

Lenten Devotional

Ash Wednesday, February 10

Matthew 6:19-21

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

On Care for Our Common Home: Laudito Si’—Pope Francis’ Encyclical

Because this Lenten Devotional grew out of two November gatherings of about two dozen people from St. Brigit’s and First Congregational, we will be including some of the Pope’s powerful and compassionate words and ideas here on Wednesdays.

We are always capable of going out of ourselves towards the other. . . .“The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast.” For this reason, the ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion. . . .What [some Christians] need is an “ecological conversion”, whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them. Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience.

Christian spirituality proposes an alternative understanding of the quality of life, and encourages a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption. We need to take up an ancient lesson, found in different religious traditions and also in the Bible. It is the conviction that “less is more”. A constant flood of new consumer goods can baffle the heart and prevent us from cherishing each thing and each moment. To be serenely present to each reality, however small it may be, opens us to much greater horizons of understanding and personal fulfilment. Christian spirituality proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little. It is a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, to be grateful for the opportunities which life affords us, to be spiritually detached from what we possess, and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack.

From Chapter Six, paragraphs 206 to 222.

Prayer: O God of the poor, help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth, so precious in your eyes. Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world and not prey on it, that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.

Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain at the expense of the poor and the earth. Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation, to recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey towards your infinite light.

From the conclusion of Chapter Six, “A Prayer for Our Earth”

Thursday, February 11

Genesis 1:1-5

1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the

waters.³ Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Thursdays with Poems

Most of us don’t take literally that Creation happened in just seven days, but we also don’t dismiss this story as mere fantasy. We know—we believe—that the intensity and rhythmic beauty of the Creation story tells us another kind of truth about God’s care for us and for all of Creation.

Writers turn to poetry when they have opened themselves to that which is beyond the ordinary, the practical, the realistic. And we turn to poetry, whether in scripture or from contemporary poets, when we want to stop or to be stopped, to stay in the present moment, to be in the Presence of the Holy.

Hear how James Weldon Johnson, the author of “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” transforms the poetry of Genesis into the language of our day:

*And God stepped out on space,
And he looked around and said:
I'm lonely--
I'll make me a world.
And far as the eye of God could see
Darkness covered everything,
Blacker than a hundred midnights
Down in a cypress swamp.
Then God smiled,
And the light broke,
And the darkness rolled up on one side,
And the light stood shining on the other,
And God said: That's good!*

You can enjoy the whole poem, called “The Creation,” in his collection, *God’s Trombones*, or online. Or perhaps you want something much shorter? Here is David Craig’s entire poem, called “Pentecost”:

*What is this Holy Spirit?
And what is it doing in the eggplant?*

Prayer: God who is our Rock, our Song, our Door, our Living Water, our Word, keep us always in your Presence, enable us to see You in everything, and help us to always share your Presence with the world. Amen

Friday, February 12

Genesis 1:6-13

⁶ And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.”⁷ So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so.⁸ God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹ And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ¹¹ Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. ¹² The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. ¹³ And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

Free-of-meat Fridays

On this third day of Lent, we remember the third day of creation, when God gave us not just plants, but the whole glorious notion of seeds. From the fullness, the fruit, of a living thing comes the tiny beginning for yet another growing creation.

Consider water, the second day’s creation. While we have easy access to clean water, almost a billion people on the Earth can barely get any water, let alone clean water. If we pay a little more attention to the foods we eat and the water it takes to make them, we can grow a big, new habit of living more lightly on the earth with our sisters and brothers around the globe.

There’s a new term (and a website) we found that gives a name to our hope of changing our earth-unfriendly habits: “reducetarianism.” There’s a mouthful, meant to encourage us that we need not fear having to become vegetarians, but that we can simply eat less meat that we have in the past. We might try becoming “reducetarians.” (And here’s the link: <http://theplate.nationalgeographic.com/2016/01/13/to-really-reduce-meat-in-your-diet-dont-go-cold-turkey/>.)

While some of us have had dramatic spiritual experiences when we were suddenly transformed by God’s powerful intervention, most of have known God’s presence through the small seeds dropped every day into our lives. If you are moved to become vegan, hallelujah! And if you are blessed to make smaller changes, hallelujah for that, too!

Each Friday of Lent, you will find recipes and ideas to help you try out more fruitful (and veggie-full) living and eating, to see how you might become a reducetarian.

According to the UNESCO-IHE Institute for Water Education, here’s how much water it takes to produce different kinds of foods. Any surprises for you?

Gallons of Water to Produce	One Ounce of Food	Gallons of Water to Produce	One Ounce of Food
106.28	Beef	4.69	Peaches
97.20	Almonds	4.22	Raspberries
84.68	Lamb	4.11	Orange Juice
44.51	Peas	2.98	Potatoes
41.25	Pork	2.26	Kale
20.32	Asparagus	2.05	Soy Milk
16.26	Rice	1.24	Strawberries
16.61	Chicken	.95	Tomatoes
5.48	Milk	.85	Lettuce

Rebecca Ferguson

Prayer: May the blessing of God, fountain of living water, flow within us as a river of life. May we drink deep of God's wisdom. May we never thirst again. May we go through life refreshing many, as a sign of healing for all; through the One who is Life eternal. Amen

Prayer is by Miriam Therese Winter, as found in the Orchard Ridge [Wisconsin] United Church of Christ Blessing Book, 2006.

Saturday, February 13

Genesis 1:14-19

¹⁴ And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. ¹⁶ God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷ God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, ¹⁸ to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

Creation

To *make* suggests making something out of something else the way a man [or woman] makes wooden boxes out of wood. To *create* suggests making something out of nothing the way a [woman or] man makes paintings or poems. It is true that the artist, like the carpenter, has to use something else—paint, words—but the beauty or meaning [she or] he makes is different from the material he [or she] makes it out of. To create is to make something essentially new.

When God created the Creation he made something where before there had been nothing, and as the author of "the Book of Job puts it, "The morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy" (Job 38:7) at the sheer and shimmering novelty of the thing. "New every morning is the love/Our wakening and uprising prove" says the hymn. Using the same old materials of earth, air, fire, and water, every twenty-four hours God creates something new out of them. If you think you're seeing the same show all over again seven times a week, you're crazy. Every morning you wake up to something that in all eternity never was before and never will be again. And the you that wakes up was never the same before and will never be the same again either.

From: Wishful Thinking, Frederick Buechner

Prayer: Lord God, we stand in awe of the interconnectedness of your creation. Every corner of the world shows your creativity and your intention for us to live in communion with each other and the land. We pray you give us the strength to spend our day today according to your will. Amen

First Sunday in Lent, February 14

Luke 4:1-13

4 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." ⁴ Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" ⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸ Jesus answered him, "It is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’”

⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,’

¹¹ and

‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

¹² Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” ¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Jesus’ Temptation

Immediately following Jesus’ baptism, he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he was tempted for 40 days. First, the tempter challenges Jesus: “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” By this point, Jesus knew he was facing a daunting task and the tempter suggests escape: Make your responsibilities fewer; Don’t try to meet everyone’s needs, just the ones you feel are most important; Don’t pour out your life for others, take care of yourself first—end your own hunger. But Jesus resisted. The faithful don’t live according to one need, one issue, one passion, one conviction. Faithful people don’t just live for themselves. As Jesus said, “One does not live by bread alone.”

In the second temptation, Jesus is confronted with false worship and the empty promise of “all the kingdoms of the world.” As Jesus’ story unfolds, we see that he does become the Lord of all the world, but not through grand use of power. Jesus’ power comes from serving and then being nailed to a cross. The tempter tries to entice Jesus into achieving greatness without service or suffering, by relying on political advantage, military strength, and economic opportunity. This kind of power gives you lots of people on your side, as well as a willingness to leave behind those who aren’t on your side. But Jesus had none of it. He knew his ministry would not go around troubles places but you take him right to the middle of them. He knew that his power came not in being a conqueror but in bring people together, offering healing and reconciliation.

In the last temptation, the tempter takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and in effect says: “So, you say that you trust every word of God. Let’s see. Jump! God’s angels will protect you.” Again, Jesus resisted. Why? Because this test comes not from trust but from a lack of trust. Testing God’s promises is not a sign of faith, but a demonstration of doubt. Having doubt is not the problem (doubt is part of faith) but we need to live out of faith even when it seems futile. When we put God to the test, we dramatically reverse our relationship with God—we think we are in charge and treat God as our servant.

Stacy Johnson Myers

Prayer: Gracious God. Jesus’ temptations seem so familiar to us. We, too, struggle to be steadfast in faithfulness. Remind us, pester us even, so that we are not tempted to forget our responsibility to the creation, the poor, the alienated, and those on the margins of society. Guard and protect us as we resist the power of the tempter. Amen

Monday, February 15, 2016

Genesis 1:20-23

²⁰And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures. And let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” ²¹So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. ²²God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” ²³And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.



“Planting a Notion”

Creation is our gift from God. Each Monday throughout Lent, we will “plant notions” about ways we can all help care for God’s gift of planet earth, our common home. “Going green” doesn’t have to be a daunting task that means sweeping life changes. Simple things can make a difference. The ideas we offer each Monday may not be new, but they bear repeating. Sometimes it takes a few reminders for things to take root.



USE BOTH SIDES OF PAPER

American businesses throw away 21 million tons of paper every year, equal to 175 pounds per office worker. For a quick and easy way to halve this, set your printer's default option to print double-sided (duplex printing). And when you're finished with your documents, don't forget to take them to the recycling bin.



RETHINK BOTTLED WATER

Nearly 90% of plastic water bottles are not recycled, instead taking thousands of years to decompose. Buy a reusable container and fill it with tap water, a great choice for the environment, your wallet, and possibly your health. The EPA's standards for tap water are more stringent than the FDA's standards for bottled water. Wash your reusable containers by hand to prevent plastics from breaking down in the dishwasher.



DO NOT PREHEAT THE OVEN

Unless you are making bread or pastries of some sort, don't pre-heat the oven. Just turn it on when you put the dish in. Also, when checking on your food, look through the oven window instead of opening the door.



DIAPER WITH A CONSCIENCE

By the time a child is toilet trained, a parent will change between 5,000 and 8,000 diapers, adding up to approximately 3.5 million tons of waste in U.S. landfills each year. Whether you choose cloth or a more environmentally-friendly disposable, you're making a choice that has a much gentler impact on our planet.

Prayer: Creator God, you have given us a gift worth keeping, an earthly home that I want to share with my children and grandchildren. Guide me each day as I am reminded how to preserve

this beautiful earth. Help me be conscious of my purchases and uses of the things I have in my home and my neighborhood. Amen

Tuesday, February 16

Genesis 1:24-25

²⁴ And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. ²⁵ God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

In 1975 economist William J. Kravant wrote that “Disadvantaged people are largely victims of middle- and upper-class pollution because they usually live closest to the sources of pollution... those with wealth and influence have political power to keep polluting facilities away from their homes. Living in poverty areas is bad enough. High pollution makes it worse.”

And in its groundbreaking 1987 report, “Toxic Wastes and Race,” the United Church of Christ (UCC) Commission for Racial Justice stunned the entire nation with its findings that a clear pattern existed in “the widespread presence of uncontrolled toxic waste sites in racial and ethnic communities throughout the United States.”

Forty years later, poor people and communities of color still bear the brunt of environmental degradation. Ironically, in the 1987 UCC report Flint, Michigan—today the site of one of the worst, contemporary toxic water disasters in the U.S.-- was one of the communities cited as being vulnerable to environmental challenges due to its poverty and racial composition.

Dave Ostendorf

Prayer: May God forgive us.

Wednesday, February 17

Genesis 1:27

²⁷ So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” ²⁹ God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰ And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. ³¹ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Dominion, not Domination

We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us. This allows us to respond to the charge that Judaeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the

Genesis account which grants man “dominion” over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church. Although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures. . . . Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations. “The earth is the Lord’s” (Ps 24:1); to him belongs “the earth with all that is within it” (Dt 10:14). Thus God rejects every claim to absolute ownership: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me” (Lev 25:23).

This responsibility for God’s earth means that human beings, endowed with intelligence, must respect the laws of nature and the delicate equilibria existing between the creatures of this world The laws found in the Bible dwell on relationships, not only among individuals but also with other living beings. . . . Clearly, the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures.

From Chapter Two, paragraphs 67 and 68.

Prayer:

God of the beginning, God of the end,
God of all creatures, Lord of all generations . . .
You are our God.
We give you thanks and praise.

Prayer is from the Orchard Ridge [Wisconsin] United Church of Christ Blessing Book, 2006.

Thursday, February 18

Genesis 9:11-13

¹¹ I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” ¹² God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

What a Wonderful World

by George David Weiss & Bob Thiele, sung by Louis Armstrong

*I see trees of green, red roses too,
I see them bloom for me and you,
And I think to myself,
“What a wonderful world!”
I see skies of blue and clouds of white,
The bright blessed day and the dark sacred night,
And I think to myself,
“What a wonderful world!”
The colors of the rainbow,
So pretty in the sky*

*Are also on the faces
Of people goin' by.
I see friends shakin' hands
Sayin', "How do you do?"
They're really sayin'
"I love you."
I hear babies cry, I watch them grow,
They'll learn much more than I'll ever know,
And I think to myself,
"What a wonderful world!"*

Prayer: Gracious God, may I sing praises to You and Your Creation all day, and may I see in the eyes of all people and all creatures Your Love. Amen

Friday, February 19

Leviticus 25:1-7

25 The LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: ² Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the LORD. ³ Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; ⁴ but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the LORD: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. ⁵ You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. ⁶ You may eat what the land yields during its sabbath—you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound laborers who live with you; ⁷ for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food.

Slowing Down

Perhaps you have a hard time letting yourself actually practice a Sabbath of rest, whether for a whole day, or even a few hours? We can get so busy—and full of ourselves—that we fail to see the beauty and the bounty of the world around us, the world we are called to care for.

We once lived among Orthodox Jewish neighbors who modeled every week the wonderful values of keeping the Sabbath; they made enough time to visit with each other, to walk slowly together, to abandon cars and tools and work in order to be present to each other and to Creation.

One thing we couldn't see was how they managed food preparation, but we've since learned they used both old techniques and newer devices, including slow cookers. Started cooking on low before sundown on Friday, the slow cooker meal would be ready to eat for the Saturday mid-day meal. While the traditional stew, called "cholent," might not necessarily have been vegetarian, the rich stew of beans you can create with your slow cooker might give you a bit of that experience of Sabbath slowing we are called to share.

Here is a broad "recipe" for beans that will create richly flavored, extremely healthy, and warming meals while you take some Sabbath time. This plan assumes that you fill the slow cooker in the morning, and come home in the evening to a house full of good smells with time enough to put your feet up, visit with your loved ones, and give thanks for God's bounty.

- ✓ Start with the more familiar dry beans: pinto, small red, black beans, white beans. Try other kinds as you become more familiar with them. Lentils, split peas, and adzuki beans

take about half the cooking time that other beans do. Each kind has its own flavor partners, but all of them benefit from experimenting! Here are some popular combinations:

- Pinto beans like tomatoes, green peppers, onions, and oregano.
 - Red beans really benefit from my favorite secret ingredient: ground ancho chili pepper; it's not spicy at all, but it deepens the flavors. They also want onions, green peppers, celery, thyme and parsley.
 - White beans like a potato or two cut up to make a thick broth, as well as spinach or kale, rosemary or thyme.
 - Black beans like lime and cilantro, as well as onions, garlic, and peppers; you can also use bottled sofrito sauce.
 - Lentils seem to love carrots, and vice versa.
 - Mix several beans together with onion, celery, peppers, some pasta, chili powder and ground ancho pepper for a vegetarian chili.
- ✓ Soak the beans (2 or more cups) overnight, covered with at least 2 inches of water; drain off this water in the morning. Some cooks say you can skip this soaking, and the beans will just need a little more cooking time. Lentils don't need soaking. *Red kidney beans, however, need to be boiled for 10 minutes before being added to the slow cooker, due to an enzyme difficult to digest.
 - ✓ Place the beans in the slow cooker with, again, enough liquid to cover to about 2-3 inches above. You can use plain water, but you also can try vegetable broth or stock or a little tomato sauce.
 - ✓ Add some flavorful vegetables, and some seasonings; you want to make a very richly-flavored broth. There's a big difference of opinion about adding salt at this point. I don't, and just add it at the table.
 - ✓ Turn on the slow cooker and cook 6-8 hours on low. (If you notice your slow cooker seems to let out some steam, cover it with aluminum foil before you put the lid on; it keeps all the juices in.) And if it you are a little late getting home, no problem; dinner's there, waiting.
 - ✓ You may want to pour your beans over rice, or top them with some cheese or sour cream or yoghurt, or some chopped cilantro or parsley.

Serve the beans with a salad or raw vegetables and some kind of bread, naan, or tortilla to scoop up the good stuff.

Rebecca Ferguson

Prayer: Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.

Prayer by Rabbi Abraham Heschel, as found in the Orchard Ridge [Wisconsin] United Church of Christ Blessing Book, 2006

Saturday, February 20

Deuteronomy 10:14-15

¹⁴ Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the LORD your God, the earth with all that is in it, ¹⁵ yet the LORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today.

I Still Plant Trees

Joseph Sittler, a Lutheran theologian and ethicist who taught at the University of Chicago, was an early Christian theologian to think critically about environmentalism. In the 1960s Sittler

wrote and spoke eloquently about the creation, ethics, and the human responsibility for care for the earth. *Grace Notes and Other Fragments* is a collection of his essays. He wrote:

I do not think we are in a very good situation historically. For instance, I do not believe that our relationship to the earth is liable to change for the better until it gets catastrophically worse. Our record indicates that we can walk with our eyes wide open straight into sheer destruction if there is a profit on the way—and that seems to me to be what we are doing now. I have no great expectation that human cussedness with somehow be quickly modified and turned into generosity or that humanity’s care of the earth will improve much.

But I do go around planting trees on the campus.

From: Grace Notes and Other Fragments, Joseph Sittler

Consider:

- Sittler wrote this passage 35 years ago. Was he and is he right?
- How can you “go around planting trees” literally and figuratively?

Prayer: Remind us, O God, that we are people of purpose. You chose us to live in your beautiful creation according to your will. Help us commit to concrete ways of protecting your creation.

Amen

Second Sunday in Lent, February 21

Luke 13:31-35 The Lament over Jerusalem

³¹ At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” ³² He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.’ ³³ Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’”

³⁴ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁵ See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Eagle and Hen

When we see an eagle in flight, we are awed by its majesty. Perhaps that is why our American ancestors, wishing to say what the tiny new nation might become, chose the eagle as our symbol of freedom and power. In Exodus, when God reminds the people of Israel of their miraculous delivery from slavery, it is with the image of a great eagle soaring toward safety, bearing the people away on its powerful wings.

About 1,200 years later, Jesus sorrowfully uses quite a different bird to paint a picture of caring for the people of his nation.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34)

Images of God, John and Katherine Paterson

Prayer: God of the covenant, in the glory of the cross your Son embraced the power of death and broke its hold over your people. In this time of repentance, draw all people to yourself, that

we who confess Jesus as Lord may put aside the deeds of death and accept the life of your kingdom. Amen

Monday, February 22, 2016

Job 38: 1-7

- ³⁸ Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:
² “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
³ Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.
⁴ “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
⁵ Who determined its measurements---surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
⁶ On what were its bases sunk,
Or who laid its cornerstone
⁷ when the morning stars sang together
And all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”



SECOND-HAND DOESN'T MEAN SECOND-BEST

We accumulate a lot of stuff, and the stuff we buy requires raw materials, energy, packaging, transportation, and disposal—as well as our time and energy to maintain it. The next time you think of buying something, try borrowing it from a friend or buying it used. Consider buying items from a second-hand store. Toys, bicycles, roller blades, and other age and size-specific items are quickly outgrown. Second hand stores often sell these items in excellent condition since they are used for such a short period of time.



PLASTIC BAGS SUCK

Each year the U.S. uses 84 billion plastic bags, a significant portion of the 500 billion used worldwide. They are not biodegradable, and are making their way into our oceans, and subsequently, the food chain. Stronger, reusable bags are an inexpensive and readily available option. Every trip to the grocery store should include bringing a reusable bag. Second-hand stores will re-use your plastic bags when you can't escape having a few. Recycle too.



USE RECHARGABLE BATTERIES

Each year 15 billion batteries are produced and sold and most of them are disposable alkaline batteries. Only a fraction of those are recycled. Buy a charger and a few sets of rechargeable batteries. Although it requires an upfront investment, it is one that should pay off in no time.



SHOWER WITH YOUR PARTNER

Sneak in a shower with your loved one to start the day with some zest that doesn't come in a bar. Not only have you made a wise choice for the environment, but you may notice some other added...um...benefits.

Prayer: Lord, I pray that you will lead me to be a good steward of the earth's resources. Help me be a leader and a teacher of environmental consciousness. Amen

Tuesday, February 23

Job 38:25-27

²⁵ “Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain,
and a way for the thunderbolt,
²⁶ to bring rain on a land where no one lives,
on the desert, which is empty of human life,
²⁷ to satisfy the waste and desolate land,
and to make the ground put forth grass?”

This is Dave's second writing, but his third, included in the next Tuesday, is about Flint—and water. Can they be exchanged?

The president of the World Bank has stated unequivocally that “Poverty reduction and climate change are linked,” and that climate change impacts will “...likely be inherently unequal and tilted against many of the world's poorest regions, which have the least economic, institutional, scientific, and technical capacity to cope and adapt.” The poor in coastal cities and on low-lying islands, according to the Bank, are among the most vulnerable to climate change.

Fifty-two of the world's small island nations—home to 62 million people—are already facing such impacts, with sea-level rises up to four times the global average, according to the UN Environment Programme, with related development losses measured in trillions of dollars due to their increased vulnerability. The negative impact on fisheries alone will be enormous, challenging the capacity of these nations to meet “...the nutritional needs of growing populations, damaging livelihoods and hampering efforts to lift people out of poverty.”

Dave Ostendorf

Prayer: May God guide us.

Wednesday, February 24

Psalm 19:1-4

¹ The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork.
² Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
³ There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
⁴ yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

The Mystery of the Universe

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the word “creation” has a broader meaning than “nature,” for it has to do with God’s loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance. Nature is usually seen as a system which can be studied, understood and controlled, whereas creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion.

“By the word of the Lord the heavens were made” (Ps 33:6). This tells us that the world came about as the result of a decision, not from chaos or chance, and this exalts it all the more. The creating word expresses a free choice. The universe did not emerge as the result of arbitrary omnipotence, a show of force or a desire for self-assertion. Creation is of the order of love. God’s love is the fundamental moving force in all created things: “For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made; for you would not have made anything if you had hated it” (Wis 11:24).

From Chapter Three, paragraphs 76 and 77

Prayer: All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe and in the smallest of your creatures. You embrace with your tenderness all that exists. Pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty. Fill us with peace, that we may live as brothers and sisters, harming no one. Amen

From the conclusion of Chapter Six, “A Prayer for Our Earth”

Thursday, February 25

Psalm 24:1-2

¹ The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
² for he has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.

Many of the Psalms praise God and the Creation in glorious language and almost outrageous images; others simply state in quiet rhythms the fact that this world is not ours. As contemporary citizens of a noisy nation proud of its independence, we may find ourselves a little uneasy with all this, but as faithful ones, we are encouraged to try on these old truths in new words and deep silences.

*from **Glory Glory** (from Psalm 19)
by Daniel Berrigan*

*The heavens bespeak the glory of God.
The firmament ablaze, a text of his works.
Dawn whispers to sunset
Dark to dark the word passes; glory glory.
All in a great silence,
no tongue's clamor-
yet the web of the world trembles
conscious, as of great winds passing.*

Prayer:

Be praised, my God, by butterfly and dragonfly wings exercising for their first flight.
Be praised by lightning and thunder causing spring showers.
Be praised by the silent voice of grass growing and trees building.
Be praised by all the colorful flower trumpets of spring.
Be praised by downy feathers freshly dried on newly hatched ducklings and chicks.
Be praised by the songs of birds, crickets and frogs.
Be praised, my God, by all your creation which tells of new life.

Prayer is by Mary Goergen, as found in the Orchard Ridge [Wisconsin] United Church of Christ Blessing Book, 2006.

Friday, February 26

Psalm 65:9-13

⁹ You visit the earth and water it,
you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
you provide the people with grain,
for so you have prepared it.
¹⁰ You water its furrows abundantly,
settling its ridges,
softening it with showers,
and blessing its growth.
¹¹ You crown the year with your bounty;
your wagon tracks overflow with richness.
¹² The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,
¹³ the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.

Build Your Own Grain and Bean Salads

Mixing grains and beans gives us complete proteins, while also helping us find tasty ways to become “reducetarians.” Here is a scheme for creating healthy combinations that please both our individual preferences and those of our family members. (The idea of these salads comes from a 2011 *USA Weekend* article from a “ThreeManyCooks” blog.)

Mix together:

- 2 cups of canned beans, rinsed and drained.
(Try kidney, pinto, black, white beans, black-eyed peas, lentils, or chickpeas, also called garbanzos.)
- 2 cups cooked grains
(Try white, wild or brown rice, barley, bite-size pasta, couscous, quinoa, or grains both new and ancient, such as amaranth and bulgur.)
- 3 cups bite-sized vegetables
(If it’s a cooked vegetable, okay to use just one, but try a mix of two or three raw vegetables.)
- ¼ medium red or white onion or 4/5 sliced green onions or scallions
- ¼ cup soft fresh herbs (parsley, cilantro, basil or mint) or a sprinkle of dried ones

When ready to serve, add:

salt and pepper

½ cup extras (Toasted nuts? Dried Fruit? Cheese? Olives? Get creative!)

¼ to ¼ cup dressing:

(Try a simple dressing of olive oil and vinegar, or a seasoned oil, like sesame or walnut, with lemon or lime juice, or your favorite purchased salad dressing.)

Serves 4 as a main course, or 6 to 8 as a side dish.

Rebecca Ferguson

Prayer: Bountiful God, help us to see the possibilities You put before us. Keep us from falling into old ruts and the too-familiar, and show us ways to create fresh and healthy sustenance from what we have! Amen

Saturday, February 27

Psalm 104:1-6

¹ Bless the LORD, O my soul.

O LORD my God, you are very great.

You are clothed with honor and majesty,

² wrapped in light as with a garment.

You stretch out the heavens like a tent,

³ you set the beams of your chambers on the waters,

you make the clouds your chariot,

you ride on the wings of the wind,

⁴ you make the winds your messengers,

fire and flame your ministers.

⁵ You set the earth on its foundations,

so that it shall never be shaken.

⁶ You cover it with the deep as with a garment;

the waters stood above the mountains.

The Land

The land is against large-scale changes. Nature is what it is in its ecologically intricate structure because of the long time in which small modifications have occurred and were absorbed into the whole. Recently I was talking with an Iowa farmer about the way intensive land use has changed from what we knew in our youth. Farmers then had a grassy corner of the field where they turned their horses and their plows, and later their tractors, around. My farmer friend recalled that his father taught him to call these unplowed margins “God’s frame around the picture.”

Now farmers plow right up to the edges of the fence or the ditch. As a result, what we used to call hedgerows—bushes or wild growth around the fields—have been destroyed in large part. This means that the cover for birds is taken away. And birds eat insects; they have them for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

We have destroyed a situation of natural predation upon insects, and therefore we have to add more things to the land, the plants, and the air to control the insects. Nature is like a fine piece of cloth: you pull a thread thee, and it vibrates through the whole fabric.”

From: *Gravity and Grace*, Joseph Sittler

Prayer: Gracious God, the beauty of your creation is all around us. Open our eyes to see the wonders of your hand. Amen

Third Sunday in Lent, February 28

Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴ Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

⁶ Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷ So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ ⁸ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

Monday, February 29, 2015

Psalm 104:14-21

¹⁴ You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth,

¹⁵ and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart.

¹⁶ The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.

¹⁷ In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees.

¹⁸ The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the coney.

¹⁹ You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting.

²⁰ You make darkness, and it is night, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.

²¹ The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God.



TURN OFF COMPUTERS AT NIGHT

By turning off your computer instead of leaving it in sleep mode, you can save 40 watt-hours per day. That adds up to 4 cents a day, or \$14 per year. If you don't want to wait for your computer to start up, set it to turn on automatically a few minutes before you get to work, or boot up while you're pouring your morning cup 'o joe.



ADJUST YOUR THERMOSTAT

Adjust your thermostat one degree higher in the summer and one degree cooler in the winter. Each degree Fahrenheit less will save about 10% on your energy use! In addition, invest in a programmable thermostat which allows you to regulate temperature based on the times you are at home or away.



WASH YOUR CLOTHES IN THE COOLEST WATER POSSIBLE

About 80 percent of the cost to run your washer is used for heating the water. Except for all-white loads, there is little benefit to washing in hot water. Most conventional laundry detergents work just as well with cold water.



KEEPING IT COOL

If you use air conditioning, a ceiling fan will allow you to raise the thermostat setting about 4 degrees Fahrenheit with no reduction in comfort. Just make sure to turn it off when you leave the room. Fans cool people, not rooms. Running your air conditioning at 78 degrees F instead of 72 degrees F can save between 6 and 18 percent on your cooling bill. The smaller the difference between indoor and outdoor temperatures, the lower your overall cooling bill will be, so set your thermostat as high as possible during the summer months.

Tom and Betsy Westerhaus

Prayer: Lord, the cycle of seasons continues to amaze us and You planned it all! Help me understand that every action I take to reduce my footprint on the environment is known and welcomed by you. Amen

Tuesday, March 1

Psalm 104:24-30

- ²⁴ O LORD, how manifold are your works!
 In wisdom you have made them all;
 the earth is full of your creatures.
- ²⁵ Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
 creeping things innumerable are there,
 living things both small and great.
- ²⁶ There go the ships,
 and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.
- ²⁷ These all look to you
 to give them their food in due season;
- ²⁸ when you give to them, they gather it up;
 when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
- ²⁹ When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
 when you take away their breath, they die
 and return to their dust.
- ³⁰ When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
 and you renew the face of the ground.

Flint, Michigan is the second most poverty-stricken city in the nation for its size, with over 40% of its almost 100,000 residents living in poverty, according to the U.S. Census. That level of poverty is 166.5% greater than the national average. The city is 57% African American. Since 2005 some 5,000 houses have been demolished in Flint.

Today Flint is a toxic water disaster site, facing one of the most critical environmental crises of our day—a crisis that has been unfolding for fifty years with no serious response or

resolution. In the mid-1960s African American residents were raising concerns about the water, to no avail. At that time GM plants were dumping some 26 million gallons of industrial waste into the Flint River *daily*.

Now the water is undrinkable. Children are being tested for lead poisoning and a host of other potential contaminants. Filtration remedies and missions of gallons of bottled water are being provided to homes by FEMA. The state has been ordered to take immediate, emergency steps to address the contamination of the city's water.

Water. A basic of life. And a source of tragedy for many poor communities.

There is hope, however, and faith abides. As Flint's Mayor Karen Weaver said recently, "With the faith of a mustard seed saying to this mountain, and the water crisis is our mountain, get up and get out of our way..." We will rise up and we will fly again... nothing will get in our way."

Dave Ostendorf

Prayer: May God give the people water, and great faithfulness.

Wednesday, March 2

Isaiah 11:6-9

⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

⁷The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

⁹They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

The divine Persons are subsistent relations, and the world, created according to the divine model, is a web of relationships. Creatures tend towards God, and in turn it is proper to every living being to tend towards other things, so that throughout the universe we can find any number of constant and secretly interwoven relationships. This leads us not only to marvel at the manifold connections existing among creatures, but also to discover a key to our own fulfilment. The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures. In this way, they make their own that trinitarian dynamism which God imprinted in them when they were created. Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity.

From Chapter Three, paragraph 240.

Prayer: O God, help me to feel Your presence everywhere I go today.

To see You in everyone I meet today.

To sense You in all I hear today.

To reflect You in all I do today.

To pray to and trust You in all I experience today.

To struggle to be like You in all I am today.

To speak of and for You in all I say today.

To thank You for everything every day.

Prayer is by Marian Wright Edelman, from the Orchard Ridge [Wisconsin] United Church of Christ Blessing Book, 2006.

Thursday, March 3

Isaiah 35:1-2

35 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,

the desert shall rejoice and blossom;

like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly,

and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,

the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the LORD,

the majesty of our God.

God's Grandeur by Gerald Manley Hopkins

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge & shares man's smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs --

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast & with ah! bright wings.

Prayer: God of Beauty, help me to see anew today. Amen

Friday, March 4, World Day of Prayer

Matthew 6:9-13

⁹“Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
10 Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
11 Give us this day our daily bread,
12 And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
13 And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

Better Butter: Spread it about

A few years ago, I just got fed up with all the plastic butter and margarine containers we were purchasing. Of course, I recycled them, but really, there were just too many to feel good about it. Then I got lucky and remembered a recipe called “Better Butter” from a few decades ago, in *Laurel’s Kitchen* by Laurel Robertson, Bronwen Godfrey and Carol Flinders.

Now, all I do is blend up in my food processor one part butter with one part canola or olive oil. That’s it!

At first, I poured the blend back into a recycled plastic container, but then I haunted the second hand stores (more recycling!) until I found two small ceramic dishes with lids. (With two, the next one’s always ready.) Stored in the fridge, the better butter acts like margarine (easily spreadable), but is much healthier, which is another bonus.

Of course, you can now buy commercial products made the same way—but with some additional unpronounceable ingredients—and still in those obnoxious plastic containers.

This is just a small act, but it is one that encourages me to try for more. It reminds me of that slogan, “use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without,” and it reminds me to look around to see, “What else can I do to protect the earth—and my family?” What else can we all do?

And maybe we should modify that phrase to include the need to communicate with each other about the ways we have found to live more simply and more sanely: “Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without— and spread it about!”

Will you commit to sharing your small acts of reusing, reducing, recycling with the rest of us, so we all learn?

Prayer: God of Comfort and Challenge, you give us what we need each day, in wisdom and in sustenance. Give us the courage to act on the challenges that confront us, and help us to see and accept the comfort you offer. Amen

Saturday, March 5

Isaiah 26:1-6

On that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah: We have a strong city; he sets up victory like walls and bulwarks. Open the gates, so that the righteous nation that keeps faith may enter in. Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace—in peace because they trust in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for in the Lord God you have an everlasting rock. For he has brought low the inhabitants of the height; the lofty city he lays low. He lays it low to the ground, casts it to the dust. The foot tramples it, the feet of the poor, the steps of the needy.

God is Like a Rock

In a landscape where there are hardly any trees, a great boulder can be seen from a long distance away. It may provide the only shade for miles, and it seems strong and immovable. Rock serves as the foundation for building and for protection from enemies. Over and over again in the Bible, rocks stand for dependability and shelter. “Trust in the Lord forever,” says the prophet Isaiah [26:4], “for in the Lord God you have an everlasting rock.”

Many years later, when a discouraged people were in exile in Babylon, another prophet encouraged them to remember their history and God who was the source of their life:

*Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness,
you that see the Lord.
Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.
Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
For he was but one when I called him,
but I blessed him and made him many.
For the Lord will comfort Zion;
he will comfort all her waste places,
And will make her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of the Lord;
Joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the voice of song. (Isaiah 51:1-3)*

Prayer: Loving God, often we don't know what to make of you. We think we know what you want us to do, and then we are challenged to think in a new way and we are confused. Remind us that you are like a rock, steady, strong and immovable, calling us to live in peace with you, each other, and the creation. Amen

Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 6

Luke 15:11-32

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for

this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is one of the best-known parts of the Bible. When the younger son journeys to a foreign land he becomes an outcast in the eyes of his family and community. When times get tough he works for a Gentile pig farmer. For a Jewish person, being reduced to working with pigs would be the ultimate in humiliation and a clear demonstration that one was impure. The surprising twist in the parable is that the father shows extraordinary grace toward his son. The father’s love for his son holds fast even in times of tremendous strain. The older son, though, does not exhibit compassion. He is furious at the reception his younger brother receives.

In this parable we see two competing perspectives on a collision course: the father’s never-ending gracious love, and the older son’s conventional wisdom that suggests we get what we earn. The parable shows us that even though it defies logic, God’s love, grace, and forgiveness know no bounds.

The parable reminds us that people who think they deserve happiness and blessings because they have “earned” it are wrong. Blessings do not come to us simply because we will them or because we have worked hard for them. On the other side, those who make mistakes with their lives are not automatically left out—they are recipients of God’s grace and compassion and should be treated accordingly.

Prayer: God of Grace, we live in a world that tells us we have to earn all we are and all we have. Unsettle our imaginations so we can hear your words calling us to accept your grace and live as redeemed people anxious to show compassion to those you place around us. Amen

Monday March 7, 2016

Isaiah 65: 21-25

²¹ They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

²² They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the

days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

²³ They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD---and

their descendants as well.

²⁴ Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.

²⁵ The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent--- its food shall be dust.



UNDERSTAND HOW YOUR HOME USES ENERGY

46% goes to heating and cooling. 12% goes to lighting. Clean or replace furnace air filters once a month. Not only will this improve your home's efficiency in both the summer and winter, but it will also help allergy sufferers. Change habits to conserve energy in your home, like turning off the lights when you leave a room.



GET THE SKINNY ON SOLAR

If you've just started researching solar energy or are already participating and want to learn more, you can get the basics on how solar power works. Personnel at River Falls Municipal Utilities (Mike Noreen) will be glad to talk to utility customers about installation costs and how you can put your home on the grid. Or buy a share in the River Falls solar garden or simply buy it in the form of a green energy block every month.



GET A HOME ENERGY ASSESSMENT

River Falls Municipal Utilities conducts home energy assessments. The true cost is \$400 but RFMU will pay \$350 of it, or \$375 if you buy a \$3 block of renewable energy for 3 months. An energy assessment provides a clear road map of customized home recommendations, cash incentives to offset improvement costs, and expert guidance every step of the way. The energy assessment helps pinpoint where you can save money and enjoy greater home comfort. Your benefits? Lower energy bills, improved indoor air quality, financial incentives, technical support, greater home comfort, and quality assurance.



CHECK OUT AN INFRARED CAMERA FROM THE CITY

It's free and it's fascinating. Discover the air leaks and seal them. Then add insulation.

Prayer: Gracious Lord, help me find those little ways today that I can make life on earth better for those who will come after me. Knowing that you are present for me and that you care about my entire family sustains me and guides me. You have favored us with your kindness. Help me pay it forward to the next generation. Amen

Tuesday, March 8

Hosea 4:1-3

Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel;
for the LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.
There is no faithfulness or loyalty,
and no knowledge of God in the land.

² Swearing, lying, and murder,

and stealing and adultery break out;
bloodshed follows bloodshed.
³Therefore the land mourns,
and all who live in it languish;
together with the wild animals
and the birds of the air,
even the fish of the sea are perishing.

Who Do We See?

It is always unnerving to read scripture thousands of years old and recognize our own realities right now. We would despair, but we have been given hope by God through the Christ and the continuing actions of the Spirit. So, we must sing as we go, even through desolate lands and corrupted cities.

A tune as beautiful as this one has been a fundamental part of worship for many of us. These new words help us bring old traditions and new concerns together. Try humming it with these new words as a prayerful way to connect with those around us in need.

<http://worldhousemusic.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Be-Thou-My-Vision-And-Help-Me-To-See-Hymn-Size-Eb.pdf>

Dr. Abe Caceras of Milwaukee has been creating new music, and new words for older tunes, for decades, always inspiring everyone around him. For more of his music, see his website: <http://worldhousemusic.org/about/>.

Rebecca Ferguson

Prayer: Holy Tree of Life, help us grow fruit that will nourish all people. Amen

Wednesday, March 9

Matthew 6:26-29

²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

. . . .When media and the digital world become omnipresent, their influence can stop people from learning how to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously. In this context, the great sages of the past run the risk of going unheard amid the noise and distractions of an information overload. Efforts need to be made to help these media become sources of new cultural progress for humanity and not a threat to our deepest riches. True wisdom, as the fruit of self-examination, dialogue and generous encounter between persons, is not acquired by a mere accumulation of data which eventually leads to overload and confusion, a sort of mental pollution. Real relationships with others, with all the challenges they entail, now tend to be replaced by a type of internet communication which enables us to choose or eliminate relationships at whim, thus

giving rise to a new type of contrived emotion which has more to do with devices and displays than with other people and with nature. Today's media do enable us to communicate and to share our knowledge and affections. Yet at times they also shield us from direct contact with the pain, the fears and the joys of others and the complexity of their personal experiences. For this reason, we should be concerned that, alongside the exciting possibilities offered by these media, a deep and melancholic dissatisfaction with interpersonal relations, or a harmful sense of isolation, can also arise.

The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things.

From Chapters One and Six, paragraphs 47 and 233

Prayer: O Great Spirit of Surprise, dazzle us with a day full of amazing embraces, capricious, uncalculated caring, great hearts, kind souls and doers of good deeds. Amen

Prayer is by Molly Fumia, from the Orchard Ridge [Wisconsin] United Church of Christ Blessing Book, 2006.

Thursday, March 10

Mark 4:3-8

³“Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. ⁶And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. ⁸Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.”

Prayers: I by Kadya Molodowsky (tr. by Kathryn Hellerstein)

Don't let me fall
As a stone falls upon the hard ground.
And don't let my hands become dry
As the twigs of a tree
When the wind beats down the last leaves.
And when the storm raises dust from the earth
With anger and howling,
Don't let me become the last fly
Trembling terrified on a windowpane.
Don't let me fall.
I have asked for so much,
But as a blade of your grass in a distant wild field
Lest drop a seed in the lap of the earth
And dies away,
Sow in me your living breath,
As you sow a seed in the earth.

Prayer: God of Grace and Mercy, every day, every moment, you seed me. Forgive me for the times when I fail to grow towards You, and thank s be for the times when I bear fruit. Amen

Friday, March 11

Mark 4:30-32

³⁰ He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

Curried Apple Squash Soup - 4 to 6 servings

(from Yankee Magazine online)

Ingredients:

- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 4 cups peeled, chopped winter squash (*or bake the squash in the oven til soft enough to cut into pieces; reduce the sautéing time a bit.*)
- 2 cups peeled, chopped tart apples
- 1 cup chopped onion
- 1 teaspoon curry powder (*We like a sweet curry mix, but you might like spicier food!*)
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cardamom
- 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1 cup apple cider or apple juice
- 1 quart vegetable stock
- 1/2 cup light cream (*I have never used this; it just doesn't need it, it's so smooth.*)
- salt and pepper to taste

Instructions:

Heat the oil in a large pot over medium heat and sauté the squash, apples, and onion, stirring gently, for 10 minutes. Add the curry powder, cardamom, and cinnamon; cook, stirring gently, for several minutes longer. Add the cider and stock, bring the mixture to a simmer, and cook, partially covered, for 20 minutes, or until the squash is soft.

Puree the mixture with an immersion blender or in a food processor. Cook over medium heat until mixture is reduced by about one-third, which takes maybe 20-40 minutes. (Add the cream, if using.) Season with salt and pepper. Keeps well, freezes well. (You can also saute a few shrimp, leftover fish or chicken, etc., and add when you are reheating.)

Rebecca Ferguson

Prayer:

The Lord is good to us
and so we thank the Lord
For giving us the things we need:
the sun and the rain and the apple seed.
The Lord is good to us. Amen, amen, Amen

Words slightly modified from the Disney song in the animated short, Johnny Appleseed. Easy to find on youtube.

Saturday, March 12

(formerly Mark 4:37-41) He also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he

does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

On the Encyclical

A group of people from St. Bridget Catholic Church and First Congregational Church proved the point that Christians have long known: eating and talking bind people to each other. The focus of our discussion was Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Laudato Si: Caring for our Common Home*.

There are many remarkable features of this encyclical, but I will highlight only three: First of all, it is amazing that people are paying attention to it. Do a quick Google search and you will find not just the Catholic journals commenting on it, but the Washington Post, The Atlantic, The New York Review of Books, The New Yorker to name a few. This is a testament to the fact that Pope Francis’ work is reasoned, reflective, and based in the Bible and the theological tradition.

Secondly, sometimes the most remarkable things are the simplest of things. Pope Francis’ primary starting point is his concern for the poor. How perfectly fitting. In adopting this position, he echoes the Old Testament prophets who time and time again tell us that the most important measure of a society’s strength is how it treats the poor. How do widows fare? How are orphans cared for? How are children treated and valued? How are strangers and refugees welcomed?

Typically in our world we use the measuring sticks of Gross National Product, interest rates, and the price of a barrel of crude oil to tell the story of our community, our nation, our world. But too often, way too often, the poor are notoriously forgotten by the markets, sacrificed by capitalism, and neglected by scientists and thinkers.

Pope Francis’ encyclical calls us to whittle away all the incomplete ways of telling the world’s story. The Pope reminds us to consider and uphold and protect those on the margins of life that we are often content to ignore. The encyclical calls us to speak and act for them and on behalf of them and their plight. Pope Francis starts with the poor. Remarkable, indeed.

The third remarkable feature of the encyclical is what I will call its sense of “urgent hope.” Urgency runs throughout the document. This is a document that speaks to us right now, right here. The Pope is very clear in his call for human beings to establish new policies and practices to protect the whole of the creation, and he says there is no time to waste. Given all this, one might think that the document is depressing and hopeless, and that is very much not the case. Certainly it powerful and clearly outlines very significant challenges we must face in order to protect our Common Home. But it also holds out hope that we can all wake up, gather together, hold each other accountable, and figure out a way to work together as people of God. From this viewpoint the human family seems to stand at an important juncture—at a place where we will have to, as the Deuteronomist once said—choose between life and death.

2015 Thanksgiving Sermon Excerpt, Stacy Johnson Myers

Prayer: Gracious God, make us truly grateful for your blessings on us. At the same time, unsettle us—pester us even—so that we might shift our imaginations from our own thoughts and wisdom to yours. This is the only way we can align ourselves with your peace and your will for the world. Amen

Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 13

John 12:1-8 Mary Anoints Jesus

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

The Poor Will Always Be With You

For the most part I appreciate Bible texts, but from time to time I absolutely marvel at how well crafted a Bible passage is. Today's Gospel text is a good example. John skillfully wove together ideas from a variety of sources, including the other Gospel writers. He connects Mary's anointing of Jesus to Jesus' raising of Lazarus, except in reverse. Jesus intrudes upon death to give Lazarus new life, whereas in the midst of life (and a lively dinner party) Mary foreshadows Jesus' impending death. Mary's actions show both her great love for Jesus as well as her understanding of where his life was leading him—to death.

Additionally, John skillfully gives examples of servanthood and true discipleship. Mary washes Jesus' feet and wipes them, exactly what Jesus will do with his disciples as a demonstration of true servanthood. Martha also serves—she meets the needs of people—and in doing so demonstrates faithful discipleship.

The passage closes with the words: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." drawing upon Deuteronomy 15:11. This passage is quite well known, but unfortunately, I think, it has been used to justify the existence of the poor rather than prompting Christians to attend to the poor. The passage is not meant to support the inevitability of poverty. That is so important I will write it again—this passage is not meant to support the inevitability of poverty. On the contrary, the passage reminds us (once again) that true disciples serve those in need. For the present moment, Mary showed her love and devotion to Jesus, but in Jesus' absence the poor will remain and will need love and devotion. A question to ponder today is: "How do I, in my life, show love and devotion to the poor?"

Stacy Johnson Myers

Prayer: Loving God, sometimes the Bible becomes too familiar and we begin to read it as we are rather than as it is. Guide my thinking today that I could think how I can show love and devotion to the poor. Amen

Monday, March 14

John 4: 13-14

¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,

¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."



WE HAVE BECOME SO ACCUSTOMED

Here in the upper Midwest, we have become so accustomed to turning on the tap and getting clean, refreshing water. But that time has ended for others. We must be aware that our conservation of water and other resources is part of God's plan for us. We hope these Monday reminders will help you in being part of an environmental movement.



BRUSH WITHOUT RUNNING

You've heard this one before, but maybe you still do it. You'll conserve up to five gallons per day if you stop. Daily savings in the U.S. alone could add up to 1.5 billion gallons--more water than folks use in the Big Apple. Turn off the water when you are shaving too. Instead, run just enough to rinse your shaver or toothbrush.



BAN BATH TIME

Baths require almost twice as much water as showering. Not only will you reduce water consumption, but the energy costs associated with heating the water. Remember to take shorter showers too. Clean water is becoming a precious commodity. What you save today will be available tomorrow and into the future.



DON'T RINSE

Skip rinsing dishes before using your dishwasher and save up to 20 gallons of water each load. Plus, you're saving time and the energy used to heat the additional water.



CUT DOWN ON JUNK MAIL

Feel like you need to lose a few pounds? It might be your junk mail that's weighing you down. The average American receives 40 pounds of junk mail each year, destroying 100 million trees. There are many services that can help reduce the clutter in your mailbox, saving trees and the precious space on your countertops. Here is just one: http://www.ehow.com/way_5392827_do-stop-junk-mail.html?ref=Track2&utm_source=ask

Prayer: Dear Lord, as we watch the white snow melt away and spring return, may it help restore our precious reserve of water. We know that other parts of our country and around the world, clean water is becoming less available. Help us be good stewards in our efforts to take care of your creation. We pray this in the name of our Savior, Jesus the Christ.

Tuesday, March 15

Romans 8:22-23

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

“Friends with a Joint Purpose Are the Best Kind”

I just discovered that wonderful sentence on a dot-org website called “Roots and Shoots,” a global, youth-led community organization started by Jane Goodall. The quotation fits with the serendipity that happens for us when we are fortunate enough to connect with friends who, in this case, share their first fruits of the Spirit.

I came home last week to an unexpected package, the present of a book a dear friend sent me just because. You may have known Jane Goodall because of her work with chimpanzees in Tanzania, but she is now also a United Nations Messenger of Peace.

Together with an amazing illustrator, an Iranian woman named Feeroozeh Golmohammadi, Goodall has created an utterly beautiful and moving book called *A Prayer for World Peace*. Find the book for yourself, because the rich watercolors so deepen the words, and because you will want to share it with your friends, those loved ones who also care about peace and healing for our world; here is part of her prayer.

Rebecca Ferguson

Prayer: We pray that we may at all times keep our minds open to new ideas and shun dogma; that we may become ever more filled with generosity of spirit and true compassion and love for all life. . . . We pray that we may learn the peace that comes with forgiving and the strength we gain in loving; . . . We pray because of our love for Creation, and because of our trust in the Great Spiritual Power.

Wednesday, March 16

II Corinthians 5:17

¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

Beyond the Sun

At the end, we will find ourselves face to face with the infinite beauty of God (cf. 1 Cor 13:12), and be able to read with admiration and happiness the mystery of the universe, which with us will share in unending plenitude. Even now we are journeying towards the sabbath of eternity, the new Jerusalem, towards our common home in heaven. Jesus says: “I make all things new” (Rev 21:5). Eternal life will be a shared experience of awe, in which each creature, resplendently transfigured, will take its rightful place and have something to give those poor men and women who will have been liberated once and for all.

In the meantime, we come together to take charge of this home which has been entrusted to us, knowing that all the good which exists here will be taken up into the heavenly feast. In union with all creatures, we journey through this land seeking God, for “if the world has a beginning and if it has been created, we must enquire who gave it this beginning, and who was its Creator”. Let us sing as we go. May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope.

From Chapter Six, paragraphs 243 and 244

Prayer: Alpha and Omega, hear us singing as we journey home to you. Give us hope as we care for all your Creation. Amen

Thursday, March 17

Ephesians 1:8b-10

With all wisdom and insight ⁹ he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Primary Wonder by Denise Levertov

*Days pass when I forget the mystery.
Problems insoluble and problems offering
their own ignored solutions
jostle for my attention, they crowd its antechamber
along with a host of diversions, my courtiers, wearing
their colored clothes: cap and bells.*

And then

*once more the quiet mystery
is present to me, the throng's clamor
recedes: the mystery
that there is anything, anything at all,
let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,
rather than void: and that, O Lord,
Creator, Hallowed One, You still,
hour by hour sustain it.*

Prayer: God of Mystery, we are so often distracted by the busyness of our lives. God of Mercy, You have given us silence, song and scripture, and the gathering of Your Church to help us stay centered in Your Love. For all this, we praise You and thank You. Amen

Friday, March 18

Psalm 63: 5-8

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, ^[a]
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
⁶ when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
⁷ for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.
⁸ My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.

Comfort

Here are two recipes that add new flavors, and subtract meat, from some favorite comfort foods. Your new way of eating also gives comfort and sustenance to the planet!

Quinoa Spinach Mac 'n Cheese (Serves 6)

4 T. butter	¼ tsp. salt
4 T. flour	12 oz. sharp cheddar cheese
2 C. milk	1 ½ cups quinoa
2 dashes nutmeg	5-6 oz. fresh spinach
	Grated parmesan cheese for topping

Preheat oven to 350 F. Cook quinoa according to package instructions. In a medium saucepan add 4 T of. Heat butter and flour in medium saucepan over medium heat. Whisk continuously until a paste forms. Whisk in milk. Increase heat to medium high and bring to a boil, whisking the whole time. Stir in nutmeg, salt and cheddar cheese. When cheese sauce is smooth, remove from heat. In a large bowl mix together the cooked quinoa, cheese sauce and spinach. Transfer the mixture into a casserole dish. Top with freshly grated Parmesan cheese. Bake 20 minutes or until golden brown.

Black Bean Quinoa Burger (Serves 4-6)

¼ cup cornmeal	1 15-oz. can black beans
2 T. flour or potato starch	1 large russet potato, baked
2 tsp cumin	1 clove garlic, minced
2 tsp. coriander or chili powder	¼ cup quinoa, steeped in boiling water for 5 minutes and drained
1 tsp pepper	1-2 T. olive oil
1 tsp salt	4-6 slices provolone cheese

In a small bowl, stir together the cornmeal, potato starch, cumin, coriander or chili powder, pepper and salt. Scoop potato out of skin. In a large bowl, mash potato and black beans. Add quinoa, garlic and cornmeal mixture. Combine well, though mixture should be slightly chunky. Form into 4-6 burgers.

In a heavy skillet, heat oil. Cook burgers over medium high heat until they are nicely browned on one side, about 5 minutes. Turn carefully, and cook the other side until firm and brown. Place cheese slice on top during last minute or two to melt. Serve on bun, topped with guacamole (optional).

Betsy Westerhaus

Prayer:

Saturday, March 19, 2016

Colossians 1:15-16

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; or in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.

Money, Wealth, and the Creation

There are a number of dangers associated with money. For one, there is the gap between the rich and poor, which raises questions of justice. Love of money can also result in danger to our environment. We consume so much, particularly in relation to people in other parts of the world, and in ways that cannot be sustained...Even if poverty were eliminated, and the if the earth's environment were not threatened, our love of money can still be dangerous to our souls. Quite simply, it can distract us from those things that are most important. All of our focus on money, the harried and frantic getting

and spending that so occupies us, can distract from those things that contribute to a truly rich and fulfilling life. I have in mind things like spending the time with family or friends, developing a relationship with God, enjoying the gifts of nature, even pursuing some interest or hobby. The love of money can threaten all of those things, and often does. When we spend money we are called consumers, but often what is being consumed is our own lives.

Everything we have comes from God and in a very real way still belongs to God. We come into the world without possessions and we leave the same way. In between, we “have” possessions, including money, as if on loan. We are not owners, the masters of all we possess. Rather, we are God’s caretakers of what has been entrusted to us for a time...If the natural world itself has been given to us as caretakers, we will tread more lightly on the earth, even as we treat carefully those things that are loaned to us, so that they will be in good shape when we pass them along to others.

From: *Words for the Journey*, Martin B. Copenhaver & Anthony B. Robinson

Prayer: Gracious God, we say that you are the creator of all that is. We confess that you are the sustainer of all life. And yet, I act as if I am the creator and the sustainer of my life. Remove from me the burden of needing to fashion meaning for myself. Prod me to remember that I, like all the created world, find my place in you. Amen

Sixth Sunday in Lent, March 20: Palm/Passion Sunday

Luke 19:35-40

Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying,

“Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!”

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Joy and Sorrow

The *Pesah* (Passover) was at hand. The people preparing for the festival were looking back on their long history, rueful over the anguished adversity of their ancient wandering migrations, and they prayed with fervor that God would come again to restore prosperity to his land now trampled underfoot by the Gentiles. Jesus, of course, knew the spirit of the feast. On this particular day, shortly before the festival itself began, with full knowledge he dared to plunge into that whirlpool of popular misunderstanding. Descending from the Mount of Olives and through the cheers from the crowd, he certainly knew that he was soon going to disappoint these people, and that the people in their frustration would then turn against him...Jesus, coming down the mountain and entering the city, wore a painful smile.

Shusako Endo, A Life of Jesus

All those who die like Jesus, sacrificing their lives out of love for the sake of a more dignified human life, will inherit life in all its fullness. They are like grains of wheat, dying to produce life, being buried in the ground only to break through and grow.

Leonardo Boff, Brazilian Theologian

Jesus' awareness of his impending death permeates his actions and can be compared, I believe, to the knowledge held today by the terminally ill...Jesus on Palm Sunday may be likened to the cancer patient who celebrates an anniversary—fully aware of the “lastness” of it all, yet celebrating nonetheless.

Lucy Bregman

Prayer: Lord Jesus, on this day that started with joy and ends in sadness, we pray. We were not there when they crucified you on the cross long ago, but we are here now when you and your continuing body are betrayed and crucified. Forgive us for our inaction and our actions that side with the crucifiers. Restore in us the joy of our salvation, that we may carry the cross with as much fervor as we sing about it. Amen

Monday, March 21

Colossians 1: 19-20

¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.



RECYCLE GLASS AND CANS

Recycled glass reduces related air pollution by 20 percent and related water pollution by 50 percent. If it isn't recycled it can take a million years to decompose.



RECYCLE PAPER

There are 63 million newspapers printed each day in the U.S. Of these, 44 million, or about 69%, of them will be thrown away. Recycling just the Sunday papers would save more than half a million trees every week. You can also recycle nearly every piece of paper that comes into your home; mail, advertising, magazines and catalogs, food boxes (cereal for instance), cardboard and paper bags. There are ways to cut back or eliminate most of these paper products but it does take your time. You can find help on the internet or suggestions from friends. Help spread the word and make it a fun activity for your whole family. Remember you are helping God's kingdom.



DON'T FORGET BATHROOM RECYCLING

Only 41% of Americans say they always recycle products from the bathroom. As a result common bathroom products like shampoo bottles, toothpaste boxes and shaving cream cans are more likely to end up in landfills. Spread the word to your family members about recycling

personal care products including toothpaste boxes and tubes, shaving cream cans, shampoo bottles, toilet paper rolls, and body lotion bottles.



CHANGE YOUR LIGHT

LED lighting is the future of home lighting because they are better for energy conservation. They also give off a brighter, clearer light and shatter less easily, unlike glass bulbs. Their lamp life is 25,000 to 100,000 hours while CFLs sit around 10,000 hours and incandescent bulbs are around 1,200 hours. Look for ENERGY STAR rated bulbs which are subjected to rigorous testing. You will find them to be intense so not appropriate for every light socket. They are pricey but the price is coming down. As you replace bulbs, you could use the older, working bulbs in closets or places where they are not often used.



SHARE!

Take what you've learned, and pass the knowledge on to others. If every person you know could take one small step toward being greener, the collective effort could be phenomenal. God's blessing on you as you protect God's creation.

Prayer: Creator God, as we enter this Holy Week, help us to ponder our place in your infinite universe. While your creation is great, we may think our impact is small. Show us, please, that each thing we do to preserve our earthly home is welcomed by you. Our suffering is small but your gift of eternal life is great. Help us honor your Son with our efforts. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen

Tuesday, March 22

Matthew 25:37-40

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Lord, When Did I?

Matthew's original audience wrestled powerfully with how to be faithful followers of Jesus. They knew the world was changing, complex, and filled with competing expectations. Much of Matthew's Gospel tries to help people figure out what it means to be a Christian in a complicated world. In *The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats*, Matthew focuses on what it means to be faithful disciples, not in theory, but in ways that attend to the needs of the world.

Our ancestors in faith needed no explanations about why a shepherd would separate sheep and goats—sheep were more valuable than goats. It would have been obvious that people, too, can be separated into groups. This time a distinction was made between those who helped others and those who turned a blind eye to the needs of others. Those who helped were given

eternal blessing because their gifts of food, drink, hospitality, and clothing were given to Jesus, the Son of Man. Those who did not offer such gifts were cast into eternal punishment.

Initially the parable reflects the idea that those who do good deeds are rewarded and those who do not are punished. But the parable keeps going. The element of surprise enters when the sheep and the goats have no idea that they were either caring for Jesus or neglecting Jesus. They asked incredulous questions: “Lord when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?” and “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” The surprising and alarming answer is that whenever they cared or did not care for “the least of these who are members of my family” they did so to Jesus.

One key truth about being a disciple is that the responsibilities never end. People are never done being faithful. They are never finished helping the poor and hungry. Discipleship has never been glamorous or easy, in ancient days or today. Faithful Christians seek to care for those in need, and in doing so they care for the continuing body of Christ in the world.

Stacy Johnson Myers

Prayer: O God, use my hands. Guide them so that they will care for those who are hungry, thirsty, lonely, or sick. Make me not rest until I walk in your paths, doing your work. Amen

Wednesday, March 23

Revelation 21:1-5

21 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.”

⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

A Christian Prayer in Union with Creation

Father, we praise you with all your creatures.

They came forth from your all-powerful hand;

they are yours, filled with your presence and your tender love.

Praise be to you!

Son of God, Jesus,

through you all things were made.

You were formed in the womb of Mary our Mother,

you became part of this earth,

*and you gazed upon this world with human eyes.
Today you are alive in every creature
in your risen glory.*

Praise be to you!

*Holy Spirit, by your light
you guide this world towards the Father's love
and accompany creation as it groans in travail.
You also dwell in our hearts
and you inspire us to do what is good.
Praise be to you!*

*Triune Lord, wondrous community of infinite love,
teach us to contemplate you
in the beauty of the universe,
for all things speak of you.*

*Awaken our praise and thankfulness
for every being that you have made.
Give us the grace to feel profoundly joined
to everything that is.*

*God of love, show us our place in this world
as channels of your love
for all the creatures of this earth,
for not one of them is forgotten in your sight.
Enlighten those who possess power and money
that they may avoid the sin of indifference,
that they may love the common good, advance the weak,
and care for this world in which we live.
The poor and the earth are crying out.
O Lord, seize us with your power and light,
help us to protect all life,
to prepare for a better future,
for the coming of your Kingdom
of justice, peace, love and beauty.
Praise be to you!
Amen*

The concluding prayer from Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home, 2015

Maundy Thursday, March 24

John 13:1-16

13 Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.² The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God,⁴ got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.⁵ 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.⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"⁷ Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand."⁸ Peter said to him, "You will never

wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.”⁹ Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”¹⁰ Jesus said to him, “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.”¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, “Not all of you are clean.”

¹² After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you?”¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am.¹⁴ So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.¹⁵ For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.¹⁶ Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.

Good Friday, March 25

Mark 15

¹⁵ As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate.² Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” He answered him, “You say so.”³ Then the chief priests accused him of many things.⁴ Pilate asked him again, “Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.”⁵ But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

⁶ Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked.⁷ Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection.⁸ So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom.

⁹ Then he answered them, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?”¹⁰ For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over.¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead.¹² Pilate spoke to them again, “Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?”

¹³ They shouted back, “Crucify him!”¹⁴ Pilate asked them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him!”¹⁵ So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

¹⁶ Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor’s headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort.¹⁷ And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him.¹⁸ And they began saluting him, “Hail, King of the Jews!”¹⁹ They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him.²⁰ After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

²¹ They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.²² Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull).²³ And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it.²⁴ And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

²⁵ It was nine o’clock in the morning when they crucified him.²⁶ The inscription of the charge against him read, “The King of the Jews.”²⁷ And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left.²⁹ Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days,³⁰ save yourself, and come down from the cross!”³¹ In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also

mocking him among themselves and saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. ³² Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.” Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

³³ When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴ At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” ³⁵ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “Listen, he is calling for Elijah.” ³⁶ And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.” ³⁷ Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸ And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁹ Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

⁴⁰ There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. ⁴¹ These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

⁴² When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, ⁴³ Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴ Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. ⁴⁵ When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. ⁴⁶ Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. ⁴⁷ Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid.



It is good to learn early on that suffering and God are no contradiction, but much more a necessary unity: for me the idea that God himself suffered was always one of the most convincing teachings of Christianity.

I think that God is closer to suffering than to happiness, and to find God in this manner gives peace and rest, and a strong and courageous heart.

The Mystery of Easter, Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Prayer: We adore you, O Christ and we thank you. By your holy cross you have redeemed the world. Make us worthy of the love you bestow upon us. Amen

Holy Saturday, March 26

John 19:38-42

³⁸ After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. ³⁹ Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰ They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. ⁴¹ Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴² And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

The Resurrection of Our Lord, Sunday, March 27

Mark 16:1-8

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

Easter

Mark’s resurrection story ends in an uncomfortable way. The women are told, “Go and tell!” but they are seized with terror so rather than proclaiming the good news, they run away and speak to no one. The glorious news of the resurrection was met with fear and quietness. Often this is true today.

There are lots of reasons why we restrict what we say and do as people of the resurrection. For one thing, when we look around the world it is often hard to see that God’s way is the most powerful. We easily see divisions among people growing deeper, the rich get richer while the plight of the poor becomes more desperate. We see the creation being harmed at an alarming rate. We see fear and hopelessness everywhere we turn. All these things and so many others, combine to try to “prove” to us that God’s way is nowhere to be seen. So, we rationalize our way out of having to live as resurrection people by saying that it is futile or naive to believe that God’s new order has arrived, while some much else tells us otherwise.

On the opposite side, it is possible to be quiet about the resurrection as a kind of defense mechanism--to erase our responsibility to engage the world and its problems. This kind of thinking quickly turns into something along the lines of: “At the right time, God will fix all this and everything will be fine.” This is without doubt the wrong way to understand the resurrection event. The resurrection makes no promise that our dreams and wishes will come true. What it *does* say is that ultimately God’s way will prevail and actions of justice and hope will not die but will be incorporated into what God is doing. Perhaps this is hard to believe, but Mark tells us to “Go and tell!” Perhaps in the telling and living of this good news we strengthen our resolve to live as people of the resurrection.

Stacy Johnson Myers

Prayer: Remove fear and complacency from us, O God, that we might truly embrace the mystery of your Son's resurrection, living as people of the resurrection. Amen