



2025

LENTEN

DEVOTIONAL

FIFTH AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

LENT & EASTER SERVICES

March 6 | Ash Wednesday | Service & Imposition of Ashes

12 & 6:30 pm • Sanctuary

March 9 | First Sunday in Lent

9:30 am • Jones Auditorium

11 am • Sanctuary

March 16 | Second Sunday in Lent

9:30 am • Jones Auditorium

11 am • Sanctuary

March 23 | Third Sunday in Lent

9:30 am • Jones Auditorium

11 am • Sanctuary

March 30 | Fourth Sunday in Lent

9:30 am • Jones Auditorium

11 am • Sanctuary

April 6 | Fifth Sunday in Lent

9:30 am • Jones Auditorium

11 am • Sanctuary

April 13 | Palm Sunday

9:30 am • Jones Auditorium

11 am • Sanctuary

April 17 | Maundy Thursday

6:30 pm • Sanctuary

April 18 | Good Friday

12-3 pm • Sanctuary

April 20 | Easter

9:30 & 11:15 am • Sanctuary

Sunday worship is at 9:30 am in Jones Auditorium and 11 am in the Sanctuary. All 11 am services are also available on fapc.org.

FIFTH FAMILY,

I'M BRINGING A MAN named Jerry into my Lenten observance this year. Jerry was an overall-wearing, trucking-driving, Texas-born carpenter. He was the first person to ever show me how to plane a piece of wood, where you use a small razor to straighten the edge of a board. Once, I asked Jerry if he would teach me how to build something. He responded by telling me that carpentry could be a pretty “monkish” thing. It takes time, he said. It takes patience.

Jerry and I would spend cool Saturday mornings sitting in his workshop, listening to hours of classical guitar music on National Public Radio, as he taught me how to plane pieces of wood by hand. “Anything worth doing is worth doing right,” Jerry would say, as he checked to see how smooth and straight I’d gotten the wood. Without a completely smooth side, you’d risk the glue not setting, thus losing structural stability. Build it right, and it’ll last forever. At least that’s what Jerry said.

This Lent, I’m taking something of Jerry’s cautionary words with me. Maybe there’s something rather “monkish” about Lent. It, like carpentry, requires patience, time. Lent is about the repeated moments where we give a small something to God that maybe we had once held back. And in those moments, almost like carpentry, the Holy Spirit peels away all that is rough and out-of-joint.

I’m so glad that you have chosen to companion with us this season at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. I hope these pages, filled with spiritual insight and challenge, become a home for you as we draw closer to God and one another.

Peace always,
Chris

To receive the daily reflections by email, drop us a line at fapc@fapc.org. You can download this devotional at fapc.org/lent.



ASH WEDNESDAY

MARCH 5, 2025

THE REV. NATALIE OWENS-PIKE, ASSOCIATE PASTOR

*"By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return."* —Genesis 3:19

On Ash Wednesday, the clergy of this church stand out on Fifth Avenue to administer ashes to members, friends and strangers alike. To each person brave enough to interrupt their commute or lunch break or tourist path, we pause with them for this ritual. "Remember," we say as we look into each set of eyes or hold our thumbs gently on each forehead, "remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

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This profound and universal truth hits me with reverence each year, for in the rush of all our human striving, this is not a truth we allow ourselves much time to sit with. Yes, we humans are as fragile and small as pieces of dust. Yes, we shall return to the ground we came from, mortal as we are. Yes, we mourn the ashes of destructions large and small in our lives and in our world. Yet this Scripture reminds us we belong to the God who created us, the God who formed us from dust, just one chapter previous in the book of Genesis! Into this dust, God breathed life, a reminder that even the dust of our lives means something to God.

So this year as we turn from Ash Wednesday to our Lenten season of contemplation and sacrifice, let us remember what God forms from dust. Let us not rush past the ash we encounter in this life, but instead invite God to breathe life, again and again, wherever we feel as small as dust or wherever ash has swept in.

*May God be with us as we try to remember that each breath is a gift.
May our daily bread be the nourishment of God's table, until to dust
we do return.*

BRANCHES, BEARING GOD'S FRUIT

THURSDAY, MARCH 6, 2025

CAROL KENNEY, ELDER

*"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you,
you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."*

—John 15: 5

When I was invited to become a church officer almost five years ago, my immediate reaction was, *Who ME???* Raised a Presbyterian in the postwar Midwest where most everyone went to church, I joined Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, then my neighborhood church, when I came to New York some fifty years ago, and twenty-plus years later, seeking greater diversity, I switched my membership to Fifth Avenue.



But, in the early 2000s, with my kids away at school, I spent most of my time in Massachusetts where I had extended family and where I worked in the nonprofit community. So, when asked to be an officer, I knew almost no one at Fifth Avenue and wondered what could I contribute? After some thought, I said Yes. In the back of my mind were the words of Jesus from the Book of John and a poem by R.L. Day from a Jan Ammon sermon at Fifth Avenue twenty years earlier:

A Bag Of Tools

*Isn't it strange
How princes and kings,
And clowns that caper
In sawdust rings,
And ordinary folks
Like you and me
Are builders for eternity?
Each is given a bag of tools,
A shapeless mass,
A set of rules;
And each must fashion—
Ere life is flown—
A stumbling block
Or a steppingstone.*

Today, I sit in church where I have many friends and I marvel at our diversity. A diverse congregation, involved in diverse roles, bearing diverse fruit. With the size and reach of our congregation, it is a mighty orchestra! Our diversity is our strength and from serving in the myriad of ways that are available to us, we truly can derive energy and strength beyond anything we contribute. Christ is the vine, but we the branches bear the fruit and do God's handiwork.

Creator God, Grant us courage to use our time and talents to bear fruit in your service. Amen



“I CAN DO IT WITH A BROKEN HEART”

FRIDAY, MARCH 7, 2025

KIRSTEN AIELLO, DEACON

“All things work together for the good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” –Romans 8:28

My marriage was strong, kids thriving, work busy. My 85-year-old Mom? Healthy, calling me daily with love and support.

Life was good.

Last October 22 things changed. A call from my brother: “Have you talked to Mom?” I hadn’t. Waiting for my brother to call back, I stood on the 6 train platform and left messages. “Hey Mom, it’s me. Where ya at?” My brother called, tears cracking his voice. “Mom had a massive stroke. It doesn’t look good.”

I went to St. Louis. We heard the doctor say, “She cannot recover. Her body is here but she’s gone.” We spent the next three days hovering over Mom’s hospital bed singing her favorite hymns, reading scripture, laughing and crying until she took her last breath.

My mom left me many gifts. What has sustained me most is the strength of her unwavering faith. As my brothers and I sorted through her clothes, hundreds of pins (mostly cardinals), kitchen gadgets, and more, we found Bibles with verses underlined and notes scribbled. In her purse I found a typed index card with prompts. “When in Sorrow: John 14. When Men Fail You: Psalm 27. When You Feel Bitter: 1 Corinthians 13. In bold letters it said, MY FAVORITE VERSE: Romans 8:28.”

Growing up, I saw her broken heart. Maybe it was from losing her dad, brother and sister to Huntington’s Disease? Maybe it was the tumultuous marriage with my dad that ended in divorce? Whatever broke her heart didn’t stop her. She got up, dressed like Melanie Griffith in Working Girl, and worked hard. My teenage self was embarrassed she wasn’t a “stay



at home” mom. She could hide it, but I saw the pain underneath. What I didn’t see clearly was the strength that came from her faith.

Through the grief, I feel her strength. I know I can do it with a broken heart because my Mom did.

Lord God, help us to know we are called according to your purpose and we are enough, through you. Amen.

GOD IS A MOURNING DOVE

SATURDAY, MARCH 8, 2025

SARAH MCKOY, DEACON

“If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.” –Psalm 139:9-10

Last spring, a mourning dove built a nest right under the awning of my front door. It was unusual—I had never seen a bird choose to lay their nest in that spot before. Nonetheless, I felt honored that it had made its home in mine. It quickly became a small daily ritual—that before leaving my house, I would pause for a moment to admire the dove, and it would quickly meet my gaze. This seemingly unremarkable exchange would make my day, as if reassuring me that everything would be okay.

After about a month, I noticed two babies peeking out from beneath their mother. It was wonderful—now, there were three doves sharing in our daily ritual. Then, one day, I stepped outside, glanced up at the nest, and to my shock, it was empty. A sinking feeling settled in my chest. I knew they wouldn’t stay forever, but their absence felt strangely personal.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I had come to see the doves as guardian angels from God—watching over and protecting me. Conversely, their departure felt like God abandoning me.

Later that day, when I returned home, I noticed a mourning dove perched on the roof of my house. I stopped in awe, wondering if it was the same



one that had nested under my awning. But before I could dwell on the thought for too long, it flew away. In that moment, it felt as though God was reminding me he is always there, even if I can't always see him.

Gracious God, though we may know in our minds that you are always with us, it is not always easy to know this in our hearts. In times of uncertainty, we struggle to see how you are working in our lives. We ask that you reveal yourself to those with weary hearts—remind them that you are walking with them at every step. Fill them with the peace and assurance of your unfailing presence. In your name we pray, Amen.

MONDAY, MARCH 10, 2025

C.S. LEWIS

“Son,” he said, “ye cannot in your present state understand eternity: When Anodos looked through the door of the Timeless he brought no message back. But ye can get some likeness of it if ye say that both good and evil, when they are full grown, become retrospective. Not only this valley but all their earthly past will have been Heaven to those who are saved. Not only the twilight in that town, but all their life on Earth too, will then be seen by the damned to have been in Hell. That is what mortals misunderstand. They say of some temporal suffering, ‘No future bliss can make up for it,’ not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory. And of some sinful pleasure they say ‘Let me have but this and I’ll take the consequences’: little dreaming how damnation will spread back and back into their past and contaminate the pleasure of the sin. Both processes begin even before death. The good man’s past begins to change so that his forgiven sins and remembered sorrows take on the quality of Heaven: the bad man’s past already conforms to his badness and is filled only with dreariness. And that is why, at the end of all things, when the sun rises here and the twilight turns to blackness down there, the Blessed will say ‘We have never lived anywhere except in Heaven,’ and the Lost, ‘We were always in Hell.’ And both will speak truly.”

from *The Great Divorce*



TUESDAY, MARCH 11, 2025

BELOVED IS WHERE WE BEGIN

JAN RICHARDSON

If you would enter
into the wilderness,
do not begin
without a blessing.

Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved,
named by the One
who has traveled this path
before you.

Do not go
without letting it echo
in your ears,
and if you find
it is hard
to let it into your heart,
do not despair.

That is what
this journey is for.

I cannot promise
this blessing will free you
from danger,
from fear,
from hunger
or thirst,
from the scorching
of sun

or the fall
of the night.

But I can tell you
that on this path
there will be help.

I can tell you
that on this way
there will be rest.

I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road
such as this,
that fly to meet us
bearing comfort
and strength,
that come alongside us
for no other cause
than to lean themselves
toward our ear
and with their
curious insistence
whisper our name:

Beloved.

Beloved.

Beloved.

from *Circle of Grace*



A PRAYER FOR PATIENCE

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 12, 2025

SIENNA TOUNG, YOUTH ELDER

“Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.” –Isaiah 30:18

I have been going to our church for my entire life. I have spent countless Sundays in the Christian Education Center, whether it be in Sunday school, children’s choir, and now in youth group. I didn’t always feel the presence of God, even when I was surrounded by people who did. It took a couple of years in youth group before I finally began to develop a relationship with God and truly understand that I was loved by Him.

For a long time, I struggled. I felt embarrassed about being a kid who consistently went to church. I doubted that I could be loved unconditionally. I wasn’t ready to open my heart to God.

Eventually, through many conversations and eye-opening youth group lessons, I finally felt God’s presence and my heart open. I was at a Friday night youth hangout and I was walking back to the group through one of the long hallways. It was dark, I was alone and I felt at peace. I don’t know how to explain the feeling, but I know God was there and that I had made a breakthrough. I finally felt that my waiting for something to happen, a sign that God was there, had paid off. I felt loved walking back to a crowd that I realized loved me too.

Recently I had another moment where I felt God’s presence. I was on college tours with my family and while they went in search of a bathroom, I sat in the college chapel listening to a young woman learning to play the organ. I had arrived at just the right time to listen to the beautiful music in an almost-familiar space.

In both of these experiences I was by myself and allowed myself to be open and vulnerable. I waited and waited and my prayers were answered.

God, hear our prayers—the prayers of your people who are waiting for you. May you find us at the right time and remind us that you love us.



THURSDAY, MARCH 13, 2025
JOHN CALVIN

Hence the reason why faith is so rare in the world; nothing being more difficult for our sluggishness than to surmount innumerable obstacles in striving for the prize of our high calling. To the immense load of miseries which almost overwhelm us, are added the jeers of profane men, who assail us for our simplicity, when spontaneously renouncing the allurements of the present life we seem, in seeking a happiness which lies hid from us, to catch at a fleeting shadow. In short, we are beset above and below, behind and before, with violent temptations, which our minds would be altogether unable to withstand, were they not set free from earthly objects and devoted to the heavenly life, though apparently remote from us. Wherefore, he alone has made solid progress in the Gospel who has acquired the habit of meditating continually on a blessed resurrection.

from Institutes of the Christian Religion

FRIDAY, MARCH 14, 2025
HOSPITAL VISIT

When I arrived he was not yet asleep
between the shelf of sky and empty cups:
I set the flowers with uneaten crusts,
that he might rest was almost a relief.
He woke and turned his milky eyes to me
and took the card, not knowing who I was.
To remind him we spoke of baseball clubs.
He placed his hand in mine but asked to keep
The card beside his bed, and then for me to say
Some words before I left: cleave our bitter skies,
Let them be opened in a ruptured cloud.
He thanked me for the visit and the prayer
Placing the vase in view, I apologized
To leave so soon, but would return somehow.

Chad Schepp, Deacon



SATURDAY, MARCH 15, 2025

JOHN BUNYAN

When Christian had travelled in this disconsolate condition some considerable time, he thought he heard the voice of a man, going before him, saying, *Though I walk through the Valley of the shadow of Death, I will fear none ill, for thou art with me.* Then was he glad: and that for these reasons:

First, because he gathered from them that some who feared God, were in the Valley as well as himself.

Secondly, for that he perceived God was with them, through that dark and dismal state, and why not, thought he, with me, though by reason of the impediment that attends this place I cannot perceive.

Thirdly, for that he hoped (could he overtake them) to have company by and by, so he went on, and called to him that was before, but he knew not what to answer: for that he also thought himself to be alone. And by and by the day broke; then said Christian, *He hath turned the shadow of death into the morning.*

Now morning being come, he looked back, not of desire to return, but to see by the light of day, what hazards he had gone through in the dark.

*from The Pilgrim's Progress from This World,
to That Which Is to Come, 1678.*



OUR WHOLE HEART

MONDAY, MARCH 17, 2025

JOANNA MCNURLIN, TRUSTEE

“We have not loved you with our whole heart.” –Prayer of Confession

As a self-proclaimed grammar authority, I used to get a little peeved when I read “We have not loved you with our whole heart” in the weekly bulletin. “Pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’ are first-person plural,” I mentally griped, “so ‘heart’ should be plural as well!”

For years I whispered “hearts” quietly to myself on Sunday, comfortable in my grammatical superiority. Eventually I (begrudgingly) accepted the singular noun as a fluke of centuries-old liturgy, and I conformed to the rest of the congregation. Last December, however, I had an epiphany: “heart” is singular because we are one church.

During times when I’ve struggled to love God with my whole heart, the church’s collective heart has helped me keep going. Through breakups, job loss—plus other struggles I will politely avoid naming in a public Lenten Devotional—the thriving community of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church has kept my faith strong.

This Lenten season, I reflect on the times I have felt the heart of the church beating around me. I feel it in the big moments such as the Christmas Pageant and the Jones Dinner, but also in the little moments: hugs and hellos during the passing of the peace, the “where are you joining from?” responses coming through in the livestream chat, postcards from members just checking in, photos of star words and what they mean to their owners... the examples are endless.

Whether it’s leaning on Fifth Avenue for support during a broken heart, or finding joy in the heartbeats of the neighbors around us, I am grateful for this shared community. For this devotional, I encourage readers to reflect on how the (singular) heart of the church has provided strength during rough times and how it has been an outlet for joy during the good ones.



TUESDAY, MARCH 18, 2025

GEORGE HERBERT

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poore:
With thee
O let me rise
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did beginne
And still with sicknesses and shame.
Thou didst so punish sinne,
That I became
Most thinne.
With thee
Let me combine,
And feel thy victorie:
For, if I imp my wing on thine,
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

Easter Wings, 1633



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 19, 2025

GREGORY OF NYSSA

All that the Father is, we see revealed in the Son; all that is the Son's is the Father's also; for the whole Son dwells in the Father, and he has the whole Father dwelling in himself... The Son who exists always in the Father can never be separated from him, nor can the Spirit ever be divided from the Son who through the Spirit works all things. He who receives the Father also receives at the same time the Son and the Spirit. It is impossible to envisage any kind of severance or disjunction between them: One cannot think of the Son apart from the Father, nor divide the Spirit from the Son. There is between the three a sharing and a differentiation that are beyond words and understanding.

The distinction between the persons does not impair the oneness of nature, nor does the shared unity of essence lead to a confusion between the distinctive characteristics of the persons. Do not be surprised that we should speak of the Godhead as being at the same time both unified and differentiated. Using riddles, as it were, we envisage a strange and paradoxical diversity-in-unity and unity-in-diversity.

4th century

AND MAY IT BE SO. AMEN!

THURSDAY, MARCH 20, 2025

JANEEN SARLIN, ELDER

I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

—Psalm 121:1-2, 7-8

Prayer has been a familiar sound to me since birth. My dad prayed before every meal and every night. It was as natural as breathing. A few simple words were enough. A plea for good weather or healing, and always closing with, "And may it be so. Amen."

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Sometimes, my prayers are simply reciting Psalm 121 or humming a hymn as I ponder my next step. I'll admit, I often use "foxhole prayers"—those quick, desperate cries for help. "Be with me, Lord," when I'm worried and unsure. "God, go before me," or "Make a way where I see no way." And more than once, in moments of fear or immediate danger, I've simply pleaded, "Be with me now!"

One such moment happened recently while traveling from the airport to my hotel. I was in the back seat on the passenger side, cruising along a nearly empty ten-lane highway when, out of nowhere, the car in front of us came to a dead stop. My young driver reacted instantly, making a sharp right—lifting the car onto two wheels—into the next lane. In my peripheral vision, I saw another car speeding toward us. Without hesitation, I prayed, "God, I am ready. Be with me now!" In that split second, another thought followed: "Thank You, God—I have my affairs in order."

Miraculously, we avoided a collision by mere inches. As we continued driving, I turned to the driver and said, "Thank you for saving our lives—and your car! You have incredible reflexes." We laughed nervously, trying to shake off the shock. When we arrived at our destination, the driver jumped out, walked over to me, and asked, "Would you give me a hug? Thank you for not being angry." As we embraced, he admitted, "I'm going straight home—my knees are still shaking." I nodded and replied, "So are mine."

Dear Lord, thank you for the gift of prayer—whether spoken, sung, or cried out in desperation. May it be so. Amen!

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FRIDAY, MARCH 21, 2025

THE REV. DR. EMILIE M. TOWNES

To combine challenge with hope is powerful. For together they enable us to press forward when we are at the verge of giving up; to draw strength from the future to live in a discouraging present. Challenge and hope make it possible for us to see the world, not only as it is, but also as it can be, so that it can move us to new places and turn us into a new people.... Ultimately, the water wears the rock away through an unwillingness to alter its course.

from Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil



SATURDAY, MARCH 22, 2025
A DISCIPLE'S RENEWAL

Help me.

I am so slow to learn,
so prone to forget,
so weak to climb;

I am in the foothills when I should be on the heights;

I am pained by my graceless heart,
my prayerless days,
my poverty of love,
my sloth in the heavenly race,
my sullied conscience,
my wasted hours,
my unspent opportunities.

I am blind while light shines around me:
take the scales from my eyes,
grind to dust the evil heart of unbelief.

Make it my chiefest joy to study thee,
meditate on thee,
gaze on thee,
sit like Mary at thy feet,
lean like John on thy breast,
appeal like Peter to thy love,
count like Paul all things dung.

Give me increase and progress in grace
so that there may be
more decision in my character,
more vigour in my purposes,

more elevation in my life,
more fervor in my devotion,
more constancy in my zeal.

As I have a position in the world,
keep me from making the world my position;
May I never seek in the creature



what can only be found in the Creator;
Let not faith cease from seeking thee
until it vanishes into sight.
Ride forth in me, thou King of kings
and Lord of lords,
that I may live victoriously,
and in victory attain my end.

from *The Valley of Vision:*
A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions

WITH US IN THE WAITING

MONDAY, MARCH 24, 2025

JAIME STAEHLE, DIRECTOR OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

“But as for me, I will look to the Lord, I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me.” –Micah 7:7

The sound of men reading aloud in Hebrew surrounded me as I stood at one of the most holy sites in the world. It was crowded, people jostling for a closer space, hoping for just a bit more room to say their prayers in silence. Between my fingers, I held a small rolled-up piece of paper. I ran my hand along the cool stone blocks, placed in this wall thousands of years ago, their rough surface grounding me. The gaps between the stones were filled with hundreds, even thousands, of other small slips of paper like mine, each one a message to God from people around the world.

We had recently been told that biological family members had stepped forward to claim the children we were in the process of adopting. Right before this trip, in fact, our caseworker had come to deliver the news. And so, as I stood there before the Western Wall in Jerusalem, which towered above me just as it had for millions before, I slipped my tiny piece of paper into one of the gaps in the wall, covered it with my hand, and prayed the words I had written on it:

“Dear God, Please let me be their mom.”



And then I waited.

Lent is a season of waiting, often marked by longing, surrender, and trust in the midst of uncertainty. It is a time of preparation, of seeking God even when answers seem far away. Just as Jesus waited in the wilderness, just as the disciples waited in the shadow of the cross, we too wait—trusting that resurrection is coming.

Dear God, in those moments when waiting feels heavy, may we remember that you are with us in the waiting this Lenten season. Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 25, 2025
CHRISTINA ROSETTI

“What is that to thee? follow thou me.”

Lie still, my restive heart, lie still:

God’s Word to thee saith, “Wait and bear.”

The good which He appoints is good,

The good which He denies were ill:

Yea, subtle comfort is thy care,

Thy hurt a help not understood.

“Friend, go up higher,” to one: to one,

“Friend, enter thou My joy,” He saith:

To one, “Be faithful unto death.”

For some a wilderness doth flower.

Or day’s work in one hour is done:—

“But thou, couldn’t thou not watch one hour?”

Lord, I had chosen another lot,

But then I had not chosen well;

Thy choice and only Thine is good:

No different lot, search heaven or hell,

Had blessed me fully understood;

None other, which Thou orderest not.



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 26, 2025
FLANNERY O'CONNOR

“Dear God, I cannot love Thee the way I want to. You are the slim crescent of a moon that I see and my self is the earth’s shadow that keeps me from seeing all the moon. The crescent is very beautiful and perhaps that is all one like I am should or could see; but what I am afraid of, dear God, is that my self shadow will grow so large that it blocks the whole moon, and that I will judge myself by the shadow that is nothing.

I do not know you God because I am in the way. Please help me to push myself aside.”

I want very much to succeed in the world with what I want to do. I have prayed to You about this with my mind and my nerves on it and strung my nerves into a tension over it and said, “oh God, please,” and “I must,” and “please, please.” I have not asked You, I feel, in the right way. Let me henceforth ask You with resignation—that not being or meant to be a slacking up in prayer but a less frenzied kind, realizing that the frenzy is caused by an eagerness for what I want and not a spiritual trust. I do not wish to presume. I want to love.

from A Prayer Journal



THE GLORY OF GOD IN ZION

THURSDAY, MARCH 27, 2025

KELLY BAER, DEACON

We ponder your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple.

Your name, O God, like your praise, reaches to the ends of the earth.

Your right hand is filled with victory. –Psalm 48:9-10

Knowing He is Here!!!

These mean a whole lot to me because whenever I am worried or scared, I know that he is there looking down and comforting me in my time of need. Prayer is also the best way to tell him your troubles and worries. Always know that God has you in his hands. I have a song that I think of.

He got the whole world in his hands. It cheers me up.

Dear heavenly Father, please be with everyone that is worried or scared about the future. We know that your praise and comfort will make this scary place a little less scary for us. Please send down your love and kindness to us. As all people say, Amen.



FRIDAY, MARCH 28, 2025
MARILYNNE ROBINSON

'Then the reasons that things happen are still hidden, but they are hidden in the mystery of God.' I can't read my own writing. No matter. 'Of course misfortunes have opened the way to blessings you would never have thought to hope for, that you would not have been ready to understand as blessings if they had come to you in your youth, when you were uninjured, innocent. The future always finds us changed.' So then it is part of the providence of God, as I see it, that blessing or happiness can have very different meanings from one time to another. 'This is not to say that joy is a compensation for loss, but that each of them, joy and loss, exists in its own right and must be recognized for what it is. Sorrow is very real, and loss feels very final to us. Life on earth is difficult and grave, and marvelous. Our experience is fragmentary. Its parts don't add up. They don't even belong in the same calculation. Sometimes it is hard to believe they are all parts of one thing. Nothing makes sense until we understand that experience does not accumulate like money, or memory, or like years and frailties. Instead, it is presented to us by a God who is not under any obligation to the past except in His eternal, freely given constancy' Because I don't mean to suggest that experience is random or accidental, you see. 'When I say that much the greater part of our existence is unknowable by us because it rests with God, who is unknowable, I acknowledge His grace in allowing us to feel that we know any slightest part of it'

from *Lila*



SATURDAY, MARCH 29, 2025

REV. DR. KENNETH O. JONES (1918-1996)

ASSOCIATE PASTOR FROM 1963 TO 1996

But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. –James 3:17

O God of winter snows and of summer heat, we worship Thee as a God of infinite variety. We see Thy handiwork in the multitude of flowers in nature, of fish in the seas, of insects and birds in the air. And we praise Thy name also for the variety within the human family. We say, thank you, O God, that everyone is not monotonously the same. Give us the grace to appreciate this variety and give us the wisdom to make use of the gifts each adds to our life together.

Help us to confess with the Apostle of old, that there are many things which we wish we had not done, and also many good things we have meant to do but have not. Help us to fill the vast gap between our professions of intent and our failure in our performance. For we know that the world is not impressed with words, so much as the demonstrations of love, compassion, and service. Forgive us for our failures as men and women who profess faith, and empower us to greater witness, through the strength of that forgiving Lord, even Jesus Christ.

In intercession we pray, O God, for all who are in prison—many for crimes committed, and others because of conviction voiced against unjust authority. We also pray for those imprisoned by their own fears and lack of confidence, for those bound by vain regrets and remorse, for those unable to see the potential within themselves when that potential is released by the divine spark of our creative Lord. And set us all free from the error of thinking that our efforts do not make a difference. Continue the redemptive work of Christ through each of us, O God, through each of us! *Amen.*

*from Lean Back on the Everlasting Arms:
The Fifth Ave Presbyterian Church Book of Daily Prayer*



BATHED IN LIGHT

MONDAY, MARCH 31, 2025

SUSAN CERSOVSKY, TRUSTEE

“God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.” –1 John 1:5

Two years ago I was given a star for Epiphany Sunday. I was collecting offering that day and, as I stood at the back of the Sanctuary, I held my dark blue star trying to read the word written on it. I had to tilt the star back and forth and squint until the indentations made by black pen marks were illuminated. Then I saw the word. It read “Light.”

I took the star home and placed it next to my bathroom mirror and meditated upon it over the ensuing months and years. When faced with difficulties, health concerns, and loved ones’ deaths, I reminded myself of my star word. Where is God in these difficulties? It’s not always easy to see the Light, but change the angle from which I see the situation, squint to see things differently, and I will find God’s Light.

It wasn’t until almost two years later that I realized something different about my star word. Shortly after Christmas this year, one of my three adult children unearthed an old video camera from our basement, literally purchased in the last century—sometime in the late 1990s. Inside was a disk. Without much hope of it containing anything viewable, much less valuable, we took it to a camera shop. When we received the digital file back, it contained a poignant video taken in 2003, the day after our third child was born. On her second day of life she was held by her four-year-old sister and two-year-old brother. They sang lullabies and beamed with pride, displaying immense joy and incredible care. New life, new love (and light) filled the room.

This was a perfect moment. I had not thought about the blessedness in this moment for the last twenty-one years until I saw that video.

Light doesn’t only show up to chase away the darkness. God’s presence, holiness and love: I have been bathed in Light each and every day. I see that more clearly now.



TUESDAY, APRIL 1, 2025

PEACEMAKING IS HARD

DANIEL BERRIGAN

hard almost as war.

the difference being
one we can stake life upon
and limb and thought and love.

I stake this poem out
dead man to a dead stick
to tempt an Easter chance—
if faith may be
truth, our evil chance
penultimate at last,
not last. We are not lost.

When these lines gathered
of no resource at all
serenity and strength,
it dawned on me

a man stood on his nails,
an ash like dew, a sweat
smelling of death and life.
Our evil Friday fled,
the blind face gently turned
another way. Toward Life.

A man walks in his shroud.



GOD, I'M READY

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 2, 2025

SYLVIA WINRICH, ELDER

*I have been like a portent to many, but you are my strong refuge.
My mouth is filled with your praise, and with your glory all day long.
—Psalm 71:7-8*

The last year and a half I have struggled with two serious problems that left me feeling that only God can guide and help me through them. I was devastated, afraid, in total disbelief this was happening to me, but I didn't blame God, I didn't even ask why!

After the initial shock wore off, I began to read Psalm 71:1-18, my go-to passage for everything. When I was calm enough, I told God I was ready to listen and I began to reach out for the help I needed. My journey was not an easy one, but the more I leaned into my faith, belief, and love of God I slowly stopped being so afraid, I was angry. A clarity came over me of what needed to be done. I started standing tall again and fighting for myself with God's guidance.

This experience was a true test for me, as I am not someone who easily asks for help or shares my struggles with anyone other than my family and God. But this time, I reached out—and I'm so glad I did. The weight I had been carrying felt lighter, replaced by the peace that comes from knowing you're not alone.

I am deeply grateful for the people and organizations that God placed in my life to support me during my time of trouble and uncertainty. I am also happy to share that both issues have been resolved. My heart is filled with joy and gratitude to God for His countless blessings and the valuable lessons I have learned along the way.

*In thee, O Lord, do I put my trust: let me never be put to confusion.
Deliver me in thy righteousness, and cause me to escape: incline thine ear unto me, and save me. Be thou my strong habitation, whereunto I may continually resort; thou hast given commandment to save me; for thou art my rock and my fortress. Amen.*



THURSDAY, APRIL 3, 2025

JEAN PIERRE DE CAUSSADE S.J.

Our task is to offer ourselves up to God like a clean, smooth canvas and not bother ourselves about what God may choose to paint on it, but, at every moment, feel only the stroke of his brush. It is the same with a piece of stone. Each blow from the chisel of the sculptor makes it feel—if it could feel - if it were being destroyed. As blow after blow rains down on it, the stone knows nothing about how the sculptor is shaping it. All it feels is a chisel hacking away at it, savaging and mutilating it.

Let us take, for example, a piece of stone that is destined to be carved into a crucifix or a statue. We might ask it: “What do you think is happening to you?” And it might well answer: “Why are you asking me? All I know is that I must stay immobile in the hands of the sculptor. I have no notion of what he is doing, nor do I know what he will make of me. What I do know, however, is that his work is the finest imaginable. It is perfect. I welcome each blow of his chisel as the best thing that could happen to me, although, if I am to tell the complete truth, I feel that every one of these blows is ruining me, destroying me, and disfiguring me.”

FRIDAY, APRIL 4, 2025

WILLIAM LANGLAND

Christ said “It is finished,” and began to grow fearfully pale, like a prisoner on the point of death. And so the Lord of Life and of Light closed His eyes. Then at once the daylight fled in fear and the sun became dark; the wall of the Temple shook and split, and the whole earth quaked.

On hearing this dreadful sound, the dead came forth from their deep graves and spoke to the living, to tell them why the storm raged for so long. “For in this darkness,” said one of the dead, “Life and Death are waging a grievous battle; one is destroying the other, and no one will know who has won, until daybreak on Sunday”—and with those words he sank back into the earth.

from *Piers the Ploughman*, c. 1377



YES, I DO BELIEVE

SATURDAY, APRIL 5, 2025

KENNETH HENDERSON, TRUSTEE

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

—Ephesians 4:4-6

I could not have been more than ten years old. Our Sunday school teacher told us that we had a responsibility to tell others about Jesus. So one afternoon Larry, a neighborhood kid, and I were playing outside and I asked him “Larry, do you know Jesus?” Larry said, “I don’t think so. What is his last name?”

Fast forward many years. I was about to enter a meeting with Roger, a colleague who knew that I was very active in our church. “Ken, you are a smart, rational, logical, and thoughtful person. I cannot figure out why you go to church. Do you believe all that stuff? Is it because you can sort of meditate and recharge during the service, away from the hustle? If not that, I don’t understand what you see in it or get out of it.”

How do you explain in just a few words the experience of Christian community, the set of values that we try to live out, the open door welcoming all, the opportunities for service, the chance for our children to learn the stories and lessons of the Bible, the wonder of God’s grace, there for each of us without condition? These and so many other blessings are the very fabric of being part of this church.

“Yes, Roger, I do believe.” Then our meeting started.

Dear God, We know we belong to you. Please keep us close. Guide us in all we do and say and may we always seek to do your will and to demonstrate your love to a world in need. Amen.



MONDAY, APRIL 7, 2025

THE REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

But we are gravely mistaken to think that Christianity protects us from the pain and agony of mortal existence. Christianity has always insisted that the cross we bear precedes the crown we wear. To be a Christian, one must take up his cross, with all of its difficulties and agonizing and tragedy-packed content, and carry it until that very cross leaves its marks upon us and redeems us to that more excellent way which comes only through suffering.

Honesty impels me to admit that transformed nonconformity, which is always costly and never altogether comfortable, may mean walking through the valley of the shadow of suffering, losing a job, or having a six-year-old daughter ask, "Daddy, why do you have to go to jail so much?" But we are gravely mistaken to think that Christianity protects us from the pain and agony of mortal existence. Christianity has always insisted that the cross we bear precedes the crown we wear. To be a Christian, one must take up his cross, with all of its difficulties and agonizing and tragedy-packed content, and carry it until that very cross leaves its marks upon us and redeems us to that more excellent way that comes only through suffering.

In these days of worldwide confusion, there is a dire need for men and women who will courageously do battle for truth. We must make a choice. Will we continue to march to the drumbeat of conformity and respectability, or will we, listening to the beat of a more distant drum, move to its echoing sounds? Will we march only to the music of time, or will we, risking criticism and abuse, march to the soul-saving music of eternity?

*from "Transformed Nonconformist,"
Preached at the Riverside Church on January 23, 1966.*



TUESDAY, APRIL 8, 2025

LOST, ALL IN WONDER

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

Godhead here in hiding, whom I do adore,
Masked by these bare shadows, shape and nothing more,
See, Lord, at thy service low lies here a heart
Lost, all lost in wonder at the God thou art.

Seeing, touching, tasting are in thee deceived:
How says trusty hearing? that shall be believed;
What God's Son has told me, take for truth I do;
Truth himself speaks truly or there's nothing true.

On the cross thy godhead made no sign to men,
Here thy very manhood steals from human ken:
Both are my confession, both are my belief,
And I pray the prayer of the dying thief.

I am not like Thomas, wounds I cannot see,
But can plainly call thee Lord and God as he;
Let me to a deeper faith daily nearer move,
Daily make me harder hope and dearer love.

O thou our reminder of Christ crucified,
Living Bread, the life of us for whom he died,
Lend this life to me then: feed and feast my mind,
There be thou the sweetness man was meant to find.

Bring the tender tale true of the Pelican;
Bathe me, Jesu Lord, in what thy bosom ran—
Blood whereof a single drop has power to win
All the world forgiveness of its world of sin.

Jesu, whom I look at shrouded here below,
I beseech thee send me what I thirst for so,
Some day to gaze on thee face to face in light
And be blest forever with thy glory's sight.

13th century

Translated by Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J.



STEPPIN' INTO BUTTER

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 9, 2025

CHRISTINE BOYLE

Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. –Ephesians 6:13-14

I have been an athlete my entire life, competing in games and races—and now, simply for the joy of movement. No matter the competition, I've always had to “dress for the game” both mentally and physically—it was key to my success.

When I took up long-distance running, I struggled at first. A few miles into a run, my feet or knees would start aching, making every step miserable. After several painful outings, a friend suggested I get fitted for proper running shoes. Skeptical, I went to a local running store—seriously, who knows my feet better than me? After assessing my gait, my running form, and even how I squatted, they recommended several shoes for me to try. Most felt fine—until I slipped on a pair of Brooks. It was like stepping into butter! The shoes supported my arch, corrected my pronation, aligned my hips, and eased my back pain. Running became a joy because my body was properly equipped for the journey.

Today, running is more than physical—it's a spiritual exercise. Lent is one of the toughest spiritual workouts of the liturgical year. We wrestle with social sin, personal transgressions, and the call to be better—for ourselves, for others, and for God. To run my race—both in Lent and in life—I clothe myself in my “God wear,” the armor of God. This spiritual wardrobe strengthens me, helping me stand firm against whatever comes my way. It reminds me that God is always the best fashion choice—for any challenge, any season, any race.

God, may we step into butter on our Lenten journeys as we pray, pause, walk, run and commune this season. Amen.



THURSDAY, APRIL 10, 2025

SAYINGS OF THE DESERT FATHERS

Poemon said, "To be on guard, to meditate within, to judge with discernment: these are the three works of the soul."

A brother asked him, "How ought we to live?"

Poemen replied, "We have seen the example of Daniel. They accused him of nothing except that he served his God."

FRIDAY, APRIL 11, 2025

JONATHAN EDWARDS

"Come unto me, all ye that labor, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest to your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." –Matthew 11:28-30

O thou poor distressed soul, whoever thou art, that art afraid that you never shall be saved, consider that this that Chris mentions is your very case, when he calls to them that labor, and are heavy laden! And how he repeatedly promises you rest if you come to him!...This is what you want. This is the thing you have been so long in vain seeking after. O how sweet would rest be to you, if you could but obtain it! Come to Christ, and you shall obtain it. And hear how Christ, to encourage you, represents himself as a lamb! He tells you, that he is meek and lowly in heart; and are you afraid to come to such a one?

from "The Excellency of Christ,"
A sermon preached in August 1736.



THE VULNERABLE MASTER

SATURDAY, APRIL 12, 2025

AUSTIN APPLEBACH, DIRECTOR OF ENGAGEMENT

“Because of this many of [Jesus’] disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.’” –John 6:66-68

I’ve looked to this passage at several big moments in my life. In those times I have found reassurance in Peter’s response. When I have been in a spiritual crisis, so often this passage has reminded me of all the beauty I have experienced as a member of spiritual communities. It has kept me yearning to be part of those moments where abundant life is found.

But as I turn to this scene today I am struck by something else entirely: the vulnerability of Jesus in this moment. He has seen the movement he started grow exponentially from a small handful of skeptical followers to huge masses of enthralled devotees. And now, as he is watching this crowd dissipate at his words, he turns to the Twelve and asks, “are you going to leave me too?” The Master doesn’t hide from this moment. He doesn’t dismiss those who are leaving as “fake followers” and disparage them to make himself feel better. He doesn’t threaten the Twelve to make them stay. But he lays himself bare to them with his simple question.

Jesus’ ability to embrace this vulnerability and invite his disciples to respond to it themselves is itself miraculous. He is prepared for whatever answer they give, and he gives them the moment to decide where their hearts really lie. I can’t help but wonder what impact of Jesus’ self-assurance has on the future ministry of the Twelve when they eventually find themselves in similar moments of vulnerability.

*Good Shepherd, give us the courage to embrace the vulnerabilities that life inevitably brings and to find solidarity in our communities when it does, so that we can embody your love and light to a watching world.
Amen.*



HOSANNA! SAVE US—OUR WAY!

PALM SUNDAY, APRIL 13, 2025

THE REV. DR. JONAH SO, EXECUTIVE PASTOR

Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: “Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!” –John 12:14-15

There’s a scene in 2001’s *Shrek* when the desperate-to-meet-her-knight-in-shining-armor, Princess Fiona hopes rise when her seeming rescuer crashes into her room. She lays there on the bed pretending to sleep ready to be awakened with a kiss. In that tender moment, the ogre shakes her awake by her shoulders, asking, “Are you Princess Fiona?” She replies, “I am, awaiting a knight so as bold to rescue me.” To which Shrek replies, “Oh, that’s nice. Now LET’S GO!”

Instead of barreling out of the castle in which she has been imprisoned, Fiona objects throughout the entire rescue. She wonders why they are not turning the moment of their first meeting into a romantic one. She scoffs at being rushed out expressing the desire to be swept off her feet, taken out the window down to ride off on his valiant steed. As Shrek bolts toward the exit holding onto the Fiona’s hand, she continues to tell him what should be happening: they should be savoring the moment, he could recite an epic poem, ballad, sonnet, or limerick. Fiona even elegantly hands Shrek her handkerchief as a token of her gratitude, which he quickly uses to wipe the soot and sweat from his face and tosses back to her. Then, when Fiona hears the dragon roar, she exclaims, “You didn’t slay the dragon?!... This isn’t right! You were meant to charge in, sword drawn, banner flying—that’s what all the other knights did! What kind of knight are you?!” To which Shrek answers, “One of a kind.”

I cannot help but think of the crowds, the throngs of people who placed palm branches and their cloaks on the road crying out, “Hosanna,” as Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey to be just like Princess Fiona.



Hosanna is both a phrase of praise and a cry for rescue. The people are desperate to be rescued from the oppression of the Roman Empire. They called their knight in shining armor the Messiah. They mapped out their rescue. The Messiah would come and annihilate the oppressors and restore Israel to glory as in the age of King David.

Alas, when the Messiah showed up riding a donkey (which expressed “I come in peace”) instead of a mighty steed (which expressed “I’ve come for war”), the questions began: “What kind of Messiah are you?” Palm Sunday expresses the joy of knowing God will save and captures the confusion of the people when they realize Jesus might not be doing it according to their expectations. What a gift to be able to process that tension from our “one of a kind” Messiah.

Humble King, the voices that shouted your praises are the same ones that shouted for your crucifixion the very next week. We call you “Lord” but we want to hold that title. Help us to see the beauty and power of your way—the better way of grace and love. Amen.

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MONDAY, APRIL 14, 2025

A PRAYER FROM THE GREEK ORTHODOX TRADITION FOR HOLY MONDAY

Believers, having reached the saving Passion of Christ in our God, let us glorify his ineffable forbearance, so that, in his compassion, he may, with himself, also raise us up, who have been slain by sin, as he is good and loves mankind.

Lord, as you were coming to your Passion, you strengthened your Disciples, taking them aside and saying: How have you not remembered any words, which I spoke to you of old: Is it not written: No Prophet may be killed but in Jerusalem? Now the moment has come of which I spoke to you. For see, I am being handed over to be mocked by the hands of sinners, who, when they have nailed me to a Cross and handed me over for burial, will reckon on me a loathsome corpse. Nevertheless, take courage, for on the third day, I arise, for the joy of believers and eternal life.

from The Anthologion: An Anthology of Prayer



TUESDAY, APRIL 15, 2025

SONNET X", ALSO KNOWN AS "DEATH BE NOT PROUD

JOHN DONNE

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

First published in 1633

THIS ROAD LEADS TO A CEMETERY

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 16, 2025

JEFF ROWBOTTOM, TRUSTEE

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. —John 10:27-28

Many years ago, our pastor said he saw a road sign that said "This Road Leads to a Cemetery." He pulled over to write it down as "there must be a sermon in there somewhere." It was a great Fifth Avenue Presbyterian



Church sermon and the punch line he used, that stuck with me all these years later was that *All roads lead to a cemetery.*

Unless I miss my guess, I am like most people, fearful and anxious in considering death. It is much more comfortable to distract yourself with day-to-day tasks and smaller issues. However, at some point life inevitably drops an unavoidable question in your lap. For me it was 15 years ago at age 39, when I heard the words, "It's malignant." My journey with melanoma forced me to face my worst fears and to urgently pray and beg God that I be around to see my daughters grow up.

God was with me and provided me tremendous comfort in my darkest times. One particularly harrowing night while in Sloan Kettering's ER, I was in enormous pain and facing emergency surgery. A sense of peace and calm came over me. It was, by far, the closest to God I have ever felt. It was unexpected and surprising given the circumstances. I looked up at my extremely worried wife and wanted to let her know what I was experiencing and said simply "God is here." This experience reminds me that God will always be there for us when we most need him.

Dear Lord, thank you for being our rock and salvation in good times and bad. Help us live our lives in your service with hope, joy, and peace knowing our citizenship is in heaven. Amen.

BE A SAILOR

MAUNDY THURSDAY, APRIL 17, 2025

THE REV. CHRIS PALMER, ASSOCIATE PASTOR

If there's one artist who I think could've written the best soundtrack to Lent, it's Leonard Cohen, especially the song "Suzanne" from his 1967 *The Songs of...* album. Some artists are theologians in hiding, and for my money, I'd say that Cohen was one of the best of them. For me, Cohen has often spoken most eloquently in harder times in my life, when I've needed a voice that could tarry alongside me. When my grandmother was passing away after a long battle with dementia, these lyrics from Cohen were a sturdy companion:



*And Jesus was a sailor
When he walked upon the water
And he spent a long time watching
From his lonely wooden tower
And when he knew for certain
Only drowning men could see him
He said "All men will be sailors then
Until the sea shall free them*

There are many battles that might make us feel like we're drowning, says Cohen, but he makes the audacious claim that it is precisely when we feel over our head that we are prone to encounter Jesus. That's a disarming, a sobering, yet a hopeful truth. Thanks be to God.

GOOD FRIDAY

GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 18, 2025

THE REV. DR. SCOTT BLACK JOHNSTON, SENIOR PASTOR

"When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts."

—Luke 23:33 & 48

Good Friday concludes at a place called the Skull. Following Jesus, beautiful Jesus, gentle Jesus, eventually brings us to a hillside named after the shell of a human head, after the fleshless remnant of a face, after a boney pate that signifies death the world over.

Of course, we end up at the Skull—a place where hopes shrivel, and the reality of our common destiny comes home to roost. Sooner or later, humans always end up here, in the shadow of a skull.

Surprisingly, though, it is here, here at the foot of the cross, under the gaze of the Grim Reaper's hollowed out eyes and rattling teeth, that Good Friday offers its most powerful testimony and hope.



Somehow, amid these awful circumstances, as spears chip bone, as bodies heave and wheeze, on this hillside where humans have chosen to put their slaughterhouse artistry on gruesome display, somehow, even here, the good refuses to die.

- You can see it when Jesus forgives those wielding hammers and pounding the nails—people so caught up in their lust for blood, that “they know not what they are doing.”
- You can see it in the criminal who speaks up for Jesus, asserting Christ’s innocence with his final breath.
- You can see it in the centurion who, Luke tells us, praises God in the midst of this horror show, and who also declares Jesus to be blameless.
- And you can see it in the crowds who depart the Skull “beating their breasts.”

In the midst of the crucifixion’s awfulness, some people retain their humanity—their sense of what is right and what is wrong. There are those whose hearts cry out, “This is tragic, broken, messed-up beyond all reckoning!” There are those who walk away from the cross thumping their chests, grieving and weeping buckets of tears.

Strangely, this painful lament strikes me as a good thing. It is a sign that the light has not gone out for humanity, not entirely. It is testimony to the fact that (even hanging on the cross) Christ continues to teach, to offer hope, to point us toward a better way. He is not done. Not done teaching, not done inspiring, not done challenging, not done calling us to embrace life.

Who else, but this innocent One, who has endured the tortures of the Skull “for us and for our sake,” can point us away from these violent hilltops and toward the dawn?

Precious Jesus, give us the courage to follow you on this day, this most difficult day. Give us the wisdom see all that is wrong and awful and painfully true in the shadow of the Skull. Help us to cling to our humanity, to beat our breasts, and to yearn with every fiber of our being for the dawn of a new day. Amen.



GOD IS NEAR

HOLY SATURDAY, APRIL 19, 2025

THE REV. WERNER RAMIREZ, ASSOCIATE PASTOR

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” –Psalm 34:18

One of the holiest and most sacred parts of my role as a pastor is walking alongside you when a loved one dies. There's a unique weight to the day after a death. For some, it becomes a whirlwind of logistics—funeral arrangements, calls, and endless tasks that leave little room for grief. Others retreat into numbness, stunned by loss. Others are left in confusion, grappling with a new and painful reality. It's all valid—there isn't a right or wrong way to grieve.

Holy Saturday holds that same heavy silence. The followers of Jesus had watched their teacher and friend be crucified. All their hopes had crumbled, and they were left wondering what would happen next. God seemed absent, the world cold and broken. And yet—God was present in their grief, in a way they couldn't yet comprehend.

While they mourned, God was preparing something unimaginable: resurrection. The very fabric of the universe was being rewoven with grace and redemption. Death would not have the final word.

On Holy Saturday, we remember that God meets us in the messy, raw places of loss. In the numbness, in the confusion, in the frantic logistics—God is there. Friends, in our grief, we sometimes become different people, and God meets us there. Even in our grief, Christ reminds us that we are loved, and through the grace of God we are enough.

Tomorrow, resurrection comes. Love triumphs over death, and the story is redeemed.

God of the in-between, hold us in the silence of grief. Be with us when we are numb, overwhelmed, or lost. Remind us that death is never the final word. Through your grace, may we trust in the promise of resurrection and cling to the hope that new life is always on the horizon. Amen.

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**"CHRIST CONTINUES
TO TEACH,
TO OFFER HOPE,
TO POINT US TOWARD
A BETTER WAY.
HE IS NOT DONE.
NOT DONE TEACHING,
NOT DONE INSPIRING,
NOT DONE
CHALLENGING,
NOT DONE
CALLING US
TO EMBRACE LIFE."**

-THE REV. DR. SCOTT BLACK JOHNSTON