

CULTIVATING & LETTING GO

Lenten Daily Devotional



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH OF AKRON

Dear friends,

Lent is by its very definition a season tied to springtime. Observing this forty-day season beginning on Ash Wednesday, March 2, and ending in Holy Week, gives us a chance to prepare for Easter and the promise of new life.

At this time of year, we can truly perceive God making all things new as nature springs to life. I pray we would each also take time to consider the new life Jesus Christ offers us.

This year, we are publishing a First Church Daily Devotional with content from various sources including many from members of the First Church community, all reflecting on their experiences of our theme: Cultivating & Letting Go.

My sincere thanks to all who made submissions, sharing their experiences authentically. As we read and reflect each day, may the reflections stir us to consider what the Spirit is leading us to cultivate and let go of this Lenten season so that we are ready to welcome the new life of Easter morning.

Our 2022 Lenten Daily Devotional celebrates our church community. We have continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to meet virtually and find ways of ministering to one another. Now, as we continue to regather in person, this devotional speaks as a testament of our shared faith journey as we tell our stories, listen deeply, and honor one another's faith and witness.

I trust you will be blessed this Lent and that this devotional will enrich your sense of possibility and Easter hope.

Grace and peace,

Nanette

Reverend Nanette Pitt
Senior Minister

JOIN US FOR THESE UPCOMING EVENTS

ASH WEDNESDAY

Wednesday, March 2, 12-1pm, Ashes-to-Go
7:30pm, Service of Wholeness and Healing

THE CHOSEN - IN-PERSON FAITH ENRICHMENT & FELLOWSHIP

Beginning March 9 at 6:30pm, a simple dinner of soup and bread in Fellowship Hall while watching and discussing *The Chosen*. Childcare available by making arrangements in advance with Bobby.

Wednesday mornings, also beginning on March 9 at 10:45am, offer another in-person opportunity to watch and discuss the series during our regular morning study time.

THE CHOSEN - VIRTUAL FAITH ENRICHMENT & FELLOWSHIP

For First Church community members who live far afield and those who are unable to join in person, join us virtually for discussion of *The Chosen* on Zoom on Sunday evenings from 7-8pm beginning on March 13. Please register at https://bit.ly/Discuss_The_Chosen and watch the episodes in advance at https://bit.ly/Watch_The_Chosen.

HOLY WEEK

Maundy Thursday Intergenerational Service, April 14, 6pm
Good Friday, April 15, 7:30pm

EASTER SUNDAY

Sunday, April 17, 9am and 11am

Each service will be followed by an Easter Egg Hunt for children on the front lawn, weather permitting.

WEEK OF ASH WEDNESDAY

ASH WEDNESDAY

REFLECTION & IMAGE BY HANNAH GARRITY,
SANCTIFIED ART

READ: ISAIAH 58:1-12

In Isaiah 58, God explicitly differentiates between personal fast and social fast. Both are required; however, we cannot simply fast alone and expect the appreciation of God. Here, God is demanding the fast of Her choice. A fast from injustice, a fast from oppression, a fast from hunger, a fast from homelessness — the list goes on. She reminds us that we are interconnected.

“The themes that underlie the human soul are deeper than the patterns that distinguish us... the lines that distinguish us can also be the interlacing that unites us.” John Philip Newell, *Praying with the Earth*.

Much like strands weave to create fabric, society is interdependent. My drawing for this text explores this idea

through the lens of weaving. Encyclopedia Britannica explains that flax is a plant whose stalk yields the fibers used to weave linen. In this image, a collection of flax flowers bloom on their stalks. Beside the flowers, water rolls down, inviting us to imagine the cleansing of our tendency to self focus. If we can wash ourselves clean of selfishness, so can we give selflessly.

Cultivate selflessness.



THURSDAY

PRAYER BY SARAH ARE, SANCTIFIED ART

Thumb to forehead, that's how this begins —
A thin dust reminder that life, in time, ends.

So how do I want to spend my days?
How do I live a life that weighs
Heavy with love and heavy with truth,
Heavy with memories of laughter and you?

And is that what matters, at the end of the day?
Or is it justice and peace and the sound of your
name?

Thumb to forehead. Remind me again.
That this precious life begins and ends.
And like the trees in autumn, may I learn to let go,
Making room in my heart for a new kind of growth.

A change in seasons, a change in me.
Thumb to forehead. Let it be.

Download this and every coloring poster in this devotional, by visiting <https://akronfcc.org/season-of-lent>

WEEK OF ASH WEDNESDAY

FRIDAY

REFLECTION BY BOBBY BURTT



Lent is a way of helping us let go of bad habits while starting to cultivate new habits. One thing worth cultivating is that no matter where we go or what we do God and Jesus go with us. For the rest of Lent take Flat Jesus with you wherever you go to remind you that you are always surrounded by God's loving presence.

1. Download Flat Jesus and every coloring poster in this devotional, by visiting <https://akronfcc.org/season-of-lent>
2. Color and decorate your Flat Jesus. Then cut him out.
3. Take Flat Jesus with you, and take some photographs to share.
4. Talk with your family about what you and Flat Jesus experienced.
5. Post your photos with a brief description of your adventure on Facebook @FirstChurchAkron, #flatJesus.
6. Let's show that Jesus is always with us!

LET'S PRAY

Loving God, thank you for this season of Lent — help me to discover more about your love, your power, and your presence in my life through these times together. Amen.



SATURDAY

REFLECTION BY SUE YODER

As we've all experienced, it's often painful to let go. Not just of those people we've loved, but sometimes of those objects associated with them. When I was informed that my husband had 2-18 months to live due to a large, deep brain tumor, I was forced to begin the grief journey with shock and disbelief. It was the worst day of my life. I wasn't ready to let go; I held on and kept thinking he would get through it unscathed. In his 5-month illness, I never fully accepted that he was actually dying; I relented somewhat over time and thought he had 2-3 years instead of one month. When he died I finally had no choice but to deal with it, which I did with the help of friends, neighbors, family, and First Church. Most of my family members live out-of-state, including siblings, so First Church became a stalwart comfort as I journeyed through the potholes of losing Jess. Two years after that, my mother died and I was compelled again to deal with a significant loss. First Church was a tremendous refuge once more to me as I dealt with her loss and attempted to support my father. He died two years later which helped to continue my training in managing a significant loss. I am so grateful that I had a relationship with First Church through those losses; I knew I had support and I felt strengthened because of my church family — ministers and congregation.

I believe we have the power to responsibly handle life's difficulties and losses, but we need to remember to have faith that we can do it. All of the people who helped me (some of whom might be reading this) displayed a "ministry of presence," which to me is extremely important. I will be forever grateful to them and will never forget their generosity and compassion. I hope I will remember to exhibit a ministry of presence for others just as those people did for me. "Do unto others..."

FIRST WEEK OF LENT

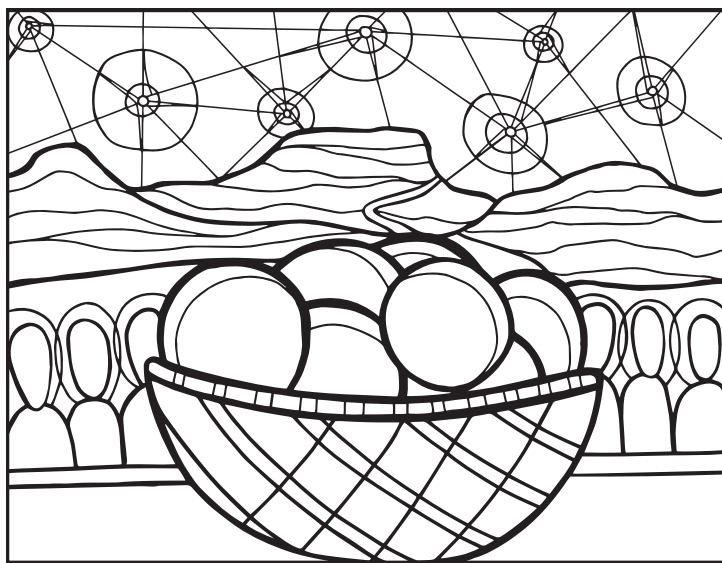
MONDAY

REFLECTION AND IMAGE BY LAUREN WRIGHT PITTMAN

READ: DEUTERONOMY 26:1-11

What a beautiful image. A full table, overflowing with the gifts of God re-given and re-distributed among the Levites and the aliens who reside among them. The native and the alien share a meal together in remembrance that their ancestors were once strangers in a land flowing with milk and honey. My ancestors, your ancestors, our ancestors, were once strangers. This text is clear; the alien resides among us and we are to celebrate all that God has given us by sharing in the bounty that God has given to our houses.

This passage reminds me of my own privilege as a white, middle-class, cisgender woman and challenges me to think of new ways I can share in my bounty. I often find myself living in a scarcity mindset, like I need to continue to Scrooge McDuck my way through this life clinging tightly to each penny that enters my bank account. I also grasp tightly to the ease with which I interact with the systems of this country; my privilege has become a comforting friend, a safety blanket. I need to live with open hands, emptying the first fruits of the ground, the fruits of my labor, the tainted fruits of my privilege and offer them back to God. In doing so, I honor my ancestors, and share in abundance with my community — the full extent of my community. We need to see, value, respect, listen to, and learn from the alien among us. We need to face their affliction, toil, and oppression, and let it break our hearts and do something about it. The aliens among us are cause for celebration.



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TUESDAY

REFLECTION BY BOBBY BURTT



1. Listen to *I Don't Want to Miss It* by Ellie Holcomb, allow yourself to be still (if you can), and just listen. What thoughts or feelings came to your mind? Did any words stand out to you? How does this song make you feel?
2. Listen again. Do you notice anything new? Are you having any new feelings or noticing anything you missed before? Allow yourself to dance or sing along.
3. If you are listening to this song with your family or someone else, share these feelings and observations and notice how this song might affect each of you differently.

LET'S PRAY

Ever-present God, you are a million things: a burning, the whisper of hummingbird wings, every breath we breath, and so much more. Help us to not miss a blessing you give. Amen.

WEDNESDAY

REFLECTION BY CHARLES SWINDOLL
SUBMITTED BY JUDY YOUNG

The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life.

Attitude, to me, is more important than facts.

It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people think or say or do.

It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill.

It will make or break a company... a church... a home.

The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day.

We cannot change our past... we cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable.

The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude...

I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it.

And so it is with you... we are in charge of our attitudes.

FIRST WEEK OF LENT

THURSDAY

REFLECTION BY SARAH ARE, SANCTIFIED ART

A letter to someone I love

Dear loved one —

I hope you let go.

I hope you let go of holding yourself to impossible standards.

Lower the bar. Give yourself grace.

God delights in who you are.

And while you're at it, I hope you let go of ignoring your beauty.

The mirror is tired of your harsh words, for you are made of star stuff and music.

You are the only you there is, and you. are. simply. stunning.

And I hope you'll consider letting go of certainty.

For the sun will always rise and set, and you will always be loved.

What more do we really need to know than that?

So let go of your fear.

Let go of perfection.

Let go of busyness as a sign of your self worth,

And the notion that creativity is a luxury.

Be wild and free.

Plant roots like a redwood,

And a spine like a sunflower;

For the days are short, and you are beautiful.

I love nothing more than to see you happy.

So don't be afraid to let go.

The only thing you cannot lose is God's evergreen love.

FRIDAY

REFLECTION BY COURTNEY ZIMMERMAN

My grandmother was famous for her heirloom tomatoes. A sandwich made with her tomatoes and mayo on white bread was truly a transcendent experience, but more often I would just eat them straight up sliced and salted. When she died in 2010, I was determined to keep those tomatoes (and her) in my life so I got some of her saved seeds and embarked upon my tomato-growing journey.

The cultivation of plants from seed is full of life metaphors — learning what the seeds need to flourish, experimenting with different methods, equipment and locations, making mistakes and changing the plan, giving the seeds the right balance of light and water, and sometimes even starting over. What I didn't realize when I started growing tomato seedlings, and what took me awhile to accept, was the letting go — the thinning of the seedlings that aren't flourishing, the acceptance that some plants/varieties just aren't right for my garden, the fruits lost to pests or disease.

Every seed I plant in the dirt will always be full of hope and every seedling that sprouts is precious to me but every year I get better at choosing what to keep and what to let go of.

SATURDAY

REFLECTION BY BOBBY BURTT



READ: LUKE 5:4-5

I don't know about you, but I struggle being told what to do. This is especially true if I know best! I don't know what went through Peter's mind here, if he struggled to answer, paused, and then said it politely but through gritted teeth, or had been so blown away by what Jesus had been saying he would have done anything this man asked. Yet, Peter was a fisherman. It was his thing. Do you have something like that, your thing? Imagine someone came along who didn't know about music, math, art, football, collectibles, looking after pets, bicycles, or running and they told you a "better way" of doing your thing? What would you do?

Sometimes it's important that we listen, humble ourselves and admit we may not know everything. We need to be like Peter and say "because you have said so I will."

LET'S PRAY

God, your knowledge surpasses all human understandings. Help us to remember humility, even though we may think we are right. Amen.

SECOND WEEK OF LENT

MONDAY

REFLECTION AND IMAGE BY LISLE GRYNN GARRITY

READ: PSALM 27

My natural instinct when reading the Psalms is to personalize them, to welcome the ancient poet's words as my own. When I first read through Psalm 27, I found myself transposing the psalmist's literal threats — armies surrounding, enemies encroaching, safety retreating — into metaphorical ones that might resonate with my own experience. Suffocating stress, seasons of instability and uncertainty, relational conflict, disintegrating health — all of these threaten my own personal sense of security and well-being. However, I lead a life cushioned by support and physical safety. I have never had to pray to God to spare my life in the midst of war.



Sometimes, to remember that scripture is not for me but for all, I imagine the words spoken by someone with a vastly different life experience than my own. In my second reading of Psalm 27, I placed the words in the lips of a Guatemalan girl fleeing violence in her home to seek asylum in the States. I encourage you to read the psalm once again, imagining how the words come to life from this vantage point.

The most stunning moment in this prayer exists in verse 4. The poet turns from survival mode to seek God's beauty and presence. Perhaps living at the edge of life teaches you that beauty, like light, is necessary for survival.

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TUESDAY

REFLECTION BY LAURA MONROE

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Ecc 3:1).

Change. It is the one constant in our lives, and yet change is something that we hope will not happen. We are all familiar with the phrase, "But we have always done it this way!" Change can be something joyous, like marriage or the birth of a baby, or it can be the painful loss of a family member, friend, job, or our health.

Change makes us uncomfortable because even good change includes loss. Maybe that new job will mean a move or leaving behind colleagues we care about. And painful changes ... they may result in growth, but that growth comes at a cost that may seem difficult to bear. The past few years have been all about change, much of which has been painful, but has also forced us to grow and see things in new and different ways.

I have been around long enough to see much change, some good, some pretty awful. In all things, I hold this close to my heart:

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 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" (Rom 8:38-39).

SECOND WEEK OF LENT

WEDNESDAY

REFLECTION BY CHRISTINE ALLISON

When the pandemic hit my world, not only did it seem like my world stopped, but it seemed like my life was falling apart.

- My music making came to a screeching halt.
- My friendships came to a standstill.
- My body seemed to be falling apart (not now!)
- My church was closed for in-person gatherings.
- I felt far away from God.

I'm sure much of what I listed above was felt by many, but it was a loss which affected me, affected my mind. There WAS some good that came out of this, as I look back over the last 2 years to the present:

- I'm content to stay at home more.
- I took time to evaluate my music "performance."
- I found time to write notes and make cookies for others.
- I became creative in ways to get together with others. (meeting in the driveway with lawn chairs, safely distanced).
- I started a daily devotional within my chorus.
- I cooked at home more.
- I watched and fed the birds more.
- I took on feeding an outdoor cat (which became cats).

My point is, there ends up being more good than bad in the lists above. You have to open your eyes and mind to realize it all. Find your blessings.

LET'S PRAY

God of all times and all places, you have told us that to everything there is a season, and a season for all things under heaven. Help us to find the blessing in each season and see you in all of the facets of our lives — the holy in each beautiful moment and place. Amen.

THURSDAY

REFLECTION BY TANA ALEXANDER

Five years ago, I lost my only son.

Rob had Autism and Epilepsy. While I was on holiday with girl friends in Ireland, I got the call from my ex, who was staying with him, that Rob had died from SUDEP (Sudden Unexpected Death in Epilepsy).

The trip home was the most horrific experience of my life. Not only was the flight delayed a day, but because it was Memorial Day weekend, I was unable to reach his neurologist or the coroner to have his brain tissue donated to Harvard Medical School for research.

I miss my darling son every day, but I put "one foot in front of the other" knowing that he is FREE — no more seizures, no more being bullied, and no more anxiety trying to fit into the world. I pray that he is a guardian angel to some child just like him.

My earnest prayer each day is that he knows how much I love him and that I will be with him again — someday.

LET'S PRAY

God of loving comfort, you came to earth in your Son Jesus, who walked and walked with us through the good, the bad, and all the inbetweens. In our darkest moments help us trust that as we let go, you will wrap us a little tighter in your embrace, reminding us that you walk beside us everyday. Amen

SECOND WEEK OF LENT

FRIDAY

REFLECTION BY NANETTE PITT

I love Elizabeth Bishop's poem *One Art* (you can read the poem on The Poetry Foundation website at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47536/one-art>).

I often feel that there is so much lost in my life that losing should have become easy, an art even. Yet, just as the flippant tone of the poem clearly belies the pain of loss, I have found that life's losses have made me leery of letting go at all.

This Lent I hope to practice letting go as a spiritual discipline. It is my prayer that I can tie the concept of letting go more firmly to that of trusting God, rather than assuming that letting go implies more loss.

As a teen, I spent a number of years attending an Alateen group to cope with my step-father's alcoholism (a part of the Al-Anon Family Groups, Alateen is a fellowship of young people, mostly teens). At those meetings I learned the phrase "let go and let God." It's been one of the many spiritual pillars I learned in that space, undergirding me ever since.

The pandemic brought a fresh wave of losses though, both tangible and intangible, and with them came a renewed sense of loss in general. To be honest, I wasn't as ready for them as I would've thought I should be and didn't cope as well!

Perhaps that's because while I learned to let go and let God all those years ago, the intervening years of my life's journey as spouse, immigrant, student, minister, foster parent, and so much more, taught me far more of self-reliance and self-determination than of letting go.

Perhaps it's because over the years the losses can seem to stack up and enough is enough! So I'd insulated myself and shaped my life to avoid that sense of loss with the blessings of so much that the pandemic then threatened, even obliterated.

So here I am again, perhaps back at square one (and thankfully so), asking the Spirit to show me how letting go can be more about "letting God" than about losing.

That instead of dreading what might be lost, I can let go as an act of trusting God and stepping out, following Jesus' example.

Perhaps most of all, I believe and hope I am learning in new ways that the precious things in my life weren't mine simply because I had grasped them. Rather, when I let go, that which is life-giving, that which is a blessing remains – I don't lose what is truly precious. In fact, in letting go I become more aware of God's overwhelming gifts abundantly present in my life and in the world around me. Letting go and realizing all of the blessings helps me to feel even more blessed!

So I am eager for this Lenten season and I look forward to letting go and, oddly (wonderfully!), gaining much more!

SATURDAY

PRAYER BY SARAH ARE, SANCTIFIED ART

I wish I could cultivate my days
Like my mother's favorite recipe,
Blending together the sweetest things —
Hope and love, you and me,
Justice and peace,
Music and dreams —
Like spices pulled from the shelf on the wall.

I'd add one cup of family,
And one cup of grace.
A dash of starry nights,
A pinch of snow.
One tablespoon of hope, and like oats, they would grow.
A tablespoon of music and the hymns that I know.
A cup for friends that feel more like family,
A teaspoon of vanilla, for life's sheer beauty.
Three teaspoons of summer, and one tablespoon of dreams.

Plus half a cup for the church that raised me,
And half a cup for the moon that serenades me.
The instructions would read:

Melt your love and whisk with justice until it
expands beyond the pan.
Gently stir in all that you hope for. Cover, and let rise.
Drizzle with a sweet glaze of mercy.

Please be sure to leave heartache and grief tucked
on the shelf

Beside comparison, doubt, fear, and depression.

Busyness will make this dish sour,

As will grudges and gossip, which is not to mention
trauma and loss, or my fragile bones.

So use only the best ingredients

When you cultivate your life.

For like your mother's favorite recipe,

These days are sacred.

THIRD WEEK OF LENT

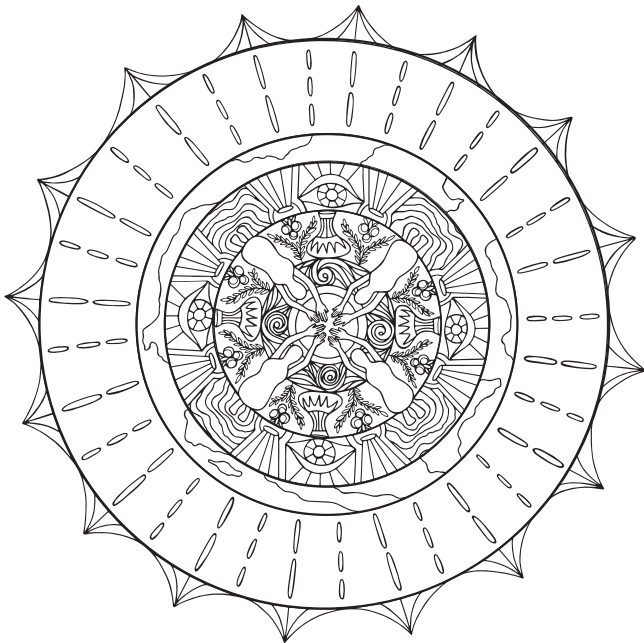
MONDAY

REFLECTION AND IMAGE BY LAUREN WRIGHT PITTMAN

READ: ISAIAH 55:1-9

Who among us does not thirst? Who among us does not feel hunger? We all thirst, and we all hunger, but some of us are so caught up in our busyness that we do not realize it. We may look long down our noses at those who are begging for a morsel to eat — a necessity of life — while we question the sincerity of their pleas and ignore the glaring spiritual thirst and hunger in our own lives. The words of Isaiah image a different world where all who are thirsty have water, and all who are hungry have all they need. This is a great leveling of the status. This is the haves and have nots coming eye to eye and recognizing what makes us the same. We need water, we need food, and we need the loving embrace of God.

These words of Isaiah come to a people exiled from their home land. In a lot of ways they thirst and hunger because they feel they have been altogether abandoned by God. They have been ripped from their places of worship, God's dwelling place, and exist in a place where they do not belong. The prophet calls on the exiled to seek God, because God is near. That in and of itself must have been a miraculous shift in perspective, because they must have felt God was far away back in their homeland. If these words can penetrate an exiled nation, allow these words to break through your distracted, overwhelmed day-to-day grind. Incline your ear, return to God, and join in the work of bringing hope to the hopeless — the work of preparing a great feast for all.



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TUESDAY

REFLECTION BY ANN SNYDER

"Sorry, but we can't take you." These words might have come from an innkeeper one night long ago in Bethlehem, but the were actually said by a ticket agent for Ghana Airways at Heathrow Airport in London.

On August 3, 1978, we checked out of our hotel and took a taxi to the airport with our very heavy seven pieces of luggage. Up until this point, our final destination had seemed truly unbelievable, but here we were, ready to board a plane whose next stop would be Ghana, ready to begin our three year residence.

During our months of preparation for this trip, I often wondered if I really wanted to do this. Slowly as other options were eliminated, I knew God wanted us in Ghana. At this point, I have should have known that God would work out the details, but I worried nonetheless. As the final week arrived before our flight and visas had not yet been granted, my trust was shaken a little. Then to arrive in London and find that we had no reservations (or so the agent said) on the flight that would take us to Ghana was almost too much to handle. I knew we should trust God, but there seemed to be no way out.

As it turned out, we were able to book a flight on another airline, KLM, for the next day. In the end, it was a much more luxurious flight than what we would have had on Ghana Airways. As they say in Ghana, "You see?" and God was saying, "You see, you can trust me."

LET'S PRAY

Thank you Lord that when we come to a dead end, you help us to find the detour signs. Amen.

NOTE

Ann Snyder and her husband Tim were commissioned to serve the United Church of Christ at the Evangelical Presbyterian Church Seminary in Peki, Ghana. The UCC had a partnership with the EP Church, and sent numerous missionaries there over the years. Our term was three years, at which point we could come home or sign up for another term.

THIRD WEEK OF LENT

WEDNESDAY

PRAYER BY SARAH ARE, SANCTIFIED ART

If the trees can do it, then so can I,
At least that's what I tell myself.
For if year after year the trees can let go
Of their brightest leaves and that warm autumn glow,
Then maybe in time, like trees with their leaves,
I can release
That which keeps me from you.
Maybe in time, I can let go
Of my need for certainty
And my need to look good,
My need for busyness,
And my need to numb pain;
The trivial ways I measure my self-worth,
Or the hurtful ways I measure yours.
For if year after year the trees let go,
Then maybe, in time, I can too.
Maybe,
In time,
My heart will know spring.

THURSDAY

REFLECTION BY TEILHARD DE CHARDIN
SUBMITTED BY THERESA (BERG) ARIST

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the
end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown,
something new.

And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through some stages of instability—
and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you;
your ideas mature gradually — let them grow,
let them shape themselves, without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on,
as though you could be today what time
(that is to say, grace and circumstances acting on your own
good will)
will make of you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give Our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you,
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
in suspense and incomplete.

THIRD WEEK OF LENT

FRIDAY

REFLECTION BY JOANNE DAWSON

Have you ever found yourself waiting for the Lord, wanting an answer, needing an answer, and, of course, ASAP, if you please!? WOW!!! I know I have.

I was especially glad that God didn't strike me dead with such an attitude, aren't you?

I wondered if He knew just how important my problem was? Filled with fear and worry, my problem would not leave me alone. I thought about it day and night. Why doesn't God answer me?

I wondered if it was my hearing? That must be the problem. I just couldn't hear God's answer. Try as I might, it did not improve.

After many months of waiting, I began to think that my problem wasn't the REAL problem at all. I needed to learn something here that only silence could provide... dependence on God, not on me?

Wow! What a thought! As the pop song goes, "Let it go! Let it go!"

When that is the only choice, you must choose it! Afterall, doesn't He have my best interest at heart and my future in His hands? He loves me no matter what.

SATURDAY

REFLECTION BY BOBBY BURTT



1. Listen to *Oceans* by Rend Collective, allow yourself to be still, and just listen. What thoughts or feelings came to your mind? Did any words stand out to you? How does this song make you feel?

2. Listen again. Do you notice anything new? Are you having any new feelings or noticing anything you missed before?

3. If you are listening to this song with your family or someone else, share these feelings and observations and notice how this song might affect each of you differently.

LET'S PRAY

Almighty God, in this time of lent we may fall short or miss the mark. Help us to remember that we are forgiven, and help us to forgive ourselves. Amen.

FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

MONDAY

REFLECTION AND IMAGE BY HANNAH GARRITY

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21

A couple of years ago, we did a water ritual at a summer Sunday service. I was needed to hold one of the bowls and perform the ritual. The liturgist instructed us to dip our thumbs into the water, slide the molecules into a cross on each person's forehead, and then look into their eyes and say, "You are a new creation; the old life is gone, a new life has begun." This sounded doable. I memorized the words. I knew the actions. I was ready.

When the time came, people began to line up at my station. "You are a new creation." After around thirty people, a child appeared. I knelt to meet her as I have for years in the elementary classroom. "The old life is gone, a new life has begun." My voice faltered. An adult was next, "You are



a new creation." A new face emerged. "A new life has begun." And another. "You are a new creation." Now the faces, the group, the line, the humans, and the souls before me were suddenly whole. Tears began to stream down my face. I was able to humanize everyone. Though I didn't know them personally, the space between us was bridged and their eye contact, this ritual, these words, made each of them a whole life before my eyes. The words began to flow through me as my tears continued. In that moment I began cultivating my ability to connect with the person right in front of me. In this image I have represented that feeling of the words flowing through me as new life emerges. Lines in the background imagine the pouring of the water, the permeating fall of the spirit. My smile is one of truth, honesty, and connection. It is the smile I find within me when I look people in the eye and greet them wholeheartedly. Growing around and above me are irises and fig leaves, two majestic species, here representing the grandeur of God in the fragility of a moment. Cultivate connection.

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TUESDAY

REFLECTION BY ANN SNYDER

I can remember as a child sitting at the supper table with a plate of food in front of me that I did not really want to eat. My parents would prod me on by saying, "Think of all the starving children in other parts of the world. They would love to have that food." And I, not particularly appreciating my parents' world concern, would reply, "Well, why don't you send it to them? I don't want it." I spoke more out of sassiness than generosity, as you can imagine. But my parents were trying to teach me a lesson about love, a lesson that was a little beyond me at that time.

Food shortages arise from many causes; some of these being drought, poor soil, and overpopulation. Although we as Americans are not directly responsible for all food shortages, our affluence and consumption play a major role in world food distribution. Once again it is our purchasing power and our greed that allow us to have so much while others have so little. As the *More-with-Less Cookbook*, states, we in North America use twice as much grain per person than the adequately nourished peoples of Europe (that usage has probably increased since this was written 40+ years ago).

Although the distribution of our excesses wouldn't necessarily alleviate malnutrition, it would certainly go a long way toward showing that we want to spread God's love throughout the world.

LET'S PRAY

Lord, we know that a loving attitude allows no room for greediness or selfishness. Help us to do away with any practices that are destructive of a love relationship with your children in other parts of the world. Amen.

FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

WEDNESDAY

REFLECTION BY SARA SCHWENDEMAN

Before First Church, I had left a toxic, spiritually abusive situation from a past church. While the decision to leave brought immense freedom, I couldn't grasp who God was anymore. That's the most dangerous consequence of spiritual trauma — it distorts God's image, and it left me feeling shattered. Knowing I needed something to recultivate who God was, my wife suggested an exercise she read about: read through the Psalms and meditate on words/images of God that speak to you. So I began — the first word was Refuge, then Sustainer, then Mindful and so on.

In the garden of our backyard and the breeze of our maple tree, as I read, meditated, and journaled out my pain, God cultivated inside me in return — slowly replacing those seeds of chronic pain, gossip, betrayal, and division sown by human hands with God's love, truth and hope.

Three years later, I return to that network of words whenever past trauma rears its ugliness. Faith can be such a beautiful heartache sometimes, but God cultivates Love. From the song *Before and After*: "I thought it was over; I thought it was done. But You always have the last word, and the last word is Love."

THURSDAY

REFLECTION BY BOBBY BURTT



READ: JOHN 10:28-30

Sometimes it can feel like God isn't listening to our prayers because we are used to getting everything we asked for in our prayers. Thinking that God doesn't listen or hear us can make us feel scared and alone or like God isn't protecting us. God is always with us and protecting us.

CRAFT: In God's Hands

1. Trace your hand on a piece of paper. You can color, decorate or cut this out to represent God's Hand.
2. On another sheet of paper draw some sheep, some people, or even the world. Cut them out.
3. Glue your drawing into the hand so that they can never be snatched from God's Hand.

LET'S PRAY

Protector God, help us to remember that we are always in your hand, and in your care. Amen.

FRIDAY

REFLECTION BY THERESA (BERG) ARIST

Tears still surface when I mention my parents' deaths. I felt lost, questioned aspects of my life, and experienced waves of pain for some time. My spiritual quest intensified leaning on the online services and programs provided by First Church as well as other online spiritual communities for which I'm grateful. Recently, I started meeting with an IHM Sister for spiritual direction which has been a blessing. I'm learning (attempting) to let go of what was, my identifications, my attachments, my expectations, and not worry about the future. Essentially dying before I die, allowing life to unfold, and trusting in God's presence and action within.

This Lent, I wish to cultivate prayer and courage. Prayer as a way of being and moving in the world. To continue taking time in the morning for reading and reflection and Centering Prayer and deepening those practices. Returning to "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalms 46:10) over and over to center myself so I may respond rather than react. And finally, courage to be honest with myself. Courage to be less than perfect and vulnerable. Courage to let go and see with the heart.

SATURDAY

REFLECTION BY BOBBY BURTT



READ: JOHN 6:66-68

Having friends and being popular can often feel like the most important thing in life, but life is not a popularity contest. There are some tough calls to make as we grow and discover more about ourselves and who Jesus is calling us to be. Sometimes we will wrestle with ourselves, other times we can struggle with our friends, but, when we hold to what we know to be true and just- our true friends will still be there for us.

Following Jesus, and God isn't always easy. Jesus' message of radical love and forgiveness for everyone can be hard to live up to, and sometimes it can feel easier to just walk away, but sometimes the reasons we think we should walk away are things we need to let go of... like our own popularity.

LET'S PRAY

God of Courage, help us to see beyond ourselves and our own wants and desires, so that we may more fully live a life of love and faithfulness through Christ. Amen.

FIFTH WEEK OF LENT

MONDAY

REFLECTION BY LISLE GWYNN GARRITY

READ: ISAIAH 43:16-21

This Lent, I have spent a lot of time thinking about the changes we can't always see. Seasons shift with the waning and waxing of light. Cells expand and divide. Hearts grow more full of compassion or more brittle with resentment. Wounds heal from the inside out. Often it's not until a crisis or an abrupt disruption that we notice what has already changed.

In this text, the prophet appeals to a people once enslaved but set free. Time has fogged their memories; new challenges have short-sighted their hope. The prophet reminds them that God is always in the process of making all things new.

In this image, a widening river cracks open the dry desert. In the foreground, a grassy ledge springs forth with wild grasses and blooms. As a viewer, where do you stand in this landscape? Parched and hopeless in the desert valley? Kneeling for healing at the water's edge? Or swaying with the wildflowers, looking out at it all? No matter where you place yourself, you are not bound to stay there. You are in the process of becoming.

Can you perceive it?



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TUESDAY

REFLECTION BY SARAH ARE, SANCTIFIED ART

I have come to believe

That it's harder to cry under an open sky.

So when life falls apart, throw open the windows.

Invite the sun into your shadows.

Lie in the grass and let the sun mistake you for
flowers.

Maybe this is step one in cultivating —

For flowers do not grow by mistake.

They need the sun, just like we need love,

And time,

And the grace to try again.

So put your body where the light is.

You'll find God there.

She is warmth.

You will know it.

And you will feel strong.

So put your body where the light is.

Maybe this is step one.

FIFTH WEEK OF LENT

WEDNESDAY

REFLECTION BY VERONICA SHOFFSTALL
SUBMITTED BY JUDY YOUNG

After a while you learn the subtle difference
Between holding a hand and chaining a soul,
And you learn that love doesn't mean leaning
And company doesn't mean security,
And you begin to learn that kisses aren't contracts
And presents aren't promises,
And you begin to accept your defeats
With your head up and your eyes open
With the grace of a woman, not the grief of a child,
And you learn to build all your roads on today,
Because tomorrow's ground is too uncertain for plans,
And futures have a way of falling down in mid-flight.
After a while you learn
That even sunshine burns if you get too much.
So you plant your own garden and decorate your own soul,
Instead of waiting for someone to bring you flowers.
And you learn that you really can endure...
That you really are strong,
And you really do have worth.
And you learn and learn...
With every goodbye you learn.

THURSDAY

REFLECTION BY CHRISTI HORNAK

God's Timing Is Perfect...

But I am impatient!

I lost so much due to COVID-19, and these losses hit me hard and fast. I had never experienced life changes like this, and I wanted none of it! I prayed so fervently, so specifically, for things to be fixed and, of course, nothing changed.

God's Timing is Perfect...

But I am learning to listen and to wait!

I had no choice: I had to let go of what hurt me. I learned the power of forgiveness (of myself and others!). I have developed a practice of gratitude: it is so amazing that, since 2020, some key things in my life have changed for the better.

My faith walk was challenged, and then renewed, as I asked for and was shown resources to replace what I had to let go. I sought quiet time to listen as well as to pray. I learned to ask Jesus if I might lay burdens at his feet so that I could again live from a place of centeredness and peace, which is working, on most days!

God's Timing is Perfect...

And God is good all the time! Amen.

FIFTH WEEK OF LENT

FRIDAY

REFLECTION BY SARAH ARE, SANCTIFIED ART

People throw around the phrase, “Let it go” like a
child throws out laughter —

Easy and light.

I wish that’s how I knew it.

I wish it felt that simple.

Instead I have to talk myself into a better frame of mind.

I have to drag one foot in front of the other until I’m closer
to love.

I have to sing my mother’s words in my head until I
can’t hear anything else.

And I pray for letting go that feels like taking off
shoes — a sort of coming home.

I pray for letting go that won’t always involve a
battle between heart and mind.

I pray for letting go that moves like muscle
memory, but it never does.

Letting go has never been as easy as holding tight.

Why is that?

So now and again I stand in the rain and let the
clouds teach me a thing or two about release.

And when that doesn’t work,

I think about the way my mother’s body broke so
that she could let me go —

Yet another body broken for me.

And when that doesn’t work,

I find myself on my knees — a sort of coming home,

And I pray,

Teach me a thing or two about grace.

Teach me a thing or two about letting go.

And I inhale.

And I exhale.

Air drawn in.

Air let go.

And I recognize God in my lungs, and I can’t help
but laugh,

Easy and light.

SATURDAY

REFLECTION BY JAN RICHARDSON
SUBMITTED BY NANETTE PITT

Easter draws near
as we watch the rain.
We know the drama
and the pageantry
that lie ahead,
the commotion that is owed
to such a miracle.

Meanwhile, we go on
quietly raising the dead,
tending them as more
than a memory,
learning to live in
the curious marriage
of absence and presence
that settles into the bones
and the aching
but durable heart.

We know resurrection as something
not merely to be anticipated
but also daily lived
as we reckon with
what abides,
what returns
of the beloved
who cannot be unknown —
who, having passed into us,
will not be so easily shed.

Still, I think of Mary Magdalene
and the secret she carried
when she left
that empty tomb:
how resurrection is
a strange dance
of reunion and release,
how our loving
will always ask of us
a letting go,

yet in the asking
a promise
that what we love
knows how to find us,
even by the path
that will bear us
far away
from here.

HOLY WEEK

MONDAY

REFLECTION AND IMAGE BY LAUREN RIGHT PITTMAN

READ: LUKE 22:39-46

Why are you sleeping? It's a simple question. In this case, it's a heartbreaking question. In anguish, Jesus prays for God to take this cup from him, though he still insists that God's will be done — an image of undeniable faithfulness.

I imagine Jesus daydreamed of ways he could get out of his imminent torture and death while blood and sweat poured from his body. I imagine his dreams of circumventing this path came crashing down when he found his disciples fast asleep. Why are you sleeping? In my reading of this text, I can feel the profound disappointment and exasperated anger of Jesus as he is almost comically abandoned by his community. In the midst of his most desperate cry for help his support system is taking a nap. This is just one of the millions of ways we as humanity have spectacularly failed in following Christ. I imagine in the moment Jesus awoke the disciples the chilling reality of his coming pain ran up his spine. He would be rejected, abandoned, betrayed, denied, and nailed to a tree.



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TUESDAY

REFLECTION BY BOBBY BURTT



READ: MARK 8:27-29

We are lucky enough to grow up “knowing” Jesus. All my life I have been in church, but I hit a point when I had to ask myself:

Do I believe this?

Is this “real”?

Is this true?

Do I know Jesus?

Until I started asking these questions, I realized I had done what the disciples said at the beginning of this passage... when they said who *other* people think Jesus is. I might answer saying:

Well, my pastor says this...

My grandma says this...

My aunt says this...

My church camp leader says this...

But this isn't what Jesus is after!

Maybe take some time here. Be still and imagine Jesus looking at you and asking you: “Who do you say I am?”

What would you say? How would you describe Jesus... to Jesus?

LET'S PRAY

God of the Cosmos, you are vast, and beyond all human comprehension, and yet you love us all, and seek to be in communion with us. May we come to more fully know who you are to us. Amen.

HOLY WEEK

WEDNESDAY

REFLECTION BY SARAH ARE, SANCTIFIED ART

Tell me again.

Tell me again to cultivate new life —

a life where I believe in myself,

a life where, dare I say, I love myself.

Tell me again to cultivate new life —

a life of dancing in the kitchen

and slow cups of coffee;

a life where Sabbath is viewed as a gift

as opposed to a luxury;

a life where I trust my own voice

and speak words dripping in hope,

heavy in love.

Tell me again.

Tell me again because I will forget.

Tell me again because change has never come easy.

Tell me again, because on Monday I'll wave palms

And by Friday I'll be at the foot of a cross.

So if you can, tell me again

Of the love that changed the world,

And my invitation to do the same.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

REFLECTION BY ANN SNYDER

How many times a day do you feel like throwing up your hands and saying, "What's the use!" If you're a parent, you might have told your children hundreds of times to pick up their belongings, but the clutter continues. Yet twenty years later, those same children have the well-kept homes on the block. Maybe you are a school teacher, and some days you wonder what ever possessed you to choose that profession; you're wasting your time on those troublemakers. Yet years later, you find one of your former students managing a large store, another delivering a sermon to a local congregation, or another assisting you in the capacity of a lawyer.

Like our friends at home, we as missionaries have our share of moments when we wonder, "What's the use!" We know what our goals here are and we work to the best of our abilities to accomplish these goals. But as with other occupations, the fruits of one's work are not immediately visible. We must think of ourselves as the farmer who sows his seed and trust God that the seed will germinate. When God gives us a job to do, we must do our best, with his help, and trust him for the desired results.

LET'S PRAY

Lord, help us to be more concerned about tending the fruit than picking it. Even on the night of the betrayal, you washed the feet and served all at the table. Strengthen us to have hope even in life's most challenging moments trusting that the future is in your hands. Amen.

NOTE

Ann Snyder and her husband Tim were commissioned to serve the United Church of Christ at the Evangelical Presbyterian Church Seminary in Peki, Ghana. The UCC had a partnership with the EP Church, and sent numerous missionaries there over the years. Our term was three years, at which point we could come home or sign up for another term.

HOLY WEEK

GOOD FRIDAY

REFLECTION AND IMAGE BY LISLE GWYNN GARRITY

READ: PSALM 22

Often, psalms such as this shock us with their honesty and brutality. We may hear these lamentful words read aloud in worship and think, “That doesn’t sound very sacred.”

But during Holy Week we remember that these words became a breathless prayer in Jesus’ final hours. We remember that God chose to surrender to death in order to rise above it. We remember that brutal honesty can be the most sacred expression of faith.

In this image, I aimed to capture the rawness of the poetry in Psalm 22. To embody the sense of complete surrender of the psalmist, I made this a self portrait of sorts. A lion roars, swords swipe, a bull charges, worms invade, enemies encroach, pot shards invade the air — this scene is graphic and horrifying. And yet, the figure stands firm, resilient in the face of death.

Perhaps this is the posture of Holy Week — we stand firm in the face of death, knowing that, like the fig tree, fruit will come.



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HOLY SATURDAY

REFLECTION BY SARAH ARE, SANCTIFIED ART

How do you let go of a dream
That has woven itself into the fiber of your being,
Except for stitch by stitch?
Anyone who has loved and lost
Knows how painfully slow that unraveling goes.

It’s the air knocked out of your lungs.
It’s grief as big as the sky.
It’s a garden that once was full of life, now of
nothing but wilderness.

And it aches.

So is it cowardly for me to say that I’m glad I wasn’t there?
That I’m glad I wasn’t at the foot of the cross?
For those gathered there had to let go of a dream —
That needle to thread, unraveling.
And those gathered there might have let go of hope,
Or faith or peace or whatever else goes
When the sky goes dark.
And that’s the worst kind of letting go —
The kind that only a broken heart knows.

So it’s tempting to say that under the soil there
were seeds,
And that behind that night, a sky full of stars.
But in that moment —
In this moment —
We’re unraveling.
In that moment —
In this moment —
The garden is nothing but wilderness,
The soil is proof that it existed,
And that is enough.

EASTER SUNDAY

CULTIVATE COMPASSION

REFLECTION AND IMAGE BY HANNAH GARRITY

READ: 1 CORINTHIANS 15:19-26

"But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. The first fruits of those who have died" (1 Cor. 15:20).

Barley is a grain that readies itself for harvest in time for Passover. In historic Jewish tradition, it was one of the grains that was approved for use as a First Fruits offering at the Temple in Jerusalem¹. In this image, barley represents Christ, the first fruit. Christ's compassion lives through us.

Cultivate compassion. At Stanford in 2010, the Dalai Lama spoke of compassion and respect as the way to a more peaceful 21st century. He noted that talking and listening are the way to solve problems which will inevitably arise. In this drawing the expression is one of compassion. Similar expressions are seen in religious artworks throughout the centuries.

Cultivate compassion.



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A NEW CREATION

REFLECTION BY SARAH ARE, SANCTIFIED ART

Of course it happened in a garden —
Dark earth and sunrise,
Fresh air and bird songs,
Trees that had not yet been cut down for crosses,
And flowers that had not yet been pressed for oil.
Of course Mary found Jesus there —
Alive and well among the fig trees and flowers.

For in a garden there is growth after the harvest,
Beauty after the rain, and that constant refrain —
"It was good. It was good."
God saw it, and it was good."
So of course he'd end up in a garden —
New life invites new life.
He and those budding flowers were one and the same.

However, he also must have known he'd find us in that garden,
For new life fills in the holes of
our pain in ways that nothing else can.
It's holding a baby at a funeral,
Bringing flowers to the hospital,
And searching for the sunrise after the night.
It's singing lullabies at our nightmares,
Holding hands in the dark,
And writing letters in the face of isolation.

So this Easter season I plan to place my heart under big trees
and blue skies,
Because the broken parts of me need a type of garden-like
healing.
And like a gardener, I will surround my
Loneliness and heartache,
My suffering and grief, with wildflowers
Until the roots of those flowers are tangled up with the worst
parts of me
And I can finally see what God sees;
Until the roots of those flowers are tangled up in me
And I can look at myself and say, "It is good."

For I am in need of a garden-like type of new life —
Growth after the harvest, beauty after the rain,
And that constant refrain —
"It was good. It was good."
Thank goodness I found him
In a garden.