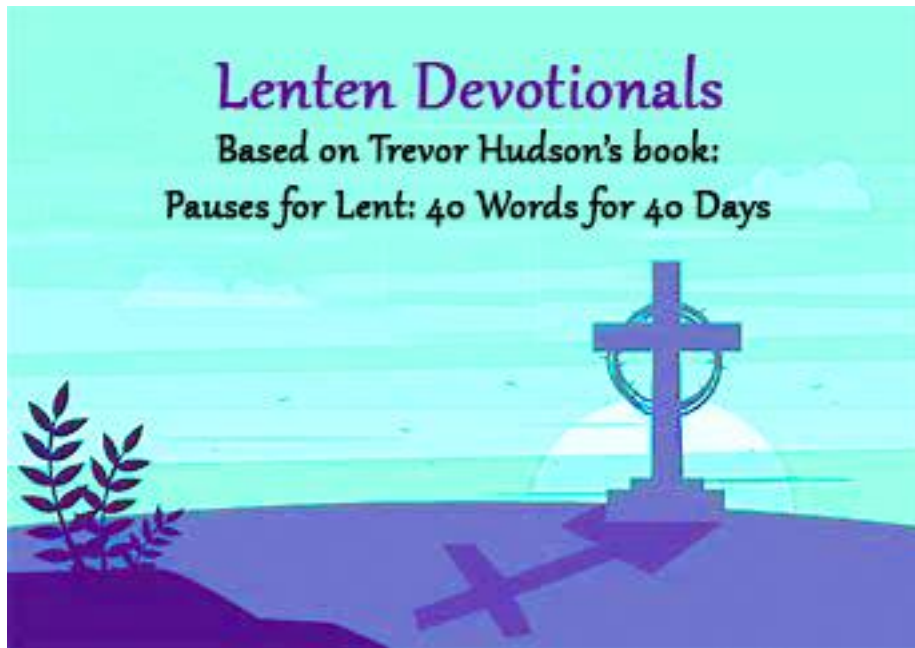




Congregational Lenten Devotional 2026

St. John's UMC, Santa Fe, NM

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This booklet is a compilation of heartfelt reflections written by 31 members and friends of St. John's UMC Santa Fe, NM. We used the book,

Pauses for Lent: 40 Words for 40 Days, by Trevor Hudson

as the central devotional book for this year.

It is our hope and prayer that this compilation of personal essays will deepen your Lenten journey this year.

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Day 1**DUST****by Anna Adams**

*You are dust, and to dust you shall return. Genesis 3:19
For He knows our frame.*

He [earnestly] remembers and imprints [on His heart] that we are dust. Psalm 103:14 (AMPC)

I am tempted to write here a little essay on the Biblical use of the word “dust.” It appears in both the Old and New Testaments. But the Lord repeatedly says, “No sermon! No lectures!” Rather my emphasis is supposed to be what Wendy told us regarding our assignment: how has the Lord worked in your life over the last year?

Right now, the word “dust” leave me flat. No inspiration. But maybe that’s the point. In my life as a Human, I’m just a ball of dust. Kind of useless and empty. And yet, as I say that, I feel God’s love for me well up within me. Through my faith in Jesus, I am God’s child, and He lights up this “dust ball” with the spark of the Holy Spirit.

Praise God! What He has been teaching me over this last year is that He is faithful and totally trustworthy. I tend to be a worrywart, and I get nervous about the pressures of “things to do.” What He has shown me is that when it is time to do a certain task, He actually makes me want to do it, rather than dread it. And I get it done on time, even if it is the last minute. A small example: earlier this week, I had to make a payment on a February obligation. It was important to get it in the mail on Tuesday, because sometimes the post office takes forever on an intown mailing. I had seven minutes to get there before closing. The Lord said, “You’ll make it. Don’t rush.” I drove through end-of-day traffic and when I got inside, the inner door was still open but I saw the clerk dashing around. “We’re closed,” the clerk said but I asked if she could postmark my mail and she did and voilà, mission accomplished! That experience gave me such joy—knowing that I’d heard from God and that He brought it to pass.

The Lord has taught me to bring EVERYTHING to Him in prayer. He continually amazes me and blesses me. Dust though I am, He loves me and “redeems *my* life from the pit and corruption...*and* beautifies, dignifies and crowns me with loving kindness and tender mercy.” Psalm 103:4 (AMPC)

Day 2**RETURN****by Jon Young**

*Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful. Joel 2:13
Prone to wander, Lord. I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love.*

When you sing the familiar hymn, *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*, do these words strike a chord within you? They do for me.

How can I *not* be prone to wander?

Like you, I confront a barrage of daily distractions: the incessant pop-up ads for products that will make me wiser, richer, and better looking; video testimonials about the newest app that solves every problem; text messages bearing urgent appeals from politicians who will heal our political woes; social media posts that express so cleverly the disgust I feel about current affairs.

How can I not be prone to wander?

Lent calls us to pause our wandering, to recognize that these many paths lead us away from our true home. Lent is a time to return.

Ponder this word, “return.” It denotes changing direction toward a place we’ve been before, a place we want to go back to, a place where we feel a sense of belonging, a place where we are loved. Home. God.

During this season of Lent, let’s pause and look with fresh eyes at the many reminders of God’s love: the majestic mountains that shape the horizons of Santa Fe; the stunning, star-filled skies that we enjoy nearly every night, experiences that point to our puniness and God’s vast enormity. Let us remember that the God who created the mountains and stars loves us so much that He became like us, taught and showed us how to live, and then suffered a violent death to atone for our sins.

As we pause to reflect on the depth of God’s love revealed in the Cross, let us hear with well-tuned ears God’s call to return to Him.

And like the father of the “prodigal son,” God will accept us with loving arms and we can offer to Him the final words of that great song cited above: *Here’s my heart, O take and seal it. seal it for thy courts above.*

Day 3**CHOOSE****by Elizabeth Lindell**

Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him and holding fast to him. Deuteronomy 30:19-20

I am 76 years old, and right now I find myself living in the most trying times of my life. I mean this in terms of societal, moral, and political division and actual hatred. My way of coping and keeping my spirit above water is to CHOOSE daily living in God's kingdom, and not in the world's chaos.

As today's devotional states, I have no control over external events and the harmful choices of others, but I do have control over my responses and attitudes towards them. I keep coming back to the scripture that says, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you." For me that means starting my day with God—reading a devotional, meditating, or simply being quiet. I ask Him/Her to walk with me that day as my Partner and Guide. With that done, my goal always is to allow myself 15 minutes of reading about the latest current events. I call this a "goal" for obvious reasons. I have frequently emerged from my well-intentioned "15-minute session" after a one-hour fugue state of doomscrolling. I have found that there is a fine line between keeping informed and becoming mired in the sludge that exists in our world right now by doom-scrolling the day away. My strategy now is to keep informed but not to immerse myself in the news.

Another important choice I try to make is to seek opportunities for service on a daily basis. I believe that this is one of the keys to living in the Kingdom every day. I do not hold myself out as a model of servanthood, but I do try daily to seek opportunities for service, both large and small. "Service" can mean something as simple as checking in with a friend, sending a card, or running an errand for someone. Or it can mean volunteering at the Bag 'N Hand Food Pantry, singing in the choir, or serving on church committees. For me this is a very practical strategy for keeping God close and my heart in the right place. If God is right next to me and my heart is in the right place there is no room for fear, anger, or any of the emotions that separate me from the Holy Spirit. It makes life good!

The third most important choice I make every day is to cultivate and nurture relationships with others who seek Kingdom living as I do. I have spent too much time in my life focused on relationships and "things" that pulled me away from God. I am not going to waste another minute on those people, places, and things. This life is too precious.

Day 4**FAST****by Sue King**

But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees you in secret will reward you.

Matthew 6:17-18

When Wendy handed me my assignment and I read the first one, I almost laughed and wondered if this was a joke. Fasting is not something I have ever succeeded at when I tried. I wanted a new assignment. My thoughts circled around this and I kept saying, "Thanks a bunch." But maybe there is a purpose in this.

The author describes fasting as "feasting", meaning it is a time to feast on "God's overwhelming goodness and love for us." My sarcastic self went into overdrive the first time I read this. Thoughts like "sure, when all I can think about is how hungry I am" ran through my mind. I can be a bit stubborn (ask my Scottish family), but I usually do come around. It was true this time too.

Fasting can be like feasting if we set the intention to make it so. I need to make a choice to turn my attention off myself, and on to God. Jesus is encouraging his followers, and by extension, all of us to do so. Sitting around complaining and letting everyone know what a hardship this is only serves us by garnering the sympathy of others. Note to self, people can really get tired of this attitude, so it does not work anyway.

What I can do is start with what I can manage: fast between meals. And set the intention to use that time to focus on God, and to follow God's lead and bidding.

The other day, in a study I am doing with some very close friends, I shared a time in my life when I really struggled, feeling how I had failed so mightily. As I shared, I realized that what was asked of me was extremely challenging, and the person asking was not aware of how hard this would be for me. I was suffering just in telling the story. So I feasted. On the music of a particular gospel singer and artist who always touches my heart. Her music is open, touches difficult issues, and her manner of singing is pure and communicates deep emotion. All day I listened to the albums I have. Each song was a prayer in my heart. God loved me though the pain of this memory, and my attitude changed. I felt compassion for myself and for the one who asked so much of me. I could feel love for both of us. This time was the most beautiful gift I think I have ever received. (*cont'd*)

So, this year, I am going to start when I can. Set the intention that as I fast between meals, and focus on how God has and does love me deeply, and is forming me into what God's intention is for me.

Day 5

STILL

by Emilie Bridges

Be still and know that I am God. Psalm 46:10

It's a saying we've all heard before but until I got it as my Lenten Devotional, I hadn't really considered the value of it. Being still doesn't just mean to stop and do nothing, it goes deeper than that.

When I think of being still, I think of the moment right before something happens. Like, the quiet moments right before we play a fast piece in band, or the total silence before the ball gets tossed up to serve at the start of a volleyball game. In these short and brief moments, I feel a sense of anticipation and excitement! Sometimes, these moments help to reset my mind and focus on the things that are right there in front of me and help me to be present in the moment.

Day 6

LOVE

by Paula Young

Let us love, not in word or speech but in truth and action. 1 John 3:18

What is love? It can be complicated or quite simple. What comes first, feeling or actions? Do you sit passively waiting for the feeling to come or do you actively seek to practice loving acts toward your family, friends, strangers? Some experts believe feelings come first, then loving actions. Others believe if you practice loving acts, it changes how you feel and feelings come. This passage talks about Agape love, which is unconditional, universal, selfless, spiritual. Everything you do "can" be an act of love. Waking up your family, fixing meals for them, praying for friends and people you don't even know, smiling and speaking to others, having patience in the checkout line, commenting positively on things they do well. Anytime you are thinking about what you can do for others in a positive way and not for yourself, you are practicing an act of love.

What are loving acts and how do you practice them? The steps are easy.

Engage directly or observe at a distance. Really pay attention to what they say or how they behave in a nonjudgemental way. Focus on them.

Think about ways you can help, show care and concern alone or with others. You don't need another to practice acts of love. If in conversation, ask questions about their day or life issues. Really listen to their answers, be there to listen not give advice.

From their answers, you get ideas about their needs and how you might help. Follow up with, "How can I help?"

Practicing loving acts has a domino effect. Often, a recipient of a loving act becomes a giver of one, and on and on. During my first year of teaching, my assistant always brought an extra sandwich which might be for a student who had forgotten their lunch or me. Soon, I saw students bringing extra food to share as well.

"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God and every who loves has been born of God and knows God." 1 John 4:7

Day 7

LIGHT

by Lynn Hall

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life. John 8:12

When you believe in Jesus as your sacred light, when you follow him as your truth, your wisdom and your way, you have His life, you are "a son or daughter of light." You are begotten into the family of light. And this light will never go out. God has called you that from the moment of your salvation.

Your light doesn't depend on what you did yesterday or the thought you just had. You are the light because God dwells within you and is constantly calling you to live as the light of the world, to light up the path to God's heart for all those around you. God is not calling you to share with the world your own perfection. He is calling you to simply be who you truly are, encounter his loving kindness, and share with the world the grace filled hope we have in Christ.

Take time today to simply let God love you. Allow him to mold and shape you into a child who completely experiences the love of the Father. And from that place of being loved, open your life and love others as you have been loved. Live today openly and honestly before God and man. Open your life to those in darkness that they might see the light of God's glorious grace!

Day 8**SEE****by Rebecca Heidel***Though I was blind, now I see. John 9:25*

In Psalms 139:13-14, the psalmist addresses God in praise, saying, “For it was you who formed my inward parts...I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works;”

Amen! Indeed, the fact that light received into the eye is processed by the brain into the objects of the world is physically miraculous. Our sight is documented as the dominant sense over hearing, smell, touch, and taste. It accounts for 80% of the environmental information we receive.

But that is only the beginning of the story. From there our brains get to work immediately, to analyze, interpret, assess, size up, assume, profile, and judge. We are not “at fault” for such spontaneous speculation; our brains are hard-wired to extrapolate, describe, or make sense of what is seen. All this is instantaneously based on what we see.

At this time of Lent, let us take care not to see with the eyes of the world. Let us not glom on to the immediate judgment that our brains may suggest. Rather let us see with the eyes of Christ, each person before us is a child of God.

However, let us remember that the verb “see,” is not always about literal vision. It is often used to indicate comprehension, especially to see, or to know through personal experience. In Psalms 34:8, the reader or the hearer is encouraged to “taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those that take refuge in Him.”

Or in the book of John, 20:24-29 after the disciples tell Thomas that Jesus is risen, Thomas declares “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands. . .I will not believe.” When Jesus does appear to Thomas who recognizes Him, Jesus asks, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

That would be you and me, sisters and brothers. Thanks be to God!

As we make our way through the days of Lent, let us be conscious that seeing others as Christ would have us see them is not always immediate, nor is it effortless. Let us make that effort with every soul we meet. To help us in this endeavor, here is a timeless quote from an American writer who was blind and deaf from the age of 19 months owing to illness,

“The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched---they must be felt with the heart.” Helen Keller.

Day 9**ASK****by Cindy Herndon***Ask, and it will be given you. Matthew 7:7*

I was startled awake by something at 3:17 A.M. I lay quietly in bed, listening. Then I heard it again. BEEP! The smoke alarm battery was low. Every 27 seconds I would hear the beep. I moved downstairs to the couch, but the beep pierced the quiet there, too. Because we have 12-foot ceilings and I had both knees totally replaced this past year, I was not eager to carry an 8’ ladder up two flights of stairs, let alone climb it. I was going to have to ask for help.

My husband lay quietly--well there was a slight snore--sleeping. I couldn’t bring myself to wake him up, so I decided to use the early morning hours to contemplate my Lenten word, ASK. Then it hit me. He would gladly replace the battery. He had a ladder. He had good knees. All I had to do was ask. Asking means I realize my limitations and I recognize God’s strengths. Asking is humbling. After each knee replacement, I had a recovery period where I was completely dependent on my husband for everything...including basic needs. It was embarrassing and humbling. But I am grateful for that experience because I realize God wants me to turn to Him and ASK. He is standing with open arms.

“Ask” is such a powerful 3-letter word! It is the only “A” word in this Lenten study which is surprising considering all the other A words that could have been chosen: Abide, Accept, Align, Acknowledge, Abhor, Altar, Amazed, Answer, Arise, Avoid. “Answer” is the only one that can be both a noun AND a verb. Ask is only a verb. It’s like a one-way street. We ask; God answers.

“Ask” has a best friend--humility. Its enemy is pride.

Day 10**WORDS****by Eric Smith***I tell you, on the day of judgement you will have to give an account for every word you utter.*

Matthew 12:36

Spoken words can ruin our day. They often crush our ego, cause us to do irrational things and even hurt ourselves or others. How many times have we spoken in haste, compelled by our emotions, including anger, only to realize later the extent of damage we caused with our harmful words?

Today, communication happens swiftly. Most of us have easy access to texts and emails and therefore we expect prompt replies. This can cause words to be communicated hastily, without much thought or contemplation. Not so much with handwritten and mailed letters where much care is typically taken. In Matthew 12:36, Jesus says that we will be judged by our words. How we underestimated that passage.

In 1839, English author Edward Bulwer Lytton, said, “the pen is mightier than the sword.” I believe everyone in the world should take heed of those words. Writing this Lenten reflection has caused me to be conscious of the power and effect our spoken words can have on ourselves and others. I believe we should carefully choose words of appreciation and love so our words will come easier than those with hurtful or caustic tones. We can make our lives and the lives of those around us feel blessed and valued, simply by softening our tone and speaking with words of praise, encouragement and compassion.

Day 11**ABBA****by Kim Rael***Abba, for you, all thing are possible.* Mark 14:36

The word *Abba* means *Father* in Arabic. Simple word. Small package. Massive meaning.

When I first thought about it, I realized something: I never really thought of Jesus as my “friend,” even though songs happily sing about it. And I didn’t think of my own father that way either. To me, God was enormous. Creator-of-everything is enormous. Galaxy-spinning. Mountain-moving. Way-too-big-for-casual-conversation... enormous. Then there’s the Trinity: God, His Son, and the Holy Spirit. Powerful. Holy. Majestic. And then... *Abba* shows up. Quietly. Softly. Personally.

Jesus and Paul only used it three times in the New Testament. That tells me something. This isn’t a word you toss around like spare change. It’s a word you hold carefully, like a fragile gift.

When I hear *Abba*, I think of my own earthly father.

“Dad” got his attention.

“Father” sounded formal.

But “Daddy”? That was different.

“Daddy” was for when I really needed or wanted something. A toy. Money. Eventually, a car. More than that, “Daddy” was for comfort. For trust. For closeness. When I talk about him in a tender way, I still say, “my daddy.” That’s what *Abba* feels like.

Not casual. Not careless. Not ordinary. It’s personal. Deep. Respectful. Real.

It’s the word that builds a bridge between heaven and heart.

It says, “Yes, God is holy. Yes, God is mighty.” And also, “He listens when I whisper.”

Abba isn’t just “Father.” It’s “my Father.”

A sacred invitation to speak to the Creator of the universe... with the trust of a child.

Day 12**BREAD****by Carol Wawrychuk***Give us this day our daily bread.* Matthew 6:11

The author starts out by saying this request points us toward our utter dependence on God for sustaining our lives. That this phrase emphasizes God’s provision – God offers us what we really need on a daily basis.

I don’t know about you, but I can easily forget that. Not that God provides, necessarily, but that He’s really providing for me on a daily basis. And for me – bread – is not my “go to” reminder.

This takes me back to seeing a Spiritual Director in my CA days. Kind of in the beginning of my journey (which means the start of believing God was truly in my life, not an entity up there in the clouds), I would sit on her living room couch and my eyes wander to the various objects: carved statues, paintings, pillows etc. placed here and there. The hallway walls to the bedrooms had a beautiful stamping of a vine with a scripture verse. Likewise, she had painted an image and scripture verse over the kitchen window looking out to the front yard. (Who knows, it could have been Matthew 6:11 !) (*cont’d*)

“What are all these paintings with scripture verses and carved crosses doing everywhere in your house?” I finally inquired after one of my sessions. “Oh, they are reminders for me. I need to see things every day that remind me of how much God loves me. How much He has loved everyone from the very beginning. I too easily forget.”

Gosh, I never thought of my Spiritual Director needing daily remembrances about God’s love. So I decided to give it a try. I started pulling out mementos I had stashed away. Put them in plain sight. Crosses. Those started to fill up one of my walls. Rocks my grandkids picked up on a walk and handed to me. A figurine which looked like one of my goofy dogs. After moving to Santa Fe, a painting of our glorious sunsets – another painting of sunflowers. All of which pointed me to the God who provides for me on a daily basis.

So maybe “daily bread” works for you. As you cut a slice of bread and eat it you give thanks to God who sustains you with every breath you take. But if you need a little extra push, find a few reminders to place in the rooms of your home. Either way, may they point to the God who never lets go, who is always finding ways to be by your side – and then we can take it out into our hurting world.

Day 13

WATER

by Cynthia Rector

Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

John 4:13-14

The Lenten subject of water is one I have been living in for the past several weeks as we have been on a vacation to the deserts of the southwest. In New Mexico, we know the importance of water in our landscape. The phrase “Agua es Vida” says to us that water is life.

Water is life for our bodies, as we are made of water, like much of creation. Drying out will happen quickly and be the end of plants, animals and even us humans.

Water is power, and can be seen in the oceans and rivers. Water is a habitat with rich life, from giant whales breaching off the Sea of Cortez in Baja, or tiny creatures that live an entire lifecycle in small pools of water. (think of a dragon fly.)

Water is a physical connection to creation. The saltiness of the ocean is the same as the saltiness in our own bodies. We are all made of God’s liquid. Let this be a thought to meditate on this Lenten season.

Water is life, which is given to us eternally by our Creator God.

Lord, help my heart and mind to be fixed on your ultimate plans for me in the midst of your perfect creation.

Day 14

TIME

by Lynn Tafoya

The time is at hand, and the kingdom of God has come near. Mark 1:15

When I first received my assignment with the word “time,” I was in the hospital after unexpected surgery. *Chronos* time was passing VERY slowly. I had plenty of time to think about the work God wants us to do in HIS time (*Kairos*). It was necessary for me to rest, be quiet, slow down, heal, and to be thankful for the surgeon and all my caregivers. The nursing staff took excellent care of me and were friendly and responsive. We made a connection—it was very heartwarming. They would most likely never see me again. Yet no one can take away our time in relationship with one another under difficult circumstances.

I believe God wants me to seize every chance to be kind, friendly, caring, and relational. God wants me to make a connection and appreciate the good in people and to recognize what we have in common—our humanity. I can be a shining light for Christ in all of my daily encounters with people.

Day 15

PEACEMAKER

by Lane Krah

Blessed are the peacemakers. Matthew 5:9

When Wendy gave me “Peacemaker” as my word I thought, “It’s perfect for me.” My thoughts immediately went to “ending war.” How wonderful that idea was when I was young and protesting the Vietnam war, and still is. But when I read Hudson’s meditation on that word, I realized that I was guilty of being “far better at loving the idea of peace than at making peace within the realities of [my] life.”

Now, when I reflect upon Matthew 5:9, I can see that when Jesus uttered the words, “Blessed are the
(cont’d)

peacemakers,” he was not thinking of anti-war demonstrators or even those who are actively trying to bring peace to warring nations. No, he was talking to all of us, and encouraging us to be peacemakers in our daily lives. One study bible I looked at had only one comment on Matthew 5:9, and that was to refer to Matthew 5:38-48. And what are those verses all about? Forget “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” but rather meet evil with good and “Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you.”

It is easy for me to love peace, but to be a peacemaker is not so easy. It means I have to strive to reduce conflict among people around me, to focus my anger on the injustice and not on the individual, to love those I do not agree with and actually pray for them (not for them to agree with me).

If we are to be peacemakers and not just lovers of peace, we need to be in harmony with God. God loves all of humanity, so we also have to strive to be in harmony those he loves. It will be hard and we will stumble if we go down this path, but we can do it if we do it, if we do it with God.

Let's take on Hudson's Daily Practice to become peacemakers!

Day 16

WORLD

by Karlee Collins-Turner

For God so loved the world. John 3:16

Thank you to the African American folks who sung these original lyrics in oral tradition, passing it down for generations before being first published in the late 1920s. Thank you for those in folk music who revised the song and made it more widely heard across the world. Adding my own lyrics to this song helped me process some of the social injustice I see while looking to God for peace. In music therapy, we often discuss songs in depth, studying their lyrics, then rewrite lyrics to possibly enhance personal meaning or create new meaning. During this season, I find this exercise to help process difficult and complex feelings while doing what I love: singing and songwriting.

Recreation of the traditional African American spiritual: “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands”. I do not own the rights to the original lyrics, nor do I intend to make any profit off of sharing this song. The purpose of sharing this video is to be an attachment to my Lent devotional.

To hear me play and sing this song, go to <https://youtu.be/pJu7vqd2baw?si=yfM1vwfXjj9ct5Q>
Lyrics sung are below:

He's got the whole world in his hands. He's got the wind and rain in his hands

He's got the tiny little baby in his hands.

He's got you and me brother (sister, everybody) in his hands

I start to question God, where are your hands? For the people God, oppressed on their land

This is a scary world God, in your hands. He's got the whole world in his hands.

He's got the people who are hurting in his hands,

And the folks who are called "less" just for being them.

He's got our unhoused neighbors in his hands. He's got the whole world in his hands

He's got St. John's UMC (United Methodist Church) in his hands

He's got Santa Fe and New Mexico in his hands

He's got the United States of America in his hands. He's got the whole world in his hands

He's got both the subjugated and privileged in his hands

He's got haters and helpers in his hands

He's got believers and non-believers in his hands

He's got the whole world in his hands

He's got the world's pain in his hands. He's got the people's pain in his hands

He's holding pain and peace in his hands. He's got the whole world in his hands

Day 17

TREASURE

by Dick Smith

For where your treasure is there shall your heart be also. Matthew 6:21

I have to confess that this particular devotional for this day that is entitled “Treasures” has been one of the most challenging devotionals I have ever encountered. That is mostly because of the writer's understanding of the words “heaven” and “earth.” The writer makes a sharp distinction between “heaven” and “earth.” The writer says “earth treasures pass away. Heaven's treasures, on the other hand, are eternal.”

I struggle with the writers concepts because so many things that I think of in my earthy experience - my wife and children, my friends, the satisfaction of my vocation, the beauty of the mountains, and the wonders
(cont'd)

of creation. All are not just important to me, they are sacred. I do understand that we can put material possessions above the gifts of heaven. The challenge is embracing both the spiritual and material gifts from God and discarding all that the material gifts that blind us to the love of God. I leave us all with this challenge.

Day 18

LISTEN

by Wendy Russel

Let everyone be quick to listen and slow to speak. James 1:19

Last December, I started reading Brené Brown's book, *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*. I was recovering from surgery and knew one of her books would be a perfect healing companion. Brown has always focused on the "power of story" in her books and in her position as research professor at the University of Houston's Graduate School of Social Work. In *Atlas of the Heart*, she challenges us to become good "story stewards," by working on our listening skills and developing an expansive emotional vocabulary.

I felt convicted to put her observations into my devotional practice but I talked myself out of it. After all, December was such a busy time of the year and I had so much on my plate. Plus, I needed to start working on the congregational Lenten devotional project. Funny how when *God* wants you to work on something that *you* have put on the back burner, it keeps popping up everywhere. Sure enough, LISTEN, was one of my Lenten reflection words. Author Trevor Hudson says that "listening lies at the heart of life with God." I knew that was where I wanted my life to be; centered of God. I claimed Brown's challenge of "courage over comfort" and started planning how I could change my behavior to become a better story steward.

First, I needed to avoid any narrative takeover, story hijacking, making things about me instead of who I am engaging. Second, I needed to rid myself of the perfunctory, "Hey, how are ya?" greeting when I encounter people. That was going to take some work.

The checkout line at the grocery store was the perfect place for me to try it out. I rehearsed a few new questions with the cashiers at my favorite Sprouts location. "Anything special happening today?" "How is your day going so far?" "WOW! You are right by the door. How do you stay warm?" "You are really good at bagging! Thanks for being so careful." Then, I had to *s-l-o-w d-o-w-n* and look them in the eye to show them I was truly interested in what they had to say. It took some practice on my part but it was one blessing after another as I watched the cashiers' face light up as they started sharing their story with me. The feeling of being seen and heard was immediate and profound.

Composer Reena Esmail, put it succinctly in her choral piece, *Listen*. Using lyrics based on a quote of Brian Palmer, she says, "[Be]cause one act of love, I know, for sure, is to listen... So, listen deeply, for you might never have that moment to listen again."

Day 19

POOR

by Diana Loomis

Jesus read from the scriptures saying, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" Luke 4:18-19, CEV

Jesus went home to Nazareth and stood in the synagogue to read scripture. It wasn't the words he read that day, but the challenge he gave that angered his hometown listeners and made them run him out of town! He had the audacity to suggest that his message of care was good news for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Folks were used to hearing that they were to care of their own Jewish widows, orphans, and poor, but they were asking among themselves, "You mean we have to make ourselves unclean and associate with THOSE people?"

It has been 2,000 years since Jesus walked this earth calling to us to "love God, and love our neighbors," yet the anger about providing services or welcoming the poor especially those who are black, brown, red or yellow is just as fierce among some in our country, our government and our politics as it was in the time of Jesus. Sometimes we have bought into the lie that wealth, power, status, success, control and things will bring us happiness. Many have failed to understand that "loving God with all our hearts, minds, souls and our neighbors as ourselves" is what brings God's shalom, God's total wellness and wholeness of body, mind and soul to our lives.

Years ago, when I was working on my doctorate, I began studying new scientific research being done by medical professionals, psychologists, and sociologists on the difference faith makes in life, especially if you are an active participant in a faith community. What they found is that people who practice their faith live (*cont'd*) longer, are healthier, are less likely to be depressed, are less likely to get divorced, and are happier. Perhaps the script for happiness truly is "love God and love ourselves so we can love others."

Day 20**FORGIVEN**

by Carol Wawrychuk

Friend, your sins are forgiven. Luke 5:20

I need to start out by saying “sin” is not my favorite word. And it seems to be used a lot! I looked for an alternative in the thesaurus; they aren’t so great either. But let’s go with “err” or “lapse” - even “offend” seems a better choice! Whatever is comfortable for you – look at those other two important words: “Friend” “Forgiven”. Friend stands out to me. Jesus is calling us his friend in the midst of our “sins”, “errors”, “lapses.”

That is so beautiful. We are His friends. Not subjects, servants, employees – FRIENDS. How soon we forget. Because sometimes our greatest lapses are against ourselves, which WE cannot forgive. When we can’t forgive – love- accept ourselves as forgiven and loved by Jesus – how can we possibly go into the world to love and forgive others.

Perhaps it takes a while to fully digest this into the core of our being. It’s taken me decades. Not there yet, but moving along! Jesus loves and forgives me – I dare say unconditionally! I’m learning that day by day – lapse by lapse.

“Friend/Forgiven.” I will remember those words the next time I need to say, “I’m sorry, can you forgive me?” I am not perfect (try as I might), I am not bad, I made a mistake. How different that feels than I

AM mistake. With Jesus there are no human mistakes – we are HIS forgiven friends.

“Forgiveness means that I continually am willing to forgive the other person for not being God — for not fulfilling all my needs. I, too, must ask forgiveness for not being able to fulfill other people’s needs. ... The interesting thing is that when you can forgive people for not being God, then you can celebrate that they are a reflection of God.” Henri Nouwen

“When all is said and done, the gospel comes down to forgiveness. I’d say it’s the whole gospel. It’s the beginning, the middle, and the end. People who know how to forgive have known how good it feels to be forgiven, not when they deserved it, but precisely when they didn’t deserve it.” Richard Rohr

Day 21**PEACE**

by Sue King

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. John 14:27

Growing up during the Viet Nam War, I thought peace meant no war. Oh, we demonstrated, we shouted and we sang songs about peace. When the war was over, I did not feel peace. I felt relief that my brothers and friends would not be drafted. I felt sad for people I knew who returned from war broken, battered, and abused by the public. But not joy or victory or peace.

I got married and we raised two daughters. I volunteered in the classroom, served as a Girl Scout leader, and went to their school events. I shared their happiness and soothed their tears. I knew love, tenderness, happiness and joy. But not peace.

I worked hard as a nurse, joined the Air Force, and changed careers twice. I earned two master’s degrees and created my opportunities by continuing the challenge myself and learn. My final career choice occurred because of the freedom I gained after the loss of my marriage. I know my gifts were fully used, and I loved the work I did and the people I served. As I matured as a mental health counselor, I worked with my clients to see both the positive and difficult life experiences. I began to know peace.

In recent years, there have been joyful reunions with my siblings. My children’s father and I have a strong friendship. My children have accomplished much and we enjoy loving relationships. My sense of peace increased.

Now retired, I am not under pressure to meet deadlines and have more time to do what feeds my soul. But the greatest thing is the quiet when I am home alone. I have begun to listen for and trust God and to contemplate my heart and my faith. My heart feels more settled. Despite the chaos in today’s world, I feel God’s constant presence. And I know deep down in my soul that no matter what happens, I can trust him completely, and I know all will be well. I feel peace.

Day 22**REST****by Byron Smith**

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Matthew 11:28

What do you do when the world seems perilous? Hide? Obsess about self-preservation? Pray your heart out? Of course, we are instructed to pray and give thanks in all circumstances, but God asks us to do something more, something contrary to our instincts. He calls on us to rest.

How can we rest when wars rage across the globe, when ICE agents break into homes and drag people out of their cars, even killing with no consequences--when unhoused individuals have no place to sleep and stay warm, and when nations invest their greatest resources in military weapons, rather than caring for the needy and poor? There is a kind of trust that is more centered on the steadfast character of our Sovereign God than on the circumstantial evidence of danger and uncertainty that surrounds us.

The first two verses of Psalm 91 read, "Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." When the psalmist tells us to dwell in the shelter of the Most High, the Spirit is directing us to look at the God who is certain rather than the world that is not. He asks us to rely on his trustworthiness rather than the daily headlines and YouTube videos of imminent doom. The ability to completely absorb ourselves in the character of the Almighty qualifies us as God-dwellers--those who rely on the fortitude of the walls of His House. In other words, those who rest.

God's shelter is our refuge, because there is nothing in this world that can penetrate it--no war, no disease, no financial burden, no broken relationship, and no masked federal agent. This Holy place of safety is available to us all. Choose to dwell there and rest.

Day 23**WEPT****by Donna Whitson**

Jesus wept. John 11:35

When I was assigned my topic for this devotional I was stumped for a bit. WEPT. What does that even mean? What do I say about it? The more I thought about it the more I realized it was a very relevant term for all of us today.

We all remember from early Sunday School classes the shortest verse in the Bible is Jesus wept. But why did he weep? The Bible tells us he wept three times.

John 11:35 over the death of Lazarus

Luke 19:41 over Jerusalem and its rejection

Hebrews 5:7-9 over his pending crucifixion and submission to God's will

Crying and weeping are related but a little different. Crying usually means a response to a physical hurt, a child's scraped knee cry. Weeping implies more of a deep emotional grief with silent tears.

Leadership of the United Methodist Church says that we are "weeping over America today". I know I have wept over the violence, unfair treatment of human beings, cruelty and a seeming loss of a moral compass to our leaders. Sometimes it feels hopeless and never ending. I want to weep more. Then I remember to tell myself there is always hope and help in God.

Jesus taught, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh" (Luke 6:21). Those who mourn "shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). As David put it, "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:5).

Day 24**BUT****by Matt Bridges**

Everyone who believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life. John 3:16

The word "but" has become an interesting discernment point for me in my vocabulary in how I form sentences in my head before I speak. It's become a measure of "do you really mean what you say?" When I read today's passage and reflection, I couldn't help but go in a different direction from what I feel is the intention of John 3:16. The word "but" can be used to either enhance a point one is making, or it can seek to provide a pivot for a counterpoint in an argument. Here, clearly, its use is to enhance, to build on a point about belief, perishing, and eternal life. It signals that death is not the end of the believer's story, but (see what I did there? You're going to see a lot of these in this reflection today) a triumphant part of a believer's story. "But" no matter what, the word is a part of speech used to purposely create contradiction.

What I have learned about myself in how I use this word came from wisdom through working with a sponsor and pursuits I have in recovery. My sponsor helped me realize that so often, when I was using the word "but" in the middle of a sentence, I was undoing everything that came before it; it became disingenuous. (*cont'd*)

“I’m sorry, but....,” “I agree with you, but....” “I like your idea, but...” “you make a good point, but....” “I know what I have to do, but....” “I’m going to do these things to get better, but....”. I’ve found that when I use this word in this way, it creates a lie, whether to myself or others. I came across a writer who pen’s himself as “inkwell,” and he writes “‘but’ is the great eraser, the silent assassin of sincerity.” My sponsor told me this in a way that was a bit more crass. He said to me, “you do realize that everything you say before the ‘but’ is B.S., right?” Haha, ouch! He used more colorful language than that, and he was absolutely right.

How are you using the word in your vocabulary? I like the question for today’s reflection that our author poses for us. (But?) I also want to challenge you to think about how you use the word for yourself and others. There are times it’s a great word to use; (but?) there are also other times we use it to avoid honesty either for ourselves or others in a feeble attempt to soften the blow of disagreement, or something we are struggling with coming to terms with. I encourage you to use the word to build. It’s proven a much healthier way for me and the relationships I have with others.

Day 25

WAY

by Cindy Herndon

I am the Way. John 14:6

Yesterday a storm moved through that left snow and ice in its wake. The nine inches of snow were compacted to about 5 when about 2 inches of sleet and ice fell. The ice was so thick that a 200-pound man did not break its surface. Instead of snow-blowing the driveway, we had to chisel out a path to the road. My husband wielded a square coal shovel to break the ice apart so that I could come behind him with a snow shovel to remove the fragments. With low temperatures and stiff breezes, our path was straight and narrow. That prompted me to think about Jesus being the Way. His path is clear and void of icy patches that cause slips and falls. His path is straight and direct to the Father’s throne. And His path is narrow because we don’t get to ride in on someone’s coattails. Each of us walks the Way by choice, by ourselves. A final thought is that Jesus doesn’t say he is “A” way; he says he is “THE” way. “THE” is a definite article that indicates something specific. His path in THE only way to get to the Father.

It took a snow/ice storm to remember that simple lesson, but it was worth it.

Day 26

FREE

by Jean McDonald

If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free. John 8:31-32

My devotional scripture reading is from John 8:31-32: “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

My word FREE brings up a story for me. Due to being brought up by parents who grew up in the depression, I have been raised to like and get whatever tangible free thing that is available to me. So, when last summer, with our SJUMC mission team eating at a restaurant that has free pie on Wednesdays, the night we were there, I had some free pie. Then a few weeks later in a different town, I went to the same restaurant franchise, hoping to get some more free pie, but they did not honor that offer, which was ok. I mention this free pie story because on the way to church this morning, I heard a preacher say that a lot of us give God/Jesus a piece of our life pie, other pieces being work, family, social activities, etc. But actually, Jesus is the whole pie, which I’m challenged to practice giving him this spot in my life.

Day 27

SIN

by Jon Young

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 1 John 1:8

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart Be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. Psalms 19:14

In chapter 3 of his Epistle, James compares the tongue to the rudder of a ship: a thing so small gives direction to something much larger. Humans are able to tame wild animals, but not the tongue, which is “an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.”

The vitriol of so much social media and the vicious name calling of too many prominent political leaders provide daily confirmation that the tongue is “an unruly evil, full of poison.” It is *so* tempting to return vicious words with more viciousness, to jump into the fray, to outdo the worst of the worst.

But even if I refrain (as I usually do) from saying or writing angry, hurtful words, I am often consumed by what I’d *like* to say. My heart’s meditations are definitely not pleasing to God. (*cont’d*)

Jesus expresses this point profoundly in his reply to those who criticized his disciples for ignoring ceremonial hand washing. It is *not* what goes *into* our mouths that defile us, but what comes *from* our mouths. For what come from our mouths proceeds from the heart, the source of “evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness.” (Mark 7)

What a parade of sins come from the meditations of our hearts! Reflect on the complete list. While I can honestly claim innocence to many of them, but not all!

Throughout his ministry, Jesus insisted that outward conformity to the Law is never enough: our hearts must also be attuned to God. It's not enough to refrain from murder, we must rid ourselves of the anger toward others that leads to violence.

Lent is a time to pause and confess our inclination to sin by word and thought and to pray again: *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart Be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer.*

Day 28

ENEMIES

by Cynthia Rector

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. Matthew 5:44-45

Recently I had a situation asking me to do just this. Pray for my enemy. It is easier to pray for an abstract enemy, but this situation was very close by. Try as I might, nothing was working. I know that I am the one changed by prayer, but all I was doing was making an argument with God.

I needed help bad and quickly, so I asked our Pastor for help with this tough task. Matt was so ready to help me, and let me know that praying is not the same as forgetting, loving, or even accepting the situation. With each thought of my current problem instead of trying to fix, or even feel better, the prayer could be one of peace, acceptance, for me, and also for the problem.

I started right away on this task because it was consuming me. My prayer was for the situation to be met each day with hope, peace, acceptance, even grace. Each time I was struck with thinking and living through this and the directive to pray for this persecuting feeling, I prayed to be changed to hope, and grace for today only. At the end of the day, my nighttime prayers could look back and be reassured that some grace was extended to myself and my problem.

Lord, help me with this directive to love my enemies and pray for the persecution I feel, not just in Lent, but in all the situations that come my way. I pray Lord to be your daughter.

Day 29

SERVE

by Mary Early

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve. Matthew 20:28

Matthew 20:28 is preceded with a story about the mother of two disciples asking Jesus to seat each of her two sons (James and John) on His right and left. The other disciples who heard this were aggravated, which led Jesus to set them straight, saying, “The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (RSV)

The story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet is His way of telling them how to become servants and do for others what he has done for them. This story reminds me of growing up in the Church of the Brethren, a denomination that defines their creed as the New Testament. On Maundy Thursday and Worldwide Communion Sunday, we always had feet washing, a simple meal, and then received the bread and grape juice. I remember the first time I experienced this. I'd been baptized by immersion that Palm Sunday. I sat with my friend and her mother and my mother, so I knew whose feet I would wash. I've known people who think this is disgusting, but I think most people at our church made sure their feet were not too dirty. Imagine, however, Jesus cleaning the feet of his disciples who'd walked in sandals or bare feet across dirty roads. Our church made this a simple process: we put on an apron, poured water in a bowl, lifted and put the feet of the person next to us into that bowl, sprinkled water on their feet, lifted them out, and dried them with a towel. Every time I washed feet, I always saw it as one of the most humbling events in my life. The idea of humility always reminds me of Micah 6:8 where we find another story about what God requires of us.

⁶ “*With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?*” ⁷ *Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”*

(cont'd)

⁸ *He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?* (Micah 6: 6-8 (RSV))

Jesus told His disciples that their mission was to become servants, and I believe that one way to do that is to follow Micah's simple formula, which has been translated in several ways: "Do justice (or justly), love kindness (or mercy) and walk humbly with your God."

If Jesus could humble himself to become a servant, shouldn't we be able to serve others?

Day 30

MONEY

by Ed Rector

You cannot serve both God and money. Matthew 6:24

The author asks us to examine our relationship with money; its' use and its' hierarchy in our lives. John Wesley asks us to "Gain all we can, save all we can, and give all we can." This is popular quote of his, but what is often not quoted is "We should not gain money at the expense of life or health." John Wesley helps us to also understand that our work can hurt ourselves and others. How is our relationship money? You have most likely heard the saying "when times get tough, the tough go shopping."

Do we use money with our purchasing power to "soothe our sinful (anxious) soul"? A kind of balm to calm ourselves, to say to ourselves "I deserve this."

I believe we should exchange money for services, labor, and materials that add value to our lives, and to those whose services and labor we employ.

Lord, help us to work hard, use money wisely, and be aware of the place that money has on our lives as Christians.

Day 31

BODY

by Amy Lovell

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God. 1 Corinthians 6:19

Admittedly, when I opened up the packet and saw the word "body" I groaned, wishing I had told Wendy that I was too busy to write a devotional this year. I don't think there is anything I'm more self-conscious about than my body, which I'm sure many of us have experienced at one point or another (yay puberty). Society doesn't help. We're now constantly bombarded with weight loss ads, questions about why you don't ski/bike/hike/you name it, lists that claim if you just prioritized better, you would have time to work out (as if prioritizing can give you more hours in the day).

My mom once told me - probably 20 years ago at this point - that it was in having kids that she finally felt like her body was useful for something (not an exact quote and probably out of context now so don't read too much into it). After having kids of my own now, all I can say is that it didn't help at all the way I feel about mine. However, it did change the way I talk about my body. Especially in front of them. I don't want them to hear from me that a certain body is better or worse. We instead work together to build good habits that we can be proud of.

I imagine that God feels similarly about our bodies. After all, why would He build a temple that He's not proud of? Sure, there's maybe some dust or cracks but nothing that can't be taken care of with a little housekeeping, physical or mental. So, let's remember that we are all vessels for the Holy Spirit and if nothing else, be able to be amazed at that.

Day 32

TEMPTATION

by Randall Kirkpatrick

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-yet he did not sin. Hebrews 4:15

Temptation: Strong desire or allure to do something, often a wrong thing, unhealthy, or against one's better judgment.

In the bible, temptation is an enticement to do evil or disobey God, stemming from our own desires. But it is not sin—that happens when we act upon it. Jesus was tempted but not sinning by being lured by desire.

What I get when I read James 1:13-15, "13 No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. 14 But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; 15 then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. 16 Do not be deceived, my beloved," is that I see a difference between our cravings and God's gifts. God is not tempted by our own cravings. Once they are acted upon, then it is a sin and sin can lead to spiritual death. (*cont'd*)

We have forty days in which to put ourselves in Jesus' place and to honor him throughout the Lenten season. I think of Luke 4:1-13, where Jesus is tempted by the devil. I see temptation from a couple of different places:

The World: indifference and opposition to God's designs, empty, passing values.

The Flesh: gluttony and sexual immorality, our corrupt inclinations and disordered passions.

The devil: a real personal enemy, a fallen angel—the father of lies.

I now name my own personal temptations so that I can be made whole through the Spirit and salvation of God. They are mainly of the flesh—gluttony and immoral thoughts. I do know my true self in the fact that these temptations are not always acted upon and they do not affect me or my fellows in an adverse way; but I am always aware of them and that I have to be firmly willing to open myself to God and His grace.

Day 33

PRAY

by Wendy Russel

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples." Luke 11:1

When you read the next three verses in this passage from Luke, you will find following what we call The Lord's Prayer, the beloved prayer that has been said in churches around the globe since the first century. Well, I have a confession. For decades, I have found The Lord's Prayer to be lacking in encouragement and inspiration. I know; this is not something I am proud of but if I am honest, and writing this devotional is making me honest, I need to own up to it. Maybe I've repeated it too many times, or found the verbiage outdated or any number of excuses but the truth is, no matter how many different times I have studied it, I have found it lacking.

When I went to seminary in 2015, I had a serious talk with God about not putting me in position to have to write some seventeen-page paper about the significance and power of The Lord's Prayer. I am not good at "faking it" and could not have pulled that off. God is good and kept that promise... at least until my first seminary internship.

That internship found me serving a very small, but spiritually mighty UMC congregation. I met with the church council and pastor to design a set of goals for my internship year which included teaching four different classes. I was so excited to be on this journey with such a gifted pastor and mentor... until she handed me the first book she wanted me to teach. You guessed it! It was all about The Lord's Prayer! God has such a sense of humor when dealing with me!!

That book was *The Prayer Wheel*, by Patton Dodd, Jana Riess and David Van Biema and it changed my life! It describes in detail an ancient prayer practice from the Middle Ages (which was rediscovered by researchers who were looking at a twelfth century manuscript called *Les Enluminures*) and used by religious communities to teach followers how to pray the scriptures. Buried deep, on an inside cover, this lovely graphic wheel places the seven phrases/petitions of The Lord's Prayer as the outermost section, or rim, of the wheel. Moving inward towards the hub of the wheel, it connects each phrase to first, a gift of the Holy Spirit as laid out in Isaiah (wisdom, understanding, fortitude, counsel, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord). Moving inward towards the hub, are seven key events in Christ's life (incarnation, baptism, passion, descent into hell, resurrection, ascension into heaven, day of judgement) and then finally, the Beatitudes were the hub of the wheel.

AT LAST... The Lord's Prayer came to life for me! Illustrated in this fashion, I finally felt a connection. This approach opened up the multivalent meaning of this prayer and pointed to the dynamic, interconnected elements of my life in Christ. This wasn't a book you read... it was a book you DID! The wheel wasn't just an intriguing work of graphic art, it was a roadmap to feasting on "our daily bread" and living fully into the kingdom of God right here on earth. Jeremiah 6:16 says, "Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it and find rest for your soul." May praying The Lord's Prayer this Lent, make you come alive in Christ. AMEN and AMEN!

(In case you would like to try a modern version of The Lord's Prayer, here are some provided by Chandra Benjamin.)

From The New Zealand Prayer Book

Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver, Source of all that is and that shall be, Father and Mother of us all, Loving God, in whom is heaven:

The hallowing of your name echo through the universe! The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world! Your heavenly will be done by all created beings! Your commonwealth of peace and
(cont'd)

freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us. In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.

In times of temptation and testing, strengthen us. From trials too great to endure, spare us. From the grip of all that is evil, free us. For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever. Amen.

By Jim Burklo, ordained United Church of Christ (UCC) pastor, author, and prominent voice in progressive Christianity, known for his work as the retired Senior Associate Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life at the University of Southern California (USC).

Dear One, closer to us than our own hearts, farther from us than the most distant star, you are beyond naming. May your powerful presence become obvious not only in the undeniable glory of the sky, but also in the seemingly base and common processes of the earth.

Give us what we need, day by day, to keep body and soul together, because clever as you have made us, we still owe our existence to you. We recognize that to be reconciled with you, we must live peaceably and justly with other human beings, putting hate and bitterness behind us.

We are torn between our faith in your goodness and our awareness of the evil in your creation, so deliver us from the temptation to despair. Yours alone is the universe and all its majesty and beauty. So it is, Amen.

By Francis Macnab, a prominent Australian clinical psychologist, psychotherapist, and Christian minister; served as the Executive Minister of St Michael's Uniting Church in Melbourne (1971–2016),

Good caring presence within us, around us, and above us; Hold us in a sense of mystery and wonder. Let the fullness of your goodness be within us and around us;

Let all the world know your ways of caring and generosity. May we find we have all we need to meet each day without undue anxiety. Overlook our many stupidities, and help us to release everyone from their stupidities. May we all know that we are accepted.

Strengthen us that we will reach out to the best, always with the faith to rise above the ugly realities of our existence.

And we celebrate the gifts you have given us – the rich kingdom of life's possibilities the power to do good and the triumphs of good and the moments when we have seen the glory and wonder of everything.

You are life's richness. You are life's power. You are life's ultimate meaning – Amen.

Day 34

WILL

by Mark Abe

You cannot serve both God and money. Matthew 6:24

When the Nominating Committee at my church in DC asked me to consider becoming a member of the Board, I was flattered but didn't really have a burning desire to join. I thought it would be dry, a little dull, and I wouldn't understand the financial stuff. But I was flattered and honored when told that the senior pastor had brought up my name...so I prayed about it for a couple weeks. I was willing to do it if God wanted me to say yes for some reason.

I didn't find my heart "strangely warmed," but I didn't get any scary warning signs either, so I decided that God's will was for me to take the plunge and do it in faith.

And what happened? I learned how to understand budgets, I found myself fascinated by all the sausage-making, became President of the Board, ran a groundbreaking stewardship campaign which increased both our donations and our reserve fund, and saw membership increase by thirty percent over my three-year term. Just kidding. No, rather, I found it dry, a little dull, and I didn't understand the financial stuff. And I left DC for Santa Fe two years into my three-year term.

But I'd predicted that the best part of being on the Board would be that I'd get to work with Ginger, our senior pastor, on a regular basis, and we'd get a little closer. And that came true. I'd been in love with her (no, not *that* way) since her first day and had always wanted some way to develop our relationship, and working on church matters together was just the right thing to facilitate trust and friendship.

Do I think that was why God wanted me to join the Board? No. That was a gift borne out of service. I think He wanted me on the Board just to serve. Following the will of God doesn't necessarily mean you will come down off a mountain carrying stone tablets still smoking from His burning finger writing it down for you, your hair ablaze and whitened from His radiance. It might just mean that you quietly do what you discern He wants you to do, with no fanfare and no resulting accolades. I served faithfully, doing my best to (*cont'd*) understand our discussions and voting with as much integrity as I could muster. When I left DC and finished my second year virtually, I got a few nice emails of appreciation, and that was it. And I felt good about it. It is the cry

of my heart to follow You. It is the cry of my heart to be close to You. It is the cry of my heart to follow All of the days of my life.

Feb 18 Day 35
by Diana Loomis

JUDGE

Jesus said, "Don't judge, so that you won't be judged. You'll receive the same judgement you give. Whatever you deal out will be dealt out to you. Why do you see the splinter that's in your brother's or sister's eye but don't notice the log in your own eye?" Matthew 7:1-4, CEV

During the 31 years I served local churches in Missouri, I frequently gave thanks for the scripture, "judge not lest ye be judged." Sometimes folks would come complaining to me about another person's actions like, "Did you see that one of the teenagers wore pajamas and skateboarded to church today?" I would listen and think to myself, "I'm just glad Joe is here!" But I rarely said what I thought. It was only after years of ministry that I learned to say with a twinkle in my eye and a laugh in my voice, "I thank God every day that I was not called to judge!"

There is a Cheyenne proverb that fits Jesus' meaning well, "Do not judge your neighbor until you walk two moons in his moccasins." Over and over in scripture, Jesus calls us to have compassion for others, to empathize with their situations, to work to right wrongs, to speak out when injustice occurs and to make God's difference day in and day out. Compassion is hard work, but we do not do it alone! What if we asked God to help us make compassion our spiritual practice as we walk through this Holy Week?

Day 36

STRANGER

by Ralph Cole and Wendy Russel

I was a stranger and you welcomed me. Matthew 25:35

This reflection is a joint effort between Ralph and Wendy because life gets in the way sometimes and you need to combine forces to get things done. Ralph provided the scriptural framework and direction while Wendy expanded the narrative. This approach seems to be quite apropos given what is going on in our country at this time. Cooperation. Support. Encouragement. Searching for shared meaning. Engagement with people regardless of how well we might know one another.

Read through the following scripture references and see what stands out to you. What are the similarities? What are the distinctions? I see requests for help, understanding, compassion and in some cases action.

Genesis 23:4 *I am a foreigner and stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead.*

Psalms 119:19 *I am a stranger on earth; do not hide your commands from me.*

Psalms 39:12 *Hear my prayer, LORD, listen to my cry for help; do not be deaf to my weeping. I dwell with you as a foreigner, a stranger, as all my ancestors were.*

Hebrews 11:9 *By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.*

The following scriptures may appear to contain more negative connotations or warnings when interfacing with a stranger but as Christians we are not called to a life of comfort and caution. We are called to be courageous in Christ.

John 10:5 *But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.*

Proverbs 11:15 *Whoever puts up security for a stranger will surely suffer, but whoever refuses to shake hands in pledge is safe.*

In this final set of scriptures, we hear Jesus pushing our definitions and concepts of the "strangers" in our midst.

Matthew 25:38 *When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?*

Matthew 25:43 *I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'*

Do you see these as commands from our Lord and Savior? What daily practice should we engage in that would remind us to orient our hearts and minds so that we are able to recognize strangers, including those who we know, may just feel estranged. At some point, we are all the stranger.

Day 37**BETRAY****by Ed Rector***Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me. Matthew 26:21*

Upon entering Jerusalem for the Passover Celebration Jesus knows that one of his trusted followers, one that has spent his days and night with Jesus, traveled on dusty, rocky paths on foot, relying on the hospitality of strangers, will betray him. How can that be? Eventually all other followers will desert him.

The author of this Lenten study asks us if it is possible that betrayals could lead us to become more passionate followers of Christ?

The betrayal of one's closest allies, friends, family is possibly the most painful experiences one can endure. This is one experience that will challenge our call to forgive.

But what of our own betrayal of our Christian values? To love our neighbors when it is easier to turn away, stay silent, while our neighbors are mistreated or marginalized with unjust laws. When we spend our money on material products that are produced by child labor, by coerced underpaid workers in unsafe factories. What of our own withdrawal of civic participation hoping that 'someone else will take care of that.' Are these examples betrayals of our Christian values?

These are the betrayals that I struggle with. Personal betrayal can occur and be acutely painful and unexpected. But my betrayal using my voice, intent, and actions can be very powerful betrayals to my ideal of being a faithful follower of Christ's examples. Lord, help me with this call to pray for the discernment to know when I am betraying my Saviors' teachings.

Day 38**PRUNE****by Tom Whitson***The Father removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. John 15:2*

When fruit trees are pruned every year, they become more productive by ridding the tree of energy-consuming branches that bear little or no fruit. We are like a fruit tree and must evaluate the things we do that consume a lot of our energy but accomplish little or nothing. For example, losing your temper when driving and saying or doing things you later regret. Maybe taking a defensive driving class might be a better use of your time. When we make getting angry a habit we can prune away that habit and be a better person.

Another habit to prune is eliminating negative thinking and being too judgmental and critical. We can replace those bad habits by empathizing with what might be happening to the other person that we don't know about. Replacing negative criticism with positive good thoughts results in good feelings about ourselves and others.

Selfishness is another area we need to prune. Sometimes we fail to share our resources and talents with others. It is easy to give a little money but more important to share our time. Little things that show caring and thoughtfulness mean so much to others. Sending a card of greeting, sympathy, happy birthday or just to say hello shows you are thinking of them.

Pruning is necessary for making trees more productive. In people pruning is also necessary to make us more productive Christians. Unlike trees we can cultivate new habits to replace what we prune. It is up to us to evaluate where we are annually and prune those bad habits.

Day 39**GETHSEMANE****by Russ Hall**

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee and began to be grieved and agitated.³⁸ Then he said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want but what you want." Matthew 26:36-39

Jesus did not ask to avoid the pain to escape responsibility, but rather to show the intensity of the struggle before submitting completely. He teaches that while it is not wrong to ask for a change in circumstances, faith often requires accepting the "cup" rather than asking for it to pass. Jesus models ultimate surrender in Gethsemane, praying, "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." Facing immense agony, He models that true strength lies in submitting personal desire to God's higher purpose. This verse invites believers to trust God's plan, even when it requires walking through painful circumstances. May we allow our own Gethsemanes to become opportunities for us to renew our trust and confidence in God's purpose for our lives.

Prayer: Father, I know the path I am on is difficult. My heart struggles, and I want this pain to pass. But like Jesus, I choose to surrender my desires to You. Give me the strength to drink the cup, knowing Your will is best. Not my will, but Yours be done. Amen.

Day 40**DIE****by Matt Bridges**

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. John 12:24

This day in the life of the church is known as "Holy Saturday." We go from "Good Friday," to "Holy Saturday," to "Easter Sunday." This passage of scripture comes from some of Jesus' final teachings and preparations for his disciples. I wonder if the disciples thought about these teachings wherever they found themselves on that day after Jesus' death on a cross. Had any of it stuck? Yes, they had faith. How could they not after all they had seen and experienced? But did they really think the final teaching, that death was not the end, was really true?

To echo the sentiments of our author for the devotional, life really does come out of death for all of creation. In our case, we experience the death of self in dedicating our lives to God through Christ, and then experience the death of our physical self. Also in our case, we experience new life, a resurrection, twice. We die to self and become alive in Christ. And we die to this world and the limits of our creation, to arise into eternal life and glory and rest. As you approach easter—resurrection Sunday—tomorrow, may you feel a sense of your own resurrection, a new resolve to live for Christ, wherever that life in Christ takes you. Take time to be holy today. Take time to think of your own holiness and what needs to die in you to be able to experience resurrection.