

The Work of the People
Lenten Devotional
2023

Cover painting by Sue Littell

February 22 - Ash Wednesday

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." For ages, those words have been intoned at the beginning of the season of Lent. This year those words take on added significance for me. As I write I am preparing for what I will be saying on the Sunday before Lent begins. The church in which I was dedicated as a baby, baptized as a youth, and ordained into Christian ministry is closing. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. I was a third-generation member of that church. My parents were both leaders there. When I was a kid it was a large, vibrant congregation in a building that covered a city block. Somewhere along the way, in the name of progress, the interstate through the city was reconfigured and cut the church off from all the other downtown churches. One could see the church easily from the interstate, but it was hard to figure out how to get there. As was the case with many churches of that time the church began to shrink bit by bit exacerbated by the difficulty of getting to the church building. A few years back, after just at 150 years, the congregation sold its building, bought a smaller church in a neighborhood, renamed itself, and continued its ministry.

The church reached out in various ways to the new location offering programs and opportunities, but most of the members from the old location were older, and their energy was limited. Then the pandemic hit, dealing a mortal blow. The congregation made the wise decision to close its doors and become a "legacy church". Money from the sale of the building will be put into permanent funds the growth from which will, in perpetuity, support ministries important to the congregation. In many ways, all this is a good thing. Still, for me, it is also sad. Many churches, just like people, have a life cycle. We are born; we live life; we die. Life may be short or long, but it ends. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

~Daniel Webster

February 23

The UCG Lenten theme "The Work of the People" is the meaning behind the word "Liturgy," which defines the prayers, songs, and readings of worship. When I was beginning ministry, I found a book of "Home Celebrations" by a Jesuit priest, Lawrence Moser (Paulist Press, 1970). His work was part of the movement of the 70's to renew worship and liturgy in both Catholicism and Protestantism. Many of the special worship experiences we developed over the years at UCG had their seeds in his writing. Quoted below are excerpts from his "Liturgy for Lent", meant to be shared in small group settings. It is available here to take as a whole or in small slices during lent.

Do not store up treasures for yourselves on earth, where moths and woodworms destroy them and thieves can break in and steal. But store up treasures for yourselves in heaven, where neither moth nor woodworms destroy them and thieves cannot break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matthew 21)

Nurturing God, we look forward in these days,
 To another Easter,
 To a renewal of your promise to us.
Our experience teaches us that birth will always be painful.
How do we uproot the false pride
 Which we call doing your will?
How do we tear up our own lack of concern,
 Cloaked behind a Church,
 Which we will not trouble to build into a community;
 Behind a self-sufficient bribery
 Which masquerades as worship;
 Behind a love
 Which costs no more than words?
And always your voice returns in the still moment,
 The call to fall into the ground and die,
 To be your seed for our world.

Give us your Spirit, God, and the strength of love
 To shatter the idols we have made.
So busily do we polish the distorted images of you
 That we do not recognize you
 As you come each day in the flesh:
 In homes and in prisons,
 In hospitals and in neighborhoods,
 In the loneliness and need of our sisters and brothers,
Give us the grace to let you be God,
 Rather than the little images we carve.

God, your Word to us became flesh,
 So that our word might learn to do the same,
 So that love spoken might become loved lived
 Not only in church, but in your world.
 Wherever we find ourselves.

In these days of Lent, Holy One,
Turn our eyes to the fields ripe for harvest.
 We can plow the acre of ourselves so often,
 So delight in turning the soil, that nothing can grow.
For us, now or never is the hour of your kindom
 For the opening of doors and the leveling of walls,
 For laying down fear and taking up the faith of the children of God
 For planting love and harvesting life.
Move our hearts we pray.
Amen.

~Larry Reimer

February 24

Sunrise

But yonder comes the powerful king of day,
Rejoicing in the east. The lessening cloud,
The kindling azure, and the mountain's brow
Illumed with liquid gold, his near approach
Betoken glad. Lo! now apparent all,
Aslant the dew-bright earth and colored air
He looks in boundless majesty abroad,
And sheds the shining day that, burnished, plays
On rocks, and hills, and towers, and wandering streams,
High gleaming from afar.

~James Thompson



Lake Santa Fe. Bye, for now, Florida. Love, Susan by Susan Austin

February 25

The Finish Line

It may be a slow crawl, ravaged
by some bone degeneration
that no one has found a cure for
or at the very least an adequate pain reliever.

It may be quick,
before I have my affairs in order,
sending my true beneficiaries
and all my good intentions
straight to hell.

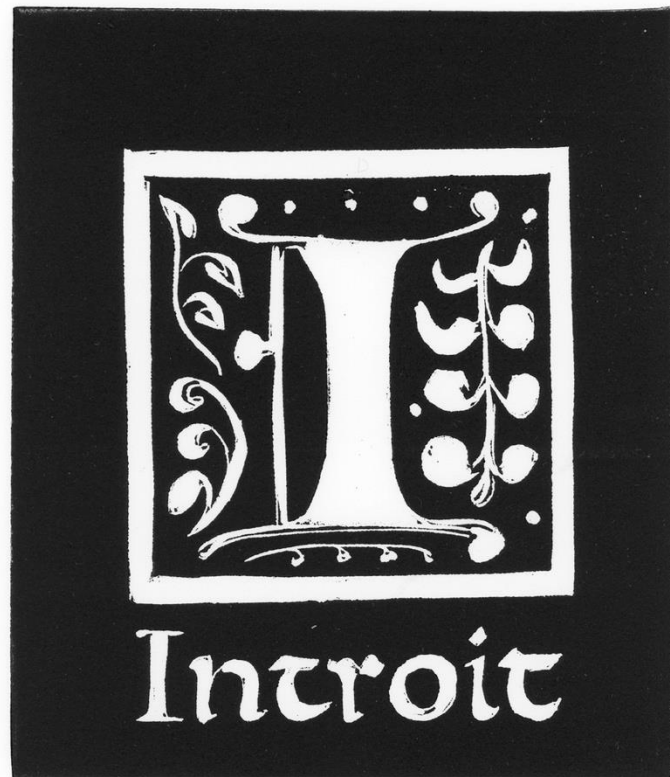
It may be with just enough warning
to see it through to the caution flag
where I would welcome the choice
to end my own life with dignity
and yet no one will legally let me
choose that controversial course.

It may be, Good Lord,
that I lay fully awakened in my bed
and am able to say to those who stand near:
Thank you, I Love you and – I'm Done.
And You accept my run as complete.

- Dar Mikula

February 26

Diana Tonnesen created these word blocks for the bulletin covers during the Lenten season. Today's reading celebrates her art, with the definition of the term, and a related meditation.



Introit: the first part of the traditional proper of the Mass consisting of an antiphon, verse from a psalm, and the Gloria Patri.

*"The beginning is always today."
~Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*

February 27

The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

~ Isaiah 58:11-12

February 28

Baptism

A pane breaks into water as we enter death
and burial to imitate Christ. Faith is measured

this way, by one's willingness to submit
to what one cannot comprehend. We rise up

as new creatures, but in what sense have we
shifted? In those seconds under water's

smooth door, do our bodies lap over
this world's edge to the next? Do the angels

who see us rejoice
to bear witness before we rise up, closing

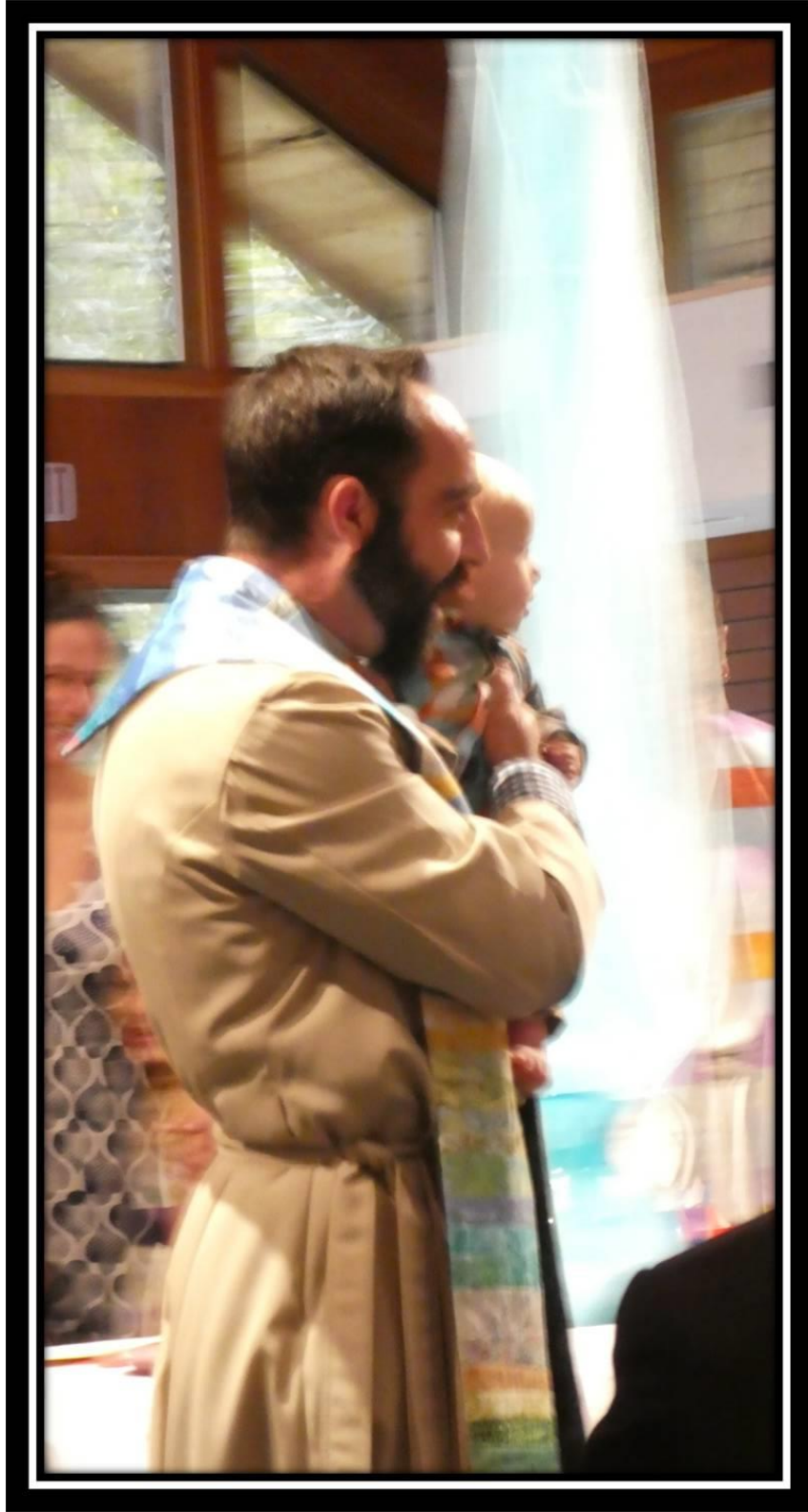
the door between us? Our lives' balance
on the wing of what we give up, yet desire.

A bird imitates but is said to have no
perception. Yet some believe it was a bird

who plunged the primordial sea,
bringing mud to the surface to form the earth

we're made from; their wings opening in the shape
of a cross, our fondest dreams of flight.

~Jill Bangkamp



Andy at a Baptism, taken by Lois McNamara

March 1

God Who Never Leaves Us Comfortless, Nor Lets Us Off the Hook.

Psalm 24

*The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,
The world, and those who live in it,
For God has founded it on the seas,
And established it on the rivers.*

*Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?
And who shall stand in this holy place?
Those who have clean hands and pure hearts.
Who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
And do not swear deceitfully.
They will receive blessing from the Lord...
Such is the company of those who seek God...
Lift up your heads O gates!
And be lifted up, O ancient of doors!
That the King of glory may come in...
Who is this King of Glory?
The Lord of hosts,
God is the King of glory. (NRSV)*

Back when Israel had a temple, this song was sung during the procession when the Ark of the Covenant was brought into the sanctuary. This procession had majestic power.

But when the temple was destroyed, the Ark captured, and the Hebrew people were dispersed to foreign lands there was no longer a grand procession of the Ark of the Covenant, just a memory. This shifted the importance from the shouts of praise for the Ark at the end of the psalm to the words at the beginning of the psalm, where it is reaffirmed that God is at the center of all things, the creator of everything, even this strange and foreign land.

And who is worthy of this God? The Psalmist says, "those who have clean hands and a pure heart, who have not lifted up their souls into what is false and do not swear deceitfully."

It would seem that this would leave us out. We don't much feel like people of clean hands, pure hearts, and non-swearing tongues. But listen to the words of Annie Dillard in her book, **Holy the Firm**. Listen in terms of the challenges you are facing as a parent, a child, a friend, on your job, a student, a concerned citizen trying to be effective, or as a member of this church. Dillard says, "There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our innocent fathers and mothers are all we have - as if innocence had ever been - and our children busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen wrongly, made a false start, failed, yielded to impulse and the tangled comfort of pleasures, and grown exhausted... But there is no one but us. There never has been."

(**Holy the Firm**" pp 56-57.)

I love this psalm of both comfort and a challenge. In the midst of people who lie and cheat and distort what is good, both in the time of Israel's exile, and in our life today, God calls us to enter into the cause of what is good and just in this world. We are indeed the company of those who seek God, and it is to us, busy, trouble and confused, whom God calls. Like the child Samuel at night, or the prophet Isaiah in the darkened temple who have said, "Here am I, send me", we have said this in one way or another or we would not be part of this church.

God never leaves us comfortless. At the same time God never lets us off the hook. God always calls us, especially in Lent, to dream of a newer world.

~Larry Reimer

March 2

Our concept of vocation comes from Luther. God has called men to labor because He labors. He works at common occupations. God is a tailor who makes for the deer a coat that will last for a thousand years. He is a shoemaker also who provides boots that the deer will not outlive. God is the best cook, because the heat of the sun supplies all the heat there is for cooking. God is a butler who sets forth a feast for the sparrows and spends on them annually more than the total revenue of the king of France. Christ worked as a carpenter. "I can just imagine," said Luther from the pulpit, "the people of Nazareth at the judgment day." They will come up to the Master and say, "Lord, didn't you build my house? How did you come to this honor?"

The Virgin Mary worked, and the most amazing example of her humility is that after she had received the astonishing news that she was to be the mother of the Redeemer, she did not vaunt herself but went back and milked the cows, scoured the kettles, and swept the house like any housemaid. Peter worked as a fisherman and was proud of his skill, though not too proud to take a suggestion from the Master when he told him to cast on the other side."

Luther commented. "I would have said, 'Now look here, Master. You are a preacher, and I am not undertaking to tell you how to preach. And I am a fisherman, and you need not tell me how to fish.' But Peter was humble, and the Lord therefore made him a fisher of men."

"The shepherds worked. They had a mean job watching their flocks by night, but after seeing the babe they went back."

"Surely that must be wrong. We should correct the passage to read, 'They went and shaved their heads, fasted, told their rosaries, and put on cowls.' Instead we read, 'the Shepherds returned.' Where to? To the sheep. The sheep would have been in a sorry way if they had not.

As God, Christ, the Virgin, the prince of the apostles, and the shepherds labored, even so must we labor in our callings. God has not hands and feet of his own. He must continue his labors through human instruments. The lowlier the task the better. The milkmaid and the carter of manure are doing a work more pleasing to God than the psalm singing of a Carthusians. Luther never tired of defending those callings which for one reason or another were disparaged. The mother was considered lower than the virgin. Luther replied that the mother exhibits the patten of the love of God, which overcomes sins just as her love overcomes dirty diapers.

Workers with brawn are prone to despise workers with brain, such as city secretaries and schoolteachers. The soldier boasts that it is hard work to ride in armor and endure heat, frost, dust, and thirst. But I'd like to see a horseman who could sit the whole day and look into a book. It is not great trick to hang two legs over a horse. They say writing is just pushing a feather, but I notice that they hang swords on their hips and feathers in high honor on their hats. Writing occupies not just the fist or the foot while the rest of the body can be singing or jesting, but the whole man. As for school teaching, it is so strenuous that no one ought to be bound to it for more than ten years."

~ Luther's Concept of Work/Vocation as described by Roland Bainton, author of "Here I Stand," a biography of Luther.

March 3

Stop trying so hard to control things. It is not our job to control people, outcomes, circumstances, life.

Maybe in the past we couldn't trust and let things happen. But we can now. The way life is unfolding is good. Let it unfold.

Stop trying so hard to do better, be better, be more. Who we are and the way we do things is good enough for today.

Who we were and the way we did things yesterday was good enough for that day.

Ease up on ourselves. Let go. Stop trying so hard.

Today, I will let go. I will stop trying to control everything. I will stop trying to make myself be and do better, and I will let myself be.

From the book: The Language of Letting Go: Hazelden Meditation Series

March 4

Blessed are you
who bear the light
in unbearable times,
who testify
to its endurance
amid the unendurable,
who bear witness
to its persistence
when everything seems
in shadow
and grief.

Blessed are you
in whom
the light lives,
in whom
the brightness blazes;
your heart
a chapel,
an altar where
in the deepest night
can be seen
the fire that
shines forth in you
in unaccountable faith,
in stubborn hope,
in love that illumines
every broken thing ..

~Jan Richardson

March 5

Diana Tonnesen created these word blocks for the bulletin covers during the Lenten season. Today's reading celebrates her art, with the definition of the term, and a related meditation.



Kyrie: A short, repeated invocation used in many Christian liturgies, especially at the beginning of the Eucharist or as a response in a litany.

Never stop caring about the little things in life.
Never stop dreaming, and don't give into strife.
Never stop wondering are we on our own.
Never stop thinking has your spirituality grown.

Never stop building bridges that lead to better tomorrows.
Never stop trying, and don't give into sorrow.
Never stop feeling amazed at the beauty that surrounds you.
Never stop hearing the music, and don't give into the blues.
Never stop pushing away negative thoughts that make you feel sad.
Never stop looking at all the miracles we have had.
Never stop loving the ones you hold dear.
Never stop giving, and don't give into the fear.

Never stop smiling, but look forward to each new day.
Never stop shining in your own special way.
Never forget that all storms will clear.
Remember brighter tomorrows are always near.

~Terri Bruchette

March 6



Al Black, one of the Florida Highwayman painters, painting a classic Florida scene. He visited Gainesville from August 23 - 25, 2022. Sheila Ginsburg was able to watch his work.

March 7

I don't even know what that means – soul. Traditionally it is believed to be the component of ourselves that survives physical death: a reflection of the Holy, made up of light and breath and silence and love, of everything ancient and of babies about to be born.

C. S. Lewis said, "*You don't have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body.*"

If this is so, we have a purpose, which is to shine, like the moon shining in the sky, or to paraphrase the old bumper sticker: *Think globally, shine locally.*

~ Anne Lamott, *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*

March 8

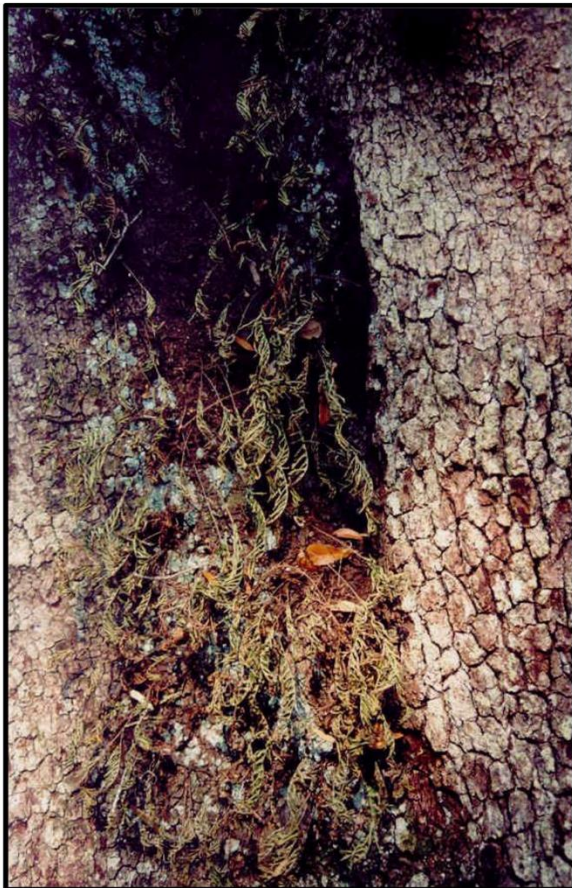
"Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life. *John 4:13-14*

Resurrection ferns cover many of the trunks of the live oaks around our home. In the absence of rainwater, the ferns shrivel, turn brown, and appear to be dead. However, they become verdant green the day following a life-giving rain. How appropriate is it that resurrection ferns live on "live" oaks?

The resurrection fern cycle of shriveling in the absence of water and bursting forth with life in the presence of water is for me a metaphor for my life. When living water (i.e., the Spirit of God) is not a vital part of my life, my soul withers. However, when I allow the living water to flow within me, my soul bursts forth with love again.

~John Harvey

Resurrection Fern



Before Rain



Next morning after rain

March 9

"To garden, to do the dishes, to make the bed, to sweep. To be here, to do what must be done. To really be with the Great Love whose life we are, we can die then; any moment, we can die, and we can live the wonder of another day."

~From *Being Home* by Gunilla Norris



Photo of Lois McNamara's mother's homemade bread

March 10

Let me ask you this.

Do you also think that beauty exists for some fabulous reason?

And if you have not been enchanted by this adventure-

Your life-

What would do for you?"

~From *To Begin With, the Sweet Grass From Evidence* by Mary Oliver



Photo by Susan Cary

March 11

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars
of light
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment
the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders
of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is
nameless now.
Every year
everything
I have ever learned
in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side
is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it
go,
to let it go.

~Mary Oliver, In The Blackwater Woods

March 12 - Daylight Savings Time Begins

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Gloria: a Christian liturgical hymn having the verse form of the Psalms

God wants to be found,
He speaks through every sound,
He works all around,
His power and glory in creation abounds,

He has given us minds greatly equipped to examine whatever our inquiries find, Every perfect
engineering, its intelligent design
Are all but undeniable testimonies that it is Divine,

The mystery of life has been given light,
It's ours to keep,
It's a place where our God we meet,
From relationships to everything in between of time,
Through everything that are yours and mine,
Are reflections to make us understand,
How God works and relates to man,
Though we violate it with rebellion, we still can't deny,
Its purpose and design can never be bowdlerized, though we foolishly try,

And to His saints, He shall be, ever so caring; sanctifying you and me,
For He has created the world as a sight for faith to see,
The birds in the air, the thirst of the deer,
The lilies and the grass, they are all pictures of how God is so near

~From *A Taste of God's Glory* by Unknown

March 13



Sheila Ginsburg took these photos of muralist, JEKS, painting Gainesville's amazing mural of Black musicians. JEKS is from Greensboro, NC.

March 14

Whenever I groan within myself and think how hard it is to keep writing about love in these times of tension and strife which may at any moment become for us all a time of terror, I think to myself, "What else is the world interested in?" What else do we all want, each one of us, except to love and be loved, in our families, in our work, in all our relationships? God is Love. Love casts out fear. Even the most ardent revolutionist, seeking to change the world, to overturn the tables of the money changers, is trying to make a world where it is easier for people to love, to stand in that relationship with each other of love. We want with all our hearts to love, to be loved. And not just in the family but to look upon all as our mothers, sisters, brothers, children. It is when we love the most intensely and most humanly, that we can recognize how tepid is our love for others. The keenness and intensity of love brings with it suffering, of course, but joy too because it is a foretaste of heaven.

~Dorothy Day

March 15

Perhaps when we pray, we don't always change what is outside of ourselves, but we do change in some way what is inside of ourselves. We don't change life as much as we change our experience of life. We move from an individual, isolated I-have-to-make-things-happen consciousness to a connection on the deepest level with the largest possible reality.

We acknowledge that larger reality when we pray, however we pray – a reality that is essentially mysterious. In praying, we stop trying to control life and instead recognize that we belong to life.

~ Rachel Naomi Remen, "Pray without Ceasing"

March 16

A Morning Walk

All hail! my brave, bright world of green and gold,
My morning, smiling from the kiss of night!
Your other lover greets you. Left and right
The air's a-twitter in the sunshine bold,
The air is praying in the shadowy world.
Sole lord am I of all this realm of sight,
These swinging meadow sweeps, this delight
Of ranking hills, these clouds just out of fold.
Stoutly the sturdy road beneath my feet
Rings me a morning welcome. Rise, my soul,
The benediction of the sky to meet.
Sound, color, fragrance, freshness—mine whole;
Mine to receive, and haply mine to give;
A kingly day, and kingly must I live.

~Amos Russel Wells



Photo by Susan Cary

March 17 - St. Patrick's Day

Chapels are Always Cold

Chapels are always cold.
They are off to the side
Away from the maelstrom of the masses,
Away from the central heat.
Or where heat may not even be turned on.
And just as well.
Because chapels are sometimes
Places to shake us a bit
By their briskness,
Places to breathe deeply,
To get the
Heart beating,
To wake up
And stay awake.
And then in the summer
The same thing,
In reverse.

~Larry Reimer

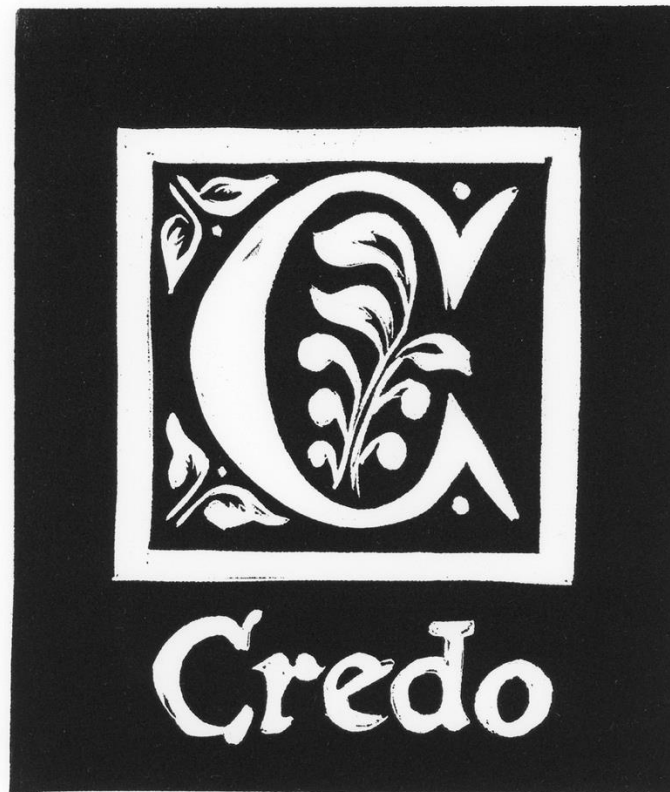
March 18

As you keep learning the art of letting go
let go of your fears, of your past
of your mistakes, of your insecurities,
of your failures, of your self-doubt,
forgive yourself enough to let go
of even the parts of you
that dim your light.

~Rania Naim, "The Art of Letting Go"

March 19

Diana Tonnesen created these word blocks for the bulletin covers during the Lenten season. Today's reading celebrates her art, with the definition of the term, and a related meditation.



Credo: A statement of the beliefs or aims that guide someone's actions; a musical setting of the Nicene Creed, typically as a part of a service or mass.

*"Credo ut intelligam. (I believe so I can understand)."
— Augustine of Hippo*

March 20 - First Day of Spring

“Every sunset is an opportunity to reset. Every sunrise begins with new eyes.”

~*Richie Norton*



Amyrillis, by John Harvey

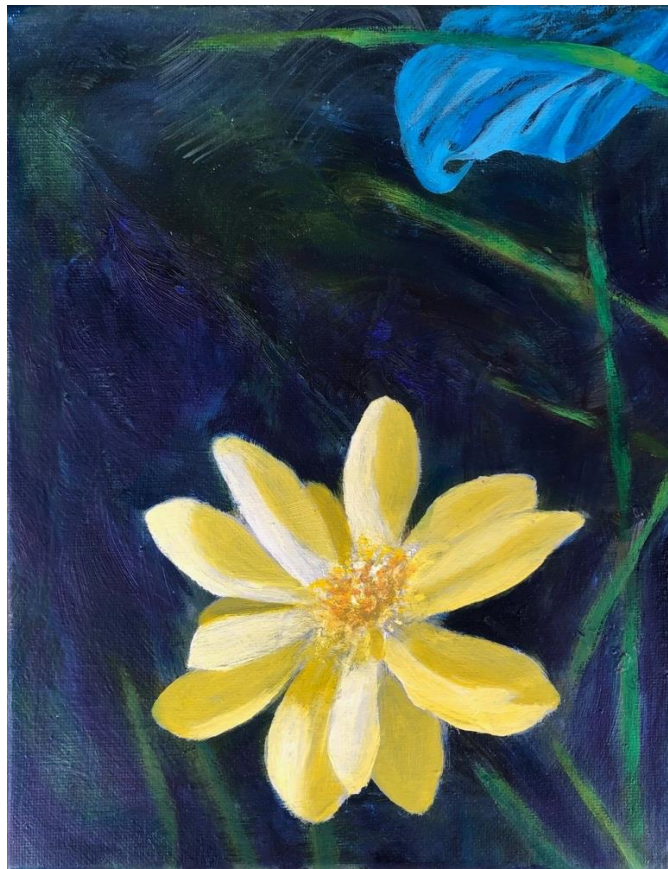
March 21

Why must we work so hard to take just a moment's pause from our day to appreciate the world around us? This Lenten season, I hope you can carve out a few moments of every day to rest easy in the beauty of creation, recognizing how blessed we truly are in this life.

Oh God,
With ears primed for an Alleluia, we walk in this world,
Waiting for the signal to turn our eyes to the sky to catch a glimpse of your grace as it glances across the world.
Be with us, and enliven our eyes that we can find your blessing every day.
Be with us, and open our hearts to the healing that comes, both to us and our friends in need.
Soothe the hurting hearts of this world with the call of the blackbird from the corner of a field,
Inviting us to a deeper wisdom, where love is the foundation, hope is the vision, tenderness the balm, and curiosity the heartspring that eggs us on.

Help us learn to fly above the earthly fray if even only for a minute, to catch a wind spring to climb us to higher heights, even if only for a little while.

~Andy Bachmann, inspired by David Whyte's poem, "The Bell and the Blackbird"



American Lotus, oil painting by Mary Fukuyama

March 22 - Ramadan Begins at Sundown

"Is this not the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out?" ~Isaiah 58:6-7

The name *Ramadan* is derived from the Arabic word ramida or ar-ramad, denoting intense scorching heat and dryness, especially the ground. Some say it is so called because Ramadan scorches out the sins with good deeds, as the sun burns the ground.

Fasting is one of the Five Pillars of the religion of Islam and one of the highest forms of Islamic worship. Abstinence from earthly pleasures and curbing evil intentions and desires is regarded as an act of obedience and submission to God (Allah is the Arabic word referring to "the one God") as well as an atonement for sins, errors, and mistakes.

The last ten days of Ramadan are considered highly blessed, especially the 27th night which is called laylat al-qadr – the "Night of Power," or the "Night of Destiny." It is believed that on this night the prophet Muhammed received the first revelation of the Qur'an. For many Muslims, this 10-day period is marked by a heightened spiritual intensity, and they may spend these nights praying and reciting the Qur'an.

March 23

The Juggler of Day

Blazing in gold and quenching in purple,
Leaping like leopards to the sky,
Then at the feet of the old horizon
Laying her spotted face, to die;
Stooping as low as the otter's window,
Touching the roof and tinting the barn,
Kissing her bonnet to the meadow, —
And the juggler of day is gone!

~Emily Dickenson



Tulips from Lois' Garden, by Nel Webster

March 24 - Spring Equinox

The Spring Equinox is this evening, marking the beginning of Spring. The Equinox occurs when both hemispheres of the Earth equally face the sun – and day and night are equal in length.

Spring is not merely the time between the Equinox and the Summer Solstice. It is any time when we struggle out of night and dreams to walk, however unsure, in the light. In the course of a lifetime, spring can come any time. We can be born when we are old.

There are many metaphors for spring. It is a door opening, a boat rocking loose on its moorings, a breaking out, a returning bird singing at the edge of a wintery marsh, a rabbi walking to Jerusalem in the prime of life, the sound of rising waters, a journey while it is still dark, a beginning and an ending all in one.

Above all, spring is the beginning of a journey of hope, rising out of the very ground of our being, a seed sprung to life in us that seems to know who we are and the path we must take.

~ Marv Hiles, from Daybook, Spring 1992

March 25

God, I'm fumbling around for answers, reasons, meaning.
I can't find any purpose in this pain.
Why me?
Why them?
Why now?

I don't know when this is going to get better.
Or if I will ever feel relief.

Blessed are we who need to be reminded
that there are some things we can fix
...and some things we can't.

Blessed are we who can say:
my life isn't always getting better.

Right in the midst of the pain and fear and uncertainty,
may we hunt for beauty and meaning and truth... together.

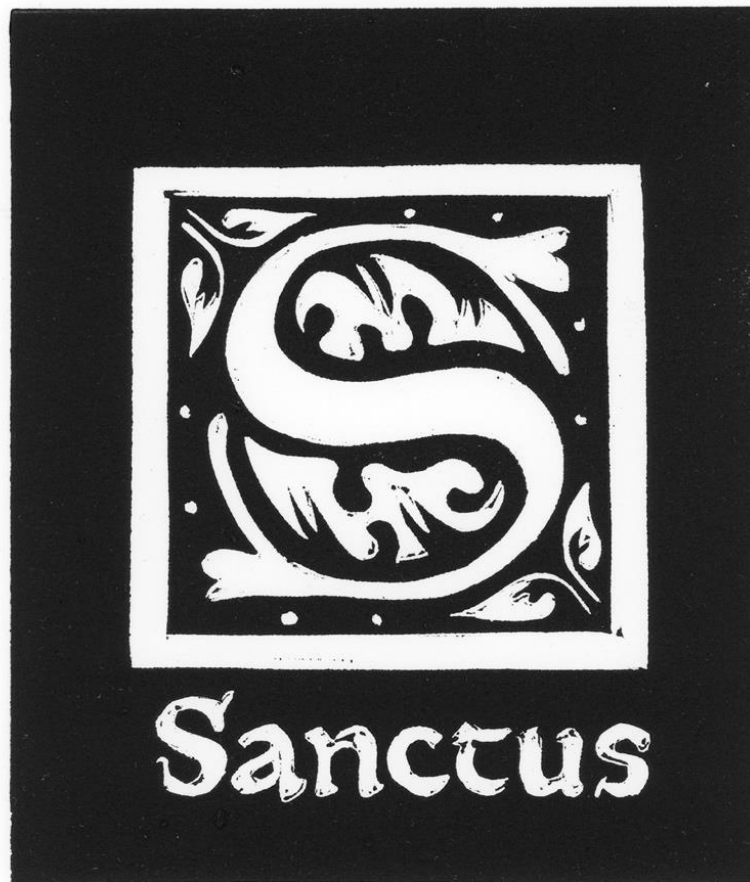
Not to erase the pain or solve the pain,
(though surely that would be nice),
but to remind us that beauty and sorrow coexist.
And that doesn't mean we're broken or have been forgotten.

In our hope. In our disappointment. In our joy. In our pain.
God is here and we are never—were never and will be never—alone.

~Kate Bowler

March 26

Diana Tonnesen created these word blocks for the bulletin covers during the Lenten season. Today's reading celebrates her art, with the definition of the term, and a related meditation.



Sanctus: "Holy" - an ancient Christian hymn of adoration sung or said immediately before the prayer of consecration in traditional liturgies

And one cried to another and said, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!"

~Isaiah 6:3

March 27

To Be of Use

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

~Marge Piercy

March 28



Valerie's grandfather, who lived in Pensacola, spent decades nurturing a lawn full of camellia bushes with an incredible variety of blossoms. When he died in May 1994, Valerie's grandmother presented her with a sprout from one of his bushes. It was the size of a well-sharpened pencil, and it was growing in a coffee can. We had recently moved to Orange Park, so we planted this tiny sprout in our yard there. It survived, and it thrived. When we sold our house, we decided to dig up our camellia and bring it to Gainesville. We didn't know if it would survive. When Bruce took a shovel out to the bush, he realized how much it had grown. Could it really be 6 feet tall? So, Bruce dug, and we shoved it into the car. It filled the whole back seat. We planted the camellia in front of our house in Gainesville in August 1998, and we waited to see whether it would survive. It certainly did. When a large oak tree fell on both of our cars in October 2021, it also damaged the camellia. Because it is so important to us, we found an expert through the Camellia Society to prune and mend the damage. Again, it survived! This camellia has gifted us with beautiful blossoms at the beginning of every year, and we have hung lights on it almost every Christmas. For us, it embodies the persistence of life and love. We remember Valerie's grandfather and grandmother every time we look at it.

~Bruce Jennings and Valerie Aslakson-Jennings

March 29

(Pleas)E May Us

I wish to wrap myself in ritual
Be immersed in the immensity of this moment
Savoring the sadness
Grateful for the tears that wash through
For they are the love notes written
From me to you.

I long to linger on this threshold
As memories flash by
Turning minutes into lifespans
Turning manuscripts to ash and dust
Turning with the seasons, each season
Bringing new and not new
Rhymes rhythms rituals remembrance

For all this "work."
For all these bodies.
For the risen and for the dead
For the life
And for the laughter
And for each and every joy
And each and every sorrow

I will ease into these days
As I ease into chilly waters
Electrified at the touch
To an awareness only I can witness
And with it
A sacred reminder that I am alive,
And the world alive with me.

I wish to wrap myself in ritual
And fall into the ancient rhymes and rhythms
That will ease me across this threshold
Until the first steps give way
To the road we've been walking all along
Until the road becomes the remembering
And I am found, once again, with you.

Peel back a piece. And pour me another cup.
And let's linger on this threshold just a little longer, my love

~Andy Bachmann

March 30



Photo of Janie Washington stringing tobacco in Alachua, by Barbara Gibbs, from her Bellamy Road Project

Janie and her husband Lemon Washington owned a tobacco farm in Sugar Hill near Bland, FL. When I took this photo in 1987, Janie and Lemon still cured tobacco in old-fashioned wooden barns. The barns were rectangular and tall. They strung the tobacco leaves onto poles and hung them in rows in the barns. There were hand-stoked fires in the barns to smoke the tobacco leaves.

I was asked by a writer named Sudye Cauthen to take photos of people and places along the Bellamy Road. She had grown up in Alachua and was fascinated with the history of the Bellamy Road and the people who lived along the road. She wrote a book called "Southern Comforts: Rooted in a Florida Place" which had some of my photos. I had an exhibit of them at the Thomas Center gallery in the 80's and then in 2018, she self-published a book with 50 of my photos called "Florida's Bellamy Road: A Place Remembered".

~ *Barbara Gibbs*

March 31

To the Poets, to Make Much of Time

Pity those who die, their poems still inside
the songs of their soul never
placed on parchment's inky terrain
or the ears of others' hearts.

May the music of your body
pulsate with your core
vibrate the space around you
massage all whom you meet
and warm the roots of loved ones
on cold dark nights.

May those in your family's circle
who haven't truly seen you
know your heart's work
grasp your fears, vigor, vulnerability,

take in your true words
blow through the chaff
cut to fidelity's essence
with the devotion of a sharp knife,

make a clean break when needed,
or melt their marrow, open eyes
and rest quietly in the silence
of the knowing that we are like each other.

May melody like a chariot
carry passion with us
on the way to our graves.

Give comfort where comfort needed.

Take comfort where comfort comes,
carry cares gravely joyously
on our way back home.

~ Art Crummer

April 1

Each person's grief is as unique as their fingerprint. But what everyone has in common is that no matter how they grieve, they share a need for their grief to be witnessed. That doesn't mean needing someone to try to lessen it or reframe it for them. The need is for someone to be fully present to the magnitude of their loss without trying to point out the silver lining.

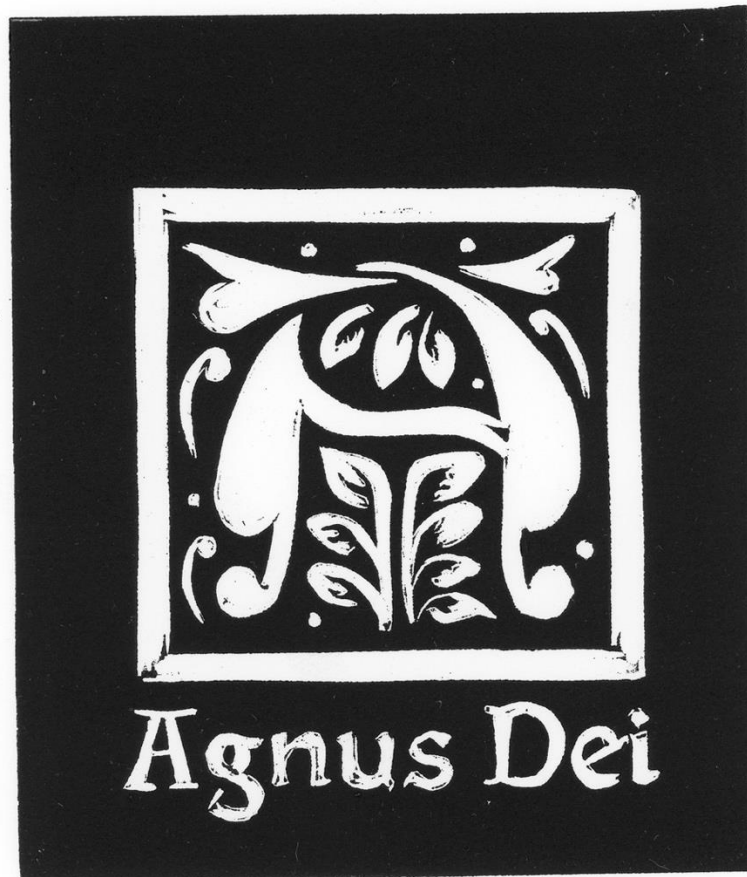
~ From *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*, by David Kessler



Sagrada Família Barcelona, by John Harvey

April 2 - Palm Sunday

Diana Tonnesen created these word blocks for the bulletin covers during the Lenten season. Today's reading celebrates her art, with the definition of the term, and a related meditation.



Agnus Dei: a liturgical prayer addressed to Christ as Savior; an image of a lamb often with a halo and a banner and cross used as a symbol of Christ.

Alleluia Alleluia
For our Lord God Almighty reigns
Alleluia Alleluia
For our Lord God Almighty reigns
Alleluia
Holy holy
Are You Lord God Almighty
Worthy is the Lamb
Worthy is the Lamb
You are Holy
Holy
Are You Lord God Almighty?
Worthy is the Lamb
Worthy is the Lamb
Amen

"Agnus Dei," by Michael W. Smith



April 3

Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits- who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

~Psalm 103:1-5

April 4

O Spirit of dark spaces and deep form,
I stand in the doorway of Your promise
Wrapped in half-forgotten scraps of dreams.
Too long I have been wandering.
Too long I fed on reason's creed.
Wait. Take care. Use caution.
And now, now wholly and in faith,
I dare to pray.
I'm too long mired in fear.
It's time to trust the heart of change.

I wait.
No bushes burn nor angels shout.
There is no need.
For You are here.
I seek Your wisdom in the deepest bells . . .
I see Your presence in my neighbors' eyes. . .
I listen to Your silence.
And I start to hope
Again.

~Maureen Killoran



April 5 - Passover Begins at Sundown

Last fall, I read Liz Bucar's excellent book *Stealing My Religion: Not Just Any Cultural Appropriation*. Bucar is a professor of religion at Northeastern University in Boston, and someone who engages with the three practices she names as religious appropriation: solidarity *hijab* among non-Muslim women, the practice of yoga for non-Hindus, and the walking of the *Camino de Santiago* for non-Catholics. Her account traces the history of the popularization of these practices in the US, and complicates their use even – especially – among well-meaning practitioners. Part of what makes her such a reliable narrator is her willingness to claim her own ambivalence and complicity. I commend it to you.

Bucar's book is fresh in my mind on this holy day, when Jews around the world begin the celebration of Passover, and well-meaning Christians struggle to articulate their relationship to this holy time. The Christian Gospels note that Jesus gathers in Jerusalem for Passover with his friends and disciples, and in the interim millennia since their writing, Christian practices of communion have drawn symbolic parallels between the two sacred celebrations. The Passover Lamb, whose blood over the door frames of Israelite homes in ancient Egypt indicates that the spirit of death sent by the Lord should *pass over* them, becomes the blood of the sacrificed Lamb of God, Jesus, offered to all for the forgiveness of sins. The celebration of the liberation from slavery becomes the celebration of the liberation from the power of sin and death.

I've served in churches where there's a tradition of celebrating "Christian seders," and that tradition, in my mind (and in the mind of most Jewish folk!) is six kinds of wrong. Despite the ways Christians have interpreted Jesus's faith and practice, Passover, and the modern practice of the Passover seder, are very distinct things. As a rabbi friend points out, the tradition of the seder didn't even develop until after the fall of the second Temple in Jerusalem, which was after the life of Jesus. The actual seders I've attended in the homes of Jewish friends look nothing like what those churches have enacted.

Nevertheless, when I've taught kids about the practice of Communion in the past, I tell both the exodus story, and we use my "play Seder" set bought at the Jewish supply shop, to learn about the elements of the seder. I borrow a *Haggadah* and show them the way the story lives on and is told in Jewish communities today. I point out the themes of God's liberating work, of eschatological hope, of the importance of re-telling the story in the community and across generations. I've made note of how the Passover story lies at the heart of Black Liberation Theology, and is so very important to the history of the Church in America.

But then I tell them about communion – a separate, later thing that borrows themes and language from this ancient story. A separate, later thing that nonetheless also speaks of God's liberating work, eschatological hope, and the connection of all people across the generations. I'm not sure if I'm walking the line right – how Bucar would feel about my attempts – but I'm trying to be faithful to the living traditions of another faith community, and faithfully teaching about the roots of my own.

Either way, on this holy day, I pray for a sweet and joyous Passover for Jewish siblings everywhere -- *Chag Pesach Sameach!* -- and that all people might know liberation and hope, this day and always.

~Bromleigh McCleneghan



April 6 - Maundy Thursday

What happened when the disciples gathered around the table with Jesus at that last holy meal is not the namesake of Maundy Thursday. Instead, it is John's account of what happens after supper. In John's story, Jesus, at the end of his life, imparts a teaching and blessing by way of a different sacred example than the bread and the cup. John writes that Jesus "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" and "having got up from supper, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him." The root of the practice of foot washing is ancient and is a way to show hospitality and care, especially where sandals were the primary footwear. This ceremony, carried into early Christianity is called Maundy - from the Latin *mandatum*, meaning commandment. Maundy Thursday is this story of service in which Jesus gave a new commandment, "That you love one another as I have loved you." This story reminds us that service is humble and rarely glamorous. Service is done only in the name of love, sometimes known as justice. Service, as Jesus reminds us in this story, is blessed when we remember that no one is greater or lesser than another. The life of faith is one of showing love for one another, no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey.

Our tradition of service work follows the example set on Maundy Thursday, that we show our love not from a place of knowledge and presumption, but from a desire to learn and to respond. These photos are from this year's Mystery Trip with our high school Youth United. They are working at the organization *Clean the World*, which receives used toiletry items from

resorts and then sorts, recycles, and creates new soap and cleaning products to send around the world. When we left that morning, our teens had sorted 1500 pounds of plastic that will never see a landfill and boxed and labeled 20,000 bars of soap that were then on their way to Ukraine, Honduras, and Pakistan. These hours will be marked in the memories of our teens, not only because of the unique (and pretty gross) experience of seeing and sorting thousands of pounds of what would have been landfill waste, but that their time and efforts contributed to the health and dignity of people all around the world. These opportunities to humbly serve echo the meaning of this holy night: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

~Talia Raymond





April 7 - Good Friday

When asked what the greatest commandment is, Jesus replies *"To love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength."* Then he says, *"and to love your neighbor as yourself."* Our church Compact echoes that call of involvement and concern for one another. We also hear that call in one of our favorite songs: *"We are pilgrims on a journey; we are neighbors on the road. We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load."*

"Do this," says Barbara Brown Taylor, *"and the doing will teach you everything you need to know. Do this, and you will live."* She's right. Doing this is what puts flesh on the bones of our faith.

Today is known in Christian tradition as Good Friday, the day of Jesus' crucifixion. The Gospels tell us, in detail, the story of that day, including that *"There were women looking on, at the cross, among them Mary Magdalene. These women had followed Jesus and had provided for him when he was in Galilee."* Imagine, for a moment, these women, standing there near the cross watching, being present through these intolerable hours of Jesus' death, helpless to change what is happening, yet not running, not shutting down.

These women embody what it means to care for another, for not only are they there for Jesus, they are also there for each other. I imagine that they are able to stay there precisely because of one another, to walk the mile and bear the load together. They have witnessed Jesus' life and ministry, and ultimately they witness his death, somehow bearing it with him, so that he is not alone. It is the cost, and also the faithfulness, of love. And because they are witnesses, the story of Jesus' death was kept alive.

When you hear that story, pay special attention to these women. They are also the first to see the resurrection, the first to witness that there is meaning, that there is hope, that there is life beyond pain, beyond the worst possible times of injustice, beyond death itself. That, I believe, is the true blessing of loving our neighbor as ourselves. In some way, walking that path allows the light of grace, the rebirth of life, the hope of renewal and resurrection to shine in our own lives as well. *"Do this, and you will live."*

In the Gospel of Mary, one of the Gnostic Gospels discovered in a jar in a cave in 1945, Mary Magdalene greets the disciples, after Jesus' death, and says: *"Do not let your hearts be irresolute, for our Lord's grace will be with you and will shelter you, for he has joined us together and made us true human beings."*

~ Sandy Reimer

April 8

Liminal Saturday

On this liminal Saturday, the space between Good Friday and Easter, I find myself thinking about the disciples on that Saturday. What were they feeling, and thinking? It must have been quiet. But not the peaceful quiet of a Sabbath at home. Rather it was the roaring silence of a devastated life, an existence with a huge hole ripped in it. What comes next? What am I supposed to do? What is that sound outside the door, are the centurions coming for me, too?

I suspect that roaring silence was much like the silence after a funeral. You have returned home, the guests are gone, and there you are, with an empty chair at the table. How now are you to live? I feel for everyone right now who is trying to navigate their way around the chasms that have opened before them.

What did the disciples do? With memories of their beloved, with help from each other, and with faith, they did their best to co-create a world that was true to their memories, to each other, and to their faith.

I think that is our charge. To grieve the losses, and to honor the lost by doing what we can to mend ourselves and our world. Of course it is a daunting task. That is why the most important thing to remember is that we are not alone.

~Tim Martin

April 9 - Easter

Easter is a day of rejoicing, but I have a hard time getting to that joy until I have experienced the anticipatory grief of Maundy Thursday, until I have named and opened myself to the heartbreak of Good Friday. Try as I might, I can never write an Easter sermon before Easter Saturday. Cole Arthur Riley, the creator of Black Liturgies, gives voice to this experience so beautifully in her book *This Here Flesh*:

"Scholar and Theologian Willie James Jennings said, 'I look at joy as an act of resistance against despair and its forces.' Despair does not want to see us reach the promised land. It does not want us to find belonging in our families, or peace down by the reservoir. Our liberation depends on our willingness to resist it. We do this by allowing joy, in whatever form, to be our song.

"There's a moment in the Bible when the temple of God, which was destroyed during the exile, is being rebuilt. The Israelites lay the foundations, and a lot of people begin shouting for joy. But many of the elders, those who had known the former temple, wept. They remembered what was. [The prophet] Ezra says 'No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise...' (Ezra 3:13, NIV)

"I have not found a better portrait of joy. Sorrow and celebration all mixing together in a holy cacophony. A collective so loud that weeping and laughter were made one...

"As joy gives way to dreaming, our hope becomes more and more secure. We begin to believe that what is will not always be, that the ache will not always linger. And we may even begin to believe that we are worthy of what we are hoping for.

"You deserve more than the despair that stalks your days. You don't have to make a sound; just let the peace pass through your belly and be what you need it to be. These terrors don't own your dreams. Call out to the masses, invite them into the warmth of your delight. Say:

`come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.' – Lucille Clifton"

Happy Easter, friends. The weight of the world, the heartache of our loved ones, the injustices of our society: so much has tried to kill us of late, just as surely as the forces of empire killed Jesus. But today we celebrate that they have failed. We sing, *made like him, like him we rise*. Happy Easter! He is Risen, and so are you.

~Bromleigh McCleneghan



Photo by Barbara Gibbs