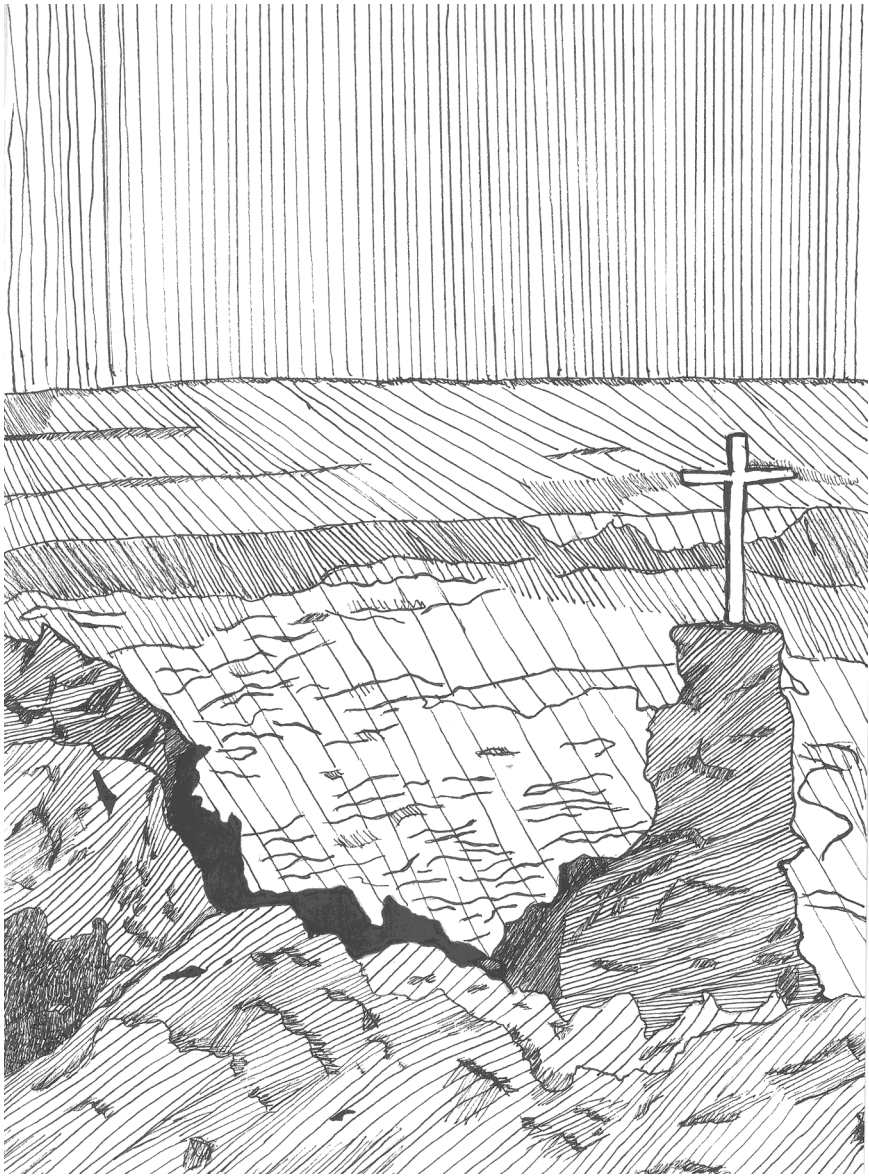


Resting in Unchanging Grace

Lenten Devotions

*When darkness veils his lovely face, I rest in his unchanging grace;
in every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil.*



Cover art by Jaya Penland

Lent is a season for repentance. During Lent we seek to turn away from habits that draws us from God, so that we can turn back to God's call for our lives. To repent well requires some serious reflection. It means asking hard questions of ourselves. Where am I following God with my life, and where am I headed the wrong direction? What needs to change if I am going to be the person God has called me to be by my baptism into Christ?

As the staff reflected on these questions, what rose to the top were practices of hope and trust in God. We are a people, a congregation, who deeply *believe* that Jesus is risen, that God reigns, and that even now God is at work to make *all things* new. But sometimes the constant flood of bad news in the world can get the better of how we *feel*. If we're constantly plugged in to the latest headlines, receiving dozens of notifications that point to the world's brokenness, what would we expect the outcome to be?

Because the power of sin and death have been defeated in the death and resurrection of Jesus, I am convinced that good news wins the day. I believe that the brokenness we experience will not last. But if I want to *feel* that confident hope in my bones, well, wouldn't resting in God's hope need at least as much practicing, at least as much input, as the steady stream of brokenness that our devices and our lived experience are downloading?

So we invite you to join us this Lent in repenting of the ways in which you fail to trust God's goodness. We invite you to dwell with us in God's unchanging grace. Contained in this booklet are stories from our community about places where God is at work, even now, to bring healing, wholeness, and new life to all of creation. So start your Lenten discipline here. Practice hope. Use the following hymn during your devotions. And of course join us each Wednesday night in Lent for a meal and worship. Plan to come on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday as we dwell together in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection.

God is at work, right now, bringing life to this weary world. Pay attention. Dwell in the pockets of the kingdom that are already breaking in. Practice hope.

Walking with you,

Pastor Matt

My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less

1 My hope is built on nothing less than
2 When dark - ness veils his love - ly face, I
3 His oath, his cov - e - nant, his blood sus -
4 When he shall come with trum - pet sound, oh,

Je - sus' blood and righ - teous - ness; no mer - it of my
rest on his un - chang - ing grace; in ev - 'ry high and
tain me in the rag - ing flood; when all sup - ports are
may I then in him be found, clothed in his righ - teous -

own I claim, but whol - ly lean on Je - sus' name.
storm - y gale my an - chor holds with - in the veil.
washed a - way, he then is all my hope and stay.
ness a - lone, re - deemed to stand be - fore the throne!

Refrain

On Christ, the sol - id rock, I stand; all oth - er ground is sink - ing sand.

Day 1

Growing up in the Pentecostal church, miracles were a dime a dozen. Cancers healed, wheelchairs discarded, demons expelled, prophetic dreams, very dramatic stuff. I had a fair share of doubts about their authenticity growing up and frankly, still do.

As a teenager I had severe eczema on the tops of my hands. Medication alleviated the pain but my hands were always irritated. Obviously not a pleasant condition to live with. One Sunday morning, I was singing during worship and I looked down at my hands. The rash was gone! Complete healing, not a trace of redness. I stood there not believing my eyes. Even now, writing about it 15 years later, it feels weird to share my healing story because it sounds so outlandish.

However, my family is still waiting in what seems like a never ending circle of Lent. My father lives with advanced Parkinson's disease and there is no cure. It is a painful question to ask: why does a God who heals, deny another the gift of healing? How do pain and suffering coexist along with joy and healing? Here is where the tension of Lent reaches its apex: reconciling the reality of deep, tangible pain with the hope of goodness to come:

“And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”
—Revelation 21:4

Lent is a beautiful time. Giving up habits or picking up an intentional practice can reassure us that even though we do not have sensible answers, we can rest in the miracle of hope and healing, if not on this earth, then in the glory to come.

Gloria Sainio

Day 2

God's Unfailing Grace

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. —1 John 3:1-3

When do I see God's unfailing Grace?

Each day it glows on a young child's face.

Children sing "Jesus Loves Me" very strong and loud,

With unbridled volume, so happy, so proud!

Small hands reach out to a visiting goat.

They're awed by the feel of its God-made coat.

Little black fingers with white ones entwine,

Shades of skin, in friendship combine.

Young eyes admire the blue of the sky,

They run like the wind to chase leaves tumbling by.

Young hands grasp markers so vividly bright,

They color God's world in a rowdy new light!

"I love you, Miss Mary," a kiss on my arm,

I am bathed in the love of preschool charm.

Silly giggles and smiles dance all over the place,

That's when I see God's unfailing Grace.

Mary Dudde

Day 3

*Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep;
If I should die before I 'wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

When my Mom died of a brain tumor when I was four I stopped saying those words: "... I pray the Lord my soul to take". My mind, heart, and soul began to be plagued by the thought of her driving away and never being able to see my sister and me again. I refused to go into the funeral service.

I know the first words my Mom said when she got her diagnosis was my name and my sister's name. But it was not good enough that she died. There wasn't a way to reconcile and heal.

Decades later, neighbors from my childhood, Gene and Anne Sage, patiently and lovingly helped me see the Living Word. It was a long road to the deep faith walk I have now at St. Mark's Lutheran Church of Asheville, NC.

It should not be hard to come to the Lord Jesus Christ's embrace. But whenever it is for you, a loved one, a friend—or even someone who just seems in need of a new light for their soul and Way to life—it is not too late to seek the face of God. The presence of the Lord was always there, in spite of the worst this world can come at us with.

"The Way, and the Truth, and the Life" is far more valuable to possess than anything else on earth; and worth using to replace any lack, or death, worry, or deprivation (John 14:6). The Way is for us all. Grab it and use it... need-fully.

Grant Millin

Day 4

*For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,
I was a stranger and you invited me in. —Matthew 25:35*

The summer of my fourth birthday Mom, Dad and I drove from Wisconsin to visit my maternal grandmother back in Mom's hometown, Santa Barbara, CA. On Sunday Mom, Grandma, Aunt Ruth and I were walking to church, a little Salvation Army chapel. We were still a half block away when the front doors opened and women ran out, straight towards us. Hugs, kisses, laughter and welcoming smiles were everywhere. No doubt I was startled by this unprecedented welcome, but quickly adjusted. And to add to the wonderment, after service there were cookies and lemonade to enjoy. I was allowed to explore the wonderful pump organ, brass instruments and the tambourine. I was still a preschooler, but the welcome – and the wonderful music – stays with me still.

Fast forward about 50 years. A considerably older and more timid version of me worked up the courage to visit St. Mark's. Within seconds, Mary Hubbard had latched onto my left arm and Harriet Miseyko latched onto the other side. I was given a cup of coffee, a tour and a crash course on how to follow the worship booklet, which was a little more convoluted than our current version. I unwittingly ended up in the same pew as Pastor Starr, June Starr and the Dudde clan. Well, that sealed the deal.

I never thought to again have the pleasure of being welcomed as I had in California, but that changed when the good people of St. Mark's showered me with God's love. Thanks be to God!

Amy Zellers

Day 5

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. —Romans 12:9-13

What does God's goodness and love look like?

It looks like helping people in need.

Can you share a story of when you saw God's goodness and love?

In school, we have different greeting choices when we go into our classroom in the morning. One morning, one of my friends could tell that a classmate was upset, and asked if she wanted a hug as her morning greeting. The hug reminded me that God's love looks like helping. I like to share God's love by helping people and comforting them when they are upset.

Liza Volk, Age 9

Day 6

Serving One Another in the Name of Christ

On the ABCCM's emblem is the message, "Serving One Another in the Name of Christ." A total of over 310 Christian churches support this organization in some way or another. God is active at ABCCM. Volunteers and staff from a wide spectrum of Christianity find a common bond in Christ as Lord and Savior. One morning recently I found three occasions that were inspiring. A man in the lobby suddenly thanked me for serving in the name of Christ. The second was a fellow worker who gave a testimonial about how Jesus became real to him at a retreat when he was 57. The third time was from the executive director, Rev. Scott Rogers, who was visiting the crisis center. He said the Lord recently provided a \$200,000 grant for a playground at the new Transformation Village. He had not approached this business for funds so it was an unexpected surprise.

We serve people in crisis in the Asheville area. These include the homeless, former prisoners, financially needy, dysfunctional people, and emotionally disturbed persons among others. That same morning I did not want to take the time to help a man find a phone call that he needed to make. He was hard to understand due to missing teeth, and I thought it was a waste of time. However, I did finally locate the number he was looking for so that a message could be left for him. It was about a pre-trial hearing. After I did, he sincerely thanked me several times and showed great appreciation. I was blessed.

Work at ABCCM is based on the following scripture: "... Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you a stranger and take you in or naked and clothe you? Or when did we see you sick or in prison and come to you? And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, in as much as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'" Matthew 25:37-40 NKJ

Ann Johnson

Day 7

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. —Ephesians 1:3-10

My parents 'sent' me to Sunday school and thereby pushed me through the open doors of the church. Through the following moves of my life, from city to city, those open doors were there for me to enter. Therefore I am not able to point to one person but to many caring members of congregations who nurtured my faith. Through those doors I discovered that grace is not something you can get but it is a 'gift' that is given you by God. Thanks to all those congregational members who led me to appreciate that the church is not just a place I can visit, it is the family I belong to.

Connie Koiner

Day 8

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. —Philippians 2:5-7

For the past year and a half, my life has not gone at all according to plan. In fact, all of the plans and commitments I had made got shredded, not once but twice as Linda's knee replacement went sideways, and turned into an extended period of recovery and rehabilitation. I have struggled with anger and depression and a sense of helplessness and total loss of control as I companioned her on her journey back to wellness. Centering prayer just left me feeling angry and alone. Retail therapy didn't work. There was nothing I could fix to make things better. In short, all of my normal coping strategies failed me and left me at loose ends. One thought kept coming to mind, "this is what love looks like," and somehow that thought held me together. Over time, I realized that the thought came from a favorite verse in Philippians that describes Christ's love as a pouring out, a self-emptying, a forsaking of self, for our sake, and specifically now at this moment for my sake. I am reminded of Martin Luther's teaching that Christ's love for us is hidden under the cross, under suffering and emptiness and helplessness. That's the shape of God's love knit into the universe by the community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit constantly giving themselves away for the sake of the other and all of creation. That's the only kind of love that can sustain us on a journey such as the one we share.

Pastor Jack McHenry

Day 9

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.
—Colossians 3:12-14

What does God's love look like?

It looks like respecting other people, and standing up to bullies. Even when people make mistakes God still loves them and we can too.

Can you share a story of when you saw God's goodness and love?

For school, my mom and dad bought stuff for other people who needed things. They were sharing God's love.

Claire Niedenthal, Age 7

Day 10

*'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.'
Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak,
for I am only a boy.' But the Lord said to me,
'Do not say, "I am only a boy";
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you.
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.'*
—Jeremiah 1:5-8

As a U.S. Navy Surgeon I was stationed at the U.S. Naval Hospital in Yokosuka, Japan during the Viet Nam war. My specialty was thoracic surgery so I got all the chest wounds as well any other combat injuries. The Naval Medical Corp cares for the Marines and they were the first in the theater. I had two wards of 50 patients. One day I received orders to report to the Riverine Forces in Viet Nam. (If you want to know about them ask Bob LaVeck.). I was issued the boots, clothing, helmet and side arm and was ready to go. I prayed and told God if that is what he wanted me to do, I was ready. That weekend, the Chief of Surgery was visiting a shrine in the rain to take pictures when he fell on some stones and broke his leg. The Commanding Officer of the Hospital cancelled my orders and assigned me double duty. I believe I was blessed and God did not want me to die but had other plans for me.

George Kroncke

Day 11

Don't be afraid for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand. —Isaiah 41:10

Quite unexpectedly I found myself alone, not because people had abandoned me but because on this Sunday morning the friends closest to me were attending church and going about their daily routines. The day before many of them had been there for me when my dear wife suffered a brain aneurism. Oh yes, the doctors and nurses too had been there for me late into the night during a time of great uncertainty. While she had survived the incident (40% don't), whether she would be among the 30% who end up with significant deficits or the 30% who return to what could be termed a normal life remained to be seen. Surgery to clip off the bleed was scheduled for early Monday morning. As she lay motionless in the ICU, I found myself in a small room, seemingly alone. Only I wasn't alone. I experienced firsthand God's promise to not be afraid for He would be with me. I get chills when I look back on that Sunday morning. God's presence was overwhelming and extremely comforting. The sense of calm I felt was unbelievable. While God's presence is always in our lives, in my case it was most obvious in a time of deep trouble. The story ends well as my wife made a full recovery and is living a normal life.

Henry Ulrichs

Day 12

Coat of Many Colors

2019 was a tough year. My father-in-law had accused me of stealing from him and trying to burn down the house he lives in, we were just getting into our house after a year in an apartment due to a fire, and we had a difficult time seeing our grandchildren. Having lost in court, their mother severed ties with us.

But, there was still the gingerbread competition at the Grove Park. The younger grandchild had won first place in 2017 and the elder one wanted her shot. In prior years, we had spent many hours watching a DVD of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. We saw the play at Flat Rock and in London. We went to Dollywood and saw a young girl play out Dolly's interaction with her own coat of many colors. So, I suggested a display that connected the two stories.

We were crawling uphill on glass. There were technical challenges as the figures were very hard to mold and bake. Then, an experienced competitor worked with us and showed us how to create the figures. We had limited time with the competitor as her mother sabotaged any time we might have had by scheduling events to interfere with our visit. In the end, we created a winning display that sits in our den and still evokes a sense of wonder when I see it. Every time I look at it, I find new meaning.

What if Dolly had been ashamed of her coat? Would there be a Dollywood? What if Joseph had not been so clever? What if he had not forgiven his brothers? What nation would rise up for Jesus to be born into?

So, our project paralleled Joseph and Dolly. We struggled against conditions not in our favor, and succeeded through faith, perseverance and providential intervention at critical moments. It is a formula that does not fail.

Tim Galvin

Day 13

A Recipe for the Good Life

A heaping cup of Kindness
Two cups of Love and Caring
One cup of Understanding
One cup of Joyful Sharing
A level cup of Patience
One cup of Thoughtful Insight
One cup of Gracious Listening
Once Cup of Sweet Forgiveness

Mix ingredients together
Toss in smiles and laughter
Serve to everyone you know
With Love forever after

No matter how it looks stand on his Word. He will see us through. Trust him. Hold on and don't give up the battle; it is not ours, it's the Lord's. And keep the faith (and faith without works is dead). Let's keep the faith alive in us. Stand together as in God we trust. Do this!

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want *Phil. 4:19*
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures
He leadeth me beside the still waters *Ezek. 34:14*
He restoreth my soul. *Rev. 7:17*
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death
I will fear no evil for thou art with my.
Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of mine enemies.
Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days
of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Betty J. Miller, WNC Baptist Fellowship

Day 14

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. —1 John 4:7-12

I always thought it was a special blessing that my mom was named Joy and her sister Hope. We were fortunate to live near our extended family so this meant that Joy AND Hope were powerful influences in my childhood and adulthood. There was a older sister Faith, but unfortunately she died in childhood. My grandparents named their three daughters Faith, Hope and Joy. Pretty good names! Excellent words to live by!

The two women I knew and loved lived their faith, hope, and joy throughout their lives. Joy died way too young at 72. One of the last acts of her life was to have my brother stop by to pick up my parents' offering as he drove past their home on his way to church on Sunday morning. By the time my brother was driving home from church having placed her offering in the plate, the ambulance was at her home and she was gone.

Hope lives on at age 94, and I love spending time with her whenever we visit Ohio. Joy is back: our youngest grandchild is named after her great grandmother; it's a special treat to attempt to keep up with this three-year-old Joy when we visit California.

I am forever grateful for being born in a Christian household with parents full of love for their family and for God.

With Faith, Hope, and Joy,

Bonnie Wheeler

Day 15

You are distracted by many things: there is need only of one thing. —Luke 10: 42b-43a

We remember the story. Jesus and some of his friends drop in at Mary and Martha's house. Martha is trying to be a good host and get them something to eat. Instead of helping Mary is just sitting around listening to Jesus. Martha asks Jesus to send Mary into the kitchen to help but instead Jesus tells Martha to adjust her expectations and change her perspective.

I am a lot like Martha. I have things to do. Important things. Things that really do need to be done. And, truth be told, I like being busy. I like the feeling of accomplishment when I set a carefully prepared meal on the table, or write a thought provoking sermon. But none of those things, in the end, is more important than placing myself in the presence of God and opening myself to hear what God is saying to my heart. I have to admit that, too often, I use those things as a way of avoiding what might be a difficult conversation between me and God.

Getting myself into that place of open attentiveness is difficult. The first task is to willingly put aside my work. I find that it helps to get out of my regular environment and find a physical place where I can be open to the presence of God. For me that is almost always a place of natural beauty. In the expanse of the ocean and the majesty of the forest I begin to see the smallness of me compared to the vastness of a God who could create such wonders. I have had deep and wonderful and frightening conversations with God while sitting on the sand. In the depths of the forest I have heard God tell me that I am beloved.

I often use the following psalm as a way of settling myself into a place of openness to God's presence. It is from Psalm 46:10.

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

Father Brent Norris, St. Mary's Episcopal Church

Day 16

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another. —John 15:12-17

What does God’s goodness and love look like?

It looks like helping and healing. When someone is sad you can cheer them up.

Can you share a story of when you saw God’s goodness and love?

Once I saw someone giving money and food to someone who was standing on the street asking for help. I think that God’s goodness looks like that.

Liam Frisella, Age 10

Day 17

I was born in a 2 bedroom cottage in Barbados, British West Indies. My family included 2 brothers and 2 sisters. We had very little but we had everything. I could throw a stone from our back porch onto a white sandy beach and then pick it up and skip it across the clear blue water of the Caribbean. Our parents were firm but loving, worked hard to feed and shelter us and educate us in the “English” tradition. They taught by example and a rare flogging (with a leather belt for the boys) to keep us safe and to instill proper behavior guidelines. We rode bicycles or the bus. We owned no car, no TV. A single radio station was it. I led a carefree childhood swimming at will and waging sand ball battles with cousins/ friends on the beach. Great fun! My Episcopal (Anglican) parents taught us to pray daily. My father prayed aloud in the hallway twice a day. Sometimes at night, after spraying DDT in our crowded bedroom to kill marauding mosquitoes (no window screens or glass panes, only wooden shutters), they would “hear us our prayers.” We also had Bible readings aloud and sang a hymn during morning Assembly every day in our public schools. Imagine that! I had been baptized as a baby and believe that He spoke to me even as a 7 year old. I remember stumping my barefooted big toe on a rock while feeding bread and grass to my pet crabs. I thought “God is punishing me for penning up His crabs”. I tipped the oil drum over and watched with relief as the crabs scattered to freedom on to the beach. We emigrated to a “new planet” in upstate New York at age 16. Cultural shock and awe ensued. I survived and joined the Army after College. A son Jason Paul was born in 1972 at Madigan Hospital, Ft Lewis Washington where I was a Medic. My wife and I approached the Chaplain to ask him to baptize JP. He agreed on the condition that we learn and accept his teachings as a Lutheran pastor. Jason was not only baptized but he was the Messenger, the reminder that we needed to become active in a church community and try to follow the teachings of Jesus. I have never regretted that.

Al Seale

Footnote: Scientific research has shown that DDT insecticide has deleterious effects on eagles’ egg shells and also human brain cells.

Day 18

*We know that in everything God works for good
with those who love him.... —Romans 8:28*

In the quiet of early mornings, I find my strength, my comfort, my peace. I hear God's words: "Be still and know that I am God." In my breath, I become aware of a depth of serene love and peace. Sinking deep into this peace, I know that I am never alone, that God is in each breath I take. In this silence, I listen for God's voice to speak to me.

These still, quiet moments of early day may become elusive as the challenges of the day begin to surface. I often find myself becoming absorbed in stress, worried about loved ones, forgetting the peace of those earlier God moments.

Each challenge, however, offers me an opportunity to remember that God's presence is just a breath away....

One such reminder of TRUSTING in this Presence became an opportunity for my spiritual growth, reaffirming my faith, when my son spent 5 months in 2018, walking the Appalachian Trail. Even though I could follow his location, most days, on the internet from his tracking device, there were days of time that this was not possible. The first 100 miles of wilderness in Maine (early July) was one of those areas of zero communication; another, was the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in December, during a two foot snowfall, temperatures in the teens.

In the beginning of his journey, I struggled with sleepless nights. Fear of the unknown was kept at bay by the few times he was able to contact us. I remember intense prayers for his continued safety on one particular day, surrendering my exhaustion of worry to God, asking God for help.

I still remember God's answer: "Trust me. His journey is in my hands. Your journey here is **trusting** in me."

From this experience, I have learned when there is doubt or worry, I take time to breathe in God's presence deeply, repeating "My trust is in you, Lord." Peace comes to me with assurance to trust in God's divine plan.

Bobbie Epley

Day 19

Rescued!

Way back in the 1960s, when I was the chaplain of a college up North, I planned a weekend retreat for students at a campsite on the Platte River in Nebraska. About 40 of us got there all right, but that night it started snowing heavily and didn't let up for days. We soon found that we were trapped. We managed to collect enough wood from outside to keep the fires going. And fortunately the camp pantry had a number of cans of food — not much variety, but very welcome. The students didn't seem to mind missing classes, but my wife and I worried about two small children left with a babysitter. There were no cell phones then, so we had no way of communicating with the snowbound world outside. But the group's spirit stayed high: we put on impromptu plays, exercised, studied the Bible, played games, and also prayed morning and evening. Finally after four days, a ranger on horseback appeared, and he arranged for a plow. By that evening we were all safely back — and rather enjoyed being the envious talk of the campus. One of our worship services was from Daniel: "For he is the living God, enduring forever. ... He delivers and rescues. He works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth" We certainly believed that!

James Aydelotte

Day 20

*And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.
– Genesis 1:3*

*The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned. – Isaiah 9:2*

I felt that unrelenting darkness when I heard the words, "You have cancer" just before turning 25. The shadow of the news still clouded the room as I prepared for surgery. I was afraid the darkness would win. I was afraid that light would be God's gift to others and not me. And then Laura busted in – well, more than just Laura. Nine of the women I had most recently graduated seminary with flooded the surgery prep room blatantly ignoring the nurses who said, "there can be two of you."

I feared that they were going to put on their newbie pastor hats and give me lots of overly-Jesus-y platitudes. But instead, in the midst of the shadow of fear that had covered my heart, in the region of the room that felt cold, Laura grabbed my hand and prayed, "God, in the beginning there was chaos and darkness. You spoke and there was light and life. Do it again. God, this feels like chaos and darkness. So speak – and let there be light and life."

There Laura was, undeterred by darkness, praying that we would see, hear and feel God's light. Y'all, if you need that prayer today. I'm praying it for you. There is no shame in your chaos, no shame in the darkness you feel AND there is a God who has something to say in the midst of it. There is a God that we are praying would 'Do it again – as in the beginning, where there was chaos and darkness – speak and let there be light and life.'

Do it again, Lord. Amen.

The Reverend Danielle DeNise, Director of Evangelical Mission,
NC Synod ELCA

Day 21

So here's what I think: The best thing you can do right now is to finish what you started last year and not let those good intentions grow stale. Your heart's been in the right place all along. You've got what it takes to finish it up, so go to it. Once the commitment is clear, you do what you can, not what you can't. The heart regulates the hands. This isn't so others can take it easy while you sweat it out. No, you're shoulder to shoulder with them all the way, your surplus matching their deficit, their surplus matching your deficit. — 2 Cor. 8:13-15 (The Message)

We've been waiting for a long time for direction on how to fulfill our Vision 2020 goal of Serving Young Children and Families living in poverty by providing a child care program at St. Mark's — like a really long time. There have been hurdles, to say the least, along with lots of critical thinking by many to figure out how to overcome them.

While reviewing meeting notes and speaking with former Loving Neighbors Board Members, we were intrigued that Christine W. Avery Learning Center — located on Hill Street, just 1 mile from St. Mark's — had a program that aligns with our goal. They know how to do this work - and, wow, they are our neighbors. Ok, but will they have any desire to work with us? We took a chance and reached out to them. They graciously accepted our invitation to meet with us and explore a potential relationship.

You know how you feel when you've found your people? Well, that's how Eve Kindley, Barbara Bassler, and I felt when we met Kyla Morton, Dr. Terrell Morton, and Rev. Nilous Avery that Tuesday morning in January. It was their genuineness, how they looked us in the eyes as we shook hands, and the smiles on their faces that made us feel so grateful to be welcoming them. Their passion for serving kids in our community who have experienced trauma and whose families are living in poverty was clear. Yes, this is our passion too. It's what we, as a congregation, decided to do. Amid the loud construction noises, we agreed this is a partnership worth exploring.

As you will read in the March newsletter, we are on this journey to serve young children and families living in poverty and to do so in partnership with the folks at the Christine W. Avery Learning Center. It feels like the right path to take.

Jenny Simmons

Day 22

*“Be still and know that I am God.
... the Lord of Hosts is with us...” —Psalm 46:10*

We want to know God, experience the presence of God with us. Lent invites us into the dark, empty space where God is found.

During my year of broken bone and surgery, then waiting for healing and some return to normalcy, whatever that is, I have discovered I cannot think God into being near. With each stab of pain, each shock of new bad news I tried to think holy thoughts. I tried to imagine God being close, comforting and healing. But all was either a whirl of agitated thoughts or just silence.

I would worry and stress and worry some more, but the healing just took as long as it took and my days unfolded one after another filled with anxiety. Then one day I just gave up, closed my eyes and sat very still. Nothing. But somehow in that nothing there was a stirring of hope. Not a thought, but a feeling. Indigestion?

I got up and hobbled off. Then the next day I got a card saying, “I am praying for you.” I didn’t see them praying or hear the prayer but I closed my eyes and in the silent darkness I felt that strange stirring of hope deep inside. Somewhere out there where I cannot see or hear or control, a prayer is happening for me. Such grace. The experience of the presence of God’s love had come to me twice now in ways I didn’t create.

“Be still and know that I am God.” Lent invites us to be still. For in that letting go of thoughts and agendas of control is a stillness that opens our hearts to experience the unchanging grace of God’s love always with us in the stillness.

Pastor Linda McHenry

Day 23

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. —John 15:7-11

What does God's goodness and love look like?

God's love causes happiness.

Can you share a story of when you saw God's goodness and love?

At home, my mom helps my dad do the dishes, and it makes them happy. I like to share God's love with people by being super nice to them.

Julia Volk, Age 9

Day 24

I knew it must be a big day. Mommy had sewn me a new dress; not a hand-me-down. I had a new bonnet too. We were going to a party! So, even though I definitely preferred my over-alls and saddle shoes, I put on my Mary Janes and skipped along with lots of other three year olds and moms. We were graduating from Cradle Roll and would get to start Sunday School with the big kids.

I loved Sunday School; the colorful picture Bible story cards and especially the singing. I learned the songs by heart, and they seeped deep into my heart and lodged there forever. Songs like “Following Jesus every day by day, nothing can harm me when he leads the way.”

Really? Wow! Nothing can harm me? Yeah!

Growing up on a farm there were lots of things that could cause harm; things that made a tiny girl fearful. The bull, Romeo, was HUGE. The mean old rooster, would he peck me too? But the thing I probably feared the most was the giant spider whose intricate web hung in the corner of the stable. Our work horses, Hector and Charlie, seemed to be totally comfortable sharing their stalls with what looked to me like a dinner-plate-sized monster. I was terrified of it.

I will never forget the day I confidently marched all the way from the house to the stable singing “Following Jesus.” I went up to that spider and stared right at it. I truly felt Jesus with me. I knew He was there, and I walked away unharmed.

That same feeling of His indwelling presence has guided and protected me though seventy more years since that three-year-old me out-stared the spider. Keeping me safe, prompting me of impending dangers, calling me to be wise and not foolish, when I failed to pay heed, letting me reap the resulting trouble, and reminding me not to fear, for He has promised “I am with you always.” (Matthew 28:20)

Eileen Cram

Day 25

Mom, my brother and I were happy living in rural NJ with my grandparents, seven cousins, and 4 aunts, during WWII. When Pop returned after the war he was fun sober, but mean and belligerent when drunk, and unable to hold a job. Mom tossed him out. Mom worked hard for short money. At age nine I started working and contributing. I felt important and needed. When I was thirteen mom married my step-father; a good man who took over finances. I resented him and felt unneeded. He tried, but I was wild and uncontrollable. I started drinking. At seventeen I joined the Navy. (My probation officer told me “Navy doesn’t release juvenile records.) I felt liberated. I advanced professionally and in alcohol consumption. At twenty-four I had a special court martial and dodged a bad conduct discharge. A drunken fight in a blackout where I put a man in the hospital for three weeks. When angry, mom always said, I was “just like my father.” Probably right. I knew I was an alcoholic but believed I could stop... or control drinking. I made a list of things I would never do. I did all but one during the next seven years. Within three months I was drinking harder than ever. When pressured by my Navy Captain, whose brother overcame alcoholism and found a better life, I tried AA. At the first meeting people told me their experiences and how their life changed. I got hope. Even though booze was no longer fun, I became depressed and contemplated suicide. The most sincere prayer I ever said was, “If there is a *^#*^* God, I could use some help.” Right then, I felt it would be OK. I had tried for seven or eight years to stop or control drinking. I always thought some day I would defeat alcoholism. I finally saw I wasn’t able to, but maybe AA could help me. I decided to try again. AA recommends a searching, fearless, moral inventory. By doing this I faced some truths about myself. Some I liked, but many I didn’t. Worst of all; my close-mindedness. Maybe there was a God. As I investigated, my mind changed and over seven more years, belief grew in my life. I memorized John 8:32: “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” I have asked God to remove the things that separate us. Some have gone and I thank him for the lessons I will learn from ones he hasn’t yet removed. (It works better if I try to help remove them.) By using the other AA recommendations my faith has grown. I’ve gotten rid of guilt, shame, and most resentments. Ninety-nine days out of a hundred I’m at peace with myself, God and people. —Ed Malkin

Day 26

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ... standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel. —Philippians 1:27

Several years ago, I received a Lenten letter from a friend. We had met at a small church in Houston. We worshipped together, participated in retreats, volunteered for lots of special events and played handbells.

The contents of the letter are private. The reason she wrote to me during the Lenten season is what I will share.

Jesus spent his whole life on earth preparing to die. We know of his life from birth to being a young Jewish boy learning to be a man. Jesus, as a man, would spend his short life reaching out and teaching through the parables, baptizing, healing. He would live the promise we had been told. He would accept suffering and torture to give up his life – to be our Savior.

My friend, in her letter, was working through what she could ‘give up’ for her Lenten commitment. The argument came down to: What can I do to honor the gift of the death of Jesus Christ, my Savior?

Her answer came in an examination of her life. Where did she need personal and spiritual improvement. What more could she do for others. What was her responsibility and did it make a difference. She went through the whole of her daily, earthly life to realize what needed more focus, commitment; and separate out what no longer was needed in her life.

The letter became her Lenten duty.

I had never been very committed at choosing something to ‘give up’ for Lent. That letter became a powerful movement in my life. Now, during Lent, I revisit the daily practice of praying the Examen of St. Ignatius. For me, it is a needed, guided self-assessment, reflection and discernment as I follow Christ on his journey to the Cross.

Beryl Mack

Day 27

Do Not Be Afraid

But now thus says the Lord,

he who created you, O Jacob,

he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine. —Isaiah 43:1

Whether you call them angels or messengers, God sent 3 of them to me all within 5 days. My story began 2 months after brain surgery, when my very close friend, Carol, invited Henry and me to spend a few days with her and her new husband (yes, during their honeymoon). On the eve of the Connecticut-to-Cape Cod trip, I began to shake and panic at the thought of leaving my home, which I had not done at all during recovery. I tried praying, reading, walking around the house, and it was not until I found a church choir singing on TV (2AM) that I calmed down. Upon awakening, the awful fear returned, as Henry and I discussed whether to cancel the trip. I recognized that part of me wanted to leave, but part really was too afraid to leave my safe, protective nest.

A call to the doctor gave me messenger #1. He told Henry that the trip would be the best thing for me—I stopped shaking, feeling almost excited. So with every bit of courage I could muster, I got into our car, the fears growing with thoughts of necessary stops and large crowds. Prayers, begging God to remove my discomfort, was constant as we journeyed.

Upon arrival at the Cape, seeing Carol & Tom (messenger #2) gave me the peace I had so urgently asked for from my Lord. Strength, courage, and laughter returned little by little as we played cards, took walks, and a few short car trips. Those 5 days ended with other close friends (messenger #3), taking us on a boat ride, they responding to my desire to go faster and faster. Only our amazing and loving God, through His messengers, could have given me such incredible change and a reminder: DO NOT BE AFRAID.

Barbara Ulrichs

Day 28

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." —Matthew 18:1-4

What does God's love look like?

The best snuggle

My dress with a big heart on it looks like God's love.

How can you show other people God's love?

Sharing

Helping

Helping put away clothes after Mommy washes them

Being friends

Give a hug

Neil, Amelia, Foxen, Noah, Eleanor, and Megan

—St. Mark's Children's Faith Formation Class

Day 29

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." —Matthew 19:14

Sitting in the choir loft provides such beautiful opportunities to witness God's people as they worship. On what seems like a weekly basis, God's goodness and love is made manifest for me; in the couple physically supporting one another as they approach the altar, in the child reaching to dip their finger in the font, in the smile of a new face who has been warmly welcomed, in the unified voices of a congregation as they sing to their Creator. God opens my eyes often to see the wonderful diversity of God's Church, and how we come together as one family each week to offer praise and thanksgiving.

A few weeks ago, God provided me, yet again, an opportunity to see God's goodness and love embodied in a member of St. Mark's. As we finished the offertory, I watched as two exuberant three year olds bounced into the sanctuary. There are very few things that make my heart sing more than children excited to be in worship, but God showed me something even greater. As I watched the children bound down the side aisle, I caught a glimpse of Marian Bradley's face. It was glowing. Even her eyes were smiling. She was filled with joy and love as she watched the children. Immediately I thought, "that's how it must look when God looks at us."

You, dear child, were created in the image of God.
You are God's beloved.
God looks at you with such joy and love.
Nothing can change that.
Nothing can take that away.

Deacon Katie Rivers

Day 30

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”
—*Philippians 4:13*

Have you ever had the feeling that God was nudging you but you just couldn't say yes? For months even years, I had been struggling with God about going to medical school. There was my family. Was I smart enough? Was it even possible for a 46 year old to get into med school? I finally gave up playing the organ as a substitute and took a couple of science classes.

Then one Friday night came the dream. The dream that said “Don't quit playing the organ.” The dream was so powerful that the next morning I picked up my organ shoes and headed out the door although I knew I didn't really have time to practice. But I went anyway.

The next day was Sunday and Henry was preaching at Incarnation Lutheran, a large downtown church in Columbia S.C. As I was helping him put on his robe, the choir director came bursting in saying that the organist had not shown up. Henry said, “My wife is an organist!” He left out the “substitute” part and lack of playing for 9 months.

Before I knew it, I was sitting in front of a three manual (keyboard) pipe organ, with 20 minutes left before church started. Just enough time to play a hymn for a prelude and experiment with a few stops. Of course I had never played a three manual pipe organ before!

After getting through the first hymn, I looked up towards the altar where there was a life size picture or statue of Jesus. It felt like he was looking straight at me, laughing and saying “What are you worried about? If you can do this you can do med school!” There was my answer! The rest is history. I might add that two out of the three hymns we sang that day I had practiced the day before!

God does work in mysterious ways! During this Lenten Season let's all quietly listen to how God is talking to each of us.

Judy McKay

Day 31

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.
—Philippians 2:1-4

What does God's love look like?

God's love helps us get through anything that happens in our lives.

How can you share God's goodness and love with other people?

I can share God's love with others by helping someone with their math assignment or other work at school.

Isa Slater, Age 8

Day 32

*“You who dwell in the shelter of the Lord,
Who abide in his shadow for life,
Say to the Lord, ‘My refuge, my rock in whom I trust.’
And he will raise you up on eagle’s wings,
bear you on the breath of dawn.
Make you to shine like the sun,
and hold you in the palm of his hand.”*

I was on a rampage! There was no stopping me! I was so frustrated, angry, and feeling shackled and imprisoned. There was nothing, I believed, to do but run. Get away.

No doubt about it. Bi-polar disease’s two poles are both horrible. The feelings in the most desperate manic state are worse, I think, than the deep sadness of depression. But, before I learned this, I thought, since I had taken some medicine, that I was cured. I stopped taking those pills, and wham, I was on my rampage.

I don’t know where I went. I don’t know how long I was gone or what I did. I don’t remember who I saw. I have no idea how much money I spent, just that it was all gone. And, I don’t know how I got home again.

The only thing I know for sure is that God never abandoned me. God knew where I was and God protected me the whole time. And God must surely have lifted me up and helped me find home. Through the hands and hearts of my mom and my doctor, God worked to bring me back to sanity and safety.

Megan Cram

Day 33

“Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ.” —Galatians 6:2

You could not pay me to return to middle school. Navigating the adolescent journey is a challenging endeavor, but watching this process unfold is no picnic either.

I tend to be a worrier. I ponder the future, question my choices and then ultimately pray for peace when all else fails. But until recently, I was the only one doing the second guessing, now my 14-year-old has joined in on that conversation. My smart, curious, creative toddler turned into a smart, curious, creative teenager who now questions the very foundation on which he was raised, causing me to obsess about where he will turn when that foundation is eventually shaken.

Sometimes fear gets the best of me, but fortunately I have received words of wisdom and encouragement from within our church family. Fellow parents have willingly shared their stories of similar struggles and through their compassion, reminded me that GOD prevails.

So, to the members of our faithful congregation, thank you for loving my son when he questions his place in this vast universe. Thank you for taking the time to guide his imagination with your kindness. Thank you for honoring his courage, celebrating his curiosity and allowing him the freedom to explore. I hear GOD’s voice in your words of support. I see Christ in your eyes as you gently lead my child in his searching, and for this, I will be forever in your debt.

Affirmation in the Presence of the Assembly:

Minister: People of God, do you promise to support these sisters and brothers and pray for them in their life in Christ?

Congregation: We do, and we ask God to help and guide us.....

Thank you for honoring your commitment!

Kari Warren

Day 34

*This is my Father's world; why should my heart be sad?
The Lord is king, let the heavens ring; God reigns, let the earth
feel glad. —Maltbie Davenport Babcock*

This Is My Father's World has been a familiar and favorite hymn throughout my life. This fascination began with a misidentification of lyrics in kindergarten: “All nature sings, and *onion* rings . . .” I loved onion rings. They were a treat in my preschool years when dad grilled steak on a Saturday night. Any song which proclaimed gratitude for such superb gifts as these connected with this five-year-old! Likewise, the simple tune of the hymn proved easy to follow and easy to learn. Together music and lyrics infused a sense of comfort, peace and contentment.

In adulthood I was curious about the backstory of this dear hymn. I learned that it began as a poem. Babcock penned the words after a long walk along the Niagra Escarpment in western New York state. (An “escarpment” is where the earth’s elevation changes suddenly, *i.e.*, a massive cliff.) Much more than just its famous falls, the Niagra Escarpment stretches from western New York all the way to Illinois via Canada. Babcock often hiked along this great cliff when his spirits needed lifting. Having been there, I understand how one could be restored at heart and moved to praise.

Now I find myself singing this great hymn every Monday morning, as I commute to Columbia, SC to teach at our seminary. This song breaks out somewhere between Saluda and Columbus as I-26 drops off the Blue Ridge Escarpment. Each week this unbelievable view opens before my eyes. It has become a time of radio silence and unspoken prayer. No words are necessary. The work of the One who made us says it all. The poet writes, “All nature sings and ‘*round me rings* the music of the spheres.” I cannot help but join the song.

Mark Fitzsimmons

Day 35

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. —Psalm 19:1

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth. —Psalm 121:1-2

Aren't we lucky to live in the mountains of WNC? Hardly a day goes by that I don't see God's handiwork on full display. For example, after days of rain recently, there was a glorious sunny day. As I turned a corner on my way home from an errand-- WOW! rime frosted mountains with a glorious blue sky surrounding them! I've seen these vistas many times before, but they never cease to move me. And to cause me to exclaim God's greatness and love for all of us He created this for us to enjoy! And as Spring arrives and flowers bloom, this awe of nature's beauty continues. It also reminds me of Jesus' death and resurrection. Let us thank God always for his wonderful creation!

Susan Van Tassel

Day 36

'Be still, and know that I am God!

I am exalted among the nations,

I am exalted in the earth.'

The Lord of hosts is with us;

the God of Jacob is our refuge —Psalm 46:10-11

My remembrance of experiencing God's handiwork in nature and human birth happened thirteen years ago at Lutherock, our campground in the area of Boone, NC. A group of women from St. Mark's were there on a weekend retreat studying the value of prayer and various ways of praying.

Vickie Hauser and Karin Doss were always our chief cooks at this event and Karin had recently given birth to Trey and brought him along. He became a tad fussy during our afternoon session and I knew that Vickie and Karin wanted to attend, so I offered to take Trey out on the porch where there were some rocking chairs.

It was such a gorgeous weekend and a warm breeze was blowing and the sky was that lovely "Carolina Blue" I had come to know and love! I nestled him in my arms and began singing some of the favorite songs from my grandkid's repertoire and he soon fell asleep in a most contented way. The beautiful setting, the quiet beauty of the mountains, and the feel of that tiny baby in my arms brought tears of joy and peace and it was truly a 'God Moment' for me.

When I think back on that weekend away from the hustle and bustle of life in Asheville, I reminisce on God's grace for all of us if we just take the time to quiet our lives, be still and know that He is with us.

Heavenly Father, let us be ever mindful of your grace and love that are with us every day. Help us spend each day of our lives knowing this. Thank you for loving us. Amen.

Connie Chaplin

Day 37

Hope Restored

*I pray that God, the source of **hope**, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident **hope** through the power of the Holy Spirit.*

—Romans 15:13 (NLT)

To hope is to look forward to with desire and reasonable confidence, to believe or trust. There are times in our lives when hope can seem far away or unreachable. When we experience the loss of someone close to us, it can leave us feeling alone and empty. At our Crisis Ministry sites, we see many families and individuals who are facing difficult situations in their lives and sometimes a listening ear and a quick response can open the door for hope to be restored, again. The story about James lets us see what a difference it makes when we take time to listen and respond to those around us who are hurting.

James walked through the doors of our Downtown Crisis Ministry site distraught and hopeless after losing the two anchors in his life, his wife and mother. He had just come from the Flint Bridge and was contemplating ending his life. While he was at the bridge, he thought about ABCCM and knew we were only a couple blocks away. He decided to come and reach out for some help. Our volunteers displayed compassion and offered a listening ear as he shared the painful events that had recently occurred in his life. They spent time praying with James and got him to a safe place where he could get some professional help and regain his stability. James returned a few weeks later with a smile on his face and a renewed sense of purpose. His hope had been restored.

This Lenten season, we invite you to come share the hope we have in Christ and be that listening ear and helping hand to those who are in need.

The Reverend Mary Messarra
ABCCM Crisis Ministry Director

Day 38

Resting in God's Unchanging Grace

Have you ever found yourself in a moment where time stood still, where your judgements, likes and dislikes, and thoughts seemed to slow down, so much so, that all you had was a feeling, a sense of awareness that everything happening at that moment was part of God's perfection? It's as if you no longer existed as a person in this body, in this form, but as if you were absorbed by the perfection of that moment, and what you thought no longer mattered, all that mattered was being present, allowing yourself to feel all that moment had to offer. Let it be. "Be still and know that I am God," from Psalm 46:10 rings ever true when trying to describe this experience. Mark 4:39 also seems to bring light to this as well, when Jesus rebukes the wind and says to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!'

I had one of these moments recently where I was sitting alone at a local coffee shop waiting for a friend to arrive. It became time for him to be there and even a few minutes passed. Suddenly, my thoughts shifted from being excited to see my friend to wondering if he was running late because something had come up. So, I thought to look at my phone to see if he had messaged me, but no message had come through, so my thoughts led to perhaps he is not going to make it. Then suddenly, there is a sound or a voice of a customer, that catches your attention and your thoughts shift away from that stream of thought, your attention shifts to observing what is happening around you, and you notice a father reading a book to his daughter as she bites into a cookie, and you notice the other guests nearby in conversation enjoying the opportunity to express themselves, and you notice the workers behind the counter discussing their surprise that it has slowed down briefly, after just finishing serving others during a busy spell. You notice your anxious thoughts have slowed down or even stopped, your breath seems to slow or even pause briefly without any effort on your part. A sense of peace pervades the space before you, and a sense of joy bounces around you. A sense of love and gratitude for this moment envelopes you... and your friend arrives.

Blake Crownover

Day 39

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. —Hebrews 13:15-16

What does God's goodness and love look like?

Helping people if they need something.

How can you share God's goodness and love with other people?

By letting them play with toys after me and sharing with them.
If they lost a toy and I found it I could bring it back to them.

Mason Frisella, Age 7

Day 40

Family comes in so many forms. Our blood related family, our church family, and the people we choose to be our family are some examples. I see God in every person I consider family, but living apart from both sides of Matt's and my family, especially with our 18 month old daughter, has had its challenges. As always, God has a sneaky way of placing exactly what we need in front of us long before we know we'll need it. We met our neighbor Paige when our daughter Annalise was 3 weeks old. We were in the depths of sleep deprivation, had just bought our house, and Matt hadn't even started his new job yet.. She was an immediate ray of sunshine in our lives and it was clear she had never met a stranger before. We started walking our dogs together, she made us beautiful cake pops, we had her over for dinner, and for the past year and a half she has cemented herself in our lives as family. I see God in her when she makes Annalise full-on belly laugh, when we cry together missing loved ones, and when we bake together. The community God sends us is so beautiful and diverse, and I'm so grateful that on a would be mundane walk through the neighborhood, God introduced us to a new member of our family.

Erin Bonawitz

Day 41

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. —Hebrews 12:1-2

My friend the Methodist minister of the church around the corner sat across from me. “The rumor is that they are coming after you with guns on Sunday, I thought you should know that.”

The struggle between members of our small rural north Florida church had reached this unbelievable level of anger. It was a painful struggle between families and friends and as the pastor I had become the target, quite literally between those who wanted to remain in the Presbyterian Church USA and those who wanted to leave the denomination.

Trial by fire in my first pastoral call was the only way to describe what it was like to have some folks reading the newspaper during worship, playing extremely inappropriate music by the volunteer organist, spreading rumors about my behavior in the community. Each Sunday I looked in the mirror and said, “God please don’t make me go today.” God answered, “You’ve been called here so quit whining and go!” At least that was the message.

And then a strange thing began to happen. Cards and notes appeared in the mail. “Hang in there, baby.” “Stay strong we love you.” “We are praying for you and God loves you.” They came from women all over Florida. On Sunday mornings, couples or small groups of people I didn’t know but who obviously knew Presbyterian liturgy would show up for worship. “We just happened to be passing through and decided to stop to give you a little encouragement” they would say.

These saints of the church helped see us through a very difficult time as a congregation and in particular this one very frightened new pastor. We were surrounded not only by the cloud of witnesses from the Old and New Testament but also by the witnesses living, breathing, and worshipping today. This is now a strong thriving and serving congregation.

Susan Denne

Day 42

God and Career

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. –Jeremiah 29: 11

When my daughter was finishing high school, I needed to work full time. I had worked as a pre-school teacher of 3 and 4 year old children, worked in our children's shoe store and as a substitute teacher. Before my children were born, I taught grades 7 through 11 in two junior-senior high schools. A neighbor told me that Montreat-Anderson College needed an Admissions Secretary. I had never done that type of work so was reluctant. I applied and was hired.

On the first day, I wondered how to turn on the electric typewriter. Yes, there was a lot to learn which I did. I worked there four years and during the first two years, Lori got free tuition as it was a two year college. It was a blessing that children of staff got free tuition. Then the college made agreements with other schools and when she was a senior at Lenoir Rhyne, she got free tuition there.

Upon leaving there, I worked at Highland Hospital as the medical records secretary and then as a secretary/transcriptionist for several psychiatrists during my six years there. I took advantage of their benefit of being reimbursed for classes taken and books. I got all but one of my classes paid for to get my Master's Degree to be a school counselor. (They closed, so my last class wasn't paid for.)

God was clearly showing his love and guidance during this part of my life. He always has, but this is the biggest situation that I recall how he cared for me when I needed direction.

Beverly Rauschenberger

Day 43

“A Samaritan traveling the road came on him. When he saw the man’s condition, his heart went out to him. He gave him first aid, disinfecting and bandaging his wounds. Then he lifted him onto his donkey, led him to an inn, and made him comfortable.”

—*Luke 10:33-34 (The Message)*

I can attest to the fact that there are Good Samaritans among us. Last July, my husband and I were in London on day two of a trip through England and Scotland. While crossing a busy street filled with vehicles and pedestrians, I took a tumble and in the process of trying to break my fall, dislocated my left shoulder.

The first evidence of Good Samaritans was all the people who surrounded me to protect me from any vehicles in the street that were beginning to move. The second was a very kind lady who came over to where I was sitting outside a coffee shop, offering her assistance in calling an ambulance, which she did, only to find out it may be some time before they could get to me due to the number of calls they had. Another kind person brought me a glass of water and then the coffee shop manager came out and offered us a seat inside out of the sun.

After waiting about 20 minutes, we decided a cab would be quicker, so my husband, Norm, left to find one. There was a line of off-duty cabs outside the coffee shop. He went to the first one, explained the situation, and the cabbie said he would take us immediately and didn’t want to be paid. Another Good Samaritan. (We paid him anyway!) So, off to the ER we went. The receptionist took my information, and because I was pretty shaky and in extreme pain, said that she would fast-track me and called for a wheelchair. Another Good Samaritan.

The ER staff got me squared away and put my shoulder back into place. Unfortunately, this whole event caused us to cut our trip short and return home, but God was certainly at work through the kindness and concern of all the Good Samaritans that came to my aid.

Thanks be to God!

Bonnie Richards

Day 44

For years, my sanctuary has been getting outside and moving. Whether that was a walk around the city, the neighborhood, or on a run. Often times, it has been my time of solitude. No music, no phone. Silence. For me to take in what is around me, to take deep breaths, meditate, have those conversations with God, and to get some exercise at the same time. In 2018, that changed because I was no longer alone. From her first week, my daughter Holden started to join me. This changed how I used my time. Now, instead of silence, I was talking to her and telling her all about what she was seeing. How what she was feeling on her skin was the wind or the sun shining down – or even those times when I did not plan properly and she was feeling rain.

She and I walk daily and have for the past 16 months of her life. She is now talking and instead of me telling her what she is seeing, she tells me. Earlier this week, we stopped to see “owers” (flowers) and I picked a small purple one to put on her stroller. I told her it was a purple flower. She repeated this back to me. And then she leaned in as close as she could to it, started at it and smiled. She was having her moment with God. I stopped the stroller so that the flower would stay in place and just watched.

For years, these walks have been my time with God. I cherish them. This particular walk shifted things as now it’s not just me having my moment. Holden is too.

Scottie Miller

St. Mark's Lutheran Church

10 North Liberty Street
Asheville, North Carolina 28801
(828) 253-0043 · www.stmarkslutheran.net

Office Hours

Monday - Thursday: 8:30 am to 4:30 pm
Friday: 8:30 am to 12:30 pm

Ministers

The People of God at St. Mark's

Staff

Pastor: The Reverend Matthew Smith
pastormatt@stmarkslutheran.net

Director of Discipleship and Faith Formation:
Deacon Katie Rivers
katierivers@stmarkslutheran.net

Cantor: David Anderson
cantordavid@stmarklutheran.net

Parish Administrator: Scottie Miller
scottiemiller@stmarkslutheran.net

Pastor of Caring Ministries: The Reverend Linda McHenry
pastorlinda@stmarkslutheran.net

Facilities Manager: Eileen Cram
eileencram@stmarkslutheran.net

Nursery Director: Ginger Dixon