

Lenten Meditations

February 17 - April 4, 2021



Plymouth

CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

February, 2021

Dear Friends,

This 14th edition of Lenten Meditations is warmly offered by Plymouth's Spiritual Exploration Committee.

Plymouth members have been generous to share their reflections. May this book help connect us as a whole community of faith.

– *The Spiritual Exploration Committee of the Board of Spiritual Formation*

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Ash Wednesday, February 17

“...you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.” –Mark 12:30-31

Reflection

I heard a sermon once on the difference between optimism and hope. If I remember correctly, optimism is believing good times are coming. Hope isn't as optimistic, but rather believing better times might happen. With the pandemic, George Floyd's murder, a divisive election, a siege on the capitol, it's scary times. Some aren't very hopeful that things will get better. Will there be more unity, will our democracy thrive, will there be social justice for all people, will all people matter, will all religions be valued, will all the children of the world be safe and healthy? We keep hoping, even believing this can happen. Throughout history there have been good and bad times. The bad times are about greed and the abuse of power. In hopeless times some quit working for a better world. If everyone had given up, even when it seemed impossible, where would we be today? Evil forces, the greedy, the lusts for power would rule the world more than they do now. So, we must stay the course. We must work to end white supremacy. We must seek equity for all people. We must keep the children of the world safe. We must keep working to make the world a great place for all people whether it seems possible or not. That's what we're called to do. Let's empower love, not greed. It's what Jesus did.

Prayer

God you are always present, help me be open to you and follow your guidance, live a life of faith, share your love with others, seek justice for those who need it. Amen

Thursday, February 18

I've had it. I am existentially sick to death of death. This is a hard planet, and we are a vulnerable species. And all I can do is pray: Help.
- Anne Lamott, *Help Thanks Wow*

Reflection

These days my prayers and meditation are wet with tears, when my shredded heart and tight fists open in the presence of God (even though my understanding is tiny.)

After many years of 12 step work, I do know I cannot fix problems, but trust that if I let go of my grip, release my certainty of what SHOULD happen, then I can get to a calm place where I can see love, compassion, mercy, and generosity that are happening in my life and hear the music, laughter, sometimes even recognize the voice of God.

Prayer

Help, thanks.

Friday, February 19

The face of the moose is as sad as the face of Jesus. —Mary Oliver, Some Questions You Might Ask

Reflection

All living beings have a soul, I believe. God is in nature and nature is in God.

How could it be otherwise? Elephants weep. Jesus wept. And how many beautiful beings have been and continue to be needlessly tortured and crucified like Jesus?

The brilliance of Mary Oliver's words is that she makes the moose and Jesus one.

The soulfulness of a moose's face and Jesus' empathy and unconditional love for others merge into a timeless meditation about our need to truly see each other as equals.

Prayer

Thank you for all the faces in the world and in nature. Please resurrect in each one of us the energy and vision to speak out and up for the rights of all.

Saturday, February 20

Through the Window, April 2020

Monday

Twigs return to childhood, tussling and bickering in the early morning sun.

Tuesday

A cardinal sings its morning call from the topmost branches.

Wednesday

The sky swoops down, a sullen swell of grey.

Thursday

This yawn of green waits for time to pass.

Friday

A blackbird serenades the empty street for hours.

Saturday

The green fills out, brighter, fresher than before.

Sunday

I watch as sky turns pink, blue fades to grey, then black.

–Rachel Carney, Poetry and COVID

Reflection

And Monday starts the watch again. I read this poem and thought, “Yes. This is me. Monday starts the watch again...days to weeks...weeks to months...when will this end?”

During this COVID pandemic I stayed home.

Books got read.

Closets got cleaned.

Events were canceled.

I learned about Zoom and a new shopping routine.

I spent a lot of time looking through my window.

But this poem challenged me. Don't just look through the window.

Watch. Take notice. See what is there.

School children at home, keeping their distance at play.

People working from home relieving stress in new ways.

Life always at home, exhausting, obscene.

A neighbor living alone. Does she feel seen?

Zoom and COVID-free bubbles bring new adventure.

Delivery trucks more frequent than ever.

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Neighbors talking yard to yard.

And messages drawn with sidewalk art.

Nose-to-nose dogs sniff and greet while their owners space out the length of the leash.

I am reminded that whether I watch or not, each day the sky turns pink, blue fades to grey, then black. But when I take notice those everyday colors show me new hues. When I take notice, I can see that any day my neighbor may or may not be doing OK. Whether my neighbor's on Zoom, across town or next door. Each day starts the watch again.

What will I see through my window today? What is my neighbor trying to say and how can I respond?

Prayer

God,

Without notice, days and weeks and time goes by. But you are there. Always there. You see all.

When the everyday keeps me from seeing, open my eyes.

Help me to notice who and what needs to be seen.

Help me find the way to respond with love.

Monday, February 22

To see the world in a grain of sand, and Heaven in a wild flower.
—William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*

Reflection

I have experienced nature through the looking glass of science. Filtering the jargon and placing it just right in my file of understanding: ecology, energy pyramid, material cycle, keystone species, predator, prey, carrying capacity, population density, mutation, migration, adaptation, extinction, etc.

I mostly understood.

Then I started to travel in nature with a poet and his notebook. He could bypass my head and explain the meaning of this great mystery from his heart directly to mine. I saw the Beauty. I felt the Presence.

I am grateful.

Prayer

I pray we are able to appreciate this ongoing creation. May we be able to pay attention and seek the loving relationships of all things. May we strive to act in love and respect while living on this beautiful planet. May we realize that we are a part of this whole of creation, and that we are in the Presence of God.

Tuesday, February 23

Saint Teresa of Avila said that we all need two senses: a sense of faith and a sense of humor. If we wake up without a sense of faith, then we must lean on our sense of humor. If we wake up without a sense of humor, then we must lean on our sense of faith. Accepting every aspect of life, regularly praying for such acceptance, and developing the two senses we most need will keep us joyously in the present.

—Ben Campbell Johnson

Reflection

Of the two senses noted by Saint Teresa of Avila, the one I rely on the most is my sense of humor. I love cartoons, puns, and jokes—even the ones that make me groan. For me, laughter is the very breath of God. It keeps me going even in the saddest times.

The isolation that comes with COVID challenges us to pursue humor rather than wait for it to arrive on our doorstep. In the face of sickness and death, we need humor to remind us that there is a Goodness in our world that is greater than the harshest realities. Humor restores our faith in today and our hope for tomorrow.

Prayer

Joyful Spirit, may I recognize something in this day that is incredibly funny, so that in my laughter I will feel your presence. Amen.

Wednesday, February 24

The one who is righteous shall live by faith. —Galatians 3:11

Reflection

Amid the noise and clamor of our current crises this Lenten season is the temptation to succumb to the external sources of oppression, discouragement, and hopelessness. The challenges are massive, and despair lurks around us and in us, as we attempt to cope with the realities of life. The apostle Paul both experienced and knew of this reality, but reminded the people of Galatia that “the one who is righteous shall live by faith!” The word faith is often associated with a religious belief system, as in, “to what faith do you belong?” The essence of faith is trust. Life and hope are not contingent on what we believe or know, rather it is trust and confidence that, in spite of pervasive darkness, there is the reality of God in whom we trust both in life and in death.

Prayer

Grant us, O God, a rich measure of faith as trust in your will and way for our lives individually and as a community! Amen.

Thursday, February 25

Solitude does not necessarily mean living apart from others; rather, it means never living apart from one's self. It is not about the absence of other people-it is about being fully present to ourselves, whether or not we are with others. Community does not necessarily mean living face-to-face with others; rather, it means never losing the awareness that we are connected to each other. It is not about the presence of other people-it is about being fully open to the reality of relationship, whether or not we are alone.

—Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*

Reflection

Parker Palmer's words about solitude and community have been companions for me during COVID time. They've been a reminder that each of us has companionship every day with ourselves. And at the same time, we are also connected to others, our communities, whether in person or not. The words show us ways for each of us and our communities to thrive; to greet each day and be open to its invitation. Our time of staying home this year (or any future time) doesn't have to be lonely if we are present to ourselves and remember that our community is still there. We are connected in our relationships, with ourselves and others, if open to the reality of relationship as Palmer says. Our staying-at-home time holds reminders to cherish ourselves and others with refreshed and vibrant eyes and a renewed heart; to see their precious nature, importance and sacredness.

Prayer

Lord, help us to cherish our relationship with ourselves and those near and far: in person, on the telephone, on Zoom, by email or text. Nudge us to love ourselves and our communities fully each and every day no matter how or where they show up. Help us be courageous in our alone time and in our times apart in ways that bring peace, assurance and calm.

Friday, February 26

Rainforest Poem

*What if our religion was each other
If our practice was our life
If prayer, our words.
What if the temple was the earth
If forests were our church
If holy water - the rivers, lakes and oceans
What if meditation was our relationships
If the Teacher was life
If wisdom was self-knowledge
If love was the center of our being
—Ganga White*

Reflection

What if --- how often we use those words.
What if I won the lottery
What if I had not said those words
Musing can be fantasy but can also influence reality

Prayer

Oh Holy Creator

May our listening, our musing, our life be a co-creation with you and the universe for the common good.

Saturday, February 27

To be human is to live by sunlight and moonlight, with anxiety and delight, admitting limits and transcending them, falling down and rising up. —Barbara Brown Taylor, Learning to Walk in the Dark

Reflection

I have had a full ration of anxiety: Pandemic, civil violence, physical isolation, politics. We each have our own list. But I have had more time in my garden. I have appreciated every contact with friends (phone, Zoom or socially-distanced). I have had more contact with my brother in Texas than I have had in years. Our Zoom conversations have been a delight.

And there are those mornings when I just look out the window at the bare trees and wonder if today will be a bad day, and those nights when I know that I have not had a good day. Even then the sun will come up and the moon will continue on its monthly cycle.

Easter is coming, the days are getting longer and the night doesn't go on forever as often. The light is changing and the pair of owls in the neighborhood are calling to signal that nesting season is here.

Prayer

Dear God, be with us as we live in these difficult days. Help us keep faith in our future. Help us know that we are not alone. Amen.

Monday, March 1



*And while I stood there I saw more
than I can tell
And I understood more than I saw;
For I was seeing in a sacred manner
the shapes of all things in the spirit,
And the shape of all shapes as they
must live together like one being.
—Black Elk*

Reflection

I have been stopped in my tracks, so to speak, in the midst of nature and found a place of no words, of silence. No thoughts...no descriptive

language.... just silence. Paying attention and breathing. Take this Lenten season and find a place each day to stop, to listen, to pay attention, to observe the sacred, to be open to possibility.

Prayer

Be with me, God of Possibility, and let me learn your Truth in silence. Amen.

Tuesday, March 2

*Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
A long way from home,
A long way from home.
—American Negro Spiritual, 1870's*

Reflection

There are times when I just want my mother.
She has passed and gone, but I just want to talk to her one more time
... ask her one more question.... make sense of this chaos, salve the
hurt, be with me in the night....

As I try to envision her and hear her speak, I realize my spiritual
longing is for God “in flesh-appearing.”

Prayer

Heavenly Mother, be with me as I walk. Remind me that you are but
a thought away, and that I might remember to look behind and find
you've been following all the while.

Wednesday, March 3

A hasty explanation could assert that to pray is a useless act, because a man's prayer does not alter the unalterable. But would this be desirable in the long run? Could not fickle man easily come to regret that he had gotten God changed? The true explanation is therefore at the same time the one most to be desired. The prayer does not change God, but it changes the one who offers it. It is the same with the substance of what is spoken. Not God, but you, the maker of the confession, get to know something by your act of confession. -- Soren Kierkegaard, Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing

"I look up from my book, from the unreality of language, and stare at the sea's surface that says nothing and means it. This morning there came this letter from the heart's stranger, promising to pray for me. What does that mean? I, who am a man of prayer, ask and am silent. Would he make me insolvent? Strip me of initiatives in order to repay trust? Must I refrain from walking the same sea, lest sinking I should deride him? Operate my vehicle at no speed, to attribute to him the safety in which I arrive? His god is not my god, or he would not ask for such things. I admit he has driven me to my knees but with my eyes open so that, by long looking over concealed fathoms, I gave myself into accepting that to pray true is to say nothing. -- R.S. Thomas, "The Letter"

Reflection

In *Purity of Heart*, one of his Edifying Addresses, Kierkegaard provides his view of "Remorse, Repentance, Confession." The Translator, Douglas V. Steere, describes the Edifying Addresses as "unpreached sermons." In explaining the role of a confession, by way of analogy, Kierkegaard provides his view of praying. A person who prays is changed by the very act of praying but is not likely to be able to change God, the unalterable. The act of praying brings self-realization. According to Kierkegaard, you "get to know something by your act." But when you pray for someone, how is that person affected by prayer? R. S. Thomas provides one possibility. Judging from the tone of his poem it appears he was upset that someone was praying for him. He appears annoyed that it seems he must alter his normal

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routine and be extremely careful so that it would appear that the letter writer's act of prayer had kept him safe. But even in rejecting the intrusion into his life of an unwanted prayer, Thomas achieves the realization that "true prayer is to say nothing."

When we pray we will never know for sure whether, using Kierkegaard's terminology, we have persuaded the unalterable to perform some alterations. But we do know that in the act of praying and submitting ourselves to the Almighty, we can attain some useful self-realization. Likewise, the subject of the prayers enjoys the positive force from the love that engendered the prayers. Even the recipient of an unwelcome prayer as depicted in the R. S. Thomas poem acquired knowledge of what constitutes true prayer.

A common ending to our prayers is to ask: "Oh Lord! Hear our prayer." But if our prayers are not likely to alter God, the unalterable, perhaps we should close our prayers in a different manner.

Prayer

Oh Lord, let our prayers be heard.

Thursday, March 4

Live not for the battles won.

Live not for The-End-of-Song.

Live in the along.

—Gwendolyn Brooks “Speech to the Young” from BLACKS

Reflection

While Gwendolyn Brooks died in 2000, she might well have written these words for this time of COVID. Sometimes I feel like I’m living in a state of suspended animation, waiting to resume my “old” life. But at the same time I’m reading more, cooking more, walking more, having longer conversations with people I treasure. I believe I’m learning to “live in the along.” And in the spirit of Lent, I’m taking more time to reflect on the present and what I will bring with me when I’m able to exit my COVID cocoon.

Prayer

Guiding Spirit, with the days I am given, help me to live each one in its fullness, to truly live in the along. Amen.

Friday, March 5

After six days Jesus...led them up a high mountain.... There he was transfigured.... His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.... Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here...." While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased...." When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus --Matt. 17.1-8, NIV

Reflection

Approaching Jesus

Overwhelmed by luxuriant warmth,
spreading,

glowing throughout me,

I come unto You.

A near distance you are, on your rock,

the wind whips your robe,

your beard is red fire,

violently its curly-cue hairs entwine

as I come closer.

Beside you now, I look into

your still, groundwater eyes,

their ancient depths.

Touching you, I am overwhelmed by

your power.

My legs quiver, not

from fear but from joy; my heart

is pounding, bursting apart in

waves of warm energy.

Such a long time I have waited

for You.

Prayer

Whatever we hear or read about you, Jesus, give us the vision to move beyond judging it and imagine, instead, where and when you might appear to us. Would we rather see you at 38th and Chicago, maybe in the middle of a reservation, perhaps behind a pulpit dressed in robes, or simply walking beside us around a lake? Help us join you in our own way. Hand us your peaceful consolations, your words of strength, your challenging call--whatever we need from you in our souls. Amen.

Saturday, March 6

*This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.
—Psalms 118:24*

Reflection

As I start out on my walk each morning, these are my words. How grateful I am to be able to walk, and to see, and to experience the sounds and smells and beauty.

Prayer

Thank you, loving God. May I always remember to be present and to be amazed and to thank you. Amen.

Monday, March 8

To encounter oneself is to encounter the other: and this is love. If I know that my soul trembles, I know that yours does too: and, if I can respect this, both of us can live. Neither of us, truly, can live without the other: a statement which would not sound banal if one were not endlessly compelled to repeat it and further, believe it, and act on that belief. —James Baldwin, The Devil Finds Work

He insisted again, that the unexamined life was not worth living. To live and move about the world without questioning how the world has shaped and is shaping you is, in a way, to betray the gift of life itself. —Baldwin Scholar Dr. Eddie S. Glaude Jr., Begin Again

Reflection

To give Baldwin the title of a mystic and a contemplative is perhaps not as much of a stretch as one might originally think. The great twentieth century author continues to be seen and revered as one of the brightest commentators on race, white supremacy, and the resilient hope of Black people. He often states without apology that the corporate soul of white people is in total disrepair and wonders if they can ever recover. Yet, at the same time, he can find deep compassion and love for all people.

He understands and writes so clearly about the oppression that Black people have suffered for the past 400 years, and in his later writings he shares his disappointment in the failure of the Civil Rights movement to lessen that oppression. Yet, at the same time, he can find deep compassion and love for all people.

Lent offers us a time to encounter oneself, to examine the gift that is our life, not with disdain but with compassion. Following the wisdom of Baldwin, the more compassion we give to ourselves, the more we can give to others and to the world. Lent offers us the time to be like Baldwin and to work to become the mystic and the contemplative that he truly was.

Prayer

Jesus, you taught us how to love ourselves and how to love our neighbors,
But we build walls that separate and are often hostile.
You asked us to seek out the stranger and to welcome them as honored
guests, But we lock ourselves up inside our own fear.
You long for us to share our abundant gifts with the disadvantaged,
But we cling tightly to our possessions and our privilege.
Loving God, have mercy on us, forgive the arrogance that keeps us apart,
Open our hearts and minds so we can see how we are all connected.
By your Spirit, make us whole and holy,
One people, united in faith in hope and love. Amen.

Tuesday, March 9

*It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch*

*a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway*

*into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.*

—Mary Oliver, "Praying," Devotions

Reflection

As I reflect upon this poem during Lent, I am encouraged to think of prayer as a doorway to enter and/or as an invitation to accept. Rather than "giving up" something for Lent, I plan to "add something" for Lent in the form of spending more time in Centering Prayer. More time to quiet my mind and body to experience, through silent listening, a closer relationship with God. Trusting that in the silence I will be creating space for another voice to speak.

Prayer

Loving God, help us to enter the doorway and join you in prayer. May this season of Lent be enriched through silent listening. Amen.

Wednesday, March 10

*O little forests, meekly
Touch the snow with low branches!
O covered stones
Hide the house of growth!*

*Secret
Vegetal words,
Unlettered water,
Daily zero.*

*Pray undistracted
Curled tree
Carved in steel—
Buried zenith!*

*Fire, turn inward
To your weak fort,
To a burly infant spot,
A house of nothing.*

*O peace, bless this mad place:
Silence, love this growth.*

*O silence, golden zero
Unsetting sun*

—Thomas Merton, “Love the Winter When the Plant Says Nothing”

Reflection

Love winter when the plant says nothing.

So many mysteries are hidden beneath the surface of nature, of human endeavor and the holy. Searching for meaning and sense is a good Lenten endeavor. Forty days in the wilderness can give us a chance to pray undistracted, to find blessing for our mad places, tease open the paradox of the unsetting sun. A good time to love winter.

Prayer

Eternal Presence, help me be comfortable with unknowns and to have the courage to see what may be true for me for now. Amen.

Thursday, March 11

Logion 74 Yeshua says... *O Lord, many have gathered around the fountain, but there is nothing in the well.* -- Lynn C. Bauman, Ward J. Bauman, Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Gospel of Thomas, The Luminous Gospels*

Reflection

Fountains spark the human imagination: The Fountains of Rome by Ottorino Respighi. The many photos of fountains in art history and humanities textbooks. The incongruous Fountains of Bellagio in the middle of the desert on the Las Vegas strip. This saying of Jesus creates for me the image of people waiting for a fountain to display its glory. However, the glory remains unfulfilled because the well is dry.

Jesus may be suggesting that the glories of the human imagination pale in comparison to the uncelebrated well where God lies hidden in each of us. Within each of us, living waters pool. It is there that the realm of the spirit, the Realm of the Kingdom, or heaven, can be found. Its water is cool, calm, and unpolluted, the eternal inner source to which Jesus repaired again and again.

Prayer

Father/Mother God, help me find the well you placed within me, where your living waters pool, that I may grow closer to you. Help me see the vision you hold for me and for each of us, that we may draw closer to one another and recreate your vision for each of us in the world – to your glory. Amen.

Friday, March 12

*When Jesus lived among us he came a child of earth
To wear our human likeness, to share our human birth;
And after flight and exile, an alien refugee,
Return in peace and safety at last to Galilee;
Through sunlit days of childhood a loving home to know;
In wisdom and in favor with God and folk to grow.*

*He came, the friend of sinners, to meet us in our need;
The gospel of his kingdom declare in word and deed;
To touch and cure the leper, the lost to seek and find,
To heal in signs and wonders the deaf and dumb and blind.
The voice of their Creator the wind and waters heard;
To those with ears to listen he spoke the living word.
—Timothy Dudley-Smith*

Reflection

I have always been attracted to the hymn lyrics of Timothy Dudley-Smith, retired bishop of the Church of England, and writer of more than 400 hymns. The good bishop has a wonderful way of offering a thought – in this case the life of Christ on earth – and expanding it with language that one can take to heart. Of course, the ending of each line has such beauty (need/deed and heard/word) making it seem effortless to write, and yet we all know how challenging writing poetry can be.

I hope these beautiful thoughts will be of joy during these Lenten days.

Prayer

Direct, control, suggest this day
All I design, or do, or say. —Bishop Thomas Ken, 1637-1711

Saturday, March 13

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. — Matthew 25:35

Reflection

We have wept, been horrified and angered these past years as walls have been built and borders closed to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger seeking asylum. Now, more than ever, we're called to move out of the sad place of bearing witness and into the gritty, exhausting and generous place of taking action.

Our prayers must be said with our hands and our feet as we work to welcome the stranger. During this season of Lent might we release the old practice of "giving something up for the forty days" and embrace a new practice of "giving to?"

Inspired by the faith that informs us may we open our arms to the migrant, offer our resources to provide food, drink, clothing, medical care, legal assistance, shelter...asylum.

Prayer

Divine Source of Blessings,

Move us out of our comfort zone, our passivity, our indifference into bold generosity. Amen.

Monday, March 15

We don't see things as they are, we see things as we are. -Anais Nin

Reflection

When I'm out walking my little dog, she is especially fond of stopping to smell things, more than she is of walking I think, although we do that too. So, I stick a small camera in my pocket for our walks, because the pauses give me a chance to look around



and possibly see things that might make a good photograph. Usually, I'm waiting for her, but sometimes, I make her wait for me. One day in late-March, during Lent as luck would have it, we stopped by a small tree for her to sniff something invisible to me, and I looked over my shoulder and saw a pair of geese floating on the lake, so I got down close to the water and took their photograph, not really expecting much. Just two geese and a city lake, nothing special. Later, I realized it was one of those pleasant surprises; the ordinary world made remarkable in that small, rectangular frame. I had walked, run, biked or driven by that spot hundreds of times, and I had never seen it like that. But it was always there, and my dog reminded me to stop, and see.

Prayer

Creator God, gently guide us to see the divine perfection in the world around us, and within ourselves, amidst the overlooked and the ordinary.

Tuesday, March 16

Dear Heavenly One, help me accept Love as it is given even though it may not come in the package I requested. —Judy Ford

Reflection

Love sometimes comes in the most unexpected ways—a broken relationship that opens the door to new friendships, a lost job that makes way for reexamining one’s passion, an argument that leads to forgiveness, a new awareness about the goodness within someone with whom we strongly disagree. We want Love to arrive in a package that’s instantly recognizable, not in a container that appears frightening. However, always wanting Love to be pretty and comfortable leads to narrow vision and lost opportunities for grace and growth. Love has countless manifestations. We only need to be open to its possibilities.

Prayer

Holy One, help us to see Love in all of its expressions, not just in the ones that we would prefer. Amen.

Wednesday, March 17

Everyone will live in peace and prosperity, enjoying their own grapevines and fig trees, for there will be nothing to fear. (A favorite bible verse of our first president, George Washington) -- Micah 4:4 (New Living Translation)

Reflection

What a wonderful piece of optimistic scripture! But, regrettably, it has no resemblance to our world today. It's a worthy goal, but we are far short of addressing it. Eleven million "illegals" in our country live in constant fear. Fear that a knock will come on their door in the middle of the night with a visit from ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). Someone who has lived here many years, worked hard to support their family and even paid taxes to the U.S. government can be taken, put in detention and even deported. For many good people, the phrase "there will be nothing to fear" is sadly far from their reality.

Yet, the goal of "peace and prosperity" is enjoyed by some. And the good news is, we may be in a period where we are, at least, moving in the right direction toward that goal. Our government has newly committed to making our immigration laws more humane. Also, once the pandemic has abated, we will again be welcoming refugees, in much higher numbers than recent years, to our country. There will be opportunities for us to reach out and take the hands of immigrants and refugees. Reaching out and taking a hand just like Jesus did in the scripture used by Lead Minister Dr. Davis in his sermon on February 7, 2021. Yes, the goal of "peace and prosperity" will not be achieved soon for all, but we may be able to, personally, help some achieve some measure of it in the near future. Reach out - grasp a hand and help someone enjoy their "fig tree" with "nothing to fear."

Prayer

Help us to be more like Jesus. Help us overcome our own fear and step into the challenge of moving someone toward peace and prosperity by actually grasping the hand of a person needing an assist. We will have opportunities - give us the courage to act! More peace and prosperity than we have today is an achievable goal. Help us to make it so!

Thursday, March 18

*I just sit where I'm put, composed
of stone and wishful thinking:
...that in the midst of your nightmare,
the final one, a kind lion will come
with bandages in her mouth
and the soft body of a woman,
and lick you clean of fever
and pick your soul up gently by the nape of the neck
and caress you into darkness and paradise.*
--Margaret Atwood, "Sekhmet, The Lion-Headed Goddess of War"

Reflection

During this season of COVID, we have tried to keep death outside our home, yet it surrounds us, reminding of our fragility, resilience, love and loneliness. This COVID season shakes us from denial, confronting us daily with the reality that despite our efforts, the end of our embodied time will come, for us, our neighbor, and our beloveds. When I am open to its metaphor, this poem brings a comforting image of a Lioness easing the transition, gently carrying and caressing our soul, into darkness that is paired with paradise.

Prayer

Dearest Lioness, please help us to know more deeply that all will be well. Help us to know more deeply what matters most. Help us to be grateful for, and to nurture, what matters most. Guide us to connect, to give, to pause, to treasure, to change, to breathe, alone and together. Amen.

Friday, March 19

Our bodies are in dynamic exchange with all living bodies...(and with) earth, air and water. -- Deepak and Gotham Chopra, The 7 Spiritual Laws of Superheros

Reflection

We live in a state of constant exchange; our breath, in and out, a part of the world's atmosphere, our energy, part of the universal energy. Our bodies, part of our parents', maybe going into our offspring, and returning to the earth. So we are connected in the deepest, highest, and broadest sense to every living thing, and to the elements. This makes the idea of our boundaries and borders false. Even oceans and tiny cells have porous and changing borders. Recognizing our connection, lets us move past and through the boundaries and borders we have constructed.

Prayer

God of our understanding, help us look at our own walls and boundaries and begin to imagine:
What are they doing for us?
What are they keeping us from?
What might happen if we took them down?
God, help us know that we can build bridges instead.

Saturday, March 20

*In the beginning was the Word
And the Word was with God
And the Word was God
... And the Word was made flesh.
—John 1*

Reflection

No matter your current beliefs, these are powerful words. Is Jesus the Word? If each of us was created in the image of God are we, too, the Word? Am I, are we, both divine and human? If so, how shall I live and love?

Prayer

Oh, Holy Creator,
Grant me the wisdom to recognize the wisdom within me.
Grant me the love to recognize the love within me.
Grant me the patience to learn I am wise and loving.
Accept my gratitude for these gifts.
Amen.

Monday, March 22

*Savoring the substance
of existence
is a serious
frivolity.*

Someone must do it.

*Someone must love
luminous hours when leaves
marry light and refuse
to stop
shining.*

*Someone must speak
the sweetness
of lilacs
or it will be lost
beneath smog.*

*Someone must bask
in the beauty of blessing
because the news knows only
brokenness.*

*When you give yourself
to a particular place
the power
and peace
of that place
give themselves
through you.*

*So savoring the substance
of existence
is a serious frivolity.
Someone must do it.*

*Will that someone
be you?*

*—Bernadette Miller, “A Serious
Frivolity”*

Reflection

During this ‘monastic winter,’ I find I am more attuned to the natural world. The moment of daybreak, the birds, especially the crows, flying overhead, letting me know life is all around me. I am not alone.

So many of us are giving ourselves to this “particular place” this year and allowing this place to give itself back to us. What a gift.

Prayer

May I savor this precious moment, the very substance of existence. Creator, grant me the blessing of serious frivolity. Amen.

Tuesday, March 23

Hope is the remembrance of radiance, the assurance that Light will be Light, even when walking in dark places. -Howard Thurman

Reflection

Carrie Newcomer posted these words from Howard Thurman after the Jan. 6th event at the U.S. Capitol. The past year has been anything but normal or radiant or light for many of us, with the stress of the pandemic, the loss of lives, jobs and housing that are a result of the pandemic, the political divide in our country, and of course the normal stresses that life can bring. And yet, if we look, we can still find radiance, perhaps in the face of a little one, or in that of an elder. We can find radiance in the sunrise or the sunset. Radiance may appear to us through a beautiful song by a choir or orchestra, or by the singing of a bird. This past year, many of us have had to slow down, and we have noticed those bits of radiance, or beams of light . . . we just needed to stop long enough to notice them.

Prayer

Holy One, may we continue to take the time to notice the beauty the world has to offer. Amen.

Wednesday, March 24

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and I am free.
--Wendell Berry, *The Peace of Wild Things**

Reflection

It is so easy to become paralyzed by worry, fear, anxiety, what-ifs, and all that is unknown and out of my control. Without even realizing it, I allow these sorts of feelings to consume me, stealing me away from the here and now and blinding me to all of the joy in my life and to the wonder of Creation all around me. This Lenten season, I am devoted to regularly stepping out into nature to experience the “peace of wild things”, where, for a time, I can “rest in the grace of the world” and be free.

Prayer

Holy Spirit, soothe my aching heart, calm my troubled mind, lead me to still waters, and grant me the peace of wild things. Amen.

Thursday, March 25

*Open my eyes, that I may see
Glimpses of truth thou has for me;
Place in my hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp and set me free.
Silently now I wait for thee.
Ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!
—Traditional Hymn, “Open My Eyes That I May See”*

Reflection

These lyrics to a familiar hymn have been rolling around in my mind for weeks, well months. So much so that it had become an annoying earworm. My usual tricks to disarm earworms did not work. And this hymn that I have enjoyed throughout my years had become a point of irritation.

And I started asking;

Open my eyes to what? What am I not seeing that I need to see? What am I to do about the tremendous problems our country? What is holding me back? What? What? What?

Questions lead to more questions and the questions became the annoying earworm. Frustrated, I reread the lyrics. Then I saw, there were no questions in the hymn. I had made this a hymn of questions.

It is not about questions. It is a request.

A request from me to God.

The only question is, will I be open, ready for “thy will to see?”

Prayer

Spirit Divine. Help me to practice being ready so that I may truly be open to your word.

Friday, March 26

God is both tough-minded and tender-hearted. One surrounds us with justice, and one is gentle enough to embrace us with grace. – Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, Strength of Love

Reflection

Dr. King was both committed to the belief of non-violence while loving the enemy, and he made special use of scripture from the New Testament.

Like many of us in the last few years, I have struggled with the meaning of both positions. Clearly, he did not mean to not take action for justice. Then I turn to Matthew 5: 43-45 ...“but I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to them who hate you and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you; that you may be children of God.” Both tough-minded and tender-hearted.

King concludes with the words of Jesus on the cross . . .”Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” I must keep in mind I am not always right, so I need forgiveness as well.

Prayer

Oh God, grant me the will for justice, and the heart to love my enemies. Amen.

Saturday, March 27

I don't believe people are looking for the meaning of life as much as they are looking for the experience of being alive.

—Joseph Campbell

Reflection

Sometimes, I have a hard time getting out of bed in the morning. The darkness, the cold, the grey winter sky. The stress of my responsibilities. It feels overwhelming. Especially this year.

And I understand, now perhaps more than ever before in my life, that each morning that I open my eyes is a gift, not a guarantee. The sunlight that filters through my window, the taste of the honey that sweetens my tea, the songs of the winter birds, the unfathomable miracle of my breath. Even the dull ache in my heart. If I'm able to slow down and notice, I can find the beauty in these small things. Each moment, even on a dark grey day in the uncertainty of a global pandemic, contains within it an opportunity for gratitude - and maybe even for rejoicing. For the gift of another day to experience all of the joys and pains of being alive.

Prayer

Creator of all: Thank you for another day. Help me to find the holiness in my life and in all life, and to find joy and gratitude in my daily experience of being alive.

Monday, March 29

*It's easy to love a deer
But try to care about bugs and scrawny trees
Love the puddle of lukewarm water
From last week's rain.
Leave the mountains alone for now.
Also the clear lakes surrounded by pines.
People are lined up to admire them.
Get close to the things that slide away in the dark.
Be grateful even for the boredom
That sometimes seems to involve the whole world.
Think of the frost
That will crack our bones eventually.
—Tom Hennen, "Love for Other Things"*

Reflection

Some days I long for snow to cover up the grit and gray of winter. I want clean, bright drifts and sunny skies, not drab, monotone expanses. On days when grime seems to reign, I need to remind myself that creation is beautiful in all of its manifestations, and God can be found in what I might discard as ugly. On days when I wish for snow's cleansing blanket, may I see goodness in the gray and beauty in the blah. Each day is a gift, no matter how it appears before my eyes.

Prayer

Loving Creator, thank you for the grit and grime. May they remind me that you are always present. Amen.

Tuesday, March 30

The one thing you have that nobody else has is you. Your voice, your mind, your story, your vision. So write and draw and build and play and dance and live as only you can. The moment that you feel that just possibly you are walking down the street naked... that's the moment you may be starting to get it right. —Neil Gaiman, Make Good Art

Creativity is any act of love. Any act of making. It is usually applied to art-making, but need not as it can also be applied to anything you do that requires your focus, skill and ingenuity. It takes creativity to dress well, for example. To parent. To paint a windowsill. To give someone you love your full attention. --Kae Tempest, On Connection

Reflection

Death often makes us prioritize who and what is really important. Ah, the joy of full self-expression. And self-knowing. But not self-consciousness. This is what I yearn to do. To be. Maybe Lent can be a time of awakening in the desert. Being naked.

Prayer

God, help me awake to your gifts that I am. Inspire me to share myself. To reach out to others with full attention and generosity. To give of myself without fear of falling short. And to be grateful for your gifts and the opportunities to share them. Amen.

Wednesday, March 31

O, the joy of my spirit - it is uncaged - it darts like lightening!

It is not enough to have this globe or a certain time.

I will have thousands of globes and all time.

—Walt Whitman, “A Song of Joys,” Leaves of Grass

Reflection

Whitman, to me, is a modern-day (relatively, of course) psalmist – a passionate celebrant of this gift of life in all its glory and messiness, tribulations and revelries. It felt good to revisit him these past months. With this passage especially, he helped make this time of confinement a time of con-fun-ment, reminding me to uncage my spirit and unleash the possibilities.

Prayer

Boundless one, I sing your praises. Amen.

Thursday, April 1

Guilt doesn't go anywhere near far enough; the appropriate emotion is shame—shame at our own dependency, in this case, on the underpaid labor of others. When someone works for less pay than she can live on—when, for example, she goes hungry so that you can eat more cheaply and conveniently—then she has made a great sacrifice for you, she has made you a gift of some part of her abilities, her health, and her life. The “working poor,” as they are approvingly termed, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high. To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor, to everyone else.
—Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nicked and Dimed*

Sitting across from the offering box, he was observing how the crowd tossed money in for the collection. Many of the rich were making large contributions. One poor widow came up and put in two small coins—a measly two cents. Jesus called his disciples over and said, “The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford—she gave her all.”
—Mark 12:41-44 *The Message*

Reflection

Sometimes we read the right thing at the right time, and it stands what we previously thought on its head. I had never thought of the working poor as philanthropists. I believed (and still do) that they are undervalued and underappreciated, but after reading Ehrenreich, mine has been a pale response to a dire need. One of the things I learned (again) from Mary Kay Sauter when we taught our Immigration 101 class was the critical role of class-ism in how we treat immigrants. The working poor are not always immigrants, but many of them are, and this has been true historically as well. And they give extravagantly, sending large sums of money to family back home. The parable of the poor widow reminds us that this is not a new phenomenon. How reprehensibly slow we are to learn the basics of human rights and human relations, the basics of love! We need Jesus to show us the way. The poor are not there for us to ignore as much as possible—they are there to give us gifts, and we are here to finally understand that and give them gifts back.

Prayer

Lord, help us see bright and fresh like children. Help us see that what we think we know is often not so, is often the opposite of the truth of a situation. Help us stand our understanding on its head, see the truth, and behave rightly while we still have breath. Amen.

Good Friday, April 2

The Gospel of John says that Jesus “was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it... While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light” —(1.4-5, 12.36, NRSV).

Reflection

Jesus’ burial and resurrection suggest light hiding under a bushel basket, then returning to sight: a mustard seed sprouting from the soil. That was how I met my three children. I coached my wife through hours of breathing and, finally, pushing. During each child’s arrival, my eyes filled with tears from the bright love shining on us all. A nurse said, “The natal room is the best job here.”

One afternoon in my office, I was tutoring a college student in her thirties restarting her education. She’d lived a hard life. She understood intelligent words, but she’d long forgotten grammar. Now she was in a fight to the death to wrangle nouns and verbs into correct sentences. We worked on fixing what she’d already written. I explained rules. She tried new sentences. Nothing worked.

Finally, I told her something like “Write this: “Tyesha cooked. Jackson ate.” Her pen moved dutifully. Then I said, “Now change the names and what they did.” Her eyes suddenly filled with light. From that moment on, she could write for college. In her darkness and struggle, a seed buried in her, like Jesus, broke forth into the sun.

Prayer

God, where have I seen myself, my family, my friends, and others burst forth in brightness? Please help me find where you lie buried. Give me the patience to welcome where you might rise, the will to help you shine, and the love to feed the dawning fire. Help me envision the possibilities in my and others’ darkness, look for each person’s soul even in the homeless and displaced, and find the hope in the fearful and alone. Teach me to understand the light by which those who disagree with me view life; to hide neither my own best thoughts and feelings nor those of others under a bushel; and to keep the flame in my soul lighting the shadows that surround me. Amen.

Holy Saturday, April 3

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day." —John 6:26-27, 35-40

Reflection

There's believing, and then there's believing. There's the easy belief that arises from seeing 5,000 meals produced out of thin air - the kind that compels you to follow a crowd in search of a self-styled rabbi across the Sea of Galilee for another taste.

Then there's the belief that Jesus is the Bread of Life. That belief holds space for curiosity to explore the full depth of what that metaphor implies. That belief compels one to risk and give things up. That belief upends expectations and cultural systems. That belief causes the believer to take different action.

Belief in Jesus isn't just faith in the rightness of his message, it's also the work of embodying his message because of faith in its rightness. The good news is that, in addition to being counter-cultural and risky, the work of belief is the doorway to connection, love, and life.

Prayer

Loving God, we confess that we don't always put in the work. Sometimes we see the exploitation that undergirds so much of our culture and don't act to disrupt it. Help us to be fully present to the small inner voice that's always on the lookout for your justice. And bolster our faith so that we may be moved to do your work in the world. May it be so.

Easter Sunday, April 4

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices which they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body.

—Luke 24:1-3

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9:00a.m. & 11:00 a.m.