



PREPARED FOR YOU BY
THE MUMC WORSHIP COMMITTEE AND THE
SOCIETY OF ST. ANDREW

Preface

About Lent

Our participation in the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is at the heart of the Christian faith. We are delivered from sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and by the Holy Spirit we are born into eternal life with God. The seasons of Lent and Easter call us to remember the mystery of our redemption in Christ and to more fully participate in his life-giving spirit. It is also a time for Christians to become engaged in the process of spiritual renewal.

The period of Lent is forty days, which recalls Jesus' wilderness fast of Mark 1:13. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and continues until Easter. Sundays are not included when we count the days of Lent, thus making the 40 days of Lent. Even in Lent, each Sunday is a little Easter a celebration of the resurrection.

The Journey Begins

The season of Lent is a journey in which we have been given the opportunity to grow closer to God through Jesus Christ. Again this year, MUMC has teamed with the Society of St. Andrew to create this Lenten devotion to reflect on repentance, forgiveness, and renewal. Our theme this year is "Into the Wilderness." We suggested Matthew 4:1-11 (Jesus' Temptations in the Wilderness) and the hymn, "Jesus Walked this Lone-

some Valley," as background for our writers, and we asked them to reflect on one of the following:

- Tell a brief story about a time your faith was tested.
- How have you felt Christ's presence in a "wilderness" experience in your life?
- How does your faith support you in difficult times?

As you make your way from Ash Wednesday to Lent, we encourage you to reflect, for yourself, on how your faith supports you in difficult times and how you feel Christ's presence in your "wilderness" times and places.

The Society of St. Andrew was formed in 1979 as an intentional community of two families called to life and ministry together in Christ. It has grown into an ecumenical, non-profit, charitable organization dedicated to leading others into lives of Christian community and service. To donate or find more information visit <http://www.endhunger.org>.

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February 18

Lenten Roads

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

I often think of Robert Frost's poem, *The Road Not Taken*, as I move through Lent toward Easter. Frost speaks of two roads, only one well-traveled. He decides to take the other one, grassy and overgrown, later saying this choice of path has transformed his life.

It seems to me that we, as followers of Jesus, are also on a road, a journey, a walk, toward the will of God, for ourselves and our world. In Lent and every day our path may be well-worn, may look hardly used, or may even appear neglected. We might be going down a road, but not one that leads us to the empty tomb and the good news of the resurrection. We may not be heading toward a life-giving encounter with the risen Jesus, but down a road of glitter, flashing lights, nostalgic memories, and the old sweet songs that we like to hear. We may be on the path of temptation, a path the world tells us will bring us happiness and joy.

The Road Not Taken beckons us away from the world's path, offering a very different destination. We are able to take this road—to face challenges and temptations with courage and grace—only because we know that God is always with us.

Where is God opening a new way, making a path for you?

Prayer: Dear God, help me today to make the choice to follow you, in this Lenten season and every day of my life. Amen.

John LeGault
Newport News, VA

February 19

Tears from Heaven

Scripture: John 11:35

I recently lost my brother unexpectedly, the third major family loss in less than two years. Because he lived far away, there was no chance to say good-bye. I cried unashamedly at the news of his passing and remembered Jesus' reaction when he learned of the death of his friend Lazarus.

My grief has been complicated in that my brother, though baptized, was not a believer. He was highly intelligent and lived a life filled with kindness toward others. Yet, I ask myself and God if I will ever see him again after this life. I am filled with guilt for not talking to him more to challenge his unbelief, and I pray that God forgives me.

I find I have been wandering in the "wilderness" of grief and confusion. How could my brother's brilliant mind discount God's hand in creation? Am I the one who has been wrong about my belief in God? I am reminded that many learned minds have wrestled with these types of questions down through the ages.

My difficult journey continues, but I know I am not alone. I am grateful for family and friends who lovingly support me. By faith, I am learning to let go and trust God to make decisions that “pass all understanding.” I know my Lord walks with me as we shed tears together for the passing of one of his beloved children.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for walking faithfully with us when we journey in the wilderness. Amen.

Bob Brooks
Fredericksburg, VA

February 20

God Speaks Through People

Scripture: Mark 12:30-31

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the greatest commandment, and the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

My life changed drastically after 46 years of marriage. I was led to a place I now call home. It seems as if I lost everything. My home was gone, my family was forever changed, and my job was gone. Now I must fend for myself or so I thought.

I met a man (Jim) who taught me how to forgive and that I could love and be loved again. He taught me to have a personal walk with God. He showed me how God can change lives by sharing his story with me and showing how his life was totally changed by accepting

Jesus as his Lord and Savior. He had lived an ungodly life of neglect, alcohol abuse, adultery and cancer. Finally he came to his knees and begged for forgiveness and asked that his life be changed.

I accompanied him to AA meetings and his cancer support group. I held his hand as he went through the dying process. I can't believe I could love a person with such a back ground, but I saw the “miracle” God had performed in his life. Jim was now loved and respected by all those who came to know the changed him.

He was searching for a new church home of acceptance here, but none seem to fill the void that his former home church had made.

Jim had worked with his former church, The New England Bible Church of Andover Massachusetts, helping aide's victims, back in the time when aide's victims were untouchable and un-loveable. He was acknowledged in a book written by Linda Murdock entitled “Rainbow of Hope” for her ministry L.I.N.D.A. (Love Is Never Dying Alone).

Five churches' in our area prayed for him. When he received word that his life here on earth would soon be over, he went to them to thank them for their prayers.

On the day Jim went to be with the Lord, I came here to the Milford United Methodist Church and was welcomed. I knew Jim would have loved it here too.

He loved Jesus, Crosses, Green and Red Ribbons and “Snoopy”. I still feel his presence. He wants me to love and be loved. I believe I have found this love again here.

Prayer: Thank you Lord for bringing people into my life who help show me Your loving ways. God is good and has a wonderful plan my life.

Janet Johnson
MUMC

February 21

The Potter and the Clay

Scripture: Isaiah 64:8

One Sunday morning, an hour before I was to lead worship, my wife indicated she was ill—sick enough to warrant an immediate trip to the emergency room. Once we arrived, it was clear things would take a while, so I left and raced back to the church to fulfill my morning worship obligations. It was a difficult morning. By the time I returned to the hospital, her medical team had reached a diagnosis: my wife had a rare type of cancer, called Leiomyosarcoma. They rushed her into a lengthy surgery that same afternoon. While the surgery went well, and she was discharged from the hospital within a week, our lives were already changing.

To that point, our 38 years of marriage had been traveling mostly in the “highlands” of life. Soon we would be struggling with a different journey: a wilderness experience, as we learned that the cancer had returned with a vengeance. The doctors suggested that my wife had six months to a year to live. My wife met

the challenges with grace, saying immediately, “I plan to go as far as I can, for as long as I can.”

As we drove home, contemplating the difficult times to come, my wife remembered some words of scripture from the book of Isaiah. “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the Potter; we are all the work of your hand.” That verse provided comfort and strength to her for the remainder of her life. She carried it with her and shared it frequently, certain that, in all things, she was being formed by God’s hands.

Now, thirteen years after her death, I still cling to those words, knowing that we are all the work of God’s hand. God molds us and shapes us in every wilderness experience!

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for holding us in your hands and molding us into your people, that we may serve you in every situation and through every challenge. Amen.

Buzz Moore
Front Royal, VA

February 22

Getting Quiet, Hearing Divine Directions

Scripture: Isaiah 30:15-16, 20-21

Years ago, I was devastated when a job that I thought God had led me to was given to another per-

son. It didn't make sense. Professional colleagues were as stunned as I. Had we not read the Holy Spirit's cues properly? "There's no way you didn't get this position," one of my references said, comparing the other applicant's published credentials with mine. Some people wondered if something underhanded was going on; others believed that God must really need me somewhere else; some thought both.

And so I entered the wilderness of depression, waiting, self-doubt, and second guessing. I tried to stay positive, pray often, and read scripture. One day, this Isaiah 30 scripture leapt off the page at me, and I knew I was on holy ground. By God's grace, my season of wilderness became a period of peace and trust.

Before long, a friend pointed me toward an opportunity which became communally affirmed as my true call. My husband and I packed up our "tent," moved 200 miles, and entered the blessing of being in God's will and God's time. Whenever I've been in the wilderness since—in fact, I'm there now—I've come to treasure the time of returning and rest, remembering the Lord's grace is near.

Prayer: Lord, when things don't make sense, remind me that all I have to do is return—return to you, rest in you, listen for your still, small voice—and you will show me which way to go. Thank you for your faithfulness in the wilderness. Amen.

Katy Yates Brungraber
Akron, OH

February 23

God's By Your Side

Scripture: Psalm 23:4

Several years ago while I was pastoring four small churches, one of the churches decided to leave our denomination. They announced their plan by refusing to set a salary for me. Because of their action, I knew that I would likely be moved to another pastoral appointment at the next Annual Conference, but I didn't know if the church would continue to pay me in the interim. I grieved the church's decision, and I worried about how I would get by on a reduced salary.

Part of my routine at that time was to spend some time each morning walking. This time was also my prayer time. One morning as I was walking I had a vision of something being lowered over me. (The only way I can describe it is as "the cone of silence," like on the old TV show, *Get Smart*.) As I saw that image I could hear God saying, "Do not be afraid. I am protecting you."

From that point on I had that peace that Jesus promises us in John 14—his peace, not as the world gives, but something more, better. I also felt I knew something about the dark valley that David talks about in Psalm 23.

Prayer: Lord, the world has many obstacles to derail our journey of faith. I give thanks that you are always by my side. Amen.

Paul Greer, Bedford, VA

February 24

Angel Light

Scripture: Hebrews 4:14-16

This passage from the book of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus suffered pain and temptation. Our Savior knows human weakness. This assures us that God is with us when we are tempted and tested. God's angelic presence surrounded Jesus, when he was tempted in the wilderness and as he agonized on the night before his death in the Garden of Gethsemane. God promises to be with us when we have lost hope in God's call.

I remember a pastor whose fondest dream was for his church to undertake a ministry of food and presence for the poor of the community. When the board of the church refused, the pastor began to lose hope for the church and faith in his work. At another church, a member fought hard for the church to install a playground for all the neighborhood children. When the board was unwilling to do this, he walked out of the meeting and sat alone, despairing, on a bench outside.

Angels came to each. The pastor visited a supportive member, who told him of the times her work with the blind had left her in hopeless despair, and of how, each time, she was assured through prayer that God would give her new strength. The church member looked up from his bench and found that his own minister had come to sit by his side and to lay a hand of support and peace on him.

Prayer: God of life and hope, let your presence rest on us in our fear and despair. Renew us and send us, restored, to be your light for the world.

William E. Olewiler
Fleming Island FL

February 25

TREES OF THE LORD

Scripture: Psalms 104:12-17

And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper. ~ Psalm 1:3 (KJV)

God's word compares us to trees. In Numbers 24:6, we are compared to Lign Aloes (healing) and Cedars (strength). But lets look at what trees actually do, and compare that with us believers.

Trees provide food and shelter to small animals and birds. They provide a place of safety to get away from danger. Trees also give of themselves without complaint (lumber). some trees are only in season a part of the year while they are at rest the rest of the year. They are resilient, not easy to move unless you have the right equipment. Some trees can't survive without the rest of the forest (Brazil nut Trees). They never stop producing fruit unless they are ill or dying. when trees die their decomposing bodies provide nourishment to those trees who are still alive.

So what kind of tree are you? Are you in season at the moment or out? Are you producing fruit or at rest, or providing nourishment? “The trees of the Lord are full of sap” God’s word is the water and nourishment we need to be a strong healthy tree, and His spirit is our sap. Trees of the Lord are planted by God to be used for his purpose.

Prayer: Father, thank you for your word, which teaches us and admonishes us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Jesus your son gave us an example of how you want us to love others-through selfless giving and sacrifice-but when it is done through love it is no sacrifice at all. Grant us mercy and Grace as we put what we’ve learnt into practice. Amen

Bob Hopkins
MUMC

February 26

The Mountain of God

Scripture: Micah 4:1(CEB)

In both the Old and New Testaments, mountain tops are where awesome things happen; where there is a holy voice and presence, and a new revelation from God. In Micah 4, it is a place for teaching the way of peace. We long for that place, and when we find it, we often return.

But where there are mountains, there are always valleys; life is not a constant mountaintop experience. Life happens. Lent, by its theme and nature, takes us

through valleys and calls us to grieve, to repent, and to hear the songs of life in a minor key. What gets me through those valleys is remembering that, out of that valley, above the clouds and shadows, is that brilliant mountain of God. That message is captured in this chorus of this great song:

*Even though the journey’s long, and I know the
road is hard,
Well, the One who’s gone before me,
He will help me carry on. After all that I’ve been
through, now I realize the truth
That I must go through the valley to stand upon the
mountain of God.*

(Third Day, Mountain of God, 2005)

Walking in the valley makes the mountain top more precious. Knowing that walking in today’s valley will lead me to the mountain of God makes the journey, even in the valley, a walk with God.

Prayer: God of the mountain and of the valley, remind me that you walk with me every step, every day. Amen.

Gilbert Hanke
Antioch, TN

February 27

Peril at the Pinnacle

Scripture: Matthew 4:5-6a (RSV)

Think of this scene as part of a mystery by one of your favorite authors, and pretend you have never heard or read this mystery before. What will happen next? How did Jesus get into this fix in the first place? I have always been baffled that it is the Holy Spirit, according to Matthew, that leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Following his baptism, the Holy Spirit leads Jesus immediately to his confrontation with evil that will determine the fate of the human race. But where does the devil take Jesus?

Remember the old board game, Clue? In God's Holy City Jerusalem... At the pinnacle of the Temple... With Satan, the villain, twisting Scripture as a weapon? Will even Christ be overcome, and will we all be destroyed forever by this evil?

We too may be assaulted by temptation, even in holy places and while at our highest and our best, as we seek to follow God's will at work or play, at church or in our homes.

Peril? Danger? During a holy season like Lent? Even while trying to follow Jesus daily?

Prayer: O Lord, when I am tempted by glory or power or wealth or anything else that distracts me from your will and your way, let me remember how, with obedient humility, you conquered the beguiling temptation to power and glory offered by our common adversary. Amen.

Bill Wade
Strasburg, VA

February 28

Defining Wilderness

Scripture: John 6, Matthew 2

Remember flash cards? They'd have a word on one side and its meaning on the other. Let's play it again: With "wilderness" on the front, what would be on the back? Most of us would think "desert," "without vegetation," "untamed," or "waterless place of death."

But the biblical record would give another definition. In the Bible, the wilderness is a place of rivers, vegetation, animals and green grass. Rather, in biblical terms, our flash card would read "solitary location" or "that which is uninhabited," implying loneliness or having been deserted by others.

We know loneliness; that deep seated, primal feeling that no one "gets" us; and that we are destined to walk alone, and find at the end that we are "surrounded by strangers that [we] thought were [our] friends." You know that feeling. I know that feeling. But most importantly, Jesus knew that feeling. From watching his disciples walk away (John 6) to feeling forsaken by God his Father (Matthew 27), Jesus understood true wilderness. But because he did, we don't have to. He promised that he would never leave or forsake us. (Matthew 28)

A familiar poem says that during the hard times of life, there are only one set of footprints, because during those times we are carried by a compassionate God. I would suggest that there is ever only one set of prints.

We are never alone. We don't have to suffer the wilderness!

Prayer: Gracious, compassionate, and faithful God, we give thanks that you are with us, through all of our days. We give thanks that we do not experience the wildernesses of our life alone. Amen.

Tom Bryant
Forest, VA

March 1

Why Bother?

Scripture: Deuteronomy 34:1-12

While cleaning a site where a trailer once stood on our property, I came across a box of discarded dishes. At first glance, there seemed no reason not to place the entire box in the trash. Then, in the box, I spotted a coffee cup

given to me long before by a close friend. It was what I had wanted, larger than most cups. Covered in grime, the cup's prospects didn't look very bright. I decided to reclaim it anyway. After a thorough cleansing, the cup proved to be as good as new, without even a nick. That cleansed cup brought enjoyment and thoughts of my friend to my morning cup of coffee for a long time.

There was a time I must have looked a bit like that cup. Covered with the grime of sin, my heart would have appeared hopeless. Yet, God took a second look and decided I was worth the effort. God believed in me

so much that Jesus went to the cross taking my sins with him and washing away all that dirt and grime. My heart was not made like new, but became new. I became a new person. I like to think that when God looks at me, God finds pleasure in the sight.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for cleansing my heart and setting me free from sin. Amen.

Anne Ownbey
Black Mountain, NC

March 2

The Wilderness Becomes a Garden

Scripture: Isaiah 51:3

In February 2008 I suffered a heart attack. My last check-up, just a few months before had shown no indication of any problems. But suddenly my life changed. One moment I was doing everything I wanted to do, and the next I was flat on my back in the hospital emergency room. Following heart surgery, I was home just a week later, encouraged by the doctor's reports and moving easily, though very slowly.

But the wilderness again surrounded me when, two weeks after my surgery, I was diagnosed with blood clots in my lungs. Suddenly I was confronted with the possibility of dying again. I remember lying in the hospital again, in intensive care, thinking, "God, why am I going through this?" It seemed God had saved me

once, when I made it through the heart surgery, but now, if the clots broke loose or moved, I could die. I struggled to make sense of my experience, but I continued to pray for healing.

I called on the Lord while I was in the wilderness, and I believe he heard me. God healed me by giving good doctors who did God's work, and giving me a body that responded to their efforts. The clots dissolved, and following a week in intensive care, I was able to return home.

Today I am back to full health, but I still take with me Isaiah's words, "The Lord will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden." I surely know that God is able to change the wilderness into a garden.

Prayer: Lord, prepare a garden for us out of our wilderness. Amen.

Jack Davis
Bedford, VA

March 3

Such a Temptation!

Scripture: Mark 8:34-37

A rear-view mirror offers a glimpse of where I have just been. When I apply this "mirror" idea to my spiritual journey, I am confronted by a most difficult temptation: I want my glimpse to reveal that my recent journey has been significant! Our culture preaches:

"Make something of yourself! Be productive; work hard; accomplish much." How early in the conversation with a friend do I hear the question, "What have you been doing lately?"—a subtle challenge, that, surely, I have been doing something significant, haven't I?

In our various ministries, we are tempted to look in that same mirror to see evidence of recent significance. We are encouraged to count our fruitfulness, to measure our vitality, to demonstrate our ministry's effectiveness—such a temptation, which our culture applauds!

Jesus' second temptation (Matthew 4:5-7) was to claim significance for himself: jump off the tower, be the most significant demonstration of God's amazing power. But the irony is, if Jesus had succumbed to the temptation, he would have missed the opportunity to do the real work that God had set before him! If I engineer my life so that my efforts will have significance and will build a lasting legacy to me, then I miss the mark of serving and making known my most significant God!

In the midst of my tireless efforts to prop up my own significance, Jesus drops God's truth on me... Take up your cross; follow me; lose your life; lose your significance—and do all this for the sake of the Gospel. When I fully embrace the significance of God, his Kingdom inches forward, my life has meaning, and the rear-view mirror glistens praise.

Prayer: Awaken me, O God, to the miracle of your grace, my strong ally in resisting the temptation to be significant. Amen.

Jay Hanke, Winchester, VA

March 4

Wilderness Trails

Scripture: Hebrews 4:15

Providence Canyon near Lumpkin, GA, better known as the Little Grand Canyon, is a place of complete wilderness. Descending 150 or so feet down the trail, one loses all thought of civilization. Sometimes in life we find ourselves in a metaphorical wilderness, cut off from everything that is familiar.

My husband was diagnosed with a rare lung cancer in early 2014. The journey through chemo and all it entails has been a wilderness journey. As I write, the future is uncertain. The tumor is stable for now, but we have no idea what six months will bring.

I wonder how Jesus felt when, following his baptism, he found himself alone in the wilderness. Did he feel deserted or afraid? Over the past months, I have experienced feelings from hope to despair, to fear and back to hope, as I remember the countless people who have held and continue to hold us in prayer. I am also comforted in the knowledge that nothing I can experience is as difficult as the test Jesus faced when tempted by Satan. Hebrews tells us that in his testing, Jesus proved his true identity. And because of his own experi-

ence, he understands and is present with us in all things, regardless of the outcome.

Prayer: Holy God, may I prove worthy of my identity as your child when the wilderness places of life engulf me and test my faith. Amen.

Anne Ownbey
Black Mountain, NC

March 5

Test Flight

Scripture: Isaiah 40:27-31

On March 21, 2012 I received a panicked phone call from my husband at 6:30 in the morning. Our 14-year-old son lay motionless on the kitchen floor. My husband and rescue workers did what they could to revive him. Yet deep down, I knew my baby was gone.

Our neighbor drove me to the hospital, more than an hour away. As I stared blankly out the car window in a state of shock, I noticed a bald eagle in a freshly-plowed field. At that moment the eagle crouched down, preparing to take flight. As the eagle began to leave the earth, I also heard my son's voice: "Mom?" As the eagle gained altitude, I heard my son again. "Mom, I'm okay. You know I'm okay." Thinking no one would believe me, I kept this experience to myself.

The darkest days were ahead, as I soon found myself in the barren wilderness of grief. Yet even through the bleakest times since, God has used my son's spirit

to balance my footing as I move forward in my faith. Now, whenever I see an eagle, I think of my son.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for staying with us—even when we feel lost in the wilderness of pain, grief, or tragedy. Help us this Lenten season to face the challenges before us. May our love for you become stronger, with every challenge. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Kelly Desclos-Estes
Montross, VA

March 6

Time Out

Scripture: Psalm 63

“O God, you are my God. I seek you. My soul thirsts for you. My flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land, where there is no water.” Like the Psalmist, we long to be close to God. We long to know God, to feel God's presence, to know that God is with us. We are desperately thirsty for God's living water. And yet we busy ourselves. We keep our eyes on our day-to-day tasks, and we let our own priorities rule.

Is it possible that we even create distractions, create activities and tasks to keep ourselves from doing what's harder? We long for God, but we don't do anything about it. We never offer ourselves to God, we never place ourselves in God's presence. What is holding us back? What are we afraid might happen?

The Psalmist knows we're missing something important: *“My mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.”* Why would we choose to miss out on this joy?

Being in the presence of God, standing on holy ground is not a time for action. It's not a time for us to run about, trying to do the right thing, anything. It's a time for wonder, for awe. It's a time to wait, to see what God has in store for us. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, *“Earth's crammed with heaven and every common bush afire with God. But only he who sees takes off his shoes. The rest sit 'round it and pluck blackberries.”*

We are so busy plucking blackberries every day. The blackberries of our homes, our families, our church. Paying bills, meeting obligations, doing our duty. We fill our days with activity, we wait impatiently, we're always on the go. But God, the maker of time, the One who numbers all our days, calls us to put down our blackberry pails, to wait, to watch, to wonder, to see the signs, simply to be in God's presence.

Prayer: Just for today, Lord, help me remember that in all of my life, in my waking and sleeping, in my activities and my rest, I am on holy ground that you have prepared for me. More than that, help me remember that you are present with me. Show me the signs of your presence today. Amen.

Randy Harbin
Austin, TX

March 7

God's Presence in our Grief

Scripture: John 14:1-6, 18-20, 27

My mom was gone. It had been a long struggle, and we had almost lost her once before. But this crisis was the final one. I went to the hospital to visit her, and she was blue. A code was called, and then a flurry of activity surrounded her. The medical team soon moved her into the intensive care unit, where she continued to receive critical care under their watchful eyes. Later that night, I received the call, "Come now." Mom waited until I arrived, looked at me as if to say, "What took you so long?" and then she was gone.

The hard part was afterward. I felt her loss so very keenly. Then one night, I heard her voice telling me it was going to be okay and that I shouldn't worry. The words were so like her, and the voice seemed so real that I started to get up to go check on her! I experienced that as the presence of God, the comfort that I needed at that moment.

I still miss her. I want to get up and check on her sometimes in the night, or I want to talk with her about something. Then I remember her telling me that everything will be okay, and realize that, yes, it is.

Prayer: Dear God, help us know, that with you by our side, that everything will indeed be okay. Amen.

Doris Page
Lynchburg, VA

March 8

Going Solo

Scripture: Psalm 116:8-10

I might best describe my life as a series of physical, emotional and spiritual journeys, and the most significant of these journeys have been as a solo traveler. The phrase "He had to walk it by himself," from the hymn, *Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley* takes me back to my 20s and a sojourn with a therapist, who introduced me to Sheldon Kopp's *Eschatological Laundry List: 43 Eternal Truths Illuminating the Human Condition*. #27 states, "Each of us is ultimately alone."

Over the years I have lived in the tension of loneliness as both burden and gift. Aloneness through broken relationships, serious illness, deaths of loved ones, and career disappointments has served as a crucible—transforming my relationship with the One who is the Source and Sustainer of my faith. In order to stay the course, I must nurture an authentic relationship with the One whose journey informs mine.

Isaac Watts' text, "I Love the Lord; He Heard My Cries" offers me these words of hope: "I love you, Lord; You hear my cry and pity every groan. Long as I live and troubles rise, I'll hasten to your throne. I love you, Lord. You hear my cry and chase my grief away. O let my heart no more despair while I have breath to pray."

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for your extravagant love. Enable us to trust that you are as close as the

air we breathe. Give us the courage to befriend loneliness in the sure knowledge that you are already there. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Laura Blevins Douglass
Harrisonburg, VA

March 9

Check Up Time

Scripture: Philippians 1:27a

I get a regular check-up to ensure my physical health. Lent is a time to check up on my “soul” health. Such a check-up helps me get in touch with how well I am doing in my relationships and soul-care. There is a biblical test I can take to indicate how I am living out my claim of being Christian. In trying to trap Jesus with their question, “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?,” the Pharisees prompted Jesus to give us all a test for our soul health. Jesus said they (and we) are to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself.” How are you doing with that? Can you pass the test?

These commandments show us what is important to God. God wants to know how we are loving one another. Are we really Christ-followers or are we simply giving lip service to our commitment to God's will and way? Is what we are doing, saying, believing, and practicing reflecting an indwelling of the Holy Spirit? After all, the Holy Spirit is God's gift to us to help us love. Is

Christ-like love shaping your life and your relationships? We Christians are called day by day by day, to love—and to love all.

How are you loving? It is Lent. It's check-up time.

Prayer: Lord of my life, give me the honesty to see how my living passes your test of loving. Amen.

Youtha Hardman-Cromwell
Washington, DC

March 10

Losing our Faith Compass in the Wilderness

Scripture: Luke 22:41-42

It was simply too much tragedy and loss. Within months of each other, two beloved church friends died while recovering in the hospital, one from an infection contracted just hours before their scheduled discharge. The church had prayed—I had prayed—for God's healing and their health. Had the prayers fallen on deaf ears?

Not long after, I was attending my mother's funeral because the cancer that we thought was in remission, wasn't. Next, I was rushing to the emergency room because another friend had suffered an apparent heart attack. The only prayer I had in me was, “God, do whatever you want, I'll get through it.”

I thought I was praying, “Lord, your will be done,” but that couldn't have been further from the truth.

With loving patience (and without lightning bolts) God showed me that, rather than praying as Jesus did, to a loving Father whose decisions are always best, I was praying as though I had to plead with a capricious tyrant. In my wilderness, I was shown how easy it can be to make God in our image and even convince ourselves that our negotiations are actually biblical prayers.

And, though my prayer wasn't worthy of it, God healed my friend, and the doctors could find no signs of a heart attack.

Prayer: Loving God, protect me from bargaining for what I don't really want, at the risk of losing your good and perfect will. Amen.

Joseph Phipps
Fairfield, IA

March 11

Look Up!

Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:3

After my mother passed away, I found myself in a “wilderness” place. As I mourned the loss of my mother, I was at the same time having difficulties in my job. I found myself taking more sick days and simply not feeling motivated to get up and out the door.

I felt Christ's presence during this time, so profoundly, the moment I acknowledged my need for change. Right then, I looked up and prayed, “God, just help me through this.” Once I looked up and saw Jesus, I began to realize that God was calling me out of that

line of work and sending me elsewhere. All God was waiting for was my attention to this new calling. As I reflect, I realize Christ was present with me all the while, and I am humbled by his love for me.

I believe that we create our own wilderness times—and that we stay way too long in the wilderness. Christ wants to comfort us during our times of grieving, and he wants us to seek him in all things. So, during this season of Lent, look up! Seek the Lord—he's waiting for you.

Prayer: Dear Lord, you humbled yourself for our sake. We thank you for your sacrifice. May we look up to see all the daily blessings you desire for us. Amen.

Tianna Durbin
Arcola, VA

March 12

While Wandering in the Wilderness

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

What did Jesus do the first 40 days and 40 nights He was in the wilderness? Verse 1 tells us Jesus was led into the wilderness. Verse 2 tells us what happened after 40 days and 40 nights of fasting. We know what Jesus didn't do for those 40 days: eat! But what did He do?

This chapter reminds us of days we were led into our own wilderness: the day we lost a job; the day a

loved one died; the day we were rushed to the hospital. What did you do for the next 40 days and 40 nights? It took that long for the devil to show up and test Jesus' faith. Did he take that long to test your faith? Time in the wilderness is part of everyone's life—there is no way

around that. What we can do is spend our (literal or metaphorical) 40 days and 40 nights wisely.

What are you doing now to prepare your faith for your next test? From Jesus' scriptural replies to the devil's tests, my guess is that Jesus spent his 40 days in prayer and reflection on the scriptures. He used that time to build up his spiritual armor so that he was ready when the devil showed his face.

Don't wait until you've been in the wilderness fasting for 40 days to scramble up some faith. In peaceful times as well as difficult times, spend time in the word. Learn God's promises, and God will renew your strength. Then the next time the devil comes knocking, you will rejoice in the knowledge that you are not alone in your wilderness.

Prayer: God, feed our hunger for faith. Engage us in your holy word, that we may be ready for any struggle that comes our way. Amen.

Lauren Holcomb
Richmond, VA

March 13

Faith Will Make Us Whole

Scripture: Mark 5:21-43

This story, this amazing story: a woman, made whole by faith. It's a miracle of Jesus, a testament to his healing power. But what does it mean for us? Does it mean that if we just believe enough, just pray hard enough, we'll be healed? We'll be free from our troubles; we won't die? Of course not. There are miracles, even today. People are healed. Cancers go into remission. Critical injuries are survived. Hopeless cases have happy endings.

More often, though, things seem to go the other way. Critical injuries are fatal. Cancers spread; people die. Why is that? Not enough people praying? Not enough sincerity in the prayers? Not enough trust? Not enough faith? I don't think so. There are people who would tell you that going to a doctor, any doctor, shows a lack of faith. If you're ill, you should trust that God will heal you. Place the matter in God's hands. God is waiting on your prayers, and then God will act.

Faith is not sitting idly by and letting things happen. Faith in God is not finding you have a life-threatening illness and refusing treatment, waiting for God to take action. Faith in God is not losing your job and waiting at home for God to hand you a new one. Faith is believing in the power, mercy, love, and providence of God, regardless of the outcome.

My friend Betsy, who died of breast cancer at the age of 36 said, "I know that God didn't cause this cancer. Growing up in the middle of pesticide-laced peach

orchards and drinking insecticide-laced well water probably caused this cancer. This cancer was not God's will for me. I know that God loves me and cares for me, and I will do everything I can to fight this cancer and try to overcome it. But I will not sap my strength and energy by wringing my hands, railing against the cancer, or worrying about it. If I can be cured and live to see my children grow to adulthood, I will be glad. But if I die, I know that God will be with my husband and my children as they grieve, and I know that we will be together again in God's time. Faith is knowing that God is with me no matter what. Faith is knowing that God will give me and my family strength to face what lies ahead. Faith is probably not going to make me well, but faith will make us whole."

Prayer: Lord, give me faith to believe in your power, mercy, love, and providence. In the broken places of my life, make me whole. Amen.

Martin Pugh
Camden, NJ

March 14

Stay the Course

Scripture: Jeremiah 29:11, NIV

I've relied on Jeremiah 29:11 for years, especially during difficult decision-making times. As a parent, it seemed only natural to share this wisdom with my son, especially when he tried to discern what vocation to pursue.

I encouraged him to explore all areas of interest, but especially encouraged him prayerfully to seek God's word and guidance in making his decision. I told him repeatedly that if he followed the path God had in store for him, everything would fall into place. He would find the place his heart would be content while providing good service to others.

He followed that advice, but everything did not fall into place. One obstacle after another plagued his college career. When he graduated, the job market had shrunk dramatically. As for many recent graduates, even interviews were scarce. After so much prayerful consideration in his educational journey, his faith was being tested. Frankly, so was mine.

Was God not listening to his concerns? Had I led him astray with my advice? Was our faith not strong enough?

No, continuing to have faith and seek God's guidance was the only answer, and that is what my son did. He continued his educational journey, though it would be another long and difficult road to travel. Soon he will be serving others as a health professional, with much hope and a future.

Prayer: Lord, lead us confidently to the paths you want us to follow. Grant us patience and perseverance to overcome the obstacles and challenges we face along the way. Amen.

Julie Erickson
Shawnee Mission, KS

March 15

Frenzy and Silence

Scripture: 1 Kings 9:9-13

Have you ever given everything you had to complete a project, or to bring an idea to fulfillment, or to handle a crisis? Have you ever worked yourself into a frenzy, doing your best and giving your all... and then, when you got a moment's respite, felt completely alone, lost and unfocused, deflated, and maybe even defeated? Have you ever felt at the top of your game, only to have everything come crashing down around you? Have you ever felt completely alone or God-forsaken?

That's where we find the prophet Elijah in this scripture reading. He has just turned the whole nation of Israel around, so that they are worshiping Yahweh, and all the ba'als (other gods) have been proven false. You'd think Elijah would feel great, but instead he's hunkered down in a cave, far out in the wilderness, alone and afraid.

God sends Elijah to stand on the mountain, to wait for God to pass by. As Elijah waits, he is buffeted by a fierce wind. Then the rocks of the mountain split from the force of a powerful earthquake, and, afterward, a great conflagration burns all around him. But God is not in any of these demonstrations of power. Instead, God encounters Elijah in absolute silence.

Elijah, the great and powerful prophet, has been so caught up in doing amazing things that he has lost the One for whom he was doing them. Elijah hides in

the wilderness in mortal fear because he has forgotten the One by whose power he acts. Wind, earthquake, fire... God does not appear to Elijah in cataclysmic events, but in sheer silence, where Elijah has no excuses, no tasks, no distractions, nothing but God to hold his focus.

Where in the busy doings of your life are you going to make time and space for God to find you? Can you allow some sheer silence for God?

Prayer: Great and powerful God, Lord of all life, when we find ourselves overwhelmed and afraid, when life comes crashing down around us, give us courage, like Elijah, to wait through all the turmoil. Open us to hear your voice in silence. Amen.

Gary Milberger
Topeka, KS

March 16

Angels, Cake, and Water

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:1-8

During my eight-year tenure as a District Superintendent in The United Methodist Church, I often had to make difficult decisions that were not popular or well-understood. Such decisions were wrenching for me to make, and usually the reasons behind the decisions were confidential and could not be explained. Because of these decisions, I was challenged, questioned, and even ridiculed. These times were wilderness times.

I felt like Elijah under the broom tree, wanting to throw in the towel and die.

But then I would get a phone call from someone who wanted me to know that God had laid my name on their heart, so they had spent the day praying for me. Another time someone called the office to schedule an appointment to come and give me a blessing. She came and washed my feet and gave me a scripture to carry with me throughout my ministry. Another time I got a note in the mail from someone who apologized for their behavior toward me.

All of these were gifts from God's angels, offering me "baked cake on hot stones and a jar of water"—refreshment for my soul, sustenance for the journey, gifts of grace, signs of Emmanuel, "God with me." Thanks be to God for angels and provisions in the wilderness!

Prayer: Emmanuel, God with us, thank you for being with us wherever we might find ourselves. As you sustained Elijah with angels, cake, and water, give us your sustaining grace to carry us through our wilderness journeys. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Tammy Estep
Virginia Beach, VA

March 17

The Joy of Trials

Scripture: James 1:2-3 (The Message)

On April 30 last year, I was having lunch with some co-workers at a restaurant in downtown

Lynchburg, Virginia. As our lunch ended we heard a train passing, followed by several loud thuds. I glanced up and saw the restaurant's servers looking out of the window in horror.

Standing up, I could see the reason: a train had derailed and was on fire about 100 yards away. You may already know the rest of the story. No one was injured, and the world kept turning.

The way people dealt with this challenge showed their true character. Despite the uncertainty of the situation—I was pretty sure I was in my last minutes on earth—I didn't see people panicking or trampling one another. In fact, I witnessed just the opposite! I saw people helping a disabled person to safety, even though doing so had the potential to cost them their own lives. Everyone worked together to get all the people in the vicinity safely away.

How we act under pressure shows our faith's true character as well. Despite the danger, I wasn't afraid, because I knew I wasn't alone. I was at peace, knowing God was with me.

Prayer: Lord, you know what it is like to be tested. Help me to weather life's storms knowing you are with me. Let me trust that you will use the trials to make me a stronger disciple. Amen.

Chris Howell
Lynchburg, VA

March 18

Is God With You?

Scripture: Exodus 17:5-7

Have you experienced a wilderness time that led you to wonder if God was with you? While it may be hard for us to recognize God's presence with us sometimes, we have, as our primary example, Jesus' faith, facing temptations in the wilderness prior to his journey into public ministry.

One of my wilderness challenges involved a superior questioning one of my gifts, a gift that, through God's call, I had developed over many years. I was devastated when that gift was called into question. I felt lost, with no road to follow. However, as I prayed, I received an answer. A short time later, I was invited to use the gift in a very different way—a way that might lead a congregation to a new beginning for them.

I believe that we all do face challenges. But I know that God knows our needs and has a plan. The Israelites wandering through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land found that God was with them, giving them water when they thirsted. God was also with me in a time of great need. My colleague's question, which so devastated me at the time, put me in the right place to respond to God's call. God knew more than I did about how I could use the special gift most effectively for him.

Prayer: Thank you, dear Lord, for knowing best what it is we need to do with your precious gifts. Thank

you for finding us in our wilderness journey and reminding us that, as you were with Jesus in his wilderness temptations, you are with us, whatever the challenge. Amen.

Nora Ramirez
Winter Haven, FL

March 19

Out of the Wilderness

Scripture: Joshua 1:5b; Matthew 4:11b

Many of my wilderness experiences have grown out of times of illness, or even times of worrying, fretting, or stewing over imagined symptoms of some drastic disease. While in these wildernesses, I tend to turn inward and spin my wheels worrying about what might happen. I neglect God. When Jesus walked that lonesome valley, being tempted to compromise his values, he turned to his Heavenly Father, quoting passages he had learned from the Hebrew scriptures. Jesus gave us the example of turning to God with each matter of concern, and he showed us the way out of the wilderness.

A number of years ago, during one of my times of anxiety about some potential illness, God spoke to me clearly with the words, "I will never leave you or forsake you." What a blessed relief that promise was! It gave me hope and a feeling of being very near God. It brought me out of the wilderness. Some time later, I found the same words in Joshua 1:5. Probably I had

read that passage before, but on that one occasion, God spoke it directly to me.

Prayer: Our Loving Heavenly Father, you bless us daily with your abiding presence. Thank you for leading us out of our wilderness times. Help us to share your promises with others who are hurting. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Dodie Fauber
Lynchburg, VA

March 20

Water, Wilderness, Work

Scripture: Matthew 4:1

As we read Matthew's Gospel, we see the progression of Jesus' life:

Water. Jesus' baptism, filled with the Spirit, was surely the high point of his life, as the words echoed, "You are my beloved Son, and I am so proud of you." How many times do we, too, have experiences like this—saturated with the water of the Spirit, ablaze with new commitment, bolstered by a new vision, ready to take on the world?

Wilderness. From that high and holy moment at the Jordan, Jesus finds himself in the wilderness, a place throughout the history of the Hebrew people associated with testing. And he is severely tested as to who he really is and how he will carry out his mission. Yet he passes with an A+. When you go to your Jordan and

the Spirit fills you, giving you a vision from God that captures your imagination, do not be surprised when you find yourself in some wilderness, tested; your ears filled with whisperings, "You cannot do this. You aren't smart enough or gifted enough. Take the easier way."

Work. Jesus comes out of the wilderness and goes to work teaching and preaching and healing. The trek through the wilderness actually prepares

him even more for the work ahead. When, with God's help, you have made it through the wilderness, succeeding at challenges (many in your own mind), you always feel stronger and more focused on what needs to be done.

Water, wilderness, work: where are you right now?

Prayer: Lord, whether we are in the water, the wilderness, or the fields, we know you have been there, too, and we rejoice in the confidence that you are always with us. Amen.

Bass Mitchell
Gainesville, VA

March 21

I Want it Now

Scripture: Luke 15:11-32

We all know the Parable of the Prodigal Son; we've heard it a thousand times. Every time I've read this parable, I've looked for myself in it. Since I've always been a bit of a goody two-shoes, I've always thought of my-

self as the older son. I haven't ever been able to relate to the idea of wasteful, riotous, or dissolute living. I tend to give measured responses, spend carefully, avoid highs and lows and sharp edges. Lately, though, I've spent some time thinking of myself as the younger son.

How often do I ignore God or turn away from God? How often do I try to do things my own way, on my time? How often do I try to make things happen the way I want them to happen, or try to control outcomes? How often do I say, "God, I'm going to have to go out and do such and such, because I can't trust you to act in a timely fashion"?

I get caught up in plans I make in my own mind, and I can't even imagine that God has something more wonderful in store for me. When I do that, though, I settle for so much less than God is willing to provide, because I'm not willing to give up my control of things and put my trust in God's goodness and grace.

When we turn away from God, when we try to be in charge, try to do things our own way, when we claim we can make it on our own, then like the younger son, we settle for being slaves or hired hands, rather than children of God and heirs of God's kingdom. We settle for being less than God intends us to be.

What is God's intention for you? Are you seeking it?

Prayer: God, your love is greater than I can imagine. When I find myself in wilderness places, wrap me

in your love and give me patience and strength to seek your will and your way. In Christ's name, Amen.

Anna-Ruth Mellon
Ft. Myers, FL

March 22

Shared Prayer

Scripture: Philippians 4:4-7 (KJV)

Surgery! Not a word I wanted to hear. I was facing major surgery, to correct a problem I had not known existed. My prayers were frantic and full of questions: What is going to happen to me? To my family? What about the people who depend upon me? There were so many questions, but no answers—just what felt like a platitude: "Everything is going to be okay," which was not exactly comforting!

But then, friends and fellow church members started letting me know they were praying for me and for my surgeons. Awareness of those prayers strengthened my awareness of God's presence. All fear did not suddenly disappear, but the "peace that passes all understanding" became very real to me. Knowing that people were praying for me and for my particular situation had a calming effect that really did make everything better.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for those who pray for others and for those that tell others they are praying for them. Amen.

Carolyn P. Maness

Lynchburg, VA

March 23

Life's Transitions

Scripture: Joshua 1:9

As I reflect on the major transitions in my career, I can see how easy it would have been to be discouraged or lose hope. Yet, because of my faith in God, what could have been major detours or roadblocks became only small bumps on the road.

Through every transition, at every stop on the way, God has guided me, giving me strength and opening new paths or opportunities. My latest opportunity, in retirement, is serving as a part-time hospice chaplain. Because of my Spanish speaking background, God put me in the right place to work with Spanish-speaking patients and their families. To be able to help patients and their families in their end-of-life time and offer them hope and comfort, sometimes simply reaching out in a ministry of presence has been especially meaningful to me. As I offer them Christ, I am reminded of God's promise to be with us wherever we go.

Through all of life's transitions, in spite of discouragement or uncertainty, I have felt the reassuring presence of God, strengthening and guiding me so that I can be strong and courageous in faith and life.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for your reassuring presence as we travel through the wilderness places of our lives.

Sam Ramirez
Lakeland, FL

March 24

Bread for the Wilderness Journey

Scripture: John 6:31-35 (CEB)

Five years ago I found myself stumbling through the wilderness. Three tragic events, including my own battle with cancer, combined to form "the perfect storm." Life turned upside down and my future was no longer certain. I knew God was in control, but struggled to make sense of everything that was happening. No words of comfort or spiritual clichés helped me battle the ensuing depression. Without being able to trust the future, I just kept walking.

Only time in the wilderness, gathering each day just enough to get me through that day, gave me something to hold onto. The manna that God sent was something I really didn't recognize for a long time. Help from family and friends I expected, and even took for granted, often without seeing it as the rare gift it was.

But one weekend, during my darkest days, a light shone on the "manna" that came through people who had been strangers: my counselor and two treatment nurses. I experienced unconditional love from these

women, who gave beyond what their job descriptions required. As I reflected on their extraordinary care, an understanding of God’s true manna—grace, unmerited love, presence, and forgiveness—settled over me like a warm blanket, embracing and sustaining me through the difficult times. My own heart was “strangely warmed” and my faith became alive as never before, knowing how much God loves me.

Prayer: Lord, help me to see you walking beside me, enduring with me, and sustaining me along the way, through each and every day, in all of life’s circumstances. Thank you for loving me, Lord. Amen.

Susan Hughes
Rocky Mount, VA

March 25

God’s Rewards

Scripture: James 1:12

I doubt that any of us can imagine how hungry Jesus, a young man in the prime of his life, felt after his forty-day fast—because few of us have fasted for forty hours even, much less forty days. Certainly the extended fast would leave him weak and vulnerable! But with God on his side, Jesus resisted temptation.

When I think of fasting and temptation, I fall back on my own limited experience. My husband and I joined a weight-loss group, and although we were allowed to eat sufficient healthy food, it was less than we had grown accustomed to, and we sometimes felt hun-

ger. We were tempted to snack, and our willpower was frequently tested. Our rewards came as we remembered and began to realize our goal—when stepping on the bathroom scale registered lower numbers than before.

When we ask for God’s help in resisting temptation, we have the assurance that God is there every time we call on Him. God generously and willingly pours out his goodness and mercy on all of us. Sometimes we get so caught up in the temptation or in fighting it, that we lose sight of where God has placed us or what God is calling us to do. Sometimes when we pursue an answer through prayer, it never comes. But God is present, and God’s spirit guide us and help us resist temptation.

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, we are surrounded by temptation. Be present in our lives, accept our love for you, and share with us the crown of everlasting life. Amen.

Neola Waller
Virginia Beach, VA

March 26

Why Go Into Wilderness?

Scripture: Psalm 23:4

The Wilderness Preservation Act of 1964 includes this succinct yet poetic definition of wilderness: “... an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who

does not remain.” I believe wilderness can assume whatever form I let it take in my life.

Some people go into wilderness seeking something, perhaps not knowing what they’re seeking or being unaware they’re seeking anything at all. Others go to get away from the crowd, or to figure things out. I went into the wilderness because I was running away from the church.

A series of experiences after college left me feeling disconnected from and cynical about my church. For ten years I drifted, still clinging to faith in God. I even changed the religious designation on my military dog tags to a generic “Christian,” as a reminder I still believed. I felt cut off from the faith community, yet God walked with me the whole time, leading me though we were traversing a dark and dangerous valley.

Gently, over many years and through many events, Christ led me to a new faith community, and eventually to pastoral ministry. Glory be to God, who is grace-full beyond our wildest dreams!

Prayer: Lord, when we wander off your path, go with us and lead us safely back. Amen.

Charlie Stribula
Nokesville, VA

March 27

Sharing the Load

Matthew 16:11-30

Jesus has been having a tough day. Frankly, it has been a tough career, and it never seems to get any better. You’d think it wouldn’t be so difficult for people to accept good news! The “haves” don’t appreciate his message, and the “have nots” can’t believe it’s meant for them. All through the Gospels, we see Jesus’ special concern for people who don’t matter in the society of his day: tax collectors, sinners, lepers, thieves, outcasts, beggars, adulterers; those who are homeless, blind, paraplegic, poor, widowed, mentally ill, criminals; those who have no one to love them, no one to care for them. Strangely, or perhaps not so strangely at all, the people to whom Jesus is most drawn are those desperate to hear even a word of good news: folks who know all too well what it means to be utterly hopeless, folks who have spent far too much time at the end of their rope, folks who have never gotten any satisfaction—and who would give anything to have even a moment of it.

Here, Jesus issues a call: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” “I will give you rest...” What an offer for those who know their need! What an offer for those who can’t even imagine that they have a need Jesus could fill! What an offer for those grumblers and complainers whose souls are empty and tired, who “can’t get no satisfaction!”

Jesus offers help in carrying our load. He does not discount the load. He acknowledges it and offers himself as the yoke-bearer with us. Jesus offers to share

our burdens. Jesus is there for us. Jesus meets us where we are.

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” It’s an incredible image: you and Jesus yoked together, like a well-matched team of oxen, pulling together, step matched for step, sharing your load—in such a way that it feels, not burdensome, not like work, not an effort, not a crisis, not a trial, not a hardship, but in such a way that every hoofbeat and every heart-beat, every step of the journey feels more and more peaceful, more and more like rest, more and more like going home.

Can’t get no satisfaction? Don’t go it alone any longer. Been there, done that? Yoke up with Jesus, and prepare to be amazed. Weary and worn down, desperate for good news? With Jesus, there’s rest, and peace, and comfort, and there’s a welcome that will never end. Thanks be to God!

Prayer: Lord, you know my burdens and my troubles. Walk with me, and share the load today and every day. In your precious name I pray, Amen.

Elise Janssen
Rochester, MN

March 28

Be Strong and Courageous

Scripture: Joshua 1:1-9

We all have passages that speak to us in the core of our being. This is such a passage for me. In the first few verses of the book of Joshua, God tells Joshua three times, “Be strong and courageous.” That’s our first warning that this “following God” thing isn’t going to be easy.

When God called me to ministry, I was a successful consultant. To obey, I had to give up my career, sell my house, and move north to go back to school. My identity and reputation as a consultant had to be put behind me. All the credentials I had spent my life building had to be abandoned. My whole understanding of who I was had to change. “Be strong and courageous.”

I had to step out in faith. “The LORD your God is with you wherever you go.” Jesus promised he would never forsake us; he would send the Comforter to be always with us.

These ten years have been an experience in learning to walk with God, learning to trust him, and learning to cooperate with him in service to his Kingdom. It has not been easy and has frequently required me to “be strong and courageous,” but God has supplied the strength and courage when I would have faltered. God has been faithful through it all.

Prayer: Lord Sabaoth*, pour out your Holy Spirit on me, make me strong and courageous so that I might be willing to abandon my agenda to answer your call. Amen. *From the Hebrew, meaning “Lord of Hosts”

Suzanne Zampella
Connellsville, PA

March 29

Camino Calming

Scripture: Psalm 51:11 (KJV)

In 2013 I walked a 170-mile portion of Spain's Camino de Santiago de Compostela, a route pilgrims have traversed for more than a millennium. The destination is Santiago's cathedral, which, according to tradition, houses the remains of James, one of Jesus' closest disciples and friends. The day before I was supposed to leave to meet my fellow pilgrim in the city of Astorga to begin the Camino, I had a panic attack, affecting me both emotionally and physically. As I prepared to enter this wilderness experience of walking 12-18 miles a day for 10 days, suddenly I was overwhelmed with anxiety, fear, uncertainty and inadequacy. What had I signed on to do? Why had I ever thought this was a good idea? What if I couldn't find my companion pilgrim? And what was I going to do now that it was too late to turn back?

I've always said, "When all else fails, pray." And so I did, asking for peace and serenity, a reassuring reminder of why I had made this commitment, trust that I would meet God (and my friend) along the way, and an awareness of God's guiding, sustaining Spirit on the journey.

All those prayers, and more, were answered on the way. They seem fitting prayers for the journey toward the cross, and toward the hope of Easter as well.

Prayer: Guardian of my soul, guide me on my way this day. Keep me safe from harm. Deepen my relationship with you, your earth and all your family. Strengthen your love within me that I may be a presence of your peace in our world. Amen.*

*Joyce Rupp and Tom Pfeffer, *The Pilgrim Prayer* (a prayer they created for and prayed daily on their Camino journey)

David Hindman
Ashland, VA

March 30

The Fork in the Road

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

Each time I came to a certain fork in the road I met Temptation. I-95 North led home to family, while Rt. 13 South led to three churches on the Eastern Shore of Virginia where I had been appointed to serve as pastor. You see, the choice I had to make whenever I was returning from a Conference meeting was never easy. I knew Jesus expected those he called to leave everything and everyone to follow him. And when I was ordained I made a commitment before God and those gathered, to go where the Bishop sent me. But I was a wife and a mother, too, and it took all that I had not to take the exit north.

Jesus met Temptation as well when the Spirit led him into the wilderness. Instead of one fork in the road, Jesus encountered three. If he turned stones into bread, he could feed the world. If he enlisted an angelic

rescue, he could draw the allegiance of millions. And if he took the opportunity to be “king,” he could rule people everywhere as their earthly leader. But Jesus chose to resist the tempter; he chose to remain aligned with God’s will and purpose for him.

The tempter is clever. None of us, including the Son of God, is exempt from the wilderness of this life. When any of us comes to a fork in the road, the choice may be between one “good” and another. And that same Spirit that guided and sustained Jesus will also guide and sustain us, always.

Prayer: O God, after the example of your Son and by the power of your Holy Spirit, help me make choices that honor and glorify you. In Christ’s name I pray. Amen.

Chris Suerdieck
Emmitsburg, MD

March 31

Praying in the Wilderness

Scripture: Matthew 6:9-13

Twenty years ago in seminary, I chafed at the words of the Lord’s Prayer—all those “these” and “thys.” “Hallowed be...” “Trespases against us...” And the Apostle’s Creed was certainly not for me. “Thou shalt come to judge the quick and the dead...” “I believe in the holy catholic church...” I couldn’t wait for the church to get with it and update those words, to realize that we were near the end of the twentieth century. I

thought perhaps when my generation was “in charge,” we could move that archaic language out and start talking in church in words people could understand. Using words like these, I thought, it’s no wonder people leave the church.

I’ve grown up in the last twenty years, and I’ve discovered that those archaic words, spoken by my parents, grandparents, and generations before them—the same words I wanted to throw out—can bring me to tears in worship. I have found tremendous power and comfort in ritual and tradition, in being part of the community of saints, part of a line of believers stretching across centuries.

At times when my life was falling apart and my faith was so small that I had no words of my own, I have found strength and hope by repeating those ancient words, by coming back Sunday after Sunday, and letting the tradition, the ritual, the faith of the community carry me along until I could again find my own words and pray my own prayers.

Praise God for language, traditions, and rituals that bind the generations together in faith!

Prayer: Lord, you know our hearts and our struggles. Help us find, in your Word and in the traditions of our faith, the words we need to hear and speak. Teach us to pray. Amen.

Linda Owens
Louisville, KY

April 1

God Shows Up In the Strangest Ways

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-2

Seminary was a wilderness for me, but it's also the time when God showed up in unexpected ways. Over twelve months: I broke my leg in a soccer scrimmage. I flipped my car one morning on the way to work, then lost my job because I couldn't drive there. And the business office told me that if they didn't receive \$400 by the end of the day, I'd be forced to drop a summer class, which would have pushed me into an extra semester.

I thought I was doing what I was called to, and it seemed that the roadblocks kept increasing. My conversations with God were intense. But after I broke my leg and couldn't navigate stairs, a group of friends offered their couch in a house off-campus. After I flipped my car, acquaintances loaned me their cars so that I could travel to see my fiancée. And the day I was to be dropped from the class? I returned from lunch to find a note on my chair that said, "Jacob, God loves you"—wrapped around \$400 in cash.

I've never forgotten those kindnesses, or the way God answered those prayers through people. God does answer our prayers, even if it's not as we'd expect—and sometimes God calls us to answer the prayers of others.

Prayer: Amazing God, show me today how you move in my life, and give me the grace to be the answer to someone else's prayer. In the name of the resurrected Jesus, Amen.

Jacob Sahms
Midlothian, VA

April 2

I will be with You

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-3

I have these verses from Isaiah on a paper taped by my desk, visible to me every day as I sit to write and study. Some years ago, I copied them from *The Workbook of Intercessory Prayer* by Maxie Dunnam, in a format that let me insert my own name in the place of "Israel" or "Jacob."

Daily life for all of us is a series of mountains and valleys, rivers and fires. In 2009, I received word my father's death in his sleep. These words comforted me in my grief. Two years later, my brother called to say that my mother, too, had claimed the promise of the Resurrection. My eyes went immediately to that tattered paper, and I read the words, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, Andy, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. When you walk through the fire, Andy, you shall not be burned, and

the flame shall not consume you.” Those words continued to hold me up and give me strength.

Just last year, I received another phone call, this one from the Board of Ordained Ministry telling me that I would need to continue in my candidacy for ministry for another year, when I thought the process had been drawing to a close. I felt crushed.

Yet, in my disappointment, the Lord continued to lift me up, keeping me from being overwhelmed by the waters, and from being consumed by the flame. No matter what happens, I know that God is with me.

Prayer: My God, my Lord, I trust in you, wherever you might take me, and in whatever may come my way. Amen.

Andy Brock
Greenwood, VA

April 3

A Spirit of Power

Scripture: 2 Tim 1: 3-14

I’ve never been quite taken with the idea of giving something up for Lent; I’d rather gain something instead. And what I would most want to gain is courage. The scripture that keeps coming to me is Paul’s encouragement to Timothy “God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power...” Perhaps Lent is more about finding the courage to press on in an overwhelming world, than it is about giving something up to prepare myself for the coming crucifixion.

Jesus was fully aware of what awaited him in Jerusalem, if not throughout his ministry, then certainly from his experience at the transfiguration onward. Yet he pressed on, knowing that what was to come was far more significant than the personal pain and suffering he would endure. His love for the Father and his commitment to completing the work for which he was born were greater than his earthly fears.

Of what are we afraid? “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31) We have been called to “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19) Yet we, in the church, are distracted by just about everything else. We are timid in our calling and easily allow ourselves to turn away from it.

This Lent my goal is to seek courage in spreading the good news that Jesus Christ died on a cross for our sin and then rose from the dead to guarantee our presence with Him in eternity.

Prayer: Father God, we can only image the courage it took for your Son to hold a steadfast course to Calvary. As we prepare our hearts for Easter, give us that same courage to share your infinite love in a world that desperately needs to hear it. Help us be your light in the world’s darkness. In Christ’s holy name we pray. Amen.

Johnnie Draughon
Virginia Beach, VA

April 4

When Tragedy Happens, Where Is God?

Scripture: John 16:33 (CEB)

I found my faith tested in late August 1981 when my pregnant cousin Becky McGuire Heath was shot and killed. We grieved the loss of Becky and her unborn child. Weeks later, Becky's husband Larry was arrested and charged with the crime. Where is God in tragedy?

Becky's husband was eventually sentenced to death in Alabama, though long years and much legal maneuvering passed before a date for his execution was set. In 1992, before Larry's execution was carried out, Christian ministers opposing capital punishment requested a pardon. But God remained silent, to me, as I grappled with justice and forgiveness. Through this I have learned that sometimes our questions are never answered. Still, my faith became stronger as I learned that God's silence is not always God's absence. God is always with us. When we hurt, God hurts with us.

Prayer: O God, be with us when we our faith is tested by tragedy, that we may know your peace. In Christ's name, Amen.

Kathy Bennett Gochenour
Springfield, VA

April 5

Faith in the Lonesome Valley

Scripture: Luke 17:20

One of the persistent questions in my life is, "What is faith?" Jesus talks a lot about faith, yet he never defines it. Is it simple trust in God? Is it confidence that God will provide, no matter how badly things seem to be going? Or is there something more?

There are many people whose steady, unwavering faith I admire. Yet I find that if I measure my faith strictly as trust or confidence, my faith bounces up and down like an errant tennis ball. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, had his own crises of faith. The day after his famous Aldersgate experience, Wesley wrote in his journal that he was once again buffeted by doubt. He knew what it was like to be in the lonesome valley.

I've come to believe that faith is more a way of living than it is having absolute certainty. Do we live as people who believe? Do we worship even when we have doubts? Do we live in ways that show our love for our neighbor? Do we feed the hungry or just tell them to believe and God will provide?

Doubts may come and go. The human brain just seems to work that way. But we can commit ourselves to loving God as much as we can in each moment and loving our neighbors in whatever way we can. That kind of life of faith, combined with the life of faith of other Christians, can indeed move mountains.

Prayer: Give us faith, Lord Jesus, and give us the commitment to loving you and serving others even when we doubt.

Ed Winkler
Charlottesville, VA