

# Journey to the Neighbor

Devotions, Reflections, Poetry,  
and Prayers for Lent



Northwest Synod of Wisconsin  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



# Journey to the Neighbor



Hello dear friends,

More than 30 years ago, Pastor Joseph Bvumbwe from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi came to the US to complete his masters degree at Wartburg Theological Seminary. During this time, he attended an event for Christian educators where he met Kathy Oelschlager and subsequently her husband, Rev. Harold Oelschlager, who were living in Indiana. Pastor Joseph returned to Malawi and was elected Bishop of the ELCM in 1995. One year later, Harold retired and he and Kathy moved to Eau Claire and became members of Immanuel Lutheran Church.\* This is where the journey to our neighbors in Malawi began.

Throughout the years, the congregations of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin, St. Philip Lutheran Church in Roanoke, VA, and Glen Cary Lutheran Church in Ham Lake, MN, continue to walk alongside our siblings in the *Warm Heart of Africa*. We visit and welcome visitors, we grieve and celebrate together, we pray, worship, learn, eat, and share stories with one another, and we support ministries that serve our neighbors with the love of Jesus Christ.

In 2002, the first companion coordinator, Diane Kaufmann, and the youth at Immanuel in Eau Claire made gray and purple ribbons for people in the congregation to wear as a reminder of their Lenten theme, **Journey to the Neighbor**, and also acknowledge their partners in the ELCM. She wrote, "Journey to the neighbor is two fold: a physical journey, across the street or as far as Malawi, and a journey of the heart from self centered to being centered on God and the neighbor. We are on that journey from a deadly obsession with self to life for God, hence the color gray. It is the journey of Christ in the Passion, of emptying himself and giving himself for us. The colors of the ribbons were taken from the dress colors of the Women's Prayer Groups in Malawi, as described in Bishop Bvumbwe's seminary paper: Spiritual Disciplines:"



*"The top blouse is purple, which is a color symbolizing Prayer and penitence in the church. It is also a color for Bishop's clerical shirts in the region. The skirt is Gray. In most African countries Gray paint is not readily available. It is made by mixing black and white paint, half each in a container, in this way you can produce gray. The paint is then no longer white neither is it black any more. Throughout Christian history, black has been known to symbolize dark hopeless situation, while light on the other hand symbolize "day" known or revealed hopeful future. The group therefore adopted "gray" as their local symbol representing them as "women on the journey", they have left "night" and are moving towards "day" but are not there yet. The journey however has begun and is being undertaken. It is a faith journey "moving in transition". Gray is used in the skirt symbolizing "walking" and as headscarfs symbolizing "their thinking" remembering that they are not yet there where the Lord is calling them to be."*

With Diane's permission, we are rekindling this theme for Lent, and we hope to honor her years of effort, commitment, and education that equipped us to be active participants as we share the love of Christ in and through this partnership with our siblings in Malawi.

So, we invite you to consider what a **Journey to the Neighbor** might be like for you. The forty days of this season invite us into a time of contemplation - to consider the losses and difficulties, to acknowledge the pain and suffering, and to feel the need for justice in the world....

*'Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.'*

And yet, the Holy Spirit calls us to be open, curious, and attentive - dwelling in spaces of silence or rest that can reveal the transformation made possible through the abundant grace of God.

*"Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified.  
He is not here; he has risen, just as he said!"*



# Journey to the Neighbor



Reminded of our mortality, our capacity for sin, and our apathy, we walk toward the cross, acknowledging that we are complicated people carrying brokenness. Simultaneously, we live in the anticipation that reconciliation is not only possible, but done freely for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. As Christ abides with us, may we, in turn, abide with one another, using our eyes and ears, and hands and feet to bring good news to those who are longing for comfort, and are in need of hope.



But, what does hope look like? The answer to that is complex, contextual, personal and mutual. Although we have partnered with the ELCM for important projects like wells, disaster relief, and feeding centers, when we visit, we frequently hear words of thanks for our prayers. We have learned that this simple gesture feels connective, relational, and filled with compassion. And, it costs nothing to give or receive. Spending time in prayer creates unity in the Spirit, and provides us with mutual encouragement that can sustain us as we accompany each other on this journey.

In this collection of devotions, prayers, reflections and poetry, I pray that you find something that speaks directly to your heart -- living words that illustrate your thoughts, a scripture story that you can find yourself in, or images that connect us with our Creator and to one another. Please note, this does not have to be a solitary journey -- others from our synod, partner congregations, and friends from Malawi will also be engaged in these texts and practices during Lent. You are not alone. You are God's child - seen, known, and deeply loved, and God will meet you right where you are. And we are church together, messy and wonderful and capable of good things on this journey. We prepare to move toward the cross of Jesus, the One who is central in our faith and in our lives, who embodies and calls us into a life of peace and love through the JOY of his resurrection. Together we are Easter People. [Alleluia!]

Lenten blessings,

Deacon Laura Ramlow

*\*A condensed history of the Companion Synod Relationship between the NWSWI and the ELCM, written by Diane Kaufmann, is available on the synod website. Click the link below.*

**Water is Life; madzi ndi moyo:** In 2024, we will continue the Bishop's Initiative: Solar Wells for Malawi. This fundraising effort has a goal of raising \$40,000 to build two new deep-drilled solar wells in rural areas in Malawi. If you would like to contribute to this fund, you can write a check, and simply include a note indicating "Bishop Initiative Well Project" and send to:

**Northwest Synod of Wisconsin Office: 944 24 1/4 Street, Suite 2 Chetek, WI. 54728.**

If you would like more information about our partnership with Malawi or to give a gift online, you can visit:

<https://nswwi.org/malawi>

Thank you for your continued generosity!



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# Day 1



## Ash Wednesday

*Mortal Hope (Excerpts)*

By Cole Arthur Riley, *Black Liturgies*

“God has always seen sacred potential in the dust.”

God of the Ashes,  
Today, let us hold the tension of the story of our making - born of the dirt, beautifully connected to the earth we walk on. And yet, possessing the knowledge of our own mortality - that our common decay cannot be escaped. As we begin Lent, help us to become honest about the ways our societies and selfhoods are marred by injustice, cruelty, neglect, and greed. Help us to see our own role in the degeneration of the world: that as we push back evil around us, we might also admit those secret evils that dwell in us. As we name how we’ve been complicit in the ashes of this world, help us to bear them in solidarity and hope. *Amen.*

### *Breathe*

**Inhale:** I will carry the ashes.

**Exhale:** God, bring rest to the suffering.

**Inhale:** There is breath in these ashes.

**Exhale:** No death is final.

# Day 2



Deacon Diane & Rev. Greg Kaufmann

## Devotion

Matthew’s gospel begins and ends with a promise of God’s presence.

1. Matthew 1:23b – “...and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’”
2. Matthew 28:20b – “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

It is January 1, 2024, as we sit together in Diane’s hospice room to write this Lenten devotion. We are still in the Christmas season, but you’ll be reading this during Lent. As we near the end of our “age”, these promises take on new meaning for us. What does Jesus’ presence with us look like when one is in hospice? As we share some of our “God sightings” we invite you to reflect on how God has been present in your life.

Diane’s room reflects God’s loving presence in the small items/gifts that people have shared with us when they have come to visit.

- The TV screen is framed by a paper chain lovingly assembled by members of Diane’s Bible study group at Immanuel Lutheran. Each link has a personal message on it shared by a member of the class.
- Two vases of fresh cut flowers stand in front of the TV, filling the room with color and fragrance.
- A hand-made card graces a book shelf at the foot of her bed.
- A miniature potted poinsettia plant sits on the shelf above that handmade card.
- A stack of cards over a foot tall are on the dresser next to her.
- Diane’s I-phone rests on her chest as she lies in bed, and it is filled with messages from people across the world.

Diane has experienced “Jesus with skin on” each time a friend has stopped by for a brief visit.

Together we can give thanks this Lenten season that our God chose to be with us all from the cradle all the way to the cross and then the empty tomb! Thanks be to God.



# Day 3



Reverend Rodger Prois, Sarona

## Scripture: Romans 15:1-3

*We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."*

## Devotion

The question, "Who is my neighbor?" is posed to Jesus, by a lawyer, as a way to pin him down to a legal definition. Jesus answers him by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. He then turns on the questioner and asks another question opening the discussion to interpretation and discernment. What isn't asked is what should we do for our neighbor? It is easy to use the simple response of "love them". Paul writes to the Romans and suggests that we must please our neighbor for their sake. To do that we might have to move from our place of comfort and actually approach them, we might have to Journey to Them, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Difficult, if not impossible on our own, the Spirit moves us to share the Gospel.

I am reminded of the Michael Card song "Joy in the Journey". The lyrics are:

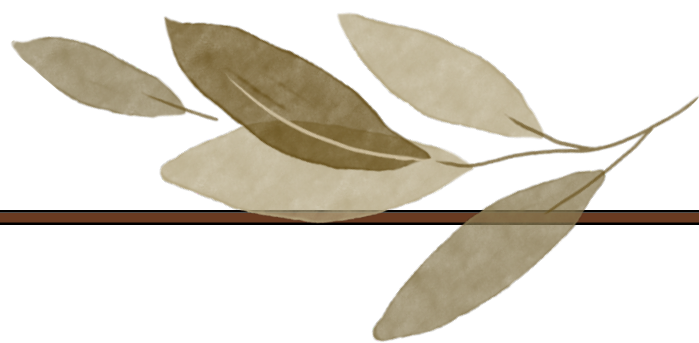
There is a joy in the journey, There's a light we can love on the way.  
There is a wonder and wildness to life, And freedom for those who obey.

To find joy in the Journey to our Neighbor could change our outlook on the endeavor and understand it as an opportunity to share the hope of our faith. The journey is not a burden but a blessed gift to all we encounter on the way. We often see Lent as a time of self-denial and inward cleansing, but should it really be about us? Jesus ended his response to the lawyer by saying "go and do likewise". Possibly, this season could offer a chance to lift our eyes from our navels and realize the neighbor needs us to come, and move us to form a new habit.

## Prayer

Gracious God. We ask that your Spirit, that is leading us into the future, would move us to love in action this season. Let our self-doubt and natural tendency to withdraw be replaced by the confidence that you are establishing the path and lighting the way. AMEN

# Day 4



## Reflection

Who are the neighbors that have been on your mind and heart lately? In what ways might God be nudging you to show up for them?

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# Day 5



Reverend Karen Ressel, Eleva

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## Scripture: Psalm 1:3

*“They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.”*

## Devotion

Due to a civil war in Sudan, people fled and became refugees in northern Uganda. As the violence de-escalated, they began returning home and discovered buildings, markets, schools and homes had all been destroyed. There was no electricity, or water, and only dirt roads. They were starting over.

Lutheran World Federation (LWF) supported them as refugees and was accompanying them as they re-built their villages and re-established their households. As part of the LWF team I found myself in Ikotos, Sudan one Sunday morning.

I, and a colleague, walked to a service at a hilltop church. The walls of the building had been destroyed, but the cross and the roof provided shelter. We could not understand the language, but the intonation and patterns of speech made the liturgy feel very familiar. It was comforting.

At the end of the service, a minister said something and, with his arm, motioned toward me. I had no idea what to do, I smiled and waved. Again, he spoke, motioning toward me. I stood and waved to the assembly. People were smiling. A third time he spoke, motioning toward me. I didn't know what to do! The woman in front of me whispered, “He wants to know your name.” I jumped up and said, “Karen!” People repeated my name, clapped, and smiled.

After worship, I discovered the woman was a teacher who had fled into the hills and continued to teach her students during the conflict. I thank her for her work and assistance. Then, she turned my Bible to the Psalm 1:3. Saying, “It matters not if we are root, leaf, or branch. We are all part of the same tree and all parts work for the good of the tree.”

## Prayer

Let us pray. Good and gracious God, bless the encounters that we have with our neighbors, both near and far, and help us to remember that we are all part of the same tree planted in streams of Divine Love, working together for the good of the tree. Amen.

# Day 6



*Belonging; For Being Known (excerpt)*

By Cole Arthur Riley, *Black Liturgies*

Divine Community,

We want to be known and we're terrified of being known. Of being laid bare in the presence of another. We are grateful that you are not a God who demands a spirituality rooted in some solitary existence, but it is hard to belong without allowing the direction of our lives to be dictated by those from whom we seek affirmation. Help us to daily discern the truth of our selfhood, that our communities would offer insight without commanding assimilation. As we find spaces that truly see and know us, help us to not run from them. The more beautiful a thing is, the more terrified we are of losing it. Do not let this terror keep us from the love we were meant for. And as we learn to accept friendship and care, may we be stirred to extend it to others. Keep us from contributing to loneliness and dislocation in the world, knowing that our freedom is mysteriously entwined with the freedom of those around us .  
*Amen.*



# Day 7



## Reverend Katie Wagner, Lake Nebagamon

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### A Blessing for Accompaniment by Meta Herrisk Carlson

There is urgency rising in search of the right thing to say or a way to fix what is hard or hurting.  
But the Spirit is pulling you gently back to stay in the sorrow and wait in the mystery of being together without all the answers.  
Just be here, she whispers.  
It is enough.  
It is more than enough.

### Devotion

We are not meant to do life alone. We are called together as the Body of Christ to be in relationship with God and with our neighbors. Just as God journeys with us in life and in faith, we are called to serve as Christ's hands and feet in a world often filled with grief, despair, and loss. In those moments, we are called to accompany others by offering a listening ear, giving space for hearing another's story or experience, or simply just being present in the midst of whatever they are facing. That is enough. It is more than enough.

In this season of Lent and as we make our way toward the cross, may you feel the Holy Spirit's presence in whatever you face, trusting that God is present and God sends others to lift us up and support us when we need it most.

### Prayer

Let us pray; God of compassion, you know all our hurts and sorrows. Empower us through the Holy Spirit to be aware of those who are hurting, those who are in need of a friend, in need of a listening ear, and in need of compassion and kindness. Above all, remind us that we are never alone in our journey and never without your love. Amen.

# Day 8



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### Reflection

Who in your life is grieving, ill, lonely, or suffering in any way? As you write, pause for each name, leaving space to consider each person carefully and what their individual needs might be.

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# Day 9



Karalyn Littlefield, Amery

Scripture: Isaiah 41:10

*Do not fear, for I am with you.*

## Devotion

A few years ago in early April, we were traveling to Northeastern Minnesota. After a several hours, the rain become heavy snow. Visibility was low and road conditions were treacherous forcing us to stop for the night. We were in Two Harbors. We needed breakfast, a head light was out and when I turned the wipers on, one of the blades flew off. So, off to the parts store and a venture to Judy's Café. A sign on the door informed us that the potato dumpling, klub, would be made, tomorrow. We order some for our dear Rosemary. Sliced and fried in butter, she enthusiastically ate them. Klub brought happy memories of her childhood in Two Harbors. It was to be her last meal of klub.

It is a coincidence. It is luck. It just happened. These are things we might say when we have no explanation to our questions. Why did the rain turn to snow? Who kept us safe on our journey? Why did we stop in Two Harbors? Why did the headlight burn out and the wiper blade pop off? Why is the auto parts store near the café? Why where they making klub? You may wonder where God is in this story. He was with me the entire journey. These are times that God shows up in my life. I only need to pay attention to God moments and miracles to know that he is with me.

## Prayer

Dear Lord, Help us to believe that you are always with us as you have told us and to know you are here through miracles and moments. In Jesus precious name. Amen.

# Day 10



Reverened Suzi Orlopp, Amery

Scripture: Hebrews 13:8

*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, forever.*

## Devotion

We live in an ever changing world. The seasons come and go, the days fly by on the calendar, and the light each day grows. Those are the obvious changes, but think about over the course of your life other more subtle changes you have seen. When I was little I was convinced onions were the worst food God created, but now as I have grown I learned really I just dislike raw onions (cooked and caramelized onions are pretty great). Every year when I was little we took my first day of school picture in front of the same tree. It is amazing to see how I grew but also how that tree changed the landscape of the yard around it as well. It is easy to understand and process the bigger changes we have seen, but the small ones truly impact our daily lives as well. Changes outside of our control can also impact us more than we know. The world is an ever changing place and during this season of Lent we have the opportunity to cling to the one thing that is ALWAYS the same. This is a season we journey through each year, it's a story where we know the ending. It is the simple fact that this story is a part of our story we know, we can see, a glimpse of all that is to come. While we may never know what the future will bring, how the landscape of the world around will change, we do know that our God is ALWAYS the same. Yesterday, today, forever...ALWAYS.

## Prayer

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*(Lutheran Book of Worship p. 153)*



# Day 11



Holli Jacobson, Eau Claire

## Scripture: 1 Peter 4:8-10

*Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you have received.*

## Devotion

Before the Malawi 2019 trip to Zomba Parish, Deacon Laura led a workshop about “Accompaniment,” a term defined as “walking together in our faith journey with Christ.” Peter’s message of love, hospitality and sharing our gifts helps us to understand how accompaniment is a two-way street, each party strengthening and growing the relationship with their unique contributions.

Our hospitable welcome to Malawi came in the Cathedral as we sat down to watch the Youth Choir. After one song, the choir encouraged us to come onstage with them to dance and sing along. We surprised the Youth Choir with “Tikondwere,” a joyful worship song that they quickly joined us in singing. This first night set the hospitable tone for the trip and laid the foundation for “walking together” in Christ.

Throughout the trip, our gifts were shared back and forth in many ways: Artistic gifts like songs, musical instruments and paintings. Spiritual gifts like preaching God’s word during worship in multiple congregations. Nurturing gifts like being invited to participate in Sunday school and sharing school supplies. Joyful gifts like playing soccer with the kids and photographing the breathtaking scenery and people of Malawi. Each of us contributed our passions to help serve one another and create lifelong connections with our new friends.

Some of the most heartfelt gifts were small but powerful examples of accompaniment. Connections came in brief moments like holding hands with a few the girl on a walk to church. The excitement of sharing photo albums of life in Wisconsin. Laughing while stirring nsima behind a home. Hearing stories about each other’s lives and cultures on the long van rides. Playing games like “keep away” with the women. Luke and Frank hoping in the back of a truck to ride with other teenagers. These often unplanned moments showed us how alike we are, despite living a world apart.

## Prayer

Lord, thank you for giving us the opportunity to visit our friends in Malawi. Give us the wisdom to find and utilize the many gifts you have given us so we can spread your love and better serve one another. Help us to be hospitable like our friends in Malawi, who have earned the title of “Warm Heart of Africa!” Thank you for helping strengthen our relationships and encouraging us to accompany one another on this journey of life. Amen.

# Day 12



## Reflection

What does it mean to you to accompany someone? What was so radical about the way Jesus accompanied others?

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# Day 13



David Derrick - Roanoke, VA

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## Scripture: Romans 12:4-5

*For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.*

### Devotion

These scripture verses from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome speak to how God calls us to live in community together. As we practice a variety of Lenten disciplines, often times in solitude, an important aspect of that time set aside is to remember we are always, always connected. We are connected to God inseparably and irrevocably by way of Christ and his cross. We are connected to one another by way of the promise that Jesus makes real in resurrection hope.

God creates us to be in relationship with one another; to be in community, even when geography might seem to separate. As we celebrate community living, you are invited to pay attention to the places and spaces in your own lives where God's intention for relationship building takes shape. Could that include the wonder of hospitality shared in song? Could that be prayers for strength and sustenance? Could that be mutual words of encouragement? We are one body in Christ, together. Let's share these stories with one another, let's intentionally strengthen established relationships and grow new ones all for the sake of living into the community God intends for us to enjoy.

### Prayer

God of love made known in Jesus of the cross, connect us one to another. May the gifts you entrust to our care serve the whole church and the world. Strengthen partnerships, empower holy disciplines, and fill the community you bring to be with the hope that only you can provide. Amen.

# Day 14



Mphatso Thole - Lilongwe, Malawi

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## Scripture: Romans 8:38-39

*For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creations, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

### Devotion

Apostle Paul wrote this letter to Romans when Christians were persecuted during the time of Roman Empire. Paul himself was put in jail for the sake of Christ's name. Besides all the difficulties Paul and many Christians faced, he remained stand still defending the name of Jesus he saw on the road to Damascus. Paul is writing to remind Christians all around the world that in the midst of misery we only find hope from the love of God in Jesus our Lord, the Lord of all lords.

As many countries are facing with various calamities, Malawi in particular is struggling economically. After Covid 19, came cholera, then cyclones. Now the Malawi currency devalued. What does these mean to a poor suffering Malawian? How can hope be found amidst these miseries and catastrophes? Paul is today reminding us that we will face all these. Yes rulers so far have imposed the devaluation of Malawi currency leading to hyper-inflation but God still loves us. God still loves Malawi. His love creates peace in the minds of those facing challenges. Besides all these, Malawians still have smiling faces as usual. They are warm as usual as 'Warm Heart of Africa' as Malawi is refereed to. Malawians still have hope in God for a better future through his love. Paul's words are still speaking to many Malawians amidst misery.

Nothing will separate us from the love of God.

May the love God through Christ be upon us. Amen!!



# Day 15



Bishop Laurie Skow-Anderson

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## Scripture: Matthew 22:37-39

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

## Devotion

I don't know what to say.

I remember a scene from a very old television series, MASH. Colonel Blake is holding a small Korean child and says, "But I don't know how to speak Korean." The company clerk, Radar, says "But you can smile in Korean."

How do you feel about meeting someone for the first time? Is it easy or difficult for you? For me it is difficult. I don't know exactly what to say, so sometimes I don't say anything. I say I'm a shy introverted Lutheran, and I confess at times it appears that I ignore my neighbors. I am afraid of being embarrassed, by saying the wrong thing or not being understood because I don't speak the same language so I don't say anything.

This Lent we are challenged to "Journey to the Neighbor." Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Perhaps loving our neighbor means trying to communicate. Being a good neighbor is making the effort to overcome our own fear and other barriers to connect meaningfully with our neighbors, even if it is just a smile and friendly wave. Perhaps loving our neighbor is making the effort to learn how to say "Hello" in Spanish or Somali or Chichewa or learning how to pronounce our neighbor's names; maybe it is just smiling, a universal language.

Talking to a new neighbor takes a bit of courage. It means moving outside our comfort zone. Someone once said that Jesus is more likely to invite you to move out of your comfort zone than your time zone.

What about talking to new folks who visit your church? Do you introduce yourself to visitors you see at church? Invite them to sit with you in worship? At coffee time? Give them a tour of the building? Try to remember their names?

This season of Lent we are invited to move outside our comfort zone to love our neighbor and take a small step to connect with someone new in these days before Easter.

## Prayer

Holy God, I'm afraid of looking stupid and saying the wrong thing. Please forgive me and give me the courage to be a good neighbor and to connect with my neighbors across the street and around the world. Help me to care for and love my neighbors. For Jesus' sake, AMEN

# Day 16



## ANXIOUS ONES

By Meta Herrick Carlson, *Speak it Plain*

There is stealthy restoration in singing together for it pulls our panicked breathing into one chorus of wind between measures, drawing deeply from where we need not be frightened.

Our bodies are fearfully and wonderfully made, with chemicals and instincts to protect who we are and what we already have. But this is mere survival, a barely being place.

How risky, then, that God is calling us out of our shallow gasps for air and into the deep, abundant breath of life, robust melodies that move us forward.

It is difficult to feel this wind all alone, so remember to sing together and often, always expanding the body and making room for shalom and the Spirit in the heart of your song.



# Day 17



Reverend David Hoadley, Osseo

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## Scripture: Leviticus 19:18

*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.*

## Devotion

There's a familiar story in Luke's gospel about a man asking Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answers with the Parable of the Good Samaritan. As a Jewish teacher, of course Jesus based his response on Hebrew Scriptures, where Yahweh had plenty to say about neighbors. The Ten Commandments are often divided into two sections: the first three about our relationship to God, and the final seven about our relationship to our neighbors. Coveting anything of our neighbors is specifically forbidden in the last two.

More of Yahweh's rules about neighbors are found in chapter 19 of Leviticus. "You shall not defraud your neighbor," (v. 13) "with justice you shall judge your neighbor," (v. 15) and "you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor" (v. 16) are all part of the Law. In verse 18, Yahweh is more direct: "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." In case the Israelites wondered as the man in Luke did, verse 33 offers a broad definition of neighbor: "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the native-born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."

Before the Chosen People ever entered the Promised Land, Yahweh makes love and care for the neighbor one of the basic tenets of living as people of God. In his daily life and in his ministry, Jesus is an example to humanity across the ages of what it looks like to put God's words in Leviticus into practice.

## Prayer

Holy God, we thank you for the ways Jesus taught and lived out a life of loving neighbors according to your Word. Guide us to protect and care for neighbors close by and around the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.

# Day 18



LOVE

By Cole Arthur Riley, *Black Liturgies*

### *Confession*

Caring God, We confess that we have not loved this world well. We have not loved ourselves. We have dismissed concepts of love as frivolous and naive, failing to recognize the wisdom in choosing tenderness and attachment in a society that trains us to exploit one another. We have lost our passions, allowing our days to be consumed with the practical and boring. Our delight has been drained as we try to survive exhaustion. We confess we are afraid, lacking the courage to risk ourselves on love for fear of losing it. We have taken advantage of those we know will not leave us, withholding affection and allowing them to receive so much more of our hatred than our gratitude. Forgive us. And have mercy on all our charades of heartlessness, that we would claim a life of more than mere survival. That we would love and be loved in return, all our days, in love's many forms. *Amen.*

### *Forgiveness*

Let your soul receive this rest: Forgive yourself, choosing self-compassion over unloved. Be assured by the divine that, despite your deepest doubts, you are lovable. That you are adored by God, as they look upon your face and swell with delight. May you be forgiven for how you've replicated lovelessness in the world. And as you are nourished by abounding mercy, may you also extend it, remembering that we are healed by both love received and love given. *Amen.*



# Day 19



Reverend Jamie Brieske, Eau Claire

## Scripture: Numbers 6:23-27

*Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:*

*“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.*

## Devotion

In 2019, my congregation, Immanuel Lutheran of Eau Claire, traveled to Malawi to visit our partner congregation, the Zomba parish. During one of our home visits, my group visited the home of a woman named Lillian from Zomba. She was growing peanuts in her garden to support herself and her family. We had a wonderful visit with her. At the end of our visit, she gave us two large bags of peanuts to take back for our group to enjoy. This was an incredibly generous gift as these peanuts were her livelihood. You will hear this refrain time and again regarding our partnership with Malawi and the ELCM. Malawi is truly the warm heart of Africa and the people we are in relationship with understand hospitality and what it means to welcome others. Lillian truly blessed us with her generous gift of peanuts and the invitation into her home. We learned she would often bring peanuts and other produce as an offering to Sunday church service in Zomba. People would exchange the food for money and leave it in the offering plate. During Lent we often reflect on giving as a spiritual practice. Lillian gave our group something that mattered to her. She truly blessed us! This Lent, may Lillian’s story be a blessing to you and inspire you to bless others as it did for me.



## Prayer

Generous God, may I give something that matters to me, so others may know they matter to God. Amen.

# Day 20



## Reflection

Who is someone you know who is generous? What makes them generous? What sacrifices are needed for us to practice generosity as we serve our neighbors?

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# Day 21



Jane Snowden - SAM, Rice Lake

## Scripture: Luke 6:31

*Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

## Devotion

My first thoughts were he must be from Minnesota and kin to Max or John from Grumpy Old Men!

When I moved to Rice Lake in August 2019, other neighbors were welcoming. Not the guy behind Door Number 3!

With time, our love of sports surfaced and we would chat outside about our Wisconsin teams. He carried a weight on his heart, and especially when our team lost on Sunday.. Mine too!

I grew up in a loving, faithful family and my parents taught and practiced the Golden Rule! Luke 6:31/Matthew 7:12 reads: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

And then in August, 2023, I was surprised by God and his timing, as I often am! I was recovering from hip surgery and my window was open. The ‘Dude’ from number 3 walked by and I shouted hello. He opened my door and maybe it was my walker or the pain on my face or just God’s timing that he offered to water my flowers daily & help with anything I might need!

And he seemed to be happy about it! I am not sure he portrays his actions as I do. However, since, he seems to have found the joy in doing for another. No matter the neighbor, the similarity is the same. Judaism: “What you yourself hate, do to no man. Hinduism: “Treat others as you would yourself be treated;” and the Native American, “Live in harmony, for we are all related.”

I believe God played a role in giving my neighbor a nudge. And when I took him a plate of Christmas cookies, for the first time, he invited me in to chat! Ah yes, the love of Christ shining brightly, neighbor to neighbor, in my little corner of his creation. Grateful!

## Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for holding hands with us and all of our neighbors. Your love in knowing our strengths and weaknesses; and when and how best to guide us to share these gifts with others. We give you thanks and praise for all acts of kindness. Give us wisdom to act when the nudge comes, that we might each be blessed to be a blessing to others. AMEN

# Day 22



FOR EMPATHY

By Meta Herrick Carlson, *Ordinary Blessings*

The world is not lacking  
opinions simplified by hindsight,  
advice for the weary,  
subscriptions to the standardized.

Be we are starving  
for love that resists these defenses,  
that can stand in the midst of suffering  
without getting too awkward  
of filling the silence with trite proverbs,  
wanting to earn its place by fixing  
what doesn’t need fixing at all.

If only the instinct was to abide  
before we explain and decide!

Listen for the Spirit  
who guides us into showing up,  
who shows us how to feel on behalf of another,  
who urges our quiet bodies alongside  
the ones who are not broken but lonely,  
the ones God loves already and always.



# Day 23

Reverend Diane House, Eau Claire

## Scripture: Luke 10:25-37

*Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus... but wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."*

## Devotion

A current question in our communities seems to be "Who is my neighbor?" Whether we are talking about homeless people, refugees, world-wide neighbors, political rivals, or the people who live in our neighborhoods, we want to know who our neighbors are and how we are to love them as ourselves.

As followers of Christ we know the great commandment but often find it impossible to follow. Jesus suggests that loving means showing mercy. May we be merciful in all the ways we love our neighbors as ourselves.

## Prayer

God of mercy, forgive us when we find your command impossible to follow. Open our hearts to those who need loving mercy. Fill them with the love of Jesus that we may love them, too. Amen.

# Day 24

## PRAYER FOR THE FARM WORKER'S STRUGGLE

By Cesar Chavez

Show me the suffering of the most miserable  
So I will know my people's plight  
Free me to pray for others;  
For you are present in every person  
Help me to take responsibility for my own life;  
So that I can be free at last.  
Give me honesty and patience;  
So that I can work with other workers.  
Bring forth song and celebration;  
So that the Spirit will be alive among us.  
Let the Spirit flourish and grow;  
So that we will never tire of the struggle.  
Let us remember those who have died for justice;  
For they have given us life.  
Help us love even those who hate us;  
So we can change the world.  
Amen.





# Day 25

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Reverend Jennifer Hallelu, Black River Falls

## Scripture: Hebrews 10:24-25

*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*

## Devotion

So often we spend time provoking the “other side” by focusing on what divides us. Whether it’s political, religious, or other divisions, we tend to fight for what we think is the “right way.” What if the word provoking was lived out in our lives similarly to that found in Hebrews 10:24; to stir up, to incite for good. Might we find ourselves seeking the needs of our neighbors, truly wanting to know who they are, their stories, their hopes, their sorrows, and joys? We forget to live in such a way that we provoke one another to love and good deeds.

The congregation I serve at, ELC in Black River Falls, sought after just this. We have been intentionally longing to know our neighbors more deeply. Over the past two years, we have taken the hard road to learn about the evil and harm that has been done to our neighbors, the Ho-Chunk people. This has been a hard road of reality that provokes us to do good, rather than continuing in the evil that has been done. We have joined together with our Ho-Chunk UCC neighbors in worship as we continue to be provoked by the Holy Spirit to love and good deeds. A simple showing up, gathering as one, is one that hasn’t been done in our 155 years of history as a congregation. Yet, this simple stance of showing up has provoked our community to continue to see the hope we have in God. To continue to break the cycles of the “other side” and create space for God’s love to show up and through us all. May you go this Lenten season being provoked by the Holy Spirit to stir your communities to love and good deeds.

## Prayer

Creator God, provoke in us the longing to love, and to see the other as you see them. Your dearly loved children. May we not neglect to gather and simply get to know our neighbors, especially those who differ politically, socially, economically, and religiously. Remind us that we are the “other” in someone’s life. May we love them the way we hope to be loved. Amen

# Day 26

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## REPAIR

By Cole Arthur Riley, *Black Liturgies*

### *Confession*

God of renewal, We confess that too often we have desired justice without repair. Liberation without healing. We have purged our stories of nuance, and exalted tragedy as the most important thing. Other times we have demanded a rushed unity of the oppressed, without fully contending with all the ways the union is still to their demise. We have not offered meaningful reparations, choosing to retain wealth that never really belonged to us. And, as for our own healing, we are terrified. We confess that we forget who we are when we aren't hurting. We want more for ourselves, but something keeps pulling us back to loveless places. Have mercy on us in our resistance, that we would pursue repair and enter the healing we were meant for. *Amen.*

### *Forgiveness*

Let your soul receive this rest: The God who resurrects the trees and the grass has mercy on the death of this world, including our own interior decay. They seek to mend the brokenhearted, provide for the economically oppressed, honor the aging, and protect the vulnerable. Receive forgiveness for the injustices you’ve participated in and be purged of those that still reside in your own heart. Find renewal in the divine, that we would welcome healing as it knocks. That we would reintegrate every part of us that this world has tried to cleave apart, claiming the dignity of our bodies daily. As you receive this mercy, let it hold you and keep you, that your hope for liberation would be reborn each morning. *Amen.*



# Day 27



Ken Nyahuye - Lilongwe, Malawi

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## Scripture: Proverbs 24:10

*If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength being small.*

### Devotion

The verse above tells us about how strength is important and without it we cannot finish this Christian walk of faith. A day of adversity will surely come but what God expect from us is to remain strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might. It is not enough to live life, but also to do what God expected from us as we stand strong in his name.

In the times of temptations and adversity Joseph never gave in. He refused to fall a victim but rather, he was strong enough to resist and flee. I am not saying life would be easy, yes there are tests, trials and challenging times in our journey of faith.

It is God's desire that we become unstoppable. When situations challenge our faith we have to check ourselves. This is the time our faith is tested and needs us to be strong. Recall what the Bible says in James 1:2 "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into different temptations." My dear friends, never be overwhelmed by any situation, for there is a strengthener in us – the Holy Spirit. And in Him, by Him, and through Him we will overcome.

*We are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because greater is he that is in us, than he that is in the world. 1 John 4:4*

# Day 28



Reverened Sara Villarreal Bishop, Eau Claire

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## Scripture: Acts 4:32-35

*All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.*

### Devotion

We are a delicate network of interdependence. We don't realize this, as individuals or as congregations, but where and how we exist in the community is, in a large part dependent upon where and how others are in relationship with us. Do your neighbors no longer wish to hear the church bells? Does zoning permit a church in that place? Are we encouraged to have different kinds of churches, temples, and mosques? Even more pointed, is there a road? Is it maintained by others, how is that paid for? We are all connected, just as deeply and importantly as the roots of a tree are to the lace of mycelium connecting them their daughter and grandmother trees, or the alveoli of our lungs are connected to our big toe or our brain. Now what if we realized that extends to our communities of faith? Can we trust that in taking care of others, we were taken care of as well? I have had many an experience where someone is looking for something (most recently, an older kind of 'camcorder'....remember those?), and I was able to say, "I just found mine." We are not forced by impending disaster to look out for one another, or by some strange sense of superiority based on financial prosperity. It is love that drives us to share grace. We are who we are because of who we are to others, and who they are to us.

### Prayer

Loving God, as individuals we feel so very small, and yet so very important to ourselves. Help us expand that sense of self beyond our bodies, our congregations, and our church. Help us cherish that delicate interconnectedness and heal it, nurture it, grow it. Help us trust. Help us love. And help us do both radically, wildly, with abandon in faith. Watch us expand that community to your whole creation, as you did in the beginning, do now, and have commanded us to do so forevermore. Amen.



# Day 29



Vicar August C. Hohl, Jr, Black River Falls

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## Scripture: Romans 8:38-39

*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord*

## Devotion

Helping our neighbor. For the last two and a half years I've been a Vicar at a two-point parish and had the honor of officiating at a number of funerals for members and family of my congregants. I've shared these verses with a number of people during their sense of loss and grief. It's been a point to share that these verses represent two things: That the loved one is now with God and that we remain to help each other through the times of hurt.

Jesus had the moments of grief and agony as he hung on the cross and felt like his Father had deserted him. He knew what his mission was and he carried it out for the remission of the sins of the world. He also knew that he would be with God after his physical death. He then died, rose again and later ascended to heaven to be with His Father.

We know that going to be with God is in our future and the future of all believers. We just need to be able to share that faith with others and these verses are good to point to.

This season of Lent is when we remember what Jesus did for everyone and what we can do for others in memory of Jesus' work. We can share the story of Jesus with others for their sake as well as ours.

## Prayer

Great and Gracious God, help us to remember the works of your Son for everyone's sake, that we might be drawn to Him, believe in Him, and share his miracle filled life for our sakes with others who need love and reassurance. We thank you for your underserved love and grace and ask that you show us others who need that example shared with them. All this, through your Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, AMEN.

# Day 30



## Reflection

How would you describe unconditional love? Who has shown you unconditional love? What does it feel like to receive love like this? Can you recall a time of difficulty when you wished someone would have respond with unconditional love, but did not? What emotions surface? How do you wish they would have responded?

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# Day 31



Linda Hedding, Eau Claire

## Scripture: Exodus 12:3-4

*Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it.*

## Devotion

This Old Testament text refers to Passover and is followed with many directions about how the lamb is to be prepared and eaten, etc. But what struck me in this reading is the simple verse about sharing the lamb with your neighbor. When I was in Malawi, it was vividly apparent to us that ALL of Earth's resources, including food, are not distributed evenly throughout the world. My wealth (even as a middle class American) became glaringly luxurious as I visited our sisters and brothers in Malawi. I came home resolved to share my wealth in an effort to more evenly distribute it throughout the world.

But what was even more powerful was the amazing, luxurious faith, devotion to God, and boundless generosity I observed among my brothers and sisters in Malawi. Even though they had little, they generously shared with us what they had. Everywhere we visited, we were fed a lovely meal and showered with offerings of song, dance, and good cheer - sometimes even gifts. A classic example took place in the most desolate of places. We visited a disaster site, the parish of Phalombe, that had been decimated by Cyclone Freddie and the ensuing mud slide that wiped out their village. Their homes, their crops, their herds of goats ... all gone and replaced by a vast field of boulders. As we were walking across the boulders, one of my fellow travelers, Mary, broke her sandal. This was particularly challenging because earlier in the trip, Mary had taken a fall and hurt her ankle. She was wearing the sandal because the swelling in her ankle prevented her from wearing her more practical walking shoes. There we stood with her in the boulder field, panicking with her because we knew there was no way she could return across the boulders barefoot. One of the kind villagers saw her plight. And without a second thought, took off her sandals and gave them to Mary, leaving the gracious villager with no shoes - at all! We all watched this selfless act of Jesus in humble awe, knowing that these were very likely her ONLY shoes.

In this and many ways, our friends of Malawi warmly shared their faith with me and I came home so grateful to have grown in my faith because they are not selfishly hoarding their faith!

## Prayer

Good and gracious God, let me be more like the people of Malawi. During this season of Lent ...and always... please help me let go of my worldly goods and 'live simply so that others may simply live.' Amen

# Day 32



## STORAGE

By Mary Oliver

When I moved from one house to another  
there were many things I had no room for. What does one do?  
I rented a storage space. And filled it. Years passed.  
Occasionally I went there and looked in, but nothing happened,  
not a single twinge of the heart.

As I grew older the things I cared  
about grew fewer, but were more important.  
So one day I undid the lock  
and called the trash man.  
He took everything.

I felt like the little donkey when  
his burden is finally lifted. Things!  
Burn them, burn them! Make a beautiful  
fire! More room in your heart for love,  
for the trees! For the birds who own  
nothing--the reason they can fly.



# Day 33



Reverened Tiffany Chipman, Hayward

## Scripture: Romans 12:9-18

*Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good. Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other. Don't hesitate to be enthusiastic—be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord! Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you're in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer. Contribute to the needs of God's people, and welcome strangers into your home. Bless people who harass you—bless and don't curse them. Be happy with those who are happy, and cry with those who are crying. Consider everyone as equal, and don't think that you're better than anyone else. Instead, associate with people who have no status. Don't think that you're so smart. Don't pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions, but show respect for what everyone else believes is good. If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people. (CEB)*

## Devotion

Many of us look to the season of Lent as a time to give things up, make sacrifices, and fast in our indulgences. Yes, this practice is excellent to endure. However, the season is also about reconnecting and deepening our love for God and others. What does it look like to move away from the individual sacrifice and move into the unity of Christ?

As a youth director, I was tasked with planning the mentorship sessions for confirmation students during lent. On our first meeting night, the youth asked me what I was giving up for lent. Honestly, I hadn't thought about it. I was too busy planning and organizing to think about it. In a quick and without-thought response, I stated, "I am giving up me!" Laughter filled the room, and another student asked what that meant. I had no idea, yet I didn't want to act like I didn't. So, I said, "I am going to spend the next 40 days trying to be a better friend, confidant, and neighbor to others. I will work on listening and being present." It was a wonderful experience and immensely rewarding.

Apostle Paul writes to the Romans about what our response to God's activity should look like. His letter urges us to seek out the genuine love and devotion of Jesus Christ and respond to our neighbors with the same genuine and sincere love. "Be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord!" Paul reminds us of Christ's transformative love and grace of the cross, filling our hearts and souls with empathy, compassion, and genuine love.

When love is the guiding force in our hearts, then love is the shining star in our journey. May this Lenten season gift you with the love for others as Jesus teaches us.

## Prayer

Loving and Compassionate Lord, Jesus: guide us through this journey of love and devotion to see our neighbors with the same admiration as you. May we build a boundless love that resembles you—genuine, sacrificial, and transformative. Lead us to the cross of salvation and into the gift of grace. Embolden us to seek harmony, peace, and humility. In our neighbors near and far, may your gracious gifts reach deep into our bodies and unite us in your name. Amen.

# Day 34



## Reflection

Where are people experiencing war or violence? What needs to be done to bring peace? What can we do to help?

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# Day 35 Reverened Sara Villarreal Bishop, Eau Claire

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## Scripture: Matthew 5:43-44

*Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (KJV)*

## Devotion

These are thoughts from a book, written way back in 2019, aeons ago now, by Arthur C Brooks entitled *Love Thy Enemies*. Mr. Brooks is a very conservative fellow, and these thoughts might surprise you as they did me. He talks about the culture of contempt, whether or not we can afford to be nice, the power and peril of identity and concludes with the five rules to subvert the culture of contempt. He talks about focusing on things we share, the values, the compassion; about things that we know are divisive and made to drive wedges between people, and how divergent values are not a bug in the human system, they're what make us stronger. So how do we love our enemies? 1. Refuse to be used by the powerful. 2. Escape the bubbles. 3. Say no to contempt; treat others with love and respect even when it is difficult. 4. Disagree better. Be part of a healthy competition of ideas. 5. Disconnect more from unproductive debates. I wish it were simple to enact these things, but it is a good place to start. We are in for a lively year, and treating everyone with respect and dignity is going to be on the line. Bodily autonomy will be on the line for some, access to employment or housing for others. We can't have these discussions if we go along with lumping people into big containers of other. If you can't point to an example of something, don't use the talking point fed to us by the media. Exercise the empathy muscles and yes, that moral high ground is there for you to stand on. But do so kindly, with love and respect. If nothing else, it will confuse them.

## Prayer

Encompassing and invigorating God,

Remind us to be compassionate this year. Remind us that everyone has a story and might want to share it, or might not want to share it, and to treat that with respect and kindness. Remind us that nothing is as simple as we are being told and that you have commanded us to live in right relationship with ourselves, our neighbors and our God, and that includes our enemies. Help us make decisions, have conversations, and approach issues with love, compassion, dignity, and respect. And, help us do so, in the name of the Creator, the Creating, and the Created God.

Amen.

# Day 36

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FEAR

By Cole Arthur Riley, *Black Liturgies*

### *Confession*

Mother God, We are terrified. So many different fears have been watered and grown in us that there are days when it feels like we are more afraid than human. We confess that we have let fear grow louder than our own voice. We have let fear grow louder than the voices of those who love us. Those fears that are healthy, we have alienated and demonized, favoring the theater of bravery over the true practice of it. We've escalated fear in some in order to control them, and dismissed the fears of others in order to feel superior to them. Steady us and have mercy on us, that we would know courage. *Amen.*

### *Forgiveness*

Let your soul receive this rest: The God who wakes to comfort her child in the night rises for you. Feel her cradle you and comfort you, never punishing you for your dread but meeting it with tenderness and understanding. Let her free you from those worries that seek to control you, and remain with you in any fear that is meant to protect you. Through this forgiveness, be guided into rest, that you would fall asleep in safe places and wake renewed. *Amen.*



# Day 37

Reverened Amy Heinz, Stratford

## Scripture: Acts 8:26-40

*Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:*

*“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.”*

*The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “**Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?**” He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.*

## Devotion

Who do we encounter along our daily paths, and how do we interact with others we meet along the way? For Philip, the wilderness road between Jerusalem and Gaza offered a learning experience he would not soon forget. We often read this story as Philip instructing the Ethiopian eunuch by describing how Jesus Christ fulfills the words of the Old Testament prophecies, but if we only read this story with Philip as the teacher, we miss an important point. The Gentile court official being “instructed” is the one who points out the connection between hearing and doing.

On one hand, we have Philip, a Jewish disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, filled with the Holy Spirit and ready to testify to all he encounters. On the other hand, we have a powerful member of the royal court of Meroe, a Gentile who the Holy Spirit has filled with hunger for the Word of God.

Philip’s clarification and testimony help the official make connections between God’s promise and Jesus. But Philip doesn’t suggest the one thing which the official does: action. The challenge when the treasury official points out the water at the side of the road is that Philip is called to do something with his message.

It is ironic that Philip is the one who had to drag Nathaniel to look [John 1:46], and it hearkens back to Jesus’ response to new disciples who asked where he was staying, “Come see for yourself” [John 1:39]. Yet Philip needs the prodding of a brand-new believer in order to act.

Come, look, see, do. We are called by the Holy Spirit—in surprising ways and through surprising individuals—to put actions to our words.





# Day 38



*GOD HAS A DREAM: A VISION OF HOPE FOR OUR TIME*

By Desmond Tutu

“You are the indispensable agent of change. You should not be daunted by the magnitude of the task before you. Your contribution can inspire others, embolden others who are timid, to stand up for the truth in the midst of a welter of distortion, propaganda, and deceit; stand up for human rights where these are being violated with impunity; stand up for justice, freedom, and love where they are trampled underfoot by injustice, oppression, hatred, and harsh cruelty; stand up for human dignity and decency at times when these are in desperately short supply. God calls on us to be his partners to work for a new kind of society where people count; where people matter more than things, more than possessions; where human life is not just respected but positively revered; where people will be secure and not suffer from the fear of hunger, from ignorance, from disease; where there will be more gentleness, more caring, more sharing, more compassion, more laughter; where there is peace and not war.”



# Day 39



Reverend Sara Villarreal Bishop, Eau Claire

Scripture: John 13:34

*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*

## Devotion

This verse is used in a lot of ways. Today I ask you to ponder it in this context: "A shift from me to we." Ubuntu is theology based on a Bantu African philosophy. This philosophy says people exist in community not isolation. We are human because of our interconnectedness with other humans. It is an attitude of faithfulness and commitment to the group above success of the individual. “I am who I am because of who I am with you.” I am a mother, because I have children. I am a daughter, because of my parents. Existing as one of many, as part of a whole, as a connected and connecting thread in a larger tapestry can be challenging in our culture, which uphold individualism, self-sufficiency, and frankly, ego. Existing in community is not socialism or communism, which are political goals, but rather a process and journey of existence. We are the garden, not the fruit, and to be fruitful, to be a community that cares for one and other and is therefore cared for as well by that community, we have gathered around the Cross, making it the center, the pillar of our community. Do we fail to practice or explore Ubuntu because it doesn't come from an ancient Greek, or because it is the same name as a computer code, or is frankly amusing to pronounce, and does that failure separate us from the commandment of loving, ourselves, one another, and God. How can we shift from me to we?

## Prayer

Loving God, you created us to live in relationship with you, and you said it is good. Help us practice the Spirit in Ubuntu, because we are who we are because of who we are with and in and for you. And help us expand that community to your whole creation, as you did in the beginning, do now, and have commanded us to do so forevermore. Amen.



# Day 40



# Palm Sunday

LENT V: Solidarity

By Cole Arthur Riley, *Black Liturgies*

God of Solidarity,

Thank you for being a God who enters the suffering of the world - who doesn't run from those in pain but rushes to the site of blood, of tears. Release us from empty cravings of unity and come at no cost to the oppressor, and guide us toward a solidarity that demands something of us. Let us learn to risk ourselves on behalf of the vulnerable, believing that when one of us is harmed, we all are. Help us to remember that justice and liberation and not a scarcity, and that our survival and dignity are wrapped up in one another. And God, keep us from those who will demonize the fight in us. Who would prefer us complacent and far from one another. Secure in us the courage to stand, knowing together we will restore what the world has tried to suffocate in us. *Amen.*

## Holy Week - Monday

Reverend Sara Villarreal Bishop, Eau Claire

### Scripture: Galatians 6:10

*So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith*

### Devotion

A person with ubuntu is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Does this sound familiar? We all know these people, we call them saints, or pillars of the community, or integral to our church. But Ubuntu isn't about the individual, even if it results in people having ubuntu as a characteristic, it is about the community. A community can be welcoming, hospitable, warm, generous and willing to share, but hospitality is hard work when you break it down into its smaller parts. What if it was simply a way of living. What if collectively, we took the opportunities to do good whenever we saw the chance, to reach out in welcome even if we weren't being approached, to be generous before we were asked for anything at all. In shifting our vision from the goal to the journey, we discover that we do nothing alone. How does Galatians 6:10 read if we are reading it as a whole body of people, rather than as individuals? How does this change what and how we do things, for others? Perhaps we have gotten caught up in what it means to me, and we aren't looking at the larger we. If my humanity is inextricably caught in your humanity, how does that look as a community, a congregation, or a church?

### Prayer

Loving God, we are inextricably interconnected in ways we cannot even imagine, which are clear and sharp in your eyes. Help us see with our hearts. Help us make others more human by who we are, and show us their humanity thriving. Building a welcoming, hospitable, warm, generous, and sharing community for all is the Kingdom of Heaven on earth - but we need to be reminded that this is not a goal, or a prize at the end of a long race, but the journey here and now that we make together. Remind us to expand that community to your whole creation, as you did in the beginning, do now, and have commanded us to do so forevermore. *Amen.*

## Holy Week - Tuesday Reflection

When you imagine 'community' what makes it welcoming? What makes it unwelcoming?

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## Holy Week - Wednesday

God's grace is meant to be communal, not just individual. What does this mean to you? For you?

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# Maundy Thursday



a

LOGOS

By Mary Oliver

Why worry about the loaves and fishes?  
If you say the right words, the wine expands.  
If you say them with love  
and the felt ferocity of that love  
and the felt necessity of that love,  
the fish explode into many.  
Imagine him, speaking,  
and don't worry about what is reality,

or what is plain, or what is mysterious.  
If you were there, it was all those things.  
If you can imagine it, it is all those things.  
Eat, drink, be happy.  
Accept the miracle.  
Accept, too, each spoken word  
spoken with love.

# Maundy Thursday



b

Scripture: Mark 14:32-42

*They went to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took with him Peter and James and John and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me, yet not what I want but what you want." He came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy, and they did not know what to say to him. He came a third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. Look, my betrayer is at hand."*

GETHSEMANE

By Mary Oliver

The grass never sleeps.  
Or the roses.  
Nor does the lily have a secret eye that shuts until morning.  
Jesus said, wait with me. But the disciples slept.  
The cricket has such splendid fringe on its feet,  
and it sings, have you noticed, with its whole body,  
and heaven knows if it ever sleeps.

Jesus said, wait with me. And maybe the stars did,  
maybe the wind wound itself into a silver tree, and  
didn't move, maybe  
the lake far away, where once he walked as on a  
blue pavement,  
lay still and waited, wild awake.

Oh the dear bodies, slumped and eye-shut, that could  
not  
keep that vigil, how they must have wept,  
so utterly human, knowing this too  
must be a part of the story.



# Good Friday

Jill Fries, SAM - Stone Lake

## Scripture: Mark 15:33-34

*When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

## Devotion

Good Friday, the day the Beloved Son of the Living God, was condemned to die by crucifixion. This day, I am reminded of God's silence.

After Jesus took his last breathe, the sky did not open up, and God did not bellow out "Hang in there folks, I am sending my Son back to you – you need to wait a few days. Have some faith in what He tried to teach you! Have some Faith!" No, there was silence. Fear and trepidation permeated the disciple's lives and any of Jesus followers. There were warrants of arrest out for them, and they knew that given the right circumstances, they also faced the same fate.

Yet, in the midst of this silence, there was also the seedling of hope being contemplated. I don't doubt for one moment, that while the disciples, the Marys' and others were mourning in seclusion; they were also ruminating over Jesus words, in particular the many times Jesus proclaimed that He needed to die in order for God's will and purpose for humanity to be revealed (Mark 8:31-33). Could it mean that their beloved Rabbi whom they all had come to believe was the Messiah – would in fact be risen from the dead?!? What did that mean? Did it mean the end to Roman rule? Or did it mean something else altogether? I believe there was earnest and heartfelt conversation and probably some arguing too.

I believe the Good Friday experience is crucial for my faith development. To learn to trust that God is in charge. To let go, and allow God's will to be discerned in my life and in the greater community. Despite God's silence, God's Holy Spirit is among us, guiding us and leading us – because, fortunately, we do know the rest of the story.

## Prayer

Dear God Creator of all that there is, be with me today. Help me to know your will and guide me. Even when I don't have a clear answer, I will continue to trust that Your Holy Spirit is present. In Jesus name I pray, Amen.

# Holy Saturday

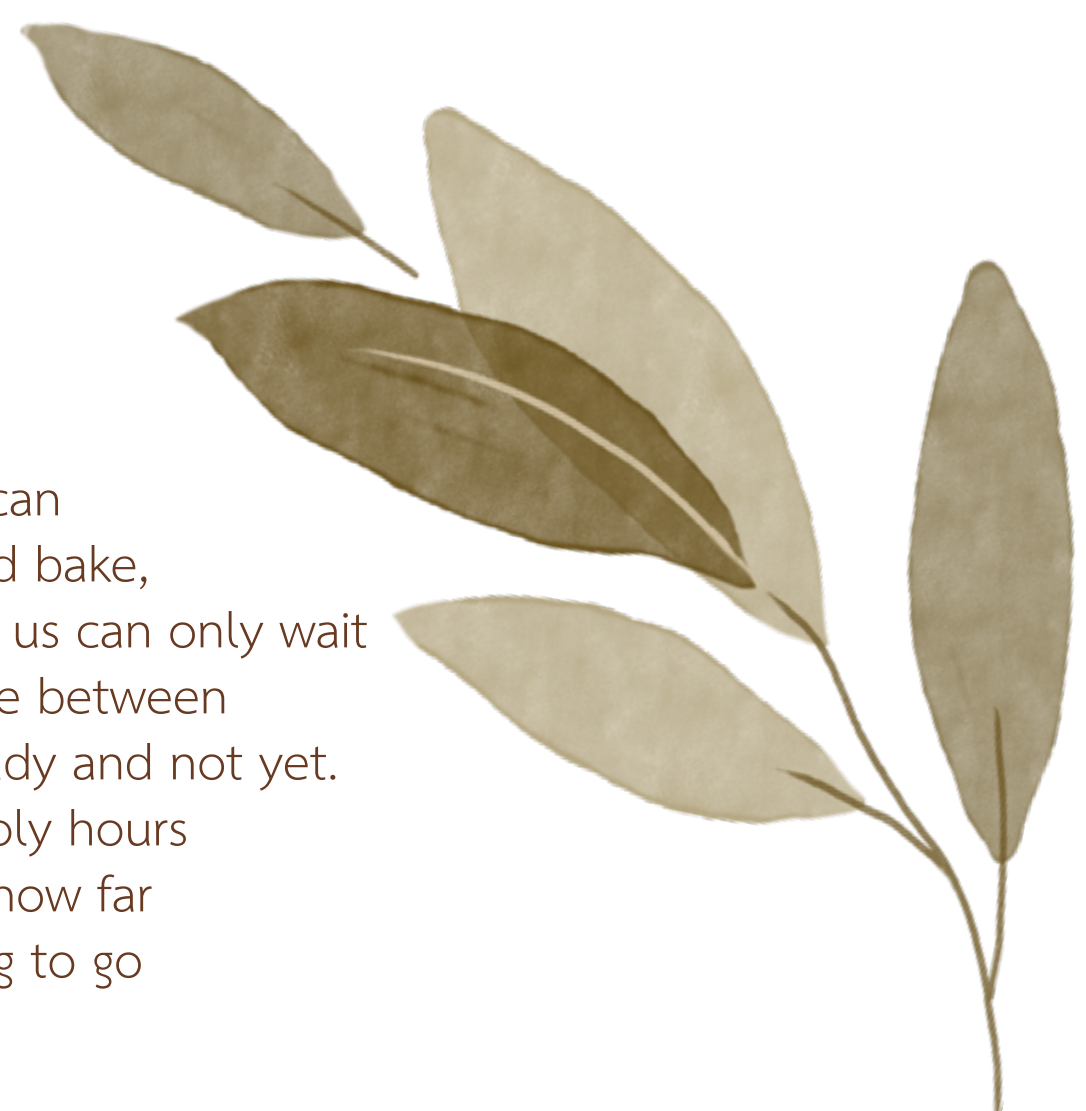
Holy Saturday

By Meta Herrick Carlson, *Speak it Plain*

The sky is still dark,  
or maybe it has come  
and gone again.  
This is a vigil,  
but not for Easter.

Keeping time is tragic,  
so we drift  
in and out of sleep,  
and puffy eyes observe  
only the piles of ointment  
and death cloths  
stacked and weary  
near the back door.

Maybe you can  
decorate and bake,  
but some of us can only wait  
in the silence between  
what is already and not yet.  
These are holy hours  
to consider how far  
God is willing to go  
for love.





# Easter Sunday



EASTER

By Cole Arthur Riley, *Black Liturgies*

Easter holds memory for a God who came back to life still bearing scars. We're reminded that we don't have to leave behind our grief to participate in the joy of liberation. Our scars remain, but we don't need to dismiss our grief to participate in the joy of liberation.

*On this mountain, God will prepare  
a feast for all people.  
On this mountain, God will destroy  
the veil that covers all nations  
God will swallow up death forever,  
and wipe away the tears from every face,  
and shame will be cast out from all the earth.*

- Paraphrased from Isaiah 25:6-8



**THANK YOU** to all those who generously contributed their time, stories, wisdom, and love for Jesus and neighbor to this resource! Zikomo kwambiri!

## Photo Credits

- Cover, Rick Hoyme; Pages 1 & 2, Bishop Bvumbwe; Day 19, Jamie Brieske; Days 37, 38 & Easter, Laura Ramlow

## Book Recommendations:

- *Ordinary Blessings (2020) & Speak it Plain (2020)*, Meta Herrick Carlson
- *Black Liturgies (2024)*, Cole Arthur Riley
- *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for our Time (2005)*, Desmond Tutu
- *An African Prayer Book (2006)*, Desmond Tutu
- *Devotions (2020)*, Mary Oliver