



RUNNING FROM EMPTY

LENT DEVOTIONAL

2023

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Introduction — Empty

Life these days. It's a lot.

If you don't find yourself exhausted and overwhelmed in this era of existential threats ranging from ecological to geopolitical to national crises (to say nothing of personal challenges), please call me immediately. I'll have what you're having.

What's more, many of us are constantly on the go, not only because our production-addicted society demands it, while shaming those with too little to do, but also because staying busy is a familiar way to avoid existential anxiety and angst. We are simultaneously running *from* empty while running *on* empty.

Sometimes our "running" is frantic and dramatic. Sometimes it is subtle. I can be found running from (and on) empty in habits like nail biting, overthinking, eating, Netflix, and doom-scrolling. You likely have your own forms of running.

At this point, Jesus might ask, "Beloved, is empty the worst thing that can happen to you? Is stillness and doing nothing so awful? Perhaps the thing you are running from is the very thing you most need."

Enter Lent, which is all about surrender, emptying and letting go . . . even during activity. Lent does not mark the time Jesus checked into a retreat center for long periods of meditation and yoga between gourmet vegetarian meals (not that there's anything wrong with that). He was constantly on the go even as he emptied himself of everything that led away from the cross.

The pages that follow offer invitations to embrace the empty places we might prefer to avoid, one for each of the forty days of Lent, plus Holy Week and Easter. May they inspire you to breathe deeply, love fully, act justly, and find Jesus in stillness and in storm.

— Matt Laney for the Stillspeaking Writers Group

Can You Keep a Secret?

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others.

Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Parent who is in secret; and your Parent who sees in secret will reward you.”

—Matthew 6:5–6 (NRSV, adapted)

VINCE AMLIN | In a workshop with Athol Fugard many years ago, the renowned playwright warned us aspiring young writers, “Don’t tell anyone about the project you’re working on. Keep it to yourself for as long as you can.”

His point was that, as soon as you told someone what you were writing, it lost a little of its magic. Sharing that story, however briefly, lessened its urgency.

Better to keep it a secret. To walk around the world with the hidden knowledge that you were about something. To let your work be animated by the mystery you were holding onto.

Jesus says the same about prayer. When you do it for others to see, it loses its power. The reward is immediate but fleeting.

Better to keep it a secret. To walk around the world with the hidden knowledge that you are about something. To let your life be animated by the mystery you are holding onto.

What would it be like to have a secret with God this Lent? To take on a prayer practice and keep it to yourself for as long as you can? To be animated by something urgent and powerful that others can only guess at?

PRAYER *Holy One, can you keep a secret?*



Clutter-Free

“When an unclean spirit leaves a person, it wanders ... looking for a place to rest. But it doesn’t find any. Then it says, ‘I’ll go back to the house I left.’ When it arrives, it finds the house cleaned up and decorated. Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself [and they] make their home there.”

—Luke 11:24-26a (CEB)

PHIWA LANGENI | Sometimes the horizontal surfaces at my house require my Tetris skills to tuck and balance things piling upward. When they do, I zealously donate, recycle, or discard items that no longer serve me and/or impede my access to the things that do. Fresh energy circulates with renewed vigor, saving me from having to Jenga my things loose from mini towers teetering to stay upright.

Mere weeks after decluttering, these ungrateful clutter guests return and bring friends and extended family with them, effortlessly concealing all my hard work. With the help of books about decluttering, I’m learning to notice and track my patterns of clutter-making. Further, I’m establishing regular check-ins to proactively prevent clutter’s return.

Likewise, as we clear the clutter of all the -isms we feel called to address in the world, we can’t just stop at noticing the patterns we’re disrupting or stop after one round of decluttering. We must attentively listen for and ongoingly respond to God’s still-speaking voice.

When the clutter *-isms* return, will they feel at home enough to invite all their friends back with them? Or will they find we’re continually rearranging the space in ways that make it unwelcoming for them to get comfortable?

PRAYER *Empower us to remove those persistent forces that clutter our listening, doing, and being. Embolden us to practice and share your brand of radical hospitality. Amen.*

Sleep Retraining

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

—Psalm 51:6 (NRSVue)

MARTHA SPONG | After years of disrupted nights, a sleep study revealed just how dire my situation had become. I was resisting sleep and then waking up anxious because my body was forgetting to breathe.

In those years, I had developed the kinds of habits we do when we are trying to avoid something we fear. I hate to think how many hours I spent running a finger over my phone; gleefreshing was no better for me than doomscrolling. Even after I put the phone down, I would lie awake, caught in a dread I did not understand.

Prescribed a CPAP, which covered so much of my face that I couldn't wear my glasses, I was left to my own non-devices, and it won't surprise you to hear that after years of avoidance, I did not know how to go to sleep. The machine that was supposed to help me breathe made me feel like I was suffocating. I told myself stories about the noise it made and the disturbance it must be causing for others.

I had forgotten how to let go of the day because I was so afraid of the night.

Medicine and mechanics could not resolve that predicament. I had to practice lying quietly, to invite God (and not Twitter) into that space with me, to tell the truth about my fear and give it space with God and let it subside. It was the work of many, many months. I began to trust: that I would sleep, that I would breathe, that I would wake up again.

And I learned that I could not do it by myself.

PRAYER *Holy One, teach us to rest in you. Amen.*



Empty, Like a Shell

If thou could'st empty all thyself of self, Like to a shell dishabited, Then might
He find thee on the ocean shelf, And say, "This is not dead", And fill thee with Himself
instead. But thou ... hast such shrewd activity, That when He comes, He says,
"...It is so small and full, there is no room for me."

—Sir Thomas Browne (1605–1682)

SUZANNE JUBENVILLE | We are constantly encouraged to be filled: with the Holy Spirit, with the Word of God, with charity and good works and pure thoughts, love, righteousness, and joy. Be filled!

But how?

The prophet Haggai tell us, "You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes" (Haggai 1:6, NRSV). Our "shrewd activity" gets us nowhere.

Consider the life of Christ: Jesus didn't run from emptiness; he embraced it. He emptied himself in order to become human, and while he was among us, he chose fulfillment in a life of poverty. What's more, he sought empty places—the desert, a garden at night—in which to struggle with doubt and listen for God's voice.

To be filled, all we really have to do is: "Open wide your mouth," says, "and I will fill it" (Psalm 81:10b, NRSV).

PRAYER *O God, nothing I do has any meaning or substance without you. I come before you, still and empty, like a shell, that I may be filled. Amen.*

Mindful Eating

God commanded The Human, “You can eat from any tree in the garden, except from the Tree-of-Knowledge-of-Good-and-Evil. Don’t eat from it. The moment you eat from that tree, you’re dead.”

—Genesis 2:16–17 (MSG, adapted)

MOLLY BASKETTE | Some people give up certain foods for Lent, or fast altogether. At a church I once served, the other pastor, a bodybuilder, fasted on Lenten Fridays. Every time he thought of food, he substituted the word “God” for the word “food.” That made him think about God *a lot*.

For others, rigid rules about food drive them further from God and from their most integrated, healthy selves. Eating disorders are the leading cause of death among all mental illnesses—even greater than depression.

Still others teach themselves to eat mindfully: doing nothing but eating when they are eating, celebrating each bite, eating whatever they want, but stopping when full.

When God made humans and was showing them around Eden, one of the first things She did was establish rules around food. Eat this, don’t eat that. Had She already forgotten how curious we were (arguably our best feature)? Or did She (chuckling all the while) suspect that to deny us something would make us crave it immediately—and knew all along how that meal would unfold?

Because truthfully: She never followed through on the threat. We didn’t die. In fact: our world expanded as soon as we ate. Our eyes were opened. Eventually, God gave us more gifts, like clothing appropriate to our new and larger habitat.

Neither feasting nor voluntary fasting is holier than the other. Try one, try another, see what makes sacred space within and without.

PRAYER *God, feed me with the food that I need. Amen.*



Hungering for God

**The angel of the Lord came . . . and said, “Get up and eat,
or the journey will be too much for you.”**

—1 Kings 19:7 (NRSV)

LIZ MILLER | Flour and honey. Butter and cheese. Bible stories overflow with rich images of food, cooking up a message that feeding our bodies leads to spiritual nourishment. Whether it's receiving cakes baked by an angel of God like Elijah does or Jesus gathering his followers together for supper, sacred stories evoke images of faithful, hungry people receiving the sustenance they crave.

Reading stories of communal feasts is one thing, but practicing it in our own lives is more complicated. How many of us struggle with our relationship to food, having internalized cultural messages of restricting our intake as the path to piousness? For others, allergies or specialized diets create barriers to breaking bread with hosts who have limits to the ways they are able (or willing) to include all people.

But then again . . .

Perhaps these same complications make the connections between physical and spiritual nourishment even more timely. How many of us struggle with our relationship to God, having internalized cultural messages about what a spiritual practice must be restricted to? How often do we hear of people being shut out of houses of worship because of who they love or what they look like, barred by church leaders who have limits to the ways they are able (or willing) to include all people?

The message Elijah receives is clear: you need to eat or the journey will be too much for you. To find our way to the strength of a fed body and a nourished spirit, we are called to prepare tables that accommodate and feed all bodies. We are called to cast aside rotten messages of shame and eat up God's provisions of love.

PRAYER *Give us this day our daily bread and may we savor every bite.*

Sinners and Sufferers

Therefore, since we have a great high priest, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess . . . Every high priest is selected from among the people. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.

—Hebrews 4:14 & 5:1–2 (NIV, abbreviated)

QUINN G. CALDWELL | The author of Hebrews says one of the most important qualifications for a high priest is to be a sinner and a sufferer who knows he's a sinner and a sufferer. Neither holiness, nor learnedness, nor wisdom are the most important; an awareness of your own weakness and folly is the thing.

And here's the real kicker: the High Priest must not only know they're a sinner and a sufferer, *they must let this information make them kinder*. That's some next-level religioning right there. I mean, any-old-body can sin and be forgiven, or be hurt and then healed, or go through hell and get stronger, and then be nasty and holier-than-thou about it: The ex-smoker who rolls their eyes at how gross smokers are. The newly-out person who's impatient and judgy with those who are in the closet. The person who's paid off their student loans and doesn't want anybody else's forgiven. But to move beyond a sin or suffering or struggle and have compassion for those still in its midst? Oof.

This is what the author of Hebrews says: the most respected religious leaders, of whom Jesus is the very best, are like this: They know the world is hard. They've seen some things; they've done some things; they have some regrets and some pain. They admit it. And they still haven't become jerks.

PRAYER *God, don't let what I've done, what I've been, what I've confessed, and what I've overcome make me hard; let it make me as soft as a savior on a cross. Amen.*



To Live For

“[God] 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.

—Revelation 21:4 (NRSV)

KAJI DOUŠA | On a recent day, to a standing-room-only audience at the newly rechristened Lena Horne theater, a surprise eulogist said: “So many of us think about who or what we would be willing to die for. And I guess that’s a good question—we should know that. But I want to ask, instead: well, who would you live for?”

And he went on to explain that on his foundational album—*Songs in the Key of Life*, on which Ms. Marva Hicks, the woman we were celebrating, sang—to live in the key of life is to live in alignment with God.

When doing for you is the same as doing for God: that’s life.

So live your life with that crown upon your head, “until the day that is the day that 8 x 8 x 8 is 4. Always.” (Stevie Wonder, “As”)

God will be loving you. Always.

Our assignment? To live our lives in the key of love.

PRAYER *Tune my heart to sing your song. Let me live in your key, God. Amen.*

Would You Rather?

You keep my eyelids from closing; I am so troubled that I cannot speak.
I consider the days of old, and remember the years of long ago. I commune with my
heart in the night; I meditate and search my spirit: “Will the Lord spurn forever, and
never again be favorable? Has the Lord’s steadfast love ceased forever?”

—Psalm 77:4–8 (NRSV)

JENNIFER RUTH LYNN GARRISON | A few years ago, a youth group I traveled with played a version of “Would you rather?” “Would you rather be a bald eagle or a grizzly bear?” “Would you rather eat only broccoli or only liver?” “Would you rather listen only to babies crying or [this was, as I said, a few years ago] only to the music of Justin Bieber?”

Each question brought laughter and eager answers.

Then, “Would you rather regret the past or worry about the future?”

The whole car groaned. People who had cheerfully, if hypothetically, chosen a lifetime of liver or baby cries refused to choose either regret or worry. We moved on to the next question.

In real life, it feels as if I don’t choose either worry or regret. Too often, alas, as with the psalmist, in the middle of the night they choose me. When regretful, I am also “troubled,” thoughts spinning back over years, lamenting the actions never taken, the words hastily spoken. With worry, I also spin out, but this time over what is to come, what is unseen and unknown.

Regret and worry seem to choose me at first, but how do I respond? Invariably, I choose them back. Like the psalmist, I let my mind circle around whatever unresolvable thing either worry or regret have placed before me.

Maybe it’s time to try something different. Maybe like the kids in the car, I can moan once, and then move on to the next question. Maybe then I will find that God’s love hasn’t “ceased” at all. Maybe then I will see the steadfastness of God’s presence with me the whole time.

PRAYER *You are God, and I am not. To you be all the glory.*

God Specializes

Where is the god who can compare with you—wiping the slate clean of guilt, turning away from the past sins of your purged and precious people? You don't nurse your anger and don't stay angry long, for mercy is your specialty. That's what you love most. And compassion is on its way to us. You'll stamp out our wrongdoing. You'll sink our sins to the bottom of the ocean. You'll stay true to your word.

—Micah 7:18–20 (MSG, adapted)

VICKI KEMPER | The prophet Micah names mercy as God's specialty. Other Hebrew prophets highlighted God's steadfast love and faithfulness. Moses might have said God specialized in deliverance; Isaiah called out God's knack for newness-making. And Jesus emphasized the inclusiveness and extravagance of God's love.


In the Gloria Griffin gospel song, which I learned from R&B artist Lizz Wright, “God specializes in things thought impossible, and [God] will do what no other power can do.”

I wonder if specialty, like beauty, is not in the eye of the beholder. I wonder if God doesn't specialize in whatever we need most at any given moment.

I appreciate Micah's correlation of specializing with love. God's specialty is mercy, he says, because that's what God loves most.

In this season of emptying ourselves of all that is not of God, how might you fill yourself up with love? What would it mean to love so deeply that you specialize in it?

PRAYER *God, I love your mercy, your extravagance, your deliverance, your healing power and all-inclusive love. Please don't make me choose just one. May I trust you to bless me with whatever I most need in the moment.*



*They gorged on the right
but still were hungry,
and they devoured on the left
but were not satisfied.*

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The Throne of Grace

We do not have a high priest unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Then let us boldly approach the throne of grace to receive mercy.

—Hebrews 4:15–16 (NRSV, adapted)

MARY LUTI | Jesus may have been sinless, but he doesn't expect you to be. So don't get hung up on that "without sin" part. Pay attention instead to the "in every respect" part. Jesus was tested by life just as we are, as he struggled for an authentic human life and died a fully human death.

He knows what is in us—the endless string of promises we've broken; the thousand times we've sworn off something and done it again; all our sordid, sad, and stupid sins; our exhausting efforts to prove ourselves to God, who isn't actually interested in our self-perfection projects, but just wants us to surrender and come home.

Jesus was a fellow testee, and life's testing turned him tender towards human weakness. As we struggle through life, driven by fears, hapless in choosing, distracted by shiny objects, overcrowded with longings, running on empty, running from empty, he sympathizes.

The ancient creeds say that he will come again in glory "to judge the living and the dead." Don't worry about the "judge" part, either. For who best to judge us than the one whose visceral compassion for weakness makes it impossible for him to condemn us?

Christ's judgment seat is a throne of mercy. We can approach it boldly, as if there's nothing to fear. Because there isn't. If that doesn't make you grateful and glad, nothing will.

PRAYER *May life's testing turn me tender, too, O Mercy. And may my tenderness ease my neighbor's way to you.*



Water

For I will pour water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground.

—Isaiah 44:3 (NIV)

DONNA SCHAPER | Annie Proulx in *Bogs, Fens and Swamps* accuses humanity of arrogant self-centeredness. We imagine ourselves above fens, where peat is made, and bogs, where waters merge, and marshes, where water cleans itself.

We act as though water was real estate. We displace it at the drop of a zone. “House with a view.” “Waterfront.” Proulx argues, “In the end all humans will be haunted by the waters.”

No wonder the empty run on empty. Humans, Proulx argues, are not better than water; we are mostly water.

In the 1990 book, *The Great Dismal: A Carolina Swamp's Memoir*, Bland Simpson admires a Carolina swamp. He delightfully praises the “genius of a natural place” and wonders why humans can’t leave well enough alone.

I once visited the Big Thicket in Western Texas. I used it as a constant metaphor for a decade, as though I were the thicketed, not it. What Proulx wants us to do is to “let sleeping bogs lie.”

How do we get the energy we need for our swamped, boggy, fenned, thicketed days? It is true we overdo in order to stay “on top of things.” What would happen if we learned to swim in the thick of it all?

What if we took a seat at the table instead of at the head of the table? Or befriended nature the way God did and does? I wouldn’t have to even mow my lawn anymore. I could meadow instead of being thirsty. I could stream.

PRAYER *O God, when we falsely self-promote to positions of aquatic power or other kinds of misplaced power, wash us clear. Amen.*

Searching and Fearless

Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.”

—Numbers 21:6–8 (NRSV)

VINCE AMLIN | As a pastor, I have occasionally had the honor of walking alongside someone in their recovery journey as they completed step four of twelve, making “a searching and fearless moral inventory” of themselves.

I’ve witnessed the courage it requires to catalog one’s failures and shortcomings in detail. I’ve been present for what was sometimes equally challenging work: owning one’s goodness and giftedness.

And I have seen the healing and new life that can come from taking such a long, unflinching look at one’s actions.

Cue the poisonous serpents.

God sends them to torment the ungrateful Israelites in the wilderness. Then tells Moses to make a statue of one, put it on a pole, and show it to them as an antidote. You know, just normal Bible stuff.

I confess, I don’t believe in a God who would send venomous snakes to kill me for my ingratitude. Not sure what to do with that.

But I do believe in a God who encourages me to take long, hard looks at my mistakes. And I can testify to the way that hard and holy work has been an antidote for some against the things that threatened their lives.

PRAYER *Healing One, make me searching and fearless.*



Drowning the Hungry Ghost

**They gorged on the right but still were hungry, and they
devoured on the left but were not satisfied.**

—Isaiah 9:20a (NRSVUE)

Content warning: This devotional discusses addiction, particularly alcoholism.

CHRIS MERESCHUK | Several years ago, I realized I didn't have a problem *with* alcohol: I had a problem *without* it. While genetics and circumstances played a role, there was also an emptiness I was trying to fill, a voracious hunger I couldn't satisfy.

Bottle after bottle, I was trying to drown a Hungry Ghost, but it only grew hungrier, thirstier, emptier.

In Buddhism, Hungry Ghosts are emaciated creatures with huge, distended, empty bellies. Never sated, the Hungry Ghost forever searches for something to fill them, its claw-like hands futilely reaching to scrape up and consume whatever it can find.

Dr. Gabor Maté likens it to addiction: “The aching emptiness is perpetual because the substances, objects, or pursuits we hope will soothe it are not what we really need. We don't know what we need, and so long as we stay in the hungry ghost mode, we'll never know. We haunt our lives without being fully present.” (*In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction*)

The “aching emptiness” of a Hungry Ghost can lead us to devour everything around us in our attempts to fill it. Ultimately, the emptiness can devour us as well if we can't address the need. Ask that Hungry Ghost what it needs, and it will demand more of the same. But ask God what you deeply need—the source of the emptiness, the depth, the shape—and transform the aching void into a willing vessel, ever-filled.

PRAYER *Help me exorcise this Hungry Ghost, Holy One. Transform any emptiness. Through you, I am filled. Amen.*

Provoking Love

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.

—Hebrews 10:24 (NRSV)

MARILYN PAGÁN-BANKS | Every once in a while, I will run across a Facebook post where someone is asking their friends to shift the conversation from what is wrong in the world to something fun or to share what they are grateful for. Sometimes good news is posted and there is an invitation to “share” so that others might know things aren’t all bad all the time.

These reminders usually come right on time. The heaviness of the struggle for liberation can cause us to burn out and even lash out at those in the fight with us and those attempting to love and care for us. The losses are real. The wounds are deep. The journey is long. Folx are tired. Damn it, I am tired!

So during this Lenten season, I commit to inserting joy and laughter into my daily fight for justice and peace. I commit to saying “thank you” more to those who put their bodies on the line and those who stuff envelopes in the office. I commit to saying “I am sorry” when I mess up or step on toes or am just plain nasty to folx. I commit to expressing tenderness and kindness with my siblings.

Perhaps this practice will provoke another to the same. And another. And another. Who knows?

PRAYER *Source of love and every good thing, help me to ground my anger towards injustice and to source my rage against the isms of the world with a deep abiding love for You, my neighbor, and myself. Amen.*



Part of a Balanced Breakfast

The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the LORD’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”

—Exodus 16:3 (NIV)

JOHN EDGERTON | I used to be the kind of person who leapt from bed, poured a cup of black coffee, and charged off to face the day. Breakfast the most important meal of the day? Pshaw! I was burning daylight and the realm of God wasn’t going to usher in itself.

But then came the lockdown months of the pandemic. So much was the same every day. The variables of the equation of my life shrunk down and down and down. With so few variables in play, I noticed something. When I skipped breakfast, or ate something insubstantial, I would run out of steam in mid-morning. Like clockwork, 10:30 would roll around and I would be filled with anxiety, fear, self-doubt, and a variety of other synonyms for existential dread. But days when I ate a good breakfast? I was a better person, a better pastor. All it took was yogurt, grapes, and granola.

The Israelites get a bad rap. Here they are, walking their way into a new world. And they’re supposed to do it on an empty stomach? We are embodied, flesh and blood. To make it through tough times, we need to start with nourishment. I don’t mean this as a metaphor. We must treat our bodies as if they are gifts from God. Because they are.

Eat a good breakfast. Like, today.

PRAYER *God of the manna in the wilderness, bless the food we eat that we may live to your service.*

Religion without the Rules

When Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves . . . They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts.

—Romans 2:14-15 (NIV)

KENNETH L. SAMUEL | For a long time, John Lennon's famous lines from his iconic song, "Imagine," haunted me:

Imagine there's no heaven

It's easy if you try

No hell below us

Above us only sky...

Imagine there's no countries

It isn't hard to do

Nothing to kill or die for

And no religion too.

A consciousness and a community without the moral safeguards and guidelines of a clearly defined religious order frightened me. Much of my fear stemmed from a deep distrust of my own basic instincts. But as I've walked with God over time, I've actually discovered that quite a few of my basic instincts have more moral value than the rules mandated by religion. In so many instances, I've found my own visceral instincts to be more genuine and more generous than the stipulations of prescribed religious dogma.

We don't really trust God until we trust what God has placed in our hearts. Catechisms that cater to religious protocol pale in comparison to the deep desires, delights and inquiries that God has deposited in our hearts. There is so much heavenly treasure in broken earthen vessels.

Saint Augustine said: "Love God and do whatever you please." Today, I only have problems with Augustine's brazen invitation when I doubt that the kingdom of God is within me.

PRAYER *Lord, reveal yourself to us through the meditations of our hearts.*



The Rest Is History

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar . . . Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

—*John 4:5–6 (NRSV)*

TALITHA ARNOLD | Are you tired yet? We're almost halfway through Lent with its extra study groups, worship services, and outreach programs. The spiritual journey itself can be exhausting as Lent moves closer to Jerusalem and the end we know is coming.

To top it all off, Daylight Savings starts tomorrow! Unless you live in Arizona or Hawaii, you have to “spring ahead” and lose another hour of sleep.

So . . . are you tired yet?

If so, you're in good company. Early in his journey—only four chapters into John's Gospel—Jesus was tired, too. He was on his way back from Judea to Galilee. He'd already overturned the temple money changers and was baptizing more people than John, which meant more trouble with the religious leaders. Now he was in the hostile territory of Samaria. No wonder he was tired.

So he sat down by the well to rest. A rest, you could say, that became history.

It's intriguing that today's lectionary doesn't include the rest of the story—how a woman came alone to the well, how Jesus asked her for a drink which led to a conversation about living water, and how she went back to tell the townspeople what had happened. All that comes in tomorrow's Gospel lesson for the Third Sunday of Lent.

But today, why not just rest for a while? Jesus did.

PRAYER *Thank you, God, for the reminder that the journey can tire us out, just as it did Jesus. Thank you for the gift of rest. Give us the wisdom to accept it. Amen.*

Losing Time

**You don't know the first thing about tomorrow. You're nothing but
a wisp of fog, catching a brief bit of sun before disappearing.**

—James 4:14 (MSG)

MOLLY BASKETTE | If Congress gets its act together and stops quibbling this year, they will finally pass some really important, lifesaving legislation: ending our practice of changing the clocks twice a year. It could be that our very last time of springing forward happened just last night: we are done losing an hour, forever.

Proponents of the end of clock-switching make a compelling case. Heart attacks and car accidents tick up in the days following the time change every spring and fall. If clergy were a more powerful lobby, we would have ended the practice decades ago. Preachers, holla if you wake up seventeen times on spring-forward night, certain you are going to be late for worship!

The chief lobby against the legislation is the National Association of Convenience Stores, who say children shouldn't be walking to school in the dark (their passion has nothing to do with their profit margins, right?).

Whatever our legislators decide, one thing is clear: we can't buy time. There's an apocryphal story about the billionaire Richard Branson: that every so often he has his private jet fly westward to get more hours into his workday. But even a billionaire can't outrun the sun, or the number of days and hours allotted to him. He has the same number of hours as any of us.

PRAYER *God, whether it's sunrise or sunset, make me grateful for the only time I have: this very moment. Amen.*



Thirst

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

—Psalm 63:1 (NRSV)

MATT LANEY | I once heard the renowned preacher, Rev. Gardner Taylor, preach about preaching to a congregation of preachers at Riverside Church. He said, “Don’t try to be a great preacher. Try instead to preach a great gospel.”

He said preaching fails when it amounts to giving “thoughts for the day,” something to mull over during brunch instead of inspiring personal and social transformation, which is the aim of the gospel. So much of preaching, he warned, is like talking *about* medicine to a sick person.

With the zeal of the converted, I took that nugget back to my church and preached against feckless, “heady” preaching. I concluded, “If all I’ve done in a sermon is given you something to think about, I have failed!”

After the service, someone came up to me and said, “Well pastor, you really gave us something to think about today.”

The psalmist said it better: a person who “thirsts” and “faints” for God is like a dry, parched land seeking life-giving water. We would never say to a dehydrated person, “What are your beliefs about water?” That would not only be useless, but cruel.

Jesus was living water for parched people. If he only talked about love, it wouldn’t have mattered much. Instead, he lived love, pouring it out until cups overflowed.

PRAYER *Let me be the sermon people need today.*

Bottle

They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

—Jeremiah 2:13 (NRSVUE)

QUINN G. CALDWELL | It's late August. It has just occurred to me that I should check to see if our son's backpack from last year is still fit for use. I take it off its hook and realize that no one has touched this thing since it was slung there back in June. Terrified and then relieved that the mess inside isn't gross and slimy, I empty out a bunch of wadded paper, candy wrappers, and full-length but inexplicably eraserless pencils.

Then I find and open his nearly empty water bottle.

Jeremiah says the big problem with trying to store water instead of relying on a flowing spring is that your cisterns always leak. I'm here to tell you that the big problem is what happens not when your cistern leaks, but when it *doesn't* leak and you leave it in the warm dark for a couple months.

Perhaps it's a question of context. Maybe if you seal water up in Jeremiah's part of the world, it doesn't turn noxious, doesn't grow a slimy disk of mold on the top, won't make you gag if you're dumb enough to stick your nose near it. Maybe it all depends on how many times a sixth-grader has backwashed into it.

God pours gifts into the world. They are for you, but not only for you. Lock them up, and they won't quench anybody's thirst, least of all yours. Hide them so well that you forget about them altogether, and what starts out good and life-giving will turn on you hard, fast, and gross.

PRAYER *Let your gifts fill me up, and then let me overflow. Amen.*



Out of the Ring

Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? —1 Corinthians 6:2 (NASB)

KAJI DOUŠA | How do we judge?

I don't know about you, but my moments of judgment tend to come out of conflict. Something goes wrong, and then I make judgements.

But I'm tired of conflict being my starting point. When it is, I get caught in this dizzying assault of thoughts, deeds—punches, if you will—that make me lose balance. I'm always reacting defensively—putting up blocks, getting knocked off my feet.

Having to take a defensive posture is distracting. And when we're distracted and off-balance, we are dissatisfied.

Maybe it's time to step back from the ring. Maybe a boxing ring is not our spiritual home.

But what is?

When we're trying to decide whether to go left right forwards or backwards, our instincts are to react like we're back in the ring. We behave defensively because we want to survive. And that's real.

But when we step back and we make decisions not reactively but taking the time to sit with our value systems—something different happens.

Living your life in the ring means living your life by accident. Living your values means living your life with purpose. A purposeful life is a meaningful life. A meaningful life is a satisfied life. A satisfied life is living in alignment with God. And alignment with God is sanctified.

A sanctified, aligned, meaningful, purposeful life is yours for the living, when you know and live by your values. What are your core values? Do the people you love know? Do you?

PRAYER *Show me the way, God. I dedicate myself to knowing myself, knowing my values, knowing you. In Jesus' name. Amen*

A Commercial Break

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

—*Psalm 23:1 (NIV)*

VINCE AMLIN | I am trying to teach my daughter to be suspicious of commercials. When an ad breaks in on the YouTube video we're watching, I'll talk back to the screen.

"We already have a car!" or "Why would I buy another cellphone? Mine works perfectly well!"

It's obnoxious, I recognize. But I am delighted when she picks up the habit: "We don't need any more clothes! We're already wearing them!"

I want to instill a sense of gratitude and sufficiency in her to combat the story of emptiness and need that the world is trying to sell her. When the nagging voice of consumerism tries to undermine her happiness, I want her to be able to shout back, "I lack nothing!" and mean it.

Of course, the psalmist is talking about something more radical.

Not just the comfort of a white, middle-class American family that has already acquired an over-abundance of material goods. But a deeper sufficiency that was true before we had cars, or phones, or even clothes. That was true when we were naked in a garden. And will be true still when it all goes away in the twinkling of an eye.

God is trying to teach me. Shouting over all the voices I turn to when I start to believe I am empty: food, and booze, and entertainment, and work, and ego, and novelty, and...

"Why would you need any of that? You already have me!"

PRAYER *The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing.*



Bearing Grief

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

—Psalm 22:2 (NRSV)

LIZ MILLER | We still haven't run out of combinations of words to describe our grief.

I thought about this as I listened to the poet read from her new book, a collection of poems written in the year following her daughter's death. Fifty people were scattered across a university lecture hall that, during school hours, would be filled with the drone of keyboards tapping, pens scratching, students fidgeting in their seats.

On this night the hall was cloaked in thick silence save for the poet's voice. This was not a lecture. There would be no Q&A at the end. The invitation was to listen and bear witness.

I think about the psalmist who recorded their anguished lament so long ago. Their words have been translated across time and languages, but we do not sanitize their pain or censor their rage. We do not add platitudes at the end of the verse. There is no reassuring voice cutting in from the heavens.

There is only the invitation to listen and bear witness.

I am not a poet. My grief sputters out in awkward, defensive, half sentences. In the moments that I withdraw my porcupine quills enough to share my sorrow with someone else, I silently pray they don't add to it by trying to make it okay or by comparing my wound to theirs.

I pray they hear the invitation to listen and bear witness.

PRAYER *Quiet my desire for quick fixes and easy answers, even when the pain feels unbearable. Amen.*

Hokey Pokey

If one [body] part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part gets the glory, all the parts celebrate with it. You are the body of Christ and parts of each other.

—1 Corinthians 12:27-28 (CEB)


PHIWA LANGENI | “You put your right arm in, you put your right arm out. You put your right arm in, and you shake it all about. You do the Hokey Pokey, and you turn yourself around. That’s what it’s all about.

This silly children’s song activates wiggles and giggles as it cycles through body part after body part, inviting the singers to move one zone of their bodies after another. It ends with putting the whole self in, out, and shaking it all about.

The wisdom of the Hokey Pokey is simple yet profound. Each individual body is made up of separate parts built into a whole with diverse shapes, sizes, colors, and abilities. Honoring and bearing witness to each whole part of the Body without judgment or shame is essential. Who are we to enact any kind of violence on God’s precious Body? Indeed, when one Body part hurts, we all hurt. When one Body part celebrates, we all celebrate.

Join me, if you dare, in doing the Hokey Pokey right where you are. Let’s put our whole selves in, and then put our whole selves out to make room for others. But when it’s time to speak truth to power and spend down our privileges, let’s put our whole selves back in again, and shake things all about. Let’s do the holy and inclusive Hokey Pokey and turn ourselves around from aligning with the various *-isms* that harm the Body. Because you know what? That’s exactly what it’s all about!

PRAYER *We give you thanks for all the diverse parts of your Body. Amen.*



*If one body part suffers,
all the parts suffer
with it.*

Hybridity

By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God,
so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

—Hebrews 11:3 (NRSV)

DONNA SCHAPER | One of my friends, Pastor Eric Elnes, says he is building the “new Jerusalem” in the metaverse. Most of my friends prefer the shopping aspects of hybrid worship more than the communal aspects of place-based worship. They can go to the great cathedrals, hear the great music, pass by the offering plate. They like the invisibility and magic of the digital and the virtual. Those who demur often brag about being less individualistic, more embodied, more willing to rough the tumble of the genuine human, instead of the talking or invisible heads online.

Both join Eric in destination.

What did the authors of Hebrews think? They clearly thought that faith helps understanding, which then sees the invisible in the visible. They “see” that the worlds are made by the word of God.

I almost get it: faith is why we worship. The world of God made fresh in the regular word of God is the point of it all. The origin as well as the destination. The creation and the redemption. The alpha and the omega.

Being a Gemini, I love both. The hybrid timelessness and the 11am weekly habitual stuckness in time and place. The good singing and the wish-I-could-sing singing. The great sermons and the ones that struggle to make their point. Nurturing faith is the point of worship; it likely doesn't matter how you get there. It does matter that you get there.

PRAYER *When we are out of gas, O God, on our long way to the New Jerusalem, let worship of both the invisible and the made-visible fuel us. Amen.*



A Little Extra

John told them, “If you have two coats, give one away to someone who doesn’t have any.”

—Luke 3:11 (CEV)

ANN KANSFIELD | This scripture sure seems to be about material goods—a call to live simply and generously by giving away excess “stuff” to people in need. It reminds me of the *UCC Book of Worship* communion prayer that describes “the vision of the day when sharing by all means scarcity for none.”

Sometimes as we pray these words before the eucharist, I think of Luke 3:11 and say, “I should go through my closet and give away my extra coats.”

Over time, I’ve experienced this prayer as a call to mutual ministry with others—something much deeper than giving away extra things. Depending on the day or the thing that’s being shared, I may have extra or I could be in need. Some days we have extra love, compassion, space for prayer and deep faith. Other days, we might need a little extra love or compassion, prayer or faith.

Recently my children and I went out for dinner. It was a long day, and they were on my last nerve. Just as I was losing patience with them, our server arrived to take our order. The kids continued to act up, and she remained calm. She turned to take my dinner order and said, “What can I get you?” I said, “I need your patience.” She smiled long enough for me to catch my breath. She had extra serenity and without thinking about it shared that with me.

PRAYER *God, help me to be generous both with giving and with receiving the things that I and others might need today. Amen.*

A Jar of Oil

The widow of one of the prophets cried to Elisha, “Your servant my husband is dead, and now creditors come to take my two children as slaves.” Elisha said to her, “Tell me, what do you have in the house?” She answered, “Nothing except a jar of oil.”

2 Kings 4:1–2 (adapted)

RACHEL HACKENBERG | Let’s not pretend with one another that loving God means you will never be broke. Let’s not repeat the lie that you are guaranteed to have plenty so long as you serve God. Because I’m not the only person of faith who ignores the 1-800 numbers of creditors calling.

Bad things *do* happen to good people. Bad circumstances. Bad relationships. Bad environments. Bad credit. And you’re on the hook for dealing with the consequences, regardless of whether it was your fault or not. Rise to the occasion. Repair your heart. Fight the system. Reassess your budget. Use whatever you have and do the best you can.

Even if it’s just a jar of oil.

Devastated by the death of her husband, the widow now faces compounding crises. She is not well-off; prophetic work doesn’t exactly come with a pension and life insurance. The stress of calling creditors keeps her awake at night. And now the worst of all nightmares: they will tear her children from her, enslave them for their own profits.

Her prospects look bleak. Empty. She could run from empty, but to what end?

When there’s only emptiness, or the threat of emptiness, then fight like hell to not be alone, at least.

Cry out to those who will listen. Call for community. Protest against those who would separate you from love and loved ones. Resist the despair that lies to you when it says *empty* means *isolated* or even *unworthy*.

Bring your jar of oil, and stay together.

PRAYER *Let there be love and companions along this weary way, O God.*



The Long Courage

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”
That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, for when I am weak, I am strong.

—2 Corinthians 12:9–10 (NIV, abridged)

MARY LUTI | Often the work of justice seems like repeatedly pushing the same boulder up the same hill. An air of futility haunts everything we do. As the late Paul Farmer said of his work in Haiti, we’re fighting “a long defeat.”

The moral arc of the universe bends towards justice, but every gain is fragile and reversible. The vast, tenacious mystery of evil won’t yield to us politely just because we’re right and good. There are limits to our power and virtue.

To admit this isn’t negativity or defeatism. It’s the foundation for a ministry that’s truly God’s. For unless we embrace weakness and futility, we’ll start believing that the world’s betterment hinges solely on us, that we are its saviors and heroes. Unless we accept inability, even our most principled efforts will become just one more arrogant attempt to force a vision on the world. Unless we relinquish the solace of outcomes, when we don’t see grand results, the work will turn bitter and leave us soul-fatigued and bitter, too.

But when we humbly embrace the long defeat, we will receive what John Shea calls “the long courage” to fight another day, and another, and another, anyway. For when you really know that *you* can’t win, you really start believing that *Love can*.

PRAYER “... Give me, Broken Lord, the long courage for compromised truths, small justices, partial peaces. Keep my soul in my teeth, hold me in hope, and teach me to fight the way farmers with hoes defeat armies and rolled up manuscripts survive wars.” (John Shea, “Prayer for the Long Haul,” *The Hour of the Unexpected*)

Sweet Jesus

So I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it;
it was sweet as honey in my mouth.

—Revelation 10:10a (NRSV)

JENNIFER RUTH LYNN GARRISON | The story goes that an aged preacher went to a lecture given by a theologian at a local university. After a long and erudite talk about all the logic that supports the reality of a Divine Being, during which there was much nodding of heads and taking of notes, the theologian took questions.

The old preacher put one hand in the air. With the other hand, he reached into his coat pocket for an apple which he began to eat. They say that when at last he was called upon, he was still chewing.

“Now, Professor (chomp, chomp), I hear you talk about the ground-of-being-this and the omniscient-overseer-that (chew, chew). But I wonder, (gulp, gulp) can you tell me what this apple tastes like?”

The professor sighed with exasperation and replied that of course he could not.

“So let me get this right. Unless you have taken a bite, you don’t know what it tastes like, is that correct?”

“Correct.” The professor looked around somewhat frantically for another raised hand.

“I do believe,” the preacher continued, “that you have not yet taken a bite of the Living Christ either. Because I have tasted Jesus! And he is sweet!”

For people with an embodied faith—whose God came to us in the form of a living, breathing human being—we are often a curiously disembodied people. When you hear about the Holy One, do you nod and take notes? Or do you receive Christ with all your senses?

PRAYER *Sweet Jesus: May we taste, touch, smell, see and hear you. Amen.*



I Wanna Be Ready

Peter responded, “Lord, I’m ready to go with you, both to prison and to death!”

—Luke 22:33 (CEB)

CHRIS MERESCHUK | Peter claimed he was ready for death. Jesus called his bluff. When the hour came, Peter ran and hid. Maybe Peter should’ve said, “Lord I wanna be ready to go with you to death, but for now I’m running.”

Seems to me that us mortals expend tons of energy avoiding death. Euphemisms keep death at a distance. Heroic measures extend bodily functions beyond comfort and quality of life. We run from the very thought of death as if it is inherently contagious and the mere word a curse.

What would it mean to stop running from death? What would it mean to be ready for death? Could we live our lives more fully if we embraced the inevitability of our end? Not in a morose way or with eager anticipation, but comfortable with it as a fact?

If I knew tomorrow would be my last, today would be filled with calls, visits, hugs, laughter, tears, deep sharing, cleaning up my messes both literal and figurative. Then I’d be ready. Right now I’m not ready, but I wanna be ready.

If I wasn’t running from death, I’d live more like it was my last day. Not at a hurried, reckless pace, but with connectedness and intention. If I wasn’t running from death, then maybe I could embrace life.

PRAYER *Lord, stop my running and call me to live each day with connectedness and intention. Before I reach my final day, I wanna be ready. Amen.*

How Can I Forget?

Then those who feared and loved the Lord spoke often of the Lord to each other.
And the Lord had a Book of Remembrance drawn up in which were recorded
the names of those who feared the Lord and loved to think about the Lord.

—Malachi 3:16 (adapted)

KENNETH L. SAMUEL | It is said that people often forget what you say to them, but people never forget how you make them feel. Words are powerfully impactful, but only inasmuch as they convey our deepest convictions, sentiments and devotions. Words are often forgotten, but the feelings they convey last a lifetime.

Among those who openly disparaged God, derided God and denounced God, there was a group of people whose faithfulness remained steadfast. The believers in this faithful group spoke to each other often about their love for God and their hope in God—despite their disappointments and predicaments.

God overheard their conversations and was so overjoyed by the deep devotion of their dialogue that God compiled a Book of Remembrance. This book did not necessarily record everything the believers said, but it did record the names of every believer. This book embossed the lives of every believer into the joyful essence of the divine presence throughout eternity.

Most of us can't recall everything told to us by our loved ones, but their names alone ignite feelings of love and affection that will never be forgotten. Blessed be the names of. . .

PRAYER *"May the life I've lived speak for me, May the life I've lived speak for me When I'm resting in my grave, And there's nothing that can be said May the life I've lived, speak for me." Amen. (Sullivan Pugh, The Consolers)*



Worry Wart

I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?
My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

—Psalm 121:1–2 (NRSV)

MARILYN PAGÁN-BANKS | I am what you would call a “worry wart.” I worry. A lot.

So, instead of giving up chocolate for Lent (which is hard for a chocoholic like me), I decided to give up worrying.

But not worrying is hard!

I mean, come on, there is so much to worry about every single day. Families facing hunger and poverty, veterans living on the streets, loved ones gunned down, community members struggling with mental illness, addiction and trauma ruining lives and wiping out dreams. The list is endless.

Even as I write this devotion, my phone won’t stop buzzing with frantic texts from my daughter fighting with a customer that is giving her the run around for work they haven’t paid her for, while she is desperately trying to make plans to travel to be with her dying father.

How can I not worry? I care too much not to!

If I stop worrying will people start to think I don’t care? Should I be worried about this? Agh! It is so easy to spiral out of control.

Maybe this is why the psalmist starts with a moment of perspective outside of herself. Not expecting answers from the hills, but finding clarity in asking the question out loud. The bold beauty of the hills reminding her of God’s power and presence around her and within her.

PRAYER *Gracious God, I turn to you this Lenten season seeking to be delivered from the lie that caused me to believe that if I don’t worry it means I don’t care. You are the source of my peace. I trust you and I rejoice in knowing that you are with me even when life is hard. Amen.*

Parched

I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land. Selah.

—Psalm 143:6 (NRSVUE)

MARTHA SPONG | The further we get into Lent, the harder it is to keep up with the practices I set for myself. I forget why I chose the particular thing; not the practice itself, but the motivation. If you're still here reading, but having to remind yourself why, you'll know what I mean.

Why did this particular practice seem like a good idea five weeks ago?

I remember my failures. If I seek some inner change, some private growth attempt, why did I think giving up caffe mochas would bring me closer to God? It only made me cranky; my daughter made me promise never to do it again. But since then I've learned, whether we're giving something up or taking something on, the reckoning will always come.

The psalmist describes a desire that would not be visible to others, a thirst for God so deep the soul experiences drought conditions. This far along in Lent we are in deep with Jesus, making the final turn toward Jerusalem. It might be that the commitments we thought would bring us closer to God have left us stretched out, as thirsty as Jesus must have been during his forty days in the wilderness. It's tempting, sometimes, to give up on it. If we can't do it perfectly, we may think, what's the point?

Why did my practice seem like a good idea? Why did yours?

What were we thirsty for?

Maybe the point of the practice is not to win Lent, but to reach this moment of feeling stretched and parched and uneasy, and to keep practicing anyway.

PRAYER *Spirit of God, I stretch myself towards you; help me to keep stretching. Amen.*

Full-Contact Love

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and closed the door on the two of them and prayed to the Lord. Then he got up on the bed and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands, and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm. He got down, walked once to and fro in the room, then got up again and bent over him; the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes.

—2 Kings 4:32–35 (NRSVUE)

VICKI KEMPER | Maybe this is what it's like when, according to the Letter to the Ephesians, we who are as good as dead because of our wrongdoings and shortcomings are made alive together with Christ.

It's not easy or pretty. It's not magic, and it's not guaranteed. But Jesus, like the prophet Elisha, refuses to give up on us. Our deliverance from death is a labor of mercy, grace, faith, prayer, and maybe just a little desperation. It is a full-contact, hold-nothing-back love that paces the floor and tries yet again, refusing to give up on us.

Which is not to say that the return to life is smooth or glamorous. We might fail multiple times before finding our life-legs. We might sneeze and snort our way back to the land of the living and loving.

No matter. We're here. We're alive. We learn that life is pure gift and new life heaven-sent.

PRAYER *Life-Giver who pulls out all the stops, Life-Restorer who never quits, thank you for seeing what is possible for me.*

The Paperwork of Hope

Jeremiah said, “The word of the LORD came to me: Hanamel son of Shallum your uncle is going to come to you and say, ‘Buy my field at Anathoth, because as nearest relative it is your right and duty to buy it.’”

—Jeremiah 32:6–7 (NIV)

JOHN EDGERTON | Let me set the stage: a great army from Babylon is encamped about the city. Civic leaders are paralyzed, religious leaders flailing, the people panicking. Disaster is certain and the people will soon be sent into exile for generations. And at the height of narrative tension, the book of Jeremiah describes . . . a detailed real estate transaction. Like, seriously detailed. They weigh silver, write the contract, describe exactly how to store the contract. It goes on and on.

What is going on here? Did Jeremiah have a side-hustle with Coldwell-Banker?

No, Jeremiah knew that the people needed hope. They needed tangible signs that there was a future for them. And Jeremiah gave that to them by buying a field that was soon to be conquered by the Babylonians. Some might call it throwing good money after bad. But Jeremiah was buying the most precious thing there is: hope.

Signs of hope in the face of disaster are not always dramatic. They rarely are. Hope can look like taking a small stand for your own dignity. Like taking the time off that you’ve earned. Like saying “no” to open up space for the “yes” that really matters.

Hope is like a prophet investing in hope instead of buying into despair. If you need hope, look to the humble things. Hope is not a military banner, it’s a handmade protest sign. Hope is not a golden crown, it’s a crocus poking up through the snow.

PRAYER *Holy God of the generations, bless us with hope.*



Into Your Hand

My times are in your hand, deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

—Psalm 31:15 (NRSV)

TALITHA ARNOLD | I wonder if Jesus prayed Psalm 31 before his entry into Jerusalem. The Gospel of Luke says that next Friday, he prayed—or more accurately, cried—part of this psalm as he died on the cross: “Into your hand, I commend my spirit.” (Psalm 31:5) But I wonder if he prayed the whole psalm sometime this week before he rode into the big city.

As he drew closer to Jerusalem and the religious and political powers arrayed against him, the psalm’s lament would have echoed his own fear:

*I hear the whispering of many—terror all around!—
As they scheme together against me,
As they plot to take my life.*


It also described the fate that awaited him as he continued to confront those powers:

*I am the scorn of all my adversaries,
a horror to my neighbors . . .
I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.*

So I wonder if Jesus prayed this psalm in the days leading up to Palm Sunday. I wonder, too, if it somehow gave him strength and even comfort—the psalmist’s lament reminding him that he, too, could pour out his terror and grief into God’s hands.

Perhaps once he’d named his fear, Jesus could also name his faith: “My times are in your hand.” Perhaps we can, too.

PRAYER *Like the psalmist and like Jesus, may we pour our lives—our whole lives—into your hand. Amen.*

The image depicts a desolate, arid landscape. The foreground is dominated by parched, cracked earth in shades of grey and brown, with numerous small, dry, and leafless shrubs scattered across it. In the middle ground, there is a band of slightly greener, low-lying vegetation. The background features a steep, rocky hillside with sparse green bushes, leading up to a hazy, pinkish-orange sky, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is one of extreme dryness and longing.

*I stretch out my hands to you;
my soul thirsts for you
like a parched land.*

Creative Ways

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways my ways.

—Isaiah 55:8 (KJV)

DONNA SCHAPER | I love the liberal arts. I don't love the way parents tell their children not to major in philosophy or English or history because "they won't be able to get a good job." While that is not true—strong companies love to hire liberal arts majors—it has a ring of wise caution to it. Getting a "good" job is deemed more important than knowing how to curate beauty or make an argument or read a scam or know when someone is about to use you for their own purposes.

I love the way the liberal arts undercut idolatrous instrumentality. Most of our days are filled with "clients" or people we think we have to please. People pleasing dehumanizes, turning us all into objects instead of subjects.

When instrumentality reigns, the humanities suffer. Science and social sciences suffer as well, if less obviously. Intelligent well-placed suspicion of the monarch can dethrone them just often enough to preserve democracy and its beloved, freedom.

Community organizing for the sake of freedom is an aesthetic activity. We do it for the beauty of community. Yes, we prefer more forth than back. But victories are few and far between. We don't organize to "win." Winning is usually for people who misuse power, like the monarch.

God is not a winner. God wins by losing. God's ways are not our ways. God is not a user. Imagine that.

PRAYER *Grant us the spiritual imagination we need and turn us liberally into artists of your great ways. Amen.*



Made for Freedom

**For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore,
and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.**

—Galatians 5:1 (NRSV)

VICKI KEMPER | In the 1994 film *The Shawshank Redemption*, Brooks, the prison librarian who has been behind bars for fifty years, is granted parole. Faced with the prospect of a life drastically different from the one he's known, he panics. Outside in the real world, he's so frightened that he considers committing a crime so he will be sent back to the brutal place he knows as home.

The other inmates don't understand. Shouldn't Brooks be celebrating his freedom? The inmate Red tries to explain:

"He's just institutionalized," Red says of Brooks. "This is all he knows . . . These walls are funny. First you hate 'em, and then you get used to 'em. Enough time passes, it gets so you depend on 'em."

And so it is with us. We've gotten used to the less-than-ideal way things are. But we were not made to wallow in regret or remorse. We were not made to resign ourselves to oppression and injustice, disappointment and division, loneliness and fear.

Lent invites us to acknowledge the walls and wounds that separate us from the life God wants for us. Jesus shows us the way to freedom and walks beside us, and Spirit empowers us to take the scary but necessary steps toward new life.

Tragically, Brooks has no community on the outside, and he never adjusts to life beyond prison walls. Thank God for the gift of the church. May it always serve as a midwife to freedom.

PRAYER *I know I can't change the past but, by your mercy, heal me and deliver me that I might cooperate with your grace to change the future.*

When Stones Shout

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.”
He answered, “I tell you, if they were silent, the stones would shout out.”

—Luke 19:39–40 (NRSV)

MATT LANEY | Shouting stones are a sad commentary on humanity.

When faithful people forget to praise God in the face of tyranny or fail to offer an alternative vision of love matched with justice, and stones must shout in their place, well, that’s a damn shame.

Therefore, I wonder if stones are constantly on the verge of shouting because who isn’t tempted to heed the Pharisees’ warning not to rock the boat, to dial it back, to play it safe, to keep quiet. Besides, even the most ardent, tireless justice warriors need sleep every now and then.

I’ve remained silent on occasion, preferring someone else to take the risk of opening their mouth. Sometimes, I have spoken up while others hushed up. But if stones shout it means all people failed to unmute.

Holy week ends with a stone, a tombstone, placed like a definitive period on Jesus’ life. When humanity lost its voice, that stone testified to the greatest injustice ever committed.

To hear the tombstone’s testimony, we must walk with Peter (whose name means Rock) and the other disciples through the valley of shadows known as Holy Week. May the words of stones not fall on inattentive ears.

PRAYER *All it takes for evil to prosper is for people of conscience to keep quiet. When evil has, it’s because people did. Lord, have mercy.*



Do You Believe in Lazarus?

When the great crowd learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the people were deserting and believing in Jesus.

—John 12:9–11 (NRSV, excerpted)

MOLLY BASKETTE | Talk about sawing off the branch you are sitting on. The chief priests' whole job is to foster closeness between God and the people. But now, because Jesus has actually demonstrated the power of the living God in raising Lazarus from the dead, the religious authorities want to put both Jesus and Lazarus to death—to disappear the evidence, as it were.

It's easy to vilify the chief priests—and let's pay attention to the antisemitism embedded in that reading, by the way. But we and our churches have also been guilty of burying the evidence of the resurrecting God-still-at-work-in-the-world.

We have worried over budgets and spreadsheets, stayed in leadership positions long past our effectiveness because we don't have confidence in the newbies, trusted only what our eyes and ears can tell us, and secretly believed that God is dead and the age of miracles has passed. We are far too intellectual and lucid to fall for actual resurrection, and our churches have become odes to emptiness. Would we know a miracle if it hit us in the face, like a Lazarus staggering stinking from the tomb? (Not all miracles smell like a rose garden). Or would we say, "it'll never work—and it's never been done that way."

The chief priests are not an Other. They are an aspect of ourselves, scared to turn over power to others, harboring a reluctance to be "taken in" by the unexpected and even impossible. Yet every day God is resurrecting us: sending us people, ideas, attitudes, possibilities that can change everything.

PRAYER *Quiet my inner priest, and show me the miracle, even if it stinks at first. Amen.*

They Wish to See Jesus

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

—John 12:20–22 (NRSVUE)

JENNIFER RUTH LYNN GARRISON | Some strangers—foreigners with an odd language and unfamiliar customs—wanted to see Jesus. They asked Andrew, because they understood that he was a friend of Jesus. But, honestly, Andrew was taken aback. I mean, what did those people want anyway?

He met this dilemma as millions of Christ followers have met their dilemmas in the eons since that day: he called a meeting. In committee with Philip, the two carefully weighed the pros and cons of allowing the as-yet-unnamed Greeks access to the Lord. At long last, they reached an agreement. They would tell Jesus himself about the request.

It would be great if the story ended here with, “So Yiannis and Dimitris were welcomed into the community and they all lived happily ever after.” Unfortunately, the unnamed Greeks grew tired of the vetting process and drifted off, never to be heard from again.

In communities that yearn to welcome everyone, we sometimes lose sight of the many processes and barriers that keep the curious from accessing Jesus. Take a close look at *your* community. What mechanisms keep people from coming right to Jesus? What language builds a wall rather than a bridge? What parts of church life are available only to “members”? How might your doors truly be open to all?

PRAYER *Brother Jesus, give us the wisdom and the words to be your widely, wildly welcoming people. In your many names we pray. Amen.*



Boring Kings

And they knelt before him and mocked him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!”

—Matthew 27:29b (NRSVUE)

KAJI DOUŠA | I’m confident Jesus wouldn’t share my devotion to one of my favorite series: *The Crown*. In fact, I think Jesus found earthly rulers to be utterly . . . boring. “Render unto Caesar” was practical advice. Not a theological mandate.

Jesus had such little interest in kings beyond what they might do to the people. Because, you see, when Jesus made his way to that Cross at Calvary . . . he showed a completely different power.

Here’s what you need to understand:

The power at play in the story of Jesus’ death was about the might of a fist. On God’s scale, whatever a fist can do will always be temporary.

The true power Jesus showed us was the power of love. Which doesn’t end.

Love walked Jesus from town to town. Love healed the sick and brought comfort to the distressed. Love brought Jesus to his knees in prayer. Love made Jesus weep at the state of Jerusalem. Love walked Jesus down that lonely road, mocked and scorned by a crowd that just didn’t understand. Love brought the women and the beloved one to care for Jesus at the cross. Love buried him whole.

And love got him up from the grave. Love brought him back that night!

A king, you see, holds his power for himself, his heirs. But the Messiah—God incarnate, Word made flesh, true God from true God? His power is for everyone’s benefit. For all to share and enjoy.

“I came to give life and life abundantly,” Jesus said.

The abundant life is a life that values the power of love above everything else.

PRAYER *Make me spiritually bored with everything inconsequential to you. Thank you for your love, God. Thank you. In Jesus’ name.*

Coffee-like Love

“I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other.”

—John 13:34–35 (CEB)

PHIWA LANGENI | There're so many steps involved in getting a nice-tasting cup of coffee into a mug. Starting from the type of plant and the ground where it's planted to how carefully it's picked and how it gets roasted and stored and shipped to your favorite coffee location, each step is important in how tasty and effective the coffee will be.

The coffee beans that made up the best cup of coffee you've ever experienced probably went through an extremely delicate and intricate and sometimes difficult process of going from plant to coffee bean to the liquid awesomeness in your mug.

Like the coffee bean, there are so many critical steps for the process of an enduring love like the one Jesus demonstrated to and commanded of his friends. How we choose to love each other is a process that can be grueling and difficult at some points, especially with people who aren't like us or, let's be honest, those we barely like.

However, enduring the grueling and intricate process of loving each other anyway is the potent kind of love that Jesus helps us experience and challenges us to live out in our daily decision-making as Christ followers. The rewards of engaging and sticking to loving without abandon are greater than anything else in this world, even your most favorite brand of coffee.

PRAYER *Though we may not all enjoy coffee, let its vitality accelerate our hearts, Love, so that we might be able to give and receive love freely and faithfully. Amen.*



Good Friday, Good Question

**“I am poured out like water, my heart is melted within my breast; my tongue sticks to my jaws.
My hands and feet have shriveled; I can count all my bones.”**

—*Psalm 22:14–17 (NRSV, abridged)*

MARY LUTI | Doug Davidson tells a story about the time he took his three-year-old with him to return a book to the seminary library. The child had never been inside before. As he toddled into the vestibule, he stopped in his tracks. Before them hung an almost life-size crucifix.

He watched his son’s eyes fix on Jesus’ twisted body, bleeding hands and feet. The boy had never seen such an image. In their Baptist church, the cross was empty, its Jesus risen and ascended.

For a moment, Davidson considered hustling the boy away to shield him from that violence, like he did when he “re-wrote” the plots of Batman comics. But it was too late.

I thought he might cry, he said later. Instead, without taking his gaze from the dying Jesus, the child whispered a question full of sadness: Daddy, what happened?

Maybe you’re accustomed to empty crosses, too. It’s almost a point of pride with some Protestants not to exhibit Jesus’ bloody crucifixion, but to focus instead on the resurrection. And that’s a good thing.

But empty crosses can also be evasive, shielding us from facing the violence human beings inflict on each other all the time. Which is one reason the church gives us Good Friday. It’s a day to stare our complicity in the face as it plays out on the very body of God.

What if today we don’t hustle ourselves away? What if we just stop in our tracks and gaze? What if we just stay put, take it all in, the pain, the horror, the confusion. What if we ask, and really want to know...

PRAYER *O my God. What happened?*

To Be Human

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.

—Matthew 27:57–60 (NRSV)

VINCE AMLIN | In Skhul Cave, near Nazareth in lower Galilee, archaeologists discovered the oldest undisputed burial of *Homo sapiens*. One of the bodies, labeled “Skhul V,” was placed in a small oval grave, hewn in the rock, tucked tightly into a fetal position, the lower jaw of a wild boar placed on top. All of that, some 90,000–100,000 years ago.

Our ancient tendency toward burial has led some to suggest that the Latin root of the word “humanity” is drawn from *humando*, meaning “burying.” To be human is to bury and to be buried.

Certainly both words (and all of us) are drawn from humus.

Today we reflect on Jesus’ final act of humanity: being laid lovingly in Joseph’s family plot. Wrapped in cloths and placed in a niche carved into the stone to protect his body from scavengers. Just the way people there had been doing for tens of thousands of years. Just the way they had been doing since they were people.

Today the promise of Christmas is kept. The promise of Emmanuel, God with us, in this final act of solidarity. Laid in the ground as we have laid so many down. Returning to the earth as we ourselves will return.

PRAYER *Jesus, we grieve, and we thank you.*



Rejected ... then Resurrected

The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. —*Psalm 118:22–23 (NRSV)*

KENNETH L. SAMUEL | There is nothing cute about being rejected.

“We don’t want you.” “We don’t accept what you have to offer.” “You don’t measure up to our standards.” “Who you are is not good enough for us.” Rejection can empty our spirits, deflate our sense of worth.

According to the prophetic interpretations of Isaiah 53, Jesus was despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. His rejection was not the transitory rejection of being denied a job opportunity or not selected for a sports team.

The rejection Jesus bore extended from King Herod’s attempt to kill him at birth to those who voted without dissent to have him publicly humiliated and executed at Calvary. His rejection—elaborately and successfully orchestrated—resounded throughout all of Palestine.

But the power of the resurrection is that no rejection we face—no matter how perpetual, no matter how powerful, no matter how imposing, no matter how emptying—no rejection is indicative of our divine destiny. Martin Luther King, Jr., commended the words of James Russell Lowell to us:

*Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne—
Yet that scaffold sway the future, and behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, Keeping watch above his own.*

Mahatma Gandhi is credited with saying: “First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.”

The power of the resurrection is the power to step outside the prescribed molds of assimilation, to resist the presumed safety of hiding or running, and to be the authentic presence God created us to be. Today we celebrate the power of an affirmation that defies every condemnation of death.

PRAYER *Live in me forever, Lord Jesus!*

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