



# BEND

LENT DEVOTIONAL

2024



## Introduction

MOLLY BASKETTE

**We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.**

*2 Corinthians 4:8-10 (NRSV)*

I learned about the extra beatitude from a church camp friend, one belatedly added by some anonymous wag in the twentieth century: “Blessed are the flexible, for they will not get bent out of shape.”

The river doesn’t go over the mountain—it bends around it. Then spends the next 1,000 years wearing the mountain down.

Trees that don’t stand stiff but flex in the wind—bounce back rather than break.

The more you bend a bow, the further the arrow flies. Bending fills the bended with potential energy.

But bending is scary. Who knows what our limits are? If we might crack instead of stretch?

The other day I went to the chiropractor for a janky hip that was making me hobble. I thought he would yank, crack, and stretch my hip into submission. Instead he had me push toward, not away from, the problem area while he provided gentle counter-resistance. He said that shortening the muscle fibers “unhooks” them and allows them, counterintuitively, to release and lengthen.

How many people and situations could benefit, not from yanking and stretching, but from a gentle bend toward the source of pain as we seek release?

Paul wrote the words above to the church in Corinth. It was his second letter to them, which implies ongoing issues. In it he promises that no matter what kind of pain is piled on them, no matter how the world tries to shatter their fragile utopia, they will not be destroyed. Lean into it, he implies. You’ll be ok. Better than ok.

He was right. When the church since Corinth has been flexible and adaptive in the face of resistance, it has survived. When it has stuck with rigid norms and rules, it has shattered.

Jesus modeled this flexibility. Hardship, persecution, and raw living bent but didn't break him. The many people he encountered along the way made his enterprise bigger, his love stretchier. He took correction from women. Foreigners became friends. And every hard thing that happened further strengthened him, so much so that when he was on the cross, they had to literally break his bones to hasten his demise.

Paul says the Christian is always carrying in the body the death of Jesus. Some of us carry the death of Jesus *on* our bodies, wearing his means of execution around our necks. We bear witness to this important heaviness. Life is a lot, and doesn't seem to be getting any easier. We don't know what the future holds. In all likelihood: more heat for the planet, more flood, more fire. More political upheaval and more personal upheaval.

And because we hold this death so fully and faithfully, we are able hold its opposite: the life of Jesus. Laughter amongst friends. Impromptu parades. Smoky fish at a beach breakfast. Impossible abundance right when they thought the food, or wine, had run out. A life with many twists and turns. Who even knows what is coming around the bend?

Flexible, we can flow around the mountain in our path. Bend but not break when the strong wind blows. Be supple in the hands of the God who bends the bow of us—then gently places in the notch the arrows of love, justice, patience, and perseverance. Resting against those hands, we gain energy so those arrows will fly far and meet their mark.

## *Faith and Uncertainty*

**Who knows? Perhaps [God] will give you a reprieve,  
sending you a blessing instead of this curse.**

*Joel 2:14a (NLT)*

**KENNETH L. SAMUEL** | On this Ash Wednesday we are called to remember the dust of our humanity. And on this Valentine's Day we are obliged to express our love to all—especially to our significant others.

The concurrence of Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day hasn't occurred since 1945 and has happened only two other times in the last century. These two special observances today have me wondering if our human mortality and our loving relationships have anything in common.

The prophet Joel helps me recognize that Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day are both connected by degrees of uncertainty.

The ashes many of us wear today are symbolic reminders of our human frailty and our eventual physical demise. And what could be more uncertain than human fragility and imminent death? The brittle threads of our lives are spun and spread through so much instability. Where will the partisan gridlock in Washington lead us? When will new home buyers get a break? Is a war with Russia and China impending?

And the uncertainties of romance may be less cosmic but nonetheless real. Will I grow spiritually and intellectually with my partner, or will we grow apart? Am I expressing love and receiving love with consistent reciprocity? When do the compromises I make to keep a relationship intact become acts of complacency?

When the ancient children of Israel were invaded by an army of locusts that left wreckage and uncertainty throughout their land, and with no word of certainty from God as to when their crisis would relent, Joel pointed to the uncertainty and highlighted its possibility ... and the Israelites found the faith to renew their trust in God's goodness and to rebuild their devastated nation.

**PRAYER** *Lord, thank you for faith that transcends uncertainty and for love that sustains through all of life's vacillations.*

## *Take It Off!*

**Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of [God's] power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.**

*Ephesians 6:10-11 (NRSV)*

**VINCE AMLIN** | When I arrived at the retreat center, my room wasn't ready. It was 3:55, and check-in was at 4. They took my phone number and said they'd call. Not promising.

I wandered the grounds, feeling anxious. I was spending the week with a bunch of strangers. Worse! Pastors. My thoughts alternated between all the reasons they wouldn't like me and all the reasons I wouldn't like them.

Then I came across the retreat center's labyrinth, outlined in mossy stones and surrounded by trees. I decided to walk it. And as I did, I asked God to prepare me for the week ahead.

Paul tells the church in Ephesus to put on the armor of God. The *whole* armor. Which, he doesn't mention, will necessitate taking off all the armor they're currently wearing: The belt of half-truth. The breastplate of self-righteousness. Shoes that will let you run back to your room at the first sign of discomfort. You get the picture.

And, in exchange, God's armor. "Be strong in the strength of the Lord." Which we know from elsewhere, turns out to be weakness. A shirt so thin they can see your rapidly beating heart. Nothing to protect you. Except God.

As I walked each circuit, God peeled it all away. The layers of my onion. The whole armor. Until, as I made my final turn toward the middle, it was just me there, open and unprotected. And when I stepped into the center (I swear, it happened!), my phone rang.

"Mr. Amlin, we're ready for you."

**PRAYER** *Clothe me in gentleness, openness, and love. And nothing else.*

## *From Light to Sugar*

**Jesus said to them, “For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”**

*Mark 8:36 (NRSV)*

**KAJI DOUŠA** | A strain of Lenten traditions calls on three disciplines: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Many focus on the “fast” of Lent, giving something up. Others look to the “prayer” component of Lent, taking on a different dimension in their conversations with God. Still others commit to “almsgiving” with a sense of expansiveness in their generosity.

In so doing, some will emerge from their fast with a new relationship to the thing they’d given up. Some will feel a new connection to God from their deeper prayer life. Some will feel more able to give than ever before.

Jesus’ question in Mark 8:36 is key to deepening our Lenten commitments, because he calls on us to consider all three disciplines at once—because fasting from the profits of the world is too hard to do without fervent prayer and radical generosity.

Profits mean so little on an eternal timeline. So why cling to them? Why not give them up? For, in so many cases, we climb upon the backs of others in order to reap our short-term rewards. But at what personal cost?

The Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, Jr., said: “Look to the trees. They need light to survive, right? So they grow leaves to turn that light into energy. But as the leaves grow, notice something; they leave room for each other. Watch the leaves—they never steal each other’s light. Instead, they make room for one another.”

What profits in our lives come at the expense of someone else? Can we give those up, once and for all? Might we photosynthesize God’s grace and turn the light of Christ into sugar?

Make room for someone else and get your life. In Jesus’ name.

**PRAYER** *Source of all that is: help us to synthesize your grace into the power to change the world. Amen.*

## *A Bend in the Route*

**I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;  
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.**

*Psalm 32:8 (NRSVUE)*

**MARTHA SPONG** | On a Friday night when other plans fell through, we decided to order from an Asian fusion restaurant that was new to us. I had a vague sense of where it was, but I put the address into the map app on my phone. About halfway there, holding the phone in my hand in the passenger seat, I glanced down. The longest road on our route lay before me, and although I have driven on it many times, I had no idea that such a dramatic bend lay ahead of us.

If you are anything like me (born in the waning Baby Boomer era), you probably grew up in church hearing you ought to walk a straight path, through a narrow gate. Certainly those images abound in scripture. But the way of Jesus is so often a reversal of expectations. Whose voice are we listening to?

In Psalm 32, we hear the voice of David, confessing his sins, but in verse 8 the perspective shifts, and we hear the voice of the Holy One. David has done wrong, but God still loves him. Their relationship remains intact.

Those moments of recognition—those moments when we acknowledge doing what we should not have done, or not doing what we were meant to do—can take us to a place that feels new, a deeper connection to God. God will still teach and counsel us even when we have messed up, guiding us to a new way of being.

This Lent, let's look for that bend in the route.

**PRAYER** *Holy God, you know where we are going, even when we do not. Counsel us, we pray. Amen.*



## *Arc of the Covenant*

**God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature ... for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth."**

*Genesis 9:12-13 (NRSV)*

**CHRIS MERESCHUK** | Post-flood, God set a (rain)bow in the clouds: a vibrant sign of a promise to, with, and between God, the people, and every living creature for all future generations. Successive generations since that first rainbow renegotiated the covenant in some ways, and not always pleasantly. There were thunderous arguments from all parties, complaints that the other was not holding up their end. The covenant needed to bend, yet remain unbroken. In this way, scripture shows that the arc of a covenant over time is dynamic, flexible, adaptable for the sake of remaining sustainable.

Covenants articulate and guide our intentions, promises, and aspirations. Relying on whole-hearted engagement, accountability and responsibility are central to common flourishing and mutual care. When one wanders out of covenant, they are called back in for repair and restoration.

Lent invites us to consider our covenants, to contemplate signs that cause us to pause in awe and wonder, to reflect on the sacredness of our promises and the divine love of holding one another while simultaneously being held. Through our Lenten journey with Jesus, we weather threats, and we look for hope. We need vibrant signs in such times.

Storms will come, and some will leave us twisted and bent. But that's when a rainbow appears, reminding us that we are not broken. Even when the arc of a covenant bends, its sacred and beautiful promises remain intact.

**PRAYER** *Show us signs when our covenants bend, calling us whole-heartedly into mutual care. Amen.*



## *Light as a Feather*

**“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”**

*Matthew 11:30 (NRSV)*

**MARY LUTI** | An older church member succumbed to a lingering illness. He'd been much loved, but that love was hard-won. Whenever his shame, regret, and bitter memories kicked up inside him, he'd take it out on people in the church. It took perseverance to love him, to find the places in him that were beautiful. With God's help, some of us eventually did.

His funeral was on a holiday weekend. Many folks had gone away, and the reception fell to one woman, someone he'd often offended. She made sandwiches, set up chairs, laid the table, served the coffee, and stayed late to put things away. I caught her at the door. “That was so much work! Thank you.”

“A pleasure,” she replied.

A pleasure? I looked at her, wide-eyed. She could read between my lines: A pleasure? For him?

“Oh, yes,” she assured me. “Light as a feather!” And out she went, looking younger than she was.

And I thought about times of my own when, because of love, some hard thing I was doing seemed the best, most compelling thing in the world. Times when I felt almost weightless. Times when the hours sped by as fast as they did for Jacob, who served Laban seven years for Rachel, “and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her.”

Love, Paul says, bears all things. Love shoulders it all, bending under it to unburden us. Light as a feather. There are many ways to live in this world, but to live the best way, go to Jesus, take his love yoke upon you, learn how light it is.

**PRAYER** *Place your yoke upon us, O Christ, that we may know the weightless joy of love.*

## *Bending Toward Repenting*

**Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”**

*Mark 1:14-15 (NRSV)*

**MATT LANEY** | A preacher ascended the pulpit on her first Sunday at a new church. She preached a riveting sermon about repentance. The message was chock-full of wit and wisdom with just the right blend of personal stories and sound biblical exegesis. The congregation loved it. During coffee hour, if they weren't praising her, they were slapping the backs of the search committee on a job well done!

The next Sunday the new pastor preached the very same sermon, word for word. The congregation was perplexed, but rationalized the repetition was for the sake of emphasis or for the benefit of those who played hooky last week.

On her third Sunday, she once again preached the same sermon exactly as before. The people were incensed. Was this new preacher a one hit wonder? Had the search committee condemned them to hear the same sermon over and over for the duration of her ministry—which would be short if they had anything to say about it!

That evening saw a blizzard of emails between church leaders. The chair of the deacons volunteered to speak to their new pastor first thing in the morning. “Reverend, we sure are glad you are here, but there are some complaints about your preaching. I am sure you are aware that you have given the same sermon three times. That is . . . unusual in our experience.”

“As soon as you have begun to practice what was preached,” she said, “I’ll move on to something else.”

The congregation repented.

Jesus’ first sermon on repentance was less than twenty words long. Repent comes from a word that means to turn; turning away from living for self alone and toward living for others and for God because God was near. That was all he had to say. He gave the same sermon, over and over, for his entire ministry.

**PRAYER** *To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed; to turn, turn, will be my delight. Till by turning, turning we come round right.* (from “Simple Gifts,” Joseph Brackett)

## *The Bends*

**Again, the devil took [Jesus] to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”**

*Matthew 4:8-9 (NRSV)*

**QUINN G. CALDWELL** | The greater the pressure on your body, the more gas will be dissolved in your various internal liquids; likewise, less pressure, less gas. Move from high pressure to low pressure too quickly—from deep in the ocean to the surface, say, or from sea level to a mountaintop—and the change will cause so much gas to come out of your liquids that it forms bubbles. These bubbles will ruin your day, giving you a range of symptoms, from extreme confusion to debilitating pain.

The first time Satan tempts Jesus is roughly at sea level; soon, they're at top of a mountain. Of course, they're up there for the tempting view, but these heights are dizzying. What if the devil flew Jesus up there to so confuse and pain him that he would give in? What if he was trying to get Jesus to bend by giving him the bends??

Course it didn't work. Jesus had been studying and reading, learning and memorizing and internalizing the scriptures of his people for his whole life. They'd made their way to his very core.

Decompression sickness is so painful, they say, that it doubles even the strongest people over in pain. But not even the bends could take from Jesus what he'd made his center. When pain and confusion stripped everything away and left him bent in half, what was left was the words and the Word. And at least this time, that was enough.

**PRAYER** *So fill me with your Word and your words that not even the bends can take them away. Amen.*

## *Don't Mistake Sin*

**For there is no distinction, since all have sinned  
and fall short of the glory of God.**

*Romans 3:22b-23 (NRSV)*

**DONNA SCHAPER** | What is sin? It is to fall short of the glory of God. It is to miss the mark of our ideal humanity. It is to be distant from God. Jesus, as the ideal human, might be defined as one who never doubted the full presence of his Creator. What made him so special was how close he stayed to the one he called “Abba.”

Often we mistake sin for its disguises in right and wrong behavior. Smoking, drinking, and eating too much come to mind. In our focus on behaviors, abuse of our body becomes more important to us than abuse of our soul. Glorious souls rarely abuse the physical temple in which they are housed. Smoking, drinking, and temple-disregard are surely sins, but they are the outer sign of inner conditions.

Glory, as well as health, is our destination as humans. When we miss the mark of our best humanity, we sin.

We are in good company! All of us are in this boat together, this place of minimal glory and maximal distance from our mark as God's creatures. What might be different? We might learn to live in the spirit, not only in the flesh. We might try to get closer to God by the practice of prayer or by raising our hands in worship to touch the Spirit of the room. We might work less on the outside and more on the inside. We might become inner-actives.

**PRAYER** *O God, you who are the source of any glory we might ever have, draw near. Help us know what it is you meant us to be. Amen.*

## *The Breaks*

**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, so far from the words of my groaning? Yet you are holy ... and sovereignty belongs to you, the ruler over all the earth. All families and all nations worship before you; all who sleep in the earth and all who go down to the dust bow before you.**

*Psalm 22:1-3a and 27-29 (adapted, abridged)*

**RACHEL HACKENBERG** | Life can break you.

I don't know whether I believe that God will never give you more than you can handle, but I know from experience that life shows no such restraints. And when life piles on, as it tends to do, sometimes we collapse; sometimes we eke through; sometimes we triumph; sometimes we bruise and bleed; sometimes we persevere; sometimes we break.

Most often, we do all of the above, in varying degrees, depending on the day. But we don't survive this life in the grand scheme of things. Always, death comes.

Those are the breaks.

So to the One Who Brings Into Existence All That Is, we bow down.

For as long as we keep breathing through life's breakage, we bend in prayer and humility to the One Who Holds Our Brokenness.

And when this life sends us back to the dust, when survival is no longer within our grasp, we bend in worship and witness to the One Who Continues The Story.

Life can break us. Thank God, there is One Who Remains Undeterred.

**PRAYER** *Be with me in every dawn and dusk of this life, O God, and do not abandon me when I break.*

## Course Correction

The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness ... and said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?"

*Genesis 16:7-8a (NRSVUE)*

**VICKI KEMPER** | It's an important question: Where have you come from and where are you going?

I was in first grade when I determined where I was going: I wanted to be a writer. By eighth grade I'd clarified my destination: I would be a journalist. All through college, while my friends agonized over what to major in and who to become, I just kept going where I'd always been headed.

I worked as a journalist for a long time, and I loved it. But I'd never seriously considered the first part of the angel's question, the business about where I had come from: a long line of self-taught, fundamentalist, fire-and-brimstone preachers. I'd run from their theology, but I couldn't escape the call of the gospel any more than Hagar could evade the caring, watchful eye of the Holy One.

Eventually, thanks to the confluence of personal experiences and world events, the persistent call of the God Who Sees, and more grace than I could have imagined, I found the fortitude to change direction.

When I did, I discovered questions even more significant than those of origin and destination: reflections on impetus and devotion such as Whom, or what, do you serve? What kind of person do you want to be?

Lent is an excellent time to consider or reconsider these questions. Lent is the perfect time for a course correction.

**PRAYER** *God, you know that if I don't change the direction I'm going, I'm likely to end up where I'm headed. Show me a better way. Show me your way.*

## *The Calling of Ancestors*

**God said to Abram, “As for me, this is my covenant with you:  
You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations.”**

*Genesis 17:4 (NRSV)*

**LIZ MILLER** | The most frequent question my wife and I are asked is, “Do you plan to have children?” Although I might cheekily respond “No; I value sleep more than I value kids,” a deeper look reveals that isn’t true. Between beloved nieces and nephews, summers devoted to working with kids at camp, and a vocation that began with teaching Sunday school, I have spent many sleepless nights worrying and wondering about “my” kids.

Although I don’t have a call to parenthood, I do pray for a place among the ancestors. Might there be an army of aunties among our fierce foremothers? A group of great mentors dwelling with the great-great-grandparents? A coven of caring adults that will be remembered and whose wisdom will shape the next generations?

When I look to my own ancestors, I remember the youth group leader with no kids of her own but a van full of kids every summer that she loved on and laughed with during weeklong service trips. Her patience and humor are now in my DNA.

I remember stories of my godparents who were committed to working for justice for disenfranchised members of their community. I pray their courage has been planted in me.

There was once a time when heritage was left to biological families, passed down from parent to child, but every time we expand our ideas of whose inheritance we have received, the ancestral plane grows and includes people whose stories might inspire, whose legacy is still felt, and who we owe a great thanksgiving for the ways they worried and wondered over our lives.

**PRAYER** *May our ancestors ground us and guide us, each and every one of them. Amen.*



## *Just What He Said*

**Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age at the very time God had promised him.**

*Genesis 21:1-2 (NIV)*

**VINCE AMLIN** | My daughter has a lot of bedtime rituals. They're comforting to her. Her water on the bedside table. Her sound machine set to ocean waves. Her stuffies tucked into their designated spots.

Then begins the recitation of requests for the morning. Will I wake her up? Will I do it in the voice of whatever character she's currently obsessed with? Will I make her chocolate chip pancakes?

After all the questions have been answered, she confirms the whole thing one more time: "You promise all the things?"

"I promise all the things." Only then can she sleep.

So much of scripture is a confirmation that God keeps God's promises. Checked and double checked. Three times in these two short verses. We're told that God was good to God's word to Sarah. God did what God promised Abraham. And God did it all, "at the very time God had promised."

Rainbows are slung across the sky. Ways open through the sea. Needlessly complicated tasks are performed—all to fulfill what some prophet said.

It's comforting. That kind of dependability. Regularity. Faithfulness. To know that something at least will be as promised.

In a world of chaos, at a time of such unpredictability, when nothing lasts and few can be relied on. It's the one thing that we can rest on.

**PRAYER** *Rock of Ages, promise us again, all the things.*

## *Moral Beauty*

**Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.**

*Acts 2:43 (NRSV)*

**MOLLY BASKETTE** | Author and psychologist Dacher Keltner says that practicing awe can save our lives. But isn't awe something that happens spontaneously? How do you hack awe?

Keltner, citing studies from around the world, came up with what he calls the eight wonders of life, vectors that reliably generate awe. Some are easy to guess: nature, music. But the one that came up most frequently is perhaps the least guessable: wonders.

Well, duh, you might be saying. But hasn't the age of miracles passed?

It depends on how you define "wonders." In those global studies, the most-cited wonder of life was moral beauty: acts of generosity or courage undertaken by others that we witness, openmouthed.

Last spring, my church ran a capital campaign to rebuild after a devastating fire. The first person to offer a giving testimony was Becky, recently diagnosed with cancer. In a pre-recorded video from the Mayo Clinic, she told us,

"In my life there are a lot of unknowns, but there also are some knowns. We know this building will help our congregation, and community, and people who haven't even been born yet. ... I worry I'll need that money for retirement or medical bills. But I also know that money does more good when it's shared with others than when we clutch it and hold tight to it.

"At the end of my life I want to believe that I was not a pew warmer. I was someone who stepped up and did as much as I could for the church. The church is more than a building. It's a place where we honor, respect, and amplify what I still think is the greatest message ever, the message of Jesus."

One after another, other saints stood up and shared. We met our goal, and then some.

**PRAYER** *God, you are still working wonders. Amen.*

## *Full Responsibility*

**As Isaiah said, “The Lord has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts—so that their eyes cannot see, and their hearts cannot understand, and they cannot turn to me and have me heal them.”**

*John 12:40 (NLT)*

**KENNETH L. SAMUEL** | Scriptures that tell me the Lord hides truth and light from people’s understanding, and Scriptures that tell me the Lord steels people’s hearts against love and compassion, are quite disturbing to me. While I don’t wish ill upon anyone, I do prefer a system of justice that holds everyone accountable for their decisions and their actions. Notions of evil people being cut off and of callous people being brought low by Divine Providence hold a definite appeal for me.

But how can people whose understanding is thwarted and whose hearts are hardened by God ever be justifiably held accountable for their transgressions?

Perhaps my focus should be less upon God’s retribution against the wicked and more upon God’s boundless mercies in my own life.

What a wonder God in Christ is. Jesus comes to give his life for the sins we have committed. Then while being executed by the people he loved enough to lay down his life for, Jesus prays, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”.

Only love that is supremely radical and utterly unflinching would cause God to take full responsibility for our sinful condition.

While watching a marriage counselling session on TV recently, I was taken aback by the rude and condescending manner in which one man spoke to his spouse. Appearing rather flustered himself, the counselor turned to the rude man’s spouse and asked, “If you could change anything about your husband right now, what would you change?”

The spouse responded, “I would go back into his life and change everything that has made it so hard for him to give and receive real love.”

**PRAYER** *Lord, your judgement is always tempered by your love, and we thank you. Amen.*

## *A Tale of Two Jesuses*

**Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”**

*John 8:10-11 (NRSV)*

**KAJI DOUŠA** | Tracing his finger on the ground, he changed everything. Stones in hand, they were armed for war against her—she a pawn, as people on margins so often are, in a broader battle with Jesus.

Then, he stood and saw her. He saw her—not her accusations, not the surrounding fury. He saw her and he did not condemn her. Thanks be to God.

I have heard this passage read in church, stopping just there. “Just as Jesus didn’t condemn her, he doesn’t condemn you, either.” The Jesus of this teaching overlooks all wrongs.

Unfortunately, that’s Jesus-lite, not Jesus himself. The next line is crucial. “From now on do not sin again.” Acknowledging that Jesus has expectations for our behavior, that he wants us not to “sin again,” sounds like he is asking something too hard to pull off.

It is. He knows very well that she will sin again, that the rest of us will sin again. Acknowledging this is key to our Lenten explorations: We dive in to examine our actions and inactions, asking God what to do. We repent—meaning, we turn back to God—because God does not condemn us. As we turn, we know that God does not delight in or accept our sin. Ironically, this is good news, because the effects of our sin are things like the war of stones, the hypocrisy of accusation, the bullying of the marginalized. Thank God Jesus says “no” to such things.

Which Jesus do you know? The one who shames accusers into silence? Or the one who gives the order not to sin? The One True God embodies both and so much more.

**PRAYER** *God, we turn and see, we dive in right now. Help us to emerge washed and refreshed.*

## *Tell Me What You Really Really Want*

**Lord, hear my prayer, listen to my cry for mercy; in your faithfulness and righteousness come to my relief.**

*Psalm 143:1 (NIV)*

**JOHN EDGERTON** | In my prayers, I often err on the side of praying for things that I could do myself. God is likely tired of hearing me ask, “Help me do my part to solve [insert societal woe].”

I like to hide behind theology for justification. Prayer isn't magic, God isn't a genie. And that's true. But if I'm honest, the reason I don't pray for the things I really want is that I'm afraid of what will happen to my faith if I don't get them.

I'm honestly afraid of entrusting my most hidden need and brokenness to God. What if absolutely nothing happens?

Could I still believe in God?

It's true that I shouldn't treat prayer as if it were a hotline to an unreliable genie. That's not faithful to the God who keeps Her own counsel and knows better than I what is good. But neither is it faithful to pray as if I know that God will certainly be of no avail.

Because what do I know?

I've been among Christians long enough to hear stories that defy reason. Dire prognoses that turn out just fine, vulnerable people thriving against all odds. People have trusted me with stories too tender and sacred to speak about except slantingly, stories that help me understand why the root meaning of the word miracle is “laughter.”

If my heart is frozen by fear at a medical diagnosis and what I most desperately want is to be well again, then that's how I should pray. If my life has fallen apart and I don't know how to put it together again and I need somebody to fix it, that's how I should pray. Pleading with God for what I really, deeply, truly need is not the end of prayer. But it is the beginning.

**PRAYER** *[Add your own prayer.]*

## *Some of It Is Your Fault*

**While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long ... my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the guilt of my sin.**

*Psalm 32:3-5 (NRSV)*

**JENNIFER RUTH LYNN GARRISON** | There is so much wrong with the world, and some of it is your fault.

The earth is collapsing under the weight of so many of us using up everything we want as fast as we want, and you just drank a cup of coffee from a disposable cup. People are really actually starving right in your town, and you continue to buy groceries for your own family as if this were not happening. Governments are overtaken by thugs, and you are too busy or cynical to vote.

There is so much wrong, and some of it really is your fault.

The curse of being human is knowing this. The blessing of being human is having a choice about how to respond to this knowledge.

You can pull the covers over your head, groan softly and gradually waste away from the helpless, enervating guilt of it all. Or you can start here: Roll out of your bed and kneel beside it. Open your mouth not to groan, for once, but to speak out loud. Tell your fault to the Holy One so that it no longer weighs you down, no longer weakens your body and soul, no longer keeps you trapped in the prison of your own making. Remember that while some of it is your fault, not all of it is.

Then get up. There is so much wrong with the world, and you have work to do.

**PRAYER** *O Most High, help me speak and then to move from confession to action.*

## Dogging

Jesus said to the woman, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” She answered, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”

*Mark 7:27-29 (NRSV)*

**MATT LANEY** | Did Jesus really call this Gentile woman, and her daughter with special needs, dogs? We want a human Jesus, but not *that* human. Has he been caught on camera with his divinity down?

Some interpreters explain that the word is actually “little dogs,” puppies, and who doesn’t love puppies? But, as Bible scholar Dr. Amy-Jill Levine points out, “‘Little bitch’ is no nicer than ‘bitch.’”

This dogged woman bests Jesus by throwing his words right back: “Even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” I think she also whispered, “Checkmate,” but that was not recorded.

As someone with a long list of pastor fails, it’s nice to know Jesus had at least one. I think Jesus was converted that day to a larger commonwealth of God. Even Jesus had to expand his understanding of who he had come to heal and save.

What about us? Who do we attempt to keep under the table and not share even a crumb? Who are the people we avoid? Who do we consider beneath us? Who do we dog?

**PRAYER** *Jesus, if dogging people happened to you it can happen to anyone. When it’s my turn, help me to hear the woman’s voice and respond as you did.*



## *How Lovely, How Loved*

**How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts.**

*Psalm 84:1 (NRSV)*

**TALITHA ARNOLD** | When the composer of Psalm 84 imagined God's dwelling place, they probably envisioned the great Temple in Jerusalem. Built of marble and the cedars of faraway Lebanon, it was a place of mystery and beauty. The psalmist's soul longed to be in that wondrous space, so adorned with gold and precious gems. It *had* to be where God dwelt.

But then the psalmist shifted focus from the Temple and instead sang of the nests of birds: dwelling places not made of marble and gold, but of twigs, mud, and any other construction materials the everyday creatures could find.

*Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars.*

A few verses later, the psalmist again shifted focus, away from the destination (i.e., the Temple) to the journey to get there.

*Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose hearts are the highways to [the Temple]. As they go through the [desolate] valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools. They go from strength to strength.*

Yes, the psalmist could experience God's wonder and power in the glorious Temple. But the psalmist also knew that God's presence and love could be known in a place as common as a sparrow's nest or as desolate as the Baca valley. Jesus knew that, too. With love, he transformed a desolate hill called Calvary into a place of life that even death could not destroy.

**PRAYER** *Lord, help us trust that wherever we are, your love will find us, and your loveliness will transform us. Amen.*

## Give Up Judging

**For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment,  
“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”**

*Galatians 5:14 (NRSV)*

**DONNA SCHAPER** | Chapter 5 of Galatians is worth a good long read. It is about the subject of Christian freedom, which the writer imagines is a kind of slavery to love. It is about the difference between the law and grace, using circumcision as an example, concluding that it matters little if we are or are not circumcised. Instead it matters a lot how we talk about the subject to each other.

Maybe you don't need to read this chapter. You may have no issues about right and wrong cultural customs, the right way to dress for church, the right foods to eat in Lent. You may never have spoken of chocolate cake as “sinful” or scoffed at someone who was obese. You may attend church meetings and tolerate all the points of view expressed by other members. If so, skip this chapter.

If, however, you find yourself coiled culturally, intolerant of difference, unkind when someone smokes in public or brings a dog to a meeting, turn to Galatians 5 and sit down for the long read. You will learn what it means to be in love with each other. You will also be brought to attention by the warning that sometimes when we “bite and devour each other,” we actually find ourselves chewed up, even consumed.

Be kind. Fall in love. Think less about circumcision, ancient or modern, and more about love.

**PRAYER** *O God, we pray that we can be a little yeast that leavens the entire dough of community and that when we are gone, people miss us because our kindness is lost. Amen.*

## Imaginal

**And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.**

*2 Corinthians 3:18 (NRSV)*

**QUINN G. CALDWELL** | Come Easter, much will be made of butterflies. The inching, munching caterpillar transforming into the bright, soaring butterfly is just too good a resurrection metaphor for some of us to pass on.

Something you may not know: once the caterpillar hangs itself up, a grand drama plays out. If the caterpillar itself can't imagine the butterfly it will become, its cells sure can. As soon as the chrysalis closes, tiny structures called imaginal discs (that's really what they're called!) form in its body. Inside these discs are the genome of the butterfly, largely separate from the genome of the caterpillar. As such, the caterpillar's body sees them as invaders. Its immune system attacks and kills them. But the genetic image of the butterfly will not be denied. The imaginal discs keep coming.

Eventually, the caterpillar's immune system becomes overwhelmed by the sheer number of them. By then, the struggle has basically liquefied the caterpillar's body. The imaginal discs then use the caterpillar soup to build a butterfly.

Maintaining homeostasis is often the way to go. It's usually the best way to survive. Fighting unto liquefaction can seem preferable to changing. But what if the thing you're fighting is the seed of a great transformation?

What if the thing you're attacking so hard is the image of what you were always meant to become?

**PRAYER** *I may not be able to imagine my future, but I know you already have. When the image of you that you've implanted inside me makes itself known, help me to not fight too hard. Amen.*

## Reminders

**“When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between [me] and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”**

*Genesis 9:16 (NRSV)*

**RACHEL HACKENBERG** | The world needs more reminders.

Guns need not just one safety lock but five safety reminders, plus a mandatory essay about violence, before each firing of a single bullet. Bombs need civilian ballot measures that pass by majority vote before being detonated against an enemy. Our emails should come with a tone-check, in addition to a spell-check, that we must review and approve before sending. Our picket fences should be engraved with “borders are a social construct” on every post, lest we forget that no one really “owns” one’s own property.

We need more reminders that we are interrelated, fewer indicators that we are islands. We need more prompts to slow us down before we cause harm, and fewer restraints that limit us from love.

Make it a bow around the finger or a bow in the sky, but make it something that effectively deters us from destruction. Even God needed such a reminder. How much more humanity?

God set a reminder in the clouds to never again allow flood waters to separate living creatures from God’s presence. Paul expanded the list: it’s not only flood waters that cannot separate us from God; neither can angels or empires, histories or futures, perils or threats, nor anything else imaginable separate us from God.

With this assurance, we must remind ourselves constantly not to be separated from one another either.

**PRAYER** *You remember, O Eternal God, what I too easily forget: that I am not my own, that I am inherently caught up in and bound to all others. Remind me.*

## *No Bearings*

**Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.**

*Matthew 3:13-15 (NRSVUE)*

**MARY LUTI** | John is rattled. This isn't right. I shouldn't baptize you, Jesus. You should baptize me. But Jesus says, Baptize me anyway. It fulfills God's purpose. So John consents.

God's purpose is that the one who needs no washing should be washed. That the one sent should be a sibling, not a judge. That creation should be healed not from high up, but from down low.

This isn't the only time the Gospels report a protest against divine humility. Remember the Last Supper? No, no, poor Peter cries when Jesus arrives at his feet with a towel and a bowl. This is wrong, I should wash your feet! But Jesus says, You can't be mine unless you let me serve you, unless you've been bewildered by my bended knee. So Peter consents.

Sometimes I think that we should think of the Christian life as one long flustered objection followed by a bewildered consent to the unthinkable. Sometimes I wonder if we are meant to live not sure of very much, but rather disoriented, upended, and undone by the undignified ministrations of a servant God.

Such that if we immerse ourselves alongside neighbors in their need, if we lower ourselves to wash their feet, it's not because we know what we're doing, but because we've lost our bearings, the old ones that always urged us up. It's because we who have been so vastly loved, so sweetly served, so surprised, have no bearings at all. Except for Christ. Who bends us towards earth, who sends us down.

**PRAYER** *Bewilder us, Jesus, with your bended knee. Make your downward way our own.*

## *Allergic to God*

**Do not be deceived; God is not mocked.**

*Galatians 6:7a (NRSV)*

**MOLLY BASKETTE** | Ask the evangelical internet, and you might hear that Christianity is under attack by malevolent forces that hate Jesus Christ. The opposite is true: plenty of folk are angling to make our country a right-wing Christian theocracy, with some success.

But where I live in the Bay Area, to admit publicly that you are a Christian is to court immediate and vehement scorn. Which honestly I get, when I see how some of my co-religionists behave. Many of my neighbors think all Christians are fools, bigots, and/or potential domestic terrorists.

So I knew what I was in for at the Bay Area Book Festival, trying to sell something very few people wanted: a memoir of progressive faith. I'd even brought free stickers with quotes from the book. One sticker echoed Rumi, "Dance, when you're broken open." Another said, "God is not an a-hole." Still another said, "God didn't send the disaster, but She will use it."

One guy glanced at my stickers, saw the word "God," and looked up at me. "Good luck with that," he said flatly, before moving on.

It's one thing to come for me and the spiritual siblings who I'm albatrossed to by the name Christian. It's another thing to scorn God when you've had very little firsthand exposure to Christian community.

It's like they have an allergy to something that their bodies think is poison but might, under the right circumstances, turn out to be the bread of life.

**PRAYER** *God, we are a stubborn and prejudiced people, some in one way, some in another. Bend us. Feed us. Heal our anaphylactic response to what is truly You.*

## *Look at It*

**Then the Lord told Moses, “Make a replica of a poisonous snake and attach it to a pole. All who are bitten will live if they simply look at it!”**

*Numbers 21:8 (NLT)*

**KENNETH L. SAMUEL** | The movement to ban books in our schools is real. Books that tell the inhumane brutality of American slavery and its ongoing impact in American life. Books that acknowledge the different formations of family that love and nurture children. Books that depict the rape and exploitation of Native Americans. Books which inform us that, given our addiction to fossil fuels, we are not exercising proper stewardship over our planet.

These books relay information that indicts some American heroes, and they offer unpleasant but verifiable critiques of many hallowed American institutions. They give facts that challenge our complacency with the status quo, and they let us know in no uncertain terms that the American experiment in democracy is far from complete.

Among the reasons given for the ban policies: These books are too stressful for the minds of young students. These books portray America in a completely negative light. These books are written and promoted by people and campaigns that actually hate America.

God was greatly displeased when the children of Israel turned against their leader Moses for leading them out from the bondage of their familiarity into the promises and challenges of freedom. In punishment for their rank ingratitude and brazen unfaithfulness, God sent poisonous snakes among the people, and many were bitten and died.

When Moses interceded for the Israelites' deliverance from the snake bites, God instructed him that only those who looked at a replica of a poisonous snake attached to a pole would be healed. The full view of what was killing them had to have been disturbing. But according to the divine directive, it was absolutely necessary for their healing.

**PRAYER** *Lord, help us to not let the failure to face our past cause us to forfeit a better future. Amen.*



## *Break Don't Bend*

**One sabbath [Jesus] was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat..."**

*Mark 2:23-26a (NRSV)*

**VINCE AMLIN** | In the movie *Women Talking*, a group of women from an isolated religious sect debate what to do in response to a series of rapes perpetrated by the men of their community—a systematic horror carried out over years.

Some of the women counsel forgiveness. Others insist they at least stay in the colony, as the rules require. But in the end, the group decides to leave.

As one character, Greta, explains, "Leaving is how we demonstrate our faith. We are leaving because our faith is stronger than the rules."

It's a truth that Jesus reminds the Pharisees of after his disciples pluck grain on the sabbath. And he points back to David, who broke the law by eating the priests' bread.

As people of God, we stand in a long line of people who knew: the rules are made to be broken.

The rules of our cities and countries. Our families and churches. The little rules we make up in our hearts.

Wherever and whenever they conflict with God's rule of love, we must be ready to leave them behind.

**PRAYER** *Give me a faith stronger than the rules.*

## *Would You Rather?*

**You keep my eyelids from closing; I am so troubled that I cannot speak. I consider the days of old, and remember the years of long ago. I commune with my heart in the night; I meditate and search my spirit: Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has [God's] steadfast love ceased forever?"**

*Psalm 77:4-8a (NRSV)*

**JENNIFER RUTH LYNN GARRISON** | A few years ago, a youth group I traveled with played a version of “Would you rather?”

“Would you rather be a bald eagle or a grizzly bear?” “Would you rather eat only broccoli or only liver?” “Would you rather listen only to babies crying or [this was, as I said, a few years ago] listen only to the music of Justin Bieber?” Each question brought laughter and eager answers.

Then, “Would you rather regret the past or worry about the future?”

The whole car groaned. People who had cheerfully, if hypothetically, chosen a lifetime of liver or baby cries refused to choose either regret or worry. We moved on to the next question.

In real life it feels as if I don't choose either worry or regret—too often, alas, as with the psalmist, in the middle of the night they choose me. When regretful, I am also “troubled,” thoughts spinning back over years, lamenting the actions never taken, the words hastily spoken. With worry, I also spin out, but this time over what is to come, what is unseen and unknown.

Regret and worry seem to choose me at first, but how do I respond? Invariably, I choose them back. Like the psalmist, I let my mind circle around whatever unresolvable thing has been placed before me by worry or regret.

Maybe it's time to try something different. Maybe like the kids in the car, I can moan once and then move on to the next question. Maybe then I will find that God's love hasn't “ceased” at all. Maybe then I will recognize the steadfastness of God's presence with me the whole time.

**PRAYER** *You are God, and I am not. To you be all the glory.*

## *Peeled Back*

Then the Pharisees said to Jesus, “You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid.” Jesus answered, “Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going.”

*John 8:13-14 (NRSVUE)*

**MARTHA SPONG** | I once worked for a boss who knew herself well enough to know she needed help with her tendency to micromanage. “Your job,” she said, holding up a clenched fist, “is to get me to peel my fingers back from all the things I keep tight in my grip,” because that grasping kept her from considering new possibilities for the program she ran.

In John 8, Jesus spars with the Pharisees at the Temple in Jerusalem. In their repeated encounters with him, they keep a tight grip on whatever will make them right and him wrong. For every statement he makes, they offer a counterargument—some rule or standard that supports their status quo.

They do not want to see who he is.

The Pharisees had a lot at stake as they grappled with Jesus’ arrival on the scene. To believe who he said he was, they needed to peel their fingers back from being authorities on everything. They needed to bend their minds to recognize that Jesus was God’s Law come to life among them.

My old boss comes to mind whenever I find myself caught up in rigid definitions of responsibility or roles or ideas. What am I trying to avoid or protect with my unbending mental fist?

**PRAYER** *Ah, Holy Jesus, when we hold tight to things that do not serve you, may we peel ourselves back, and let you be you. Amen.*

## *Born Blessed*

**Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.**

*Psalm 51:5 (NRSVUE)*

**CHRIS MERESCHUK** | While my son was in utero, his mom and I searched for daycare. Why not the one at the nearby church? Well...

“What role does the church play in this daycare?” I asked.

“Pastor visits weekly! The children learn early on they were born with sin in their hearts,” the director proudly replied.

All these years later, I’m angered by the accusation that before my child’s heart could beat on its own, sin was pumping through his veins. What transgression could a fetus commit? Are we born condemned, and that’s the whole story? Surely, the Author of Life doesn’t end with that.

In Psalm 51, we meet a sobbing, repentant mess of a human, prostrate before God, begging for forgiveness. In verse 5, they see no hope or promise in themselves, even damning the fertilization of their wretched life. Yikes! Reading nothing else, that one verse becomes a death sentence.

Despite deep shame, this self-loathing psalmist knows condemnation is not the end of the story: “Create in me a clean heart. Teach me your wisdom and I will teach others. Open my lips and I’ll declare your praise.” They pray for a return to newborn blessedness.

Imagine how powerful it would be to teach children early on that they were born blessed, that their hearts pumped God’s mercy and grace, their lungs inflated to breathe the Holy Spirit, bones formed to declare joyful praise.

We might feel broken now, but we were born whole.

We will sin on this side of the womb, but we were born blessed.

**PRAYER** *Re-create in me a clean heart and willing spirit, O God. Open my lips to proclaim all creation is born blessed. Amen.*

## *Don't Make Up Your Mind*

**“Which of the two sons did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came preaching righteousness, and you did not believe him, but they did; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds.”**

*Matthew 21:31-32 (NRSVUE, adapted)*

**MARY LUTI** | You know this story: A father tells his two sons to do their chores. The first says, “No way!” but eventually goes. The second jumps up, “Yes, sir!” but never shows. Jesus asks, “Which one obeyed?” His religious audience doesn’t blink. It’s obvious: “The first,” they reply. The obedient person is the one who actually does something. Quiz aced.

But Jesus isn’t done. He accuses them: People you consider sinners are entering the kingdom before you. Because you didn’t believe John, but they did; and even after you saw that, you didn’t change your minds.

For Jesus, the first boy does his father’s will not so much because he goes, but because in order to go, he had to think twice, to correct himself, to change his mind. The religious people Jesus addresses are in trouble with God not so much because they are bad or hypocrites, but because they won’t bend. They lack spiritual agility, the capacity to think the better of something and turn around.

When deeds match words, we lead coherent lives. *Merely* coherent lives. But there’s a greater depth: to become fully responsive to God is to accept the fallibility of being creatures and adopt the flexibility proper to the very good chance that we could be wrong.

The question about who does God’s will is not answered by prompt obedience, at least not by prompt obedience alone, but by letting Christ dismantle our defenses and change our minds.

**PRAYER** *Give me the grace not to make up my mind, Christ Jesus. Make me permanently convertible, always ready to think again.*

## *Retirement Job*

**God said, “The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt.” But Moses said, “Who me?”**

*Exodus 3:9-11 (NRSV, adapted)*

**MATT LANEY** | The older we get, the more entitled we feel to say “no,” because we don’t have as much energy and besides, it’s time for the next generation to step up.

Imagine you are eighty years old, enjoying your sunset years after a long and satisfying career, when out of the blue you are called to a full-time volunteer position leading people out of a country where you are wanted by the law. I can feel your “No!” from here.

When God spoke to him through the burning bush, Moses declined not once, but four times. It’s possible Moses’ reluctance to lead is one of his strongest credentials. No truly great leader ever thought of themselves as great.

Moses thought leadership required outstanding public speaking skills, but God had much different criteria: a heart of gold, not a golden tongue.

An ancient Hebrew legend explains it this way: One day, while Moses was tending his father-in-law’s flock, a kid wandered off. Moses left the flock in search of the one that had become lost. He finally found the poor, tired, hungry creature, gave it water, placed it on his shoulders and carried it home. God said, “If that’s how he treats one lost kid, he will show great care and compassion for my people.”

Our job at any age is to show compassion for God’s people. Maybe you will be called to care for thousands or for only one. It’s all the same to God.

**PRAYER** *Holy One, may I see you and serve you and care for you in each one today.*

## Religious

**Restore me to the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.**

*Psalm 51:12 (NRSV)*

**QUINN G. CALDWELL** | I was talking with one of the most generous supporters of the ministry I'm a chaplain for. Generous and dependable in his giving, but generous and dependable too in all the other ways one might long for a church member to be. I asked him why.

This man had the temerity to look me right in the eye and say, "Because I'm religious but not spiritual."

I don't think I'll ever get over it.

A willing spirit is certainly something to long for. But if we sit around waiting until God vouchsafes us some mystical experience of spiritual willingness before we do stuff, we're going to get a lot less done than we otherwise might.

My guy understood human nature pretty well. Almost as well as Jesus, who told us to put our money where we want our hearts to be, because hearts follow money more often than the other way around. And so this man—doggedly, regularly—religioned. He showed up. He gave money. He spent time. He prayed—dutifully, not ecstatically. He trusted the ancestors who'd said, after many generations of learning, "Do this, not that." "Act this way; try not to act that way."

And while the rest of us were floating around labyrinths and Taize-ing until our brains leaked out our ears and just generally trying to out-Hildegard Hildegard, there he was, building the city of God brick by brick.

I don't know if he'd agree or not, but I'm pretty sure he was building his spirit, too.

**PRAYER** *Grant me a willing spirit, God. Until then, grant me religion. Amen.*



## *Tears in Our Eyes*

**Jesus wept.**

*John 11:35 (NKJV)*

**DONNA SCHAPER** | When we get done weeping about a school shooting, environmental catastrophe, or whatever comes next, we might want to pay attention to Lucy Easthope, a well-known British disaster response expert, who worked major events ranging from the 2005 London bombings to the 2020 Covid pandemic. Her wisdom for disaster response has parallel lessons for the work of Lent:

First, declare helplessness. Don't assume your own usefulness. Forswear advice, even if you think you know what everybody else should be doing. Try saying, "Do you mind if I sit around helplessly with you?"

Second, concentrate on the next crisis while making tea and tidying up. Be prepared, not shocked. Be calm, not worried. The calmer you are, the calmer others will be. The opposite is also true.

Third, support a local leader who isn't intent upon the limelight. Make sure that leader knows the meaning of non-anxious presence, who knows better than to feed worry to worriers.

Fourth, multiply the ways of belonging. People are like border collies during a disaster—having a job focuses their energy amidst chaos. Gather people and connect them. Help people belong to each other, and the depression will subside long enough to manage what's unfolding.

Fifth, don't say anything Jesus wouldn't say. Better yet, do something Jesus would do: wash feet, comfort the outcasts, eat with the sinners. Don't wipe away tears so fast that humanity is missed.

Belong to and take care of each other. Repent from the sin of disaffiliation.

**PRAYER** *Through every crisis and through life, make us all essential workers in a mutual aid society. Amen.*

## *Souls in Prison*

**Christ was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison.**

*1 Peter 3:18b-19 (NRSV)*

**KAJI DOUŠA** | “But this city is designed as a cage,” he said. “The tall buildings are like prison bars; where’s the sky?” In his reverie to the glories of New York City living—amazing music, marquee proclaiming “the best” for everything from pastrami to proper pizza to elite gallery space—he said, “We have it all.” Except the sky.

In service to our love for the very best, we run for trains quick to shut the doors in our faces. For our proximity to the employers who might make the best use of our talents and skills, we yield to a redefinition of personal space foreign to any other city in the country. We breathe in ambition at the expense of anything close to cleanliness. As we cross the threshold into a future we pray will bring access to growth and—please God—a better future for the ones we love, we step over piles of ... other things.

And these conditions of flesh and spirit are true not only in New York City.

We start to accept the things we really should not, growing accustomed to being so enclosed that we risk forgetting what it means to be free—if we ever knew it. The feeling of grass on our toes. The ability to behold without limit. The chance to gaze without interruption.

Into this prison, Christ breathes freedom. Setting souls loose from the captivity we may not even see is the very work of resurrection.

So today, I ask: where are your shackles?

**PRAYER** *O God, may I recognize my own captivity and know that my captors hold nothing to your salvation.*

## Take Courage

**Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? Yet now take courage, says the Lord. Take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord; work, for I am with you. My spirit abides among you; do not fear.**

*Haggai 2:3-5 (NRSV, abridged)*

**VICKI KEMPER** | You who fear your best days are behind you, take courage, for the Holy One is not finished with you.

You who fear what is yet to come, take courage, for the God of Glory is yet with you.

You who fear that the generations before you have left your generation with nothing but demise and disaster, take courage; the Creator is yet at work.

You who fear that the church is dying, take courage and consider what the Spirit is doing even now.

You who are inclined to become evangelists of every new self-help fad, take courage and make space for the still, small voice within you.

You who refuse to change, take courage—and commit to trying one new thing this week.

You who are prone to catastrophizing, take courage and get to work. God can make a way out of no way.

You who are prone to denial, consider the facts and take courage anyway, trusting that the truth will set you free.

Whoever you are, wherever life finds you, whatever you fear, name it and carry on. Face it, and lean in. Take courage, and live with the boldness of a love that death cannot contain.

**PRAYER** *For the gift of courage, the hope of flexibility, the practice of surrender, and the promise of new life, we give you thanks and praise.*

## *A Love That Lasts*

**Let those who honor the Lord say it: "God's faithful love lasts forever!"**

*Psalm 118:4 (CEB)*

**LIZ MILLER** | Do you remember the popular 1980s children's book, *Love You Forever*? It traces a mother's love for her son through the lullaby refrain she sings to him throughout his life as she cradles him in her arms. It is a tearjerker for every new parent, or any child that grew up hearing that same lullaby whispered, but it has also become a point of awkwardness and ridicule. A mother climbing a ladder into her grown son's room while he sleeps? Is that love, or is that trespassing?

Thirty years later, a new writer updated the book with an ending that incorporated some healthy boundaries between mother and son. The hope was to mold the eye-rolling elements into a story that allowed readers to stay focused on the love. In this rewrite, the original book has found renewed life and is being shared as a language of parental love for a new generation.

It's not just children's books that call for new images and metaphors, shifts in how our stories are told or who is telling them, or adapted language to allow us to understand the message without getting stuck in a mucky part. The particularities of our sacred stories and scripture, hymns and liturgy, can sometimes cause us to stumble, step back, and miss the overarching message they hoped to convey.

When contexts change, so must the stories we tell in order to equip us to first perceive and then proclaim God's love in our lives. The details might bend and shift, but God's love will last forever.

**PRAYER** *May we find God's love in the center of our stories and in the heart of our traditions.*

## *Before I Go through the Gate*

**Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.**

*Psalm 118:19 (NRSV)*

**RACHEL HACKENBERG** | I did not grow up in a “come forward” church. Our weekly worship did not include a routine in which people came from their seats to the front of the sanctuary for a specific liturgical purpose. We stood up and sat down at the appropriate moments, but we weren’t drawn forward—not for communion, not for prayers, not for an altar call.

(The children ran forward to the pulpit steps for the children’s sermon, but I don’t pretend that we regard “children’s time” as a liturgical moment in most churches as much as we treat it as a mid-worship intermission.)

We did, however, go forward from our pews to the altar during Ash Wednesday services to receive the smudge of a cross on our foreheads. Consequently, my physical memory of going forward in worship is tied to stillness, quietness, a bowed head, a humble posture. Dust to dust.

So I subconsciously recoil at the psalmist’s suggestion of bounding forward into God’s space with shouts of joy and loud thanksgivings. Such unreserved exuberance: “Open the gates! Here I come!” Such triumphant relief: “I made it! God brought me here!” Head up. Shoulders back. Smile wide. All together, an unfamiliar posture.

I really just want to tuck myself somewhere along the outside wall away from the celebratory chaos at the gate, lean my head back against the cool surface, let my weary feet rest in the soft grass, and whisper my thanks that these ashes still have breath. I’m not quite ready to sing or dance or fling my arms as wide and free as the gates, but I’ll be grateful to those in the Palm Sunday parade who do—whose loud praises echo the sighs of my glad heart.

**PRAYER** *Let the gates of joy remain open for a long while, O Gracious God, so that even the weary ones and the shy souls might have a chance to enter.*

## *But Emptied Himself*

**Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.**

*Philippians 2:5-8 (NRSV, abridged)*

**MARY LUTI** | This ancient hymn about Christ is an ode to downward mobility. The Word steps down from the throne, strips off divine privilege, assumes a body with its limitations and frailty, fully enters our human experience, and never once looks back, even when it means he'll not be dying in bed surrounded by family, or in a sad accident, or even as the victim of ordinary violence. His will be the humiliating and brutal death of people that other people have decided are trash.

And it's precisely this downwardness that makes Jesus the most fully human person ever—his capacity to be in the world vulnerably, with no agenda other than to be alongside us, to eat the bread of our tears and drink the wine of our joy, wash all our dirty feet on bended knee (so many feet!), and never ever cop out of all the consequences of bodily life.

What opens the way to healing is empathy. What makes reconciliation thinkable is humility. What makes life extraordinary is the willingness to remain ordinary in lowly companionship with all life's stubborn uncertainties.

If you aren't sure what Christianity is about, here's a clue: it's not a hero story. If you were expecting someone divine to save the world, well, yes. But it turns out that the divine savior is a man like anyone else, less than anyone else, living on his knees, a towel around his waist, a bowl at his side, and feet. Many, many feet.

**PRAYER** *May the same mind be in me that was in Christ Jesus. Amen.*

## *Evil Underestimated*

**I have heard the many rumors about me and I am surrounded by terror.  
My enemies conspire against me, plotting to take my life.**

*Psalm 31:13 (NLT)*

**KENNETH L. SAMUEL** | Constantly playing the victim is not well received in many circles. Feeling like you're always under attack, combined with conspiracy theories about how people are always out to get you, won't win you much sympathy or favor from most people I know.

But someone said, "Just because I'm paranoid doesn't mean that my enemies are not out to get me." The statement is insightful.

In our devotion to truth, if we devalue the vast network of shiny things aimed only at distortion, we imperil our own progress.

In our commitment to peace, if we ignore the lucrative systems that are fueled and financed by the dogged twins fear and violence, we will never understand what we are really up against.

In our fight for justice, if we downplay the reality of the principalities, the powers, the rulers of darkness in this world, and the spiritual wickedness in high places which are always aligned against us, we are unprepared for battle.

And in our desire to be Christian, if we don't think that the individuals and institutions that despised Jesus and his message enough to crucify him will not also come for us, we are diluting the gospel.

On the first Palm Sunday of what appeared to be his triumphant ride into Jerusalem, Jesus was likely the only one among his family and followers preparing himself for the lethal attack of his enemies by the end of the week.

Paranoia is excessive. Vigilance is vital.

**PRAYER** *My soul, be on thy guard; ten thousand foes arise. The hosts of sin are pressing hard, to draw thee from the skies. Never think the victory won, nor once at ease sit down. The arduous work will not be done till thou hast got the crown.* (from "My Soul Be On Thy Guard," George Heath)

## *Two Kinds of People*

**Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you.  
Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.**

*Psalm 84:4-5 (NIV)*

**VINCE AMLIN** | There are two kinds of people in the world: travelers and homebodies. Those who are always off in search of something new and those who invest in their own comfortable, hospitable dwelling. Innovators and nest-makers. You know who you are.

The same could be said of the Church. There are people—and whole congregations—whose gift is to create welcoming and cozy communities in which people can rest, and work, and pray. There are people—and whole congregations—whose gift is to venture out, beyond the confines of buildings and tradition, to explore new possibilities of faith.

Sometimes these two groups see themselves in opposition to one another. The homebodies scoff at the unorthodox ideas of the travelers. The innovators sneer at the nest-makers' investment in institutions. Both have been heard to say the others are not “real” Christians.

Psalm 84 settles the score. The ones who stay home to sing God's praises all day? They're blessed. The ones who call on God's strength to set out for points unknown? They're blessed too. And perhaps the two need one another.

Most travelers first heard God's call in community. And every house of the Lord was founded by someone who ventured out in faith.

There are two kinds of people in the world: those who are blessed and those who are also blessed. May the Church remember.

**PRAYER** *You who founded an institution on the rock of Peter and you who promised a transformation so radical that not one stone would be left on another, bless us.*



## Making Toast

**And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”**

*John 8:11 (NRSV)*

**JOHN EDGERTON** | “You are not your fault,” writes Anne Lamott. So then, whose fault are we? Frankly, is there any fault? The question of blame has all but taken over our conversations. If I get sick, what did I do to cause it? If there is a deficit, what did I do to make it happen? If I get pregnant at an inopportune time, there are those with a lot to say about what I did to cause my fertility to be fertile.

What would life be like if we lived beyond and without blame?

First of all, our days would be happier. We would lean forward rather than back into our loss and resentments. Secondly, we would blame fewer victims. In congregations, we would not blame the pastor for not “growing the church” and learn ways to be responsible to each other. We would know the attitude of lovingly mystified indifference, normally attributed only to the most mature Buddhist monks. Finally, we would live like Jesus, who knew only how to love and lead and seemed to have missed the course in blame and condemnation.

Roger Rosenblatt, in his 2010 memoir, *Making Toast*, says he enjoyed making toast for his grandchildren after the untimely death of their mother and his daughter. He calls the act of making toast “a simple gesture of moving on.” Often we put condemnation and exterminationist violence into the word “toast”: “I wish they were toast,” we say. Jesus says something different. “Neither do I blame you.”

Living without blame means we can also live without revenge ... and share a piece of bread together, every now and then, under the most difficult of circumstances.

**PRAYER** *O God, teach us to love making toast with each other. Let the blame game be exterminated and let the rest of us live.*

## Seeming Unseemly

**Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.**

*John 12:3 (NRSV)*

**JENNIFER RUTH LYNN GARRISON** | Scholars always seem to say something, well, scholarly about this passage, like, “In first-century Palestine, the act of wiping Jesus’ feet with her hair would have been an act of unseemly immodesty by Mary.”

Honestly, I’m hard pressed to think of a time or place where it would *not* be considered unseemly or immodest to pour a pound of perfume (which then, as now, is generally sold by the ounce) on a dinner guest and then massage that guest with one’s hair. Adding to the unseemliness of this scene is the use of nard, which would have cost a year’s wages and was imported from India—which even by today’s travel methods is not exactly a hop, skip and a jump from Palestine.

Mary’s act of devotion irritated at least one of her fellow disciples and likely unsettled the rest of her guests, who now had their nostrils filled with an overwhelming redolence of nard instead of the dinner in front of them.

Why did Mary do this, pour out her devotion in such a flagrant way? With the death of Jesus looming ever closer, I suspect she gave her all because she knew it was the last chance she would have. She knew the end was in sight, and so she did not hold back.

Sometimes people pose the question of what you would do if you knew you had no more time left. Maybe a more interesting question is what you would do if you knew Jesus had no more time left. Would you be willing to seem unseemly if you knew that today was your last day with the Teacher? Would you be willing then, at last, to pour out all your love and all your worship, every last drop?

**PRAYER** *Christ Jesus, we have so little time left to worship you. Let us make every remaining moment count.*

## A New Mandate

**Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”**

*John 13:34-35 (NRSV)*

**MATT LANEY** | Maundy Thursday: the day in Holy Week—this week, the week before Easter—with a name that is pretty much a complete mystery to the average English speaker. In my church it’s known as the day people won’t deal with Atlanta evening traffic to come to church (totally understandable), so we have an at-home comzoomion service.

Maundy comes from the word *mandatum*, which means “command, order” or closer still, “mandate.” Maundy Thursday got its name from an anthem sung in Catholic churches on this day: *Mandatum novum do vobis*, which are Jesus’ words, “I give you a new commandment that you love one another.”

There are days when I wish Jesus hadn’t said that.

Why not stick with the part about loving God, who, let’s face it, is much easier to love. How could Love not be loved? People on the other hand... In order to love them, I first have to know them, hear their stories, feel their joys and their pains, put up with their issues. I guess that’s why Jesus made it a commandment rather than a suggestion. Tall order, especially on the eve of Good Friday when we remember just how low humanity can go. It’s too easy to stay home and not bother.

Truly, Maundy Thursday is a mandate for change, a mandate to do the hard and holy work of showing up and loving people as Jesus did even when, especially when, humans were at their worst.

**PRAYER** *When I think, “Not today, Jesus,” or “Not them, Jesus,” remind me that I am also loved anyway.*

## *A Good Friday Credo*

**Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.**

*Isaiah 53:10a (NRSV)*

**TALITHA ARNOLD** | I don't believe it. I won't. I cannot believe it was God's will for Jesus to be crushed with pain, tortured, and strung up on a cross to die. I know atonement theology has been a part of Christianity from the beginning. I also know that no matter how hard I've tried, I've never been able to believe that God wanted Jesus to suffer and die.

I *do* believe, in the words of Isaiah, he “was despised and rejected” by the leaders and the mob they'd whipped into a frenzy. I believe he was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief,” as he was betrayed and abandoned by his closest friends.

And I certainly believe he was “wounded for our transgressions.” The sin of human greed, oppression, and selfishness crushed his life and despised his work as it has others who've welcomed the outsider and advocated for the poor. I also believe “all we like sheep, have gone astray and turned to our own way,” time after time.

But do I believe that the crucifixion that came from such sin was—or is—God's will? No. I cannot lay on God the responsibility for my actions or inactions—or those of others—that lead to suffering.

If I don't believe God willed Jesus' suffering, how can I still believe that Jesus was, and is, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? Because I believe that on the cross, Jesus showed us not only the cost of human sin. He also showed us the power of love, both human and divine, to overcome sin and even death itself. That I can believe.

**PRAYER** *Whatever we believe about this day, O Lord, thank you for being here. Amen.*

## *The Morning Watch*

**My soul waits for the Lord. More than the keepers of the morning watch.  
More than the keepers of the morning watch.**

*Psalm 130:6 (adapted)*

**KAJI DOUŠA** | Sometimes when I read the Psalms, I skip over the laments. Psalms like 130 begin with sadness that can feel like buzzkill on a good day. “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.” But what if we are not in the depths?

Psalm 130 acknowledges the rhythm of life that includes moments of joy and moments of difficulty. In either place, we will find that our “soul waits for the Lord.” There is always a part of us that needs God. On a sleepless night, in moments of loneliness, in the swirl of complicated emotions on a birthday, in any of these places, we need God close.

That closer walk is just what we have prayed for through (and beyond) Lent. Our discipline of prayer comes directly out of this waiting on God, this sense of anticipation that—as we divert our attention from our usual routines to a deeper time of prayer—God will be there.

Of course, we might be in the depths. And if we are not today, some day we will be. The prayerful practice of engagement with God, no matter the circumstance or feeling of the day, will always, always be worth exercising. It can be as simple as remembering to say “thank you” to God when something goes well.

Maybe our souls are in the holding pattern of endless night, waiting, waiting, waiting for the dawn of a new day, the arrival of a resurrection. Psalm 130 reminds us that life will always include night and day. But, as Psalm 139 reminds us too, night is not night to God, who is always awake with the response to our most fervent prayers.

**PRAYER** *When shadows spend the night, Holy God, please bring us the joy that morning promises.*

## *Bent*

**Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept,  
she bent over to look into the tomb...**

*John 20:11 (NRSV)*

**QUINN G. CALDWELL** | Can you imagine what Mary must have been thinking as she bent down to look in the tomb? Resurrection was not on her mind, for sure. You and I know what had happened, but to her, the only options were to look in and see Jesus' broken body, or to see that someone had stolen it away. She had already looked once; John and Peter had come and looked and gone away. Was she hoping they'd been wrong? That somehow they'd missed his body lying there? My God, which would be better? Dead and still there or dead and stolen?

And yet, she bent again. And she looked again. She would not refuse to know. She would not stand up and look away; she was going to look until it made sense. And in the bending, she saw: angels first, and then, soon enough, Salvation standing there right before her.

Look up at the cross, they tell you these days. Look to the skies and watch for stars and omens and the Son of Humanity coming on the clouds. OK. Do that. Tilt your head back and scan the heavens.

But don't forget to bend down low, too. To look into the dark holes of your riddled heart. To look into the lowliest, the dirtiest, the dankest places, the kind of places where they shut up goodness to die. Get right down on your knees and stare into the oubliette they dropped love into.

Because it was just when Mary was bent lowest, not knowing which terrible thing to long for, that Hope came to her in her crouch, and lifted her up high.

**PRAYER** *When I am bent and searching, come to me. Amen.*

## About the Writers

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