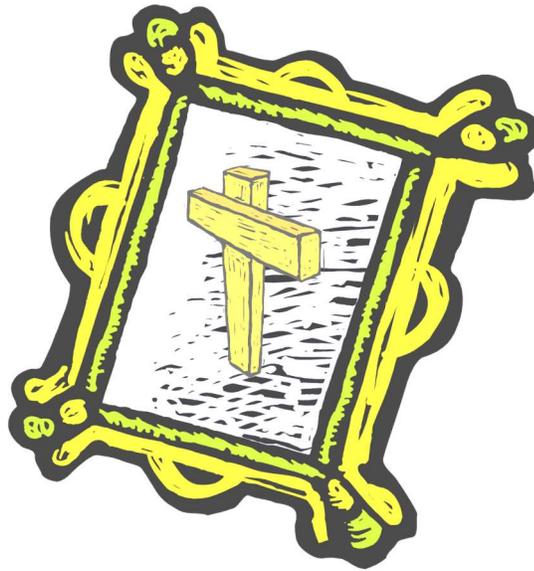


Reflections of Faith



A Devotion Guide
For Lent
2020

Prepared for the Members and Friends of
Friendship United Methodist Church
Sherman, Texas

By
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Welcome!

For the past thirty years I have prepared a devotion guide for Lent as a way to enable the members and friends of the church to prepare themselves for the celebration of Easter. These guides have been modeled after John Wesley's pattern of devotion, involving study of the scripture, prayer, personal reflection and transformation. Because of this pattern, the devotions are best done on a daily basis, and the best time is in the morning as the day begins. If you cannot spend time in the morning, then I suggest you utilize the time just before retiring as a means to prepare yourself for the next day.

While this guide is designed for personal use, many people have found that regular discussions based on the guide are very helpful. In the past, some have used the devotions as a topic of discussion in their regular study group or Sunday School class. Others utilize their family devotion time to share their experiences with one another. I highly recommend this approach, for several reasons. First, it opens the door for new ideas as the reflections are shared with others. Second, the experience of others often sheds light on our own experience in faith. Certainly, this level of intimate sharing enhances relationships with others and facilitates the growth of those relationships. Finally, by holding one another accountable for the daily discipline, we assist one another in spiritual growth. However you choose to use this guide, I trust that you will find it helpful.

May God bless you in this season of Lent as you grow in faith.

Grace & Peace,

Roy

Introduction

Every once in a while, we have to look in a mirror. Can you imagine what it would be like if you didn't? In fact, looking at ourselves in the mirror is a part of our daily routine and we use the time spent in this enterprise to make sure that we are (or will be) presentable to those with whom we come in contact. Thus, the mirror gives us an opportunity to see ourselves as we will be seen by others.

Likewise, it is important that we periodically look into a spiritual mirror, to see ourselves for what we are, to become aware of our faith and to straighten out what seems to be amiss, making ourselves presentable before God. The scriptures provide us with the mirror by which we can examine our faith, but unless we are willing to look into this mirror, our faith seldom changes. This devotion guide is designed to be a spiritual mirror for you to use during this season of Lent, to enable you to reflect on your faith and to make the journey from awareness to repentance and from repentance to new birth, based on the Good News that Jesus brought into the world. The design of these devotions gives us the opportunity to reflect on both the general human condition as well as our own spiritual health, then moves us to hear the Good News and what we can do to repent and make the necessary changes in our lives. Finally, it gives us the opportunity to praise God and to rejoice in our new birth. At times, this awareness may be painful, but remember that this is what we expect in order to be born again: out of the pain of labor comes the joy of a new life. Your new life awaits you in these *"Reflections of Faith."*

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Jesus offers a scathing indictment of the hypocrites: the things they do as spiritual discipline are nothing other than a means to draw attention to themselves. This judgment has little to do with the nature of their actions and everything to do with the intent of those actions: they were doing the right things, but for the wrong reasons. Jesus clearly informed them that here is no benefit in doing the right thing if it is done for the wrong reason.

This passage invites us to examine our own motives in entering into the spiritual discipline of Lent. Are we motivated by the right reason, by our desire to please God and God alone? What do we hope to gain from this discipline? Are we willing to do these things in secret, so that only God knows what we are doing? Are we really being honest with God about our intentions? The fruit of our discipline will only come forth if our hearts are right!

Lord, as I begin this new journey during the season of Lent, I offer up to you my life. Teach me to empty myself of all selfish motivation and vain striving that I may be filled with your love and charity in all my thinking and in all my doing. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Make a list of the things you don't like about yourself and offer them up to God.

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

*Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
 Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—
 a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!
 Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes;
 their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them
 in ages to come.
 Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart,
 with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
 rend your hearts and not your clothing.
 Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful,
 slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.
 Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him,
 a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord, your God?
 Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people.
 Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children,
 even infants at the breast.
 Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy.
 Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep.
 Let them say, “Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery,
 a byword among the nations.
 Why should it be said among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”*

One cannot read the words from Joel's prophecy and not hear the urgency behind them. Like a watchman over the city, the time has come to sound the trumpet and warn the people: God is near! It is also clear that the coming of the Lord brings judgment on those people. Yet the purpose of God is not to destroy, but to redeem. In repentance there is hope: hope that God will be merciful and spare God's children from the approaching disaster. God is not lost in the wilderness of life; God is present in the midst of the people.

As we face the trials and tribulations of life, many of which are brought about by our own doing, we often find ourselves in desperation, living in the fearful consequences of our collective sinfulness. It is easy for us to get discouraged, wondering how God could ever allow such things to happen. To us, Joel's message comes through loud and clear: call upon the Lord, for our hope rests in God's mercy. Beyond the judgment of our sinfulness rests God's grace and our redemption

Lord, I now confess that I don't always live my life for you and that often my treasures lie in earthen vessels. Come into my life with your forgiveness and fill me with a new hope for all my days. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Think of one thing that you do that God does not like and refrain from doing it today.

II Corinthians 5:20b - 6:2

So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says,

*“At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”*

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

There are two points in Paul's message. First, the Corinthians must not take God's grace in vain. Second, there is a sense of urgency in their need to commit themselves wholly to God's grace. Thus, in these words Paul calls the Church to understand that while God's love is a free gift (grace), the power of the gift depends on the willingness of the Church to receive and honor that gift and there is no time like the present to do so.

In similar fashion, we are invited to understand the graceful nature of God's love, not given because we deserve it, but because we need it. God loves us so much that the gift is given, but the benefit of grace rests in our willingness and ability to live in the power of God's love. Without our participation in grace, the gift of God's love is an empty phrase. Each day, we must renew our commitment to live by grace and grace alone. How can you do that on this day?

Lord, thank you for the gift of grace that you have given me for this day. Guide me in your grace that I may find my strength in you and seek your kingdom in all that I do. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Take an extra five minutes in your devotional time, being still and listening for God.

Psalm 51:1-17

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
 according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.
 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.
 Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight,
 so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.
 Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.
 You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
 Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.
 Create in me a clean heart, O God, 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.
 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.
 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation,
 and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.
 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.
 For you have no delight in sacrifice;
 if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
 a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

Like so many of the Psalms, this passage begins in the recognition of the author's sinfulness. In the midst of his recognition of unworthiness, however, is also the affirmation of God's faithfulness. If anything is to change, it must be by the power of God's Spirit. The appeal, therefore, is "*Create in me a clean heart.*"

It is one thing for us to want to change our lives; it is quite another to find the power to bring about that change. The affirmation of the Psalmist is ours as well: the power to change our lives for the better rests in the power of God's Spirit. When we discover this power, we realize that there is no force in all creation that can withstand God's power. We are able to repent because God gives us the power to change, and we burst forth in praise!

Lord, I praise you for the transforming power of your love. Empower me today to make those changes that fulfill your hope in me, that my life might be a living witness to your grace. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Make a list of the things in your life that you would like to change and place the list in your Bible.

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Upon the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus takes up where John leaves off. The message of the Baptizer now comes from the lips of Jesus: "*Repent!*" For both John and Jesus, the time has come to change things. Faith can no longer be a tradition of the past: it must be born into the present, becoming alive in the present moment of time. Only by turning from the old can the people make room for and accept the new.

Repentance literally means a change in direction. While we normally consider this to be a reversal of our lives, this is not always the case. A small diversion in any path soon becomes miles of separation down the road. Repentance is not always a dramatic shift in our lives. Sometimes repentance is simply the fine-tuning of our priorities in order for us to stay on the right path. The season of Lent, a season of repentance, invites us to fine-tune our lives so that the path we take doesn't miss the destination.

Lord, open my eyes to the shortcomings of my life, those things that need adjusting so that my feet will follow the right path to your Kingdom. Grant me the wisdom to know that path and the strength to follow it as Christ leads me on my journey of faith. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Make a list of the things in your life that you would like to change.

Romans 3:9-18

What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written:

*“There is no one who is righteous, not even one;
there is no one who has understanding,
there is no one who seeks God.*

*All have turned aside, together they have become worthless;
there is no one who shows kindness,
there is not even one.”*

*“Their throats are opened graves;
they use their tongues to deceive.”*

“The venom of vipers is under their lips.”

“Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”

“Their feet are swift to shed blood;

ruin and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace they have not known.”

“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Paul's word to the Jews in Rome is a strong one and hard to hear: just because you are Jews, that does not make you any better than the rest. One can certainly see Paul's move toward an equality of ethnic groups, one that is echoed in his image of the Body of Christ. More importantly, however, one can hear Paul's words calling the Jews to a new self-understanding, one in which they can no longer point their finger at others in condemnation without also condemning themselves.

Paul's words are as strong today as they were then, and we are the ones to whom he is writing. It is easy for us to look down at others, especially those who look different or who hold differing beliefs. The message to us comes through loud and clear: don't try to straighten out the lives of others until your feet are on the right path. Thus, we are led to consider the path we are following and where that path leads, but we are also led to look at ourselves, our life and our faith, through the eyes of others.

Lord, as I go through this week, help me to be aware of those that I encounter on life's journey. Clear my vision that I can see them for who they are and see myself as you see me. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

From yesterday's list, choose one thing you can change and make that change today.

Genesis 9:8-17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

While the story of Noah and the Ark focuses on the destruction of creation, the story is really about God's love. It is by the love of God that Noah and his family are spared from the waters of the flood. It is by God's love that creation begins again. It is because of God's love that the covenant is established. Having brought forth the waters of the flood, God proclaims his love for creation in the form of a covenant to never do it again.

Beyond our fear of a flood, this story invites us to understand the providential nature of God's love in our lives. This love is expressed in the form of a covenant and because of the covenant with Noah we share in the continuing and never-failing love of God. The new beginning brought about by our repentance finds strength in the knowledge that God's love will always be with us. Not only are we invited to know that God loves us, we are invited to understand that God's love has always been there for us and to understand how our life is different because of that love.

Thank you, God, for your gift of love. Before I ever knew it, you loved me. When I forget your love, you remember. It is your love that goes before me into all my days, and I am grateful. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Write a thank you note to someone who helped you discover God's love.

Romans 3:21-26

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

Although Paul was a teacher of the Law and was a Pharisee who had lived his life in an effort to fulfill the Law, as a result of his encounter with the risen Christ, Paul came to understand that it was not the Law that brought salvation. He and all Christians were saved by faith and Jesus was the testimony to this salvation. In a supreme act of love, even as a fulfillment of the long-standing covenant, Christ became the sign of God's righteousness and the seal of the covenant.

While our repentance is important, we must always realize that it is not our act of repenting that brings us salvation. Rather, it is the grace of God's love that brings us salvation and our repentance is a response to God's gift of grace. Without grace, we are powerless against the sin of our lives; with grace we are empowered to change and to overcome our sin. More than simply opening the doors of the kingdom of heaven as a future hope, Christ leads us to repentance as a gift of God's love in the present moment of our existence. We are thus led to reflect on how God is working in our lives, not just to save us, but to change and transform us.

Lord, thank you for your transforming grace. Give me eyes to see how you have worked within me, changing me in ways that make me fir for your Kingdom.

For Continued Growth:

Give an unexpected gift to someone you know.

Thursday

March 5

I Peter 3:18-22

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

In his words to the "Exiles in dispersion" Peter recalls the story of Noah as an explanation of their deliverance from sin. Just as God saved Noah and his family through the waters of the flood, so God saves the exiles through the water of baptism. But this baptism is not merely a cleansing of the flesh, an act by which they are made pure and acceptable to God; it is a sign of their inclusion in the Kingdom of God. In other words, baptism is not just a saving act, but a sign of salvation through Christ.

We, too, are reminded of our salvation in the act of baptism. It is more than a symbolic act that shows our obedience and penitence. In the act of baptism, as an expression of God's grace, we become children of God and are made to share in Christ's death and resurrection so that we may also share in God's salvation. This is God's act, not our own, and once given it is ours forever. In baptism, we are made to be children of God, now and for all time.

Lord, before I knew you, you knew me; when I was alone, you claimed me; now you have made me your child and an heir of your Kingdom: Thank you, Lord! Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Find a copy of the Baptismal service and read it as a means of reclaiming your baptism.

I Peter 4:1-6

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same intention (for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin), so as to live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires but by the will of God. You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry. They are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme. But they will have to give an accounting to him who stands ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does.

Hidden between the lines of these verses is the story of the early Christians: having claimed the salvation of Christ and changed their behavior, they are now suffering the abuse of others, who do not understand why they no longer participate in the life of self indulgence. Suffering this abuse, Peter claims, enables them to share in the suffering of Christ and raises them above the life of the flesh. They should, therefore, welcome their suffering as a sign of their righteousness.

It is hard to accept suffering as something that is good, and we must be clear about understanding the suffering of which Peter speaks. There is a difference between what we suffer as a result of our new lifestyle and what comes as the result of human tragedy. When we are persecuted because we are right, we may rest assured that God is blessing us. As we reflect on our lives, we find those times when we felt persecuted by others for our beliefs and realize that often these were our greatest moments of growth in faith.

Lord, sometimes I wonder if the sacrifices I make for you are worth it. Help me to face exclusion and separation from others with a sense of hope, knowing that these are my moments of growth in faith. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Write a letter of encouragement to someone you know who is struggling with his or her faith.

Psalm 25:1-10

*To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
 O my God, in you I trust;
 do not let me be put to shame;
 do not let my enemies exult over me.
 Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
 let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
 Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
 teach me your paths.
 Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
 for you are the God of my salvation;
 for you I wait all day long.
 Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,
 for they have been from of old.
 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
 according to your steadfast love remember me,
 for your goodness' sake, O Lord!
 Good and upright is the Lord;
 therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
 He leads the humble in what is right,
 and teaches the humble his way.
 All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,
 for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.*

The Psalmist is quick to affirm that God is righteous and that in God's righteousness is the power to overcome the persecution of others. It is for this power that he longs, in the confidence that God will grant this power and lead him beyond the shame and ridicule of others. This Psalm is both an act of praise and an act of submission to God.

When we recall the strength that God has given us, the power to change our lives, the new life beyond our persecution and the forgiveness beyond our sin, can we do anything but praise God? Like the Psalmist, when we reflect on the greatness of God and the wonderful, almost unimaginable, things that God has done for us, we want to break forth in song and shouts of joy!

Lord, words cannot describe the joy that I feel when I consider the gift of your grace. Lead me to sing your song of praise throughout the day that I may never forget this joy! Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Do something special today to offer your praise to God.

Mark 8:34-38

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Since Mark's Gospel was written after the crucifixion, after the disciples came to realize the meaning of the cross, it is difficult to know whether these words made sense to their hearers at the time they were offered. Yet there is no doubt about their implication: anyone who wants to be a disciple must be willing to face persecution and even death. It was a high price to pay for the privilege of following Jesus, and some were obviously turned away for their unwillingness to make this commitment.

Although it is unlikely that we will face death on a cross in the way the disciples did, we must, nevertheless, understand that discipleship is not without its cost. To follow Jesus demands that we commit our entire being to the task, not blindly giving up one set of benefits in exchange for another, but seriously understanding that God expects our all, without our consideration of the reward we are to receive. What have you given up to be a disciple? Was it worth the cost?

Lord, the idea of sacrifice is not a pleasant thought to me, but I am willing to offer up what is necessary to follow you. Help me to find joy in offering myself to you, knowing that you gave your all for me. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Write a note to someone you admire for having made sacrifices in his or her faith journey.

Mark 8:31-34

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

When Peter heard Jesus talking about suffering and death, his first reaction was to appeal to Jesus' sense of well being and to avoid those things that would put his life in jeopardy. This reaction, quite normal in most circumstances, came from Peter's own desire to avoid problems and seek safety. In his reply to Peter, Jesus was quite clear: you are thinking in human terms, not divine. Jesus knew and sought to teach Peter that sometimes fulfillment of our divine destiny stands opposed to our human desires. To give in to the human side is to work in opposition to God's intentions.

It is against our human nature and all sensibility to intentionally place ourselves in a position of danger when there is no reason for it. Yet when faced with the necessity, most of us would rise to the challenge. This is the point made by Jesus: only when we see life with God's eyes can we understand the necessity of suffering for the sake of the Kingdom. As disciples, we must seek God's vision and be willing to be guided by that vision, no matter what. In this season of Lent, we are invited to reflect on God's vision for us and to make that vision our own as we seek to follow in the footsteps of Christ.

Lord, I know that what I want is not always what you want for me. But I also know that my greatest desire is to serve and please you. Grant me the ability to know your vision and the courage to live it out today. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Spend some time with a young person today and help him or her gain a sense of vision.

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

It was an impossible dream. Abraham was an old man and Sarah was an old woman, yet God was promising them children! The only condition that God placed on Abraham was his obedience. If Abraham would go where God led him and do what God expected of him, then God would also bring blessings upon him. It was in this covenant that Abraham found his meaning and his very life.

We often have a hard time understanding God's covenant with us. Sometimes it seems like God's promises are impossible. We often see ourselves as unworthy of the promises. We can hardly believe that in exchange for God's love, all God expects from us is our loyalty and affection. Furthermore, God gives this love before we even know it, so that what we do is in response to love rather than as a means to earn it. God's covenant with us, even God's desire to enter into that covenant with us, is something that we can hardly understand; but God does not require understanding, only acceptance.

Lord, I don't always understand you and sometimes I'm confused about your actions. But I know you love me: you always have, and you always will. Teach me to trust you, even when I don't understand. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Make a list of the things you don't understand about God's love and talk to someone you trust about your questions.

Genesis 18:9-15

[The messengers] said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

When the messengers came to visit Abraham and told him that Sarah would bear a child in the spring, it was news that was hard to believe. In fact, it was so unbelievable that Sarah laughed: how could she possibly have a child at her age? Yet this was the promise of God, and it came to pass.

We can understand Sarah's reaction. Would any of us not laugh in the same situation? Sometimes God's promises are so far beyond our expectations that they become laughable. Yet what for us is impossible is entirely possible for God and sometimes what is unimaginable for us sometimes rests in the heart of God's vision. God does not call us to understand, only to accept. We are invited, then, to reflect on God's promises for us, even the unimaginable ones, and trust that God can and will do what God promises.

Lord, like Sarah, I often find your promises laughable because they are so far beyond my own vision. Yet I know that nothing is impossible to you. Today, grant me the grace to accept the impossible and the strength to believe your promises. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Write a note of encouragement to a leader in your church.

Romans 4:13-16

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham.

As a Pharisee and teacher of the Law, Paul certainly knew what he was talking about. His experience with the risen Christ, however, changed his perspective on the Law. While necessary for determining the correctness of one's actions, the Law did not and could not bring salvation; salvation was an act of God's grace, because mortals can never live in perfect obedience to the Law. Beyond the judgment imposed by the Law stands the power of God's grace to forgive sins.

We could never live our lives without the law to guide us. Yet when we reduce God's covenant to a set of legal prescriptions, we fail to understand the meaning of salvation by faith. Taking up our cross means more than just living a good life and obeying the law. By faith we place ourselves in God's hands, to be guided beyond the law and into the power of God's grace. Like Paul, we must come to understand that the Law is but a guide, pointing us to the truth of salvation that lies in the power of God's grace, leading us toward a loving response to that grace.

Lord, I know that I cannot live without the law, but I often confuse obeying the Law with living in grace. Help me to look beyond obedience to the Law in order to find my commitment to you. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Write a note of encouragement to someone in law enforcement.

Romans 4:16-25

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Paul's admiration for Abraham as a man of faith comes through loud and clear. It was not the Law that brought the fulfillment of God's covenant in the birth of Abraham's son, but God's power to overcome the limitations of human existence. Abraham's faith was that he trusted that what God had promised, God would do. This faith was far more important than Abraham's obedience of the law.

Likewise, as careful as we are to be good, ultimately, it is not our goodness that saves us. We are saved by grace, and beyond our ability to obey the Law lies our belief that God can overcome all the obstacles before us to bring about God's vision for us. What seems impossible to us is well within God's ability. The best that we can do is trust God, knowing that even though we cannot understand God's reasoning or comprehend God's power, we know that God's love for us is never failing. It is this faith that enables us to take up our cross and gives us strength in our faith.

Lord, in this day grant me the strength to trust you. Enable to grow in my faith that I may stand strong in my trust of you. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Consider your stewardship and seek ways to strengthen your commitment.

Psalm 22:23-31

*You who fear the Lord, praise him!
 All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
 stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
 For he did not despise or abhor
 the affliction of the afflicted;
 he did not hide his face from me,
 but heard when I cried to him.
 From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
 my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
 The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
 those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
 May your hearts live forever!
 All the ends of the earth shall remember
 and turn to the Lord;
 and all the families of the nations
 shall worship before him.
 For dominion belongs to the Lord,
 and he rules over the nations.
 To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
 before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
 and I shall live for him.
 Posterity will serve him;
 future generations will be told about the Lord,
 and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
 saying that he has done it.*

When the Psalmist considers the breadth and depth of God's love, he responds in praise and invites the congregation to join him. The words of this Psalm show forth the devotion of the people, who realize that only the love of God empowers them to joy and salvation.

When we come to understand the covenant of God's love and when we dare to take up our cross and follow Jesus, we find life to be filled with joy. We are led to consider the depth of our devotion and invited to join in the praise of the Psalmist.

Lord, when I consider the depth of your love and the grace of salvation that you bring into my life, I am humbled. I offer to you my praise and humbly ask you to complete my joy in the commitment of this day. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Share your love of God by inviting someone to join you for worship tomorrow.

John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

The wrath displayed by Jesus at the Temple stands out to us, for it is one of only a few times when our Lord showed his anger. Even the unjust sentence of death handed down to him did not incur his wrath like the sight of the money changers in the Temple. Why was Jesus so angry? Because those merchants were using the Temple, a place dedicated to the worship of God, as a place to make a profit for themselves. Rather than assisting persons in their devotions, they were using the Temple for their own gain.

While we would never be guilty of seeking to turn a profit by setting up business in the sanctuary, we must understand the larger spirit of what Jesus said and did: those things dedicated to the praise of God should never be used for selfish ambition or gain. Such an attitude calls for us to examine our own participation in the life of the church. When we share in the life of the church, is it for God's benefit or ours? We want to answer this question quickly and say our worship is for God, but the reflection is critical to our faith.

Lord, you know that I love to go to church because it makes me feel good. Is this wrong? Nevertheless, help me to see that my worship is a gift to you and feeling good is only a by-product of the giving. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

In your worship this morning, try to focus your attention on what you give to worship rather than what you receive.

I Corinthians 3:10-17

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Like Jesus before him, Paul draws the connection between the body and God's Temple. Indeed, the body is God's Temple. Just as the Temple was built from the foundation up, so our bodies are built upon our knowledge and understanding of Jesus. Just as the Temple is holy, so are our bodies. Just as the Temple should not be profaned by unholy acts, so should our bodies be protected from those things that defile it.

In this season of Lent, we tend to focus our attention on our spiritual health, and rightly so. Yet we must take Paul seriously by remembering that the vessel of the Spirit is the body and taking care of the body edifies the dwelling place of the Spirit. While taking pride in our bodies may be a sign of vanity, neglecting our body's health can be a sign of spiritual poverty. We are thus compelled to examine our habits and routines, asking ourselves if we are being good stewards of the temple God has given us as a dwelling place for the Spirit.

Lord, you know that I stand guilty of neglecting your holy temple. I do not always take care of myself and too often indulge myself in unhealthy acts. Help me to realize that the dwelling place of your Spirit is truly sacred and do my best to make it a fit habitation. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Think of one habit you have that is not good for your body and try to refrain from that habit today.

Exodus 20:1-11

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before[a] me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

The Ten Commandments form the basis of God's covenant with Israel. In these words, God establishes the proper relationship with the people. It is a relationship that is based on God's initiative: God is the one who brought the people out of Egypt and cared for them in the wilderness. Because of the covenant God has established, the people are led to respond to God's love with their love, offered to God and others. The Law, as it is set forth in the Ten Commandments and the subsequent ordinances and statutes, show Israel how to love God.

While we tend to relegate the Ten Commandments to the "Old Covenant," we must realize that they also form the basis of our relationship with God. Because God has acted in our lives, we are led to respond to God in our faith, and a large part of that response is in the form of living our lives in respect of God's sovereignty, living our lives in a manner that acknowledges that God is one and that there are no other gods. In this season of Lent, we pause to ask ourselves if we truly live our lives in the truth that we place no other things above God.

Lord, you are truly one and I know that I should not place anything before you. I also know that this is not always the truth of my life. Forgive me, and lead me to make you the number one priority of my life this day. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Make a log of your activities for this day and discover what your priorities are.

Exodus 20:12-17

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Beyond their respect for God, the Hebrews were led by the Ten Commandments to live their lives in a relationship with other people that respects the value of the other's life and property. These laws were intended to enable people to live in community with one another and to bring harmony to that community. In essence, God led them to understand that the best that they could do for themselves was to treat others with respect.

This portion of the Ten Commandments forms the basis of all civilization. We are given strength through the community, but for the community to exist at all requires us to live lives that consider the needs and rights of others. Thus, in taking care of the needs of others, we are taking care of ourselves. While our faith is a very personal matter, it must lead us to view our relationships with others as both a necessity for and outgrowth of our spirituality. There is no such thing as a solitary Christian.

Lord, I am concerned about my own faith and I want to grow in that faith as much as I can. Help me to realize that my growth often depends on those around me, so that I may open myself up to their needs. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Look at the log you made yesterday and note how much of your activities focused on yourself and how many on the needs of others.

I Corinthians 1:18-25

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

*“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”*

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

Paul recognizes that a man voluntarily dying on the cross is a foolish notion to those who do not understand it. Yet to those who do understand, this "foolishness" brings salvation. To understand God, one has to set aside the logical reasoning of the world in order to accept the wisdom of God.

Self denial is a concept that is not understood by most of the people of the world, yet one which forms the backbone of the Christian Faith. It is in denying the things of the world that we come to understand God's gift of love, as we approach the cross. Giving up the things that bring us pleasure may seem foolish to a lot of people and may, at times, even seem foolish to us. We deny ourselves in order to get close to God and understand Christ's gift of self denial. In this manner, we strengthen the temple of our mind and spirit. What seems foolish to the eyes of logic and reason can only be understood by viewing life from God's perspective.

Lord, it is sometimes difficult for me to accept the wisdom of dying as a means to find life and I often struggle to understand the true power of your gift. Open my eyes in this day to see your wisdom and the power of your love. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Try giving up something that you really enjoy today and see how it makes you feel.

I Corinthians 1:26-31

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

With just a casual glance, it seems that Paul is accusing the Christians in Corinth of being weak, powerless, and lacking in wisdom. With a more careful reading, however, Paul's point comes out: wisdom, power and strength are gifts from God. Therefore, if anyone would like to boast of these qualities, it must be a boast of God's love. In other words, God is the one who deserves the credit for all these qualities shown forth in the Church. Whatever a person has in the way of ability and understanding has its origins in God's grace.

It is human nature to take credit for our accomplishments and we often want the world to know the things we have done. The message from Paul, however, calls us to place credit where credit is due. As we consider what it means to "clean up" our lives, we must come to realize that the ability to change rests in the transforming power of God and any strength that we have in life comes from God. Ultimately, if we want to make the temple of our body a credit to God, we must do so by giving God the credit.

Lord, thank you for the change that I have seen in my life over these last few weeks. Help me to be constantly aware of your transforming love and allow myself to be shaped by your gift of grace. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Write a note of encouragement to someone you know is struggling to change his or her life.

Psalm 19

*The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
 Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.
 There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;
 yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.
 In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
 and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
 Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them;
 and nothing is hid from its heat.
 The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;
 the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;
 the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
 the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;
 the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever;
 the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.
 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
 sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.
 Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.
 But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.
 Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me.
 Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.
 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you,
 O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

The Psalmist knows the source of his strength: God. This Psalm of praise echoes the reflections of Paul, giving God the credit for creating the world and seeking the same transforming power in his life. It is God who gives life and God who empowers people to change.

We join the Psalmist in acknowledging the power and love of God, who has transformed us into disciples, not by our own merit and strength, but by nothing less than God's own grace. Now is a good time for us to reflect on that transforming power, how we have changed over the years of our faith, where our journey has taken us and where it might lead us in the time to come.

Lord, as I consider the change you have brought into my life, my heart wants to sing. I praise you this day for your transforming love and the change you have brought into my life. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Call someone you know who is struggling to change and invite him or her to come to church with you tomorrow.

John 3:14-18

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

The words of John 3:16 are probably the most quoted from all the Bible. Why? Because they are a summary of the entire Biblical message: through the love of God demonstrated in Christ Jesus, humankind is saved. This is God's act, an act of grace prompted not by the worthiness of the world, but by its great need for salvation. Yet there is a point that must not be overlooked: people participate in God's act of salvation through their belief.

As we pass the midpoint in our Lenten devotionals, the word from John's gospel comes as a reminder to us. We clearly know that salvation belongs to God and that this salvation is an act of grace. Yet to experience salvation in our lives, we must believe. Our belief does not save us, but it does open the door for us to share the power of grace offered in our Lord. We pause to reflect on the nature and meaning of our belief, to examine its strength and to grow in a way that makes it stronger.

Lord, I believe, but I know my belief can be stronger. Help me to trust you, even in the midst of unseen things, knowing that my vision is limited, but that your love triumphs over all things. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Look for an opportunity to share your belief with someone.

John 3:19-21

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

While John 3:16 is one of the most famous passages in the Bible, most people stop reading before they get to verse 19. In order to understand John's message, this next passage is critical. Continuing the theme of light introduced in the prologue, John talks about the light and the darkness. Jesus is the light; the darkness is anything that hides the light from the world. The witness of John is that people prefer the darkness to the light!

By hiding in the darkness, we veil our weaknesses and shortcomings. Just as the night limits our visibility, hiding in the darkness means that others cannot see us for who we are. Living in this anonymity gives us a sense of security, as opposed to the vulnerability we experience when others see us for who we are. What we fail to realize is that God sees through the darkness: we cannot hide from God. If God can love us anyway, why should we go on hiding? Belief means we are willing to trust God enough to step out of the darkness and into the light. In our reflection, we must ask ourselves what it is that we are trying to hide from God.

Lord, as I go about this day, help me to walk in the light. Chase away the darkness with which I surround myself and reveal to me the Truth of your love. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Think of someone you know who is hiding in the darkness and express your love to him or her in a special way.

Numbers 21:4-5

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food."

If it were not so serious, the behavior of the children of Israel in the wilderness would be laughable. Every time God seeks to deliver them, they find something wrong and begin to gripe and grumble. Moses is caught in the middle, trying to please God on behalf of the people and trying to please the people for God's sake. As the people grumble, God visits them with hardship, then they come running to Moses to set things right!

While we may have a hard time accepting the fact that God brings hardship on the people, we, nevertheless, hear the message of the story: we are often so blinded by our human condition that we cannot see God working in our midst. In an act of vanity, we think that we could do a better job running God's creation and grumble with our dissatisfaction with life itself. Even though we would not say it out loud, sometimes we wonder if God really knows what is going on. But in the end, our reflection must lead us to trust that God's way is always better than ours.

Lord, sometimes your actions confuse me and sometimes I wonder if you are even working at all. Yet my faith tells me that you are the one who is to be trusted. Today, Lord, help me to have that trust and not grumble about my life. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Share with someone close to you what God has done in your life recently.

Numbers 21:6-9

Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

The children of Israel gripe about their lot in life and blame Moses for all their problems, yet when they face hardships, they come running to Moses to intercede with God on their behalf. Each time this happens (and it happens often!) God does an about face and delivers them once again. In spite of the short-sighted grumblings of the people, God is the one who is always there to bring deliverance.

Even as we complain about our lot in life, we know that God is the one who can deliver us from our problems. Sometimes only as a last resort, when we have done all we can, we swallow our pride and seek God's grace to deliver us. As we reflect on this behavior, we have to admit that sometimes we are guilty of the same response. Wouldn't it be better if we just trusted God from the beginning?

Lard, grant me the faith to trust you today ... no matter what! Amen

For Continued Growth:

Help a friend to see God's grace in the midst of adversity.

Ephesians 2:1-7

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

As God always seemed to be there for the children of Israel, so Paul affirms that God is there in the midst of sinfulness for the early Christians. Paul enumerates the nature of sin and how the Ephesians live out the heritage of sin that has plagued all humanity. Just as a life of sin leads to death, though, Paul is quick to also affirm that beyond death is life, made possible by God's gift of grace.

We do not like to confront our sin because it reminds us of who we really are. It is hard to look in the mirror and love the persons we have become. Yet our hope for renewal is found in the power of God to transform us. This is the hope Christ came to bring us. As you look into the mirror today and examine your faith, ask yourself if this faith is as full as you want it to be.

Lord, I seek your strength to help me look into the mirror today. Although I am comfortable with what I see in my mirror, I also know that there is much more that you have in store for me. Lord, help me grow! Amen.

For Continued Growth:

As you encounter someone struggling with righteousness today, share your understanding of hope.

Ephesians 2:8-10

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

The hope for renewal, Paul says, rests in God's grace, offered through Jesus Christ. All the good works of the world cannot secure this love, but God offers it freely. Once salvation has come, then the people do good works, as a response to God's love.

Even though the theology may be somewhat confusing to us, we come to believe what Paul says: our good works are enabled by God's grace and not the other way around. Only when we believe in the transforming power of God's love can we experience the joy of salvation, which manifests itself in the good works of our hands. We are thus led from grace to good works, from receiving to giving, from faith to action as the expected consequence of God's redemption.

Lord, in this day help me to know your transforming power, but even more importantly, let your redemption become manifest in the works of my hands. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Do something nice for a member of your family which affirms your love.

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.
Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,
those he redeemed from trouble
and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.*

*Some were sick through their sinful ways,
and because of their iniquities endured affliction;
they loathed any kind of food,
and they drew near to the gates of death.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress;
he sent out his word and healed them,
and delivered them from destruction.
Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices,
and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.*

The affirmation of the Psalmist is clear and to the point: in the midst of sin and hardship, God brings a love that transforms Israel and offers peace and joy. Beyond the darkness of the life chosen by the people, God waits to bring new light.

This is our affirmation as well: in the darkness we have created through our sinfulness, God's light shines to show us the way to salvation. In our belief, we seek out the light and respond in joy!

Lord, shine your light in my darkness today. Open my lips to shout your praise and my life to be a vessel of blessing. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

As you prepare for worship tomorrow, invite someone to join you as an effort to help bring light into his or her life.

John 12:20-26

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

The words Jesus spoke to Philip and Andrew were a confusing contradiction, placing his glorification and death in the same lesson. No doubt, the disciples did not know what to make of this teaching. How could dying bring glory? How could losing one's life aid in finding it? The answer is in the grain of wheat: only when it dies and falls to the ground can it sprout and grow.

As we hear these words from Jesus, we automatically think of the grief that comes from death. If we dwell on the subject long enough, our thoughts begin to focus on our own death. How can dying bring glory? How can the end of life bring new birth? It is all a mystery to us and we search for answers that are not there. What we find instead is hope, born in faith. What greater hope can we have than this?

Lord, I confess that I shrink from death. I don't like to think about death at all, and especially not my own. Yet you faced death and brought forth life. From my fear of death, O lord, bring forth my new life. Amen

For Continued Growth:

Send a letter of hope to someone you know who is grieving over the loss of a loved one.

John 12:27-33

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.

The disciples did not understand what Jesus was saying to them because the meaning of his words were wrapped in the resurrection, an event they had not yet experienced. Only by understanding the meaning of resurrection can one hear the glory in Jesus' words. The logical, human thing to do was to walk away from Jerusalem and avoid arrest, but Jesus chose, instead, to submit to the pain of suffering in order to proclaim the glory of new life.

Could we make the same decision as Jesus? Hopefully we will never have to learn the answer by being forced to make such a decision. Yet we must hear Jesus' decision as more than simply the choice of life or death. Only when we are able to accept the power God has over death can we face the suffering of life. Only when the glory of God is more important than our own security can we understand why Jesus submitted willingly to the cross. Only when we realize that death is not the final word can we know the power of God's love.

Lord I love life and don't want to lose it, but I know that I must die someday. Help me to accept death as a part of your gift and live free, knowing that your gifts are always good. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Write down the words you would like to have on your tombstone.

Jeremiah 31:31-33

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Writing to the people in Exile, Jeremiah sought to bring them a sense of hope. Taken away into a foreign land, the people of Judah had lost all that was sacred to them: the Temple, Jerusalem, their very way of life. The word that the prophet spoke assured them of a new day, a new covenant, a new beginning. On the other side of their destruction rested a new day of God's glory.

When we think of death, we tend to see it as the end. Truly, it is the last episode of our earthly journey, but it is not an end: it is a new beginning that rests in God's ongoing love and salvation. God's covenant takes us away from the destruction that life brings and into a new creation in God's Spirit. The hope that God gives to us rests in the assurance that nothing on earth can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, not even death. We cannot have faith without recognizing this reality.

Lord, thank you for your gift of love in Christ Jesus. I know that this gift is mine that nothing can take it away from me. In the constancy of your love, help me to find my new faith. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Find an opportunity today to express your love to someone who doesn't expect it.

Jeremiah 31:34

No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

The new covenant pronounced by Jeremiah was different in that it was based on a personal relationship with God, not on the national identity of Israel. Thus, Jeremiah spoke of the covenant as written on the hearts of the people. In the future, there would be no need to teach the covenant to others because each person would feel it in the heart.

This shift in understanding calls us to a sense of responsibility. It is not enough just to share in the communal relationship with God that we experience in the Church. While we will never have a day when we do not teach others about God's love, we also realize that faith is an individual act, and no one can have faith for someone else. In other words, while we know that God loves the whole world, we must also know that God loves "me." The covenant God makes is for everyone and God's love moves every individual to hope. We are led, then, to remember and reflect on the many ways that God has given us hope in our lives.

Lord, on this day I reaffirm my covenant with you, knowing that you have written your love on my heart. Help me to live in such a way that my life brings honor to your name. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Write a letter to God that expresses your understanding of God's covenant.

Hebrews 5:5-10

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

*“You are my Son,
today I have begotten you”;
as he says also in another place,
“You are a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.”*

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

The author of the book of Hebrews takes great pains to show that the role Jesus plays is that of "high priest", meaning the one who intercedes on behalf of the people. Yet Jesus the high priest fulfills this role not by glorifying himself, but by an act of submission. The intercession of Jesus is in the form of the cross and, as strange as it may sound, the glory of Christ rests in the power of submission.

It is sometimes difficult for us to understand how submission can be powerful, just as we struggle with the question of how death can bring life. The answer is really quite simple: the power is God's and only by giving ourselves away to God can we participate in this power. It is not our strength that brings us life and hope, but the strength of God that overpowers the vain frailty of human life. As we reflect on our faith this week, we must ask ourselves in what ways we are willing to submit ourselves to God.

Lord, today I join with Jesus in praying "Not my will, but thine be done." Help me to mean what I pray in all sincerity and faith. Amen

For Continued Growth:

Take some time reserved for yourself today and do something for God instead.

Psalm 51:1-9

*Have mercy on me, O God,
 according to your steadfast love;
 according to your abundant mercy
 blot out my transgressions.
 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
 and cleanse me from my sin.
 For I know my transgressions,
 and my sin is ever before me.
 Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
 and done what is evil in your sight,
 so that you are justified in your sentence
 and blameless when you pass judgment.
 Indeed, I was born guilty,
 a sinner when my mother conceived me.
 You desire truth in the inward being; [a]
 therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
 wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
 Let me hear joy and gladness;
 let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
 Hide your face from my sins,
 and blot out all my iniquities.*

The prayer of the Psalmist recognizes the fact that, left to his own desires and ambitions, sin manifests itself in all of his life. The hope for new life, a life free from the guilt of sin, rests with God and God alone. Only when God acts to bring new life can the strangle hold of sin be broken.

While these words may leave us feeling ashamed and depressed, their intention is just the opposite. The important thing to remember isn't that we are consumed by sin, but that God is the One who overcomes the power of sin and restores our righteousness. We experience God's forgiveness and love, however, only when we recognize our need for it. We experience new life only when we die to the old. Thus, our cry must also be "God, forgive me."

Lord, how many times have I confessed my Sin? Yet again today I recognize that I am one who is consumed by Sin; but you are the one who fills me with forgiveness. Lord, forgive me. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Find a way today to express your forgiveness to someone that has hurt you.

Psalm 51:10-15

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,
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.
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.*

The prayer of the Psalmist continues. From the bondage of Sin, he is set free by the power of God's forgiveness. The filth of sinfulness is washed away, and a new righteousness appears. The old has died and the new is given birth. What else can the Psalmist do but break forth into the praise of God?

Likewise, when we experience the renewing, cleansing, forgiving power of God's love, a new spirit is given birth within our souls. The old has passed away and the new has come. Our response can be nothing less than our heartfelt praise of God!

Lord, accept my sacrifice of praise as it comes from my lips, that you may know the true joy that I feel in my heart when I experience your forgiveness. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Think of someone you know who needs to experience new birth and encourage him or her to join you in church tomorrow.

Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

"Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

What a day it must have been! It was the moment for which the disciples had been waiting, the time when Jesus would enter into his glory! Things were not to turn out as they had expected, but for the moment, it was time to celebrate. Yet why would Jesus need a colt? The disciples surely didn't know of the events the next few days would bring. All they knew was that Jesus needed a colt and asked them to fetch it. The disciples obeyed Jesus and did what he asked.

While we certainly want to celebrate the entry into Jerusalem with Jesus and his followers, we must not overlook the obedience of the disciples, which becomes a model for our own faithfulness. As the disciples complied with Jesus' request without knowing what he had in mind, so must we be willing to obey, even if we don't fully understand why. To be faithful in our relationship with Christ, we must be willing to be obedient. Above all else, it is our obedience that characterizes our covenant relationship with God. Our reflection must lead us to ask: "What is God calling me to do?"

Lord, what are you calling me to do? As I worship today, make your will clear to me and help me to be obedient to your calling. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Take a few extra moments in your devotion time today to be still and listen for the voice of God that calls for you.

Isaiah 50:4-9a

*The Lord God has given me
 the tongue of a teacher,
 that I may know how to sustain
 the weary with a word.
 Morning by morning he wakens—
 wakens my ear
 to listen as those who are taught.
 The Lord God has opened my ear,
 and I was not rebellious,
 I did not turn backward.
 I gave my back to those who struck me,
 and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
 I did not hide my face
 from insult and spitting.
 The Lord God helps me;
 therefore I have not been disgraced;
 therefore I have set my face like flint,
 and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
 he who vindicates me is near.
 Who will contend with me?
 Let us stand up together.
 Who are my adversaries?
 Let them confront me.
 It is the Lord God who helps me;
 who will declare me guilty?*

This passage from Isaiah is often used to describe Jesus' conduct before his accusers. It is a combination of submission and resolve: accepting the suffering of unjust accusation in the knowledge that it is God's judgment that prevails, not that of mortals. In this week that we call "holy" we are brought even closer to the obedience of Christ that led to his suffering and, ultimately, leads to our salvation.

It is not easy to suffer at the hands of others and it's even more difficult to be obedient, knowing that in so doing we will suffer. Yet the promise of God is that our obedience leads us to experience the fullness of God's grace, which leads us beyond the torment of others and into the joy of God's kingdom. Our reflection leads us to ask: "How obedient am I to God's will?"

Lord, it hurts me when others stand opposed to me and seek to bring me down, yet I want to do your will, even if it hurts. Help me today to stand firm in you and find the comfort of your trust in me. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Share a word of comfort with someone you know who is suffering because of his or her faith.

Philippians 2:5-11

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
 who, though he was in the form of God,
 did not regard equality with God
 as something to be exploited,
 but emptied himself,
 taking the form of a slave,
 being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death—
 even death on a cross.
 Therefore God also highly exalted him
 and gave him the name
 that is above every name,
 so that at the name of Jesus
 every knee should bend,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
 and every tongue should confess
 that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father.*

If anyone had a right to claim God's glory, it was Jesus, yet, as Paul affirms, Jesus did not revel in that glory. Instead, he took upon himself the role of a servant. He was willing to offer up his own life for the sake of others, even to the point of dying on the cross. In Christ's obedience, Christians find their hope and meaning.

We will surely never be asked to forfeit our life on a cross. Most of us will never even be in the position to offer our lives for the sake of another. Nevertheless, God calls us to obedience. We are called to serve others as a witness to the power of love. Like Jesus before us, we are called to empty ourselves in order that God may make us full! Our reflection must cause us to look in the mirror and ask: "What am I doing to empty myself in order that God may fill me?"

Lord, my love for you leads me to obey you, but sometimes other things get in the way of my obedience. Help me to set aside those things today so that I can offer my full love to you. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

If possible, fast for one meal today and use the time to read the scriptures and pray.

Psalm 118

*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!
 Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."
 Let the house of Aaron say, "His steadfast love endures forever."
 Let those who fear the Lord say, "His steadfast love endures forever."
 Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place.
 With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me?
 The Lord is on my side to help me; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.
 It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in mortals.
 It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in princes.
 All nations surrounded me; in the name of the Lord I cut them off!
 They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side; in the name of the Lord I cut them off!
 They surrounded me like bees; they blazed like a fire of thorns;
 in the name of the Lord I cut them off!
 I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the Lord helped me.
 The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.
 There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous:
 "The right hand of the Lord does valiantly; the right hand of the Lord is exalted;
 the right hand of the Lord does valiantly."
 I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord.
 The Lord has punished me severely, but he did not give me over to death.
 Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them
 and give thanks to the Lord.
 This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.
 I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.
 The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.
 This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.
 This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.
 Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!
 Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
 We bless you from the house of the Lord.
 The Lord is God, and he has given us light.
 Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.
 You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.
 O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.*

This is a marvelous Psalm of victory! In it the author proclaims the greatness of God, who stands before all enemies to open the Kingdom to the righteous. What more can be said? God brings victory over all the forces of evil!

In our obedience to God we find our salvation. God delivers us from hardship when we are willing to follow. God rewards us with forgiveness when we repent and gives us mercy when we are persecuted. God fills us with hope when our own deeds bring us despair. This is God's doing and it is truly a victory for us. Our reflection leads us to understand that our ultimate victory over pain, hardship, suffering and even death rests in the strength of God's mercy.

Lord, I probably don't say it enough, but I am truly grateful for the victory you give me in Christ Jesus. Thank you! Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Make plans to worship with your family or friends this week.

I Corinthians 11:23-26

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Aware of a gross misunderstanding of communion in the Corinthian Church, Paul sought to make the meaning of the Lord's Supper clear to these Christians. Eating the bread and drinking the wine is a means of sharing in the last meal with Jesus. The Greek word "*anamnesis*" (usually translated "remember") literally means "to participate again." This is not an ordinary meal, one that would satisfy the hunger of the body, but a "holy meal" that takes away the hunger within the soul. Each time the Church celebrates communion, they become a part of the sacrifice of Christ.

We, too, often misunderstand the act of communion. It is sometimes seen as an intrusion on worship, one more thing to make the service too long. Or we find it as the time to tell God what we want in our lives. To share in the body and blood of Christ, however, means that we sit at the table with our Lord and feel the power of his love, a love that led him to offer his own life for our salvation. As the bread and wine are taken, our spiritual hunger is fed and we are nourished in the grace of God. In our reflection we must honestly answer the question: "What does communion mean to me?"

Lord, feed the hunger of my soul and quench the thirst of my spirit. As you have given your gift to me, grant me the grace to receive that gift anew, that I may find the nourishing strength of your love. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Join in the service this evening and take communion.

Hebrews 10:11-25

And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, “he sat down at the right hand of God,” and since then has been waiting “until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.” For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying,

*“This is the covenant that I will make with them
after those days, says the Lord:*

*I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds,”*

he also adds,

“I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.”

Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

It all boils down to this: Jesus accomplished what no one else ever could or can; Jesus, through his sacrifice on the cross, brought salvation into the world. All the testimony and witness of the scriptures focuses on this one reality.

While good Friday brings us sadness when we recall the death of Jesus, when we understand what is accomplished by his death, we cannot keep from rejoicing. It's Friday ... but Sunday's coming! Are you ready?

Lord, make me ready. Turn my sadness to gladness and my fear to hope as I wait for the day of your salvation. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Write a note to someone who is grieving.

I Corinthians 15:1-2

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

Holy Saturday is a day of waiting and preparation. In the early Church it was the day proselytes and converts were prepared for baptism. For us, it is one last time to repent of our sin, take up our cross, cleanse ourselves from unrighteousness, believe the gospel and pledge our obedience to God. It is on this day that the old self dies in preparation for the new birth of the resurrection.

Lord, I offer to you my life ... completely and absolutely... and place my trust the resurrection that is to come. Come to me, Lord, and fulfill my hope. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Review your journey in this Lenten season and note how you have grown, spiritually.

Acts 10:34-43

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

The time has come! The day is here! Our salvation is accomplished! We have been set free from our bondage to sin and we have been given new life beyond the shadow of darkness. We are God's children, made whole by Christ Jesus our Lord. So, what do we do now?

Lord, words cannot express the joy I feel in recognizing your gift. I thank you with my whole being that you have given me the gift of new life and pray that I may be a good steward of this great gift. Amen.

For Continued Growth:

Share the joy of your salvation with others.