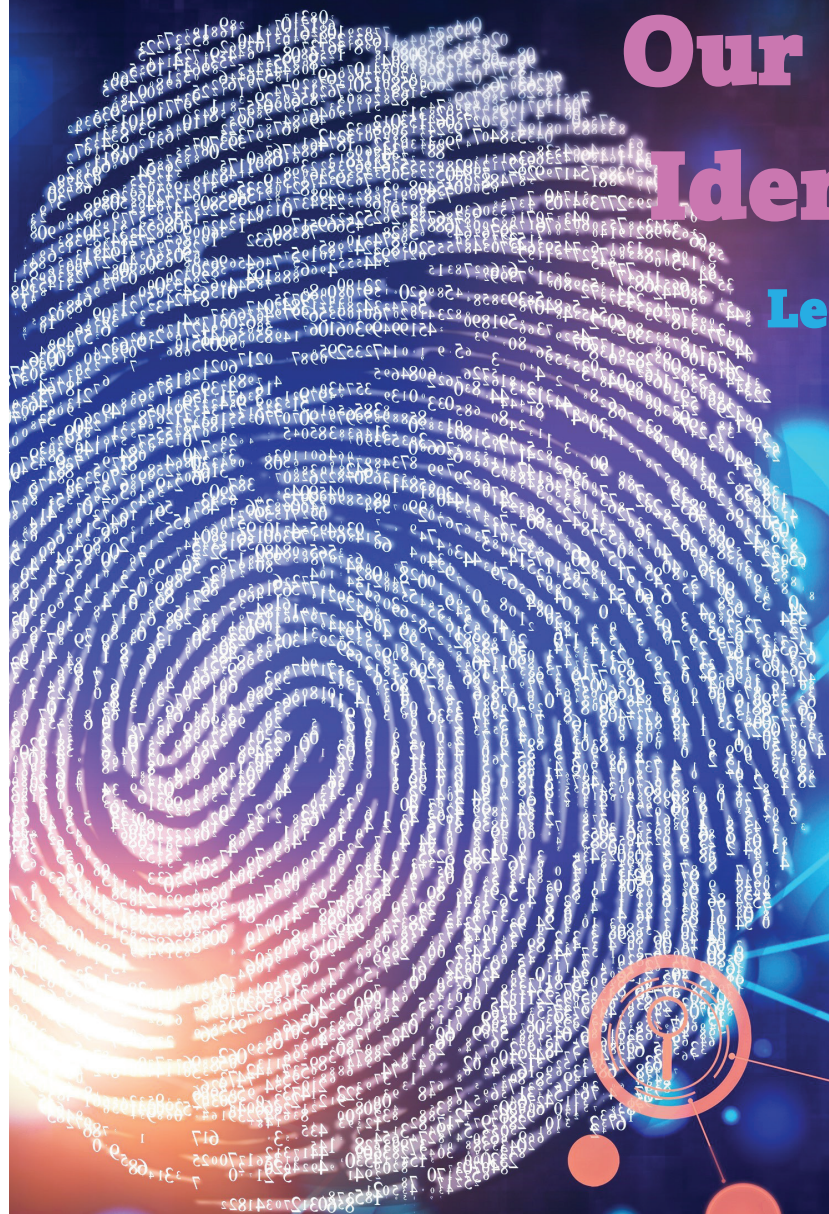


Claiming Our True Identity

Lent 2024





Lent 2024

Claiming Our True Identity

From Your Editors:

We are blessed to bring you this collection of devotional writings from fellow Congregationalists. Thank you! We have a variety of writings from people across the country. We pray these and the whole booklet are inspirational to you during this Lenten season.

Has God's Spirit given you a devotional thought that could start the day of Congregational friends from coast to coast? We would welcome your writings any time during the year. Please note our deadlines, in the summer and fall of 2024. Details about the themes, our devotional format, deadline dates, and the email addresses for submission for Advent 2024 and Lent 2025 are on the last page of this booklet.

Your editors have intentionally left the writers' theological and spiritual expressions intact, editing only for grammar, clarity, spelling, and punctuation. We sincerely respect the breadth and depth of theological understanding embraced within the NACCC and are honored to reflect that variety in this devotional booklet.

Blessings to all our readers in this season of preparation and, once again, thank you to our writers.

Your co-editors,
Casey vanderBent
Carol Taylor
Terry Bobzien

Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2024
God's Unfailing Love

"Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love. Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins." - Psalm 51:1 (NLT)

Psalm 51 is filled with really good stuff that fits into so many corners of our lives including the Ash Wednesday prayer: *Create in me a clean heart, O God.* But for me, the best part of this Psalm is in verse 1: *Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love.*

If you ask me my favorite things about God, I will tell you it's that whole steadfast and unfailing love thing. Throughout our lives, love fails us time and again. Mostly that's a direct result of our putting someone on a pedestal that serves only to topple the person already standing there. Love, to us, feels as if it is all about failing.

But God's love is totally and completely and always unfailing. It never ends. It never wavers. It never qualifies. It never shifts based on the good or the bad that we do. It is unfailing. It is boundless. His love is consistent and continual and that thing upon which we can count, every single day. That is powerfully significant.

As you move through today, consider how much you are loved by God - no matter who you are, what you've done - YOU are loved, always and forever, by God. Need proof? Just remember another great verse: *For this is how God loved the world: He gave His one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.*

Amazing and steadfast God, help me to see today Your unfailing love. Grant that I may recognize that love in every corner of my life. And then, teach me to follow Christ's example and return that love to You and to the world. In His name, we ask this and more. Amen.

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Thursday, February 15, 2024
Silence and Space

"Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness..."
- Matthew 4:1 (NRSV)

This Lent as well as every Lent we are asked to join with Jesus in His 40 days in the wilderness. The wilderness is a placeless place. But it is not an empty place. It has a floor, but no walls nor a ceiling. Therefore, in the wilderness, we are not constrained spiritually or mentally by enclosures, walls, barriers, or confines. Everywhere we look is open to us. We are grounded only where we are.

In our lives, when we erect walls, whether emotional, intellectual, or especially spiritual, we are creating our own reality. We paint our walls with colors which affect our emotions. Within our walls, we find safety because others cannot reach us. If the walls we create are thick enough and high enough, then even God cannot enter, we are then free to fashion a god we want our god to be.

In the wilderness, Jesus was also confronted by silence except for the natural sounds of birds, animals, and wind. It is in this golden silence when we are open to the voice of God who can enter into our very being, into our deepest selves, affect our souls and minds and hearts, and inspire our strength. During His ministry after His 40 days, Jesus taught us that whenever we pray, to go into our room, shut the door, and pray. Mt. 6.

Lord, during this time of Lent may we tear down the walls we have built to protect ourselves. So many walls: walls which reflect only what we want reflected back to us, walls which prevent us from going outside of ourselves, walls which don't allow others in, and walls to keep You out. And let us pay attention to what distracts us from Your Divine Reality: social media, TV, or anything which leads us from You. Let us pray as Jesus did, and as He taught. Let us be open to Your Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Friday, February 16, 2024
The Prince of Darkness Grim

Please read Matthew 4:1-11

In *The Gospel According to the Son*, the 1997 novel by Norman Mailer, we encounter the Gospel as a first-person narrative by Jesus. It is a fascinating take on (and an accurate augmentation of) the Synoptics and John. Granted, imagined conversations abound — the most fascinating being the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness by Satan.

After His forty days of fasting, Jesus is told by the Father to prepare himself for a “visitor” who will soon come. The next chapter opens with Jesus saying, “The visitor soon arrived. And he was as handsome as a prince.” I am reminded of Albert Brooks in the 1987 dramatic romantic comedy *Broadcast News*, who describes the Devil as being nice, helpful, and attractive.

Of course, the Devil is attractive. No one is going to listen to a horrific beast. If you were a filmmaker tasked with depicting Satan, you’d cast Grace Kelly or Paul Newman, not Phyllis Diller or Marty Feldman! The Prince of Darkness is beautiful and wealthy. He (or she) appeals to our ego-desires and encourages self-gratification — “flash over substance,” as Brooks’ character claims. In the bestselling 1971 novel *The Exorcist*, William Peter Blatty’s character Father Merrin warns a young Father Karras, “The demon is a liar. He will lie to confuse us; but he will also mix lies with the truth to attack us.”

This is not a systematic analysis of Demonology. It is common sense. Evil is attractive, and we are lured and lulled by that which, ultimately, comprises our faith and values.

Maybe I’m way off. Maybe the Devil only exists as a mythic figure — a character in Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and Jonathan Edwards’ “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Maybe. But just remember what Charles Baudelaire said: “The finest trick of the devil is to persuade you that he does not exist.”

Lord Jesus, deliver us from evil. Amen.

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Saturday, February 17, 2024
Your New Identity

"For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you^d to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light." - Colossians 1:9-12 (NIV)

The Apostle Paul is writing to the Colossian people helping them understand their identity as new Christians. He explains how they have been rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the light of Christ. He then gives practical examples of how to live their lives as new Christ followers.

He prays for these people to have endurance and patience and to bear fruit in every good work. This means every day we should look for opportunities to make Jesus smile; we should look for opportunities to serve and help others around us; we should give "joyful thanks" to the Father for all that unfolds in our day.

When our day goes as planned, without stress or inconvenience, it can be easy to give "joyful thanks." It is when we are truly challenged in the circumstances of our day that we are tested, and our true identity is shown.

Gracious God, help me to walk with you every day, giving joyful thanks for rescuing me from darkness and bringing me into your Kingdom. Give me a heart of gratitude and allow me to see others the way you see them. May I extend grace and forgiveness in the same measure to which you have done for me, and may others see Christ in me. Amen.

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First Sunday of Lent, February 18, 2024
Who Am I?

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." - Matthew 22:37-40 (NIV)

Under God's guidance, Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to their Promised Land. They began a journey not knowing how long it would take or exactly where they were going. This was more than a relocation trip; it was a time to re-establish their faith and build their trust in the power of God. *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.* The Israelites were claiming their true identity as God's chosen people.

Jesus taught how God intends all people to live in peace loving one another. All people, Jews as well as Gentiles. *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* Jesus demonstrated the power of God through healings, casting out demons, and then victory over death. Jesus claiming His true identity as the risen Christ.

When asked, what is the greatest commandment? Jesus replied: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*

When we apply these commandments to our daily lives, we are claiming our true identity as Children of God.

Gracious God, I thank you each day for your unconditional love. Continue to guide me to love my neighbors and share your love for all creation. Amen.

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Monday, February 19, 2024
God He Created Them

"Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

- Genesis 1:26-27 (NIV)

Have you studied the sky lately? We hardly miss anything new in the sky anymore. On March 22, 2013, while casually driving home from a movie at 9:10 at night, we saw a huge grouping of lights down a neighborhood street. This was frightening to me. I wanted to hurry to gather our family. As it turned out, six spaceships each flew to our house and paused one at a time with one smaller ship on each of their three corners. Although this was interesting, it was frightening. They quietly flew to our house, paused in front, then flew straight up disappearing into the night sky.

I share this because we now see trails of what looks like twenty stars trailing through the sky in a straight line. We discovered these are Starlink satellite trains launched from SpaceX Falcon rockets and visible as a train. These are deployed and go into orbit. This is called SpaceX Starlink Satellites Tracker, a project of Elon Musk.

None of these can outshine or outlast God's creations or Jesus's teachings. This thought gives me more comfort than you can ever imagine.

May the light of God's angels always comfort us. Amen.

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Tuesday, February 20, 2024
Who Do We Think We Are?

"I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me." - Ecclesiastes 2:18 (NIV)

People love labels: athlete, musician, medical professional, academic, etc. I went from being insecure to quite confident when, in sixth grade, I discovered I was a pretty decent actor. Whenever I was cast in a play, I was on top of the world. Unfortunately, whenever I was turned down for a role, it was soul-crushing.

As soon as children can talk, adults start asking them what they want to be when they grow up, implying that what they do for a living will be the thing that most defines their lives. Is it any surprise that many of us grow up to be overworked and stressed out? Who ARE we if we aren't accomplishing something significant?

Even worse, the amalgamation of occupation and identity leads countless retirees into a scheduled depression. They feel they suddenly become irrelevant in society. Whatever they accomplished while working is subject to becoming undone by younger hotshots who have no respect for their predecessors. This is the sad scenario we find discussed in chapter 2 of Ecclesiastes. But when we shift our focus from earth below to heaven above, we find hope in the realization that our true identity comes from being children of God. Our most enduring work is that which God began in us, that which God will continue to do until Christ returns (Phil 1:6).

Dear Lord, thank you that we aren't required to labor and toil to earn your love. Help us to be secure in our God-given identities and to do all things for the sake of your kingdom. Amen.

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Wednesday, February 21, 2024
Realizing Our Identity

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.” - Matthew 7:1 (NRSV)

Why do some people fix their identities on who they hate? To despise others in this newest age of incensed anger and rage seems to be a badge of honor for some. Antisemitism, anti-LGBTQ+, anti-black and brown, and anti-who-they-disagree-with are all intensifying. Jacques Maritain, when he observed ever increasing criminal and immoral antagonism against others, wrote that Jesus Christ crucified extends His arms toward all individuals. Jesus clearly charges us to love our neighbor, tells a story which confirms that everyone is our neighbor, and, further, commands us to not judge others. His mandate extends to all races, sexual identities, belief systems, and more. Even if we cannot accept others for whatever reasons we feel, we should not attack people with hate.

St. Paul explains that Jesus's intent is to reconcile peoples, to break down the dividing barrier of enmity between us. He tells us “Jesus the Christ is our peace,” and that we are “one body through the cross.” (Eph. 2:14, 16) Therefore, as members of Christ's Body we have a continuing task to bring unity, love, and peace to this world. As we do so we confirm our identity, but also that Jesus is at the very heart of our lives and character.

Because we call ourselves Christian, we are to live as Jesus taught. In the Gospel we learn that Jesus shared table fellowship with individuals who others judged ‘sinners’. Those who criticized Jesus went so far as to call Him a glutton and a drunkard! This is the Jesus who welcomed and loved everyone. (Matthew 11) Therefore, in this Lenten season let our love of God and neighbor increase as we sincerely pray “may Your Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.”

Father, your Son showed us how to love, and not judge. Just as Jesus was accused by those who judged Him wrongly, let us not judge others, for we don't really know who they are. Amen.

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Thursday, February 22, 2024
A Child, A Follower, Who Is Indwelt

"Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" - John 1:12 (NIV)

If someone asked you, "Who are you?" my guess is you'd tell them what you do: "I'm a teacher," or "I'm an electrician," or "I'm a techie." But that's not really who you are. Which leads me to this question, "If what you do is who you are, who will you be when you stop doing what you're doing?"

Who we are is found in our relationship to God, to Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. So, let's look at Scripture to tell us who we are. Deuteronomy 14:1 says, "You are the children of the Lord your God." Jesus says in Mark 10:14 that the kingdom of God belongs to children.

In addition, we are followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus said "follow me" thirteen times in the Gospels. He uses two simple words to call Peter, Andrew, James, and John as His disciples. For Jesus to ask them to follow Him and learn from Him was an honor. Today, when we are asked to follow Jesus, it is still an honor.

And finally, we are indwelt of the Holy Spirit. In Romans 8:9, Paul reveals that the Spirit of God dwells in us. The moment we are brought into faith and the Holy Spirit comes into our lives, we become part of His work and plan, and He promises He will complete the good work He started in us.

So, the next time someone asks you "Who are you?" I hope you'll answer, "I'm a child of God, a follower of Jesus Christ, and I'm indwelt of the Holy Spirit."

Heavenly Father, thank you for calling me your child; help me follow your Son's example in my own life; and help me rely on your Holy Spirit for guidance and direction in my life. Amen.

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Friday, February 23, 2024
A Conversation About Identity

"Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is - what is good and pleasing and mature." - Romans 12:2 (CEB)

Pastor Sarah: I remember on the first day of Kindergarten, Mrs. H. took all six of my classmates down to the chapel. We all sat in a circle and talked about the importance of Jesus living in our hearts. We then prayed a very special prayer. But for months following, I had a kindergarten complex about whether or not my prayer had stuck! "Jesus, are you in there? Seriously! Are you in there?"

Linda: As a teenager my family was breaking apart, my father had a public role, so my family was struggling out in the open. I turned into a rebellious teen and was thus put into the most conservative Baptist school my parents could find! There my religion teacher told me that only 144,000 people would one day make it into heaven. It was then and there I thought, "Welp. I'm out! So what does it matter?"

Identity. Who am I? Am I in? Am I out? Where is Jesus? Is He in there somewhere? We have both come a long way from our childhood conundrums. Our souls are today far freer and more alive. Filled with a faith that was discovered through relationship and trust and little nudges from the Lord. The world can be a noisy place, where everyone has something to say. Most with the best of intentions. Many that will open doors of wonder! But also a few will slam closed a door without ever knowing the damage that was caused.

Through a relationship with Christ, through time, healing and growth, God's Will is revealed! At the end for the day Sarah can trust that, indeed, Jesus is in her heart. And Linda can be confident that there is a place for her in God's kingdom.

We are claiming our identity with a loving God.

All together in God's Love,
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Saturday, February 24, 2024
Was It Worth It?

"The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son." - Revelation 21:7 (ESV)

When I need alone time with God, I will strap a backpack of life-saving supplies to my body and hike into the wilderness. I was working in healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic. My colleagues and I worked indefatigably while navigating a pandemic with hastily written protocols. Our burdensome duty became a mechanical service that would be a disgrace if any one of us were to abandon our post.

I traveled to The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in northern Minnesota for my first sabbatical to escape my newly thrust duties. After driving 16 hours, I disembarked from my vehicle to hike a day-and-a-half to Minnesota's tallest point, Mount Eagle. I picked a day that was hot, humid, and dank. I was slipping on rocks while transporting 35 pounds of gear on my back across mosquito-infested hills and swamps. Mosquito swarms so thick that the habitual high-pitched buzz in the air would drive someone mad. Falling over and doing my best not to twist an ankle became the paramount duty while trudging through the madness that I volunteered for.

Finally, I reached the summit of the tallest point in all of Minnesota. My eyes cast out for miles, looking at God's beauty. Closing my eyes, I did not say a word. I took a deep breath, felt my Heavenly Father enter my lungs, and heard no sound. Tranquility and grace swept over my body. My shoulders dropped back, and my vitals slowed. Was it worth getting atrociously bit by mosquitos to get to sit with God? Would I get more bruises and scrapes again just to be here? Was it worth the blood, sweat, and tears to be with Abba? Yes! Yes! Yes!

Dear Heavenly Father. We come to you through your son, Jesus Christ. Thank you for forgiving us when we know we are unworthy. We will trudge through swamps because we feel that's the need for salvation, but you gave us your only Son, so we don't have to. Condemnation of ourselves is indeed condemning your creation, and we ask for your forgiveness when we fall into our pits of despair. Thank you for loving us just the way we are. Amen.

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Second Sunday of Lent, February 25, 2024
Abundant Life is Available to Us

“So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.’”
- John 10: 7-10 (NRSV)

Years ago, I read a suggestion from Norman Vincent Peale to repeat the last part of John 10:10 every day but say it like this: “Christ has come that I (fill in your own name) might have life and might have it more abundantly.”

If we make Scripture truly personal to our everyday lives, it becomes easier to see the true path that God has for us. We are better able to live our lives with vitality. If instead we let worry and anxiety steal our joy and our energy, we are moving further away from our path.

When we make a choice every day to carve out quiet time with God and bring ourselves fully to the Divine Presence, then we open the door to living out our true identity in Christ. If day after day, we don’t prioritize this time, we are in danger of losing ourselves to the troubles of the world.

Divine Spirit, lead us ever onward to the path that You have set for us. When we get discouraged, remind us that You will make a way for us in our personal wilderness. Help us to spend time in silent prayer every day, so that we may hear and better understand who we are in Christ. Amen.

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Monday, February 26, 2024
Your Calendar and Your Checkbook

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."
- Matthew 6:21 (NIV)

Years ago, I heard a speaker say, "Show me your calendar and your checkbook and I will know who you are." He went on to say, "Where you spend your time and your money is who you are."

What is most important to you? What is your treasure for which you are ready to leave all else behind? Where do you spend your time and your money? Who are you? To find the answers to those questions, let's look at Matthew 6:19-21: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Treasures on earth include money and possessions. Jesus did not say that you cannot own a phone, a computer, a home, or a car. We simply need to stop focusing on accumulating money and things and set our hearts pursuing treasures in heaven. Real wealth (eternal rewards) is obtained by investing in treasures in heaven, like giving to others, praying and fasting in private, forgiving others, loving your enemies, and enduring insults and persecutions.

Like an experienced doctor who can diagnose the source of your ailment, Jesus knows that our struggle in life is an issue of the heart, not what we do or do not do. This is why Jesus connected His command to stop laying up treasures on earth and store up treasures in heaven to the heart. He knows that what we value is reflected in how we live.

Heavenly Father, help me treasure Jesus rather than the world. Help my life be a direct correlation between how I handle money and possessions with my faith. Amen.

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Tuesday, February 27, 2024
Christ's DNA In Us

"You are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household." - Ephesians 2:19 (NIV)

I am a big fan of Forensic files and true crime shows. I am always impressed with the ability to use out-of-the-ordinary things to find criminals. DNA has a fascinating history. DNA was first identified in the 1860s by a Swiss chemist called Johann Friedrich Miescher. As Miescher's name fell into obscurity in the twentieth century, other scientists continued to investigate the chemical nature of the molecule formerly known as nuclein. Today, even a small trace of DNA can be used to identify someone. A simple mouth swab can be used to trace our ancestry.

It is interesting to note that as believers in Christ, we have been promoting a special DNA for the last 2 thousand years. By accepting Christ as our Savior, we are accepting His DNA, His blood to cover our sins. A young boy was once facing heart surgery. The surgeon asked the boy on the morning of the surgery if he was scared. He said, "No I am not." The Doctor said, "What do you think I will find when I get into your heart?" The little boy said, "You'll find Jesus!"

Today, people are searching for their true identity. As believers, we can look deep into our souls and find our identity in Jesus. Deuteronomy 14:2 (NIV) says; *"for you are a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be His treasured possession."* 1 John 3:1 says *"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him."*

Father, help us to accept Your Son as our Savior and to act like Your children! Amen.

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Wednesday, February 28, 2024
How can things be this quiet?

"For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken." - Psalm 62:1-2 (ESV)

It can be easy to slip gradually into the grips of the rustle-and-bustle of life. We get absorbed with our jobs and hobbies and scrutinize how to balance time—the problem of how to keep twenty spinning plates from falling, all the while keeping ourselves healthy. When we fall short, self-condemnation can take over our thoughts and rob us of grace. Sometimes, we get so tired that it is easier to walk away and let all twenty plates fall and regroup in silence.

My pilgrimage to Denali National Park in Alaska would take two days. Crawling out of the vehicle, exhausted, I was alone. I threw my backpack on and trudged through 3 feet of snow to find a quiet place. I had no weapon to defend myself from the wild, and when I should have cared, I didn't. I needed my time with God, and I was desperate for His company.

After coming across three moose, I approached a bend on the Savage River. It was still and serene. The sun was luminous with all its glory. I laid down while I listened to the water trickle at my feet. The wind was motionless. There was no sound because there was nothing to make a noise. I was spellbound in that mountain valley with God's beauty all around. Even the wildlife paused. I closed my eyes.

Three thousand miles away, I had a world waiting for me to come back and solve problems, give compassion, and keep things afloat. At this moment, I was recharging with God in silence. With a world tugging on our coattails, know that God wants to have a relationship with us even throughout the turmoil. When you feel that peace, serenity, and calm come over you in a noisy world, God graces you with the Spirit. That's how you know you trust Him to change and transform your soul. He calms the tremulous waters in our lives so we can breathe easily. This is knowing God.

Lord, help us calm our thoughts in a noisy world. Please give us the protection needed to feel your grace. The world can present us with stormy seas, but we know that your comforting hand can still the waters beneath us and give us the rest we need. May we enjoy every still moment you bless us with. In Jesus name, Amen.

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Thursday, February 29, 2024
Biting Insects

"He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young."
- Isaiah 40:11 (NIV)

I have spent my entire life trying to get close to people. Whether it be my dear loved ones, including my parents, brother, and husband; or friends whom I enjoy spending time with. One of my deepest desires is to really know people, and to understand their perspectives. I feel the same way about Jesus, I want to know Him nearer, dearer, and clearer in every way.

I also want to know nature. I memorize the scientific names of the species I see every day where I live. Sometimes, I sit quietly in the woods behind my house and try to see how close wildlife will dare to approach. Just the other day, I had a deer approach me within a distance of just a few yards.

The only wildlife I don't want close to me are those biting insects. Whether they be mosquitoes, flies, ants, or bees; I want no part of them. I will swat them away as they approach. This wildlife is most interested in me, but I am not interested in letting them suck my blood, thus causing itchy welts. So, I keep them away, sometimes even applying insect repellent to deter their approach.

Those insects just want to get a part of me to nourish their bodies. Just like those insects, I want to be closer to those who I care about, even though they sometimes swat me away. I desire to get closer to the Lord so I can know Him better. Really, if you think about it, I am basically an insect hanging around to satiate my own desires. I am so glad God does not swat me away!

Dear Lord, thank you for pulling me close to your heart. Like an insect, I am sure my constant demands can be wearisome. So, thank you for not only tolerating me but helping me flourish. Amen.

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Friday, March 1, 2024
No One Loves Me More

"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know Him." - 1 John 3:1 (NIV)

Lord Jesus, though I sin
and am rotten to the core-
If I cry for Your mercy,
from my peril You will save me-
No One loves me more.
And when I am sick-
of body, mind, or spirit-
I trust You'll get me through it,
healing every wound and sore-
For You Are The Greatest Physician.
No One loves me more.
You Are my present, past,
and Eternal Parent-
As Your child I'll know true happiness!
Even in this hurtful, hurting world
I will know You, Lord-
Because of Your love,
Because of Your faithfulness,
Now and forever, as Your child
You, Lord, will I adore.
Secure in Your salvation,
Joyfully grateful to You
on every occasion!
I know- yes, I know-
that no one, yes, no one-
can ever, will ever love me more.

*Almighty God, Heavenly Father, Thank You for Your love for me through
The Life, sacrifice, and resurrection of Your Son Jesus. He Who knows
the love of being Your Son has made The Way, as The Truth- free and
clear for me to be Your child. I love You, Heavenly Father. Amen.*

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Saturday, March 2, 2024
The Lord Sings Over You

"The LORD your God in your midst, The Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing." - Zephaniah 3:17 (NKJV)

I am a musician and a music teacher. Music is a huge part of my life and I believe that it is one way the soul communicates with the divine. I am also a grandmother and I love that my granddaughter's family lives in my basement, so I get to see her every day. She's 3 1/2 now, but when she was a baby, nap time was a favorite time for me because I could hold her in my arms and sing lullabies and watch her drift off to sleep, safe and loved.

When I read this quote from Zephaniah I picture God holding me in His arms, singing me to sleep, knowing that I am safe and loved. I am God's child. Just as we rejoice over the simple things our children do; helping clean the kitchen or drawing a picture or riding a bike for the first time, God rejoices over us.

He is with us in our small victories and knows our struggles and He quiets us with His love when we are agitated or anxious. God is our loving parent and we are God's children. That is a comfort and relief in the midst of today's uncertainties.

LORD, thank you for being in my life, for watching over me, and for singing over me. Grant me the ears to hear your song and to join you in it. Amen.

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Third Sunday of Lent, March 3, 2024 Making Peace

"The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."

- Colossians 1:15, 19-20 (NIV)

We are all diminished by the conflicts that continuously wash through our lives. Global wars that bring no resolution to ages-long disputes fill our eyes with images and tears. National disputes over leadership, laws, and legitimacy make our heads spin with often pointless harangues. Local debates separate neighbors as we disagree about what should be built where and how we can house homeless families in a market that cares only about money.

Our hearts, souls, minds, can be ground down into scraps under the weight of the world's struggles. Even Lent only seems to bring death and betrayal and isolation to the forefront of our thoughts. How can the promise of peace through the blood of Christ be fulfilled?

Because it was. Because through Christ's death and resurrection, He who is the very image and being of the invisible One, all things were reconciled to God. We are brought into the closest relationship possible, made children of God, and brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. We are no longer isolated, separated from God or one another, awash in tears that have no end, living without hope. The love of God is here in all creation, lifting us to stand beside our Brother, cleansed in the grace of Holy Spirit, reconciled and made whole.

God of earth and stars, we give thanks that You are the Lord of all, the Source of our wholeness and life. Bring each of us to your heart, and to the hearts of one another, in love and mercy. Amen.

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Monday, March 4, 2024
I Am Adopted

Please read Ephesians 1:3-10.

Consider the difference between our American elections, where we choose someone to (hopefully) do a job for us, and adoption, where people who want to be parents choose a child who can do nothing for them but receive their love. We know that God has chosen us... but it does beg the question: Why? What does it mean to be "Chosen People?"

Firstly, consider that we are CHOSEN TO BE, not chosen to DO ~ verses three through six of Ephesians chapter 1 tell us that God chose us before the creation of the world to BE holy and blameless. And we weren't chosen to be some kind of holy robot, but we're a part of His family. He's adopted us as His sons (and daughters, of course). This is an old idea: Isaiah said "...You, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name."

We are CHOSEN BY DADDY, not by distant deity ~ We have received the Spirit of sonship. And by Him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' (Rom 8:15) That is NOT the description of some far-off, unknowable deity in some unreachable place. I love that Scripture says that the Lord *lavished* wisdom and understanding on us. God KNEW what He was doing in choosing YOU. God brings us into His family and tells us WHY: it makes Him happy (2 Corinthians 6:18).

Amazing to think that what makes the Lord happy is to give us the full rights as His own children. "Because you are heirs, God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts..." We have FULL RIGHTS as Family, and the Spirit to prove we belong!

Lord, We pray that You'd help us remember when we mess up; when we hear that little voice saying, "don't do that, it will make God sad, you're better than this..." THAT is the Spirit. We belong to You! Thank You for bringing us into Your family, in Jesus's name. Amen.

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Tuesday, March 5, 2024
Wrestling with God

Please read Genesis 32:22-32.

I always thought of myself as a Christian. I never doubted who I was, I never doubted I belonged. After I was married, I moved away, and my family church became distant. During this time, I began to meet other Christians, and I began to hear them speak about their conversion experiences, their “road to Damascus” moments. They would describe in detail the date and time; the place and the people present at the time of their conversion. As they spoke, I realized I had no road to Damascus story of my own. I started doubting I was a Christian because I couldn’t tell people exactly when I became a believer. Maybe I wasn’t a Christian after all.

One day, while walking along the river in town, I started thinking about the water in the river. It is fresh water at the source and saltwater at the mouth. Somewhere between the beginning and the end, the water converts from fresh to salt. The brackish water offers no clear demarcation between the salt and the fresh, just a constant wrestling for control. There is no visible line in the water. If the water was transformed from fresh to salt, without any clear conversion point, could the same be true for me?

I found answers in the story of Jacob’s wrestling with God. Jacob didn’t know who he was wrestling. He didn’t realize it was God until after the fact. I too didn’t know who I was wrestling with until later. Jacob thinks he’s in control, but it was God who started the wrestling match and it was God who decided when it was over.

God decided I needed to change, so He wrestles with me, and he’ll decide when it’s over. Wrestling with God changes you. Jacob was changed physically (when God dislocated his hip), and God also changed his identity (from Jacob to Israel). Through wrestling, God is changing me too, how I think and how I act. He is also changing my identity as a Christian even if I can’t give the exact date, time, or place.

Lord God, continue wrestling with me. Thank you for not letting me give up, I know you’re not done with me, Amen.

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Wednesday, March 6, 2024
Do You Do This for Everyone, God?

"Then King David went in and sat before the Lord and prayed, 'Who am I, O Sovereign Lord, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far? And now, Sovereign Lord, in addition to everything else, you speak of giving your servant a lasting dynasty! Do you deal with everyone this way, O Sovereign Lord?'" - 2 Samuel 7:18-19 (NLT)

In this text, David pours out his thanksgiving for God's message that his descendants would be an everlasting dynasty and raise up the Anointed One. What I dearly love about David's initial response here is the question he asks at the end of verse 19: "Do you do this for everyone, God?"

Well, David, maybe not everyone gets a Messiah among his descendants or a royal dynasty that will last forever, but, yes, God does do amazing things for us all. You may be a man after God's own heart, but God loves each of us just as much as He loved you. Surprised? Don't be.

From time to time, we all question our place in God's heart. We think we couldn't possibly matter because we have messed up beyond some limit that would allow God to love us. We think our behavior has been so bad, God dropped us from the list of God's children and we're toast.

But we're not. In verse 28, David says, to God, "Your words are truth." And they are.

So, as you walk into this day, say to yourself, as often as is necessary, "I am a beloved child of God."

And then, go act like it.

Sometimes, O God, we forget that Jesus was not Your only child. We, too, are your children, brothers and sisters in Christ. May we open our eyes and see Your love. May we open our ears and hear Your voice. May we open our hearts and feel the love You shower upon us each and every day. In Jesus's name, we ask this and more. Amen.

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Thursday, March 7, 2024
Turns on the Path

"The Lord is your keeper...The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore."

- Psalm 121:5, 8 (NRSV)

I have found labyrinths to be extremely meaningful vehicles for discernment and spirituality. Labyrinths are like mazes, but with one entry point, one center, and one way out. In the Middle Ages, architects of churches in Europe often integrated a labyrinth design in the lower levels so that faithful women and men could have the simulated experience of pilgrimage. This was especially helpful during the period of the Crusades, when making an actual pilgrimage to the Holy Land could be very dangerous and put pilgrims at risk.

At one church that I served, for a number of years, a grass labyrinth was maintained for use by members and the community. In one of the first walks we hosted, someone in the church took a very long time getting through it. It became clear that they had wandered off of the set paths and gotten a bit "lost" (as much as one can get lost in a grass-mowed labyrinth). I remember declaring, "I'm giving another 5 minutes, and then I'm going in after them!"

There is a counter-intuitive aspect to walking the labyrinth. Just when one convinces one's self that he or she is walking one direction, all of a sudden, the path takes the pilgrim in another, unexpected direction. Certainly, one has to trust in the process and that one will end up in the right place, which, in a labyrinth, means the center, where one can have intensive prayer and communion with God.

The labyrinth turns us away only to bring us back. As long as it is our intent to move forward with God, we can have faith that we will return to where God wants us to be. Wherever the path has seemed to take us off course, Lent, like a labyrinth, turns us back. It is a season in which we affirm the truth of Psalm 121, "The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore."

O God, Our Keeper, make us not troubled, thinking that we will always be headed in the wrong directions. Assure us that we can make a turn back to you. Amen.

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Friday, March 8, 2024
Sharing in God's Nature

"By his divine power the Lord has given us everything we need for life and godliness through the knowledge of the one who called us by his own honor and glory. Through his honor and glory he has given us his precious and wonderful promises, that you may share the divine nature and escape from the world's immorality that sinful craving produces. This is why you must make every effort to add moral excellence to your faith; and to moral excellence, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, endurance; and to endurance, godliness; and to godliness, affection for others; and to affection for others, love."- 2 Peter 1:3-7 (CEB)

It doesn't take much time or reflection on the world we live in to realize that human nature is problematic: wayward, judgmental, and transactional. On our own, we may intend to do good, but somehow, our self-interest and flaws creep in. If it were only up to us, all would be lost! But as Peter reminds us, the good news is that in the coming of Christ, God offers us transformation into our new, true nature. While we can't make this happen on our own, we can do a lot to hinder it! And so, we are encouraged to add moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, affection, and love to the way we conduct our lives. We don't do this to EARN God's love; we do this to DISCOVER God's love ALREADY THERE FOR US, TRANSFORMING US. What good news!

Lord, as you are transforming us through the power of love, help us to show forth the new, true self we find in you. Through the power of your spirit, re-make us into our true selves, following the example of Christ, so that we may love and serve the world from the fullness of life in your love. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Mary E. Biedron
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Saturday, March 9, 2024
Lord, Are You There?

"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." - Isaiah 41:10 (NIV)

There are times I am mentally and spiritually exhausted and question if God is in my life because of real or perceived challenges. When I find myself mentally or verbally saying those words from Psalm 22 and spoken by Jesus on the cross, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*, then I know it is time to pause, step away and spend time in prayer. It is not unlike Jesus going to the Garden of Gethsemane asking the Father to remove the cup of suffering, then adding, "It is not my will, but your will that is to be done."

Along with prayer, I spend time with scriptures and one of the scriptures that bring me peace and comfort is Isaiah 41:10; *"So, do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."* This time of scriptures and prayer renews my strength to face what lies ahead as I reclaim my true identity as a follower of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Loving God, I am sorry for those times I lose sight of you and wonder where you are. Thank you for reminding me you are always with me. You guide me through the good and difficult times in life. I pray I glorify your name through my words and deeds. Amen.

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Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 10, 2024
God's Stewards

"This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy." - 2 Corinthians 4:1, 2 (RSV)

Specifically, we are stewards of God's grace (Ephesians 3:2) for others--stewards, caretakers and administrators but NOT creators or owners, and always under the scrutiny of The Creator!

During Lent we take time to honestly reflect on our own fallen status. By God's grace we have been reconciled and restored to Him in Christ by the free gift He offers to all who turn from sin and back to Him (Romans 6:23).

Christ has shined His Light into the darkness of this world (John 1:5) to reveal our sin and remind us of God's unchanging Truth (Matthew 5:17-20). In it He offers hope and peace to each of us. By enlightening and restoring us He has entrusted us to share in His ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18) as His stewards.

Peter and Paul had differing perspectives at times just as we do, but both came to know that "anyone who fears (God) and does what is right is acceptable to Him." (Acts 10:35) With them we are now privileged to act as God's stewards and able to share that Truth with our world. And our world desperately needs to be reaffirmed of God's Truth about who we are (male and female created by Him) and that He loves each of us.

Father God, I thank you for your Amazing Grace and for the privilege of being a steward in your service. Amen.

Rev. J.R. McAliley III, Pastor
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Monday, March 11, 2024
Directionally Challenged

"Show me the right path, O Lord; point out the road for me to follow. Lead me by your truth and teach me, for you are the God who saves me. All day long I put my hope in you." - Psalm 25:4-5 (NLT)

Have you ever been LOST? I mean, so lost you might have to (gasp) ask for directions? Maybe you pulled a map out of the glove compartment to figure out where it went so wrong. I'm sure most of us now use an app on our phone or in the car. When we go wrong, a gentle voice informs us, and soon we're back in business. Easy-peasy, lemon squeezy.

My wife and I traveled around Lake Michigan through Michigan's Upper Peninsula, over the Mackinac Bridge to our home in the Lower Peninsula. Great idea, except the cell service and GPS in the wilderness of the UP was virtually non-existent. We stopped to go old-school, pulling out a road atlas. Though inconvenient, we were thankfully treated to several off-the-beaten-path sites that we might have missed. Our trip was enhanced because we were lost and needed help from a trusted source.

We get "lost" in our lives sometimes, don't we? We don't know the next steps to take. There are times when we can't move forward because of fear of the unknown, afraid that the next step might take us off the cliff into oblivion. It's times like this that we need a trusted source of direction, a reassuring voice that says, "follow me." And so, we reach out to God, who knows exactly where we are and where we need to go.

As we journey through this time of introspection and the renewal of Lent, let's remind ourselves to follow the One who "gets us" and still has compassion to keep us on a good path. And as we journey, let's keep our eyes open for other lost travelers, to offer a hand of friendship to them. We're better when we can go together. Amen.

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Tuesday, March 12, 2024
God's Pond

"But if we live in the light—just as he is in the light—then we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin." - 1 John 1:7 (GNB)

I had opportunity to attend the Quiet Day retreat in 2023 at Fox River Congregational Church in Pewaukee, Wisconsin. A Quiet Day retreat means you are silent, the whole day. And, I really did need this quiet time to reflect on my future identity, as I had just retired from teaching. Still, I wondered: "Will I be able to remain in silent reflection for the entire day?"

I chose to enjoy some time in nature, paddling a kayak on one of the church's ponds. While launching the kayak, I slipped into a hole that pulled me in above the waist. Now, I was screaming, soaking wet, and cold.

Meanwhile, my fellow Quiet Day participant, Laura Wright was sitting near the pond. Of course, she heard me screaming. I had interrupted her silent time. Eventually, I was able to properly launch the kayak and enjoyed paddling.

When the time came for me to exit the water, Laura assisted me without being asked. Indeed, if she would have had the strength, I believe she would have completely pulled me on to dry land. What a godsend! In that moment, I felt the perfection of the fellowship in Christ as described in 1 John.

I realized, on that pond in Wisconsin, that I need to be more willing to accept help from my Christian friends. They are there to help; they want to help. Instead of ruining her quiet, with my screams in the cold water, I should have asked for her help from the outset.

Dear Lord, Guide me in being silent so I can listen to you. When in fellowship, guide me to accept help from my fellow Christians, especially when I need it the most. Allow me to discern when silence should dominate, and when I should ask for help. Amen.

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Wednesday, March 13, 2024
Do You Know Who You Are?

"For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations." - Psalm 100:5 (NIV)

"From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live." - Acts 17:26 (NIV)

His hands from heaven scooped the rich soil,
and He from His might, mercy, and the power of His love
formed and molded us in His image.
Do you know who you are?

He breathed the breath of life into our lungs
and from His lips He sang a song, "It is good."
Do you know who you are?

From the abundance of His love He showed blessings from above.
God held nothing back, how did we get off track?
We forgot who He is. We forgot who we are.

From one man came many nations, this we have denied
Yet time after time God's immeasurable love unties the very truth that we
have denied to set us free from the sinful lie.
Do you know who you are?

His transforming love for us is free. A transformation that takes our
hearts from dryness and or bones that crackle and break from sin. He
will mend us by His breath and His living water that flows from His
throne. He will bind our hearts together by the power of His steadfast
love.

Let us cry out together and say, "Father mold me. I submit to your will."
His love will shine in us and through us like diamonds in the sky.

God is love.
So let His agape love spring up like a fountain within us and flow like the
river from us.

God is love, God is holy, God is justice and truth.
Let us walk like God in love, holiness, justice and truth.
Do you know who you are?

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Thursday, March 14, 2024
I Am Accepted

Please read John 15:12-17.

Much is made these days about people's rights and privileges. It seems that every other day, we hear of someone standing up for some "right" that has been denied, or bemoaning the loss of a privilege from days long past.

Did you realize that all followers of Jesus have rights and privileges due to our relationship with God? A key privilege that many don't really understand is the privilege of being ACCEPTED BY GOD.

We are accepted because we have a Just Proxy ~ Jesus knows that on our own, we'd be completely lost without Him. Knowing that we'd be lost, the Lord appointed a stand-in for our sin. In Exodus 28, the Lord tells His people that Aaron and his priests would act as go-betweens for the people, and represent them to the Lord. God sees His stand-in for your sin. And just as Job ended up sacrificing on behalf of his probably-good-intentioned-but-badly-wrong comforters, our Stand-In prays for us when we're also good-intentioned-but-badly-wrong!

We are accepted because we have a Joint Practice ~ The prophet Ezekiel tells us that the Lord draws us to Himself (Ezekiel 20) and that He will accept us (Ezekiel 43). It's important to remember that God doesn't determine to love you based on who you are, or where you come from, or even the good things you do (Rom. 5:8): God's love is available to EVERYONE (Acts 10:34-5).

This is because, believe it or not, we are Jesus's Partners ~ In John 15, Jesus Himself tells us that we are His friends; He has brought us in on His plans for humanity. The Lord Jesus loves us, calls us His friends, and then tells us *why* He has drawn us to Himself: because He has chosen us "to go and bear fruit-- fruit that will last." That fruit is God's love; given to us, bringing us to life, and giving us a reason to share what we've received.

Lord, thank You for accepting us because of God's choice. We are accepted to live out the implications of that choice. We are loved... so help us love! We pray in Jesus's name. Amen.

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Friday, March 15, 2024
My Faith Looks Up to Thee

"Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access to faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God."

- Romans 5:1-2 (KJV)

Ray Palmer is one of those men who found his identity in Jesus. He penned the hymn he is most famous for in a hotel room in 1830 while he was exhausted, lonely, and discouraged. He wrote "My Faith Looks Up to Thee" as a poem from his own heart. He had no intention of it being one of the great hymns we still enjoy today, but so it is!

Palmer was a busy young man when he wrote the poem. He was working as a clerk in a store, attending classes at Yale, teaching at a girl's school, as well as preparing for the ministry. He was just consumed by all the tasks at hand. He was at the end of his energy. As he wrote, "May thy rich grace impart strength to my fainting heart, my zeal inspire" in the second stanza. He was just drained.

Then, two years later, in 1832, he crosses paths with Lowell Mason who wants Palmer to write for him. Still too tired to come up with anything new, he shows this poem to Mason who takes it, in his excitement, and writes the perfect music to accompany the poem in song. Thus it was that the great hymn was born. And the author of the words simply wrote this great hymn from the deepest part of his soul.

So it is when we make room in our hearts for Jesus. It just pours out of us and the Lord rejoices in our receptiveness and inspires us. Hallelujah!

Dear Lord, inspire us to claim our identity from you. Allow us time to study, reflect, and share our experiences with others. For when we are faithfully looking up to you, we can really be filled with your spirit. Amen.

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Saturday, March 16, 2024
There Will Be Wars and Rumors of Wars

"When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom." - Mark 13:7-8 (NIV)

"If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom he has chosen, he has shortened them. At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it." - Mark 13:21-22 (NIV)

"Hope all are well." I have often noticed my husband, who is a minister, starts most of his communications with this quote. He has continued this practice for a long time. It comforts me to see and hear these words as I imagine it does others. Perhaps this might be a greeting we all could add to our daily lives and share.

I particularly like the way Wikipedia describes hope: "Hope is an optimistic state of mind that is based on an expectation of positive outcomes with respect to events and circumstances in one's life or the world at large." As a verb, its definitions include: "expect with confidence" and "to cherish a desire with anticipation."

I pray when you are reading this that peace has settled over the land once again. In any case, I join you in praying "with hope" for peace in daily life in our world.

Dear God, may your peace and understanding light our way in the darkness and show us the light. Amen.

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Fifth Sunday of Lent, March 17, 2024
Just Breathe

“Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, ‘Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.’” - Mark 6:31 (NIV)

On our sisters' trip in September, my sisters and I went to a mountaintop retreat in Asheville. With its east-facing balconies, it was the perfect place for viewing the sunrise. Because it was on a curvy road above the noise of the city, it was a peaceful place to rest and relax.

We spent the week enjoying one another's company and basking in the peace of God's creation every morning and evening. It was there that I suddenly realized that I had forgotten how to simply be, to just breathe in the stillness of the moment, and to embrace wonder. I realized that like the rest of our culture, I had become a human doing rather than a human being.

We live in a culture where productivity is more important than anything. We find our identities in our things and in our titles. Even our children are pushed to be on the move constantly. We do not encourage contemplation. We have little patience for the old ways that encouraged people to live simply, to embrace silence, to approach God's world with a sense of awe and wonder. We live under constant pressure and wonder why depression, anxiety, and substance abuse are increasing.

God did not create us to be constantly doing. God created the Sabbath so that, at least one day a week, we would rest and recharge. Jesus took time to pray and rest. We need to get away to a quiet place and rest our weary minds and hearts. We need to embrace quiet so that we can hear God's still small voice. We need to remember that we are not beloved for our busyness, but for whom we are as God's children.

Beloved Papa, teach us to lean into the stillness so that we can hear your heartbeat and remember that we are your beloved. Amen.

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Monday, March 18, 2024
What a Wonderful Savior!

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or of vain conceit."
- Philippians 2:3a (NIV)

When I ponder what I would have done had I been called to give my life for humanity for all time, I realize there is a vast difference between Jesus and myself.

I sometimes resent spending time on seemingly pointless situations or conversations.

Jesus, on the other hand, is joyfully attentive to my selfish desires and endless whining and yet, He still beckons me to call upon Him. What a wonderful Savior!

Holy and gracious Lord, how can I possibly offer you anything? Scientists say there are 200 billion trillion stars in the sky, and You put them there. I am humbled by Your gift to me. I am not worthy. Thank You for loving me in spite of myself. Amen.

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Tuesday, March 19, 2024
Secular Versus Spiritual

"Then he said to them, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.'" - Matthew 22:21 (NIV)

Many people identify themselves in terms that are secular or worldly-minded. They use terms like their race, nationality, place of birth, occupation, and personal achievements. When we first meet someone, we may ask, "Where are you from?" or "What do you do for a living?" We tend to link ourselves so closely with others using secular or human characteristics and events that they seem to become our identity. Secular identities are everywhere: extrovert, athlete, artist, writer, cancer survivor, and so on.

But secular identity labels cannot reveal who we truly are. The Bible teaches us that men and women are made in the image and likeness of God. In Genesis 1:26-27, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created mankind in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.'"

Therefore, the identity of each of us is spiritual, not secular, or worldly-minded. Spiritual identity, as opposed to secular identity, is based purely on the nature of God, and is found only in God. We were made to live with God forever. Thus, we owe God our lives. Therefore, we are to pay our due share to God, which is what we are told in Matthew 6:33, "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Heavenly Father, thank you for protecting us in our daily lives by providing an ordered and peaceful existence. Help us to obey and respect the governing authorities. But above all, lead us to honor and obey you, and to serve you with all that you have given us. Amen.

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Wednesday, March 20, 2024
Called By Name: Are We Listening?

"...I have called you by name, you are mine...[Y]ou are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you..." - Isaiah 43:1c, 4a (NRSV)

Parker J. Palmer, in his work, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, encourages that a critical step in forming one's identity and claiming one's path in life is to first listen. Be open. Pay attention. If one does that, one's very life will disclose truths that are at the core of who we are meant to be and doing what we are meant to do.

For persons of faith, that "voice of vocation" is likely understood to be the voice of God. Scripture is filled with instances of God trying to communicate with individuals so that they can know themselves and their gifts more completely. God desired that Jacob reunite with his family and take on the identity of patriarch. God summoned Moses from out of a burning bush and urged him not to run away from his identity as liberator of his people. Jesus re-framed the identity of several disciples in terms of "fishing for people" instead of fishing for fish.

Palmer has inspired me to think of all of the various jobs that I have held over the years, and, though seemingly vastly different experiences, if I step back and look at them from the perspective of the course by which my life has run, I see a thread that connects many of them. What in your life has led you somewhere you may not have imagined years ago? How have your gifts surfaced over time, perhaps unexpectedly, and what common theme has emerged as you made your way on life's journey? God's calling is ever real. Our gifts are there to be used. It is up to us to listen and to respond.

God who calls us by name, remind us that we belong to you, that we are yours, and that you have given us gifts to use that clarify who we are meant to be. Ever let us be your beloved children. Amen.

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Thursday, March 21, 2024
Perfect Peace in Jesus Christ

"You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you." - Isaiah 26:3 (NKJV)

In only 18 words, this simple, beautiful and profound passage from Isaiah teaches us five blessed and joy-giving truths.

The first, shown by the word You, is that glorious God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit loves us so dearly and so intimately that He desires to give us amazing gifts throughout our lives and through eternity.

Secondly God gives us peace when we love and believe in Him, and this is a double peace, perfect peace. We receive peace with Him through the forgiveness of our sins, peace with others, because, when God works in our lives we are strengthened and guided and blessed so that we are able to do His will, not our own, and are able to forgive others when they hurt us, and peace with ourselves when we fail others or are overwhelmed by life's struggles.

Thirdly, this peace comes when our minds are stayed on God, are focused on, concentrated on, settled on, devoted to God, and not ourselves and getting our own way or being consumed with earthly thoughts and needs.

Fourth, this peace from God comes through our minds, our thinking, our reasoning. Many gifts come through our hearts and souls but this one specifically works on our minds. Thinking and planning, deliberate actions are very important to serving God, in addition to feelings.

Finally, we receive this wonderful double peace from God, which transforms our minds and blesses our lives so much because we trust in God. God's love for us is so great that we can always trust Him, no matter what!

Dear Jesus, thank you so much for this perfect peace that You give us, thank You for ever renewing our minds, and for loving us so much that we can trust You no matter what. Help us more and more trust in You and receive Your perfect peace. Amen.

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Friday, March 22, 2024
Who Am I?

"To the one who conquers...I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it."
- Revelation 2:17 (ESV)

In my freshman year, our college invited Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, a Christian philosopher, to speak. I didn't follow everything, but I do remember that he was emphatic about the importance of a person's name. Here is a statement attributed to him: "The greatest forms of man's speech are names."

When I was little, I was called "Bobby" by everyone. The number of people who still know me as Bobby has shrunk drastically. In second grade, I insisted on being "Robert." Into her old age, my second-grade teacher called me that. After third grade I was always "Bob." It seemed to fit.

When I was in sixth grade, we boys spoke a language we called "Hsilgne," English backward. Then I was Trebor Malleh. My close friends were Nhoj Namwolph, Ecurb Mmub, Egroeg Ztnel, Llib Neerg, etc.

In Sunday School my names made the same progression, though I was never Trebor Malleh at church. After high school, I dropped the name "Child of God," thinking I was too mature for church.

Later, after fifteen years of nonattendance, my wife dragged me back to church. Two years after that, we were at a marriage seminar on a night when no one else showed up except the two of us and the teacher, Rev. Hal Caton. I told him that I had been attending church for two years, singing the songs, saying the prayers, listening to Rev. Marty Murdock's sermons, but I was not a Christian. Hal said, "You're closer than you think, Bob," and he led me to Christ. I took back the name I had discarded: "Child of God."

Gracious God, You know each of us by name. Help us and others to know You. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Saturday, March 23, 2024
We Are Never Alone

"The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'" - Genesis 2:18 (NIV)

When God created the world, He saw that each thing He made was good. In fact, the first time something was not good was when He saw that Adam was alone. Have you ever been alone—truly alone? I'm not referring to people who live in a remote cabin on a mountaintop far from civilization. I'm talking about those who feel alone in a crowded mall or in a church full of people. I'm referring to people who simply cannot find anyone to connect with.

This is a principle of Christian life: It is not good to isolate yourself from others. The Lord's desire is not only that you have a relationship with him, but that you also have a relationship with other believers, as we're told in Hebrews 10:25: "Let us not give up on meeting together."

If you have ever been alone, there is good news for you. If you have invited Christ into your life, as your Savior and Lord, you are never alone. He is constantly in your presence. His promise in Matthew 28:20 says, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." And from God the Father we read in Hebrews 13:5, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

Of course, we all need flesh-and-blood companions, but let's not overlook the reality of the Lord's presence. We can depend on it. With Him by our side, we are never alone.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the blessing of godly friends in my life. Help me to grow closer to you and to those you've given me to love. Amen.

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Palm Sunday, March 24, 2024
I Am Assured

Please read Philippians 1:3-11.

Have you ever seen street artist painters? Some of them merge painting with performance art by creating their works from an upside-down perspective. Creating art upside down forces people to avoid assumptions about the end result. The same is true with the work the Lord is doing in our lives. God is creating us, shaping us, changing us... and the process might seem upside down to the world. Until we are turned "right" and people see Jesus, that is...

Be assured that God IS working on us. While God is changing us, let us remind each other that we are people in progress. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul gives us an example: to remember each other before the Lord with JOY.

Remember that you are IN PROGRESS – don't waver because you're not all you're "supposed" to be; it's not about DOING, it's about BEING: "We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit." (1 John 4:13)

Let us reaffirm each other as partners, because no matter our circumstances, God is at work in our lives. Paul's deep conviction – gut-moving compassion, from verse 8 – is not feeling sorry for others, but feeling WITH others – shared life. We share life with each other.

As we do that, we are to respect each other in this process. Our love for each other is intended to DEEPEN. We live in love so we can learn not to trip each other up. And we should not lose sight of the fact that this is an ONGOING process in Christ.

Lord, we know that change is a challenge. Help us go beyond looking for mere cultural shifts; foster in us more Christ-like surrender. May Your face shine upon us as we make God's ways known upon the earth. Let us praise God in our homes and in our streets to bring God's gladness and joy to our nations and neighbors. All this we pray in Your name. Amen.

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Monday, March 25, 2024
He Said Who He Was

Please read John 8:56-59.

There are over a thousand years between the time of Moses and the time of Christ. That's important to note for the purposes of this devotion. If you are reading this, I am assuming you know the story of Moses or at least a general outline so I want to skip to the event that is Moses and the burning bush.

Moses flees Egypt and becomes a shepherd, years later he encounters a bush which is on fire but does not burn. From within it he hears the voice of God telling him to go back to Egypt and free His people, the nation of Israel. God had heard their cries, and He (God) is going to use Moses to answer them.

Within this incredible interaction Moses asks the following question, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is His name?' Then what shall I tell them?"

God's answer is powerful, profound, and has everything to do with the season of Lent. God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

During the time of Christ (remember, over a thousand years later) the following interaction happens between a crowd of people and Jesus where He (Jesus) makes a statement about how Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing Jesus. The crowd is taken aback of course since Jesus is only in His thirties.

At that, Jesus states something only He can state, "Very truly I tell you, Jesus answered, before Abraham was born, I AM." Jesus took the very name of God because He could. The identify of Christ was revealed by Christ Himself, here standing before them was God emptied, God incarnate.

Precious Lord we are humbled at the mere idea of God emptying Himself to show us what forgiveness is all about. Let us never take that for granted. Amen.

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Tuesday, March 26, 2023
My Relationship With God

"We love because he first loved us." - 1 John 4:19 (NIV)

God desires a relationship with us because He loves us and because it is the best thing for us. He created us and He knows what we need and do not need. And the only way for Him to reveal that to us is through a right relationship with him, through His word and prayer. As we spend time with God in His word and in prayer, we grow in our relationship with Him and we learn to be more and more like him.

The first question – the real question – that needs to be answered is: "Do you want a relationship with God?" If your answer is "Yes," then – like your current friendships and relationships – you must spend time with God. How and where do you do that? When Jesus said, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4), surely, He intended, at the very least, for us to read every word. My two suggestions for consistent success in Bible reading are find the time, and find a Bible-reading plan.

Next, in developing a relationship with God is prayer time with him. Colossians 4:2 says, "devote yourselves to prayer." Make prayer a priority and give time to it. Like Daniel, in Daniel 6:10, you will develop a strong faith that will not waver when face you persecution, as he did. Prayer will do the same for you as your time with God becomes a priority.

Heavenly Father, help me to pray to you continually and to read your word so it may penetrate my being and transform me. Amen.

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Wednesday, March 27, 2024
A Calming Peace

“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” - Matthew 11:29 (NIV)

My son and I were driving to an NACCC meeting many moons ago before GPS. The meeting was in Wisconsin and we were just coming up on grid-locked traffic around Chicago, which quickly became a parking lot. We were inching along when the inevitable happened. “Mom, I need to use the restroom.”

So we decided to get off at the next exit, no matter where it was. Soon we were on the road again, taking a back way. My son calls these “mom’s little misadventures” because we go on faith. Lo and behold, the road came out right on Lakeshore Drive. Having never seen Lake Michigan, he gasped and said, “That is the most beautiful place I have ever seen.”

When Jesus was crucified, it seemed like a dicey misadventure. As the mother of two sons, I have always wondered how God could sacrifice His only son. Jesus knew the bigger plan before He went to the cross.

The resurrection is the miracle of what seemed like a misadventure. The life lesson I have repeatedly learned is the need to have faith. His plan is not always our plan. This change in my perspective and understanding has evolved over time. I tend to be a fixer but I can’t always fix things. I have to let go and let God.

And since I’ve allowed God to take the wheel, I am bathed in calming peace. Blessed assurance indeed. So I invite you to lay your burdens down at the feet of Jesus. God will never lead you on a misadventure. Just trust Him.

God of wonder, help us to trust your bigger plan, even when it seems like a misadventure. In Jesus name, Amen.

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Maundy Thursday, March 28, 2024
Moments of Truth

“Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, ‘Surely this man also was with him, for he is a Galilean.’ But Peter said, ‘Man, I do not know what you are talking about!’ At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.” - Luke 22:59-62 (NRSVUE)

Sometimes unforeseen circumstances ambush us, and we're found lacking in clarity, conviction, or fortitude. A momentary weakness is understandable—especially when suddenly confronted by a surprising situation. In such instances, we may turn away from our values and loyalties. A “fight or flight” reflex may kick in, or we may freeze like a deer caught in the headlights.

But Peter had no such excuses. Jesus had briefed him in advance. Peter knew he would face not one, but *three* moments of truth. And yet, when those moments arose, he turned *away from* his teacher and friend.

Thankfully, for Peter's sake and ours, the story didn't end there. With forgiveness and sensitivity, the resurrected Jesus presented Peter with not one, but *three* new moments of truth: “Peter, do you love me?” (John 21:15-19). This time, Peter turned *back to* his teacher and friend. He was redeemed, reinstated, and reconciled. Jesus lifted from Peter's shoulders that great burden of guilt, leaving Peter ready to embark upon years of bold leadership.

God of fresh starts, thank you for opportunities to turn back to you, even after we've turned away. Grant us abiding peace and sturdy faith to handle abrupt challenges and tame our fearful instincts. In crisis, may we turn toward you, not away from you. In Christ, we live and pray. Amen.

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Good Friday, March 29, 2024
Wanted

“Then Pilate had Jesus flogged with a lead-tipped whip. The soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they put a purple robe on him. “Hail! King of the Jews!” they mocked, as they slapped him across the face.

“So they took Jesus away. Carrying the cross by himself, he went to the place called Place of the Skull (in Hebrew, Golgotha). There they nailed him to the cross. Two others were crucified with him, one on either side, with Jesus between them.” - John 19:1-3, 16b-18 (NLT)

At a recent conference, the opening speaker said to the attendees, “You are welcome and wanted.” That statement struck a chord.

Often when we hear a person is “wanted,” it is not good news. The wanted individual is in trouble with the authorities. In a TV western or in cartoons, you know the bad guy because he is pictured on a wanted poster. The person pictured is desired to be found and brought to justice.

Jesus was wanted and apprehended. Jesus endured horrific physical pain. He took our sin upon himself on that cross and in so doing endured total separation from God. He did this in order to bring all of humanity to the justice of being right with God, even for all eternity.

We, you and I, and every person ever, are so loved and wanted by God, so valued, that the very Son of God came to live as one of us. He lived with His family, had deep friendships, knew hard work, and the joy of a good meal. He knew sleepless nights, and the sound of laughter. Jesus was wanted, because we are wanted, in the very best way.

Lord of All, thank you for wanting us. Thank you for Jesus’s life and His death on the cross. Show us how to want and welcome others in your name every day. Through Jesus our Lord, Amen.

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Holy Saturday, March 30, 2024
It Is Us

"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?" - 1 Corinthians 3:16 (NIV)

Paul laid the foundation for the church in Corinth but after he left, the people lost sight of it. There was conflict within the church, people seeking status and power being just one of the issues. Many of the issues in the church in Corinth can be found in churches today.

Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 3:16, *"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?"* The "You" Paul refers to is plural, meaning the collective group of believers that are the local church, God's temple, and it is within that church that God's Spirit lives. Paul also reminds them it is their collective God given gifts, skills, and talents that make up the church, the body of Christ, and each person is an important part of that body.

Paul's words are true today. Each of us is an important part of the body of Christ. It is the combined individual commitments to serve and follow Christ that builds the strength of the church.

Throughout Lent we have been praying and fasting to develop a closer relationship with God. We follow the story of Jesus from the Last Supper to the celebration of victory as Jesus claims His true identity as the risen Christ.

This Lent let's also reflect on the purpose and true identity of our church remembering the importance of each individual being a part of the body of Christ.

Lord, help us claim our true identity as Christians. Guide us to be a community of believers that reflect your love for everyone. Amen.

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Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024
Who is it You Are Looking For?

"He asked her, 'Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?'" - John 20:15a (NIV)

Who in your life has the most recognizable voice? Whose voice can you pick out of a crowd, in a noisy room? Whose voice can get your attention just about anywhere you are?

Mary Magdalene is weeping and quite confused at why Jesus's body is not in the tomb. She's mad, where did they take Him? Who removed Him. She just wants to touch and clean His body once more like she did when she poured perfume on His feet a few weeks earlier.

I imagine Mary with her hair all in front of her eyes and the tears just flowing. Verse 14 says that "At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus." She thinks it is the gardener who tended the graves.

And then He speaks. . . "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Then He says in a voice so recognizable . . . "Mary."

That voice got her attention. That voice she would recognize anywhere and she pushed the hair back and she picked up her head and looked right at him!

Jesus said in John 10:27 "My sheep listen to my voice." This Easter will you join me in listening for the voice of Jesus. His voice, His life is recognizable above all others. The Lord speaks in a tone only you will know. His voice brings comfort, hope, and new life for anyone who is sad or lonely, discouraged or troubled.

Lord today help me to listen for your still small voice that will guide and comfort me for the Season of Easter. Amen.

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Share your devotional thoughts with Congregational friends!

We are eager to receive your devotional writings to help with this sharing of our faith during the seasons of Advent and Lent. After thinking about the theme of the booklet, pray about how you can best communicate some aspect of your faith life for the benefit of fellow Congregationalists.

Here are the details for upcoming devotional booklets:

Advent 2024: Theme: What's in a Name?—The names of Jesus to guide our Advent preparation

Deadline August 15, 2024

Email your Advent 2024 entry to nacccadvent24@gmail.com

Lent 2025: Theme: Throughout These Forty Days

Deadline October 15, 2024

Email your Lent 2025 entry to naccclent25@gmail.com

For questions or clarification, contact Carol Taylor at jazzytay@gmail.com.

For some issues, we have extra submissions, which we set aside for later use. Please feel free to remind us or resubmit your writings if you don't see them used. Rest assured, we value every submission and strive to have a diverse representation. We deeply appreciate the work of all our devotional writers!

Your editors will honor the breadth of theological convictions of our membership and our congregations. Throughout our booklets, you will find a range of faith expressions; this booklet reflects the NACCC in its rich theological diversity.

As you prepare to write, please frame a central thought that contributes to the theme of the booklet. Please include each of the following in your submission:

- 1: Title;
- 2: Scripture verse(s) with translation used;
- 3: Body of the devotional;
- 4: A short prayer;
- 5: Your name;
- 6: Your church and its city;
- 7: Your email (if you do not want it published, let us know).

We can use submissions of up to 350 words, with title, scripture, body, prayer, name, church, and city included.

Your editors will proofread grammar, spelling, punctuation, and will make minimal corrections for narrative flow. We want your voice to come through these devotionals!

Blessings to you all,
Casey, Carol, and Terry



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