Diving Lessons

2017 Lent Devotional

Christina Villa, ed.
The Stillspeaking Writers’ Group is composed of United Church of Christ ministers and authors who collaborate on resources for people in the church, outside the church, and not so sure about the church. Their motto: “Hearing God where you live (and other surprising places).”

Stillspeaking. It’s the shorter form of “God is still speaking,” a campaign by the United Church of Christ (UCC) to remind us that God still has a lot more to say. Since 2004, Stillspeaking has worked with thousands of UCC churches and individuals across the country to make religion relevant and to extend an extravagant welcome to all — because no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you’re welcome here, at the United Church of Christ.

Our cover and title are inspired by Philippians 2:5-11:
“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.”

Lent can be a time to think about Christ diving down into human life, into service and sacrifice. How did he do it? What lessons can we learn from it?
Diving Lessons
2017 Lent Devotional

THE STILL SPEAKING WRITERS’ GROUP

Hearing God where you live (and other surprising places)

Christina Villa, ed.
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I N T R O D U C T I O N

During the summer of my eighth year, I learned to swim at the YMCA in Camden, Maine.

I don’t remember my instructor’s name, but she taught me to float, tread and crawl. Those lessons not only helped me avoid death by drowning, they also allowed me to have fun in the water, assured I would live another day.

In the ancient Church, adults seeking baptism on Holy Saturday or Easter Sunday spent the season of Lent in study and prayer, learning the Christian way of navigating the waters of life. Working with experienced coaches, they prepared to be submerged in water, conquering death and rising joyfully with Christ.

In either case, finding an experienced friend is key.

This book offers a series of Lenten lessons for diving deeper into the Christian life, written by caring friends. By the end of it, you might desire to be baptized for the first time or to have your baptism renewed at your church. Or you might simply read and be refreshed, growing in the confidence of faith.

I never advanced from the YMCA to the NCAA as a champion swimmer. And, thankfully, there are no experts or champions of Christian living, just friends passing on the life-saving good news of Jesus Christ.

Turn the page and dive in with us.

- Matt Laney, for the Stillspeaking Writers’ Group
Halfway through the line I almost lost it. Until that moment I’d been in a ritual groove, looking my parishioners in the eye, dusting them with ashes, calmly delivering the ancient admonition: “Remember, you are dust and to dust you will return.” One by one they came, listened, received. But halfway through, I faltered.

It wasn’t that I suddenly realized the gravity of what I was telling them, that they were breathtakingly fragile, that at any moment they could dissolve into elemental bits, that someday they would. I’d been feeling the heft of that truth all evening.

So no, it wasn’t that I was giving them fatal news. It was that they wanted to hear it. It was that they’d lined up to hear it of their own free will. They knew exactly what the message was going to be, and still they inched their way towards the messenger.

My knees went wobbly as water. I wanted to wave them off, to tell them they didn’t have to come, they could go sit down. But I knew no one would. That was the most stunning thing: even if I’d said it, I knew no one would.

So I regrouped, kept tracing charred crosses, kept saying the old words. And they kept coming, one after another, offering me their foreheads with the trust of a child.

And when I told them they would die, some nodded. Some said amen. Some even smiled; they said thank you, as if instead of sentencing them to death, I’d showered them with stars.

Holy One, may I live this Lent in bare truth, total trust, and knowing joy; for in life and in death I belong to you.

“For dust you are and to dust you will return.” Genesis 3:19
So my wife and I are having a baby. Sometime between now and Easter — likely — our first child will be born. There is something deeply appropriate about the forty days of Lent concluding the forty weeks of waiting that is this great journey through the wilderness of welcoming new life.

Every doctor’s appointment and milestone and test bring a complex mixture of joy and fear. Joy that at the end of the wilderness there may be waiting for us a child we will meet and be forever changed. Fear that at the end of the wilderness there may be waiting for us a child we will meet and be forever changed.

It is not simple, it is both/and. Both joy and fear. Gain and loss. Prayer and silence. New life and the approach of death. It is already both/and.

So thank God for the Psalms. They are too honest to depict children as if they were angels, heavenly visitors who are different and better than we who have been tainted by living too long in God’s creation.

I believe it’s true, what the Psalm has to say of this child I’ve never met. I believe it’s true that the child is already sinful. Sinfulness, which is to be tied up with and implicated in the heartbreaks of the world. But if the Psalm is true, it’s also true that God has already implanted wisdom in this child. Wisdom, which is the capacity to reorder both self and world to more closely resemble God’s hope.

Both/and. Life is already both/and. I believe it always will be.

Beating heart yet lacking breath. Helpless yet powerful. Mortal yet clothed in immortality. Sinful as any, wise as any, good as any, flawed as any. This is the person I long to welcome to the waters of baptism.

O God, bless the living, and those yet to be alive.
I once asked Jim Forbes, a professor of mine at Union Seminary, to help me understand the difference between predominately white and predominately black churches. I asked because I experienced a power in the worship of the black church that I didn’t often find elsewhere.

Jim, whose background was in an African-American Pentecostal church, pondered my question, then said, “In predominately Caucasian congregations people believe God needs them; in predominately African-American churches, people understand that they need God.”

Of course, that’s a generalization, but so was my question. And there’s a truth in those words real in my own life in this way: for much of my life I have found it easier to offer help than to ask for help. Admitting “I need help,” can be a tough thing to do. Even, in a way, shameful.

As the apostle Paul began his letter to the Romans he said a striking thing. “I am not ashamed of the gospel.” Why would he have been ashamed of the gospel?

Paul was a man who had worked hard to attain perfection and status by his own efforts. An unexpected encounter with Jesus led Paul to a sudden realization: the one thing he most needed was to accept the help, and the grace, of God. To embrace the gospel was to embrace help — and to not be ashamed that he needed it. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who has faith.”

In the end, the two parts of Jim’s answer to my question are a both/and. As we accept grace ourselves, we become gracious to others.

Holy One, grant me the courage to ask for your help and the confidence to know that even before I ask, you have already said “yes.” Amen.
Humility isn’t in vogue in our culture. Even more than competence, outright hubris can now win the day. Humility is for losers with low self-esteem, and we love winners.

But what might win elections and promotions is not what wins God’s heart. Jesus rejects those who are seeking to be “the greatest” and instead opens his arms up to those who “humble themselves” like children.

In certain circles I’ve traveled in, ones where power and privilege are not the norm, I’ve heard the concept of humility dismissed. I get why. When you are a part of a group that has been oppressed or treated as “less than,” someone telling you to be humble seems particularly unhelpful. Many groups have, rightfully, claimed the concept of “pride” as an antidote.

But being proud and being humble are not opposites. You can, and should, absolutely believe that you are a beloved child of God, created by God and profoundly gifted. No one is inherently more worthy than you.

But the problem comes when you begin to believe that you are more worthy than others.

True humility is not about thinking of yourself as less than others. True humility is knowing that you are equally worthy, and that every good gift you have been given is not for yourself but for others.

What we learned, and somehow better understood, about how to treat one another when we were children still applies. And even if it doesn’t win the day in the board room or on the ballot, that child-like virtue still wins God’s heart every time.

God, help me to love myself exactly as you made me, and help me to be humble enough that I may love others. Amen.
Did God Say?

Richard L. Floyd

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?” Genesis 3:1

Our scripture lessons for Lent feature a wily bunch of tempters, the serpent, Satan, the devil, who pose questions that cast doubt on the truth of God’s Word. That’s their job.

Although they make for a colorful cast of characters, we don’t really need them since such questioning is more likely to come not from them but from deep within us.

We are all partisans in the perennial human rebellion against God. We revel in our personal sovereignty and unbridled freedom.

God made us for worship, but instead of worshiping God we “worship ourselves and the things we have made,” as one of our old UCC prayers of confession so wisely put it.

Some of what God says seems just too good to be true, and so we question the truth of it.

Did God say, “I will be your God and you will be my people”?

Did God say, “Look, I am doing a new thing, do you not see it?”

Did God say, “Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God;

I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand”?

Did God say, “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope”?

Did God say these wonderful words, full of comfort and love, of promise and hope for the whole human family?

Yes! God said them.

God of the future, let us put our full trust in you, and in the truth that is always breaking forth from your Holy Word.
As a prank, I, along with four of my college senior class colleagues conspired to steal the bell that was stationed at a corner of our college square. After we’d done the deed around 3 a.m. one morning, we delighted in hearing the utter befuddlement and bewilderment that characterized the responses of various students regarding the missing icon.

The plot was a great source of amusement until our senior class voted to contribute a sizable sum for the replacement of the bell. At that point I had to speak up, because I couldn’t rest well with the fact that my senior classmates were going to give good money to replace something that didn’t need replacement, but return.

I went to the class president and told her that the bell would be returned. Of course, I implicated myself . . . but I was so ready to be free from the guilt that I was happy to sing like a bird.

And I was relieved to deal with the consequences of my actions (which amounted to a stern reprimand. As it turned out, we weren’t the first seniors to pull that prank).

As I look back on the incident, my cover-up was as bad as or even worse than my misdeed itself.

Sin is an enticer. But after it entices us . . . it entangles us.

There is nothing that can free us from our conscientious entanglements like open, honest, full-throated confession. The truth about who we are and what we’ve done—even when we believe that what we did was harmless—is tonic for our souls.

Lord, help us to realize that even though we can live with cover-up and denial . . . we cannot live well.
There is so much wrong with the world, and some of it is your fault.

The earth is collapsing under the weight of so many of us using up everything we want as fast as we want, and you just drank a cup of coffee from a disposable cup. People are really actually starving right in your town and you continue to buy groceries for your own family as if this were not happening. Governments are overtaken by thugs and you are too busy or cynical to vote.

There is so much wrong, and some of it really is your fault. The curse of being human is knowing this. The blessing of being human is having a choice about how to respond to this knowledge.

You can pull the covers over your head, groan softly and gradually waste away from the helpless, enervating guilt of it all. Or you can start here. Roll out of your bed and kneel beside it. Open your mouth not to groan, for once, but to speak out loud. Tell your fault to the Holy One so that it no longer weighs you down, no longer weakens your body and soul, no longer keeps you trapped in the prison of your own making. Remember that while some of it is your fault, not all of it is. Then stand up. There is so much wrong with the world, and you have work to do.

Oh Most High, Help me speak and then to move from confession to action.
This verse, one of the very last in the Bible, makes me think of two bumper stickers: “Jesus is Coming. Look Busy!” and my favorite: “God is coming …and she’s pissed!”

It’s silly to think of God as a nitpicking boss, watching and waiting for us to slack off, check our Facebook page, click over to solitaire, or take a power nap in the youth lounge as a pretext for kicking us to the curb. It’s also cartoonish to make God into an angry parent yelling, “Don’t make me come down there!” to kids-gone-wild in the basement playroom.

On the other hand, scripture repeatedly forecasts a day when God will come to earth and “clean house,” end injustice, cast out evil and make things right. That good news is the theme of Revelation. I don’t know if God will be “pissed” when it happens but I suspect it won’t help to “look busy.” In fact, I think we’re supposed to “get busy” right now.

Because maybe God’s renovation project is already underway. Maybe, when the writer of Revelation said it would happen “soon,” he meant “now.” If that’s true, all baptized disciples are called to roll up their sleeves and join Jesus in cleaning house. Even as new messes pile up, we can whistle as we work because we know how the story ends.

Lord, I will have countless opportunities to right some wrongs today. Help me see, and do, at least one.
F
lint-knapping is the process by which a stone core is shaped into a hand axe or an arrowhead. A hard hammer stone is pounded into a more fragile rock, knocking off large chunks. Then another stone is used for pressure flaking, breaking off smaller shards until the edge is sharp and the tool is well-defined.

It’s amazing what archaeologists can learn even from those shards: how far a group of people ranged, who they traded with, what kind of work they did. All by looking to the rock, following those flakes back to their source.

Isaiah says it is the same with the children of Sarah and Abraham. Those who pursue righteousness and seek God can do no better than returning to the source to remember what their ancestors were made of:

Trust that led them out of their homeland. Hospitality that could entertain angels. Humor that allowed them to imagine the impossible. Faith that held back nothing from God. And if we’re honest, some deep flaws running through the stone as well.

We know, because we’re chips off the old block. We are the many born from the one. We are made of good stuff, both fragile and strong. Remember it, you who seek God, and be shaped for Love’s use.

You who raise up children of Abraham from stone, form us for your work.

“Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many.” Isaiah 51:1-2

F

Family Resemblance

Vince Amlin

THURSDAY, MARCH 9

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T. S. Eliot wrote that we are “Distracted from distraction by distraction.” We daily lose whatever focus we had. We attend the small matters, not the larger ones. Missing cell phone? Lost keys again? We love the idea of a God who neither slumbers nor sleeps — and rarely slumber or sleep ourselves. It is God’s job to tend eternity and ours to swim in it for our short term of consciousness. Why do God’s job? Plus, your cell phone is in your purse and your keys are in your pocket.

Baptism comes to mind. Perhaps you were baptized by a sprinkle. But it represents the deep water. It was a physical reminder of a spiritual reality: you belong fundamentally to God.

Tutored by my own distractions, I have realized that it takes a whole, deep, not shallow, life to become a Christian. Knowing I am baptized means I was marked for Jesus. We may mark our precious child with water and then forget to keep hosing them down. Baptism is the ferocious search for a life-giving community in which to raise a child. It means knowing the child doesn’t belong to us but to God. It means knowing we want the child so well-anchored that he or she can sprout wings. It means “dedicating” the baby, or yourself, to a Godly, spirited, Jesus-led life.

Hesitate or forget to remember your own baptism? Or to baptize a child? There is no better time to plant a tree than yesterday. The God who neither slumbers nor sleeps is still waiting to focus you. Dive deep into the waters and meaning of baptism. As you arise, you will be able to float there and focus there.

Save us from the daily distractions, O God, for the deep waters of a baptized life.
More than a Gentle End

Matt Fitzgerald

“God will guard your going out.” Psalm 121

Our Book of Worship has a section titled “Order for the Time of Dying.” What wishful thinking. We can’t impose order upon death. All we can do is wait. Or be surprised. Death never comes on time.

The “order” contains a prayer I love. “Let death be as gentle as nightfall.” No gasping for breath, no terrified eyes, no morphine stupor. Just soft, soft nightfall.

But a good death requires more than a gentle end. I pay regular visits to Del, who is dying of ALS. He is an intense man. His anger at the world’s injustice won’t let him ignore the injustice of his own disease.

But Del is not content to spend himself despairing. He dives into dying. He’s read almost everything he ever wanted to read. When he could no longer hold a book, he switched to television. Del is the only senior citizen I know who watched “The Wire” in two weeks. “What did sick people do before Netflix? Probably had their kids read Dickens to them.”

He’s thanked his wife ten thousand times. He thanks God that he can still speak. He’s said goodbye to a parade of friends. He called the ones who are afraid to visit. His pain lets him better know the pain on our city streets. He is a Christian, not a stoic.

He told me he remembers his mother humming “I Come to the Garden Alone” while he slept in a laundry basket beneath her ironing board. When we sing it at his funeral, I’ll see a small boy in 1940, napping on folded laundry, safe in his mother’s embrace. Del is already helping me grieve.

If his prayers are answered, Del will have died by the time we’re reading this. And I will have said the “nightfall” prayer again. I don’t know if God will grant either petition, but I know that Del’s death has been good. May it be so for all of us.

O God, guard our going out.
Very once in a while, something (or someone) happens to us that forces us to confront everything we thought we knew. We awake as if from a dream. We see the compromises we made, sometimes for decades, to meet other people’s expectations or to protect our status or position, or just because we didn’t know any better.

The wake-up moment may be the realization that you’re in an abusive relationship. Or that your work is hurting others or killing you. Or that you’re an addict, hurtling toward catastrophe. Or that you’ve been dead wrong about your politics or your religious convictions. Or that you’re gay, or in a body that doesn’t match your spirit’s gender, and you need to come out or you’ll die.

We used to call it a midlife crisis, but the radical re-orientation of self to calling can happen at any age.

Nicodemus experienced just such a crisis. And you know what? It’s embarrassing to have a midlife crisis. Even if we’re punch-drunk on new love, our natural conservatism fights against our impulse to blow up our lives publicly. It’s why Nic went to see his man Jesus in the middle of the night. He was awake to something altogether new and utterly compelling, but that doesn’t mean he was any braver. What would people think of him? Getting a platonic crush on this scruffy, antiestablishment rabbi — Nicodemus! A respectable Pharisee! He would be a laughingstock.

And yet. Could he really go back to the way things were, knowing now how things could be?

We have to evaluate our whole lives in the wake of our waking-up. It will cost us. It may cause us to leave behind our work, our marriage, our mortgage, our political party. It’s a painful process, including one that may cause distress to others as we live into God’s calling. But there’s no going back into the womb of the status quo.

Jesus, we won’t always welcome the midnight epiphanies that blow up our lives, but we’ll thank you in the end. In the meantime, keep us company and give us courage as we get born again and again and again.
Long journeys can reveal, deeply, the nature of the traveler. A person in a hard wilderness behaves differently than the same person comfortably at home. At this point in the Israelites’ journey to Egypt, we witness humanity at its most petulant: “There’s no food, and besides that it tastes lousy.” Seriously?

Could God be so easily bothered that the answer to griping was to deploy venomous snakes? Go just a bit deeper and we see that the story doesn’t state positively that the serpents were a response to the muttering: we jump to that conclusion because one follows the other. Travel a bit further through a study Bible, and we find that snakes were common fertility symbols in ancient cultures of the region: Seriously?

There’s more than one way of understanding our vast and mysterious God. It could be that the story reminds us of untamed divine anger. The story could also illustrate what happens when, stressed by hunger and fear, we forsake gratitude and replace it with complaint: now our world, stripped of praise, becomes filled with peril. Hunger is terrible: not to be ignored. The snakes still have so many meanings they wriggle out of our grasp. The story continues — and in the continuing, despite our complaining, God cures.

O Merciful Provider, O Mystery, O Perplexing One: may my spirit and mind and belly be open to all that you are giving. May my complaints, like chaff, be blown away. Even in my perplexity, grant me grace to live in awe.
Few people are as cruel as parents can be to each other online. Ask a question in an online parenting forum about what and how to feed your baby, the best way to discipline your ten-year-old, which products to use in the home, and within minutes, you will become convinced, if you weren’t already, that Satan has the world in his clutches.

Parents who criticize other parents usually are doing it because they love their own kids a lot and have made thoughtful, intentional, well-informed choices about how to raise them. When other people make other choices, they can wind up thinking that the reason must be that the other parents don’t love their own kids as much.

But parents who think this way have fallen into the same trap that Paul is writing to the Romans about. Some of them had begun thinking that circumcision was an end in itself, that circumcising one’s kids is how one loves God. It’s like the angry online parents who claim that attachment parenting is the way one loves one’s kid.

In fact, all those choices are simply ways that proceed from some parents’ love for their children. Love comes first; the all-organic diet comes second. Or the highly-processed diet comes second. Parents who make either choice love their kids equally. Likewise, Paul argues that loving God comes first, and that circumcision is one way that some have chosen to show that love. Not being circumcised is another way. People who choose either option love — and are loved by — God equally. So as Paul says: everybody, lighten up. The specifics aren’t important. The love is.

God, grant that I might love you so hard that love spills over even onto people who show it differently than I do.

“We say, ‘Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.’ How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.” Romans 4:7-11

Quinn Caldwell
“Jesus straightened up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, sir.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.’” John 8:10-11

Tracing his finger on the ground, he changed everything. Stones in hand, they were armed for war against her, she a pawn—as people on margins so often are—in a broader battle with Jesus.

Then, he stood and saw her. He saw her, not her accusations, not the surrounding fury. He saw her and he did not condemn her. Thanks be to God.

I have heard this passage read in church, stopping just there. “Just as Jesus didn’t condemn her, he doesn’t condemn you, either.” The Jesus of this teaching overlooks all wrongs.

Unfortunately, that’s Jesus-lite, not Jesus himself. The next line is crucial. “From now on do not sin again.” Acknowledging that Jesus has expectations for our behavior, that he wants us not to “sin again,” sounds like he is asking something too hard to pull off.

It is. He knows very well that she will sin, that the rest of us will sin, again. But that does not mean that sin is good. Acknowledging this is key to our Lenten explorations, which include the discipline of penitence, or repentance for sins. We “dive in” to examine our actions and inactions, asking God what to do. We repent, meaning: turn back to God, because God does not condemn us. As we do, we have to know that God does not delight in or accept our sin either. Ironically, this is Good News. Because the effects of our sin are things like the war of stones, the hypocrisy of accusation, the bullying of the marginalized. Thank God Jesus says no to such things.

Which Jesus do you know? The one who shames accusers into silence? Or the one who gives the order not to sin? The One True God embodies both and so much more.

God, we turn and see, we dive in right now. Help us to emerge washed and refreshed.
Go Back or Go Deep

T a l i t h a  A r n o l d

““The whole congregation of the people murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness . . . .”” Exodus 16:1-8

““Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full.”” Exodus 16:2-3a

T wo choices: Go back to Egypt or go deeper with God, i.e., deeper into the wilderness.

Six weeks into the exodus out of Egypt, those were the options. The Hebrews’ first heady days of freedom quickly gave way to murmuring against Moses. They’d scarcely dried out from the Red Sea crossing when the fleshpots back in Egypt started looking mighty good. Who could blame them? They were thirsty, hungry, and wandering in a God-forsaken desert. Who wouldn’t want to go back?

Two weeks into Lent, we face the same decision. The first few days of fasting from alcohol or sugar or any other Lenten discipline are a piece of cake (no pun intended). By now, it’s no fun. Why not give it up and go back to the good old fleshpots?

Yet for us, as for the Hebrews, that’s not the way to new life. Moses tells the people that if they hang in with God, they will know it was God who brought them out of the wilderness, God who turned bitter water sweet, God who blessed them every day with bread and quail. In fact, if they don’t go back to the fleshpots of slavery but stay in the wilderness, they shall even “see the glory of God.”

So will we. Whatever your discipline this Lent, go deeper with God, which means deeper into your own hunger and your own deserts. As the Hebrews learned in their wilderness, it’s the only way to new life. “If sackcloth and ashes are at its start,” Frederick Buechner wrote of Lent, “something like Easter may be at the end.” Hang in there.

God, we know the temptation to go back to the fleshpots. Give us the strength to go instead more deeply into your new life.
I’ve been a church worship leader for decades so I’ve heard every imaginable element of the “worship wars.”

“They sing too loud.”
“They sing too traditionally.”
“I hate hymns.”
“Praise groups aren’t as intellectually stimulating as hymns.”
“Lyrics on screens are too distracting.”
“We need a screen so everyone knows the lyrics.”
“We love the organ. No band!”
“We love the band. No organ!”

The Church gets so focused on how we worship that we forget why we worship.

We argue about our preferences when worship is supposed to be a completely selfless act. It’s not supposed to be about the worship style but that we worship with our whole heart.

This Lenten season, join me in waving a white flag in the worship wars. Push yourself to consider who God is to you instead of how a song sounds to you.

We belong to the flock of the Most High, welcome in God’s pasture, regardless of our shortcomings. That thought alone should at least stir up a heartfelt “Hallelujah,” even if the choir isn’t singing in our favorite key.

Let the words of my mouth be acceptable in your sight—whether they come from a hymnal or a worship screen.
Had To

Mary Luti

“Jesus left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar . . . Jacob’s well was there.” John 4:1-6

Of course he didn’t have to go through Samaria. Most Jews wouldn’t have — it was enemy territory. There were routes back to Galilee that avoided Samaria. Jesus could’ve chosen one of them. But no, the gospel says, he “had to” go through.

The Jesus we meet in John’s gospel is a driven man, driven by the Spirit and the Spirit alone, coming and going solely according to God’s purpose and pleasure. If scripture says he had to go through Samaria, then it was inescapable, a summons. He could do no other.

Turning the page, we discover why. Someone was waiting for him there, a woman at a well. She was waiting for him without knowing he was coming, without knowing who he was, but waiting all the same — to speak and be known, to drink new water from a different well, to set down her jar, to be released for running, for telling, for showing the way.

He had to go. To her.

If we’re not spiritually compelled like that, agile and swift when the Spirit moves, maybe it’s because we consider too much what could happen to us, what it might cost, if we go through Samaria, and don’t consider enough what it will cost that someone who’s surely waiting for us there if we don’t. The conversation that will never happen because we didn’t sit down, tired and thirsty, at their well. The things they’ll never know about themselves, their truth, their beauty, their worth. The un-bestowed mercy, the freedom denied, the withheld joy.

Compel me, Spirit of God. Make me have to go. Someone in Samaria is waiting for me.
Evangelism for Millennials

John Edgerton

The woman said to Jesus, “I know that the Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When He comes, He will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am He, the one who is speaking to you.” . . . Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” . . . Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” John 4:29

Say what you will about millennials (or better yet, talk to us instead of about us, it’s only polite), but we know something about evangelism. A generation that insists on integrity, millennials have neither interest in nor patience for a preening faith that pretends it has all the answers. A would-be evangelist pretending their life is perfect? To a millennial they’re nothing but a turn off, a try-hard.

Such boasting is obviously fake, like wood veneer over press-board. And believe us, we’ve owned enough wood veneer over pressboard bookshelves to know what they feel like, smell like, break-in-half when-you’re-moving like. Better to have cinder blocks and two by fours; at least they look like what they are.

Better to have a faith that publicly asks real questions, rather than broadcasting fake-bravado certainty. Better to listen to a believer earnestly confess their shortcomings than watch the silent and sad pantomime of a church full of people pretending that they’re all okay. Better to listen to a woman asking “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” than some dude asking “Have you accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior?”

You want millennials at your church? Or really anybody new, frankly? Then be like the woman in our story. Just be honest. Ask your questions, tell your story, live your hope. That’s not just evangelism for millennials. It’s evangelism for everyone.

God of the perfectly waxed handlebar mustache and hand-built fixie, help us be real.
Letting God Be God

Tony Robinson

“He prayed to the Lord and said, ‘O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning: for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.’” Jonah 4:2

If Jonah weren’t so sad, he would be really funny. Actually, he is pretty funny, and that may be the best way to get into his story, by seeing the sad humor of it all.

For when Jonah said, “I knew you to be a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,” he is biting off each word in white-hot anger. The unspoken is, “You are merciful, forgiving, slow to anger . . . and I don’t like it, no, not one bit.”

Jonah wanted God to blast the hated Ninevites, to wipe them off the face of the earth. When instead they turned from their evil ways and God forgave them, Jonah let God have it. After telling God off for Her graciousness, Jonah said, “That’s it. Take my life. I’d rather be dead than have to watch you being merciful.”

Like a four-year-old who is so mad that his errant (in his eyes) brother got dessert that he refuses dessert himself. Chocolate sundae melts into a puddle. The only thing is, we can manage that at any age — 24, 44 or 64. By some terrible magic, we too can turn, instantly, at whatever age into a small, angry child who insists that God operate as we think God should, that life conform to our expectations.

Or we can do a Ninevite, do a 180, turn around and let God be God. We can accept life on God’s terms, rather than demanding it be on our terms. And we can enjoy that chocolate sundae before it melts.

Sometimes, Holy One, the hardest thing to swallow is our own willful pride. Lower my blood pressure and restore me to my rightful mind.
Strange Gods

Emily C. Heath

“I lifted the burden off your shoulders; your hands are free of the brick basket! In distress you cried out, so I rescued you. I answered you in the secret of thunder. I tested you at the waters of Meribah. Listen, my people, I’m warning you! If only you would listen to me, Israel. There must be no foreign god among you. You must not bow down to any strange deity.”

Psalm 81:6-9

God’s warning comes too late for most of us. As much as we try to put God first, the reality is that we all have foreign gods. I don’t mean that in the sense of coming from another land, but instead of being totally incompatible with the life of faith. Idolatry is the word theologians have used for centuries to describe putting something else in the place of God. Most of us are good about knowing that God should come first. But if we look closely enough when we make daily choices, or allocate our resources, we might find that we give too much to other gods instead.

But here’s the thing about bowing down to those other gods: you can give them everything you have in the hopes that they will bring you joy and contentment, but in the end they will never love you back. Instead you will find that they are not gods at all, but are black holes that suck away every good thing you have to share.

That may sound harsh, but Lent is in many ways a time to be honest. As we walk through the desert with Jesus, preparing for his death, I’m reminded of my time as a hospice chaplain. It may sound cliché, but it’s true: never once did a patient of mine find any comfort in the past purchase of a vacation house, an expensive car, or a country club membership. In fact, at the end those strange deities finally looked like the hollow shells they had always been.

So what did people find comfort in? Their faith, of course, but more than that in lives where their faith in God’s love had moved them to love others. Family members who came day after day. Friends who showed up. Lives of service to something greater than themselves. A world made somehow just a little better by their lives.
Some of the most joyful services I have officiated as a pastor have been funerals. (Some of the most joyless and anxious have been weddings, by the way.) I don’t think that’s a surprise. A life well-lived becomes a cause of hope for the rest of us, and a witness to what it looks like to be free from serving what can never love us back.

God, may I love you with all of my life knowing that you loved me first, and may that love be enough to keep my heart turned towards you.
Living Water and Leaky Containers

Richard L. Floyd

“My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.” Jeremiah 2:13

When you live in the desert you know the difference between green and brown, between wet and dry. In the parched lands from which we get our Bible, water was not only a precious resource, but also an important metaphor for life itself.

In our passage for today the prophet Jeremiah speaks God’s judgment against the nation for seeking life where there is no life. He employs the metaphor of water, saying the people had turned away from God, the source of living water, and had built for themselves leaky cisterns, to try to catch whatever limited rain might fall. But however much rain came, the cisterns had cracks in them and could hold no water.

It is a vivid image. God has offered them a life with God’s own life-giving resources, instead they have attempted to fashion a life for themselves apart from God.

If we imagine this season of Lent as a wilderness time, where is the dryness in our own lives? Where are the parched places that long for living water? And where have we foolishly looked to our own resources for life and turned away from God, the source of life, the fountain of living water?

We are a dry people, O God, living in a dry land. Turn us back to you, the fountain of living water, that we may drink deeply and live fully.
The election of last November was another stark reminder of how deeply divided we are as a country. People who live in the same state, the same county, the same city, and sometimes even the same street are at polar opposite ends regarding many of the critical issues that face our nation.

Yet, an open, honest conversation with our political opposites might reveal that no matter the political affiliation, the overwhelming majority of us want many of the same things: Safety for our families . . . good education for children . . . the opportunity to work and make a livable wage . . . a clean environment . . . a government we can trust.

With all the common concerns that unite us, why do we as a country continue to find ourselves separated and alienated from the very people we ride with on mass transit . . . or shop with at the mall . . . or see at the post office . . . or sit with in the waiting room at the hospital . . . or whose children share a classroom with our own?

Could it be because instead of talking truthfully to one another about our common concerns, our common fears and our common prejudices, we have spoken to one another in sound bites, political slogans and media-hyped stereotypes?

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus makes it clear that our neighbor is not necessarily the one who lives closest to us, but the one who travels a common road with us.

We could make the road better for all of us if we began an honest dialogue with a fellow traveler whose perspectives don’t necessarily resemble our own. We could share a lot . . . learn a lot . . . and better understand our common lot.

God, give me opportunity to open up an honest dialogue with those who are different from me.

“Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.” Ephesians 4:25

Kenneth L. Samuel

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M y favorite nine-year-old tells me it freaks him out to look at his friend through binoculars held backwards. “It looks like they are far away, but then you take the binoculars off your eyes and they’re standing! right! there!”

I know what he means, because my husband Jeff has a degenerative illness. If you have lost a spouse, you may feel that binoculars make everything too big. Grief seems too close most of the time, you can observe every detail, every wrinkle and outline. But those of us who are living with a long slow illness are looking at grief through lenses held backwards. Grief seems small and fuzzy, distant and even unthreatening.

Every now and then, though, the binoculars get ripped off, often when we least expect it. The frustration in Jeff’s eyes when he drops a piece of paper on the floor and can’t pick it up. The cancellation of today’s small errand because someone forgot to charge the electric wheelchair. The careful conversation with friends to decide if their house is accessible enough for a visit. It’s a shock every time, how close grief really is, how clearly it really looms.

What do we do then, when the binoculars fall for a minute, when we are poleaxed by the sudden and startling nearness of grief? Take a moment, take a breath, take the long view. Look around, binocular-less. Let our eyes adjust for a moment. Coming into focus, see the One who is right there by our side, who was there all along. The One who will not forsake us, no matter how long the valley of the shadow may stretch before us.

Thou art with me. Thou art with me. Thou art with me.
Billy

Matt Laney

“A man knelt before Jesus, and asked, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’ He said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth . . . .’”

Mark 10:17-20

Mark doesn’t name the guy so let’s call him “Billy” because he’s a combination of Bill Gates and Billy Graham. He has loads of money and seems to be leading a morally impeccable life. Billy asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Billy’s not sure what needs to be done to earn eternal life but whatever it is, he’s pretty sure it’s up to him. That means Billy does not yet understand the Gospel. He thinks God grants eternal life to people who do good things. In fact God grants eternal life not because we are good, but because God is good.

So Jesus asks Billy to surrender the indicators that he is a deserving person due to being a prosperous and virtuous person: “Go, sell what you own, give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me.” Billy is shocked and wanders away, assuming eternal life is way out of his price range . . . which, of course, it is.

You can’t buy or earn your way into the kingdom, but you can show you are a child of the king by walking with him. The purpose of life is not achievement and ownership but relinquishment and followership, proving once again that the best things in this life (and in the next) are free.

Lord, just for today, or even for the next hour, let me drop everything and follow you.
There is a restaurant in Pittsburgh called Conflict Kitchen. Every few months the place changes its entire menu, but it always serves the cuisine of a country with which the United States is in conflict.

As I write this, the food of the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois Confederacy, is on offer. Diners can start with succotash, then move to cranberry and juniper braised venison, and wash it down with Oktahgi’, a root tea. They can also hear Haudenosaunee “perspectives on Indigenous sovereignty, economic and environmental conflict, and cultural erasure.”

I’ve always heard the words of Psalm 23 as a comforting invitation to a familiar feast. But what if I am the enemy at the table?

I think of the confusion and self-consciousness of sitting down to a meal I don’t know how to eat. My first time negotiating crawfish or tamales. The discomfort of eating with my hands on low stools at an Ethiopian restaurant. The embarrassment of chewing on an edamame pod for minutes until I realized I was only supposed to eat the beans.

Looking in on the table of my enemy, I may see God’s grace received through dishes I cannot even pronounce. De-centering my own experience, I may recognize God’s goodness and mercy served with utensils I don’t know how to use.

And if I am lucky enough to be invited by my enemy to sit down at her table, and wise enough to humbly eat the food of her heart, what mystery may I learn about dwelling in God’s house my whole life long?

Strange One, fill my cup with an unfamiliar grace. Show me your greatness, overflowing my bounds.
“A voice from heaven said…Saul, why do you persecute me?”

Acts 9:4-5

I live a very safe life and am white enough to trust the police. That being said, I often feel persecuted. My persecution is called trivialization. I putter my piety. I neglect the divine on behalf of the immediate. I play penultimate, not ultimate Frisbee. I stay in the shallows. I keep God alive in my heart only to forget about what God might want from me on a regular basis. That is a version of spiritual privilege. I know I am baptized and blessed with the deep water of Jesus’ Christianity. I know where I’m supposed to live. I just don’t get there most days, most of the time. That is what it means to be a generalist at religion, an amateur at faith, and a second stringer spiritually. I get to play in the game after the others have already won it. I feel more than a little persecuted by the heavy demands of faith and the great shallowness of not knowing what to have for dinner.

I have been thinking of adopting a nickname — Rip Van Twinkle — which would allow me to dive more deeply into my days. Rip came back after twenty years’ sleep and found that everything had changed.

I woke up one day and realized that I had become old. I woke up one day and realized that most of my life was over. Instead of diving deeply, I had been sticking my toes in one shallow pool after another. Why, God asks me, did I consent to persecution of the divine? I didn’t really consent. I just fell asleep.

Spirited Jesus, during this Lent let us realize we were offered twinkle and took temptations instead. Help us.
Jesus is demanding. Grace brings stitches, but it will cut you first. So we look for God in easier places.

Liberals find God in natural beauty, as if the One walking toward Golgotha and my lakeside vacation are the same. We’ve made God so tame.

Conservatives find God in the Bible, as if they could smell His breath by getting close enough.

In both cases we take something controllable and turn it into God. We aren’t two camps. We’re two wings on the same bird, flying away from Christ and his intensity.

God is not scripture, creation, politics, success, pleasure, beauty, art, church, family, the pursuit of social justice, or anything else that we grant ultimate significance. None of those things are God.

That doesn’t mean they aren’t wonderful. Smart people worship good idols. But even the best false god gets crushed when saddled with colossal expectations. There is love that only God can give. My family is too frail to carry it.

Name what you’ve made more important than God. Take the weight off its shoulders and it might stand up a little taller.

Let beauty be beauty, don’t worship it. Let your family be your family, don’t expect everything from them. Let work be work, don’t let it define you. Let our nation be our nation, not something to kill for.

Let life be what it is: a beautiful gift full of trouble, days of joy and contradiction, expiring in our hands. Life isn’t everything. We shouldn’t try to wring eternity from existence.

If we can find the faith to hold the reins lightly, the ride might get lively. As Charles Spurgeon says, “We make too much of this poor life, and this fondness costs us dear.”

Dear Lord, forgive our overburdened gods. Then let them leap to life.
“When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, ‘Do you believe that I am able to do this?’ They said to him, ‘Yes, Lord.’ Then he touched their eyes and said, ‘According to your faith let it be done to you.’” Matthew 9:27-28

I remember the first time I realized, about 32 winters in, that the trees where I lived in New England lacked foliage fully six months out of every year. For half of my life, I had been walking around in a Spartan moonscape. What a recipe for depression!

And yet, every spring, over several magical days, nature delivered on her promise to move the dial from “apparently dead” to “most certainly alive.” Forsythia arrived on the scene like so many jazz hands. Fetal maple leaves emerged damp and exhausted from twig-ends.

The most wondrous part of the blossoming is that new life emerged from such a sorry-looking source. Dead branches didn’t fall off, making way for new young shoots. The branches themselves grew young again. The shivering gray sprays of rosebush greened from within. External cues—warmth, and the angle of the sun—catalyzed a change within every tree, shrub, square foot of earth.

The visionary medieval abbess Hildegard of Bingen spoke often of “viriditas,” the greening of things from the inside out as physical things respond to the Divine energy unleashed on the world.

This story of Jesus healing the blind ones is a story of viriditas. Jesus might be magic, but even he can’t perform miracles without the active participation of the one who would grow greener.

“Do you believe that I am able to do this?” he asks the blind ones.
In their simple answer lies everything: “Yes, Lord.” The “Lord” recognizes God’s power. The “Yes” recognizes ours.

What in you has seemed defoliated and dead for a long time? What spring have you been waiting for, passively? Can you put your face in the sun, and let it call to a hidden, dormant power in you? Can you believe that Jesus is Lord of Life, and has the agency to heal anyone — even you?

God, with every YES I have, with everything that is inside of me waiting to burst forth, green me.
Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, “Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land.” So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, “Take it, and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth.” So I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter. Then they said to me, “You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.”

Revelation 10:8-11

The bold, ancient Revelation to John repeats the even more ancient vision of Ezekiel. Take in the Living Word of God. Consume the Word with your body as well as with your mind and heart and spirit. Take it all in, with this warning: you will be changed.

The Word will go down easily, sweet in your mouth. It will then burn and pierce. Like the agony of restoring a dislocated joint: the Word will reveal the depth of your soul’s injury. Like the sourness of a broken relationship: the Word will describe the end of the dream of love. Like the earth, screaming in the form of climate chaos: the Word will point to the consequences of exploitation instead of reverence.

Is it simple coincidence that as I read and ponder this scripture I am also reading Kristin Ohlson’s The Soil Will Save Us? Perhaps not. The bitterness she describes is in the land, used without understanding: its extraordinary, complex microbial life devastated by humanity. We have ploughed, paved, and depleted the soil. Earth responds with terrible devastations: an awful prophecy of overuse and abuse.
Those digging deep, looking carefully, listening quietly, have witnessed the deadly human uses of earth — and also its extraordinary ability to heal. When God’s creation is revered (think of no-till farming; of massive composting; of vast new expanses of photosynthesizing plants), the soil has the capacity to heal creation. Which means that the earth, also, is God’s prophet, bearing God’s Word.

Living Word, you speak and we tremble. You sing and we are renewed. You offer your very self to us, so that our own selves may find healing and hope. Give us courage today to take the bitterness; give us promise today of the sweetness that is ours, with you.
One way that many talk about what happened in the Garden of Eden — which is to say, one way to talk about the human condition, why it’s so fraught and difficult — is to say that when Adam and Eve ate the fruit, their disobedience, their sin, made death enter the world.

That’s never made sense to me. Death is actually absolutely necessary in our world. Without it, there is no way for nutrients, for minerals, for energy to cycle through the system. If people didn’t die, we’d just keep making more until we covered the whole planet and — what? Not starved to death. Likewise with bacteria or rabbits or trees. Without death, everything on the planet as we know it would eventually grind to a halt.

And yet, sin is real, and death does seem terrifying to many of us. Maybe sin doesn’t create death. Maybe what sin does is make death terrible instead of peaceful, disordered instead of a part of the cycle. Maybe what sin does when it enters the picture is to make death violent. Or untimely. Or forced. Maybe what sin does is make us believe we own the components of our bodies instead of borrow them; maybe it makes us believe that eventually returning them to the system is unnatural when in fact keeping them is.

Maybe because of sin the problem isn’t death; maybe because of sin, the problem is us.

OK God, so I’m not exactly eager for my death, but when it comes, let it be what I hope my life will be too: brave, and generous, and gentle.
The Morning Watch

*Kaji Douša*

“My soul waits for the Lord. More than the keepers of the morning watch. More than the keepers of the morning watch.” Psalm 130:6

S

ometimes when I read the Psalms, I skip over the laments. Psalms like 130 begin with sadness that can feel like buzzkill on a good day. “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.” But what if we are not in the depths?

Psalm 130 acknowledges the rhythm of life that includes moments of joy and moments of difficulty. In either place, we will find that our “soul waits for the Lord.” There is always a part of us that needs God. On a sleepless night, in moments of loneliness, in the swirl of complicated emotions on a birthday, in any of these places, we need God close.

That closer walk is just what we pray for in Lent. Our Lenten discipline of prayer comes directly out of this waiting on God, this sense of anticipation. We “dive in” to our prayer lives knowing that as we divert our attention from our usual routines to a deeper time of prayer, God will be there.

Of course, we might also be in the depths. And if we are not today, some day we will be. The practice of acute engagement with God, no matter the circumstance or feeling of the day, will always, always be worth exercising. This could be as simple as remembering to say “thank you” to God when something goes well.

Maybe our souls are in the holding pattern of endless night, waiting, waiting as the Psalm repeats (in one of the few repeating lines of Scripture), for the dawn of a new day. Or maybe all we see is daylight. Psalm 130 reminds us that life will always include night and day. But, as another Psalm reminds us (Psalm 139), night is not night to God, who is always, always awake with the response to our most fervent prayers.

When shadows spend the night, Holy God, please bring us the joy that morning promises.
Lazarus was dead: to begin with. There was no doubt about that. Not asleep. Not sick. Not away on sabbatical. Dead. Dead as a doornail, as Charles Dickens wrote of Jacob Marley.

By the time Jesus got to Bethany, Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. Long enough to bring the whole town to tears. Long enough to make a stench, as his sister Martha told Jesus (or in the King James’ version, “a stinketh”). Lazarus was dead.

Even before he got to the tomb, both Martha and Mary told him Lazarus was dead. They also told him it was his fault. “If you had been here, our brother would not have died.” The townspeople drive it home again. Lazarus is dead, and it’s your fault. Three times. Like nails into a coffin — or into hands and feet.

No wonder Jesus stood at the tomb and wept, sobbing for his friend whom he loved, for Martha and Mary whom he also loved. Weeping for himself, too. The next tomb would be his own, after he’d hung dead on a cross in a place called “The Skull.” Other women would weep, just like Martha and Mary. Three days later, when those women went to his tomb, they’d also expect a stench. Why else take spices?

Lazarus was dead. Jesus would be soon. Often titled “The Raising of Lazarus,” I call this miracle story “The Descending of Jesus.” It shows God’s willingness to go to the depths of human life — deep into the despair, impotence, and grief Jesus knew at Lazarus’ death. This story demonstrates, in the words of Holocaust survivor Corrie Ten Boom, “There is no pit so deep that God’s love is not deeper still.” Sobbing at the tomb of his friend, Jesus showed the depth of that love. That’s miracle enough for me.

Thank you, God, for going to the depths. Thank you for your love that goes deeper still.
A minister at my childhood church used to start many of his sermons with a song called “Love Lifted Me.” The main chorus repeated, “Love lifted me. Love lifted me. When nothing else could help, Love lifted me . . . .”

I think I’m finally starting to get the concept.

I am falling in love for the first time.

I’m not just doodling hearts and initials on a notebook. I’m not just changing a Facebook status to see how many likes I can get and how many curiosities I can pique.

No, this time’s different.

This time, there’s safety in what I know. This time, there’s faith beyond what I can’t know.

This time, I finally understand there is no such thing as love without trust.

This time, I’m not doing all of the heavy lifting.

This time love is lifting me.

Recently, I realized the word “Love” in “Love Lifted Me” is capitalized because the songwriter uses Love as another name for God, suggesting that God is so intertwined with Love that God is Love.

It makes sense that God would create us in Her image to do something She does best.

Every time we give and receive love authentically, vulnerably, and purposefully, we honor our spirit and the Spirit in which that love was created.

I’m ready to dive in to this new understanding of what love is because I finally understand who Love is.

Blessed Savior, thank you for a Love that doesn’t stop lifting.
I know a professor who’s delightful in the classroom. His courses routinely overfill. But he loathes those huge classes. He suspects many students come for his style, not his material; to be entertained, not educated. He can’t get a personality transplant, so he’s revised the course requirements — now it’s a killer. This semester, the crowds thinned out fast.

“You must hate your family . . . .” That’s a killer, too. Jesus sounds tired of being the teacher everybody likes but nobody learns from. Tired of crowds that come for surprising stories and clever banter with lawyers, but remain unchanged. Maybe he’s stiffening the requirements to thin them out.

Or maybe he’s having a smelling-salts moment, head snapping back as he comprehends, with mind-clearing clarity, how much it’ll cost him to love what is most worthy of love, in and above all other loves. Maybe he’s saying it aloud to make it real for himself as well as for us: “I will have to loosen every tie of blood that binds.”

Here’s a horrible vision of life: I’ll love you and let you live if you’re like me; I’ll hate you and kill you if you’re not. It’s the ruling vision of our world. We know the ferocious consequences of its demonic irrationality. The question is whether we have any sense at all of the sacrifice it’ll take to destroy it and create the boundless fellowship of God.

Jesus says, “You want to be my disciple? Then don’t come to me casually as if we were going to a picnic in the woods instead of a pitched battle in the anguished heart of the world. Read my syllabus. Read it again. Then come, follow me.”

I’ve read it, Jesus. I’m not sure I can do it. Give me courage and grace.
Tell Me What You Want, What You Really, Really Want

John Edgerton

“Lord, hear my prayer, listen to my cry for mercy; in your faithfulness and righteousness come to my relief.” Psalm 143

In my prayers, I often err on the side of praying for things that I could do myself. God is likely tired of hearing me ask: “Help me do my part to solve [insert societal woe].”

I like to hide behind theology for justification. Prayer isn’t magic, God isn’t a genie. And that’s true. But if I’m honest, the reason I don’t pray for the things I really want is that I’m afraid of what will happen to my faith if I don’t get them. I’m honestly afraid of entrusting my most hidden need and brokenness to God. What if absolutely nothing happens?

Could I still believe in God?

It’s true that I shouldn’t treat prayer as if it were a hotline to a not-very-reliable genie. That’s not faithful to the God who keeps Her own counsel and knows better than I what is good. But neither is it faithful to pray as if I know that God will certainly be of no avail.

Because what do I know?

I’ve been among Christians long enough to hear stories that defy reason. Dire prognoses that turn out just fine, vulnerable people thriving against all odds. People have trusted me with stories too tender and sacred to speak about except slantingly, stories that help me understand why the root meaning of the word miracle is “laughter.”

If my heart is frozen by fear at a medical diagnosis and what I most desperately want is to be well again, then that’s how I
should pray. If my life has fallen apart and I don’t know how to put it together again and I need somebody to fix it, that’s how I should pray. Pleading with God for what I really, deeply, truly need is not the end of prayer. But it is the beginning.

We usually end these with a prayer, but I’ll leave that to you.
God’s Surprising Choices

Tony Robinson

“For the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but Lord looks on the heart.” 1 Samuel 16:7

A friend of mine did a sermon series she called “The Ten Essentials.” Her subtitle was, “The Ten Bible Stories You Have to Have.” She would tell her congregation, “It’s too dangerous for you to go out there without these stories tucked in your hearts.”

This one, the story of the prophet Samuel’s visit to Jesse to anoint one of his sons to be king of Israel, would make my top ten, if for no other reason than the line quoted above. “God does not look on outward appearances, but upon the heart.”

Jesse had a passel of sons. He paraded seven of them before Samuel, beginning with Eliab, who was not only the eldest but big and tall and studly. Looked like excellent king material, as did the others. But one after another God gave a thumbs down to an increasingly exasperated Samuel.

Finally, Samuel — desperation in his voice — asked Jesse if he had seen all of his sons. “Well, there is one more, the youngest. He’s out tending the sheep.” Samuel said, “Bring him.” God said, “This is the one.” He was the youngest, the smallest, the least likely, a mere boy. David.

But he was the one God wanted. Why? Well, God seems to like surprising us. God gets a kick out of messing with our expectations. God seems to like choosing people that conventional wisdom would not consider in a million years. Like Moses, who had a public speaking problem. Like Jeremiah who was a raw youth. Like Mary who was unwed and poor. Like Paul who was known as an enemy of the church. God, as a friend likes to say, has, “a preferential option for the unlikely.”

There’s both bad news and goods news here. The bad news is that our choices and evaluations are often made on a superficial basis. The good news is that in our heart of hearts many of us harbor a sense of deep inadequacy. We think we’re not enough. Not smart enough. Not good enough. Not faithful enough. We feel we are very unlikely candidates for God’s love, for doing God’s work in the world. But good news: God can and does have a preferential option for the unlikely, which includes me and maybe you, too.

Holy One, when the voices thrum that repeat “not enough,” ring in my ears; help me to hear your surprising word and to know that, by your grace, I am enough.
It has become quite common for some American Christians to believe they are being persecuted for their faith. This has always struck me as odd. In the few moments in my relatively privileged life that I have faced any kind of persecution it has never been for my faith. Actually, even though I am a Christian, it has often been at the hands of other Christians.

And yet, in a world where some Christians are no longer allowed to use their faith to dictate everything from who can get married to what songs can be sung at the public school holiday pageant, some of us have come to believe we are being persecuted.

The first century church understood real persecution. Real persecution is not a matter of no longer being able to impose your faith on others. Real persecution is about going to jail, being tortured, and losing your life. We American Christians have no idea what persecution is like, choosing instead to launch court cases and lawsuits at the drop of a hat when we are reminded that this country has a clear separation of church and state.

I often wonder, though, what would our first century forebears think of us? These were people who not only understood persecution, but who gladly suffered it. Privilege for them was not about dominance, but instead about being invited to witness to their faith by suffering for Christ.

I don’t glorify suffering, but I do believe that the first century church was on to something. In fact, most of the shining moments of our faith came in the midst of great persecution. Members of the Confessing Church that stood against Hitler, for instance, suffered gravely, often to the point of death. But, unlike many of us who have never had our faith tested, they
knew who they were, and Whose they were, and they still rejoiced and found strength.

I do not wish persecution and suffering on the church. But I think that maybe, just maybe, there may be some spiritual benefit to getting a little more uncomfortable.

Dear God, call me out of my complacency and safety, and into the privilege of standing with you.
Jesus knew that people who said the kinds of things he said and did the kind of things he did in Jerusalem were likely to end up on a Roman cross. As Christians ready to embark on the week we call holy, we do well to recall that when Jesus set his face to Jerusalem, he knew where he was going. But his disciples didn’t know, and they weren’t ready for the journey he was taking. Because he loved them he wanted to prepare them for what was to come. Here on the road, before he entered the city, he took the twelve disciples apart and told them the hard truth about his vocation and where it was to take him. He will try again to prepare them around a table on the night he is betrayed. But we know from later in this week’s story that they were still not prepared. We know that one of them will betray him, one will deny him, and all the rest will flee from him. Which raises the question for the church in every generation: are we any more prepared to follow him than they were? We want to follow you, Jesus, but we never know quite where you will take us. Prepare us for the journey, and remind us that wherever we follow you, you will be with us.

“‘See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.’”  Mark 10:32-34

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, ‘See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.’”  Mark 10:32-34
Today we mark the triumphal entry of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem . . . riding on a donkey. He comes not as a military conqueror riding on a stallion, but as a humble servant riding on a donkey.

But Jesus didn’t just ride on a donkey; Jesus rode on a donkey and a colt. He rode not just on a beast of service, but also on its young, weak, vulnerable offspring.

The Gospel emphasizes that Jesus rode the donkey and its colt into Jerusalem. He was not only making a statement about his humility, he was also making a statement about his vulnerability.

Can there be any true humility without a true realization of weakness? Is it possible to really be humble and at the same time be shielded from hurt . . . pain . . . rejection?

Jesus enters the world through the vulnerability of a baby . . . and Jesus prepares to end his earthly sojourn by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey and on a young, tender colt.

In counseling, people seek someone who sees and understands the visceral pain of their perplexities and dilemmas. In relationships, intimacy can only be reached through a common let down of defenses and a common openness of transparency. In politics, we are always searching for the candidate who is straightforward enough to identify with our deep-seated struggles and anxieties.

The humility of Jesus is not a lofty, singular virtue. It connects all of us who labor with the stresses and strains of everyday life. And it tells us that our power is not in camouflaging our weaknesses, but in recognizing our weaknesses, and acknowledging the common places where we hurt together.

There is only one who can heal. It is the one who has been wounded.

God, as we try to humble ourselves in hostile situations, show us how your strength is made perfect in our weakness.
Seeming Unseemly

Jennifer Garrison Brownell

“Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” John 12:3

Scholars always seem to say something, well, scholarly about this passage, like, “In first century Palestine, the act of wiping Jesus’ feet with her hair would have been an act of unseemly immodesty by Mary.”

Honestly, I’m hard pressed to think of a time or place where it would not be considered unseemly or immodest to pour a pound of perfume (which then, as now, is generally sold by the ounce) on a dinner guest and then massage that guest with one’s hair. Adding to the unseemliness of this scene is the use of nard, which would have cost a year’s wages and was imported from India — even by today’s travel methods not exactly a hop, skip and a jump from Palestine.

Mary’s act of devotion irritated at least one of her fellow disciples and likely unsettled the rest of her guests, who now had their nostrils filled with an overwhelming redolence of nard instead of the dinner in front of them.

Why did Mary do this, pour out her devotion in such a flagrant way? There could be many possible reasons, but with the death of Jesus looming ever closer, I suspect she gave her all because she knew it was the last chance she would have. She knew the end was in sight, and so she did not hold back.

Sometimes you’ve been asked to consider what you would do if you knew you had no more time left. Maybe a more interesting question is what you would do if you knew Jesus had no more time left. Would you be willing to seem unseemly if you knew that today was your last day with the Savior? Would you be willing then, at last, to pour out all your love and all your worship, every last drop?

Christ Jesus, we have so little time left to worship you. Let us make every remaining moment count.

Lent Devotional 2017 / Diving Lessons  45
Who Owns You?

Matt Laney

“‘The Pharisees and Sadducees asked Jesus a question in order to trap him: ‘Teacher, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?’”

Mark 12:14

Obviously, the answer was, “No way!” What could be more objectionable to the children of Israel than paying for their oppression by a brutal foreign overlord with pretentions to divinity? Saying that in public would be treason. Condoning Caesar’s tax would be blasphemy. Clever trap.

So Jesus asked them for a coin (significant they had one of those idolatrous, God-mocking coins and Jesus did not). The coin clearly belonged to Caesar since it bore Caesar’s name and image. “Give to Caesar what belongs to him,” Jesus said, “and give to God what belongs to God.”

What, then, belongs to God? That which bears God’s image and name. That’s us, of course! We are God’s “coins,” God’s currency in the world. In addition to being a political statement against Rome, it was a statement of empowerment for the Jewish people. In effect, Jesus said, “No one owns you, but God.”

And who doesn’t need to hear that in a world awash in brands (I’m wearing half a dozen right now) and graven images vying for a piece of us, if not full ownership? Reciting “I belong to God” as our daily mantra might be as important in our time as in the days of Jesus. Idolatry never goes out of style.

Lord, I give myself to you. May my day and my life be well spent.
I remember the feeling when the principal came into my classroom. In the moment between the door opening and the announcement of who she wanted to see, we students examined our consciences with the fervor of medieval monks. Most, I would wager, found some reason to believe the name called would be their own. I know I did.

Jesus uses a similar strategy. He declares that someone is in trouble and waits an excruciating five verses to reveal who. The disciples shift in their seats and replay the last 24 hours in their heads. Peter is too nervous to ask. He makes John do it. Jesus draws it out further by dipping the bread and looking meaningfully at each one.

Perhaps it’s not by accident. Over those five verses the twelve realize something about themselves. It could have been them.

And maybe the reader, too, imagines Jesus’ hand outstretched and offering bread.

If we dive deep into Christianity, we must eventually take a dip in that dish. I must recognize the possibility of betrayal within myself, and allow that recognition to free me. Free me from judgment of others. Free me for the grace Jesus extends, hand outstretched.

Forgiving One, a moment’s pause reminds me of my need for grace.

“Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, ‘Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.’ The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking . . . Simon Peter motioned to John to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, ‘Lord, who is it?’ Jesus answered, ‘It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.’” John 13:21-26a

Take a Dip
Vince Amelin

WE D N E S D A Y, A P R I L 1 2

Lent Devotional 2017 / Diving Lessons 47
Do This

Kaji Douša

“For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” John 13:15

How far are you willing to let God go?
Is there a line in behavior, a place of secrets, a shelter of practices that you expect God not to breach?
It seems that Jesus crossed that line in the story of the Last Supper.
Peter drew the line when Jesus gets too close to his (presumably filthy) feet. The work of a servant was too much for his Lord.
Jesus knew that they would never expect their Teacher to cross a major class divide. But he pushed. “You should also do as I have done to you,” he said.

Some people’s feet are unsafe to touch. We do not need to force people into situations of intimacy that will harm them. The literal interpretation can be convenient when it emphasizes a sense of physical submission. Far too often, submission is asked of the marginalized who are asked to kneel before the powerful.

Jesus’ example inverts the power structure. The Power of the Most High knelt at the feet of his friends.
If your traditional place is to kneel at the seat of power, hiding your face, keeping quiet, holding back, never upsetting the people who hold the reins to your ability to thrive, then truly following Jesus means a subversion all of this. If you were born into a position that allows you to tower over everyone else, then following Jesus will mean getting down on your knees. If your place in life includes expectations of servitude, then following Jesus might just mean standing up.

Diving in to the practice of giving alms, one of the traditional Lenten disciplines, means setting the conditions so that this is possible for everyone. What might that take in your life? What line is God challenging in your life?

God, if you would wash my feet, help me to wash away the injustice that expects this of some and not of others. May we all stand proud in the love of God.
Bearing

Quinn G. Caldwell

“When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days…
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, And he shall bear their iniquities.” Isaiah 53:10, 11

The Oceti Sakowin camp had been there for months by then, full of Water Protectors resisting proposed plans for the Dakota Access Pipeline to cross a dammed section of the Missouri River not far from the lands of the Standing Rock Sioux. Other waves of supporters had come before them: waves of clergy, waves of sympathetic activists. This was just another wave, this time of military veterans.

But then a group of them did an astonishing thing. Standing in formation before tribal leaders, they dropped to their knees. They recited a list of the atrocities that the American military has perpetuated against native Americans throughout the years. Then they literally begged for forgiveness.

Of course we don’t know the name and history of every single person there that day, but it’s probably safe to assume that most of them did not actually personally commit any of the injustices they mentioned. And yet, there they were apologizing for them. They chose to bear the iniquities of their ancestors as a way of making things right in the present.

Neither was Jesus the creator of any of the systems that destroyed him on this day so long ago: the forces of empire, the greed of client kings, the cowardice of leaders, the fickleness of crowds, the betrayal of friends, the tyranny of the powerful over the weak. And yet, he chose to bear them in his own body to try and make things right in his present and in the future.

Jesus, who didn’t have to, climbed a cross with the weight of others’ sins on his back. The vets at Standing Rock, who didn’t have to either, bowed low under the same weight. And in each of those moments, something like salvation entered the world.

Holy One, let me not bear the sins of others in vain, but if the bearing will help your salvation to enter the world, give me strength to do it.
Joseph didn’t have to give Jesus his tomb, but he did. What moved him to such an extravagant gesture? I think he didn’t have to do it and so he did it. He was so upset that he needed to do something. He did what he could so many.

Without any intent to trivialize Joseph, let me tell you about my rubber band balls.

I make these balls because I don’t have to. Most of what I do I have to do — in the same way that our family budget is usually determined long before we take a look at it each year. The student loans. The mortgage. The insurance. Discretionary is not a word that applies to my time or my budget.

But the rubber band balls are different. I don’t have to make them and therefore I do.

The balls are a parable or a ritual about networking. It takes the abandoned and turns them into community. It forms the random. The very action of adding a band relaxes me a lot more than the actual building of community. Real raveling is hard; discretionary raveling is easier.

Joseph and his community were destroyed by the murder of their leader. What could they possibly do? They could find a linen cloth. They could rebuild and re-ravel their network. They could give away their own tomb — on the grounds that they really wouldn’t be needing it anymore anyway.

When things fall apart, O God, wind us around each other in pain and community.

“A rich man from Arimathea . . . took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and placed it in his own new tomb.”

Matthew 27:1, 3

Donna Schaper

Holy Saturday, April 15

What Could They Possibly Do?

Lent Devotional 2017 / Diving Lessons 50
I knew a woman who had a baby. She was addicted to heroin. She cleaned up, relapsed, had another baby, quit cold turkey and relapsed again. She lost custody of both children. Then she got serious. She went to meetings. She got clean.

Eventually she got supervised visits. Twice a month her living room would burst to life. Her toddler and her infant, crying, babbling, shouting, filling up the room with diapers, laughing in her arms.

At the visit’s end the babies were taken again. She would stay in her empty living room for hours. She would sit in her daughters’ glow, letting it linger, stretching her sense of their presence as long as she could. She stared at the indentation on the couch where her three-year-old sat, watching it slowly disappear. She kept vigil, smelling the air as their scent faded.

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I don’t feel God’s presence. Not really. If the same is true for you, admit it. Atheists are wrong, but they might be wise. Christ is real, but he might be gone. What if we let God be absent? What if we took time to learn the ferocity of our longing? Perhaps we’d become sensitive.

I have not felt God’s presence. But I have felt as if I’ve stepped into a room that God just left. The first Easter women felt it in a tomb, but you can feel it in an intersection, on the train, in a clearing in the woods. You can feel it anywhere. Christ is not here, but he just left.

The next time you step into this feeling, inhale sharply. Breathe Christ’s absence in. Perhaps you’ll catch a lingering sense. Maybe you’ll see an indent on a couch cushion or hear the echo of babbling laughter. Maybe you’ll feel the air moving in His wake. Maybe that will be enough. Enough to sustain your longing and enough to see the truth: He is not here, but has risen. Hallelujah.

Let us be pulled up in your wake, O risen one.
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