



EVEN WHEN IT HURTS

St. Paul's Episcopal Church • Mount Vernon, Washington

FAITH IN THE MIDST OF TRIAL

We are approaching the one year anniversary of the pandemic hitting the state of Washington, and many of us are still keeping a strict quarantine. Some of us have gotten the first COVID vaccine while others are not eligible for another few months. Many of us have only seen our extended family on a computer screen, and we are craving hugs and time spent in person. For others, everything just feels heavy and grayish right now, and they aren't thinking about giving things up for Lent right now because this pandemic feels like the Lentiest Lent that ever Lented.

I have found that the Book of Psalms speaks to me in times like this because at least a third of the book contains psalms of lament. These psalms start off complaining and petitioning the Lord to end the persecution, illness, pain, or captivity involved before ending by praising some aspect of God's power. For me, it's a reminder that things do get better and that my suffering (or the suffering of others) is temporary. I am also reminded that I can praise God in every situation... "even when it hurts".

This devotional book gives you a psalm to read daily, a reflection on some aspect of it, and a prayer at the end. I hope that the psalms give you words to pray and remind you of the promise that God will deliver us from adversity.

We also have a Lenten YouTube playlist that will be ready to listen to starting on February 16th. The URL is:

<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLwcuWzmdmjgHUDeR0ST6Qk5-NNPIwJ9B>

Blessings to you.

-Jen McCabe

FEBRUARY 17 (ASH WEDNESDAY)

Read: Psalm 51

Purge me from my sin, and I shall be pure; wash me, and I shall be clean indeed.

-Psalm 51:10

When I was a small child, a Sunday school teacher told us that Mary was chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus, because she had been so good all her life. In my child's mind, and in a circular way of thinking, I thought that if I were very good all the time, I might also get to be Jesus' mother. From then on, I was as good as I could be, so I was very easy to bring up, and a delight to classroom teachers. I couldn't understand why others thought it was so difficult to follow rules and behave as one should.

Then as I grew into adulthood, I began to find it more difficult not to sin. Or maybe I was just more aware of all the ways I could hurt others and God. God once forgave me for what I thought was an unforgivable sin, and I then understood my need for God to keep me on the straight path. I couldn't do it on my own.

The psalmist was way ahead of me, knowing deeply how easy it is to sin, and how only God can cleanse us and set us on the right path. Most of us try not to hurt others or to do what is wrong, but, oh, how we fail. Our loving God, however, is so ready to forgive us and welcome us into God's warm, loving embrace. Then, having been forgiven and cleansed, we can go forth again, trying to do what is right in God's sight.

Oh, Lord, thank you for always being ready to forgive us and to lift us up into your loving arms.

Without you, we cannot be whole, but with your grace, we can try always to do what is right and good.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

-Penny Worrell

FEBRUARY 18

Read: Psalm 13

How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

-Psalm 13:2

A year ago on a Monday, one of my students thought it would be funny to come up behind me and poke me in the side. It backfired magnificently because I have PTSD from being assaulted by someone who grabbed me from behind, and she also managed to poke me in the ribs hard enough to leave a bruise. When I told her sternly not to do it again, she responded by laughing at me and telling me that I was overreacting. Her response triggered a massive PTSD flare-up, and I had to flee the classroom and leave campus because I was sobbing so hard. Thankfully, I have a support network of people I trust, and one of them took care of me that afternoon, getting me to the point where I could parent Daniel when he returned from school.

I did not have work the next day and thankfully had a therapy appointment already scheduled. My therapist had never seen me cry until that appointment, and she had the task of getting me OK enough to go back to work on Wednesday. We started trying to work through the trauma, but the pandemic hit, meaning that my sessions were now phone ones at home where I do not have as much privacy as her office. Making things harder, she left the practice a few months later, and she was replaced by a man who reminded me of my attacker. Eventually, I did get another therapist, but trust takes time to build and the trauma is sitting on my soul like an open wound. I have no choice but to heal because it will affect my future relationships if I don't, but it is painful work to try and untangle the knots of anger and hurt.

Needless to say, verse 2 of the psalm speaks to me right now. I need the reminder of God's presence with me as I do the work to heal, and God's presence is not always felt. I am having to step out in faith and trust that God will be with me in all of it, and that I will eventually heal from what happened to me.

Gracious God, be with us in our pain and anger. Give us the strength we need to persevere in the midst of it and help us to trust that we will make it through to the other side. Amen.

-Jen McCabe

FEBRUARY 19

Read: Psalm 32

For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

-Psalm 32:4

I've lived in some pretty hot places in the course of my life. India; Iran; Stockton, California; Boise, Idaho. Having grown up in the temperate climate of San Francisco, it took moving far from the Bay Area to appreciate the meaning of "debilitating climate" (try Kolkata in August). But far worse, especially when coupled with the heat of summer, is the turpitude of the soul. I'd rather cross the burning deserts of Iran's Dasht-e-Lut than experience the bone-crushing weariness of a crisis of faith and the loss of hope that attends it. But what has always saved me is love — and that love originates from a source more eternal than the sun and is just as surely reflected by those who have chosen to share that love with me.

Lord, thank you for sustaining me in my most difficult moments of doubt and anxiety, and for your constant reminder that, in the words of the psalm, "many are the woes of the wicked, but the Lord's unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in him. Amen.

-Michael Boss

FEBRUARY 20

Read: Psalm 39

Lord, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is.

--Psalm 39:4

The Psalmist is in pain. He is sick and trying to keep the information from his enemies. I understand the pain, but I'm not sure I would ask God to give me my expiration date. I think it is enough to live each day to the fullest and, frankly, who cares what my enemies think? Our days are numbered. None of us is getting out of here alive. A burial office of one sort or another will be prayed over each of us.

What I fear is reaching the end and never having lived in the first place. Perhaps the psalmist isn't asking for a peek at his sell-by date, but to be reminded that he is mortal, and for the courage to live life to its fullest. Not in that "eat, drink, and be merry" sort of worldly

stupidity, but in a “how may I experience and express the love of God to the best of my ability day by day?” sort of way.

When I hurt, I am prone to snap and snarl like a wounded dog. Healing comes in time and with time. Perhaps the psalmist is asking if he or she has time to heal. I hope so. Time doesn't heal all wounds, but it certainly can help, especially when we place ourselves in the hands of the One who holds the Hourglass, even when it hurts.

Lord, my days are numbered. Help me rise each day knowing you are there. Guide and direct me to the fulfilling of your purpose. Let me lie down in appreciation for the day ended, and in hope for the morrow. Amen.

-The Rev. Keith Axberg

FEBRUARY 21

Read: Psalm 52

I will thank you forever, because of what you have done. In the presence of the faithful I will proclaim your name, for it is good.

-Psalm 52:9

This psalm is a recounting and commentary by David, the psalmist, of the terrible events recorded in 1 Samuel 21 and 22. As he runs for his life from Saul, David seeks refuge from the priests at the tabernacle of God in the city of Nob. Doeg the Edomite informs Saul that David has been provided assistance by the priests. An angry Saul sends for the priests and Doeg kills 85 priests, and women, children, and animals in the city of Nob. The psalmist, David, condemns this massacre and prophesies what will happen to Doeg. In verse 9, David praises God for what God has not yet done. David trusts that God's love will outlast Doeg's evil.

Similar evil deeds exist in our world. There are those who “love evil more than good, and lying more than speaking the truth,” and who “trust in abundant riches, and seek refuge in wealth!” The Psalm calls us to “trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever.” We are called to trust and we can only do it with God's help.

Dear God, help us to have the faith and trust that we need to know that your love transcends evil. Guide us and direct us. Amen!

-Cathey Frederick

FEBRUARY 22

Read: Psalm 137

For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

-Psalm 137:3

As I read the first part of this psalm, I was reminded of an episode of the NPR show "On Being with Krista Tippett" where she was interviewing Joe Carter, who spent years educating people worldwide about the meaning of African-American spirituals:

And sometimes I imagine how some of those songs were used and I imagine someone on the plantation, the master, who is always very happy when he hears the slaves singing because he knows where they are, he knows they're not escaping, as long as he can hear them. An old master comes out one day. He says, "Hey, Joe. Big Joe. I don't hear nobody singing down there. You guys strike me up one of them good, old spiritual songs. You know how I like them. Give me one of them good, old songs." And often when I go to the schoolchildren, I have them sing with me. I say, "OK. Now pretend you're going to be — you're all slaves, OK? And master wants us to sing a song, but we don't really want to sing for master, do we?" "No. No, we don't." I say, "Well, I'll tell you something. Master loves our singing, but he doesn't listen to the words we say. He doesn't have a clue. So we can say anything we want. So, let's give the master a good old song." (Joe Carter, "The Spirituals", May 9, 2003)

There is a very strong parallel between slaves in the antebellum South and the Israelites. Both were taken from their native lands to a foreign one, both were forced to work in inhumane conditions, and both were mocked and told to be cheerful even when they were living a miserable life. Is it any wonder that the slaves created spirituals out of Old Testament stories?

This is an "imprecatory" psalm, meaning that it calls out God to judge the psalmist's enemies, which is why it ends with the words "O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" (vv. 8-9) One could say that this anger is overkill, but we have to remember that it comes from a place of great pain. The anger that got BLM started is similar. It moves people to act, and if tempered, it is useful. God works in our anger, and sometimes the pain behind that anger is how God gets our attention.

Lord, be present with us in our hardships and give us your aid in tempering our anger at injustice that we might use it for better things. Amen.

-Jen McCabe

FEBRUARY 23

Read: Psalm 5

But let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you.

-Psalm 5:11

Years ago, a manager to whom I reported in my Silicon Valley job told me something that seemed odd at the time. “Your problem is that you don’t have any enemies,” he said. While I’ll certainly cop to the charge that my insecurities have tended to make me a “people pleaser,” I also have to confess that never in my life have I held the conviction that anyone ever woke up in the morning with the sole intent of making my life miserable. As a consequence, I have a difficult time relating to the psalmist’s frequent diatribes against their perceived foes. Still, just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they ain’t out to get you — I’ve just never believed that anyone who thought ill of me was a greater risk to my spiritual well-being than my own desire for retribution.

Lord, in knowing that “you are not a God who is pleased with wickedness,” and that “the arrogant cannot stand in your presence,” help me be ever mindful of the enemy that lurks within, and that my best protection remains, as the psalmist sings, “the shield of your righteousness.” Amen.

-Michael Boss

FEBRUARY 24

Read: Psalm 35

For they do not speak peace, but they conceive deceitful words against those who are quiet in the land.
-Psalm 35:20

One of the hard parts about living in small Midwestern towns is the rumor mill. Everyone knows everyone else's business, and I would hear things about me that were not even close to being true. For example, I was at the grocery store while six months pregnant, and my shirt rose an inch when I reached for something. Apparently, an inch of my baby belly was visible, and one of my former husband's parishioners saw me. They mentioned it to one of our church treasurers, and the treasurer called my former husband to accuse me of flashing the parishioner who saw me.

...

Um, excuse me? Have they **met** me?!?!? There are nuns that show more skin than I do on a regular basis, and I don't think I owned a dress, skirt, pair of pants, or shorts shorter than knee-length at that time. When I told my boss, she fell off her chair laughing. Our ELCA bishop thought it was the funniest thing ever, as did pretty much everyone who was told what the treasurer had said. Still, I was (and still am) irritated that she (the treasurer) tried to ruin my reputation in the community maliciously.

I can really understand the psalmist's pain and why he is calling for God to judge those who are hurting them. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can be really stinging to me. I have to remind myself that nothing anyone can say to me or say about me can diminish my worth in God's eyes, and God's opinion of me is the only one that matters.

In those times when words wound our spirit, be present with us, Lord, and remind us that You created us to be worthy of dignity and respect. Amen.

-Jen McCabe

FEBRUARY 25

Read: Psalm 86

The arrogant rise up against me, O God, and a band of violent men seeks my life; they have not set you before their eyes.

-Psalm 86:14

No, it's not just paranoia. Think of the first children: Abel really did find favor with God, and Cain did kill him.

We are living through a difficult time politically. Especially notable is the inability for the people of this country and our elected leaders to deal with each other with respect and a willingness to cooperate. Rather than that, we seem to have grievances: you are my enemy and you treat me badly/unfairly/dishonestly!

Seeing others as "enemies" and oneself as victims of those enemies – has it always been thus? And if so, how are people of faith supposed to deal with that?

The psalmist in Psalm 86 wants us to know that there are really bad people out there and they are out to get him. They are arrogant. Violent. Have not set God before their eyes.

So how do we see those "others?" Are they the problem? Are we the reasonable ones who are just seeking God's will? Confession? It's oh so much easier to confess the sins/faults/damage of others than it is to confess the sins of oneself. In fact, telling about the evildoers seems to be pretty satisfying to our psalmist. I know I fall into a similar rut of grievance and blame all too often.

The "I" of the psalm establishes himself as the innocent victim. Then he enlists God's help with a litany of all that he is doing to be on God's side. Contrast those evildoers with myself, suggests our psalmist. "I am faithful." "To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul." "I will thank you, O LORD my God, and I will walk in your truth."

And without hesitation, the psalmist praises God's qualities: good, forgiving, great, gracious, full of compassion, full of kindness and truth.

God is all that. I am not; perhaps even you are not. Our great teacher once told us to remove the log from our own eye before we fret with someone else's eye splinter.

Lord, the affairs of humankind seem difficult. We need your saving actions to open us up and draw us into your purposes and dreams. Amen.

-Tom Worrell

FEBRUARY 26

Read: Psalm 69

Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.

-Psalm 69:1-2

Three of the four years I was in high school, I went whitewater rafting on the South Fork of the American River with my parents and twin brother. There were so-called “swimmer’s rapids” where you could jump out and float the river, and it was an interesting experience. You jumped into cold water and were then carried down the river at a decent clip while the raft followed nearby. Your life vest held you up, and it was the closest I have ever felt to being completely weightless.

I did have one experience of falling out of the raft, and that was a bit different. We hit a rapid and I had not braced myself correctly, so I tipped out of the raft. I remember going under and fighting to get myself into position to get back to the raft. I knew that if I didn’t fight, bad things could happen. One of the men in the boat pulled me back in and all was well, but it was still a frightening few minutes.

That experience of tipping out of the raft and going under is what comes to mind in the first two verses of this psalm. While I did not have the problem of being mired in something, the water sweeping over me was very fast, and I imagine it would be similar to being swept away by floodwaters. I can feel the psalmist’s anxiety and fear and they ponder being swept under by everything going on. It is one of those cases when the only way they were going to survive was to trust that the Lord would pull them out of the turbulent metaphorical waters... just as I was plucked out of the American River.

Comfort us, Lord, when the waters are rising around us and we fear being swept away. You made the waters to flow the way they do, so bring us through the flood. Amen.

-Jen McCabe

FEBRUARY 27

Read: Psalms 120-121

I look up to the hills, but where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

-Psalm 121:1-2

These two psalms are among the Psalms of Ascent that may have been used liturgically as people approached the temple in Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the city on a hill, was always approached by going up. “Going up” bears metaphorical meaning as well. One ascends to meet God on high. One ascends into greater capacity for faithfulness to the covenant. One ascends into more compassionate expression of virtue. Both of these psalms presume that one begins below, the place of lament, and expresses a desire to ascend.

In the first one, the psalmist finds himself among untruthful people. How can one trust those who do not deal in truth? Deception unravels the social structures that provide security, it is a way of waging war. The psalmist foresees God’s punishment accurately, as the fruit of their own untrustworthy labors. They will go to war and pay the price. He, however, wants peace. One can imagine the psalmist trusting that he, too, will reap the fruits of his labor: peace.

The second psalm begins outside the city gates, looking up toward Jerusalem. The psalmist stands outside, among the defiled and defiling nations, yet he puts his trust in the Lord, the one “who made heaven and earth,”—not Baal, the god of thunder, rain, and fertility, or any of the other Canaanite gods to which surrounding hills had been sacred. He takes his comfort and security in the God worshipped on the holy temple mount.

In today’s world there is a lot of talk, but is it trustworthy? Does it build trust or tear it down? Does it look to the true source of truth or the hundred lesser gods of our day? We, too, stand in a place we would rather ascend out of. The psalmists name our place because they share it. We can share their hope as well. We, too, can “strive for justice and peace” as our Baptismal Covenant says, knowing that as we do so, God, the ever-vigilant one who never sleeps, who is not caught off guard by untruth or violence, will guard us as we come and go, “both now and forever.”

Loving God, we live in a world full of deceit and war. Shine the truth of your love as a beacon on a hill to guide us up the path to where your beloved community lives in truth and peace. Amen.

-The Rev. Paul Moore

FEBRUARY 28

Read: Psalm 3

But you, O Lord, are a shield around me...

-Psalm 3:3

I am fortunate. I have not known many enemies. Unlike the psalmist, I don't know of anyone who is/was out to kill me. Oh sure, I was a cop and I've been shot at (and missed), but I don't believe the poor soul who was mentally distraught was out to get me. He was in too much pain to know what he was doing. No, I've had adversaries and antagonists over the years, but none I would count as enemies (even if they counted me one).

What I have found corrosive isn't being on an enemy's hit-list, but being ignored, abandoned, or counted as nothing. That's where I have found the fires of hell licking me every now and again. God says I am of value – that each of us is of value – but to be zilch in the eyes of another is too painful to bear. The psalmist knows that, and while the warrior acknowledges the value and protection of a shield, what I find of greater comfort is the image of God wrapping arms around me. An embrace is God's shield. I confess I'm not much into hugs, but during this time of Pandemic distancing, God knows I've missed hugs terribly much, especially when I hurt.

My pain is relieved when I perceive the psalmist's prayer for a shield is a cry for a hug. Hugs are healing touches and blessed.

God, you know the pain each of us feels, the fear each of us harbors. Assure us of your love. Wrap us in the arms of your love. Send us arms to wrap us tight and make us right; be our shield and our delight. Amen.

-The Rev. Keith Axberg

MARCH 1

Read: Psalm 42

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God... When shall I come and behold the face of God?

-Psalm 42:1-2, 11b

I REALLY don't like to be thirsty! I have a glass of water on my nightstand, by my reading chair, in the kitchen, on the dining room table, a bottle in the car.... You get the picture. When I'm thirsty, my throat feels like it is going to close up and I can't talk. I cough and it's most uncomfortable. This psalm of lament makes me very conscious of that discomfort (and grateful for continued access to clean, fresh water.)

The psalmist's image of a deer longing for flowing streams is a powerful one. I picture a buck high in the mountains in the middle of the summer when the melting of winter snows no longer feeds the streams. The water is no longer flowing, and so it sometimes feels to me about my connection to God. My soul longs and yet nothing is happening. I feel distant from the Source and wonder when I will again be close and connected. It is most uncomfortable!

Much like the psalmist, experience has taught me that if I am patient, continue to pray, and "hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God." This setting of the 42nd Psalm by John Michael Talbot helps. (<https://youtu.be/1FhFnITREz4>)

Thank you, God, for giving us markers during the dark time to lead us to your light. Amen!
-Cathey Frederick

MARCH 2

Read: Psalm 83

Make them like tumbleweed, my God, like chaff before the wind.

-Psalm 83:13

It must have been tough to be an Israelite back in the day. I mean, who wasn't out to get you? And while it's sad to witness the paranoia that seems to define life today as a modern Israeli, the millennia are but nanoseconds in the span of God's time...and the more things change, the more they seem the same from a biblical perspective. Suffice it to say that this isn't the world I would choose to live in, but as a male of northern European ancestry in 21st Century America, I constantly remind myself of how privileged I have been. It's that awareness that makes it hard for me to relate to the feelings of retribution of the psalmist. As a student of history, if not the bible, I am nevertheless also reminded that those of us fortunate enough to live in this country are ultimately no less likely to avoid the fates of Midian, Sisera, and Jabin (never mind the Roman Empire) if we fail to cover our own faces with shame when we seek out God's name.

Lord, keep me mindful when I fret over my enemies that “you alone are the Most High over all the earth,” and that as a suppliant it is I rather than you that is more likely to “turn a deaf ear” and “stand aloof.” Amen.

-Michael Boss

MARCH 3

Read: Psalm 7

O Lord my God, in you I take refuge; save me from all my pursuers and deliver me.

-Psalm 7:1

No one I know enjoys feeling powerless. This truth is as timely today as when the Psalms were being written. The images in verse 2 are of being like the prey of a lion, surely to be killed and torn apart, then dragged away with no help in sight. It would be as if one never existed.

In modern terms, there is a big trunk of feelings to unpack here! Powerlessness is one of the most difficult things for us to endure as humans, and often it is replaced with anger. Many experts suggest that the recent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, for example, illustrates what violent rage a majority losing the death grip on control might do to preserve their power. Scorched earth. Death and suffering to those who disagree. “If we can’t have it, then no one will.” Bone-chilling examples abound.

The psalmist goes on to reflect a sense of contrition and repentance, stating that if he has behaved as his pursuers, “if there is wrong in [his] hands”, then God should allow him to be overtaken. It seems to be an Old Testament understanding of the Golden Rule, going so far as to present deliverance as a gift given in return for kindness. I sense his comfort from the realization that behavior is a choice and there’s hope in doing the right (righteous) thing.

We can choose to do the same: to refuse to let negative experiences turn us into people who continue the cycles of violence—physical, emotional, spiritual—seeking revenge rather than forgiveness and peace. **True** peace, not a false peace offered by those who would continue to marginalize the “different” ones.

As a victim at least three times of violent crime myself, “gay-bashing” by common reference, there came a point where I was faced with three choices: harden my heart and tighten my fists to fight back punch by punch, ignore my heart, and retreat to solitary powerlessness

and perpetual fear, or open my heart in forgiveness that would return life to my wounded spirit.

By the grace of God, I was able to choose the last.

O God, help us to look to the cross and desire the kind of forgiveness Jesus himself chose for those who crucified him. Amen

-David Sloat

MARCH 4

Read: Psalm 109

May his days be few; may another seize his position.

-Psalm 109:8

When I was reading through this Psalm, I was reminded of where I had heard it before that it used to be prayed by some regarding Barack Obama. As early as 2009, verse 8 was mentioned with his name by Republicans hoping that he would be a one-term president. The problem with this is that the next verse speaks of the children of the person becoming orphans and their wife being a widow. As former senator David Perdue of Georgia found out when he caught fire for suggesting people pray the Psalm about Obama in 2016, it is not a good psalm to pray about the President of the United States... even if you don't happen to like him.

Michelle Obama has spoken in interviews about being afraid of losing her husband or one of her children during the former president's time in the White House, and I cannot blame her one bit. People took a psalm out of context and applied it to her family. It is an "imprecatory psalm", meaning that it is one that calls for judgment of the psalmist's enemies, and it has some pretty heavy implications for those who invoked it regarding the former president.

So, how should we deal with passages like this that are angry to such an extreme? We need to read them as a whole and not parcel out soundbites from them that seemingly meet our needs. Anger is a valid emotion, but it is one where action needs to be tempered to avoid crossing over into sin.

Gracious God, help us to remember that anger is an emotion, not a reason to act. Amen.

-Jen McCabe

MARCH 5

Read: Psalm 41

... O Lord, be gracious to me; heal me, for I have sinned against you.

-Psalm 41:4

The psalmist is sick. He's not just sick, but gravely ill. It's bad enough that his enemies are gloating over his condition, but even his best friend – his bosom buddy – has turned against him. OMG! What's interesting, though, is that the psalmist doesn't ask for forgiveness for his sin, but rather restoration to health so he can "repay" his enemies. Ah, "revenge is a dish best served cold" (a Klingon axiom).

I suppose there is a certain satisfaction with revenge or seeing our *bêtes noires* receiving their just desserts, and yet I find such an attitude quite lacking in the Spirit of Christ, who calls us to forgive and to leave judgment to God. I have found that sort of satisfaction, like sweets themselves, quite tasty in the short run, but lacking in nutritional value. It may satisfy my sweet tooth for the moment but leaves me hungry and wanting later. Jesus offers to feed us with nothing less than himself, and I have found over the years that to eat and drink at the Lord's table has often brought me out of my need (or desire) for vengeance. God is immensely satisfying, even when I hurt.

God, you know I have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed; by things done and left undone. And yet, for some strange reason, you'd rather keep me in the fold than wreak vengeance upon me. So be it. Help me to be just as gracious towards those who trouble me. For that, I certainly need your help. Amen.

-The Rev. Keith Axberg

MARCH 6

Read: Psalm 140

I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the poor and render justice to the needy. Surely, the righteous will give thanks to your Name, and the upright shall continue in your sight. I like the psalmist's positive hope and the assurance that the LORD will make everything all right. From my early days our culture has encouraged me to look for a positive ending.

-Psalm 140:12-13

When I was a kid in grade school, there was a guaranteed good time to be had on Saturday, when our small town's movie theater showed kid-friendly films - for nine cents! The movies were usually cowboy films starring virtuous western heroes – Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, Hop-a-long Cassidy, maybe The Lone Ranger with his trusty sidekick Tonto.

Whatever the storyline, some things were certain: that there would be bad guys who did bad things like rustling cows or robbing banks or being really mean and maybe even pulling out their six-shooters on virtuous folks. And our cowboy hero would, using only fair play, put a stop to their evil doings and restore peaceful order and joyful relief as he rode off into the sunset on his faithful horse... (Trigger? Silver? Champion?).

Children's literature usually followed a similar trajectory with troubled times which ultimately came to a happy resolution. Isn't that the way things are supposed to work? For when a TV show, movie, book, play, or story from a friend "warms the heart," there's a positive outcome to the dangers and troubles of life.

Maybe God agrees. Just as the psalmist must deal with terrible and cruel attacks from his/her enemies, Jesus must suffer at the hands of others. And then – the miracle. The death on the cross leads not to despair but to confidence that yes, THIS story – our story - has the happiest of endings. All happy endings echo our best story.

In the end, the psalmist rejoices, and - praise the LORD - so can we, because indeed, God will save his people.

Thank you, LORD. We believe that God is healing and restoring the world and that we are recipients of and participants in that restoration. Amen!

-Tom Worrell

MARCH 7

Read: Psalm 4

When you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.

-Psalm 4:4b

Each night before sleep, I enter the sacred realm of prayer. I structure my prayer time using the ACTS model: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. On any given night, I dwell in each of those four rooms for as long as I need.

Some nights, I am awash with adoration, especially if I have spent time outdoors. On difficult days, I linger in the virtual confessional (a holdover from my youth in the Roman Catholic Church). Thanksgiving is my favorite room, and I usually tarry there for many minutes. If this past year has taught me anything, it is to be thankful for even the smallest of blessings. When I have spent a considerable amount of time giving thanks (which I also do all day long as the Spirit moves me), I move into the final room: Supplication.

Psalm 4 is about supplication:

Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer.

David opens this psalm with a passionate plea. As one commentary noted, David isn't throwing up a wayward prayer to the heavens here; he is asking for God's immediate attention. David asks why the ungodly prosper (sound familiar?) and he laments about those whose ways are contrary to God's ways (sound familiar again?) At the end of the psalm, David asks God to set him apart for God's purpose and glory. With this assurance, he sleeps.

When sleep is about to overtake me, I close with a familiar ending I have used for many decades:

Dear Lord, I place my life into Your hands tonight; hold me fast until the morning light. Amen.

-Ashley Sweeney

MARCH 8

Read: Psalm 6

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror.
-Psalm 6:2

When COVID deniers talk about how COVID is “just a cold” or “just flu”, it takes every ounce of self-control that I have not to scream at them. A “cold” can land me in the emergency room with respiratory distress because I have asthma and cannot have oral steroids. I have ended up in the emergency room often enough with “colds” since I moved here that I am on a first-name basis with the respiratory therapy staff at Skagit Valley Hospital. One of the last “colds” I had in 2018 hit me so hard that I was sleeping 18 hours a day, and my doctor had to prescribe me a combination of medications so that I could mix my own Duo-Nebs as the hospital was overrun with flu patients. It is one of the reasons my family is quarantining so strictly—I went into sepsis the last time I had pneumonia, and we know that COVID will be even worse for me.

This psalm is labeled as “a prayer for recovery from grave illness”, and I can empathize with the psalmist. Bones shaking with terror (v.2)? I’ve had that. Soul struck with terror (v.3)? That’s not uncommon either. Weary with moaning (v.6)? That’s also normal.

Verse 9 describes the reason for the prayer: **the Lord has heard my supplication; the Lord accepts my prayer.** Healing may take time, but it does eventually come.

Be present with all who are fighting COVID, dear Lord, and protect all the health workers who are treating COVID patients. Amen.

-Jen McCabe

MARCH 9

Read: Psalm 54

Arrogant foes are attacking me; ruthless people are trying to kill me—people without regard for God.
-Psalm 54:3

I have a strong hunch that if you had quoted the third verse of this psalm to the people who stormed the Capitol in Washington, D.C. on January 6 you would have received an

affirming, “Right on!” along with a token militia badge. Behind the outward political grievances connected with a national election the previous November, the animus propelling this event, and others like it across the country, seemed fired up by the Old Testament zeal against the wicked hosts who are hell-bent on our destruction. In fact, my greatest fear for the soul of our country is that the emotions of our better angels — compassion, empathy, love — no longer give us the same sense of being alive and human as the feelings of sheer outrage. In such times, as the psalm suggests, the Lord is indeed the one who sustains me.

Lord, you have truly delivered me from all my troubles. It is therefore only fitting that my “freewill offering” to you be the arrogance that I ascribe to my enemies but fail to decry in myself. Amen.

-Michael Boss

MARCH 10

Read: Psalm 43

Why are you cast down, O my soul?

--Psalm 43:5a

In Psalm 43 the psalmist laments not only his distress at the hands of the wicked but his estrangement from God. His hope lies in the steadfastness of God.

Sometimes I wonder, is God not listening? Why doesn't God do something to help? The strength that once got me through pain and grief has drained away. My days are ruled by fear, my sleep disturbed by strange dreams. I beg, plead, thank, cajole, demand--that's what prayer is... isn't it? I pray but hear only silence.

What do I fear: Being like the self-righteous ones who seem so sure of everything, or not being like them? I always try to do the right thing but miss the mark too often. Could so many failures make me unworthy to make that final, heavenly cut? Do I fear the dissolution of my world by hatred and twisted values? Perhaps my values and way of life are not honest-just-true-humane-sincere enough. Am I not good enough; am I not enough? Is that why God has been so distant?

These thoughts, these insecurities are my inner enemy. My own weaknesses oppress and deceive me, drive me further into that low, dark place where God can barely hear me. It is there that my soul lies, heavy, disquieted.

Yet, even there the blackness is not all there is. A small point of light catches my eye, and the longer I look at it the larger it grows. Its warmth stirs my soul, bathing it in a soothing tenderness. And still, there is silence, but silence filled with meaning, a wordless prayer.

Then I realize that I am standing on a high and holy place, a place of reconciliation, where God judges me with love. God was with me, hearing me, all the time; I just didn't know it.

Gracious God, grant me an awareness of your divine presence, let me welcome you into my heart, and accept my gratitude as we sit in silence, together. Amen.

-Carol Treston

MARCH 11

Read: Psalm 28

Do not drag me away with the wicked, with those who are workers of evil, who speak peace with their neighbors while mischief is in their hearts.

-Psalm 28:3

I feel bad for the psalmist. So many of his laments would indicate he's had a rough go of it. It seems he has plenty of enemies – more than enough to go around. The psalm contains three stages: “don't forget me”; “give my enemies what they deserve”; and “thank you (for my deliverance)”.

I don't know that I have ever felt abandoned by God. I've certainly had rough times, and there have been times I've decided God doesn't exist – couldn't exist. But those are my realities; they aren't the ultimate reality. If there is a God like the one we proclaim, then I know that God never leaves or abandons those God loves (and God loves everyone). I believe that if God were to forget me, I would simply vanish without a trace. Since I haven't, I have confidence God hasn't forgotten me. That's good news (for me, at any rate).

While I have been mightily vexed by enemies real and imagined, I have never actually prayed for their demise. I always think of prayer like a boomerang. What one sends forth comes back, and I don't want my prayers coming back with a vengeance. So, I pray for God to soften my heart, bless me so that I may be a blessing to others, and so on. I have found that to be much more uplifting, even when I hurt.

God, you taught us to pray “deliver us from evil.” I presume that was for a reason. It is so easy to want burning coals to be heaped upon the heads of those who torment us; but to be completely honest, I don’t like how I feel when that happens. I find that sort of giddy delight soils my soul; I’d prefer you to purify me and my thoughts. Deliver me from evil. Amen.

-The Rev. Keith Axberg

MARCH 12

Read: Psalm 129

Let them be like the grass on the housetops that withers before it grows up, with which reapers do not fill their hands or binders of sheaves their arms, while those who pass by do not say, “The blessing of the Lord be upon you! We bless you in the name of the Lord!”

-Psalm 129:6-8

I am intrigued by verses 6-8.

Grass on housetops? Were the Judeans the earliest proponents of green roofing? Yeah, no. Roofs were made of beams and branches covered in mud and plaster over reed mats. There was frequently grass seed embedded in the mud, so the seeds would sprout during the rainy season and grass would quite literally start growing on rooftops. However, the mud wasn’t that thick so there was no way for the grass to put down decent roots to grow, making it wither and die. That withered grass was of no use or interest to reapers because it was no good for hay. Thus, the psalmist is saying that they hope their enemies become useless, which is something that I think everyone would hope for those who oppose them.

Lord, help us to sort out the people who are “like rooftop grass” in our lives and show us the people who will be useful to us as we grow in your love and grace. Amen.

-Jen McCabe

MARCH 13

Read: Psalm 130

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits for him, in his word is my hope. My soul waits for the LORD, more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.

-Psalm 130:5-6

I may wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, but it's never my first choice. As an adult convert to Christianity, early on I looked for, hoped for, presumed to expect, that God would answer my prayers right speedily or at least "in due time." "In due time" meant, of course, before my limited patience gave out.

It's a common enough outcome for people with experience in the faith: "Be careful when you ask for patience because God will then give you plenty of opportunities to practice it." Yes, I've made that tactical error, and God met me there.

So, what I want to know now is, whose big idea was it to ask for patience in dealing with all the ordinary routines of life? Because I lay at your feet this pandemic, the splintered political situation, the drastic curtailing of moving about, the complications involved in communicating and gathering together, and so much more.

What a wonderful chance to practice patience!

My soul waits for the LORD, more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning...

Lord, we need your gift of patience and your strength to meet the challenges of every day. Thank you that you are walking our roads with us. Amen.

-Tom Worrell

MARCH 14

Read: Psalm 56

In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I am not afraid; what can flesh do to me?

-Psalm 56:4

The notes on this psalm say that David composed or sang this when the Philistines seized him at Gath. According to the account in 1 Samuel 21:10-15, David was acting like a mad

man, presumably trying to keep from staying in their custody. Apparently, it worked because Achish, the king of the Philistines, did not want David in his presence.

The psalm itself is fairly upbeat for a “psalm of lament”. He does express concern about “people trampling on him” (v.2), “seek[ing] to injure [his] cause” (v.5), and “stir[ring] up strife” (v.6), but the majority of it is recalling God’s strength and protection. What confidence he has!

Does this mean that all of us are remiss for not having the same level of confidence as David? Not at all. We are going to go through times when we don’t have a clear path forward. I think the trick, however, is to remember that God **IS** and **WILL BE** present through it, even if we are saying those words with shaky voices and trembling hearts.

Be present with us in the midst of trial, Lord. Amen.

-Jen McCabe

MARCH 15

Read: Psalm 143

So my spirit grows faint within me; my heart within me is dismayed.

-Psalm 143:4

Throughout the long sweep of human history I am constantly reminded that while we have become more successful in combating pestilence (who knows how many people would have died from the novel virus that lurks among us today if it had occurred in the Middle Ages), we have been far less successful in vaccinating our souls in the face of virulent ideologies that have spread rapidly through digital transmission. Small wonder that, as the psalmist intones, “I spread out my hands to you (and) I thirst for you like a parched land. Fortunately, the psalm holds the promise of the cure as well as the explanation of the illness: “Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground.”

Lord, in the words of the psalm, “let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life.” Amen.

-Michael Boss

MARCH 16

Read: Psalm 64

Hear me, my God, as I voice my complaint; protect my life from the threat of the enemy.

-Psalm 64:1

After reading several different versions of Psalm 64, one word, "bullying", kept popping up in my brain. Years ago when my son Bayard was in elementary school, he came home with two black eyes. After questioning him, Dennis and I found out that he had been walking down the bus aisle and someone stuck out a leg and tripped him and he lost his balance and fell. This was not the first time he had been harassed and it would happen to him in high school. My husband called the school and was told that they would talk to the bus driver and the driver "saw nothing".

Bayard's friend Nathan attended the same school and was harassed numerous times during recess by a group of girls. In frustration, he lashed out at them and was suspended for three days.

Now, we have Republic Act 10627 (or the Anti-Bullying Act) in place which protects children in schools from being bullied. Schools are now required to adopt policies to keep children from being bullied.

We have had people accused of bullying in our government, protestors in the U.S. Capitol, Canada's Governor General resigning as a result of bullying allegations, Boy Scouts, cyber, sexual, physical, and verbal attacks.

So, where is the good news? In addition to Republic Act 10627, we have the ability to vote out or impeach elected officials, the option to put safeguards on our computers, ways to report unwanted or violent sexual and physical abuse or attacks to the police, peaceful (hopefully) protests and we have Psalm 64.

The Message tells us "Everyone sees it. God's work is the talk of the town. Be glad, good people! Fly to God! Good-hearted people, make praise your habit" (v. 9-10)

Lord God of mercy, grant to us to be preserved from all our enemies and saved in thy Son with an everlasting salvation. Amen.

-Mary Ann Taylor

MARCH 17

Read: Psalm 17

Guard me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.

-Psalm 17:8

Every time I read the Psalms, I feel deep empathy. As a child, I was taught that David was the author, so perhaps that's why I felt especially drawn to them initially. We know, of course, that writers also included Moses, Solomon, etc., but there's still an almost mystical familiarity for me. Even now as I near 60 years of age my most common intentional readings of scripture find me in Proverbs, Song of Solomon, the Gospels—and always, the Psalms. I have come to see it as my persistent confirmation of a call to music.

Why empathy? I believe it's because the Psalms frequently remind us of the emotional states of being human: fear, loneliness, vulnerability, hopelessness—brought about by that nagging worry that, underneath it all, we don't really deserve love. As is so common, Psalm 17 finds the writer praying for deliverance from persecutors. Again. It's a recurring lament throughout the entire book. It's a recurring lament of the human condition!

But there are also glorious mountaintop moments in the Psalms: triumphant songs of confidence, thanksgiving for victory, gratitude for recovery from serious illness, the joy of forgiveness—even an ode for a royal wedding—and of course, the beloved story of the Divine Shepherd's love and care for us.

I chose to highlight verse 8 because I'm new to Washington State. Sure, I've eaten Washington apples my entire life, but I see new meaning here now. We're not just *an* apple of God's eye, but *the* apple—the fullest, shiniest, reddest, most sweet, juicy, and delicious. We're Honeycrisps! We're Cosmic Crisps! Or giant, delightful Jazz apples! And as God's favorite, each of us, we may feel secure—and loved completely, perfectly, unconditionally—in that protective shelter right next to God's very own heart. Maybe that's *really* why I return over and over to the Psalms.

In verse 15, the psalmist declares hope in the morning: that he will behold God's face in righteousness, satisfied to behold God's likeness. That likeness in which we are all created. So even at our worst moments, in the fear, loneliness, vulnerability, and hopelessness of life's lowest places, we can look in the mirror and find comfort.

Oh, God, hold before us your divine countenance; may it always be our aspiration. Amen.

-David Sloat

MARCH 18

Read: Psalm 102

I am like an owl of the wilderness, like a little owl of the waste places. I lie awake; I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.

--Psalm 102:6

In the prayer book version of this psalm, the first owl is like a vulture, circling above. My Hebrew is too poor to know whether the bird in question is an owl or a vulture, but I know both circle overhead looking for food. The vulture looks for the carcass, while the owl looks for the snake or the rodent. Then there is the swallow, sitting on the rooftop watching for the squiggle of the worm beneath. All hunger. Each needs nourishment. Each must be vigilant. Closing their eyes, they will see nothing. Seeing nothing, they would die.

When I wrote my book, Who the Blazes is Jesus, I couldn't help but see Jesus (in the Gospel of Mark) as One who always kept his eyes open, but not with a desire to devour what he saw, but to see God at work in the world around him. When Jesus hung upon the cross, I wonder if this passage came to mind. As the people around him circled, and mocked him, and spit upon him, I wonder if he saw them as vultures and owls. As others mourned his death, I wonder if he remembered what he had said about "not one sparrow falling from the sky but that God knows about it."

It has been a long time since I have felt like smoke blowing away on a gentle breeze. Maybe it is a scary image. Maybe it is a sad and lonely image or feeling. But I trust God's promise that God will gather us all up at the end. Our lives may decline and dissipate in the manner of all that is organic and corrupt, but I know our Redeemer lives, even when it hurts. That's all I need, even when the worm turns; the swallow will carry us up to high places in the end.

God, sometimes I am not all here. Sometimes, like smoke, I find myself carried aloft or carried away. And yet, you bring me back. You circle, you see, you find, you grasp, and you save, even when it hurts and especially when it hurts. And you make it better. Thank you. Amen.

-The Rev. Keith Axberg

MARCH 19

Read: Psalm 59

Even now they lie in wait for my life; the mighty stir up strife against me. For no transgression or sin of mine, O Lord, for no fault of mine, they run and make ready.

-Psalm 59:3-4a

The social media site Reddit has a subreddit (or a separate message board) called “Ask Reddit” where people can ask questions. A popular post topic is “Medical professionals of Reddit, what is the stupidest excuse you have ever heard someone give for what happened?” Some of the more family-friendly stories involve someone getting stabbed or shot and claiming that they were “standing on the street corner minding their own business” or “sitting on the porch reading the Bible”. The true explanation for how the stabbing/shooting happened is a little more complex in reality, but people really do think that the ER staff believes that they were doing nothing when they got injured.

Unlike these emergency room patients, David really is innocent in all of this. King Saul has fallen out of favor with God, David has been anointed as Saul’s successor, and Saul wants David dead. There is legitimate fear on David’s part, but he has a very strong trust in God protecting him. He looks forward to God showing up his enemies in front of everyone to show off the power of the God he serves. It reminds me of Jim Wallis’s comment that “God is so much bigger than all the things we fear.” God is so much bigger than Saul’s hatred of David.

Remind us, loving God, that you are so much bigger than all the things that scare us. Amen.

-Jen McCabe

MARCH 20

Read: Psalm 71

In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me.

-Psalm 71:2

Here the psalmist raises another prayer for protection. He laments once again vulnerability at the hand of wicked enemies. He pleads for God to incline an ear, to really hear the cries for help. We humans have a need to be heard, to be truly understood. We instinctually

know as newborns that we must cry for our very survival. Verse 6 says, “Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother’s womb.” So, there was never a time that God didn’t hear us. What a comfort!

I’m also reminded of something my mother told me. Now, Mom wasn’t particularly “touchy-feely”; she was definitely a “spare the rod, spoil the child” kind of parent. When I was only four years old, I passed her bedroom late one evening and heard her quietly speaking. Eight months pregnant with my little sister, she was lying on the bed, reading aloud—and alone. When asked who she was talking to, she patted her belly and said, “To your little brother or sister.” Surely wide-eyed, I asked why. In the sweetest tone I can ever remember her intoning, she replied, “So they’ll know my voice already when they’re born. When I call you, you know my voice. That’s because I read to *you*, too.”

Nearly thirty-five years later, it was my turn to read to her. Mom had Parkinson’s for about 20 years by this point and following hip surgery, she spent about two months at a rehab hospital. I traveled from Texas to Indiana to give my sisters, who lived locally, a break from overseeing her care by spending all day every day with her for my two-week visit. At her request, I read to her from the Bible for hours, always from the psalms, and she frequently asked me to repeat the 71st. She noted that we are not cast off in old age and gray hair, that God is faithfully present throughout our entire lives. We may well “see many troubles and calamities” (v. 20), but God’s promise is repeated revival—life anew over and over.

Indeed, God is our hope (v. 5) and our salvation (v. 3).

Oh God, you who created us, we thank you for always hearing us when we pray. Amen.

-David Sloat

MARCH 21

Read: Psalm 61

From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

-Psalm 61:2

Shortly after I moved to Minnesota, I was flipping channels in the middle of the night and came upon a music channel and the refrain of a song kept playing over and over again.

*Hear my prayer, O Lord
From the ends of the earth I cry
Your peace will lead me to
The rock that is higher than I*

Unfortunately, I never caught who recorded it, and that bummed me out because I could not get the song out of my head. It was not until the end of my time there that I caught the song again on that late night Christian music show. It was called “Hear My Prayer” and recorded by the Maranatha Singers. I ordered the CD off of Amazon (as this was in the days before iTunes), and the song has remained a favorite of mine for close to two decades. (For those who want to hear it, the link is:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViklW4EyYu4>.)

I love this particular song (and the psalm from which it comes) because of the image of God as a rock that is higher than me, and which is therefore a safe place to be placed. This two year period marked the second time I was put on medication for depression and anxiety, and it was during this time that we found the magic dosage of my current medication that I have been on for almost two decades. It was a time where my former husband’s parishioners were mining my personal life and my web presence to try and to find any negative thing about me to use against me and against my former husband. It was a time when I needed peace, and it was the point I had to separate my faith from my former husband’s ministry because his churches were literally trying to hurt us. The image of God as my rock sustained me then, and it sustains me to this day.

Be our rock and a strong tower above our enemies, Lord. Give us your peace and surround us with your presence. Amen.

-Jen McCabe

MARCH 22

Read: Psalm 38

I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin.

-Psalm 38:18

I will readily admit that I am very much on the Anglo-Catholic end of the Episcopal spectrum. I’m happy with the bowing, sitting, kneeling, genuflecting, and standing parts of

the pew aerobic routine that is Sunday worship. Holy water? Love it! Ash cross on Ash Wednesday? Let's wear that baby out in public until it wears off! Stations of the Cross on Good Friday? Totally there. I have two Anglican rosaries because of a former rector who taught me about it and made one of them for me, and I am one of those people that needs something in my fingers to pay attention.

One of my favorite "Catholic" things is the rite of Reconciliation, commonly known as "Confession". I am a convert to Christianity, and it took me years to believe that I was truly forgiven for things in my past. I dwell on my sins longer than I should and going through the rite once a year during Lent keeps me both mentally and spiritually healthy. (It was essential during the two years I went through my divorce because it helped me work through my part in things.) The feeling of hands on my head and the sign of the cross being made on my forehead is a tactile reminder that I am forgiven and that my sins do not define me.

For this reason, I identify with the psalmist today. I know the feeling of "my iniquities ... weigh[ing] like a burden too heavy for me" (v.4), and "groan[ing] because of the tumult of my heart" (v.8). What I need to remember is that the Lord is faithful and will forgive my sins. I need the reminder that God will "make haste to help me" (v.22), and that Jesus died for my sins. It is why I kneel for the Confession of Sin during worship—it is a tactile reminder of humbling myself before God and confessing what I have done that has hurt and me and has hurt others. God forgives me... and will forgive you as well!

Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen. (BCP, p. 360)

-Jen McCabe

MARCH 23

Read: Psalm 27

One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and inquire in his temple.

-Psalm 27:4

In this psalm, David is lamenting that he is not able to worship the Lord as is his custom while he is waging warfare. His adversaries are surrounding him, his enemies are plotting against him. But he knows that “the Lord is my light and salvation; whom shall I fear? This Lord is the stronghold (refuge) of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” His wish at this exceedingly difficult time is to be able to have a room in the house of the Lord where he could worship every day.

I think of us in 2020 and 2021 waging warfare against the COVID-19 virus. We are hunkered down in our homes, isolated from our friends and family, taking all precautions necessary to not contract the virus. As humans, we are social beings who want to spend time with our friends whether it is a walk together, sharing a meal, or just sharing that hug.

But most of all, we are missing that chance to “live” in the house of the Lord as we are accustomed to. Instead of being able to go to church and sit in a pew with the rest of the congregation, we are at home on Zoom! I miss the awe of feeling God’s presence in the church, the singing of the hymns, and the choir anthems. I miss hearing your celebrations of life and being able to support you in your joys and sorrows. I miss being able to extend God’s peace to you with a handshake or a hug. But most of all, I miss sharing Holy Communion at the Lord’s Table with all of you – that special time to commune with God.

But, like David, we are here keeping the faith. We are fighting the virus knowing that this too shall pass, and the time will come when we can go back to some form of “normalcy”. Circumstances change but God is faithful and steadfast in His love toward us and He will give us the strength to persevere until we can worship together again.

Lord, thank you for your promise to be with us even during COVID-19. Help us to keep the faith!
-Marilyn Allen

MARCH 24

Read: Psalm 141

Give ear to my voice when I call to you. Let my prayer be counted as incense before you.

-Psalm 141:1b, 2a

By now familiar to us, the psalmist is once again praying to be preserved from wickedness. This hits close to home if I am honest; it pains me to admit that I relate to his plea that God place a guard over his mouth. “Keep watch over the door of my lips”, it reads. I am

reminded that I can in this way save myself from wickedness. Words can be weapons if we so choose.

The writer implores God to hear his petition, asking that his prayer be “counted as incense”—ephemeral, floaty, sweet-smelling smoke. When I think of incense, I am reminded of the vague, faint aroma that lingers long after the oh-so-slow burning has finished. Is it too much to imagine that our prayers could likewise saturate the very space around God? Just think: our words continue to resonate long after the sound itself has evaporated into silence.

My dear friend Sharon Kohn, a Reformed Jewish temple cantor in the Kansas City area, inspired me to think of music similarly. She gave the children’s “sermon” once at a Presbyterian church in Houston where I served as pianist and music director. The subject was prayer, so she demonstrated by singing a brief Torah reading and prayer in her gentle, rich soprano voice for the kids. They were asked to imagine why the chanting tradition might be so important in her faith. After several long seconds, a boisterous little three year old girl exclaimed, “Because it’s prettier that way!” Well, yes! Sharon likened song to wrapping paper enclosing the prayers offered up like gifts. Indeed, isn’t the very best present even better when it’s in beautiful ribbons and bows? And how blessed we are that God hears our every prayer, sung or silent, wrapped or bare, in great exuberance or excruciating pain!

At the end, the psalmist expresses several hopeful thoughts: his eyes turn toward God, seeking refuge and defense. Evildoers become prey to their own traps, and he alone escapes. So may we, in keeping our eyes on God, thus be preserved.

Dear God, thank you for hearing our prayers and for your faithfulness as our refuge and defense. May we always strive to be the same for any of your creations in such need. Amen.

-David Sloat

MARCH 25

Read: Psalm 139

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

-Psalm 139:7

Full disclosure: This is my favorite psalm. I was really surprised to find this on a list of psalms of lament because most of it seems like a psalm in which the psalmist is in awe of the presence of God. They are pondering how they could go to the ends of the earth, and yet God is there. They are marveling at how they were put together in their mother's womb, which I find incredibly profound. I mean, this is the psalm I go to when I need to be reminded of God's presence with me.

The problematic part comes in verse 19 when the psalmist takes a violent turn and talks about wishing the Lord would kill the wicked. Umm... OK... They then talk about hating those who hate the Lord (v. 21), and I find myself wanting to back away slowly while looking for all the possible exits out of this psalm. The psalmist talks about hating them (the wicked and people who hate God) with a perfect hatred (v.22), and I find myself pondering how exactly we went from a psalm expressing wonder and awe to hating people. The psalmist then returns to wanting God to search them and know their thoughts (v.23), and I start wondering what just happened here.

The issue, I think, is that the psalmist's zeal for the Lord gets a bit out of hand in those four verses from 19-22, and they want to be part of the judgment on the wicked because they have perhaps been persecuted. Zeal is a wonderful thing, but it needs to be tempered and focused in a specific way lest it get out of hand and bad things happen. Those four verses are problematic for me, but I can see (mostly) how they could fit into the psalm. I hold them in tension with the wonder and awe expressed in the majority of the psalm, and I return to feeling like the psalm encircles me like a mantle of strength.

Thank you, Lord, for your presence in the world and the ability to wonder and ponder things. Amen.

-Jen McCabe

MARCH 26

Read: Psalm 70

Be pleased, O God, to deliver me. O Lord, make haste to help me!

-Psalm 70:1

Author Anne Lamott wrote a book eight years ago entitled Help Thanks Wow: The Three Essential Prayers, and I think this psalm would definitely be included in the “Help” section. Pleas for haste and deliverance appear twice in this psalm, which is a big theme when the psalm is only 5 verses.

Why is it important that pleas for help appear consistently in this psalm? Why is it important that we ask God for help when we are in trouble? Does prayer make a difference?

My answer to the last question is “YES!” Prayer does make a difference when we unite our will to that of God. God wants to help us and deliver us and seems to want us to ask. Does this mean that we will always be delivered from trouble? The answer to that question is “not exactly.” When our trouble is caused by our own bad decisions, we do have to face the consequences. God is present with us, however, as we face them.

In everything we face, be present with us, Lord. Amen.

-Jen McCabe

MARCH 27

Read: Psalm 57

For your steadfast love is as high as the heavens; your faithfulness extends to the clouds.

-Psalm 57:10

This psalm is believed to have been written by David during one of the two times when he was hiding from King Saul in a cave. David was a servant of King Saul and his job was to make music when Saul was sad. Saul was jealous of David’s popularity with the people and sought to destroy him. So “Bible students think that David also wrote this psalm so that the people could sing it to music that they called “Do not destroy”. Psalm 57 is called a “miktam”. This means it had a hidden meaning or had special teaching in it.” (Free Bible

Commentary) Think of David hiding in a cave singing and praising God for his steadfast love and faithfulness!

God counts on us, His people, to reach out to those around us who are suffering or in need so that they experience God's faithfulness in their hour of need. I am thinking of a friend of mine who was suffering from COVID-19 and who was in desperate straits, trying to survive the virus all alone in her apartment. I reached out to the prayer chain in our church and to different members of our congregation asking them to hold Sue in their prayers. A month later, Sue is doing so much better and is so grateful for the prayers and good thoughts sent her way. God is faithful!!!!

Our Soroptimist club in La Conner has budgeted money for a Christmas Program which gives out gift cards and checks to the families of children in our local schools who are facing financial difficulties. The number of children who experience food insecurity and/or homeless has almost doubled from last year. Our club felt privileged to also deliver the gifts for these families that were purchased by different members of the community through the Washington Federal Christmas Tree family adoption program. Due to COVID-19, we were not able to give and receive the hugs we normally do but we did see the joy and anticipation on the children's faces and the gratitude and relief on the parents' faces that there would be gifts under the tree this year.

Lord, help us to be sensitive to your prompting to show Your faithfulness and love by reaching out to those in need. Amen.

-Marilyn Allen

MARCH 28 (PALM SUNDAY)

Read: Psalm 31:9-16

For my life is wasted with grief, and my years with sighing; my strength fails me because of affliction, and my bones are consumed. . . . I am as useless as a broken pot.

-Psalm 31:10, 12b

Palm Sunday is a cacophony of extremes, starting with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem before adoring crowds; descending all too quickly into the horrors of arrest, trial, bloodthirsty mobs, and agonizing crucifixion in a full public display; and from this pit of

despair emerging triumphant over the final enemy, death. And the world is changed forever.

But that pendulum swing from one state to another is our experience, too. Life, no matter how well lived, does not promise anyone an easy time of it. Many of us do our best to put the down times out of our minds, and many of us will not advertise our failures, pains, and losses. We often deal with our griefs primarily in our own minds and hearts. Sometimes we have no choice. Jesus was deserted by his best-loved friends and suffered alone. Alone.

So, what is it with this psalmist, who goes public with his fraught life and fears of his enemies? He energetically lays out samples of what stinks (“they plot to take my life”) and takes a good long time to get around to seeking God’s help. But he does, at last, get there.

If we have similar low times, perhaps it’s good to remember that we can turn to God. We don’t have to be alone.

O LORD, my times are in your hand... make your face to shine upon your servant, and your loving-kindness to save me. Amen.

-Tom Worrell

MARCH 29

Read: Psalm 123

To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!

-Psalm 123:1

My Dad taught me (from an early age) to “step on your eye.” I presume that was something he was taught, either as a child or as an enlisted man in basic training. I never asked him where he got the saying, and he never told me. Either way, his point was simple: “Watch where you’re going.”

The psalmist has enemies. When Israel was looking to enter the promised land, they sent in spies who returned with news: The people there are humongous giants. We are like grasshoppers in comparison. Rather than turning their eyes upon the One who led them out of slavery into Egypt, the people listened to the spies and decided they couldn’t tackle the task ahead. It was too big. The task was too great. They didn’t look up, nor did they look

down. Instead, they looked back and remembered the meals they enjoyed in Egypt, but not the lashes they endured. They remembered the onions they ate, but not the tears they shed.

I think God calls us to look up, but we should also keep an eye out for where we go, for there are many roots to trip us up, holes into which to fall, and curves that could send us careening out of bounds. Ultimately, it is God to whom we look up, and who provides light for the paths we trod or tread. Either way, I plan to step on my eye as God leads me away from where it hurts.

God, grant me grace to lift up my face and dare to see in You all your wonderful glory. Remove from me the stains of my sins; bleach out those stains with the powerful light of your presence, and help me know when I look upon you, I do not see One hastening to scold, but One who desires my hand to hold. Amen.

-The Rev. Keith Axberg

MARCH 30

Read: Psalm 32

Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord. Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

-Psalm 32:10-11

This psalm celebrates the joy of forgiveness and provides instruction as to how we should “acknowledge our sins” and “confess our transgressions to the Lord.”

Oh, how difficult it is to acknowledge our sins! We squirm; we hide; we pretend they never happened. Our stubbornness and pride take over and we bury our sins deep within where, as the psalmist tells us, our bodies dry up and there is no strength within us.

If only we acknowledge our sins and confess them, we will be forgiven. It’s that simple - and that hard. If we trust in God’s word, we will be surrounded by God’s steadfast love and can shout for joy.

Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen. (BCP, p. 360)

-Cathey Frederick

MARCH 31

Read: Psalm 142

I cry to the LORD with my voice; to the LORD I make loud supplication.

-Psalm 142:1

This is a hard psalm for me to say. I was the youngest child. As kids, my brothers had little desire for my company. One of them took every opportunity to say and to do hurtful things to me, and when as a small child I cried, then I was a cry-baby, beneath contempt.

Tormenting me seemed to be his hobby.

By age five or six, I had decided that it was better to be borderline invisible than to make a fuss about anything. Better to be ignored than to be vulnerable.

King David (or whoever wrote this psalm) considers it highly appropriate to “cry out” and make sure God hears – full volume, please! I shrink back. No fuss, please. Let ‘er rip, yes, in praise and song and celebration. But in times of physical or emotional pain or trouble, well then: whining is not okay; no one wants to hear that.

So as an adult, it’s been a bit of a revelation to discover that real men do cry. That real people learn to be open about who they are. Real people ally themselves with spiritual partners – real people seek out trustworthy listeners. And learn to be trustworthy listeners themselves.

I admire the human behind Psalm 142. This was someone who was wholeheartedly opening him/herself to God.

Not a bad model to follow.

Lord, we all know that short verse, "Jesus wept." Thank you for leading us as you opened yourself to the fullness of your humanity which is lived in the fullness of God. Stay with us and be our Guide and Savior always. Amen.

-Tom Worrell

APRIL 1 (MAUNDY THURSDAY)

Read: Psalm 55

If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were rising against me, I could hide. But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship at the house of God, as we walked about among the worshipers.

-Psalm 55:12-14

Being wronged by someone you love and trust is the ultimate betrayal. Psalm 55 offers us a glimpse into David's fractured heart as he mourns over the betrayal by a close friend and confidante. In 21st century language, we could say he was beside himself. How could this friend do this to me? And why?

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, I gave myself time and permission to revisit a betrayal that occurred earlier in my life and had lain buried for decades.

As a young woman, I was repeatedly and violently assaulted by a man I loved. I ended the relationship abruptly after a life-threatening beating, and never took time to fully process my grief. And then I avoided talking about the assault for decades, not wanting to be stigmatized.

Last spring, I unpacked and revisited every detail of that long-ago relationship, from my long history with the abuser to the day I finally left (it's amazing how clear your memory can be, even about events that occurred decades earlier). Although I didn't feel the physical pain that I endured in the assault, I felt the emotional pain again as if the event had just happened.

It was the ultimate betrayal.

I mourned.

Over the next couple of months, I dealt with denial, anger, bargaining, and depression. As I sat with the assault fresh in my mind, I ran through the gamut of emotions, from irritability

to stress to anxiety to outright rage. This ushered in other negative emotions, including resentment and even hate.

I credit my faith walk and prayer life—and God’s sustaining hand—as the reason I have come through this long-buried trauma stronger and more committed to Him, and even more devoted to helping those less fortunate.

Tonight, on Maundy Thursday, let us remember Judas’s betrayal of Christ, and feel the heaviness of Christ’s heart (on Good Friday, Christ will be betrayed again, this time by Peter, Pontius Pilate, and the mob).

Like David in this psalm, Christ cried out in distress in the dark night of His soul. As do we in times of utter despair. Like David, ultimately Christ trusted God’s will in His life. As must we as we press on toward a glorious Easter.

Dear Lord, let us trust in You, morning, noon, and night. Amen.

-Ashley Sweeney

APRIL 2 (GOOD FRIDAY)

Read: Psalm 22

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.

-Psalm 22:14-15

It has been ten years since the night Daniel almost died.

Ten years since I was pasted against the wall by the team rushing into the PICU at UC Davis Children’s Hospital after a Code Blue was called.

Ten years since I followed them down to Daniel’s PICU bay where I stood helpless as they worked on him, completely in shock.

Ten years since the UU chaplain held me as the doctor told me that they were putting Daniel on ECMO because they didn’t think they could bring him back a second time.

Ten years since the UU chaplain held my hair as I threw up into the wastebasket in the Family Room outside the PICU because my stress level was activating my fight-flight-freeze response.

Ten years since I called my twin brother and my former husband Jon to come and be with me at the hospital.

Ten years since I sat in the Family Room and wondered why God was forsaking me.

Ten years since I did one of the hardest things I've ever done by signing the ECMO paperwork.

Ten years since I cried all the tears my body could produce so that I wasn't sobbing but starting to keel instead.

Ten years since the doctor walked in the room and told me that Daniel had improved with a few ventilator tweaks and that he would not be put on ECMO.

Ten years since I slept on the hard floor of the Family Room because Daniel's room had to stay sterile in case he needed to be put on ECMO in the middle of the night.

Ten years since I simultaneously put God on notice while giving thanks for the miracle my child received.

Ten years since I came to the end of myself... and found that I was embraced and surrounded by God when my strength was utterly sapped,

Ten years since I stopped being able to participate in the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday without starting to cry at various points because I watched my son almost die.

Ten years since I received my son back alive.

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name. Amen. (Source: BCP, p. 101)

-Jen McCabe

APRIL 3 (HOLY SATURDAY)

Read: Psalm 77

I will consider all your works and meditate on all your mighty deeds.

-Psalm 77:12

I'm definitely a "glass half full" person by nature. That said, I also realize that however much I'm inclined to think that my faith and optimism have been tested over the nearly seven decades of my life, the greatest travails most likely lie ahead. For this reason, I try to keep both my physical and spiritual being in fine fettle. A great way to do this is by taking a walk outside. The prophylactic benefits are well established, but beyond that, it doesn't take much time in nature to be reminded of "the deeds of the Lord" and God's "miracles of long ago." This sense of continuity and faithfulness is both humbling and sustaining, and leads to the inescapable conclusion, "What God is as great as our God?"

Lord, when I am in distress, help me to recall "my songs in the night" — the meditations of the miracles you show me every day. For you are the God who performs miracles, and who leads me "like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron." Amen.

-Michael Boss

APRIL 4 (EASTER SUNDAY)

Read: Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

I will not die, but live, and I will tell what the Lord has done.

-Psalm 118:17

This portion of Psalm 118 is a shout of triumph but it is not triumphalist. The psalmist has been through dark days. He thought he might not make it. He has learned a "hard lesson," but lives to tell about it. The story is not about how he triumphed, but how God saved him from the day of trouble, to which he responds with praise. "I will tell what the Lord has done." He opens with a common refrain that expresses how Israel was to understand the heart of God: "His love continues forever." This is all about praising God's everlasting love. He ends gathering the people together with him. "Let us rejoice and be glad today!"

Lent is over. Yesterday was the last day of Holy Week. It is as if we have been through the lament of Lent and are emerging from the other side full of hope.

COVID-19 has had us lamenting for over a year, compounded with new variants that are more virulent than what first emerged to plague the world. Yet as vaccines gain momentum, the beacon light of herd immunity begins to dawn on the horizon. This trial will not go on forever. There is hope.

A little less than a year ago the death of George Floyd galvanized the nation and brought into sharp focus the disparity between how black and white people are treated. The ghosts of our past have emerged in violent white-supremacist groups, even as we have wrestled with the unconscious ways in which we, too, have participated in our nation's original sin. Yet the work is yielding fruit. The backlash from the events of January 6th show signs that most of us really do want to expand the national story to include the stories of people of color. Oppression will not go on forever. There is hope.

If we are to take the pattern of this psalm as our own, then we must give thanks to God for bringing us through. Even our own efforts are made in the context of God's never-ending love. In the end, we must all join together in praise, for a single voice just does not do the moment justice.

God of unending love, we lift our hearts in praise for the ways you are bringing us out of darkness into the light of love, faith, and justice. Amen.

-The Rev. Paul Moore

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May you be blessed by what you read.

-Jen McCabe