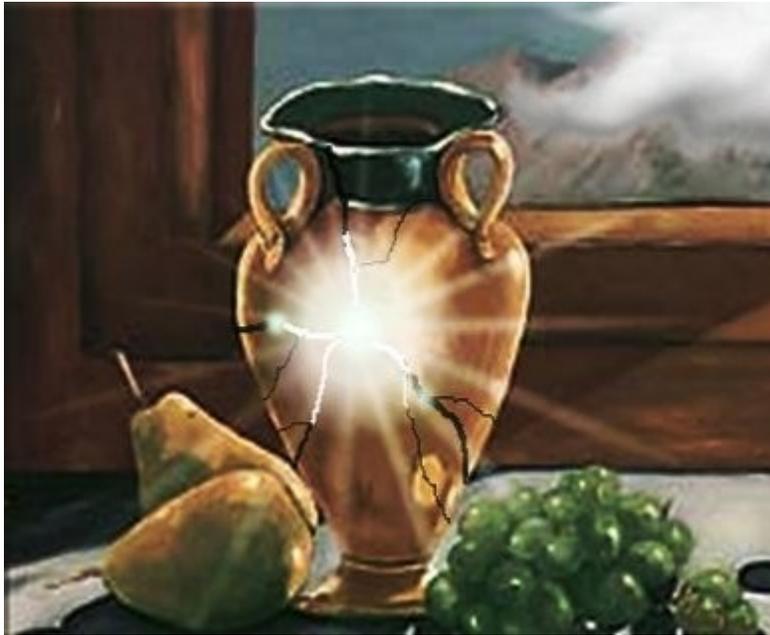


We Do Not Lose Heart



43 Days of Devotions for Hope

“But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” – 2 Corinthians 4:8

Special Thanks to:

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Rev. Tanner Howard

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...and the many minds that it took to compile this collection of verses and devotions.

Words from the Editor:

We all have times in our faith where we become discouraged. It may be when we notice fewer people in our pews on Sunday. It may be after the sudden loss of a loved one. It may be during a challenging time in a relationship, or it may be any number of other things.

This collection of devotions, written by clergy and lay people across the Montana Synod, is meant for times such as these. These verses come from suggestions of scripture stories or verses that have given many people hope in dark times, helping them not to lose heart in their faith.

Most verses are taken from the NRSV version of the Bible. The verses are quoted, followed by a short devotion and a prayer. May these words be a source of light and strength for you.

In God's hope,

Rev. Katie Emery

Day 1

Hebrews 12:1-3 - Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely^[a] and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of^[b] the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.³ Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners,^[c] so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. (NRSV)

I am not a runner. I sometimes run, but I have never been in a race and I rarely run with other people. I am self-conscious when I run and prefer to do it on my own away from people in the country. I wonder if sometimes this is how I (and probably many others) view our faith lives. We would prefer to do it on our own, self-conscious about praying out loud or speaking up in Bible study – afraid of how we might sound. However, races are not meant to be done alone and neither is faith. Hebrews claims our faith to be a race that is set out before us, surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. We are in this race together to uplift and uphold, encourage and encounter others. It is through being with others in our faith that we are reminded most clearly of God's presence and goodness. We run or walk or crawl this race of faith together, and Christ urges us on.

Holy God, we run this race together. Help us to keep our eyes fixed on you. Attune our ears to your voice in the cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Restore us in faith and grant us hope in you. Amen.

Day 2

Psalm 51:10-19 - Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right^[a] spirit within me.¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.¹⁶ For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.¹⁷ The sacrifice acceptable to God^[c] is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

¹⁸ Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,
¹⁹ then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar. (NRSV)

To this day the six-note introduction to Evangelical Lutheran Worship hymn #186 still lifts me to my feet to sing as the offerings are presented. “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”

Psalm 51 has rightly been utilized for its beautiful imagery in liturgy and song for generations. We are reminded that we come before God desperate for restoration and renewal; that it is not the sacrifice of bulls (or our pocketbooks) that pleases God, but a spirit of confession and a willingness to turn ourselves over to God’s mercy and care. We are sinners in need of forgiveness - thanks be to God that our savior so generously provides!

Prayer: Merciful God, create in me a clean heart, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. Amen!

Day 3

Mark 1:9-11 - ⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved,^[a] with you I am well pleased.” (NRSV)

Did you ever play the ice breaker “I am”? Each person jots down the words “I am” 20 times and completes the statement. I am a parent, I am a rancher, I am a spouse, I am a griz or cat fan, etc. All answers are shared so everyone in the group gets to know who you are and insight about what you value in life. I guess it’s really about one’s identity. However, I like to believe who I am, begins with whose I am. When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan and came up out of the water the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove and voice from heaven proclaimed – “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” Just as God gave identity to Jesus, so too in baptism are we proclaimed and claimed by the great I Am to be beloved daughters and sons with whom God is well pleased. Somebody said, “once I was a nobody, but now I am a somebody.” Perhaps that’s part of what happens in baptism. So, remember whose you are and who you are, a beloved child of God, a real somebody no matter what, always and forever.

Prayer: God of all, remind us time and again that our foundational identity is drawn from you. No matter what the rest of the world says about us, we are wonderful in your eyes. Amen.

Day 4

Romans 5:1-5 - Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.(NRSV)

Christians are to be humble...

But sometimes, we just can't be. And that's ok. We know the story of Jesus. It's hard to be modest or underestimate ourselves when that's what we bear within us. We have the greatest news *in the history of the world* written on our hearts and in our Bibles. It's the best story ever, hands down. We *can't* be humble about that.

It sounds odd to boast as a Christian - but we don't do it in a way that hurts others or brings them down. It's actually the opposite - we boast, we take pride in the story we bear so that others can be lifted up by it, too.

Christians can boast because we have hope of sharing God's glory and when we boast in the Lord, we boast for the good of the world.

Prayer: God, give us passion for your good news. Give us hope, so we can share hope, so we can be hope. Amen.

Day 5

Exodus 2:23-25 – “After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.” (NRSV)

Have you ever been oppressed? Have you ever been enslaved? Have you ever cried out to God in anguish?

Perhaps you have never been a slave of a person or oppressed by a regime, but we all have periods in life where we have experienced someone or something holding power over us. Times where all we can do is throw our hands up in the air and cry out to God. This passage assures us that all of those struggles and anguished cries are heard by our God. He sees us when we are hurting and comforts us when we are despairing because we are his people. He made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that he would be their God and they would be his people. This covenant extends to all of us as well. If we are God’s people, we are assured of deliverance, for God will never leave us in oppression and despair. Thanks be to God!

Prayer: Delivering God, hear us when we cry out to you. Comfort us amidst our many struggles and take notice of our predicaments. Remind us that you are our God and we are your people. Amen.

Day 6

Psalm 62 - ¹ For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. ² He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken. ³ How long will you assail a person, will you batter your victim, all of you, as you would a leaning wall, a tottering fence? ⁴ Their only plan is to bring down a person of prominence. They take pleasure in falsehood; they bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse. *Selah*

⁵ For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. ⁶ He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

⁷ On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God. ⁸ Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. *Selah*

⁹ Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath. ¹⁰ Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them. ¹¹ Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, ¹² and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord. For you repay to all according to their work. (NRSV)

“For God alone my soul waits.” These words are so powerful. In them are the words themselves, but also these ones: “All fades in comparison to God.”

When the worries of life grow strong, and our strength grows weak, the time comes to lean on words like these. No matter the thing, all things are less important than God.

TV entertains our eyes, food fills the stomach, exercise nourishes the body. Yet, the soul is sustained by the presence of God, by waiting for God, by resting in God.

In the midst of despair, trust in this: All fades in comparison to this God who is our mighty rock in the midst of a storm.

Prayer: God our rock and fortress and salvation, come to us as we wait, and sustain us through the weary times. Amen.

Day 7

Mark 4:35-41 - ³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” ³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” ³⁹ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰ He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” ⁴¹ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (NRSV)

There is a pervasive idea in our society which assumes that people who go to church regularly have everything figured out. That if you have Jesus in your life, things are somehow going well, or at least better for you than for others. Put bluntly, that’s just not the case.

The disciples in this passage would agree. By this time in Mark, they have witnessed Jesus preach to vast multitudes of people throughout the land and teach parables to the crowds who follow him. Jesus has healed lepers and paralytics, cast out demons, and taken on the religious elite. These first faithful followers of Jesus are soundly in his camp, and excited about the work ahead. Even so, when the wind blows and the waves crash against their boat, they are afraid.

Following Jesus does not guarantee a storm-free life. There will be times when we, like the disciples, cry out in fear to Jesus, wondering if he cares about our struggles. He does. Have faith.

Prayer: Prince of Peace, you stilled the storm and brought your followers to safety. Still the storms of our lives too. Give us faith to have confidence in your word. Teach us to place our trust in you, even in the midst of challenging times. Amen.

Day 8

Acts 2:29-32 - ²⁹“Fellow Israelites,^[a] I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. ³¹Foreseeing this, David^[b] spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah,^[c] saying,

‘He was not abandoned to Hades,
nor did his flesh experience corruption.’

³²This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. (NRSV)

“Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!” The Easter Proclamation springs easily to the lips no matter what season of the church year we are in. We are an Easter People, people of the resurrection, who proclaim boldly this message of hope and promise of salvation because of what Christ has done.

But why does it matter? The apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, that “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sin.” Yet, Peter, in this address to the crowds on Pentecost, asserts again and again that the death and resurrection of Jesus brings salvation, healing, and hope to this weary world. People of God, the Messiah has come and set the Holy Spirit loose in the world. All we have to do now is bear witness to what God continues to do.

Prayer: God of all people, on Pentecost your Holy Spirit came with the rush of wind and tongues of flame. Continue to breathe new life into our bodies, minds, and hearts. Fill us with the fire of your Holy Spirit, and call us to renewed and vibrant faith. Amen.

Day 9

Isaiah 43:1-3a - But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, He who formed you o Israel: Do not fear for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (NRSV)

“Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit, and marked with the cross of Christ forever.” These are some of the first words spoken over the newly baptized in our rite of holy baptism. You have been created by God, claimed by God, named by God and redeemed by God. These are not mere words or catchy sayings. They describe the deep and abiding promises of God, covenants that will never fail, hope that will never cease.

God’s word to us is a commitment to never leave us, to always sustain us. “When you pass through the waters” - the chaos of this world, the tumult of this life - “I will be with you”, says the Lord. “When you walk through fire” - temptation, fear, self-destruction and external hardship - “you shall not be burned.” The worst trials of this world don’t hold a candle to the power of God, the Holy One, our Savior.

Prayer: Holy One, you call us by name and gather us into you loving embrace. We give you thanks for your mighty acts throughout history. Help us always to cast our burdens at the foot of the cross, trusting you to walk with us through the hard times and celebrate with us in times of joy. Amen.

Day 10

Psalm 121 -¹ I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? ² My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. ³ He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. ⁴ He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. ⁵ The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand. ⁶ The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. ⁷ The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. ⁸ The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore. (NRSV)

“I lift my eyes up to the hills – from where will my help come?” How many times have these been words spoken from our own mouths? In the darkest times of life, how many times do we lift our eyes up to the place where we most identify with God being present and ask a question like this? I find hope in this psalm because it reflects my own experience of crying out to God and then quickly being reminded that it is only from the Lord that my greatest help will come. My faith gives me an assurance that any human efforts and assurances could not. This God made the heavens and the earth. This God does not slumber nor sleep for his upholding us and keeping us. This God will keep us close from this time on and forevermore. This is the God who will continually be the one who answers our cries.

Prayer: God of the hills, lift our eyes up to see your face and open our ears to hear your voice in our times of joy and sorrow. Amen.

Day 11

Matthew 5: 13-16 - ¹³“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. ¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Whenever my spouse and I are driving on a long road trip and I'm not carrying on a conversation, she'll look at me and say, "Tell me about yourself. Who are you?" Now I've got to say something so next time I want to try this out: "Well Honey, here's who I am. I am the salt of the earth, I am the light of the world, all this cuz Jesus says so, Matthew chapter 5!" That should keep things quiet for a few miles. But noooo, "tell me what that means." Well, I wondered that too and got some insights from "The Message" contemporary Bible where Jesus says, "Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God flavors of this earth...You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept." And of course, my spouse says, tell me more. It's gonna be a long drive, but definitely not boring. The Holy Spirit must be riding shotgun!

Prayer: God, help us to ever understand more and more about who we are as your "seasonings that brings out flavors of this earth." Shine your light through us to the world. Amen.

Day 12

John 1:5 - The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (NRSV)

“...and the darkness did not overcome it.”. Or is it “... and the darkness has never mastered it.”? Or perhaps “...and the darkness can never extinguish it.”?

This is one of my favorite verses in all of scripture to compare translations. This is partly because it seems like all translators have a different interpretation, but also because those translations are all so illustrative. We can all imagine a light – a candle in an otherwise dark room, a lamp that gives light to the whole household. We can also imagine a battle between light and darkness. The light shines and the darkness presses in, but whenever it creeps in closer, it can never overtake the light. It is an easy comparison, then, to see Jesus as the light and evil as darkness. Jesus is the light of the world and no matter the evil that invades the world, it will never be able to overcome or master or extinguish that light. It shines on into eternity, lighting our path and guiding us home to safety in Christ.

Prayer: Light of the world, with your presence in our lives, we will never walk in darkness. Shine in our hearts and drive back the darkness that creeps so close. Amen.

Day 13

1 Kings 19:11-16 - ¹¹ He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” ¹⁴ He answered, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” ¹⁵ Then the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. ¹⁶ Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. (NRSV)

God speaks in out-of-the-way places. God spoke to someone hiding from the weather in a cave...and God speaks to us. In what are considered out-of-the-way places, towns that slow traffic for a mile on its way somewhere else, churches that struggle to get by...God speaks. And honestly, sometimes God speaks the most clearly in those places.

I get stuck on this part every time I read it: “...a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it...” It’s ironic, but also relatable. I know I have heard silence, felt calm, and tasted hunger. It is in those moments – sometimes because of them – that I hear God most clearly calling, nudging, shoving me in one direction or another.

In those moments when God speaks, we are called to listen, and then to serve. Where you are may seem out-of-the-way, but to God, it is the holy ground that heard the divine voice.

Prayer: Word of Life, speak to us, and give us ears to hear. Amen.

Day 14

Psalm 46 - ¹ God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. ² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; ³ though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. *Selah*

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. ⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. ⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. ⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*

⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. ⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.

¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth." ¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. (NRSV)

On January 12, 2010 I was standing in the middle of a road in Jacmel, Haiti when the world fell down. And throughout the next days, months, and years that I was processing that day, this was the piece of scripture that defined the whole experience for me. In that time, God was my refuge and strength, as He was for so many in that place. As we watched and felt the mountains shake and tumble around us and the seas foam and rage as they rose into the city, we knew the Lord of hosts was with us and the God of Jacob was our refuge. There was nothing more still than the moment the shaking stopped. This psalm reminds me of a time when the veil between life and death came so close to me and I knew God deeply in that place and time.

In the midst of the craziness this life brings – the unexpected nature of the pain that we experience and the uncertainty we endure, we are reminded that it is in God we are to take our refuge. When we are still for a moment – forced or intentional - we find that God is there, and we cannot but know Him in the stillness.

Prayer: God of all creation, be our refuge in the midst of the storms that befall us. When the mountains of our foundation threaten to throw us into the raging sea, draw us close and remind us of your presence. Amen.

Day 15

Matthew 28:18-20 - ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (NRSV)

There’s a sign over door as you leave the sanctuary of Fairbanks Lutheran Church in Fairbank, AK that says, “Now Entering the Mission Field”. The banner you pass as you leave First Lutheran Church in Havre, MT includes a portion of their mission statement: “In faith sharing God’s love, in kindness serving all!” And the camp sign that sends you out of Riverside Lutheran Bible Camp in Story City, IA is a reminder from this text: “Go and make disciples!”

It’s useful to note that in all of these places, these final words from Jesus are not directed at pastors or deacons or bishops or chaplains, but to everyone. All followers of Jesus are called to go out into the world, to boldly proclaim the good news and make disciples of all people. To some people this may seem like intimidating work. Never fear! Jesus promises to be with us always, even to the end of the age. So, people of God, GO!

Prayer: Jesus, you have called us together and you send us out. Give us faith to out with boldness and courage to share your gospel with all people. Thank you for being with us wherever we go. Amen.

Day 16

Romans 8: 28 - ²⁸ We know that all things work together for good^[a] for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. (NRSV)

I struggle with this passage. It's often pulled out when things are going bad, as a Scooby-Doo band-aid that is supposed to make us feel better in the moment. "Though you're going through something hard, God's got a purpose for this terrible situation." Or sometimes, "This trial you are going through is a good thing."

And these rub me the wrong way.

This passage doesn't mean everything will be perfect, or that God orders bad things. It says that God is ultimately the one in charge. It says we are called - God chose us! And we are called for God's purpose in the world. We become the good that works together for others who love God.

Escapism isn't helpful - but community is. And that is what God calls us to here - to our neighbors, near and far.

Prayer: God, Give us strength to do your purpose in the world, for the good of others. Amen.

Day 17

1 John 1:1-5 - We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—² this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—³ we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.⁴ We are writing these things so that our^[a] joy may be complete. (NRSV)

How do you encounter God with your senses? Primarily, I think we are apt to say that we encounter God with our ears. We hear the sermon preached, we listen to scripture read in worship, we perceive God's voice in prayer. But we are reminded in these verses that God uses all of our senses to meet us. We also see God with our eyes as we observe goodness in creation. We taste God with our mouths in the meal of communion. We feel God with our bodies in the waters of baptism washing over us and the embrace of a much-needed hug. We smell God through the use of incense, anointing oil, and a meal made in love. God is all around us, willing and able to be perceived with all our senses. We need only become aware.

God of our senses, you are able to be perceived all around us. Help us to experience you with not only our ears, but our eyes, our noses, our tastes and our touches. Reveal yourself. Amen.

Day 18

Psalm 75 - ¹ We give thanks to you, O God; we give thanks; your name is near. People tell of your wondrous deeds. ² At the set time that I appoint I will judge with equity. ³ When the earth totters, with all its inhabitants, it is I who keep its pillars steady. *Selah* ⁴ I say to the boastful, 'Do not boast', and to the wicked, 'Do not lift up your horn; ⁵ do not lift up your horn on high, or speak with insolent neck.' ⁶ For not from the east or from the west and not from the wilderness comes lifting up; ⁷ but it is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another. ⁸ For in the hand of the LORD there is a cup with +foaming wine, well mixed; he will pour a draught from it, and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs. ⁹ But I will rejoice for ever; I will sing praises to the God of Jacob. ¹⁰ All the horns of the wicked I will cut off, but the horns of the righteous shall be exalted. (NRSV)

It is really easy for me to get in God's way. To think that I know better, that my wisdom, my authority, my strength is what's needed to take care of a problem. Typically that leads to foolish mistakes, humiliation, and burn out. We can't do it all, and what's more, we shouldn't enter into projects without remembering that it's God's work we are about to do.

The psalmist speaks of "horns" which are a symbol of strength. "Do not lift up your horn" the psalmist warns - do not lift up your own strength or exalt your own power. For it is God who sets time, it is God who judges, and it is God who makes steady the pillars of this world (see also Job 38). Psalm 75 is not a word of condemnation, but of thanksgiving for what God is doing, and a reminder to put our trust in God's strength and give praise to the Lord.

Prayer: God, you created all things and have authority over all that you made. Give us your wisdom and strength to work for your kingdom each and every day. Amen.

Day 19

Mark 5:25-34 - ²⁵ Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. ²⁶ She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. ²⁷ She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸ for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” ²⁹ Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. ³⁰ Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” ³¹ And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’” ³² He looked all around to see who had done it. ³³ But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. ³⁴ He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” (NRSV)

This woman desired physical release, that is certain. But her suffering was not just physical, it was not just from her bleeding. After striving to get better and exhausting all her resources and the doctors’ best guesses, her body was no better and her soul was worse.

Seeing Jesus, she knew what she needed. She claimed healing by reaching out to him, trusting a power beyond anything she had seen before.

And she received healing beyond her hope. Not only was she healed in body, but sent off with the peace of Christ. What greater healing is there than the tranquility of divinity?

This is the same peace we share every Sunday - the life-giving, death-defying, hope-inducing peace. May the peace of Christ be with you.

Prayer: God, help us receive peace, be peace, and give peace, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Day 20

Romans 8:26 - ²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.(NRSV)

Do you ever just not know what to say to God? You are so frustrated or hurt or frightened or worried, but you just don't have the words? I find comfort in this verse when those times come. It is comforting to know that the Spirit knows our hearts when we cannot find the words to say. It is comforting to know that when we are too far gone in our angst and emotion that the Spirit is able to translate our groans and screams and sobs into prayers. It is comforting to know that when we don't know how to pray or be strong, that in our weakness the Spirit comes to us and gives us strength and connection with God. So, cry out, dear friends in Christ. The Spirit knows what you mean and hears the cries of your heart, no matter how incoherent they may seem.

Prayer: Loving Spirit, we cry out to you from our hearts for all the things we cannot find the words to express. Come to us in our weakness and help us to feel your presence. Amen.

Day 21

Leviticus 26:3-13 – “³ If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, ⁴ I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. ⁵ Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land. ⁶ And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid; I will remove dangerous animals from the land, and no sword shall go through your land. ⁷ You shall give chase to your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. ⁸ Five of you shall give chase to a hundred, and a hundred of you shall give chase to ten thousand; your enemies shall fall before you by the sword. ⁹ I will look with favor upon you and make you fruitful and multiply you; and I will maintain my covenant with you. ¹⁰ You shall eat old grain long stored, and you shall have to clear out the old to make way for the new. ¹¹ I will place my dwelling in your midst, and I shall not abhor you. ¹² And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people. ¹³ I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be their slaves no more; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect. (NRSV)

This seems like a likely exchange. God says, “If you do what I ask of you, I will take care of you.” Much like the bargains we make with God in our attempt to have him to bend to our wills. Yet, this can take a dangerous turn in terms of how we believe God works, especially when we are in a place where we are losing heart. Thinking that God’s goodness and mercy and blessings will only come to us if we are good enough will always be a losing exchange because we will never be able to uphold our end of the deal completely. The grace we find is that God does not actually work this way. God is faithful even when we are not. God is good even when we are not. God is loving even when we are not. None of these aspects of who God is for us are contingent upon our own goodness. God will always be true to God’s character. And that character is to love you no matter what.

Prayer: Unchanging God, we praise you for being a God who keeps your covenant with us no matter how badly we mess up. In those times, bring us back to you and set us on the right paths again. Amen.

Day 22

Matthew 5:48 - "Be ye perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect" (KJV)

Hearing these words of Jesus as a Sunday school going child was somewhat scary. Was I supposed to be a perfect child? Do everything right? Never make a mistake? And heaven forbid if I ever forgot to get a note saying I was in Sunday school when visiting grandma's church so I could keep my perfect attendance pin!

My piano teacher always said "practice makes perfect" but it didn't work for me, nor did the ruler laying on the end of the piano to tap my fingers when I played the scales wrong!

A few years ago I found new meaning in these "be ye perfect" words. I was reading this Bible verse from a contemporary study Bible called "The Message" by Eugene Peterson, a pastor who retired in Kalispell. Here's how he writes "be ye perfect". "In a word, what I'm saying is *Grow up*. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God given identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you." So, while you and I are not perfect, we are still a somebody, a beloved child of God!

Prayer: Loving God, you made us all to be somebody with unique gifts and precious talents. Help us to use these God-given gifts to enrich the world and make it a more perfect place. Amen.

Day 23

1 John 3:1a - ¹ See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.

Children get what their parents have. Through Baptism, we become children of God - so we get what God has. This is one of the central promises of Christian thought.

And what does our God-parent have? God has love. God has peace. God has life. And we get all these things.

And while all of that comes us, us, eventually we inherit the responsibility that goes along with being a child of God. Love does not leave us where we are - it moves us to go out and serve our neighbors. It doesn't move us so we become children of God - it moves us because we are already children of God.

In becoming God's child, you have received much. Now, be God's child for the world.

Prayer: Stir in me the fire of your love, blow through me the wind of your Spirit, that I may be your child anew. Amen.

Day 24

Proverbs 3:5-6 - ⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.
⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. (NRSV)

The first ten chapters of Proverbs are filled with instruction for righteous living, warnings against temptation, and encourage the reader to reflect on wisdom. We are reminded that God is involved in every aspect of our lives, both guaranteeing cosmic order as well as being present in the most minute details of our days.

As individuals and communities of faith we are called to “trust in the Lord”. Of course, that’s not always the easiest thing to do. It can be scary to give up our own authority and lean on someone else with such completeness - even if that someone is God! Throughout history the people of God have been called to this trust. Sarah bore Isaac, the Israelites were saved from the land of Egypt, and the walls of Jericho fell. We too are called to this radical faith. So, when you’re faced with a difficult decision (or any decision), how do you involve God in the process?

Prayer: Alpha and Omega, you call us to trust in you and you alone. Help us to set aside our idols of wealth, privilege, and power, and to focus instead on you. Give us peace as we place all that we are in your hands. Amen.

Day 25

Psalm 91 - ¹ You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, ² will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.” ³ For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; ⁴ he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. ⁵ You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day, ⁶ or the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noon-day. ⁷ A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. ⁸ You will only look with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. ⁹ Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, ¹⁰ no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. ¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. ¹² On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone. ¹³ You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot. ¹⁴ Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. ¹⁵ When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. ¹⁶ With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation. (NRSV)

It is hard to read this passage and not start hearing the melody of *On Eagle's Wings*. It's also hard to read this psalm when life is hard and there is no change, when I think of refugees who spent years or decades away from home in temporary shelters, when I think of people unfairly convicted. I struggle with passages like this. Why does God not protect and guard them? Why does God not deliver? This passage consoles and is confounding.

But when read it in song format, the message comes across more clearly. Every verse comes back to the refrain: *And he will raise you up...* Over and over again, God will raise us up.

Maybe not physically, but God will resurrect our souls from despair. God is a God of resurrection, of rebirth, of re-creation.

Prayer: God of restoration, lift me on your wings again and again, so I may know your love.
Amen

Day 26

2 Corinthians 12:9 - My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.
(NRSV)

“Will I ever be good enough?” This is a question that plagues souls and destroys self-esteem. It harms us because the world seems to speak out with a resounding “no!” when we ask. Whatever enough looks like, we will never reach it by the standards of the world. And it hurts. And then I read this verse. And I read it again. And I memorize it and it becomes part of me. Jesus proclaims to us with a resounding “yes!” to the question in this verse through the offer of his grace. A grace that bridges the apparent gaps in our inadequacies, a grace that covers our shortcomings. We have received grace upon grace. And it is enough. It is enough and because it is enough, we are enough. For it is only when we are allowed to show our weakness, admitting that we are not perfect, that Christ can shine through us and remind us that because of our weakness, we can be made perfect by the power of his grace over us. And so I boast in my weakness, for there I experience God’s grace.

Prayer: God, you claim us as your children and see us as your perfect creations. Help us to receive your grace and know that we are enough and then to proclaim this in word and action so that others may hear these words as well. Amen.

Day 27

Nehemiah 2:17-20 - ¹⁷ Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.” ¹⁸ I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, “Let us start building!” So they committed themselves to the common good. ¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they mocked and ridiculed us, saying, “What is this that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?” ²⁰ Then I replied to them, “The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building; but you have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem.” (NRSV)

“When I was growing up, this church was filled every Sunday for both services and we had so many kids in Sunday School, we had to build an addition! This church isn’t what it used to be.” Have you heard that sentiment before? Perhaps you fondly remember a ‘Golden Age’ of the church when everyone made more time for the church. Maybe you lament the loss of how things “used to be.”

When the people of Israel returned to Jerusalem from exile they were excited to pick up where they left off. Instead, they found the city in shambles and the Temple turned to rubble. They worried whether God was even with them anymore. Nehemiah rallied his people, reminded them of God’s promises, and convinced them to begin to rebuild. There were certainly naysayers and those who mocked the builders, but the people trusted that God was with them. Things weren’t going to be the same as what they were - God was doing something new!

Prayer: God of new life, when we are worried about what will be, help us to stay centered in you. Help us to start building. Remind us that it is your work that will bring about new life. Amen.

Day 28

John 16:33 - ³³ I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" (NRSV)

Jesus doesn't deny the difficulty of life. The world is hard place, and being Jesus' follower is not an easy thing. Instead of shying away from hardship, Jesus leans into it - he names it and confronts it. Life is hard, persecution exists.

Jesus doesn't stop with just telling it how it is - he does something about our current reality.

Jesus did what great military leaders throughout history were not able to do - Constantine, Napoleon, Hitler - he conquered the world. Not with might and power, but with vulnerability and love.

Lasting peace comes from these things. Asking for help, caring for others, listening to God and our neighbor - these are the places we find victory, courage, and peace. Things in this world aren't perfect, but in the imperfect we find perfect peace in Jesus.

Prayer: Jesus our peace-bringer, give us courage, peace, and victory. In this may we be examples of your love. Amen.

Day 29

Ephesians 2:1-10 - As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh^[a] and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (NRSV)

Saved by grace through faith, not works. It’s the quintessential Lutheran mantra, and it’s a good one. We are all of us, after all, fully dependent on the grace of God that comes to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Oftentimes thought this verse gets misinterpreted to mean that works aren’t important. Nothing could be further from the truth! The theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, reminds us that “silence in the face of evil, is itself evil. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”

There’s an old saying that says, “my talk talks and my walk talks but my walk talks louder than my talk talks.” What we say matters. What we do matters even more. Faith is about giving more than lip service to Jesus. “We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to *do good works...*” Faith is a verb - live it!

Prayer: God, you have saved us, and we give you thanks! Please continue to work in our hearts and our lives as we work to bring about your kingdom. Help us to always lean on you in the hard times, and to praise you in the good times. Amen.

Day 30

1 Peter 5:8-10 - ⁸Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. ⁹Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings. ¹⁰And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. (NIV)

This passage serves as a warning and a promise to all believers in Christ. The warning is that the devil is always on alert for a chance to take us down, especially when we are most weak and vulnerable, as substances cloud our mind and judgment. We can find comfort and strength in knowing we are not the only ones going through trials and troubles, because all are tested. But the Lord is far more powerful than the devil and our Lord provides us with a promise that even as we go through life and things may be tough we are loved and strengthened by the Lord's promise of everlasting life.

Prayer: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Day 31

Matthew 11:28-30 - “Come to me all that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (NRSV)

When I was in college, one of my best friends stole my brand new phone and put this verse on my home screen. I was not too phone savvy at that point and so it remained there for a couple years. Every time I picked up my phone to make a call, this verse popped up on my screen. As a college student, these words meant a lot to me. I was often stressed out and frequently weary. When I would see this verse on my phone, it always put me a little more at ease, knowing that God had whatever it was that I was dealing with taken care of. As I have grown into being a pastor, the significance of this verse has not really changed for me. I am still stressed. I am still weary many days. But this verse reminds me to lay it at the feet of Jesus in prayer, and when I pick myself up to move on with my day, I find the yoke is considerably lighter. Thank you, Jesus.

Prayer: Savior, when the burdens are heavy and our load is too much for us, remind us of your gentle heart that desires to carry it with us and for us. Walk this road alongside us. Amen.

Day 32

Habakkuk 3:17-19b - ¹⁷ Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, ¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. ¹⁹ The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights. (NIV)

I think about this passage often. A painting of it hangs on the wall in my office at church, a gift from my wife. I've fallen back on these verses for years. I like to sum up verse 17 with these words: "There is no hope." That is basically the sentiment – no figs, no olives, no flock, no herd. There is no future.

I often read this twice – once as it is, then again with my summary of verse 17. When there is no hope...and even though there is no hope...I will still rejoice in the Lord. I will praise God who gives salvation. For me, these verses are the ultimate re-framers. Yes, life might suck, it might be hard, it might be hopeless. But God exists, salvation exists, God is strength, and God leads me to see the beauty of all that God does.

Prayer: God of our good days and God of our barren days, remind us of your salvation from all that would seek to destroy us and our hope. Restore our commitment to you. Give us hope. Amen.

Day 33

Galatians 2:20 - ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (NIV)

As Christians, this is what we hope for – on our best days we hope that we are able to show Christ to the world through our example and experience. When I was growing up, I was a part of a teenage Christian retreat. This was the theme verse the weekend that my best friend was co-director. As we were discussing the verse and how we could illustrate it during the weekend, we came up with saying that we were “Christ with a Katie twist” or “Christ with a Barbie twist” and commended that thought to the weekenders. The fact of the matter is that we are, each of us, representatives of Christ in the world. When people see us, they see Christ. So, everything we do reflects Christ. Let us live lives worthy of being Christ, with a twist of personal flavor, so that he may be seen and known.

Prayer: Father, you call each of us “child” and place your face and your grace upon us. Work in us to live lives worthy of our calling to be your face in the world. Amen.

Day 34

Jeremiah 29:11 - For surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. (NRSV)

Do you ever wonder what the heck God is thinking? Do you ever question what God is up to and what the plans are that God might have for you? Which path to take or which job to accept? If you do, you are like the rest of us. Sometimes we just want answers without ambiguity. Guidance without effort. But I wonder what we would do if we actually knew without any doubt what was going to happen in our lives? Could we even handle it? And if we did, there would be no need for faith. We would spend less time discussing our days with God and the relationship would suffer. So, for today, I am reminded in this verse that I don't need to know everything, for I have a God who does. As we walk this road together, God and I, daily she will reveal my plans and they will be the right ones. I have hope in this assurance.

Prayer: All-knowing God, help me to put my trust in you, believing in the plans you have for me. Lead me on in hope. Amen.

Day 35

Deuteronomy 31:6 - ⁶Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them, because it is the LORD your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you.” (NRSV)

There are days when I feel weak, unable to do the work that is set before my hands. My voice feels too faint to speak the words to be spoken and my heart is filled with fear and dread. And then I read this verse – a verse spoken by a man who is nearing the end of his days and will not live long enough to see the work of his own hands come to completion. Moses speaks these words knowing full well he will not see the Promised Land he has been journeying toward for years. Moses will die in the wilderness. Yet, somehow he is able to speak these words with confidence to the people before him. Though he does not get to see the end of the plan, God promises there is a plan and that He will bring them through whatever comes before them.

In our darkest hours of hopelessness, fear, weakness, or dread, may we be emboldened by the promise that our God still does not fail us or forsake us.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to trust in you. Whatever befalls us, whatever comes on the road before us remind us of your promise to be with us and keep us strong in our faith in You. Amen.

Day 36

John 21:15-19 - ¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶ A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” ¹⁹ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.” (NRSV)

Food is a necessary part of life. We must take in more energy to continue living. The same is true for life in Christ.

Sometimes we are the ones doing the feeding - like Peter was asked to do by Jesus. Sometimes we are the ones being fed - the sheep.

There are lots of types of food for a Christian. We can receive nourishment from the sacraments, prayer, fellowship, different parts of worship, reading the Bible, being in creation, or other things. Just like with physical food for our physical bodies, we need to eat a variety of things to fully sustain our Christian life. Bread is good, but eating only bread is not only boring, but not fully nutritious.

Food changes us - even if only slightly. In the Christian life, our food changes us, too - whether we give or receive it.

Prayer: God of life, feed us what we need. Move us to feed others. As your nourishment works in us, form us to be like you. Amen.

Day 37

Romans 8:38-39 -³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (NRSV)

As I have been speaking with people about Scripture verses and Bible stories that give them hope in tough times, these verses are the ones that came up more than any others. Romans 8:38-39. This tells me that when we are losing hope, we feel abandoned. Loneliness and hopelessness go hand in hand. When we feel lonely, we feel unloved. When we feel hopeless, we feel unloved. And in those times, these are the verses that are able to draw people back in. For in these words, we too are convinced that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God, no matter how hard the world tries to do so. You are loved by the creator of the universe, and nothing and nobody can take that away from you.

Prayer: Lord, the world crowds in on us and robs us of love. Remind us again that there is nothing that can take you away from us and that we abide in your loving grace forever. Amen.

Day 38

Isaiah 46:4 – “Even to your old age and gray hairs, I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you” (NIV)

When I was in high school, this was a verse that sustained me through many days when I was feeling abandoned and depressed. I almost got part of this verse tattooed on my ankle, it was so sustaining for me. Though I was young, and had few gray hairs, this verse spoke to me of a God that would be with me through all the ages and stages this life brought me. When it was hard, I would be carried. When I was weak, I would be sustained. When I was facing trying circumstances, pain, or grief, I would be rescued. There was no season of my life in which God would abandon me, even if I felt the world has. This is the God who still sustains me each day, and will through my old age and gray hairs.

Prayer: God of all seasons of our life, we are thankful for the way in which you sustain, carry, and rescue us. Remind us of your presence and ever turn us toward you. Amen.

Day 39

Romans 12:12 - ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.(NRSV)

Rejoice in what has not been fully realized yet - your salvation in Jesus. Though we have been saved, the fully weight of that hasn't come to us, as we are still living in a world of sin. That release will come, and we can find hope in that.

Be patient - the afflictions of this world are difficult, but God will make a way through them. Sometimes, life just plain sucks. But God is with you.

Persevere in talking with God. In the joyful times and the afflicted times, talk with God. God is really great at listening - and when God does speak back, it's pretty stellar stuff. You might not hear the words. Sometimes God uses other people as a mouthpiece for us. So keep talking, and listening.

Prayer: God, you're awesome. Thanks. I love you. Let's talk again soon. Amen.

Day 40

1 Corinthians 12:12-27 -

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ²² On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴ whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (NRSV)

I need you. And you need me.

Sometimes I wonder which one of those is harder to say. But both are equally true in Christian communities. We need each other. We retain our individuality as part of a community of faith, but we also become part of something bigger - the Body of Christ.

We are called to care for each other. Just as the stomach digests food so the heart can have nutrients, and the heart pumps blood so the stomach can digest food, so we must work together.

And if one of us hurts, the rest are called to enter the hurt with them. This vulnerability and mutuality is what creates life in the body and the Church.

We are to do within congregations, and between congregations. We all have special abilities, useful for the whole Body of Christ.

Prayer: Jesus, we need you. Help us to need our neighbors. Move our neighbors to need us. Amen.

Day 41

Psalm 107:1 - ¹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. (NRSV)

The Lord is good for his steadfast love endures forever. There are two phrases in this one verse which instill a deep and abiding sense of hope and joy. First, the Lord is good. He is steadfast and true. These are two defining characteristics of the Lord's very being. This gives hope to us because so often these are not words that describe us. Hard as we try to be strong and courageous and on the right path, we repeatedly fall short. It wears on us. But the Lord is all of these things. Good to core, even when we are not. Steadfast, though we fail. We can rely on the Lord. And the second bolstering attribute is that the Lord is these things forever. Not just once in a while. Not when the Lord feels like it. The Lord is loving and steadfast and true and good forever. And we may find our hope and our strength on our most trying of days in this Lord for He will always be there.

Prayer: - Lord, we lift our voices in praise and thanksgiving for who you are – steadfast, loving, and good. Sustain us in our walks and help us to rely on you in all seasons of life. Amen.

Day 42

Colossians 3:12 - ¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

People get to see our clothes. And Paul reminds us that just as people can see our clothes, we are to wear the fruits of the Spirit.

Christians live public lives. Maybe you don't wear a cross around your neck or a t-shirt that says "I love Jesus" - but the characteristics of the Christian life are supposed to be as evident as our clothes are as we walk around.

When we do this, we have to trust in Jesus to give us the strength and courage to do it. And also when we do this, we give strength and courage to other believers. Others will look and see the compassion and kindness and humility and gentleness and patience we wear, and be more willing to wear them, too.

When we live like this, we give hope to our sisters and brothers in Christ, and become hope for the world.

Prayer: God inside us, God outside us, show us how to live for you. Amen.

Day 43

John 14:27 - ²⁷Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. (NRSV)

In the midst of Jesus' last meal with his disciples he spends a lot of time talking (seriously, it's a five-chapter meal in John's Gospel). These final conversations are filled with reassurances about the trials to come, and teachings about how they are to treat each other: "Love one another as I have loved you." Then Jesus promises that his followers will never be alone, but that the Holy Spirit was coming to be with them, to teach them and guide them in the days ahead.

Finally, Jesus blesses his disciples: peace be with you. And he reminds us that the peace he leaves is different from the peace of this world. Indeed, the life that the faithful are called to will leave that odds with the world more often than not. This counter-cultural faith that is Christianity should cause us to feel a little off from the rest of the world. Do not be afraid! Christ's peace has overcome the world.

Prayer: God of new beginnings, sometimes this call to live out your good news is hard. Sometimes we feel alone and worry that we aren't doing everything right. Give us your peace and fill us with your Spirit, so that we can boldly proclaim your good news to all. Amen.

Entries Submitted by:

Emery, Rev. Katie. Days: 1, 5, 10, 12, 14, 17, 20, 21, 26, 31, 33, 34, 35, 37, 48, 41

Howard, Rev. Tanner. Days: 2, 7, 8, 9, 15, 18, 24, 27, 29, 43

Johnson, Rev. Will. Days: 4, 6, 13, 16, 19, 23, 25, 28, 32, 36, 39, 40, 42

Miller, Kelley. Day: 30

Wilker, Rev. Kim. Days: 3, 11, 22