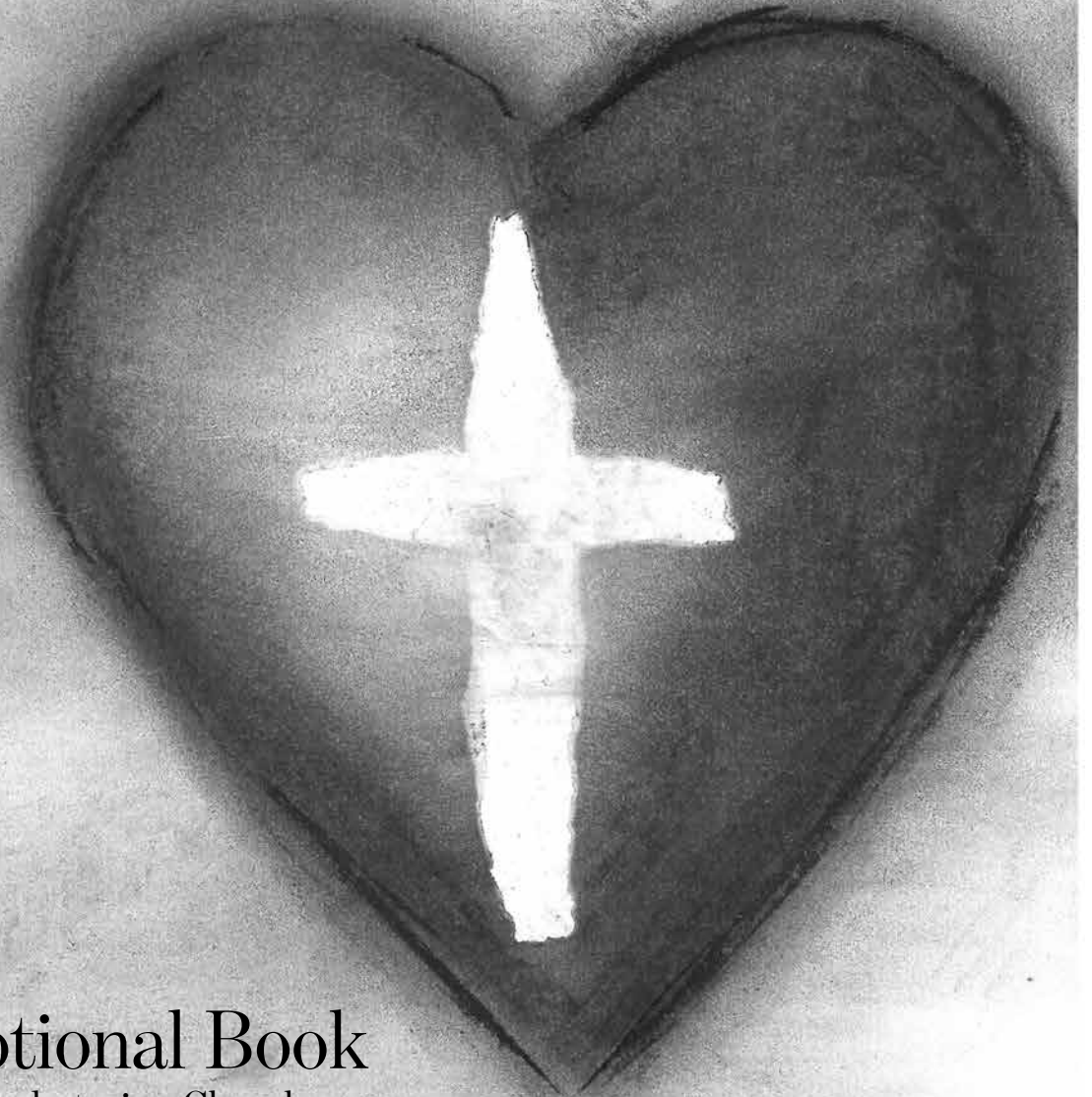


Welcoming the Grace



Lenten Devotional Book

Prepared by Second Presbyterian Church

Little Rock, Arkansas

“*I do not at all understand the mystery of grace—
only that it meets us where we are
but does not leave us where it found us.*

Anne Lamott

Introduction for Lent

What if this Lent was going to be different from any Lent we've ever experienced? What if God intends to offer us many new graces this year? God may transform our lives, with greater joy, greater freedom and deeper hunger for love and service.

If we imagine Lent as a time of self-denial and dread, then our expectations will inhibit us from alternatives. What if we used this time during Lent to anticipate something wonderful that is about to happen? What we anticipate shapes our heart. Preparing ourselves for Lent is a matter of preparing our desires.

When we can imagine what God wants to give us, our anticipation and expectation will grow. There is something coming that we can look forward to. If we are too focused only on ourselves, we may miss the gift God wants to give us.

Grace comes from God. God wants to bless us and enfold us in grace. Embracing this mindset, we can more readily receive the grace God wants to give us.

In *The Mystery of Christ*, Thomas Keating wrote, "Easter, with its grace of interior resurrection, is the radical healing of the human condition. Lent, which prepares us for this grace, is about what needs to be healed, [forgiven and celebrated]."

Open yourself to the discovery of what needs to be healed, forgiven and celebrated during Lent. Let this book guide your reflection into deeper relationship with God and one another. Spread your arms wide to welcome the grace that enfolds and remakes us.

Grateful,
Alisa Secrest
Associate Pastor for Congregational Nurture
Lent, 2019

How to Use This Book

This book was written by members of Second Presbyterian Church, Little Rock. Use these reflections to deepen your own spiritual reflection during Lent. Let each entry guide you to a deeper place of wonder about your relationship with God, God's people and God's creation.

There is an entry for Ash Wednesday, each Sunday in Lent, and every day during Holy Week. Find a quiet time when you can feel in God's presence. Read the reflection on the given date. Pray the prayer which follows.

On the days which follow until a new devotional appears, stay with your reading. Select a word or phrase which stands out for you each day. Ask God to shed light for you on how this word or phrase might relate to your spiritual life. Close your reflection time each day with prayer.

If you are leading a meeting at the church and would like to center your meeting with a devotional, consider a moment to ask participants for a single word from your reading which stayed with them. Close by thanking God for continuing to speak grace in a confusing world.

Also note the family-friendly Lenten practice included in this booklet. It is designed for you to do in your home.

Let us prepare our hearts and minds for a grace-filled Lent.



Ash Wednesday

by the Second Presbyterian Outreach Ministry

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

² *“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

⁵ *“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. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

¹⁶ *“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

— Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-18

For many of us, Lent is a special time during our Christian year when we make commitments to do things that bring us closer to God. For some of us, that means being more deliberate about our prayer life or study of scripture. For others, it might mean giving up things that distract us from being faithful. For others, it might be to increase our church participation or to worship in new ways.

Our scripture lesson is, therefore, very appropriate for the first day of Lent because it focuses on the ways that Christians practice their faith. Our verses for this week, however, are not simply a list of suggestions. Instead, they are some fairly explicit instructions on what we should, and should not do, as Christians. According to this passage, praying, giving an offering, and fasting are not necessarily helpful if they are not done with the right spirit. We shouldn't engage in practices of faith for public praise or admiration. Instead, we should do them with humility and even privately so that we will know that God is our focus and not someone or something else.

As part of our Lenten journey this year, those of us on the Outreach ministry will be offering some opportunities for contemplation and service that we hope will complement our weekly devotions. These opportunities focus on the realities of food insecurity in our community and world and how God might be calling us to help our neighbors. As you use these Lenten devotions to guide your prayer life, we hope that you might consider incorporating some of these Hunger Action practices as well. We will do so, not for the purposes of public praise or self-congratulation, but in hopes that these practices will strengthen our own understanding and compel us to engage more actively in God's work in the world.

Gracious God, create in me a new heart that I may desire you above all else. Amen.



First Sunday of Lent

by Jim Guy Tucker

“You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress; my God in whom I trust.” ... “Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them.”

— Psalm 91:1-2, 14-15

⁶ But the righteousness that comes from faith says “Do not say in your heart ‘Who will ascend to heaven?’ ... ⁸ The word is near you on your lips and in your heart (that is the word of faith we proclaim) ⁹ because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved ... ¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. ¹³ For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

— from Romans 10

To ponder:

A simple description of Lent: “It is a time when Christians dig deeper in their relationship with Christ.”

—Dr. Charles Hardwick, Presbyterian Center, Louisville, Presbyterian Church U.S.A.

Time:

As humans, our relationship with God—with Christ—is shaped not just by our life, but by the 50,000 years of human life on this earth, including the more than two thousand years since Christ’s resurrection. That time is only a moment for God. But none of us of any age, young children and their Moms and Dads, unmarried youth, “old” folks (relatively speaking, a category into which I now fall) can identify with the varying life realities that existed over that time compared to the reality of our lives today. But Christ came to us from God and remains with us now inviting a relationship.

Our search for that relationship is shaped by the history of the human soul’s search for the heart of God. That heart is revealed in Christ on the cross. “God is Love” (1 John 4:16). William Sloane Coffin said “Faith is not believing without proof. It is trusting without reservation.” (Coffin, William Sloane. Credo. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004. 40).

The search for a relationship with God did not culminate just one time in His gift of Jesus or Jesus’ gift of his human life. It may culminate and our relationship with Christ may strengthen if we grasp that each of us are “spirits that have bodies not the other way around.” (Coffin 171).

It culminates every time a person is able to accept, believe, and choose to reach out to and have faith in Christ. It is a similar love and relationship and trust as we have or had with our Mothers and Fathers, with our families and friends. Let Lent be a time for us to dig deeper into the same sort of relationship with Christ. There our spirits—our souls—will find both new desires, and new ways to serve God and our fellow humans in Christ’s name.

*Loving God, grant us courage to dig deeper in our relationship with you.
Delight us with your spirit and the joy of serving in Christ’s name. Amen.*

Lenten Candle Cross

A Family Friendly Practice for Lent

This Lenten devotional practice is similar to lighting candles on an Advent wreath. Instead of lighting one additional candle each Sunday, for Lent, we begin with all candles lit, then extinguish one each week.

Materials Needed: Six purple votive candles and one white votive candle in holders.

Place the candles on your table in the formation of a cross. From top to bottom, place a purple, a white, then three purples. Place a purple at either side of the white candle. The white candle is the Christ Candle.

Each week, use the litany and scripture provided to guide your activity and conversation. Begin with all candles lit for each weekly practice. Each week, extinguish one purple candle. If you are doing this activity with a meal, it is good to do it at the beginning of the meal, so you spend time noticing how the light diminishes each week. On Good Friday, we will extinguish the white candle, the Christ Candle. For Easter Sunday, we light the Christ Candle, then use it to light all other candles.

Each time being with:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

Family: And also with you.

Leader: Lift up your hearts.

Family: We lift them up to the Lord.

Sing: *Blow your Lenten candle out*
(Tune: Jesus Loves Me)

Blow your Lenten candle out.

Face your fears and face your doubt.

Christ our Lord who lived and died,

On the cross was crucified.

Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me.

Yes, Jesus loves me; the Bible tells me so.

Read the Great “I AM” Statement and Conversation Starter. Then close with prayer.

(The Lord’s Prayer if your children are old enough)

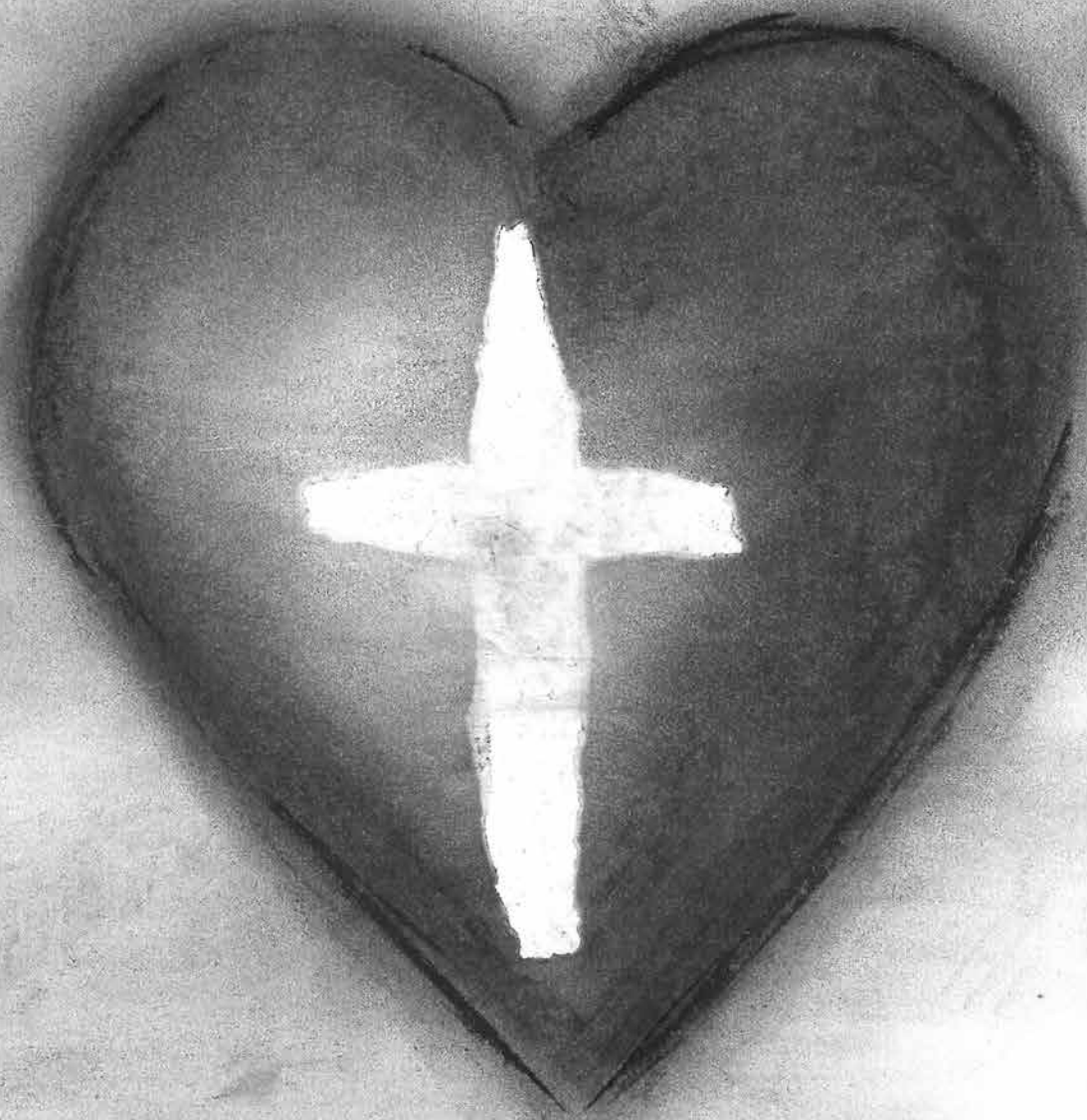
— Adapted from a resource prepared by Linda LeBron

Week One

Jesus said, “I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of Life” (John 8:12)

Why is it better to walk in light than darkness?

How does Jesus give us light for our way?



Second Sunday of Lent

by Daniel Ford

¹ The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? ² When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—my adversaries and foes—they shall stumble and fall. ... ¹³ I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. ¹⁴ Wait for the Lord, be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!

— Psalm 27

¹⁷ Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸ For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. ¹⁹ Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹ He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. ¹ Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

— Philippians 3:17-4:1

When I was in high school, I went on a Second Presbyterian mission trip to the border town of Reynosa, Mexico, a city plagued by violence and poverty. To drive across the Rio Grande is to see firsthand the real world effects that a manmade concept like “citizenship” has on a place. Geographically, Reynosa is no different than McAllen, Texas, its sister city across the border. But Reynosa and its people struggle in a way that those in McAllen often do not.

Citizenship is a divisive topic in today's world—a discourse fraught with absolutism, fear mongering, and imperfect answers to impossible questions. It is a discourse filled with walls and borders and fences, exclusionary rhetoric and policies designed to protect a certain vision of citizenship.

But we, as Christians, must remember that we are dual citizens. Apart from the countries listed on our passports, Paul reminds us in his letter to the Philippians of a holier citizenship, a higher and more divine belonging as Children of God. A citizenship that is easy to forget in the face of its more immediate earthly counterpart.

But this heavenly citizenship is not a reward we recoup at death for having lived a good Christian life. It is a condition of our living selves, a condition in which we must renew our focus and energy. May we spend this Lenten season of waiting doing justice, actively exercising and proclaiming the joys attendant to such a dual citizenship.

*Almighty God, open our eyes to your goodness around us.
Help us to see that goodness in people of every nation,
exalting the beauty and breadth of our citizenship not of
any one country, but of Heaven. Amen.*

Lenten Candle Cross

A Family Friendly Practice for Lent

Week Two

Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for my sheep.” (John 10: 14-15)

How does it feel to know that you belong to someone who thinks you are so important, loved, and valuable that he would give up his life for you?



Third Sunday of Lent

by Jean Kohler

*“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
⁶ Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;
⁷ let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”*

— *Isaiah 55:1, 6-7*

In Isaiah 55:1-9, an amazing offer is extended! We receive an invitation to share in the fruits of a new kind of life. It is free and offered to absolutely everyone. It tells us that we can give up the race for possessions that can never satisfy our deepest longings. Instead, we are invited to “come to the waters,” to eat and drink what is good.

The theme of waters in the Bible reminds me especially of the Psalmist longing for God “as a deer longs for flowing streams” (Psalm 42:1); Jesus inviting the Samaritan woman to the “... spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14); and Isaiah’s words, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.” (Isaiah 12:3). The water, wine, milk, bread, and the “good” offered here are not of this world but are a feast where everyone will be satisfied. To us, it might be an invitation to share in the body and blood of Christ. To those who accept this invitation, God will extend the everlasting covenant made with David—God’s “faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him.” (Psalm 89:24)

The only condition is to “incline your ear, and come to me.” There are no barriers between the people and our God. God’s love for all people and the dependability of God’s word are truly celebrated here.

There is a note of urgency though in verses 6 and 7—the need for repentance and renewal. To me, it seems my job is to try to bring justice and the love of God to my neighbors and all the world in any way I can.

Years ago, I read a devotional that stuck with me. It told of members of a symphony warming up for a performance. As each person played his/her own instrument, there was a total cacophony of sound. Then the oboe sounded its piercing note to which the other instruments tuned. The orchestra then became one harmonious unit. The eternal word of God intersecting with our lives today puts us “in tune” and brings about the same order and harmonious effect.

*Loving God, help me to accept your offer
and share your love with others,
so that all might receive you.
In Christ’s name, Amen.*

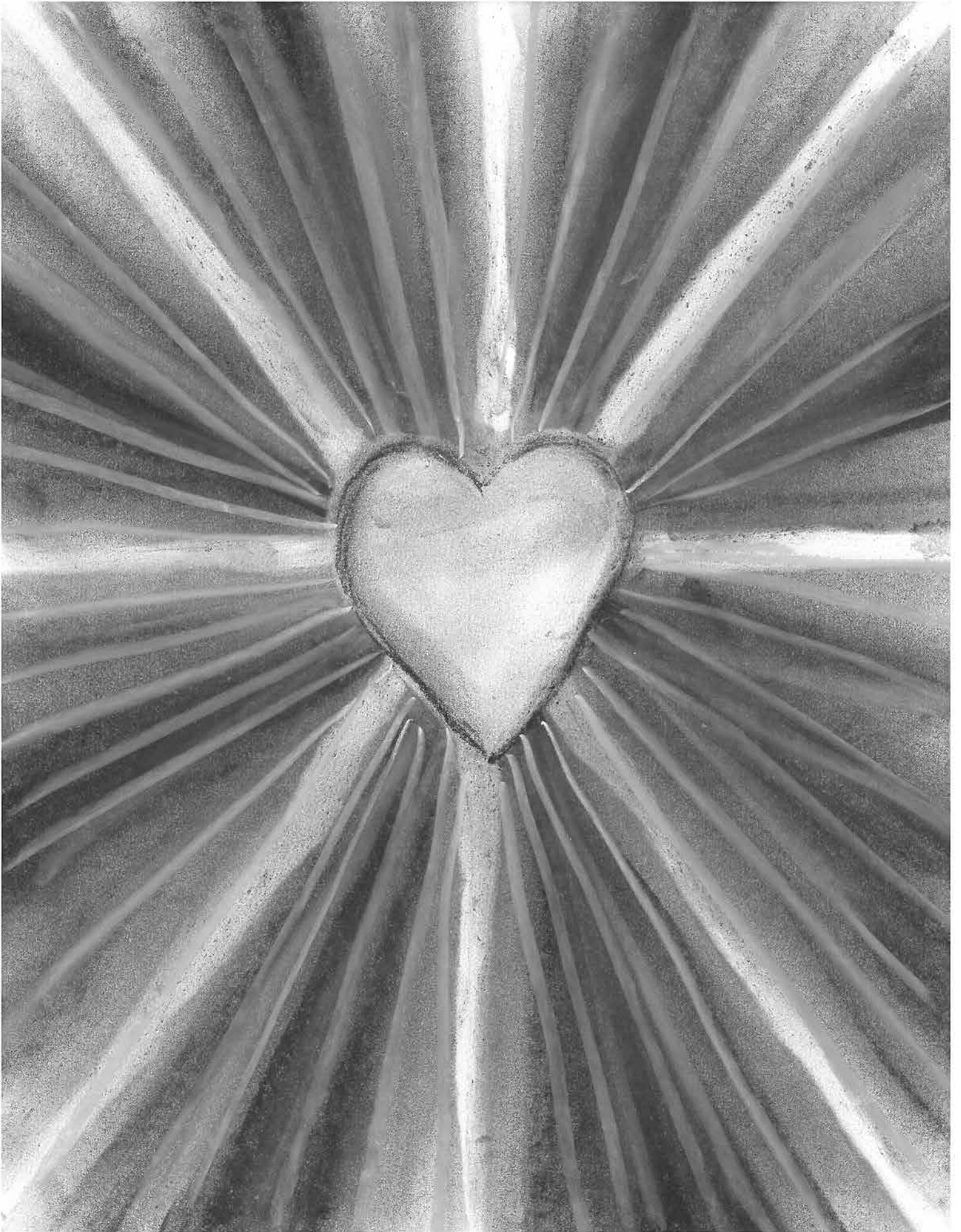
Lenten Candle Cross

A Family Friendly Practice for Lent

Week Three

Jesus said, “I am the Gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that you might have life and have it abundantly!” John 10:9-10)

Jesus opens the door to a place where we can live our lives without fear. How can we make the most of that and live abundantly, joyfully, fully?



Fourth Sunday of Lent

by Kathryn McMillian

“¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

— II Corinthians 5:16-21

The more I read this verse, the more I enjoy it. Initially, I struggled with the idea of discarding the “human point of view”—we are all human, are we not? How could I “discard” that part of me that fumbles over myself, gets pulled into another political discussion that doesn’t end well, or still making unhealthy choices despite my promise to do otherwise? I’d love to get rid of it but it still seems to be there.

Then the verse speaks about new creation and reconciliation which reminds me of a couple of coping skills I’ve been using lately. One I borrowed from my yoga teacher who ritualistically says at the end of class “The light within me recognizes the light within you.” The other one borrows from Marsha Linehan in DBT therapy where there is an “inner well” of knowledge that we all can access, that helps us all connect with our “wise mind.”

I use these ideas when I come across particularly terrible things—a cancer diagnosis of a family member, telling my daughter about her beloved dog getting hit by a car, feeling immense sadness “The light within you recognizes the light within me”—or the “Christ in you, recognizes the Christ and love within me”—it cannot take it away but it can get us past our human selves to our light and wise selves where we can communicate love for each other and bear the pain together. We can be Christ’s ambassadors to each other, and we can live with reconciliation.

*Creative God, you continue to create a new thing within me.
Open my eyes and ears to the grace of your life-giving spirit.
Help me embrace the reconciliation of Christ to the world
so I might serve as a loving and faithful ambassador in my life.
In Christ, Amen.*

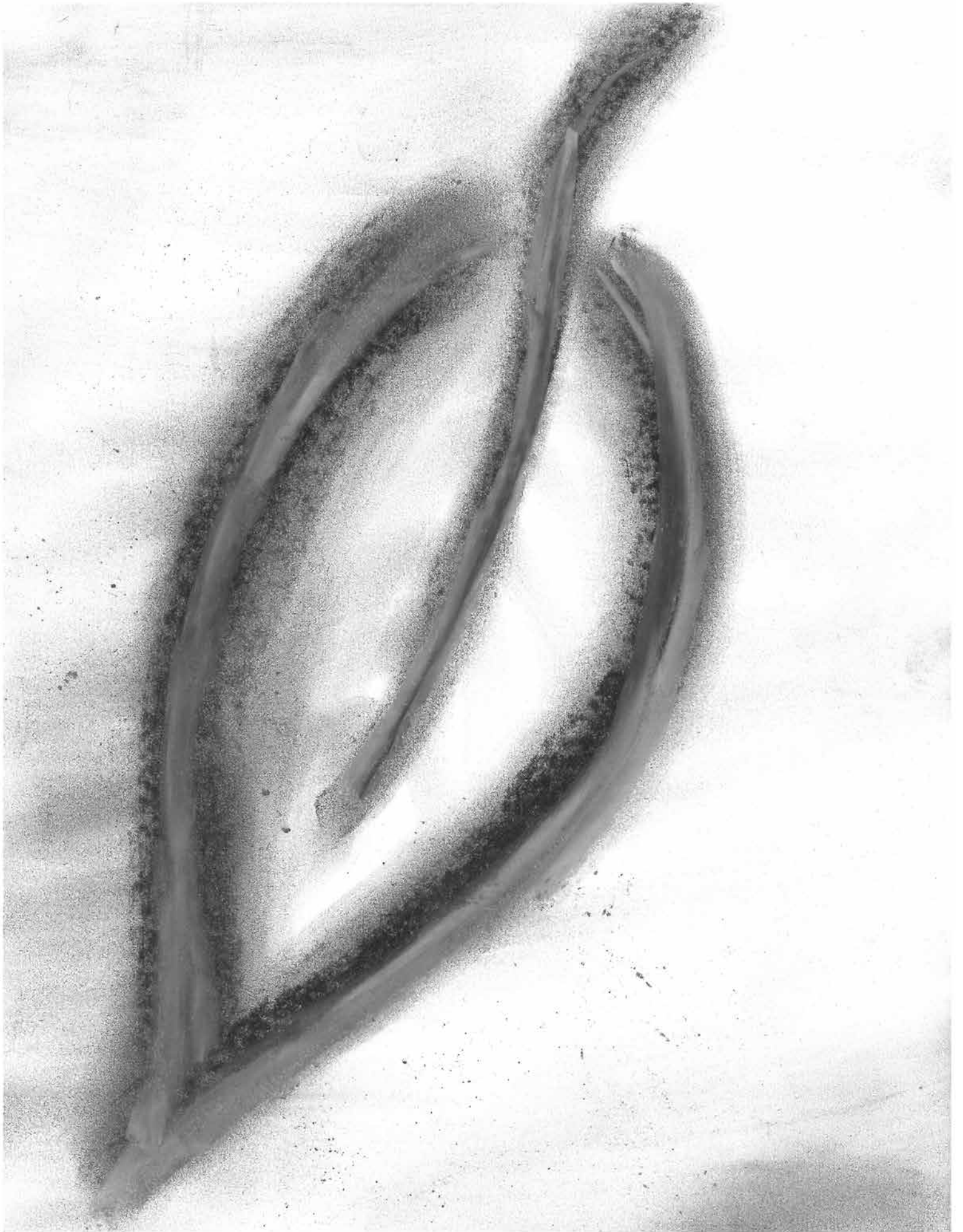
Lenten Candle Cross

A Family Friendly Practice for Lent

Week Four

Jesus said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” (John 14: 6-7)

What are some of the things Jesus did that show us what God is like?



Fifth Sunday of Lent

by Rosslyn Elliott

“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen.”

— *Isaiah 43:18-20*

Lenten Candle Cross

A Family Friendly Practice for Lent

Week Five

Jesus said, “I am the Vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

To abide means to stay close or attached, like a branch to a tree. How can we stay close to Jesus so that we grow to be like him and “bear fruit?” What fruit can we bear?

Wasteland

I do not walk willing into the wasteland.
The wasteland winds its way to me
in my busy, colored life,
It breaks over me in a wave of silent
monochrome
and hushes the chatter from the pews.
The church melts to greys and hazes—
Now I walk in a silent film,
Shadow ripped by light that haunts and hurts,
Flat ground stripped of trees, wilted and sere—
This is the wasteland.
The wasteland finds those wanderers who have
lost something precious.

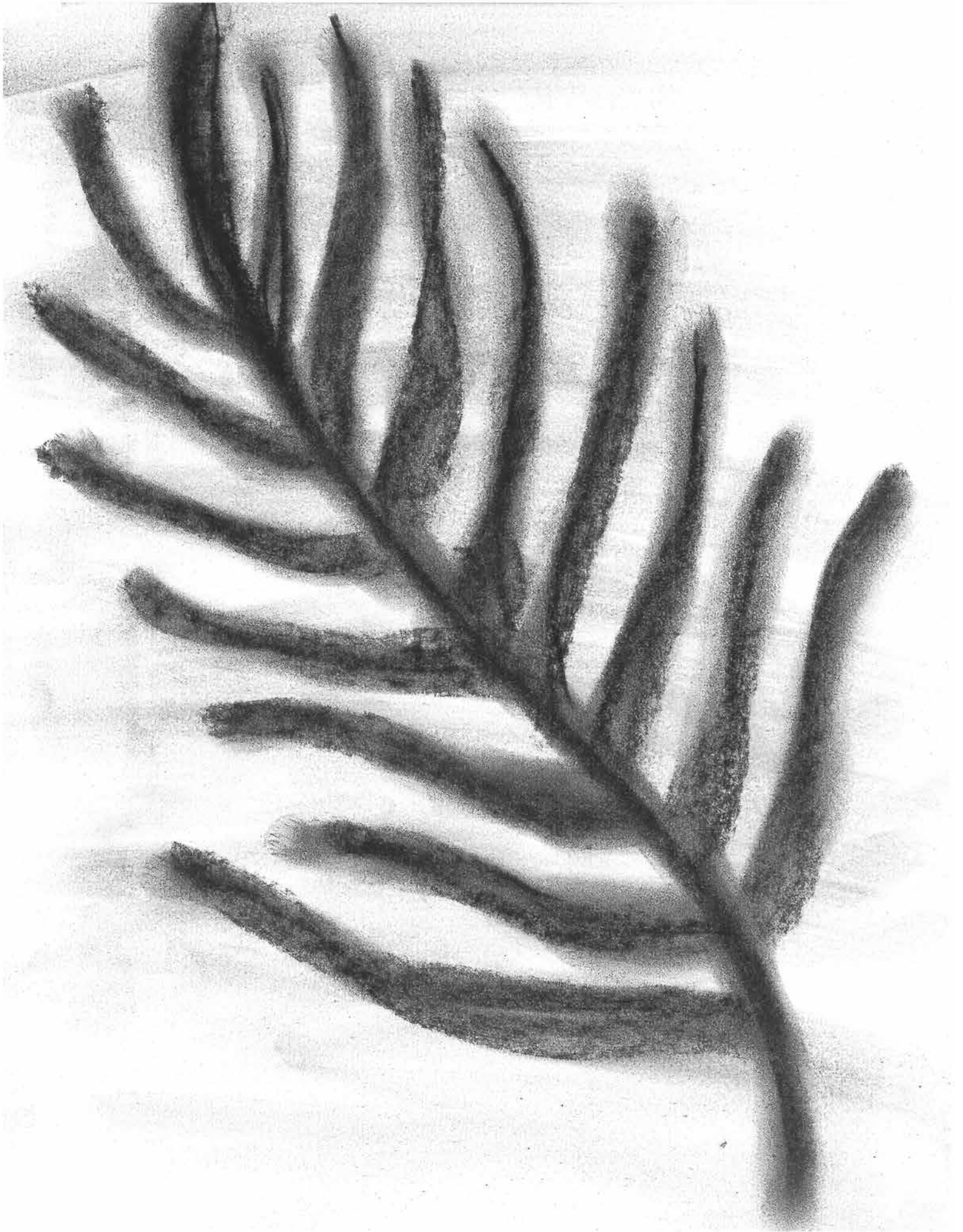
Through the parched silence
I can see that the other world is still there,
That people who seem black and white
still wear the same clothes I know held color
before,
Color that swirled and clashed on their passing
bodies.
Their voices hum below my hearing, murmur half
words like ghosts of fever,
But in their other world, the voices must be loud
and merry,
and swirl in confusion at their ears.
Hubbub and color still rule that world.
But not in the wasteland,
Where one foot falls without sound, and another.

They cannot see you
Their eyes drugged with color,
They cannot hear you
Their ears stuffed with voices.

But against their blur of motion,
I see him
Standing still, a slim silhouette,
A study in contrast, the man in black and white.
Our eyes meet. And then he points,
And across the ruined heath
Where once there were pews
I see a spot of green—
Gathering the shadow to itself
Clothing it in moss,
Gentling the light with lichen—
Do they not see?

They do not hear
The trickle of water rising through rock,
The tender shoots of grass creeping through
cracks—
I go to the man in black and white
We join hands and watch.
Something is coming into my soul
It is green.

*Oh God Who Sees,
Help us to see those around us who walk in the silence of grief;
Help us to look for the hope of new life,
your water renewing the wasteland.*



Palm Sunday

by Cyril Hollingsworth

⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

— *Philippians 2:5-11*

Lenten Candle Cross

A Family Friendly Practice for Lent

Week Six

Palm Sunday: Jesus said, "I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35)

We eat bread baked from flour to fill our hungry stomachs. What other kinds of hungers do we have that Jesus might be able to satisfy?

How do we respond to Paul's words: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus?"

These words might seem rather tame when considered at some other time of the year. The problem is that this is Palm Sunday. Even with the palm branches and hosannas, we know what lies ahead. Paul goes on to say how Jesus emptied himself, humbled himself, and became obedient. The humility and obedience of Jesus is not something easily pondered from some ethical or theological dimension when Holy Week looms in front of us.

This passage always is part of the Lectionary readings for Palm Sunday, driving home the point that the mind of Christ Jesus, riding a donkey into Jerusalem on that day, led him to become obedient "to the point of death—even death on a cross." It is a heavy proposition when thinking of Jesus' mind being set to head into Jerusalem. It seems a bit better when you read another translation, which says, "Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus." Those words seem to give me more leeway than "have the same mind."

Whatever the translation, Barbara Brown Taylor's observation hits home when she says, "Paul writes, apparently believing that this is within our reach. On Palm Sunday we do not witness the singular death of a singular child of God. Instead, we witness the kind of self-emptying that we too are capable of. Sooner or later we, too, will be called to be obedient to death. In the meantime we are as free as Jesus to decide how we will spend our energy: on self-protection or self-donation, on saving ourselves, or giving ourselves away?"

Holy Week may stir within us many deep thoughts about God and the meaning of all that transpired that week. Yet we still face the words Paul directs to the church at Philippi, and thereby to us. Perhaps the words will stick with us, as we let ourselves walk with Jesus through this week. In whatever ways the words may become manifest in our lives, let the same mind be in us, becoming obedient, and giving ourselves away.

*Let us sense your presence with us, O God,
as we go through this week, and always.*

Monday of Holy Week

by Ben Barham

“I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”

— *Isaiah 42:6-7*

She looks at her coffee as she talks about her shortcomings. She claims that she is afraid. She hesitates to do this or say that because someone might be uncomfortable. The truth, her truth, frightens her. When she tells me these things, her conviction is deeply grounded. But then, her voice cools. She sighs coldly. “I don’t know. They won’t understand.”

In this moment, God is reaching out a hand to her, if only she would grasp it.

The question is, as the question always is, will she take the hand that is offered? The same hand in the same moment is offered to me as I listen to her. Should I encourage her? Should I just listen? God is there reaching, but what does he want?

It is my own inadequacy that I fear most, as she fears hers. We hear the truth calling us, but doubt our ability to speak it. The inadequacy to take the hand that is offered. To trust that God will lead. How often are we sure of the right path, but doubt our own ability to follow it. We of little faith.

Her fear, my fear, all fear is bound together in the moment where we choose. Take the hand, accept that we don’t know, accept that our weakness is human, and trust that God is there ready to uphold us, to embrace us, to offer the divine love and guidance we need. Or sit, mired in darkness and self-doubt.

In the end, I don’t need to find the answer and neither does she. Deciding what to do is often not within our power. Deciding whether to take the hand of God, that is the choice, the decision that leads us from the darkness. Faith is the question, as the question always is...

*Righteous God, you take my hand leading me toward light and life.
Grant me the courage and faith to follow you out of the darkness. Amen.*

Tuesday of Holy Week

by Fred Harrison

“In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame. ² In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me. ³ Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress. ... ⁹ Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent. ... ¹² O God, do not be far from me; O my God, make haste to help me! ... ¹⁴ But I will hope continually, and will praise you yet more and more.”

—from Psalm 71

There is a reflective and comforting feeling to Psalm 71, Prayer for Lifelong Protection and Help, particularly for someone at an age where his account of Lifelong Protection may be approaching overdrawn status. The Psalmist prays not to be cast off in the time of old age and not to be forsaken when his strength is spent.

These words strike home more keenly to someone in his eighth decade and who has lived through the last few years dealing with illnesses and deaths of old and dear friends. They also call to mind the words of Martin Luther King the night before his death—“Like anybody, I would like to live a long life; longevity has its place.” But this was not to be for him with the only certainty being God’s promise in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

As one who survived a brain aneurysm over thirteen years ago, the reality of lifelong protection has special meaning for me and, as the Psalm says, I remain filled with continual hope.

But Psalm 71 is not just a prayer to be sung for old age since it is for “lifelong” protection and help and expresses praise for all protection and help which has led to this moment—throughout all deaths, illnesses and other trials of life as well as marriages, children, grandchildren, illnesses cured and other joys of life. In none of these have I been forsaken and I express daily praise for God’s help. It is also ironic that the prayer is to not be “forsaken,” echoing the words of Jesus on the cross days later. And the word “forsaken” expresses an intentional abandonment more than simply neglecting to protect or watch over—a harsh thought for a loving God.

For continued lifelong protection and help, I pray to our abiding and steadfast God in whom we live and move and have our being—thanks for our time on earth and for eternal life to come. Please grant me courage to face my final days strengthened by the certain knowledge that you will never forsake me—my rock of refuge and my salvation.

*Sheltering God,
renew my faith in your protection and loving care.
Amen.*

Wednesday of Holy Week

by Marguerite Burgin

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.”

— Hebrews 12:1-3

Living from the Inside Out

Jesus learned to live his life from the inside out. This gave him a deep understanding of what he was to do and how to do it. He was taught from a young age by his elders. As he listened to them, he also listened inwardly. There were people around him who wanted him to be a certain way to fulfill their idea of how a Messiah would look and act. Throughout his life he took the time to go inward to ask questions from his inner self and to ask for help, trusting that he was being shown the path he was to take. Even when he was reluctant and humanly afraid at times, he persevered.

We too are like Jesus. We have parents, friends, and teachers who tell us how to be and what to do with our lives. We have the same voice inside us that wants to have a deep relationship with us; who wants to guide us; who wants to help us realize our true nature. Our part then is to do what Jesus did—go to that place of silence within us so we can listen and do as we are bidden.

We can go to that place trusting that whatever is required of us in this earthly life, no matter how difficult or counter-cultural it is, our inner voice knows us, loves us, and will never leave us along.

Gracious God, enfold us in your strength that we may run the race with perseverance and confidence of your loving nearness. Amen.

Marguerite died February 11, 2019. She wrote this devotional in the month preceding her death. Marguerite was an important part of Second Presbyterian Church. She served here as an elder, Sunday school teacher, and choir member. She led book studies and dream groups for many spiritual seekers over the years.

Maundy Thursday

by Greg Adams

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

— *I Corinthians 11: 23-25*

When I was in high school, Kay often filled the role of my foster grandmother. Sometimes when I came home from college, I was able to visit with her and reconnect. The last time I saw her before her death, she was living in an assisted-living facility. A woman of great strength, grace, and grit, she was not pleased with her present state. She said to me, "Don't remember me this way." Implicit in her comment was the desire to be remembered, but not in this way.

In Paul's account of the last night Jesus had with his disciples, Jesus also expresses the desire of so many of those facing death. He wants to be remembered and he wants this particular sharing of bread and wine to be part of those memories. So much to remember for these he called friends. Teachings that burned within them and shook the foundations of their understanding. Broken rules and boundaries demonstrating a wider grace than they had known. Amazing experiences of healing of mind, body, and spirit. Compassion for their brokenness and the brokenness of others. Sacrifices of their old to making way for God's new. And now this—cryptic and loving words about body and blood. How full their minds and hearts must have been as they remembered. And how full his heart and mind must have been as he prepared for his next and last day. So much to remember.

*God of sacrificial love,
may we also remember and in our remembering
find comfort in our pain,
inspiration in our weariness,
healing in our brokenness,
and courage to follow wherever the Spirit leads.
In memory of the one who was faithful to us
through death and beyond. Amen.*

Good Friday

by Vernon Markham

"¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. ...²³ You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!²⁴ For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him."

—from Psalm 22

I don't know about you, but on certain dates the memory of a loved one who died prematurely or the thought of a tragic situation in the past will almost always re-emerge. Sometimes it's not on that fateful anniversary but on other days while sitting quietly or reading or on my way somewhere. It always causes my heart to ache, a little bit less as each year goes by, but still a reminder of the pain once harshly felt.

In January 2003 my younger sister was diagnosed with leukemia at age forty-four, leaving a loving husband and four beautiful young children in fear for the future. Despite deep faith, loving support from her family and amazing bravery through intense treatments, she died in June of that year. That day was one of the worst I can remember. It's at times like these that we seek God urgently and that the opening verses of Psalm 22 seem so apt. But the passage also offers us a path to hope.

Psalm 22 opens with the words we later hear in the Gospels as Christ's anguished outreach from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It's a human cry to God for an answer to a desperate condition over which one has no control. But God does not answer. The Psalmist goes on to describe scorn and abuse heaped on him – similar to what we as Christians recall of Christ's own humiliation at the hands of the authorities before his crucifixion – with his persecutors even casting lots for his clothing as death closes in. In Psalm 22:24 God does finally respond! "For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him."

The Psalmist was redeemed by God's commitment to the people of Israel, and his faith in this covenant God was strengthened. He offers exuberant praise as his prayers were answered. As Christians we are blessed with the boundless hope that comes through Christ since God does not forget us but loves us deeply and eternally. As 21st century Christians we encircle ourselves with our loved ones and the whole body of Christ surrounding us so that when we have desperate and fearful days, we will be reminded that God hears us. And we know that the hope that comes from God's love will lift us up.

*Lord, hear our cries
and remind us that you never fail to hear us. Amen.*

Lenten Candle Cross

A Family Friendly Practice for Lent

Week Six

Good Friday: Tell the story of the arrest, crucifixion, and burial of Jesus in a simple way and extinguish the Christ candle so all light is gone. (From Luke 22 & 23)

What would life without Jesus be like?

Saturday of Holy Week

by Jenna Rhodes

O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory. ² The Lord has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations. ³ He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God. ⁴ Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises. ⁵ Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre and the sound of melody. ⁶ With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord. ⁷ Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. ⁸ Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy ⁹ at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

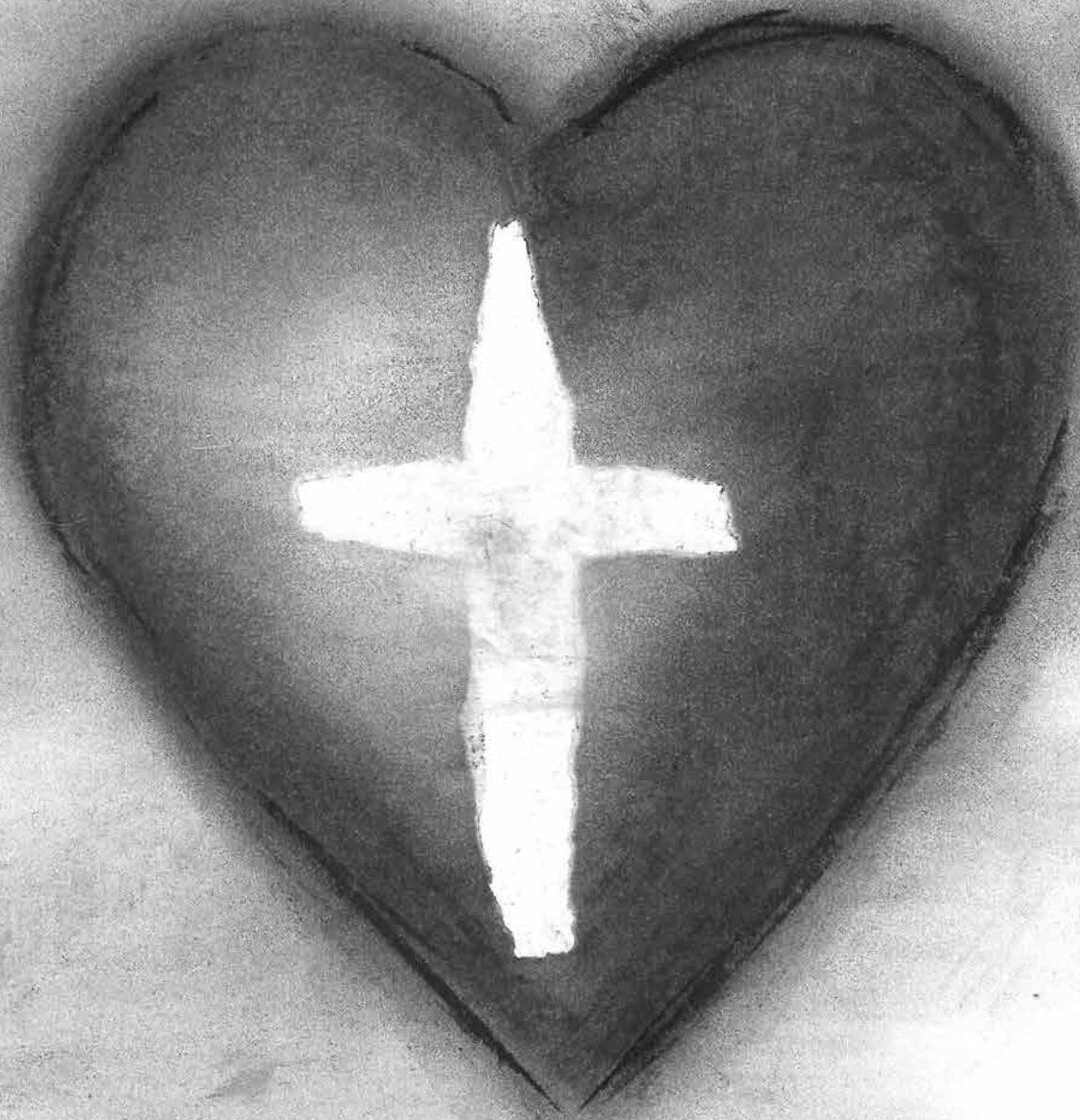
— Psalm 98

I've always loved to sing. Deep breaths in and exhalations of noise and joy and song. I suppose I feel like it's a way to announce yourself to the world, to move the air around you with vibrations of sound. It's an exercise of creativity and emotion. It's a method of expression and communication. When I sing I get a warm feeling in my chest and a huge smile on my face. Music and singing make me happy. But singing publicly has always embarrassed me, until I came to realize that my voice was gift from and a glory to God! He wants to hear me sing and use song to add beauty and harmony to this often troubled world, even if it contains some unintended flats and sharps occasionally!

Psalm 98:1 teaches us to "Sing a new song to the Lord, for he has done wonderful deeds. He has won a mighty victory by his power and holiness." Boy has he! Think of all the amazing things God has done in your life, in the life of the church, in the life of this community. He has given us His only Son, even when we didn't deserve it. He gives us beautiful sunsets even when we're too busy to see them. He gives us others to love and to love us, even though we mess up and need forgiveness. And He gives us music, even though we forget the words and sing off key! He gives us so much in this amazing life. "Let the sea and everything in it shout his praise! Let the earth and all living things join in. Let the rivers clap their hands in glee! Let the hills sing out their songs of joy before the Lord" (Psalm 98:7-8).

It's true. If you sit still for a few moments during your busy day you'll hear them. You'll hear all the songs that are happening around us all the time. Songs singing praise to God for all his goodness and blessings. They sound like the wind blowing, car horns honking, children laughing, dishes clinking, heaters humming, pages turning, keys clicking. They are the many songs of our life, all reminding us of the wonderful deeds that He has done and the brilliant life that He has created for us.

Holy God, we are fortunate as Easter people to know we are not stuck in the darkness after Good Friday. We know what Easter holds and can, therefore, sing the joy of your life-giving song. Remind us in our in-between times of the new life ahead. Amen.



Easter Sunday

by Anne Crow

“²¹ I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. ²² The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. ²³ This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. ²⁴ This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

— *Psalms 118:21-24*

In this passage, the imperfect stone becomes the strength and support for the wall. This parable is reflected in New Testament scripture about Jesus. God placed him in the world and he became the supporting stone even though the priests and rulers rejected him.”

Have you had a time when you needed to become the supporting rock without a way to do it?

Years ago my mother lived in Jonesboro, Arkansas. She was older, with medical issues and no local family. She was independent and my visits every two weeks from Nashville, Tennessee were important.

After getting a scary phone call notifying me about her bad fall, I drove to Jonesboro to the emergency room. She was in great pain and unresponsive from broken ribs, so a stay at St. Bernard’s Hospital began. Her future was uncertain. What should be done?

Late in the third week, a Catholic nun asked to meet with me. She was in her habit with a white head covering and gentle, kind manner. She connected deeply with me. When she held my hands to pray, I felt deep peace and calm about what would come next. Her observation was, “It’s time to have your mother closer to you to help you take care of her.” Her words filled me with peace. Immediately all roadblocks cleared for this to happen. Nothing felt difficult to do. Her transportation to a distant city, a bed in a well-regarded nursing home, finding a local doctor, or dealing with her house of thirty years, all had God’s hand guiding me.

When Mother was safely in the Nashville nursing home, I felt gratitude for the nun who offered this direction. I wanted to thank her but lacked her name or address. When I turned to a friend in the hospital administration, she was very surprised and said that no nuns in habits worked there for at least ten years.

I was stunned. Who came to see me, help me, and support my mother? A Catholic nun came for a Presbyterian daughter and an Episcopalian mother. In my mind, God sent her.

God brought his son, who became our cornerstone, into the world. His followers can be imperfect stones that provide a secure gate for a journey, too, That nun was a cornerstone for us, too.

Lord of Heaven and Earth, thank you for new life made possible through Jesus Christ. Equip me to serve as a fortifying stone where I can bring faith, hope, and love to another. Guide me to live fully as the person you made me to be. Amen.

Lenten Candle Cross

A Family Friendly Practice for Lent

Week Six

Easter Sunday: Re-light the Christ candle and use it to light all the rest. Change the words to your song:

Light the candle of the Lord,
He’s the one that we adore.
Christ our Lord who lived and died
Risen on this Eastertide.
Yes, Jesus loves us. Yes, Jesus loves us.
Yes, Jesus loves us, and Easter tells us so!

Jesus said, “I am the Resurrection and the Life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” (John 11:15-26a)

Easter means that our eternal life has already begun. Only our bodies will ever die. What do you think it will be like in heaven? How can we thank God for Jesus’ resurrection and the promise of ours?

Mission Statement

We, the members of Second Presbyterian Church,
celebrating our rich heritage
and the faith we affirm in Jesus Christ as Lord,
claim our mission
to be a growing and inclusive congregational community
where all are committed:
to grow in knowledge of the faith,
in depth of spirituality,
in the quality of our fellowship,
and in compassion for all God's children
and creation;
to recognize and use effectively
the time, talents, and material gifts
of all members
and of the congregation as a whole;
to care actively
for the spiritual, physical, and intellectual needs
of persons in this congregation, community,
and world,
and to participate meaningfully
in the larger Church.

Statement of Welcome and Inclusiveness

As one part of the church of Jesus Christ, we are inspired and guided by Christ's vision of God's realm—one that includes all who seek to love God and neighbor:

Second Presbyterian Church welcomes all people.

As a congregation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we invite those who respond in trust and obedience to God's grace in Jesus Christ to become part of the membership and ministry of the church.

We would be pleased to have you join us in our journey of faith, regardless of age, race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, economic or family status, ethnic background, mental or physical abilities.



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