



What We **Believe**
And Why

**Daily Devotions
for the 40 Days of
Lent 2017**

*From the Family and Friends of
Grace United Methodist Church*

Lenten Worship Opportunities 2017

Ash Wednesday, March 1

4:45 p.m. Ash Wednesday Worship Experience

7:30 p.m. Ash Wednesday Worship

Palm Sunday Worship, April 9

8:15, 9:30 and 11:00 a.m.

Holy Week Worship Experience - Wednesday, April 12

4:45 p.m.

Maundy Thursday Worship, April 13

7:30 p.m., with foot washing and Holy Communion

Good Friday Worship, April 14

7:30 p.m.

Easter Saturday Worship, April 15

5:00 p.m. in the Sanctuary. This is an Easter service!

Easter Sunday Worship, April 16

8:15, 9:30 and 11:00 a.m.

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www.peopleofgrace.org*



ast year's Lenten theme was "See, I Am Doing a New Thing," but that theme is appropriate this year, too. For the first time in many years, Merrill Litchfield is not spearheading this booklet. He "retired" last year to pursue other interests, but his legacy lives on. Here is a good place to lift him up and thank him once again for his many years of service to this project. I, for one, have missed his guidance, wisdom and companionship in this endeavor. Fortunately, he has contributed to this year's book with some thoughtful devotions that you will find within.

While I am no longer on staff at Grace, I am grateful to Pastor Cindy Marino for the opportunity to lead this project while our communications department settles into a new regime under the guidance of Ashley Pierce. It feels like "old times" for me, and I am honored to bring this 40+-year (probably 50 by now!) Grace tradition of our Lenten devotions booklet into yet another year. I extend heartfelt thanks to all who responded to my personal pleas for devotions and to those who reached out to me of their own volition. Some have never contributed before; others have participated numerous times, and I feel truly blessed by their gifts of spirit and pen.

While this year's theme is based on Adam Hamilton's book *Creed: What Christians Believe and Why* (a study of the Apostles' Creed), I stressed to contributors that they need not have read Hamilton's book (I didn't!) to offer a devotion, nor did they have to follow the theme at all. "Write from your heart on whatever means something to you," I urged them.

This is what I believe should be shared during the season of Lent: meditations from the heart. You will notice that some people have written on-topic, including the traditional Bible verse, hymn and/or prayer. Others have not. "It's all good," because it's all from a place of generosity and candor with those to whom we open ourselves. Coming off an historically contentious election this past year, there could be no greater gift during this wilderness of reflection and darkness before rebirth than the indiscriminate love of Christ.

Blessings,

Barb Ceruti

Ash Wednesday, March 1

Pastor Tammy Scott

BEGINNING THE JOURNEY

It's hard to believe it is already Ash Wednesday. It seems like just yesterday we were celebrating the baby Jesus being born into our hearts once again. Much like the world into which Jesus was born all those years ago, our world is one that is in much need of love, healing, peace, and restoration. And yet, here we are at the start of a new Lenten season in which we prepare ourselves for the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Today marks the beginning of a 46-day journey leading us to Easter Sunday. Last year we held our second Ash Wednesday Experience designed for children and families. I thought that the concepts of Ash Wednesday and Lent would be difficult for children to grasp, but I am continually amazed at just how much our children understand, and I am even more in awe of the questions they ask. Children ask questions as a way of trying to understand something or gain new knowledge.

In a world with Google at our fingertips, we often have the answer to a question before we can even fully type or speak it. But questions of faith (what we believe, why we believe, and why it makes a difference) are not answers that are as easy to pinpoint. Throughout this season of Lent, the people of Grace United Methodist Church are encouraged to ask questions and turn to the historic Apostles' Creed as one place to find some possible answers.

What are your questions about faith? God? Jesus? The Church? Write them down here and spend time during Lent pondering those questions.



Thursday, March 2

Emma CW Ceruti

LETTERS OF LENT

There are three traditional practices that are taken up during Lent: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Prayer is practiced as justice towards God, fasting as justice towards the self, and almsgiving as justice towards neighbors. These can be seen as a form of penitence and as a way to draw oneself closer to God. Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving are usually practiced starting after Ash Wednesday for the 40 days of Lent, not including Sundays. Moses spent 40 days on Mount Sinai with God (Exodus 24:18). Noah spent 40 rainy days and nights during the great flood (Genesis 7:4). The Hebrew people wandered for 40 years in the desert while traveling to the Promised Land (Numbers 14:33). Jesus retreated into the wilderness, where he fasted for 40 days and was tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1-2, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-2). This is why Lent lasts for 40 days.

Each person practices Lent in a different way. Chocolate, meat and soda are typical luxuries that are given up as a form of penance. In the past, I have given up some of these items as a Lenten practice. Seven years ago, I started a new Lenten tradition. Every year, I write 40 letters to 40 different people for 40 days. These 40 people include family, friends, co-workers, teachers, and mentors. I write a personal letter to them, reflecting on our relationship, what they mean to me, and how grateful I am to have them in my life. It is my way of praying, fasting, and giving. I pray for them and I thank God that they are a part of my life. I do not traditionally fast by giving up a physical luxury, but I do give up 20 minutes out of each day to write a letter. Each year, there are a few people who are the same, such as my family and some friends, but there are also new people, new friends and new mentors. It is my form of penance and a way to grow closer to God and the people in my life.

Prayer: Loving Creator, as we embark on this Lenten journey together, help me to remember how much I need you in my life. Help me to appreciate all of the friends and family who have helped me become the person I am today. May this reflection be a way to clear away the clutter in my life and see you more clearly. May I acknowledge my faults and failings and my deep need for your loving forgiveness and grace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Friday, March 3

Lynn Leitzen

A LENTEN LOVE SONG

Every year, without fail, as we enter the Lenten season, at least one of the Junior Singers asks if we can sing Helen Kemp's "A Lenten Love Song." It has become somewhat of a tradition. And, regardless of whether or not we are preparing to sing it in worship, we find time to not only sing it in rehearsal, but delve deep into its lyrics. I can't think of another single piece of music that I have used in my ten years of directing, except perhaps, "God So Loved the World," that allows for a greater discussion of the season of Lent and Holy Week.

I like to start by simply looking at the image on the cover of the octavo and trying to discern what the song might be about. The image in this case is a simple graphic of a person bent over a large rock beneath a "weeping" tree that has "bleeding" hearts hanging from its four branches. I ask the choir what emotions they see. The responses range from love to sadness. Then we open the cover. The song is prefaced by these instructions: *NARRATION: (To be read by a child to prepare the scene) Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "My heart is very sorrowful. Sit here while I go and pray." And going a little farther into the garden, he fell to his knees and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, take this cup away from me! Yet not what I want, but what you want." (Matthew 26: 36-39)*

I ask for a volunteer to read the passage, and after helping all the children learn to pronounce "Gethsemane," we listen to the introduction played on the piano. I ask them to listen carefully and describe what emotions they now hear. Because Kemp so wisely chose a minor key, the choristers quickly understand the somber mood of the song. We proceed to read through the lyrics together, and I ask one person to read the part of Jesus: "Dear God, I am so sorrowful, is there no other way? Dear God, if it is possible, let this cup pass away...Dear God, your Son is sorrowful, but knows your way is best. Let love take hold of me! Help me to be bold and free to do your will, to do your will, to do your will and rest..."

Wow! Until I taught this piece for the first time, I don't think I fully realized the awesome responsibility (and marvelous opportunity) I had in these children's faith formation. Over these ten years, we've had some wonderful discussions surrounding this song, and many others. Songs like this one provide a rich opportunity to teach the narrative of our faith in a way that they will keep with them forever.

Gracious and loving God, I am humbled and honored by the responsibility you have entrusted to me. Help me to shepherd your youngest disciples as we discover together the richness of a life lived with and for you, not only through our music, but in the way we love others in and outside of the rehearsal room. Guide my words and actions so that their young ears and eyes might hear and see what it means to be a loving and faithful servant. Amen.

Saturday, March 4

Ruth and Dick Trondsen

BELIEVE IN THE CHILDREN

I BELIEVE....

Every time I hear
a child that sings
a song, or smiles
at me, or shyly grins,
then I know why
I believe.

A Prayer...
Lord, Your plan for
the cycle of life
causes us to entrust
the future to our
children. They are
tomorrow's parents
and grandparents.
Help us to invest
our children with
the necessary
judgment, ethics,
and values for their
future roles. Amen.

Ruth & Dick Trondsen



Sunday, March 5

Rev. Cindy Marino

Each Sunday's devotion in this booklet is a reflection on the topic of the week from the Lenten sermon series, for which we are using Adam Hamilton's Creed: What Christians Believe and Why. I pray you are blessed as we pursue these questions together, exploring God's promise that there IS more to life!

THE APOSTLES' CREED WEEK ONE:

"I believe in God the Father, creator of heaven and earth."

What do you believe? How did you come to that belief and why does it matter? These foundational questions lead to some of the most thought-provoking conversations. They are questions asked in the first week of Hamilton's study, and they are questions that I have been asking myself and others throughout my faith journey and my ministry. Each person's answer is a little different, as it should be. We come to our beliefs through different experiences and circumstances in our own unique life journeys.

It is crucial to our spiritual health that we pursue these questions. The questions will keep us awake to the work God is doing in the here and now. The questions require us to relate what we believe to what we live. Often we find ourselves projecting an attribute onto God that is really something of human origin. We name God as the bad guy, when, in reality, God is as sad about that behavior as we are.

This was the case with Jack, whose fiancée, Jeanine, was dying from AIDS. Jack was sure that God was punishing Jeanine for her past life. Jack knew her to be a kind and loving person, and he was incensed that God would "do this to her." As we talked through his beliefs about God, Jack began to realize that he was describing his own father, one who would give or withhold love based on his own needs or mood. I asked, "What if what we get in God is what we can see in Jesus? Would Jesus do this to Jeanine?" Jack's anger shifted rather quickly away from God. It was a wonder to see his rage subside.

Jack's anger didn't go away altogether, though. Instead, it landed on the unknown person who had infected Jeanine with the virus earlier in her life. At some point, Jack will need to ponder forgiveness. But at least, in the midst of his grief and loss, he could consider the possibility that God was not the enemy, that God would be working with him and not against him. The answer for Jack that day was not definitive. But the questions would continue to guide him in pursuing the truth of God's love, even as God is pursuing him.

Gracious God, help us to untangle the thread that ties our beliefs about you to our own misunderstandings of love and life. Give us faith to believe, allowing the truths of scripture to guide our traditions, our reason and our understanding of our experiences. Give us faith to pursue the questions. In Christ we pray, Amen.

Monday, March 6

Angela McCurdy

IMAGO DEI In the Image of God

Genesis 1:1-2:3

John 1:1-18

James 3:2-12

It's no coincidence that "aspiration" means both hope and the act of breathing. When we speak, we use the breath in our lungs to give our thoughts a physical form. The sounds that we make are simultaneously our intentions and our life force. I speak, therefore I am.

This quote is from the short story "The Great Silence," by Ted Chiang. It was created in collaboration with Allora & Calzadilla as part of a video installation piece on the Arecibo Observatory in Puerto Rico. Part of the premise of the piece, and of Arecibo itself, is that language is a means and a marker of intelligent life. Individually and collectively, we are, in some ways, created by words. Developmental psychologists have posited that language acquisition is a necessary precondition for the formation of memory, which is why our earliest memories only go back so far. We need words to construct our memories, our history, the institutions of our culture and societies.

In Genesis, God speaks the world into being: "And God said..." And so it was. On the sixth day, God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...And God saw every thing that he had made, and behold, it was very good." We are God's creatures and his image, imago Dei. Let us speak good things into being.

Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight. May we ever strive to be your reflection in the world and to see your image in everyone that we meet.

Tuesday, March 7

Gaye Lynn Loufek

LENTMAS?

John 16:33

Christmas and Lent had a bit more distance between them on the calendar this year. For some reason, that separation catches my attention every year. It's as if Jesus' birth and his crucifixion/resurrection are a new occurrence each year and not the anniversary of the events that happened so many years ago. Often times, it feels that Jesus has just been born, and it is already time to grieve his crucifixion and celebrate the resurrection.

Though Easter is our highest Holy Day, it is difficult to celebrate Good Friday and Easter without remembering that had Jesus not been born, the Good News of Easter wouldn't be possible. Consequently, Christmas and Easter stay closely linked in my mind—so much so that I feel they are but weeks apart, depending where they fall on the calendar each year.

This past December, during one of Pastor Matthew's sermons, he provided us with a tear-off question of: "It wouldn't be Christmas without _____." I distinctly remember writing "family," but as the season progressed and I reflected on that Sunday in worship, I realized what I should have written was "chaos."

Unfortunately, one of the most sacred and precious times of the year often feels all too chaotic, especially this year. As I continued to reflect, I couldn't help but think about Mary and wonder how she kept her sense of calm during the birth of her Son. She was betrothed to Joseph and preparing for a virgin birth; she was riding on a donkey and ended up in an unknown land; she was giving birth in a stable; she was miles away from family; and yet, she was eager to do as God willed her to do.

Many years later, she watched as that Son was carrying the very cross on his back from which he would hang to His death, and again she stood by and, though weeping, kept a sense of calm because she believed what God told her.

This Lenten Season, as we focus on why we as Christians believe what we believe, I find comfort in knowing that Mary paved the way. If we but trust God and follow Jesus, we can remain calm in the chaos.

Lord, we thank you for your mercy. May we be instruments of your peace, Amen.

Wednesday, March 8

Merrill Litchfield

TRUTH THAT'S HARD TO FIGGER OUT

Read: John 8: 48-59

"I tell you the truth, "Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"

John 8:58

We humans are time-bound creatures. We live out our lives in the span between our birth certificates and our death certificates, sometimes wisely saying, "Time marches on." We try to make use of our time by planning (either carefully or frantically), yet we're still puzzled at where all of our past time has gone. And, as if we didn't have enough of a headache trying to figure out time, here comes One Who has at least one foot in eternity. Now it *really* gets complicated! I don't blame the onlookers of Jesus' time for not getting it the first time they heard it; I praise God for the two thousand years of devoted people studying the Bible, helping us to the gift of understanding what we can of our God, who is beyond all human understanding.

I don't suppose that the ones who picked up rocks to throw at Jesus were all that troubled about someone less than 50 claiming to have seen Abraham; their real sticking point was that Jesus called Himself by the Name of God, "I AM." Blatant blasphemy, to their way of thinking. Yet how ironic, that these people who claimed to serve God would seek to kill Him Who is One with God. Who would have been the real blasphemers?

Prayer: Eternal God, thank You for simplifying our lives by inventing Time for us to live in. Only after we have come to trust You completely, and become the children who are given a place in Your Kingdom, may we see the wonders of Your Eternity, and rejoice in them! Amen.

Thursday, March 9

Nick Scotti

HIDDEN PARADISE

In a time of deforestation and suburban sprawl, one can find it difficult to escape the busy world around us. Fortunately, I have been lucky enough to live down the street from a forest preserve that became like a second home to me. Over the years I have grown to know every creek, every trail, and every tree in that place. I cannot imagine any other place I know that well or that makes me feel more at home besides my own house. My friends and I have found solace there. It became a simplistic retreat from the hassles of the outside world where we managed to find a way to escape. It is through a field and across a stream that I found my hidden paradise.

I remember my father first taking me out on this forest's trails when I was five years old. A few years later I began to roam out there alone or with my friends. It was there I developed my love for the outdoors and all it has to offer. I became akin to each season, and knew its best and worst qualities. Winter in the forest is my favorite. The trees creak and sway with the wind, the grass lies fallow, the streams freeze enough to traverse, and most importantly, everything is still. An awed hush descends over the place.

Growing up, practically every Saturday my friends and I went out there. We would build forts, play games, and find enjoyment in the simplest of ways. It was rare for people of our generation to be doing such things. It was the pastime of another age, and we innocently perpetuated the tradition in our own time. I have never known contentment like I had out there. Out there it felt like nothing in the world could dampen our spirits. The land became our domain. We ruled and cared for it like it really was our own. It was like this for many years until a rainy day in November of 2009.

The day we finished "The Fort" in that place was a day of triumph and accomplishment. Built around the base of several trees, we had constructed sturdy walls made of timber and scrap wood. There was a working set of double doors at our designated entrance with a cat walk running above it. At the top of a large oak were two platforms for a tree house that would never be completed. I remember we were so proud of it all, until the day a policeman stumbled upon our creation.

The officer was an older gentleman, in his fifties or so. He ordered us to take it all apart and never to rebuild. He said he honestly wished he didn't have to ask us to do this. Too many times, he said, he had to contend with the kids doing drugs, having sex, drinking, and causing trouble out there. But we were the innocent ones, and he supported our efforts because it reminded him of himself when he was young—when it was a simpler time.

I was the first to do it. I struck the wood with a crow bar and tore it off its frame, and my friends followed. Each piece of our fort was sent down river. Each piece represented a piece of ourselves, our childhood, and our paradise being sent away one by one. It was that day my place of solitude changed forever, and where my childhood died a bit. The forest lives on, as do my fond memories. I still journey out there from time to time. It has never been the same. I trace my steps through my beloved forest to the round of tall oaks and run my hands along the trees where bits of nails still protrude. That is all that is left of my hidden paradise.

Friday, March 10

Rev. Doug Bowden

WHO IS OUR NEIGHBOR?

“Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.”

Leviticus 19:34, Common English Bible Translation

Am Shalom is a Jewish synagogue in the northern Chicago suburb of Glencoe. “People of Peace” is the meaning of their name in Hebrew. God’s faithful and compassionate people they are, demonstrating on Friday, January 27, when synagogue members greeted one of the last Syrian refugee families to be accepted into the United States at O’Hare International Airport. Jodi Kantor, reporter for the *New York Times*, wrote of this Am Shalom welcome and refugee sponsorship in the January 29 *NYT* Sunday edition.

I was deeply moved by the pictures I saw, along with Jodi’s story. A child made a sign and held it up for the Syrian refugee family: “Welcome to chicag Hope you make your selfs at home.” Indeed, all ages in the Am Shalom Synagogue, including Rabbi Steven Stark Lowenstein and his wife, Julie Stark, were present and waiting with big smiles to welcome the Syrian refugee family. In talking with the Am Shalom families, Jodi learned that there is a statue in the synagogue that names members of families who perished in Nazi concentration camps.

Then the happy moment came. The Syrian refugee family of four, including mother, father and two children, came into the baggage area. “The synagogue members surrounded them protectively, offering the flowers and signs,” as a resettlement worker translated. All who live by Leviticus, in the Jewish Torah and Hebrew scriptures, we smiling!

Prayer: O God, once we were immigrants and were welcomed. Help us, now, to be like this. Amen.

Saturday, March 11

Rev. Doug Bowden

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

"I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Communion of Saints..."
The Apostles' Creed, Ecumenical Version #882

I love these words of the Apostles' Creed. Each time I say that "I believe in the Communion of Saints," I feel so comforted and strengthened in my faith. Indeed, I am sure that I am connecting with my family and church family members, who have lived, died, and risen with Christ. In this joyful moment, I am "surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Adam Hamilton stands with many of us in Grace Church who believe this. "Communion of Saints involves the word 'communion' and is one of the most beautiful ideas in Christian theology. The idea is that those who are becoming saints here on earth and those who have become entirely sanctified in heaven, still commune together." (*Creed*, p. 124) This most certainly includes the Apostle Paul, calling all believers "saints" as well as Rev. Dr. Phil Schroeder, also calling us all "saints" when he preached at Grace on Sunday morning, January 29, 2017.

Jarrod Severing, my good friend and pastor of Lanark United Methodist Church in the Rockford District of the Northern Illinois Conference, sings "I Have Friends in High Places" on All Saints' Sunday (always the first Sunday of November) and, thankfully, at many memorial/funeral services. This is what we are saying when we profess our faith in these words, "I Believe in the Communion of Saints."

Reflecting on both his living daughters and his sisters and brothers in the Church of the Resurrection who have lived, died and risen in Christ, Adam Hamilton (a pastor extraordinaire) helpfully adds: "But I do think our loved ones who have died continue to love and care for us and await the day when we will be reunited. I think they do pray for us." This is an ever-present gift of the Apostles' Creed.

Prayer: O God, a blessing is the Apostles' Creed, saying, "I believe in the Communion of the Saints." Amen.

Sunday, March 12

Rev. Cindy Marino

APOSTLES' CREED WEEK TWO: JESUS CHRIST

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I grew up hearing about Jesus Christ as the Son of God. I heard many titles for Jesus, such as the Messiah, Jesus our brother, the Good Shepherd. Then, one day, as an adult, I heard someone saying that Jesus is God, God in the flesh. They said, "This is the point driven home by the story of the virgin birth." I have to admit, the statement rocked my world. It has taken years for me to unpack it, and I still find myself in awe of its implications in the day-to-day stuff of life.

My life became a series of questions. Most agree that Jesus of Nazareth did exist and was, at the very least, a great prophet. If we end there, I can see Jesus as a great role model, someone I need to aspire to emulate. The burden is on me to do so, but I fail again and again. How can I be of any use to others when I can't get it right?

Some would say Jesus was only human, but adopted by God at His baptism. So was He simply the chosen scapegoat, or the new Adam sent to get it right on our behalf? Can God be that easily satisfied? And if God's satisfaction is the goal, how much trouble are we in now? The One Great Sacrifice may have atoned for the world's sin, but it certainly hasn't tamed it. If God couldn't accomplish it, where is the hope for me?

And so my questions continue...and I can come to only one conclusion: God is love. I know because that's what I see in Jesus. Jesus as the revelation of God —God with us —gives me hope that the world can change. Jesus as the incarnation of God, born to the poorest of the poor, tells me that God cares for all. I don't have to succeed in this world or attain any certain place in life. Jesus gives me hope that I am not alone in my questions, and that gives me strength to be there for others with questions. Together we find that Jesus, as the way, is a very good way indeed.

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, Be patient with me as I struggle with the questions of life. Only you know the truth. You are truth. Remind us that our call is not to convince others, but to love them. And we do so with the love we receive from you through Jesus, in the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Monday, March 13

Ruth Allison

“DOING GOOD!”

Oftentimes, we charge out the door, heading for what is next on our agenda. I think back and remember watching as my mother would stop each morning and take time to talk with God first, then head out the door to "Do Good!" She was a DG... Delta Gamma, and proud of it. "Do Good" was the sorority's motto.

Having a purpose for running out the door is important, too. Getting in shape is necessary if you want to live a long and a healthy life. Taking time to do that is necessary.

I find that joining with Grace Church women friends and hiking at the Arboretum has been a great way to start my week. As I write, our Sisters Bible study (led by Pastor Tammy Scott on Monday afternoons) is focusing on the Psalms. Being a Stephen Minister has given me a focus on caring for those in our church as they struggle with the difficulties in life.

As a "Walk to Emmaus" attender, my prayer life has been enriched. I have needed the love of fellow members of Grace as I try to go out and "Do Good!" I watch for the music to make my life more fun as well as for new adventures to undertake. Whenever people in my family see a rainbow, we think of our mother.

**Prayer: Dear God,
Let us all take time
to listen for Your
guidance in our
lives and enjoy the
inner rewards of
"Doing Good!"**

DeColores!



Tuesday, March 14

Ellen Burrows

MADE TO ORDER

As I received this past year's Christmas cards and read the handwritten notes and the nicely printed letters, I realized that no two were alike. Each seemed to be "made to order" by its sender. Each reader could apply their own personal interpretation as they read the writing.

How many times do we as Christians want our church relationship to be made to our order, not God's order? Our church time must be timed to the service schedule, not to the message and what it is intended to mean to us. If the hymn is not one we know, we don't try to sing it. If the pew Bible is not our favorite translation, we don't bother to open it and follow along with the reader. If the special music is different in style, we read our bulletin announcements. If the sound system isn't just right for us, we think about our "to do" list for after church. After all, the most important times in the Christian life are Easter and Christmas. We want our "made to order" Christian life, not the life Jesus desires for us. As confirmands, some of us learned the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the 23rd Psalm.

What else do we need to know in our "made to order" life? What service do we need to perform? We spend an hour on Sunday morning, put a few dollars in the passed plate, and then go out the door to our car and are pleased with our participation in our "made to order" Christian life. We feel pleased that we made it to church.

However, this is our plan, not God's plan for us. Where have we given of ourselves for others? Where in our "made to order" life have we passed God's love on to someone who needs to know it?

God's message is to love another and take time for God to truly be a part of our lives. Our "made to order" Christian life must include time for God to show his love for us and for us to show that love to others.

Prayer: Help us to accept God's love for us and to show that love for others in our "made to order" Christian life.

Wednesday, March 15

Merrill Litchfield

GOD OR CRAZY MAN?

Read: John 14:4-10

“...I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

John 14:10

C.S. Lewis, discussing how to explain the Bible to people who are looking for answers, says that he falls back on a classic case: “Either God or a very bad man.” If we check out the things that Jesus said, especially about himself, these are the only two choices we have. This particular verse often gives offense. If someone who was only human said that we had to go through him in order to get to God, we’d find that kind of proud presumption intolerable. But Jesus was also God. Having just said that He Himself was “...the way and the truth...,” He was stuck with having to tell the exact truth, no “spin” allowed. And the people who do not yet know how unique He was get a little ruffled in the feathers.

It makes me curious: these people who think “No one comes to the Father except through me” is so outrageous, what are they going to do when Jesus meets them at the gates of Heaven? Run away to the place for people who choose themselves over Jesus, or immediately see how hopelessly wrong they’ve been and repent on the spot? Not that I need any answer to speculative questions like this one; the question I need to ask myself is do I really believe Jesus is both Lord and God to me?

Prayer: Lord and God, and, by Your magnificent gift, Friend, I have to admit I know very little about You. I have to know You by faith. Please shepherd my wobbly path of believing, so that I may be close enough to You to enter Your fold when night comes. Amen.

Thursday, March 16

Merrill Litchfield

MORE STICKY SCRIPTURES

Read: John 6:32-58

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.”

John 6:44

In yesterday’s devotion, we looked at Jesus’s statement, “No one comes to the Father except through me,” noting that some people have trouble accepting it. Verse 44 (above) seems to paint the same picture in reverse: we humans will not come to Jesus unless the Father sends us. And that, too, raises some hackles. Very few of us are naturally humble. We want to claim some pride for having gone to Jesus “on our own”—but that doesn’t happen. The more we realize how much God has given us without any suggestions from us, the more we can begin to see how much love we owe Him for all He has done for us.

Here’s another hot spot: when Jesus says in verse 51 that his followers must eat his flesh and drink his blood, we, who have seen and enacted the Sacrament of Communion, have no trouble recognizing what he’s talking about. But his immediate hearers could only have accepted what he said by faith in Him, that even the wacky-sounding ideas would become a revelation at their proper time. How long after Easter would it take for followers other than the Disciples to pick up on what the Disciples were doing with a now-more-special meal of bread and wine? How long after Easter was the Gospel of John written?

Prayer: Loving Father, You who teach us in so many ways, thank You for Your patience with our slowness to learn. Help us to trust that when we need to know more, You, Who are the Way, will provide the way for us to be given Your Truth. Amen.

Friday, March 17

Rev. Doug Bowden

“HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH”

“I believe in the Holy Catholic Church...”

The Apostles’ Creed, Ecumenical Version #882

“I believe in the Holy Catholic Church.” How can this be?, I wondered, as a Confirmand in 1958. I am a Protestant Christian and certainly not a Roman Catholic Christian. My first uninformed thought was that these words of The Apostles’ Creed must be referring to the Roman Catholic Church, like St. Benedict’s parish, just down the block from the First Methodist Church of Highland Park, Michigan. So, it was like the light coming on when Pastor Roy Johns explained to all of us Confirmands that the word “Catholic” here meant “Universal Church” and not just the Roman Catholic Church. Thankfully, we now live in the time of the very ecumenical Pope Francis, when we are free of word associations that do not help us.

Indeed, we cherish this freedom to ponder deeply what we mean when we say “I believe in the Holy Catholic Church” in our worship at Grace. A big help is Adam Hamilton. He writes, “Our belief in the holy catholic church is an ecumenical belief that all who call upon the name of Christ seek to follow him as Savior and Lord are, despite their denominational or non-denominational names, part of that one universal church.” (*Creed*, p. 110). The Apostles’ Creed unifies us as one together in worship and ministry.

Nicholas Kristof really helps me understand the unity between Christians when we are faithful disciples of Jesus. He tells us that in 1953, the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Oregon sponsored his refugee father, Wladyslaw Krzysztofowicz, from Europe. And, now, in 2017, this same congregation is sponsoring a new refugee family. This we affirm, saying, “I believe in the Holy Catholic Church.” Amen.

Prayer: Help us remember, O God, all that we believe, saying these words of The Apostles’ Creed. Amen.

Saturday, March 18

Chamus Burnside-Savazzini

PARTICIPANTS, NOT SPECTATORS

Matthew 25: 14-30

I grew up in Freeport, Grand Bahama and was raised by Christian parents. I was raised with God at the center of everything I knew. I could recite the Apostles' Creed from start to finish when I was in the second grade, because it was mandatory at the Catholic school I attended. Everything I learned in that school and from my mother paved the way for what I would believe as I grew up.

I never thought about the words of the Apostles' Creed until I was studying for my first communion. Then, Reverend Weir would ask us as a group, "Do you know why you come to church every week?" or "Do you know why we say the Apostles' Creed as Methodists?" Of course, I did not fully understand, but I knew I had to pass this class. As I look back on this time in my life, I realize nothing was connecting; I was just following the motions.

I went to a Methodist high school and we had a young educator who led the Religious Education class. He was so energetic and what I would now describe as "fanatical" about why we should walk with God during our life journey. As a high school student, I did not appreciate what he was telling me, but as an adult, I will never forget that he wanted us to invite God into our lives and live our lives like Christ did, not just go through the motions.

After being told what to do my entire young life, I stopped going to church when I went off to college. I thought I just did not internalize what I was hearing. Learning was not enough for me; I needed to *do* something in response to what I was being taught. After college, a lady who was a senior employee of mine invited me to church. At that first service I attended, the pastor said, "Do not be a **spectator**; be a **participator** for God's glory." That was what I was missing. I was not using the skills and talents that God had given me for his glory. So that day, I made a decision to start turning my life over to what he had prepared me to do: serve the church and the next generation. Even though I did not have children of my own, I believed that I was called to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with the next generation. I was not perfect, but I was willing because of what I believed.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I pray that you will continuously provide opportunities for me to turn my belief into action all for your glory. Amen.

Sunday, March 19

Rev. Cindy Marino

APOSTLES' CREED WEEK 3: THE HOLY SPIRIT

John Wesley had a very simple way of understanding the Holy Spirit. For him, it wasn't an intellectual exercise to define the Holy Spirit. Wesley wasn't concerned with the theoretical as much as he was fascinated with identifying the way in which God works in the lives of those who love God. Wesley would interview the person we might call the "faithful old lady in the pew," the one who has remained faithful in spite of the hardships of life, the one who is always joyful, peace-filled, non-anxious and wise beyond words. Wesley sought out these persons as he was struggling with his own doubts and fears. He sought them out when he, at last, was celebrating the same inexplicable joy and peace, comparing his "heartwarming" experience with theirs. He searched the scriptures for an explanation as to how all of this worked and whether it was a human thing, or perhaps was it of God? You see, Wesley was an intellectual living in the heart of the age of the enlightenment, but God found him through his emotion, his imagination, his heart and his spirit.

It was in pursuing this question of *how* that Wesley came upon the recognition of the work of the Holy Spirit in us. The very foundation of all faith for Wesley became based upon this reality for him: that God in the Holy Spirit directly witnesses with our human spirit, that we are indeed God's children. And this is a result of what God, in Jesus Christ, has done on our behalf. And along with this witness, we experience the immediate consequence of having that kind of assurance, the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, patience, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness and self-control.

The Holy Spirit, then, brings the love of God and the work accomplished on our behalf by Jesus into our lives in the here and now. The "more" we seek in this life is already available to us — not by seeking joy, peace, etc., although we might find glimpses of them from time to time — but by seeking God's assurance, which brings with it the joy and peace we seek.

"If we are wise we shall be continually crying to God, until his spirit cry in our heart, 'Abba, Father!' This is the privilege of all the children of God, and without this we cannot retain a steady peace, nor avoid perplexing doubts and fear. But when we have once received this 'Spirit of Adoption,' that peace which passes all understanding, and which expels all painful doubt and fear, will 'keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.'" —John Wesley

From Sermon 11, The Witness of the Spirit II, a sermon on Romans 8:16, April 4, 1767.

Monday, March 20

Sue Churchill

SHOW YOUR COLORS

Spring of 2016 is here as I write this...trees leafing, flowers blooming, grass green and beautiful tulips as I enter my neighborhood. It is a delight to work outside, as there is no snow or ice to contend with.

I have been reminded of the caterpillars with their “16 feet.” Eventually, they metamorphosize into a butterfly — the miracle of it all. I understand the “process” takes 40 days. Wow! I have also heard that if you step on a caterpillar (I never have), the color of the eventual butterfly comes forth.

In the 2015 Lenten guide book, Merrill Litchfield wrote about the hymn of Promises (one of my favorites)...that butterflies will soon be free!

What colors do we all have hidden inside?

May we not be “squished” before they show.

Prayer: Dear Lord, Thank you for each change of season and the beauty of your creation. Amen.



Tuesday, March 21

Jaci Green-Tschirhart

THE "I DO"XOLOGY

Praise God from whom all blessings flow,
Praise Him all creatures here below,
Praise God above the heavenly host
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.
The Doxology, UMH #95

"So, the ceremony is standard in nature, but you do have some choices with regard to readings and music. Do you have any favorite hymns that you would like to sing?" queried Reverend Guthrie. Thirty-one years ago, Bob and I were planning our wedding ceremony with the Episcopal minister in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where we met and had decided to marry.

My mind cast a wild net. What music should be sung at our wedding? I grew up in an Episcopal church, but we attended rather sporadically. I loved church music, but one piece stood out as most memorable, since we sang it every week. "I want to sing the Doxology," I stated. Rev. Guthrie looked surprised, but simply said, "That's a bit unusual, but okay."

My mother had a different reaction: "What?! Don't you realize that's what you sing after the collection? People are going to think you're going to pass the plate!" She was appalled.

I had never thought of it that way. When I sing the Doxology, I take the words literally, as a general recognition of the gifts that God provides for our lives, so many of which we take for granted. We *did* sing the Doxology at our wedding, with Bob and me standing at the front of the church. The power of the combined voices of our loved ones, family and friends, projecting this song of gratitude and praise in our direction, was overwhelming.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for all your gifts to us: may we be ever mindful of our blessings, that we share with others in a spirit of gratitude and love. Amen.

Wednesday, March 22

Barb Ceruti

GOD AND DOG

For the past several years, our pastors have engaged in a Blessing of the Animals service. This is a Franciscan tradition over the first weekend in October that I am happy Grace Church has adopted. I have attended these services with great anticipation, not only because I am an animal lover, but because I love seeing other church members' pets and the joy they bring to their owners. I also believe wholly in the power of the blessings our pastors bestow upon our four-legged friends. And, if we're lucky enough to have the dogs howl along with our singing, there are fewer things that bring a broader smile to my face.

By the time you read this devotion, our Golden Retriever, Katie, will be 12 years old. Or, perhaps more likely, she will no longer be with us. As I write, Katie has a large mass on her spleen, and something is attacking her red blood cells, rendering her dangerously anemic. Things are not looking good for her. Still, she is thrilled to see us every day and offers her love generously. Her gentle brown eyes adore us as always. She tries not to show us she's struggling.

Katie sets the finest example of unconditional love I have ever known. Even among dogs, she is especially sweet. She has never known a human she didn't love, she is kind to other dogs, and she moves patiently out of the way of our snotty cat. I have always thought God must have given humankind dogs because of their special breed of love. There is even a song, "God And Dog," to this effect that Vickie Wagner sings at our pet blessings. It never fails to bring tears to my eyes.

I know it will soon be time to say goodbye to our dear Katie. But my husband, three sons and I will never forget her. I thank God for her—and all the dogs who so purely love His flawed people.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you that Katie's surgery showed no cancer and that, as of this writing, she recently celebrated her 12th birthday. Thank you for creating "all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small," who help me to believe ever more surely in your love. Amen.

Thursday, March 23

Rev. Dr. Thomas Aldworth

THE BEAUTY OF THE CHRISTIAN STORY

We have lost much of the beauty inherent in the Christian Story. We have emphasized the next life to the detriment of this life. We scare people by proclaiming (LOUDLY!) that if you don't give yourself to Jesus, you will spend the inexhaustible expanse of eternity in hell!

It's no wonder our young flee from such sadistic and dangerous theology. Can we really worship a God who is a divine variation of a schoolyard bully? Trying to frighten our young into faith is doomed to failure. Yet, how many T.V. evangelists and pastors keep beating this dead horse?

Having spent eight years as a full-time campus minister as well as an additional 12 years teaching in college settings, I have a great fondness for our young people and a deep appreciation for their struggles with faith and the spiritual life.

Their struggles tell us a great deal about how religion in general and Christianity in particular have gone off the tracks. In essence, I believe the beauty of the Christian Story is no longer accessible to our young (and many of us who are older as well!).

Too many have for too long muddied the beauty of the Christian Story. Too many have for too long corrupted the "Good News" of the Gospel into the "Bad News" of hellfire and damnation. Too many have for too long fought over who has it RIGHT instead of recognizing that we all have it WRONG to one degree or another.

I am struggling these days with the loss of my beloved wife, Beth. I know that time will have a healing effect, but right now the healing effect of time is not very evident to me.

Yet, there have been moments recently where encountering beauty has helped my soul heal in tiny increments. Beauty has the power to heal! As the psychologist Rollo May writes in *My Search for Beauty*, "Beauty...is the resplendent gown of God and of our spiritual life. Beauty is eternity born into human existence."

As I went through Beth's things a few weeks ago, I found a framed replication of a Botticelli Madonna. I had forgotten about it until coming across it in one of Beth's closets. I immediately took it and hung it prominently in my home office.

Beth and I would often go to the Chicago Art Institute. It was always one of our special outings. For some years, my favorite Art Institute painting was Renoir's "Two Sisters." And while I still enjoy that painting greatly, I have a new "favorite": the Botticelli "Virgin and Child with an Angel."

The Botticelli (painted between 1475 and 1485) moves me whenever I stand in its sacred presence. I especially love Botticelli's luminous lace. Do yourself a favor and go to the Art Institute and stand in this painting's transforming presence (often you will be there by yourself, since the crowds usually head to the large French Impressionist collection).

The Christian Story is resplendent with beautiful images, many of them flowing from the divine promises proclaimed through the Old Testament prophets. For instance, the images found in chapter 11 of Isaiah are incredibly consoling.

There will come a time when "the wolf shall live with the lamb." There will come a time when "the lion shall eat straw like the ox." There will come a time when "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

These promises are both beautiful and reliable. These promises, along with many others, are part of the dream God has for our earth and for all who inhabit our earth. These incredible promises WILL come to pass. They will come to pass when Jesus Christ comes to renew and heal all that stands in need of healing.

Every creature, including us, will be transformed into the image God created us to be—before evil distorted and diminished that divine image. This is what is promised! This is what I believe as a Christian. This is what every Christian is called to believe.

We will not spend eternity in some far-off place called heaven. We will spend most of eternity living on a transformed earth, living with resurrected bodies! To believe anything else is contrary to the promises of the Bible and the long expanse of Christian theology. To believe otherwise is to place ourselves outside Christian faith.



There is so much beauty in the Christian Story!

Prayer: Dear Lord, I pray we might glimpse a glimmer of that beauty during these Lenten days leading up to the promise of Easter.

Rev. Dr. Thomas Aldworth is a former Roman Catholic priest, current college instructor and pastor of Morgan Park Baptist Church in Chicago.

Friday, March 24

Rev. Doug Bowden

“THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS”

“I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Forgiveness of Sins...”

The Apostles' Creed, Ecumenical Version #882

“I believe in the forgiveness of sins.” Lewis Smedes is our soulmate, when we affirm this belief in the Apostles' Creed. His liberating thought is that when one forgives a brother or sister, who has hurt or wounded him or her, one is free, no matter how the brother or sister responds to the forgiveness given.

In this same grace-filled way, Adam Hamilton builds a three-part journey for us that we take each Sunday morning in worship when we recite, “I believe in the Forgiveness of Sins.” Pastor Adam writes, “When we say that we believe in the forgiveness of sins, we're not only confessing that we are sinners, nor only that God is willing to forgive us; we also are expressing what is taught throughout Scripture, that we are called to forgive the sins of others.”

“Forgiving the sins of others!” As God forgives us, through Jesus Christ, we are, in the church, to forgive each other (Ephesians 4:32). Indeed, in the most heartbreaking and transforming way, our sisters and brothers in the Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina teach us to forgive.

Tears fill our eyes as we remember their immediate forgiveness of Dylann Roof, who shot and killed their family members: Clementa Pinckney, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Cynthia Hurd, Daniel Lee Simmons, Jr., DePayne Middleton-Doctor, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance, Myra Thompson, and Tywanza Sanders. Grief-stricken beyond what we can comprehend, they are remembered by us with love and gratitude and, thanks to each of them, we know the grace of these words, “I believe in the Forgiveness of Sins.”

Prayer: Free at last, O God, we are, when we say I believe in “the Forgiveness of Sins.” Thanks be to God! Amen.

Saturday, March 25

Gaye Lynn Loufek

SPENDING THE TIME

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth; And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord: Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontious Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; On the third day He rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting, Amen."

You may notice some discrepancies in the Creed the way it is written above and the way we recite it today. However, the translation above is how I learned it—by repetition. Every Sunday, barring illness, we were in church, and we said the Apostles' Creed. To learn anything, whether family values, Christian beliefs, character traits of your friends, who Jesus is in your life, you have to spend time. There has to be a foundation built. Ever wonder why you and your best friend talk alike or wear the same clothes? You spend time together. Ever wonder why parents begin to look and act alike? They have spent time together. Want to learn how to be like Jesus? Spend time with Him.

By repetition, I learned the Apostles' Creed at a very early age. Whether I knew what it truly meant or not, it didn't really matter. What mattered was the people in my life who cared about what "foundation" was being built.

The first two lines are why I believe what I believe as a Christian and a United Methodist. This Lenten season, spend time with Jesus. Get to know Him. Let him get to know you.

**God, may we all walk in a way that leads others to you,
and may we be builders of a strong faith foundation for
our brothers and sisters so we may all glorify you.
In Jesus' name, Amen.**

Sunday, March 26

Ashley Pierce

WHY CHURCH?

The question of “Why Church?” is one I have pondered most of my life. Growing up in the South, it was never a question about “if” you went to church, but more “where” you went to church. It was assumed that if you spent the night at a friend’s house on Saturday night, you would go to church with their family on Sunday morning. As I got older, if you went out with friends on Saturday night, no matter what time you got home (always 10:00 p.m. for me), you would be up and happy in time for Sunday School.

It was not until I went off to college that going to church, or not, really became a matter of choice in my life. Like all rebellious young adults, I made the choice to not go to church and eventually realized the answer to the question “Why Church?” in my life. “Why Church?” to me is simple, because it is the foundation of who I am, what I believe and what shapes every choice I make in my life. Almost every memory in my life relates to “church” in some way. For example, I took my first steps in the nursery on a Sunday morning while my mom was in the worship service. My high school Sunday School teacher was the first person I remember seeing in the hospital the night my dad died when I was 14. And that same Sunday School teacher gave me away at my wedding.

Church is the place where we build relationships and have experiences that create the foundation from which to build our faith for a lifetime.

Prayer: May you ponder the question “Why Church?” and remember the foundation of faith that church has helped to build for you in life. Ecclesiastes 12:1 encourages us to “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, ‘I find no pleasure in them’...” Prayerfully consider how you can be a part of building that foundation here at Grace for other people so that they clearly know the answer to “Why Church?” in their lives.

Monday, March 27

Rev. Tom Babler

THE “I” IN “I BELIEVE”

“...since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...”

Hebrews 12:1

We should be careful with the first word of The Apostles’ Creed.

It looks simply like “I,” as in first person singular—me, myself and mine. But we must read it in context. The liturgy invites us to the Affirmation of Faith with the words, “Let us unite in this historic confession of the Christian faith.”

There it is. “Let **us unite**,” as in first person plural, objective. I am part of a community standing in the stream of an historic tradition. I am surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.

So, the Creed is not mine. It belongs to the Church. It arose from early centuries of discussion, debate and division in the Church about our human understanding of God in Christ Jesus reconciling the world to the Almighty.

In confession, I am lending my voice to the great chorus of faith composed in the heat and light of the old Ecumenical Councils of the Church.

Bishop Will Willimon admonishes that it is not just that we interpret Scripture, but often that the Holy Scripture interprets us—i.e., poses to us the deep questions that shape our thinking and discussion.

We might correlate to say that, while we confess the Creed, often the Creed “confesses” us. That is, it speaks for us and to us and about us with meanings that surpass our limited “first-person” human grasp.

We need only open our mouth and confess, “I believe” to be drawn out into the deep mystery and wide community of faith in God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Tom Babler is a retired pastor of the Northern Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Tuesday, March 28

Cheryl Ameiss

STRENGTH IN GOD'S CREATION

"But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength..."

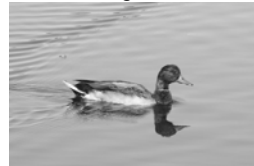
2 Timothy 4:17



I am sure everyone has had times in their lives when they feel they just can't handle one more problem, emergency or crisis. I had that feeling for most of this past fall and winter. Major problems/ crises just seemed to keep piling up on top of each other before I even had a

chance to resolve the previous issue. "Lord, I just can't handle another thing, please!!"

Hold on!! What am I complaining about? Everyone in our family is in relatively good health, we have a good house to live in, Dave has a job where he is happy, and we are doing better financially. We have extended family nearby who help and support us when things are overbearing. We have friends and colleagues who truly



care about us. No one is in jail or having legal issues, no one is struggling with life-threatening illness. It could be worse, and, for many people, it is. *We are surrounded by God's creation! We are blessed!*

Why do we do this to ourselves? Yes, we put this on ourselves. This is not the way God wants us to live! Despite what we do to ourselves or others, He is there with us, giving us the strength to get through, helping us see some joy in the struggles. We just need to remember His love!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, You have given us so much to enjoy, in things we see, hear, taste, smell, and touch. Please help our wavering faith. Please open our eyes and our hearts to embrace your love and strength when we feel overwhelmed. Please Lord, don't give up on us. In your Son Jesus, Amen.



Wednesday, March 29

Merrill Litchfield

HOW LONG, OH LORD?

Read: Matthew 2:1-12

"When they saw the star, they were overjoyed."

Matthew 2:10

How long does it take God to answer a question, or bring a tender seed to fruition? It depends on a number of factors, but none half as important as when God is pleased to bring it about. I don't offer my own story as anything more than one person's experience. I cannot prove it, I do not know why or how it happened when it did; I simply believe that God gave two rich answers to one little boy's question.

Somewhere around Christmas season in 1946, I was three years old and must have just begun to listen to the Nativity story, because I asked my mother, "Mom, how did the wise men figure out that seeing a star in the sky meant a baby had been born?" Her answer may have skipped around my factual curiosity, but was excellent nonetheless: "Well, dear, because they were *wise* men." That little extra *oomph* that she put on the word "wise" spoke volumes: "wise" was something good, something to be desired. And, from that point, I wanted to be wise, myself. Too bad I didn't know how to go about it.

Fast-forward to about 1970. I "met" C. S. Lewis by reading his *The Screwtape Letters* (with *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*) and was enchanted by how much insight he offered on the subject of temptation. I was especially wowed by the second preface (which actually occurs first in the book), where Lewis discusses what's been written or painted or said about devils, angels, and how literally we should take them. It was written about the same time as the "Toast," to enrich the book's enlargement, and it was partly based on Lewis's 20-year experience with reactions to his *Letters*. I loved his wide knowledge, his lively imagination, and his willingness to share what he liked with anyone who showed an interest. This was a source as close to wisdom as I had yet discovered; I've been reading him for 45 years now.

But what about my original question? My wife and I moved into our retirement community in 2007 and were pleased by the number of welcoming, sociable residents. One of them was a man of great learning who liked to share what he knew. One of the little bits of information I gleaned from him, maybe about 2010, was that astrologers of Jesus' time would have associated the different constellations, or astrological "houses," with different nations. Thus, it wasn't just that a brilliant new star appeared in the sky, but the fact that it appeared in the "house" associated with Israel that made them immediately saddle their camels and go ask Israel's king what the buzz was. So I waited some 65 years to enjoy the excitement of having my curiosity satisfied. Did I have to wait too long? I don't think so—I still remembered the question!

Prayer: Father in heaven, Your Truth is eternal; let me seek Your Face, and not quibble about how long it takes. Amen.

Thursday, March 30

Ruth Ann Parsapour

THE CHAPEL CANDLE

John 8:12

One summer, many years ago, a Purdue classmate and I flew to Mexico to study Spanish. We enrolled at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and lived with a Spanish-speaking family. We first met our “Mexican mother” at the university.

Our adopted family lived in a suburb of Mexico City, not far from the university. Before long, they welcomed a total of nine American girls as student-boarders. The family’s large, modern home contained two spacious dining rooms, an elegant living room with a piano and fireplace, many religious paintings, a chapel upstairs, and numerous bedrooms.

It so happened that I turned 21 that summer. I had said little about it, because my own family was planning a party when I returned to the U.S. The evening of my birthday, however, I was completely surprised. The “Senor” appeared on the stairway holding a huge, lit chapel candle. As he walked downstairs, my Mexican family and American girlfriends sang “Feliz Cumpleanos.” Afterwards, we continued to sing songs in Spanish and English and visit. It was a time of sharing, hope, joy, and celebration.

Today, I still remember that evening well. Especially the candle with its beautiful flame. It was one of two candles kept in the chapel, along with a large Bible on a stand and a kneeling bench. The two candles were not burned or removed during the rest of our stay. The light from that candle has now become one of the symbols of my faith. It is a reminder that Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.”

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to look for the light you offer on our daily walk. Amen.

Friday, March 31

Rev. Doug Bowden

“THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY”

“I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Resurrection of the Body...”
The Apostles' Creed, Ecumenical Version #882

“I believe in the Resurrection of the Body.” This statement of belief raises many important questions for us as God's people, who worship together, professing our faith in the words of the Apostles' Creed. We are Easter people. Indeed, every time we worship, wrote Martin Luther, “It is a little Easter.” So, we are certain, through our baptisms, that when we die, we die in Christ and then we rise in Christ. Rising in Christ (Apostle Paul, Romans 6), what form does our former earthly body take?

Indeed, that is a question that challenges and perplexes us. Paul emphasizes that, while our physical bodies are placed in the ground, we are raised “as a spiritual body” (I Corinthians 15). Is this what we affirm in these words of the Apostles' Creed? This is the Resurrection of the Body. Seeking to understand with us, Adam Hamilton declares, “What I love about this idea of the resurrection of the body is that we will have a glorious body that isn't subject to disease... If Jesus' appearances following his resurrection (John 20-21 and Luke 24) are any guide, we'll be able to touch, feel, eat, drink, see and be. Yet, our body will be different from anything we've experienced on this side of eternity—a glorious body by which those who have known us in the past will know us in heaven.” (*Creed*, p. 161).

On NPR Weekend Edition, Scott Simon shared the moving story of James Driscoll, who received a kidney from 32-year-old Ashley Terrio, a former Peace Corps worker who died from an illness. Her family, while deeply grieving, rejoiced for James Driscoll. They said to him, “As Ashley loved to travel, may you travel the world with your new kidney from Ashley.” Indeed, in ways far beyond our full understanding, this may give us a sense of “Resurrection of the Body” in the Apostles' Creed. When we die in Christ, God does give us a new spiritual body, which we affirm by these words of the Apostles' Creed.

Prayer: O God, giver of our earthly bodies, in certain faith, we believe in the Resurrection of the Body. Amen.

Saturday, April 1

Gaye Lynn Loufek

TEN THOUSAND ANGELS

Psalm 91:11-12

Have you ever had one of those “near miss” moments? You know, those times when something could have, maybe should have, gone terribly wrong and, yet, everything turned out just fine? Have you ever thought about how, or why, that happened? When I was a little girl, my Mom would have said it was because the “angels were watching.”

Angels were a significant part of my childhood. Not only did I have a little, gold guardian angel that I wore (often) on the shoulder of my blouse or sweater (to watch over me and remind me to make good choices), my Mom and two of her dearest friends sang in a trio, and one of their favorite songs (and mine) was “Ten Thousand Angels.” I loved to hear them sing and I *loved* that song. The song taught about Jesus’ trip to the cross and how Mary stood by and watched as her son was betrayed, humiliated, spat upon, and yet was merciful.

The chorus of the song was this: “He could have called ten thousand angels to destroy the world and set him free. He could have called ten thousand angels, but died alone for you and me.”

I used to sit in awe as I heard that chorus and try to contemplate just what that would have, could have, looked like: 10,000 angels. I remember thinking how special Jesus must have been that so many would have come to His rescue had He but asked, and I remember wondering why He wouldn’t have called upon the angels to help. I remember trying to understand how Mary must have felt as she watched her son not only be tortured, but die on that cross. I remember listening to the rest of the song and wondering why Jesus would have taken all that He did during those hours on the cross when He was, after all, *Jesus*, who certainly should have been able to save Himself if He was willing to save all of us.

That song stirred me, to say the least. The vision of 10,000 angels appearing in the sky (though somewhat childlike in my memory now) is still a vision I carry with me. As I’ve gotten older, those angels have names of loved ones from my lifetime; loved ones who—if and when I need them—will, beyond the shadow of a doubt, come to my rescue, just as the 10,000+ Jesus had at His disposal.

Sunday, April 2

Rev. Cindy Marino

APOSTLES' CREED WEEK 5 : THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

In Matthew 18:22, Peter is asking Jesus a question. Perhaps he is trying to impress Jesus: How many times do we forgive? What if we want to be perfect; would it be seven times? Seven was the number that meant completeness in the Hebrew world. It was a good guess!

But Jesus comes back with an unexpected answer. Even seven times is not enough. Try seven times 70—that's 490 times! It is said that God forgave the Israelites 490 times for forgetting the Sabbath year before He actually sent them into exile in Babylon. But this is not Jesus saying, if God can do it, so can you. This is Jesus saying, you can't possibly do that!

And therein lies the key to forgiveness. We have to be fully aware of our own weaknesses, and yes, sin. Sin is turning away from God, believing we can live apart from God, that we can manage on our own and forgive out of the goodness of our hearts.

The church tells a different story: God makes the first move, coming to us in human form. Jesus lives the temptations we face and overcomes them on our behalf. He is crushed by the consequences. As He lay dying at the hands of humanity, Jesus declared that God would forgive us. God would forgive the worst that humanity had to offer: the very rejection of God as God. Jesus would be rejected, and we would get a second chance.

Forgiveness is our different story. It is how we live within a community of faith. We can believe in the forgiveness of sin because God loves and forgives us. Out of that well of love and forgiveness we can draw what we need to love and forgive others. Forgiveness is our way of life. It's not just our call; it's our reality. It's the "more" to life we seek.

Prayer: Loving and forgiving God, bring us to your side. Wrap us in your love. When we find it impossible to show mercy, remind us of your mercy. When we find it impossible to forgive others, forgive them on our behalf. Hold us in your care until your love so penetrates our hearts that we can no longer withhold it, even from those who have wounded us. We ask this in the name of Jesus, Amen.

Monday, April 3

Ellen Burrows

STANDING ON HIS PROMISES

“Standing On the Promises”

UMH #374

As I was awakening from my four-hour long surgery heart valve surgery, I was told it had been successful, and all should continue to be well for me. However, at that point, I suffered a stroke that affected my right leg and right arm. It was six weeks later that I was finally able to return to my own apartment.

I was released from the heart hospital and spent five weeks in the medical rehab section of my Acts retirement community. As I spent time trying to regain the ability to walk using my faithful walker, I kept telling myself all would be fine, because Jesus told me so. I kept saying the words to one of my favorite hymns, “Standing On the Promises.” Those words kept me going when, for days, I seemed to show no good progress.

I could not use my right arm at meal time, so I spilled my food as I tried to eat left-handed. I needed help with showering, and a kind aide was there for me. She was a Baptist, but sang “Standing On the Promises” along with me as I learned to stand and shower myself. Each of the aides learned the hymn and often during my rehab would say to me, “Are you ready to stand up by yourself? Remember, you are standing because God wants you to return to your apartment.” Yes, Jesus our Savior truly was on my side and helping the aides to help me.

At our Sunday evening services, my song request was “Standing On the Promises.” All that love Christ promised was shown to me by aides who were of other religious memberships. What Christ has shown me was shown to others through me. In return, I am now in my own apartment, still singing “Standing On the Promises” as I continue to strengthen my right arm and leg.

To all this, I say daily, “Amen.”

Tuesday, April 4

Jaci Green-Tschirhart

HEALING THE IMPACT OF GUILT

"...and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us..."

The Lord's Prayer

In a sermon, Pastor Cindy told a story about her young dog, who had escaped the leash and was hit by a passing car, and how her heart sank as she saw her beloved pet roll from the impact. The car continued on; the dog somehow survived unscathed. Pastor Cindy concluded that the driver was too preoccupied to notice, or care, that he/she hit her dog and, hence, didn't stop.

For some reason, this story has stuck in my mind in the year or so since she related it. And I think the driver *did* care—in fact, it is my suspicion that he/she cared so much that they were appalled at what they had done, and in the horror of the moment, decided to avoid the situation and continue on their way.

But what was the ramification of this? Had the individual stopped, they would have discovered immediately that the pup was fine and been filled with relief for the grace of God that saves small dogs. Instead, I suspect, this person still wonders and worries about that day when they were driving, perhaps a little too fast, and they might have killed someone's beloved pet.

How often do we avoid a difficult situation when we have wronged another, and rather than face the problem and ask for forgiveness, we turn away? We are haunted by guilt. And yet, when we confront this guilt, seeking forgiveness from those we have hurt, and from God, we receive the healing power of forgiveness.

Prayer: Dear God, We ask for strength to face our wrongs and ask forgiveness, to accept forgiveness, and, perhaps most difficult of all, to truly forgive others who have wronged us. Amen.

Wednesday, April 5

Merrill Litchfield

HOW CAN WE SEE WHAT'S INVISIBLE?

Read: John 3:5-8

"The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

John 3:8

Consider the hymn: Faith, While Trees Are Still in Blossom
UMH # 508

Have you ever noticed that we cannot see the wind? That seems odd to say, since we can see something happening; but all we can see is what the wind is doing: blowing trash down the street, making the trees move, mounding up snowdrifts. Jesus made use of that phenomenon in talking to Nicodemus. The Greek word *pneuma* is a fascinating one, meaning several things: spirit, wind, breath, life. It seems to lend itself to His using it for both the (almost) visible wind and the invisible Spirit of God. Perhaps, by meaning "life," it even touches on Jesus' "born again" phrase (which my Bible's footnote suggests could also be said, "born from above"). In a way, we can see how Jesus faced an uphill battle, trying to teach new things that people had not yet seen happen.

Hymn #508 puts it in a couple of interesting ways. "Faith, while trees are still in blossom, plans the picking of the fruit"..."Long before the dawn is breaking, faith anticipates the sun. Faith is eager for the daylight, for the work that must be done."..."Faith, uplifted, tamed the water of the undivided sea, and the people of the Hebrews found the path that made them free." And, best of all, verse 5 says: "Faith believes that God is faithful: God will be what God will be! Faith accepts the call, responding, 'I am willing, Lord, send me.'"

So, how do we see the invisible? When faithful followers act it out, we can see not only faith, but love, as well.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, You who are the Way, the Truth, and the Life, how much of my faith, my trust in You, is visible to those around me? Bring me closer to You, in deed as well as in word. Amen.

Thursday, April 6

THE PRAIRIE

Anonymous, age 11, April 2007

Our boots clean of mud crunch the gravel underneath
Like a car on a driveway
We march like soldiers in a line
All of us go through forest as thick as jungle
We cross the river like pioneers, packs above our heads
The mosquitos buzz like fluorescent lights in our ears
The forest is our home away from home
We do what we can with what we have
Like survivors on an island
The forest is a world without walls
We can do or say whatever we like
We are alone as alone gets
Silence only broken by our footsteps
And voices like an engine
We walk like soldiers in a line
Our mud caked boots crunch the gravel
Like a car on a driveway

THE PRAIRIE

Ten years later

It beckons me like a lighthouse once did ships
My rain boots meet the gravel path that crunches underneath
Silently, thoughtfully, I follow the path
Each step shepherding me closer to what was you
and hope and heartache like a moth to light
Birds of glorious song and vibrant color soar around me
Timid deer peer out from their dense cover while
Prairie dwellers scurry swiftly across the path
Morning dew glistens on low lying branches announcing
A new day to the prairie like clockwork
The prairie is a comfort I wish to have earlier known
Under different circumstances and a simpler time
Rather than for this earthly nonsensical plan
Now wandering, wondering, wishing for a presence
To be revealed like a mystery of faith
My tear stained boots retrace each step
Forever knowing It beckons me
Like a lighthouse once did ships

Friday, April 7

Rev. Doug Bowden

“THE LIFE EVERLASTING”

“I believe in the Holy Spirit, the life everlasting...”
The Apostles’ Creed, Ecumenical Version #882

“I believe in the Life Everlasting.” These last words of the Apostles’ Creed give us assurance and comfort beyond our saying them in worship. Indeed, we can pick up a pew Bible, right beside our hymnal, and go to the Gospel of John, Chapter 14:1-4, and read these farewell words of Jesus to his disciples: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” Blessed also we are by some of the last words in the last book of the Bible, Revelation 21:3-4. “God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying or pain anymore...”

So, we do believe in “the Life Everlasting.” As he is soon to be arrested, put on trial, convicted and sentenced to death on the cross, Jesus assures and promises his disciples that he is going to prepare a place for them. They will be returned again. And, where they will be reunited, there will be no more tears or death there. Jesus, whose life and ministry is the heart of the middle part of the Apostles’ Creed, is calling us to live in certain hope and always in grateful anticipation of “the Life Everlasting.” Alleluia! Alleluia!

Adam Hamilton is a listening and caring pastor. He was with Julie, a colleague in the ministry of the Church of the Resurrection, who was dying of cancer. At her funeral, “we celebrated her life and the hope that Christians confess in the Creed—the hope of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting (*Creed*, p. 163).

Prayer: O God, raising us up through Jesus, your Son, we look forward to “the Life Everlasting.” Amen.

Saturday, April 8

Linda Fronk

KNOWING GOD THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT

Romans 8:2, 26-27

2 Corinthians 5:5

Acts 2:16-21

Mark 1:10-11

God in three persons is a hard concept for many people. The truth be told, God Himself is a bit much for some people because it means, by definition, someone higher than themselves. Coupling that with God incarnate in the person of Jesus further complicates the matter. Now, we are asked to worship not only God, but His son, who was a person.

How often do people disappoint; that has been our experience. The third step is the concept of the Holy Spirit, the one given as a gift to the disciples by God after Jesus left. The one who is implanted in our hearts that intercedes for us at prayer and empowers us to witness for Jesus being the Christ.

Christianity is not an easy religion to comprehend through the mind. Theologians have worked for centuries to understand how each concept and detail meshes. New branches of the faith have arisen over these theological differences.

But, at the day's end, it is not whether we know or understand all these theological details. What is critical to the Christian believer is faith in the Holy Spirit who "warms our hearts" and connects us spiritually to the eternal. Often, it takes a life event that wrenches what we believe to be our "control" from us to make that connection. Often, it is when we are at our most vulnerable that we allow this connection to occur. Like Scrooge, the hardness of our heart is stripped away, allowing a healing, heavenly balm to be administered. That is the power of the Holy Spirit.

Palm Sunday, April 9

Rev. Cindy Marino



CREED WEEK 6: THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

“The resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It’s adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike “What’s next, Papa?” God’s Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children. And we know we are going to get what’s coming to us—an unbelievable inheritance! We go through exactly what Christ goes through. If we go through the hard times with him, then we’re certainly going to go through the good times with him!

From Eugene Peterson’s “The Message”

What if church were the place where you could find a group of people living with joy, exuberance, expectancy and hope as they pursue the resurrection life with Christ? You could say things, ask questions, admit things—like you’ve never read the Bible—because nothing would change your status. You could stand up right now and shout “Amen!,” and God would still claim you as His own child!

Once more, what you believe impacts how you live. We can question whether or not Jesus was resurrected from the dead. But if we allow the notion past our intellect and into our hearts, we will have our answer. For now, we can live as though it is true. If God can resurrect the body, than we have nothing to fear! God promises us new life—not only at the end of our earthly life, but right here, right now! What in your life needs to die and be resurrected into something new? What might God do through you as a result? Pursue the questions. Ponder the possibilities.

Prayer: Almighty and glorious God, Forgive our timid ways and hesitancy to trust in you. Give us such faith and courage that in all things and in all ways we can trust in you to lead us forward. Remind us that nothing we can do or say will be the last act or the last word, for you have reserved the last things for Yourself. With Jesus at your right hand, we have nothing to fear. Thank you for inviting us into His resurrected life. Amen.

Monday, April 10

Gay and Mike Craig

THE VISITOR

“I will not leave you comfortless. I will come to you.”

John 14:18

On November 10, 2015, we went to the Edward Hospital emergency room, thinking Mike had a severe case of the flu. Tests revealed a colon tumor, requiring surgeries on November 13th and 19th. Each day brought complications and challenges. We lived hour-to-hour, trusting God. Mike spent two months in two hospitals and two months in rehabilitation, followed by many weeks of preventative chemo and radiation therapies. He firmly believes that God has kept him here for a purpose.

In the hospital, while two friends visited, Mike called me to his bedside to ask who was sitting on the couch and why that visitor wasn't talking. He was wearing a trench coat and a hat that cast shadows on his face, making the visitor unrecognizable. I assured Mike that no one was on the couch and that there were only four of us in the room. He accepted my answer. Another day, when we were alone, he again saw the silent visitor and asked who it was. Once more, Mike accepted my answer that we were alone. He didn't ask about that visitor again.

When Mike returned home in March 2016, I asked if he recalled seeing an unknown person in his hospital room. He replied, “Yes. The person wore a trench coat and hat (like Mike's father and beloved grandfather wore). One day the visitor was gone, but on the couch was the trench coat, neatly folded, with the hat resting on it. I knew then that I was going to be all right.”

Was it an hallucination or a medically-caused psychosis; did Mike see his guardian angel or a deceased family member? We are both certain that he saw someone, keeping vigil nearby, who left Mike with a message of comfort in the present moment and hope for his future.



Tuesday, April 11

Mark and Laurel Fleming

KYLYNN'S HOPE

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28 (NIV)



Six years after the beginning of Open Doors Ministry at Grace Church, God has given us an opportunity to establish another ministry to children with special needs at Laurel's hometown church in Wisconsin. We have been aware of several children with special needs in the church and the greater community, but we needed a first student in order to launch the program. Last August, a family came forward, hoping that their 10-year-old daughter, Kylynn, might participate in Sunday school.

Despite a rare congenital disorder that left her wheelchair-bound and non-verbal, Kylynn was a happy child with a beautiful smile and a giggle that lifted the spirits of everyone around her.

We and the church staff were excited! But God had a different plan for us. In October, as we were finalizing a plan of accommodations to include Kylynn in the fourth-grade Sunday school class, she suddenly and unexpectedly passed away. We will forever remember the dozens of balloons at her funeral—including one monkey-shaped balloon (her favorite animal)—floating higher and higher in the clear autumn sky as her spirit was lifted up to heaven.

At various times in life we might see our hopes and dreams floating away, just like those balloons. Yet God promises to be with us always and to show us new paths in our journey. In the months following Kylynn's passing, her spirit has inspired us and many others in the congregation to move forward to initiate a special needs ministry in the church, named "Kylynn's Hope."

God continues to show love through this special child!

Wednesday, April 12

Merrill Litchfield

MORE THAN I CAN IMAGINE?

Read: Ephesians 3:14-21

“Now to Him Who is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Ephesians 3:20-21

Let me admit it plainly: I'm a daydreamer. Is that good or bad? That depends. In *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis wrote that most of our gifts are not good or bad by nature, but by how we use them. If we use them to serve God, then they are good, perhaps even holy; if we use them to avoid God, so we can do as we please, they will be the destruction of our souls. If I offer my imagination to Jesus, to let Him lead me down a thought-path that leads to Him, one that I can share, that may be very well; if I use my imagination to create my own sweet, comfortable internal world by detaching myself from reality, I may end up finding that I've also detached myself from the God of all reality.

Part of the reason I've been such a Lewis fan is his imagination, which has taken me to places I'd never dreamed of, like Narnia, or Perelandra, or the celestial bus from hell up to the edge of heaven. But, even so, both his imagination and mine have their limits. He has challenged people to try to create something new, rather than patching together odd parts of what already exists. But when I look at the size of our world, and the fantastic variations of all the different plants and animals that fill it, I can only say, "I give up!" And that's even before I raise my eyes to what-all exists and happens in the universe around us. Can God do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine? You bet! And amen!

Prayer: Lord, open our eyes to all the wonders You have provided, both around us and within us. Open our hearts, that we may adore You as You deserve. Amen.

Maundy Thursday, April 13

Pastor Matthew Johnson

COMMUNION IN THE EVERYDAY

It is a right and a good and a joyful thing, always and everywhere, to give thanks to you, Almighty God, creator of heaven and Earth.

I say these words every time I'm honored to lead those gathered at table to celebrate the Lord's Supper. It is near the beginning of the prayer offered before we share in bread and cup, and it serves as a reminder that the solemnity and spirit of the "formal" communion table isn't limited to those formal times.



On this day, when we remember Jesus establishing the tradition of communion for us, I find it appropriate to remember why he did this. In the same way that what happens on Friday isn't the end of our faith's story, neither is what happens in worship the end of our faith life.

When we surround the communion table with our hope and prayer, it is a good and pleasing thing to be a part of...not because of the moment alone, but because of where it sends us. Leaving the communion table, filled with the goodness of God, transforms our lives, relationships, and neighborhoods. We are sent to serve and love in thanksgiving.

Ultimately, what is good and pleasing isn't about how we feel, but rather who we become. There is power in that. It begins in worship when bread is broken and is lived after the lights go out and everyone heads back into a reality where the reign of God is breaking free.

Good Friday, April 14

Rev. Dr. Thomas Aldworth

DARK NIGHTS AND THE SILENCE OF GOD

My beloved and beautiful wife, Beth, went home to God on Wednesday, October 19, 2016, just after 5:00 p.m. She had been at home on hospice for two weeks. I was alone with her when she passed. She was taken away for cremation, per her request. There is a perennial problem understanding the unnerving silence of God when we see so much wrong with our world. The world is a mess and it has always been a mess. Why do good people suffer so? Why the suffering of children? Why do lovely, vibrant people such as my beloved Beth die so prematurely? Where is God in all of this? I've spent a lifetime trying to discern a reasonable and satisfactory answer.

One thing I've come to know is that the God we meet in suffering is not the omnipotent God we typically extol in philosophy. The God who is silent in the midst of all the suffering we see around us, the God who was silent when Beth suffered from her vicious malignancy, is the God who has become wounded in and through love. In the dark night, we often recognize our disillusionment with the things of the world. We see the emptiness, the meaninglessness, of much of our striving. We recognize our misguided but chronic need for affirmation. But we also begin to understand that our ideas about God need to change. We need to let go of the naive notions of the Almighty that were part and parcel of our childhood. We come to see, in the words of the mystic John of the Cross, that God is something we can even talk about. God is not a thing!

We must come to believe in our deepest heart and our deepest soul that we are united to God with a bond that has never been broken, a bond that can never be broken. The bond is God's love for each of us, even for the most desperate sinner among us! God is at the core of each person. We can never really achieve union with God because that union already exists. In the dark night, we come to know this fundamental, foundational truth. We can never escape God. We can never completely withdraw ourselves from God's love—either here or in eternity.

We are made for love. But we stumble into trouble because we become too attached to things. We love what we accumulate instead of loving God and one another. This is one of the reasons why God appears silent. We mistrust the love residing at our core and seek our consolation in power and possessions. We grasp instead of embracing. To fully learn this truth, we must relinquish everything which is not love. We must learn to simplify our lives. We must learn to empty ourselves instead of always filling ourselves up with this and that. Our spiritual life is much more about subtraction rather than addition. God is certainly the Master of All Creation. Yet to think of God in such a way makes God seem quite separate from us. The God who is in charge of ...

continued on back cover

Holy Saturday, April 15

Phyllis Pepiot

FAITH – HOPE – LOVE IN ACTION

Early on in my adult life, Bea Gates helped me answer the question “Why Church?” She asked me to accompany singing at what was then the Women's Society of World Service (predecessor of United Methodist Women) meetings. Being a busy young homemaker and new teacher, I asked if I could leave right after performing my service (answer: yes), but somehow I stayed until the end and gladly returned to every meeting.

Soon I volunteered for various other jobs, finding the answer to that “Why Church?” question. I found a “community of women whose purpose is to know God and to experience freedom as whole persons through Jesus Christ; to develop a creative, supportive fellowship; and to expand concepts of mission through participation in the global ministries of the church,” even though it was a few years before that purpose of UMW was approved by the General Conference of the United Methodist Church.

That community of women at Grace and around the country has nurtured me and helped me to grow into the person I am today. Witness was an important part of my life in the church, even before it was a part of the UMC membership vows. I have always believed Jesus calls us to action as well as to study. United Methodist Women gave me a course of study and provided suggested action to help in that witness.

Each year the national organization offers three studies: one with a scriptural emphasis; one with an emphasis on a people, culture or geographical area; and one related to a justice topic. I experience these studies monthly at our meetings, often with area expert speakers. I am challenged to tell others about the subject, to volunteer and give in-kind and monetary gifts to various causes that work for particular justice issues or worldwide mission projects.

Another national offering that stimulates me is the UMW Reading Program. This is a book list presented annually in five categories: Education or Mission, Leadership Development, Nurturing for Community, Social Action, and Spiritual Growth. Our local unit purchases a sampling of these and they become part of the Grace Church Library. The latest are kept on a cart in Room 101.

United Methodist Women is more than women having coffees (although that is enjoyed too). It is Faith, Hope and Love in Action!

Easter Sunday, April 16

Chamus Burnside-Savazzini

AN EASTER STORY

"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."
Hebrews 11:1 (KJV)

I believe in God because I have come to develop a deeper relationship with Christ through a series of life events with miraculous conclusions. One particular event was in 2014. My mother's heart stopped as she was substitute teaching at a middle school. The children found her in the classroom. Her heart had stopped for over 20 minutes, but the paramedics used the defibrillator and eventually got a pulse. She lay in a coma for eight days with only "involuntary" movements, as described by the medical team. On the eighth day, we met with the medical team and made the decision to let her function on her own without medical assistance. That was the toughest day of my life, but I knew and felt God's presence with me. I felt Him with me each of the eight days that I slept in her hospital room by her side.

That night into the early morning, various teams came in to unplug, remove, detach and disconnect everything that was helping her body to function. I sat there and opened my laptop, as I did every night, and read scripture and encouraging text messages from friends and family. When the sun rose, I decided to get up, go home and take a shower, because the many guests I was sure would fill my mother's room (like they had done every day since she got there) would be there again with their prayers and support. As I left, I squeezed her hand, kissed her several times on her cheeks and whispered in her ear that if she could hear me, she needed to squeeze the doctor's hand when he came in that morning so they'd know that she was still alive. I got no response.

I prayed harder than I have ever prayed in my entire life. I got to the house, took a shower, and when I was getting out of the shower, my phone rang. It was my aunt, who shouted, "She squeezed the doctor's hand!" Wow! My husband later told me he'd never heard me say "Praise God!" so many times. I rushed back and could not stop thinking that God showed that *He* is the ultimate healer, and I had to put my trust and faith in Him! No machine, no doctor and no medicine did what He could do. I was blessed to hear story after story of people who had visited her, thought she was gone, and then heard she woke up and dropped down to praise God. This is just one reason why I believe in God! Even when I could not see, He was working on my mother's behalf. I know that God is real.

Prayer: May we believe even when we do not see. May we praise God even when we do not understand. Amen.

Good Friday's "Dark Nights" continued from page 49

...everything—the God who can give us good things as well as bad things—who is completely transcendent, often leads to the dead end of agnosticism and atheism. A God who doles out blessings, who grants an occasional healing, who tests us whenever it seems appropriate, is not the God of the Dark Night. Such a God is also not a God who seems to love us unconditionally. This is not the God who was with me as I sat and watched my beautiful Beth waste away in her tragic sickness.

The God who I believe in, the God who was with me, the God who swept Beth up in a divine embrace last October 19, is the God who has become wounded by and for love. No other God makes sense to me. No other God seems worthy of my worship! As the Episcopalian pastor Alan Jones writes in *Soulmaking*: "The humiliation of God for the sake of Love means there is a rift in the heart of God. There is, therefore, no human heartbreak, no alienation, which cannot find its home in the broken heart of God." What reassuring words! (Words I used in Beth's eulogy!)

I'm truly heartbroken by my beloved's passing. I'm not sure at times how I will go on. On a Sunday shortly after her death, I cautioned people to stop asking, "How are you doing?" I don't have any good answer to that question. I don't know how I am doing. I know that the passage of time may well help heal what is broken. But, then again, time may only break open more fissures in my heart and soul. Time will tell.

My faith is not about what I believe, nor has it ever been. My faith is about a surrender—a willingness—to rest in the all-powerful love of God. I feel myself now to be deeply empty. I pray that this deep emptiness may be filled with the only balm that can suffice: God's love!

Editor's note: Space limitations required the unconventional placement of a continuing Good Friday devotion on the back cover—after Easter Sunday! Grateful thanks again to all of our generous contributors to this year's Lenten devotions booklet, particularly former editor Merrill Litchfield, Rev. Cindy Marino, and Rev. Doug Bowden for their multiple submissions.

In compiling this booklet, I couldn't help but remember fondly those people who have contributed to it in the past who have since passed away. Some of them include the prolific Ralph Keiser, the prize-winning poet Glenna Holloway, Candyce Krumwiede, Rev. Larry Hilkemann, and several others who went before them. May they live forever in our hearts and in the renewed hope of Easter.