

All We Need:

A Devotional Guide for Lent



Introduction

Welcome to All We Need, a devotional guide to the 2025 Lenten season.

Let's be honest. A whole season on need sounds a bit... tiresome, maybe? But this is need as you may never have considered it before.

When we talk about need this season, we mean things like beauty and rest and vulnerability. Human beings need so much more than basics like food and water and shelter.

Each week, we will explore a different need. On Ash Wednesday and on each following Sunday, we'll introduce the week's need. Then we will invite you to explore the concept through scripture stories, prayer, and spiritual practices.

Each week's theme is different, and you can expect a wide variety of devotional experience over the course of this Lent. If you don't like or don't connect with a particular week's theme, just wait a few days! Feel free to dabble, exploring the spiritual practices we provide. Keep what works for you and your spirituality; set aside what does not.

Choose your Lenten spiritual practice early (or don't!)

Early in the season, we'll invite you to select an individual devotional practice to follow throughout the season. You can pick anything that feels meaningful to your own spiritual practice: fasting, almsgiving, adding a constructive habit like reading the Bible or praying more regularly, volunteering at church—whatever you want. Even if you don't select a single practice, or if you have trouble choosing one, each entry in this devotional guide will provide a different type of spiritual practice for you to consider. If one of these works for you, you can always opt to stick with it.

Your needs and the needs of your neighbor

Whatever you choose, we invite you to consider how your devotions this Lent can help you grow more aware of the needs of your neighbor. How can you use your devotional practice to serve your neighbor's needs, too? For instance, if you decide to give up meat, chocolate, or Unnamed Expensive Coffee for Lent, how can you use the money you save to serve your church's hunger ministry? If you decide to create more time to rest, how can you help take the burden off other busy people as well?

Get used to asking these questions: What do I need? How does my neighbor need this, too?

Weekly themes

Initial Days of Lent, March 5, 2025

Our needs and the needs of others

Do you focus first on your own needs or on the needs of others? We tend to think of these as distinct categories. Scripture shows us that from God's perspective, our needs and the needs of our neighbor are similar and interconnected, and God will not be satisfied until everyone's needs are met.

First Week of Lent, March 9, 2025

The need to embrace vulnerability

Our society overemphasizes individualism: our strength, our bootstraps, our independence. Starting from the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, we examine how Jesus' humanity is fully realized through his vulnerability—and since Jesus embraced his vulnerability, we are called to do the same.

Second Week of Lent, March 16, 2025

The need for sleep

By following the story of Jesus and his friends' overactive ministry, we'll see how loss of sleep and sleep deprivation affect Jesus' tiny team. We'll find ways to honor God's call to rest: in sleep, in peaceful moments, and in honoring God's sabbath commandment.

Third Week of Lent, March 23, 2025

The need for an advocate

Testing and trial are core human experiences. When you find yourself in the midst of a test, it helps to have an advocate, someone who can work on your behalf and do what you cannot. This week, we consider how God steps in to advocate for us and how we can become advocates for others.

Fourth Week of Lent, March 30, 2025

The need for change

Change isn't just an inevitability; it's a force for goodness and new life. Jesus' parable of the prodigal child gives us a test case for change: change over the long haul, change in an instant, change in momentum, change of heart, and more.

Fifth Week of Lent, April 6, 2025

The need for beauty

We all need consumable resources like food, clothing, and shelter, but beauty feeds the human spirit. Every culture develops elaborate

expressions of beauty, and humans experience beauty across our senses. The scriptures point to the central importance of beauty in our devotion to God, too. God gives us the means to experience and produce beautiful things, and we, in turn, use beauty when we worship.

Palm and Passion Sunday and Holy Week, April 13, 2025

Jesus needs our help

While we know that Jesus must eat and drink and sleep, Jesus only expresses something he needs once: an animal to ride into Jerusalem. Here we consider how Jesus invites us to participate in the work of God.

Easter Sunday, April 20, 2025

The need to rejoice

Death is inevitable, even for Jesus. On Easter, we recognize that God turns this inevitability into a new possibility. Those raised from the dead must rejoice because they simply can do no other. And, as Jesus reminds us during his triumphal entry, if the hard-hearted humans will not rejoice, the rocks around us will!

Initial Days of Lent

Learning the Needs of Others Devotions by Justin Kosec

Ash Wednesday, March 5, 2025

Recognizing others' needs

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isaiah 58:6-7)

Do you fast during Lent or otherwise follow a spiritual discipline, like giving something up?

Many who habitually undertake this practice begin Lent with a plan. One of my friends fasts from all kinds of music except one artist, who he listens to all Lent. Another gives up work meetings, an idea that thrills me but also sounds terrifying. When I was a child, my family fasted from eating red meat on Fridays.

These days, I forget to give up something until Lent begins. Then I waffle on some kind of spiritual discipline until it's halfway through the season.

If you will choose to follow a spiritual discipline this Lent and don't already have a plan, start thinking about it now and make a choice by this weekend. Consider selecting something this year that connects to something you need.

Note that there are many types of fasts. You likely already know about fasting by refraining from certain types of food, as many Christians do during Lent. Some traditions refrain from eating meat during Lent, or just during certain days of the week. Some Christians fast during the daytime or give up breakfast. Imagine forgoing your morning cup of coffee. (Eek!)

You could try this type of fast for Lent, but remember that you do need to eat, and eating should be nourishing and good for your body. If you want to fast from food, consider a "fast" in a way that highlights this dimension of our relationship to food and drink. Fast by eating

more vegetables, by drinking more water, or by giving your body more of what it needs to be healthy. You could also “fast” from devices or from media, like Netflix. Give yourself an earlier bedtime.

As you do, consider what changes these experiences introduce into your day. What do you notice about yourself in the process? What does fasting teach you about what you need—or what you do not?

Reflection

Choose a spiritual discipline you’ll follow through the season of Lent. Write it in the space at the end of this devotional guide. Give yourself a couple days to consider your choice, if you need to, but if you’ll follow a discipline, select something by Sunday.

Prayer

God, you make each day anew so we have a fresh opportunity to draw closer to you. Make this Lent a spiritual season in which each day’s sunrise and sunset, each day’s hunger and satisfaction, and each day’s activity and exhaustion turn our minds to you. Amen.

Thursday, March 6, 2025

Knowing the needs of others

“Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. ...Is not this the fast that I choose: ...Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” (Isaiah 58:4, 6a, 7)

Yesterday we began the season of Lent by considering a spiritual discipline, and we encouraged you to select a discipline that connected in some way to something you need, like food or drink or rest. In many Christian traditions, spiritual disciplines are connected to depriving ourselves of what we need, but you can also pick a discipline that provides more of what you need, like rest.

Fasting can come in many shapes. The ancient prophet of Isaiah recognized this, too, writing that God desired God’s people to “fast” in a way that creates more justice in the world. Even traditional spiritual practices can help you accomplish this goal in the modern age.

If you refrain from eating meat this season, take your hamburger money and donate it to your church's work with a food pantry or other local agency that fights food insecurity.

If you fast from devices, try using your screen time to build relationships with those around you.

If you decide to drink more water this Lent, consider how can you help with local, regional, or global efforts to provide clean drinking water for others.

Remember this: if you need something, your neighbor needs it, too. God wants each of us to have everything we need.

Reflection

Consider how a Lenten spiritual discipline can help you broaden your awareness of the needs of others.

Prayer

Holy Spirit, you know everything I need, and I trust you to give me those things. Help me notice ways I can share my bread and clothes and food and water and resources--to show up for those who need me in the way you show up for me. Amen.

Friday, March 7, 2025

Praying for the unexplainable need

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matthew 6:7-8)

Do you know what you need today?

As you consider that question, recall the devotion from yesterday: do you have a good sense of what your neighbor needs, too?

You might be able to identify a certain number of things you need. On some level, we're all able to do this. Today, practice looking for the places where you notice needs you do not understand or cannot explain.

In your own heart, that might take the form of a yearning you do not understand or a growing sense of dissatisfaction with life's circumstances, even if you don't know what's bothering you.

In others, you might notice the sudden emotionalism in a child or a change in their behavior. You may reflect on the unexplained illness that renders a family member unable to eat or exercise or even get out of bed. You might consider a loved one who hurts in ways they cannot explain due to grief or mental illness or stress.

In any case, recognize that God knows what you need. God understands all our needs. God knows even the unexplained and unexplainable need, and God may already have plans to fulfill it before you even know how to ask.

This season, practice considering the needs of others whenever you think about your own needs. But you might have some questions: how do you care for someone when you don't understand what they need? How do you care for someone who cannot express what bothers them, the way they hurt, or the depth of their hunger? How do you care for someone when everything you have tried seems to fall short of what they truly need?

Remember that God knows what that person needs, too. You don't have to understand what they need to love them.

Reflection

In the margins of this book, write briefly about a time when an unknown need—either yours or someone else's—became clear to you.

Prayer

Before you pray, find an unknowable need in your heart, something you need but do not understand. Also consider the unknowable needs faced by a friend, loved one, neighbor, or even your city or church. Cup your hands and hold them before you. Imagine placing these unknowable needs into your empty hands and holding them as an offering to God while you pray the following words:

Jesus, I hold before you some unknowable needs. I can sense these needs, but I do not know what they look like or feel like. I do not understand them. But you do. Trade me. Take these needs, and give me enough bread and love and peace to share. Amen.

Saturday, March 8, 2025

The need to pray

But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:17-18)

Would your life fall apart if you didn't take time to pray to God?

It's okay to be honest about it. Every Christian's spirituality is a little different. Some need to serve others to feel closer to God. Some need to hear the words of scripture. Some need to pray.

If your life depends on daily prayer, take time to remember today how your life is different in times when you do *not* pray.

If you feel bored during prayer, or if you find that days have passed between moments of prayer, you may find that praying more regularly can even *create* a need for prayer. Try using this season to pray more regularly. You can even use modern technology to help you remember by setting a calendar reminder or alarm on your phone.

Reflection

Set an alarm (or several) today, and pray when that alarm goes off. If it would help, create a calendar appointment and duplicate today's prayer below in the appointment's note so you can easily find the words.

Reminder

Did you select a Lenten discipline? It's not too late. If you haven't yet done so but would like to, perhaps consider making this devotional guide your discipline! Simply commit to reading these devotions daily

Prayer

Here I am, Holy Spirit. Amen.

First Week of Lent

**The Need to Embrace Vulnerability
Devotions by Emily Trubey-Weller**

Sunday, March 9, 2025

Jesus' first temptation and the need to eat

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tested by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" (Luke 4:1-4)

Vulnerability. Ick. Did you squirm when you read that word? I always do.

Yet vulnerability is as common a human experience as can be. We all come into this world as needy little creatures, completely dependent on others for our care. Though we may not want to admit it, our vulnerability doesn't end in childhood. We continue to be vulnerable throughout our lives. As we grow and age, we might find ourselves vulnerable due to illness or injury, workplace stress, the pressures of parenting, natural disaster, the violence of a partner, or economic struggles. The circumstances change, but the reality does not. We are all vulnerable.

This week, we'll explore why acknowledging and embracing our vulnerability is necessary for our life as God's people.

Lent always begins with the familiar story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Jesus has been fasting for forty days, and he is famished. Though Jesus is fully God, he's also fully human. His need for food makes him as vulnerable as anyone. The first temptation the devil sets before him is the temptation to turn stone to bread. The devil suggests that Jesus is not actually as vulnerable as he appears. Surely he, of all people, has the power to provide sustenance for himself.

There are many different ways we can be vulnerable, and our physical needs, like the need for food, cover only some of our vulnerabilities. Jesus' response to the devil indicates that our human needs are deeper than the physical needs that might be most obvious.

Jesus refuses to use his power to create bread and instead points to how he would remain vulnerable even if he were to do so. Referencing Deuteronomy 8, Jesus says, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone'" (Luke 4:4), implying that even with bread, he'd still need the word of God to truly live. Even if every physical need

were filled, Jesus—the Messiah himself—would still need God to get by.

What does it mean to need God? Do you ever feel like you need God beyond the physical things God has provided for you in daily living? If so, at what moments is this need most apparent?

Reflection

Today, every time you feel hungry, your stomach grumbles, you reach for a snack or drink, or take time for a meal, pause for the length of one long breath to be mindful of God's presence with you.

Prayer

Ever-present One, draw me into deeper knowledge of my need for you. Amen.

Monday, March 10, 2025

Jesus' second temptation and the need to let go

Then the devil led [Jesus] up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" (Luke 4:5-8)

In the first temptation, Jesus resisted the devil's temptation to craft himself some nice crusty loaves or warm flatbread from rocks. In the second temptation, the devil comes back with a new way for Jesus to avoid his vulnerability. The devil promises to give Jesus authority over all of the kingdoms of the world if only Jesus will worship him.

What's the temptation here? The devil is exploiting Jesus' vulnerability to power. Given his status in society, Jesus has limited control over his own life and the lives of those he loves. The Roman Empire rules his people, who also defer to a class of priests within their own tradition. Jesus isn't setting the rules of the sociopolitical game. I wonder if he already suspects that his vulnerability to those in power will end up getting him killed. The devil tempts Jesus with enough power to gain control over his destiny and those of the people close to him. If Jesus governed the kingdoms of the world, surely he could rewrite the rules. Surely he could make things different.

What would you give up to rewrite life's rules for yourself or those you love? What compromise would you make to gain control over your own fortune, your child's future, your loved one's medical prognosis, your church or community's prospects? If you had to give up something significant to have the authority you need to set things right, would you do it?

The temptation is real.

Refusing the devil's offer, Jesus again puts himself in a position that is vulnerable before God. He won't cling to control. When tempted with earthly power, Jesus reminds himself of who is in divine control.

What does it mean to continue to turn to God even when we don't have power, when those with power over us do not have our best interests in mind, and when we cannot provide for ourselves or those we love?

Some would label this naivete, but I sense an invitation to tremendous freedom. When we don't cling to control or to our own authority, we are freed to know that we are loved, cherished, blessed, and guided, whether we stand atop the kingdoms of the world or are vulnerable to their whims.

Reflection

What are some of the organizations or institutions that hold power over you? Your employer, the healthcare system, your child's school, your family traditions, the criminal justice system, the IRS? Take a moment to name or jot down one or more of those you find most frustrating. Then pray the prayer below.

Prayer

God of all,

[breathe in]

in moments of powerlessness

[breathe out]

you are no less present.

[Repeat a few times, then spend time in silence.]

Amen.

Tuesday, March 11, 2025

Jesus' third temptation and the need to trust

Then the devil led [Jesus] to Jerusalem and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. (Luke 4:9-13)

In Jesus’ final temptation, the devil tempts him by proposing that Jesus throw himself from the roof of the temple in Jerusalem. Surely God will save Jesus from injury when he’s the very son of God. The devil even quotes from the psalms to justify this outcome.

This time, the devil targets Jesus’ susceptibility to doubt, tempting him with certainty. Will God protect him? He could test that theory right now and be sure.

But being such a good student of scripture, Jesus’ final response comes from Deuteronomy again: “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test’” (Deuteronomy 6:16). Jesus can place his trust in God’s goodness without testing it. He can live without proof. He has faith that God is trustworthy and true.

Where were you the last time you felt such confidence in someone’s ability to protect you? What age were you? What were the circumstances?

Perhaps you have never been blessed with that experience. Imperfect human beings are prone to letting one another down. We certainly have experiences when it feels like God has abandoned us at the moment we need someone to “bear us up,” too: when the results of the medical tests are not what we hoped, when the mortgage doesn’t come through, when we get another call from our kid’s school, when the boss calls us into their office and tells us to clean out our desk, when the news continues to speak of war and death and turmoil. We might be tempted to cry out, “Where are you God?!”

Here, Jesus reminds us that as difficult as they are, none of those experiences are a test of God’s faithfulness to us. The miracle is not that God corrects every wrong we will experience in this world. It’s not miraculous that God will catch Jesus with angels if he jumps from the temple. The miracle is that if Jesus were to crash to the ground

instead, God would still surround him with care. When the world around us drags us down, God is still on our side. When the worst happens, God still guards us and loves us as God's own.

Are we able to trust God's promise without testing it? If not, it is no less true.

Reflection

During the course of your day, how often do you trust your safety or wellbeing to something or someone else? Your car, the train, the bus driver, or other motorists on your commute? Your home security system? The advice of a doctor, friend, or Google search? The decisions made by public officials? Make note of how many instances of trust you encounter today. Each time, pray the simple prayer below.

Prayer

God, I trust you. Help my un-trust. Amen.

Wednesday, March 12, 2025

The need for protection

You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust."

For he will deliver you from the snare of the hunter
and from the deadly pestilence;
he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and defense. (Psalm 91:1-4)

In yesterday's devotion, Jesus trusted in God's protection without demanding proof or needing to test God's trustworthiness. He willingly put himself in a vulnerable position, trusting something beyond himself with his safety.

Can you remember a time when someone sheltered you? Sometimes, sheltering is a good thing. It means that we are kept safe from what would be harmful to us or what we aren't ready to face. Being sheltered also has negative connotations. It means that someone has over-protected us, keeping us from things we should have experienced. Which types of sheltering have you experienced? The balance is important. We all need to be a baby bird nestled under

the shelter of our mother bird's wings, and we all need to leave the nest to learn to fly.

You might be wondering how you can shelter or protect others appropriately, especially young or vulnerable people in your lives. But for now, practice embracing your own vulnerability. Today, pray along with the psalmist for God's protection to come to you. In what form do you need God's protection in your life? How might God serve as refuge and fortress for you?

Reflection

Read through the verses above from Psalm 93 three times. Underline, circle, or highlight the form(s) of protection that feel like what you need most right now.

Prayer

Pray the entirety of Psalm 91 today.

Thursday, March 13, 2025

Help for the vulnerable

...everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.
(Romans 10:13)

Calling on the name of the Lord is one way to embrace vulnerability. It is admitting that you need help, need God, need something beyond yourself.

This verse prompts us to acknowledge that as the people of God, we experience a particular need for vulnerability. Everyone—regardless of religion, ethnicity, or nationality—can find life more whole, satisfying, and manageable when they embrace vulnerability and accept help in their time of need. As followers of Jesus, we particularly need to embrace our vulnerability in order to receive God's help. It is in the fulfillment of this need that we learn to better love, trust, and embrace our divine provider. Having received God's help, we are better prepared to recognize one another's vulnerability with less scrutiny and judgment and to offer aid to one another in Jesus' name.

In contemporary American Christianity, we often hear “bootstraps” theology. It's the idea that God helps those who help themselves, an idea that does not appear in the Bible. What the apostle Paul writes here in Romans is the opposite. God helps those who need help and call out to God. That's it. Not the people who really,

really, *really* need help. Not those who have waited in line for their turn to get help. Not those who haven't been helped before. Not those who are from around here and need help. Not those who regularly worship God and need help. Not those who deserve help. *Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

What would it mean to really believe that?

We might open our hands more freely when our fellow human beings ask for aid, large or small.

We might open our mouths more freely to seek the help we need, if we thought all we had to do was ask without risk of judgment.

Reflection

All God's people have won the grand prize! For what do you call out to the Lord? In what ways, whether large (like eternal salvation) or small (like a good nap), can the goodness and grace of God save you today? Consider as many ways as possible. Remember that your fellow Christians are Jesus' hands and feet, so this grace may come through them. In an act of boldness, fill up the margin with your ideas.

Prayer

Save me, Lord! Amen and amen.

Friday, March 14, 2025

Embracing vulnerability

When the devil had finished every test, he departed from [Jesus] until an opportune time. Then Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding region. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. (Luke 4:13-15)

As Jesus leaves the temptations behind, he exits the wilderness in the power of the Spirit. Jesus has an intense ministry ahead of him. He will experience inspiring preaching and teaching, crowds of eager followers, powerful healings and miracles. Sometimes, it will seem

like he has left the devil's temptations behind to create the power, control, and authority he was tempted with for himself.

Yet Good Friday will find Jesus in a place of ultimate vulnerability.

When tempted by the devil, Jesus chooses vulnerability. Jesus decides that it is better to trust in the help of God than to rely on his own power. He will continue to choose vulnerability. The Lenten season leads us to Good Friday's cross. God accomplishes incredible things through vulnerability. On the cross, God doesn't save the world by meeting our vulnerability with divine strength. Rather, on the cross—as in the incarnation—God fully embraces our human vulnerability alongside us. Jesus' crucifixion is perhaps the ultimate example of the need to embrace vulnerability.

Jesus can't rise on Easter morning unless he dies first.

Reflection

If you chose a Lenten discipline at the beginning of the season, take a moment to return to it now. How is it going? Where have you found success in keeping your discipline and where have you fallen short? What has it taught you about your own vulnerability?

Prayer

God, teach me again of strength found in weakness and life found in death. Amen.

Saturday, March 15, 2025

Thanking God

[You shall say,] "When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. (Deuteronomy 26:6-10)

At first glance, this Deuteronomy text seems to have little to do with vulnerability at all. It begins by describing how the people of Israel should present an offering of their first fruits to God. Yet the root of this offering is thankfulness for the help they received when they were

most vulnerable, wandering in the wilderness after leaving slavery in Egypt. The words accompanying the offering emphasize how God helped them in their time of need.

Rather than mask their vulnerability behind a brave face, the people cried to God for aid. They were unable to liberate themselves, unable to cross the Red Sea without help, unable to sustain themselves in the wilderness or to cross into the Promised Land without aid. Their situation was so desperate, they had no choice but to embrace their vulnerability. Afterward, they were able to accept the help that God so readily gave. God took action on their behalf. God was the one who brought them out of slavery and oppression. God gave them the land they now inhabit. God made possible the fruit that they have grown. Everything they have comes from God's action, which came because they needed it. Now, they offer it back to God.

Can you think of a time when you had to ask for help, when you had no other choice than to admit your vulnerability? What feelings surface when you remember that time? Who came to your aid? If you can't think of a time, are you able to identify a time when you should have asked for help and didn't? What difference do you think asking would have made?

Reflection

Make an offering of thankfulness to God today for having helped you in your vulnerability, whether you knew it or not. This offering could be a monetary gift to God's work in the world, a pledge of your time given in service, or an offering of artwork or prayer

Prayer

Thank you, God, for meeting me in my vulnerability. Amen.

Second Week of Lent

The Need for Sleep Devotions by Justin Kosec

Sunday, March 16, 2025
The need for sleep

Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep...
(Luke 9:32a)

How often do you get a good night's sleep?

According to the National Council on Aging, up to a third of the population of the United States powers through the day on a bad night's sleep. Sleep costs nothing, yet the sleep industry is a multi-billion-dollar moneymaker—whether it's supplements, snoring aids, or prescription medication to calm the mind or body. As I type this devotion, a mattress ad plays in the sidebar of my chosen Bible website.

Sleep is a human necessity, yet our society struggles to find enough of it to feel satisfied.

Jesus' friends knew the feeling.

When Jesus brought them to the mountaintop on the day of his transfiguration, the gospel of Luke tells us that Peter was weighed down with sleep. Peter was present to witness a majestic transformation, the revelation of Jesus' nature as a divine child of heaven! But he was so sleepy that he almost missed out on the experience.

Why was Peter so tired? I think it had everything to do with a busy schedule. The disciples spent each day following Jesus, a person on a divine mission. Jesus rose early in the predawn morning. He often worked late after sunset. They were busy, and the work was important.

But by burning the candle at both ends, the disciples grew so tired that they almost missed the miracle of the transfiguration.

This week, we will follow the story of their sleep deprivation. As we do, consider your own relationship with sleep and with rest. Do you ever feel you're too tired to enjoy the best parts of your life? What keeps you (or those you know) from a good night's sleep? How can you use this season of Lent to develop better habits around sleep and rest?

Reflection

Begin a sleep log—tracking when you go to sleep, wake up, dream, how restful your sleep felt, and what interrupted your sleep.

Prayer

Holy Spirit, you know when I feel rested. You also know when I am tired, even when I believe I can push through my exhaustion. Help me recognize when I reach the edge of my energy. Give everyone the sleep we need. Amen.

Monday, March 17, 2025

Rest amid the storm

A windstorm suddenly arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves, but he was asleep. (Matthew 8:24)

I often went to movies as a high schooler, and I often saw the same man there. He would sit in the back corner of the theater, in a seat on the very top. He would snore through entire movies.

I don't know who this man was, or why he spent so much money to fall asleep during loud movies. But he clearly needed his rest! His boisterous breathing punctuated the quiet moments of a thoughtful drama, and no feat of cinematic pyrotechnics ever managed to rupture his slumber.

My friends and I would feel annoyed that he would disturb our entertainment with his own selfish soundtrack. We would look at him with astonishment, confusion, and wonder.

I imagine similar looks on the faces of the disciples who stared at Jesus as he slept in the wind-battered boat. After long days of preaching and miracle-working, Jesus conked out on the passage across the Sea of Galilee, sleeping straight through the tumult of that sudden storm. His friends couldn't understand his peaceful rest. Jesus awoke to admonish everyone—disciples, wind, and waves—to just calm down for a little bit.

There are moments in our lives when rest feels less like a necessity and more like a lavish luxury. We are so filled with anxiety that sleep is impossible, or so busy that we push off what our bodies need, or we feel so threatened, so traumatized, or so alert that sleep feels dangerous.

This is just how Jesus' friends felt in the boat, where the emergency of the moment made rest utterly incomprehensible to them. Yet by choosing to rest in a time when the conditions were right for storms,

Jesus demonstrated his trust in his friends. He trusted them to care for him while he rested. He demonstrated what we often fail to recognize: sleep is just a need, as huge and as powerful a need as the need to breathe or the need to eat.

Just ask my snoring moviegoer! I may have found it strange that he would pay to go to the movies to fall asleep amid the Hollywood noise. But he knew what Jesus discovered in that boat: at some points in life, you've got to take your sleep whenever and wherever you can get it.

This week, recognize that the storms in your life may not calm long enough for a good night's rest. What can you do to create a moment of rest in the middle of the storm?

Reflection

It's early in the week for your sleep log, but based on last night's sleep, project how many hours of sleep you should be able to get this week. Consider your weekly schedule and try to arrange for a moment of peace and quiet (or even a nap!) in your calendar.

Prayer

Jesus, you trusted your friends to care for you when you were tired. Show us someone who needs a moment of peace today. Help us calm their storm. Amen.

Tuesday, March 18, 2025

Getting away—and recognizing opportunities for connection

[After John the baptizer was beheaded, his] disciples came and took the body and buried him; then they went and told Jesus. Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them... (Matthew 14:12-14a)

Sometimes we just can't get away.

Maybe it's the work assignment that follows you home after you've left the office or the business that interrupts your vacation.

For me, it's often the child who interrupts an important adult conversation, or phone call, or sleep—well, any moment, really!

For Jesus, it was the crowds who followed him wherever he went. After hearing the news of his cousin John's death, Jesus just wanted to be alone, to take some time in solitary reflection and prayer. But the crowds would not let him rest. Like a child asking for a parent's help over and over again, the crowd felt so concerned about their own needs that they couldn't give Jesus a moment of solitude. Still, Jesus responded to yet another interruption with compassion and care, even in a moment when he was exhausted, grieved, and desperately in need of some rest.

What follows this story is one of the greatest miracles in the gospels, where Jesus healed the sick among the crowd and fed them with a meal of multiplied fish and bread.

Based on how frustrated I feel when a child interrupts my phone calls, I think I rarely model Christlike grace and compassion. That's because I am frequently more concerned about my own agenda, my own pressing needs and concerns. Even in a moment of deep personal need, Jesus could recognize that those who interrupted him did so because they craved a connection.

We don't have to multiply fish and bread to recognize when the people around us need us to let go of our busyness and give them a moment of our time. What seems like an interruption just might lead to a moment of unexpected abundance, even on the days when we feel like we have nothing more to offer.

At the same time, we need to recognize that we are not Jesus, and we simply cannot multiply fishes and bread when we have nothing left to give. Some days, our whole family shows up in the wilderness without food and without rest.

Yet Jesus fed a crowd of people so battered by the world that they lacked a single good dinner between them. Jesus can multiply our blessings even in the midst of exhaustion and short fuses, and even on days when we have nothing left to offer but leftovers.

Reflection

Write the name of someone who interrupted you today (or interrupts you often). Did you respond with compassion? If you fell short, consider why: are you feeling tired, worn out, or hungry? Then consider those who interrupted you: do their interruptions signal a need for connection? What small blessings do they bring you even in the midst of their interruptions?

Prayer

Jesus, when I arrive at the end of the day with nothing left to give, remind me that you are here. Please multiply the blessings I need to feel satisfied. Amen.

Wednesday, March 19, 2025

To get away (this time for real)

Immediately [after Jesus fed the multitude,] he made the disciples get into a boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When the evening came, he was there alone. ...And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. (Matthew 14:22-23, 25)

After feeding more than five thousand people with a miracle of multiplication, Jesus finally got away to that mountain to pray by himself.

In yesterday's devotion, we noticed that Jesus found compassion in his heart when he otherwise wanted to escape those needy crowds. After that, it could have been easy for Jesus to believe that he had to keep working. After all, his time on earth was short, and the people clearly needed his help. But he kept his commitment to himself to seek his time away, and he sought solitude in prayer after he lovingly dismissed the crowds.

The next morning, Jesus performed another fantastic miracle: he walked to the disciples across the water. The water-walking miracle tends to eclipse the detail about sleep in this story: after another long day of teaching and miracle-working, Jesus pulled an all-nighter in prayer. It wasn't a sleepy evening, in other words. At times, we need something more than sleep to find true rest. We may not even be able to sleep until we clear our minds through some other activity. For Jesus, that activity was prayer. What does it look like for you? What activity, hobby, or spiritual discipline helps clear your mind after a busy day or season?

Reflection

Use any wakeful insomniac moment this week as a call to prayer. Bookmark a passage in your Bible that you can read during a sleepless moment. The psalms are particularly wonderful for this—see Psalm 4, 6, 16, 42, 119:57-64; 119:145-152, and others. If you do not want to turn on a light in the middle of the night in order to read,

place a prayer reminder beside your bed, like a small stone or a cross. Take the object in your hand when you pray during your sleepless moment.

Prayer

Holy Spirit, when all the world rests, you remain wide awake, praying for us. When I cannot rest, give me a portion of your compassion for the world, and then I will join you in prayer. Amen.

Thursday, March 20, 2025

The occasional need to lose sleep

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, “My soul is deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want but what you want.” Then he came to his disciples and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, “So, could you not stay awake with me one hour?” (Matthew 26:36-40)

Sleep is a need shared by both Jesus and his disciples. Throughout the gospels Jesus demonstrates that, as with other needs, we sometimes choose to go without sleep so that we can provide for others. This is a fact of life that many new parents recognize, for instance.

The busyness of Jesus’ ministry must have led to plenty of sleepless nights. Today, we would say that Jesus and his disciples have a sleep debt—they have lost sleep they needed. Unfortunately, this means that they arrive in the garden too tired to stay awake with Jesus on the last night of his life, even though he has asked them to lose a little sleep to support him in a dire time.

Jesus’ friends lost sleep because they were doing immensely important work. Often, the work that consumes our energy during the day feels important, too. We press so hard, work so hard, that we often arrive at the end of the day too exhausted to pay attention to the ones who need us. Even when the work is important, the sleep debt adds up, and we may have to pay it on the very day someone needs us the most.

How often do we give our best selves to our work and leave little for those we love? Jesus provided so regularly for his friends that they

missed the opportunity to provide for him. All it cost them was a little sleep.

Reflection

Consider those around you who may not receive a good night's sleep. You may even take the direct approach and ask people you know if they have been resting well lately. Commit to do something for others to help them find some rest, or stay with them in the midst of their sleeplessness.

Prayer

Holy Spirit, show me a way to share my energy with others who need rest this week. Amen.

Friday, March 21, 2025

Needing sabbath

If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth. (Isaiah 58:13-14a)

As we head into the weekend, this is the perfect time to remember that God provides for our rest by commanding a full day of sabbath in the rhythm of our weeks.

For modern Christians, sabbath often looks like trying to take a day of rest—trying to carve out downtime in the midst of busy work, school, sports, and social schedules. It's okay to be honest about it; church may or may not fit into that downtime, and many people evaluate whether they have the energy to mobilize for worship on a week-by-week basis.

But if we do not make time to worship weekly, we miss a crucial component of the commandment to rest. Worship helps cultivate a restful mindset, because in worship, we can set down all the day-to-day troubles of the world to reconnect with the God who loves us.

We must work to live. But we are not created solely to be busy, even on our days off. On the contrary, we are actually created to require a rhythm of daily rest. God's commandment to honor the Sabbath is an

invitation to release the pressure of the world at least once weekly, to find rest in the word of God with the people of God.

Worship and sabbath don't happen on their own. Both take planning, care, and attention. Today is Friday. Can you plan your weekend worship with God? What do you need to do to make worship possible for you this weekend? Consider what tasks you need to do in advance, or how you can prepare yourself or your family. Maybe you even need to go to bed early so you can get a good night's rest!

(Would you expect any other suggestion this week?)

Reflection

Plan to go to church this weekend. Has it been a while since you've attended? Try a new church or just go to the one you love. Have grace with yourself if you work on the weekend; try to bring some part of your church's weekend worship (like a televised service, or a YouTube sermon, or a communion visit with the pastor) into a day off this week.

Prayer

God, as I prepare to worship you this week, help me push aside every distraction so I can reconnect with you. Amen.

Saturday, March 22, 2025

Needing to worship when you're tired

On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight. There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting. A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead. (Acts 20:7, 9)

As a pastor, I'm going to expose a small secret shared by many people in professional ministry: we know you've nodded off in worship before—probably when we've been speaking—and we noticed! But don't worry. I've done it, too.

I've often read this passage from Acts, where Eutychus falls from the window and dies, and felt sympathetic to poor Eutychus, even as a

preacher. As we saw earlier in the week, even Jesus' best friends could fall asleep while Jesus himself prayed only feet away. How could we expect to do any better? Christians have been falling asleep in church since there was church.

But that day Eutychus fell asleep and died in worship, Paul raised him from the dead... and then Paul continued preaching until dawn! Eutychus was fine, and everyone went home happy in the end.

This week, these devotions have tried to encourage healthful sleeping, moments of rejuvenation, and even careful planning for the sabbath. But the week is still so busy! And even if you plan carefully and sleep well all week, you might still find yourself Eutychus-ing in the middle of worship. Somewhere in church this weekend, almost certainly in *your* church, someone will play Eutychus. It might even be you.

In one church, I had a parishioner who would often tell me I delivered a great sermon, even when I was not the preacher. I often saw him snoozing gently in one of the rows in the front, our community's very own local Eutychus.

We could judge our local Eutychuses, but I wouldn't recommend it. After all, in Troas, Eutychus was the only one of those first Christians who could say what it was like to be raised from the dead.

Reflection

Embrace your Eutychus moments. If you go to church with anyone this weekend, make a pact to admit to one another if you temporarily doze off during worship. Then discuss how you've been sleeping this week. You may even want to review the results of your sleep log, if you started one.

Prayer

God, I know I have not always given you my full attention, even when I try to worship you. But even when I am tired, I can come to you for renewal; please give me what I need. Amen.

Third Week of Lent

The Need for an Advocate Devotions by Victoria Larson

Sunday, March 23, 2025

Needing an advocate

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:1-2)

If you've ever applied for college, for a job you wanted, or for a specialized program, then surely you've had to make one of my least-favorite requests: that someone write you a letter of recommendation.

Asking someone to take time out of their day to sit down, write "to whom it may concern," and then say nice things about me for an entire page makes me itchy. I hate inconveniencing people, and hate it even more when it's for my personal benefit. I particularly hate the vulnerability it involves: I've asked for at least a dozen letters of recommendation over the course of my life, and I have no idea what any of them have said. I just have to trust that the person I've asked will advocate for me, speaking for me and my work when there's no more I can do for myself.

In his first letter, John frames Jesus as a sort of advocate. Jesus stands before God, whose justice is perfect, and pleads on your behalf and mine because we've run afoul of God's justice a time or two (thousand). But for John, there's a crucial component to Jesus' advocacy: Jesus doesn't appeal to God on the basis of our goodness but of his own. It's like Jesus writes each of us a letter of recommendation not based on how well we did, but just because he loves us. He knows that God will eagerly temper that perfect justice with perfect mercy if he asks.

Have you ever had to write a letter of recommendation or serve as a job reference for someone? Was it an onerous task? Was there joy in supporting someone you wanted to succeed? Do you think Jesus might experience a similar joy in advocating for us? If you had to ask someone for a letter of recommendation today, who would you ask?

Reflection

If you have an inclination toward creative writing, consider drafting a letter of recommendation from Jesus on your behalf. If that's not your thing, think of someone striving for a goal that you genuinely hope

they achieve. Tell them so, or, with their permission, recommend them to someone who could help them toward that goal.

Prayer

Jesus, you are my advocate. You speak for me when I can't speak for myself. You put your goodness between me and what I've done wrong. Open my heart to accept that love, and help me reflect it to others. Amen.

Monday, March 24, 2025

Needing a defender

Who is to condemn? It is Christ who died, or rather, who was raised, who is also at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.
(Romans 8:34)

The New Testament points us to Jesus as our first and best advocate in a world where the thing we can't ever do on our own is to be perfect. If you're someone with perfectionistic tendencies, this truth may be both recurring and especially annoying to you. In this life, we fall short of our own expectations and those of others. We sin. When we do, we have Jesus, who will intercede and defend us from what we suspect or know we deserve, someone who loves us so deeply that not even our greatest failures separate us from him.

A centuries-old prayer practice called the daily examen asks practitioners to take stock of the preceding day before going to sleep. Reviewing the day means remembering the places where they have failed, whether the failure was big or small. The practice doesn't end in guilt, though; it then invites users to ask for God's forgiveness and open themselves to receive it. The prayer that requires us to admit our imperfection also requires us to accept God's grace, to feel ourselves as creatures who fall short, but whom Christ defends and raises.

How does this resonate with you? What feels more difficult: cultivating your own perfection or recognizing your sins and mistakes, accepting Jesus' help, and receiving God's grace?

Reflection

Try to pray the daily examen today. There are several websites that can walk you through it in detail, or you can follow this shorthand:¹

Relish the moments that went well and all of the gifts I have today.

Request the Spirit to lead me through my review of the day.

Review the day.

Repent of any mistakes or failures.

Resolve, in concrete ways, to live tomorrow well.

Prayer

Jesus, I know I'm not perfect, but you are, and your love for me is perfect, too. Defend me from the spiritual cost of my sins and my mistakes and strengthen me to face the consequences of my actions with honesty, courage, and a genuine desire to repair what I've broken and reconcile with people I've hurt. Open my heart to receive your help and your forgiveness so that tomorrow can be a new day. Amen.

Take a moment of quiet and visualize Jesus interceding for you. Hold your hands open to receive God's forgiveness for you.

Tuesday, March 25, 2025

Needing a protector

*The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer,
my God, my rock in whom I take refuge,
my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. (Psalm 18:2)*

The Bible overflows with images of God as a protector. Lots of those images picture God as a hard, unbreakable shelter: a rock, a fortress, a shield. A famous hymn adapts this imagery, petitioning a rocky, obdurate God to be “cleft for me,” letting the singer “hide myself in thee.” It's a powerful image for God, projecting strength, durability, infallibility, and safety.

There's also biblical imagery that evokes a softer kind of protection. The reign of God is compared to a tree in which all the birds of the air could make a nest (Matthew 13:32-33). Jesus compares himself to a mother hen who longs to gather her chicks under her wings (Luke 13:34). Deuteronomy compares God to an eagle hovering over her

¹ Mark Thibodeaux, “Try the Daily Examen,” Loyola Press website.

<https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/ignatian-spirituality/examen-and-ignatian-prayer/how-can-i-pray-try-the-daily-examen/>.

eaglets in the nest (Deuteronomy 32:11-12). Such images project nurture, tenderness, and compassion.

Which set of images resonates more deeply for you? Do you find that your answer has changed at different times of your life or in different circumstances? These images are so different that they might seem at odds with one another, but their diversity can make our ways of imagining how God protects us even more robust.

Reflection

Reflect on circumstances in your life that make you long for protection, either for yourself or someone else: a conflict with a colleague or partner, the risks you see a child encounter, or an aging loved one who is growing increasingly fragile. Imagine the person at the heart of that circumstance sheltered in a stony fortress. Then, picture them sheltered under God's holy wings. Which image meets your needs best right now?

Now consider what kind of help you find yourself most comfortable offering to those who ask: is it strong protection or nurturing tenderness? How easy or difficult is it for you to adapt to the needs of different situations? How might you grow in your ability to offer different kinds of help?

Prayer

God, I bring you circumstances in my life that I can't handle on my own. Help me. Give me shelter within your love, so that whatever happens, I can rest securely in you. From a place of shelter and safety, help me grow in my ability to meet others with the kind of help they truly need. Amen.

Wednesday, March 26, 2025

Needing a champion

Do not fear them, for it is the Lord your God who fights for you.
(Deuteronomy 3:22)

These words from Deuteronomy come from Moses. He's speaking to the Israelites who have been wandering through the wilderness for forty years, and who now stand just outside the land that God promised to them, the land that they've been seeking for so long. Along the way, the Israelites have encountered people hostile to

them, but, as Moses reminds them now, God fought on their side and brought them safely through the danger to where they stand now.

Where are you journeying now? Maybe you're on a literal trip, traveling from point A to point B. Maybe your journey is educational or professional, or perhaps it has to do with an upcoming transition in your life. In any case, bring to mind your "promised land," the goal you've been working toward for a long time.

Imagine you're right on the brink of achieving it.

And now, imagine stopping and remembering every mile of the journey you took... and remembering, as you do, that God was with you in each moment. God has been working for your good all along.

Reflection

As you look back over the journey you've taken through your life, what moments can you identify in hindsight when God was working for your good? Drawing on yesterday's reflection, consider: when has God been a rocky fortress for you? When has God given you a sheltering wing?

Prayer

Holy Spirit, you are always with me. I don't always feel you. I don't always realize you're there or understand what you're doing. But I believe and trust that you love me, that you're sustaining me, and that you're bringing me where I need to go. Amen.

Thursday, March 27, 2025

Needing a nourisher

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (Genesis 2:8-9)

There's a magnet on my refrigerator that reads, "Love people: Cook them tasty food."

There's something divine in that. One of the very first stories of the Bible describes how God plants a garden in Eden, full of trees that are not only beautiful but good for food. God creates the human creature and tells it, "You can eat the fruit of any tree in this garden, except two." God loves people and grows them tasty food.

Of course, the rest of the story isn't so straightforward. The food that God has created becomes a site of division from God as Adam and Eve take what God hasn't permitted them to have. Their wrongful eating resonates with our own extraordinarily complicated relationship with food, ranging from diet culture to disordered eating to food insecurity.

Despite all this, food remains one of the surest recurring signs of God's love for us. Whenever we sit down to a meal, we have the opportunity to remember that the food in front of us came to be there by a panoply of small miracles: a tiny seed that burst open into a fruitful plant, patient hands that cultivated and harvested the fruit, people who brought it to our stores and into our homes and made it into something delicious. When we look at a plate of food, remember all of this, and thank God for it, food can transform from a site of division from God to a place where we can see the manifold and extraordinary ways that God chooses to enter our everyday lives to nourish us, care for us, and give us what we need to thrive.

Reflection

How can you share the love of God by sharing food with those who don't have enough? This week, donate to or volunteer at a local food pantry; make a casserole for a local food ministry; buy snacks in bulk to keep in your car and give away; sign up for a meal train for someone who needs a little extra help.

Prayer

God, you open your hand in blessing and satisfy the needs of every living thing. Thank you for providing everything I need. Lead me to share what you have given me so generously with others. Amen.

Friday, March 28, 2025

Needing someone to cover us

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:27-28)

If you've been to a few baptisms, you may have noticed a trend in baptismal wear. In many Christian traditions, the person being baptized is dressed in white. Sometimes the garment carries a special personal history, having belonged to the family for a long time

and having been used for generations of baptism. Sometimes the garment is brand-new.

The meaning of the white garment goes beyond a personal family history. The garment helps us visualize something that Paul writes about in Galatians: when we are baptized, “we have clothed ourselves with Christ,” and there are no longer divisions between us.

A seminary professor once explained it to me this way: the garment symbolizes Christ covering us with his own righteousness, so that when God looks at us, God doesn't see our imperfection but Jesus' own perfection. This is one of the ways that Jesus advocates for us.

Because Jesus has helped us in this way, we become capable of helping others in the same way. Martin Luther, for example, writes about how we can use our own good reputation like a cloak to help cover one another when we're exposed. Rather than assuming the worst about someone, we instead make a deliberate choice to interpret their actions in the most generous possible light. Imagine a world in which everyone practices the same graciousness with one another that Jesus practices with us.

Reflection

Bring to mind something that someone has done lately that struck you the wrong way. What's the worst possible way you can interpret that person's intentions? What's the best possible way? Today, choose to cover them with the cloak of your own honor, as Luther would put it: assume the best about their intentions.

Prayer

Jesus, sometimes it's hard not to take a hurt personally. In moments when I struggle to believe the best possible interpretation about someone's actions, remind me that in my baptism, you covered me with your own righteousness. Help me respond to others with the grace you have given me. Amen.

Saturday, March 29, 2025

Needing a supporter

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he considered me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 1:12-14)

How's your self-confidence lately? For me, it's a resource that ebbs and flows. Sometimes, I really need a supporter: someone who believes in me and in the value of the gifts I have to offer.

Paul points to Jesus as his supporter. Paul was a person who started out persecuting the very community he eventually came to lead. He was, in his own words, "a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence." But Jesus saw more in him than that. Despite his past and the hurt that he had caused, Jesus chose Paul to be a messenger of the gospel.

Jesus has chosen you, too. In choosing you, Jesus didn't leave you alone to figure it out. Jesus' own Spirit supports you, strengthens you, and equips you to reflect the image of God that you carry to the world. No one else can reflect the same picture of the divine that you do: you are fearfully and wonderfully made, and no one else is quite like you.

What does it feel like to have a savior who believes this so sincerely about you? Who has chosen you for their service? Who has absolutely no question that their grace is sufficient for you? Who puts people in your life to encourage and support you?

Reflection

Make three lists in the corner of this page. First, write down the names of three people who have been supporters and signs of God's support for you. Then, write down three gifts they have named in you. Finally, write down the names of three people in whom you see gifts for serving God in the world. Today, commit to telling those people what you see in them.

Prayer

Holy Spirit, strengthen me. Jesus, guide me. Creator God, encourage me. Amen.

Fourth Week of Lent

The Need for Change Devotions by Emily Trubey- Weller

Sunday, March 30, 2025

The need for change

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being! (2 Corinthians 5:17)

I have a new favorite hymn for this Lenten season. It's called "Hymn of Promise," and it was written by Natalie Sleeth in 1986.

The text begins:

*In the bulb, there is a flower,
in the seed, an apple tree.
In cocoons, a hidden promise,
butterflies will soon be free.
In the cold and snow of winter,
there's a spring that waits to be,
unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.²*

At first, the hymn's straightforward words and singable tune might seem simplistic, childish, and sentimental. This text may even evoke a little sigh at the end of each line. The dry bulb becomes a beautiful blossom! The little seed, a big juicy fruit! The caterpillar, a fluttering butterfly! Ah, how nice.

Yet that gloss conceals one dark reality present in each of these innocent-seeming examples: each of these transformations requires change.

Oh no, not change! Ahhh! Heaven help us.

Have you heard the one-line joke about "the last seven words of the church," a play on Jesus' seven last words from the cross? It's often heard among people who study church leadership. The seven last words of the church are: "We have never done it that way!" It evokes a chuckle or at least a groan every time, because these are familiar words for anyone who's been around the institutional church for a while. Not only do churches actually avoid change, but our talk about avoiding change is so frequent it's pathological.

Yet change is something we need as individuals and as a church.

Reflection

Reflect on a recent time when you resisted change. What about the change was so difficult to accept?

² "Hymn of Promise," Natalie Sleeth, © 1986 Hope Publishing Company.

Prayer

God of all, change is sometimes so difficult. Be present with me in the pain that comes with change. Amen.

Monday, March 31, 2025

The change of growth

The Lord said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.” And so that place is called Gilgal to this day. While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal, they kept the Passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and roasted grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year. (Joshua 5:9-12)

The change in Joshua 5 is a big one, and it has been coming for an entire generation. After the Israelites have crossed the Jordan River into the promised land, God rolls away the disgrace of Egypt from all the people. What a big weight that must be! It’s the disgrace of having been enslaved, of indignities born over decades, of oppression, and of wandering homeless in the wilderness for a generation. Now, it’s all gone.

While the Israelites are still in Gilgal, on the day after Passover, they eat the first crops produced by their own land. With that, the manna and quail that God provided to sustain them in the wilderness cease. Without this change, the people of Israel would be unable to move into their own land fully. With disgrace weighing them down and daily dependence on manna, they can’t grow into the people God now calls them to be.

Though some of the people may have resisted giving up the easy meal of manna and quail, I can imagine that eating food they grew and prepared themselves was much more satisfying, and potentially more delicious, too. The change may have been scary and filled with uncertainty, but it was necessary for the people to move forward.

Growth—physical, emotional, and spiritual—is nothing but change. Change enables us to move from infancy through childhood and adolescence into adulthood. Change allows us to choose a new direction when things aren’t going well. Change allows us to reconcile when mistakes have been made. Change gives life motion.

Reflection

Identify a sign of something that has changed through growth: pencil on the wall marking a child's height, outgrown clothes, photos of yourself from childhood, signs of the great new habit you've formed or the old bad habit you've dropped, new ministries that your congregation has begun...

Prayer

God, thank you for the gift of change. Amen.

Tuesday, April 1, 2025

The change of forgiveness

*Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.*

*Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

*While I kept silent, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.*

*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah*

*Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;*

*I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin. (Psalm 32:1-5)*

The change that the psalmist desires today is forgiveness, an erasure or covering of past sins. Forgiveness is perhaps one of the most striking forms of change we encounter in our lives. To meet someone who has been given another chance and is aware of the opportunity is truly inspiring. There is a lightness and a contagious joy. I am blessed to encounter folks like this daily in my ministry, residents in our church's housing for folks in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. They come for their second, fourth, sixth chance at sobriety, and find themselves welcomed back once again. The psalmist acknowledges that those who have been forgiven are happy (Psalm 32:1) and that they find relief when they confess their sin to the Lord and receive forgiveness (Psalm 32:5).

But forgiveness doesn't really depend on the forgiven party. Change within ourselves allows us to forgive, regardless of whether or not the one who made the mistake is repentant. Even when the forgiven party doesn't change, something in the forgiver does. Nursing a grudge, staying angry, and withholding forgiveness takes energy. It keeps us bound. Forgiveness is something that frees the forgiver at

least as much as the one being forgiven. Forgiveness can also be practiced when the guilty party is long gone, or when you can no longer have a relationship with them for the sake of your own safety. Even if reconciliation between the parties isn't possible, forgiveness lightens the load.

Reflection

Identify one person who has wronged you at some point in your life (their wrongdoing may be great or tiny, long ago or recent). Reflect on what it would take for you to forgive that person.

Prayer

God, help me to forgive as you have forgiven. Amen.

Wednesday, April 2, 2025

Change that takes time

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 wealth that will belong to me.' So he divided his assets between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living..." (Luke 15:11-13)

Some changes are daily occurrences we hardly consider, like the length of a day or the growth of our fingernails. Other changes, though incremental, are meticulously documented, like the height of a child marked on the doorframe. Some changes just take time, whether we want them to or not, like the fruiting of a tree over a season or the expansion of patience over the course of a lifetime. And some changes, though they seem huge, are actually the result of dozens of small changes that have come together in a culminating moment, like a high school senior walking across the stage at graduation.

I wonder how this monumental change, this decision to ask for his inheritance and to leave home, occurred for the so-called prodigal son.

It seems impulsive, but I think it may be a sort of culminating change, one that happened in small ways over time. I wonder, has resentment been building for years? Has he kept a diary of all the annoyances

and injustices his dad and older brother committed? Does he have a journal of the dreams he'll fulfill when he finally leaves home? Has he made a plan for what he'll do with this inheritance? He must feel that this is a change he needs in order to move forward with his life.

When have you needed a change that took time? Did it occur because of accumulated resentment, perhaps like the prodigal son's? Was it a change that took time and education to happen, like a change in career? Was it a change in a relationship made over time, little steps closer to or further away from one another?

When such changes over time are made intentionally, they are thoughtful and deliberate. When such changes over time build unexamined beneath the surface, they can create strife, resentment, disillusionment. God can work within it, either way, as we'll continue to see in the parable.

Reflection

Choose one thing you need to change, something that will take time. Take one small action toward that change today.

Prayer

God of grace, may I know your presence through the glacial process of change. Amen.

Thursday, April 3, 2025

Change in an instant

"...When [the son] had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything..." (Luke 15:14-16)

Some changes take time. Others happen in an instant.

A marriage begins with the words "I do." A career ends with the words "I quit." A storm blows through in a couple of hours and leaves lives totally upended in its wake. A phone call divides time, and now, there's always a time before it happened and a time after. Some changes that happen quickly leave us elated. Others leave us devastated.

For the prodigal son, it's the latter. When the famine hits, change comes swiftly. He goes from living it up to feeding pigs in a handful of verses. I'm sure he would hardly describe this change as necessary or desired. Presumably he's been enjoying his new life in the foreign land. Not all changes are good ones, and a turn of fate in which this son and the society around him are short on food is not a good one. God is still at work within these dire circumstances. The son's hunger will motivate him to change direction. But for today, before his change of heart, stay with him in bewilderment as he feeds those pigs, hardly able to wrap his mind around this quick change in his fate.

When has your life changed so quickly it left you dizzy? Have you experienced something that changed quickly for the better? How about a tragic change that happened overnight?

Reflection

Yesterday, you took a small action toward a slow change. Today, see how you can work with a quick change. What is something that shifted suddenly within the past few days that might offer you new possibilities? Perhaps a canceled appointment opens up your schedule, bad news from a family friend sets you back, you discover an unexpected deposit in your bank account or a \$5 bill in the parking lot, your child or grandchild's agenda changes, or a new ministry or volunteer possibility is announced at church. What opportunity does that change present for you?

Prayer

God, work within the quick changes and shifts of my daily life. Whether the changes are desired or unwanted, needed or unnoticed, use them to make a new way for you to work in my life. Amen.

Friday, April 4, 2025

Change of momentum

"...But when [the son] came to his senses, 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...”
(Luke 15:17-24)

Though it is sometimes preached as a story about a change of heart, I believe that the characters in this parable actually play stable, predictable roles. The circumstances around them change, but the characters themselves are consistent. What changes is their momentum.

The lost son and the father don’t have to change their personalities in order to reconcile. They need only change their speed and direction. After his wealth is squandered, the lost son changes his course. He no longer runs away from his family but returns to them. The father, who may well have been waiting at the door, is no longer standing still as he rushes out to greet him. The father is still loving, gracious, and patient, but it’s now an active love, one that seeks the son out and embracing him rather than standing stoic and quiet as he leaves. The newly returned son is still looking out for his own interests and desires. He didn’t come back because he felt badly about what he did. He returned because his stomach was rumbling. The motivation, though, is beside the point. Now that he moves toward his family rather than away, transformation is possible.

Sometimes, if only we can change our momentum, moving in a new direction (or moving at all), it will make all the difference. God can work with that. Our heart, our intentions, and our attitudes will follow in time.

Reflection

Today, each time you change direction, orientation, or momentum—from sitting or standing to walking, turning on foot or in the car, going back to get something you’ve forgotten—pray the following short prayer. It will likely seem ridiculously frequent, and you may forget more than once. That’s okay. Just resume the practice again when you remember.

Prayer

Thank you for my ability to change. Amen.

Saturday, April 5, 2025

Change for us

“Now his elder son was in the field, and as 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 assets 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.’” (Luke 15:25-32)

Yesterday’s devotions focused on a change in momentum. Sometimes, necessary change is deeper.

In his telling of this parable, Jesus offers the prospect of true, transformational change to us and to the older son. Can the older son drop the guarded role of hardworking eldest like a tree drops its leaves in fall and lays itself bare to prepare for a new season? Can he grow into the forgiveness his father has extended, unfurling from his hard exterior like a seed that bursts forth into a green shoot? Can he allow grace to *really* change him, to alter who he is down to the cellular level like a caterpillar metamorphosing in its cocoon? And can we? Change is not only new life: it is also death. A real and sincere change requires old ways to pass away before new ones can take hold.

“Hymn of Promise,” my new favorite Lenten hymn, gets at that, too. For a hymn that might seem simplistic, it isn’t. Its writer has found a way to communicate deep theological realities using the relatable images all around us. The final verse goes like this:

*In our end is our beginning,
in our time, infinity.
In our doubt, there is believing,
in our life, eternity.
In our death, a resurrection,
at the last, a victory.
Unrevealed until its season,*

*something God alone can see.*³

We need change to grow, to live, to die, and to rise.

Reflection

When has gone through such transformational change that your old self would no longer recognize it? Would your childhood or teenage self recognize you as an adult? What did you have to release to become who you are now? How has God been at work?

Prayer

Gracious God, wrap us in the cocoon of your grace each day, that we might daily emerge as new creatures nurtured in your love. Amen.

Fifth Week of Lent

The Need for Beauty Devotions by Linnéa Clark

Sunday, April 6, 2025

The saturation of beauty

The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (John 12:3b)

In college, I spent a summer studying in Paris. Alone in a strange city, I needed an anchor for my days, so I began attending the daily vespers service at Notre Dame de Paris. Worship attendance meant I got to skip the line of tourists to experience the building in a different way: not as a museum, but as a living, functioning church.

As I sang “may my prayer rise before you as incense” with the rest of the congregation, the acolyte lit a huge incense burner in front of the altar. While I watched the smoke wreath its way into the heights of the cathedral, catching the afternoon light, the smell of frankincense spread outward, saturating the air. Not all scents are as visible as burning incense, but when I imagine Mary in John 12 opening the jar of nard and beginning to smooth it over Jesus’ feet, I think of the incense. In my imagination, the nard winds through the room, touching every corner. The perfume’s saturation marks the space as sacred, special.

³ “Hymn of Promise,” Natalie Sleeth, © 1986 Hope Publishing Company.

Daily, I observed the cathedral transform from a tourist attraction to a sacred space, set apart by the burning incense. Likewise, Mary's perfume transforms her home from a utilitarian space to a precious one, dedicated to the holy work of tender care. The saturating fragrance sanctifies, though the space is visually unchanged.

God moves into the ordinary spaces of our lives like a beautiful fragrance, sanctifying them in every corner.

Reflection

Light your favorite scented candle or apply your favorite perfume or cologne and pause for a quiet moment. Close your eyes if desired and breathe slowly. Focus on your sense of smell as the room fills with the odor. If you are sensitive to fragrances or do not have the ability to smell, observe how a flickering candle or warm-hued lighting changes the mood of your space.

Prayer

God, make my life fragrant with your presence. Saturate every corner of my being. Embrace my ordinary moments and sanctify them. Help me to find the beauty of your presence everywhere, in my struggles and joys, my friends and my neighbors. Amen.

Monday, April 7, 2025

Beauty by hand

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. (John 12:3a)

When I'm not working as a pastor or writing devotional entries like this one, I spend time on traditional fiber arts like spinning and weaving. I maintain my loom and my spinning wheel with a beeswax paste. Twice a year, I apply the wax to both pieces of equipment with clean rags. It's a messy job, but the beeswax smells warm and heavenly. It melts all over my hands as I rub it into the wood. By the time I'm done, my own skin is soft and fragrant, and the beech hardwood has a glossy reddish-golden glow. Saturated with wax and oil, the wheel and loom are ready to withstand another six months of the humidity and temperature fluctuations of my New Jersey climate.

Maintaining something with my hands – even an inanimate object – gives me a sense of connection to it. I treat my loom and my spinning wheel with care, and they seem to come alive for me, complete with their own quirks and personalities. Perhaps other people feel this way

about maintaining their cars, for example, or prized tools. To offer care with physical touch is to form an intimate connection.

As Mary cares for Jesus, wiping expensive perfume into his tired feet with her hair, she offers him dignity. She treats him as treasured, beloved, and precious. Her care fortifies him for what will soon come: his arrest, torture, dehumanization, and execution. Consoled and encouraged, Jesus will be able to choose the cross with even greater care and with love for the whole world.

Reflection

Take care of something or someone that needs it today: an important object, your pet, a family member, or even yourself. Mend the holes in a favorite sweater; polish a tarnished piece of silver; oil a sewing machine; change your car's oil; clean your computer keyboard; rub your favorite lotion into your own chapped hands.

Prayer

God, you prepare your people with tenderness for whatever will come our way: challenges, successes, heartbreak, and joy. Care for me today and teach me to care for others. Let care be a doorway for me to perceive the preciousness and belovedness of my neighbors. Amen.

Tuesday, April 8, 2025

The dignifying power of beauty

Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. (Luke 12:27)

In the winter of 1912, workers in textile mills in Lawrence, MA—most of them immigrant women and children—went on strike after their hours and pay were cut. These workers already struggled to make ends meet for their families, and they labored with dangerous machinery in unsafe conditions. The strike lasted for several months. Picketers became victims of violence at the hands of militias and police. The strikers cared for one another with soup kitchens, mutual aid, and translators who could help them communicate across the approximately nineteen languages they spoke. The strike ended after women and children testified in court about their working conditions, the injuries they had sustained in the factories, and the financial crises their families faced. The workers successfully negotiated with the mill owners for better pay, hours, and conditions.

Shortly before the strike, a poem called “Bread and Roses” had been published, inspired by the words of labor activist Helen Todd. It asserted that working people needed more than just food: they needed “roses,” too. Only the rich had the luxury of spare time, rest, and dignity; rather than luxuries, labor activists declared, these things were basic human needs, and the working poor had a right to them as well. The 1912 textile workers’ strike became known as the Bread and Roses strike. Famous songs have since set the words of “Bread and Roses” to music: “Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses.”⁴

In God’s creation, beauty does not belong to the wealthy. It is given to all God’s people. Even the wealth of Solomon cannot buy beauty as exquisite as that worn by lilies. Though the rich may try to restrict beauty, God intends it for all. Beauty is much like the “roses” demanded by the Lawrence textile workers in 1912: they did not just want food; they wanted dignity, too. Beauty dignifies, and God intends beauty and dignity for all.

Reflection

Listen to an arrangement of “[Bread and Roses](#),” sung here by vocal ensemble Windborne. Which workers in your community are in need of adequate pay and spare time enough for metaphorical roses? What changes would make roses accessible to all?

Prayer

God, you send us our daily bread, and your bread is more than food: you satisfy the needs of our hearts and spirits, too. Give food and dignity to all who hunger today. Support everyone who works. Help our communities provide fair pay, safe conditions, bread, and roses for all. Amen.

Wednesday, April 9, 2025

Beauty in art

Then Moses said to the Israelites, “See, the Lord has called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; [God] has filled him with a divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge, and with every kind of skill, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold,

⁴ Oppenheim, James. “Bread and Roses.” Jewish Women’s Archive, 1911. <https://jwa.org/media/bread-and-roses-poem>. Public domain.

silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of artistic craft.” (Exodus 35:30-33)

My spouse and I studied music as college and graduate students. Others sometimes criticized us for pursuing a costly craft that had little prospect of earning us a living. Musicians don't discover the cure for cancer, solve world hunger, or end wars. As a professional composer, my spouse is well aware of the challenges of being a working artist, even though he believes his work is meaningful. In the United States, where we live, the arts tend to be accessible mainly to the wealthy. Meanwhile, artists themselves work multiple jobs simultaneously to make ends meet while facing judgment for the seeming ease and frivolity of their professions.

With our society's emphasis on utility and profit, it's easy to forget that being an artist is a calling from God. Take Bezalel, one of the thousands of Israelites traveling through the Exodus wilderness. He can craft precious metals, cut gemstones, carve wood, and even work with the finest fabrics. None of these skills are particularly useful for daily subsistence living. What good are Bezalel's gifts to his society? Lots of good, it turns out. God has filled him with a divine spirit and empowered his artistic gifts for one important task: building the tabernacle, which will house the ark of the covenant and the heart of ancient Israelite worship. The tabernacle will be essential to the Israelite community, but it isn't just supposed to be utilitarian. It must be beautiful. The only person who can make the tabernacle beautiful is Bezalel.

Artists have a sacred calling on behalf of society. Adjacent to beauty, they inspire and dignify us. They help us identify injustice and call for change. They urge us to dream of future possibilities. With their ability to notice both beauty and need, artists inspire us all.

Reflection

What is your favorite art form—music, visual arts, dance, film, poetry, or something else? Spend fifteen minutes with your favorite art form today, whether it is reading a poem, watching a scene from a film, listening to a piece of music, or looking at a photograph. How does it inspire you to understand the world differently?

Prayer

God, your Holy Spirit nurtures creativity among your people. Thank you for the gifts of artists of all kinds. Inspire their work and use it to breathe life into us all. Amen.

Thursday, April 10, 2025

Beauty in worship

[Bezalel] made the ephod of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen. Gold leaf was hammered out and cut into threads to work into the blue, purple, and crimson yarns and into the fine twisted linen, in skilled design. [Bezalel and Oholiab] made for the ephod shoulder pieces, joined to it at its two edges. The decorated band on it was of the same materials and workmanship, of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen, as the Lord had commanded Moses. (Exodus 39:2-5)

When Bezalel and his colleague Oholiab create the tabernacle in Exodus, they don't cut any corners. They use precious metals and costly fabrics donated by the whole community of the Israelites, and they do not use them sparingly. Completed, the tabernacle will sparkle and shine, catching the sunlight by day and the starlight by night. The robes of the priests will ripple and flow as they move, glowing with saturated color.

With less decoration, the tabernacle would still function. But because all the materials were donated by the Israelites, from the wealthiest to the poorest, its lavish beauty now represents the community's devotion, love, care, commitment, and prayers. After all, they worship the God who set them free from slavery. By accepting and using their best materials, Bezalel and Oholiab honor both God and the people who love God. Now, the people can look at the tabernacle with pride in what they built together.

If you flip through the catalog for a liturgical supply company, you might be shocked to see some of the prices for gold-plated chalices, linen cloths, hand-embroidered paraments, and wool and silk vestments. Even a ceramic communion set can be costly. *Isn't it a waste of money to have beautiful but expensive things in church?* you might ask.

Not necessarily. The items a worshiping community uses represent their collective care, love, and worship. This is true whether a religious tradition values decoration or simplicity – humble objects and simple spaces can be beautiful, too. Like the tabernacle, our worship spaces and furnishings remind us: *look what we did together! See how abundantly God has blessed us.* Whether simple or ornate, beauty helps focus the prayers of the assembly. It dignifies the

assembly, too, by reminding us of what we can do when we work together in God's name.

Reflection

List all the objects your worshiping community uses. Which one is your favorite? Perhaps it's a chalice, a banner, a vestment, a chair, or even an instrument. Why is it your favorite? What do you think it communicates about God's role in our lives?

Prayer

God, we worship you in the beauty of holiness. Thank you for the gifts of artists, designers, writers, and musicians. Help us bring all our best gifts to you so we can encourage one another to serve you with courage, hope, and honesty. Amen.

Friday, April 11, 2025

Beauty overflowing

*How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!*

*It is like precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,*

running down over the collar of his robes. (Psalm 133:1-2)

Throughout the Bible, God has a habit of giving God's people enough of whatever they need—not too much and not too little. Manna from heaven is sufficient for one day. Water from the rock satisfies thirst. Elijah, the widow, and her son have just enough food to survive the famine.

Once in a while, God's version of "enough" looks like overflow, because sometimes, "enough" requires extra. When Jesus feeds the five thousand, there are twelve baskets of leftovers to remind the people that they will not go hungry. When the disciples haul in nets overburdened with fish, it's no ordinary haul; it's an indication that something amazing is happening. When priests like Aaron are anointed for God's service, the oil is no mere dab on the forehead. It's excessive, pouring over his beautiful robes and soaking his beard, lavish enough to show God's incredible, overflowing love for God's people.

In John 12, Mary isn't sparing with the perfume she massages into Jesus' feet. She uses an entire pound of it. The fragrance is

overwhelming in the small room, but the outsized impact is necessary. Jesus is precious and beloved, and so is Mary's lavish gift of love.

Sometimes, we are aware of God's abundance when we have enough and no more: enough on the table to eat, enough money to make ends meet, enough courage to get through a difficult day. But sometimes, "enough" just isn't enough. We need God's beautiful excess: joy in impossible circumstances, hope in hopeless places, love in painful situations, grace when we are broken beyond repair.

Reflection

Do you have too much of something? Today, give it away to bless someone else. Take unexpired food to a food pantry or donate clean clothes. Donate to your favorite hunger- or justice-related cause. On the other hand, if you don't have an excess, give away something a bit more precious so that someone else can marvel at God's abundance. How can God's goodness pour into your life?

Prayer

God, you pour blessings over us like so much precious oil. Thank you for blessing us with excess. Help us bless the people around us, too, so that they will also find your love in overflow. Amen.

Saturday, April 12, 2025

Beauty of the ordinary

You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you. (Song of Solomon 4:7)

I make conversation with my cats. I tickle their warm toes, pet their silky fur, gaze into their green eyes, and kiss their little foreheads. I assure them that they are the best cats, the babiest babies, the cutest of the cute. I can only imagine what my neighbors think.

I love seeing pictures of other people's cats, too, but cats who aren't mine usually look... ordinary. I'm always happy to come home to my own kitties after a trip out of town, because my cats are the *best* cats.

Of course, they're not the best cats, objectively speaking. They're completely ordinary in a chaotic feline way. They jump on counters, pick fights with each other, and stomp all over me in bed. They cost too much money in vet bills and cat food. I love them anyway.

In the Song of Solomon, the lover says to the beloved, “You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you.” I find it hard to believe that the beloved is objectively perfect, as I’ve yet to meet a human being without a single flaw (only flawless cats). But when people are observed from the vantage point of love, flaws become irrelevant. Even the ordinary becomes beautiful and precious. Love treasures the beloved.

When we use love to observe one another, despite our flaws, we too can discover the beauty in each other. After all, that’s how God views us: from the lover’s perspective. To God, we are beloved, and God treasures us. It’s a lesson to all of us about the transforming power of love. When we love our neighbors, their God-given beauty will be revealed to us, too.

Reflection

Spend time in public today and notice the people around you. You might choose to go to a grocery store, for example, or another public space like a library. As you observe your neighbors, consider who might love them. What do you think their loved ones appreciate about them?

Prayer

God, you view us through the perspective of love, no matter what our flaws and mistakes may be. Cultivate love in our hearts as we interact with our neighbors. Stir us to a love that reaches out to others. Amen.

Palm Sunday and Holy Week

What God Needs Devotions by Justin Kosec

Sunday, April 13, 2025

Needing an invitation

When [Jesus] had come near Bethpage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here.” (Luke 19:29-30)

Jesus sent two of his disciples to find a colt (or perhaps a donkey; the gospels differ). He directed his disciples simply to take the animal and bring it back. Jesus didn’t tell them what the colt was for, and his instructions were cryptic at best. But the disciples followed through. Jesus wanted the animal, and that was all they needed to know.

I don't know if I could do it. I like complete instructions. I'd want more information. If you send me to the grocery store for something as minor as beans, I'm going to have a hundred questions: dried or canned beans? What color? What size packaging? Brand preference? Do we need anything else to cook them? And despite all that, I'd probably still end up calling you while I was in the bean aisle with a few more questions.

Jesus's friends were supposed to go find an animal (what color?), untie it (from where?), and bring it back to Jesus (how soon?).

Even if they found Jesus' instructions as cryptic as I do, they knew that Jesus had given them all the information they needed to have, and that God would show them everything else they needed along the way. So they went. They found a colt tied up, just as Jesus said.

What task does God ask you to complete today? Often God's instructions seem incomplete. But if God invites you to accomplish something, then God will make sure you have everything you need to complete the task.

What we may not realize—what may even seem hard to understand or accept—is that Jesus asks us to do godly things because Jesus trusts us.

So get to it; you'll find what you need along the way.

Reflection

Write down one invitation you feel you have received from God where the instructions seem unclear or incomplete. If you cannot think of such an example, ask people you love if they have had a similar experience. Then, reflect on your own or discuss together: even if you do not know exactly what you're supposed to do, how can you take a first step?

Prayer

Holy Spirit, we do not always understand your instructions, but we do not need to understand to follow you. We are listening. Beckon us forward again and we will go with you, even if we do not know where you're leading us in the end. Amen.

Monday, April 14, 2025
Needing a common purpose

[When sending two disciples to fetch a colt, Jesus tells them,] “If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” (Luke 19:31)

“The Lord needs it.”

This is the only time Jesus explicitly tells anyone what he needs, but he doesn’t illuminate that need very well at all. Aside from the vague instructions he provides, he doesn’t give an explanation for why he needs the animal.

Soon, Jesus will use that animal to ride into Jerusalem during a tiny parade, which Christians celebrate as the events of the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. The gospels tell us that Jesus’ use of the animal fulfills ancient prophecies from the Hebrew scriptures. But doesn’t need sound like a strong word? Does Jesus need the animal in the same way he needed food or water or sleep or friends?

Even biblical scholars can’t totally agree why Jesus needs to ride into Jerusalem on an animal. But the actual reasons aren’t as important as this: if Jesus wanted to summon a colt out of thin air, he is more than powerful enough to do that. Instead, Jesus invites two disciples, some animal owners, and a colt to fulfill his only stated need in scripture.

Let that sink in: Jesus could arrange the whole animal-to-ride-on thing himself. He is more than capable of doing it. Instead, he gives his friends tasks to accomplish so they can contribute to the day’s purpose, too. Jesus has been extending similar invitations to believers like us ever since that day.

What has Jesus invited your community to accomplish together?
What small role can you play to fulfill this common purpose?

Reflection

Review your church’s or favorite charity’s current volunteer needs, mission partnerships, charitable giving opportunities, or other needs. Find one way you can contribute to their goals.

Prayer

Jesus, thank you for the invitation to join your creation and its people in celebrating your goodness and reveling in your love. Show us what you need today, and we will do our part to fulfill it. Amen.

Tuesday, April 15, 2025

Playing a part in a bigger design

So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." (Luke 19:32-34)

I've often wondered if the owners of the colt had some previous conversation with Jesus about their animal. Perhaps Jesus saw it tied up earlier and reserved it. We just don't know! The only detail we know about the animal is that it was unriden. Jesus invited the owners to give something they had not otherwise trained, prepared, or utilized, something that had, to that point, not much of a purpose.

Not much purpose, that is, until Jesus called and invited that colt to a starring role in his personal story.

What unriden colt do you have in your life—something humble that awaits a higher purpose or that currently goes unused? Ask God to show you how those things can fulfill God's needs, and ask God to help you let go of them so they can achieve their full potential.

Reflection

Inventory items in your home that you no longer need or never needed in the first place. Alternatively, you may consider more significant assets, like savings, a recent financial windfall, or even a portion of your estate. Make a plan to give them to a charitable organization that can use them for something greater.

Prayer

Jesus, I have something you need today, and I do not even recognize its true value. Send someone to untie it from my life so it can fulfill your purposes. Amen.

Wednesday, April 16, 2025

Needing to praise God

Devotion by Victoria Larson

As [Jesus] rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. Now as he was 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.” (Luke 19:36-40)

Celebration is not my spiritual gift.

If you are lucky enough to know someone who is excellent at celebrating, then you are fortunate indeed. Celebrators help the rest of us pause when we’ve reached a goal or completed a big project. They don’t permit us to rush onto the next thing without first recognizing that something big has happened. I think of the friend who threw me a farewell party when I moved, or the friend who burst into happy tears when I told her I was engaged. Whereas I was immediately subsumed by all the logistics of these big life transitions, my friends were wise enough to invite me to stop, breathe, and revel in the emotions that came with the moment.

Today’s Bible passage culminates not with the colt, who has been the focus of so much attention in this chapter, but with a celebration: people praising Jesus as he finally enters the city of Jerusalem, the city where he has been headed throughout half the gospel. The Pharisees urge Jesus to get his followers to behave with more decorum, but Jesus frames their praise as a need that cannot be denied: “If these were silent, the very stones would cry out.”

Jesus is inviting a pause for celebration at the tipping point of Holy Week. Beginning tomorrow, the journey changes from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the dreadful walk to the cross. Jesus could all too easily let himself be subsumed by what he knows is coming on Good Friday, but he does not. He sees his disciples’ need for praise, and he meets it by means of a colt, a dusty road, and a slow walk into the great city.

Here you are at the end of a journey yourself. Lent is ending; the Great Three Days are about to begin. What is there to celebrate here? What has stoked your joy this Lent? How has Jesus met your need for praise?

Reflection

Find a way to celebrate the end of the Lenten journey today. If you've given something up for Lent, mark the joy of being able to return to it. If you've taken on an additional discipline, notice how it's affected your life, and open yourself to gratitude for what that discipline has done for you.

Prayer

Jesus, I can't believe that Lent is over! Thank you for the ways in which this journey has brought me closer to you. Help me celebrate this moment as you invited your disciples to celebrate with you in Jerusalem. Amen.

The Great Three Days

*Love, Protection, and Time
Devotions by Victoria Larson*

Maundy Thursday, April 17, 2025

To love and be loved

Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. (John 13:34)

No matter how many times we hear it, the message is still profoundly moving: God loves us. Yes, God loves humanity writ large, and yes, God loves everything that God has made, but God also loves *us*, each of us, specifically, in our unique particularity. God loves us.

It's out of this love that Jesus calls us to love one another. In fact, it's because Jesus loves us that we are drawn to one another. The early Christian community was infamous for this kind of love, as so many corners of the global church still are: Christians have been known as the ones who go where no one else will in order to show God's love: to the widows and orphans, to the poor, to the incarcerated, to the sick, to the little, lost, and least.

How is God calling you to share God's love today?

Reflection

Attend a Maundy Thursday service today. If the service offers footwashing, let this strange ritual become a site of special meditation

and reflection for you today. What feels awkward about this rite? What feels beautiful? What surprises you about it?

Prayer

Holy Spirit, keep up your work in and on my heart. Open it to others a little more each day. Guide me to where you need me to love others as you've loved me. Amen.

Good Friday, April 18, 2025

The need to be guarded from harm

Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus. Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?" (John 18:10-11)

Throughout Jesus' Passion, different people need protecting. The disciples and Malchus all need Jesus' protection during his arrest; Peter needs the protection of anonymity as he tries to stay close to Jesus during the trial; Pilate desperately seeks protection from political pressures through his machinations; Jesus' mother needs protecting as she stands at the foot of the cross facing a future without her son.

Then, of course, there's Jesus. Ostensibly, Jesus needs protection, too, as the forces that seek his life circle closer. But Jesus has a greater need: the need to live according to his Abba's will, even when it leads him toward death. The grief of this narrative unfolds as Jesus forgoes his need for protection over and over again, choosing instead to love God and God's people fiercely and defenselessly even as it costs him his life. Paradoxically, this divine vulnerability is transmuted into our protection: the Son of God goes to the cross to shield us from the cost of sin and reality of death.

Reflection

Imagine yourself in the place of each of these characters and imagine how their need for protection finds resonance in your own life:

The disciples and Mary: What is it like when someone you love protects you even though you're powerless to protect them?

Malchus: Can you think of a time when the act of a stranger protected you from harm?

Peter and Pilate: Have you ever felt the need to protect yourself so desperately that you were willing to lie or deny the truth?

Jesus: Under what circumstances will you forgo your own need to protect yourself?

Prayer

God, you are my rock, my shelter, the wings protecting me. Knowing that you keep me safe, help me to be open to the awfulness of the story of Jesus' trial and death. Within it, help me notice the voices still crying out for protection from war, violence, illness, and threat of death. Still my anxious soul so that I can wait with the disciples at the foot of the cross and let my heart break as yours does. Amen.

Holy Saturday, April 19, 2025

Spending time at the grave

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. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. (John 19:41-42)

Holy Saturday asks us to put ourselves in the place of the disciples who buried Jesus: to wait with them in the in-betweenness that filled the time from Jesus' death on Good Friday to his resurrection on Easter Sunday. It asks us to confront the reality of death. Even in the present day, on the far side of Jesus' resurrection, death still marks our lives, though its ultimate power has been broken. Holy Saturday asks us to feel the depths of the space between hope and despair, between lament and rejoicing, between doubt and faith. This day challenges us to approach the tomb and remain there awhile, not running from death but keeping company with the dead, and letting our tears fall as they will.

Paradoxically, sitting by the side of the grave helps to free us from death's power. Running from death and denying its power are both deeply human impulses, but they are also ways of living in fear of death. Confronting the reality of the grave, allowing it to break our hearts, breaks the grip of fear and denial, too.

Spending time at the grave prepares us to embrace the goodness of new life, which is coming... and coming soon.

Reflection

Who or what has died in your life, spiritually or literally, over this past year? What emotions or thoughts arise as you sit with the reality of those deaths? Write some of them in the margins.

Prayer

Jesus, I haven't left you.

[Breathe in.]

Please stay with me.

[Breathe out.]

[Repeat for several breaths.]

Easter Sunday, April 20, 2025

The need to rejoice

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, [the women] went to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body. (Luke 24:1-3)

Picture them: the women on their way to the tomb in the predawn darkness, toting the pounds of spices that they had prepared for Jesus' body. But they never ended up using them. The tomb was empty; the body was gone; Christ was risen!

What happened to the spices? Did the women leave them at the tomb? Did they lug them all the way back home? I like to imagine that the urgency of the good news overcame them, and that those spices were simply dropped by the rolled-back rock for someone else to find. This is the overwhelming joy behind the wasted effort of hauling all those spices: they were never needed! God's promises were good; Christ is raised from the dead!

I resonate with this detail because I know that I do my own share of spice-toting. How about you? What worries or anxieties do you carry, even knowing that you don't need to? How do you prepare for the worst possible scenario in the hope of shielding yourself from the possible heartbreak? When your hands are full of burial spices, can you truly open them to receive the joy of the resurrection?

Reflection

Rejoice! On this day of resurrection, simply choose to put down the spices: the worries and anxieties about the future, the worst-case scenarios, the planning of every eventuality. Be present in this moment. Rejoice!

Prayer

Hallelujah!

[Sing it, shout it, write it, rejoice in it! Make it your refrain for the day.]

Hallelujah!

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