



The Adult Council invited church members to join them in writing a Lenten Devotional Book for our Soapstone family. The weekly themes will follow our focus for worship on being Holy Vessels.

We encourage you to use a journal or make notes in your Bible as you experience God through the Scriptures and writing each day.

It is the prayer of the Adult Council that our church family will use the Lenten Devotional Book to help create a daily practice of spending time with God and reading God's Word.

Soapstone UMC
2021

He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.” Matthew 8:17b

Each of us is created a precious and holy vessel of embodied love. We have been through a harrowing time since last Lent that has shattered our sense of wholeness—body, mind, and spirit—like a glass vessel fractured into pieces. In this Lenten “season of recovery” for our physical, communal, mental, intellectual, and environmental health, we will explore the healing narratives of Jesus that tell of divine solidarity with human suffering and remind us that we can begin a journey toward making something beautiful from that which is seemingly broken. Beach glass offers us a multifaceted symbol of this transformative process.

Ash Wednesday: Shattered — Ash Wednesday is a time of naming brokenness. As we enter the season of Lent, we commit to enter also into a season of healing and recovery that requires the naming of what has been shattered as a first step. We take “the yoke” of responsibility as disciples of Jesus to be the Body of Christ—a body of those who need healing and offer healing in the world. The promise of Jesus is that he is with us in our weariness and burdens.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” - Matt 11: 28-30

Lent 1: Treasure (Physical Health) — Beach glass begins as something whole and yet discarded. As it is tumbled by the sea, it is broken and polished until it becomes a treasured “mineral gem.” We do not embrace that suffering is necessary or God-given, but that suffering is a part of life. When pain comes and brokenness enters our lives, Jesus reaches out to touch and remind us of the Treasure that we *all* are—worthy of new life in the midst of hopelessness. In a year when pandemic has wreaked havoc on our world, we begin by affirming our journey to physical health.

When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him; and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.” He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. Then Jesus said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” - Matt 8: 1-4

That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and cured all who were sick. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.” - Matt 8: 16-17

Lent 2: Safe Keeping (Community/Economic Health) — God gathers us as a Beachcomber gathers and marvels at every precious surviving piece of beach glass she finds. We are never alone, we are never lost to the One who seeks humanity’s wholeness. We affirm our commitment to be the Body of Christ that knows we cannot be personally healed until we see the interconnected community as part of the process of healing. Jesus has the power to re-vision the family of God in which false boundaries are overcome. In a year of devastating loss of livelihood, we consider the economic health that reimagines status quo.

When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.” And he said to him, “I will come and cure him.” The centurion answered, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it.” When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.” And the servant was healed in that hour. - Matt 8: 5-13

Lent 3: Stories (Mental Health) — Those who collect beach glass often become “archeologists”—seeking out any markings or clues as to the story of the original piece. It often takes much time to bring out the truth behind it. This week we acknowledge the power of truth-telling as a healing property. There are stories that have shaped our lives, leaving us without the ability to see who we truly are in the eyes of God and leaving us without the ability to speak the depth of our stories of struggle. We focus on the importance of recovery of mental health, reclaiming our sense of who we are and being able to proclaim new redemptive stories of divine worth.

As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, crying loudly, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” They said to him, “Yes, Lord.” Then he touched their eyes and said, “According to your faith let it be done to you.” And their eyes were opened. Then Jesus sternly ordered them, “See that no one knows of this.” But they went away and spread the news about him throughout that district. After they had gone away, a demoniac who was mute was brought to him. And when the demon had been cast out, the one who had been mute spoke; and the crowds were amazed and said, “Never has anything like this been seen in Israel.” -Matt 9: 27-33

Lent 4: Different Pictures (Intellectual Health) — Prolonged times of difficulty can impede our ability to stay creative. The picture of our lives is dulled and hope for a brighter future can fade. We need a touch of inspiration to awaken us from our sleep, as we hear in one of this week’s healing stories. We also awaken to our agency to seek out the Divine Healer, reaching out to touch the power we know can restore our intellect and imagination. We emerge ready to re-engage with the world, seeking and seeing solutions, creating different pictures of life renewed just as a mosaic artist creates beauty from broken pieces of glass.

While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, “My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.” Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.” And instantly the woman was made well. When Jesus came to the leader’s house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, “Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.” And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout that district. - Matt 9: 18-26

Lent 5: Restoration (Environmental Health) — The demands of following Jesus are great. He shows us that sometimes we must make extraordinary efforts to move in a new direction. As we consider the health of humanity, we cannot ignore the need to heal the very planet that sustains us. We live in increasing chaos of a beleaguered environment and the hoarding of resources. We want to be “saved” by something or someone else, but we discover this week that we are in the boat with the One who shows us our power to turn it around, to calm the storm. We protect the jewel that is our home, making something beautiful from scars of the past.

Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. A scribe then approached and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Another of his disciples said to him, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” But Jesus said to him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.”

And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!” And he said to them, “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?” - Matt 8: 18-27

Lent 6 (Palm/Passion): Holy, Wholly (Integrated Health) Matt 9: 1-8 — We have seen that the stories of Jesus' healing ministry are filled with words *and* deeds. Our ability to forgive ourselves and others is the foundation that can transform infirmities and allow us to move on. We integrate our beliefs and actions for the health of the whole. The parade of compassionate power we celebrate today is underscored by a story of transformation, symbolizing our ability to fuel our movement of recovery. We glorify God for beautiful words and works of wholeness and share that treasured beauty with others. We know there will still be pain, but we also know love will win.

And after getting into a boat he crossed the sea and came to his own town. And just then some people were carrying a paralyzed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." Then some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming." But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he then said to the paralytic—"Stand up, take your bed and go to your home." And he stood up and went to his home. When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings. - Matt 9: 1-8 [also Palm/Passion narratives as desired]

Holy Week: Healed and Still Healing (Commission of Christ) Matthew 10:1-8 — This culminating moment of our worship series invites us to consider a commission from Christ to his disciples: to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and cast out demons. These are very things his disciples have seen him do and that we have sought to witness for our own lives in this Lenten season of recovery. What will we do with this commission? What passion has been piqued in our church that we can offer to our community beyond this moment as we continue to participate in the revival of the spirit of humanity? How will we address ongoing pain, ourselves "healed and yet still healing?"

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment." - Matthew 10: 1 - 8

Shattered—Naming Brokenness

February 17 — Ash Wednesday — Laura Garrett

TITLE: Show Up

PAUSE: Ever have days when it's all you can do to show up - - and even THAT takes all the resolve you have inside? It's tempting to think there is no point in just "going through the motions..." But maybe, sometimes, that's enough.

LISTEN: James 5:13-15 ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.

REFLECT: Does that scripture passage sound kind of like familiar rituals? Pray. Sing praise. Call the church elders. Receive anointing with oil. Nothing earth-shattering or difficult here. No pilgrimage. No big showy act of sacrifice or penance. Just pray. Sing praise to God. Call the elders -- put it on the prayer chain. Go tune in to the online worship service. Sing along with the hymns. Read that daily devotional guide, even if the words feel flat today. Call that introverted friend to check on them, even if they don't seem to care. Give that offering you planned to give, even if it seems like just a drop in the bucket. Speak the words of the liturgy, even if you have said them a thousand times before. Receive communion. Practice those holy habits. Go to the sacred spaces. Let muscle memory take over, if you must. Just. Show. Up. I believe that along the way, the power of holy liturgy will undergird you. The prayers and faithfulness of others will wash over you, strengthening you in your weakness. And you will find strength to just. Show. Up. One. More. Time. I believe this, because I have lived it - - AM living it. I retired earlier than I wanted to from a career I loved, and I struggle now to accomplish everyday tasks over obstacles of chronic pain, illness, and limited mobility. Especially now that the restrictions of COVID-19 have been added to the picture, there are many days I feel like I am making NO difference at all in the suffering of the world. Those are the times I take comfort in the power of familiar rituals like those listed here. I just show up for my husband to talk to. For my new friends at the dog park who need an ear or a silent prayer. For a tired grocery bagger who needs a "thank you!" and an eye-smile from behind my mask. For a waggly ball of fur who needs to go outside AGAIN. And sometimes when I do those things, I sense God's gentle Spirit saying, "That'll do, Laura. I'll take it from here."

PRAY: Dear God, thank You for reminding us that You've got this handled. You can accomplish Your work in the world without us lifting a finger. But You are gracious enough to want to share the work with us, and kind enough to show us ways we can participate according to the skills and interests You placed in us when You created us. Thank You for letting our little bit be enough. We love You. Amen.

GO: If today is one of those days when the best you can do is just show up, then do that. Just. Show. Up. God will do the rest.

Shattered—Naming Brokenness

February 18 — Joan Cavin

TITLE: Our Broken Society

PAUSE: When you look at our world do you see brokenness? Are you left wondering how to respond to the needs around you?

LISTEN: Psalm 34:17-22 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears, and rescues them from all their troubles. The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD rescues them from them all. He keeps all their bones; not one of them will be broken. Evil brings death to the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be condemned. The LORD redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

REFLECT: We are living in a time when I frequently become overcome with negative thoughts about the brokenness of our society. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted our everyday lives, but even more has exposed the brokenness of our society, whether racial injustices, parallelizing political polarization, gaps between rich and poor, the way we depend upon hardworking teachers, doctors and nurses, but still fail to compensate them fairly.

Now in 2021, as hope for a return to 'normalcy' rises, and we tire of the isolation we have experienced this past year, I pray that these words from the Psalmist remind us more than ever to seek God's help in setting personal priorities and answering calls to serve others. We will not destroy the pandemic all at once as each of us get vaccinated, nor will we solve all of society's ills at once by waving a wand.

PRAY: Holy Spirit, help me to stay positive and to understand how I can best help others and lessen the brokenness of society both here and globally. Give me the humility and strength to reach out to those in need. Teach me to understand better the needs of others and to listen to their aspirations. Show me how to reflect God's love for me and show others that they too are loved. May it be so, through Jesus Christ who witnessed our brokenness as a human, and showed us how to respond with love and humility.

GO: Do you hear God's voice calling you? Respond to the nudges placed upon your heart. Use your gifts and talents to meet the needs of those God places in front of you.

Shattered—Naming Brokenness

February 19 — Katie Cable

TITLE: Blessed but Limping

PAUSE: Do you ever feel so broken that you think nothing will ever be whole again? Do you ever feel so broken but blessed at the same time for the support you have through the brokenness?

LISTEN: 2 Corinthians 4:7-9 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.

REFLECT: I am sure everyone has their favorite sermon that they have heard that replays in their hearts from time to time. Mine was one titled, “Broken and Blessed.” As I sat there listening to each word and looked over at a friend, many pews over, I watched the tears slowly pour down her face as she was dealing with the recent loss of her father. In that moment I remember thinking, “what can I say, what can I do?” I am not good in those situations even with the ones closest to me. I continued to listen to the sermon and pray for my friend right in that moment. I looked around the sanctuary and noticed several, including myself, were tearing up for our own brokenness and it clicked, we are limping around from our brokenness. Each of us have our own struggles, heartaches, and losses. Each of us has gone through times in our lives where everything we thought we knew was just shattered to what we believed to be in that moment, unreparable.

God teaches us that even his precious son was broken from time to time, but he was never really truly destroyed, and neither are we. As the sermon finished, I had thought about many times in my time here at SUMC where my life had been turned upside down and I thought I would never be able to put those broken pieces back together. I came home from church that day and prayed again for my friend and all of my church family I had seen crying that morning. I realized while praying for each of them that I bet some of them were praying for me. All of those broken pieces, all of those people I had seen that morning somewhat limping in their own brokenness, each of them were there for me in times where I was broken. Each of them helped me when I was limping from life with their faith and friendship. They gave me the strength to go out still limping but very much blessed that I didn’t have to be broken forever.

PRAY: Precious God, thank you for those broken pieces in our lives. Thank you putting people in places to help us come back from brokenness stronger than ever because we are stronger together. Remind us we are all blessed but we are also all limping. Amen.

GO: May you go out in your brokenness and recognize we are all limping through life with struggles but we are also all blessed beyond belief. That is ok and much better to focus on than the hurt.

Shattered—Naming Brokenness

February 20 — Isaac M. Hardison

TITLE: Jesus is the way to seeing and speaking the truth.

PAUSE: Do you have a problem with seeing things clearly? Do you know how to tell the truth? Do you not speak when truth must be spoken?

LISTEN: Matthew 9:27-33 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed Him, calling out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" When he had gone indoors, the blind men came to Him, and He asked them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" "Yes, Lord," they replied.

Then He touched their eyes and said, "According to your faith let it be done to you"; and their sight was restored. Jesus warned them sternly, "See that no one knows about this." But they went out and spread the news about Him all over that region.

While they were going out, a man who was demon-possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel."

REFLECT: We live in a precarious time. The world we live in is full of sights and sounds that are constantly driven into us through an ever-pervasive media complex that shows no signs of getting smaller or calmer. With so many competing narratives and stories floating around it is hard to discern what's fact or fiction. When we find things that boast our own ideas of virtue and fact, we cling to it. When we see or hear something that does not support our views, we scoff. How do we train ourselves to decipher through the sights and sounds to discover what is real? How do we interact within such a place where so many words are silenced? The answer, as any good Sunday School patron knows, is Jesus.

In this story, Jesus heals those that come faithfully to Him. This is not something uncommon as Jesus performs tasks like this all throughout the Gospels. What we tend to forget is that Jesus not only heals physical ailments, but spiritual failings as well. As the one who created all things and gave them their place, Jesus is the way to seeing and speaking the truth. Every time He spoke, people heard the truth. Every time they witnessed a miracle (most importantly the resurrection), they saw it. Likewise, as we live our lives Jesus is the one we must have a relationship with and know if we have any hope of properly interacting with reality. If we only see things without knowing how God ordained their value, we are blind. If we are blind, we cannot speak to the way things should be. Let God be the one who gives you the wisdom to know what to look for, and how to speak. Go to His word, understand its meaning and through time and practice God will instruct you to know what to look for and how to talk about it.

PRAY: Dear God, please heal me when I'm blind and mute. Please help me see and speak the truth you have ordained since the beginning. You are King, you are sovereign, your ways are holy and good. You sent your Son to die on the Cross for our sins. Thank you for always loving us even when we cannot see or speak your glory. In your Son's name we pray. Amen.

GO: Do not be afraid to go to Jesus and have your eyes opened to the truth. Don't be afraid for God to use you to speak it. The world needs us to see and speak truthfully to His Kingdom and Glory. If we do not, the world will become more and more chaotic, and truth will be unknown because it is unheard.

Treasure—Physical Health

February 21 — Laura Garrett

TITLE: Plan B

PAUSE: Naming is great! It allows us to call our children and pets away from danger. It allows us to grasp and hold a troublesome behavior we need to address. But what happens when we can't "name it?" What do we do when our brokenness defies a name?

LISTEN: Romans 8:26-27 ([Bible Gateway Link](#)) ...we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words...

REFLECT: Naming is a helpful practice. It helps us identify what needs to be fixed. It gives us power over the behavior or thing named, such as a medical condition, a phobia, or an addiction. Yes, naming is important. But what if you can't put your finger on it, put words around it - - "name it?" Does that mean your pain can't be fixed until you understand the cause of it? NO. Good News! Plan B. We don't HAVE to be able to name it. The Holy Spirit knows what is hurting and can pray for us when we can't! We can just crawl into the lap of the Holy One and cry out, "My heart hurts, God. Please fix it!" And like a tender loving mother, God knows the source of that pain and begins that very moment to heal it.

It's so important to be able, when we can, to name our brokenness. "I'm angry with you for leaving me!" "I'm afraid of being alone when I get sick." "I'm ashamed of the way I acted." But sometimes, like a child waking from an unspeakable bad dream, we cry out with pain words cannot express. And like a loving parent, the Holy Spirit knows what we need, holding us and rocking us until the terror dissipates into peaceful sleep. Deeper than words, the Holy Spirit knows how to touch the heart and heal what we cannot name. God's knowing is not dependent on our understanding of why we hurt.

Maybe sometime we'll get that intellectual grasp of what has wounded us, and be able to name the brokenness. That would be great! But even if that never comes, God has Plan B. God's power to heal is not held back by our weakness. "The Holy Spirit prays for us in groans that words cannot express." Precious truth. Thank God!

PRAY: Holy, loving God, Thank You for seeing right through us like a Mother reading her child's heart. Thank You for words to use when we are able. Thank you, also, for Plan B when words are not enough.

GO: God's knowing is not dependent on our understanding! Praise God!

Treasure—Physical Health

February 22 — Tom Huffstetler

TITLE: His will for you is wholeness

PAUSE: What does God want for your life? Why is Jesus referred to as the Great Physician? How often do you meditate on the fact that he knows your every concern?

LISTEN:

Hebrews 4:15 ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

Psalms 30:2 ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me.

REFLECT: There we were on our way to carry out a short-term mission trip to Lima, Peru. In all we were a group of 10 folks from different churches who answered the call to go and spread the good news of God's faithfulness with our brothers and sisters in South America. Our lead was Pastor Stone who was particularly passionate about mission work and furthering the kingdom of God. None of us had been to Peru, but we were all excited about what we would encounter together.

Pastor Stone, like most of the saints on our trip, spoke no Spanish. I had agreed to serve as one of two interpreters for the group. The other interpreter was Sharon, a fellow Spanish teacher from Colombia, a small, rural town in the eastern part of North Carolina.

Each night on our trip it was determined that we would be in worship together in different churches throughout the city. Lima is a huge city with millions of inhabitants, and at that time in 1995, the city was growing tremendously as folks were "invading the city" looking for work and a better life. While we were there, it wasn't uncommon for there to be power outages and even times when the running water did not flow in the parsonage where we were staying.

One evening, Sharon was not feeling well and asked to remain at the Pastor's house while the rest of us went to church for the evening service. If you've been on a mission trip, you know that sickness is not an uncommon occurrence as your body adjusts to different foods and climates and the stress of traveling far from home. When we returned a few hours later, we found Sharon collapsed on the bathroom floor, too weak to move on her own. She was extremely pale and had a high fever. When we asked her what happened, she could barely respond to us.

We quickly scooped her up and put her in the van and began rushing to a clinic. On the way there we all witnessed a miracle. As we traveled through the city, we prayed for the Lord to heal her. I remember as it was yesterday, how I felt her brow as it cooled under my hand while God delivered her from her fevered condition. By the time we arrived at the medical facility, she was already much more lucid. This was one of only a few times I have witnessed spontaneous healing, but it was very real. God had placed us on this trip, and he did not abandon us in our time of need.

PRAY: Dear God, as we struggle with all manner of burdens and illness both physical and mental, what comfort it is to know that you already know. You know what we are going through, and you care. You cared enough to send your son to bear our sin and sickness on the cross. We raise our voices and hands in praise to the One who will never leave us or forsake us. Thank you for making us whole! Amen.

GO: He knows! God knows where you are and what you need. Rest in the assurance that he is with you and he will never let you go.

Treasure—Physical Health

February 23 — Sarah Lancaster

TITLE: On the Shoulders of Others

PAUSE: Whose mat do I need to help carry today?

LISTEN: Mark 2:3-5 ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

REFLECT: When I think of healing, I remember my own story of a cancer diagnosis in my early thirties. I was frightened and struggled with the idea of death. However, in the midst of that fear of sickness, the faithful prayers of my family, church family, and friends were the healing balm I needed to survive the chemotherapy, radiation, and trepidation of the unknown. Throughout the five-month treatment period, there was not a day I did not receive a card or phone call or visit from people near and far. Each time, the person would tell me he or she was praying for me. These saints of the church carried my mat up to the roof and lowered me into the presence of Jesus.

There were many days I did not want to eat or get out of bed or follow the doctor’s orders. I was distressed over hair loss and personal vanity. I was in pain from chemo induced arthritis. When it all seemed too much to bear, the saints of the church stepped in with calls, visits, and cards. I would remind myself if that many people believed I could be well again, then I would trust in their petitions for healing and God’s response. I would be faithful. I would do my part in the wellness journey, no matter the outcome. Prayers were answered due to an early diagnosis, wonderful care and treatment by medical professionals, healthy diet and exercise, and the faithfulness of friends and family. I am reminded of this quote from a book I recently read, *Sometimes, Odie*: “Sister Eve went on, ‘in order for people to reach up and embrace their most profound belief in God, they need to stand on the shoulders of others.’...Their experiences are the shoulders for others to climb on” (William Kent Krueger).

Twenty plus years later, I am profoundly grateful for the shoulders of others I stood on when I needed healing. Those shoulders strengthened and emboldened my faith.

PRAYER: Lord, in times of physical illness and despair, we pray for your healing. Surround us with a cloud of witnesses who will pray for us, love us, and support us in our fears of the uncertain future. This is the 11th month of the COVID-19 pandemic and there is so much grief and sickness, so much fear and loneliness. We pray for your healing touch. Surround us with your presence and the ‘shoulders of others’ to help us find peace and to trust in you. --Amen

GO: “Go, confident in the knowledge of God’s steadfast love for you, assured of the healing touch of Jesus upon you and emboldened by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit within you.” — Written by Moira Laidlaw

Treasure—Physical Health

February 24 — Joan Cavin

TITLE: To Care for Oneself: Body and Soul

PAUSE: How my faith journey has matched my health journey! Do you care for your physical body? Do you care for your spiritual health? I learned to do both.

LISTEN: Isaiah 40:29-31 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

REFLECT: As a child, I suffered the typical childhood illness of measles, mumps, and chickenpox. But for the most part I was a skinny child who took health for granted. It was only in middle age that I learned that my skinniness was due to an auto-immune thyroid disease known as Grave's disease that would need to be monitored. Sure enough, a Thyroid storm caused me to lose even more weight and to cause my blood pressure to rise to dangerous levels. At this point I lost my sense of invincibility and realized that I needed help.

After surgery to remove the diseased thyroid, I now had to change my lifestyle and learn to eat like other people. Instead of being able to eat more than 8000 calories per day I now had to watch my weight like other people. I also had to learn to monitor my blood pressure. A heart attack led to further lifestyle changes, and now, in my later years I am feeling the effects of years of negligence on my part.

How my faith journey has matched my health journey. I had a basic faith in God that I took for granted, but I did not work at it and did not seek God's help. Then my husband showed me a different aspect of faith and I learned to pray and to serve others. When he died suddenly, I realized I need God's help just much as I had needed medical help earlier. I changed my lifestyle and started to take Bible Studies and to serve others. And now as I age and my physical capabilities deteriorate, I need God's help even more to discern how I can continue to serve.

This devotional has reflected self-absorption, but does not reflect the fact, that despite my physical strengths and weaknesses, I am grateful for the life I have enjoyed and humbled by the fact that I have been privileged to get the medical help I need while others may suffer more without such help.

PRAY: Heavenly Father, thank you for helping me to survive both physically and spiritually. Please help those who need your strength and comforting care. Show me how I can continue to help others.

GO: Allow God to show you ways in which you can care for yourself, body and soul.

Treasure—Physical Health

February 25 — Mitzi Johnson

TITLE: Take a Load Off

PAUSE: The longest commandment is also the one we ignore most frequently and the one most often repeated throughout the law of Moses: Keep the sabbath – work six days, rest one.

LISTEN: Exodus 20:8-11 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

REFLECT: In ancient Egypt, the Israelites were enslaved by a Pharaoh obsessed with productivity. They made bricks for buildings they would never enter. They built storehouses for food they would never eat. They catered banquets, cleaned palaces, and helped an empire produce goods they would never be able to afford. In our own country, we pride ourselves on being free, but we emulate the work patterns of those ancient Israelites who were not.

Our phones ping, and we get up from the dinner table to answer a text from a colleague or review a document or return a call. With a computer connecting us to the world, unplugging is a challenge. Work hours are up. And in these days of virtual school, parents are overseeing education to an extent we've never been asked to do before. And retirees? You care for adult dependents, companions, and grandchildren, and volunteer at church and in the community. It's amazing how quickly we can get to that place where we realize it's been a month since we've eaten with a friend, called that loved one, taken a nap, or played a boardgame. All of this takes a toll on our health and wellbeing.

The first time we read the ten commandments in scripture (today's passage), we're told to keep the Sabbath because *God did*. We follow a pattern of work and rest because God did and when we do so, it honors him. The second time we read the commandments in Deuteronomy, we're told to rest on the Sabbath because we *can* – because God delivered God's people from slavery. Slaves can't take a day off. We can. And when we do, we remember it is God whose provision makes that possible.

PRAY: Lord, help us grow in our ability to rest. Help us find enough faith to lighten our load, to look our loved ones in the eyes, and enjoy time spent with you and each other. Amen.

GO: Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." May it be so.

Treasure—Physical Health

February 26 — Gretchen Shea

TITLE: Sometimes Healing Comes Through Tears

PAUSE: What happens when healing doesn't come the way we hope? What if our healing comes through tears? Do you struggle with unanswered prayers for healing? I do.

LISTEN: Matthew 8:1-3 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him; and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean. He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately his leprosy was cleansed.

REFLECT: In December 2019 I started seeing a physical therapist two times a week for what a doctor thought was a shoulder and neck injury. For weeks I experienced no relief from the pain and stiffness in my neck and shoulders. Riding in the car hurt. Sitting at my desk typing hurt. Picking my granddaughters up hurt. Walking my dogs hurt. Washing dishes hurt. It seemed there was no relief.

By the end of February, with still no improvement, I turned to a new doctor. After more X-rays I received a diagnosis, undifferentiated polyarthritis in the neck and spine. I was stunned! The fear was crippling my mind and soul while the pain kept me in a mental fog and state of physical exhaustion. All I could think about was living this way for the rest of my life.

I prayed and prayed for God to have this diagnosis be wrong. I prayed that God would heal me, take away the arthritis and pain.

Well, that hasn't happened. Instead, with a revamped physical therapy plan, a few trials of medications until we found the right combination, and a complete overhaul of my nutrition, I am functioning and living with arthritis.

Healing doesn't always come in the ways we expect. Our prayers aren't always answered as we would hope. But God is still there, working, walking with us, being present along the journey.

Yes, I still have days, even a full week here or there, where the pain takes over, but I know how to work through it now. I know what exercises to do to lessen the tension in my muscles. I know what activities to avoid.

I still have occasional fits of tears. But what I have learned is that the tears are cleansing. They are restorative. As I call out to God for release, God wipes away the tears and brings peace to my heart and soul. It isn't the physical healing I would wish for, but it is a healing all the same.

God is with me in the moments of pain. God is with me when my heart cries out. God is with me when I can't speak the prayer request again but can only let the tears flow. God is there, holding me and telling me it will be okay.

God is showing me a new way to live. And sometimes, in that new life, the tears are the healing balm I need.

PRAY: Mighty Healer, help us to accept the times when our prayers aren't answered the way we hope. Help us to recognize that sometimes healing comes in ways we least expect or may not recognize. Walk with us when your plan for healing is something different than we ever imagined. Amen.

GO: Allow the tears to flow at the feet of the Savior. There we are washed anew and healed.

Treasure—Physical Health

February 27 — Becky Fouts

TITLE: Healthy with Jesus

PAUSE:

Father, empty my busy mind so that I may rest in you.
Only through you and your love may I be truly healthy. Amen

LISTEN: James 5:14-15 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.

REFLECT: Speaking as one who has been on both sides of prayer, I strongly believe there is NO health without it.

I can go back far into my Methodist memory and remember the power of prayer. I remember praying for church members, praying for family members, praying for EVERYTHING. This was taught to me early and reinforced throughout my childhood.

More recently, we prayed over my cousin Len's prayer shawl a few years back. There is no description for the power of that prayer while kneeling on the steps at the altar. The light of the Lord shone during that prayer and again when I gave the shawl to Len. Len eventually lost his life due to complications from brain cancer. God was there though. God didn't leave.

It wasn't until I re-submerged myself back into the church community these past several years that I saw the POWER and HEALING of prayer. I have prayed and been prayed for, but it was not until I truly surrendered to God that I knew He was with me in my prayer, always, regardless of whether my prayer was answered the way I wanted. That surrender was and is key. We aren't given a map of our lives; we aren't given a crystal ball to see the future. What we are given are the tools needed to stay spiritually healthy – this is a sickness God can always heal.

Not my will, Lord, but Your will be done. This is my opening words to God when asking for health, healing and wellness. Coming to God with this lets me know that my prayer will heal even if my prayer is not answered. Asking for prayer is a prayer in itself; you are opening your mind to the power of Jesus, the power of God, the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a confession that "Lord, I cannot do this without you." Bringing yourself to this place where you are asking God for healing is the first step. It is the place you need to be to heal.

I know, when I ask for prayer, these things will happen to me: 1) God will be with me. 2) My church family will lift me and pray to God for my healing. 3) Through faith and prayer, I will feel the healing grace of God. 4) I will know in my mind, spirit and soul that my sins are forgiven and I am loved by God and my church family, and 5) The end result will be God's will.

PRAY: Dear God, we come to you, in full confidence of Your power. We pray together for health for each of us and all of those we know and love. We surrender to Your will. As we pray to You, we know that in Your purest love, through Jesus, we are forgiven of our sins, and we are thankful. Amen.

GO: Spend time in prayer today for the health of others.

Safe Keeping—Community/Economic Health

February 28 — Laura Garrett

TITLE: Community = Family

PAUSE: “Love one another with brotherly love, as members of one family...”

“Family.” What images does THAT bring up for you? Does the thought of family bring joy or anxiety, or maybe a mix of both? Our community IS our family.

LISTEN: Romans 12:9-21 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

REFLECT: What images does the thought of “family” bring up for you? Do you think of carefree childhood days with siblings? Do you remember the angst of tolerating difficult personalities during holiday gatherings? Maybe you think of the incredible self-sacrifice of the sister who gave up a college education to take a full-time job so her brother could go to college instead. Maybe you think of the seemingly irreconcilable feuds that grow in some families. In a family we see it all, unvarnished. Knowing where the “soft spots” are can allow both great tenderness and deep wounds to occur. It’s no wonder so many novels, TV sit-coms and dramas are written about relationships! Scripture tells us that our whole community is to be loved and treated as family. In this passage, we are given a to-do list of actions to make that happen.

- Love one another with brotherly affection = that new neighbor with noisy kids? Cut him some slack.
- Rejoice and exult in hope = cheer for your neighbor when good fortune strikes, even if YOU are having a rough time at that moment.
- Be steadfast and patient in suffering and tribulation = Hang in there while we deal with COVID-19 in our community. Wait patiently for your turn in line. Put up with foggy glasses due to your mask.
- Be constant in prayer = get up earlier, if you have to, to spend time with God. Get your focus right. Lift up your community in prayer.
- Practice hospitality = welcome the immigrants who come to your community for safety or a fresh start. See Jesus in each person.
- Bless those who are cruel in their attitude toward you; bless and do not curse = No hateful speech. No vengeance.
- Don’t repay evil for evil = take the high road. Overcome evil with good.

PRAY: Creator of us each and all, thank You for Jesus, who shows us Your heart. Please help us see Jesus’ face in each person we meet.

GO: Remember—Goodness is stronger than evil. Love is stronger than hate. Light is stronger than darkness. Life is stronger than death. Victory is ours, victory is ours, through Him who loves us.

—Bishop Desmond Tutu

Safe Keeping—Community/Economic Health

March 1 — Mike Wenhart

TITLE: The Faith of the Centurion

PAUSE:

How strong is your faith?

Is it strong enough to stand in the gap for a friend, a loved one, someone who doesn't know Christ?

LISTEN: Matthew 8:5-13 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress." And he said to him, "I will come and cure him." The centurion answered, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; let it be done for you according to your faith." And the servant was healed in that hour.

REFLECT: As we go about our days, this story should be a great reminder to all of us. So many points can be made and so many different directions this devotion could go. What if each of us could follow the example, and the faith of this man.

First of all, as a Centurion, he was high up in the Roman army, a position he earned over time. The Romans were not exactly openly promoting Jesus, and we also can conclude that he was a Gentile. At this point in history, the Gentiles and the Jews were not exactly Facebook friends. This man had no reason to follow Jesus, yet he completely understood the magnitude of Jesus and had immense faith.

Was this story a last resort request? Or a genuine belief that Jesus truly is the Son of God? This Roman Centurion should not have faith, yet when he went to Jesus, he addressed Jesus as "Lord". Next the humble request – this leader asks for help for the lesser, his servant, who is about to die. Is the centurion worried about losing his help? Or does he have compassion for the man's life? I believe in his position of power with multiple men under him, he can easily get more servants. This leader had compassion and empathy for his sick and about to die servant.

Jesus asks if he can come make a house call and heal the man. Once again the centurion humbles himself, stating he is not worthy, but also probably thinking "Lord, you have more important things to do, don't waste your time. Just say the word and it will be done."

Here's where the power and faith come in. The centurion knows Jesus has the power to heal through word only. Lord speak and heal, I know you can. Jesus is amazed at the amount of faith, not just because this man believes Jesus' word alone can heal, but more because of all the people who SHOULD have this amount of faith, they don't. This man who has no historical reason for faith, has faith that far exceeds the ones who should! Jesus says go and it shall be done!

What if we took these positions each day? What if we humbled ourselves to have the compassion for others? What if we carried this level of faith? After all, we are like those in Israel where Jesus said He had not found anyone with that level of faith. What if those of us who SHOULD have the most faith actually acted like we had faith?

PRAY: Lord open my eyes and ears to those who need you. May my faith and my actions make a difference to those you put in my path.

GO: Take a moment now to picture how you can give up in your mind your lofty position to help someone in our community that needs your faith. The sick servant may not have known Jesus or had faith. It was not the servant's faith who healed – it was the centurion's. Those we help may not have faith, but those in need can definitely benefit from our faith.

Safe Keeping—Community/Economic Health

March 2 — Joan Cavin

TITLE: Caring for God's People

PAUSE: Now, more than ever, we need to maintain constant love for one another and to reach out to help others. The COVID-19 pandemic has

LISTEN: 1 Peter 4:8-11 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

REFLECT: Now, more than ever, we need to maintain constant love for one another and to reach out to help others. The COVID-19 pandemic has truly exposed the economic disparities so pervasive in our society and has exacerbated them

The past 12 months have been exceptionally hard for millions of people, those who have lost jobs and businesses, those who have unexpected expenses and those who fear how we can cover the costs of COVID-19. And those are just considering the effects of the pandemic, not the economic woes of millions of people trying to make do on low incomes.

But there is hope, because while millions of jobs were lost, millions of others still have income from working jobs requiring them to work at home, or income from pensions. And for these people, the costs of entertainment and vacations have in many cases been saved. I now go to the grocery store only once every two weeks and purchase only the necessities. I don't splurge on fabric and sewing supplies, but instead go and 'shop' in my stash of fabrics and thread. My ability to continue sewing has been a welcome distraction from the loneliness of being shut in. And I have been able to use this fabric collection to make masks and presents for people who need them.

Many of us have also gained time. Not time to mourn the things we cannot do, but time to reach out to others through Zoom calls, written notes, and telephone calls. And time to clean out cupboards and bookshelves finding lots of items sorely needed by others. And time to meditate and pray to God for the strength and wisdom to use out gifts to help others.

PRAY: Heavenly Father, I am grateful for relative health and security you allow me to enjoy. Please show me how I can use my gifts and time more effectively to help those with greater needs than mine.

GO:

Safe Keeping—Community/Economic Health

March 3 — Mitzi Johnson

TITLE: Friends

PAUSE: Young people today are obsessed with *Friends* (1994 to 2004), a sitcom which took place in an era relatively unscathed by political, climate, or economic catastrophe. There was no Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, and only the beginnings of email. To them, a place where people spend time talking in real life, loving each other, helping each other, and building friendships is utter fantasy, but also at the heart of their deepest longings. And ours.

LISTEN: Hebrews 10:19-25 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

REFLECT: Imagine the shape of a bowl. Now imagine Jesus, God's only son, moving down from the heavens into human history, experiencing testing and suffering of every kind, and then sweeping back up to the heavenly places. This bowl-shaped curve isn't only the way Jesus traveled, it's his way of grace to scoop all of us up and bind us back to the presence of God.¹

He invites us to travel there together as people who belong to each other. To those who watch the show *Friends* yearning for relationship, the Hebrews writer would say, "It's right here. It's within your grasp." That's why today's passage started, "Therefore my **friends**, since **we** have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus ... let **us** approach with a true heart." Other versions say, "Therefore brothers and sisters." We're not strangers or outcasts who have to hang back beyond the tent, we're family. We're a congregation, which means we congregate together.

Let me speak "Southern." When we come to visit God, Jesus waves us over through the kitchen door, the one off the carport where the cat food sits alongside the recycling bin, not the front door covered in cobwebs that opens to the room with the uncomfortable couch in front of the coffee table book no one reads. The Old Covenant led through that door, where we had to sit up straight and use the right spoon -- a place of anxiety. The new covenant says, "You're my family. Remember that winter night when you thought all was lost? Well, I've lit an oil lamp of grace, and my grace will lead you home. Find a place. Sit a spell. Scooch up to the table, and let's gather round and tell the old stories." You're among friends.

PRAY: Gracious God, these days we find ourselves gathering online, outside, and on Zoom, but we know even there you are with us. As you have welcomed us, help us to be welcoming community even when that takes extra effort and creativity. Send your Spirit to blow through any form our worship takes as a breeze blows through the open windows of a long-closed house.

GO: "I expect to pass through life but once. If therefore, there be any kindness I can show, or any good thing I can do to any fellow being, let me do it now, and not defer or neglect it, as I shall not pass this way again."
William Penn

¹ Long, Thomas. *Interpretation: Hebrews* (1997), 104.

Safe Keeping—Community/Economic Health

March 4 — Don Warsing

TITLE: Only Say the Word

PAUSE: Do you know anyone who is “the strong, silent type,” someone who speaks little, but says volumes when they do? Faith is perhaps best shown in ways that do not demand attention, that do not demand to be heard, but instead command attention through their depth and sincerity.

LISTEN: Matthew 8:5-13 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.” And he said to him, “I will come and cure him.” The centurion answered, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it.” When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.” And the servant was healed in that hour.

REFLECT: I grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition, and many of my memories of church are ones of awe — at the towering ceiling in the church my family attended; at the way that footsteps echoed through that church from the hard, terrazzo tiled floors; at the mysterious rituals performed weekly by the priests at mass. But, when I read this scripture passage, the words that ring in my head come from the Catholic mass, recited by the people in unison before Holy Communion, but always quietly, which went like this (in my day, though they’ve recently changed), “Lord, I am not worthy to receive You, but only say the word, and I shall be healed.” It’s a powerful statement, one that professes faith, humility, and an openness to healing. It states unambiguously that I will submit to God’s will and faithfully accept it.

Now, think about the passage in Matthew from which this part of the Catholic liturgy was drawn, in which a man of authority and power, a Centurion, a commander in the most powerful army on Earth, a man who could demand action and get results with just a word or two — “Go,” “Come,” “Do this” — has deferred his authority to a humble, itinerant, Jewish preacher. Beseeking this humble teacher and healer to have mercy on him and his servant. Claiming that he, a man who commands substantial earthly power, is not worthy even to have Jesus enter his property. And yet, he knows that Jesus can, with just a word — “only say the word” — command a much higher power, a heavenly power, to bring healing.

How can we live in ways that defer to God, like the Roman Centurion? How will we submit to God to confess that we are humble servants, open to receiving the power of God’s word? Do we act in ways that reflect that earthly titles and positions of authority are not what God requires of us? What God requires is our faith, a faith that submits to God and humbly asks for the healing of body and soul that we all require. Only say the word, O God, and we shall be healed.

PRAY: O God, I know that the things of this earth shall pass away, but the healing power of Your word is forever. I humbly submit to You, God. Only say the word, and heal me, body and soul.

GO: May you live this day and every day as a humble servant of God, open to receive the power of God’s healing word.

Safe Keeping—Community/Economic Health

March 5 — Gwen Cox

TITLE: The call to house a stranger

PAUSE: Have you ever welcomed the homeless into your home? Did you take the time to share your faith? What did you learn from them? What did they learn from you? Extend hospitality to strangers.

LISTEN: Romans 12:9-21 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good..

REFLECT: A few years ago an ad appeared on NextDoor that caught my attention. That night at dinner, my husband Tom mentioned the very same ad and wondered if we should respond. It seemed another resident in our subdivision was looking for a room for a homeless friend of hers to rent until she could get on her feet again. We happen to have a basement apartment that had been empty for awhile since our sons had stopped boomeranging back home. The ad clearly "spoke" to both of us.

We responded to the ad and it turned out that within a few days we had a tenant and embarked on quite a journey with a remarkable middle-aged African American woman. For the next six months we were affectionately called "Miss Gwen and Mr. Tom".

There was never a dull moment with our tenant. She filled our basement apartment with laughter, tears, ups, downs, soul food aromas, support, practical jokes, her grandkids on occasion, and a determination to "turn her life around." A relationship of love and respect grew between three people who started off thinking we were worlds apart only to learn that we had a lot in common.

She was definitely out of her normal environment -- in a predominantly white middle-class neighborhood in the suburbs with no transportation and not near any type of public transportation. She managed that very well between her long-time friend who helped her find us; a county van service that would come get her for work only (although she had to get up at least an hour earlier to use this and ask for it a day in advance); and the occasional request of us to give her a ride if possible.

She also was not used to how quiet it was in the suburbs. She admitted it took her awhile to get used to that especially when she was trying to fall asleep. But it was the quietness and the lack of transportation that finally put her in a position to "get her on her own feet" again.

She had started phlebotomy school several times and not finished for one reason or another. She started again while in our apartment. Her going to school, in addition to working 30 hrs a week, also meant she had to figure out transportation to school from work and from school to home. It made for really long days and she wanted to drop out, but this was her time and her season to finish.

It was during this time she would frequently called me downstairs to "talk". She is an extremely smart woman but had some anxiety about her ability to finish the course. I would listen and tell her "it's only ever so many weeks left. You've come this far, you've got this." We'd chat about something completely off topic as a distraction for a few minutes and then she'd get back to studying. She even convinced me to come and let her practice "sticking" me because she had to get so many practice sticks in before her exam. I'm so glad I did because it let me see her with her peers. She was outstanding with her sticks (I barely felt anything) and her "bedside" manner was excellent. I saw firsthand that she totally "had this" and now I had facts to encourage her.

Fast forward six months -- she's become a certified phlebotomist, found her own apartment (on the bus line), and after a few months, found a full-time job at a lab. We thought we were simply providing a temporary home to someone in need and what we got in return was much more. Intimate knowledge of how hard it is to get affordable housing; what not having reliable transportation is like; going beyond hand-outs to giving a hand up; and a new friendship that we would not have if not for a simple ad on NextDoor. When we look back, there's no doubt that God was working in us and in our new friend.

PRAY: Dear Lord, I lift up the homeless right here in our city and county. Give me courage to fight for affordable housing, to be aware of those in need in our community, and to look for ways to encourage, support and provide a "hand up" whenever possible.

GO: May you look for ways to extend hospitality to strangers and live in harmony.

Safe Keeping—Community/Economic Health

March 6 — Gretchen Shea

TITLE: Love Our Neighbor

PAUSE: I miss gathering with my church family to serve. But, in the last eleven months, our church congregation has stepped up in unique and wonderful ways to respond to God's call to love one another. We haven't let the pandemic stop us from loving and caring for our neighbors.

LISTEN: 1 John 4:9-12 NSRV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

REFLECT: On March 13, 2020, I was in New York on vacation with my sister and niece to see a Broadway show. We never saw the show. New York City began to shut down and Broadway closed. As we sat in a restaurant waiting for our lunch, my sister and I were both on our phones talking with our bosses to figure out what we needed to do to respond to the threat of COVID-19 in our own communities. Within 24-hours, I was back home, our trip ending two days early, and running full-speed ahead to prepare for whatever was coming our way.

The first step was to initiate drive-through prayer. Church members volunteered to sit outside and pray for those came by. Almost every day at least one person stopped for prayer. It was meaningful to me to be able to pray with two members of the congregation who had just lost a parent. Other volunteers prayed with people who were just driving by and saw our sign; they stopped and asked for prayers for their families and their jobs.

The second step was to contact our ministry partners to find out what their needs were/would be as the NC Governor announced we would begin Safer-at-home orders. With lists from four different partners, we scheduled a drop-off donation event. Soapstone responded with overwhelming support!

And you continued to respond in mighty ways!

Since those first few weeks, Soapstone has hosted Family Promise three times, providing meals and groceries which are delivered to the Day Center. We have hosted the Blood Connection Blood Mobile three times (four by the time you read this devotion), with the greatest ever number of donors. We have done a teacher supply drive for Baileywick Elementary School and provided food and paper goods for Baileywick families displaced by a fire at an apartment complex. We provided Christmas gifts for five families in the emergency housing program with Family Promise. We filled meals for Rise Against Hunger at their warehouse which allowed for a socially distanced packaging event. We sent work teams to Ocracoke and Camp Rockfish. We held Mission Madness where we collected food for Backpack Buddies, pillows for Family Promise, underwear for Urban Ministries, office supplies for Justice for Our Neighbors Clinic, meals for Congregational Care, supplies for Goodie Bags for Soapstone Preschool and Baileywick Elementary teachers, and we painted a triptych for the Baileywick cafeteria. And on top of those donations, we financially supported ZOE Empowers with our Christmas Challenge, Raleigh Rescue Mission, North Raleigh Ministries, UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Relief), the North Carolina Storm Fund, and rural churches of the North Carolina Conference.

I am in awe of the ways Soapstone continues to step up in times of adversity. In less than a year we have served neighbors near and far in whatever ways we could while still keeping our congregation safe during the pandemic. I am so thankful for the witness of this congregation and for your willingness to respond to God's call to Love Our Neighbors! I am so thankful for the open hearts, willing hands, and overwhelming kindness that flows from our church into our community and into the world.

PRAYER: To the Holy One who calls us, I give thanks and praise. For this congregation, for the people who so willingly respond, I give thanks and praise. God Almighty, may we always seek to hear your call to love our neighbor. May your love be perfected in us as we share it with others. Amen.

GO: May you find a way to show kindness and God's love to someone today.

Stories—Mental Health

March 7 — Laura Garrett

TITLE: Keep it? Let it go? Let it be?

PAUSE: For mental health, we need to discern which memories to nurture and which ones to release.

LISTEN: John 14:26-27 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

REFLECT: It's about time for Spring cleaning. You know, the routine questions - - "Do I keep this? Do I let it go? Is it worth the space it takes?" Author Marie Kondo has made popular the KonMari method of decluttering, involving the question, "Does this bring me joy?" Sometimes we need to do some Spring cleaning of our mental space, as well as our physical spaces. Today's Scripture says that the Holy Spirit will teach us everything and help us remember what God has taught us in the past. In her book, *The Helper*, author Catherine Marshall calls the Holy Spirit "The Remembrancer." I like that name. Obviously, the memories the Holy Spirit brings to mind are "keepers!" The Spirit helps us remember just the right Scripture at just the right time to encourage us or warn us of danger. The Spirit helps us remember lessons learned and insights gained. The Spirit brings us memories of joyful times and beauty when we are in the midst of struggles. But, what about all the other memories that clutter our minds and weigh on our hearts? How do we discern what memories to keep and which to let go? And how do we go about getting rid of the ones we don't want? Some thoughts that I find helpful in the process of "memory decluttering" are these:

- Does this memory bring me joy?
- Is this memory true, or is it maybe warped by having been formed when I was too young to understand what was going on, or when I was enduring a stressful period of life?
- Does this memory prompt me to be kinder to myself and others?
- Is this memory helpful in guiding me to avoid repeating mistakes in judgement?
- Does this memory prompt me to be appreciative of all God has done for me?
- If the memory brings pain, is it useful? Has this memory served its purpose? Is it time to let it go?
- Does this memory open my eyes and heart to see things from God's perspective?

If I do determine I need to put a memory in the "Let it go" pile, how do I do that? Unfortunately, I've not had any success in making unwanted memories disappear. I have found, though, that sometimes they will calm down and fade if I just don't focus on them. Kind of like ignoring a little kid throwing a temper tantrum on the hallway floor - - step over her and go about your business. Often the lack of attention will do the trick. Another technique that has worked for me is one I've learned from my son, who is a visual artist: If the mistake spoils the picture, and the paint is too dark to wash off or cover up, instead of throwing out the painting and starting over, incorporate it into the picture. Be creative and make the mistake a part of a new vision of the artwork. Here again, the Holy Spirit is our Helper! She will teach us everything we need to know. If we cannot remove the unwanted memory, the Spirit will show us how to move on.

PRAY: Oh, Holy Spirit, thank you for being our Helper, our Remembrancer, our Teacher! We are so grateful for the many ways you nurture us. In the dark times, please continue to help us remember what you have taught us in your Light. Amen.

GO: Today, when memories come to mind, thank God for the ability to remember, and ask the Holy Spirit for discernment as to whether to keep it, toss it, or transform it.

Stories—Mental Health

March 8 — Darleen Tibbs

TITLE: The Lord is Near!

PAUSE:

- * Take a deep cleansing breath in via your nose while thinking “More of YOU Lord”
- * Then release your breath out of your mouth while thinking “Less of Me Lord”
- * Repeat 3 times

LISTEN: John 14:26-27 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

REFLECT: I struggle with anxiety, as do/did my parents and many of my siblings. I have reminders on my computer to “breathe,” “not to worry as the Lord is Near,” and “Have Faith.” I was raised being told that taking medicine and going to counseling was a crutch, a sign of weakness. I’m a witness that this is not the case. Talking is an act of courage and talking about your struggles or weaknesses, even a bigger act of courage. I have learned over many years that our mental health is as important, if not more important, than your physical health. They are very connected.

What I have also experienced is the importance of staying connected with God as part of my mental health. The anxiety medication, the counseling sessions I’ve attended, the Ted Talks I’ve watched, the books I’ve read, all have helped me. But none of them bring the type of calm and peace that we can obtain from being and staying in relationship with our heavenly Father. It’s through meditation (breathing in the holy spirit), prayer (acknowledging our blessings), scripture (reminders of his advice), and worship (praise, support and accountability to each other) that we obtain peace for “He does not give as the world gives!” I often wonder how those without Faith walk through the ups and downs of life, I’m grateful I don’t have to.

PRAY: Dear Heavenly Father – Thank you for not giving as the world gives. Thank you for the Holy Spirit that we can breathe in so we can fill our minds and bodies with a peace that surpasses understanding. Please help us remember to turn to you daily so we don’t get overwhelmed and surrender our burdens to you. Amen

GO: Go filled with more of Him... and may His peace be with you.

Stories—Mental Health

March 9 — Isaac M. Hardison

TITLE: God is setting a path and leading the way even when we do not know the next steps.

PAUSE: When was the last time you felt lost? Do you currently feel lost? Does the pain of this life keep your focus away from the truth? Remember, God is always at work even when we don't see it.

LISTEN: Romans 8:26-27 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God .

REFLECT: The ending of 2019 and most of 2020 were not good times for me. Due to one random event (not COVID-19 related) my world went from the familiar comforts of a stable job and routine to the chaos of being fired for something I was not guilty of and trying to piece together my mind in the aftermath. I was almost destroyed with a lie. I was punished for another man's wrongdoing. The mental fallout from that event was so intense I was not mentally stable headed into my next job. Then when COVID-19 hit, I was the first to go because I was unable to display any sort of competence due to my left-over fear and anxiety. My mental struggles continued as I was not able to land jobs for which I qualified. I even had a great job offer get revoked the day after it was given for unclear reasons. What was I supposed to do! I hated God during this time. I almost left the faith. I asked several times, "Why should I follow Him when following Him causes me to suffer so much?" That's not the question I should have asked. I should have asked "When will I see how God is continuously bringing me back into His will".

Thank God, He knows more than I do. I have a new job now in a Christ-centered company with God-fearing people. Our mission is to help grow His kingdom. We have scriptures on all of our engineering drawings and we preach the Gospel to anyone willing to listen. I would not have left the positions I had if God didn't use those seemingly random events and troubles to bring me to this place where I could serve Him. God knows that the only way we will be whole and have a full, meaningful life is to be connected to Him. Sometimes, our pain is used to bring us back to Him. God knew that those positions were not where I was supposed to be. He knew how much my joy and well-being were damaged in those places, how I was not able to grow into who He wanted me to be. He knew there was a better place for me. The pain I went through gave me the insight to help others with trauma and help them back to a place of wellness with Christ. This new position I have now has given me confidence to be bold in my faith in an increasingly hostile world.

You might be uncomfortable; you might be afraid. You will make mistakes and be humbled through life's unexpected events. Remember, through the work of Jesus and the Spirit we are made better people and we will be placed in the right situation to be in His will. We do not know the specifics of God's master plan for us. However, we do know that God works all things to the goodness and glory of His kingdom. He has always wanted us to be a part of it! God's the one who makes us into who we should be for His purpose and plan. His plan is for his Kingdom and Goodness. He is the one who knows our value. Don't be discouraged in today's woes. Take comfort in that God is with us, even in the pain.

PRAY: God, please give me the wisdom to see things the way you do. To know that you do all things for your Good and Glory. Please help me find my place in your will, help me in my struggles and times where I lose faith. Continue to renew my spirit even when I don't know what will bring me comfort. In your Son's name I pray, Amen.

GO: Take heart that God is always with us. Remember, even death could not beat Him. With Him, it will not defeat us either.

Stories—Mental Health

March 10 — Diane Dougherty

TITLE: Hoping, Seeking, Healing

PAUSE: What would prompt a mother to physically and emotionally abuse her young daughter?

LISTEN: Matthew 9:27-33 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

REFLECT: Why does a young man who seems to have everything close himself and his running motorcycle inside his garage where he inhales gas fumes until he is asphyxiated? Why does a beautiful, creative young woman drink alcohol until her body can't take the trauma any longer? In part, these tragedies occurred because of the loss of the hope that leads us to Jesus and God who offer us further hope and merciful healing. When hope resides in us or is given to us, we actively seek our savior for healing, the future, and life itself.

“When he had gone indoors, the blind men came to him, and he asked them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” “Yes, Lord,” they replied. (Matt. 9:28)

The blind men sought Jesus because they knew his character and power well. They had hope for the future through Jesus' merciful healing.

There are several people in my family who suffered or are suffering from mental illness. The abusive mother, the alcoholic young woman, and the suicidal young man are just three of the others who suffer from depression, anxiety, and stress. Unfortunately, I don't think my family is an anomaly, but our society does not want to talk about or admit to a history of mental illness. It is a taboo subject that carries embarrassment, stigma, and shame. Consequently, mental illness is an isolating, lonely disease that often goes untreated medically or spiritually. We often try to hide a loved one's mental illness by euphemisms or outright lies to tell what is happening. The depression, anxiety, and postpartum hormone depression of the young mother was vaguely called “her troubles.” The alcoholism that was brought on because of depression was called “liver disease from a bad blood transfusion.” My brother's-in-law suicide due to depression and anxiety was attributed to “accidentally falling asleep while repairing his motorcycle.” From a place of unwarranted shame, our families tried to hide from the truth, but God knows our hearts and our heartaches. He wants to help us reach a place of hope.

When people suffer from mental illness, they often descend into a place devoid of hope. Hopelessness prevented my relatives from seeking any kind of help. Loss of self-worth and hope for healing and a future brought about destructive behavior that hurt others and themselves. But this outcome is not inevitable.

My great-aunt Elsie had five children in eight years during the Great Depression. She worked in her home rolling cigarettes for a local tobacco company while my great-uncle Herbert sang and played the ukulele in a band that played in small venues such as local bars. He died mysteriously when the oldest child, Frances, was eight. Elsie was left alone and jobless with five young children enduring poverty and depression. Today we would know that in addition to grief, she suffered from postpartum depression, a very real physical and mental illness. She was without hope, but she had family who helped her and her children find some healing.

Elsie's brother and sister-in-law took Frances into their home and raised her as their own daughter, sparing her from further abuse and leading her to a life and purpose in God. Frances began going to church service, Sunday school, and choir. She had a beautiful voice that she used to praise and serve God her whole life. And she had hope for a future that included loving and serving others. The cycle of abuse was broken as God's merciful healing began and continued. She was a loving, spiritual mentor to me my whole life, showing me the comfort of scripture.

God needs us more than ever to comfort and serve those who are trying to endure and heal from mental illness. These silent victims cannot get better on their own. They need us to love them and lead them to God for the hope and healing he wants so badly to provide to everyone who is aching.

PRAYER: Dear Lord, thank you for your promise of hope and healing. Help everyone who is suffering from mental illness to find physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Dear Lord, please give them hope and comfort.

GO: May we be the friends and servants who give hope and lead hurt, suffering people to our savior God for healing.

“Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary;
they will walk and not grow faint.” (Isaiah 40: 31)

Stories—Mental Health

March 11 — Mitzi Johnson

TITLE: In Remembrance of Me

PAUSE: In Deuteronomy, we're told, "Take care that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (6:12). Jesus says, "Do this in remembrance of me." What happens when we can't remember?

LISTEN: Isaiah 49:14-16 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.

REFLECT: When I was little girl, I was endlessly fascinated by my great-grandmother, Nanny. I knew she had traveled by train to New Mexico and taught school there before it became a state, and I imagined her in a pioneer dress and braids, writing with chalk on a slate board, while a smitten Almonzo Wilder flirted through the schoolhouse window. By the time I was in grade school, Nanny had become legally blind and developed dementia which affects memory, understanding, the ability to calculate numbers, the use of language, and judgment among other things. One morning, I sat across from Nanny at the table squinting my eyes, when my mother said, "You must be sleepy. Why don't you go lay down?" I was too embarrassed to admit I had just been trying to imagine the world as Nanny saw it.

My suspicion is that few of us as adults attempt to see the world as one does who has dementia. Well over half of nursing home residents have no regular visits from outside and that number is higher for those with dementia.¹ The real problem the church faces is not that people with dementia forget; the problem is they are *forgotten*. God's command to remember isn't directed to individuals. It's directed toward the community. We, together, are the memory keepers of the faith. If one of us can't remember, the rest of us are meant to visit and keep the stories alive. Failure to do so puts us at odds with God.

The good news is God never forgets. We are written on the palms of God's hands. French philosopher Descartes said, "*I think, therefore I am.*" That's just hogwash. Scripture tells us, "In God, we move, and breathe, and have our being." (Acts 17:28). That means "God remembers me; therefore I am." Our identity is in God.

PRAY: O God, in Jesus, you chose to enter the world as a human. In Jesus, you walk among the forgotten, the powerless, the vulnerable, and the helpless and grace them with your presence. In Jesus, you enter places that are broken, dark, dangerous, dingy, dirty, and smelly and grace them with your presence. In Jesus, you enter hospitals, and nursing homes, and memory care units and dining rooms turned into makeshift bedrooms and grace them with your presence. Thank you for never forgetting and for carving my name on the palm of your hand. Amen.

GO: You are more than your memories. You are more than your thinking. Whoever God says you are, then that's who you are.

¹<https://www.cnn.com/2015/05/18/health/elder-orphans/index.html>

Stories—Mental Health

March 12 — Donna Mayo

TITLE: Be Still

PAUSE: How many days last week were you stressed? How many days did you have problems sleeping? How often were you in a hurry? And, how often did you take time to be still?

LISTEN: Matthew 11:28-30 ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your soul. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

REFLECT: I grew up quickly. My family experienced some life-changing events when I was still in elementary school, and I felt forced to be older and more responsible than all the other kids my age. At twelve years old I took control of my life and established a pattern of being in control.

Getting married and having children helped me realize life can't always be put on a spreadsheet. However, I continued on the hamster wheel of life doing all the things that "needed" to be done at break neck speed and with great accuracy. Life was good. I had a terrific husband, amazing children, a great job, good friends. What's missing?

As we became empty-nesters I took on more responsibility at work, and the responsibilities included a lot of changes for a lot of people (family members, employees, friends, and me). This was perfect for me, because I believed I could work lots of hours and get tons of things done, and life would be lovely. And, I did get a lot accomplished, but at what expense? I didn't understand how difficult change is for most people, and how difficult enacting change would be for me. For years we didn't take vacations, and when I did take a few days off, my phone buzzed constantly. I vowed to change my situation.

One day I was in a meeting and thirty minutes into the meeting I realized I hadn't heard one word that was said. I was physically, but mostly mentally and spiritually, exhausted. I felt as if I couldn't walk back to my office. I had not taken time in days, weeks or months to "be still." I mostly operated in an atmosphere of busyness and noise. Not only had I not focused on my relationship with God, I hadn't taken care of myself or others around me. The realization hit me hard that I was trying to do it all on my own, just like my twelve year old self. My heart, mind, and soul needed to refocus. And, so it began.

That meeting was three years ago, and my life has changed significantly. I've discovered God can carry our burdens and give us rest. But, we need to be still and ask.

PRAY: God, let us always remember our reason for being, and help us to be still in the midst of the noise.

GO: Beginning today make stillness a necessary part of each day.

Stories—Mental Health

March 13 — Mike Wenhart

TITLE: Everything We Need

PAUSE: Abraham Maslow was a 20th American psychologist who argued the primary goal of life should be the actualization of self. An atheist, Maslow rejected organized religion and its beliefs, yet he is also credited with the hierarchy or pyramid of human needs.

The 6 basic needs of humans are: *Air *Water *Food *Shelter *Safety *Sleep

While many people will accept these items as truth, long before Maslow, a great architect came up with the same needs. For some reason, people will accept the words of Maslow while rejecting the Word of God. God has already told us humans what we need, and more importantly He provides and fulfills each. Read Psalm 23 – this is a passage anyone in the church (or even outside the church) has heard and read many times, yet we often read through quickly without really letting the words soak in.

LISTEN: Psalm 23 ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

REFLECT: These 6 verses provide everything we need. Take your time, read slowly. Read again, and as you read look for the basic human needs. We find air, water, food, shelter, safety, and sleep. Interesting how the Lord knows what we need, and Psalm 23 is the assurance that He provides.

This week on mental health and healing, how comforting is it to know God meets our every need? Maslow stated that if basic human needs are not met, psychiatric and mental health issues will occur. In addition, illness and even death can and will occur when basic needs are not met.

Written about 1000 BC, almost 3000 years prior to Maslow, God, the great architect, knew exactly what we need.

PRAY: Heavenly God, thank you for meeting my every need. When I question, make yourself known and remind me you designed and created me and know exactly what I need.

GO: Reach out to God, pray, and ask for these needs to be met. Ask God for healing our minds and rejoice in His promise. Spend time in His Word, seeking these basic needs and know He loves you enough to know every hair on your head. There is no better healing than knowing “I shall not want.”

Different Pictures—Intellectual Health

March 14 — Laurie Cain

TITLE: Sights and Sounds in the Dark Unknowingness

PAUSE: How many times have I walked up and down Sycamore Road over the past 50 weeks? (hundreds of miles worth) What did I see? What did I hear? How did I feel?

LISTEN: Isaiah 43:1-3a NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you will not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

REFLECT: Sycamore Road is .8 of a mile from our house to the end and back. It is a lovely road with multitudes of trees, large yards and 18 driveways.

A typical spring brings blooms of cherry trees and azalea bushes, tulips and daffodils. I have always noticed, but during the spring of 2020 I got to really soak it in. It was memorable to schedule (distanced) walks with friends to catch up and experience a touch of normalcy. I met neighbors for the first time, that I'd actually never seen before. We would have conversations from across the road. Now I pass them regularly. We welcome each other by name.

Then came hot summer. Walks continued, but much earlier or later in the day when the intense heat could be tolerated. I wore out a pair of shoes. I almost stepped on a snake in my yard which compelled me to pay even better attention. I remember many days held some gratitude for the freedom and ability to walk on such an uncrowded street. The birds sang to me nonstop. I beheld the different songs and came to look forward to the chorus that awaited. I had noticed the cardinals before, but didn't recall seeing the swathe of red dancing this way and that, providing an entertaining daily performance, free admission, no less! The hawks, a dozen of them riding the thermals, seemingly watching over us, continues to give me pause and thankfulness that I have sight even as I write this in late winter of now 2021.

As pretty as the spring of 2020 was, the autumn brought hues of such glorious color that new color names need to be invented to reflect the intensity. I remember the walks of late autumn smelled different as the color drained from the leaves and the trees shed their coat and moved toward slumber. As holidays and winter approached, I would sing and walk, remembering that the familiar Christmas music could still be enjoyed somewhat, though not in the choir loft with a group singing lovely harmonies. Winter will maybe bring a BIG snow. We already had a little one. I yearn for that novelty and newness.

Nature has surely delivered over the past year!

However, on the days when the sun shone brightly, but my eyes couldn't see it, or the vivid colors were lackluster and dull, I could remember to breathe, and try to engage my senses once again. When the sounds of birds were overshadowed by the noise in my head, I could remember a song or prayer. When loneliness felt like a pit, I could reach out to a friend for a virtual hug. (Marco Polo has been a great video app to keep us connected).

Today may still be dark, but I am hopeful tomorrow will bring Light.

PRAY: God of all, thank you for Nature. You are like Nature in your ever presence. And we thank you for bringing the Light. In the dark unknowingness, you are the Lord our God. Amen.

GO: Walk, wander, see, hear, smell, touch and feel. Feast your senses on all that is available to us.

Different Pictures—Intellectual Health

March 15 — Donna Mayo

TITLE: Living Wisely

PAUSE: Who are the wisest people you know? Why do you think they are wise? How are you working on developing your own knowledge into wisdom?

LISTEN: James 3:13 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

Who is wise and understanding among you?

Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

REFLECT: My father-in-law, Robert, was one of the wisest people I've ever known. He was also a quiet man of God. He began his life living and working on his family farm which existed only to provide sustenance for the family. His family was "land rich and cash poor." When it was time for Robert to go to high school he had to move away from home and live with an aunt and uncle, thirty miles from his home, which was quite a long distance in those days.

Robert paid for his college education, working two jobs, as a butcher and a bellhop for a hotel. On an average day he walked more than 10 miles between his apartment, school, and two jobs. After his undergraduate degree he began his career in education, serving first as a high school history teacher and basketball coach. He earned a graduate degree in education and served in several different administrative roles, completing his career as the president of a very large community college.

So, Robert was well educated, and he had a very successful career in public education. Is that why I think he was one of the wisest people I know? Hardly. Like you, I've known many people who are wise but lack formal education and many who have a lot of knowledge, but lack wisdom. Perhaps this is because we forget to regularly ask God for discernment and wisdom in our daily lives.

Throughout Robert's career he had some very tough decisions to make, and he made his decisions based on justice and truth. One of his decisions resulted in a cross being burned in his family's yard, while another resulted in a boycott by the African American community in the town in which he lived. Both of these actions happened because others felt Robert wasn't being fair. I'm sure Robert sought and received wisdom and discernment for his many decisions.

Though I always knew he was a smart, humble, thoughtful, and understanding man, I didn't really know the impact he had on those with whom he interacted throughout his life. Until he died.

Hundreds of people from all over the region stood in line for hours and hours to pay their respects and to tell stories of how Robert helped them when it was most needed. The people in line were from all walks of life: maintenance workers, governors, church friends, friends of 50 years and of 6 months, those who always agreed with him and others who never agreed with him. All because he was a wise man. He used his knowledge for good works.

PRAY: God, as I reflect on the knowledge I have and the knowledge I hope to gain, let me use it all for good works. Let me remember to seek discernment and wisdom from you.

GO: Use your knowledge to increase your understanding and good works.

Different Pictures—Intellectual Health

March 16 — Becky Fouts

Title: Smart vs. Wise

PAUSE: Are you smart? Do you feel confident in your knowledge and your ability to learn? Or, have you come to a place where you know you can never possibly stop learning? Especially, when it comes to learning about God.

LISTEN: Proverbs 1:1-7 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight; for receiving instruction in prudent behavior, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young—let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance—for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

REFLECT: A proverb (from Latin: proverbium) is a simple, concrete, traditional saying that expresses a perceived truth based on common sense or experience.

Since I was an elementary student, I've known I have the capability to learn and the capacity to grow intellectually. School was always easy for me. I barely studied, and I graduated with honors. This didn't make me feel superior, but I was always proud giving my report cards to my folks. Then, I grew up and experienced more, saw more, witnessed more. There came a time when I realized that there was a very real difference between being smart and being wise.

My Christian growth stagnated for a while, and when I actively returned to church, I felt.... well, dumb. I was so overcome in my first Bible study I didn't stick with it. I felt like a child in a college discussion. I was so over my head. I didn't give up though. I joined other studies, I read more, I got involved in different groups and exposed myself to so many wonderful, knowledgeable Christians here at SUMC. I experienced more, learned more, discussed more. So, while I've hopped, skipped, walked, run, jumped and fallen along my spiritual path, I am now at a place where I am able to put one foot safely and soundly in front of the other. I am on the path of wisdom. I AM gaining wisdom, I AM becoming more discerning, I AM listening, hearing and absorbing. And while "The fear of the Lord" sounds scary, it's not at all scary. It just means the ability to KNOW the power and strength of the Lord and His might. Knowing this, knowledge of this, is not really fear at all. Learning more, day to day, is such a gift!

PRAY: Heavenly Father, thank You for Your blessings. Thank You for Your word. Thank You for teaching us, day after day and year after year to continue to receive Your word and to learn from You. May my simple, humble and heartfelt thoughts bring joy to You and those who read them. Amen.

GO: May you trip less, jump more, and walk the beautiful path of wisdom in your journey with the Lord!

Different Pictures—Intellectual Health

March 17 — Gretchen Shea

TITLE: Letting the Pandemic Ignite Our Creative Spark

PAUSE: Do you feel stalled in life? Does the pandemic have you stuck mentally, physically, emotionally? What if this season was meant to jar us out of complacency into a new creative nature!

LISTEN: Matthew 9:20-22 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.” Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.” And instantly the woman was made well.

REFLECT: In today’s scripture reading we encounter a woman who has suffered for years, hidden from others. She desperately wants to be healed. Her circumstances have her stuck. She has heard about the healing power of this Jesus. A creative spark ignites. Normally hidden in the shadows, she braves the crowd to reach out and touch the hem of Jesus’ robe. Her belief in Jesus’ healing power is so deep, she trusts that she will be healed even if he doesn’t know she is there.

I am sure you can think of at least one person who has learned to knit, crochet, or sew during the pandemic. You can probably name someone who learned to garden, maybe even to can vegetables or make jam. You might know a parent who has had to get creative in how they handle virtual school with a child while maintaining a home office. Maybe you know someone who learned yoga, began walking, or took up cycling. Many of us have learned new things during this season.

It seems to me that the pandemic has allowed our creative natures to spring up and overflow!

Don’t get me wrong. I know we are all tired of this situation and we want to get back to being able to be in fellowship without wearing a mask. I get it! I’m right there with you. But I recognize for many, this time of being at home has opened new doors and allowed us to engage parts of our brains that haven’t previously been tapped. We’ve grown! We’ve gotten creative!

We have reached in, and out, and up, to discover a healing that we didn’t know we needed. Not wanting to stay in, hidden in this dormant time, not wanting to be stuck in the shadows of an illness that is threatening us, we have taken creative steps to move beyond the darkness that seemed so threatening just a year ago.

We have grabbed ahold of those creative sparks to reach out and touch the hem of Jesus’ robe so our lives can be filled with life and breath and the healing of our souls! And God has responded by allowing our creative energy to produce new things, and good things, healing things, and—in some cases—life changing things.

PRAY: Creator God, thank you for giving us those creative sparks that have been flowing forth from the shadows of the pandemic. Thank you for giving us the courage to reach out for the healing only Jesus can offer. Help us to step into this new normal to carry out our fresh ideas with excitement and joy. Amen.

GO: Take note of the creative ways you, your family, your friends, and your neighbors have responded to this time. Celebrate the ways you see God moving in those creative sparks.

Different Pictures—Intellectual Health

March 18 — Patsy Booth

TITLE: Looking to the Lord for Help!

PAUSE: When was the last time you prayed for God's help?

LISTEN: Psalm 121:1-3 ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.

REFLECT: Growing up at the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the tall mountains were a familiar sight. As a child, I was amazed at how huge they seemed, and that God had made them; and how did he make mountains? There was a large mountain, Hibriten Mountain, near my Grandmother's house and every Christmas a huge lighted star was placed at the top. At Easter, it was decorated with a lighted cross. Both could be seen for miles. All of us have experienced trials and troubles in our lives. I have asked God many times for help and guidance. The problem may have been ridiculously small or what I perceived to be a huge problem. I have gone to this favorite psalm many times saying it over and over, either out loud or silently to myself.

When our granddaughter was born, I was in the delivery room with our daughter and her husband. I was holding our daughter's hand and putting a cool cloth on her forehead. As the pains were getting more and more intense, our daughter was becoming exhausted. I leaned over her face and started saying this psalm. She started saying it with me. We repeated it over and over and suddenly with one push, I heard the cry of my newborn granddaughter. God gave me and my daughter strength. I also saw the wonderful miracle of childbirth. Thank you, God, for strength and blessings!!

During Joe's many surgeries and hospital stays, as I have waited; I have prayed for Joe's health and for strength from the Lord to help me through whatever would happen next. This psalm again plays over and over in my mind.

This past year with COVID-19, I have felt weak, lonely, and somewhat broken. I want to go back to worship service. I want to go back to Bible Study. I want to go inside the grocery store. I want to celebrate the holidays with our children and grandchildren. I want to hug them so long they will lose their breath!!! I want to socialize with my friends. I want to be free of a mask. Lord, please give me strength. I know I can go to the Lord anytime day or night, whether I am inside my house or in the yard filling up the birdfeeders or feeding the fish in the pond.

PRAY: Oh Lord, this day and every day I am thankful for your strength and comfort. I am thankful that I do not have to be strong, because you have all the strength I will ever need. I am thankful that I can read your word in my Bible. I am thankful that I feel your love, strength and caring. Help me Lord to be more of the person you would have me to be. Be with all my brothers and sisters in Christ and let each and every one feel your love, comfort and strength. Thank you, Lord, that you do not sleep and are there whenever I call your name. Give me more strength and help me to share your love and strength with others.

GO: May each of you feel God's strength, love and comfort in everything you do this and every day. Who can I pray for today and ask God to give them strength?

Different Pictures—Intellectual Health

March 19 — Wanda Rozier

TITLE: An Empty Shell

PAUSE: How do you show faith? How might you be spiritually blind or mute? How can Jesus heal your sight and speech?

LISTEN: Matthew 9:27-33 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, crying loudly, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” They said to him, “Yes, Lord.” Then he touched their eyes and said, “According to your faith let it be done to you.” And their eyes were opened. Then Jesus sternly ordered them, “See that no one knows of this.” But they went away and spread the news about him throughout that district.

After they had gone away, a demoniac who was mute was brought to him. And when the demon had been cast out, the one who had been mute spoke; and the crowds were amazed and said, “Never has anything like this been seen in Israel.”

REFLECT: When I was a child, I enjoyed walking along sandy beaches on sunny days and feeling excited when I found a large, empty conch shell. I would bring the conch close to my right ear and “listen” to the ocean waves. When I was an adult, I went snorkeling in the crystal blue waters of Puerto Rico. I saw a conch slightly hidden in the bottom of the ocean floor. I pointed it out to the guide. He said that if there wasn’t an animal in it, I could pick it up and take it with me. To my delight, it was empty, and I brought it home.

Many times, I sit and stare at that conch shell as it adorns my table. It’s been there for almost twenty years, constantly reminding me of a memorable and beautiful moment in my life. It also reminds me of empty moments in my life. One particular time was during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown. My husband died three years before, my adult children lived far away, and most everything was closed. I felt lonely and isolated. I threw my hands up in the air several times asking God, “Where are you? Can’t you see that I need connection and community? I don’t think I am strong enough to go on like this anymore.” I felt spiritually blind.

A few weeks later, I reconnected with people through social media that I hadn’t seen or heard from since high school and college; friendships reemerged after decades of no connection. Catching up with old friends was therapeutic and rewarding. Looking at photos of them and their families, as well as talking on the phone lifted my spirits. Laughter and sharing stories was medicine for my loneliness. Reconnection was the silver lining of COVID-19 for me. And even though I still craved normalcy, the emptiness of my shell didn’t feel so void. This experience reminded me to keep my faith and eyes open to the miracle of God’s unconditional love, and how he will never forsake me.

PRAY: Lord, help me to always remember that you are with me during good and bad times. Help me to keep the faith of knowing you will never forsake me, and to keep my eyes open towards you. Amen.

GO: Open your eyes to the miracles Jesus provides every day, particularly during difficult times. Be aware that they are there, and be faithful that he is always with you and will restore you.

Different Pictures—Intellectual Health

March 20 — Joan Cavin

TITLE: Love of Learning

PAUSE: Do you love reading books? Do you love learning from others? I do! I especially love to learn God's message for us.

LISTEN: The Value of Wisdom Proverbs 2:1-10 ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; if you indeed cry out for insight, and raise your voice for understanding; if you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures— then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly, guarding the paths of justice and preserving the way of his faithful ones. Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.

REFLECT: Heavenly Father I am grateful that I can walk with you through these difficult times. I pray for wisdom to understand how I can best reflect your love for all of us, and how I can help others to grow in their knowledge of You and your commandments.

As a child I was always curious, buried in books and asking questions 'why this, and why that?' I also questioned my faith, asking why, if we are all God's children there are 'chosen' people. As I have learned and experienced more, I have also come to realize that all the problems of the earth cannot be solved at once but by starting somewhere and taking smaller steps, just as a baby learns to crawl and to walk.

As an adult I began to study Scripture more and to accept the teachings present in each book. Most of all, I have come to learn about Jesus Christ and his teachings. I am now retired, but my desire for learning has not stopped, but has become even more urgent as I realize that there will not be enough time for me to learn all I want to. Most of all I have learned that wisdom does not just come from understanding the facts from books, but from the relationships I have experienced and the ones I need so much.

I am grateful for the relationships I have had and now hold dear in memories, and now understand more clearly Jesus teaching that the first and greatest commandment is 'to love you God with all your heart and all your mind, and the second is like unto it, to love your neighbor as yourself'.

May it be so.

PRAY: Heavenly Father I am grateful that I can walk with you through these difficult times. I pray for wisdom to understand how I can best reflect your love for all of us, and how I can help others to grow in their knowledge of You and your commandments.

GO: Share your love of learning God's message with others.

Restoration—Environmental Health

March 21 — Bill Poston

TITLE: Taste the Goodness of God

PAUSE: My favorite place to visit in Raleigh is the State Farmers Market. In July, strawberries, tomatoes and watermelon fill the market stalls. You can taste the goodness of God in each bite of fresh produce. Cut these up together for a tasty salad.

LISTEN: Genesis 1:26-31 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

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

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

REFLECT: I grew up in a small eastern South Carolina tobacco town. I remember the buzz in town when the tobacco markets were open. Families filled the sidewalks because they had just sold their crop and had money in their pockets.

One summer I visited my uncle. It was time to get the cured tobacco out of the barn and to market. At the tobacco barn, my cousins positioned themselves in the rafters to hand down sticks strung with golden leaves. I handed each stick to my aunt and uncle who carefully pulled the leaf from the stick and laid it on a pallet with the best leaves the most visible. I remember the sweat pouring off my cousins so that standing at the bottom meant getting soaked. At the end of the day, I was rewarded with the chance to ride on top of the stacked pallets of tobacco on a trailer headed for the tobacco market. Laying in the tobacco and entering the huge field of tobacco pallets in the warehouse, I inhaled the sweet aroma. After sales the next day, my stern Grandfather Poston took us out for ice cream.

A few years later, I began to help my Grandfather Mims at his farm. I cleaned and whitewashed the siding of his house. Then we built a shed in the back yard for his lawnmower and tools. With some other family members, we built a large hay barn in a back field. I liked driving the tractor with a mower to cut fields of grass and with a baler to rake, pack and drop off blocks of hay. While the mowing and baling were fun, running behind the trailer and tossing bales on to it was hard work. Especially, if dew or rain made the bales heavy. Then we would take the trailer to the haybarn and stack it there.

Even as a townie, it was easy to see the rhythm of the seasons of work. Planning and care resulted in harvest. And there was a reliance on providence that livestock grew healthy, rain and sun came in correct proportions and winds were not severe. There was a lot you could not control, and farming was an every-day, all day job.

When I think of my grandfather's farm, the calendar of Jewish festivals makes sense to me. Many of the Hebrew celebrations were timed with the planting and harvest calendar. I enjoy visiting the state farmers market today because it captures the excitement of farmers bringing crops to market and the harvest season celebration when the hard work of planting and caring for the crop results in taking a bite of a sweet strawberry, tomato or watermelon.

PRAY: Lord, today we thank you for the garden of goodness with which you bless us. Thanks to the farmers and the preparers that turn your bountiful harvest into a table of delicious food where we come together in your love. Amen

GO: Check out the farmers, Community Service Agriculture opportunities and farmers markets in our community. Some of our grocers now have signs highlighting local produce. Thank a farmer or the person that puts food on your table.

Restoration—Environmental Health

March 22 — Jim Galloway

TITLE: Reconnection: Embracing the Rest of Me

PAUSE: Do I relate to the world by taking things from it? Or manipulating it to advance prosperity? Or by intervening to repair it? Yet when do we just be in it, part of it, letting God heal us all through our interconnectedness with it?

LISTEN: Romans 8:19-21, 28 ([Bible Gateway Link](#)); Colossians 1:15-20 ([Bible Gateway Link](#)); Ephesians. 5:1-2a ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

“...the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” (Rom. 8:21b NRS); “...in him all things hold together.” (Col. 1:17b NRS)

REFLECT: My yearning gaze out the bedroom window took in our large snowy yard, with woods beyond and all sorts of lively creatures within. It was out there. I was in here, separated from its gleefully cold kids by insulated glass. Warm and safe, I could neither catch secondary infection nor infect playmates. Born three months premature, with pneumonia an annual winter companion thru age 12, I could not wait to escape my bed-bubble with its oxygen tent, and camp by the windows. My live-in RN and MD (Mom and Dad) kept me supplied with books, vinyl 45 rpms, a TV tuned to Nature programs and Lassie—and math & chemistry puzzles (at age 7).

If I could not be part of it, I would study it, and dreamily identify with friends and pets I could not touch, whose warm, rich aromas I could not enjoy. Yet imagined interaction was so one-sided. And so, nature and I, community and I, grew apart. The young would-be scholar-scientist as observer, the world under my microscope.

That’s a hard habit to break, yet I was not its only addict. The whole Western world lives in a false, unconscious “I-It” dualism with non-human Creation. As I grew healthier and was placed in honors classes, I grew ever more analytical, ever less collegial: more stoic, less empathetic. Until. Until I realized how many others, humans, animals, the air and the waters, were suffering also. And so, I plunged into that pool with them. The city air of the 1960’s was dirty, cigarettes were deadly, the War was escalating, and the poor and nonwhite were drafted to fight it. And we, the co-sufferers? Should we also fight and win? No, the first Earth Day had a different vibe.

A close friend gradually won me to Christ. Christ entered my heart. I began to feel the pain that Jesus, “the Human Face of God,” feels when anyone suffers or loses, even the enemy oppressor. Martin Luther King Jr. with his non-violent way of struggle showed us the way.

So, I took those insights back into my science studies and first career as an environmental chemical engineer. Quantum physics shows us that we, the observers, the “fixers,” inescapably are under the microscope with the “objects” we “observe.” When they suffer, so must we. Their healing is our only path to being healed ourselves.

--Yet we humans, as disciples of Christ, are unique in this: we are privileged to be part of the liberation of all the earth, self-consciously choosing to help our Creator/Sustainer/Redeemer free us all. Let us embrace our oneness with all creation, in its endangered harmony.

PRAY: Lord, make us your wounded healers, for we live in union with creation in its harmony and its groaning.

GO: May we enjoy observing nature, not as isolated from it, but as part of it, the way we observe Easter, in commemoration, and so let Christ through nature heal us even as we help its Creator heal it.

Restoration—Environmental Health

March 23 — Mitzi Johnson

TITLE: God's Gracious Pantry

PAUSE: Most people give a fair amount of thought to the food they eat. They make lists of the foods they enjoy and crave. They consider which fruits and vegetables are in season. They may even think about how much time each food takes to cook and what recipes to make. But, what about God? How much do you think of God as you choose and enjoy your food?

LISTEN: Genesis 1:29-32 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.³⁰ And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so.³¹ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

REFLECT: The description of the first two days of creation in Genesis is concise. Then on the third day where God stocks the pantry, words begin to pour forth like a harvest from a cornucopia. *"Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it."* This bit gets repeated. Then we when we get to sixth day where God creates humankind, and we realize that being created by God means we eat for a living. All that creation building, laying out of a garden, stocking the oceans and the skies, is part of providing sustenance for God's beloved, human and animals alike. *"See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so.*

Have you ever considered whether the process of choosing the foods you eat could be a spiritual practice on the same level as worship or prayer? The Biblical writers did. That's one of the things that separates them from us. This storyteller in Genesis is from the cradle of civilization where daily sustenance comes in the form of hundreds of varieties of seeds - lentils, peas, chickpeas, and on and on. So, he writes this beautiful liturgical poem that celebrates seeds. To him, seeds represent God's fruitfulness and provision. Something as simple as seeds are ... spiritual. Our Creator made us to experience hunger so that every time we eat, we would acknowledge God as the giver of every good gift. How would your choice of food and your stewardship of the earth that produces that food change if every time you approached the table became an opportunity to give thanks to God?

PRAY: Lord, when we come to the table, we celebrate Eucharist, "Thanksgiving." You provide us wheat and grapes and allow us to give them back to you as bread and wine. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we receive them again as the body and blood of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and food for the journey. For this we are grateful. Amen

GO: All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small. All things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all. The cold wind in the winter, the pleasant summer sun, the ripe fruits in the garden, God made them every one.

Restoration—Environmental Health

March 24 — Bill Poston

TITLE: Our Precious Land

PAUSE: My wife was elated the day my National Park pass or “geezer pass” as she called it, arrived in the mail. The National Park Service sells lifetime admission passes for anyone 62 and older. We used mine to visit Yellowstone National Park in September 2020.

LISTEN: Psalm 104:24-30 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.

REFLECT: In 2015 Rebecca drove our daughter Betty Lou from Raleigh to Eugene to start grad school at the University of Oregon. They made stops along the way, but the one I heard about the most was Yellowstone National Park.

When I retired in 2020, we combined a trip to see Betty Lou who is now employed as an architect in Portland, with a trip to Yellowstone. Because our trip coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic we questioned whether we should travel, ultimately deciding it was important to see our daughter. We sought to lessen risks by taking steps like wearing masks and goggles during our flight. We took the plane to Portland, then drove to the park.

Yellowstone is like another world. Driving through the Lamar Valley in the late afternoon, you see hundreds of bison grazing on the valley floor. Suddenly the cars stop because a dozen of the huge wooly creatures are in the road or walking by your car. We spilled out of bed the next morning to gather with 200 people wearing masks and coats to watch Old Faithful steam, spew and shoot water high into the air right on schedule.

Then just down the boardwalk, you see the large field of geysers steaming in the cool morning. With a short drive and a hike, we found the Grand Prismatic overlook. Below lies a steamy pool slicked with the color of the rainbow. Later, we walked the boardwalk around the 160-degree hot springs with a crowd at sundown.

During COVID-19, the park offered cabins and take out, but not hotels or restaurants. Most visitors were masked up, there were no ranger talks and some facilities were closed. This visit was so different from other vacations, but these conditions only made us appreciate Yellowstone’s majesty all the more.

We left the park, stopping at the Roosevelt Arch built to honor Teddy Roosevelt for his two-week visit to Yellowstone in 1903. When I see the stunning beauty of God’s creation at Yellowstone, I give thanks to the creator. I give thanks to those who have preserved the park and gave me a chance to see a century later what President Roosevelt saw.

As we made the return drive to Portland, we heard reports of wildfires near the city. The closer we got, traveling along I-84 in the Columbia River Gorge, the more smoke we noticed. We eventually began to wear our masks inside the car. Portland was dark and gloomy from the smoke and health warnings urged staying indoors. Noon seemed like dusk and the primary reason for masking up changed from COVID-19 to the choking smoke. During our stay, health officials said Portland had its worst air quality ever. We hated to leave our daughter there, but she had to get back to work and we had return tickets.

Our changing climate has increased the threat of wildfires in the Western U.S. The Portland forest fires burned one million acres and required the evacuation of 40,000 people. Two weeks after the fire started, rain doused the fires and cleared the smoke.

The Psalms repeatedly describe the wonder of God’s creation. And the Genesis creation story tells us humans are given dominion and responsibility for creation. We have a duty to care for our world and all that is in it. We want our children and future generations to have the chance to appreciate the wonders God provided us.

PRAY: Lord, help us to see how we can best protect the world you created for us. Help us work with you to protect the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat and the good things you give us. Amen.

GO: May you enjoy the beauty of God’s creation walking in your neighborhood or hiking in a national park.

Restoration—Environmental Health

March 25 — Jim Galloway

TITLE: Green Vocation: The Call to Restoration

PAUSE: What's dominion for? A license to exploit? Or an opportunity to nurture?
To cultivate and protect (Gen. 2:9)? Or to strip-mine and over-fish?
We are made in God's image, so maybe have dominion the way God rules?
How does God rule wild animals?

LISTEN: Gen. 1:26-30; 2:15 NRSV Job 38:41-39:1 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

So, God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion... And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." Genesis 1:26-30 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.
Genesis 2:15 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?
"Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you observe the calving of the deer?"
Job 38:41-39:1 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

REFLECT: "Don't you hurt that little dog! He's just as human as you are!" My 3-year old bratty self had just bitten our new dachshund puppy's tail. Freddy had whirled around and nipped my nose. Mom saw who started it. Ignoring my sore nose, she ran to him and wailed at me on our pup's behalf: "He's just as human as you are!" Mom learned that from God. Yet God especially loves wild animals, not only our pets. They run free, while God helps them survive. So that is what "dominion over nature" looks like. That's how it should feel, to the one exercising deputy dominion: we should feel the love and concern for nature that God feels. The rainbow covenant of Genesis 9:16 was made with every living creature, not just humanity.

My first career was neither housing and homeless ministry (2nd) nor parish ministry (3rd), but a clear call into a lay ministry of environmental chemistry. I always loved math, and adored chemistry from the second grade, when I got my first set of molecular models and chemistry set. What is the world made of? How does it work? There are only 26 letters, only 92 elements, how do they result in the near-infinite variety of word-messages and chemical compounds (even messenger RNA)? How do the parts form the whole, and why is the whole so much more than the sum of the parts? Nature is allegedly based on cut-throat competition, yet how is it that the circle of life fosters harmony, even symbiosis? Such questions led me to biochemistry, genetics, and ecology.

I wanted to help us make and sell things sustainably without using up the earth, polluting air and water, or wasting useful energy into chaotic heat. So, under President Jimmy Carter's win-win philosophy, I spent four years with a small consulting group in RTP developing methods for EPA that would enable chemical companies to make money while harnessing energy and recycling waste products. Decades later, that 1st call has returned.

Our great-grandchildren may need this earth. When God does transform the world, he will glorify it, not destroy it. God raised Jesus' crucified body: He is no disembodied ghost, but transformed, not cast aside.

PRAY: Lord, help us to love your creation, and every creature in it, as much as you love. In this hour of grave danger for our earth, which we humans have caused, help us to awaken and make the necessary self-sacrifices, as You gave your very Self for us.

GO: May each of you feel the joy of a trust faithfully kept, as you discern and act in ways that restore and preserve our spaceship earth.

Restoration—Environmental Health

March 26 — Rebecca Galloway

TITLE: Wonder at God's Creation

PAUSE: Can you stop multi-tasking? Can you say “No”? “Slow down, you move too fast, you've got to make the morning last,” (Simon & Garfunkel).

LISTEN: Psalm 104:24-30 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there...
These all look to you to give them their food in due season;
when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.
When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.

REFLECT: My Dad worked at a florist's greenhouse and had a chicken and egg business. I was raised on the outskirts of Raleigh in the 1950's, tending gardens, helping raise chickens, and helping deliver eggs. Dad taught me carpentry and electrical work. I once built, and wired, a State Fair food booth for a Vietnamese refuge family. Later I designed and built a playground for a homeless family housing complex, and then finished our attic.

But Dad especially taught me to care for plants, including both flower and vegetable gardens. I was struck by nature's diversity and intricacy. Starting at age 8, I collected insects and studied their habitats. I would frequently run to the house from my garden chores explaining “I need a jar for a bug!” Both ecology and ethology (animal behavior) fascinated me. My math teacher Mom wanted me to follow in her footsteps: “At least major in biostatistics!” I chose the field biology, studying salt marshes and swamps and mountain streams and the way water pollution upsets their balance and function. For one year I taught science and math to 7th graders. My approach was to show them the wonder of the living world. We set up a nature trail with labeled plants in the woods next to the school. At the NC Department of Agriculture, I worked in biological pest control, so that pests like gypsy moths and cereal leaf beetles could be stopped without resorting to chemical pesticides that pollute. There I finished my master's work on the behavior of a gypsy moth parasite. When Jim started divinity school in Louisville, I worked on the seminary grounds crew. Later, cancer research for the VA/medical school was less satisfying: too indoors and microscopic for me. So, I ended up getting a second bachelor's in landscape horticulture and becoming a lawn and garden advisor for twelve years, until health issues intervened.

Whenever It became hard to perceive God in the human world, I have been able to discern the Creator's hand clearly at work in creation. Helping in that sphere has always renewed my faith.

PRAY: Father encourage us by your constant care for all creation. When human relationships are difficult, or when health fails, remind us you are there. Help us continue to care in hope and joy.

GO: May you find time to “Watch flowers growin.’
“Let the morning-time drop all its petals on” you.—Simon and Garfunkel

Restoration—Environmental Health

March 27 — Gretchen Shea

TITLE: Caring for the Earth

PAUSE: In 2013 I had an opportunity to visit several working groups with ZOE Empowers. I came back to the United States with a renewed appreciation for running water and fresh dirt. I also came back with a renewed commitment to care for these precious parts of God's creation.

LISTEN: Genesis 1:9-12, 27-29 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

REFLECT: When my sons were little they would often spend a week each year with my mother-in-law. My mother-in-law used homemade cloth napkins in her home. My youngest once asked her why we used paper napkins at our house. Yes, you guessed it, we received cloth napkins shortly thereafter. My son led the charge in our home to recycle, reuse, and reduce. In his child's mind, this was to be an easy task. I found it a harder thing to do.

We worked on it over the years, even trying our hand, unsuccessfully I might add, at composting. But it remained a challenge and never quite took hold. I didn't connect the use of our natural resources or the waste we produced with my faith. Until I went to Kenya that is!

In Kenya I watched as children and women got up early and walked to the nearest water source to gather water their buckets. Some traveled quite a distance and carried sizable containers of water back to their villages. Water was carefully boiled for its use in cooking and for drinking. Water was also used for bathing and washing clothes. I couldn't help but think how spoiled I was to have running water whenever I felt the desire to simply turn on the tap.

I also watched the young people in the working groups as they ran water lines to their crops. Those who had land that could be farmed used the land to grow their own vegetables and often grew small crops that they could sell in the market. I watched one group of young men help a member of their working group carefully mark the lines in the soil and then go back to plant seeds. It was more than their livelihood, it was a source of sustenance – one that would be shared with other members in the group. Again, I felt spoiled in that whenever I'm out of a food item, I can jump in the car to be at the grocery store in less than five minutes.

Returning to the United States, I realized something inside me had changed. The young people in Kenya that I had met were so incredibly grateful to God for everything they had. They shared so freely about the blessings God had given them in their land, their food, their resources. I began to deeply treasure the ease of life we have here in the States, but I also started to consider ways in which I could protect the resources God has so graciously given us in the Earth.

I can't say I've tried composting again, but my family has worked with me to be more conscious of our use of water. We are more intentional about ordering from The Produce Box rather than purchasing all our fruits and vegetables from the store. We work harder at eating leftovers and not having so much food waste. And we try to recycle or to use resources that won't need to be recycled, trying to cut out the use of plastic as much as possible.

It can be quite challenging at times to try and stick with our best intentions. We fail more frequently than I'd like to admit. But we do try! God has planted a seed within my soul that I cannot ignore. We are called to care for the beautiful creation called Earth.

PRAY: Creator, thank you for the precious gifts of water and soil. Thank you for the farmers who so lovingly work their fields to produce crops which feed us. Thank you for the water systems that allow us to have clean water at our fingertips. May we learn to not take these gifts for granted. Amen.

GO: Practice one thing this week that protects our natural resources.

Palm Sunday

March 28 — Gretchen Shea

TITLE: Welcome to the King of kings!

PAUSE: Today is Palm Sunday. It is the day we celebrate Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Palm branches waving. Shouts of "Hosanna!" ringing in the air. Today, we welcome the King!

LISTEN: John 12:12-18 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!"

Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"

His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him.

REFLECT: Can you imagine it, walking with Jesus into Jerusalem? Do you see the crowds of people? This is the largest crowd yet! And they are so excited to have Jesus among them; they are waving palm branches and shouting to him, "Hosanna to the King of kings"!

You've been following Jesus for years now. You have seen him heal people many, many times. He restored the blind man's sight with a little dirt and spit. He spoke to the man who couldn't walk, and the man got up and walked. You watched as the woman in the crowd gently touched him; she was healed because she believed that all she had to do was touch him. He healed the leper. He healed the Centurion's. He healed Peter's mother-in-law. He even had the power to raise Lazarus from dead.

You have seen some incredible things happen!

Now following the Messiah into Jerusalem, you wonder, "Why are we going here? Why is he putting himself in danger?" Surely Jesus knows this isn't a safe place. The Jewish leaders are out to get him. He is breaking the law. He is challenging their authority. He is performing miracles that they cannot perform. Jesus must know he will be arrested and put to death if he continues into the city.

But still, you follow him.

You follow him because even with the possibility of danger, you know Jesus is the Messiah. You have seen his power to heal. You have seen his miracles. You have witnessed firsthand the power God has given his Son.

After all, Jesus has healed your body. He has restored your mind. He has changed your heart.

And so, you follow him.

You join in the exclamations of the crowd. "Hosanna! Hosanna!"

WE join in the exclamations of the crowd. "Hosanna! Hosanna! Praise to the King of kings!"

It is Palm Sunday, the day we welcome Jesus!

PRAY: Glory to God for the healing power of Jesus. Hosanna! Praise to the King of kings who has changed our lives and called us to continue his ministry in the world. Thank you, Lord, for the healing you offer us - body, mind, and spirit. Amen

GO: Share the Good News! Shout Hosanna! The King of kings is here.

Holy, Wholly—Integrated Health

March 29 — Mike Wenhart

TITLE: Wholly Holy

PAUSE: Another devotion on healing? Really? How many of these do we have to endure, and haven't we gotten the message yet? This week is about Holy, Wholly, but can we be Wholly Holy instead? I love the word play and yes, we can be Wholly Holy!

LISTEN: Matthew 9:1-8 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

And after getting into a boat he crossed the sea and came to his own town. And just then some people were carrying a paralyzed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." Then some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming." But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he then said to the paralytic—"Stand up, take your bed and go to your home." And he stood up and went to his home. When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings.

REFLECT: THERE are several things we can learn from THEIR story and where THEY'RE doing in this story. We know more than TWO people are concerned Jesus has gone TOO far in this healing TO this paralyzed man. The people no doubt had awestruck STARES on their faces as the paralyzed man was now able to climb the STAIRS. Who KNEW that something from long ago could make us NEW? As the author sat down to WRITE, did he know it would help make us RIGHT? How do we become WHOLLY HOLY?

Once again we have a story of Jesus healing, actually a pretty common theme in our Scriptures. We have a story of a man who is healed who did not ask to be healed, but his friends wanted him healed. It was the faith of the friends bringing Jesus to the man, yet before they even asked, Jesus saw their faith and healed the man. We don't know if the man asked his friends to bring Jesus to him – we just see the end result.

So what is the end result? Healing, but how did the healing occur? Was the healing the fact that the paralyzed man could pick up his mat and walk home? After all, Jesus did not say "your legs are better, get up and walk." Jesus said "your sins are forgiven." Then the man could get up and walk.

Sin is anything that separates us from God. While this story is not saying sin caused the man to be paralyzed, the sin being forgiven enabled reconciliation with God - this reconciliation allowed the healing to occur. Being one with God through the forgiveness of sin remains the theme of this story.

Wholly Holy is possible in this same way. We will never be sin free, but we can be free of sin. As we inch closer to Easter in this Lenten season, we are free of sin through the resurrection of Jesus, His death paying our penalty for sin so that we can be free. We may not achieve the same healing here on earth (or we may!) but we will be healed from sin through grace.

PRAYER: Jesus, thank you for grace and thank you for death and resurrection. Thank you that our sins are forgiven, and we can be wholly one with God.

GO: While we may not always be holy, we can always be Wholly Holy. Pick up your mat and walk home, your sins are forgiven!

Holy, Wholly—Integrated Health

March 30 — Katie Cable

TITLE: What will you learn in this season?

PAUSE: Have you ever heard the saying, “everything has a season”

LISTEN: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

Everything Has Its Time: For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

REFLECT: Each season of life we are in is filled with lessons we must learn to get through to make it to the next season. This I know but some of those seasons are harder than others. For me right now this season of waiting, 6 feet apart, is really hard. I knew back in March of 2020 that I loved my church but I never really knew how much each passing in the hallway, each smile on Sunday, each hug from my huggers, meant to my faith and my heart until I have had to learn to live so far away from them for so long. This whole year without being able to hug or spend time with others has really gotten to so many and I for sure am one of those.

I don't get to hear first hand what is going on in the lives of the ones I love and they don't get to help me with my struggles. Most of all we aren't in a space where we can learn from each other's struggles. It seems crazy at times because I know God put each of my brothers and sisters in Christ in my life for a reason and how can I get through this insane time in life with out their strength? I am not going to lie, there have been a few times in the past year where I have dropped to my knees not knowing what to do and felt so alone as I pull a lot of my strength from my church family. At the same time through prayer, a lot of text messages, and yes some secret much needed hugs. I know I am not alone.

This season has been so hard for all and everyone feels so far apart from each other, so what do we do? We organize, declutter, garden, watch Netflix, we continue to go on because well, we are in this season one way or another. Good news though it won't last forever. The best thing I have gotten from this last year is I know without a doubt I can't live without my church family. I can't wait till God is like, “ok folks it's time to get up and go back out in the world and hug people.” Yes doesn't that sound great? I want to share a meal with so many and just listen to all of what has happened in the past year. This is so real but more so that we are all in God's time not ours. We have to have faith and stay strong that this season will pass and we will be in another season before we know it. I am just praying that season will be closer than 6 feet apart.

PRAY: God be with us in each season of our lives. Your love and grace will get us through each of those seasons. Open our eyes and hearts to the lessons you have for us in each of those seasons. Thank you for always teaching us and equipping us with your armor to get through anything. Remind us that there is goodness in each of those times we just need to trust your plan for us. Amen.

GO: Everything does have a season. Learn everything you can in that season because before you know it we will all be on to the next season in life.

Holy, Wholly—Integrated Health

March 31 — Becky Fouts

TITLE: Four Words That Sum It Up

PAUSE: Rest now in the word of God and let Him lift you, guide you, and surround you with His love.

LISTEN: Philippians 4:6-7 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

REFLECT: I have a hard time deciding whether Christmas or Easter is my favorite holiday. Knowing the story, and knowing that neither can happen without the other, it is a tossup. I think for me Easter wins. In this scripture, I believe it is summed up in four words: Rejoice, Thanksgiving, Prayer and Peace. As with all things, I need to preface this by saying I'm GREAT at mis-reading directions. So, I prayed, meditated, and am reflecting on Philippians 4: 4-7 rather than 6-7 (God forgives me, and I hope you will too)

Nothing is more joyful than the love of our Father. Rejoicing in that love, reflecting on that love, and acting on that love exponentially grows that joy. God blesses us daily with life, nature, friends, family and church. Take a moment to unpack that and feel the joy!

Because of the joy of our Lord and because of His love for us, we are in constant Thanksgiving for His son Jesus. Is there a mightier, more everlasting gift? There is not!

While it doesn't always feel as though our prayers are answered, to me it is because we can't possibly comprehend God, His timeline, His vision. We CAN pray though and know that our prayers are heard. We can pray in the quiet, in the midst of commotion, before sleep, when we wake, when we gather. I pray erratically... I pray when I need to talk to God. Not always when I should; still, I know God hears me. He couldn't answer my prayer to save my son Jerry 12 years ago, and that one was so hard for me personally. However, if I could take you through these past 12 years and show you how He HAS answered my prayers, and just how amazing His plans for me are unfolding, it would astound you. He has blessed me with so much and He has shown me His love in so many ways, that I KNOW it's ok. Not my will, but HIS, and it's ok. Better than OK. I'll see my son again, and I can and do (most times) live confidently in that knowledge and knowing that my story is not yet over. I wonder what comes next.

Finally, PEACE. There are so many reasons that I would imagine this prayer for peace is such a big one in so many lives now: politics, pandemic, at home changes, turmoil, grief and anxiety. So, pray for peace, brothers and sisters! Peace, also, can be that wash of God's love when you just stop. I mean STOP! (This is so hard for me to do). Even a 5-minute break with zero interruptions. You don't even have to pray. Simply ask God to be with you. Feel God's peace. Know it. Let it surround you. If you can do this, and feel this, you too can know that He is with you, even when it feels as though he is not. God IS WITH YOU!

PRAY: Heavenly Father, thank You for Your love, for being with us always and for never ever giving up. Thank you for Your greatest gift, Jesus Christ. I pray You stay with us and keep us mindful of Your love through our joy, thanksgiving, prayer and peace. May it be so for each of us. In Your son's name, Amen.

GO: Rest now in the word of God and let Him lift you, guide you, and surround you with His love.

Holy Thursday

April 1 — Gretchen Shea

TITLE: To Be Whole

PAUSE: Healing, restoration, hope, forgiveness, what do they all have in common? They come from God. They are offered to us by a loving Creator who wants us to be whole.

LISTEN: Jeremiah 29:10-14 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

REFLECT: In a previous church I served, we gave a stone to the graduating seniors with verse 11 of this scripture passage printed on it. "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future of hope." This verse is often quoted when people are experiencing a change in their lives. I've even had it said to me recently by a friend, "God has a plan for you; God has something special in store for you and your family."

I believe God does have a plan for my life, for all our lives. But there is so much more to this passage than just that one verse. For us to live into God's plan we must follow God's instructions in verses 12 through 14, "Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all you heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord...". To live into God's plan for our lives, we must take action!

God wants the very best for us, the children of God. The Lord wants us to have hope and to be healthy, and to live in relationship with our Creator. God wants to offer us forgiveness and wholeness. But we must seek God. We must ask God to lead our lives. We must seek God's will. God is waiting for us!

Will you seek God's wholeness today?

PRAY: God, to know the plans you have for us, you tell us to pray to you, to search for you, to seek you with our whole hearts. We want to do that, but we often fail. We get distracted by the world. Help us to put you first. Help us to see the hope and wholeness you offer us. You provided a way for us to be forgiven and restored. You offer us grace and mercy. We long for these gifts, dear Friend. Help us find our way to you. Amen.

GO: Seek God's will for your life. Search for God with all your heart. Hope in the future God provides. Receive God's wholeness today.

Holy Friday

April 2 — Susan Graebe

TITLE: Prayer Shawl

PAUSE: Nearly six months ago I hugged my mom goodbye on a Friday. On this Friday, I am finally with her again and she is trying to tell me: "It is finished."

LISTEN: John 19:30 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished."

Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

REFLECT: In early March 2020, our family moved my parents from their beloved farm to a small, assisted living apartment in a retirement community in Florence, SC. That snapshot captures a hard reality--my mother's difficult struggle with Alzheimer's and my parent's increased need for support. The move was a costly, bittersweet sigh of relief. I said goodbye to them on a Friday with the promise of returning the next Friday. COVID-19 had other ideas.

Three weeks later my mom was in the hospital with a cracked hip and an infection, following a bad fall. No visitor rules were in place due to the lockdown, so talking by phone was the only way she could hear from us and only when nurses had time to assist her. The trauma of the move, the fall, and isolation from my dad and her family took a huge toll. She sank into what I can only describe as delusional imprisonment, a cruel reality of her disease. I would hold a picture of her from a few weeks earlier at a going away reception, dressed up to the nines, wearing bright pink lipstick and heels, and not be able to believe what had happened to her since.

In early April, my mom began a lengthy stay in the Healthcare Facility in their new community. Continued COVID-19 restrictions meant that my parents could not see each other. Mother's hip healed slowly and while her dementia did not stabilize, we were grateful that it did not get worse for a while. Once, as my husband and I walked toward her building for a window visit, she leapt out of her wheelchair, pressed both hands against the glass and called out our names. She asked her nurse if she could climb out and give us a hug and a kiss, then quickly began telling us about all that had happened. Some of it made sense, most of it did not. She was in good spirits and that meant a lot to me.

Mother made it back to Assisted Living with my dad the first of June. The following weekend, they celebrated their 64th wedding anniversary and our family visited from a window outside their apartment. As the summer progressed, so did my mom's dementia. Memory Care became the better living choice, but her erratic behavior made it an impossible option. The medical staff brought in doctors to try new drugs to help her thrive. COVID-19 regulations were lifting a bit and my dad would be able to visit her daily once she was stable enough to move into the building next door to him. With renewed hope we waited, and my mother began to make progress. In late August, the staff packed her up for a visit to Memory Care. Throughout the day her social worker sent text messages to let us know that she was doing well. At the end of the day, I received a picture that I still cherish. A retired teacher, my mother was helping other residents in her new surroundings with their schoolwork. I called my dad to tell him about it and he was relieved.

Two hours later we received a call letting us know that my mom had suffered another terrible fall and was being rushed to the hospital.

On August 28, nearly six months since I had hugged her goodbye on a Friday, I was with her in person on another Friday in an IC Unit. She was in restraints, delusional, and unable to be understood. A spike in her blood pressure had caused a stroke, which caused her fall. All of it impacted her ability to speak and move independently and she was not having it. She could not eat and fought any efforts to give her nourishment. On Saturday, now the sole family member allowed to visit under COVID-19 restrictions, I was encouraged to go home and talk to family and I did. My dad, my brother, and I were all on the same page about what my mother would want now.

On Monday, I walked back into her room with a Soapstone prayer shawl knowing that I would meet with palliative care doctors within the hour. I pulled up Psalm 23, placed the beautiful shawl across my mom and began to pray. Eyes closed, still restrained, and agitated, she somehow grabbed hold of it and threw it off her bed. I tried again and she did the same. I tried once more and knew better than to keep going.

"It is finished," is in itself a prayer. I take comfort in knowing that Jesus prayed it as his heavy weight, embodied with love in the depths of own being, was lifting.

That day in the hospital with my mother, I did not need her to be rational or come out of the state she was in. From the deepest part of her own broken body, she was letting us know she was finished. I folded the prayer shawl and carried the weight of it to meet with the doctors.

PRAY: "This day let all stand still in silence, in sorrow. Sun and moon be still. Earth be still. Still the waters. Still the wind. Let the ground gape in stunned lamentation. Let it weep as it receives what it thinks it will not give up. Let it groan as it gathers the One who was thought forever stilled..." Still by Jan Richardson.

GO: Stand still in silence, in sorrow.

Holy Saturday

April 3 — Susan Graebe

TITLE: Ivory Soap

PAUSE: On Holy Saturday, as you think about Joseph wrapping Jesus' body and placing it in a new tomb as two friends sit watching, do not brush past them or hurry the plot along.

LISTEN: Matthew 27: 59-61 ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

REFLECT: On Monday of the week that she died, seeing my mom restrained in her bed, tethered to the pain and struggle in her mind and broken body, I resigned myself to the one last thing that was left to do for her. I met with the palliative care doctors. On her behalf, I asked them to stop any efforts that would only prolong suffering and make her comfortable as she made her way toward her inevitable freedom.

Soon after, I left the hospital and drove the short distance to Hospice. The staff welcomed me and took me to her room. I was reading through a booklet that explained the process of active dying, when a Hospice nurse came in to let me know that mother would be arriving soon. She asked me what I wanted most for her. Given all that she had been through the last six months, I asked that she would be peaceful and look beautiful.

When my mom arrived, the nurse went into gentle action. She removed the restraints and any medical paraphernalia that was not necessary, all the while talking to her as if she were sitting in a salon chair. Surveying her appearance, the nurse immediately removed what my mom woefully referred to as her chin fuzz. Eyes ever closed; mother's face brightened into a wide smile. The nurse took a small swab and dampened it with water and mouthwash and placed it on her lips. "Here comes your lipstick Betty." With absolute clarity my mom said the last words I would ever hear her say: "Thank you."

When the nurse finished combing her hair, I took the prayer shawl from my bag again. Woven together with her signature colors of deep blues, purples, and pinks, I draped it across her. She did not resist at all and was more than beautiful. She was radiant.

Then the sitting and waiting began.

On Wednesday afternoon, a different nurse came in to give mother a bath, so I stepped away for a few minutes. When I came back, it looked as if she was just getting started, and indeed, she was. Her sacred work stretched well into an hour. I did not know it then, but this hospice ritual happens at a very particular point in the dying process. Each step carried out with intention, grace, and love so that the body can relax, let go, and do what it is meant to do.

Sitting there with the nurse and my mom, the smell of ivory soap filled the room. There in that room, on a day and a moment I could write into in my calendar, my mom, felt to me, loved in the deepest way possible by all that is heaven and all that is earth. She was held tenderly by a Light and Love that was already hers. We were not waiting for the best that is yet to come, it was already here. I closed my eyes and began breathing it into the deepest parts of me: my muscles, my bones, my cells, my heart, and my soul. Into my own pain, regret, disappointment, and grief. One breath, after another.

On Holy Saturday, as you think about Joseph wrapping Jesus' body and placing it in a new tomb as two friends sit watching, do not brush past them or hurry the plot along. Everything that happened to Jesus happened in real time with those who loved him close by, only one large stone away. This alone has much to offer us.

PRAY: Let it be that on this day we will expect no more of ourselves than to keep breathing with the bewildered cadence of lungs that will not give up the ghost...Let it be we will not try to fathom what comes to meet us in the stillness but simply open to the approach of a mystery we hardly dared to dream.
—Jan Richardson

GO: Breathe

Easter Sunday

April 4 — Susan Graebe

TITLE: Angel Biscuits

PAUSE: What I reach toward is not in a better place that I have to wait for at a later time.

LISTEN: John 4:14 NRSV ([Bible Gateway Link](#))

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

REFLECT: My mother was anointed with Ivory Soap on Wednesday afternoon and died early Thursday morning. COVID restricted us from the church worship services we might have hoped for, complete with as many family and friends as possible. Yet it robbed us of little in the end.

We buried her a week later in a small gathering at our family cemetery, masked and six feet apart, with fields and her well-traveled road all around us. The next day, we gathered for a celebration of her life outside under funeral tents on her beloved farm.

The week between her death and her celebration, I sat on my back porch every day working on the message I would share when we gathered. Reaching back for memories overshadowed by her illness and struggles and my own anger and grief, I fell in love with her all over again.

I am still reaching.

I teeter on the edge of her stepping stool stretching for her china pot on the top shelf so I can steep the Lipton iced tea bags properly and she reminds me to add extra sugar and not forget the lemon. I walk toward the ocean and she advises me to be careful of rip tides. I eat a Hershey's Kiss and we laugh about her being a chocaholic. I decorate my Christmas tree and she tells me the story of where she bought the ornament I am holding in my hand. I stand in my kitchen making her angel biscuits and cannot believe how long it takes and how much effort it takes and how she loved to see me at her table slathering them with butter and eating my weight in them.

Once, Jesus told a woman at a well that the living water he gives is like a spring that will well from within until it overflows into eternity. What I reach toward is not in a better place that I have to wait for at a later time. It is spilling over everywhere right here, right now.

On the morning that I finished writing my Lenten reflections, I woke up early in that thin place between fully asleep and fully awake to this dream.

I am sitting on my porch. I look up and see my mother in her garden. She is wearing her floppy sun hat and cutting okra from a thick lush green stem. She reaches down to place it in her wicker basket next to the bright yellow squash she picked moments before. The sound of it crackling in her iron skillet later when she comes in to make lunch hums in my head. The thought of browned flour and butter is so wonderful I can taste it. She turns her head and sees me, and our faces break into a smile. She picks up her basket and starts walking toward me. I stand and press my hands against the screen. When she is just a few feet away, I climb out. She opens her arms wide and gives me a hug and a kiss, warm pink lipstick smudging my face. The first words she hears me say to her are Thank you.

PRAY: Here between two mysteries, we are light and dust and memory, floating from and back into the place it all begins. Where we start is where we go, all that is, is ours to hold: lasting peace and gratitude, for love that never ends.

GO: So, let us live

Hallelujah

