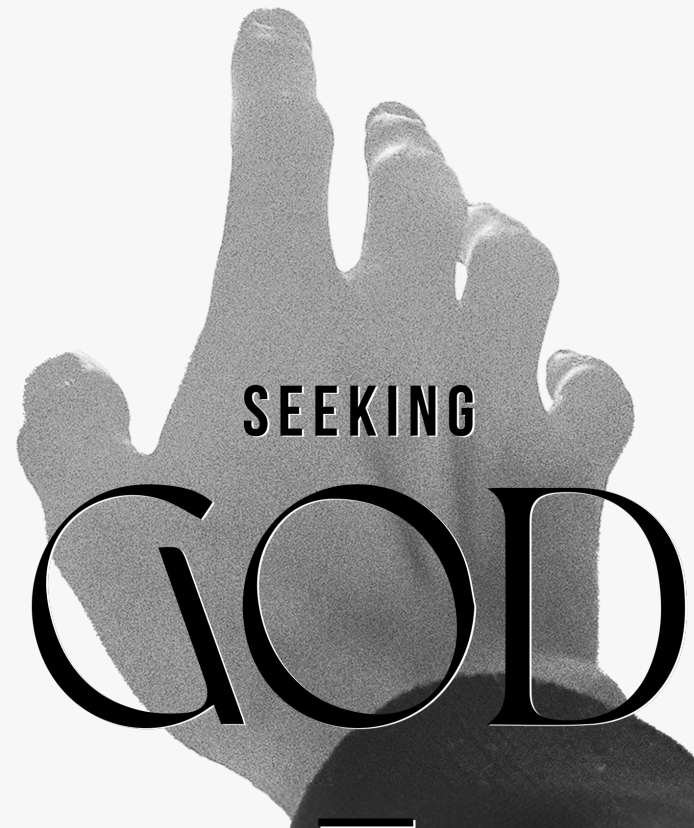


LENTEN READER 2024




The Evangelical
Covenant Church
of Canada

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A COMPILATION OF
REFLECTIONS ON
SCRIPTURE FOR
THE SEASON OF LENT

**HE IS RISEN!
HE IS RISEN INDEED.
ALLELUIA!**

LENTEN READER 2024

Evangelical Covenant Church of Canada
Strathmore, Alberta
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FORTIETH DAY OF LENT
Holy Saturday

MARCH 30

Saturday Examen

Get into a comfortable position. Take a few breaths.

Ask God to guide your reflection and prayer in these moments. Ask Him for the grace to be aware of His work in you this past week.

Reflect on the past week. Begin with Sunday and move through the week in your imagination. Linger on anything that brought you joy, made you smile, encouraged you, or simply made life a little better.

Thank God for these moments of gladness and goodness. Imagine God rejoicing with you.

As you reflect, pause on any difficult or challenging times this week. Also, consider how you have missed the mark. What have you done or left undone that requires repentance?

Ask God for His mercy for sin and comfort for struggle. Imagine God pouring out His love over you.

Pray that God would show you how to respond to the consolation and desolation in your life. Ask Him for His help in responding to His invitation.

Share with God any other thoughts or reflections.

Amen.

INTRODUCTION

In the opening chapter of his book, Seeking God, Trevor Hudson writes,

“People will seldom say, ‘I am looking for another kind of life.’ I do, however, hear phrases like these:

- *There’s something missing in my life.*
- *My life is such a mess.*
- *Is this really what it’s all about?*
- *Surely, there must be more to my faith than what I am experiencing.*
- *I’m not getting much out of going to church right now.*
- *I’ve given up on organized religion.”*

As we begin our Lenten journey, what would it look like to encourage one another to seek God in the spirit of Jeremiah 29:13-14, Matthew 6:33, or Matthew 7:7-8?

During the season of Lent, we “release” and “let go” so that we might pick up and engage more of the life God invites us to. We proclaim, remember, and respond in gratitude and faith to the life Jesus lived and died to bring. We re-calibrate and re-orient ourselves to the resurrection life that Jesus by his Spirit offers us here and now.

As a movement of Covenant churches across Canada with friends around the world, I pray for a deeper longing, desire, and practice of seeking God. Over the last year, the Canada Covenant and the Covenant in general have encouraged greater intentionality in seeking God through prayer. Might this season invite us deeper into awareness and friendship with the one who became flesh, was truly human, lived, died, and (wait for it) rose again... that all creation might experience the “other kind of life” God desires to bring.

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Matthew 7:7-8



Glenn Peterson
President/Superintendent
Evangelical Covenant Church of Canada
LENT 2024

John 18 - 19

I was struck by just how much fear is present in these chapters. The whole situation was put in motion out of the fear of the religious leaders and their own power being questioned. The fear of the soldiers who come to arrest Jesus, Peter's fear of the outcome provoked his response to protect Jesus, well at first at least, then it was the fear of being associated with him. The chief priest was afraid of his responses, Pilot was definitely afraid of Jesus and the crowd. Without a doubt, the disciples and the followers of Jesus were afraid for him and themselves. What I read here in these chapters is fear.

It makes me reflect...what are the things I fear? What is it that I would protect out of fear? Would it be my control over situations in my life? Would it be my theology or what I want to be certain about? Maybe my reputation? Honestly, probably all those things and a lot more. When I come back to this passage, I ask, "what is it that I love about Jesus?" Jesus was so in touch with himself that he wasn't controlled or tossed around by that fear. Was he afraid? I think so, but the message that I believe he wanted me to get was that I can trust Him. He wants me to know that no matter what happens, no matter how out of control things get, I can trust that Jesus will not go against himself, or even his word when he is afraid.

I am drawn to Jesus here because even though I see fear all over the chapters I believe that he was communicating Love. It was a love for each of them who took him away, those who ended his life out of their own fearful hearts. It was an act that was meant to help me see that his intention for me to understand his love was so deep that he knew, if he didn't die, I might not believe that kind of love existed for me. I'm drawn to him because I know no other kind of love like that. It draws me toward him like no other relationship I have ever experienced. My sacrifices for this kind of love seem so small, but they are all I have to offer. What's crazy is I know they will be accepted, that Jesus is pleased with me and sees me, and knows me. I can stop asking, Am I enough? I can stop trying to live up to something or someone out of fear, I know that I am safe. I know that Jesus, this guy, this Messiah knew what he was doing and was doing it quite intentionally.

I am loved even in my fear.

THIRTY-EIGHTH DAY OF LENT
Maundy Thursday

MARCH 28

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

(13:3) *“Jesus knew. . .”* Jesus knew to whom He belonged. He practiced remembering the One who had sent Him and anointed Him with the Spirit of God. Jesus also knew His imminent future held betrayal, departure from His friends and family, and physical agony. In remembering His identity, Jesus moved with confident trust in His Father, the Creator, faithful to a promise.

(13:4) *“So he. . .”* Jesus knew His Sonship, so He was compelled to show His friends more fully and deeply how much He loved them. This parting gift to the disciples was for them to know who they were in God’s sight. Just as the Lord instructed Moses in Exodus 3 to remove his sandals from between his feet and the holy ground on which he stood, so Jesus took the feet of those He loved and held them in His holy hands. Then with water, He anointed the feet of His disciples, saying, *“Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other”* (John 13:34). Peter balked just as Moses had. There were feelings of incompetence, of wanting things to stay as they were. They had misunderstandings of God’s will and how their feet were destined to walk out a plan and purpose of glory, in glory, for glory. *“Just as I have loved you.”* In these directive words of Jesus we hear God’s promise to Moses, *“I will be with you”* (Exodus. 3:12).

Remember that as believers in Christ, we, too, have been identified as children of God and anointed by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13). We, too, face suffering. Through remembering our identity, we stand fast, our feet held firm by holy hands that restore, support, and strengthen (1 Peter 5:10).

Pray individually and together as a community of believers: “Dear Father, as Your anointed child(ren), I/we seek to know how wide and long and high and deep is Your love. Fill me/us by Your mighty power with this love too great for me/us to understand, so that I/we may love just as You have loved me/us. To You be glory in this church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever! Amen.”

Now you know, so. . .what?

Amy Wegner | Strathmore, AB

FIRST DAY OF LENT
Ash Wednesday

FEBRUARY 14

Prayer | Psalm 51:1-7

Take a moment to be still. Tell God that you are listening.

Read the text. Don’t worry about finding meaning or application. Psalms are prayers, simply read the prayer.

Read the text again. Pay attention to a word, phrase, or theme that seems to stand out or shimmer for you. Trust that this is a nudge from the Holy Spirit. Be silent with the word, phrase, or theme. Resist the desire to study the text.

Read the text a final time. What does the word, phrase, or theme invite you to pray? What about your word, phrase, or theme seems like God’s invitation to you?

If this is an unfamiliar practice for you, know that it can take some time to get used to reading and praying Scripture this way. We are used to analyzing and theologizing, Lectio Divina invites us to meditate on God’s Word in His presence, guided by the Spirit. Take a few moments to respond to God in prayer using your word, phrase, or theme.

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*“You have made us for yourself, O Lord,
and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”*

AUGUSTINE

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

There are times when life with God becomes so mundane. We believe there is more to be experienced because we've heard about it, and we've read about it in the scriptures. But we don't know how to get from here to there.

So, we try changing things up to try and improve. We might get up early for devotions. We might volunteer down at the food bank. We might try to memorize some verses. We might join a small group. All good things, yes. But all the kinds of things that fit nicely into a New Year's resolution.

Our passage from Joel today tells us that there is something we can do, but we might not think it's written for us today. The prophet, Joel, gives us ample warning that the day of the Lord is coming. A day of sober sadness, a day of darkness and gloom perhaps unknown in our lives. It may be THE day of the Lord, or it may be a day of the Lord's visitation in our lives. Whichever it might be, it is a message of warning that Joel was called on to deliver to his generation, and to us.

What if this Lenten season we received Joel's warning and began to act on it as he instructs us? What if we would turn towards God with a sorrow-filled heart? What if we were to call our hearts to a sacred assembly, a holy meeting with God, and repent? Oh, we may say we have nothing to repent of. Our relationship with Christ is good.

Yes, I know it is. Mine is too. However, I found when I started to heed His warning, and I intentionally stopped and turned towards Him, and I asked Him what I should repent of, He showed me my selfish acts. My acts of pride. My incidents of self-righteousness. He showed me my moments of anger. He showed me my envy and my careless attitude. On and on, He showed me. I began to repent, and it has led to more repentance, and it has turned into a season of repentance. It turns out I do have things to repent of and to clean up between Jesus and me. (And if I run out of things to repent for, I can start repenting on behalf of my nation.)

And you know what? Life gets a little clearer, and my step gets a little lighter and gladness takes the place of what was once mundane in my relationship with God.

Amazing how that works.

Randall Friesen | Malmo, AB

Prayer | Psalm 70

Take a moment to be still. Tell God that you are listening.

Read the text. Don't worry about finding meaning or application. Psalms are prayers, simply read the prayer.

Read the text again. Pay attention to a word, phrase, or theme that seems to stand out or shimmer for you. Trust that this is a nudge from the Holy Spirit. Be silent with the word, phrase, or theme. Resist the desire to study the text.

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Lord Jesus Christ, give me the grace to be with you in your suffering on the cross and whatever you suffer today. Free me from my tendency toward self-absorption, self-centeredness, and self-interest, so that space can be created for your compassion to flow into me and through me. Help me to freely lay down my life, with the same Spirit in which you gave up your life for me, that I may take up whatever fuller and richer life you have prepared for me. I confess that I do not find this easy. Please renew within my heart the assurance that your compassion is like a mother's womb love that will never forget me, no matter what happens. Help me now, by your Spirit, to enter your sacred mystery of dying to live, that I may bear the fruit of divine compassion toward each person in my life. May my heartbeat echo yours.

TREVOR HUDSON

Isaiah 49:1-7

As I read this text, following the author's instructions to listen and hear, I'm struck by the tension poignantly highlighted:

*Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations:
Before I was born the Lord called me; from my mother's womb has
spoken my name.
He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his
hand he hid me;
He made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. vs 1-2*

Hopefully we share the author's deep conviction that we are called and crafted by God for greater purpose. Nonetheless, we often find ourselves (seemingly) under-deployed, on the bench, or otherwise sidelined: a sharpened sword... hidden away in shadow; a polished arrow... still in the quiver, concealed and as yet unleashed. The promises don't always ring true:

*He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display
my splendor."
But I said, "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for
nothing at all." vs 3-4a*

We want to serve well, to display God's glory (or is it sometimes our own?) – whether through vocational ministry, the marketplace, home & family, academia, or the many combos all those entail.

And yet. The imagery reminds us we're always held close to God, set apart for his purposes, in his timing— a sword in his expert hand, a purpose-made arrow in his quiver. If we're patient (and often even when we're not), his purposes and timing prevails:

*And now the Lord says [...]
"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes
of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may
reach to the ends of the earth." vs 5-6 excerpts*

Reflect on your own unique Calling. In what ways does it echo or rhyme with that of his servant, Israel, in this passage? Are you...

- Spirit-led by his hand to speak words of challenge, hope, correction, and healing that cut through the confusion and noise of this world?
- At the ready for God to aim and release, straight and true, in the direction he chooses?
- Not "merely" serving the previously or already convinced to come back to the fold? (a very good thing... but too small a thing)
- Above all, pointing everyone to our Redeemer and Lord, the Holy One of Israel, so that his salvation may extend to the farthest reaches of the world?

We may never cause kings to stand or princes to bow. Better still, God will reward us with even greater honor as we patiently and faithfully live out his calling on our life. Let this Lenten Season remind and refine us to serve his purposes, in his timing, to his glory, ever strengthened to do so, "because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you" (Isaiah 49:7b).

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

When I read this passage, I wonder about that first audience who heard these words of Jesus and how they might have received them. These were God fearing Jews who valued their religious practices. Mostly good people, who practiced giving to others, prayer and fasting. In their minds this was what a person did who honors God. Hmm...maybe they were people that would read a Lenten reader, raise their kids to love God and participate in practices that they believed honoured him. Sound like anybody you know? I can identify with that. It could be easy for me to criticize these "pious" religious people until I stop to realize that these things that Jesus is saying were so counter to what the audience understood about God and his ways. Okay, maybe there were some bad apples in the crowd, but I have to believe there were many like you and me.

So, what do we do with this? How do we respond when Jesus shakes up our comfortable way of living for Him?

For me the first step is to be open to wrestle and discern what it means to love and serve God. In this passage Jesus was not condemning their acts of serving him: giving, praying, fasting. In fact, he implied that they would continue to practice these things. These were good things to do. However, he told them of a different way to live into these practices. This wasn't a light invitation. It was much more of an imperative. Do not do it one way but do it a different way.

Instead of looking for the attention of others, Jesus said: give in secret, pray privately to me and fast so it is only obvious to me, not others. This wasn't simply Jesus' way of giving us a formula for how to do "Godly" right, although maybe some of us would prefer that. Instead, He was moving our focus away from the external to private spaces. Places where he says the Father sees us. A couple of times in this section the Father is described as "unseen". I wonder if these secret places that we are called to live into are not only places where we are seen by the Father, but in those spaces, we are given vision to see and know the Father and the kingdom He is teaching us about.

I really don't like being in the spotlight. I prefer to be in the background, blending into a crowd. Jesus is inviting us away from the crowd, but still into the spotlight, where He "sees" us. For some of us this isn't easy because, most certainly, there will be things that God wants us to see differently, ways he, most assuredly, wants us to live differently. That may be why the message fell so heavily on the religious people of that day and why it may also be hard for us to live into. I love how Jesus responds to those who give, pray and fast in secret. He makes it clear that he "sees" us, but what he sees is good, in each case he says that he will reward us. So, my initial fear of God's "spotlight" is unfounded. These secret spaces of relationship that shape us are places where God's love abounds, where he sees and knows us and where we too see Him in deeper fuller ways. Who wouldn't want that?!!

So let us be brave. Let us practice, in this season of Lent and beyond, stepping into the spotlight of the private, quiet places where God meets us.

Saturday Examen

Get into a comfortable position. Take a few breaths.

Ask God to guide your reflection and prayer in these moments. Ask Him for the grace to be aware of His work in you this past week.

Reflect on the past week. Begin with Sunday and move through the week in your imagination. Linger on anything that brought you joy, made you smile, encouraged you, or simply made life a little better.

Thank God for these moments of gladness and goodness. Imagine God rejoicing with you.

As you reflect, pause on any difficult or challenging times this week. Also, consider how you have missed the mark. What have you done or left undone that requires repentance?

Ask God for His mercy for sin and comfort for struggle. Imagine God pouring out His love over you.

Pray that God would show you how to respond to the consolation and desolation in your life. Ask Him for His help in responding to His invitation.

Share with God any other thoughts or reflections.

Amen.

John 12:1-11

Think for a moment about the last thing you *splurged* on. An experience, a meal, an outfit, some kind of gadget or toy, perhaps a gift for someone else. (If you're very frugal, you may be struggling to think of anything, and that's okay!) But if you've got something in your mind, ask yourself: What about this particular thing - this experience, this item, or the feeling it produces - makes splurging feel *worth it*? When you find yourself moving from "I really shouldn't" to "I'm going for it!" - what tips the scales?

In this story, we see Mary *splurge* in a way that draws criticism from those around her. She spends a year's worth of income - go ahead and do the math using your own income - in a gratuitous and intimate display of honor, respect, and love. She is misunderstood and maligned by Judas, but Jesus defends her actions. In Matthew's telling of this story, Jesus goes so far as to say that "*Wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her*" (Matthew 26:13).

The thing Mary understands that Judas doesn't is that Jesus is inherently, intrinsically worth it. What tips the scales for Mary is her recognition of the inestimable value of Jesus himself. In comparison to Jesus, nothing else is worth holding onto. It's reminiscent of Paul's statement in Philippians 3:8, a statement so strong we're tempted to dismiss it as hyperbole: "*I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*" When we know Jesus, really *know* him, what once seemed precious to us simply can't compare to his indescribable worth. Like Mary, our entire framework for value is upended and reordered.

Little does Mary know, her act of extravagant love is part of a larger story she could not possibly comprehend. In verse 7, Jesus implies that she has anointed him for his burial. Suddenly, as we read, the beautiful scent of Mary's adoration mingles with the stench of death. Within the week, much to her surprise and dismay, Mary will come to understand his meaning as Jesus demonstrates his own act of extravagant love.

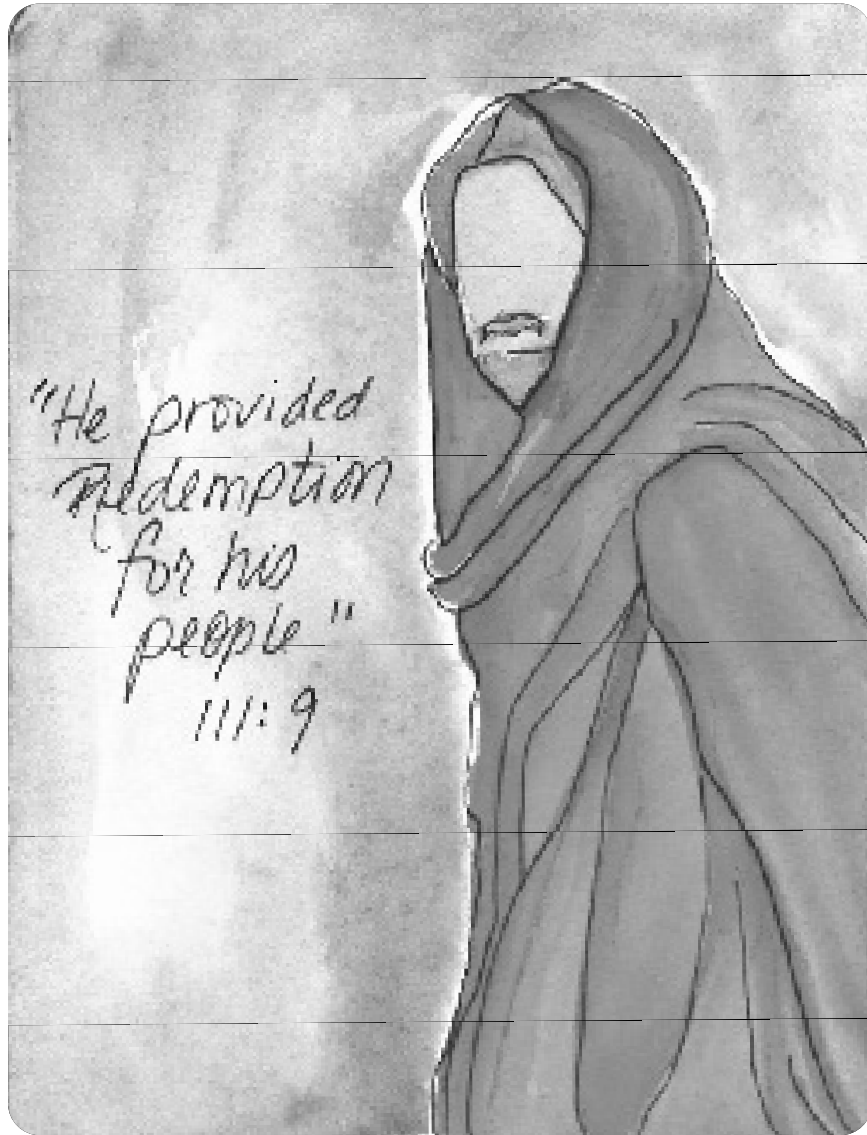
Today, reflect on the intrinsic, inestimable value of Jesus.

Then consider the comparative value Jesus holds in your life.

What needs to be reordered in your life to properly reflect his worth?

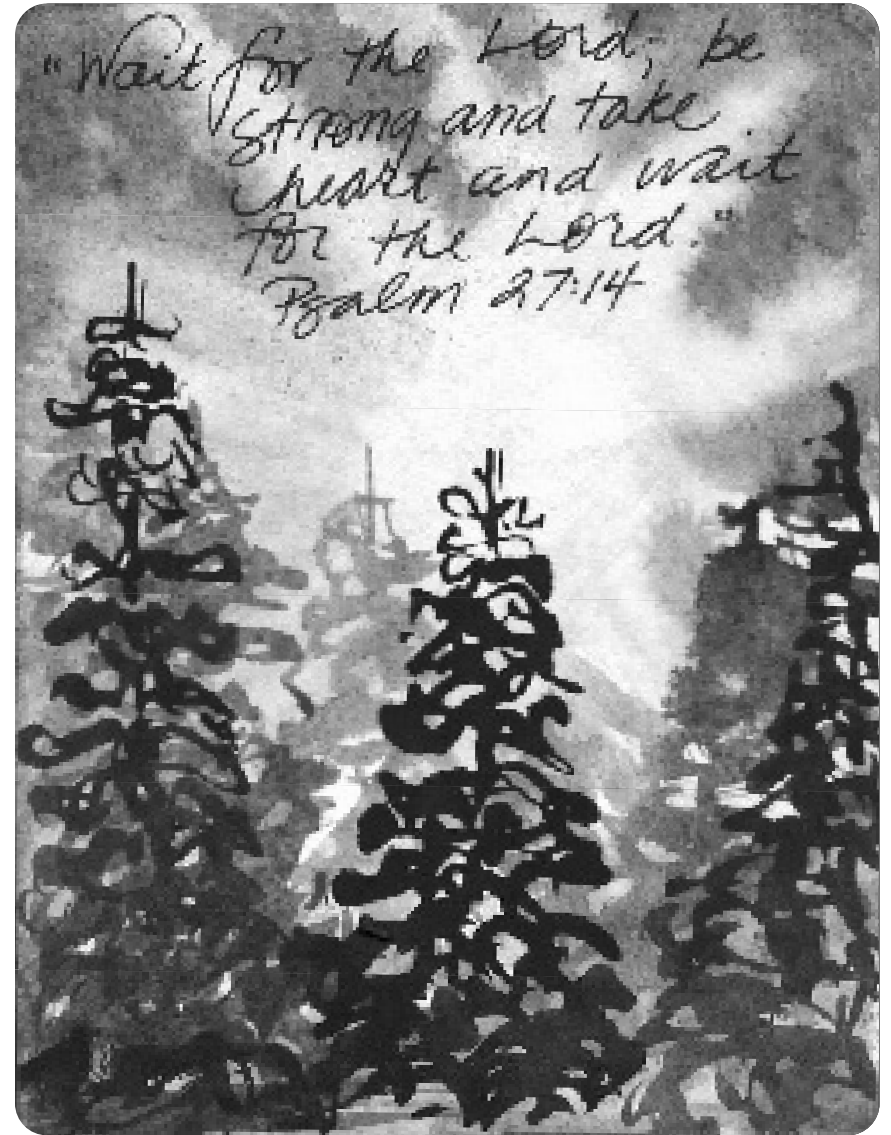
SIXTH SUNDAY IN LENT
Palm Sunday

MARCH 24



FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

FEBRUARY 18



Genesis 9:8-17

On the mantel in my living room, I have a little hand-carved wooden Noah's ark and a bunch of animals, from a trip to Zambia. I rearrange the animals—pairs of giraffes, hippos, geese, turtles, elephants, and more—every time I dust. Sometimes I put Noah and Mrs. Noah standing by the ark on one side of the mantel, with the animals on the other. Sometimes they're taking up the rear, herding the animals along. I usually remember to keep a lot of distance between the lions and rabbits, and I often wonder what the environment on the ark must have been like.

Never once while dusting, though, have I thought about seeking God. What does God's faithfulness that's reflected in the promise of the rainbow to Noah, and to us, have to do with seeking God?

As I've been reflecting on this passage I've found at least one thing. Noah knew that the only logical response to a God of faithfulness is a desire to learn more.

Noah was told to build a huge boat and herd wild animals into it two by two. It would have been hard to blame him for ignoring such instruction, but he didn't. Genesis 6:9 says that Noah *"walked in close fellowship with God."* Clearly, he had seen God at work in the past and experienced his faithfulness before, so he got out his hammer and saw.

Then Noah spent forty days and forty nights in the rain with no solid ground beneath his feet, and he grew closer to God. True, we don't know if he had a change of heart on like day three (though if he did, what could he have done about it, abandon ship?). But eagerly or not on that ark, Noah persevered and trusted God, and the result was a promise from God blessing not just him, not just his family, not just all humanity, but every creature on the planet. I'm guessing that in retrospect, he didn't mind the work of keeping the lions away from the rabbits.

Maybe it's our individualistic culture that causes us to think of faith as a personal journey, but it's so much more than that. Each step we take to learn more about God and grow closer to him influences, witnesses to, and blesses those around us. Maybe God won't create a spectacularly beautiful weather phenomenon to commemorate our obedience to his leading, but I think he celebrates just the same.

Saturday Examen

Get into a comfortable position. Take a few breaths.

Ask God to guide your reflection and prayer in these moments. Ask Him for the grace to be aware of His work in you this past week.

Reflect on the past week. Begin with Sunday and move through the week in your imagination. Linger on anything that brought you joy, made you smile, encouraged you, or simply made life a little better.

Thank God for these moments of gladness and goodness. Imagine God rejoicing with you.

As you reflect, pause on any difficult or challenging times this week. Also, consider how you have missed the mark. What have you done or left undone that requires repentance?

Ask God for His mercy for sin and comfort for struggle. Imagine God pouring out His love over you.

Pray that God would show you how to respond to the consolation and desolation in your life. Ask Him for His help in responding to His invitation.

Share with God any other thoughts or reflections.

Amen.

John 12:20-33

Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. (John 13:24-25)

I have found myself in church contexts over the years where the instruction from Jesus' words above leads to a kind of distance from or even destruction of self.

Even if you don't *feel* like befriending the new family down the street or swallowing hurt from co-labourers in your community or volunteering for the next church program, you just need to do it anyway, because that's "dying." Give, give, give and think less of your own needs. Pour yourself out—like Jesus.

I was primed for this brand of self-sacrifice in church life by my childhood community, who would tell me as a youth that I was selfish for disagreeing with adults' wishes. I was used to putting myself aside for the needs and plans of more powerful figures and systems. That was my training. As a kid and later as an adult, I wondered when my giving and doing would be enough. Enough to catch my breath, find myself, even enjoy life.

Jesus' next words to his disciples in this passage are important: *Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me* (13:26).

Sacrificing is not the end and not even necessarily the point. When we trust our God enough to walk Jesus' road, we find *intimacy* with our enfleshed Lord, *community* with all the saints who are near him, and *honour* from God Most High. In other words, we are continually with Jesus, we are surrounded by good people, and we are adored by our Daddy. We are neither depleted nor alone.

If we are not experiencing this communion as we give, perhaps we are walking a different road. Jesus' road is one full of companions that ends in life eternal.

A spiritual mama recently told me she imagines it like this: We give, and our gift enters the Trinitarian flow, nourishes others, passes back through Trinitarian Love, regenerates, and returns to us. And nourishes us.

May we trust and see the Love surrounding us as we love like Jesus.

Psalm 25:1-10

It feels easy to say we trust God when things seem like they are going according to our expectations and plans. However, when our expectations are unmet and we are left feeling anxious, afraid of the outcomes and not in control, the words "I trust you" don't seem as easy to say anymore.

The Psalmist here shows that he is struggling with anxiety, shame, and in fear of his enemies coming after him. Now, many of us may not have the same physical enemies as the psalmist has, but we all have enemies, nonetheless. Whatever is 'against' us, whether it's a person, a circumstance, a crisis or even our own sinful nature can be an enemy of ours. We also can't forget that there is an enemy working behind the scenes seeking to discourage and to destroy.

I remember not too long ago; I was really struggling with truly trusting in God. I was able to say that I trusted Him when I shared with others about my life (maybe I felt that it made me look better), but I knew that I wasn't. In that season, our family was going through many big transitions, marital struggles, financial strains and we had many doors close on us that we thought would have been great opportunities. I was constantly restless, worried and full of fear. The more I tried to take control, the more discouraged I would be. It was a difficult season to trust in the Lord because I couldn't see the outcome ahead.

Psalm 25 reminds us that:

- Trusting in God isn't about knowing exactly what is coming ahead.
- Trusting in God is about believing that our Father knows you better than you know yourself and that He has you in his hands.

As I spent more time with Jesus and praying very similar words to this Psalm, for God to **show me, teach me** and **guide me** in His ways, I was overcome with a peace that transcends all understanding (Philippians 4:7). I was reminded of the truth that God works all things for good - that every "no" we receive means there is a better "yes" to come because my Father knows me best.

Is there something that you are struggling to trust the Lord in? Maybe you are questioning the season you are in and why things aren't as you expected.

I want to invite you to read Psalm 25:1-10 again as a prayer.

May you be reminded today that God knows you, He is with you, and He has you in His hands.

Prayer | Psalm 32

Take a moment to be still. Tell God that you are listening.

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*I pray that you would have a rich life
of joy and power, abundant in supernatural results,
with a constant, clear vision of never-ending life in God's World
before you, and of the everlasting significance of your work day by day.
A radiant life and death.*

DALLAS WILLARD

Hebrews 5:5-10

We can never assume and decide for ourselves what God's plan is for our life. Only He can choose us, only He can designate a specific calling on our lives. And that He does – we are chosen; however, there is a requirement, an action required by us.

In the Message, Eugene Peterson writes *“that while he lived on earth, anticipating death...”* Think about that – he lived with this knowledge and anticipation – he didn't live fearing the outcome, dreading what was to come. No; he anticipated it. He was waiting, expectantly. Our God cares so greatly for each one of us; that He sent His son to pay for our sins. Have you reflected on Christ's pleading and agony in the Garden of Gethsemane? On one hand, he shows us his human nature; 'Dad, isn't there another way?'. And, on the other hand, I wonder if Jesus felt he still needed to make sure his disciples understood, that there was so much more to teach; and maybe there was another way to still accomplish his Father's will. And of course, the way it went.

Jesus knew his purpose. He knew the great works that God would do through his obedience. Even though he was distraught, his reverence for God – to obey – was far greater than what he would suffer. He was able to obey during a trial I can't imagine. Why? How? Because he constantly, persistently, *sought* God. Wholeheartedly – with every part of his mind, body and strength – in every moment. Jesus' life teaches us the importance; no, the necessity, not the option, of seeking the Father. We must go and look for, search out God. Not just in a morning prayer or a quick read – but actively, it should be part of who we are. The nervous twitch we have, the smile that we can't get rid of, the seeking of God.

Even Jesus didn't receive the answer from God that he wanted; but God answered. God heard... because of Jesus' reverence, his submission, his obedience. Jesus, although perfect, learned. Learned obedience through his suffering, through his trusting of God's plan. We too must learn this. I continue to learn this. To seek God, so that in every moment – the easy or the difficult, the exciting or the challenges – God will listen, will give HIS answer, to have an intimate relationship with Him.

Where do you find yourself today? Fighting sickness or depression? Financial or work problems? Family or Marriage problems? Feeling far from God or comfortable, but not growing? Feeling wonderfully blessed? Be honest – God is listening. I want to encourage you to start seeking God. Constantly, honestly, don't stop. I can assure you; the rewards of your obedience are far greater than anything you could imagine. The bold faith you can't explain is worth more than any material item. I pray you experience a renewed walk with God – no matter how many years into your journey you are.

Prayer | Psalm 119:9-16

Take a moment to be still. Tell God that you are listening.

Read the text. Don't worry about finding meaning or application. Psalms are prayers, simply read the prayer.

Read the text again. Pay attention to a word, phrase, or theme that seems to stand out or shimmer for you. Trust that this is a nudge from the Holy Spirit. Be silent with the word, phrase, or theme. Resist the desire to study the text.

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If this is an unfamiliar practice for you, know that it can take some time to get used to reading and praying Scripture this way. We are used to analyzing and theologizing, Lectio Divina invites us to meditate on God's Word in His presence, guided by the Spirit. Take a few moments to respond to God in prayer using your word, phrase, or theme.

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Take us on a journey to deepen our relationship with You. Empower us to run to you when life careens or hope wanes. Invigorate our prayer life.

Move mountains. Unleash freedom. Heal wounds. Restore what's been lost. Demonstrate Your love in "us-shaped" ways. Thank you that you're the empathetic Savior who understands what it's like to walk this dusty earth, clay-footed. Thank you for making a way for us to be safe, forgiven, and welcomed—all because You left the glory of heaven for earth's sin-scarred shore. Oh, how You love us. **Oh, how we need You.** **Do something new in the heart of the one reading these words.** May spiritual growth and freedom spring forth, a new river through a wild land.

Amen and amen.

MARY DEMUTH

Mark 1:9-15

The last few months have been a difficult season for me. I have struggled with many questions that I've demanded answers to, particularly about sin and judgment. It left me in a bleak wilderness. The new year brought a sort of new beginning, and I have felt better emotionally. But now being able to look back on that period, I have noticed that I felt like I was always missing something. I tend to make standards for myself that are almost impossible to achieve. It's easy for me to imagine a perfect image of myself that I try to attain, and that has caused a deep feeling of inadequacy. I am looking for another kind of life. A life rooted to the very core in Jesus Christ.

When I read Mark 1:9-15, there is one verse that catches my attention. Verse 15 says, *"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"* It emphasizes that this life in Christ is very near. Other translations say that *"the Kingdom of God is at hand"*. What I hear from God in this verse is that I don't have to search far and wide to find this life in Jesus. He is not hiding it from me! He is not going to let the call go to voicemail. The Holy Spirit is as close as our very breath.

This is the Spirit of the God who says, *"You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy."* This is the most complete, the most powerful, the truest love possible. God will continue to joyfully and patiently extend this kind of life to us, no matter how broken we are and no matter the wilderness we find ourselves in. But like it says in verse 15, *"the time has come!"* There is no reason to wait around for some vague time. Now is the moment to turn around, to reorient ourselves in the resurrection life that Jesus offers to us in this very moment.

Ask yourself now, as you move your eyes across these letters, as you feel the spine of this book or the weight of your phone in your hands: What would it look like to turn right around and accept a new kind of life?

Caleb Waldschmidt | Saskatoon, SK

1 Peter 3:18-22

A strong desire to be closer to God pushed a 17-year-old me through the doors of a Russian Orthodox church on a warm spring afternoon. I had no idea that I would walk into a baptismal service and be baptized right there. What I knew, though, was that I needed to experience a tangible ritual - something that would help me align my life with the life of God in me, something that would tell me, "You are home."

Reflecting on my baptism much later in life, I learned that I was baptized during Eastertide. The church I happened to walk into followed the traditional practice of the early church in tying baptism to Easter (*Pascha*), linking the ritual of water to the theology of dying and rising with Christ. Scholars believe that this connection between our baptism and Christ's resurrection was Peter's unique contribution to early Christian thought.

As if riffing on an ancient creed, Peter writes that Christ suffered (*pascho*) to bring us to God. Christ defeated death. Christ ascended into heaven and now reigns over all. Christ's life fills all the nooks and crannies of reality - our past, our present, and our future. Nothing and no one remains shut off from the reach of Christ's grace. Everyone gets a second chance. The ritual of your own baptism is here to remind you of that.

And this is a gift we also find in Lent. Every year, we are reminded that there is a second chance. Every year, we have an opportunity to allow ritual to shape our theology once again. We pick up simple disciplines to train our attention to notice grace, to become more aware of the life-breathing Spirit present with us at this very moment. We spend time in the story of Christ's suffering and resurrection to re-story ourselves in the narrative of our faith.

Here is my blessing for us all this season:

As we walk toward God, may we remember that we are being brought to God.
As we intentionally engage with the world differently through our body, may we know that our fasting is about being nourished in ways our soul needs.
And as we contemplate Christ's suffering, often in the suffering parts of our own hearts, may we stand assured that the grace of Christ reaches into those trapped memories and imprisoning narratives to save, to make whole, and to bring us home.

Psalm 51:1-12

In Psalm 51, David's repentance after the prophet Nathan confronted him about his sin of committing adultery with Bathsheba, David pours out his heart to God. David, someone described as a man after God's own heart, had committed terrible sins, and is pleading to God for God's mercy.

I often jump right to verses 10-12, "*Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.*"

I remember singing that in youth group in a nice peaceful way with our eyes closed around the campfire – vocalizing our desires to draw near to God and to the Holy Spirit. But there are no catchy tunes to illustrate verse 3, "*my sin is always before me*" or verse 4, that names the severity of our sin against God stating, "*against you, and you only, have I sinned?*"

Verses 5 and 6 state, "*surely I was sinful at birth...yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb.*" How do we even wrap our heads around that reality?

This Lenten season, we're invited to sit with the reality of our sinful nature and to bring the pain of that before God. Linger in the discomfort of being a sinful people who have sinned against God and are in desperate need of God's forgiveness. Thankfully, we are not stuck in our sin and God's mercy and forgiveness is abundant, gracious and free.

Loving God,

We confess that we are a sinful people. We have sinned in what we have done and what we have left undone. Holy God, we lay all of that before you and ask for your forgiveness and grace. In your mercy and loving kindness, please restore us and make us whole in you. As we go forward living in the reality of your Holy Spirit, we are filled with gratitude. Your love for us has no bounds and we worship you.

Amen.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Everyone has experienced the devastating impact of a broken relationship. No words can adequately describe the grief, anger, and heartache that come amidst unkept promises. For those involved, broken relationships create a sense of disorientation, confusion, and isolation. God describes his relationship with Judah and Israel in similar ways: *“They broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them.”* For Judah, the result of this spiritual adultery was exile to Babylon. It left Judah with a question: Had God abandoned his covenant promise?

Into this pain, God gives Jeremiah a comforting word for His people. God promises that he will give a new covenant. It will achieve the goals that the old covenant couldn't accomplish. Michael Williams writes, “The goal of covenant is intimacy, friendship, communion, the richest of interpersonal relationships, in which persons are persons to the full, as is the communion between them.” While these goals of rich relationship could not be achieved through the old covenant, they are offered through Christ in the new covenant (See Hebrews 8).

Reflect on the gifts of the new covenant. Through Christ's death on the cross, God forgives His people's wickedness and remembers their sins no more. Because of Christ's resurrection and ascension, Christians are given the Holy Spirit. The Spirit writes God's law on our hearts and empowers us to obey the Lord. By the Spirit, Christians will 'know the Lord'. This is not primarily intellectual knowledge. It is a relational knowledge that invites us into intimacy, friendship, and communion with God. Through this new covenant, God offers His people forgiveness of their spiritual adultery where a rich relationship is the result. As Jeremiah writes, *“I will be their God and they will be my people.”*

As a pastor, one unique wedding that I officiated was a wedding for a divorced couple. The couple had previously divorced from each other. Over time, they confessed their failings and offered forgiveness to one another. Eventually, they sought to be remarried. Due to the provincial marriage laws, they had to get remarried and make a “new covenant”. What was broken had been restored. This kind of restoration is what God has provided for his people in Christ. As you go through your day, meditate on the new covenant promises offered in this text - God has forgiven your wickedness, invited you to know him, and called you His own. Thanks be to God!

Saturday Examen

Get into a comfortable position. Take a few breaths.

Ask God to guide your reflection and prayer in these moments. Ask Him for the grace to be aware of His work in you this past week.

Reflect on the past week. Begin with Sunday and move through the week in your imagination. Linger on anything that brought you joy, made you smile, encouraged you, or simply made life a little better.

Thank God for these moments of gladness and goodness. Imagine God rejoicing with you.

As you reflect, pause on any difficult or challenging times this week. Also, consider how you have missed the mark. What have you done or left undone that requires repentance?

Ask God for His mercy for sin and comfort for struggle. Imagine God pouring out His love over you.

Pray that God would show you how to respond to the consolation and desolation in your life. Ask Him for His help in responding to His invitation.

Share with God any other thoughts or reflections.

Amen.

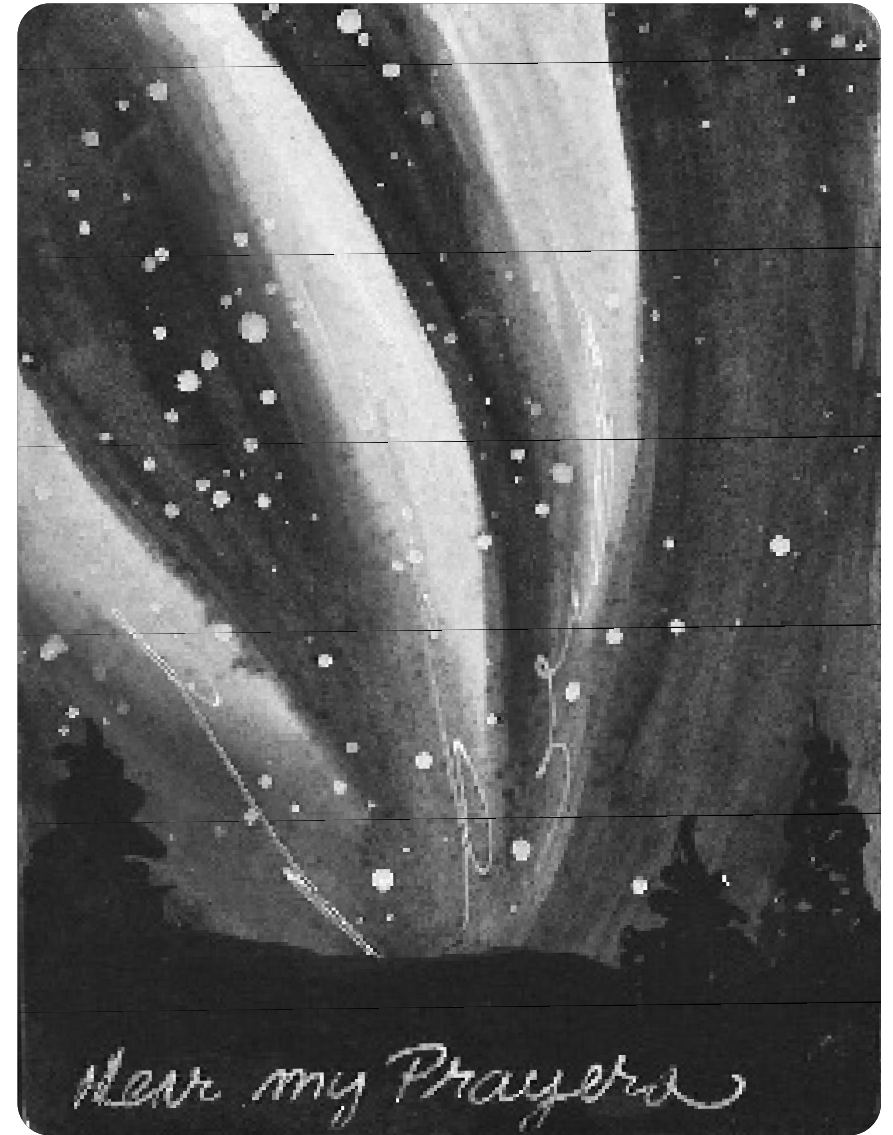
SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

FEBRUARY 25



FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

MARCH 17



Saturday Examen

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Share with God any other thoughts or reflections.

Amen.

Genesis 12:1-4a

One example of how relational God is can be seen in the call of Abram. When the time came for God to fulfill his promise in Genesis 3 of bringing forth a son to reverse the curse and redeem what was broken through sin, it seems that his first thought was, *who can I do this with?* This is like what he did with Adam and Eve, as he sought to partner with them to make a good world even better through relationship. When it came to finding someone to partner with to build an Ark, he may have thought, *"I know a guy."* Did you catch the joke? "I, Noah guy!" Anyway, I digress.

I often prefer to complete tasks independently, rather than seeking assistance from others. If things do not go as planned, I would rather be disappointed in myself than in others.

It appears that God considers the value of community to be greater than the potential risk of disappointment. It would be more efficient for God to reveal himself to his creation rather than his image-bearers. It is believed that it took Noah upwards of a hundred years to build the Ark. God could have done it himself with a word. Regarding humanity, God is willing to sacrifice efficiency for intimacy. I liken it to making cookies with your children or grandchildren. If you want quality cookies, don't make them with children. You are apt to have too much salt and too little sugar in the dough. You don't make cookies with your kids for the quality of the cookies but for the experience of making something together.

God wants to partner with us. He has you and me in mind for another building project. Rather than a boat, we're building a kingdom with His Son, Jesus Christ. God was true to his word. Through Abraham's family, Jesus came. His kingdom advances a little more when we partner with him to see the Father's will done on earth as it is in heaven. A kingdom that will take on a unique shape because of who is a part of it. Think of it like this: every party is unique based simply on who is in attendance. The Kingdom of God is a party, and you're invited. God wants you there. There is no one who reflects him quite the way you do.

Psalm 22:23-31

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” David begins this psalm by scribing these words from the depth of his despair. Desperate to hear an answer, only to be disappointed by the silence.

Where are you God? vs 1-2

Twenty-two verses, David continues to describe the persecution and torment he was facing. These words so poetically and prophetically echoing the suffering that Christ would endure hundreds of years later. Jesus cries out *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* while he hung on the cross, bearing the weight of our sin on his shoulders. David writes as though he was there with Jesus in Golgotha.

Is there another way? vs 3-22

Well known for his honest prayers, David never holds back his questions, and God does not punish him for his honesty. God can handle his pain. As easy as David can question the faithfulness of God, he is also quick to give the Lord praise. You hear the text’s tone change to worship, reverence, and awe as he pens the last half of the passage.

You who fear the Lord, praise Him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor Him! vs 23-26

While still suffering, David chooses to praise the Lord and he welcomes others to do the same. When there was no hope of the trials ending, David remembers the unfailing love of God, and worships Him. He reminds those around him that God has not turned His back, and he has heard the cries of his servant. David knows His Father’s heart.

All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him. vs 27-30

In his deepest moments of suffering, Jesus also remembers the Father’s heart for his people. In his final breaths on the cross he prays for those who have persecuted him.

Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

Jesus suffered the cross, so we did not have to. The hope of Christ proclaimed to the generations before us and continued to be shared to generations who have yet to come.

They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn - for he has done it. vs 31***It is finished.***

It brings me peace to know that when I am in my deepest pain, my prayers are heard by the One who understands great suffering.

John 3:14-21

One summer night, in my 20s, I had the foolish idea to lead a group of 14-year-olds on a blindfolded hike. It was a “faith walk” and I led this group of 12, hand to shoulder, up a forested hill. Thirty minutes later, we stood in a field on top of a hill, far away from light pollution. I asked these teenagers to remove their blindfolds and look up into the night sky. We were outside of the city, so starry skies were a regular occurrence. However, the stars shone brilliantly that night – to their eyes, brighter than they had ever seen because of that time spent blindfolded.

John 3:16 is the world’s most well-known Scripture. It is the first verse I memorized. It is a cultural meme, waved at public events, to the point of becoming a regular occurrence. John 3:16-19 provides clear instructions on how to live with God eternally: believe = have eternal life. This formula is clear and simple but wrapped in mystery and the miraculous.

This passage comes in the middle of Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus – the young man who comes under the cloak of darkness, who is trying to wrap his mind around the mystery of the man before him – a teacher who performs “signs” and therefore must be from God. It is clear from Nicodemus’ questions about Jesus’ statements, that he is not understanding Jesus’ meaning even as Jesus calls him out for being a teacher and not understanding. Jesus then recalls Moses hoisting up the snake in the desert. If you are not familiar with the story from Numbers 21, the Israelites were still wandering the desert and complaining, so they were bitten by venomous snakes, and many died. The people repented and to keep living, they had to look up at the bronze snake mounted on a pole. The instructions were clear: look at the snake = life. The instructions were simple, and the event was a mysterious miracle. The parallel between the event in the desert and the event of Jesus’ death on the cross in John 19 is made apparent in John 3:16-19. Look up and live.

The Lenten season is a journey through darkness – the darkness and monotony of fasting, the darkness of death on a cross. But when you arrive at the cross, look at it – *really* look at it, and be in awe of the mysterious miracle of life in death as the resurrection shines brilliantly – brighter than you’ve ever seen it before.

Ephesians 2:1-10

Often, our faith walk goes through seasons of highs and lows. Some days it feels like we really are God's handiwork, living like Jesus, and doing the good works God prepared us to do (2:10). Then there are days where we don't respond well to difficult people or situations. Our reactions are very similar to the ways of the world (2:1).

Lent is a sacred time to reorient our life back to Jesus. What does it mean to you that even on the days when you feel like you failed, when you were rude, when you were stressed, God does not give up on you? Instead, God loves you as you are and invites you into a relationship (2:5). The closer we grow with God, the more we learn about love and grace and are prepared to do good works.

When I think of God's great love for us (2:4), I imagine Jesus holding out His arms so that I may run into them. Despite the day I had—good or bad—Jesus is saying, "Come here anyway." He embraces me, reminds me that my identity is found in Him. That He is the Savior, and the weight of the world is not on my shoulders. He reminds me to trust Him during my struggles. With those reminders, He lets go of me and tells me to continue with the work He has laid out for me.

In this season of Lent, what kind of embrace do you need from Jesus? What can you release to God? How can you invite Jesus in? He is standing there waiting patiently, lovingly, understandably, and with arms wide open.

Lord, Help us run into Your arms and be transformed by Your great love. We long to live out the good works You have created for us.

Amen.

Seth and Sam Jordan | Serve: Global Personnel - MENA Region

Prayer | Psalm 27

Take a moment to be still. Tell God that you are listening.

Read the text. Don't worry about finding meaning or application. Psalms are prayers, simply read the prayer.

Read the text again. Pay attention to a word, phrase, or theme that seems to stand out or shimmer for you. Trust that this is a nudge from the Holy Spirit. Be silent with the word, phrase, or theme. Resist the desire to study the text.

Read the text a final time. What does the word, phrase, or theme invite you to pray? What about your word, phrase, or theme seems like God's invitation to you?

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*Govern everything by your wisdom, O Lord,
so that my soul may always be serving you
in the way you will and not as I choose.
Let me die to myself so that I may serve you;
let me live to you who are life itself. Amen.*

THERESA OF AVILA

Romans 4:13-25

Even when there was no reason for hope Abraham kept hoping...

Abraham never wavered in believing God's promise. In fact, his faith grew stronger....

At first glance, these verses leave me feeling more discouraged than hopeful. I *want* to be a person of unwavering hope and faith, but I know I'm often not. Quite frankly, this level of faith seems unattainable.

As I reread these words from Paul, I am struck by how similar they sound to a Eulogy. A recalling or retelling of Abraham's life. An overview of all the best parts. If I was able to take a sneak peek into his journal, could I gain a greater understanding of his life story and more of his faith perspective? Did he struggle as I do? How did he keep hoping when there was no reason for hope? My faith is often weak and sometimes wavering, especially when life gets difficult or messy and I wonder if this was part of Abraham's journey too.

As I look back over my scribbled thoughts, I'm reminded that sometimes what feels like faithlessness to me might actually be a leaning into faith, as I talk to God about my doubts.

Sometimes I write about "disappointment weighing heavy and my resilience seeping away". Sometimes it's simply a verse, reminding me, "When life gets heavy and hard to take, go off by yourself, enter the silence, bow in prayer" or "*In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world*". And often it's just a prayer, "Lord, help me believe! I'm struggling to believe right now!"

As I read these verses from Romans again, I also notice Abraham is the father of all who believe *because* he believed in the God who brings the dead back to life and who creates new things out of nothing. I believe this too. It is this seed of faith at the core of my being that also gives *me* an unwavering faith. As the most recent notes from my journal remind me, where else would I go Lord? Even in all my messy, wavering, weighed-down moments, You are the one who holds the words of life. God, You are my only hope!

Prayer | Psalm 32

Take a moment to be still. Tell God that you are listening.

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Read the text again. Pay attention to a word, phrase, or theme that seems to stand out or shimmer for you. Trust that this is a nudge from the Holy Spirit. Be silent with the word, phrase, or theme. Resist the desire to study the text.

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My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following You will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that, if I do this, You will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust You always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for You are ever with me, and You will never leave me to face my perils alone.

THOMAS MERTON

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

As we navigate through the season of Lent, I have written a note and placed it on my desk as a daily reminder: "Lent is a time to release and let go so we may make room for the life in which God invites us to."

I have never been a good person to release and let go. I hold on to how things are tightly and carry them with me and live my life like that is just how it was supposed to be. I was painfully shy, but that's just how God made me...right? I had a constant narrative of negative self-talk constantly running through my head, but that's just how I was...right? It was a very lonely headspace that I had placed myself in.

I realized I was looking at myself incorrectly and from the wrong perspective...one I had created for myself. How I was looking at myself wasn't true. Sin never tells the truth and not having faith in God and his ability to sustain me meant I was saying 'no' to the things that God wanted me to say 'yes' to. I had to let God be God and live my life according to how he wanted me to, not how I perceived was the way that it was supposed to be.

Psalm 107:6 says, *"Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress."*

I had heard of people calling out to the Lord but had never given thought as to how one would actually do that. Do they call to him in a loud internal voice? Is it something that their heart does? Send out a beacon of sorts? Maybe. I, however, in my frustration, verbally called out to him. I told him that I was tired and that I knew I was not living life the way he wanted me to live.

My favorite noun to describe God is 'chain breaker' because in my personal experience, that is exactly what he has done for me. It is absolutely God, who, after my desperate plea to him, started bringing people and events into my life that really challenged me and pushed me outside of my comfort zone. The following few years, I felt Jesus walk beside me as we maneuvered my life, which, in return, started to change me inwardly. I was starting to see how God made me, not how I was settling to be.

I cannot imagine going back to who I thought I was and the life I was living, because that was 'just how it was'. I have grown leaps and bounds by the grace of God, and I will continue to look for ways in which I can live my life to glorify him. Our relationship with Christ is not about changing our behavior, rather it is about God changing us inwardly to be like Him, (Romans 12:2,8:29) which then, changes our behavior.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He sent out his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave. Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind. Let them sacrifice thank offerings and tell of his works with songs of joy. Psalm 107:19-22

Mark 8:31-38

What if Christ isn't asking us to deny ourselves or the temptations of the world to only instill in us an unwavering sense of self-discipline? What if by rebuking Peter for acting based on the world's influence, He wasn't acting as an angry school teacher but as a gracious father? Jesus saw that Peter wasn't keeping His eyes on the things of Heaven and He knew that that would only cause Peter grief; Jesus wanted something better for him. He wants something better for us.

I can testify that chasing the world while neglecting Jesus brings heartache. However, I can also testify that denying myself the things of this world and carrying my burdens without a genuine relationship with Jesus, is just as fruitless. I would argue that it's more so. It can be easy to fall into the trap of trusting in the world's empty promises and seeking validation from the wrong sources, but it can be just as easy to believe that habits, discipline, and complete removal from the world will solve that hollow feeling inside us. I don't believe that this is God's heart for His children, and I don't believe that is what He means when He tells us to follow Him, crosses in tow.

As I read this passage and pray through the text, I firmly believe Jesus is calling me into a season of abandoning the ever-present urge to whip myself into shape. He is reminding me that the call to deny oneself is never a call to self-degradation or to prove yourself to others. He calls us to deny ourselves of anything that is acting as a barrier between us and Him. He wants a relationship with us, and He knows that the world alone won't offer lasting gratification.

However, abstaining from something, just for the sake of it, also won't offer lasting gratification if it doesn't nudge us closer to Jesus. He calls us to seek after and desire Him with *all our heart*. I want my whole heart to belong to Jesus. I want to believe that by removing myself from the shininess of the world or from something that's hindering me, I am not walking into a life of less but of *more*. Through this season of reflection and letting go, may it act as a reminder that Jesus came not to offer us a life of scarcity but of *abundance*.

Saturday Examen

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As you reflect, pause on any difficult or challenging times this week. Also, consider how you have missed the mark. What have you done or left undone that requires repentance?

Ask God for His mercy for sin and comfort for struggle. Imagine God pouring out His love over you.

Pray that God would show you how to respond to the consolation and desolation in your life. Ask Him for His help in responding to His invitation.

Share with God any other thoughts or reflections.

Amen.

Numbers 21:4-9

In moments of need - where do we choose to look? I think this a very human question and find it to be a constant biblical query as well. There is a unified push amongst the biblical authors to consider where we choose to look.

In Numbers 21:4-9 Israel is in the wilderness between slavery and the land of promise. The space of wilderness is an appropriate one for Lent. In [A Way Other Than Our Own](#), Walter Brueggemann describes Lent as “being in thin places without resources and being driven back to the reliability of God, and our capacity to trust God.” The people of Israel certainly feel themselves in a “thin place”, and throughout their journey they had spoken against Moses many times, but this occasion was different. They also spoke against God. They looked longingly upon their past, being resentful of their rescue from Egypt, and badmouthing God’s sustaining gift of daily bread - manna.

Where were they looking? At all they lacked. It is interesting to see how looking at the **wrong** places doesn’t just blind us from the **right** focus but misconstrues our experiences of **past** moments and distracts us from **future** promises. So, they complain, and then the snakes show up, and there is much that can be written about this sequence. However, I find it interesting that the bible doesn’t outline God placating their complaints or the elimination of snakes, but rather commands where to **first turn their attention**. Sounds much like the invitation given to us.

Jesus references this story in John 3:14-15, likening Himself to the bronze serpent: *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.*

In our lives of lack and longing, look not at the lack first but look to me.

In this Lenten season where are your eyes turned?

- *I lift my eyes to the hills...* (Psalm 121)
- *Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you.* (Proverbs 4:25-27)
- *So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen...* (2 Corinthians 4:18)
- *Look at the birds of the air ... Are you not much more valuable than they?* (Matthew 6)

This is what I have found - when you focus on what you lack, faith dies. Faith is choosing to seek and to seek is faith forming work. When we seek, we give that which we seek attention, and attention is the beginning of devotion. Attention leads to adoration. So today on your Lenten journey might you hear that bold invitation - LOOK. Not at what you lack, but at the one who brings help, provides guidance, considers the heart, is eternal, dwells with you, cares for you, who heals you, and saves you.

Look first to Jesus and discover him being all that you lack and more.



Exodus 20:1-17

Thunder and lightning. Billowing furnace-hot smoke. God's commanding voice that caused Mt. Sinai and the people at its base to tremble. Is it any wonder that Exodus 20 says the Israelites shook with fear and "*stayed at a distance*"? Who would dare draw near to this terrifying presence?

Yet Moses exhorts the people to not be afraid. For him, this ominous moment reveals God's fierce love for his people. Moses knew God in and beyond the present darkness because he had experienced not only his fearsome power but also his loving faithfulness. He witnessed God's protection at birth, calling through a burning bush, unimaginable power at the Red Sea, patience in the wilderness, and presence towards the promised land. I too can recount God's power, goodness, and faithfulness, but in moments of darkness and doubt, I struggle to remember and, like the Israelites, step back from him.

Throughout Moses' life, the ever-present God invited him to draw near in trust and dependence, to move *towards* God's love, not away. Moses chose to turn back again and again to the One who faithfully and fiercely loved him. We too have that choice before us – to remain at a distance or approach God as Moses did at Mt. Sinai.

Fear, disappointment, shame, or suffering may contribute to the distance, but we like Moses can "draw near to the thick darkness where God was." Gerald Sittser in [A Grace Disguised](#) wrote this after the tragic death of his wife, daughter, and mother:

"The quickest way for anyone to reach the sun and the light of day is not to run west, chasing after the setting sun, but to head east, plunging into the darkness until one comes to the sunrise...I discovered in that moment that I had the power to choose the direction my life would head, to run from the loss and pain or **to face it**...and allow myself to be transformed by my suffering rather than to think I could somehow avoid it."

The Lenten journey is an invitation to know God deeper in the darkness of Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection. Jesus asks as he did the disciples in John 6 when others turned away, "*Do you want to go away as well?*" May we respond like Peter, "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God.*"

Saturday Examen

Get into a comfortable position. Take a few breaths.

Ask God to guide your reflection and prayer in these moments. Ask Him for the grace to be aware of His work in you this past week.

Reflect on the past week. Begin with Sunday and move through the week in your imagination. Linger on anything that brought you joy, made you smile, encouraged you, or simply made life a little better.

Thank God for these moments of gladness and goodness. Imagine God rejoicing with you.

As you reflect, pause on any difficult or challenging times this week. Also, consider how you have missed the mark. What have you done or left undone that requires repentance?

Ask God for His mercy for sin and comfort for struggle. Imagine God pouring out His love over you.

Pray that God would show you how to respond to the consolation and desolation in your life. Ask Him for His help in responding to His invitation.

Share with God any other thoughts or reflections.

Amen.

John 2:13-22

Most of us are quite familiar with this passage, where Jesus drives the money changers and those selling animals (for sacrifices) out of the Jewish temple. But is there more here for us to consider than Jesus criticizing people for doing business in the temple, as important as that may be?

In its parallel passages in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus, quoting Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11, says: *“Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”* (Mark 11:15-17)!

The temple in Jerusalem had four courts: 1) Court of the Priests, 2) Court of Israel/ Men, 3) Court of the Women, and 4) Court of the Nations/Gentiles (cf. Revelation 11:2). Therefore, the Outer Court of the temple, the Court of the Nations, was intended for non-Jews (Gentiles) to come to worship Yahweh.

Unfortunately, the Jewish leaders had forgotten that they had been blessed to be a blessing to all nations (Genesis 12:2-3), so there weren’t many, if any, Gentiles in that section of the temple. Therefore, they had put it to “good use”: selling animals for Jews to offer their sacrifices. But Jesus was not at all pleased, that instead of inviting and praying for the nations/Gentiles, their “court” was being used for business: One of the highest purposes of the temple, to reach out to the nations, was being neglected, for more “practical” purposes.

In response, the Jewish leaders challenged Jesus’ authority for what he did and said, to which he replied: *“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”* Looking back, his disciples understood, and so can we, that he was referring to his own body, which the religious and political leaders would destroy, but God would raise again. But if we are honest, we might have felt as confused, and perhaps angry, as those Jewish leaders were: *“But we’re providing such a good and necessary service: sacrificial animals!”*

This Lenten season, may we reflect on how we also can fall short, letting the “business” of our lives, and even of our churches, crowd out more important priorities, such as praying for the nations.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, as we continue our Lenten journey, may we and our churches come to be called “a house of prayer for all nations”! Amen.

Psalm 19

In 1994 our family moved from sunny Calgary to Balfour, B.C. which is a small community in a valley on Kootenay Lake. Winter days are very short, and clouds often settle in, hiding the sun for days at a time. In those rare moments when the sun breaks through you feel this sudden JOY! And then it comes...awareness that you need to clean house! Suddenly you can see the dust and dirt that’s been there all along but is hidden by the clouds and darkness. In our passage today, David calls on God to ‘shine the light’ on his life – to show him the ‘dirt’ that is lurking in the shadows that he can’t see.

In our passage today David addresses these hidden places in our hearts in Psalm 19:12-14 LBT: *“But how can I ever know what sins are lurking in my heart? Cleanse me from these hidden faults and keep me from deliberate wrongs; help me to stop doing them. Only then can I be free of guilt and innocent of some great crime. May my spoken words and unspoken thoughts be pleasing even to You my Rock and my Redeemer.”*

Interesting that God is as concerned about the hidden (thoughts) as the visible (speech), knowing that our thoughts are the seeds of our words and actions.

In Psalm 139:23.24 GWT, David writes, *“Examine me, O God, and know my mind. Test me and know my thoughts. See whether I am on an evil path. Then lead me on the everlasting path.”*

The season of Lent is a time for us to seek God’s light to shine in those hidden corners of our heart. If we ask, He will show us. Then He can help us turn back onto the everlasting path. While it’s sometimes annoying, there’s something comforting about the GPS lady in the car when she says “recalculating, recalculating”. What she’s really saying is, “You’ve turned the wrong way, but you’re not lost. I can guide you back onto the road to your destination”.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, shine Your light into the hidden places of my heart and mind today. And give me courage to confess the sin that lurks there and seek Your forgiveness and grace as You lead me back onto the everlasting path.

Prayer | Psalm 63

Take a moment to be still. Tell God that you are listening.

Read the text. Don't worry about finding meaning or application. Psalms are prayers, simply read the prayer.

Read the text again. Pay attention to a word, phrase, or theme that seems to stand out or shimmer for you. Trust that this is a nudge from the Holy Spirit. Be silent with the word, phrase, or theme. Resist the desire to study the text.

Read the text a final time. What does the word, phrase, or theme invite you to pray? What about your word, phrase, or theme seems like God's invitation to you?

If this is an unfamiliar practice for you, know that it can take some time to get used to reading and praying Scripture this way. We are used to analyzing and theologizing, Lectio Divina invites us to meditate on God's Word in His presence, guided by the Spirit. Take a few moments to respond to God in prayer using your word, phrase, or theme.

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Come and fill the hole in my heart.

I want to come to know you, and to love you, and to follow you.

I want to share your desires for my life and the world.

Please shape all my desires so they may echo yours.

Help me to learn from those who have gone before me,

who have sought to shape their lives according to your desires.

Above all, help me to make those daily choices

that will enable me to live more in tune with your dream

for my life and our world, for this is my deepest desire.

TREVOR HUDSON

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

These past 2 years, I was privileged to walk alongside community members who struggle with poor mental health. I would provide rides for appointments, facilitate group meetings to encourage social skills, or just go for a walk in the park. Sometimes I witnessed courageous growth; other times I witnessed addiction relapses. And at times, I witnessed a sustaining faith in God amid their struggles. They didn't explain their theology or what they believed, nor could they make sense of the injustice of their traumas. But I glimpsed the beauty of their simple trust despite ongoing grief at what their illness had stolen.

One woman, who I'll call Amira, had fled a war-ravaged country. She tried to escape the horrors of war by marrying someone who might protect her only to have spousal abuse be more traumatizing than the war. She was left emotionally and mentally crippled. But every time I chatted with her, she would respond to situations in her life with "Thanks, God!" When her landlord improved the security in her apartment, she would say, "Thanks, God!" If her children came to visit, she'd say, "Thanks, God." If her goldfish was thriving, she'd say, "Thanks, God." If tomatoes were on sale, she'd say, "Thanks, God."

In 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, Paul reminds the Corinthian church of the foolishness of God which confounds the wisdom of this world. That the Messiah Jesus would die dishonorably on a Roman cross as a criminal and that our Lord's suffering would somehow inaugurate the Kingdom of God... all of this was unfathomable for the world's wisdom. But God's foolishness is far wiser, stronger, more powerful, far beyond the greatest of human intellect, strength and might.

We might do well to take a page out of my friend, Amira's, book. She doesn't intellectually understand her theology, but in the morning, she knows that although her night was once again plagued with nightmares, she remains a child of God.

How do we seek a deeper friendship with God? Seeking God may simply be saying (on repeat) 'Thanks, God,' to our Messiah who has invited us into membership in his family. It's a family that knows God as our faithful father. It's a family who lives in grateful obedience to Jesus, God's unique son, conqueror over the nightmare of the cross and reigning King.

Renita Hamm | Rosebud, AB