A photograph of two people in silhouette against a sunset sky. They are holding a lit sparkler that is glowing brightly. The sky transitions from a deep blue at the top to a warm orange and yellow near the horizon. The overall mood is hopeful and celebratory.

THE TRANSFORMATION:

FROM
DARKNESS
TO
LIGHT



UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST

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Introduction



It is an honor for me to write this introduction to this remarkable resource: a Lenten devotional written by youth and young adults.

The Church has always oriented its life around resurrection. For Christians, the transformation of death into new life is the core teaching around which our faith comes alive. Receiving that gift of new life as an act of utter grace from our Creator is the source of our joy, the locus of our hope, and the ground of our comfort. Take away resurrection hope, and the essence of our faith dissolves.

Easter is our defining moment. The week of passion that precedes it becomes an annual rehearsal for us of the constant pain, struggle, and death humans must face on our journeys in faith. We face it bluntly and with courage. We tell the story of Christ's passion, agony, and death without shame or embarrassment precisely because we know that the story and power of resurrection transforms how we process our pain, our struggle, our death.

Even before we get to Holy Week, though, we spend an entire season in what we call Lent. Lent is our slow confrontation with mortality and frailty and humanity, in inglorious and ignominious vulnerability. It is a visceral reminder that joy cannot ignore the realities of walking this pathway we call life. In Lent, together we face fully both what the world inflicts upon us through its own misfortune and what we inflict upon ourselves and others through our own selfishness. Lent stands as a stark reminder of the cost of discipleship, even as it prepares us for the joy of the grace of God through resurrection hope.

These youth and young adults serve as authors of a fresh vision and a new grounding in hope. Their own lived experiences of violence, economic uncertainty, Me Too movements confronting the degradation of women, an entire life lived under the threat of climate catastrophe, a rise in global fascism and political upheaval, a renewed and vigorous uprising of race hate and homophobia, all serve to make their reflections poignant, powerful, rich in meaning and grounded in hope.

I covet their vision, their wisdom, and their raw honesty that leads us through our season of Lenten sorrow to discover anew, and again, the power of resurrection hope. I am grateful for every one of their voices, the courage needed to remain grounded in that hope, and the skill with which they speak their truth to a world much in need of what they have to say.

Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer, General Minister and President

Welcome



On behalf of Faith INFO (Innovation, Education and Formation) and Justice and Local Church Ministries of the United Church of Christ, I am excited to present to you the second edition of the Youth & Young Adult Lenten Devotion.

As you read this devotion it is my hope that you will do so with an open mind and fresh eyes. You are invited to read the daily scripture in your own Bible, and then the devotion entry as written. Each writer has included a prayer that we collectively offer to our God as a starting point for further conversation. You are encouraged to take the writers' words and allow them to inspire further dialogue with the Divine, your family, friends and even social media.

Last year we presented the Church with a downloadable devotion which was our way of re-launching youth and young adult ministries from the National Office, and showcasing the voices of our young people. With its success, we decided this should be a resource that continues to involve and brings new voices to the forefront of the Church.

In collaboration with our Conferences, Council on Racial and Ethnic Ministries, Outdoor Ministries Associations, the Association of United Church Educators and the Network of Wider Church Youth Ministries, we have brought together a diverse group of individuals to present *The Transformation: From Darkness to Light*. Our writers' range in age from twelve through the mid-thirties and represent several racial and ethnic communities. As you read through this daily devotional you will also experience a range of theological expressions and beliefs. As members of the United Church of Christ, we know there is space to hold all these diverse representations.

Each day you will walk with Christ as darkness gives way to light in familiar and surprising ways. Enjoy the journey.

Rev. Trayce L. Potter

ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 26

Let Our Hearts Be Broken



“Tearing your clothes is not enough to show you are sad. Let your heart be broken.” (Joel 2:13, NCV)

There is something resoundingly powerful about this passage. We hear echoes of it today: Thoughts and prayers are not enough. Condemning racism and bigotry is not enough. It's not enough to be “not racist.”

In response to another mass shooting, President Obama said, “Our thoughts and prayers are not enough. It's not enough. It does not capture the heartache and grief we should feel and it does nothing to prevent this carnage being repeated somewhere else in America.” <https://time.com/4058961/oregon-shooting-president-obama-transcript-speech/> In today's world, it's easy to “keep scrolling,” or turn off the news. It's easy to put ignore what's happening around us. But the reality is, atrocities have happened and are happening all over, particularly in this country. We cannot keep ignoring it. The very land we stand on was stolen; there is a whole people in this country who cannot trace their ancestry like I can as a white woman; children have been ripped from their parents' arms as they seek refuge and asylum; black folk are being murdered in their homes; bullying and hate crimes are at a high; and so much more.

So let the prophet Joel's words pierce you: Let your heart be broken.

Nothing will change unless we truly feel the heartache and grief of what is happening, and has happened, all around us.

It's time to blow the trumpet. Call for a special time of fasting. Call a special meeting. Bring the people together. Make the meeting holy for the Lord. It's time we gather all the people: the children, the elders, and everyone in between. It is time to gather in the name of the creating, redeeming, and sustaining God who is always on the side of the oppressed, who hears people's cries for strength and mercy. It is time to gather in the presence of God, coming together with broken hearts, repenting, asking God for mercy, seeking forgiveness, committing to justice, and creating change.

It is time for our hearts to be broken open by God to the pain of the world, so that we may also see the beginnings of the restoration and redemption of the world.

It starts with us. It starts with you. Let your heart be broken.

Prayer:

Gracious God, break our hearts wide open. Rend us apart. Let the pains of the world change us. Let it stir us from complacency and move us into action to follow your call so that we may also be a part of the restoration of your Creation. Amen.

Rev. Kelsey Peterson Beebe, 27

FEBRUARY 27

King David the Soap Star



Any day I was home from school I knew where I'd be at lunchtime: sitting at my grandma's table, eating with her and my grandpa, watching *The Young and the Restless*. I always assumed it was Grandma's favorite but given that my grandpa continued watching daily after she died, I suspect there were multiple fans in the kitchen.

I loved the show, and watched characters fall in love, get married, break up, get re-married, and have babies who came back three years later from boarding school, fully grown (#Soap-OperaAging). I loved the good guys and hated the bad guys, and it was clear who was who, even when they switched from one to the other. Bad guys weren't bad forever, and after their evil doings broke up my favorite couple for the umpteenth time, something would happen, a redemption arc would kick in, and they'd be forgiven, at least for now. Sure, the ruthless business tycoon cheated on his latest wife, skipped town, and let his family think he died in a plane crash, but then he fell in love with a blind woman while working on her farm in Kansas, so he was able to return as the conquering hero and be a good guy once again. Redemption!

David's story certainly has some soap opera level drama. (Go read 2 Samuel, I'll wait.) After David commits multiple sins (Murder! Adultery! Rape!), an angry God sends the prophet Nathan to convey disapproval, and though David resists at first, he ultimately acknowledges his sins and is forgiven. Redemption! And he didn't even have to fake his own death!

Prayer:

God, I'm not a tycoon or a king, but I could use a redemption arc. Help me to acknowledge my sins, against you and others, so that I may be forgiven and with a clean heart praise you with hallelujahs. Amen.

Diana Maxwell, 34

Christian Identify, Lenten Lifestyle



A lot of my friends are not really into church. It can be uncomfortable to talk to them about it, because they often don't understand my perspective. I think a lot of them feel jaded, having watched a litany of prominent faith leaders commit some pretty heinous acts over our lifetimes. But I tend to think that demonizing the shortcomings of individuals is a pretty bad way to assess Christianity (and for Christians to assess the world).

When I articulate my Christian faith, I watch people start to size me up too, to see if I meet some otherworldly moral standard. Spoiler alert: I always fall short. They'll look at me and say, "So that's Christianity, huh?" The truth is, when you compare me to Jesus, I'm pretty underwhelming. I make a lot of mistakes, and I've done some regrettable things in my life. But following Christ isn't about living a flawless life that can be put up on a pedestal.

Our faith, especially during Lent, is a way of understanding life, self, and society, that calls us to be accountable, to make amends, and to work towards a vision of what could be. Following Jesus means seeking community with messy, messed-up people. It means striving to do the right thing—and failing. It means trying to clean up your own messes—sometimes failing at that too. It means being uncomfortable a fair amount of the time. That's what I want to spark when I talk about my faith—a vision of what could be if we all lived like that.

What could the world be like if people understood failures and sincere apologies as empowering acts of building relationship and strengthening communities, instead of public and shameful admissions of moral failure and hypocrisy? What if we could tell and model that story at Lent?

Paul proclaims Christians as God's representatives, and then acknowledges that it's going to be a bumpy ride. People are going to misunderstand your motives and criticize your failures. Keep at it anyway. Should we not try to model a more perfect world simply because some doubt it can be done? Telling others about our faith should be as simple as that: "I'm walking the walk, which fills me spiritually. Would you care to join me?"

Prayer:

Creator God, grant us the wisdom and fortitude to be people that strive to live in the model of Christ, especially when we fall short. Take from us our fears of judgment, so that we can proclaim in word and deed, your world-shaping vision. Amen.

Andrew Wicks, 31

FEBRUARY 29

Spring Cleaning



“You’ve got so much stuff, you don’t know what you’ve got!” These words, spoken by my great-aunt Mabel to my great-grandma Irene, have been lovingly repeated by my family every time one of us moves. If my own house is any indication, I seem to have inherited my great-grandma’s knack for collection, and I wonder if perhaps I should move simply to declutter my life a bit.

Lent offers us an opportunity to do just that with our spiritual lives. Some people store up treasures in their homes here on earth. This is a shortsighted practice—don’t undertake it. What am I holding on to? What junk is getting in the way? Instead, put up your treasures in heaven. What do I need more of? What is helping me let go? What is leading me to Love?

“You’ve got so much stuff, you don’t know what you’ve got!” Take time this Lent to do a spiritual inventory and spring cleaning. Embrace all that is leading you deeper into relationship with God and the world and people around you and begin to release those things that don’t.

Life is short and the ashes we received on Ash Wednesday remind us of that. “From dust you have come, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19). We do not have forever. This thought shouldn’t cause us to despair, or call us to live busier lives, but to live deeper. To love God and others more fully. And to reflect on what in our lives is keeping us from doing that.

Prayer:

God, help me to see the things in my life with fresh eyes and to keep what leads me deeper into your love. Amen.

Mark Hakes, 31

Firstfruits

The Lord is giving you the land, and soon you will conquer it, settle down, and plant crops. And when you begin harvesting each of your crops, the very first things you pick must be put in a basket. Take them to the place where the Lord your God chooses to be worshiped, and tell the priest, "Long ago the Lord our God promised our ancestors that he would give us this land. And today, I thank him for keeping his promise and giving me a share of the land." The priest will take the basket and set it in front of the Lord's altar. Then, standing there in front of the place of worship, you must pray: My ancestor was homeless, an Aramean who went to live in Egypt. There were only a few in his family then, but they became great and powerful, a nation of many people. The Egyptians were cruel and had no pity on us. They mistreated our people and forced us into slavery. We called out for help to you, the Lord God of our ancestors. You heard our cries; you knew we were in trouble and abused. Then you terrified the Egyptians with your mighty miracles and rescued us from Egypt. You brought us here and gave us this land rich with milk and honey. Now, Lord, I bring to you the best of the crops that you have given me. After you say these things, place the basket in front of the Lord's altar and bow down to worship him. Then you and your family must celebrate by eating a meal at the place of worship to thank the Lord your God for giving you such a good harvest. And remember to invite the Levites and the foreigners who live in your town.

Reclaiming Our Name



My middle name happens to be Eve. When I was younger, I used to think it was funny to tell my Pentecostal Sunday school friends that I was named after the originator of sin. From a very early age we were taught that Eve was the reason we were sinful and needed God. For those of us born in female bodies, we learned that our biology could cause others to fall just like Eve made Adam back in that garden. When we heard the story of Jesus suffering and dying on the cross, the girls in the room knew that it was our sex's fault he was there. For women throughout history, this story hurts. In many ways, it is the underlining cause of the #metoo movement, the inspiration for the equal pay problem, the origin of women's healthcare being inadequate, and the curse that keeps us from more female representation in places of leadership, and more. Where is the good news for Eve?

The problem here is not Eve picking a piece of fruit. The problem is humanity trying to play God. It is the attitude of "I know best" or "my way is the right way" that causes Adam and Eve to be tossed out of the garden. The serpent tempts Eve with the ability to be and think like God. It isn't Eve's biology or gender that causes the fall; it is humanity's inability to recognize our need for God and one another that is our downfall. Like the fruit being separated from the tree when it was picked, the problem is disconnection. What Jesus teaches is a way of RE-connection. It is in recognizing our need for one another and for God that we find redemption for our lives and for our world.

Prayer:

Creator God forgive us when we believe we do not need you or each other. Help us to courageously connect with you by building relationships with those whom you put in our path. May we live into Jesus' vision of a world reconnected, where in our bonds people find dignity, mercy, and peace. Amen.

Rev. Allysa De Wolf, 32

Reconciliation for the Young People



I am a full-time college student. I have two jobs that add up to 40 hours a week, and I try to keep up with organizations and churches on campus. Add to that trying to maintain relationships and practice self-care, and I have very little time or energy to spare.

When I first sat down with this scripture passage, it was 8 o'clock on a dark Wednesday night. The deadline of this draft was drawing near and I was exhausted. In an act of desperation, I decided to not attend worship at my campus church that night to work on this devotional. No matter how hard I pinched myself to stay awake, how much I prayed for some words, and how much I willed my mind to focus, I could not put anything coherent on paper. So 30 minutes later, I decided to go to the last half of worship and table my devotional for another hour.

I walked into the worship space in the middle of a song. The community gathered was small but familiar. I took a seat and felt at home. Once the song ended, I picked up a slip of paper and a pen. And the words that I had been trying so hard to find were found on my tiny slip of paper. I reflected on myself and my generation, and what reconciliation means to me. To me, reconciliation means two different truths existing in harmony.

These are the two truths that I know. We have endless demands on our time, we have pressure from ourselves and others, and we have a world with endless problems to solve and other generations looking towards us—the young people—to solve them. There is also beauty in our possibilities, the futures ahead of us, and the imagined world we are desperately working towards.

Prayer:

Dear God, help us to see the reconciliation in our own lives so that we may see the potential for reconciliation in the world. Amen.

Madeline Loss, 21

MARCH 4

Choices



This passage from Romans discusses Adam's sin and Christ's sacrifice. It contrasts the two events and their effect on the rest of the world. Adam's one action brought death and despair unto the world, while Christ's action brought salvation.

Adam and Christ are juxtaposed to represent good and bad, simply put. Although opposites, they are treated as one and the same. Both Adam and Christ's actions represent our own. We all have the ability to do good and bad.

But life is more complex than that. Not everything is black and white; reality is a spectrum consisting of a large grey area. Our universe and our life in it cannot simply be categorized as good and bad. Rather than looking at the act itself, you must also look at its effect on the world.

Adam's action spread negativity throughout the world. Anyone can spread negativity, and if you've done so there is nothing you can do to take it back. But Christ's positive action shows us that there is always hope. You can still choose positivity in the future and your positive energy can help foster a positive future for all.

If we see our negative actions as the end-all-be-all, then there would be no point in doing good, ever. But when we acknowledge the negativity inside us, then we can choose to address it in a way that does not spread to others. Everyone has bad days. Life is hard. And when we feel negatively, it can be hard to act positively.

We are only human, just like Adam and Jesus. To say you do not make mistakes is to say you are not human. How we react and move forward from those mistakes says more than the mistake itself. Be kind to others, be kind to yourself, choose hope, and practice forgiveness.

Prayer:

All Knowing One, help us to identify our wrongdoings and in doing so help us find positivity within us to move forward. Help us to find kindness in a world that is unkind. Help us in practicing kindness, positivity, and forgiveness. With your help we can foster a positive and kind future. Amen.

Hayley Richards, 24

Do The Right Thing



I spent a lot of my life preparing to do something significant in the world. When I got to college, I chose a major, a ministry, a mission that I felt would allow me to change the world. College put me in its big expensive mouth, chewed me up, spit me out, washed me clean, and changed me into something magnificently new. In the few months after college, I felt bright, shiny, prepared, and unwilling to be deterred from my mission to change the world. And to, ya know, maybe find a job that allowed me to practice my ministry and financially support myself.

Suddenly I was thrust into the world with my brand-new mission, ready to try out my fancy college-gained wisdom. No one told me the world was a wilderness filled with constant pressures and temptations. Pressures to find work to keep food on the table. The temptation to give up on my mission to work at any job that will take me. No one told me that about the constant temptation to suppress weaknesses or insecurities. No one warned me about cut-throat behaviors and being stepped on in a ministry that doesn't cater to women of color.

No one signaled that giving in to these pressures and temptations would be doing myself a great injustice. Nevertheless, I persisted. I chose to use this hard lonely time to push through all the distractions and double-down on my mission. I was highly rewarded with a job that let me work on my ministry while being able to put food on the table.

Sometimes I wanted to skip over all the hard parts and reach my goals with ease. But I know that when I chose to do the right thing, I could clearly see the way it affected the world around me. The results that come from doing the right thing—the sometimes-harder thing—yield very clear results and give the evidence needed to keep on doing the right sometimes-harder thing. Temptation is part of having a choice. I could try to talk the talk and even walk the walk, but it takes far more courage and strength to do the right thing despite personal risk of looking different than the others.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for the option to choose my own path. Amen.

Jennifer White, 35

MARCH 6

Life Is Hard



Having grown up in a church, this passage isn't something that is unfamiliar to me. The idea that "God has a plan" and "simply call out to God, trusting him to do it for you" is not an uncommon phrase for me to hear from friends, family or people in my church family.

However, for such a simple catch phrase, it sure is difficult to actually put into practice. I think this passage in Romans sugarcoats the idea that "all you have to do is sit back relax and trust God and you won't regret it." Like that's the easiest thing to do in the whole world, but it isn't. Life is hard. School and work are completely draining, and relationships are a battle. There are times when reality can hit you in the face like a ton of bricks and make you feel helpless.

In that moment, when the world is crashing down, the last thing that goes through my brain is the fact that God has it under control. For me, it's arguably the hardest part about my faith journey, trusting that everything is going to work out. It is the thing I have to work on everyday and have failed at countlessly.

Trusting in God is not as easy as it seems, nor is asking for help. I feel that this passage is a good reminder that we should always be working towards trusting in God fully with our whole heart and soul. But it's also okay to think that it's not that easy. It is also okay to forget or fail at it.

Prayer:

Dear God, please give us strength when life feels overwhelming. Help us work to trust in you and your greater plan. Help us be gracious towards ourselves, each other, and the church when we feel as if we have forgotten or failed you. Amen.

**Hannah Rose, 20
Midland, MI**

MARCH 7

Help Is Always Near



Growing up in the Christian faith, I was very familiar with this passage. So familiar that I thought, “What do I have to say about this? What do I have to add?”

But then, I really started thinking about this passage on temptation. Honestly, I probably would have failed the first challenge Jesus faced. I get seriously “hangry” when deprived of food for extended periods of time. The fact that Jesus resisted the temptation to feed himself—after not eating for 40 days—is impressive. Clearly he felt a need to satisfy more than his physical hunger at that time.

Just like Jesus, we also experience temptation. Whether it be to eat one more cookie or to tell a lie or to break a rule. We are constantly tempted to drift away from God. This can feel discouraging as we want to be close to God, but our temptations can sometimes damage our relationship with God. Thankfully, Jesus not only saved us, but also showed us how to resist our temptations.

In the second trial, Satan promised Jesus power over all the kingdoms if Jesus worshiped him instead. Many of us have worshiped things of the world. We sometimes become absorbed in collecting more money, more items, or even more respect from others. Jesus wasn’t excluded from these temptations, but he provided guidance on how to handle them. He recalled the commandment to worship only God and to focus on God. He even maintained his focus throughout the third trial when Satan attempted to use scripture against him.

Throughout these trials, Jesus also taught that we never have to face our temptations alone. Jesus consistently drew his strength from God, and we can do the same thing. We can ask for assistance. In the prayer Jesus taught to his disciples, he included both a request for God’s assistance and a praise for God’s greatness. So, while we may continue to experience temptations, we know that we can always ask for God’s help to resist them.

Prayer:

Dear God, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Jocelyn, 27

MARCH 8

Abram's Vision

Later the Lord spoke to Abram in a vision, "Abram, don't be afraid! I will protect you and reward you greatly." But Abram answered, "Lord All-Powerful, you have given me everything I could ask for, except children. And when I die, Eliezer of Damascus will get all I own. You have not given me any children, and this servant of mine will inherit everything." The Lord replied, "No, he won't! You will have a son of your own, and everything you have will be his." Then the Lord took Abram outside and said, "Look at the sky and see if you can count the stars. That's how many descendants you will have." Abram believed the Lord, so the Lord was pleased with him and accepted him.

Turning Point



This passage represents a major turning point in Genesis. Chapter 11 is the end of what scholars call the "primeval history." Those stories set up the rest of Genesis, which is about family and faithfulness. Abram is called to leave everything behind for something new, for something God will show him but that he hasn't yet seen.

I am struck by God's instructions to Abram to leave his land and family. This was a big turning point for him, when he was called to leave behind his life as he knew it and create something new. Like Abram, we must eventually leave the home we grew up in to discover faithfulness for ourselves. In this economy, of course, many of us find ourselves back in our parents' homes for a time. Wherever we may live, this is a time in our lives of discovering our own identity and our own faith. It is a time to create something new.

Like Abram, we often won't find what God has in store for us until we are ready to let go of what came before. As a young adult myself and as a pastor, I know that life for youth and young adults is filled with these turning points: moments between the past and the future, full of both peril and possibility. Moments where we need some of Abram's bravery, to follow God's call and move towards the future, no matter how unknown or scary it may be.

With Abram as an example, we can face those turning points with faith. We can choose to go where God is calling us, blessing what came before, while also letting it go. Surely when we do, God's blessings are with us.

Prayer:

God, help me face turning points with Abram's bravery, and of course, with trust in you. Amen.

Rev. Sean Weston, 27

Remembering Christ



This is one of the most cited psalms, one of the glad psalms that people easily whip out to explain God's love for us all. What we often leave out is that the psalm is attributed to David, after he had fallen from the throne and been exiled. The question at the beginning is not purely rhetorical, but a sincere plea, coming from a place of fear, longing and desperation. He stands in need of help, in need of hope.

David's question is answered in the next verse: "My help comes from the Lord, who made the heavens and the earth." It does not dismiss the question, does not condescend to it, but straightforwardly responds. God is here with us at all times, the shade at our right hand, and yet is vast enough that They created all that we see and know. Our doubts are not invalid, but even in the midst of them, God will not let us down.

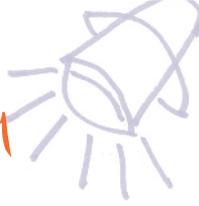
In Lent, we remember Christ's own wandering in the desert, and both the privations and temptations he faced there. Many of us fast, or use this season as a time for meditation, in honor and memory of his sacrifice not only on the cross but in the desert. It is a time purposefully carved out for wrestling with doubt, fear, and all of the less-sparkly aspects of faith. In that spirit, this psalm can be seen as an exercise, like the tensing and relaxing of a muscle to relieve stress. It begins in fundamental doubt and fear, with David looking to the mountains of his first exile where he hid from Saul. The rest of the psalm follows an arc of reaffirmation, answering that doubt and bolstering faith.

Prayer:

In this time of winter, meditation and sacrifice, I lift my eyes up to the hills for assurance, for guidance and for hope. Oh Lord, the shade at my hand, I give you thanks.

Joshua Witten, 20

Affirmed by Faith



My freshman year of high school I discovered that I love the theatre. Since then, I have been in several plays. I have had small parts and leads; I have also worked tech behind the scenes. Theatre has become a part of who I am.

I have joined the International Thespian Society. As part of this society, I am in partnership with performers past and present, joined throughout the ages by our involvement in theatre. We are not joined together by “blood” but by our common passion. Passion for theatre is my inheritance from thespians past, present, and future.

When I read this section of Romans, I hear Paul talking about inheritance. Paul claims that justification is not inherited from Abraham by being a descendant of Abraham, but by embracing the faith that Abraham embraced. The people Paul is writing to are not justified by family inheritance, but by faith.

When I think about “justification” I think about bringing things in line with each other. Like the options on a Word document at the top of the screen: left justify, right justify, center justify. Justification lines things up, and justification with God lines us up with God. If we can only be lined up with God because of how we were born, we have no hope. But if we are lined up with God because of our faith, then there is hope.

I inherited a lot of things from my parents; my hair, my eye color, my skin tone. But the theatre aligned me with a whole new inheritance. As Christians, our faith is like that theatre passion; our inheritance is through our faith, not through our birth.

Prayer:

Dear God, thank you for my inheritance and for affirming me just as I am. Help me to accept others and to claim all of your people as inheritors of your love. Amen.

Lindsey Oberle, 17

MARCH 12

If Only



Reading this scripture, I feel like I've heard this story too many times before. Every Christian knows the story of Adam and Eve, and how we humans couldn't make it a couple of days without messing up the gifts God had given us. Every time I hear the story of Adam and Eve, I always catch myself wondering what life could be like if Eve hadn't eaten that fruit. I wonder if humans were really better off without sin. It seems like so often I tell myself that I could've done better if I had made a different choice, that I wouldn't be so angry with myself if I had thought my actions through.

This story from Genesis has been repeated throughout the history of our world. "If only" we had made the right choice. "If only" Eve hadn't eaten that fruit. Sin is found within every human on this earth, there is no denying that. However, I think our sins are something we should hold close to our hearts. More often than not, we learn from our mistakes. Sins make us the people that we are. Even if sins are something that are often thought to be bad things, I look at sins as chances for me to do better, to learn and improve. Every time I fail to make the right choice, I have always been forgiven in the end. After every time my sister and I fight, we still end up talking and laughing the next day.

The reason for this is love. I think love is like a sibling to sin, because it is the bad things that happen to us that make us appreciate what we have. I have struggled with my faith, my purpose, and my identity. I've fought with my best friends, pushed great people out of my life, and failed to make the mark too many times. But even after all the things I have done wrong, all the times I've let myself down, I still come back to the things I love. Though life without sin would be nice, life without sin wouldn't let us appreciate all the great things we have. Through God and Christ, we experience a love and forgiveness like no other.

This Lent, I hope to focus on the things that I can do right and learn from my mistakes, rather than dwell on a story I've heard many times before.

Prayer:

God, we know how many times we have messed up. We know that we are far from perfect, but we thank you for giving us chances and love no matter how many times we miss the mark. May we find the love that comes from our sins, and may we seek for your love in everything we do. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

Jane Amstutz, 14

More Than a Story



If I were there, I imagine that I would be like Peter, talking about all the things I would want to do to remember this special moment. Or maybe, I would tell Peter to stop talking and listen. I would be freaked out seeing these people from the past and a cloud that is talking. If I saw something like that in real life, I would also be afraid and say, "What is happening?" Or, would run away, even if I knew that the cloud was the word of God trying to tell them to listen to Jesus, because he is God's son. I would want to listen, but some things are just too scary for me. They were probably excited to see Moses and Elijah. They probably wanted to talk to them about what life was like in the past and what it's like in heaven.

If I were there when Jesus said, "Don't breathe a word of what you've seen; after the Son of Man is raised from the dead, you are free to talk," I would try to think about what that means. It would be hard to keep this secret, but I would try. I would act funny around people, because I would be too busy thinking about his words and what he said. I would always try to listen, but sometimes it might just be too hard for me to watch or stay focused. If I were Jesus, I would politely ask Peter to stop talking about all of his great ideas, so that everyone else can have a chance to share their ideas. Then, everyone would be happy, because everyone's ideas got put into one!

So, if I was everyone in the story, I would probably just be like them. I would be scared if I saw a cloud talking, I would be like Peter and keep on talking. In the story everyone is their own person and that shouldn't be changed.

Prayer:

Dear God, thank you for bringing us Jesus and telling that he is your son and for always making him a part of our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Lucy Myers, 12

Hear the Cries



Tarana Burke unleashed a movement of powerful vulnerability with the creation of #MeToo. In creating space for survivors of sexual assault to tell their stories publicly, to bear public witness to the pain they have endured, she and others in the movement have transformed the public consciousness around sexual assault, consent, and justice.

Because of this movement, I can no longer read this text and hear “reverent submission” through Jesus’ “loud cries and tears.” Or maybe reverent submission doesn’t mean what we think it means. Maybe it is not about submission to earthly norms, laws, or authority. Instead, obedience is about radical vulnerability, about daring to trust one’s own body, one’s own emotions, one’s own human frailty. God lifts up vulnerability—whether through cries and tears, or honest fear and doubt—and offers eternal salvation in the form of complete acceptance.

As our most high priest, Jesus paved the way for the rest of the priesthood of believers to practice this radical vulnerability—with each other, but first and foremost with God. God heard Jesus’ tears and cries, and God hears ours. Whatever our own struggles are, we worship a God who wants to hear about them.

In a tradition that lifts up the priesthood of all believers, we are all compelled to follow Jesus’ example of holy vulnerability, emotional honesty, and humility.

And because there is space for each of our tears and cries in God’s kingdom, let us lift up the voices amongst us who cry out, and believe them.

Prayer:

Vulnerable and listening God, hear my cries. Help me to hear the cries of my neighbors. Amen.

Katrina Forman, 31

MARCH 15

Thirsty

If you are thirsty, come and drink water! If you don't have any money, come, eat what you want! Drink wine and milk without paying a cent. Why waste your money on what really isn't food? Why work hard for something that doesn't satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and you will enjoy the very best foods. Pay close attention! Come to me and live. I will promise you the eternal love and loyalty that I promised David. I made him the leader and ruler of the nations; he was my witness to them. You will call out to nations you have never known. And they have never known you, but they will come running because I am the Lord, the holy God of Israel, and I have honored you. Turn to the Lord! He can still be found. Call out to God! He is near. Give up your evil ways and your evil thoughts. Return to the Lord our God. He will be merciful and forgive your sins. The Lord says: "My thoughts and my ways are not like yours. Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, my thoughts and my ways are higher than yours."

Water from the Rock



Faith is hard. No matter our beliefs and intentions to trust in God, everyday life presents us with challenges that can make faith difficult. Whether faced with the uncertainty of illness, loss and other life transitions, one never truly knows what God has in store.

And yet, the faithful know to trust anyway. The faithful know to believe anyway. The faithful know to have hope anyway.

Just as God chose Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, God chooses each of us to carry out a unique purpose. It's not always easy to step into that purpose, however. Moses called the place by the rock at Horeb "Massah" (testing) and "Meribah" (quarrelling), naming those challenges faced in his attempts to walk a spiritual path vulnerable to the complexities of being human.

But from the rock at Horeb flowed water for God's people to drink. Out of stone came abundance witnessed by the Israelites, an overflow of grace once confronted by doubt. As always with water comes new life akin to the renewal of faith in God as Moses led the Israelites out of bondage and slavery.

Such renewal is present within each of us too.

Just as physical wellness requires routine exercise and healthy eating, a wellness of faith requires regular amounts of spiritual practice and a routinely nourished connection to God. We may have to sit with and lean into the unknown more often than not. We will inevitably be challenged by our doubts and our fears. We will test and quarrel with the divine timing of our lives.

But abundance prevails. The water of life will always flow. Prophet guides of spirit and flesh will be there to lead the way. The faithful know to trust in God. May it be so.

Prayer:

Dear God, may we each remember to stay grounded in the foundation of Spirit, connected to the abundance of Source, and steadily present with the cycle of life.

Tracey Rogers

God's Fingerprints in the World Around Us



I imagine that many Christians can agree that we often find ourselves pleading for God to “show us a sign.” In our society, we are, in fact, very visual learners. We go by the “see it to believe it” mentality for most of the important situations in our lives. So, that’s why having faith is such a challenge for us—to have trust and hope in something that we consider to be invisible and out of reach.

However, in this psalm, we come across some pushback for this perspective. In verse 9, the voice of God recounts how God’s people had always done a similar thing, challenging God to show the physical proof of divine existence that we crave to strengthen our faith. Here we find a solidarity in the fact that for generations we have all been reaching out for proof.

However, in the following verses, God feels frustrated because humans ignore the innumerable examples of “proof” already given us. Some of this proof is described in verses 4-6, where the psalm writer praises God for the majesty of creation. Every day, we are all surrounded by billions of works of art formed by the hands of the Lord. What if we challenged ourselves to see:

the mountains and valleys as God’s sculpted pottery,
the flowers as God’s brilliant acrylic paintings,
the sky as God’s lovely watercolor,
and much more.

If we allow our spiritual eyes to be opened to all the proof of God’s love and existence, we will see that it is found in every detail of this beautiful world, and that is worthy of immense praise.

Prayer:

Lord, help us to open our eyes and hearts to see your beautiful creation and value it as a testament of your love for us. Renew our faith and trust in you.

Maya Wright, 18

MARCH 18

Results of Justification



Has a parent or friend or sibling ever forgiven you? If not, then I feel bad for you. In this scripture that's what Paul is saying about God to the Romans. The first part, not the second. God forgave us through Jesus, but what exactly is grace? What does it look like? What does it feel like? Maybe grace taste like something.

Grace is forgiveness that is given to us even when we don't deserve it. For me, grace is Oreo ice cream. Every Friday after school we go out for ice cream even if we had a bad week. That's how my parents show grace. Maybe for you, it's pizza or cookies. (This is making me very hungry). Maybe grace for you is the bread and grape juice at church. If God didn't forgive us, I wonder what the world would be like? Probably pure chaos. Thankfully God's grace is stronger than our mistakes.

Prayer:

Dear God, thank you for your forgiveness and your grace. And for still loving us even though we make mistakes.

Liam Chandler, 11

The Power of Prayer



Ask and you shall receive
Blessed you are to be,
With your prayers to me.
Through mistakes and sins,
Prayer will always win.
Without judgement calls,
Come and give me your all.
I know your sufferings,
It may just get tougher.
In more ways than one,
This battle has begun.
Do not be afraid,
For I have come to aid.
Your worries and pain,
Will never go unnamed.
Blessed you are to be,
Ask and you shall receive.

My grandmother has always told me that prayer is powerful and to be careful with what you pray for. I never really paid attention to this until I found myself in need of some serious guidance. I was at a loss, though I did not know what to pray for. I looked in all the wrong places for answers out of fear that if I turned to God, my prayers would go unheard. When I came up empty handed, I turned to God as my last resort, and I prayed and asked for the guidance I needed. Shortly after, my prayers were heard and answered, and I was filled with a sense of understanding that I had not gotten or could have gotten from anywhere else.

Prayer:

Lord, we pray for the strength to put our trust in you and for help in asking you for help. We pray for guidance and wisdom to help others believe in you. Amen.

Xaniyah Sanders, 19

Seeking Clarity



Nicodemus is a man like all humans of the universe; teachers and leaders in our own ways, as we walk the earth yearning to be humbled by our own way of life and the way others live theirs. We are beings of wonder and become enlightened by those with power or skill unlike our own.

As we grow with knowledge we begin to question the things that set us apart. This is where seeking becomes a theme. Needing answers to feel stable in mind, body and spirit. God extends love, beauty and belief from God's heart. For us, this sounds pure and authentic. We too want to give good to others as well, because that's what feels right.

Those in this world who walk with spirit in their hearts do not walk with the intent to change the world; they live as they do to influence the change in the world. As God said, "the wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes." I think God is showing us that those with spirit are heard, are seen but never questioned. Those still seeking spirit, recognize it, follow it, but do question it. We as humans, whether we are seeking or just being, will give it up to God and wherever we go is where we are supposed to be. This gives us comfort.

Now we question, just like Nicodemus who is seeking and believing but still confused: how can something so whimsical and uncertain be so comforting? Maybe knowing that what we are seeking is good is what makes us feel wholesome and true to walk on a path in which is supported by such a powerful and pure source. Those answers are not physical answers but more a feeling of contentment. This path we choose to travel, whether it be in seeking or influencing, is the path to being loved eternally. We walk both, at one time or another, or maybe a few times throughout our lives, walking a wind-filled path that sweeps us all different directions, raising questions, giving us a "seeker" perspective until once again we influence along a new path. One day we may not be physically on this earth seeking or influencing, but we will live on, to seek and influence in the life after this—to enter the real life of what we once actively sought to find, except this time it will just be.

Prayer:

We pray with thanks to those who have taken our hands, just like the wind, to fill us with the knowledge that we endure the spirit and we have the ability to influence the world to walk with spirit too. Amen.

Taylor DeMur, 26

MARCH 21

You Are Never Alone



When sad stuff happens, something lifts me up and makes it OK. Something, a presence, is just there.

I had to take second lunch with all the upperclassmen because of my orchestra schedule. I was really nervous. I thought I wasn't going to know anyone because all my friends have first lunch. There turned out to be other freshmen there, and I'm doing good now. Sometimes we get in our own little world, and we just need to look up. We shouldn't be scared to do anything. We'll look back and wish we did it. Sometimes we focus on trying to fit in, but we may regret not being ourselves.

When I play my violin, I feel good. I love listening to "Michelle" by The Beatles. It's relaxing. They speak a different language in the song, and I like hearing other languages. I want to work hard for what I want to be when I get older.

Everyday, even if it's not a good day, we'll be surrounded by goodness and love. Even if something bad happens, the love is still there—you don't stop being loved. When I get out of my comfort zone I think of my family, my parents, my ancestors. I think they think of me and they're proud of me. Sometimes I wonder if the people who have died that I looked up to, if they watch me—my Grandma Ruble and Grandpa Ruble even though I didn't meet him. From my grandpa's side, my Great-grandpa and grandma Littlewolf. My dad's mom.

Prayer:

Let's enjoy life. Let's appreciate the tiny things. You'll get through it because sometimes something not pleasant happens and it seems like it will be like that forever, but it will change. Life changes a lot. Just pray, and we are never alone.

Neveah Killsnight, age 14

It Was Me

I am the one who cut a path through the mighty ocean. I sent an army to chase you with chariots and horses; now they lie dead, unable to move. They are like an oil lamp with the flame snuffed out. The Lord said: Forget what happened long ago! Don't think about the past. I am creating something new. There it is! Do you see it? I have put roads in deserts, streams in thirsty lands. Every wild animal honors me, even jackals and owls. I provide water in deserts—streams in thirsty lands for my chosen people. I made them my own nation, so they would praise me.

God Looks into the Heart



Taking things at face value is a dangerous pastime. What if we lived in a world where we believed every advertisement we saw? All that would matter would be the selfies we take!

God informs Samuel that God does not judge at face value—and there is cause to be thankful that God does not. Samuel wants to find a new king for the people of Israel but mourns the newly rejected Saul. Samuel then discovers potential kings in the sons of Jesse of Bethlehem, but God corrects Samuel's assumptions. "Men and women look at the face; God looks into the heart."

God sees deeper than outward appearances and invites us to do the same. As we interact with each other in today's world, we see deep judgments made from shallow observations: "They are uneducated because they come from the 'hood.'" "They don't support our rights because they're too privileged."

People are not what society dictates them to be, and sometimes not even who they believe they are. One has to imagine that the youngest son of Jesse did not feel worthy. His father did not even bring him along with his brothers to meet with Samuel; he was sent out to the fields to tend to the sheep instead. But God saw David's heart and chose him. David rose to the occasion. And the world is better for it.

Prayer:

O God, we seek your counsel for our struggles, for they distort your vision for our lives. But you are love, you are our hope, and you know our hearts. Teach us to see, as you do, a world where people may work together towards love and acceptance. In Christ's name. Amen.

Ben Allen



Just Have Faith

My relationship with God, and my church, has always been (more or less) stable and trusting. My relationship with the Bible, however, has not. I love that some people may find more comfort in it than I do; I just don't agree with some of its themes.

Yet Psalm 23 is one of my favorite passages, and one I come to for comfort often. My life has always been very complicated, as a child living in between three wildly different (yet all loving) households. In the past year or so, God has certainly thrown many challenges my way, from problems with my friends, to struggling with my grades, to major health issues with my family. God has, as I trusted that God would, gotten me through it all.

I've come to find out that "God being with me" doesn't mean I will never come across hard times. It does not mean that I won't face problems, face sadness, face grief. It means that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me." I believe that sometimes you need to mourn, you need to go through what you're feeling, and not instantly act as if everything is better. But having this trust in God—faith—means you trust that eventually things will be better, because you are a Child of God and God loves you.

That is what "faith" means to me: trusting that things will get better. Sometimes, this may happen in an unexpected way. Sometimes, you may need to take initiative, and try and do your part to fix the issues in your life. But just know that God will be there, supporting you, and loving you unconditionally. Just have faith.

Prayer:

Dear God, please help us all to feel your love and support as we go through hardships and help us all to learn to trust in you and your love. Amen.

Sara Bolden, 14



Stop Saying No to God

Temptation seems to be a theme occurring throughout the Bible. A quick Google search informed me that there are approximately 30 Bible verses that empower you to resist temptation.

In Isaiah 7, God told Ahaz to ask for a sign, anything in order to encourage his faith, but Ahaz refused. He resisted what he thought was temptation from God. After Ahaz refused, God decided to send a sign of God's own choosing.

One quote from the passage that really stands out to me reads, "Listen, house of David! Isn't it enough for you to be tiresome for people that you are also tiresome before my God?" This makes me think that Isaiah is implying when you say no to others, you can be saying no to God as well. Everyone has done this at some point in their lives. Whether you choose not to sit with the new person in class or you weren't the nicest person to a telemarketer, you said no to the people, but you didn't stop to think that you also said no to God—whose message is to love others and care for God's people. I know I'm guilty of this.

Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness getting ready to stop saying no to God and to start helping the people who needed it. If there was one thing I could take away from this passage, it would be to recognize when saying no to someone else might be saying no to God.

Prayer:

Dear God, help us to recognize when it is ok to say no and when we should say yes. Help us to know who or what to help in order to help you. In your name we pray. Amen.

Sam Ringgold, 15

MARCH, 26

VOICES



We can eliminate traditions that no longer serve or benefit our communities. If we examine why something was done in the past, then we may be able to understand why we need to change our response for the purpose of relevance to current times.

In the first verses of Hebrews 10, the frequent sacrifices could never “make perfect those who come forward to worship,” and the blood of bulls and goats is powerless to take away sins. It doesn't matter how many times we sin, it is pointless to kill a living thing because, as the old hymn says, “Jesus paid it all!” His blood is the only sacrifice needed to wash us clean of our sins.

The scripture challenges us to look at those practices we are holding so dear that no longer serve the intended purpose. We are human, and this passage reminds us that in our weakness we will sin. The joy is that Jesus can and will forgive our sins; all we have to do is ask.

Prayer:

Lord, forgive us of our sins. Whatever is not like you, we ask that you remove and allow us to live the example you set for us to love you and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.

Randi Blair

MARCH 27

Shine God's Light



I was not born into the United Church of Christ; for 17 years I was a devoted Catholic. It was a difficult journey to find my home here. In high school I was sexually harassed by a faculty member. I was distraught and felt completely alone. I thought God had forsaken me. It felt like no one believed me, and no one ever would. I tried to talk to my priest, but he had told me to “do as Jesus would, and forgive.”

I remained silent and withdrew from my life. I became distant, ate little, and did not sleep. One day, I just could not stop crying in the bathroom. When I exited after having composed myself, my science teacher was sitting as the hall monitor. “Hey, is everything okay? What’s going on?” Instantly the dam broke. I told him everything. I told him who it was, what he did, and who else he had done it to. I told him everything I had been too terrified to admit out loud. Like an angel sent from heaven, he sat there and listened to me. He was honest and caring in a way I had never thought I’d see. He had also told me to pursue action on this, and helped me go through that process.

As he advised me, I found myself calling on God more and more, but I felt my relationship with my church slipping through my fingers. My science teacher reminded me time and time again that shining a light onto the darkness the school has chosen to ignore was the right thing to do. On the last day of school, and the last day he was working at my school, I had been talking to him with a friend. We had referenced all the things that my priest had said. He was horrified. He told us that his wife sang at a church. That church was the United Church of Christ

Prayer:

Lord, please give us the strength to shine a light on darkness. And give courage to us to do something about it.

Katy Albar-Kluck, 17

Opening Your Spiritual Eye

How can we learn to not be spiritually blind? We can start by opening our eyes. Now, your eyes are obviously open if you're reading this. But I'm meaning in a spiritual sense. Open your spiritual eyes. Let your spiritual eyes notice the people around you. Don't let laws and interpretations cloud your perception from the spiritual being inside of every wonderful human being, one our God has created.

In the world today, I see a lack of spiritual awareness everywhere I look. People leave out members of the LGBTQ+ community from the love they share with their other friends and family. They leave people of color out of this love. Why? There's only one answer. It's because they are not spiritually open. Even when people don't intend harm with their words and actions, Jesus says their judgment is sin, just like the Pharisees. The Pharisees judged and doubted the miracles of Jesus the Christian mystic. They didn't understand why this man was doing miraculous acts on the Sabbath because of their strict interpretation of Moses's laws, much like some people's strict interpretation of scripture to this day.

Our spiritual eye helps us to see everyone's spiritual being, or the presence of God in each person. Jesus' spiritual eye had better than 20/20 vision. He was able to see the spiritual being in everyone. This allowed him to accomplish some of the miracles he performed. He was able to look at everyone and see those in need, those who nobody else paid attention to. You can see that in this very scripture, when Jesus heard that the Pharisees threw the man out after they asked him questions.

Prayer:

Dear God, we ask you to help us to open our spiritual eyes to see those who need us. Remind us to love all. Give us the strength to cast off our ignorance and help others to see as you want us to. Stay with us throughout this difficult yet rewarding task. Amen.

Grant Weber, 16

Running My Race

I have not yet reached my goal, and I am not perfect. But Christ has taken hold of me. So I keep on running and struggling to take hold of the prize. My friends, I don't feel I have already arrived. But I forget what is behind, and I struggle for what is ahead. I run toward the goal, so I can win the prize of being called to heaven. This is the prize God offers because of what Christ Jesus has done.

It's Not Over

Imagine what it might be like to be exiled—no, deported—and deported from your own home. Some of you, as you read this, might have already experienced this awful event, be it in first- or second-hand. Unjust deportations and detentions continue to happen all around us, whether we are aware of them or we choose to ignore them. Ezekiel felt the pain, fear, and uncertainty that followed his exile, but it was in that dry and dead place, in the valley, where he heard the voice of God.

Will things ever get better? When it seems as though all hope is dead and your future is over, it's not. God is selecting you, like Ezekiel, in a time where you and/or others suffer violence, oppression, and injustice. Can you hear God's voice? If so, what is God telling you? If you can't recognize God's voice or if you don't know how to listen, it is as simple as this: Anything or anyone that tells you to do something to lift up, to heal, to speak life, to stand for another, is usually God speaking through them.

We may not have the extravagant vision Ezekiel had in the valley of dry bones, but through the text, God also speaks to us. Perhaps God is saying there is still hope, that God will indeed bring justice and healing to our land, and the way God will do that starts with at least one faithful servant who will be open to listen, proclaim, and act justly with love. Be the voice of hope in times of fear, that others might listen and find refuge in that hope. Furthermore, be willing to live out God's restorative justice when presented with the opportunity, for it's not over; change is coming.

Prayer:

O God, I know things might appear hopeless sometimes, but you have called me to hear your voice, to speak life, and to do your work. Use me today to serve you and all whom may know oppression. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

The Rev. Edwin Perez Jr., 26

To Take Courage in Our Song



Words of hostility, animosity, and hatred are not whispers muttered under silent breath or thoughts concealed within the mind; they are yelled with vehemence, filling our ears. It seems that today there are no neighbors, no friends, no God; everyone is everyone else's enemy.

But the world is not without light, for there is no task too great nor too dark to be overcome by the words of the Lord. When our wounds may feel deep, when our doubts may creep, and when our hearts may weep, take courage. No matter how great our enemies may seem, they shall stumble and fall upon the thin sand which they tread upon. No matter what we wrestle with internally, our God will not forsake us. No matter whom or what we may face, our hearts shall not weep for our God shall strengthen them.

Rather than echo the spite of our enemies, we should sing. Sing in praise of the Lord, and cry with all our voices. In our unified voice we will hear the whisper of mercy, and we will hear the accompaniment of grace in our song. And in our singing, we shall be lifted up on rocks, built above the discordant cacophony of those who sing against us. No matter how harsh, nor how loud the symphony of hate may be, our singing will never end; the shrieking of evil can never silence the singing of those whom are righteous.

So I say again, take courage. To deny the shouts of hate is foolish, yet to deny the cries of hope is more foolish. When you cannot look past the darkness of the world, look towards the light, the candle that is salvation. When swimming in the sea of malice, come upon the vessel, the ship that is salvation. Those who bear witness against you falsely shall never overcome you, so long as you sing unto the Lord. So then, let us sing unto the Lord.

Prayer:

Dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we pray that you give us the strength to bear the day, and that you fill our lungs with ample air so that we may sing your righteous praise. Amen.

Jackson Coleman, Age 15

APRIL 1

Beautiful Bodies



Bodies aren't everything ... and bodies aren't nothing. Bodies are the only tool we have in this world to engage the spirit, and yet our bodies are not the same as our spirit. Sometimes, when the body we've been given by God feels like it doesn't fit in the world, it might be tempting to think about disconnecting body from spirit.

And yet in the body is also Jesus. In the flesh is also Christ. These beautiful skin-bags we have, full of flesh and bones and matter, full of life and hope and dreams, full of God and Spirit and Jesus. These are the ways we carry our values, ethics, theologies. And oh, beloved! Bodies are complicated—especially when the whole world tells us that we have to be a very particular kind of body. It's easy to slip into a despair of never feeling like our bodies aren't enough. To set our minds only on the ways we aren't matching what the world says is death.

God made us in spirit and flesh. I remember the first time I saw a large-bodied woman dancing in total confidence. I saw possibility. I saw a way for myself. I saw God. I cried. The body came alive through Spirit, and whole through God. It's not either flesh or spirit, but both Spirit and Flesh. We cannot have one without the other, and we need one to get to the other.

Prayer:

Bless these bodies and the spirits they carry. Bless the big bodies, the tiny bodies, the messy bodies, and the hairy ones. Bless the bodies of all shades and tones, the bodies with scars, the bodies with pimples, the bodies with bellies. Bless the queer bodies and the trans bodies and the cis bodies. Bless the disabled bodies and the twitchy bodies and the hyperactive bodies. The bodies formed by sports, and the bodies formed by books. Bless the bodies who have been through hell, and the ones who hurt. Bless all the bodies, in the name of the one who offers us this spirit and this life. Amen.

Dr. Chris Davies

This is Your Mission



In John 11:1-45, it talks about two sisters, Mary and Martha, whose brother Lazarus died of an illness. Mary and Martha both tell Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Both sisters wanted to blame Jesus for the loss of their brother, because Jesus was not with them at that moment to help Lazarus. But what if he was? A question often asked by many, including Mary and Martha who felt this is, "If God loves us, why does God let these bad things happen?" Over the summer I had the privilege to attend Heifer Ranch in Arkansas. After learning about one of the missions at Heifer, ending world hunger and poverty, I asked myself and God a similar question: if God loves these children and families, why do they live in hunger and poverty?

With this thought running through my mind, I realized that God does listen, and God knows of what is occurring between the good and the bad. And God put us on this world to send us on a mission. Aware of the power God holds, God also knows the power that God has placed in all of us. Hunger and poverty will continue to take place because we aren't God, but we were sent on a mission to help.

People all around the world are sent on a mission to help those in need whether it's around the world or in the community. In Mary and Martha's case, God sent Jesus on a mission to help the women to give Lazarus life.

Prayer:

God, please help us to know that you do love us no matter the bad that happens, and that you we were sent on this mission to help through the bad and be the change.

Abigail Dewert, 16

Stepping into the Light



In 6th grade I was asked to write a list of ten things I like about myself. At first, I couldn't think of a single thing to add to the list. Despite my innate ability to see and name the qualities of compassion, kindness, and determination in those around me, I was unsure how to see and name these things in myself. With time I began to uncover a few talents and qualities I was glad to possess. The more I thought, the faster things came to me; by the end of the eight-minute activity I had written down about 17 attributes of myself in which I truly took pride.

Whether out of fear of appearing arrogant or doubtful as to my own self-worth, I still find that I undersell or undervalue myself all too often. Despite this challenge, continuing to practice self-affirmation has become an important part of my life. This year, as a high school senior with hopes of higher education, I have had to bring these self-affirmations under the harsh, scrutinizing light of college applications. I have had to say aloud those things that I believe make me unique and valuable, which has been a great learning experience for me.

I have found that the practice of self-affirmation gives me assurance in who I am and brings me closer to my faith. When I am willing to love and appreciate the good things in myself, I am able to feel the love of my community, and of God, more fully in my life.

Stepping into the light of self-affirmation allows us to notice the places of brokenness and disappointment in our lives while continually acknowledging our inherent worth. Through God we can find community, support and love, but through affirming our own value as beloved children of God we can fully commit to these pillars of our faith; seeing and affirming them in ourselves allows us to share them in the world.

Prayer:

God of unconditional love, remind us that we each have inherent value. Help us to see and affirm your goodness in ourselves as well as in those around us. Amen.

Martha Coleman, 18

APRIL 4

Take Me



These verses set the stage for us to understand the three parables (The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin and The Prodigal Son) that Jesus is about to share. The Pharisees and Scribes are complaining about Jesus and the fact that he is hanging out with "those" people, "those" commoners, "those" low lives, "those" who are poor. They are upset because Jesus has an attitude with these sinners that are way too friendly, and they do not approve. Their statement ("This man welcomes sinners and eats with them") illustrates to us their disbelief in his offering of kindness, grace and mercy to these undesirables. They are not happy, and they would not give the least of these the time of day. But, Jesus does.

This reminds me of a song by Gregory Porter, called "Take Me to the Alley," where he says they will be surprised to hear Jesus say:

Take me to the alley
Take me to the afflicted ones
Take me to the lonely ones
That somehow lost their way
Let them hear me say
I am your friend
Come to my table
Rest here in my garden
You will have a pardon

We must always remember, Jesus cares about all of us. Jesus welcomes all, not some but all, to the table of grace and mercy. Jesus carries the philosophy as stated earlier in Luke, "Those who are healthy have no need for a physician, but those who are sick do. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32). More than anything he cares about all of us regardless of any label we may carry, whether we are differently abled or differently labeled. He simply cares.

Prayer:

Lord, we thank you for offering your table to us with unconditional love. Allow us to receive your tender love and care. Amen.

Jamani Blair, 20

APRIL 5

Jesus Comes to Jerusalem

When Jesus had finished saying all this, he went on toward Jerusalem. As he was getting near Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples on ahead. He told them, "Go into the next village, where you will find a young donkey that has never been ridden. Untie the donkey and bring it here. If anyone asks why you are doing this, just say, 'The Lord needs it.'" They went off and found everything just as Jesus had said. While they were untying the donkey, its owners asked, "Why are you doing that?" They answered, "The Lord needs it." Then they led the donkey to Jesus. They put some of their clothes on its back and helped Jesus get on. And as he rode along, the people spread clothes on the road in front of him. When Jesus started down the Mount of Olives, his large crowd of disciples were happy and praised God because of all the miracles they had seen. They shouted, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory to God." Some Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, make your disciples stop shouting!" But Jesus answered, "If they keep quiet, these stones will start shouting."

Anticipation



I have a lot of memories attached to Palm Sunday. One year, all the kids in the church got a handful of palms and ran through the sanctuary in our own celebration of Christ's arrival. Another year, some of the adults tried to teach us how to fold crosses out of palm leaves, which I was never able to get the hang of. My mom frequently bought the palms for our congregation, and I think she still does. It's a Sunday of excitement, joy, and eager expectation, a bright spot while we approach the end of Lent; it's almost like its own holiday separate from Easter.

This scripture reading is about the excitement of the arrival of Jesus in the city of Bethphage, and Palm Sunday still manages to capture that excitement for me despite being thousands of years and miles away from when and where it happened. I wish I was able to keep that excitement all year long, though, not just when the church and the liturgy reminds me of it. Jesus can come to us and be a part of our lives all the time, after all, not just at certain parts of the year! That can be hard to remember sometimes, but the cool thing is that God's presence is always around and available to us. Think of each reminder of Christ's energy as him arriving into our lives once again. That's definitely a way to make everyday occurrences much more exciting.

Maybe not every Sunday comes built-in with the chance to run around your church flailing a set of leaves and create controlled chaos, but we can all still cultivate that sense of excitement and anticipation whenever we need it. And there's also nothing stopping anyone from making Christ-related plant-based craft projects whenever they want to.

Prayer:

In the buzz of everyday life, it's easy to let Christ's energy in our life become part of that background noise. Help us to remember that he's always there for us, eager to come to us and bring us love.

Grace Schumann

APRIL 7

If Our God is For Us, Then Who Can Stop Us?



"It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me; who will condemn me?" Isaiah asks (Isaiah 50:9a). In this time of Lent leading to Jesus' condemnation, we consider the sinless life he lived. Jesus healed the sick, raised people from the dead, shared the word of God, and through this, successfully gathered disciples to continue his work after death. He rode triumphantly through the gates of Jerusalem, only to be put to shame and crucified days later. He died the death we deserved, so we could live without fear of enduring his suffering. We are given life of the Spirit through Jesus; "therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:1-2).

God instructs us to live our lives in the image of Christ, yet we fall short sometimes. We use this time of Lent to confess that we are disobedient, uncompassionate and do not truly listen to our community. We seek Christ's forgiveness in our unpreparedness. In order to live in Christ's image fully, we must be ready to listen openheartedly to our brothers and sisters, recognize the abilities of others and accept when things don't go our way. We must follow Christ's steps, not turning away from those who mock us and listening to the full instruction of God. We must be rebellious against the injustices of this world and use this life to continue Christ's mission through the ever-flowing Word. God is still speaking; are we listening?

Prayer:

Sovereign Lord give us compassion for those who mock and disgrace us. Let us be lights in this world that cannot be dimmed and let us have voices that cannot be hushed. Amen.

Suzy, 20

APRIL 8

Make Mistakes



Even though Jesus was sent here by God, he wasn't sent here with the righteousness of God. Like any other human, he earned it through loyalty. And, in being human, he made just as many mistakes we do; just because Jesus is God's son that doesn't make him perfect. Because he devoted his life to doing God's Word he felt compelled to gather disciples and teach them the word of God, because everyone dies but they can also have an eternal life in heaven.

Prayer:

Lord, we ask for you to show us that it's okay to make mistakes. To enlighten us with the strength to accept them and give them to you and ask forgiveness. We know that we are graciously given your unconditional love and even though we may forget it, we ask for courage to spread that same love to others. Amen.

Autumn Kruckeberg, 17

APRIL 9

The Last Supper's Relevance Today

When I think of the Last Supper, I think of Da Vinci's awe-inspiring famous painting and the gathering, betrayal, and sacrifice that happened so long ago. I know the story, I can picture how it must have looked, and I can celebrate with communion. But as I move through the rituals of church, am I really taking time to reflect and appreciate how Jesus' sacrifice impacts me today?

During communion, I think of how my senses are stimulated to bring me to the here-and-now of God's endless love. I see the pastor and church members handing out bread and wine. I hear their blessings and the background music. I touch the soft bread and dip it into the juice. I smell the grape flavor. I taste the food and drink. Communion is not just Hawaiian bread and Welch's, but an invitation to feel grounded and supported by God in the everyday moments. It's a physical reminder that I am loved unconditionally.

Prayer:

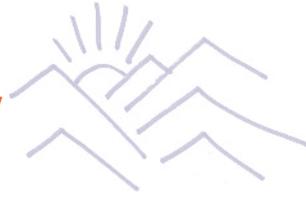
Gracious God, thank you for giving the ultimate sacrifice so that I can rejoice and share communion with my community today. Please help me to notice your presence in the ordinary moments and feel grounded in your unconditional love. Amen.

Jordan Struckman, 23



APRIL 10

Through the Valley



Jesus was loyal to his Father until his very last moment. He was faithful to God and trusted in God throughout his whole life, but Jesus still questioned his Father at his darkest moment, hanging there on that cross. Jesus, the Son of God, felt like he had become far away, but really, he was the closest he had ever been.

And that is exactly the same for us as Christians. When we feel like we are so far from God that we can't see God, it's really because we are so close that God is about to reach out and embrace us.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, please help us to always be looking for you in our daily lives. Help us to yearn for you and live through you, even when we are walking through the valley. Amen.

Sara Stubblefield, 16

You're Not in Charge



The disciples had the plan, to follow Jesus and be part of building his kingdom. Sounds fascinating and exciting right?

What they did not realize, the kingdom they had in mind was not the same as what God had in mind. It happened to be far different from what actually would happen. Some of the disciples dreamed of overthrowing the Roman government, constructing an empire of their own, and rising to be the most powerful, but that never occurred. They were captivated by what actually occurred; it was not even a thought that crossed the disciple's minds. Jesus was the only one that knew the plan that was in place. He knew that it was not going to be easy. It was going to be painful, hard and tiring, but through it all, God's kingdom would come, and God's people would be delivered.

The plan you have for life may not be going as planned. You may not have gotten the grade you wanted. The dream of you being accepted into your dream college was turned down. Your hopefulness to get a good night's rest last night did not happen. Due to these you are probably echoing the same as Jesus said on the Mount of Olives: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me." In that meaning of the cup, he is talking about sorrows and pain. But he ends the prayer by saying, "yet not my will, but yours be done." Jesus realizes that there is going to be separation from God and that weight of our sins is tearing Him apart.

Will you go wherever God leads? You may have not planned to drop a class that you needed so badly, getting a grade that lowered your GPA, or not making that spot on a team. Do you still believe that Jesus has a plan in place? No matter what we face in life, we keep taking steps of faith and moving forward, see the faithfulness of the Lord in our lives. God will never abandon us, for God longs for us to be free.

Prayer:

May we find strength and faith in Jesus and willingly go wherever God has planned and leads us. Amen

Courtney Moyer, 20

Closing Reflection

Our Christian journey is one full of unending transformations. We experience the change from darkness to light; sorrow to joy, pain to praise and death to life. While it sounds like an easy process, many would agree that following Jesus is never that straightforward. There are sharp turns and dead-end paths that lead us back to the exact place from which we began. We become tired of waiting and wonder if the change will ever happen.

This Lenten journey we have walked with our Savior as he gracefully handled the uncertainty that life brings to each of us. Jesus stood face to face with tough decisions, wondered if his God had left him to fend for himself and contemplated walking away to something much easier. But he stayed and endured so that we might have the ultimate transformation before us today: brokenness to wholeness.

Beloved, life is never easy, and we all have a cross to carry. My hope and prayer for each of us, is that as we answer the call to come and follow Christ, we would experience moments of certainty that life is beautiful, precious and full of God's grace to see us through the temporary pain and fog. This is the story of Christ's resurrection. It is the opportunity to see new life for you and one another and to know that his words are true: "I will be with you always, even until the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20).

Rev. Trayce L. Potter

UCC Minister for Youth and Young Adult Engagement

Thank you

As Paul offers a prayer to the church in Philippi he says “Every time I think of you, I thank my God. And whenever I mention you in my prayers, it makes me happy. This is because you have taken part with me in spreading the good news from the first day you heard about it.”

I want to echo those words to each of the young writers that graciously said yes to being a part of this project. You all wrestled with the text, asked meaningful questions and thoughtfully reflected on what God was saying and what the Church needed to hear. Your words will live past the Lenten journey and continue to shape our denomination and the work that comes from Faith INFO.

I want to thank our General Minister and President, Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer for his inspirational introduction to this devotion. Thank you to Rev. Traci Blackmon for believing that our youth and young adults need to be heard and for continuously giving a platform to make it happen. Thank you to our artists Mr. Ted Dawson and Mr. Brandon Graves for making the writers’ words and scripture texts come alive. Thank you to all of my UCC colleagues near and far who contributed in any way to make *The Transformation: From Darkness to Light* come alive. And we give thanks for the generous donations from our friends and members who have given to the Strengthen the Church special mission offering. A portion of the fund directly supports youth and young adults in the United Church of Christ.

Rev. Trayce L. Potter

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