

2023 Lenten Devotional Series

“I am a God who is everywhere and not in one place only. No one can hide where I cannot see them. Do you not know that I am everywhere in heaven and on earth?”

Jeremiah 23:23-24 (GNT)

Where do you see God? God is everywhere!

Some people naturally see God in everyday life and the things around them. The beautiful sunset, the rock formations, the snow and other natural wonders created by God. They can see God's presence in people and situations. And each creature that God has created, the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, the beloved pet...God shows up there too. I call these people “old souls” because they see things beyond their years. They can suspend logistical reality to be able to see spiritual wonders.

But most of us have to learn this beautiful technique of seeing God around us. And it may take some time to practice and realize that God is everywhere. If we start with “God is always working for good in the world” that helps. Because looking for goodness is somewhat easier than looking for God who we believe we've never seen. But once we get the hang of seeing God around us then we can start looking for God in others...in the sparkle of their eyes, in their feisty personality, in their creativity, even in their thoughts that are different from ours.

This Lent, you will read stories of where others have seen God around them. We hope that through these stories, you will believe with your own eyes where they have seen God. It is a rich world as God shows up through people's unselfish actions, the beauty of the earth and in our own hearts.

Karen Curren kawooster@gmail.com

Dana Ullom-Vucelich duv@columbus.rr.com

Kim La Rue kimlarue@powellumc.org

Easter Sunday - April 9 (cont'd)

It is easy for us to look back and recognize God was at work on Easter, but what about the ordinary days of our lives? All too often, we don't even recognize God at work right in front of us. It is interesting to me that Mary sees Jesus and assumes that he is a gardener. It makes me wonder what he was doing there in the garden. Had Jesus been working in the garden that morning? Did he have dirt under his fingernails? Was he doing the work that he saw that needed done?

I believe that John gives this detail for a reason. Jesus being mistaken as a gardener is certainly significant and connects to his life's mission. Creation started in a garden where sin was non-existent. It was a place of peace. It was a place where God came down to walk in the garden among the people. However, Genesis tells us that sin entered the garden and created a chasm between humanity and God.

Jesus came among us to restore that garden that sin may be forgiven and our relationship with God would be restored. So, perhaps Jesus was working in the garden that day to remind us that he is at work all around us seeking to complete that mission.

On this Easter Sunday, may we not only recognize God at work through the resurrection, but may we remember that God is at work all around us. We need to be on the look out for the extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary. We need learn to recognize God's presence in the midst of everything that we experience. We need to trust that God is at work. God is working to restore all of creation, and God wants us to join in this important kingdom work that God's will may be done on earth as it is heaven.

Pastor Justin Williams

Prayer: O God, we thank you for Your continued presence that surrounds us each day. Open our eyes that we may see You. Open our ears that we may hear You. Open our hands that we may join You in the work that You are calling us to do. Amen.

Easter Sunday - April 9

*Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"
Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him
away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."
John 20:15 (NRSVUE)*

In John's gospel, we are told that Mary Magdalene sees that the stone is rolled away and goes to tell the disciples. Two of the disciples came to the tomb, saw that Jesus wasn't there, and also ran to tell the others. However, Mary stood by the tomb weeping. She is overwhelmed with sorrow at the empty tomb because she assumes that someone has taken the body of Jesus. Then, she sees Jesus standing there but doesn't realize it is him. Jesus asks why she is weeping. She thought he was the gardener and explained the reason for her sorrow.

It was Easter morning. Mary encounters the empty tomb. She is face to face with the Risen Lord, and yet she doesn't recognize him. I believe that Mary was blinded by many things that day. She was experiencing overwhelming grief and sorrow because of the events of Friday, where she had watched this man that she loved die a cruel death. She had doubt that there was hope for anything beyond the cross. She was afraid because if someone had taken his body they might accuse her and the disciples. She was confused, pained, shaken, anxious, and overwhelmed. It is hard to imagine all that was going through her mind in that moment.

The theme for our devotion has been all about recognizing God in our midst, yet often times, we are like Mary. We too can allow grief, doubt, fear, and more to get in the way of being able to see God at work around us. In the midst of our difficult times, it is often hard to acknowledge that God is right there with us. So, on this Easter Sunday, we are standing face to face with an empty tomb and a risen Lord. Do we recognize the hope that this provides to our lives? Do we see God at work around us?

While it is easy for us to look at Mary, knowing what we know now, and judge her, we must realize it was just an ordinary day for her. She didn't realize that this was a day that would change the course of history. At that moment, she wasn't expecting something miraculous to happen. It is hard to see the extraordinary when you are in the midst of the ordinary.

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 22

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.

Isaiah 61:1-3 (NIV)

“She only has 3 weeks to live.” I was shocked! And as I was processing this horrible diagnosis, my mind recounted the significance of this life that was shortened to an unbelievable length.

My experience of this woman was that she was a beautiful example of a woman of God. She helped everyone in her path, she was an amazing hostess, a wonderful caregiver and my son's step-mom.

When you go through the experience of a relationship that is broken and you move on in your life, you don't have control over the ramifications of all that means. And one of those things is: who will also parent your child as life goes on? I couldn't have asked for a better step-mom for my son. She kept him safe and created a loving environment for him with my ex-husband. I couldn't have crafted it better.

And so I realized that I was grieving in significant ways for this woman who I appreciated and who had made life special for many people. We got along very well even though we didn't see each other often and lived in different states.

As I attended her memorial service with hundreds of other people whose lives she had touched, I knew that God was with us. God had given her 13 months instead of three weeks. Many of her friends had been able to see her in that time. And even though we laughed through our tears as we remembered her life, we knew that we had just experienced beauty and we needed to pass that on to others.

Kim La Rue

Prayer: God of beauty and ashes, as we live this life of fulfillment and also mourning, help us to continue to remember that You are always with us in the good times and the bad. Show us those glimmers of hope in the darkest of situations. Amen.

Saturday - April 8

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

Revelation 21:4 (CEB)

Today is Holy Saturday. A day of emptiness, a day of silence, a day in between. In between brutal and painful death and a light and joy-filled resurrection of Jesus Christ. In between despair and hope. In between sorrow and gladness. In between thorns of death and white cloth of life. In between the golden leaves of fall and the newly sprouted growth of spring. We find ourselves in between places in our lives all the time.

After the death of a loved one, there is a long period of winter in our souls, when our spirits are crushed, hearts broken, and bodies exhausted.

When we lose a job. When we get separated or divorced. When our beliefs do not match anymore the life we are leading.

These are the places of change, places of unknown, places where God seems distant and silent. These places have a potential to corner us into anger or resentment, because of how uncomfortable they might feel. Yet these places can hold potential for transformation, new beginnings and new life to come out in a new way. These are uncomfortable holy Saturdays.

I personally feel like I have been in Holy Saturday for some time. My brother's suffering and death led me to seek counseling and as a result of that I uncovered many childhood traumas and abuse. I feel like I am unraveling for the last year and a half. I am not where I was mentally, spiritually, emotionally, yet I have not arrived at a place of resurrection and light-filled hope. Yet I learn to be still and trust the silence of this in between space. I trust God to guide the process of healing without me controlling it; for God to take care of me and wipe away my tears; for God to stretch my compassion towards myself and the whole humanity; for God's resurrection to enter my heart so I can breathe anew sweet air of hope and wholeness that God gifted us and this whole earth through the life, ministry, death and the resurrection of Christ Jesus. Yet today, we sit in between death and resurrection.

Pastor Katya Brodbeck

Prayer: O God of Holy Saturday and many Holy Saturdays in our lives, as we find ourselves in that in between place, may Your gentle spirit wipe away our tears. May we trust that the former things have passed away and may we find courage to do the hard work of letting them go. May we lean into the hope, light, newness of the resurrection of Jesus that can't come soon enough. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Good Friday - April 7

Jesus prays:

“Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. “I have revealed you [a] to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me.

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

John 17:1-8, 20-23 (NIV)

Thursday - February 23

“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”

1 John 4:16 (NRSV)

I have spent a lot of time trying to see God. Trying to find God in what felt like obvious places with no luck. Eventually, I decided there was no God to be found. Only after this did I stop to wonder how anyone can find anything if they don't even know what they are looking for.

Sure, I was looking for God. But what is God? I certainly do not feel qualified to answer this, but I do know there has to be a reason behind the mysterious and complex universe we live in, a unifying force that even science is still working to explain. If this unifying force is God, then God is everywhere and in everything, the reason behind all existence. This would mean that God is in me and the reason behind who I am. So that is where I started looking, inside myself.

The search for God led to thinking deeply about who I am and who I want to be. Call it prayer, meditation, mindfulness, call it whatever you want, but this thinking felt bigger than myself. The longing to understand who I am eventually revealed emotions of love and compassion as the source of who I want to be. Love is a beautiful emotion and the more I looked for it, the more I found it. Love is where I first truly saw God and love is still my favorite place to return to.

Rachel Parfenchuk

Prayer: O beautiful Love, radiate through me to touch all those who seek You and all those who do not. Inspire all beings in this world and the next to share freely the radical compassion sparked by Your love and shown to us through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Friday - February 24

He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

Psalms 147:3 (NIV)

The grief associated with death occupies every part of your mind, body and soul. There is no overcoming it or going around it. You walk through it. Gut-wrenching walks covered with feelings of pain and loss can lead to walks of intense clarity and hope. I see our God in the clarity and the hope. He's provided a vision of purpose. A purpose not based on arrival at a specific point but rather trust in His process. Seek God, pray to Him, breathe in the world around you with eyes wide open.

The goosebumps on your arms and neck that appear during a powerful sermon – that's God. The warming of your heart as you read a text from a friend that arrives at just the right time – that's God. And even the tears that stain your face as you try to pray to that God are ok. He hears the unspoken and provides His grace. The grief will not diminish or go away but God binds our wounded hearts with healing. Healing that begins when grief births gratitude.

Tara Schnetzler

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, please continue to walk beside me and embrace our family with clarity and hope of healing. Guide us as we seek to be gracious despite our pain. Allow us to live Your process with open eyes and hearts. In Your loving name. Amen.

Holy Thursday - April 6

"I will put my breath in you, and you will live. I will plant you on your fertile land, and you will know that I am the Lord. I've spoken, and I will do it. This is what the Lord says."

Ezekiel 37:14 (CEB)

My favorite part of Sunday morning is turning on the lights, adjusting the thermostat and stepping back to breathe into our youth space. I remind myself that youth will fill the space in a matter of minutes and my heart swells. One year ago this space was a little dry. The walls were different colors, the concrete was broken, the rooms were sectioned off by curtains and it was hard to see exactly what this space could be. Surely I knew God was in the vision to make room but I was curious where exactly God was.

Then I had a baby. JD was born a short while after we put the finishing touches on the Lower Level but the decor wasn't up to my standards! We needed wall decor, more furniture, elements of cozy and cool. I didn't have to look far for God once I witnessed the birth of my son. It was overwhelmingly clear where God's presence lay; bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh. But once I returned from maternity leave, I saw where God's breath had breathed life. Here in this space I found those new bones that Ezekiel talks about.

My first Sunday back I was greeted by youth in the Lower Level in their space, cozy and cool, definitely needing more furniture, but we were together nonetheless. We all huddled onto the white couch for a picture. The same couch that was in this space just a year ago, that has sat down here for years. The same couch I'm sitting on now writing this devotional. God is here in this place, God has always been here, breathing new life into us all.

Hannah VanMeter

Prayer: God that surrounds us all, thank you for breathing new life into us. On this Holy Thursday we recognize the power of Your Son Jesus gathering with His disciples as He prepares to take His last breath, all while knowing His presence would never leave us. May we find hope in the breath of life and in the way of our Savior. Amen.

Wednesday - April 5

*Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God.
1 John 4:7 (NLT)*

I see God in the love of family.

In November 2022, my husband and I welcomed our first child, Brody, into the world. I knew how special and precious this child would be and knew God was with us as he came into our lives. But it was after he was born that I truly saw God's presence with us as we begin to introduce him to all his extended family.

The first instance was Christmas Day when he met his three cousins in Cincinnati. Kaiden and Kaiser (3) immediately came in stood around their grandma who was holding Brody and they began talking to him and calling him by name. The youngest, Cohen was just 11 months old and the look of amazement on his face when he saw Brody was God's gift to us. He was absolutely smitten and just amazed at this little baby who was smaller than him.

The next instance was when his cousins from Texas came to visit. Abe (5) and Piper (2.5) were both very excited and were constantly asking to help hold Brody and feed him. Even in times of slight jealousy from Piper, she still facetimes and asks to see "Baby Brody" and come help feed him.

Finally, where I truly saw God was in the pure acceptance and love shown to Brody from my step-father's family. Even though we have been joined together for over 15 years, there is always worry that two families will never fully accept each other as one. However, when we joined together for our Blackburn Family Christmas, I was blessed by how excited everyone was to meet Brody. Most surprising was when Drew asked our nephew Justin (18) if he wanted to hold Brody and he promptly answered "sure" and held out his arms. From then on Brody was passed around between my step-sister, Sarah, and her two children, Justin and Kylie (16), each taking their turn holding, talking and loving on Brody.

According to Scripture, children are a blessing, God's gift and reward. In 1 John it is made very clear, all begins with God's love. God is the source of love. For Him sending His one and only son to live and to die for us was the ultimate sacrifice of true love. This life-giving love is too much to keep all to ourselves so God commands us to love one another as God has loved us. The next time you are with family, whether they are blood relation or not, look for God because where there is love, there is God.

Alyssa Thiele

Prayer: We thank you Lord for bringing others into our lives who we call family. Whether they are related to us by blood or not they are each gifts from You. We show our love for You by loving them. Bless us as we continue to show our love each and every day. Amen.

Saturday - February 25

*"Oh that my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book!
Job 19:23 (ESV)*

This might sound crazy, but I see God in books. My favorite thing to do is curl up and read. And not a "good for me," or "I can learn something" kind of book, but fiction books that are purely entertaining. I am always reading, but when I tell people what I read, I always qualify them as books that will teach me nothing. I mean, I don't read biographies or history, and I'm horrible about keeping up with current events. But ask me about a Nora Roberts, Robyn Carr, Janet Evanovich, or J.A. Jance book, and I can talk all day!

So it always surprises me and warms my heart when I read something and think, "that sounds like something I'd read in the Bible." I've had it happen frequently. The Harry Potter books come to mind. Now I know many people will disagree with this and I don't want to debate with you, but I feel like there is a God throughout the series. A divine one who is watching and overseeing all that is happening with Harry. The Chronicles of Narnia is another series that comes to mind. Aslan, the lion, exudes my image of God. I love that for Christians, you can see God in these books, and for anyone who doesn't yet know Christ, they are first introduced to Him within these pages.

Thank goodness for books. Thank God for them! They give us differing points of view about so many things. And they give us things to think about and debate different ways to look at the world. Books are a way to introduce people to God and to share his word.

Debbie Wenner

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for the gift of the written word, in so many forms. It is a wonderful way to reach people, no matter where they are on their journey with You. Amen.

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

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 10:1-10 (NSRV)

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.
Romans 7:15 (NRSV)

Romans 7 and 8 is my favorite part of scripture. Paul the Pharisee apparently was *THE* leading Jewish law enforcer until his conversion, when he became Paul *THE* evangelist and had the law enforced against him. He taught that rules were good, but following rules wasn't the main point; instead, here he uses his own example to help encourage others to follow Jesus and allow the Holy Spirit to turn us from our sinful nature. I remember sitting in a graduate class taught by a professor who had been a post doctoral researcher of Sir Hans Krebs, the famous Nobel scientist who is credited for putting the pieces together in how mitochondria create cellular energy in the “Krebs cycle.” Perhaps because of this authority, my professor felt he could emphasize the role of mitochondria in evolution. I was still trying to figure out my own faith as I learned more science, and mitochondria became a knife's edge for me. If I believed in the power of science to create the foundation for my academic path, did that mean I couldn't believe in the power of the Holy Spirit as I tried to follow God's path? Some 40 years later and after serving on dozens of Ph.D. committees, I still say that most students reach what I call an “ahah moment” when they realize how much science they do *NOT* know. I recently watched a segment on TV about scientists at my alma mater trying to improve the efficiency of photosynthesis from sunlight in chloroplasts (scientific relatives of mitochondria) to increase crop production. My first thought was how could the basis of life, photosynthesis, be only 3% efficient? Shortly thereafter, I had another “ahah” moment thinking about the lyrics from the old Elvis song, *I Believe*: “every time I...touch a leaf or see the sky, then I know why I believe”. I never got to talk with my dad about such matters because he died when I was only 19, but I'll always remember hearing him sing that song above the tractor at full throttle. Reading Romans years ago was God's way of inviting me to realize how much I don't know and to believe, anyway. And if I don't always do what I want to do, but still I cling to my belief, as did Paul, then “nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:39)

Jeff Firkins

Prayer: Holy God, thank you for revealing Your incredible love to us through Your risen Son and for opening us to the Holy Spirit's “ahah moments.” Thank you for Your patience and for forgiving us over and over. Please help us to understand that it is ok to question and be satisfied that answers will come in Your good time. Amen.

Monday - April 3

See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.

Isaiah 43:19 (NIV)

We were determined to create an experiential “pilgrimage” for folks to understand more about our Black brothers and sisters. We had mapped out locations nearby to visit historic sites to understand more about the people and the underground railroad.

As we continued planning, my friend, Diane Thomas, attended many gatherings of local historical societies. In one of these meetings, she heard about the Lucy Depp community. She made connections with people who were familiar with the community and had deep connections there. As we continued to plan, we realized that our original plan would not be as effective as connecting with the Lucy Depp community to hear their personal stories of struggle and victory.

One day Diane called and said that our speaker would like to invite residents from the Lucy Depp community to come to our day. My first response was, “No, we don’t even know what we’re doing.” I was so afraid that we would say or do the wrong thing. But I got a second insistent call that they really would like to invite and have the community participate with us. I could feel the Holy Spirit nudging me to realize that this was important. We needed to have the two communities be in conversation with each other. Not just observing from afar, but hearing and seeing and lamenting together. God was with us from the first idea to the mingling of two communities. We have felt the gracious ongoing hospitality of the Lucy Depp community to this day. And I pray that we will have ongoing conversations and create more relationships in the future.

Kim La Rue

Prayer: O Lord of all creation, You have created us for Yourself. And You have created all peoples, cultures, and races to be in relationship with You and each other. Please continue to be with us as we seek to love each other. Amen.

Monday - February 27

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

Philippians 4:6 (NIV)

I am a worrier. It’s not that I lack faith. Maybe I think that by worrying, I can let God know what’s really important! It’s not logical thinking, of course.

My family really saw God in a recent event. My elderly sister and brother-in-law made the difficult decision to leave their home of 60 years in Pennsylvania and move to an independent living apartment in Chicago, to be near their children and grandchildren.

I had my list of worries. How would they handle leaving a large home for a tiny apartment? Can they afford the monthly expenses on their moderate pension? Will their house sell in this relatively depressed area when it needs so many updates? Will they be happy there, away from their friends and church? My mind went on and on, even though I believed that it was the right thing to do.

When the time came for the move, I saw God in every detail. We packed up the house in record time and my husband had purchased exactly enough boxes! When we took them to the airport, there were no tears or looking back. They love the apartment! And the day their house was listed, they received a cash offer for the asking price before the For Sale sign even went up!

When I spoke to my sister on the phone after they settled in the apartment, her comment was, “God was really in this move.” And that was so true for every step of the process. Sometimes I need a reminder that God always shows up!

Joy Waldron

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us to look for You in all circumstances, and not stress about what is out of our control. Thank you for showing up in even our small daily struggles and taking our worries out of our hands. Amen.

Tuesday - February 28

His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.

Matthew 25:23 (KJV)

My Grandma Ginny lived to be 90 years old. At her funeral, I remember standing by her casket, as over 500 people came through the line. My family and I still talk about how many of the callers said that Ginny was their very best friend.

My grandmother was only 18 when she had her first baby. This quickly changed her plans of going to college and being a teacher. After two more children, my grandfather left her and she was instantly a single mother. That was in 1959. To make ends meet, my grandmother cleaned houses, earning only a few dollars a day. She never owned her own home, she never learned to drive, but she never felt sorry for herself.

Grandma Ginny was a Christian and had inner joy. She shared her gift of educating children in a preschool Sunday School Class at Calvary United Methodist Church. Imagine how many lives she touched during her 50 years of perfect attendance. Many children in Jackson, Ohio knew their Bible Stories because of my grandmother. I am so grateful my son Tommy, had the opportunity to be in her class when we returned for occasional visits. My Grandma was the one that taught him the Lord's Prayer.

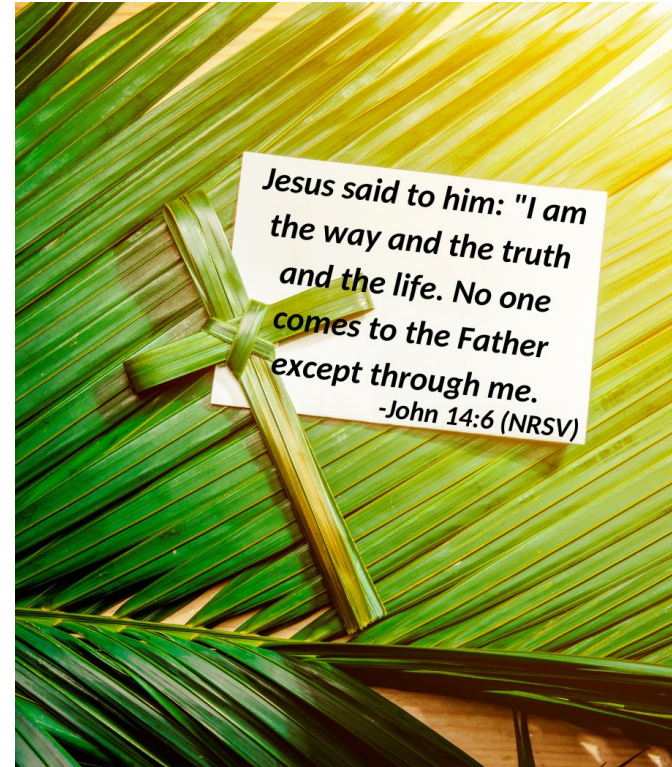
One of her other missions was to send cards to everyone she knew. Grandma Ginny sent birthday cards, get well cards, and sympathy cards, writing the most thoughtful and personal letters in each one. At times, the only card they received was from her.

She spent what little resources she had buying snacks for her Sunday School children and stamps for greeting cards. Even though she didn't have much money, she was the richest woman in town.

Lori Kipfer

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for giving me such a fine example in my grandmother to show how one person can share Your love with so many. Amen.

Palm Sunday - April 2



Saturday - April 1

*Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love,
And don't take yourself too seriously—take God seriously.
Micah 6:8 (MSG)*

Driven by God's Spirit

John's a preacher's kid who became a recluse wearing worn clothes and eating locusts and honey. The spitting image of the Prophet Elijah. He hated sin but felt called to reclaim sinners. At a river he preached, people repented, and drowned their sins in the water.

One day his cousin showed up. John recognized him as the Messiah and said, "You should baptize me!" but his cousin replied, "No, I need to be baptized just like my brothers and sisters here." So, John did. That's when God took action. The skies opened, the Holy Spirit came swooping down on Jesus, and the wind formed words, "You are my Son, my chosen one, marked by my love, now get to work."

Jesus' mind whirled, "What work? What am I to do?" God's spirit gave him a big shove driving him out into the wilderness for a Lenten's worth of forty days. Alone he fasted, prayed and began to comprehend God's purpose for him. From there he began his ministry of doing justice, showing mercy and walking humbly with God.

Jesus was called into ministry; in turn He calls us. Let's use this Lent to practice the ministry of justice, mercy and humility.

Dave Woodyard

Prayer: Wondrous Lord, drive me through these 40 days, steering me to see more clearly the purpose You have for my life. Amen.

Wednesday - March 1

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

— Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*

Thursday - March 2

"Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

Matthew 15:27 (NIV)

I see God every day in our dog Scooby. He was rescued from a kill shelter in Texas by the Canine Collective organization and brought to Ohio on Friday, September 13, 2019. We adopted him the next day. He loves us all very much but is especially attached to me. He follows me everywhere and always wants to protect me which can be a deafening experience in the car. I honestly feel he was a gift from God as he kept me busy during the pandemic walking miles each day enjoying all of God's creation and now he has me writing this.

In Matthew 15 Jesus goes to Canaan and meets a woman who has a sick daughter. At first he tells her that he has been sent only to rescue the lost of Israel. That his word, the bread of heaven, is not to be tossed to the little dogs aka gentiles. The woman, clearly a dog owner, reminds him that even puppies eat crumbs that fall from their masters table. Jesus gets it. She's got faith and is absolutely right and so he heals her daughter. It's a pivotal point in his ministry. He moves on to immediately feed the four thousand with just five loaves. Those crumbs were scattered thin and went far beyond the Jews. We owe that lady. She saw God in her dog too.

Gillian Anantharaman

Prayer: Jesus, help us to listen like You listen, consider and change our opinions too. Amen.

Friday - March 31

He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Luke 10:27 (NIV)

Every year at Christmas, I watch *It's A Wonderful Life* and tear up at the end when George's neighbors replace the money his business has lost. These ordinary people don't hesitate to do the right thing and love their neighbor. The film reminds me of the one stoplight town where I grew up. In a small town, everyone is kind and looks out for one another because everyone **IS** your neighbor. When a neighbor's barn burned down, we took up a collection and built a new barn. During one surprise snowstorm, we housed all the kids on the school bus that couldn't get home. Casseroles were automatic for every birth, funeral, and wedding. When I visit my parents, the small-town kindness is still present today.

I see God's presence when I experience myself or others offering or receiving acts of kindness. Living in a larger city, I still have the motivation to spread kindness, but I get busy with so many distractions around me. I am more intentional in looking for opportunities to extend kindness to others, no matter how small or big. God is present in these intentional acts of kindness whether it is on the highway when I slow down and let someone merge in front of me in traffic or when someone in the queue buys my coffee. Loving our neighbors through kindness makes a difference in someone else's world as well as our own.

Karen Jordan

Prayer: God, thank you for Your never-ending kindness toward me. Open my eyes to the needs of my neighbors and extend my hand, so that they may see You in my kind words and actions. Amen.

Thursday - March 30

Come, let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the LORD our maker, for he is our God. We are the people he watches over, the flock under his care. If only you would listen to his voice today!

Psalm 95:6-7 (NLT)

God made trees and birds and bugs. Things under the ground and up above.
With so many colors to see and go “ahh,” why do we hurry so quickly by (duh)?

Is it snow and darkness that makes us so slow, instead of bright sunshine that keeps us aglow?

Well, I know a Savior that wants us to see that He is here and waiting for thee.
He sits with his Father, God up above, enjoying creation and spreading His love.

Let's take a moment and look up and see the beautiful moments and scenery.
Do you see God's hand in colors or sound? Or the busy and noise that competes all around?

Lord help us to stop and crave time with You. If we come to You, You are there too. For You fill us, restore us and change things anew. For You are Almighty, Creator and King. You created me and everything.

I bow down before You, spend time at Your feet. May this time be sacred and like a retreat. Fill me with You and all that is true. For moments like these are a treasure indeed.

Sandy McKinley

Prayer: God, thank you for Your creation that is everywhere. Help us to stop, see it and savor it. It could be trees, birds, bugs or even the sun or moon. Thank you for Jesus and the love that You give us every day. May we spend time with You regularly so we can be filled with Your wonder and love. Amen.

Friday - March 3

*Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up.
Proverbs 12:25 (NIV)*

A few years ago my husband Harry and I were on a road trip from California to Ohio and we stopped for gas one evening somewhere along the way. Harry started inside while I stayed in the car. There were a couple of steps into the building and Harry was using a walker and as he started up the steps two very large questionable looking guys were coming out. No one else was around and I was frightened for him and prayed for God to watch over him and keep him safe. To my amazement, the two stood aside, opened the doors, held them for him, tilted their caps and continued on their way. When Harry got back to the car he asked if I had seen them and I told him I had been frightened. He smiled and said they were very kind to him and asked if he needed help with anything. I saw God in those two men that night and said another prayer for God to help me see the very best in people even if they don't look like me. That experience changed the way I see people no matter what they look like on the outside.

Janet Haigood

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for being so patient with me as I strive to be more of what You want me to be and less of what I am. Amen.

Saturday - March 4

Put your trust in the light while there is still time; then you will become children of the light."

John 12:36 (NLT)

It was a typical day in Cherub Choir. The children came in full of energy. They checked out their surroundings and noticed some changes. The altar area had little candles and there is a fabric drape with peace symbols. "Ms. Sandy, what's that?" a child asked pointing to the altar. I held up a votive and said, "What is this?" A child replied, "A candle." "Right." And he responded, "Like the Advent wreath. Peace, Joy, Love, Hope." "Correct," I said. Do you remember who is the light of the world?" "Jesus!" they all yelled. "Yes, good remembering! This is a symbol of peace. Last night people came to our chapel to pray for peace for our world, nation and everyone." "Wow!" the kids said, "Cool," more replied. "Some people just need help to get along. This is a way we can do that." The kids were satisfied and we began to sing.

I never anticipated this moment, but was thankful to be a part of it. What a joy to see our God in action and our little ones putting pieces together regarding our heavenly Father and Jesus! May we be willing to ask questions and seek answers too, to bring God actively into our daily lives in meaningful ways. Will you join me in becoming more aware of God "speaking to us?"

Sandy McKinley

Prayer: Dear God. Thank you for Jesus and all the ways You bring meaning and purpose to our lives. Open our eyes, mouth and heart to receive You in whatever way You approach us. We love You. Thank you for loving us back. Amen.

Wednesday - March 29

Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again...

Psalm 71:20a (NIV)

At the beginning of January nine years ago, my husband Ken and I returned home from a wonderful three-week trip to New Zealand. We were back in Powell to resume our normal lives. That was not to be.

Soon after our return Ken experienced a catastrophic medical emergency. Pastor Sandy came to the hospital to be with me while Ken had surgery. He survived surgery, but never woke up again.

As the agonizing days passed, there were numerous visits, emails, texts, calls, and cards from Pastors Larry and Sandy, friends, colleagues, family, and church members. Many prayers were said by myself and others for Ken, myself, and my children. One day Kelly Brown, who was a hospital employee, stopped by and held me as I cried. Meals were dropped off to my house. A neighbor shoveled my driveway. I felt that these actions showed that God was with me and had not abandoned me.

In the many months of grieving that followed Ken's death, I believed the ongoing support from others was an expression of God's love. The scripture above gave me hope.

I have found a path forward which includes delighting in spring flowers, conversations with friends, a grandchild's laughter, and more. All signs of God's presence.

Kathy Inamura

Prayer: Loving God, thank you for being with us during our darkest times and helping us find our way to the light again. Amen.

Tuesday - March 28

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.

1 John 1:5 (NRSV)

I see God in light. It is written in Exodus 33 that Moses desired to experience the light of God's glory and goodness passing by and over him. Beverley Nichols wrote in his book *Sunlight on the Lawn*, "It is curious that so vague a quality as goodness, so difficult to define, should be so easy to recognize. It is like a light. Virtue carries not only its own reward, but its own illumination." I see God and his goodness in the virtuous pureness of light.

I look for God in sources of light. My Joanne was from California and had never seen fireflies. On our first summer trip to visit my family in Ohio, she saw fireflies for the first time. She was enthralled. How can one not see God in these little miraculous bugs of light?

For many of us, the most beautiful moment of the year is on Christmas Eve when in the sanctuary all lights are extinguished except for the light of the Christ candle. One flame, Love's Pure Light.

It is holy to stand under a starry sky and look deeply into a universe of light, "It is breathtaking simply to be here" wrote the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. I feel blessed to revel in God and His light by staring into the starry night.

I ask myself, "Can I be the light of God?" When I invite God into my life, I can shine boldly and brightly, I can ignite the same blessed spark within others that God ignites in me. This is my Lenten prayer, to be the light of God for me and others.

Michael Ott

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me to accept and embrace Your light within me and lead me to send out Your light and truth to others. Amen.

Second Sunday in Lent - March 5

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." Then the Pharisees said to him, "You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid." Jesus answered, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards; I judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is valid, for it is not I alone who judge but I and the Father who sent me. In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf." Then they said to him, "Where is your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also." He spoke these words while he was teaching in the treasury of the temple, but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

John 8:12-20 (NSRV)

Monday - March 6

Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.

Psalms 107:6 (NIV)

We bought a spiral cut ham for our daughter's family to come over Christmas day and then have sandwich leftovers for the next day when both of our kids/families would be coming. Then our daughter Holly told us the four of them would be staying home on Christmas day! They wanted to have a cozy Christmas with their kids who were hanging around home. We were really disappointed.

We had to go to Sylvania the Monday before Christmas, staying at Joan's sister's home the night before their brother's open heart surgery in Ann Arbor. His three out of the four major valve, open heart, surgery went really well. He sounded great the day after surgery and looked great when we drove up to see him on the 22nd!

While in Ann Arbor we got a call from an old Toledo friend who now lives in Kentucky. For many years, Al had been taking mission trips to Haiti and a friend he made (Dabel) had escaped the violence and just landed in Columbus. He was having trouble wiring him money and wondered if we could help get warm clothes and some food to him. Since brother Wes was doing so good, we felt really comfortable driving home. It was dark before we arrived, but we beat the winter storm that was coming THAT night!

We made a couple of calls, our neighbor gave us a coat and sweater, Pastor Katya's husband gave us a brand new looking coat and we got some food from the mission pantry at church Christmas Eve. We added some warm clothes, some food (they love rice and beans) AND cut off a big chunk of that ham. After church on Sunday, we found our way to the inner city with five bags of donations! I wish you could have seen Dabel's huge smile as he received that coat, which he put on right away!!!

I've heard "here God closes a door, He opens a window." Here we thought a door was slammed shut for our Christmas, but I really believe God had another idea! Joan told me that she had been praying for God to show us how we could brighten someone's life on Christmas day! We thought we'd be down in the dumps, but it turned out to be the best Christmas ever!!!

Tim Kreps

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for answering prayers and for showing us that You are there to be seen....even when we least expect it! Amen.

Monday - March 27

So don't worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Matthew 6:34 (NIRV)

Where is God? Do I see Him in my life? What has He done for me lately? How do I know if He really cares about me? Do I really know He is there for me?

As I have aged (or matured with wisdom) and encountered numerous situations with fighting cancers since my original diagnosis in 2006, I now find these questions humorous as I truly now see Him affecting my earthly journey constantly. I know over the past year He was there (and here) with me. Examples include:

- A grandson running towards me full of energy and giving me a hug.
- A wife who is my caregiver who has helped me along this path, never wavering in her desire to support me mentally, emotionally, or physically.
- A doctor who tells it like it is, holding nothing back, and my accepting the news with peace, thus living and loving life one day at a time.
- An oncology infusion nurse who shows compassion still, even though I may be her tenth patient of the day.
- An ENT oncologist surgeon who held my hands and prayed with me before a biopsy procedure, me for him and he for me.
- Medical staff who respond to my comment "you have to have faith and humor to get through cancer treatments" in an open discussion manner.
- Front desk personnel who remark at my fight cancer bracelets (I wear four) and my "Thank you God...I am grateful" rubber bracelet.
- Notes of encouragement received electronically or in the mail are uplifting, knowing someone cares.
- My positive attitude of accepting the last biopsy results with appreciation that it was not a new cancer but one I already have.

God has given me peace and has blessed me more than I ever deserve. I know He is present 24/7 down to the milli-second. I find myself not asking for something but rather thanking Him for the outcome ahead of time. It feels so good to be loved by God that I no longer fear death or transitioning to heaven above. That is because I know deep in my heart, whatever happens with my life tomorrow, I win. Yes, "either way I win" tosses all of the worries aside as I continue to show others His presence in my life.

Harry Poston

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, thank you for today's blessings You give us. Amen.

5th Sunday in Lent - March 26

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

John 15:1-17 (NRSV)

Tuesday - March 7

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

Matthew 19:14 (NIV)

When I saw the subject of this year's Lenten devotion I immediately thought of children, particularly our little ones in Cherub Choir. It is impossible to look at those precious children so open to singing, moving and learning about God's love for them without seeing God in each of their faces. I've worked with the cherubs for many years now, and felt my enthusiasm waning a bit, especially as Karen was retiring from the group and we weren't sure who would jump in to take her place. But Sandy joined us with enthusiasm and we are thrilled that the group is growing larger and that our new kiddos are as eager to learn about God and sing His praises as the children who have sung with us in the past. After every practice, Sandy leads them in an echo prayer that ends with "... and the children said Amen." I can't help but smile and thank God for each and every one of them as that Amen rings out loud and clear!

Nancy Cuartas

Prayer: Thank you for all the children who bless our lives. Please guide us as we share the songs and stories that teach about Your never ending love for them and for all of us. Amen.

Wednesday - March 8

...in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Psalms 16:11 (ESV)

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.

Philippians 4:4 (ESV)

Joy That Can Take Our Breath Away

January 22: our first sizeable snowfall. I drove to Delaware to bring Phyllis Vesey to worship. Snow had turned the trees white, the ground glistened, the roads were covered. The world was transformed by the muffling of sounds, and lives moving slower. Joy bubbled up in me. Jesus was present. I had to blink tears away. I understood the Psalmist: "In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

Maybe you've experienced the joy of the risen Christ being close. In nature. With your family. When you're understood. Reading a book. Seeing a play or a movie. Helping someone. Being helped. God finds so many ways to overwhelm us with joy that it can take our breath away. Like Paul we'll sing out, "Rejoice and again I say rejoice."

To experience Christ alive is to find that in all places, persons, and things. We may become more alive by his life, and in being made more alive, brave, strong and beautiful, we may be sure the joy Jesus promised is present. Even though more often than not our eyes are kept from recognizing it because we're running too fast and there's too much noise in our lives.

Dave Woodyard

Prayer: Surprising God, help me meet the risen Christ in my daily life and be so caught by His splendor that I will experience the breathtaking joy You have for me. Amen.

Saturday - March 25

Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it. Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.

Psalms 96:11-12 (NIV)

My husband and I started the new year with a stay at the Inn at Honey Run. This boutique resort is located in the heart of Ohio's Amish Country. It was our first stay at the inn. The Inn at Honey Run has several places you can stay including a cabin, a traditional inn room and the most interesting to me was the honeycomb rooms that are built into the earth and surrounded by stone. These handful of rooms all have views of beautiful rolling hills and nature.

Additional amenities on the property include bee keeping, a flock of sheep, birding and bird watching, a garden, a cove of cats, an open air art museum and many walking trails including a Haiku trail. On New Year's day after breakfast, feeding the sheep and staying away from the cats, since I am allergic, I convinced my husband to walk the Haiku trail. He was not as enthusiastic as I was to walk the trails to view the open air art in the woods and to walk the Haiku trail. In his defense it was cold that day and the trails were really muddy.

The opportunity to view art and read Haiku was intriguing to me. I remembered in middle school when we wrote Haiku for English class. Haiku is a Japanese poem of seventeen syllables, in three lines of five, seven, and five. The brief poems are designed to call attention to the senses experienced in one's surroundings. I was excited as we walked the trail and came upon our first large mossy boulder with a Haiku poem:

early light
pulling fog
from the lake

We kept walking the trail, reading the Haiku poems on the boulders and looking at the open air art. As we kept walking, my senses were filled with the beauty that God has given us in nature. The trees, the fog, the chill in the air, the muddy earth at my feet and the light rain that was falling on my face. I could feel God's peace come and rest upon me that day. It was almost too much take in!

As 2023 continues, I crave for many more opportunities to be in nature, read poetry, view beautiful art and to have God's spirit pass through me.

Karen Curren

Prayer: Oh God of Creation, we stand in awe of the beauty of the earth You created. Help us care for the earth as You care for us. Thank you for the living things around us and the beautiful plants and trees that populate the earth. Thank you for the blessing of nature and may the earth continue to thrive under Your care. Amen.

Song to listen to today: *Rest On Us*- Elle Limestone

Friday - March 24

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.

1 Peter 4:8-10 (NIV)

Early in my faith journey, I remember many invitations to look for “God sightings” in my everyday life. I often identified beautiful sceneries, nature’s simplicities, and coincidental oddities as moments where I believe God may have been with me. Even though these moments still make great illustrations and examples, I have found in the growth of my faith that the even more regular, yet powerful, moments of God’s presence in my life have been within my interactions and relationships with other people.

While people often share that it takes a village to raise a child, Alyssa and I recently discovered for ourselves it also takes just as large of a village to simply bring a child into the world. As we have watched and marveled at Brody’s first several months in this world, I can’t help but look back on the number of people that were involved in his birth. There were at least nine nurses assigned to us over many shifts, but there were also the three anesthesiologists, several charge nurses, our doctor, and countless aides and other staff that made sure we had everything we (all three of us) needed.

God’s presence was with us at the hospital, in not just the meaningful interactions we had those trying to help us, but also the inconspicuous grace that was shown to us by people whose presence we barely recognized around us.

In what ways could God be using you to make His presence known to those you interact with every day?

Drew Thiele

Prayer: Loving Father, You were present with our souls even before the earliest days of our lives began. In the hustle and bustle of our everyday lives, it is very easy for us to become focused on our worldly needs and obsessions. Open our hearts, our minds, and our eyes so that we can see You and Your grace not only in moments of magnificent beauty, but also in the way we share this life with those around us. Let us see Your grace in the actions of others towards us and let us share Your grace in our actions towards others. Let Your love flow to and from us, so that the love of Christ and the flame of the Holy Spirit grows within our community and this world. All honor and glory be Yours. Amen.

Thursday - March 9

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.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (NIV)

The loss of someone we love is one of the most painful experiences we endure as humans. When that loved one is a family member, it is a deep wound of the heart which can feel like joy is elusive and you don’t know how you will get through your days. I encountered this deep wound for the first time when my mom died in 2020. I knew that clinging to God would eventually get me through the heartache. It allowed me the experience of receiving love and care from supportive friends, especially those that truly understood how I felt because of their own experience of losing a parent. The same was true for my dad who received the special support and words that could only be expressed from another heart that had lost a beloved spouse. With the help from other wounded people and our God, we learn how to get through our days and feel joy again. To me, this is seeing God. He takes our pain and transforms it into the ability to help the next suffering mourner. “Pain shared, my brother, is pain not doubled, but halved. No man is an island”-Neil Gaiman, Anansi Boys.

Kristina MacKenzie

Prayer: Dear Lord, I pray that whatever trials I face in life, You will help me understand that You are creating in me the ability to help another human heart that needs Your comfort and peace. Thank you for Your unfailing love and help me to share this love with others. Amen.

Friday - March 10

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 (NIV)

While working in the operating room, I was assigned on this particular day to the Plastic Surgery Service. Our first patient was a young female who was undergoing reconstructive surgery for a facial deformity on her left side. As I walked into the pre-op bay, I could clearly see the deformity on this beautiful young lady. I started my interview by introducing myself, asking for her name and I.D. bracelet and gently asked her what operation she was expecting to have today. She glanced over to her mother, who was holding her hand and stated, "My face, I'm here for the doctor to fix my face." I paused, and answered back, "Which area? Please show me." My patient pointed to her left side. "Oh, I said, I had not seen that." The young teen looked again at her mom and said, "Ohhh mom," and a smile grew across her shining face. I knew then that I had clearly communicated to her that no matter what, she was lovely in my sight, and that her view of herself was different from mine.

That is how we are with our Father. We may be feeling ugly, dirty, even rejected and unloved, but God sees through all of this and looks into *our heart and soul*, and His vision is not on those things that we see or believe about ourselves. It is based upon His peace, His nature and His truth, His love and nothing can separate us from Him.

David Narance

Prayer: Lord, help me see and love people always through Your eyes. Amen

Thursday - March 23

"For the LORD your God is living among you. He is a mighty savior. He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs."

Zephaniah 3:17 (NLT)

In the summer of 2021 at the 9:30 service, in the fourth pew on the South side of the PUMC sanctuary, a mother and daughter were seated. I was solo in the pew right behind. I noticed how close they were sitting together and how peaceful they looked as well as having what I thought was a typical familial interaction during a Sunday service. Until it wasn't. As I watched these two, clearly linked people in front of me, I became mesmerized with their intimate connection. The sweet glances, soft smiles, gentle touches, tender kisses on top the daughter's head were all so loving that I found myself unable to look at or think of anything else. I was just engrossed in the moment with the love between them. It was so strong that it was truly palpable, radiating outward like warm sunrays. It was an incredibly beautiful thing.

I barely noticed the service was ending or that tears were falling down my cheeks. And I didn't realize this little girl's terminal illness was advancing. All I knew was that this was a special moment indeed.

Upon reflection, it was God who was the flowing love between mother and child. This love was fierce, joy filled, and all-encompassing in the very best of ways. It was and is a powerful reminder of who God is and that God is everywhere. It was especially evident to me during that one 9:30 service in the summer of 2021, in the fourth pew on the South side of the PUMC sanctuary.

Kathy Perry

Prayer: Dear God, Thank you for creating the world and for dwelling among us. Thank you for sending Your Son to help show us how to love fiercely, joyfully, and completely; thank you for people who reflect that love. Help us continue to intentionally seek You and then share Your love with our world. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Wednesday - March 22

*Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it.
Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing
for joy.*

Psalms 96:11-12 (NIV)

My Father's Altar

My father was born in 1913 and grew up working on a farm. After he became a family physician and started a family, he put his family to work in growing dahlias, vegetables, collecting honey from beehives, tending apple and pear trees, and taking long Sunday afternoon walks in the woods. Looking back we didn't always appreciate those times involving nature. But he was patient, showing us by example how to not only appreciate nature but to enjoy, respect and care for it.

On mountain walks in Vermont, he taught us how to hear the earth sounds of the wind, the humming of insects and the songs of birds. One of the greatest pleasures was sitting quietly in the grass and just experiencing nature. It made everything, even the simple act of pumping and drinking water from a well, holy.

In raising my own family, I remembered those wonderful times of communing with nature. I took them on many walks in the woods helping them hear the beautiful sounds of nature that God gave us to enjoy and share. My gardens were not as lavish as my dad's. Today, when I hear frogs croaking late at night or the beautiful songs of birds at dawn, I remember, and my spirit begins to worship God at my father's altar.

Nancy Heaver

Prayer: Creator of heaven and earth, we join all the earth in praising Your name. Thank you for the beautiful altar of nature that helps us experience You in new ways. Amen.

Saturday - March 11

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

Romans 12:2 (KJV)

I see God in His children. As an occupational therapist, I saw people cope with bad things. My first patient was a 16 year old who had drunkenly driven his Dad's car into a tree and would never walk again. While he completed his exercises, he talked about changing his mind to focus on God instead of being cool. But that was just listening. What I saw was the boy showing interest and compassion for the other patients on the rehab unit. He began doing things for others. His parents saw this change and asked if this was typical after loss. I was not much older than the boy, so I did not have a clue. Instead of conforming to "poor me I'm in a wheelchair," he turned to God and said "thanks for letting me live, I'm going to do good." More than 40 years later I think of him. I would say it happens a lot. I would say that to watch people be renewed by God and to think differently from the world is seeing God in the world.

Brenda Allen

Prayer: Dear God, help me focus my thoughts on You. Redirect me from worry and anxiety. You renew my soul. Let me listen to Your children who are coping with pain and suffering. Please help me follow the example of Jesus and promote healing through transformation of thought. Amen.

Third Sunday in Lent - March 12

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."

Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us, then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" 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. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away, for I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day."

John 6:25-40 (NRSV)

Tuesday - March 21

"For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands..."

Isaiah 55:12 (ESV)

My husband and I love to travel! We have been to 49 states (Alaska awaits us) and seven countries. Some of our favorite places to visit are the US National Parks. We have admired the awesomeness of the Grand Canyon, stood next to giant Sequoia trees in Sequoia N.P. and Kings Canyon, gazed at the wonders of hot springs, waterfalls and geysers in Yellowstone and drove along age old glaciers in Glacier N.P. in Montana. We often feel a special connection to God as we are surrounded by amazing beauty that He has created. It was in Acadia N.P. in Maine, as we were walking a dirt path leading to a mountain hike, that I realized I had lost my cross necklace that was once my mom's. We had walked quite a distance and I had no idea how long it had been missing. I stopped before we ascended the mountain and said a prayer in hope of finding it. We hiked up the mountain and felt a sense of accomplishment (it was a rather difficult climb) and a sense of wonder as we gazed down at a lake that reflected the surrounding mountains. We returned back the way we came in hopes of "getting lucky" and finding my cross necklace. As we walked back along the trail, I saw the cross, shining brightly in the dirt and I was overwhelmed with gratitude. Not only in finding my necklace that was important to me but in being reminded, once again, of God's presence. I think that is a big part of what we love about traveling- we have the opportunity to slow down and reconnect to God. We then return home to the business of "life" but try to remember that God is always with us. It may not be as obvious as the bright, shiny cross in the dirt path, we might have to look a little harder, but He is truly everywhere.

Rebecca Domka

Prayer: Thank you God for all that You have created. Thank you for Your promise that You are always with us, guiding us and leading us. Amen.

Monday - March 20

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

1 Peter 5:6-7 (NIV)

Sarcoma Cancer. I've never heard of it until I was diagnosed with it in May 2018. The cancerous tumor was about the size of a small football in my right thigh. The tumor was wrapped around the femur and the sciatic nerve. I underwent seven surgeries on my thigh, one surgery on a lung when the cancer metastasized on it, and two surgeries when the dreaded amputation took place.

During this entire time, I had, and still have, the support of our families, friends and our church family. Our pastors visited me often in the hospital and in our home, along with numerous texts and phone calls. Everyone's support and prayers are very much felt and appreciated which have helped to see me throughout all of my treatments. The physicians at The James are wonderful!

God's timing came into play on October 14, 2022, when the amputation surgery took place. I always prayed for healing during these almost four years of this cancerous journey. After the surgery, I heard and felt God saying, "We need to amputate first, and then I will heal you."

I had many crying moments and asked God, "Why me?" Recently I read the following comment in a book and I believe it is true: "Tears wash away the old and make way for the new."

Today I know He is assisting me with learning to walk with a prosthetic leg. Knowing that God is with me as I relearn how to walk again, is getting me through this process.

When we trust Him and pray to Him, He will answer us.

Renaté Curtis

Prayer: Dear Gracious Father, Your healing hands have been felt and is very much appreciated. Knowing that You walk with us daily gives us comfort and strength. We are thankful for Your son, Jesus, for all Your blessings, for Your healing and Your unending love. With a grateful heart, please receive our prayers. Amen.

Monday - March 13

What do you think? If someone has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, won't he leave the ninety-nine on the hillside and go and search for the stray?

Matthew 18:12 (CSB)

I see God. Anywhere. Everywhere. Always. In the stillness and in the noise. At work and at church. In happy or sad. In birth and in death. However, if I'm really truth telling, I'd acknowledge that more often than not I'm running through the day not looking for God. It's more like, "I've got this God, I'll catch you later in the car, or right before bed or something, love you!" I find that I'm most effective in my "heart-filled God moments" when I'm pausing and invitational. Although I'm humbled and somewhat chagrined that I have to tell myself to "pause," God's great omnipresence by definition is widespread, constantly encountered and everywhere at the same time. Basically, He's running with me and pausing with me, working with me and resting with me. With the birth of Jesus, Emmanuel (God with us) is assured. It's like God knew I was going to fail in my relationship standards with Him so He promised to be with me always so I'd get it right and never be alone.

I once heard a pastor examine Psalm 23 and the reference to people as sheep. God didn't reference us as lions, or wolves but as sheep. In looking to the rod and staff, we are comforted to know we are safe, we are not alone and our Savior knows the way. Whether we are by His side or straying in the vastness of an open field of darkness, He's got us. He promises to look for us when we are not in his fold, a beautiful promise that has never been broken.

Dana Ullom-Vucelich

Prayer: Holy God, thank you for Your promises and the fulfillment of Your promises. Amen.

Christ with me,
Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right,
Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down,
Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.

St. Patrick

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from My Father."

John 10:11-18 (NSRV)

Saturday - March 18

We have known and have believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them.

1 John 4:16 (CEB)

I see God in many different things. One of the things I see him in is my dog, Joey. He reminds me of God because he is so loving and always is excited to see me. Every time I come home from school he is always whining so happily because he misses me during the day. He also makes me laugh. He is never too tired to protect me from the squirrels running up the big trees. I love how he snuggles with me and makes me feel comforted when I am sad, just like God makes me feel. Joey reminds me of God because he is adventurous. Joey will sniff all the bushes and eat everything he can find. He reminds me of God because he loves everyone he sees. He reminds me of God because when he is a little upset with me, he always still loves me. He is playful and is never too tired to play. Joey makes me happy every day just like God does.

Maren (10 years old, 5th grade)

Prayer: God, please help us to see Your presence everywhere we go and in everything we do. Amen.

Wednesday - March 15

the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. The LORD has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad.

Psalms 118:23-24 (NIV)

My two yellow Labrador Retrievers are great joys in my life and our daily walk is a highlight of the day for all of us. Paisley is six years old and Piper is seven months old. Although it is a daily routine that seems the same, in fact each day and walk is unique: the seasons and temperatures change, the sun shines or the clouds darken the sky, the leaves and flowers come and go.

One day we were walking and I was daydreaming about what to write for this devotion. I wasn't paying much attention to my surroundings and was lost in thought. Piper suddenly made a lunge to the left, after a leaf blowing across the street.

A little further along, Piper looked up, then stopped in her tracks to sit down and watch a passing airplane. At the same time, some birds took off for flight out of a nearby tree. While Piper watched the activity in the sky, Paisley patiently waited, looking at active squirrels in the neighboring yard. Once the birds passed by, Piper looked at me and we all resumed our walk, with both of their tails wagging.

It made me laugh that while I was musing over ways to notice God, my dogs were enjoying the delights all around us. They reminded me that rejoicing in the moment makes me alert to God's presence.

Kim Parker

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for the gift of this new day. Thank you for the beauty of Your creation. Open my eyes to blessings and opportunities in the moment. Help me remember that You are always with me, and to rejoice in You always. In Your loving name. Amen.

Thursday - March 16

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Colossians 3:12 (NIV)

While on a summer vacation many years ago when my kids were young, we pulled off the highway and there was a homeless man on the corner with a sign asking for help. I didn't look his way. I was almost locked in fear and just could not look at him. I think I just didn't know what to do or how to respond and how would I explain my actions to my kids if I did act in mercy towards this man. Instead of helping and making this a teachable moment for my kids - I did nothing. That experience made me feel guilty. I made a decision to help similar people in the future when I could.

A few summers ago, a similar man holding a sign for help was on the corner a mile from my house. I had seen him several times at this corner, but was always too far back in line when the light turned red. When the light turned green, I was on my way and again felt bad for not helping. I turned around at the next block to return to this man. I stopped my car in the center turn lane and walked towards the man in need. He saw me coming and started to walk towards me. I planned to give him \$20 and wish him well in some way. As I handed out the \$20 ready to say "take care" or "God bless," he said, "God bless you" to me. I was not expecting that. I was really moved by his words to me. The more I thought about it, the more I realized this person was certainly thankful to God for those that showed mercy to help him in his time of need. God was so present in this experience. I see God the most when I humble myself to see what God wants me to see, say, or do.

Bill Barwinski

Prayer: Loving Father God, continue to pour out Your spirit to us so that we can continue to see You in the world around us. Help us to be Your hands and feet in the world. Help us lift You up in our words, actions, and deeds. Amen.

Friday - March 17

"Be still and know that I am God!"
Psalms 46:10a (NRSV)

"Let's get moving so we can get it done!" If I had a dime for every time I uttered those words. I tend to be a hit the ground running type of person. I have my daily task list and I take great pleasure in crossing things off of it. Most of the items on my list are not life changing, "make the world a better place" type of tasks. They are the everyday, get groceries, do laundry, clean the house kind of tasks. When it comes to Bible stories, I would say I am more of a Martha than a Mary.

In our Thursday morning bible study, we have been reading *An Altar in the World* by Barbara Brown Taylor. It offers a number of spiritual practices designed to help the reader encounter God in the world. One of the things I have longed for and prayed for is a deeper awareness of God's presence in my life. One chapter in the book is entitled, "The Practice of Paying Attention." As an exercise, we were tasked with examining a plant. It involved slowing down. It involved being intentional. It involved being focused on something that I usually did not pay much attention to. I examined the plant and noticed that each leaf had a similar pattern of green and white stripes, yet each leaf was unique. The number and width of the stripes on each leaf varied. There was such detail. Branching off of the plant were runners supporting new young plants, miniature versions of the original. I saw this plant in a way I never had before. I had always overlooked its beauty and complexity. I could never create something like it. I had a hard enough time remembering to water it. This plant had to be the work of a loving Creator. Something way bigger than myself. Like Martha in the Bible, could it be that God's presence really was all around me and in my busyness I missed it? I will probably never be a Mary. I still have my lists and enjoy checking them off. But I have learned the value of slowing down, of paying attention, of appreciating creation and giving thanks for God's handiwork.

Shelly Eden

Prayer: Dear God, grant us the opportunity to pause and explore Your magnificent creation. Help us to see Your presence even in the small things that we often overlook. Amen.