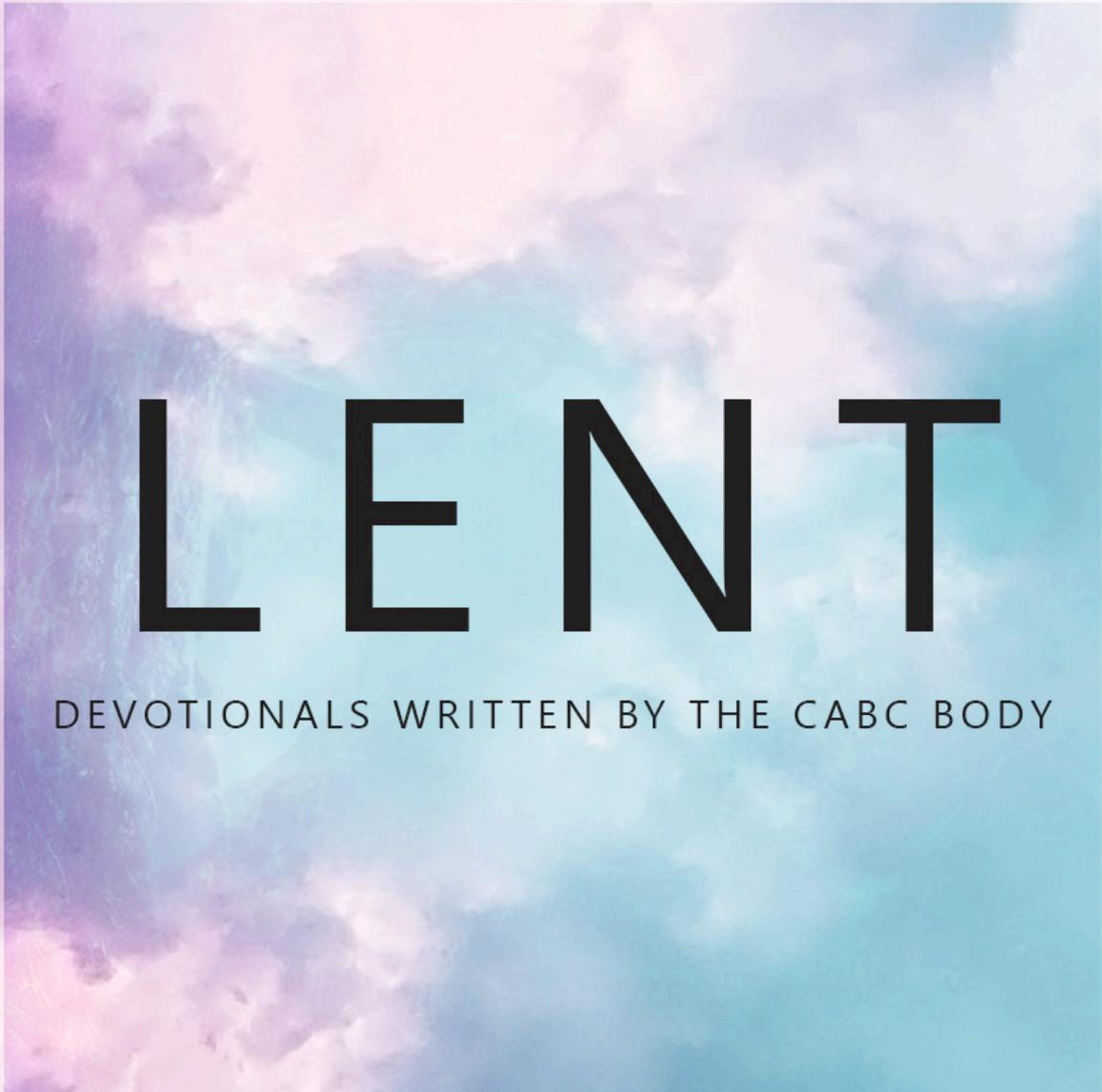


CHRIST'S AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCH



LENT

DEVOTIONALS WRITTEN BY THE CABC BODY



EASTER 2021

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. (Hebrews 12:1, 2)

The list of ways the COVID pandemic has impacted our lives in 2020 is longer than most of us want to consider. One unexpected benefit, however, has been the development of new, creative ways to share the events of CABC. A recent project is producing a virtual "Getting to Know CABC" class. We started with interviews of people who were involved at the beginning. Thus far we have videos of conversations with Lucille Kennedy and Pastor Bob and Janet Coddington, who participated in the initial home Bible study group. Pastors Ralph Eib, David Dunn, and Bob Coddington were recorded on a Zoom gathering as well. All of these interactions are being edited and we are working to make them available for everyone.

Through the process of this project, I have been able to view the video from Mrs. Kennedy and the above scripture passage came to mind. The writer of Hebrews 12 is referring to the great cloud of Old Testament characters just described in chapter 11. I am reminded that each of us, as followers of Christ, will see additional faces in that group. We stand on the shoulders of faithful servants who preceded us. Many of us had praying parents and grandparents. People we may never know committed time, money, and rooms in their homes to bring the message of Jesus to their neighbors. The ministry of CABC was born out of just such a group. Who are the faces you see in that great cloud? Have you thanked God for their presence in your life and the role they played in pointing you to Him? In this Lenten season is there someone you want to thank?

At the end of the conversation with Mrs. Kennedy, I asked her to share any advice for those attending CABC today from those beginning years. Her words, "Keep your mind on the purpose," echo with the words from Hebrews 12 above, "fixing our eyes on Jesus." Regardless of the circumstances that challenge our plans (and there were many described by those early CABC pioneers), a clear purpose will keep us moving in His direction. As Mrs. Kennedy shared, "We were there to bring people to Jesus."

We continue that mission today.

Greetings from a charter member of C.A.B.C.!

During this season of life that we call Lent (Springtime), our hearts and thoughts turn to the celebration of Jesus' resurrection from death and the tomb. These forty days, for many, have become a period of time for fasting and prayer as we remember what Jesus has done for us when He died to redeem us from our sins. Our Sovereign God (the all-powerful, all-knowing, everywhere present, all-the-time God) would not leave His Son, Jesus, in the tomb, and so with thankful hearts we rejoice as we celebrate His resurrection at Easter time.

Jesus taught many things to many people while he was here. He gave us a new commandment to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. He taught us how to pray, how to live, and how to die (Matthew 5, 6, 7). He also said He would come back again and He gave us signs to be aware of His coming (Matthew 24, 25). Jesus also said, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you, and surely I am with you to the very end of the age."
(Matthew 28:19).

So then, knowing that we have such a wonderful Savior and Lord, we can be assured that as we go through each troubling event in our lives, He will walk with us through each rough valley and carry us through every dark storm. Then He has promised one day to come again as King of Kings and take us to be with Him for Eternity! How can we not be rejoicing that Jesus lives?

He lives, TODAY!

Our Father, may our hearts rejoice, our minds remember,
and our lives respond to your abiding care, NOW!
In the loving, living name of Jesus,
Amen

There are many technical components, programs and wires that make our “regular” (as in now it’s a regular thing but wasn’t before Covid) livestreaming services possible each week. There are the big and obvious parts like the camera, computer and soundboard, and then the equally needed-but-less-visibly-obvious-to-the-average-passerby parts like the computer programs and connecting wires to make Big And Expensive Tech Equipment #1 talk to Big And Expensive Tech Equipment #2 and #3. But even smaller and more in depth than that, there are all the specific settings and preferences within each program or machine that have to be set just right in order for it all to work. So even if all the big, fancy equipment is on, plugged in, and technically working, if one tiny, seemingly mundane setting in the program isn’t set just right... well... it just ain’t going to work.

The Body of Christ is just the same. There are the obvious parts: the pastors, missionaries, and Christian education teachers who are more “seen” in the Body. They are the obvious ambassadors of Christ as their job is, generally speaking, about the Church. But we all are ambassadors for Christ, no matter our job. Whether you work in the warehouse of a factory, the kitchen of a restaurant, or are a stay-at-home mom (guess which one I am?!), you are an ambassador of Christ to those around you. I heard someone say once that you are the greatest example of Christ that someone will ever know. Wow. That’s kind of a big concept (and a little bit of pressure). Even if I only am “working” with those living in my house, how I act as a Christian and how I live out my life as a follower of Christ is going to impact their lives and their decisions as additional followers of Christ.

I invite you to read 1 Corinthians 12 today. This is a commonly known section of scripture that describes the Body of Christ as being like the human body. There are many different parts – some big, some small and some that are seemingly unseen – but each plays a vital role in the body and no part is unneeded (except maybe that darn appendix). And much like my tech equipment illustration above, if one seemingly small part isn’t connected right, then the more obvious parts are not going to work right somewhere down the road.

So if you have days when you feel like you are just a “small” part in the Body, I assure you that it doesn’t mean your job and connection isn’t just as important to the health of the Body as a whole. I may not be the big and noticeable HD camera that is filming His message, but I sure am one of the parts that helps get the live feed through the TV.

“But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”
(1 Corinthians 12:18-19, 27)

"In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to
his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father."

(Philippians 2:5-11)

From the setting of our mid-winter's kitchen, I said to Vicki, "Today I'll devote my time to moving some firewood." Just then, I was reminded of our yearly Lenten Devotional here at CABC and realized my contribution to it.

Three decades ago, the five acres we built on had numerous trees growing on the fringes of the property. Since then, many more trees were planted and additional trees have grown up on their own. In most years, we've been able to supplement our firewood needs—a woodstove and a fire bowl. I can still remember how, early on, the thick understory of wild vines and brambles had caused me to recall, "The ground will produce thorns and thistles for you." (Genesis 3:18)

But today I found myself curiously looking for Scripture in reference to firewood. It was interesting to me that most Old Testament references have all to do with burnt offerings and sacrifices. It impresses me to understand how great the need for firewood must have been—firewood for the kitchens and the altars of the Temple(s). It also strikes me to see how precious and few are any New Testament references to firewood. Indeed, they are practically nil. Why such little mention of what was probably a commodity?

In Psalm 40: 6-8, we are given passage to the heart of the matter of firewood, not for altar fire, woodstoves or fire bowls, but of Priestly Duty:

...Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,
But my ears you have pierced; but a body you prepared for me;
With burnt offerings and sin offerings
You did not require; you were not pleased...

The Author of Hebrews repeats David the Psalmist/Prophet in Hebrews 10:5-7, and further presents all that is entailed within that Chapter. Until at last it culminates in explaining how, because of the obedience of Christ our High Priest, there is no more need of firewood. There is simply no place or function for it in the Temple. Hence, no direct reference to firewood in the New Testament.

Dear Father, as we focus this day on your provision for our need of a priest, we are fervent in prayer for our remembrance of the Blood and Body of Christ, who is our High Priest forever. For it is in that blood, not of bulls and goats, that we find the Comfort and Hope of Forgiveness. This season, approaching Easter Morning, cause our recall of your Word O God, our Salvation. Amen.

Greetings everyone, from your favorite D.R. coconut friend, Carlos! You may have seen me on social media a time or two since I've returned with your D.R. Mission Team almost a year ago. And most likely, you haven't seen me without my favorite instrument – its almost like we're physically stuck together or something!

Ironically, a little known fact about me is my favorite type of music. Being a coconut with such a hard exterior, I often enjoy a style of music that can break through this hard shell and really reach me in my inner most being. Which is why I typically prefer the instrumental and vocal stylings of heavy metal rock music.

One of my most favorite of songs is called, "The Finisher" by the band Oh Sleeper. This song's lyrics are essentially a monologue of God giving warning to Satan, stating that He is the ultimate power and authority in heaven and on earth, and He will not stand by and let His children be subject to his evil anymore. It is essentially the final, victorious battle of God over Satan. And it is performed in a way so that you can really sense God's passionate love for His people and anger towards the continuous evil of this world.

I once heard a speaker, actually from this RightNow Media resource I've heard Pastor Todd and Pastor Josh talk about so much, who stated something along these lines: God's love and devotion for us, and His anger towards anything that would seek to turn us away from Him, are the two sides of the same coin.

We are God's children. We know of His unconditional love, grace, mercy, and justice for us. But His justice is also one that cannot let evil go unpunished. As Revelations reads, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God; because His judgements are true and righteous." (19:1-2) Just as we earthly fathers will fight for and defend our children against anything that seeks to do harm, so too will our Heavenly Father fight for us and bring about His justice on our behalf.

This song (though perhaps not for the faint of heart to hear) reminds me of God's power and that He is ultimately in control. And while we may face sufferings, trials, and temptations, He has not left us to face them alone and He will rise victorious in the end. Proverbs 21:31 reminds us, "the horse is prepared for the day of battle, but victory belongs to the Lord." So, too, let us take heart and remain steadfast in His love for us, putting on His armor each day and trusting that He will bring about His glory in the end.

"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

"Do not be anxious about anything." That phrase has followed me this year—plagued me in some ways. Sometimes I have no idea what God is trying to teach me. Other times I feel like everywhere I turn there are flashing neon signs pointing to the area of my life He is working on. For 2020 it was "be anxious for nothing." You may already know this about me but in case you don't...I am a control freak. And what this past year has taught me is that I am NOT in control. Not even a smidge.

One of the things I love doing most is buying a new planner and filling out all the events for the year to come. (Yes, I am a nerd.) I still prefer paper to digital and Josh laughs because I need three different calendars. (My yearly planner, my monthly desk calendar, and my weekly calendar on the fridge. Have I mentioned I have an issue with control?) When the pandemic hit and we had the initial two-week shutdown, I remember crossing all the things off my calendar and then gazing at future months wondering if anything that I had planned for the year would happen.

Throughout 2020, I kept coming back to these verses: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6,7) Not knowing what is coming makes me super anxious. But the more I have come back to these verses, the more I have realized that whether my calendar is filled out or not, I don't actually know what the future holds.

This is both absolutely terrifying (as a control freak) and wonderfully freeing (as a child of God). Proverbs 16:9 says, "In his heart a man plans his course but the Lord determines his steps." In my small, human wisdom, I think that I have everything planned, sorted, and in its appropriate place. Then life happens and I realize that my tiny human perspective is far out-stripped by my God's all-knowing one.

Pre-2020, I had fooled myself into thinking that I could hold everything together. Now I live with the knowledge that I can plan, but it is ultimately up to God what happens. I don't need to be anxious, even though I don't know what the future holds, because I do know the God who does. He has complete control and He wants what is best for me. (Which ultimately is to give Him control.)

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

(Matthew 6:25-27, 33-34)

"Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me.'" (Matthew 16:24)

There's a passage in C.S. Lewis's book, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, in which Susan, speaking of Aslan the Lion, asks "Is he -- quite safe?" In this allegorical story, Aslan is the King of Narnia and, as such, represents God.

And so the question stands: "Is he safe?" Is our God safe? We like to think so. We have numerous songs, devotions, and sermons talking of being safe in His arms and resting safe in Him. While those things are true, it's also true that sometimes following Him isn't safe. Sometimes following Him means going out of our comfort zone and talking to someone we wouldn't normally talk to. Other times it might mean turning the other cheek and not retaliating in an attack, leading to personal physical harm. Many have followed our Lord and have endured hardship and death.

Jesus was led like a lamb to the slaughter. He had the power and means to command legions of angels to put an end to everything he was going through, but He didn't. He chose what was most unsafe, to endure the beatings and whippings, to endure the suffering of the cross, and to ask His heavenly father to forgive those that injured and then killed him. Is He safe? In Mr. Beaver's reply to Susan, Lewis answers that question better than I ever could. "Safe? ...Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow Him. May we be willing to follow him that far.

I think if I hear that phrase one more time, I'm going to throw up. It was inspiring the first 200 times we heard it but now it's one of those phrases that you want banished from the earth, like "Y2K", "reach out", or "transparency".

So. I've decided that from now on when I hear that phrase, instead of getting angry, I'm going to let it remind me to think of the things that I AM certain of. Like, my health is good, my job is great, my home is safe, my family is healthy, my friends are the best, and my salvation is secure.

What's certain in these uncertain times? No matter what is happening down here, God is still on His throne! Jesus is alive! He is risen! He'll be back! I am glory-bound! God is in control.

Wait. What do you mean, God is in control? If that's the case, why is all of this happening? Because we live on earth, not in Heaven. Because Adam and Eve ate the fruit. Because He gives us free will. Because it's a fallen world but fortunately, we're falling right into His hands. (That's helpful only if we let Him catch us!) I am certain that whatever I go through, He is beside me. He laughs with me and He cries with me. He is ALWAYS there for me. And you. He will use our choices, good and bad, to bring us closer to Him, and to bring Him glory. There may be pain along the way, but with God in your heart, it will always end well.

Be aware of what is happening in the world today. Don't hide from it or agonize over it. I have memorized and lean on Philippians 4:6-7, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace that passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

I also find comfort in Romans 15:30: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

No, "this world is not my home, I'm just passing through."

And of that, I am certain!

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

(Romans 5:1-8)

You Must Not Eat Bats

Terry Hess

March 1

After a year like 2020, we need to have a little humor in our lives. While not trying to diminish the severity of what a lot of people went through (and still are going through), I think it is important to be able to smile and even laugh out loud once in a while.

Humor is described as the ability to see or show the funny or amusing side of things.

In a search through the Bible, humor is used more than eighty times. Who but God could use a talking donkey to get His point across (Numbers 22:21-34)? So I hope these few bits of humor make you smile today.

A girl was visiting her friend who had acquired two new dogs. She asked, "What are their names?" The friend replied, "This one is Rolex and that one is Timex." The girl replied, "Who ever heard of someone naming their dogs those names?" "What's wrong with it?" said the friend, "They are watch dogs."

Why did the man put his car in the oven?
He wanted a hot rod.

Why did Humpty Dumpty have a great fall?
To make up for a bad summer.

What did the left eye say to the right eye?
Between you and me, there is something that smells.

What is brown and sticky?
A stick.

My prayer is that, just for a moment, you found reason to smile.

(Read Deuteronomy 14:18 to understand the title!)

I have struggled with writing this Lenten Devotional. I mean, REALLY struggled. I think I started and stopped at least seven times, woke up in the middle of the night multiple times, and jotted down side-bar notes while supposedly taking notes at a staff meeting (sorry—not sorry) when an idea was triggered. It seems like I just can't land on a topic, theme, or point that I want to make, or, more rightly, that I perceive God is wanting me to make. Nothing seemed to fit.

It occurs to me that life, and perhaps more so the last year, has been a lot like this. Starts and stops, interruptions, detours, derailments. Times of trying to listen but just not hearing. Things not fitting properly.

And yet...

And yet, if nothing else, with all that happened in 2020 and all that is to come in 2021 and future years, at the very bottom of it all, God is faithful. He has been faithful, He is faithful, He will be faithful. In all things, in all circumstances, in all situations, He is faithful.

One more time: He. Is. Faithful.

No matter the storms, no matter the changes, no matter the sorrow, no matter the joys, no matter the quiet...God is faithful.

Nothing added, nothing extra, nothing else but, in the fullness of the promise of His Own Word, God Is Faithful.

Lord, in the midst of life, help us to deeply, without question or reservation, know Your faithfulness to Your people. May we move in confidence, serving You as we step forward in faith. Amen.

“Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father
There is no shadow of turning with Thee.
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.

Great is Thy faithfulness, great is Thy faithfulness
Morning by morning new mercies I see.
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.”
“Great Is Thy Faithfulness”, Thomas Obadiah Chisholm

What Was That Conversation About? Herman Crawford

March 3

I have been reading Francis Schaffer's book *True Spirituality* (copyright 1971). I think this is about my third time reading this particular book. That is unusual for me. Normally when I read a book for study purposes, I take notes and then use the notes for future reference rather than read the book again. But *True Spirituality* seems to be a little different for me. Some might say that the book is deep, has a lot of substance, etc. That is probably a very good description because each time I read this book, I find something which I feel is key but had missed during the previous reads.

What has caught my attention in the reading thus far are a couple of things that have to do with the death of Christ. Schaffer asks the question: "How central was Christ's death for our redemption?" In the book of Luke, the event of Jesus up on the Mount of Transfiguration meeting with Moses and Elijah is recorded. Now I know that I have read this before but it is one of those passages which I read, but didn't really READ. In Chapter 9:30-31, Luke writes, "And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah, who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure, which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem."

Scripture does not tell us how long Jesus and His disciples were on the mountain but it must have been for some period of time. The disciples, as the disciples did in the Garden when Jesus was arrested, became tired and were overcome with sleep. Schaffer's question is being answered while they slept. Jesus, Moses and Elijah were discussing "His departure." This was not about leaving the Mount, it was not about leaving Jerusalem or Galilee or any other Israeli town or city. It was about leaving this earth for His place at the right hand of God the Father. But I think it was even more than that. I think maybe it was about how the departure process would happen. The arrest, the trial, the carrying of the Cross, the crucifixion, what took place during the time of His death, the burial and finally the resurrection. Essentially, the Easter story, but in the kind of detail that I cannot not even imagine. How important His departure must have been to spend time in this kind of detailed conversation about it – and probably a good deal of time if the disciples slept through it. Francis Schaffer points out that the death of Christ was central to the work of Christ. The prophets spoke of it in the Old Testament and here we have Jesus, Moses and Elijah talking about it in the New Testament.

So then, perhaps each of you should read the story of the transfiguration. Answer the question for yourselves. What would your/our redemption have looked like without the "departure" of Christ? What do you think Jesus, Moses and Elijah might have been discussing in their conversation?

Father God, thank you for loving us. Thank you for giving what you loved most, your Son Jesus, for us. We thank you for the power of the resurrection, which now enables us to join you, both now and in eternity. Amen.

So if you've read my prior devotional, you will recall my rough description of all the components that need to come together to make our now-regularly scheduled Sunday morning livestream. When all the technical parts are set up correctly and working together, you see and hear God's Word coming through. But if there is a misconnection of equipment or two tech pieces aren't communicating properly, well, the end result is not as good.

Perhaps you've seen the end result when all the parts don't work together. It's a video with no sound, sound but no video, or just a big blank screen. It's VERY obvious when something isn't working.

2020 was a year that tried to divide, separate, and destroy the Body of Christ. Racial tensions, political tensions, Covid tensions, and divisiveness all around. But as Christians and true followers of Christ, we cannot give into this pressure to divide and hurt one another. That's not what Christ did when he walked this earth. And that is not Him at work now. We need to be perfectly aware that what divides us and seeks to tear us apart is not the work of Christ, it is the work of the Devil. And Satan has had some pretty easy work pitting us against each other this past year.

Instead, we need to unite first as believers, if we want to bring peace and the rest of the world to Christ. Regardless of our opinions, affiliations and just straight up differences, we are all equal in Christ. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. And if we truly want to show Christ and His love to the rest of this world, it starts right here with us and how we interact with those around us. Because when we are connected and work together, God's message is broadcast clearly and streamed to all those around us. When we don't, it is very obvious that something isn't working.

I'd like to say that I was not one of those adding to the divisiveness of 2020. But I don't think that is true. I can say that God has been working on me in this area and I hope to be a better example of His love and grace in 2021. Ephesians 4 has crossed my path a few times in the last couple months and I can't help but think how true those words are for us (me included) today. I'd invite you to read through it as well and pray for God to grant you patience, grace, and His calming spirit to guide you through the rest of this year.

"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. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."
(Ephesians 4:14-16)

When we left for Spring break, everything was as it should be. My books for classes were piled on the table in my office, ready to be quickly grabbed as I would dart back to the classroom in a week. A stack of papers, ready for grading, was piled on the corner of my desk. There would be plenty of time to take care of that when we returned. It had been a long semester already and I was looking forward to a little break. My students were certainly ready for one. A number of them had even used one of their unexcused absences to head home a day early to get a jumpstart on some much-needed rest and relaxation. Their rooms were left much like my office, their books piled in a corner, their clothes in the closet, their laptops on their desks.

After teaching for over two decades, this was a familiar pattern. One that marked that the ending of another school year was fast approaching. One more opportunity for students and faculty alike to catch their breath before the onslaught of final papers, final projects, and final exams would consume our time and our attention. We would blink and it would be Easter and blink again and I would be donning graduation robes to mark another successful completion of the school year. The Spring semester goes by in a flash!

We had no way of knowing that this spring break ritual would not look like previous years. There was just no warning. At least not one we had paid attention to inside our protective bubble of campus life. Little did we know that those offices and dorm rooms would stand, like time capsules, for months before anyone would reenter them. Little did we know that for some of us, the hasty "goodbye" and "see you after break" would be the last time we would be in a class together. Little did we know that everything was about to change... forever.

It was shortly after we got home that the news reports started. COVID-19? What was that? Somewhere, halfway around the world, a maelstrom was forming.

That sounds awful. Thank goodness we are safe here. Truth be told, I still couldn't point out Wuhan, China on a map if my life depended on it. The news seemed to be too awful and too far removed all at the same time.

"What do you mean they quarantined an entire city? They shut the whole thing down?"

"Thank goodness we live in America; nothing like that would ever happen here." "We have the best hospitals and medical centers in the world!"

"The American people would never stand for it."

An email came that week from the Provost's office. Our week of Spring break would be extended into two as we monitored the situation as the Governor worked with the CDC to determine the best ways to keep everyone safe. Students and faculty were to refrain from returning to campus. The college was effectively closed.

An extra week of spring break? We rarely even got snow days. This was going to be awesome! The amount of work I could catch up on... I mean, the amount of Netflix I could catch up on!

Governor's orders,. Shelter at home order in place. Restaurants closed. Movie theatres closed. Businesses closed. Schools closed. Churches... closed. Come on... it's Easter!

50 percent capacity. 20 percent capacity. 10 percent capacity. Everyone wear masks. Stay at least six feet apart. Don't visit with friends... extended family... your parents. Close the nursing homes. No visitors in hospitals. What do you mean we are running out of ventilators... masks... hand sanitizer... antibacterial soap... Lysol wipes... toilet paper?!?!? This can't happen here! Can it?

Somewhere those papers still sat, ungraded. The books were still piled in eager anticipation of being snatched up again. Empty chairs waited at empty desks. Empty classrooms sat in silence. The gaze of students was replaced by flickering screens... laptops for those that had brought them home...

smartphones for others. No textbooks... they were still locked in dorm rooms. No library books for compiling research; they were locked in a shuttered library. No graduation ceremony. No robes. This will certainly be over by the Fall. Right? God, you've got this... right???

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 do not 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." As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. (James 4:13-16)

When things are going well or at least when they are predictable, it is easy to believe the lie that we are in control. It's easy to live our lives without much thought towards God. We make our plans, we set our paths, and we assume that we have control over small to monumental decisions in our lives. We've got this! We have this all under control.

However, this control is an illusion. It can be disrupted in a moment...even by a microscopic virus. Then, all of the power of all of the governments of the world falter and our weakness and inadequacy is revealed.

As James so adeptly points out, living our lives without recognizing God's lordship or His will is sinful living. In a country where rugged individualism is coupled with a "pull myself up by my own bootstraps" mentality, it is easy to fall comfortably into this lie. I wish that it didn't take a global pandemic to remind me that He is in control. He alone has the power over my life and over His creation. My sense of control is only an illusion and my belief in that illusion is fostered by my pride, my arrogance, and own sinful sense of self-importance. My strength lies not in my wrestling for control but in my releasing that

control to the only One that has the power and authority to wield it. Indeed, this is what the Bible teaches us, that our freedom is found in submitting to the authority of God, to His purposes, and His will.

The things of this world that shock us are no surprise to our God. The powers that bring us to our knees are no match for our God. The evil that deceives us flees before our God. The fears that hold us captive shatter before our God. And the peace that eludes us is ever-present with our God.

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39)

"If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing."

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."

"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

(1 Corinthians 13)

This has been a tough year of separation and new normals and unexpected events. We can choose to look at all we lost, how things have changed, and how much we wish things would go back to the way they were. I find that thinking that way only brings about more heartache and stress. We can find good in the bad and bring glory to God through it all. That is our purpose in life after all.

Jesus came to live as a man to show us how to live a life for God, how to love, how to turn from evil, and how to forgive. He came to save us from our sins and from an eternity without God. He came to bridge the relationship that was lost with our Heavenly Father and to be what God sees when He looks at us instead of the ugly sin that is in our lives. But He came most importantly to bring God glory!

All would have been in vain if the glory was not given to God! In all we do in this life, be it raising children, cleaning the house, working at our jobs, or just going through the day to day, it should all be for God's Glory.

I remember overhearing my girls when they were little telling someone that "Mommy loves to clean!" To be completely honest, I love how it feels and looks when things are clean, but I can't say that I totally enjoy the process. However, a long time ago, I decided that I was going to do my best to do all things for the glory of God. It made everything more enjoyable, so I guess it showed even in housework! Do I get it right 100% of the time? Absolutely not! I must ask for forgiveness and adjust my attitude just like every other human being on this planet but I am reminded of the promise I made to give Him the glory in everything. After all, He is the reason that I live and breathe, love, and have all I have in my life, the good and the bad!

God is so deserving of glory! It was not meant for us but all for Him! Let us all do everything, big and small, for His glory and follow the example of Jesus!

"Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen." (Philippians 4:20)

I went to my "memory bank" to see if I could make a withdrawal from my many deposits of these many years. This is what I found and I am praying it is as helpful in your life as it has been in mine.

I had always been somewhat glad that every time we went out with the "A" we were able to get home without calling upon the tow truck, until that one time when I used everything I knew to use and the "A" just would not go any further. I was less than a mile from home and nothing I did would get it started. My last resort was to call upon my son-in-law. He had a trailer that would be able to get the "A" home where I could determine the cause. At home, I was able to narrow it down to the distributor. It was shorting out because of a fifteen-cent fiber washer. Can you believe it? A fifteen-cent item could bring this auto to a halt!

I remember some mighty big oak trees that were brought down by little ants.

Yes, just one sin can fester and bring down a mighty fine Christian believer if we leave it unattended.

At this Lenten Season, we need to be reminded of why Christ came: to set us free from our sin. Maybe we ought to attend to that now, asking Him to separate us from our sin. He will do just that; scripture says He will remove our transgressions from us, as far as the east is from the west. (Psalm 103:12)

"But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleans us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:7-9)

Just something to think about as we travel through Lent this year.

May our Lord bless you and keep you in the palm of His hands in the days ahead.

I officially became a Christian about twelve years ago. I say this only to explain that I still consider myself young and somewhat childish in my walk with Christ and even in my theological understandings. I consider myself blessed to say that I have not faced huge trials or temptations in my walk thus far but I have certainly seen God work on me and in me these past several years nonetheless. One of the more recent understandings I've had with God came about four years ago when my husband, Ethan, started working third shift. Each night, there I would be. In my house. In the country. Alone.

As a woman, maybe the fear of being alone at night is a little more heightened (or the fear of not being alone I should say). A few months into this new living situation I started to have issues going to sleep because my mind would start playing the "What If" and "What Would Happen" games. What if someone broke in? What if someone tried to hurt me and I couldn't get help? What would happen if God, knowing my fears, used these scenarios to try to test me and make me confront my fears? Sad to say this went on for a least a week or two. And more than the first two thoughts, the last one troubled me the most. What if God let something happen to me?

I still refer to this moment as my "heart-to-heart" moment with Him because it was one of the first times that I just laid it all out before Him and then heard His response back to me almost instantaneously. I told him my fears. I told Him I couldn't handle the idea of having to face that kind of a test from Him. I mean, Job was tested pretty harshly, right? Abraham too. Heck, Jesus was tempted right out of the waters of baptism. Scripture even tell us we'll face trials and temptations. I'm not sure I would do so well. And then I heard his gentle reminder... "But I am good".

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him..." (Romans 8:28)

"The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works." (Psalm 145:9)

"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning." (James 1:17)

"Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him." (Psalm 34:8)

I slept fine for the next year or so until my husband moved to first shift again (and then I didn't sleep for like three months, but that was due to a newborn baby and is a whole other devotional for another time). Not to say I didn't have the late-night thoughts creep in every now and then but I could rest in His promise and faithfulness. Why?

Because God does not seek to cause us harm. He does not seek to hurt us. He does not just sit around waiting to "get us" and then ask why we didn't trust him. He is good. He is loving. He desires for us to draw near to him but he calls us gently and without brute force. He knows all of our thoughts, our fears, our worries and temptations, yet he does not use those against us for his own gain. He seeks out the good. He uses our good. He works for our good. He is GOOD.

Again, I consider myself young in my walk with Christ so perhaps this isn't as revelatory for some, but this was just an amazing realization for me. I felt my worry lifted and my fear diminished. Because I love and serve and trust in a God who faithful and good.

"In peace I will lie down and sleep,
for you alone, Lord,
make me dwell in safety."
(Psalm 4:8)

I started playing golf about 15 years ago and was quickly captivated by the game. It's the scenic beauty of each course, the chance to spend time with family and friends, and the challenge of hitting a small white ball with little more than a thin stick – all of these make it an enjoyable game to play. For most of my golfing life, I have been able to get out to play only a few times per year. But recently I have had the opportunity to play more often, prompted by my kids taking an interest in the game. I love seeing them get excited to be out on the course and enjoy the extra quality time as we learn the game together.

These extra trips to the course and time playing with the kids have helped me realize something: the ball never takes the same path from the tee box to the cup. No matter the skill level of the golfer, every time you play there's a unique set of shots, club choices, and ball placements used to finish each hole.

This is like our path to a relationship with God. Everyone has his or her own faith journey – not one is the exact same! Some believers attended church from birth and accepted Him at a young age and for others it was much later in life that they found salvation. Some have lived lives they were not proud of when they came to Him. Consider the tax collector from Luke 18: 13-14.

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner'. I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luke 18:13-14)

In this parable, the tax collector knew he wasn't worthy but came begging for mercy. Even though he had a sinful past, this man could still honor God and receive forgiveness from Him. If you're struggling with something in your history and worrying that you're not good enough for God – DON'T! Jesus came for all of us and no matter the steps you have taken in your life He will welcome you with open arms. Or going back to the golf comparison...I can hit a terrible shot off the tee, or overshoot the green, or land in multiple bunkers on a hole – but no matter how many strokes it takes, I can always finish the hole and put the ball in the cup! If you're a golfer, think about that the next time you play a round – the path may be clean, or it may be messy, but it's always unique!

"And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?" (Luke 18:7)

According to the scriptures, the last teachings of Jesus were made in parables. This could have happened as a result of the unbelief of the people and the opposition of the scribes and Pharisees.

In order to understand the parables, we must have an attitude of humility, a heart willing to be changed and to learn. In Luke 18:1-8, we have the opportunity to read a parable full of teachings, a judge dealing with a persistent widow who apparently suffered a damage from someone else and needed justice.

According to the law of that time, women could not demand justice in a court but Jesus introduces this figure as a way to teach us that we must persist in prayer, no matter how difficult the situation may seem to be.

God's grace and His justice are available to anyone who comes to Him, male or female. Finally, Jesus confronts us with a great question:

Will not God do justice to his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night?
We can trust in the justice of God.

Lord, help me be persistent in prayer and to continue believing, despite my moments of difficulties. Amen.

The Baptism of Jesus

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

(Matthew 3:13-17)

Though she may not know it, Bethanie Freeman is the inspiration for the title of this devotion and moreover, my commitment to read the Bible through in a year. Bethanie announced to me, during one of our conversations in the narthex, that she wanted to try to read the Bible through in a year and that she was going to do it! That conversation was December 2019/January 2020 (can't remember for sure) and to say that I was touched, moved and compelled by that statement is an understatement! Talk about a New Year's resolution with some punch....I was down for that exercise.

But to Bethanie and to all of you, I must confess: I am on the two year plan!

However, at this writing, I am a little over halfway through the Old Testament and little over halfway through the New Testament. I am following the "Our Daily Bread" plan that is listed at the bottom of each "Our Daily Bread" devotional. My 93-year-old mother has decided to use this plan too. I told her I was on the two year plan.....she giggled.

There are lots of plans to read through the Bible and many are online, so that you can use them on your smartphone, iPad, or laptop and those are great also.

My purpose in sharing this with you, my church family, is to encourage you to give this a go, whether you have already read through the entire Bible already or not. For me, the important thing was to start – regardless of how long it takes. Once I started, I found myself longing for more time in the Word, more time with the Lord, and the enjoyment in reading, learning and loving God's precepts and His promises. That is what has taken me so long – I find myself reading the notes at the bottom of my Bible to understand more and I am underlining/double underlining all over the place!

Psalms 19 and 119 remind us of the blessings and truth that come from the Word of God:

"The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes." (Psalm 19: 7-8)

"Teach me, O Lord, to follow Your decrees; then I will keep them to the end. Give me understanding, and I will keep Your law and obey it with all my heart. Direct me in the path of Your commands, for there I find delight." Psalm 119: 33-35)

"How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! I gain understanding from Your precepts therefore I hate every wrong path. Your word is a lamp to my feet and light for my path." (Psalm 119: 103-105)

During this Lenten season, I want to encourage you to begin your "walk through the Bible" and if you do decide to do this, let me know so that I can pray with you and for you, as we journey through the Word together! (Thank you Bethanie!)

Heavenly Father, I thank you for Your Word that is flawless and true. I pray that as I read and study the Scriptures, Your Spirit would speak to my heart and help me resist every wrong path. Please teach me, Lord, that I might gain understanding, keep Your law, and obey it with all my heart. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Hi, Church Family. My name is Greg.

Every year I get a calendar for the year. Last year I went to "Hearts and Minds" to get a calendar. I found one with the poem, "Footprints"; this poem tells me God is always with me, no matter what happens in my life.

When I was 14, I decided I didn't need God. A lot of bad things started to happen to me. That's when He put His arms around me and carried me. That was some time ago.

As I live and love my Jesus, I find out that things still happen. Life is not fair. Two years ago I lost my wife to cancer. As I was leaving the hospital that morning, a song popped into my head from Sidewalk Prophets—"Soldier On".

I believe He was telling me don't worry, He's got me.

Last year was a little different and this year we will see. Don't forget the poem "Footprints". He does truly love us. When I got baptized, Pastor Todd gave me Proverbs 3:5-6, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your path straight."

As I read the Bible, other verses pop out at me...like Joshua 1-9: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."

Lord, thank you for being with us, in every part of our lives. Thank you for loving us. Help us to not be discouraged and to always look towards You. Amen.

For the past few months, I have been participating in a Women's Bible study on two of Max Lucado's books, Because of Bethlehem and He Chose the Nails. I have learned so much from the ladies in that group and I'm so glad to be with them and to hear their thoughts.

In one chapter of the book He Chose the Nails, Max Lucado writes about the way the guards abused Jesus. He said, "Herod wanted a show. Pilot wanted out. But the guards, they wanted blood." So, they blindfolded him, beat him, shoved the crown of thorns on his head, tore his beard, and scourged him. I think that if that had happened to a mere mortal, he would not have survived even a tiny inkling of the physical abuse Jesus endured. Have you ever seen the whip they used? I literally get upset every time I think about it. He could have summoned the angels to whisk him away at any time. Why didn't He? He could have killed all of the soldiers who abused him. Why didn't He? He could have miraculously healed himself. Why didn't He? Because He had to endure so He could wipe away my sin. It was what He was born to do. It was why He gave up everything to become a man. It was His purpose. He is my Savior.

Mr. Lucado goes on to question the fact that Jesus never once reached up to wipe away the spittle that the guards spat on Him. He wore that spittle on His face, all the way to the cross. That spittle? That is my sin.

One of the ladies in our group, Deb Trojak, shared that she finds it amazing that it was not all of the physical punishment bestowed on Him that killed Him. It was the weight of the emotion of all of the sins of the world that finally killed Him. All of the sin of all of the world for all time. That's what finally killed him. Me, you, every soul that came before us, and every soul that will come after us. Can you imagine how heavy that was? I cannot.

2 Corinthians 5:21 reads, "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

Are we worthy? I think not.

But by the pure and holy grace of God, He thinks we are.

"O Lord , our Lord, How majestic is Your name in all the earth, Who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens! From the mouth of infants and nursing babes You have established strength Because of Your adversaries, To make the enemy and the revengeful cease. When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have ordained; What is man that You take thought of him, And the son of man that You care for him? Yet You have made him a little lower than God, And You crown him with glory and majesty! You make him to rule over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, All sheep and oxen, And also the beasts of the field, The birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, Whatever passes through the paths of the seas. O Lord , our Lord, How majestic is Your name in all the earth!" (Psalms 8: 1-9)

Ever since I was a little kid, the night sky has fascinated me and the more I learn about the things in that sky, and about how far away they are and how big they are, the more I'm in awe of what God has created.

It took about 10 years of taking pictures from a satellite in space to get all of the exposures required to create the Hubble Extreme Deep Field image, which is part of the Hubble Ultra Deep Field. The Hubble space telescope was pointed to an area of the sky that, to our eyes, appears to be completely black, like there is absolutely nothing there. In the resulting image of that apparently empty region of space, there are approximately 5,500 galaxies, each made up of thousands or millions of stars. The Hubble Extreme Deep Field is 1/32,000,000th of the sky.

Our God has made, and continues to make, an amazing universe. The vast majority of what He has made we will never see. The universe is full of things we can't possibly fathom and we are minute little specks in it. Really, the entire galaxy in which we live is a minute little speck in this universe! And yet, what does Psalm 8 say about man? That God has made mankind a little lower than Himself, that he has crowned mankind with His glory and majesty! That He has put all things under our feet. God, the creator of all that there is, wants to take our hand and wants us to rule with Him, wants us to shape our world into something beautiful by being His image bearers, wants us to bring His love to those who don't know him.

That love is what all of this is for. He created this nearly infinitely vast universe and placed us into it simply because He wants to love us and wants us to love Him and to love each other. Hopefully, when we see how small we are, but that God made everything there is because of His love for us, and also that He came to us in order to fix the relationship that we broke, we can see not how insignificant we are in the universe, but rather how much God loves us and how much we mean to Him, and then go share that love with those around us.

Waiting. Oh, how I dislike to wait. And yet, that is what the past year of my life has been. Honestly, it is what the majority of my life has been. When I was younger, I thought life began at 13 because it was then that I could wear make-up, get my ears pierced, and babysit. (Yes, I definitely had my priorities straight....) During high school I could not wait until college. Then college came and I was super excited to graduate, get a job, get married. Then once married, I couldn't wait to have kids. And now that I have kids...well of course, now I'm not waiting for anything. (Mmmhmmm.)

Then along came this past year – a year of blank calendars, uncertainty, and...yep...waiting. Some of that because of the pandemic but a lot of it was also from becoming a foster family. There is so much living in limbo when you become a foster parent. For a couple months we weren't sure what children would be placed with us. We waited expectantly to see how many, what ages, genders, personalities, etc.

Since July and the arrival of our foster kiddos, it has been a long process of living with uncertainty with no foreseeable end in sight. Will they get to stay with us? Will the courts decide to give them back to their parents? Each month brings about delays and pushed back hearings. And yet, in the midst of all of this unknown – life happens. We continue to discover who these three beautiful children are and how they fit into our family. We continue to live. I've realized that this kind of living is very much how we are to live as Christians. In Hebrews 11:1 it says – "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." We do not know when Christ will return, but we do know He will return. There's a theological concept called the "already-not yet." It's the idea that we as believers live in a time of tension. Christ's first coming started the end times, but it is not "the end" until He comes again. So we are to live in the present, while holding on to the promises for the future.

And life continues to happen in the waiting. Thankfully, as a Christian, the expectation of what is to come makes the wait worth it. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 says, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

On the days I lose heart, I need to change where my focus is. These circumstances are temporary. At some point, it will become clear whether these children will stay in our home or not. (And at that point, I will then have to start waiting for something else.)

The wonderful thing in the midst of all the "momentary troubles" is that at the end there is an "eternal glory." So in the small amount of time I have with these children, I can hopefully have an impact that is eternal. I can be present in the moment, while looking forward to the certainty of what Christ has for me and for them.

Jesus Predicts His Death

"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!'"

"Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'"

"Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.'"

"Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'"

(Matthew 16:21-28)

I'm sure we all agree that 2020 was a difficult, crazy year. Who would have imagined we would have a pandemic, civil unrest, and an election like no other. I admit that I was caught up in the election media-hype and rhetoric more than I should have been.

Like many people, I wondered what could possibly happen next? Would it get worse? What could possibly happen to me or my family? As God is wont to do, he showed me a devotion about being content based on Hebrews 13:5-6. "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you. So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?'" That verse and devotion certainly helped calm my fears and put my mind at ease.

With all that going on in the world, my thoughts turned toward the end times. We know that before Jesus returns there will be troubles. But before He returns, He had to come to earth and become the perfect sacrifice for our sins. The babe of Christmas, Emmanuel God with us, who became the perfect Lamb and gave himself for our sins. That sacrifice is what we celebrate at Easter.

So as we look forward to Easter, let's put aside the cares of this world and focus on the salvation provided by His sacrifice and His resurrection.

Do you KNOW He made that sacrifice for you? Have you ACCEPTED Him as your Savior? Have you ASKED Him into your heart?

If you know Him, are you willing to share the Good News of His sacrifice with others? There has never been a better time. People are wondering what is happening in the world and what is coming. Let's tell them about Jesus, His sacrifice, and His return.

As Paul wrote to the Philippians, "I want to know Christ- yes to know the power of His resurrection...not that I have already obtained it....But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind [and around us in this world] and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal, to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:10-14)

God has called each of us to a heavenly prize but given us an earthly task, to share the news about the Savior.

Let's prepare to celebrate Easter and Jesus' resurrection and to share that Good News with those around us.

When We Don't Know What To Pray For
Linda Zeigler

March 23

"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. (Romans 8:26-27)

In February 2014, my granddaughter Addie had a liver transplant. Five years later, March 2019, she was diagnosed with cancer. On the same day, Doug's Dad, Steve, had a stroke and in April he had open heart surgery. On June 28, 2019, Doug went to be with Jesus.

I found these words in Romans that helped me make it through. I got to the point I just didn't know what to pray for; all I could do was groan.

These words of Jesus still help me through the days when it hurts so much. Sometimes life gets so overwhelming. Even with all that everyone is going through, God is there for us.

Thank you, Jesus.

In any anxious situation, you have two options. You can either break down or break through. I have had many anxious moments in my life but in many situations, I have tried to turn towards God. In those times, I have turned to two different verses.

"Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken." (Psalm 55:22)

This verse helps to remind me that even though I have my rough patches, I am still loved by God and He will help to guide me through my struggles.

The other verse is "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7)

This verse is the one I turn to the most. It helps me remember that I'm not in this fight alone. I can trust God to help me and to not abandon me.

A lot of times I feel like I fight the same fight over and over again but the difference is when I put my trust in the Lord, the fight feels different. There is a weight lifted off my shoulders and I know that God has my back.

During a recent quiet devotional time (like you are doing now), I read in John 15 where Jesus talks about the fact that He is the vine and we are the branches. In verse 4 He says, "Remain in Me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me."

As Christians, I suspect we all want to accomplish things for Jesus – have our lives mean something and have purpose. The word remain stuck with me after this most recent reading of that verse. What does that really mean? How can I remain in Jesus?

I can recall times I have desired to remain in a particular setting or moment – the birth of one of our children, taking in a spectacular sunset, or standing at the edge (not too far out) of the Grand Canyon. All of these moments, and others we can all remember, are times where we cannot remain. My Bible dictionary/concordance defines remain: to abide or continue unchanged; to be something yet to be shown. One thought from this is that when I remain in Christ, I do not get pulled into worldly things - not moving away from the mindset and activities God has deemed for me to ponder and to do. But that can be accomplished only through the power of the Spirit that God has placed in me and by becoming sensitive to His leading. Giving me the ability to love others as He commands. Keeping me unchanged, still redeemed and obedient to God's call.

I also like the part of the definition that says something yet to be shown. Could that be opportunities that God has for me to experience? Can that mean He will reveal to me the person I can truly be in Christ? How can I be successful at doing that? He has provided His Word, His constant presence, His Spirit living in me, the fellowship of our church body, and a mind and heart that can decide where my mind remains.

Dear God, help me in my quest to want more of you. As the world continues to reach for my time, my heart and my mind, help me to find ways to remain in you. You desire that, I know, and you have a plan for me. A plan that can include sharing your love when I do avail myself to your will and leading. Thank for your love for me and the gift of your availability. So when I do decide at any moment, you are there for me to remain in your presence and love.

Have a blessed Easter season!

The year of 2020 was a year of many ups and downs for me, as it was for all of us.

My 2020 consisted of my parents getting a divorce, Covid, helping my mother move, getting engaged, planning a wedding, getting married, moving, and so much more. One thing 2020 has taught me though is that even when I can't see what will happen next, I need to trust in God.

James 1:2-4 have always been some of my favorite verses because it flat out tells you life won't be easy. I've read these verses many times through 2020 to remind myself that I should find joy in these times, because even if everything in my life falls apart, God is using those moments to teach me how to listen for that quite whisper of His voice. When a teacher is teaching, you have to be quite otherwise you'll miss the lesson.

My favorite way to spend time with God and when I feel most connected with Him is by listening to worship music. Some of my favorites are "Lean Back" by Capital City Music and "Midnight" by Rita Springer. God's Word and some amazing songs have taught me so much this year. So I challenge you to find a song and just listen to it or pour your heart out to God as it plays. God is always eager to hear from us, and the good thing is that He never gets tired of us.

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." (James 1:2-4)

The Greatest Commandment

"Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?'"

"Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'"

(Matthew 22:34-40)

Anybody feel scarred by this past year? I can say I physically will probably have an actual lifelong scar because of 2020. That sounds ominous, but it really isn't that bad. One of my 2020 moments was having to run down a problem with our sanctuary projector setup. While crawling around in the attic of the sanctuary, I cut my wrist on a metal joist bracket. I didn't think much of it at the time but I can still see it on my wrist today. It got me to thinking about the lasting affect that 2020 will have on our lives, whether we like it or not. There were plenty of things this past year that we would like to forget. But in the midst of the painful scars, there were times of God's presence, provision, and healing that we must not forget.

The question is, how can we heal from those scars? I think Jesus gives us a great example. When He rose and conquered death, He wasn't the same. His divinity was now on full display but his body still bore the marks of what happened on the cross.

"Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord." (John 20:19b-20)

His hands and side had scars of what He went through but the end result made those scars worth it.

Our scars are not on the same level as Jesus' ultimate sacrifice for us but our scars (from 2020 or any other time in life) can remind us that God can redeem anything. He hasn't left us in the struggle and can use those scars to bring people to know His love in the future. Thomas wouldn't believe Jesus was alive until he could physically touch those wounds on Jesus. After doing so, he believed. We can't touch His scars but we can rest in the promise that Jesus made just after Thomas believed.

"Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'" (John 20:29)

Do you believe?

God in His perfection cannot allow us as Christians to misrepresent Him, His Word, or His ways in any way. As a righteous, Holy, pure God, He has to bring discipline or judgment if we do this. The story of Moses in the Old Testament is one from which we can learn.

When the people lacked water in the wilderness, God told Moses to strike the rock and He would bring forth water. 1 Corinthians 10:4 tells us, "All drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them, and the rock was Christ." But it happened a second time that the people complained, needing water. This time, God told Moses to speak to the rock, but, out of anger, He struck the rock. God could not allow Moses to misrepresent Him to His people, so Moses was rebuked by God and was not allowed to go into the Promised Land. This was a sad day for Moses! His words cut to the heart in Deuteronomy 3:26, "But the Lord was angry with me on your account, and would not listen to me. So the Lord said to me, 'Enough of that! Speak no more to me of this matter.'" It's hard to imagine how it felt for Moses to hear these words from God.

As Christians, we are ambassadors of Christ, representing Him in a lost world. We have to be careful of our words and actions by tapping into the Rock and being led by His Spirit. We need His help daily to do this; He is our supply.

When Jesus ministered on this earth, he explained, "...I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what He sees the father doing." And in John 12:49 Jesus says, "I don't speak on my own authority. The father who sent me has commanded me what to say and how to say it." If Jesus relied on the Father to this extent, we would be wise to do the same.

Thank you, God, for this example of Jesus, the Perfect Lamb of God, tapping into Your wisdom and power. Thank you, that as ambassadors for you, You give us Your Word and Your Spirit to help us, so we do not misrepresent you. Thank you that one day You will take us into our promised land of Heaven!

Too young to be marked by the 'flowers and powers' of the 60s, our young minds got 'blown away' by riding Schwinn bikes through any pasture or water, allured by the promise of pan fish over a campfire. Those days we carried transistor radios tuned to AM stations all day long, then we'd turn to Orioles Baseball in the cool of the evening. By the end of "The Summer of Love", 1967, I was still a ten-year-old centerfielder in pinstripes and stirrups of Heidelberg blue. Today, all this stuff gets termed "vintage" somehow—like a pinot noir.

Back then there was little regard for the Byrds or Woodstock. But, four summer vacations later, the flip of a switch, literally, offered us the new venue of Starview, WRHY on the FM dial. Happily, when it first aired in 1972, its format included a good measure of folk music.

During that same year, Peter Yarrow, of Peter, Paul and Mary fame, would release "Greenwood", perhaps the most poignant song I had ever heard. The chorus comes from the Gospel of Luke.

"...if we do these things in the greenwood,
What will happen in the dry?"

These are the recorded words of Christ in Luke 23:31. Nowhere else in Scripture is there another reference to it. Yet here I believe God, with His most serious Face, is still speaking to us today. "...As His Message was being rejected when He was physically present, how much more it would be rejected in the coming years." (NIV commentary).

Until Today, within this dear season of Lent, our focus on the Lord's devotion to us has never been more vital to me. For I know the women along the Via Dolorosa (sorrowful way) were supposed to be weeping for us, as the Lord was sure of His appointment with His final work on the cross. These days, current events remind me of how needful our world is.

"It's you and me and we must make the choice now, and not destroy the life we're living for..." (Yarrow, Peter. "Greenwood")

May we be ever inclined to prayer, that our children's children grow to understand just how dry the wood is.

"And it happened that while He was praying alone, the disciples were with Him, and He questioned them, saying, 'Who do the people say that I am?' They answered and said, 'John the Baptist, and others say Elijah; but others, that one of the prophets of old has risen.' And He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' And Peter answered and said, 'The Christ of God.' But He warned them and instructed them not to tell this to anyone, saying, 'The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed (slain) and be raised on the third day.'" (Luke 9:18-22)

I mentioned in my previous devotional that I am in the process of reading Francis Schaffer's book True Spirituality. He points out three specific things from the reading above that we must endure in order for us to truly be followers of Christ.

1. Must be rejected – in this instance it was rejection by the Elders and religious leaders of the day. For us, it may be family, it may be friends, and for sure, the world in general. We can read and see today how the Church (that's us) is under attack. We will be rejected.

2. Must be killed/slain – In Luke 14:27, we read: "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple." What is the purpose of the cross? People die on them. Not only do we as followers of Jesus die on it, we do so daily (Luke 9:23). Schaffer says that "there are splinters in the Christian's cross" as we are surrounded in this life by things that are alien to God. We die to ourselves daily to live for Christ!

3. Must be raised – Romans 6:1-7 – "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? Far from it! How shall we who died to sin (Note: point 2 – slain) still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for the one who has died is freed from sin." Our sinful life died with Christ upon accepting Him as our Lord and Savior, but thanks be to God our resurrected life (new creation) began at that time as well.

So, as we look at the death and resurrection of Jesus at this Easter season, do you really identify with Him in the sense that you have been rejected, slain, and now risen? Does this make sense? Study the Scripture passages above. Meditate on them. Have you felt the splinters of your daily cross?

God, help us as we struggle daily to live as you desire us to live. Amen.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.
Praise Him all creatures here below.
Praise Him above ye heavenly host.
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.
Amen.

Earlier this year, as we spent many more nights around the dinner table together as a family, we began singing this song for our prayer before the meal. These words are titled "The Doxology" and originate as the closing stanza to a collection of three hymns that Anglican Bishop Thomas Ken charged the church to sing "in the morning and the evening" when they were composed in 1709.

In the morning and the evening....

I had a conversation recently with a friend about prayer. We processed through the "why should we pray?" and the "what to do when God doesn't answer like I want?" It occurred to both of us that we often come to prayer as a means of last resort and often with a specific request that we want answered a specific way. Can you relate? As we discussed it though, we realized that often it gives us comfort to bring our requests to Him, to let Him minister to us, to make time in our day to invite Him in.

"Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.

In the morning and the evening. Pray continually.

We recently started a family prayer circle. There is no specific time of day...if it works in the morning, we can meet then. Maybe before bed works best one day. We light a candle and read a prayer to start and then take turns praying aloud. It was so awkward at first! No one really knew what to say, or whose turn it was, or why we were even doing this. Like He always does, the Holy Spirit met us there though and prayers of peace, comfort, thankfulness and requests for His help have been prayed over during that time.

"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God." Romans 8:26 & 27

In the morning and the evening. Pray continually. The Spirit helps us.

Lord, I thank you that you have made a way for us to talk to you. Help us to reach out to you more in prayer. You hear us in the quick one- or two-word prayers, in the times when we have a lot to say, and in the times when words do not even come. Thank you for sending your Spirit to intercede for us and thank you for all the ways you answer our prayers. We trust you and we love you Lord. Amen.

The Last Supper

"When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.' They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, 'Surely you don't mean me, Lord?' Jesus replied, 'The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.' Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, 'Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi?'"

"Jesus answered, 'You have said so.' While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.' When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives."

(Matthew 26:20-30)

The Death of Jesus

"It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' When he had said this, he breathed his last. The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, 'Surely this was a righteous man.' When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things."

(Luke 23: 44-49)

Jesus Has Risen

"After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you.'" So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. 'Greetings,' he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'"

(Matthew 28:1-10)