

Reflections:

Stories of Renewal & Hope—2021 Lenten Devotional Series

Reflection:

A new year offers renewed commitment for our relationship with God. This is a perfect time to reflect on how God has renewed our faith and plopped hope down into the middle of our difficulties. And not only has the year gone by produced difficulties to all of us, but life in general can be difficult.

In the book to the Romans, the Apostle Paul says, “... 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” (Romans 5). Our difficulties in life, relationships, and faith move us through to hope, if we stay close to God and allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives.

These devotions are stories of how the writers were intentional about faith goals which motivated them to keep going; stories of stumbling and finding their way back to faith; and how in giving and doing for others they found hope and offered hope through the light of Christ.

We are so thankful for each of these writers who are connected to our congregation in a variety of ways and from a variety of places throughout the earth. Each of us has the ability to inspire another by our own experiences of God. We pray that these experiences will inspire you to a deeper walk with Christ this Lenten season.

Blessings,

Kim La Rue, Editor
Adult Ministries, Powell UMC

Easter Sunday - April 4

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Mark 16:1-8 (NRSV)

The Gospel of Mark ends with these words, "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." In the early centuries of the church, more was added to the gospel because it was felt this ending was too open ended and too negative. But, I've always thought Mark got it right. When we face our greatest threat, the loss of everything we know and trust, which is what death brings to us, fear is what's left. The power of Easter meets us there and waits for our response.

Recently, we lost my dad, George, to death following a long struggle with Parkinson's Disease. My dad was a faithful pastor. He had a resonant, baritone voice, about which folks often made comments. Some even said, "When George Brown speaks it sounds like God is talking." Dad would smile. He wasn't "God talking" but I do think God spoke through him, and the voice of God speaks through many experiences in our lives, especially when we need assurance that the resurrection is true.

One of the last times I was with my dad, my mom and I decided to sing hymns. He wasn't awake but I'd like to think he was aware. Later on, I wondered how we were able to sing when sadness and loss were so near. God's voice made it possible, which speaks to us through hymns, scripture, worship, our shared mission, and our caring for others. Death makes us fearful. It always does. But God is always speaking so our stories will continue with hope and faith.

Pastor Larry Brown

Prayer: Holy God, may we hear your voice calling us to hopefulness and life on this Easter Day. Amen.

The Season of Lent

Lent is the season of forty days, not counting Sundays, which begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday. The season of Lent is a preparation for celebrating Easter. Easter is the first Sunday, after the first full moon, after the vernal equinox. For this reason, Easter is never the same date two years in a row.

Lent is a time for penance by all Christians. The First Sunday describes Jesus' temptation by Satan; and the Sixth Sunday (Passion/Palm Sunday), Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his subsequent suffering and death. Because Sundays are always little Easters, the penitential spirit of Lent should be tempered with joyful expectation of the Resurrection.



Ash Wednesday emphasizes a dual encounter: we confront our own mortality and confess our sin before God within the community of faith. The use of ashes as a sign of mortality and repentance has a long history in Jewish and Christian worship, and the Imposition of Ashes can be a powerful nonverbal and experiential way of participating in the call to repentance and reconciliation.



Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday and continues through the great three days from sunset on Holy Thursday through sunset Easter day. This is the climax of Lent and the whole Christian year, and a bridge into the Easter season. These days proclaim the mystery of Jesus Christ's passion, death and resurrection. During these days, the community journeys with Jesus from the upper room, to the cross, to the tomb, and to the garden.

Ash Wednesday - February 17

"[Elijah] went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life..."

1 Kings 19:4 (NRSV)

"At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"

Mark 15:34 (NRSV)

It's January 8, 2021, after midnight. I'm lying in a hospital bed. My back is aching, my legs are in compression hose, I can't find my call button and I'm wearing a heart monitor which I think has me chained to the wall. I'm miserable. I'm sinking into depression and wondering how I can end all this. I'm alone. I'm abandoned. I feel like death is the answer!

The door opens and a shaft of light beams across the room. A nurse asks how I am. "I'm miserable and want to die!" As we continue to talk, she takes the compressors off my legs, she assures me that my heart monitor is not attached to the wall, she puts the call button into my hand and says she'll get me some pain medication. I feel better.

God didn't abandon Elijah or Jesus, and God didn't abandon me either. Actually, I was given an opportunity to gain a bit of empathy for persons caught in depression and show how important light is and how interacting with a helpful caring person can be healing.

Overcoming real depression is not simple, but it can be helped when the dark debilitating isolation it drags people into is exposed to God's light and to caring persons who have the experience and wisdom to provide real help.

Dave Woodyard

Prayer: Loving God, for those experiencing depression, I pray that they may be guided to your light and to caring experienced persons who can give them hope through care-filled listening and helpful actions. Amen.

Saturday - April 3

So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

John 10:7-10 (NRSV)

I just finished an amazing full-course meal in theology, scripture, and history in connection with Jesus' crucifixion: *The Day the Revolution Began* by N.T. Wright. While reading, I was reminded of what C.S. Lewis said: "Any theories we build up as to how Christ's death did all this are, in my view, quite secondary: mere plans or diagrams to be left alone if they do not help us, and, even if they do help us, not to be confused with the thing itself." ¹A theological understanding of this event alone can't fully provide meaning. It is experiencing, acknowledging, and accepting the Crucifixion, followed by the Resurrection, that truly changes us.

I'm 42 years old, and I imagined I would be married with kids, have all the trappings of a lucrative career, and live in a nice house in a nice neighborhood. My family and I would spend quality time with my parents, extended family, and friends.

Instead, I'm single, live far away from family, and have bought a house in the Hilltop area of Columbus, one of the rougher parts of the city. Prostitutes regularly work on my street. I see people living in violence, filth and strung out on drugs. I indulge in my passion for firearms at a shooting range, unlike some of my fellow residents who discharge their firearms into the air on celebratory occasions or sadly, at each other. Nevertheless, there are some awesome people and places to visit in the Hilltop.

My life has been forever changed because of the Crucifixion. Moving to the Hilltop was a calling, and I feel like this is where I've always belonged. I'm surrounded by family all over the greater Columbus area, spanning from my parents' generation to the kids I thought I would have. I have a great job that allows me creativity and flexibility to do the things that are important to me.

Life is not what I imagined it would be - it is so much more! I'm living in abundance and thank God every day! Jesus says that he is the gate through which we are offered abundant life. I can't tell you precisely how this works, but I know that acknowledging, accepting, and living through Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection is the way.

Matt Utt

¹ *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis

Prayer: God, please help us to recognize the abundance that you offer us through Jesus' death and resurrection. For those who may have difficulty seeing your abundance or have yet to see it, I pray that their experience of the Crucifixion and Resurrection this year will transform their lives. Amen.

Good Friday - April 2

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. Then he said to them, "I am 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." Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again he went away for the second time and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.

Matthew 26:36-45 (NRSV)

I remember going on a first date with my husband, Josh, and telling him that I was afraid of death. If you think that it is not the best topic to talk about on a first date, I would agree. But the fact that I was telling Josh about one of my deepest fears, told me a lot about him. I am so thankful that I married him. Yes, I am a pastor and since when I was a teenager and had a mind-blowing realization that I was going to die some day, once in a while the anxiety about death tightens my chest and clouds my mind. But last spring something freeing happened to me. I was participating in a webcast based on a book by a theologian, N.T. Wright, called "Surprised by Hope." One particular night I decided to sit outside. There was something about sitting outside in the brisk air of early spring evening listening to the words of beauty and hope of N.T. Wright, listening to Larry, the lively discussion of the participants, and looking at the creation waking up from winter slumber into a new season of life. The trees started to bud, the grass was getting greener and the air was full of promise of warmer weather, blooming flowers, and countless hours spent outside. In that moment, like never before in my life, I trusted God. I trusted God with my whole life. More importantly, I trusted God even with my death. For the first time, there was such air of freedom and hope that filled my lungs to the full. I knew that death had no grip on me, that Jesus had conquered it and I did not have to worry and get anxious about that anymore. I caught a glimpse of the freedom that only Christ can give to us, as he went through the agony and fear and imminence of death himself, while he prayed in Gethsemane for God to take this cup from him.

Pastor Katya Brodbeck

Prayer: Holy God, we pray on this Holy Friday, that your suffering and dying on the cross may not be something that we hear and read about. May it touch our own suffering and fears. May it leave a trace on our hearts so deep, that it becomes for us a way to life, freedom, and love. In the name of the one who conquered death, we pray. Amen.

Thursday - February 18

Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken.

Psalm 62:5-6 (NIV)

The first few months of 2009 were very challenging and stressful for the Haigood family. My dear husband Harry was experiencing some health issues and he was in and out of the hospital numerous times and then transferred to a rehab facility to regain his strength. He was there for a few weeks when he was transported back to the hospital. His condition continued to deteriorate to the point that the decision was made for hospice care. That's where the real challenge began. The hospital wanted to move him to another facility. The family wanted to keep him in the hospital where he was receiving excellent care and because I knew he was well cared for I could sleep at night and start another day with him renewed and refreshed. His daughter and I visited several facilities in the area but none seemed right for Harry so his son and I began the arduous task of trying to keep him in the hospital. We were met with resistance from the administrative staff. We were in his room one morning discussing the situation when a young infectious disease doctor who had treated Harry came in and said he had heard the hospital wanted to move him. He asked me, "What do you want to do"? I said I wanted to keep him in the hospital and he said "Then you fight for that!" And so we did and were able to keep him there until he passed on July 2nd to go to his forever home.

Harry was a man of great faith but I knew he was counting on me to make the right decisions for him. I had prayed many times and had asked God for his help and his guidance. He was in control. He sent that wonderful doctor to us who gave us the hope we were looking for and for that I will be forever grateful.

Janet Haigood

Prayer: Dear Lord, I trust you with my life. And I know that if I seek you and ask you for your help your ears are always open to my pleas. No matter my circumstances, I know that you are always with me and will never leave me. Thank you for your steadfast love. Amen.

Friday - February 19

*But those who trust in the LORD will find new strength.
They will soar high on wings like eagles.
They will run and not grow weary.
They will walk and not faint. Isaiah 40:31 (NLT)*

If your path has not crossed with the Ohio poet Barbara Fant, I highly encourage seeking her out. This powerful word slammer and artistic being has been sharing her gift with Columbus for years now. She has provided hope and healing for our community. Barbara has been weaving together her love of poetry with her passion for God for her whole lifetime. What a gift for us! I received healing myself through her and a simple writing activity she asked me to attempt. I'd like to share it with you today and then encourage you to find new strength through participating yourself.

Name the thing that has helped you survive 2020. Write a letter to yourself from that item in 5-7 minutes. Can you guess who my letter is from below?

Dear child,
Just like you I am created anew each and everyday.
Just like you I am ever changing, ever growing, and moving through seasons.
There is much to discover and rejoice in.
Time is needed.
Slow down.
Breathe.
Engage with me.
I long to connect with you...to gather you up and to bless you.
Come. Come away.
Pause to Listen.
Open your eyes. Open your heart.
There is more to discover and learn.
Thank you for seeing me.
For noticing what I have to offer.
Just like you I am created anew each and everyday.

Anonymous

Prayer: Father God, thank you for words, for art, and for your creation all around us! You are an amazing God. When the days are hard, the struggles real and the worries high Lord may we turn to you again and again. May we not give up but seek your face and your strength anew. Open my eyes and my heart. May I seek you today and everyday. Amen and Amen.

Holy Thursday - April 1

"Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?"

Luke 15:4 (NRSV)

He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep.

John 21:17 (NRSV)

I was sitting in the back of church when the minister announced plans for a young adult retreat the next weekend. I like to think this was the third time he'd mentioned it (John's passage). There was just something different this time the way he said, "all are welcome, even if you've never participated before". The small voice told me that going to this retreat might not answer my prayers, but I didn't know that it wouldn't. That was the first step toward numerous small church groups ever since. You take turns listening and talking, accepting and encouraging, feeding and sometimes being fed. That retreat also was the first time I opened up in public about the tragic loss of my dad in a farming accident when I was just 19. I still think back on how hard it was on the farm and how hard was his loss. For example, when I was 13, we lost dozens of sheep to predators—neighbors' dogs. I always say that sheep are too gregarious to get lost, as in Luke's parable; they get separated before they get lost. Every night, regardless of the weather, my brothers and I rounded them up for their own safety. They knew they would be fed physically, but they would just circle and circle, maddeningly...until one would go through the opening, and then they all followed. Isn't our instinct to circle in our lives until someone leads us to where we should be in our spiritual barn, safe from the wolves in dog's clothing (worldly draws)? On that Sunday in 1988, I let myself be welcomed even though I was scared because I had never participated in a group before. Every so often when I need spiritual feeding, I think back to that first welcoming retreat and am reminded that I'm not alone in the flock, yet others might feel like they are. The Good Shepherd knows what it is like to be the Lamb and welcomes all 100% of us. In return, He only asks us to welcome others through the gate one at a time.

Jeff Firkins

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for Your Son's teachings, culminating in His sacrifice and resurrection to reach all 100 of us. Please help us to be fed with your lovingkindness so that the fullness of your Spirit helps us to feed others. Amen.

Wednesday - March 31

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: "Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be in the right? Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?"
Job 40:6-9 (ESV)

Like so many other, I have had moments and experiences of doubt, discomfort, pain, and hopelessness. These are the times I find myself most drawn to God and His Word.

The book of Job is a book I have read through several times and have been lucky enough to go through with a few different study groups. This book is synonymous with suffering. Much of this book is Job lamenting and there is so much to dig into here, but I have found amazing renewal in the last few chapters of this book when God challenges Job. God puts things into perspective. His words are incredibly powerful and a bit difficult, but the perspective God provides grants me immense peace, hope, and renewal.

God allowed Job to question and cry out to Him through the entire book and now finally responds. He puts Job back in his place. God essentially asks "Who are you to think you can understand all that I am and all that this world is? Do you think you understand enough to judge me?" Wow. To me that is the story of our relationship with God. Do we think we know better? Do we think we understand the reason some things happen while others don't? God communicates to Job that we cannot understand it all and that he is ultimately in control. This is the place where I find hope and renewal; In knowing that God is all powerful and that I do not need to understand. I only need to trust Him. And this is where I find my joy, hope, and peace.

Mackenzie Callahan

Prayer: Dear God, Help me to rest in your sovereignty. Help me to seek you more and to trust you. Amen.

Saturday - February 20

Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.
Proverbs 28:13 (NIV)
Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,
Acts 3:19 (NIV)

Over the past couple of years, I have been physically sickened watching young black men being killed by police, hearing about a black woman being shot in her bed, and just recently watching a mob of violent men and women try to take over the Capitol. During that event, I cried as I watched a policeman being crushed in a doorway, and other law enforcement officers being beaten with poles. How could we survive as a nation when we allow such violence?

Then on January 20th, I heard our new president say that we must confront systemic racism and belief in white supremacy. He actually said that in public! (Associated Press Posted: Jan 20, 2021 / 03:26 PM PST / Updated: Jan 20, 2021 / 08:20 PM PST Biden is the first president to directly address the ills of white supremacy in an inaugural speech)

While the admission of guilt and remorse I must feel as a white American is considerable, I can also rest in the promise I have that God is forgiving and merciful. While the process of acknowledging what we have done is painful, the opportunity for joy as children of God in a blessed community is before us.

Mary Ellen Hatton

Prayer: Lord of mercy, Guide us and show us how to be humble and recognize the worth in others. Help us to be the solution to injustice and not perpetrators of harm to others. For you are holy and we long to do your work in the world. Amen.

First Sunday in Lent - February 21

Scripture reading for the day: Mark 1:9-15 (NRSV)

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Tuesday - March 30

Hallelujah! Thank you, Lord! How good you are! Your love for us continues on forever. Who can ever list the glorious miracles of God? Who can ever praise him half enough?

Psalm 106:1-2 (TLB)

Have you ever gotten lost in a big city? It happened to me in New York City! Mark (my son) had attended a college in NYC and had gotten an internship through the school and decided to stay in the city and continue working there. Mark and a friend had agreed to room together in an apartment in Brooklyn. So, of course, he needed some furnishings from home. We loaded my Suburban with items he would need. All went well until it was time for me to return home. I decided it would be best to leave Brooklyn at 5:30 am. I had directions to get to the interstate but somehow made a wrong turn and got lost! (No Cell phones in those days!)

I stopped at three different gas stations to seek directions to no avail – none of the attendants working at these stations spoke English. I tried my best to follow each of the directions they gave me but none of them got me to where I needed to be. I became very anxious over this situation. I had wasted a lot of time and energy trying to find my way.

What should I do? My first thought was to ask God for his help. "Please God help me find the right road to start home." By this time I was in tears! I kept asking God's guidance while driving around. Finally, somehow, someday, I was on the interstate finally!

To this day, I don't know how I got on the right road! But suddenly I realized God must have had His hands over mine, on my steering wheel guiding me to the highway I had been searching for! Thanks be to our Heavenly Father! He is always there for us and responds to our prayers!

Judy Koenig

Prayer: Thank you God for loving us and for your promise to always be with us and answer prayers. Amen.

Monday - March 29

*Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."
John 6:32-35 (NRSV)*

One of the most anticipated youth events at PUMC is our annual Fall Retreat. I don't need to remind you of the difficulties and limitations that COVID brought, we all remember and are still living in the midst of some of these. As we thought of ways to somehow replicate our retreat for the fall of 2020 I felt disappointed. It felt like trying something different would take away from tradition, the spiritual renewal that is sought on retreats and the deep connection that students walk away with to God, and each other.

Fortunately, we were blessed by the incredible hospitality of Camp Wesley staff and warm weather, which allowed us to spend lots of time distanced outside. That retreat ended up being our highest attended, ever. Now, this is not the part where I felt a spiritual renewal coming on. The response to the retreat actually made me quite nervous considering the safety protocols that needed to be in place for any gathering. Again, all thanks to Camp Wesley and mindful youth & adult leaders, we had a very safe, socially-distanced weekend.

My spiritual renewal hit afterwards, once everyone went home. Normally after a retreat, everything goes back to normal. Not this time. After months of virtually trying to fill our cup through zoom we finally were able to safely reconnect in-person and when we all came home...things did change. I witnessed a hope for our young people like never before. Youth continued to have meaningful conversation from the retreat with newly made friends, engaging in Bible study, coming to Sunday school, a few of them even formed a youth band.

During one of the most difficult and trying years, our youth nevertheless inspired me with their relentless faith and response to God's call and their own community of faith. Thanks be to God for these young spirits.

Hannah Ewald

Prayer: Holy God, thank you for offering opportunities for us to continually seek you and experience a renewal within our hearts. Even when we question your presence, you make it known to us that you are with us and you love us. Through your Son we receive the Bread of life; may we continually be nourished by him. Amen.

Monday - February 22

*You will be secure, because there is hope;
you will look about you and take your rest in safety.
Job 11:18 (NIV)*

When I was 15, my mother dropped me off to work at a nursing home. Besides needing college money, I had to get experience to be selected for the competitive Ohio State University occupational therapy program. So I thought it would be lovely to pour water and read to the elderly. It was more complex. That "awful" job continued six years, through college, and brought me hope that pain could be endured and faith in God's purposes for our lives.

Mrs. Christian was not old. She was an elementary school teacher struck down by the most severe rheumatoid arthritis I was to see in my next 45 years of healthcare. It hurt her beyond words to move or be moved. She never complained or discussed her life. She asked to be "set up" to write letters 30 minutes daily using the bit of shoulder motion she had with adaptive equipment. She had an elegant boxy script. To my horror she would request that I be her aide. To feel the crackly, light, fragile state of her body being moved scared me. She would comfort me and tell me what a good therapist I was going to be. Let me repeat: She would comfort me.

Later I met a life long friend who had been a recipient of Mrs. Christian's letters. She had been sharing her love, faith and wisdom with her students as they grew. I never knew.

Brenda Allen

Prayer: Holy God, we give thanks for the experiences and people in our lives which shape us for the future. Thank you for those who comfort us even as we try to help them. Amen.

Tuesday - February 23

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 (NRSV)

Hollyhocks grew along my grandmother's garden fence. As a young girl, I loved how tall they grew. I loved the brightly colored trumpet-like flowers and delighted in turning the petals and buds into beautifully dressed dolls. As a grandmother, I wanted a garden of hollyhocks. I imagined them growing in front of a small fence hiding the utility boxes in our current yard. I bought seeds and planted them. Nothing grew. A second year I bought seeds and planted them. They grew, but only a few inches tall. A third year a few plants reemerged. I transplanted them. I watered them. I tenderly cared for them. They started to grow. I was thrilled! And, then the rabbits found them to be delicious. When I saw rabbits nibbling, I chased them away but I couldn't stand guard all day and all night, so I repeatedly sprayed the hollyhock remnants with a repellent. But still, the rabbits came to feast and before long, nothing was left but hollyhock stubs, my anger with the rabbits, my disappointment and whatever lays beneath the ground.

The hollyhocks are a reminder to me of something that I have been learning for most of my life. Having what I want is not always possible. Accepting what cannot be changed, doing what I can to make a difference when and where I can, living in hope and trusting in God's prevenient grace is the way of life.

Sandy Huber

Prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardships as the pathway to peace...." Amen. (Excerpted from the Serenity Prayer)

Palm Sunday - March 28

Scripture reading for the day: John 12:12-16 (NRSV)

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!" Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

Saturday - March 27

*After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.
Matthew 6:9-13 (KJV)*

Can we have Renewal and Hope if we don't ask for it ? Jesus told us to, "Ask and it Shall Be Given to You." So how should we ask ? What better way than the way our Lord directed. We all know the Lord's Prayer and many, like John Wesley, have thought long and hard about it. Have you ever thought about applying this prayer to the needs of another rather than to yourself ? It hadn't occurred to me to do this until recently. I'm a late developer! Try it. It really has helped me. Imagine the person's face and then say the Lord's Prayer. All those asks take on such meaning. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give this dear one what they need today. Forgive them for any mistakes they make and help them to forgive others. Keep them safe and out of danger and away from evil.

Gillian Anantharaman

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us love each other like you love us so that those we love feel renewed and filled once more with hope. Amen.

Wednesday - February 24

*... "for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."
1 Samuel 16:7b (NRSV)*

I attended Our Whole Lives (OWL) sexuality education training last February in preparation for facilitating K-1 and Grades 4-6 OWL curriculum sessions. I remember this experience as life-changing for me because it was my first time sharing my time with a group of people with great diversity in their gender identities. My new friends taught me many things - that gender is not an enclosed box; differences should be normalized and all family identities should be validated. I learned about gender inclusiveness, to create comprehensive space and not to group by what I think somebody's sex might be. I learned to assume that every kind of gender is in the room.

I also learned to grant myself grace and forgiveness. Being part of a church or being a "religious" person doesn't mean that we will be instantly and perfectly comfortable with human differences or lifestyles that seem foreign to us. What it does mean is that I need to be willing to honestly work on my discomforts, ignorance and prejudices as I move toward being a more generous and welcoming person.

My hope is that I will be inclusive and welcoming to all genders and honor their unique gifts and particularities of their lives. To affirm and celebrate all gender lives, issues and history. And to start advocating for all gender justice, freedom and equality. Jesus said that he came that all may have life, and have life in abundance. I feel renewed in celebrating the great diversity of life that God has lavished upon us.

Michael Ott

Prayer: Our Creator, we praise you for we are fearfully and wonderfully made with all the kaleidoscopic beauty of human difference. Enable us to celebrate the abundant gifts of diversity that enrich and bless our lives. Amen.

Thursday - February 25

“With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!”

Mark 15:37-39 (NIV)

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Hebrews 4:14, 16 (NIV)

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.

Hebrews 6:19 (NIV)

The curtain was ripped from top to bottom and the centurion said this must have been the Son of God. But the disciples ran and hid, they were scared, frightened and alone. Oh how stupid, how self-degrading they felt; despair set in, all hope gone. Three days of put downs, three long anguish days of thoughts, bad thoughts circling their minds forgetting all that Jesus had told them. Then all of a sudden Jesus appears and they touch his hands and side, all things change. Hope Arises.

Come and touch, Come and see, come and know all HOPE is here. Touch Jesus, Invite Jesus to Come and rip away your fears, your failures, your sins and degrading thoughts. Come boldly, arise and let Hope tinkle, glimmer through your body, veins and restore peace. For Jesus is Alive. Alive In You!! Jesus promises never to leave you/me. Praise God Halleluiah.

Beverly Avers

Prayer: O Lord, you are right here with me, bringing hope, bringing peace. Help me to lean on you and trust you, for you are my God who makes all things possible. In Jesus’ Name I pray. Amen.

Friday - March 26

Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy.

Ephesians 4:23-24 (NLT)

Recently I participated in part of the One Conference through the school district where I teach focusing on Inclusion and Diversity. Sitting by myself staring at my screen I learned about resiliency and how to build that in my students. Days later I continue to wonder and reflect on key takeaways regarding being resilient like: start with myself-stand tall and firm in my values, name and recognize my own emotions then invite them for tea, and work to build a better community through truly listening and engaging in healing conversations. I don't know about you, but those three items could take me all of 2021 to process, negotiate, and develop!

Today I am reminded that this Christian journey is ongoing. Paul encourages us to renew our spirits and minds, to daily put on our new selves, and to walk in love. This process of renewal is not a one and done, but a perpetual choosing and requires a resilient spirit. May we step up to the call and align ourselves with Christ as we cling to hope and renewal on this day and each day going forward.

Join me in pondering: What are three words that reflect the world you want to live in? What are three words that represent your values? How do you want to be remembered? What healing conversation can you be a part of?

Heidi McDowell

Prayer: Yahweh Nissi, you are the guide of my life. I need you as I can't do this alone. I know you are on all sides of me, my past, my present, and my future. I offer you my life and continue to look to you for guidance as I renew my mind, my thoughts, and my faith. Increase in me a resiliency that allows for growth of your kingdom here on Earth. May I choose the better road as I put on my new nature. May I go into the world, listen and love and press into a renewed relationship with you today and everyday. Amen.

Thursday - March 25

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Galatians 6:10 (ESV)

Every year in VBS, Rebecca encourages the kids to look for God sightings. They do a great job of seeing examples of kindness, love and faithfulness around them. During this past year we've seen many heroes who have done amazing things to get us through a difficult time. But I've tried to look for God sightings on a more personal level, examples of kindness and love that have inspired me. There is a member of our congregation who knows how much Monica loves stickers, so she saves any that come her way and sends them to us. A high school friend of mine knows how much we're missing our annual Disney trip and sends Monica cards and notes anonymously that Monica believes are coming from the Disney characters and she just squeals in delight. A woman at the gym who heard me say how Monica still watches videos and how hard it is to find VCR players these days gave me one they didn't use anymore. Then there are the neighbors who surprised me by raking leaves or shoveling snow, proof that there is a benefit to being an old lady in a neighborhood of young people! In all these examples (and there are many more) I'm sure the giver would say that it was no big deal at all and yet those simple acts of kindness meant so much to us. I hope that I am able to make as much of a difference to others as I continue to find ways to share God's love.

Nancy Cuartas

Prayer: Dear Lord, In a world where you can be anything, be kind. Help us remember these words, and look for ways that we can show love and kindness to those around us, as you have loved us. Amen.

Friday - February 26

The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and he delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with his hand.

Psalm 37:23-24 (KJV)

If you have kids, you have worried. When they are little you worry about what they eat and you worry when they are sick. You worry about when and if they will learn to walk and talk. You worry that they will never sleep all night or that they will never get potty trained.

When they go to school, you worry they might not learn to read or that they won't learn their math facts or spelling words. There is the worry of whether they will have friends and get invited to birthday parties. The list goes on and on!

Then they become teenagers and you realize that the toddler and grade school ages. . .well that we was really the easy part!

The high school years bring on a whole new set of worries. Will they make the Varsity team and will they get to play? Will they make safe choices when they are driving. Will they make safe choices in general!?!? Then there is their GPA, the ACT test and college decisions.

But we can stand on this promise in faith. *Psalm 37:23-24 The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and he delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with his hand.*

I think about this scripture almost everyday. It gives me hope to know that Tommy's steps are numbered. It gives me peace to know that if he falls God is holding his hand.

Lori Kipfer

Prayer: Dear God, Bless all of our children and keep them safe. Show them the plan you have for their lives. Help us to be good parents. Amen.

Saturday - February 27

*For I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.
Isaiah 41:13 (NIV)*

I received a gift for Christmas, something I would never buy for myself and honestly, something I was a little nervous about receiving. It was an amaryllis bulb that you plant and let grow. What a great gift, right? A burst of beauty and color during the long, gray winter. However, and here is the problem, I do not have a green thumb. In fact, pretty much any time I try to grow something, I manage to kill it. Not intentionally, of course, but mostly because I forget about it. I don't put it at the top of my list of important things, and therefore it gets left to take care of itself.

I am so glad that God doesn't put me at the bottom of his list! He doesn't leave me on my own to take care of myself. He is always right here with me, holding my hand and helping me, guiding me. There is such comfort and hope in that. Even when I veer off of his chosen path for me, He is right there waiting for me to figure it out and change course.

So, I planted my bulb and it has been living on my kitchen counter. Every day I watch it grow. I haven't forgotten about it. In fact, I look forward to seeing how it grows and changes each day. It started small, just a couple inches, but is now 23 inches and the flower is starting to open! The amount of joy I am receiving from this gift is not what I expected when I first opened the package. I am so thankful for this visual reminder of God's beauty and hope every day.

Debbie Wenner

Prayer: It is so comforting to know that you are always with me, holding my hand and taking care of me. Thank you for the visual images of beauty and hope that remind me of your love and care. Amen.

Wednesday - March 24

*We wait for the LORD; he is our help and shield. For our hearts rejoice in him because we trust in his holy name. May your faithful love rest on us, LORD, for we put our hope in you.
Psalm 33:20-22 (CSB)*

I love the Psalms, then again, I am a poetry, and song lyric person. I find words to be beyond profound. I love to listen to the rhyming, the cadence and then to analyze the meaning of how and why the words are put together. Many people find Psalms to be frustrating, but for me, they truly breathe life into my mind, soul, and body. Since the pandemic began, I read from the book of Psalms every day to refresh myself and to stay connected with the Lord. So, for me, when I think of "stories of renewal and hope" my mind always goes towards the Psalms because that is what this whole book does for me - I truly become renewed and feel hope after I read them.

This psalm convicts me on so many levels. I am not blessed to be a natural "waiter". I am a person of action, I respond! So, all of this "waiting" with the pandemic challenges me, but I have realized the important of waiting. I think I have always had the wrong definition of what to wait means in my mind. I have looked at it as "doing nothing", being lazy, or not wanting to get involved. People say, "I am going to wait" as a way of "getting out of things" and that annoys me. However, I have realized I have looked at waiting all wrong. I have not looked at it from a Biblical standpoint until now.

Waiting does not mean to sit idle, to not move or to be at a standstill. Waiting means to pause and allow the Lord to take control of the situation. And that was a life changing thought for me. My mind was blown beyond. To wait for the LORD means to refuse to push my agenda of what I want life to be over the LORD's agenda. We wait for him to go in front of us... to prepare the way... to defend and protect us... to love us and in that waiting we need to rejoice in His glory because we trust Him. We trust his plan. We trust his sovereignty. And because we wait, we are able to put our hope in him.

I now find the times of waiting, to be life changing. I still struggle; however, I have chosen to dig deeper into God's Word; to read, to listen, to stay connected to Him and I realize as I am waiting (not sitting idle) that God is working, and God is setting a path for me and my life. So, now in times of waiting, I am finding calmness, finding strength, I find myself rejoicing, and I find the love of the LORD surrounding me. This pandemic has truly taught me a wonderful and very much needed lesson in understanding and the important of waiting which has brought me personal renewal and hope beyond!

Rebecca Brownlee

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to wait on you. Help us to allow you to go before us as our help and shield. Allow us to rejoice in our times of waiting to grow closer with you. Amen.

Tuesday - March 23

Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them. Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever. He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the LORD is gracious and merciful. He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant. He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations. The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy.

They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures

forever.

Psalm 111 (NRSV)

When you wake up one morning,
All of a sudden you realize
That your life cannot be repeated, it is a gift and it is unique
But you live like you are in deep slumber,
While miracles are passing you by.
Try to recognize and see a miracle
In the radiance of the night sky,
Create roadmaps in your head
Of places you have never been before,
And hear child laughter,
And remember all your dreams.
Wake up from winter slumber
For actually, God's miracle is you!

Проснувшись утром вдруг поймёшь,
Что жизнь твоя неповторима ...
А ты живешь, как будто спишь,
И чудеса проходят мимо.
Попробуй чудо разглядеть
В сиянии ночного неба.
Составь маршруты в голове,
Где ты ещё ни разу не был.
Услышь звенящий детский смех
И вспомни все свои мечты.

От зимней спячки ты проснись. Для Бога чудо —это ты

Vera Oreshina

Prayer: Merciful God, in these anxious times, help us remember about your holy love and be the light for those who are suffering. Wake up people's hearts to be open to your truth. Amen.

Second Sunday in Lent - February 28

Scripture reading for the day: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 (NRSV)

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

Monday - March 1

*I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people,
Ephesians 1:18 (NIV)*

It was nearly a year ago when a good friend's son-in-law slipped on the stairs inside his home and experienced severe head trauma and fell into a coma. When I finally made contact with my friend, he indicated his son-in-law was on life support for over a week and the doctors were not very hopeful that he would survive. My friend is a devout believer in Jesus Christ and very active in his faith, but was torn emotionally and spiritually by these events and praying for a miracle while also trying to console his daughter and three grandchildren.

As the days passed, his condition continued to worsen, hope began to wane and the family finally made the difficult decision to remove life support ties. After a few days Robbie gave up his struggle and passed away on Good Friday of last year. My friend texted me to let me know God had called his son-in-law to his eternal home.

At the time the text came in to my phone I was on-line watching the Good Friday services at PUMC. Ironically, at that very moment the song "In the Cross" was being sung and the lyrics, "In the cross, in the cross be my glory, 'til my raptured soul shall rest beyond the river. Thank you for the cross Lord." were running through my mind. I'm not sure why my cell phone was sitting next to my laptop as I watched the Good Friday service, but I'm so grateful God gave me the opportunity to share these lyrics with my good friend to ease his grieving and pain. My friend was very thankful for the words God allowed us to exchange that day and that his son-in-law knew Jesus as his Lord and Savior. What a powerful presence God has in our lives each and every day. God was there to console and lift up my friend in his time of greatest need. He knows what we need, when we need it most and we simply must always watch and listen for him in our lives. We believe and therefore we have reason for hopefulness.

Alex Dumm

Prayer: Loving and merciful God, we pray for your comfort, strength and renewal each and every day. It is through your love that we best learn to gift others with the joy of your mercy and hopefulness. Thank you for accepting us in our brokenness and welcoming us into your kingdom without condition. Amen.

Monday - March 22

*Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.
Hebrews 13:1-3 (NIV)*

This past year I became part of a new group at PUMC called Hope Letter Writers. This team was formed to write letters of hope and to provide encouragement to both men and women who are incarcerated in the Ohio prison system. In January of last year I was excited to be assigned my inmate to whom I was to correspond, Shelby. Shelby was serving her time at the Ohio Reformatory for Women located in Marysville Ohio. I wrote my first letter with some nervousness, but explained my purpose for writing, described our Hope Writing group at PUMC and mentioned that the chaplain at ORW thought that she might appreciate receiving letters from those in the community that support her and others that are incarcerated. In the first letter, I also probably mentioned what the sermon topic of the week had been the previous Sunday and also included one of my favorite Bible verses and what it meant to me. I waited with excitement to receive a reply. No reply came to my first letter or my second letter or my third letter, much to my disappointment.

Each month our group met to encourage each other with our letter writings and to share responses that had been received from those inmates who had responded. For those of us who were not getting responses it was hard. Did the inmates not like receiving our letters or were our letters not interesting or engaging? The consensus of the group was even though some of us may not be receiving a response, that hopefully our letters would continue to encourage the recipient. I admit, I was discouraged and had even considered drafting a letter to let Shelby know that I was not going to continue writing to her since I had not received a response.

I kept writing all through the summer and fall with no responses from Shelby. Then the week of Thanksgiving, Deacon Sandy, who is one of the leaders of the Hope Writers group, let me know that Shelby had been released from prison and that she had sent an email to the PUMC office address! Shelby thanked me for my letters and even though she had not written back to me, she shared how much the letters had meant to her! She also shared that she was pregnant at the time of her incarceration and she had recently been reunited with her baby and 8 year old son.

This experience is a reminder to myself and others how important human contact is! Don't underestimate the phone call, the text, the letter or the card or the hug that you give someone. Keep sharing the hope and love of God, even when you don't get a response or don't think it matters to the other person. Reach out to someone today that you think may need encouragement. Be the light today and everyday.

Song to download today: "Less Like Me" by Zach Williams

Karen Curren

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for loving us. Help us to focus less on ourselves and what we need. Help us to be on the look out for others that may need encouragement and to be reminded that they are loved by You. Amen.

5th Sunday in Lent - March 21

Scripture reading for the day: Jeremiah 31:27-34 (NRSV)

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD. In those days they shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge. The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Tuesday - March 2

The faithful love of the LORD never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning.

Lamentations 3:22-23 (NLT)

Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many.

Hebrews 12:15 (NLT)

Good morning friends!

I come to you once again to share my story of hope, love and faith. My journey of faith began approximately six years ago. I work on my faith daily by doing daily devotions and prayers. Very soon into my journey I realized that I didn't feel love, something that I had never felt. The feeling of love was brought to me by a very special young lady who now lives with God. I will one day thank her.

My journey of faith was furthered by a representative of God who lives on earth. Her example of living and loving will forever serve as an example for me. Within the past year I have begun to learn about the Holy Spirit and daily look for the Spirit's guidance and prayers.

This past year the pandemic has radically changed our lives. To those of you who are feeling down, I suggest you cheer up by cheering up others; those who are home bound for many reasons. You can phone, text, write notes and pray for them. Keep in contact with people. They will love you for it. I have faith that God will take care of us. His mercies begin afresh each morning. Our pastors, active and retired and church staff have given so much encouragement and help to all.

I MISS HUGS!!!

Sue Sheets

Prayer: Loving God, thank you for those who show us who you are through their love, example, and cheer. Help us to learn from them and share your love with the world. Amen.

Wednesday - March 3

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Colossians 3:16-17 (ESV)

In early March 2020 we disembarked our Disney Fantasy cruise after snow birding in Florida and started our trek back home to Delaware, Ohio. What a great 2 months we had in warmer weather and little did we know that would be our last truly “free time” in 2020. We decided to sequester ourselves to stay very safe during this pandemic and continue to do so until we receive the vaccine.

During this time, I find myself bored and missing interacting with others. Facetime and Zoom are excellent technologies but I long to see and be with friends. But I also find myself enjoying this calmness and reduced drama of life. I am reminded to thank God for the blessings He gives us, especially with health.

I remember that in 2019 my wife was told twice that she would be a widow as I fought Lymphoma and then atypical pneumonia during the chemo regime. Only living 3-5 months was the initial diagnosis for the Lymphoma and one night I was “Code Blue” for the pneumonia. During this treatment I allowed my God to drive my Life Journey Bus, trusting Him in all aspects, and me discipling to the medical staff along the way.

So, as I compare these last 12 months with the previous 12 months, I remember to express thankfulness each and every day, as I do what I can to stay healthy and make a difference to others while here on earth.

Harry Poston

Prayer: Abba Father, thank you for always being there when we need You. Amen.

Saturday - March 20

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength ...

Ephesians 1:18-19 (NIV)

A few summers back, my friend Cathy and I took a drive to Wooster to see our friend. We covered lots of geographic and verbal territory. I was telling a silly story of leaving my sunroof open and drenching my car. It led to sharing how my Joyce Meyer book got a little water logged, and then transitioned to how I admired Ms. Meyer’s ministry and writing. I said that I couldn’t fathom Ms. Meyer’s courageousness in surviving her father’s sexual abuse. And then with a jolt of reality, Cathy looked at me and said, “I can.” I was shocked to learn that from ages 5 to 12, Cathy was the victim of her stepfather’s twisted abuse. But the thing that kept turning over in my head was how in our multi-year friendship I didn’t know. Cathy is one of the most fun, sensitive and kind people I know and I couldn’t reconcile how some trace of bitterness didn’t penetrate her personality and her love of humanity. I said some of my words out loud because honestly, I was mad for her and her five year old self and for victims everywhere. For Cathy, her perseverance came through manifesting attributes to create her healing... the main one being forgiveness. Several months after our drive Cathy dug deep into her faith and wrote her book, *From Broken to Beautifully Whole*.

Survivorship is remarkable, sharing pain is courageous and finding a path to healing instills hope for all.

Although I fear my words fall short, I believe anyone who has suffered and still reached for another day is the personification of HOPE.

Dana Ullom-Vucelich

Prayer: Loving God, may your light of goodness shine a path of hope for all. Amen.

Friday - March 19

*"But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who long for your saving help always say, "The LORD is great!"
Psalm 40:16 (NIV)*

I can point to many moments in my life when I know that God was drawing me nearer to Him and those moments felt significant. Sadly, those were just moments and although I lived a life of church attendance and participation, I was not seeking a relationship with God. Without that relationship I saw no hope or light and had no strength in my soul when I entered a dark period.

While wreaking havoc on my own life, I reached a bottom and cried out to God to rescue me and He did! I had a burning desire to express my gratitude through praise and worship. That's what I knew how to do, so I started attending church again. In 2015, God's nudges sent me to a devotional group where His love was shown to me, a small group where He provided fellowship and ultimately a Women's Bible Study where His Word penetrated my heart and ignited my passion to know him more dearly. Still today, this Bible Study provides me a pathway to renewal in my life because it allows me a pathway for a relationship with God. Seeking Him through The word, in fellowship with others, strengthens my hope to face challenges in my life and in the world. It provides evidence of His grace and mercy throughout eternity. Grace and mercy that transform my life and give me hope because of His greatness!

Kristina MacKenzie

Prayer: Dear Lord, I seek to know you more today than I did yesterday. I praise you for Your Holy Word and I praise you for fellowship with others that desire to know you more too. Thank you for your transformative power and love, always available to me, to renew me and to provide me hope that I can share with the world. Amen.

Thursday - March 4

*Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding,
but one who has a hasty temper exalts folly.
Proverbs 14:29 (NRSV)*

This has been a year when it has been so very easy to be angry. I've struggled with anger that isn't really specific but more of a generalized anger just below the surface. I have leaned heavily on Proverbs 14:29 to keep my head cool and treat everyone I meet around me the way I would wish to be treated. I have found that people around me reciprocate with great patience, understanding, and sympathy.

Jeff Bernard

Prayer: Please help us to remember your greatest commandment and love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and all our mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Amen.

Friday - March 5

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Philippians 4:8-9 (NRSV)

My mother was an avid gardener, as was her mother. But where my grandmother enjoyed growing flowers and vegetables, my mother enjoyed landscaping and yard work. While growing up, I could always find my mom outside in her yard trying to make the grass greener, the shrubs healthier, always learning more and more about the best ways to make the yard look it's best, and even winning "Yard of the Month" twice. She always shared her gardening insights with me.

I also enjoy spending time working in the yard. Having lived mostly in parsonages until 10 years ago, I haven't had the opportunity to hone my skills - so let's just say I don't have a green thumb. I have a running battle trying to keep the grass growing and green in certain areas of our yard. Over the past few years, I've tried the easiest ways possible to regrow the grass - mainly just throwing seed out there and hoping it grows. I know from the lessons my mother taught me that this is not the proper way to see to a healthy lawn. So this year, I made a concentrated effort to fix these suffering areas of our lawn. It took multiple attempts over the spring, summer and fall. With each attempt, I remembered another step to help the seed take hold in the yard. In the fall, I finally had all the steps in place - preparing the ground, adding fresh soil, using the appropriate seed, covering the seed with hay mulch and water. Thick grass grew! Now winter is here, even though dormant, the lawn looks healthy.

As I contemplate this experience, I realize the lessons God has shared with us prepare the way for growth. There's no easy way, but if we follow what we've learned through faith, good things will result. The seed is planted and hope will grow!

Kelly Brown

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for teaching us how to grow in faith. Amen.

Thursday - March 18

I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence... For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.

Psalms 91:2-3; 11-12 (NIV)

Have you ever been in that place where life just isn't going right for you? Four months ago I was trapped in my thoughts, nervous, anxious and in darkness.

Thoughts swirled of doubt. Of worry. Am I good enough? Does anyone care? Did I make a mistake? Will my text be answered? How did I get here? Can I fix it? What's going on in this world? Do I matter? I don't belong...

I could have curled up under the weighted blanket and hibernate until these feelings passed—but God sent an angel - in the form of a new friend, who literally walked beside me each week, with her 80 pound boxer shepherd dog in tow, as we got our steps in, at a local park. She is a member of PUMC. This angel listened to my swirl and said - we'll take you at PUMC! So, I got involved. It snowballed quickly into a whole lot of PUMC angels. I discovered new friends and reconnected with old. Everything was so easy. It just felt like divine intervention. A light began to shine in me. I was connected. The light was healing. I realized I do matter. I am loved and appreciated for the authentic me. Everyone gets caught up in their head. It's through the relationship with God and others, caring others, and positive activities, that frees us from the darkness. That makes us connected. PUMC did that for me. And this is my refuge in the people of PUMC.

Pat Arnold

Prayer: Peace be with you. May Peace be with you who are awash in thoughts of doubt, worry, anxiety, and nervousness. May God abolish these thoughts and feelings from your mind and shine the light of Christ upon you. May you gain strength and healing, connections, love, communion, and most of all, within you - peace. Amen.

Wednesday - March 17

Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it;

1 Timothy 6:6-7 (NRSV)

'Simple Gifts'. I know you know the incomparable Shaker tune. I know you are singing it to yourself right now :)

Many years ago, in our high school band, we played the melody repeatedly in an adapted version of the song for our level of ability. Our band director shared a history of the song with us, and I have gone back to the obvious message many times: simplicity over complexity. My mother's voice reframes it for me saying, "Don't take yourself so seriously, Todd!"

We are planning another wedding in my family right now, and it is so ... well, I am supposed to say stressful, right?! But it isn't, and we won't let it be! We are actively not sweating the little things and all of the details that could overwhelm us. We have all lived through tough times in our lives, and we know faith and hope are not just words! Each of us has gifts to offer, simple gifts that bring contentment and a genuine feeling of a renewed heart and a restored soul.

And upon further inspection, our music teacher explained another fact, "Simple Gifts' is a dancing song intended for lessons in dancing and lessons in how we live our lives." So, friends, shall we dance?

Todd Hardesty

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for the gift to be simple! We lift you up each day and know an attitude of gratitude will be our goal. Bless each one of us in our dance today. Amen.

Saturday - March 6

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:13 (NRSV)

I once took a multiday hike through an area that had been ravaged by a major forest fire. As I hiked, I was continuously surrounded in all directions as far as the eye could see with the charred, black burned-out skeletons of what had once been magnificent living trees. There was no undergrowth under the trees. The ground was covered in black and white ash. With every step that I took, the ash made a plume that went half-way up to my knees. The land was totally silent. There was not sight or sound of any wildlife. No squirrels. No birds. Not even any insects. There was no water to be found. The land was totally dead. After a sad 10-mile day, I finally camped for the night.

The hike during the second day started out much like the first. However, I experienced something different in the afternoon. At the base of a dead, burned-out tree there was a little spot in the ash that was not the same color as the ash. I brushed away the ash from around the spot and uncovered a little living sprout with two little tiny green leaves. I gave that little plant all of the water that I had left. I sat there with it for a while before finally moving on. You see, to this day it is that little living sprout that I remember whenever I hear the word "Hope."

Steven Bettencourt

Prayer: Almighty and Everlasting God, thank you for life. Thank you that we are surrounded by so much life each and every day. Thank you that we have each other. For it is from You and You alone that truly gives us all that is Good and all that is Holy on the face of this earth. Amen.

Third Sunday in Lent - March 7

Scripture reading for the day: Exodus 20:1-6 (NRSV)

Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Tuesday - March 16

*For our momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.
2 Corinthians 4:17 (NASB)*

Some times I wonder: "Am I the only person who struggles?" I believe in my heart that I am a Child of God! And yet there are times and circumstances that make me have doubts! Why do I suffer? Why do those I care for die and go away? Why do people that I do my best (in and out of church) to be what they expect forsake me when I fall short?

I gave my life to the Lord, was baptized and committed my life to Him in my teens. My parents were not Christians: their comfort was in alcohol. The church family held me close and I tried even harder to be the best. I attended Bible College, graduated was ordained and moved forward to be and do everything they expected. Struggling within my self constantly. Am I really serving the Lord or just in bondage trying to please others? Like every one--I wanted love and respect. I found myself in my own Gethsemane! I prayed! He heard!! My life would never be the same! At the ripe age of seventy-five the grace of our God has never failed! Ministry is still going strong and I have good friends, brothers and sisters (in the church and out) who love and care for me just as I am.

In this most sacred season; we as His children must not give up! ! How could we? Things look like they are falling apart out side, but inside God is making new life! Instead of crying out in frustration; know that all these hard times are small potatoes compared to the blessings that yet to come! God hears our call in the nick of time; when you need Him....HE WILL BE THERE!!!

Paul K Fowler

Prayer: Lord of my life: help me to look beyond the frustrations and anxieties of life and to catch the vision of what is to come! It is worth it all to be Your child to prove You through the last long mile. I wait in the shadow of Your grace; knowing, You will change me and keep me in safe in all my ways!! **THE BEST IS YET TO COME!! AMEN!!!!**

Monday - March 15

*And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.
Colossians 3:23-24 (NKJV)*

In June 2020, I received the news that my school was planning to return to in-person learning in the fall and needed to make some changes for the start of the school year. After having taught online from March to June I was happy to do whatever was asked of me. Little did I know these changes consisted of me becoming a classroom teacher for the first time. As an intervention specialist for the past 8 years, I was confident in my role. Becoming a 5th grade teacher was out of my comfort zone.

When August 25th rolled around there was no turning back, I now had 12 students who were relying on me to be with them almost every minute of every day for the school year. I had no idea how I was going to teach new concepts and subjects and be the best teacher for these students. I very quickly learned, however, that it was not about how “good” of a teacher I was, it was about caring for the well-being of these students. None of the parents had any high expectations for this year, they were just grateful their child was in school with their friends. So even in all my worry about being the “best teacher” in a new position, I really just needed to do my best to ensure that each of my students felt safe and cared for.

Alyssa Thiele

Prayer: Lord, I pray that you stand with each person who is making changes in their life. I pray that you can help them see what they are doing is their best and that it is good enough. I ask that you will not only receive their best but show them that they are worthy. I ask this in your name. Amen.

Monday - March 8

*Jesus replied, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.
John 6:35 (CEB)*

One of my favorite parts of the year is the youth fall church retreat. The fall retreat is a time for us to take a step back from school or whatever else is going on in our lives, so we can worship and strengthen our relationship with God. Although this year’s retreat was different, I think it helped us connect with each other a little bit more. Since everyone had been through similar experiences in the past year, we were able to relate to each other more. One of the scriptures that we talked about was John 6:35, “Jesus replied, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’” Imagine you could only eat your favorite food for the rest of your life, never get tired of it, and it will always satisfy you. This is exactly how God wants us to see Him. Bread is a food that is cheap. Shareable and filling. Bread is accessible to everyone, just like God. You can also share God’s word and it will fill you spiritually. God wants us to take His word, read it, share it, and not only fill ourselves but others. He is the bread of life, as long as we continue to strengthen our relationship with Him and spread His word, we will never hunger.

Ally Sutton

Prayer: Dear God, I pray that we are able to continue to share your grace, spread your word, and help others to do the same. May we always be reminded that Jesus is the bread of life and with him, we will never be hungry. Amen.

Tuesday - March 9

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Matthew 11:28-30 (NIV)

Two of the most rewarding, yet exhausting weekends of my life were when I was asked to serve as the assistant lay director of a Chrysalis retreat in Cincinnati. Like Emmaus retreats offered for adults, Chrysalis is a three-day youth retreat that features fifteen presentations of faith to youth by other youth, adult laity, and ordained clergy. While the participants are intentionally left clueless as to the time of day or the agenda, it falls on three assistant lay directors working in the background to maintain a literal minute-by-minute schedule for three days straight. It is one thing to go into a short stint of stress and worry knowing that rest and reprieve will come soon enough.

I am sure it will come as no surprise to anyone who knows me that I am often guilty of trying to maintain an intense focus and attention to detail for longer periods than is realistically sustainable. Often my passion for providing others with the best and smoothest experiences possible leaves me in moments where I feel overwhelmed, totally exhausted, and like I am letting those around me down.

While I wish I had a grand and complete remedy, I have still grown to learn that there are times where you must find satisfaction in the work you have already accomplished, focus on the relationships that have grown in that experience, and seek out those moments of rest and quiet that allow you to rest and re-find God in the craziness. Whether it is a period of meditation and prayer, a time of joy with friends, or a moment of music that moves your innermost emotions, find rest for your soul.

Remember...even Jesus took naps!

Drew Thiele

Prayer: Great Father and Redeemer, it is too easy to get wrapped up in the demands of this world. Whether it is trying to help everyone with everything, or simply trying to do everything for ourselves, we can unknowingly wander out of reach of your yoke and allow our burdens to weigh down our souls. Watch over us, guide us, and continue to call us back to the refuge of your sanctuary. Open our hearts and minds so we can remain focused on your love for us and share it gracefully with all that we encounter in our daily lives. In the name of your son, who came to bear our burdens and give us rest. Amen.

4th Sunday in Lent - March 14

Scripture reading for the day: John 3:14-21 (NRSV)

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

Saturday - March 13

*Great is his faithfulness; his loving-kindness begins afresh each day.
Lamentations 3:23 (TLB)*

Many of us look back on our lives and realize that there were certain times (weeks, months or even years) that were very challenging. I often wondered how those without a deep faith get through those difficult times.

In 1998 I experienced such a time. My husband was planning to retire at the end of the year and we both realized that our lives would undergo some changes. We talked about our retirement and looked forward to spending time on the coast of Maine, which is my happy place. Then life took on a detour. My athletic father suffered two heart attacks on his way home from a Board Meeting. My mother was in frail health so my dad's rehab became my everyday routine. I was grateful to be able to help but our retirement trip was postponed.

A month later my daughter's husband left her with two small children and we stepped in to offer child care. The trip to Maine was again postponed. Suddenly our lives were in chaos. I had always relied on my faith but never so much as during that tumultuous time. Instead of a tranquil home with just the two of us, we suddenly had a two year old and a five year old scheduling our every moment. Being a nurse was never my calling but I managed to tend to elderly parents and tried to make time for special moments with them as well. One Sunday I slipped away to attend church which I had been unable to attend regularly. The congregation stood to sing one of my favorite hymns and I found myself tearful as I realized that God had never left my side during these months, but rather had been holding my hand as well. His faithfulness gave me the hope and strength I needed. All I had needed His hand had provided...And eventually he brought me to Maine.

Nancy Tela

Prayer: Comforting God, thank you for never leaving our side even though we are not aware of your presence. Help us to look for you in everything around us. And to know that we can trust you even in the most difficult circumstances of our lives. Amen.

Wednesday - March 10

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?
Romans 8:35 (KJV)*

*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Romans 8:35, 38-39 (NASB)*

For a force to change direction, it must encounter something in its path. For me, that was the pandemic. It struck like a lightning bolt. In a matter of days my whole world changed. It shrunk. Because of health problems, I had to restrict myself to my condo. No trips to the grocery store, no going out for haircuts, no contact with friends or neighbors, no hugs from my daughter. Feeling alone, disconnected, and isolated. I wasn't attending any church on a regular basis and was floating through my life. But the sudden changes in my life prompted me to start having morning devotions again and regular daily prayer. My prayers began with remembering those with covid. Then, I added the first responders, my friends and relatives, for their safety and health. As I was praying, I could feel God's presence working in my heart. These verses from Romans came to mind how NOTHING can separate us from God's love. Even in our most alone and dark places, God is with us. I started missing church and discovered PUMC had services online. I started counting the days from Sunday to Sunday. I began to drink in the Word and be fed by the sermons and worship. All this led me to taking a new members class by zoom. I can do that! God was leading me in a new direction, a better path than I was on.

The pandemic is still going on, but I am not alone. I am walking and growing each day with God.

Nancy Heaver

Prayer: Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty. Thank you for the lives you have given us to celebrate your creation. Thank you for loving us in dark days as well as sunny days. Help us to mirror your love to those who so desperately need it. Show us how to live lives that honor you as we journey together on our path through Lent. Amen.

Thursday - March 11

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.

2 Corinthians 1:3-5 (NIV)

Twenty years ago I was hit with atypical Meniere's disease. I went from never having a single health problem to being critically ill within a few months. I felt defeated as physicians were unsure what to do. I had two young children to care for, a job, a great life! Although I felt everything was out of my control, I could pray. I prayed through every attack, through every MRI, and through every physician visit. I especially prayed when a risky surgery was suggested as my only treatment option. While the surgery was successful, I lost my hearing in one ear and lost the ability to balance well.

The truly remarkable part of the story isn't the disease progression or the outcome. The remarkable part is God's guidance throughout the journey. I was awed by the constant stream of caring that was given to me and my family through our church and friends. Physicians I had worked with in the past helped me find the best treatment options. I experienced amazing kindness through meals, cards, visits, and many prayers.

My faith expanded during this experience. It also reminded me we are called on to love and care for a person when they are broken and weak.

Karen Jordan

Prayer: Thank you God for being there for us! Help us see the needs of others, so we may lend a hand, be a comfort, or offer encouragement. Amen.

Friday - March 12

Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

Philippians 2:4 (NKJV)

And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.

Galatians 6:9 (NKJV)

As life moves along, we all experience trials and happenings we want to move past. Covid is probably not our first challenge. An example in my life relates to the above verses.

When I had started my first job after college, I remember my mother suggesting to me that whenever I had some free time, I should visit someone in a nursing home. She said they would enjoy my company. It sounded boring, and surely I could make more exciting plans. But her words rolled around in my mind, never quite leaving me. As I came to find that I did have time, some of it lonely, her words resounded in me. Looking back, I think that she anticipated I would experience loneliness and was trying to provide a suggestion for me to overcome it.

At the time, I knew an older woman I had chatted with at church but didn't know well. She had been hospitalized and did not have nearby family. It was intimidating at first to think of what we might talk about since I thought we had little in common. Influenced by my father, who read articles on the radio station for the blind, I took the newspaper with me to the hospital. As I visited with my new acquaintance, I realized talk was not terribly important. She seemed to enjoy just my presence and that I thought enough of her to be with her. So from then on, I visited without conversation props. I, too, enjoyed just her presence.

This led to my future long participation in both Stephen Ministry and Christ Care. Both programs are designed to comfort and show concern for those going through difficulties, but I have also found that they have been rewarding to me.

As the verse reminds us, you are blessed when you are helping others. I am so grateful to my mother for subtly pointing me to something so enjoyable that God blesses also.

Arlene Diaz

Prayer: O God, thank you for blessing us with the wisdom of others and helping us live out the ministry of presence. Amen.