at it. Is God punishing me? Is He unhappy with me? Is He going to keep me here indefinitely? Is He correcting some attitudes, some behaviors?

I cannot answer these questions right now except to say that I am sure He isn't punishing me. I know He loves me and is helping me. Yes, He is showing me the things I need to change, things I need to stop thinking, saying, and doing. I think the Lord is pruning me. That is a good thing, but it hurts!!

I once heard on a Joyce Meyers program after Joyce had delivered a tough message, a woman way up in the auditorium balcony shout, "OUCH! Hallelujah!" Well, I am in the "ouch" phase, but I have glimpses that the "Hallelujah" breakthrough is coming. Thank you, Jesus. You will get me there.

Monday, March 10

Day 5: Don't Give Up GOD'S WORD by Randall Kirkpatrick

*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.
(Matthew 24:35, ESV)*

God's word will not pass away. To me, God's words are about love and hope. I've always enjoyed the words spoken, sung, and written. It's always a gift to hear and read not only God's words but the words of my fellows and people who inspire me to feel God within them and myself.

Today, I am grateful to be a part of a church during Lent to keep the words of God close to my heart and remember that I can pass on special words to others also. May God keep you and bless you until then.

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Tuesday, March 11

Day 6: Don't Give Up GRATITUDE by Jean Mc Donald

*Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
(1 Thessalonians 5:18, ESV)*

The “gratitude” section I am reflecting on is in the peace theme week. I usually feel peaceful and happy when I think about and feel gratitude. When I am not feeling grateful, I am usually in a negative and/or complaining mood where I feel unpeaceful and unhappy. Therefore, I try to be in an emotionally grateful, happy spot. Ressler, the author of this book, gives several benefits of having gratitude.

“Gratitude creates joy” is the first benefit Ressler mentions. He states, “It is better to count your blessings than one’s shortcomings.” I think that when I look at what I have rather than what I don’t, I feel happier and more optimistic about my life, like looking at a glass that is half full.

Ressler says that “Gratitude saves you money” because when one is content with one’s life, you don’t have to buy things to complicate it. I think this relates to less is more; when one has less stuff, one has more room, etc.

The next benefit of gratitude is that “Gratitude creates hope.” Ressler says that when one realizes that God has given one all that one needs to prosper, one can then trust that one is enough. Without gratitude, one may feel like a failure. I remember years ago when I was afraid to make positive changes in my life, a friend told me, “Can’t never can and can, can!”

“Gratitude opens up opportunities” by giving one an open mind to the possibilities of what one can discover. The last benefit given by Ressler is that “Gratitude creates healthy relationships.” By this, I think Ressler means to appreciate the people in one’s life. I recently heard on the radio that “The number one quality that an employer is looking for in an employee is having a positive attitude,” and I think having gratitude plays a big part in this.

Ressler offers up several ways to instill an attitude of gratitude: keep an ongoing gratitude list, write thank-you notes, and keep a daily gratitude journal. I took it a step further and created a Gratitude Box. I write down all my God-answered problems/requests and put them in my gratitude box. Whenever I feel down, I can just look at my gratitude box and know that my God is there for me.

Wednesday, March 12

Day 7: Don't Give Up *PATIENCE* by Bruce Bradford

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and late rains. (James 5:7, ESV)

Okay, I may be one of the most impatient people you know, not in everything I do, but certainly when I am on my way somewhere. I am often in a bit of a rush on the highway and become exasperated if the left lane is clogged unnecessarily. Many years ago, I hit a deer in Deanna's brand new car – all because I zipped around traffic as it slowed in front of me. The lane was open, but my brain was not patient in assessing my circumstances.

Part of my impatience comes from my competitive nature. I like to win (even when those around me don't know there's a competition underway!) I have slowed, nominally, in recent years, but I still have a long way to go. I ask forgiveness from those whom I have sped past on the road as well as those where I have been quick to make a decision, perhaps without always having gained the full download of pertinent information.

Career-wise, I have been impatient at times as well, pushing for promotions, and the chance to take on more responsibilities has been a hallmark of much of my banking career. Happily, I dodged opportunities to take on roles in great places like Sour Lake, TX, or Farmington, NM, when my impatience was driving me.

Music has impacted me for almost all of my life. In the fifth grade, I was a very impatient piano student, and thus lousy. Later, I became a reasonably well-accomplished trumpet player and, even later, a singer. I draw joy and inspiration from music. As I contemplated patience, a hymn verse resonated: "Trust and obey, for there is no other way, to be happy in Jesus, than to trust and obey." (#467 in UM Hymnal) In my opinion, the "trust and obey", in this case, is born out of patience, reflection, and belief.

Deanna and I have recently moved into a new season of life as grandparents. Elena is now six months old, and Ewan just arrived in February. They are, in our eyes, incredible! Perhaps these two will help me in my journey to slow down and smell the roses rather than racing by them. With the arrival of our grandkids, I have begun to stop and consider more fully the miracle of life itself, the uncountable generations that have come and gone over millennia, that have given us great role models. Combining the cosmos with all that we currently have and all that have come before us puts me into a contemplative, patient mode. I recall the words to *The Hymn of Promise* (#707 in our UM Hymnal)

"There's a song in every silence, seeking word and melody,
There's a dawn in every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.
From the past will come the future; what it holds, a mystery,
Unrevealed until it's season, something God alone can see."

I hope that my thoughts above resonate with those who read this. I am eternally grateful for each one of you that I've come to know through SJUMC. Each of you has mentored and impacted my life as I have witnessed your faith and service over the years. I leave you with one final scripture to encourage us all along the path to increased patience.

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you don't even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." (James 3:13-15, NIV)

Thursday, March 13
Day 8: Don't Give Up REST by Sue King

*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11:29, ESV)*

The thing that struck me most in the chapter is that in the midst of chaos, Jesus was sleeping. I find it very hard to rest when life feels chaotic. I wake up in the morning not feeling rested. Our modern life seems to set us up for chaos. I have been working for a long time. It always seems so important to do above and beyond what I am asked, making for long days and feeling as though I never meet the mark. I am now asking, "Who set the mark?" Usually, it is me trying to meet or exceed the expectations of the society around me.

The author said, "Lack of rest is a lack of faith." In my opinion, so is striving for perfection on my own. I just plain don't trust God to take care of things. And to be honest, I am afraid that if I trust God, I won't be fulfilled or happy. But is feeling tired, overwhelmed, and chaotic fulfilling? Am I happy? Truthfully, if I am tired, I am crabby, and I don't want that to be what people see.

The author also offered a solution. First, I pray to know what I am called to do. I do try to do things I was not created to do. I want to start my day at sunset. After dinner, I can identify what I need to do the next day and place that in God's hands while I sleep. In the morning, I am pretty sure I will be well prepared for what is coming up, and I can learn to trust God more and ask less of myself. I will be happier, and God will be pleased.

Friday, March 14

Day 9: Don't Give Up LISTENING by Carol Wawrychuk

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. (Matthew 7:24, ESV)

The very first sentence got me: “We live in a time where there is a politically charged atmosphere.” Talk at. Talk about. Talk over. Even talking “to” is charged with emotions, mostly of, “I’m right, you’re wrong- why aren’t you listening to me?”

Hmm. I don’t think that is the kind of listening we’re being asked to do! But for many of us, it is in our DNA. “*Just listen to me, please!*” Perhaps this is why some will say they don’t feel heard. I want you to hear me, but why aren’t I listening to you?

Then I reflect on God listening to us and vice versa. In a way, it’s the same scenario, isn’t it? We want to be heard and send up our agenda, but with the understanding that we (quite honestly) have it all figured out anyway! Then, we go on with our day, wondering when those prayers will be answered- of course, that day, if at all possible.

My listening to God has changed over the years. I’m not sure I even knew what listening to God was all about. Only if He answered my laundry list of petitions – and what I already presupposed was in the correct way. It wasn’t until things went really haywire in my life that I just gave up on all traditional prayers and stopped trying so hard. That is when I first heard God. And in the most untraditional ways. The eyes of my dog. My husband tending his Bonsai trees. The clouds in this deep blue sky. Sunrise. Sunset. A hug from a grandchild. An unexpected phone call from a friend. Lyrics to a song. He speaks into my silence. I hear Him in my silence. It’s the most beautiful sound in the world. A whisper. Can you hear the whisper? Here is a very paraphrased version of I Kings 19:11

God tells Elijah to go stand on the mountain and wait for God to pass by.

While Elijah was there, a great wind came, but God wasn’t in the wind.

Then there was an earthquake, but God wasn’t in the earthquake.

And then a fire, but God wasn’t in the fire.

After the fire, there was the sound of sheer silence.

After the quiet, Elijah went out and spoke with God, and he was told what to do.

Saturday, March 15

Day 10: Don't Give Up SILENCE by Byron Smith

*Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among nations,
I will be exalted in the earth! (Psalm 46:10)*

Silence, please! This word can be used in so many different contexts. The song performed by Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel in the 1960s, "The Sound of Silence," comes to mind as what on the surface appears to be a paradox, but actually, it is an accurate if not seemingly contradictory description of "silence."

My favorite time of the day is the very early morning, just as there is the slightest glow in the east, but with the stars still making their case for a celestial marvel! Even in our cold Santa Fe mornings, I bask in the silence and the anticipation of a new day, a new start. As I "listen" to the silence, I find that it brings a cacophony of sounds, just waiting for the serene soul to appreciate.

I hear the soft occasional chirping of birds, hidden among the pine trees and Butterfly bushes. Some coyotes mourn in the distance, and even the barely perceptible sounds of vehicles traversing the interstate contribute to the early morning peace.

It is at this time I feel closest to God. I know God is ever-present, even in the midst of the most chaotic times of the day. But it's in the early morning that I truly seek God's presence and put everything else aside. Sometimes, I feel ashamed that I'm not very adept at doing that during other moments of the day, but I brush aside any guilt feelings to simply bask in God's presence with praise and gratitude.

Sometimes, those wee hours of the morning bring overflowing prayers of thanks. Other times, it's a plea for guidance and understanding. Most recently, I've reflected on the loss of family members, being so grateful for their presence in my life and their service to others, but sometimes simply fighting the tears of grief.

Several verses speak of seeking the Lord in the stillness and silence of the morning. For example, Psalm 5:3 (NIV) says, "In the morning, Lord, You hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before You and wait expectantly."

Jesus provides us with another example in Mark 1:35 (NIV.) "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where He prayed."

Any moment of the day, we can turn to God in prayer, and other verses speak of this. But learning to be silent...to be still, helps us seek God's presence in prayer and meditation.

One of my favorite hymns, which our choir sang both in Dallas as well as here in Santa Fe, is "Be Still" by Mary McDonald. A few of the lyrics are

Be still and know that I am God.
Be still and know that I am here for you.
Be still and know that I will comfort you,
 when you come to me, in your hour of need.
Be still and know that I am here for you.
And I will wipe your tears, you will be renewed.
Come unto me, my child, be still.
And know that I will give you rest.
I am present in your pain, and I always will remain
 your Comforter and Friend.

What words of reassurance! What better words to meditate on in the still silence of the day, whether it be the early morning or in the waning hours of the day as night draws near! Be still (and in the silence) know that God is God.

Monday, March 17
Day 11: Don't Give Up COURAGE by Donna Whitson

*No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.
(Romans 8:37, ESV)*

Courage is a trait that Christians must exhibit. Especiall on difficult days such as those we are currently experiencing. Joshua 1:9 says, "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." Examples always help me understand concepts better.

We all remember characters from special movies. There were several in The Wizard of Oz, but the Cowardly Lion was my favorite. The Cowardly Lion : [crying] You're right; I am a coward! I haven't any courage at all. I even scare myself." The Cowardly Lion's story teaches us that courage is not a lack of fear, but rather acting in the face of fear. The lion saw his courage could be found within himself.

Another more relevant example from today is the story of Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde of the Washington National Cathedral. She spoke at the inaugural prayer service. As a Christian, Bishop Budde chose to speak truth to power. It took a lot of courage to speak up for what was right. She asked for mercy for those who cannot always speak for themselves.

I ask you to have mercy, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away, and that you help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here... Many people are "scared now," and "there are gay, lesbian and transgender children in Democratic, Republican and independent families, some who fear for their lives — and the people, the people who pick our crops and clean our office buildings, who labor in poultry farms and meat packing plants, who wash the dishes after we eat in restaurants, and work the night shifts in hospitals.

Trump did not receive her sermon well. He said, "She was nasty in tone, and not compelling or smart." He wanted an apology. Standing her ground, she refused. She had done nothing wrong. She was doing what Jesus said we should do.

Jesus spoke up in the same way for those who needed a voice. He calls us to be his voice today. As Christians, we need courage to speak up for what is right.

Tuesday, March 18

Day 12: Don't Give Up PERSISTENCE by Wendy Russel

*And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night?
Will he delay long over them? (Luke 18:7, ESV)*

We are now in Week 3 of our Lenten Journey. Ressler has assigned the theme of Strength to this week with the overarching scripture of Philippians 4:13; "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." He identifies courage, persistence, discipline, focus, simplicity, and humility as strength-giving qualities. Today, we are to consider the strength that comes from persistence.

Ressler uses the story in Luke 18:4-5 about the woman who returns to a judge four times for justice after he denied her the first time. She wears down the judge by her persistence and finally tells the woman, "Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this woman keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming." I guess that's one way to do it! Nag him until he grants your request. Somehow, that approach doesn't sit well with me.

If you look up the definition of persistence, you will see that many use phrases such as "obstinate pursuit" and "stubborn determination". I would rather think that persistence moves me into a place of perseverance. It is a subtle difference, but I view perseverance as persistence with grace, wisdom, and the conviction of success.

My biggest lesson in persistence came during what ended up being the last six months of my husband's life. Many people around me didn't understand why I kept working as the full-time Director of Fine Arts and Creative Worship right here at St. John's during that difficult period. Often, I was asked why I was still running rehearsals, teaching classes, doing worship design, and insisting on putting on big Christmas and Lent/Easter programs. However, I persisted in coming to work and fulfilling my duties. My husband, John, was well cared for, and he delighted in having many of our St. John's family come and visit him all throughout the day, in addition to the many hours I stayed with him. Working fed my soul and gave me strength to face what I knew was inevitable.

For a number of years, all the musical and fine arts groups at St. John's hosted a Musical Gala. In 2015, our pastor chose to do a sermon series entitled The Gospel According to Disney. Needless to say, he wanted Disney music as anthems to help punctuate his sermons (*GASP...I am still getting over it*) so it was only logical that our gala would be Disney-themed, right along with a Mad Hatter's tea party afterward. My husband, John, and I met singing in an operetta thirty years earlier, and continued to perform with that group for the first 13 years of our marriage (our two sons even performed with us) so musicals were our love language.

The gala was on March 1 that year. Ed and Stu Rector arranged to pick John up, wheelchair and all, and bring him to the Gala. John was beyond thrilled to be surrounded by music (he was an accomplished singer) and sang along with many of the Disney numbers even though he could hardly hold his head up. He "held court" at the tea party afterwards, greeting all the people he had come to know and love over the ten years we had been there. My papa would have said, "He was happier than a pig in slop!" A dear adult choir member came over after the program, with tears in his eyes, and said he now understood why I insisted on doing the Gala. It was pure bliss for John and was the greatest gift I could have given him. Within 48 hours of the Disney Gala, John lapsed into unconsciousness and passed away on nine days later, on March 10th.

God understood my need for persistence when no one else did and granted my deepest desire, my most ardent prayer: to bring joy to my husband in his final days. These two Bible verses sustained me during that tender time. I pray they will give you the strength to persist with grace and wisdom.

Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; and persevere in prayer. (Romans 12:12, NRSV)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us^[b] and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith. (Hebrews 12:1-2, NRSV)

Wednesday, March 19

Day 13: Don't Give Up *DISCIPLINE* by Mark Abe

*For the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant,
but later, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.
(Hebrews 12:11, ESV)*

I've written fiction all my life. My first story, written in 4th grade, was about an elephant with a cold. In high school, Judith Guest, who wrote *Ordinary People*, chose me and one other student to work together on our writing for four to six weeks. I've done many week-long summer workshops at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, MA, the Taos Summer Writer's Conference, and the Iowa Summer Writing Festival.

Being a writer is a big part of my identity. I couldn't wait to retire so I could more fully live out this part of who I was. I was going to write for hours every day! And though reality hit pretty quickly, I did manage to write for at least a little while most days of the week—for a few years, until I decided to move to New Mexico.

As soon as I set those wheels in motion, I quickly realized it would take all my time to make it happen—the endless tasks and research required to prepare my condo for the market, declutter and put many of my things into storage, identify a mover, plan ahead for renting in Santa Fe while house hunting, plot out a route to Santa Fe, drive across the country, settle into temporary housing, change addresses, open new bank and utility accounts, go house hunting, purchase a home, identify contractors for post-inspection repairs, accept delivery of our goods, change addresses again, and unpack and settle into our new house while combining households for the first time, left absolutely no time for writing or anything else I was doing in retirement prior to making the decision to move.

As painful as it was to set aside such a vital part of my life, I knew it was necessary to first establish our home, and that would eventually free me to do what I needed to thrive without prolonging the settling process and living with that cloud hanging over my head. Now, 18 months later, the process is nearly over, and I'm eagerly anticipating a return to my creative life, which also includes photography and music.

Phil Ressler, in his devotional *Forty Things NOT to Give up for Lent*, talks about putting aside something you want to do now for something better down the road as a form of discipline and how that discipline leads to freedom. This transition to a new life in Santa Fe has felt like discipline as I wait to resume my pre-move life.

Similarly, my life doesn't feel complete without some form of volunteer service, but I had to put that on the back burner, too. I was looking into some things I'd wanted to do in Santa Fe when I was called to become part of the yet-to-be-formed Visioning Team at St. John's. For me, this was a clear call to service, so I accepted. The other ways of serving my community would have to wait. Thinking and talking through what God would have us do to bring about a vision of St. John's place in Santa Fe and the wider community would be Kingdom-building, laying a foundation for greater things ahead, preparing the way for meeting the needs of our neighbors in a more focused, intentional, and efficient way. It would give us freedom in the future to serve boldly. The work of the Visioning Team is expected to last only 12-18 months, the first few of which are already behind us, so I will pursue other volunteer opportunities after that.

The discipline of putting off what I want to do now for something greater in the future is not always fun. But if I can just keep my eyes on the end result—whether a settled, organized home or a plan for how the church can better serve the congregation and community—it will free me to more fully realize my place in the bigger picture.

I believe God will be faithful in honoring our discipline and will not let us be disappointed at the outcome of our sacrifice but rather allow us the enjoyment that comes from the freedom of knowing we have first seen to the greater good before looking for our own satisfaction.

Thursday, March 20

Day 14: Don't Give Up FOCUS by Wendy Russel

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2, ESV)

I love Phil Ressler's acronym, which he shares right off the bat in this chapter. It is worth repeating here.

- F- follow
- O- one
- C- course
- U- until
- S- success

It screams WENDY RUSSEL! Being able to focus is my superpower, sometimes to my detriment. I set my mind on something, and there is little hope of anyone (gently) redirecting me. That might have to do with a few other traits of mine, namely stubbornness and/or persistence (see my reflection essay for Day #12).

Being able to focus has its advantages. When I decided to go to seminary in the summer of 2008 while still working full time, my family was all on board to support me, knowing that it included time away when there was still one teenage son at home. We all had to focus on the goal of getting me through to serve God to the fullest of my calling.

Little did I know that 18 months later, my husband's cancer diagnosis was going to derail my dream of becoming a pastor. Fortunately, the seminary I attended could apply my two summers of coursework and projects to a five-year United Methodist certification course in Worship Arts with the added option of advanced studies. I lost nothing by switching programs and was even able to do an additional four years of advanced studies in choral directing and worship design after the initial five-year course. It was a win! We did not know how long John would be with us (they gave him 9 months, and he lived for five years), so I knew how valuable my hyper-focus ability was going to be.

A few weeks before succumbing to his cancer, John made me promise to return to seminary to pursue my calling as best as I could. I was seven years older than when I first attempted this, and I was carrying a tremendous amount of grief with me this time around. I returned to a seminary different from the first and started afresh with all the focus I could gather. The earlier switch to the certification course gave me the gift of my "great cloud of witnesses" in the friends I made there. They, along with my new best friend Natalie and my wonderful husband, Eric, saw me through my second seminary journey with such joy and grace. I couldn't have done it without them. They taught me how to become more fully present wherever I found myself, to "lay aside every weight" and "run the race with endurance that is fully set before [me]".

Friday, March 21

Day 15: Don't Give Up *SIMPLICITY* by Diana Loomis

*Try your best to live quietly, to mind your own business, and to work hard, just as we taught you to do.
(1 Thessalonians 4:11, Contemporary English Version)*

When I was in journalism school, I took several graphic design courses. The most important lesson I learned during those courses was the design maxim “less is more.” I learned that continuity, simplicity, and discipline in magazine design are essential. I could see that constantly changing print fonts, art, photographs, and color is distracting to the eye. Little did I know when I was 20 that “less is more” would end up being a lesson that would follow me all the days of my life!

As a young associate pastor, I remember being overwhelmed by the constant and varied needs of the large, fast-growing congregation I served. I worried about the twenty-something woman who had problems with her first pregnancy and was put on bed rest for months. I worried about the people who lost their homes in a flood in Valley Park, MO. I stressed over there being enough of me to make a difference for all the folks who needed me. One night, when I tried to go to sleep, my stress was so high that the ceiling spun around me! At that point, “less is more” and simplicity was a foreign concept.

The next day, I asked my senior pastor how he dealt with his stress, and he said, “Diana, when I go home—even if it is for a couple of hours—I leave the problems from work in the pockets of my jacket. I don’t allow myself to take them back out again until I put on my work clothes and head back into work.” What a powerful way to apply “less is more” to life!

I began disciplining myself to leave work at work and home at home. My stress lowered because I enjoyed a peaceful, healing time away. I learned several other tools that simplified my attitude toward work, faith, and life. The first was to ask myself, “Did I do the best I could do in the situation I was in?” If the answer was yes, then I worked to let go of that worry and gave it to God. If the answer was no, then I contemplated what I could have done differently, sorted through how I needed to change my behavior, asked God for forgiveness, made amends where necessary, worked to let go of that worry, and gave the situation to God. One simple “less is more” step at a time.

It is not easy to let go and let God, so sometimes, when I would start worrying and obsessing, I had to give the problem to God again and again and again until I could let go. Occasionally, if I were by myself, I would shout out loud, “Shut up!” as a means of helping me to let go of obsessive and unhealthy circular thinking.

The holy thing about “less is more,” “letting go and letting God” and simplicity is that by setting boundaries—even if they are only in your mind—the easier and more natural it becomes to practice simplicity and accountability which leads to living God’s shalom, God’s holiness of heart, mind and soul day in and day out.

Saturday, March 22

Day 16: Don't Give Up HUMILITY by Amy Lovell

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. (James 4:101, ESV)

I am very bad at bragging about myself - which is not an attempt to be humble. I occasionally have to write short bios about myself, and I agonize over how much is too much. Sometimes, I wish that someone else would just tell me what the perfect accolades to list are. Recently, however, someone else did write a bio for me. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, what they emphasized was not what I would have. Compared to others, sitting on a committee is less flattering than being a world-leading expert.

I've been watching a ton of Super Bowl interviews lately (which I don't just bring up because the Eagles won – still, go birds!), but there's something that has struck me with every single one. They haven't been boasting about individual talent but about the efforts of others. Their teammates, coaches, support staff, owners, family, and God. This is a time that they have every right to brag, but they are instead making their boast in one another.

Psalms 34:2 has been running through my head for the past several days as I've been mentally composing this: "My soul makes its boast in the lord; let the humble hear and be glad". It also makes me wonder, if God were to boast in us - or write a bio for us - what would God say? I'm sure it would be filled with love and pride, but I'm sure it would be humbling, too. So maybe as we continue to go through Lent, we can work, with humility, on adding to our resume those things that God would boast about.

Monday, March 24

Day 17: Don't Give Up LEARNING by Ralph Cole

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully. Even as I have been fully known. (1 Corinthians 13:12, ESV)

Learning is the process by which we gain knowledge and understanding. Therefore, learning plays an important role in Christian life by giving us tools to deepen our faith and do God's work in the world. Through learning and the pursuit of knowledge, Christians are better equipped to reflect the teachings of Jesus Christ and to share Him with others.

When I was a new Christian, many of the things I had seen and heard about God growing up suddenly had meaning and relevance. The things I had learned as a child had application and meaning to me. And there was so much more I wanted to know! I had an insatiable appetite for learning scripture and all things to do with the Christian life. I learned a lot and grew a lot, in a short period. Learning was essential for me to build on the faith I had been given.

Jesus taught in the synagogue to prepare people for his message. Many of those listening learned enough to follow him. The same is true today. We learn through studying scripture, discussing and listening to others, and through our own experiences. Through learning, we strengthen the foundation of our beliefs, which helps us deal with adversity, among other things. Learning scripture helps us put on "the whole armor of God".

The great commission emphasizes the responsibility of Christians to learn: "make disciples of all nations... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Christians are to share what they have learned with others so that they might receive faith.

Learning is indispensable to the Christian life. It deepens faith, fosters personal growth, and strengthens the Christian community. As we pursue knowledge and wisdom, we are better equipped to live out their faith, share the Gospel, and glorify God in all aspects of life. Embracing a lifelong commitment to learning is a vital aspect of discipleship and spiritual maturity. Who can know the mind of God? We need not worry about learning too much about God because God's character is immeasurable.

Tuesday, March 25

Day 18: Don't Give Up DISCERNMENT by Diana Loomis

*Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth and the life.
(John 14:6, Contemporary English Bible)*

In journalism school, I learned about the importance of reporting the facts or what some would call true facts. In seminary, I learned about the difference between true facts and God's "Truth" with a capital "T." All too often, we humans are confused by the facts vs. the Truth! What I mean is this, in terms of my faith and discerning what God is calling me to do in any given situation, I have learned that Truth is more important than true facts. For example, Genesis describes two different stories of creation. The first is described in Gen. 1:1 through Genesis 2:3. The second is described in Genesis 2:4-25. We could get into an argument that would last millenniums (which Christians have done for our entire history) discussing which creation story is factual OR we could read these chapters of Holy Scripture with an eye to discerning or discovering the Truth God is trying to teach us through the scripture. We could focus on which is most important—knowing all the facts about creation OR knowing the Truth that God created us and we are a good part of God's creation. Sometimes we Christians are so hung up on the details of life that we miss God's overarching story of love for us and all creation.

Phil Ressler, the author of "40 Things NOT to Give Up for Lent," is right when he says, "*The starting point of discernment is discerning your relationship with God and your standing with him. I find so many people struggle in life because they fail to discern God's work of truth about who they are. They have failed to grasp that they are a child of God. They think that they've got to work, earn, or do something to win God's love.*" Then he shares a powerful Truth, "**GOD DOES NOT LOVE YOU BECAUSE OF WHAT YOU DO.**" He continues saying, and I paraphrase, "**GOD LOVES YOU BECAUSE OF WHO GOD MADE YOU TO BE IN CHRIST!**"

This Lent, through this compiled congregation devotional and through Ressler's book we are being challenged to add spiritual disciplines to our lives that draw us closer to God, increase our understanding of the ordinary holy, help us claim the most astonishing fact in the universe Christ lived, died, and lived again because God loves us! So, what do we do in response? My hope is that this Lent, you and I will add moments of discernment to each day so we can better focus on God's TRUTHS of love, mercy, grace, and forgiveness.

Wednesday, March 26

Day 19: Don't Give Up NEW EXPERIENCES by Eric Smith

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away;
behold the new has come. (2 Corinthians 5:17)*

I'm ready for a new experience and, most of all, ready to stop giving up on the exciting thoughts of a specific new experience – building a new house! This idea has become a growing dream that has dominated my daily thoughts for some time. I'm ready to experience the hope and joy that come with newness. These thoughts make me feel that I could become stronger, self-fulfilled, confident, and successful.

Yet, I realize that challenges and risks come with new experiences. The risks are multi-level, but I trust that so will be the joy. Just when I was second-guessing the wisdom of moving forward, God gave me three affirmations: one from the IRS, one from my wife, and one from this Lenten study!! I couldn't have gotten a better word to help me understand what moving forward with this new experience would bring to me.

One of the reflection questions asked by the author of my study book is: What new experience have you been putting off out of fear? Obviously, this essay answers the question. When I was thinking about the “new experience” stories in the Bible, I thought about Zaccheus in Luke 19. When Jesus was passing through Jericho, Zaccheus was determined to see Jesus, but he could not see over the crowds because he was short. He climbed a tree for a better vantage point. He was not embarrassed by his actions and Jesus noticed him and spoke to him. He felt glad to be noticed and overjoyed when Jesus told him that he would come to stay at his house.

I believe that Zaccheus felt rewarded for his brave and bold actions. He felt blessed to be honored by Jesus's visit and shared the news and his wealth with everyone. This story has renewed my energy and encouraged me to be brave in my endeavors, bringing my friends and family along the journey of new experiences with me.

Thursday, March 27

Day 20: Don't Give Up *FAILURE* by Cindy Herndon

Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13-14, ESV)

Six months after I got married, my husband began to have back problems. Muscle relaxers failed. Traction failed. Injections failed. Physical therapy failed. Ten spine surgeries failed. However, we saw God directing and providing for us throughout those failures. Those failures put us on a different path than what we had planned. God had a better plan. He cultivated faith in our lives. We learned to lean into Him and praise Him not for what did or did not happen, but for who He was/is. I am thankful for the failures and the grace He gave us during the trials to draw close to Him.

Failures are a facet of a prism that help create the rainbow we call life. They are detours that get me to my final destination God's way. Failures are opportunities to trust God more. They are but the valleys between the mountains; we can't have one without the other. Personally, failures are my classroom where I discover who I am and who God is. As my husband went through many medical "failures," I drew closer to God than I have ever been. I realize now that those trials—failures—exercised my faith so that I could face future trials. I thank God for those failures that grew my faith.

Here are some biblical examples. Joseph was sold by his brothers, accused of sexual assault, and forgotten in prison for 30 years. God was with him in his failure. The restoration was bigger than anyone had imagined.

Moses and the Israelites faced failures. It took 10 plagues before Pharaoh released them to worship God. When they did get to leave, the Egyptians gave them jewelry and other gifts. Out of the failure, they were blessed beyond what they would have ever imagined.

In the New Testament, Paul was beaten and imprisoned multiple times. But his arrests and failures were what enabled the Gospel to be spread throughout the world. Paul's "failures" are our inspiration.

Failures are opportunities to draw closer to God.

Friday, March 28

Day 21: Don't Give Up *FITNESS* by Cynthia Rector

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own... (1 Corinthians 6:19, ESV)

How does Fitness impact a Lenten practice? A more basic question might be, how does fitness contribute to my spiritual health?

Many religions include a physical aspect of practice. Our current Christian practice does not encourage physical or fitness issues as a part of practice. I am excited to examine this idea during our Lenten journey. Glancing at our Muslim sisters and brothers, a 40-day spiritual practice is Ramadan. It is a time of fasting, prayer, and a way to reset the clock on daily activities.

During Ramadan, meals begin at sundown. Often, this is with traditional foods, and family and friends participating in Ramadan join for the evening feast. One friend of mine told me that during Ramadan, he would sometimes gain weight! The next meal during this season is before dawn. I envision a lovely plate of the previous night's special foods as a morning meal, and then the day is spent fasting. Fasting has always been a ritual that uses hunger or the change of activity to increase awareness and turn attention toward prayer and the dependence of faith in our daily lives. The end of Ramadan is a very special feast that starts at sundown on the last day of the fasting time. I like to think of a holiday celebration like Easter Brunch.

Let's look at our physical bodies during Lent. Celebrate the aches and pains with more deliberate physical routines and increase movement and exercise. Another idea may be to look at our diet, making intentional improvements in healthy foods and eating with others. Lent is a time of attention, deliberate practice, prayer, and anticipation of all the promises of Easter.

Saturday, March 29

Day 22: Don't Give Up VISION by Jon Young

Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might...(Ephesians 1:18-19, ESV)

“Start with the end in mind” was a mantra of my professional life. I encouraged my fellow teachers to clarify what their students should know and be able to do by the end of the semester and then plan all instructional activities accordingly. Similarly, as an administrator I consistently reminded my colleagues that effective institutions have a clear sense of mission and purpose, of why they exist, and then organize all resources and activities to achieve this mission.

The opposite of such vision-driven living is expressed in the familiar quote from Lewis Carroll, “If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there.”

What about our spiritual lives? Do we have a guiding vision for our faith? Are our “to-do lists” filled with so many demands, tasks, priorities, appointments, and even church-related activities, that we lose sight of the ultimate purpose and meaning of it all? Is “surviving the day” sufficient to make us happy?

When I ask myself why I participate in a community of faith, sing, pray, study the Bible, listen to sermons, I think of Paul's description in Galatians 5:22-23 of the Fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Even as the naming of them reminds me of how far I fall short, this vision guides my faith. I hope that I can become a person whose living exhibits the Fruit of the Spirit, not simply for my own well-being, but for the positive effects such a spirit-filled life can have on others.

If I apply “start with the end in mind” to my life as a whole, I am forced to answer the question, “What is the ultimate fulfillment of my life?” In such matters, it is best to trust in the goodness of God and to leave the details to Him. But a recent choir anthem repeated the following lines as its conclusion: “Good Shepherd, may I sing Thy praise, within Thy house forever!” I can think of no more glorious and hopeful vision of life's end than this.

What is your vision?

Monday, March 31

Day 23: Don't Give Up PEOPLE by Emilie Bridges

*For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?
Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? (Matthew 16:26, ESV)*

This chapter on people is important, especially if you are a teenager like me. In school, going from class to class, and encountering so many people in one day for five days straight makes it seem like you are never alone. Even though it seems like you can never catch a break from people, it turns out that a lot of students feel as if they are alone, and they don't have anyone to turn to for friendship.

Something that really got me thinking was Phil Ressler's view on people. He gave his perspective as a man and nothing else. He talks about the different ways he feels going through life as a man. Ressler says that most men don't make time for friendships, or when they do, it's more like acquaintances. When I first started reading this chapter about people, I hadn't realized that this book was written by a man, but when I started to read more of the chapter, the first thing I asked was if a man wrote this book. I really like how Ressler gives his thoughts and shares himself through this chapter. He doesn't try to give his opinions on how children have friendships or how women have friendships; he sticks to what he knows and bases his writing on what he believes.

I need people in my life because it is important to have someone to support me and lift me up, people other than family. Sometimes, there are things happening in my life that I feel I can't talk to my parents about, and that's when your friends step in to be there and listen to you. If I didn't have that extra support from my friendships, I don't know how I would be able to express things about myself.

Tuesday, April 1

Day 24: Don't Give Up GRACE by Elizabeth Lindell

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other;

as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must forgive. (Colossians 3:12-13, ESV)

How many times had I sung that famous song, “Amazing Grace,” without realizing the full magnitude of its meaning? Hundreds! I grew up in a church-going family and was taught that God is gracious and loves me unconditionally. We sang “Amazing Grace” at my church just about every Sunday. I’ll bet half of the songs in our hymnal mentioned God’s grace. I loved singing them but, truthfully, never thought very deeply about their meaning.

Then, I left home as a young adult. I became preoccupied with my new independence and its exciting adventures, experiences, and relationships. I left my church and spiritual life behind, as some young people are prone to do. Unfortunately, I also brought along my adolescent feelings of insecurity and fear, and they dogged me. These feelings vanished when I found my new best friend: Alcohol. A friend and a crutch.

After a time, though, it turned on me. I could not control when or how much I drank, and I could not stop. I lived under a cloud of addiction and experienced all of its ugly side effects for 12 years. My life became unmanageable. My behavior became unpredictable and dysfunctional. I hurt friends and family through thoughtless and offensive conduct, inaction when I should have stepped up, and self-centered, me-first behavior. I damaged relationships and alienated friends and family. I had wandered from my Christian roots, pushed God away, and was running on self-will. I found myself alone, floating in a sea of guilt, remorse, and self-loathing.

One day, I ended my day as all the others, buzzed and barely functional. God, with His Amazing Grace, gave me a moment of clarity and realization that I could not continue on my current path. He moved me to ask for help. I reached out. Help came. At that moment 45 years ago, I began my journey of recovery from alcoholism through the 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous. Part of the AA recovery program required that I “make a list of people I had harmed and become willing to make amends to them all.” I was to make amends to these people, wherever possible. As honestly as I could, I listed the people I had harmed through my words, actions, and inaction. My list contained a lot of people. It took months, but I was able to directly apologize to the people I had harmed. Almost without exception, they embraced me, offered forgiveness, and told me that they had been praying for my recovery. They wished me well. What a miracle!

Now, I understand the true meaning of grace and what those songs meant. I was the recipient of a MOUNTAIN of Amazing Grace from God and from the people who forgave and embraced me. Whenever I am wounded by another’s offense, I think of God and the loving souls who gave me their grace when I least deserved it. I try to thank them by passing it on.

May your Lenten season and all of your days be filled with Amazing Grace.

Wednesday, April 2

Day 25: Don't Give Up *FORGIVENESS* by Matt Bridges

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32, ESV)

What do we sacrifice when we forgive? How about when we are forgiven? I think one way of looking at forgiveness and sacrifice is that we sacrifice our ego in this process of forgiveness—whether we are doing the forgiving or forgiving others.

A common and simple way I've come to see ego is that it stands for "Idging (G)od (O)ut." When we are at the center of our universe, we are not allowing God's amazing grace the opportunity to work in our lives. If we look at yesterday's topic about grace, we can see that grace has the power to heal and restore that which is unable to be set right through mere human means.

There is one line in today's chapter that just doesn't sit right with me, and perhaps he meant it as a throwaway line, but I gotta bring it up: "It is easier to hold on to bitterness and grudges than it is to forgive." I think that line of thinking can open up a trap to let the ego have too much power. Forgiveness can be difficult, sure, but holding on to the bitterness and grudges in life is more difficult for sure—that is, letting the ego run wild. It shoves God out of the way and puts our pain and suffering at the center of our lives. It tears down our mind, body, and spirit. A life that lacks forgiveness is like a life of walking around with open and untreated wounds. Studying our wounds is absolutely crucial, but healing from them to turn into scars is also crucial. A scar, while a reminder, one that we move forward from, is much healthier in life than trying to move forward with open wounds.

Who is someone you need to forgive, and who can you be ready to forgive? Who is someone from whom you need to ask for forgiveness? How can I help? How can a faithful sister or brother in Christ help? We're here to help tend to each others' wounds. It's part of our job as Christians. So, how can we help? Don't give up forgiveness for Lent! You'll miss the opportunity to find the true freedom that God offers you.

Thursday, April 3

Day 26: Don't Give Up ADVENTURE by Wendy Russel

Yet, it was kind of you to share my trouble. (Philippians 4:14, ESV)

Phil Ressler's take on "adventure" is peculiar if you don't see it within the larger framework of this week's theme of relationships. He clearly states that his focus in this chapter is on how *men* interact with each other. "It is not 'connection' that men seek as much as it is belonging to something bigger than themselves" (page 109)

I cannot speak to how men interact or what they desire from their connections, but my adventures do connect me to something bigger than myself. That is why I make such efforts to expand my horizons, experience new environments, and challenge myself with unfamiliar endeavors. Some of that happens in nature, but many times my "adventure" is choreographing dances to an ABBA themed concert, learning to sing a mass written in 9/8 time, attempting to play "Dance Dance Revolution" with my granddaughters or trying to cover three handbell positions in our handbell choir and discovering the camaraderie that happens when everyone is pulling together to accomplish a common goal. That kind of adventure expands and cements relationships in addition to being hilariously fun!!

A few of my adventures have shown me how *not* to do something. I should not try to hike from rim to rim in the Grand Canyon all in one day. Hiking twenty-one miles with 11,000 feet of elevation change in one day is not a good fit for me. It was downright awful. I was miserable but there was something holy in the canyon that got through to me even in my deepest misery. When I had the opportunity to do that hike again (four more times actually), I divided it up into two days to cross, with rest days at each rim, which was much more enjoyable. That experience taught me the importance of slowing down and choosing my hiking companions who shared the same, slower approach. It gave me the confidence to hike the 147 mile Tour du Mount Blanc through France, Italy and Switzerland over 17 days. That adventure changed my life and prepared me for some of the arduous events I would have to face later on.

I hope you will keep adventure in your life, whatever form it takes. Don't be afraid to take on things that *you* see as challenges. Don't be disappointed if it flops. Try again. Do it differently the next time. There can be growth, joy, and connection in everything when you open your heart to God's amazing ability to reveal the sacred in the midst of the ordinary. Mary Oliver asks an important life question in the last two lines of her famous poem, *The Summer Day*: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with you one wild and precious life?"

Friday, April 4

Day 27: Don't Give Up RESPECT by Jon Young

*Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.
(Ephesians 5:21, ESV)*

Respect is one of the greatest casualties of our current “us-versus-them” political environment as social media is used too often as a venue for trading insults, and public discourse frequently degenerates into angry name-calling.

What is respect? Some years ago, Paula and I became involved with the public education program “Character Counts,” which offers this helpful guide. Considered one of the “six pillars of good character,” respect involves following the “golden rule”: being tolerant of differences, avoiding the use of offensive language, being considerate of the feelings of others, and dealing peacefully with anger and disagreements. Character Counts is based on a simple and profound recognition: A good society requires mutual respect among its citizens.

Showing respect has practical benefits. When we treat service providers, employees, colleagues, friends, family, and strangers with respect, our interactions are more likely to have positive results. Improving society and strengthening interpersonal relations are good reasons for respecting others. However, we must also understand that respecting others is a vital and essential expression of our Christian faith. Respecting others means affirming the inherent dignity, value, and worth of each individual, regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, culture, language, dress, customs, beliefs, or any other attribute. When we respect others, we live out Jesus’s command to “love our neighbors as we love ourselves” and when we respect our neighbors, we honor the God in whose image we all are made.

Respect for others must grow out of self-respect. How much of the vitriol spewed out on social media is actually self-hatred turned outward? If we are insecure in who we are or disappointed in what we do; if we are secretly envious of others because we feel we are lacking in some important way, we are more likely to disrespect, ridicule, and diminish others as a means of inflating ourselves. Self-respect begins with trust in God as our creator and the recognition that like the whole of His creation, each of us is “fearfully and wonderfully made.” (Psalm 139: 14)

I believe I do pretty well when it comes to respecting others – well, at least I know I try. But does this self-image hold up with careful self-scrutiny? I am not sure that it does for me. What about you?

Saturday, April 5

Day 28: Don't Give Up ACCOUNTABILITY by Diana Loomis

So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. (Romans 14:12, ESV)

In my thirties, I went through burnout in ministry. My mental, physical, and spiritual health were in grave jeopardy. Through prayer and discernment with friends, family, physicians and counselors, I realized that I needed to take a sabbatical year to slow down and seek to understand God's discernment for my life. During that sabbatical, I learned the most important lesson of my life aside from learning Jesus is my savior. I learned that I was codependent and that I was powerless over people, places, and things. I learned that my life had become unmanageable and if I did not learn a new way of living, I would struggle my whole life!

That was the start of my practicing the 12 Steps, attending 12 Step groups and of admitting to myself, God, and others that

1. I was powerless over others – that my life had become unmanageable.
2. I believed a power greater than me could restore me to sanity.
3. I made a decision to turn my will and my life over to the care of God.
4. I made a searching and fearless moral inventory of myself.
5. I admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of my wrongs.
6. I was entirely ready to have God remove all my defects of character.
7. I humbly asked God to remove my shortcomings.
8. I made a list of all persons I had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. I made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. I continued to take personal inventory and when I was wrong promptly admitted it.
11. I sought through prayer and meditation to improve my conscious contact with God as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, I tried to carry this message to other codependents, and to practice these principles in all my affairs.

I found that practicing the 12 Steps and the teachings of Jesus is a lifelong learning process that takes personal work, study, prayer, AND accountability to others in the faith. I found that accountability in Christian 12-step groups, in clergy support groups, in Bible studies, and in friend groups, and I am healthier and happier for it!

Who holds you accountable? Who supports you in your daily walk with Jesus? Who reflects to you that God loves you no matter what? And who do you support? How do you change other's lives? This work is all part of practicing the Christian faith. It is all a part of living life, making mistakes day in and day out, remembering we are God's children, and leaning on those who help us discern our right paths in God.

Monday, April 7

Day 29: Don't Give Up COMPASSION by Karlee Collins-Turner

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our afflictions, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4, ESV)

God has given me the gift of being a music therapist, where I get to show compassion to every person I make music with. I have always had a difficult time journaling to reflect, so writing a song would be the perfect way to show my current feelings of compassion with all of you.

At the end of this essay, you will see the text to a song I wrote while reflecting on compassion, using many of the words and thoughts from the author, Phil Ressler. There is also a YouTube of that song that I hope you will pull up. While listening, please read the lyrics and wonder how they might bring something up in your heart. Having compassion is often lost in our world, and more specifically, in our day-to-day interactions with others.

To write this song, I first read the chapter a few times, making annotations to verses, thoughts, or words that stood out to me in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4. This scripture helps to center my understanding of compassion, specifically in a way that honors God's will in my life and what God hopes for us in our daily interactions with others. It reminds me of the "Golden Rule": treat people how you want to be treated. If God comforts us in all our afflictions, we should comfort our neighbors similarly. Even when there are financial barriers, we are reminded that God created us with unique gifts, talents, and abilities that can be used to provide compassion to others. My gift of compassion for you today is singing, playing the guitar, and using songwriting to convey a message. What is yours?

Find my song here: <https://youtu.be/c4LAMOkfTPo>

Here are the lyrics to my song.

Compassion, God wants you to show it, I wish that we practiced, but we do not.
He created each unique person with talents and gifts in his perfect image.

So do something to get involved. Use your gifts as a resource to others.

So act on His Holy Word. Don't break his heart with your apathy.
If you have compassion, you'll make a difference!

Have compassion! Have compassion!
Compassion, for all that you do, serve one another, just as he serves you.

It's not only money, but what you can provide! Get creative and it will be just right!
So do something to get involved. Use your gifts as a resource to others.

So act on His Holy Word. Don't break his heart with your apathy.
If you have compassion, you'll make a difference!

Have compassion! Have compassion!

I know there's not enough time to fill cups for others when yours is running dry.
So call on Him to pave a way and give you an action
to brighten you and your neighbor's day.

So do something to get involved. Use your gifts as a resource to others.
So act on His Holy Word. Don't break his heat with your apathy.
If you have compassion, you'll make a difference!

So have compassion. Have compassion!

Tuesday, April 8

Day 30: Don't Give Up PRAYER by Sue King

First of all, then, I urge that with supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. (1 Timothy 2:1-2, ESV)

Years ago, I joined the Order of St. Luke, OSL, a healing ministry. We prayed weekly for people brought before us meaningfully and meditatively. My occupations include nursing and counseling, and I like to think of myself as a healer, but I can get arrogant if I am not careful.

truth, I am merely an instrument of God. This has been brought home to me recently. The definition of healing has taken on a new meaning. My beloved nephew suffered a bout of the flu that made him sick for several weeks. He developed pneumonia during this illness. He was so ill that his wife called the paramedics, and he was admitted to the ICU and was later intubated and placed on a ventilator. He was terrified. I requested prayers from everyone I knew and prayed for him myself. I am so grateful for the faithfulness of these faithful people.

I learned that I am not alone in prayer, and my nephew was not alone in being healed. My siblings and I supported my nephew's family and each other. We shared the burden and celebrated as he improved. We cooperated in supporting him and his family, and each of us used our special gifts in the process. At some points, I was just so sure that my input was needed, and I should call people up and advise them. But I was surely prompted by God that I did not need to be the one to fix everything. As the oldest sibling, I had gotten used to being the boss and the negotiator. But this time, I learned to keep my counsel to myself. The people involved were able to reconcile the issue without my help. I supported Debbie when she felt overwhelmed but waited for her to ask. Second lesson: Things work best when I listen to God. I don't have to be in control.

My nephew is now in rehab, and he is seriously considering what God has planned for his life. He is healing, and for that, I am grateful. This situation and shared prayer brought our family, which is close, even closer. We were knit together by common concerns and witnessed how "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). Thank you for all your prayers. God has answered with incredible generosity.

Wednesday, April 9

Day 31: Don't Give Up GENEROSITY by Tom Whitson

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. (2 Corinthians 9:6, ESV)

What does it mean to be generous? It has been defined as a willingness to give money, help, kindness, etc., *more* than expected. A generous person is willing to give to others without expecting anything in return.

St. Francis of Assisi said, "It is in giving that we receive." In 2 Corinthians 9:7, we read, "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." As a member of St. John's UMC, we should give not just our money but also our service, our ideas, and whatever is asked of us to make our church an even better place to be.

Thursday, April 10
Day 32: Don't Give Up PURPOSE by Frank Hardin

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10, ESV)

Purpose is defined as the reason for which something is done or created or the reason that something exists. That is interesting when we apply purpose to human beings like ourselves. Indeed, what is our purpose?

To begin with, our purpose in its most basic form is two-fold: to procreate and self-preserve in order to maintain our species in the world. We must maintain our health, sanity, and intelligence long enough to accomplish our main goals. But having only procreation and self-preservation as our purpose leaves a lot of time and energy for other things in our lives.

If we are lucky enough to have children, that gives us a bigger purpose in life. We have the responsibility of caring for and instructing our children so they can have a happy and productive life. During the child-raising years, that effort to protect and guide our children has to be foremost. Our purpose during those formative years is to provide for them, educate them, and teach them thoughtfulness, patience, virtue, tolerance, respect, and morality. Once they leave home, they move on to become adults and possibly parents with their own purpose. As we move into post-child-rearing life and our parental responsibilities have diminished, we have opportunities to discover other purposeful endeavors.

When we have the chance to choose what our purpose is, we define who we are. We need to continue to protect our loved ones from harm, maintain our health, and provide financial security. I believe that we should live a life of moderation, which would include pleasurable activities, social activities, volunteering, and a way of staying grounded, such as religion or another belief system. If we didn't maintain these activities, life would become meaningless, and we would lose our purpose.

After writing this essay, I listened to Jonathan Pascual read part of his book entitled *The Art of Dying*. At 33 years of age, he was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Fortunately, it was curable and following that close call, he decided to challenge himself to be a better, healthier person. He entered multiple physical competitions, including the Iron Man, where he was successful and earned numerous awards. At age 44, as a nurse practitioner, he self-diagnosed cancer, which had become stage 4 by that time. He was given 5 years to live. That is when he wrote the book and continued to challenge himself, but also chose to share his life story with others so they could benefit from his personal challenges. His purpose in life had changed.

I am reminded of a Tim McGraw song about his father, professional baseball player Tug McGraw, who died of cancer at an early age. The song was entitled "Live like you were Dying". In the song, his father's purpose changed to become a better person and experience all he could before his life ended. Again, extenuating circumstances changed his father's purpose in life after the diagnosis.

The purpose of one's life varies from person to person. It is not the same for everyone. Some people just want to survive while others want to party and have fun. Some want fame and fortune while others just want to live comfortably. Still, others find room to be concerned and have the desire to help others who are less fortunate.

So, why do we exist? I believe our purpose is to care for ourselves and our environment and respect our fellow man. I really like John Wesley's quote, "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can as long as ever you can."

Friday, April 11

Day 33: Don't Give Up COMPLIMENTS by Paula Young

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thanksgiving in your hearts to God. (Colossians 3:16, ESV)

Are you frustrated by the condition of the world: selfishness, coldness, and cruelty? Do you feel there is nothing you can do to help? You have the power to change it.

It is in our human nature to find faults in others to make us feel better about ourselves. We may temporarily feel better, but what does that do to the receiver? It creates poor self-esteem, hurt feelings, and defensiveness, which closes us off from each other. Why does that matter? It is the opposite of what God desires for us as his children. In Matthew 22:39, Jesus says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself, treat others with the same love and respect that we want to be treated." Thessalonians 5:11 "Therefore, encourage one another, build one another up."

When we encounter another person, we need to recognize we are children of God, made in his image. Then, consciously look for the good in them and genuinely tell them. It may be an outer or inner characteristic or quality or something they do. Examples: "You have a great smile," "You are so helpful," or "You do that so well." But it must be sincere and not said to manipulate. How does that affect the receiver? Your comment uplifts, encourages, heals, and builds a path to connect. As the giver, you feel pretty good about yourself, too. To paraphrase Shakespeare's insight on mercy, "It is twice blest, it blesseth him that gives and him that takes."

This chapter is titled "Compliments." A compliment is defined as a polite remark said to someone to show you like something good in them. I prefer an archaic definition, which means "gift." You are giving a gift to another. Perhaps God is using you to give a gift to someone. A homophone for compliment is complement, which means to enhance something already present. When you give a gift of a compliment, you enhance something good in that person. They feel better about themselves. Thus, they are kinder to others, who then are kinder to those they encounter. Do you see my point? You can never see the end of your kindness. The positive feelings you put in the world spread. You have the power to change the world one person at a time. Be an encourager; the world has enough critics already. Matthew 7:12 says, "In *everything* then, do to others as you would have them do to you for this is the Law and the Prophets."

Saturday, April 12

Day 34: Don't Give Up GIFTS AND ABILITIES by Dick Smith

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. (Ephesians 4:11-14, ESV)

The first thing I would say about today's reflection is that I appreciate that the focus is to affirm the good things we have in our life and not focus on things we need to give up.

This day's meditation focuses on "Gifts and Abilities." It has challenged me to reflect on my own gifts and abilities. As I have grown older, I have come to appreciate my ability to reflect more on the important things in life. As a young person, I focused more on material things.

This lesson challenges me to reflect upon spiritual things and matters of the heart. What do I have that makes a difference in the world? As this week's reading points out, it's those spiritual things that come from the heart that make a difference. It determines how we feel about others, about creation and the world around us, and about the mysterious depth of all reality and God's creation.

Although getting older (I'm now 83) is not a piece of cake, aging has deepened my appreciation for all that is around me - my wife, my friends, the mountains I enjoy each morning, and even the challenges that force me to grow.

Monday, April 14

Day 35: Don't Give Up WORSHIP by Carol Wawrychuk

The twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lived forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne saying, "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created. (Revelation 4:10-11, ESV)

Why is this one bothering me so much? Am I not doing enough for God? Giving enough? Do I put people, things, etc. etc. before God? Well, to be honest – probably so. But does that really mean I don't deem God worthy of worship?

This Reflection comes at the beginning of Holy Week. The author talks about the commitment of Jesus in looking toward Jerusalem. His commitment was to fulfill the will of God. Likewise, as we walk into this week, are our commitments in the right place?

Can one be committed to Jesus, to God, and deem Him worthy of worship all the while we are making not-so-great decisions about how to spend time or money? And what does worship mean to each of us anyway? My guess is there are as many different ways to worship God, as there are people.

So, where am I going with all this? Still not so sure. I haven't found any conclusions. EXCEPT, I know I love God, and I know I am loved by God. I may not follow all the rules of commitment, but God's Grace is poured out anyway. I try, I fail, I try again.

I read a quote by Brian McClaren: "Imitating Jesus is more important than worshipping Jesus." Perhaps this is where I'm settling with the reflection on worship. No need for guilt. No need for shame. We are imperfect human beings. And God loves us anyway. I don't need to look at my calendar or checkbook to know if I worship God and love God with all my heart. Richard Rohr sums it up this way: "*Christians have preferred to hear something Jesus never said: 'Worship me.' Worship of Jesus is rather harmless and risk-free; following Jesus changes everything.*"

Tuesday, April 15

Day 36: Don't Give Up ANGER by Cynthia Rector

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. (Romans 12:9, ESV)

I admit that as I write my reflection on anger, I see and feel anger all around me in the political situation and rhetoric that is present in our country. I need to prayerfully look at the steam rising within me to be sure this energy is helpful and not just anxiety turning to rage.

The Lenten journey takes us to Holy Week, which includes a very dark time of political upheaval that ends in the capital punishment of Jesus/God in the flesh. Every year during this week, I react with horror and anger at over 2000 years since the death of Jesus that humanity still is full of violence and extermination of humans for political gains. Has nothing changed? Will it ever change? I am angry.!

This year, I saw an opportunity to participate in a day at our State Legislature lobbying for Health Care reforms. I joined a work colleague and about 200 providers of medicine here in New Mexico. I took my political anger and learned about our state's problems in health care. I learned about proposed solutions to improve access, care and the best use of health care dollars. I was able to use anger to learn more about a problem that impacts me, and anger was my motivation. This was anger turned into action. I will try to use this idea when I feel the steam rising after the nightly news stories and turn to prayerful consideration and investigation of what I can do to put my faith (including anger) into action.

Wednesday, April 16

Day 37: Don't Give Up SACRIFICE by Lane Krahl

*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.
(John 15:13, ESV)*

The scripture for today is about the ultimate sacrifice – to lay down your life for your friends. Jesus made that sacrifice for us, but most of us will never find ourselves in a situation where this sacrifice is being asked of us. Yet, in this Lenten season, this year, we may well be called upon to make sacrifices for our friends.

When I read today's meditation, Matthew 25:31-46 came to mind. This is where Jesus describes what will happen on judgement day. He says that on that day, the king will divide the people in two groups, and will say to one group, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you ... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me" Then the chosen ones will ask, "when did we do these things for you?" "And the king will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'" Or, as Woody Guthrie put it, "Maybe your ticket on the last train to glory is the stranger whose been sleeping on your floor."

Given all that is going on in our nation during this Lenten season, I wonder if we will be called upon to make sacrifices to help those who are unhoused – who are hungry, who are thirsty. To welcome the undocumented among us – the strangers in our midst. We certainly will not be called to lay down our lives for them, but we may be called to take some risks, to sacrifice some of our own comfort. Will we have the courage to do that?

Lord, in this Lenten season and throughout the coming year, help me to be willing to make sacrifices for you and the least of your people. Open my eyes to opportunities to serve you by serving others, even if it means sacrificing some of my own comfort.

Thursday, April 17

Day 38: Don't Give Up COMMUNITY by Ed Rector

Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:25, ESV)

Community is defined as a unified body of individuals: such as a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society. In ancient Israel, strangers coming into their land were to be treated with respect and hospitality. Landowners were required to leave the edges of their fields unharvested so that some travelers could collect crops and the fallen fruit. This was their community, worshiping together and welcoming visitors who were different. An example we could learn from today.

The community we live with here in Santa Fe has a wealth of diversity that we should celebrate. Our church community or family should strive to be part of this greater community. But during this Holy Week, I am reminded that Apostle Paul said that we need to be the hands and feet of the body of Christ and that there should be neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, we are all important in the service of God.

I need my brothers and sisters in Christ, especially in this unstable political time. Alone, I would spend too much time adrift, frustrated and lost, stubbing my toes on the steps of the world, putting my faith in shiny new trinkets or shallow new trends.

In our community we need to serve, forgive, reconcile, honor, and love one another. The only way I can do this, is to gather with my church community and with their fellowship find the courage to continue to be the best Christian I can be.

Friday, April 18

Day 39: Don't Give Up GRIEF by Byron Smith

For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. (2 Corinthians 7:10, ESV)

My mom passed away somewhat suddenly on Feb. 14th, 2009. She fell ill with a brain bleed on February 8th and never recovered. The doctor said she was in a "deep sleep" and unresponsive when I arrived at her bedside on the 9th. I spoke to her and held her hand as soon as I arrived, and she made a sound as if she wanted to speak and grasped my hand tightly. Even the doctor was surprised at her response. That was our moment of good-bye, at least in this life. February 14th was her favorite day of the year, and she always hosted a Valentine's Day party for close friends and family. She had already sent invitations before her fatal illness. We celebrated her life in the form of a memorial service on her special day.

I found the following well-known poem to be of great solace after her passing. I continued to meditate on it after my nephew's tragic death in 2020, and again after my dad passed away on December 10th, 2024.

This was the first poem Mary Elizabeth Frye wrote, and she wrote it on a grocery bag. Her Jewish roommate's mother had fallen ill and passed away in Germany, and her roommate was distraught over not being able to go back and be there for her and mourn at her grave due to the rising unrest in Germany at the time.

Do not stand at my grave and weep
I am not there. I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow.
I am the diamond glints on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning's hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry;
I am not there. I did not die.

Although this poem was written regarding the loss of a young Jewish girl's mother, I find it equally applies to a Jewish carpenter, the Son of God, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The One who willingly died on the cross for us all, Jewish and Gentile, all races, all orientations, no exceptions. Does He not tell us to look for Him in the beauty of His creation--the gentle rain, the sunlight on ripened grain, and the thousand winds that remind us of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit? We must accept His invitation and seek His transformative presence and love.

Of course, there will be grief. It is a consequence of having loved greatly. But we must remember, "Death, where is thy sting?" (1 Corinthians 15: 55) Our Savior died an earthly death but was raised on the third day. He promises a new and eternal life to all who follow Him. We may rightly grieve today, but "Joy comes in the morning!" (Psalm 30: 5) Easter is coming!

Saturday, April 19

Day 40: Don't Give Up JOY by Mary Lucey

Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I will say rejoice. (Philippians 4:4, ESV)

No one could have prepared me for the news that my in-laws brought me that night in 1991. The look on their faces said it all: something terrible had happened. And indeed, it had – my only brother had died suddenly by suicide. A knife went through my heart as deep and cutting as anything I'd ever felt. For the next few months, I floundered – at home with my husband and young son, at work, and spiritually. How could this have happened? My love for my brother was fierce – I had thought love could conquer anything. I also believed I would never again experience joy in my life.

When my 25-year marriage suddenly ended a decade later, my world again was turned upside down. Blindsided, hurt, and incredibly sad, I again felt that joy and happiness would never be mine.

A close friend encouraged me to come to church with her – God's grace at work in my life. I went and soon became an active member, singing in the choir and serving in various ways at the church. The anthems we sang were difficult at first – the words spoke of joy, renewal, and hope. At the time, I felt precious little of these. I even cried at one verse, which I remember to this day: "No eye has caught the light, no ear the thun'dring might of such glory. There we will go: what joy we'll know! There sweet delight will ever flow.*" The faith community of that church, my willingness to let it lead me to new areas, and leaning on new faith practices brought me back to God and

In 2004, I met a truly wonderful man, and we have been married now for 18 years. He has brought joy to my life through love, companionship, exploration, and adventures. In 2022, he was diagnosed with Stage IV kidney cancer and began treatment, including surgery. Through many therapies, the doctors had managed to control the cancer until now. We recently learned that the disease has spread beyond what surgery and radiation can do. This week a new drug will be started in hopes of preventing new cancer growth. Can I still feel joy? Yes. I find joy in these things: preparing a meal, watching movies together, massaging aching feet, watching the tiny birds at our feeder together, seeing my grandson's first steps on FaceTime, and taking long walks with my sister.

Can we feel moments of joy during the troubling times? "..Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning" (Psalm 30:5). Yes -- Knowing God walks beside us every step of the way. His blessings are many, the source of all our joy. The promise of resurrection, the Word made flesh through Jesus Christ, and the life everlasting should bring us all much joy! I hope you find joy this Easter.