



שְׁלוֹמִי

The Way to Shalom

A Lenten Journey to Peace and Wholeness

INTRODUCTION

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Lent is a time of spiritual renewal. It is a season of preparation during the 40 days and six Sundays before Easter. Lent is a time when we reflect upon the love of God and the gift of God's grace. It has a solemn beginning with Ash Wednesday, which is on Feb. 17 this year. On that day, with burnt palm branches crushed into ashes smudged onto foreheads, we are reminded that "from dust you came and to dust you shall return."

But Lent is not a time to wallow in worry about God's wrath. It is not a time of anxiety about our sinfulness or worth. Lent is a time of reflection on what God has done to redeem us and how we can live a whole and full life as a child of God. The Apostle Paul counsels us in Philippians 4: "Have no anxiety about anything" (RSV).

A different Lenten focus for 2021

While Lent is a time for prayer, fasting, service and contemplation, at the top of our list should be a prayer for the acquisition of peace. This year for the season of Lent, we invite you to reflect upon the gift of *shalom*, the Hebrew word for peace. In the Bible, shalom can be translated not only as peace, but also as tranquility, security, well-being, health, welfare, completeness and safety. How can we receive this gift of shalom and, in turn, bestow it upon the world?

In Israel, shalom is both a greeting and a farewell. When greeted by "shalom," it is a form of hopeful blessing that you are filled with God's perfect peace and well-being. It is a prayer that you will have health, prosperity and peace of mind and spirit. Shalom denotes fullness and perfection, an overflowing joy that moves from your innermost being and is expressed in the way you live your life and engage with others.

The season of Lent moves us to reflect deeply upon shalom. We live in a world in desperate need of peace. The United States has just come out of a contentious election

while struggling with a global pandemic and grappling with racial violence. Poverty, misery and despair fill many corners of the world. Violence holds a vicious grip on the lives of many people. We desire peace. We need peace. We must pray — and work — for peace here in the U.S. as well as in other parts of the world. The need for peace is a global one, and this devotional will raise awareness of our brothers and sisters who are living in areas around the world that are filled with conflict and strife.

To obtain peace, though, we must explore the full extent of its meaning. The search for shalom must examine it as relational, connectional and communal. It is relational wherein my peace cannot be achieved if others are denied what makes them whole. It recognizes that what impacts you impacts me. It is connectional in that it begins with a recognition that we are children of God created "in the image and likeness of God." Shalom is communal in that it builds community and enables us to live as one. Scripture proclaims the need for shalom. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, blesses us: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives" (John 14:27a).

This Lent, let us make our way to shalom — a gift that will bless one another and the world. — *Jimmie Hawkins*

About the authors

The Rev. Jimmie Hawkins, director of the Presbyterian Office of Public Witness in Washington, D.C., is joined by colleagues Catherine Gordon, associate for international issues; Christian Brooks, representative for domestic poverty issues; Sue Rheem, representative for the United Nations; and Ivy Lopedito, a mission specialist for the United Nations, in writing this year's devotional. The Office of Public Witness is the denomination's advocate and social witness in Washington, D.C. Learn more at presbyterianmission.org/ministries/compassion-peace-justice/washington.

**Engaging with the Lenten Devotional:
How to approach each week**

Each week in Lent will have a new theme covering one of the many definitions of shalom. You will be invited to begin the week by reflecting on the theme. Ponder it in prayer before beginning to read each day's devotional. Ask God to open your heart to receive whatever message the Spirit is eager to give you during this season of walking with the Prince of Peace, Jesus.

Presbyterians Today also invites you to create your own visual reminder of the importance of praying for peace. Using strips of fabric and a fabric marker, write your

prayers for peace weekly or daily and then attach them to either a tree in your yard, a railing on the steps of your home or even a fence. Let the fabric, blowing in the wind, be a witness in your community that peace is possible and that it begins with each one of us. Go a step further and share with those in your community about God's shalom and invite them to add to the peace tree, railing or fence. By Easter morning, may there be hundreds of peace prayers blowing in the wind, greeting a new day with hope. Share your peace prayer trees, railings or fences with Donna Frischknecht Jackson, editor of *Presbyterians Today* at Donna.Jackson@pcusa.org.

ASH WEDNESDAY AND THE FIRST WEEK IN LENT

Shalom: The Way to Justice

Written by Jimmie Hawkins



Reflect: Lent 2021 begins with the sobering reminder of Ash Wednesday that we always stand in the need of God’s mercy and grace. God is eager to hear our cries for forgiveness — forgiveness for the times we didn’t work for justice and forgiveness, for the times we took justice into our own hands. This week’s theme of justice as “the way to shalom” invites you to think more deeply about God’s justice and what it looks like in your life. Recall a moment in your life when you received God’s mercy and grace. What was the situation? How did it feel to know you

were forgiven? Now think about a time when you withheld forgiveness and when you sought justice on your own. How did that work? Were fractured relationships healed by your own actions? What would have been different if the justice you sought was turned over to God?

Start your peace prayer “tree” with prayers for justice. This week, as you read the devotions, write on strips of fabric your prayers for justice in your community and in the world. And then hang them someplace for all to read.

Ash Wednesday, February 17

Peace in the Holy Land

Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. — 2 Corinthians 13:11

Peace in Hebrew is the word *shalom*. There are 236 biblical references with the word *shalom* in the Old Testament. It can mean peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare and tranquility. It is used to mean both hello and goodbye throughout the Middle East. The Jewish greeting is *shalom aleichem*, meaning “peace be upon you.”

Peace is often defined as an absence of war or fighting. It has a more positive connotation emoting completeness or wholeness. It is expressed in our relationships with God and humanity, and even with the created world. It involves positive engagements in the relationships between human beings.

Peace is a state of balance and harmony arising out of our desire to be one with God. It is our duty not only to seek peace, but to strive for its attainment in every sphere of life. We are called to seek peace for every living person. If peace is absent from any community, the negative consequences could include conflict and possibly death. We pray for peace to permeate our lives and every region of the world, especially in the region which blessed us with the Prince of Peace.

Today, as the season of Lent begins with ashes being bestowed virtually in a time of COVID-19, we pray for peace for all people. We especially turn our attention to the need for peace in the Holy Land. The Middle East, like many regions in the world, suffers from a lack of peace. Life has become increasingly difficult for Christians living in the Holy Land. In Israel there has been a rapid decrease in Christian residents as their numbers have dropped to just 2% of the population. The tiny Christian communities experience intense societal pressure as they are caught between much larger Muslim and Jewish populations. Their experience is similar to that of West Bank Palestinians as residents and rights groups document land seizures, arbitrary detentions and collective punishment as a part of the Israeli occupation.

Most gracious and loving God, we pray for justice and peace that leads to an end to violence. We pray that those who struggle internally might be blessed with the spirit of God, which grants up solace. We pray for the presence of the Prince of Peace in the hearts of those who believe. Move us all to actions of peace and justice. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Thursday, February 18

Greeting others with peace in spite of divisions

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. — Matthew 5:9

We put into practice what we learn from Scripture by working for peace. According to Scripture, *shalom* implies freedom from fear, injustice, disorder and oppression — internally and externally. It demands more than just talking about peace. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called the people who work for or make peace “happy” or “blessed.” The word in New Testament Greek for blessed or happy is *makarioi* meaning “exceedingly happy or blessed.”

The Arabic word for peace is *salam*, which also means wholeness, safety, well-being and good intention, and it serves as a traditional greeting. In Arabic, the root word for peace-making is *sulh*. It denotes the importance of goodwill for building a long-lasting peace. *Shalom* implies harmonious relationships, the right way to live and work for peaceful coexistence.

The situation in Israel/Palestine is one of the most delicate and contentious for American Christians. Many support the state of Israel while being disturbed by the plight of the Palestinians. On May 14, 1948, Israel was officially founded, marking the first Jewish state in over 2,000 years. The majority of the people in the region were Palestinian Arabs who lived in what was then known as Palestine. The Arab-Israeli War was fought between Israel and five Arab countries (Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Lebanon). Egypt controlled the Gaza Strip as 700,000 Palestinian refugees left Jewish Israel and settled in the Gaza Strip, trapped between two countries, Egypt and Israel. As of 2018, most of the Palestinian inhabitants remaining are the original 1948 war refugees and their descendants, many still living in refugee camps. They face ongoing discrimination through laws, home evictions, cuts in electricity, prosecution in Israel's military courts, and incarceration in Israel's prisons. In spite of all this, Palestinians still use the greeting of “*salam*” to all they encounter.

An intimate part of discipleship is the call to be a peacemaker. A peacemaker seeks to transform the world by applying the teachings of God. It is one who has been transformed by their faith in Christ Jesus, a transformation of our attitude towards God and others. And it could easily begin by greeting others with the hope for peace to be in their lives.

Lord God, make us granters of your peace. To be called a peacemaker is a gift from God to be of use in God's kingdom. We pray for peace in the Holy Land and to serve as instruments of God's peace around the world. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Friday, February 19

Justice repairs broken promises

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. — John 14:27

Jesus promises a legacy of peace for all who believe in him. The rights of the poor deserve defending. We live in a society which has abandoned the rights of the impoverished. There is no peace without justice; there is no justice without peace. Justice and peace exist together, and the search for one leads to the other. Peace seeks the ending of war between nations, countries and individuals. Peace is living a life seeking the elimination of conflict as a means to resolved differences. Peace denotes integrity and respect for the other.

The word peace in the Cherokee language is *dohiyi*. For centuries, American Native Nations have experienced broken treaties and unfulfilled promises. The Cherokee Nation, a sovereign tribal government, adopted a constitution on September 6, 1839, which was 68 years prior to Oklahoma's statehood. It is the largest tribe in the United States with more than 380,000 tribal citizens located in all 50 states. More than 141,000 reside within the tribe's reservation boundaries in northeastern Oklahoma. It is committed to protecting its people's sovereignty, culture, language and values. It seeks to improve their quality of life by providing services in health and human services, education, employment, housing, economic and infrastructure development, and environmental protection.

God calls us to work for the well-being of all people. It all begins with respect and a determination to repair broken promises and fulfill our national commitment to justice.

Lord God, as disciples of Christ, we confront the issues of injustice which are rampant against the Cherokee people. Use us to walk alongside those who walked the trails lined with tears. May the One who heals, restores and redeems send his Holy Spirit. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Saturday, February 20

Peace for immigrants

Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil, but those who plan peace have joy. — Proverbs 12:20

In our world, there are men and women who feel as if they have no voice. It can be extremely frustrating to feel that no one is listening to you. It brings emotional anguish when one experiences the painful sensation that one's voice has been silenced. It can mean a lifetime of stress and emotional pain. One of God's eternal promises is the granting of peace to those who believe in and rely on the Lord.

The word for peace in Spanish is *paz*. A sharp rise in Central American families seeking asylum led to what U.S. Customs and Border Protection called a "humanitarian and national security border crisis." The number of migrant apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexico border rose in fiscal 2019 to its highest annual level in 12 years. The 851,508 apprehensions recorded from October 2018 to September 2019 were more than double the number of the year before (396,579).

The growing number of migrants seeking asylum includes people traveling in families, not single adults, who constituted the majority in the past. Fifty-six percent were from the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, which have struggled with violence and a lack of economic opportunities. That represents a change from the 2000s and early 2010s when Mexicans accounted for the vast majority of those apprehended.

These families have been struggling against forces of an oppressive manner which threatens the lives of everyone they love. They have identified issues which affect their lives, families and communities, and yet little has changed over the decades. In the midst of their struggles, they need someone who understands their frustrations, yet offers hope. A relationship with God offers the hope that comes from a peaceful relationship with God.

Most loving God, we pray for the immigrant children who have cried themselves to sleep at night. We pray that children snatched from their parent's arms might be reunited. Turn our hearts from indifference to compassion. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.



FIRST WEEK IN LENT

First Sunday in Lent, February 21 *Peace for Nigeria*

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. — Ephesians 2:14

Jesus is our peace. He gives us the ability to overcome those things which divide us. Hostilities exist all over the world. They occur not only between different nationalities and tribes, but also between people of the same group.

The word for peace in Igbo (Nigeria) is *udo*. The African country of Nigeria has been terrorized by the terrorist group, Boko Haram. According to the United Nations, over the past decade 36,000 Nigerians have been killed and two million resettled. In December 2020, the group abducted 300 boys from a secondary school in northwest Nigeria. That Christmas Eve, the terrorists killed 11 people in the Christian village of Pemi, burned a church, kidnapped a priest, stole Christmas gifts and medicines, and set fire to a local hospital. Six years ago, it kidnapped 200 schoolgirls on Christmas Day. In his 2020 Christmas message, Pope Francis prayed for international support for peace in war-torn regions of the world, including Nigeria.

Nigeria needs our prayers for peace.

Peace calls for an absence of violence. Peace cannot be brought into existence by force. Peace is the result of justice and the establishment of just relationships.

Almighty God, who loves justice and gives peace, help us live according to what you have revealed to us. Bless the people of Nigeria with an end to violence and the capture of innocent children. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Monday, February 22 *Peace for indigenous people*

Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace — in peace because they trust in you. — Isaiah 26:3

It is God who keeps us in perfect peace. While perfection is beyond human capacity, we trust in God's ability to provide grace and forgiveness when we err. It is the power of God that brings perfect peace which is a blessing in our daily living. It is bestowed when we trust in God's love and mercy.

The word for peace in Lakota is *wolakota*. According to the 2010 census, 5.2 million people or about 2% of the U.S. population identifies as American Indian or Alaskan Native. The government has legally binding obligations to the tribes that have been systematically violated with

devastating consequences for life expectancy, political participation and economic opportunities in Indian Country.

Representative Debra Haaland is making American history. The 60-year-old congresswoman from New Mexico is the first Native American cabinet secretary in U.S. history as the new head of the Department of the Interior under President Joe Biden. She is a member of the Laguna Pueblo, one of 574 sovereign tribal nations located across 35 states. She stated that as secretary of the interior she would “move climate change priorities, tribal consultation and a green economic recovery forward.”

So many people have never experienced the gift of ongoing peace. Their lives have been burdened by oppression, violations and exploitation from those who should have protected them from harm. God’s call is that we acknowledge what has gone wrong in the past and work to correct it today. Jesus Christ lived a perfect, sinless life, died a sacrificial death and rose again to make right that which was wrong.

God of peace and justice, move our hearts and guide our actions to be in line with your word. Your word promises inner peace expressed through outward actions. Your native children demand justice. Enable us to stand by their side to see that your will is done. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

Tuesday, February 23 *Peace for Korea*

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. — Philippians 4:6–7

Peace is a state of tranquility or quietness of spirit that transcends circumstances. The term “peace” is described in Scripture as a gift from God and congruent with God’s character.

The word for peace in Korean is *pyonghwa*. For centuries the Korean peninsula was a single, unified nation. It was occupied by the Japanese Empire for 35 years from 1910 until the end of World War II in 1945 when it was divided into two nations by two war allies “in name only” — the Soviet Union and the United States — to divide control over the Korean peninsula.

Between 1945 and 1948, the Soviet Union set up a communist regime in the north, and in the south the United States established a military government. The Korean War (1950–53) killed at least 2.5 million people as the U.S. military bombed villages, towns and cities

across the northern half of the peninsula. They leveled the country and destroyed every city. An armistice ended the conflict in 1953 with a demilitarized zone running roughly along the 38th parallel dividing the two nations.

Most gracious God, we pray for peace on the Korean peninsula. Please grant us the peace of God that grants a tranquil state of being as we submit to and trust the commandments of God. It changes and transforms our relationships. Grant us the humility and courage to experience and share God’s peace, seeking beyond the mere abilities of our own understanding. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

Wednesday, February 24 *Peace for the Congo*

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps. — Psalm 85:8–13

Psalm 85 is a petition from Israel for the restoration of a right relationship to the promised land and to God. Its prayer is for a just, peaceful and prosperous society where all experience God’s good creation. It is a psalm full of future hopes and expectations. Peace and order come from God. God speaks peace to his people. God’s speech is a creative act. For God to speak peace is for God to create peace. From God’s original creation itself comes faithfulness springing up from the ground, nurtured by the righteousness coming down from the sky — perhaps like the rain kissing the ground and the land yielding food.

The word for peace in Ntomba (Congo) is *nye*. Between 1997 and 2003, a civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) killed five million people. More than 13 million Congolese need humanitarian aid: 7.7 million face severe food insecurity — up 30% from a year ago, according to the United Nations in March 2020. And the latest figures show more than 4.5 million people are displaced, the highest number in the DRC for more than 20 years.

God’s peace is different from a peace built on the world’s justice and order.

Lord God, like the Israelites, we desire to know your justice and peace. We too can recall better days, but we know that

true justice and peace are granted by your love. Empower us to act for your gifts to enable all people to live in harmony. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Thursday, February 25

Peace grants unity

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. — Colossians 3:15

The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Colossae a blessing for unity. He writes from prison in Rome in a church he has never attended. The church was in a critical moment as it was being attacked by heretical teachers misinforming the members about the dual nature of Christ. Paul strongly affirmed that Jesus is creator and redeemer.

Paul also declares that Jesus is the lord of peace who grants it to those who follow him. Christ's peace is a blessing and resides in our hearts. Once we accept it, we can live as one body of people living faithfully despite the pressures from those who think they know more than they really do. The end result is a spirit of thankfulness. God is the one responsible for our ability to live in unity and peace. When we are raised with Jesus, we have a new life filled with all of the benefits of living faithfully. One of the most important is the blessing of peace that enables us to serve God faithfully.

God of peace, continue to bless us with the knowledge that no matter how wide the divisions, we can live together in peace. The divisions of the world are not our inheritance for we are heirs of unity as children of God. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Friday, February 26

God's peace when we are alone

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you. — Genesis 28:20

Jacob was alone. After tricking his brother, Esau, out of his birthright and father's blessing, he had to flee. Out in the desert he makes a vow to God. If God will deliver him to a

place of safety, he will be a faithful follower.

We have all felt alone and even deserted in life. The power of faith is that it is experienced more acutely when we are jostled about than in times when we are settled. The wonderful thing about our relationship with God is that God does not show up just when we are at our best or most obedient. It is when we are wrong, when we have made mistakes and even sinned, that God is ever-present. If we dedicate ourselves to God, God's promises will be delivered.

God of remembrance and fulfillment, you do not disappoint us. We don't have to question you because you remember your promises and fulfill your word. A word that lets us know you love us and provide for us. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Saturday, February 27

Sometimes peace means saying goodbye

Moses went back to his father-in-law Jethro and said to him, "Please let me go back to my kindred in Egypt and see whether they are still living." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace." — Exodus 4:18

Moses loved Jethro who had made him a part of his family. Moses had married his daughter, Zipporah, and together they had a son, Gershom. Moses was a valued member of the family and was given responsibility. More than anything, Jethro provided him protection from his enemies in Egypt who were looking for him. It was hard for Moses to ask for permission to leave. But God had called him to return to Egypt to be a deliverer for his people. Jethro gave Moses a tremendous gift, rather than accusing Moses of deserting his responsibilities, he blessed his son-in-law to "go in peace."

There are times when we are happy where we are. We have everything we need, and our plans include staying right where we are. But Lent is a time to remember that God has other plans and calls us to go to places where we do not want to go. Sometimes God even calls us into a desert wilderness. Wherever we are led, God blesses us with inner strength to do the things we are uncertain we can accomplish. God's vision for our lives is greater than our own. God's purposes for our lives enable us to accomplish great achievements that help others in their struggles. We must trust in God, even when God calls us to do the impossible — far from our area of comfort and security.

Lord God, enable us to trust in your purpose for our lives and enable us to do your will. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

SECOND WEEK IN LENT

Shalom: The Way to the Promise of Peace

Written by Catherine Gordon



Reflect: Jesus gives us the promise of peace, but not as the world would define peace. Peace is not the absence of trouble or conflict, but the certainty that in life's storms, we have a Savior to calm the seas. Where in your life can you recall the stormy seas being calmed? How did it feel to know that amid trouble you were being held safe and secure? Where is this peace that passes all understanding needed right now in your home, community, church or country?

Add to your peace prayer "tree"

This past week, the Rev. Jimmie R. Hawkins lifted up

prayers for peace in several parts of the world. Take strips of fabric and add to your peace "tree" — or railing or fence — the word for "peace" in the various languages that Hawkins shared. After writing each word out, close your eyes, hold the fabric and pray for God's peace to be felt by those in that region. The words for peace highlighted in the first week of Lenten devotionals are: *shalom* (Hebrew), *salam* (Arabic), *dohiyi* (Cherokee), *paz* (Spanish), *udo* (Igbo/Nigeria), *wolakota* (Lakota), *pyonghwa* (Korean) and *nye* (Ntomba/Congo). Now think about those close to you who are feeling restless or scared this Lenten season. Write their names down and pray for peace to wash over them.

Second Sunday in Lent, February 28

Peace appears in the strangest of places

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. — Luke 2:8–11 (NRSV)

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him. — Matthew 4:8–11 (NRSV)

How desperately the children of the world need peace. We wander looking for peace, yet God proclaims peace in the strangest places. It isn't heard from brass bands or symphonies, or seen in military parades, stock market exchanges or super bowls, but rather among the silence of shepherds on a cold mountain top as we heard a few months ago in Luke's telling of the nativity story. And then we have the Lenten Scripture that reminds us in the moments when we need it the most — in our desert suffering — peace comes. We are not left alone. The peace of healing appears just as it did with the angel tending to a tempted and tried — and victorious — Jesus.

A friend described visiting a refugee camp in the Middle East, full of people desperately seeking food as famine ravaged their country. And with all those people, especially young babies and children, there was no crying. There was the silence of hunger. As we seek peace, maybe we should try to center ourselves in silence. The noise of war, the noise of political demonstrations in the streets and the noise of political rallies can distract from the deep needs around us. We should pay attention to the quiet suffering and hear the angels tell us where God's peace is needed in the world.

In this time of Lent, Lord God, help us hear the proclamation of peace among your beloved children. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Monday, March 1

Do not be afraid

If you love me; you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever. . . . 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. — John 14:15-16, 27

The world seems to have gone awry. There is no place that is not filled with anger, hatred, food insecurity, war, viruses, corruption and violence. It seems that all we have is fear itself. If all we have in the world is fear, what do we do to overcome that fear? The statement of Jesus in John's Gospel is simple. What we desire, what we need to hold on to, what gives meaning to our lives is to fill our whole life with the peace that God gives us through the Holy Spirit. If our lives are filled with the Spirit, all the products of fear — worry, angst, insomnia — and fear itself, have no power. In his book “Lost in the Cosmos,” Walker Percy suggests that we should look at the evil that is going on in the world as an “I Love Lucy” comedy, with no power and little meaning. What has meaning is a life whose advocate fills us with the wisdom and the power of the Holy Spirit. The battle with fear can only be won by the power of God. And we do not need to be afraid, for God will defeat evil.

Lord God, in this time of Lent, let us strive to fill our whole selves with the power of the Holy Spirit to give us the peace that enables us not to be afraid of evil. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Tuesday, March 2

Moving closer to God

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promises, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish. — 2 Peter 3:11–14

All people of faith — be it Christian, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, etc. — offer greetings of peace. Peter suggests that as we live in the violence and destruction of the coming of the day of the Lord that we all live in peace and let God deal with sin. Yet how does one wait in peace? Interestingly, in Islam, the way one deals with Satan is not

by any battle or violence. Instead, it is seeking God and not letting struggling with Satan disrupt our seeking God. In the battle for good, the Reformed faith of Presbyterians knows it is about being faithful in moving closer to God. We cannot defeat evil — only God can. We are to seek God and understand the precious struggle of the divine Son on the cross.

Lord God, in this time of Lent, help us to focus on the love you have shown us in the struggle and the victory of your Son on the cross. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Wednesday, March 3

Peace doesn't come with power

Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him". — 1 Samuel 1: 13–17

Eli was the high priest of Shiloh — a position with power. To have power given by the culture or to have control provided by religion brings with it the risk of losing touch with humanity. So the man with power sees the drunk woman. The problem is the woman is struggling with life and with God. She defends herself with the religious man, and he ceases to be arrogant and powerful. He does as he should and offers the woman the peace of God. The woman, Hannah, becomes the mother of Samuel, the one who anoints King David.

The minister had a bad day. All the staff had gone home, and he was eager to get home, have a quiet meal and relax with his family. As he passed the front door of the church, there was a person at the door. "He looks like another one of those poor drunk street persons," he thought. "I don't need that right now." He ignored him and avoided eye contact. But he felt guilty and eventually turned and opened the door. The man at the door asked, "Does Bus 54 stop on the corner?" He was a simple person in need for whom Christ died. The minister was, too, and he had answered the call to proclaim Christ's peace and love to the very person now standing before him asking about a bus route. Not everyone will be someone who will be part of something great, but everyone is a child of God who can foster peace so that each one of us can receive it.

Lord God, in this time of Lent, help us to see through our power and arrogance to see clearly the peace that can be offered to everyone we encounter. We are all children of God for whom Christ died on the cross. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Thursday, March 4

How beautiful it is to proclaim peace

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." — Isaiah 52:7

The shiny trucks of UPS and Amazon could be called beautiful when they bring things that we have longed to get in stores ourselves because of the pandemic. They bring the necessary and the desired. How beautiful are those trucks!

How much more beautiful, though, are the proclamations we bring into the world about Jesus, our Prince of Peace. How much more beautiful is the news we can share of peace on earth that the angels sang at the birth of Jesus. How much more beautiful it is to know that our God reigns and to proclaim it.

And isn't Lent our time to face the uncomfortable reality that such beauty was consummated in the denial of Jesus, in the mocking and the beating, in the shaming questioning of Jesus by the council, Pilate and Herod, and in Jesus' crucifixion, death and burial? How can it be that God redeems this darkness? God does though. And because of that we can be at peace. We can proclaim that peace.

Lord God, in this time of Lent, help us in our prayers of confession and penance to find our peace and then to proclaim it to others who are seeking the same. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Friday, March 5

Flourishing

Deceit is in the mind of those who plan evil, but those who counsel peace have joy. — Proverbs 12:20

Joy seems to have a special meaning in the vernacular language of Scotland. When one comes out of a job interview, a friend will ask, "Did you have joy?" It has the connotation of flourishing. It has an almost spiritual meaning. When you have joy, you flourish.

But one cannot flourish while planning evil. For such thinking chases away any hope for joy. In other words, there is no peace in the hearts of those who continuously plan and do deceitful things — dare I bring up church

parking lot meetings without the pastor, gossiping on the phone or spreading hateful words on social media? These are the very things that are destructive to the community as well as the body of Christ.

In the church, we work for peace. We desire joy. And yet, there is always the risk of deceit in our hearts to crowd out joy which stops us from flourishing, which robs us of peace. It is the peace of our Lord Jesus that should be at the core of everything we think, say and do.

Lord God, in this time of Lent, make sure that all our thoughts, prayers and actions are of peace rather than personal deceits. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Saturday, March 6 *Peace is a gift from God*

He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God." — Genesis 28:19–21

When Jacob wrestled with God, God broke his hip, and he limped for the rest of his life. In this text the rock that

Jacob used as a pillow is a symbol of the loving presence of God. As unbelievable as it might seem, a broken hip and a cold stone are God's gifts of peace.

In this age when we wrestle with a pandemic and making sure all have access to care and vaccines, it would seem this is not the peace that we would choose. But often God gives us not what we want or what we think our lives should be. That doesn't mean, though, that God still isn't giving us peace.

There is a scene in "Dr. Zhivago" where an elderly Jewish couple is packed into a cattle car going to a forced labor camp in a Siberian blizzard. Cuddled together for warmth, they were surrounded by those already dead and those going to die soon. As night fell, they sweetly kissed each other. With nothing else but their love and sure death, they found solace. The kiss would not save them, yet it was sufficient. They found peace being in the presence of one another and in the presence of God. And that presence of peace was enough to sustain them on a very difficult journey.

Lord God, in this time of Lent, help us accept your gifts of divine love as yours to give — as you choose to give them — not what we insist them to be. Open our eyes to see that. May we feel your presence of peace this day. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

THIRD WEEK IN LENT

Shalom: The Way to Healing

Written by Catherine Gordon and Susan Rheem



Reflect: In Hebrew, “shalom” can also mean wholeness. When Jesus first appeared to his friends as the Risen Lord, he greeted them with words of shalom. “Peace,” he said. What he was wishing for them was healing in their grieving and wholeness for their shattered dreams. What healing do you need this Lent? What would it take to achieve wholeness in the life of your immediate family, church community or neighborhood? And do you have the courage to be the one who stands amid the brokenness and proclaims shalom — wholeness — to others?

Add to your peace prayer “tree”

This past week, the daily devotionals talked about peace being able to take away fear, peace being able to produce joy, and peace that can be seen when we dare to move closer to God and keep our eyes on Christ. Add to your prayer “tree” petitions for those who are afraid, for those who harbor resentment and for those who perhaps have turned away from God. Write their name (or even your name, if need be) on a strip of fabric or paper. Pray over each name. Now prepare for the third week of Lent by thinking about healing and wholeness.

Third Sunday in Lent, March 7

A peaceful rest is possible

I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety. — Psalm 4:8

Another casualty of the continuing pandemic is the lack of a good night's sleep, which is not good as sleepless nights can aggravate physical and mental health problems, according to the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Take a look around; there does seem to be more commercials for sleep aids and more advertisements for apps that will help one doze off peacefully. Sleeping aids and apps aside, Lent is a season to breathe deeply and center ourselves — to find space where wholeness and healing can thrive.

Lent is a season that traditionally focuses heavily on confession, penitence and forgiveness. The moving of our lives closer to God through these activities can be powerful, easing our minds and our souls. To sleep in the understanding of the love of God and the sacrifice of the Son for us, leads all parts of our life to a fundamental deep peace. And to the sleep that might eludes us: Don't count sheep. Count blessings. And peace will come.

Lord God, in this time of Lent, help us to so confess and offer penance that we may find as we turn in at night, peace will be the blanket that covers us. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Monday, March 8

Simple fixes can heal differences

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. — Romans 14:13–21

There are so many things that get in the way of peace in the world, and many of them are so obscure, such as the way

you wear your hair, what you eat or how you dress. Even among the faithful, things such as when, how and where you worship can get in the way of peace.

A few years ago, there was a group of ministers and rabbis in Edinburgh working to include the Muslim community in their interfaith service, but the Muslim members were not coming to the planning meetings. It seems the organizers always met at the same time as the call to prayer for the Muslim community. There was a simple fix: They decided not to meet during the Islamic prayer time.

They also needed to figure out how to include their Muslim brothers and sisters in the service itself. They did this by arranging the Imam's prayer to occur in the ecumenical service at the very time for Islamic prayer. When it was time, the Imam gave the call to prayer. He laid out his prayer rug in the church. Muslims who were attending the interfaith service laid their prayer rugs in the aisles and prayed their usual prayer while the Christians and Jews respectfully prayed in the pews.

Sometime later, the Islamic country where the Imam was from was having trouble between the Muslims and the Christians. But those who attended and remembered this interfaith service lifted it up as a sign of hope and healing, that existing together peacefully can happen. And it was simple to do. All it took was listening to and understanding the ways of the other, and doing so with respect and love.

Lord God, in this time of Lent, help us to not judge one another, but respect how prayer and worship are done differently by others. There is no right or wrong way to give God praise. The main thing is to give that praise freely. For praise brings peace and peace means healing. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Tuesday, March 9

Peace builds us up

But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. — 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13

In Thessalonians, Paul reminds us that in the body of Christ we are to encourage and build each other up. We all have a mission to heal a broken world, each in our own special way. Billy Watkins was the type of church member that every minister wants more of. No matter what needed to be done, Billy was the first there to help. He fixed things before anyone knew they were broken. Food was in the home before anybody knew somebody was hungry or sick.

As a union man, he was first on the strike line advocating for workers.

At Billy's funeral the minister said, "He was always in church on Sunday. Sitting there in the same corner, sleeping." The congregation laughed as the minister went on to tell everybody that he had every right to sleep, for Billy was up before everybody else doing the faithful witness of God's love for those who needed to be reminded of God's love.

As we come closer to the cross, we are reminded today that it is not those who are first, at the head of the table or have the most who will be applauded, but those who always serve the other and do not seek prestige or position for themselves. It is the one who loved the child, fed the hungry, clothed the naked and healed the sick. The community of God's beloved people is comprised of those who are at peace with all of God's beloved and reach out to heal all, even those we call a stranger or an enemy.

Lord God, in this time of Lent, let us meditate on how God is calling each of us in our own special way to love everyone, even our enemies. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Wednesday, March 10 *Peace settles us down*

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.
— Luke 1:78–79

It seems that in the constant negativity, conflict and dangers in our world, our escape route is that of TV binge watching and guzzling wine. Both of these "medications," though, don't heal our souls. They don't ease our troubled minds. These ways of coping can only perpetuate the gloom.

So rather than stay in the gloom self-medicating, it is necessary to seek slivers of light that come from the tender mercy of our God, by looking to God's Word for help and healing, and turning to the psalms for solace. It is when we turn our eyes to God and remember how Jesus walked toward the cross with God ever close to his side that the light we seek begins to appear. The unmanageable starts becoming manageable. Slowly and tenderly the mercy of God fills our lives and the TV and the wine are no longer the balm in Gilead we need. The mercy of our God guides us into the way of peace.

Lord God, in this time of Lent, give us the strength and courage in our struggles to turn toward the tender mercy of God who promises a light to chase away the gloom. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Thursday, March 11 *Reprioritizing the parts of our life*

Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding, for her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy. — Proverbs 3:13–18

Wisdom, understanding, silver, gold, jewels — all you desire — and a long life are all in your right hand. In your left hand are riches and honor. Imagine all of these as the branches of a tree. It would be a pleasantly shaped tree, all balanced with leaves, flowers and fruit. Completing the tree is the trunk through which flows what feeds the tree. It stabilizes the way in which the tree grows.

The psalmist reminds us that God has created all of life to function correctly. Yet our lives have gone awry. There is no peace. Each part of life is at war with every other part. The answer is not more wealth, more power or more weapons. It is not in some being smarter than others. The answer is in reprioritizing our lives and focusing on the very things that truly matter. So we begin with the question: How do the parts of our lives work together to glorify God? For in the glorifying, our lives — and those lives around us — find healing.

Lord God, in this time of Lent, help us to understand the peacefulness of life that is found in the mercy and love of the cross, the tree upon which Jesus was crucified. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Friday, March 12 *Waiting for the Lord*

And now, O Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in you. — Psalm 39:7

The disciples followed Jesus for three years, waiting for the day when Jesus would be publicly declared the Messiah. Some had high hopes. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, hoped they would become princes and sit together with Jesus on the throne. Judas thought he might become the treasurer of the kingdom and have more money than he ever dreamed of. Perhaps other disciples thought they would perform miracles and earn high acclaim. They surely hoped their fortunes would improve and their dreams fulfilled.

What ended up happening was not what they had expected. Their master was arrested, tried, beaten and crucified like a common criminal. How crushed they must have been to realize that all their dreams had been shattered to smithereens. They were shaken to the core. They had expected some type of a reward for their hard work as his followers. They had left behind their families and livelihoods, wandering from town to town with a radical preacher. They had placed their hope in things they could see and grasp.

But the psalmist tells us our hope is in God, not in things, and we need to be patient in waiting for this hope. Lent is a journey filled with things not yet seen. It tests our patience. Yet in the end, when we wait for God, we will find that hope. We will find healing. And at the end of the Lenten journey, beyond the cross and tomb, we will discover through the promise of the resurrection that we will never be shaken no matter what happens in the here and now.

Lord, you are our hope. You are our strength and salvation. Help us to make room in our hearts for you during this Lenten season. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Saturday, March 13

True friendship

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you

friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. — John 15:13–17

True friendships are hard to come by. It is a gift of God, and Jesus offers us his friendship when he says, "I have called you friends." It is mindboggling to think that Jesus desires to share everything with us. It is friendship drawn on intimacy. Jesus invites us to share in the deep, mutual, abiding love that he shared with God and the Holy Spirit, even before the world began.

His friendship with us cost Jesus everything. His love for us took him to Calvary where he experienced the utter agony of being separated from God. In Christ, the reconciliation of the world with God took place. In offering his friendship, Jesus calls us to love one another. The friendship is not between just the two of us, Jesus Christ and me, but with all who have also been invited through Jesus to form community. It is a community based on the costly grace of Christ who died for us, a community prepared to love and serve each other. It is a community where healing can happen in the most unexpected and amazing ways.

Lord, thank you for calling us to be your friends. May we take your hand in friendship and be worthy of your friendship. Help us to be friends to one another as you have shown us through your love on the cross. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

FOURTH WEEK IN LENT

Shalom: The Way to Hope

Written by Susan Rheem and Ivy Lopedito



Reflect: As Christians we hope for things yet seen. We look forward to the promise of a new day. Hope, though, can be hard to hold on to. In the season of Lent, what are you hoping for? Who do you hope in?

Add to your peace prayer “tree”

This past week, the daily devotionals talked about healing and wholeness. Add to your prayer “tree” petitions for those who are in need of healing, be it physical, emotional or spiritual.

Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 14

Hope unseen

For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. — Romans 8:24–25

I hope for a better future. We are living through a crisis of a lifetime. As I write this, the country is seeing the highest spikes in COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations and deaths, with no end in sight. The nation is shaken by the attack on our democracy. I hope everyone will be vaccinated soon, so we no longer need to worry about this virus. I hope we will work together to build a better democracy, work towards equity and justice for all people and build a stronger nation.

In times of crisis our relationship with God comes into full focus as we cry out for God's attention. What's important becomes very clear. In less chaotic times, we become so distracted by the routines of life that our relationship with God suffers. Our worship becomes rote, and our vision for a new way of doing things becomes dull. In those moments, our imagination can use a boost of color. And imagination is one of the greatest gifts God has given us. God's handiwork in the Hebrew Scriptures is a way to imagine God's glory as reflected in God's creation — the sunrises and the sunsets, the sun and the moon and the stars, and the changing of the seasons, the mountains and the oceans — the magnificent glory of God's creation echoing God's glory.

Hope in God is an indwelling of God's presence for the fulfillment of God's promise to us in Christ. God invites us to be holy and to share in God's glory. May we wait in devotion and service for that peaceable and flourishing world. May our imaginations of what can be beautifully color a new world yet to be seen.

Lord, the hope you give us is greater than what we can ever hope or imagine. Help us to be filled with your hope that awakens our spirits to serve you with joy, and with justice and mercy. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Monday, March 15

Beholding the beauty

One thing I ask of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple. — Psalm 27:4

The word "Lent" comes from the old English word meaning "spring." Lent is springtime, a season for rebirth, rejuvenation, renewal and, for Christians, the resurrection

at Easter. Spring is a time for preparing for new life to grow.

Lent has traditionally been observed through the practice of self-denial such as fasting or giving up of luxuries like chocolates in order to recreate the sacrifices that Christ made. But self-denial isn't an end in itself. Self-denial is a way to clean our hearts and minds so that new life might have room to come in.

So, during this Lenten season, perhaps think about a spiritual practice to make space for God to come into our lives. Devote a few minutes each day to rest in God, away from the hectic pace and the weariness and anxiety of modern life. And like the Psalmist who desired to do this more than anything, gaze at God's beauty and inquire in God's temple. Spend time with God in wonder and make room in your hearts and minds so that new life may be formed in you.

Lord, may we make time in our busy lives to find moments of reflection to gaze at your beauty and to rest in you so new life may grow in us. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Tuesday, March 16

Hope remains

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." — Revelation 21:1–5

Living in the time of COVID-19, when so many have died or have lost loved ones, we hope for the day when death will be no more, and God will wipe away every tear. As followers of Christ, we are a people of hope and we long to see this new world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and martyr who stood up against the Nazi regime during World War II, was adamant about his hope in God: "Who would even want to speak of God without hoping to see God one day? Who would want to talk about peace or love among people without wanting to experience them one day in eternity? Who would want to talk about a new world and a new humanity without hoping that we would share in it?"

And why should we be ashamed of our hope? One day we will have to be ashamed not of our hope but of our pitiful and fearful hopelessness which believes God is capable of very little, and in false humility does not act where God's promises are given. Such hopelessness gives up in this life and is not capable of looking forward to God's eternal power and glory. Hope does not disappoint us. The more person dares to hope, the greater that person becomes with God's hope. People grow with their hope, if only it is hope in God and God's power alone."

Lord, you have given us the gift of hope in Christ that does not disappoint us because your love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. May we continue to place our hope in you to make all things new. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Wednesday, March 17 *Seeing things through*

Trust in the Lord forever, for in the Lord God you have an everlasting rock. — Isaiah 26:4

How many times do we start new projects with great enthusiasm only to become discouraged when we realize all the work that needs to go into it? The excitement wanes when reality strikes. We can't see the end and we become discouraged and drop the project all together.

When the people following Jesus found out how hard it would be, many walked away. Jesus predicted this would happen. In the parable of the sower in Mark's Gospel, Jesus says that we are like seeds sown among the thorns. We hear the word, but the cares of the world, the lure of wealth and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, yielding nothing.

No matter the difficulties, though, God will give us the strength to follow God one step at a time. Isaiah reminds us on our Lenten journeys to "trust in the Lord forever, for in the Lord God you have an everlasting rock." Jesus himself reminds us also not to worry about our lives, what we will eat or drink or wear. He says to consider the lilies of the field and see how they grow.

We have a great big God project to see through on this Lenten road and beyond — that of sharing the hope that we have in God. And God knows what we need and God will provide it. Will we see it to a good finish?

Lord, trusting in you leads to life. Help us to trust you more. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Thursday, March 18 *A living hope*

By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you. — 1 Peter 1:3b-4

It seems our popular culture craves superheroes that will save us from an impending doom: Wonder Woman, X-Men, Iron Man, Captain America and Superman. With their supernatural powers, they can scale and jump over buildings and use their super strength to overcome evil forces.

But this pandemic has shown us that our real superheroes are ordinary people carrying out their duties, performing their responsibilities day in and day out. These are the doctors and nurses and health care workers in nursing homes, the postal workers and mail carriers, the delivery drivers, grocery cashiers and truck drivers — all of whom are essential workers keeping our society functioning as they put their lives on the line. We give thanks for our everyday heroes.

Throughout the Bible, God has a way of using ordinary folks to fulfill the divine mission for God's purpose. He chooses the outcasts, the nobodies, those who wouldn't be considered hero worthy by society. Mary Magdalene, Matthew the tax collector and Mary, the mother of Jesus, are just a few. And consider this: While Saul was a strong handsome warrior, God chose David, a teenager tending sheep in the field to be the greatest king Israel ever had. Peter, the author of today's Scripture passage, had obvious flaws that would not make him the candidate to be the rock on which the church would be built, and yet he became one of the early leaders of the church.

Everyday heroes are everywhere. And one of them is now reading this Lenten devotional: you. Peter calls us to be disciplined and ready for action, meditating on the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory and the hope on grace that Jesus Christ will reveal. God is with us yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Lord, help us to draw from your everlasting strength and be the everyday heroes you desire us to be for the healing of your world. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Friday, March 19

What is reconciliation?

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. — 2 Corinthians 5:17–18

Within the New Testament, Paul presents the loving and deeply sacrificial act of God in order to bring reconciliation to us all. Reconciliation is one of those words that I come back to, look up the Greek and dig into the definition to fully comprehend the significance that this word truly holds through the sacrifice of Christ. Throughout Scripture, it is typically used when describing the relationship between God and humanity. The Greek word that Paul uses within the New Testament is *katallage* meaning “to rid enmity between two people who are at odds with one another.”

Reconciliation is so much more than being forgiven of our sins, but rather goes beyond forgiveness and restores what was once broken. Through Jesus Christ’s death on the cross, by paying the price for our sins, we now have a changed relationship with God, and all hostility is removed. This is something that God has provided and nothing we can do, but something we can fully receive.

Our greatest representation of reconciliation is through the death of Jesus Christ and, as we are walking in this season of Lent, may we be reminded of this powerful restoration and the sacrifice it took. May we reflect upon the greatest example of love the world will ever know.

Almighty God, we do not deserve the sacrifice that you so lovingly gave to bring us reconciliation. You are the restorer of all things, who brings peace and hope in the darkest of circumstances. I pray that we continue to grow in our understanding of reconciliation and, through your example, continue the ministry of reconciliation that we are called to do. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

Saturday, March 20

Forgiveness and renewal

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times. — Matthew 18:21–22

The response Jesus gives after Peter asks how many times we must forgive leads us to the importance of reconciliation in our lives. Our greatest example is Jesus, and through Jesus’ actions and words we are able to receive glimpses into how we, too, can approach reconciliation that results in greater peace and unity for all.

As we prepare our hearts and minds during this time of Lent, and reflect on our own lives and relationships, let us do so with this Scripture passage as a lens to look through. What might it look like to go beyond the act of forgiving, maybe even seven times, and move into the deep work of restoration? How can that help change our relationships, change our hearts, and to lead to a more whole community — one that seeks restitution for the wrongs and harm done in the past.

I pray that we will be a people who seek reconciliation, that we will take time to ask God where this reconciliation can be done within our relationships and that we may use Jesus as our guide.

Lord, strengthen us so we do not grow weary in the process of forgiveness and renewal. I pray that your Spirit guides us to work on the relationships we have so that we can find the wholeness and the peace that you so desire. In Christ’s name, I pray. Amen.

FIFTH WEEK IN LENT

Shalom: The Way to Repairing

Written by Christian Brooks



Reflect: In Lent, as we journey to the cross with Jesus, we are reminded that along the way the Lamb of God repaired what was broken — healing bodies and spirits. As we get closer to Holy Week — and to the cross of Good Friday — how can we see the broken world with compassion? How can we stop long enough on the roads we travel to reach out and bring shalom into our communities?

Add to your peace prayer “tree”

This past week, the daily devotionals talked about a hope that is unseen, which can bring peace. Add to your prayer “tree” all that you are hoping for in this world. Hope for hunger to ease. Hope for poverty to banish. Hope for healthcare for all. Give it to God in prayer.

Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 21 *Enough for All*

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. — Amos 5:24

When I think of a world where justice will “roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,” I think of a world where there is no suffering or oppression. I think of a world where the oppressed are vindicated. Where the wrongs from the past have been acknowledged and made right.

I think of a world where everyone has all of the resources that they need. Everyone has food. Everyone has clean water. Everyone has shelter. Everyone has access to education.

I think of a world where there are no more “isms” such as racism and sexism. There will be no more patriarchy, homophobia, xenophobia, transphobia, discrimination or bigotry. We will all be viewed as worthy and of value.

We have the tools at our disposal to create a world like this. We can stand up for the one knocked down. We can speak up for the one who has been silenced. We can advocate for better policies to ensure everyone has enough of what they need. This year, we can emerge from our Lenten wilderness wandering and begin repairing the world. What’s stopping us?

Lord, help us to understand that a society without suffering and oppression is possible. Teach us how to get there. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

Monday, March 22 *Repairers always face opposition*

When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers. — Proverbs 21:15

This passage in Proverbs gives us a startling and sobering reminder that when seeking to repair the world, not everyone welcomes progress. Jesus saw this as he made his way to the cross, encountering opposition along the way from those in power who wanted the status quo to remain as such. This is a concept that is important to understand as we continue to move forward in our fight for justice and equality for all people.

Our country was built on an ideology of power which created a dichotomy of “those who have” and “those who have not.” This dichotomy says in order for “those who have” to have power and resources, they must take from “those who have not.” This unhealthy understanding led to the oppression of many groups of people through stealing

land and enslavement.

Though these atrocities occurred long ago, the ideology from our founding is still deeply embedded in the fabric of our country. Some Americans still hold to that ideology. Because of this, though, some will rejoice for progress; others will fear progress and perceive it as a threat to their way of life. But regardless of the resistance, we must continue in our call to seek justice for those who are oppressed.

Lord, as we continue to fight for justice, let us hold those who resist with love and compassion, but continue to fight for what is right and set at liberty those who are oppressed. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

Tuesday, March 23 *Finding faith to stand up for justice*

When Esther’s maids and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed; she sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth; but he would not accept them. Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king’s eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what was happening and why. Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king’s gate, and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king’s treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people. Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, “All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come into the king for thirty days.” When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is

against the law; and if I perish, I perish.” — Esther 4:4–16

I love the book of Esther, especially this chapter as it tells us a story of a young woman whom God calls to do something extraordinary, but she is struggling with fears and doubts. Ultimately, she overcomes her apprehensions, puts her faith in God and starts living into what God has called her to do — to stand up for what is right and save her people.

Many of us can identify with Esther. Many of us fear stepping out of our comfort zone to stand up for what is right. But like Esther, we must overcome our fears and step out of our comfort zone because the world needs us.

Every day we watch in horror as another Black person is gunned down by the police. Children are locked in cages like animals in detention centers. Just recently, too, we had to witness in our country voter suppression tactics to keep people from exercising their right to vote as citizens of the United States. This isn't right. We have to do something about it.

This Lent, as we explore the ways to shalom, we must remember Esther's example and live into our calling to be liberators. Why? It's because our people need us.

Lord, like Esther many of us are scared to speak up. We have families to care for and households to maintain. But just as Esther overcame her fears, we must too. Lord, help us to step out in faith and move forward in our call to seek justice. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Wednesday, March 24

Jesus the liberator and protestor

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. — Luke 4:18

Who is this Jesus that we follow to the cross? He was a healer to the sick. He was a friend to the friendless. He was also a liberator and a protestor, speaking out against oppression and corruption.

Not everyone, however, embraces Jesus the liberator and protestor. In Luke 4, as Jesus continued to teach about healing and liberation, people became furious. A mob formed in an attempt to drive him out of town.

As followers of Christ, Jesus entrusts us to continue his mission. We are called to be truth-tellers who not only proclaim the gospel, but also live out the gospel in our daily lives. We are called to speak out against oppressive systems that were built to abuse, oppress and marginalize.

As we continue to speak up, there will be people who are

not pleased. Just as they did with Jesus, people will raise up against us. However, just as Jesus continued to speak out, so shall we.

The Lenten path we trod is not an easy one. It leads to the cross of crucifixion where the world thought it finally silenced Jesus. But like Jesus, we put our faith in God, knowing that hope reigns beyond the cross. The work of liberation will not stop.

Lord, guide me in your way and help me to speak up for what is right, even when there are people who are against me. In Christ's name, I pray. Amen.

Thursday, March 25

Be the change you want to see

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? — Micah 6:8

Jesus knew the teachings of the prophets and turned to those lessons often as he modeled for others what a life filled with shalom could look like. On our Lenten journey, we turn to this oft-recited Scripture passage from the prophet Micah and discover two little words that can make all the difference in our broken world: “to do.” We are not only to hear about the work of justice, but we are also to do that work. And we are not only called to seek justice from others, but we must also behave justly ourselves.

Micah calls us to look within ourselves, our organizations and our communities to make sure we are behaving justly. If we discover injustice within our lives and communities, we must have enough humility to acknowledge our missteps and correct our mistakes. We must also have the kindness to apologize and ask forgiveness for our mistakes. We cannot only expect others to change. We must also be the change we want to see.

Lord, please give me the strength and humility to look for injustices within myself. Give me the courage to acknowledge my mistakes and give me the strength to change. In Christ's name, I pray. Amen.

Friday, March 26

A new reality

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. — 2 Peter 3:11–13

In the Second Epistle of Peter, we are given the hope of a new reality. This hope is much needed as we are still reeling from and dealing with a year — 2020 — that brought us a global pandemic that claimed the lives of millions around the world. The pandemic also triggered an economic crisis that rendered millions of people unemployed, homeless and food insecure.

The legacy of deep-seated systemic racism and oppression was also unveiled in 2020. The Scripture addresses the need to tear down the old to create a new existence where there is no oppression, suffering or inequality, but one filled with love and righteousness. This hope for a new existence is important now more than ever.

As people of faith, we must take heed of Peter's words. Lent is a time to repent, to acknowledge past mistakes and repair the wrongs of the past. When we do this, we will begin reimagining an equitable society for all.

Lord, help us prepare for the shift that is necessary in our society. Help us to accept what needs to change with grace and love. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Saturday, March 27

Unity

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. — 1 Corinthians 1:10

The divide in our nation has been very apparent in recent years. This division has led to fear, hatred and destruction. We are in dire need of unity and healing.

However, before we can even begin the work of repairing and move toward reconciliation, we must acknowledge our wrongs. There are past and present atrocities that have not fully been acknowledged. The colonization of the Americas and the enslavement of African Americans are two horrific events in America's history that still need to be addressed. These events breached trust; they stripped the dignity from and took the lives of many.

Though these events took place long ago, the descendants of Indigenous peoples and enslaved African Americans are still suffering. People lost their languages, their native religions and their cultural identities. Families were separated. Land and income were stolen.

As we look forward to unifying our nation, let us not forget the pain and suffering that are part of our history. This Lent, as people of faith, let us take on the role of repairers — restoring the dignity of those who have been harmed.

Loving God, guide us as we journey to become a more unified nation. Give us the humility, grace and courage to make right our wrongs. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

HOLY WEEK AND EASTER

Shalom: The Way to Reconciliation

Written by Ivy Lopedito, Christian Brooks and Donna Frischknecht Jackson



Reflect: Our Lenten journey to the ways of shalom has brought us to the final week — Holy Week. It is a week that starts with the triumphal entry into the Holy City where soon the cheering crowds will become jeering crowds no longer praising Jesus but condemning him. How quickly the tide can turn. And yet, as the week ends with the cross of Good Friday and the tears of grief filling our Holy Saturday, joy will return. Resurrection Sunday comes and we are reminded that in Christ, God was reconciling the world. As we journey through Holy Week exploring the theme of reconciliation, think of the

hurts, grudges and hatred that need to be nailed to the cross and laid to rest in a “tomb.” Think about the healing power of reconciliation and where you have seen it in your life.

Add to your peace prayer “tree”

Each day during Holy Week, think about the hope we have in the promise of the resurrection and add prayers to your tree, railing or fence; make them prayers for the “new” things you are hoping for in your life.

Palm/Passion Sunday, March 28

Let our voices shout out

Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. — Isaiah 1:17

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” — Luke 19:38–40

As Christians, we have a biblical mandate to seek justice by speaking out against systems of oppression that exploit, dehumanize and abuse people. Just as Jesus spoke against corruption in society, so must we. But what does this call look like when it interferes with our understanding of peace? Those who greeted Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem on a humble donkey, not a powerful war horse that Roman soldiers rode on, misunderstood the peace God was seeking to bring into the world.

Society has taught us that peace is the absence of conflict. Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary defines societal peace as “a state of tranquility or quiet such as freedom from civil disturbance.” Unfortunately, this understanding of peace does not consider the inequities of society that call for us to speak up, not to remain silent so that the proverbial boat will not be rocked. The Pharisees wanted silence from the people. They wanted silence from Jesus. But peace doesn’t come from staying silent. Staying silent only perpetuates a system that maintains the tranquility of the privileged. Is that really peace?

As we begin Holy Week, we must ponder two questions: Can there be peace in the world with no justice? And will it be our voices crying out or will the stones have to shout for us?

Lord, guide us this Holy Week on our journey for justice. Help us understand the true meaning of peace. Strengthen our voices so that we continue speaking up for what is right. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

Monday, March 29

Seeking reconciliation when hope seems lost

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. — Romans 12:18

When we read this verse within Scripture, I think we can all agree that yes, if it is possible, our greatest goal is to live peaceably with all. This is something that so many of us strive for, but when we look around us it sometimes feels like an impossible feat.

We see political parties consistently at conflict with each other. We see movements trying to change systemic problems, but these movements are always greeted by opposition. This whole goal of living peaceably seems pretty impossible when we are at odds with our families and neighbors in ways we may never have been before. Even in his last week of life on Earth, Jesus had a less than peaceable moment: overturning the tables of the money changers in the temple.

The conflicts and injustices of the world do their best to bring us down. In these moments, I turn to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech. It’s a speech that was spoken during a time when the dream Dr. King had was nowhere near the reality that he was living in. Even though his surroundings seemed grim, his speech was filled with hope for equality, justice, unity, peace and overall reconciliation.

Let us remember when things seem to be crumbling around us, as they seemed especially to be for Jesus’ followers as his last week of earthly life unfolded, nothing is too great for our God. Let us keep that dream of peace alive even when the darkness seems overpowering.

God of peace, we look around and it is sometimes hard to find hope. We pray that even when we don’t see it, that we can be people who call forth hope — hope for peace and reconciliation — in a world that so gravely needs it. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

Tuesday, March 30

Radical reconciliation

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.” — Matthew 21:23–27

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. — Matthew 5:23–24

It's hard to seek reconciliation when tensions continue to rise and where conflict is around every corner, as Jesus witnessed with the Pharisees early in the week leading to his crucifixion. Yet the Gospel of Matthew makes it clear how important reconciliation is within relationships here on Earth. It's so important, that before you come to the altar with your gift, if there is any animosity between you and someone else, you must go and be reconciled. This is something that I find challenging and sometimes seems impossible to do.

The time we are living in has brought family members against each other, has broken lifelong friendships and has also caused us to greatly dislike people we might not even fully know. I don't want to always try and be reconciled with my brother or sister. Sometimes the easiest thing seems to be to just hold all the anger, hate and animosity within us and push it down without doing anything about it.

Reconciliation these days seems to be a radical thing to do. It's radical because it's not easy. But maybe doing something radical might be the very thing that starts the healing process with someone who you've had animosity with. During this week, may we slowly take steps toward forgiveness and healing, knowing that when we forgive and seek reconciliation we are also given the gift of letting go of the toxins in our own lives. May we allow the Spirit to work in places we can't, to heal and bring peace in ways we cannot even imagine.

God of heaven, heal our hearts and give us the ability to start the process of radical reconciliation. Remind us that it can take time and help us to endure when it seems to just get harder. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Wednesday, March 31 **The work of humility**

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

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." — John 13:1–11

He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. — Genesis 33:3–4

Long before Jesus stunned his friends by stooping down and humbly washing their feet during what would be their last Passover meal together, there is another story of humility to share this Holy Week.

The Old Testament story of Jacob and Esau presents a very raw depiction of revenge, anger and deception. From the start of their story, we see that the two boys were always very different, and most of the time at odds with each other.

The rivalry of the two brothers comes to a head toward the end of their father Isaac's life. It was then they knew that he would give a blessing to Esau, the oldest son. Yet both Rebekah, their mother, and Jacob, the youngest son, tricked Isaac into giving Jacob his blessing. Esau was devastated from being so deeply deceived. As the story continues, it leads to Jacob running away so his brother doesn't kill him and results in years of distance between them out of fear and animosity.

It is through the promptings of God that Jacob returns to his brother to start the reconciliation process. On the day Jacob meets with Esau for the first time, he bows down as an act of humility in front of his brother. He came to his brother acknowledging his wrong and that he had deceived him. Humbling himself, admitting his faults and coming before his brother show the start of the reconciliation process and lead to the embrace of two greatly estranged brothers.

For any relationship in need of reconciliation, so much of it has to begin with admitting the faults typically on both sides of the relationship in order to start the repair. Humility is challenging, but it is something that we can practice within our lives. Let us not forget it took Jacob many years before this happened, and much of his decision came through the promptings of God. Jacob showed humility, and through this we see the embracing of two brothers.

Dear God, provide us with the humility we need so that we can find peace within our relationships. Help us to seek forgiveness. Help us to stoop down and wash another's feet for

it is through our humility and in our being vulnerable that healing can begin. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Maundy Thursday, April 1 **Love one another**

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” — John 13:34–35

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you. — Psalm 89:14

As the disciples gathered with Jesus in the upper room for their last meal together, Jesus announced something startling. One of them will betray him. We know it is Judas, who leaves the dinner party to do the unthinkable: turn his friend over to those seeking to take his friend's life. But after we learn what Judas will do and Judas leaves, Jesus gives a new commandment to “love one another” — to love no matter what others might do to you. It seems an impossible commandment to see through, doesn't it? Yet we must. It is not an option, but a mandate. That is why this day in Holy Week is called “Maundy Thursday.” The word maundy is Latin for “mandate.”

Love is a mandate and that love requires reconciliation. And reconciliation requires inward work in order to seek peace and forgiveness. It also requires an action focused on justice and a restitution of wrongs. When two parties are at odds with one another, typically there is a side that needs to forgive the wrong that was done and a side that requires justice of the wrongdoer. Of course, every relationship is unique, yet justice can always be found in the hard work of restoring what was once broken.

Let us walk in the Spirit and be led by our God to bring this justice to a world that so greatly needs it. Loving one another as Christ has loved us is the work that we as believers have been called to do. This is the heart of shalom, and we have a chance to bring love and reconciliation into our own lives and within our own communities.

Dear God, as we work on the restoration of our relationships let us remember Jesus' words about loving one another. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Good Friday, April 2 **The cross of reconciliation**

So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. — John 19:16b–17

For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. — Romans 5:10

Our Lenten journeys have led us to Golgotha where the ultimate display of reconciliation is seen through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Through Paul's writings we understand that he considers the work that was done by Jesus Christ as a work of reconciliation. God is the reconciler, and we are the ones who are reconciled, having our sins wiped clean. Nothing was done on our part in order to bring about this reconciliation, but rather it is something that we can fully receive. This is a more powerful and sacrificial love than we have ever seen.

Right now is a time to ponder and meditate on this reconciliation that we have so lovingly been given. I hope this can be the reminder of what we have been given, and through knowing that deep love and restoration, that we too can be ones to live in a way that is unlike what we see so often within this world. To repair a broken world, we must be Christ to one another. We must act as ones who know the redemptive power of being reconciled.

God, we come before you filled with gratitude that while we were sinners your Son died for us, bringing reconciliation to all. We pray that we never forget your sacrifice to save us. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Holy Saturday, April 3 **Doing what is right**

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb. — Matthew 27:57–61

To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice. — Proverbs 21:3

Proverbs tells us “to do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.” And Joseph, a man from Arimathea, did just that. He did a righteous, just thing in giving Jesus a proper burial. He didn't think of what others might say about his selfless act nor did he worry about what his wealthy friends would say about giving a radical, itinerant rabbi who was mockingly labeled “King of the Jews” a place in a tomb that was to be for him when he died.

Like Joseph, God wants us to step out of the shadows and stand up for what we believe in. God wants us to do acts of selfless love. Anyone can stay comfortably in the background and give a sacrifice in silence. It takes true strength, courage and love to do the right thing. On this Holy Saturday, how is God compelling you “to do

righteousness and justice”?

Lord, show me how to truly love those around me. Help me to step out of my comfort zone and give me the strength and courage to take action for what is right. In Christ's name, I pray. Amen.



EASTER

Easter Sunday, April 4 *Hang in there*

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and

to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened. — Luke 24:1–12

You’re not much of a morning person, are you, pastor? The chiding was coming from the big, bald, burly farmer standing next to me in the slushy snow. I smiled. Inside, though, I was cursing the idea of an Easter sunrise service. Why couldn’t the women in Scripture set their alarm for 9 a.m. to get to the tomb? It wasn’t because I didn’t function till my third cup of coffee; getting up before the crack of dawn in the New England community I served meant enduring still-frigid temperatures.

My toes were numb with cold. I wished my throbbing knee was numb, too. I had smacked it on a headstone

as I made my way to the area in the cemetery where the service was being held. This was an ecumenical gathering and, being the new Presbyterian pastor, I was happy to let the Methodist minister plan and take the lead. And take the lead she did. She gave a perky greeting that made the big, bald, burly farmer look at me slyly. She recited Scripture, gave a homily and broke the communion bread with nimble fingers. Fingers? I couldn't feel mine. She did all of this without reading from notes. My turn came. I fumbled with the paper my closing prayer was written on and the flashlight in which to see the words. With my less than enthusiastic "Amen," the service was over, and folks scurried back to their warm homes.

I remained frozen in place, but not from the cold. I was frozen with dismay. It was still dark. I thought the idea of an Easter sunrise service was to see the sun rise. I didn't risk frostbite not to see the dawn's first rays. It was more than just seeing the sun, though. I needed to see the Son. I had been questioning my call to this community. How did a former fashion editor from Manhattan wind up in a little struggling community, freezing in a dark cemetery on Easter? Should I leave? Where was God calling me next?

Just then I realized not everyone left the cemetery. The big, bald, burly farmer was still by my side. He didn't chide me. "I'll wait with you to see the sunrise," he said softly. He motioned to his pick-up truck and we drove to the highest hill of the cemetery, which offered the most amazing view of the little village below. We got out and stood in silence. I wasn't sure what the farmer's prayers were, but I knew mine: "God, let this Easter be a new beginning."

The black sky began turning light gray. Soon pinks and oranges appeared on the horizon. My heavy heart lightened along with the sky. When the bright ball appeared with its

rays stretching out like heavenly arms ready for an embrace, I felt my eyes water. I heard a voice, not from heaven, but from the farmer: "I hope you hang in there with us." All I could do was nod "yes."

Later that morning, after the traditional worship service was over, I thanked the farmer for waiting with me to see the sunrise and wondered out loud why no one else hung around. He didn't have an answer, but just laughed and shrugged.

It's been years since that cold Easter morning and I still remember how everyone left when it was still dark out. It got me thinking about how many times I have turned around too soon before seeing God's light shine in my life. After all, if I had not hung in there during the dark days of a struggling congregation, I never would have been able to experience the moments of resurrection in people's lives — those moments when the light shines and we realize, yes, death does not have the last word.

This Easter, hang in there when the sun's rays seem to take forever to break through. For Easter is a promise that a new day does dawn. Hope does shine. And if you're tempted to turn back into the darkness before the light breaks through, then may there be a big, bald, burly angel waiting beside you, whispering, "Hang in there. Easter hope is dawning."

God of resurrection hope, thank you for the promise that death never has the last word. Thank you for how darkness always gives way to light. But most of all, thank you for the light of your Son, Jesus, that shines brightly in our lives. As we begin this season of Eastertide, may we hear our Risen Lord greet us with "Shalom" and may that wish for peace become a reality in our lives. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

The Way to Shalom
A Lenten Journey to Peace and Wholeness

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