

The Art of the Possible

(And with God, nothing is impossible!)



Lenten Devotional



Written by First UMC Congregants
and compiled by the Spiritual Formation Council

“...since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...”

– Hebrews 12:1

Lent can be a deeply personal time for renewal and reflection. In the early church, it was the time when new converts prepared for baptism by prayer, study and fasting.

This collection of writings is offered to you for your own Lenten meditations. It is the work of our members, sharing their faith and their stories. There is one devotional for each day of Lent, starting on Ash Wednesday, March 6.

Our “theme” this year is “The Art of the Possible (And with God, nothing is impossible!)” We hope these writings open you to seeing the Possible in you life.

Please join us in these readings and all our Lenten opportunities for worship, service, prayer and observance. The full calendar of the season is available on our website, www.santamonicaumc.org/lent.

Information is also available by calling the church office at (310)393-8258.

May you find these days to be holy and blessed.

First United Methodist Church of Santa Monica
Spiritual Formation Council

ASH WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6

Acts 7:35-42

Depth of mercy! Can there be
Mercy still reserved for me?
Can my God his wrath forbear,
Me, the chief of sinners, spare!

I have long withstood his grace,
Long provoked him to his face,
Would not hearken to his calls,
Grieved him by a thousand falls.

I my Master have denied,
I afresh and crucified,
Oft profaned his hallowed name,
Put him to an open shame.

There for me the Savior stands,
Shows his wounds and spreads his hands.
God is love! I know, I feel;
Jesus weeps and loves me still.

Now incline me to repent,
Let me now my sins lament,
Now my foul revolt deplore,
Weep, believe, and sin no more.

Charles Wesley, 1740

UMH 355

THURSDAY, MARCH 7

Romans 12:9-13

Upon reading this Bible passage, I was mindful of all the other letters from Paul to his communities of faith that focus on love. It is the center of our faith and one that has many levels of meaning. In the modern lexicon one hears (I've said these things, too): I love chocolate, I love my new car, I love Mexican food, and on and on. But, as Christians, we are called to express our love in deeper more meaningful ways that present greater challenges.

Our church gives us many opportunities to do just that with service projects and Family Place just to mention a couple.

From my perspective those are the easier ways to show love. They seem to be “tidy” and well organized. Harder ways for me are things like being open to helping a homeless person begging on the street. It's a little frightening. I try to remember that they were a child once and loved by a family. Or, at least I hope that was the case. Where did life go wrong for them? And, aren't I fortunate not to have had that happen to me.

In our polarized country it is hard to “love”—or even carry on a civilized conversation with—those with whom we disagree. As our Lenten theme addresses: With God, nothing is impossible. But, we have to intentionally make it happen.

We are all children of God and deserve to be loved fully for what we are and can become...

Blessings and love,
Claudia Flanders

FRIDAY, MARCH 8

John 13: 1-7, 31b-35

When I received my “assignment” to comment on the foot washing of the disciples by Jesus I was delighted to be given something with which I am familiar. I’m a doc in a community clinic and 15 years ago I noticed a Physician Assistant in the exam room adjacent to mine soaking a patient’s feet. I asked her why and she said he was homeless and “foot sore.” She even clipped his long, misshapen nails.

I started offering a warm soapy foot bath to my most impaired, neglected patients and could visibly see the relief on their faces. Foot infections are common and serious in diabetics and anyone with poor circulation. It makes good medical sense to offer this “treatment” when needed. But anyone who has dipped their tired feet in warm water knows it soothes more than limbs.

As the tension leaves the weary faces of such patients, I am reminded of the example we have been given by our Lord who, though we may not be able to follow immediately, has surely demonstrated ways to live in this world. Rendering to and comforting the often overlooked reminds us that in God’s kingdom “the last shall be first,” and “as you do for the least, you do for me.”

Kendra Fleagle Gorlitsky

SATURDAY, MARCH 9

1 Corinthians 8:1-3

This scripture seems to be referring to people who think they have all the answers to everything and believe their answers are the correct ones. However, it goes on to say that those who think they know everything really know nothing. The Living Bible translates the second half of verse 1 as “But although being a know-it-all makes us feel important, what is really needed to build the church is love.”

In this day and age, love seems sadly lacking even in some churches and with some who claim to be Christians. We need to—as Jesus said—love God with all our mind, heart and soul, and love our neighbor as ourselves; remembering that our neighbor is EVERYONE. If we truly live as Jesus taught and put love back into our lives and our world, we could literally change the world! Again, the Living Bible translates verse 3 as “But the person who truly loves God is the one who is open to God’s knowledge.”

Prayer: Dear God, may we truly love You and be open to Your knowledge. May we spread Your love to EVERYONE! Amen.

Barbara Parker

SUNDAY, MARCH 10

Romans 10:8-13

It's an odd season, Lent: It is somber and yet celebratory. Lent just might be my favorite liturgical season. It invites us into life, death and resurrection with Christ. The Lenten journey invites us into a deep exploration of our hearts and asks us to take a long loving look at our lives and to sit presently with suffering. All of which can be desperately uncomfortable.

Lent invites us to ask hard questions and to put to death the things that keep us from living into the fullness of the resurrection. It hasn't been until the last few years that I have begun to fully realize that there is no resurrection without the death. Again, super uncomfortable but necessary. We must take a deeply honest inventory of our hearts and lives and ask ourselves:

“What needs to be buried in the tomb?”

Maybe it's the worshipping of our own religious idols, placing “things” over people, maybe it's an addiction, maybe it's holding on to the past or fear of the future, or maybe it's living in secret with whatever our struggle may be.

Hear this good news: we are indeed an Easter people. For it is written that “no one who believes in Christ will be put to shame.” This is the hope that is coming.

Beloved, you are called good, loved, and holy.

Kristia Oney

MONDAY, MARCH 11

Exodus 17:1-7

“What am I to do with these people?” (NIV) I often find myself asking the same question Moses asked of God. About my family; my coworkers; maybe your friends? Spouse? Children? We all know people who try our patience and challenge our calm, some more than others. Imagine what Moses was feeling! He led the Israelites out of Egypt and slavery, only to have them complain about everything little thing:

“Are we there yet?”

“I’m hungry.”

“I’m thirsty!”

It must have been very frustrating. Imagine how many complaints God hears a day...a minute...a second. And yet, God never rebukes us for expressing our feelings. When the Israelites complained to Moses about being thirsty, God didn’t say, “Tough;” He tells Moses to gather the elders, take his staff and go to the rock at Horeb. “Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.” What an amazing feat to witness! But with God, nothing is impossible.

During this season of Lent, I challenge you to remember that with God, nothing is impossible. We face so many trying people and situations in our everyday life. Rather than getting frustrated, consider how God heard the Israelites’ cry and granted them relief. He will do the same for you, if you only ask. Please join me in the following prayer:

Dear God,

Thank you for the challenges life brings us, as they help us grow into the people you intend for us to be. Help us to remember that with you, nothing is impossible, including the resurrection of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Whitney Hagan

TUESDAY, MARCH 12

Genesis 12:7-9

If thou but suffer God to guide thee,
and hope in God through all thy ways.
God will give strength, whate'er betide thee,
And bear thee through the evil days.
Who trusts in God's unchanging love
Builds on the rock that naught can move.

Only be still, and wait God's leisure
In cheerful hope, with heart content
Go take whate'er they Maker's pleasure
And all-discerning love hath sent;
We know our inmost wants are known,
For we are called to be God's own

Sing, pray, and keep God's ways unswerving,
So do thine own part faithfully,
And trust God's work; though undeserving,
Thou yet shalt find it true for thee.
God never yet forsook at need
The soul that trusted God indeed.

George Neumark

1657 Trans. C. Winkworth

UMH 142

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 13

Psalm 22:23-31

We are much more familiar with the first part of this psalm, *My God, My God, why have you forsaken me*, the last words Jesus cries out from the cross in Matthew and Mark.

But Jesus, being well-schooled in his Psalms, probably could recite the whole psalm. And so, *in extremis*, it comes to his mind.

But, beyond this first section, what does it say?

*he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him. (v24)*

Was this only to save himself from a painful death or was there more to it?

The poor shall eat and be satisfied. (v25)

*All the ends of the earth and all the families of the nations
shall worship him. (v27)*

*Future generations will be told...and proclaim his
deliverance... (v30-31)*

*Is this not closely allied to what he said as he began his
ministry? (Luke 4:16-19)*

Is this not still part of his ministry?

He is not alone; we are not alone.

Anonymous

THURSDAY, MARCH 14

Job 20

Inside ...

Summary: In twenty-nine verses we read about the misery and ruin that await the wicked. This is a second discourse by Zophar, one of Job's three friends. (We can read previous comments in chapter 11 from Zophar.)

“Inside of me there are two dogs. One is mean and evil and the other is good and they fight each other all the time. When asked which one wins I answer, the one I feed the most.”

- Sitting Bull, Lakota leader, 19th century

An Old Testament book and an 1800's Native American leader, sharing this page for today's Lenten Devotional, tell us about our behavior. For this writing, I ask how can we not feed the “mean and evil” dog and choose to feed the “good” dog the most? We can see, here in chapter 20, what fates await if we choose to feed the “mean and evil” dog. Possible ways we can choose to feed the “good” dog the most: acting with compassion; attending worship services, recognizing grace surrounds us; keeping “Love thy God;” showing “Love thy neighbor.”

Prayer: As we prepare for Easter's arrival, may we choose through our words and deeds to feed the “good” dog the most; to choose love.

Art Dodd, Jr.

FRIDAY, MARCH 15

Mark 6:4-6

Prophets! We all know them. The people who presume to tell us what's in our future. They don't all haunt the streets proclaiming "The world is coming to an end." Some of them offer more benign, even trivial, messages. The stock market analysts who proclaim from their infinite wisdom that the bull/bear market will last for another two/three/five years. The sports writers who assure us that the Rams are going to win/lose the Super Bowl, news anchors who tell us that Brexit will be the best/worst thing that can happen to Britain. Guesses...educated guesses, perhaps, but guesses nevertheless.

No wonder so many people are skeptical about the ramblings of today's self-proclaimed seers. There are so many of them trumpeting so many conflicting messages that we tend to tune them out. Prophets! Who needs 'em?

In early religious times, both in the Old and New Testaments, real prophets... were regarded as having been asked to speak to their neighbors and kinfolk on behalf of a divine being. They were God inspired. But their message promised listeners a future that would require new thinking and behavioral changes. It was too much for many people, even fathers, brothers and friends to accept and so the prophets were reviled.

At the same time self-styled prophets, not God inspired, also claimed to deliver God's message. They, too, were vilified, as were the genuine prophets. Severe punishment became the lot of many...both the true and the false.

And Jesus said, "Prophets are not without honor except in their hometown and among their own kin and in their own house."

Prayer: Heavenly Father give us the wisdom to differentiate between those who only claim to bring us God's word and those who truly do.

Anonymous

SATURDAY, MARCH 16

Joshua 4:1-13

This chapter of Joshua tells about a great miracle God performed: the seemingly impossible passage of the people of Israel through the Jordan, on dry ground, similar to how God had parted the Red Sea for Moses. Or rather, this scripture passage tells what happened after that miracle. God tells Joshua to have the people build two memorials made from stones taken from the Jordan river, to be to the people of Israel a memorial forever. (4:7)

But there is something else, something very important, that has to happen for this memorial to have meaning to others, beyond those who witnessed the miracle themselves. Someone has to explain what those stones were all about. Someone has to tell the story. God tells Joshua that “when your children ask in time to come, ‘What do these stones mean to you?’ Then you tell them the story of that miracle, and how God made the impossible possible.”

We, as people of faith, are the ones who can tell the story of the amazing things God has done, and what that means to us personally. We are walking memorials to God.

Prayer: Dear God, Help us to tell the stories of the wonderful things you have done for us so that others can know, and so that we never forget. Amen.

Ann and David Wilson

SUNDAY, MARCH 17

Luke 13:31-35

Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem and being warned the Pharisees are coming to kill him. He says that he must continue to heal and cure until the third day when he will complete his mission. He clearly knows that he must fulfill this in order to die on the cross and rise into heaven.

I wonder if the Pharisees were telling him this news to help him or impede his mission. I find myself thinking about this in a weird way. I associate this passage in a strange way to the parenting of children and caring about my loved ones. We try to be supportive, instruct and teach, but sometimes things just happen. Even though we know we must let them make their own journey, it still hurts. So, what are we to do?

We are given the opportunity to trust, love and pray along the way. We all have this mission we must complete and let's be real, it can be a good thing and it can also not work out the way we planned. Whatever the outcome the journey is the gift.

So, embrace this journey and everything about it and continue to trust, love and pray through the joy, even the pain and disappointments, and be ever amazed at the grace God shows us all every day.

Thanks be to God for giving us his son to teach us the way to live abundantly.

Amen.

Sandra Jones

MONDAY, MARCH 18

Psalm 27:13-14

If you read the whole of Psalm 27, you sense that the writer was well acquainted with “days of trouble” and various threats to his well-being. So, when he shares his belief that he will see the goodness of the Lord in his own life, it’s clear this is not just a pious toss-off sentiment. He’s been up against some rough times and knows his need for rescue. When he asserts his belief that God will be there for him, he’s making a statement of faith that God cares and God wills goodness for him.

I believe this is one of the most profound beliefs that our faith offers us. We all know bad things do happen to people no matter how good they may be. As much as we might wish for a tranquil trouble-free life, we know that’s not the kind of world we’ve been given. Suffering, pain, and loss are part of the package. The question then is, how does this shape our basic approach to life? Do we just give in to the negatives and live with a dark cloud over our head—or do we live with hope for something better?

Viktor Frankl, the well-known Holocaust writer, reminds us that no matter how dire our circumstances may be, we do have a choice in how we opt to look at life. And what our Christian faith offers us is the revelation of a God who loves us and cares for our well-being. We do have a basis for hope that God’s goodness is there for us too. The faith of the Psalmist is confirmed in Jesus’s own witness to a loving God and in his Easter victory over the powers of darkness. “The art of the possible” embraces living in that kind of faith. Therefore, “be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!”

Rev. Larry Young

TUESDAY, MARCH 19

Ephesians 1:11-23

After reading this passage several times, one line jumped out at me: “I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.”

Having a three-year old and an eight-month old, we have a system for bed time. Brush teeth, put on pjs, pick two books, read them, sing our bedtime song and then say our prayers.

For a bit our toddler was not wanting to say them with us, so I asked Tricia (*Director of Children & Youth Ministry*) what to do. She suggested I ask him to say one thing he is grateful for that day.

This has evolved into being my favorite part of the routine – after everything else, right before bed, we go around and each of us says one thing we are thankful for from that day. The answers are endearing and sometimes surprising. (Dominic’s current go to is Horses and Grandma Sheep) It always ends my day with a feeling of gratitude.

What are you thankful for today?

Sarah Rold

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20

Mark 9:33-37

A couple of weeks into the Lenten season, we join Jesus and the apostles on the road to Capernaum, a familiar lesson from the Gospels. Mirroring our preparations for this solemn season, Jesus foreshadows His own fate and prepares His disciples for continuing their ongoing mission after His ascension.

Instead of trying to gain greater understanding by listening and questioning Jesus about the impending events that will have major impact on their friend, their Lord, and the whole world surrounding them; the disciples turn to pride, ambition and ignorance to elevate themselves in the Lord's eyes. They distract themselves with a petty argument over who among them is the greatest and deserves to be Jesus' #1 disciple. Confronted by Jesus, pride and ambition turns to shame and embarrassment as He teaches them about humility and their need to be servants to the even the lowest people in society.

As we struggle to understand the sacrifice and the betrayal by His friends and followers, we too search for answers that do not come easily. Do we falsely believe that we know the answers, or do we open our eyes, ears, hearts and minds to seek Jesus' true message of humility and sacrifice? Are we willing to serve those who are at the bottom of society rather than chasing the glory of leadership? Are we willing to trade our spot in God's plan to the less fortunate and downtrodden who truly need God's grace? On top of that, will we lend our own hand to raise them out of their suffering? Do we truly believe that we should focus on humility and service to others to live out a faithful life?

Prayer:

Dear Lord, in this holiest of seasons, let us not forget the humility and sacrifice Jesus bestowed upon us through suffering on the cross, that we may live by His example by fulfilling His aspiration to live humbly and serve those less fortunate.

Ben Ing

THURSDAY, MARCH 21

Romans 4:1-5

Faith is patience in the night,
Waiting for the morning light,
Never giving up the fight.
 Spirit God give us faith.

Faith is laughter in our pain,
Joy in pleasures that remain,
Trust in one we can't explain.
 Spirit God give us faith.

Faith is steadfast will to live
Standing firm and positive,
Being ready still to give,
 Spirit God give us faith.

Faith is courage under stress,
Confidence in hopelessness,
Greatest gift we can possess.
 Spirit God give us faith.

Mary Nelson Keithahn
TFWS 2211

FRIDAY, MARCH 22

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Who among us has not tried to make a point, one we feel strongly about, only to have some members of the intended audience question you – not for the content of your speech, but for your style or attitude.

This seems to be exactly what Paul is dealing with in this passage.

Paul's answer, though, is not to attack, but to point out the authority he comes with, and to reinforce the difference between "worldly" arguments and the divine power he represents. Instead of dropping to the level of his detractors, he reclaims God's authority over earthly quarrels.

But the key to the passage is the very last line "...the sphere of service God himself has assigned to us, a sphere that also includes you."

All of the arguments, questioning, doubting, even criticizing, does not matter to God. All that matters to God is that you are one of his children, included in that "sphere of service," and included in His love.

This is not easy for us in our daily lives. When people criticize us, do we not criticize them back? In this day and age, the usual response is to immediately exclude detractors from "us," moving them out of that sphere and into the "them" box.

We know this is wrong, but we do it anyway. In this time of Lent, our period of deepest personal reflection, let us always remember this: no matter who you are looking at, talking to, writing to... we are all part of God's sphere of love.

Matt Crawford

SATURDAY, MARCH 23

Mark 4:39-41

As a relatively anxious person, this scripture reminded me of the times my anxiety and fear creep up on me. I can be in the middle of class minding my own business, at church, or even just lying in my bed. I never know when the negative voice will pop into my mind. Then it appears, ruining everything and telling me things that aren't true.

Over the years and as I've matured, I have found ways to quiet or shut that voice down when it becomes overwhelming. The thing that has helped me the most is calling upon another voice that triumphs over the negative one. That voice helps me stay calm, not be afraid of negative thoughts, and reminds me that I am good enough. The voice that calms me is one that comes from deep within; it calms my mind in the midst of all the negative thoughts trying to break me down. This voice of peace within me is like the voice that the disciples heard when they, too, called out in fear, *"Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him."*

The way Jesus' words comforted the disciples in their time of fear remain the same words of peace to us today. In a moment when anxiety overwhelms, may we remember God's presence within each one of us. This is where the words of Jesus find us and speak to our fear.

God's presence is always with us. I invite you to remember this whenever the winds and waves in your life are overwhelming - when you're feeling sad, anxious or lonely - remember that with God, nothing is impossible. In our Lenten journey, may we give thanks for the voice of peace within us and the faith in that peace that brings us closer to God and to one another.

With love,
Mia Staraci

SUNDAY, MARCH 24

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Chapter Ten of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Corinthians opens with a warning against over-confidence in their spiritual status. Baptism and partaking the Lord's supper do not guarantee salvation. He goes on to give us examples from the antics of the ancestors (remember the golden calf and the all-night party which followed?). In verse 13, Paul tells us that "God is faithful, and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."

If we venture one more verse (v.14), Paul says, "Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols." It seems that in listing the examples above, Paul is moved to warn against participation in pagan worship or idolatry. An idol is anything that, in the words of Henri Nouwen, "prevents us from growing into spiritual maturity, and there is hardly a moment in our lives in which we are not invited to detach ourselves from certain ways of thinking, ways of speaking, ways of acting, that for a long time gave us energy, but need to be renewed and recreated.

"Lent offers a beautiful opportunity to discover the mystery of Christ within us. It is a time of solitude and a time of community. It is also a time of listening to the voice within and paying attention to other people's needs."*

One can make an idol of anything. Can you think of idols in our culture? Perhaps, even you have an idol or two. I know I do. Have you had an experience where God gave you the strength to cope with an idol that confronted you? This Lent are you willing to give God a chance to help?

Jean Young

* From *Called To Life, Called to Love*, Lenten reflections by Henri J.M. Nouwen, written just weeks before his death in September, 1996.

MONDAY, MARCH 25

John 1:1-5

In The Beginning

GOD/WORD

creates/gives birth to

LIFE

which turns to GOD/WORD

in praise

and becomes

the LIGHT of LOVE.

The darkness wars with the LIGHT.

But

GOD/WORD, LIFE, LIGHT

intertwine like a DNA molecule

and darkness can never overcome

LIGHT.

TUESDAY, MARCH 26

Psalm 102:25-28

In this Psalm, the writer gives us verse that assures us that God is our foundation. It also describes, using clothing, that things will change and wear out. This, a metaphor for all things that exist on this earth. However, God is everlasting. Although things change around us, God will not change.

In these modern times, the world changes at amazing speed. Technology changes. Local, state, national and world politics change. Those that are dear to us change. We feel as though we are on a roller coaster, blindfolded, for the first time. There are twists, turns, and loops that we cannot anticipate.

In these times, the safety bar that holds us down to keep us from being thrown from this wild ride is the fact that an ever-loving God is our rock and our foundation.

With this knowledge, we can play it safe, hunker down, and let the world pass us by. Or, we can venture out and explore the possibilities that this ever-changing world offers. We can involve and submerge ourselves in the limitless opportunities for service. We can learn new technologies that are dated the second they are offered to the public and then have to learn the new way. We can become informed citizens of the world by staying knowledgeable of events that happen worldwide. There are end-less possibilities.

As we venture into these limitless opportunities, we are held to our base by a lifeline that is anchored to a loving God. As we explore, we, ourselves, will indeed change. But we do so with the knowledge that, as the Psalm tells us, God's "years will never end."

Ron Theile

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 27

John 8:31-32

I'm reminded of the story of Pinocchio. He was a wooden puppet brought to life by a fairy. He wanted to be a real boy and to do this he had to prove that he was "brave, truthful, and unselfish." He got in with a group of bad boys and started telling lies. Every time he lied, his nose grew longer. Kind of funny, but also sad. Our noses don't get longer when we tell a lie, but our hearts do feel heavy when we aren't truthful.

Unlike Pinocchio's story of truth and lies, our scripture asks us to reach out with our hearts and minds to a deeper understanding of truth. This truth is about our experience of God as revealed in Jesus' own self. Knowing this "truth" is knowing God: God made present in Jesus, who is "the way, and the truth, and the life."

Today's scripture is a promise of and hope for relationship and connection. Jesus says that remaining connected to him is the true measure of discipleship. As disciples who follow in the way of Jesus, the way of self-giving love, we are to remain connected - to God and to one another.

While it sounds beautiful and good, the actual work of staying connected is not really all that easy. It is easy to be bombarded by the disconnections of daily life - disconnections to those who annoy us, those with whom we disagree, those who cut us off on the road. If we're honest, to remain connected is hard work. It requires love that forgives and asks for forgiveness. It requires letting go of my personal wants and considering others basic needs. Yet Jesus tells us this is the way to freedom.

We cannot make this journey on our own. We need the presence of Christ's light guiding us along the way, making the impossible journey one that reveals itself through love. When we come together despite our hate, our misgivings and our differences, God's love transforms the impossible. During this time of Lent, may we welcome God's love into our hearts and make room for love to lead our way.

Tricia Guerrero

THURSDAY, MARCH 28

Luke 6:43-45

To me, this means, you are what you are. If you have a good heart, you will do good things. If you have an evil heart you will do evil things. It doesn't matter what you say, it's what's in your heart that matters.

This scripture relates to me since I've always worked at non-profit organizations. I feel it's better to do good and make a difference in the world than to make a lot of money.

Karen Hopkins

FRIDAY, MARCH 29

1 Chronicles 21:1-17

A Psalm of Repentance for King David

Before you, my Lord, I lay bare my sin.
You have given good fortune and might
to your chosen people and me, as their king.
We have thrived, multiplied and prospered full well
in this blessed home you have granted to us.

Yet I grew proud, and thought to protect your
people by finding strength in their numbers.
I ordered a census throughout this land,
to know how many strong is my kingdom. And so
I forgot you alone are our strength and our help.

I thank you, Lord, for showing me how wrong
were my thoughts, and I beg your forgiveness.
For my sins of pride and not trusting you,
and for the grievous punishment I've brought onto
your realm, I sorrowfully repent on my knees.

But you have shown grace and love for your people
by letting me choose you to punish my sin
by Your own hand, and not merciless man's.
All praise to you for loving your people, and
tempering punishment with divine mercy.

Prayer:

Please help me, Lord, to listen and hear your quiet voice within me, and to have faith and trust to follow where it leads.

Laura Farrand

SATURDAY, MARCH 30

John 3:31-36

Chapter 3 and much of John's Gospel provide parables and other passages where Jesus describes his purpose and role on earth as the Son of God. The beginning verses of Chapter 3 present Jesus' discussion with the Pharisee, Nicodemus, who, as a learned man, was trying to understand Jesus' teachings. (Nicodemus again appears at the end of Jesus' life, so his quest to believe was not a trivial thing.) Subsequently, the chapter revisits John the Baptist, who also attests to Jesus' purpose.

Verses 31-36 continue these lessons using words that weave back and forth to help people understand. This may be the technique that depends on several different ways to express a thought, as different people understand in different ways. I found it fairly consistent with previous expressions. Until it came Verse 36. Up to that point, it seemed very similar to the familiar John 3:16. But this section ends rather harshly, by saying "the wrath of God" will be on those who do not obey God.

My grandfather and father were Methodist preachers and I can see and hear them using that last phrase from the pulpit, especially at revival meetings. Today, I do not like to invoke or judge "the wrath of God" on anyone. I believe there is evil in the world, and evil people, but any judging I'll leave to the law and ultimately, God. More to the point, I prefer the forgiving and merciful God who works with us to overcome our sins and shortcomings. This is more in the spirit of "The Art of the Possible."

*Dear Lord, help us to understand the Possible through the love of God.
Amen.*

Bee Campbell

SUNDAY, MARCH 31

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

In this season of Lent, I am so thankful to be blessed me with the multitude of precious gifts that God has provided in my life. This includes unconditional love, life, light and dedication to family and friends. This foundation has helped me to grow and continue to help others by “paying it forward” in our community.

I find that in the book of Luke a similarity in these blessings through this parable between the farmer and his youngest son. He is a parent with great compassion and unconditional love for his son.

His joy is that God brings his lost son back to the fold. Thus, the precious bond of love, light and family is once again sealed with his return through the Holy Spirit.

Karen S. Lewis

MONDAY, APRIL 1

2 Corinthians 5:6-15

In these oft-quoted letters to his fellow Followers of the Way in Corinth, Paul is working out his ideas concerning what it means to believe in Christ as a Jew and/or as a gentile.

In this passage he seems to be sketching out a long walk home, which includes meta-level reflections on walking by faith instead of by sight while musing on just what and where our home is. In Paul's at times rather idiosyncratic constructions this new pattern of belief in Christ brings everything into reimagining.

What I take from this passage is the promise and power of a radical inclusiveness...that, through Christ, and for all our differences, we are all in this together. I think that this is what is meant by the strange-to-my-ears language regarding boasting. That together with Christ we will find a way through; and that together with Christ we will also find a way home.

It may seem to be a long strange trip, but Paul reminds us that we are far from alone. Amidst the often paradoxical turns of life, in which it can seem as if "*The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree / Are of equal duration*" our interconnectedness in faith may be our true strength for the journey.

David Bremer

Quotation is from T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

TUESDAY, APRIL 2

John 10:11

When I first read this scripture, I immediately thought of the wonderful young Marines I led into battle. They were very good men of which most had strong Christian foundations. They were answering their country's call, spending 13 months in a constant state of combat, unless seriously wounded and evacuated. They were ordinary individuals, serving their country and offering up their lives for their brethren, while performing their duties with bravery and compassion.

One Marine, the oldest in the Platoon, age 26, was drafted, the only one. He was taking too long to graduate and his college deferment expired, due to his need to work. He was assured he would work in a clerical position, that didn't happen. He was assigned to the Infantry as a rifleman and arrived in time to fight in a ferocious battle, witnessing many of his new associates being killed or wounded beside him. His name was Leonard and he was recognized by his fellow Marines as having a solid moral compass and being a devout Christian, while experiencing many incidents of horrific combat.

This continued throughout his 13 months, to include his last month where he fought in one battle that started out with 35 Marines and ending 7 hours later with only 12 able to fight without serious wounds. Leonard was one of the 12. I personally observed him being a "Good Shepherd" while providing an example to his fellow Marines, in combat.

Leonard returned home, married and once again was the "Good Shepherd" by sacrificing to care for his wife, later in their marriage, until she died from a terminal illness. Last year, Leonard suffered a debilitating injury as a result of his exposure to Agent Orange. This church provided him a quilt through the Prayer Quilt Ministry. When I presented it to him on November 2, he cried. On November 10, Leonard died. I will remember Leonard; he was a "Good Shepherd."

Thank You,
Larry Wilson

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 3

Hebrews 3:5-6

Where does “Authority” come from?

In Political Science circles that topic has been discussed for many years ... and no one has come up with a definitive answer. In America it comes from “we the people;” other societies see things differently.

In The United Methodist Church the question is applied to Bishops. Does their authority come from God or from the Jurisdiction that elects and consecrates them? Again, no definitive answer. (Lest you think this is a minor matter, the first scheme implies that Bishops are accountable only to God; the second implies that they are accountable to us.)

This is the topic considered in today’s passage from Hebrews. The authority of Christ is compared to the authority of Moses. The author uses the metaphor of a house comprised of the followers of God. Moses’s authority is that of a prophet, one who speaks the words that God, the owner of the house (the metaphor actually specifies the builder of the house, but I have updated the metaphor for contemporary society), tells him to speak, come what may. (The life of a prophet was not always painless.) He was a faithful servant of God.

But Christ’s authority is that of the son of the owner of the house. His relationship to God is that of an heir, not a servant.

The author closes the passage by qualifying the metaphor: “...we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope.” In short, Christ has authority over those who grant it to him.

But the same can be said about Moses.

And that’s about as good an answer to the question as we’re likely to get.

Anonymous

THURSDAY, APRIL 4

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Our reading for this day finds us between the Fourth and Fifth Sundays of Lent. The Fourth Sunday is traditionally called “Laetere Sunday,” a day to rejoice and to find the strength to persevere on the Lenten journey towards the cross. At First UMC, our worship on the Fifth Sunday brings the annual service of Lessons and Anthems, rehearsing the whole story of this season in Scripture and music.

So here we are, carrying all the weight of this season—fear, anticipation, fatigue, resignation, tempered hope, longing, sorrow. Yet hope beckons. We vacillate between what seems inevitable and what God has promised.

How do we juggle the apparent limitations of “The Art of the Possible,” while stubbornly asserting that “with God, nothing is impossible?”

Hope can be discovered, and re-discovered again and again, in the ancient story itself. The lively and intriguing rendition of the anointing of King David seems to reveal that while God looks on the heart to determine the mettle of a king, outward appearance played a role as well. So young David is chosen and anointed, and, as they say, the rest is history.

But not the end of the story. That history takes a sharp turn in the story of our Messiah and Savior Jesus. Luke’s Gospel quotes the prophet Isaiah to remind us what that anointing is for. Jesus reads: “the spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me...to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

There’s the light shining into the world, the source of our hope, the promise of a world made new. Rejoice! Walk this walk with courage. For an empty tomb lies ahead. With God, nothing is impossible!

Rev. Patricia Farris

FRIDAY, APRIL 5

John 9:35-41

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth.” Matthew 23:27 NRSV

The Pharisees missed the point. They indicted Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, but the metaphor of the healing escaped them. One could say that they were blind to it.

Jesus restored the sight of a man blind from birth – a beggar whom the Pharisees shunned because blindness marked him as a sinner. They shunned Jesus too – not just because he healed on the Sabbath but because he dared to speak for God and to call out the Pharisees’ hypocrisy. When the beggar proclaimed “If this man were not from God, he could do nothing,” the Pharisees drove him out, for they would not listen to a sinner.

The Pharisees were self-righteous in their view of Jewish tradition and Mosaic law. They saw themselves as enlightened religious luminaries, but Jesus openly criticized their hollow piety. Jesus said “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” The Pharisees smugly exclaimed, “Surely, we are not blind are we,” meaning “surely we are not sinners.”

But the story takes an ironic turn, a reversal of spiritual fortune. The blind beggar professed his faith and came into the light. The Pharisees denied their sin and the light dimmed. Jesus is the light. He did not take his light away from the Pharisees; the Pharisees made themselves blind to the light.

The blind beggar’s faith opened his eyes. The optic nerves transmitted visual images to his brain. His belief in a healing Messiah illuminated his soul.

Linda Diane Anderson

SATURDAY, APRIL 6

Matthew 23:37-39

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones
those that are sent to it!*

These words of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew were directed at the scribes and Pharisees of the day. Time and time again these important (some would say self-important) Jewish leaders resisted the teachings of the prophets. Their ancestors had ridiculed and flogged earlier prophets of the good news. They demanded the best places at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues...a sign, their egos told them, of respect.

And if this new generation of Jewish leaders claimed to be different, in many ways they were not. They chose to stress to their flocks, as did their forebears, the beauty and value of the gold and precious spices tithed and laid atop the altar rather than the spiritual message embodied in the altar itself.

*How often have I desired to gather your children
together as a hen gathers her brood under her
wings and you were not willing.*

Jesus, clearly, was not a big fan of the current crop of Jerusalem's scribes and Pharisees, as this chapter vividly illustrates. No fewer than six times does he brand them as hypocrites.

"You snakes, you brood of vipers," he says. And "You blind guides." And "How can you escape being sentenced to hell?"

*See, your house is left to you, desolate. For I tell you,
you will not see me again until you say,
"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."*

Prayer: Father, help us to practice humility...never to consider ourselves more important than we really are...never to mistake the beauty of the gift for the beauty of the altar...and never to demand the best seats at the banquet.

Jerry Brown

SUNDAY, APRIL 7

Psalm 31:14, 16

Psalm 31 is a lament that seeks help in a secret place of God's presence for a faithful person with deep and personal trust in God during the depths of his difficulty. This song, dedicated to the Choirmaster, was intended for public singing. All kinds of people can find themselves in this prayer.

David expresses trust in the Lord (v.14) in his present distress. However great David's troubles were, his trust in God was even greater. He understood that Yahweh was his God and therefore greater than all his trouble as he calls out "You are my God."

This trust is built on the promises of the covenant (v.16) as David borrows from the priestly blessing described in Numbers 6:25 "Make your face to shine upon your servant." David's faith rests on the hope that the mercy of God will not allow him to have more persecution than he can bear.

When we, like David, place our lives and times in God's hands, we discover a God who comes to deliver, to shine the light of well being, and or to save. So much is expected of David and he knows where to turn when the demands come. The Bible says in Proverbs 3:5-7 that we are to trust in the Lord for "He will direct and make straight and plain your paths." We need direction when we face a time of crisis in life. Faith is a journey without maps. Trusting God to guide us and strengthen us in all circumstances is the way to find that direction.

Salvation means surrendering ourselves to God and entrusting ourselves into his keeping. God has a plan for us and His plan is much better than ours. If we trust God for the answers, we can enter rest. Let us walk with God convinced that He will do what He has promised to do. Let us live in that conviction, in that trust, in that faith that with God, nothing is impossible. How great is our God who refuses to leave us!

Rose Marie Kujawa

MONDAY, APRIL 8

Psalm 131

And such is Wisdom!

Wisdom is to know you are not to take credit for what you have accomplished. Your accomplishments are by the Grace of God and the kindness and support of others. You stand on the shoulders of those who have come before, those who have raised you, those who have prayed for progress, success, peace, healing and social justice. Many sacrificed and suffered before you. Many tilled the soil and planted the seeds before you arrived with the watering can

You are where you are due to so many factors, some of which you may have tried to control or contribute to. No one walks alone. We are the keepers of our Sisters and Brothers, our neighbors and strangers, and our friends and enemies. We are responsible for each other and so many results and occurrences.

Yes, be Grateful. Yes, lift your eyes to God
Yes, say “Thank you” and be Humble.

Remain Calm. Remain Mindful and Discerning.

What is yours is not yours. Yours belongs to the Past, Present and Future. What you think is yours is only yours because of God and all the surrounding circumstances and history. Whatever you have gained in Wisdom and Possessions you must pass on.

Dear God, you have made all Good things Possible.

Guide me to remain focused and humble, Grateful and Graceful. Open my heart and mind to do good works, be kind and generous. All I have is for the greater good. All I have is for me pass forward, to use wisely and to promote love forgiveness and understanding. I pray all this in Jesus' name.

To God be the Glory!

Amen.

Cindy McQuade

TUESDAY, APRIL 9

Romans 2:1-11

“To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.”

That verse reminds me of my father, the most devout Catholic I've ever known. So devout that we lovingly nicknamed him “Pope Tom.” The funny thing is that if you didn't know him personally, you would never know he was a religious man. He rarely talked about his faith - he lived it. He lived it every day through his actions, words and kind deeds.

I often wondered where his devoutness came from. When I was in Catholic school I questioned my religion. I would often ask my father how could he be so sure that God existed. He always explained it in a simple way. He said that it's impossible to prove that God exists. That's where faith comes in. By choosing to believe in God, my father said he was an infinitely better person because of it.

He said that by putting God first and believing in the possibility of eternal life, his life was filled with love, hope and the realization that anything is possible. He rationalized that if it turns out that there was no God and no eternal life, then nothing had been lost. Living his life in what he believed to be God's grace was its own reward - a true gift.

My father died 16 years ago and I still think about those conversations.

Two days before he passed, as I was saying goodbye to him, he gently comforted me in my sadness and quietly reassured me that he wasn't afraid. He told me he was looking forward to seeing Jesus. How wonderful it must have been for him to have a faith so strong that it filled him with peace, love and the hope of eternal life as he faced his final moments.

I pray that I will be blessed with that same inner peace and strength

Anne Premer

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 10

Isaiah 58:1-12

The people in this passage were missing the point. They thought if they dutifully fasted and humbled themselves for a short time they were showing their faith and God would do great things for them. My self-study Bible calls fasting “a time of self-denial and repentance for sin.” Yet, the Jewish people were missing that second part and went on sinning in multiple ways of commission and omission.

Are we guilty of doing this in our own lives? I think of the parent/child relationship. What if a child is promised some good thing like ice cream if he cleans his room but then he fights with a sibling and then still expects the ice cream because his room is clean? And do we do something similar as grownups maybe with our loved ones or employers? Do we do this with God by thinking showing up to services on Sundays is so pious but then not sharing our blessings with those in need?

I love the tradition in today's Jewish faith where, when fasting through Yom Kippur, Jews bring the food they might have eaten during that time period to the Synagogue to be donated to those less fortunate. This is an example of mindful fasting that changes the community for the better.

God gives concrete examples of what he expects from us in our fasting: loose the chains of injustice, share food with the hungry, provide shelter to the wanderer, clothe the naked, and don't turn away from our own flesh and blood. If the people do this God promises great things; especially his guidance always. For with God nothing is impossible.

Holly Pitrago

THURSDAY, APRIL 11

Psalm 51:1-9

This psalm is traditionally attributed to David, who, according to that tradition, composed it following a reminder (from the prophet Nathan) that God was not pleased with David's dealings with Bathsheba (not just his lust for her, but the way he pursued it). David's authorship is debatable, but it certainly sounds like something he could have written – if we assume that his character was anything at all like it is presented in the Book of Kings.

We can all relate to the psalmist's experience. Granted, our sins may not include arranging for a friend's death in order to steal his spouse, but they are nonetheless sins. We take God's name in vain, we spread malicious gossip, we are stingy towards the homeless, and on and on. We know we're supposed to do better than we do, to be better than we are. But we're human beings, born with the tension between personal survival and group survival within us. The former leads us to self-centeredness and greed; the latter leads us to humility and compassion. We have all followed both paths at one time or another.

When (not if) we choose ourselves over our neighbors, it is our faith that God can and will forgive us that keeps us from giving in to despair, that allows us to pick up the pieces of our self-shattered lives and keep going, that gives us the courage to try to improve. We can't pretend to understand how this all works, or exactly what it means, but we can experience it in our own lives and in the lives of those around us.

And that is a cause for rejoicing.

Dick Crawford

FRIDAY, APRIL 12

John 12:12-16

When I was in high school, I was cast in the chorus of a local production of “Jesus Christ Superstar.” It was a bittersweet showbiz experience for me because, even though performing on the Orpheum stage in downtown Omaha felt like the big time, my girlfriend, also in the chorus, dumped me for one of the apostles. I was inconsolable. But what could I do? He was a college senior whose Levantine-style beard was real while mine had to be glued on before each show.

I can’t help associating the musical with this passage from John. This is Jesus’s big entrance into Jerusalem, which is also dramatized in the play. The crowd is crying out for him, carpeting the streets with palm fronds, shouting “Hosanna,” a word with a complicated etymology, but in this context is a joyful cry meant specifically for a savior. Especially powerful is the image of Jesus, not in some golden chariot but seated on a donkey’s colt. He is humble, gentle, “lowly.”

Yet despite the donkey and Jesus’ unimpressive retinue of worried disciples, the crowd exalts him and calls him “King.” What could be more threatening to the Pharisees? Here is a man who, without money or weapons or any earthly power to speak of, has inspired the devotion of all these people. He is dangerous; it is no surprise that Jesus predicts his own death a few verses later.

The stage version of this procession in “Jesus Christ Superstar” carries the same sense of foreboding. The people sing “Hosanna” while Caiaphas, the high priest, glowers menacingly and threatens everyone with his very deep, sinister voice. But Jesus reminds the crowd that there is always hope. “There is not one of you who cannot win the kingdom,” he sings. (Rock loves a first tenor.)

With God, nothing is impossible. Not even the mending of a broken teenaged heart.

Sam Johnson

SATURDAY, APRIL 13

Mark 7:32-37

So full disclosure - I wrote a devotional entry before this version, and it was totally fine! I think I nailed explaining the symbolism in the passage, and I was happy I understood what was going on well enough to sound like I knew what was going on, and whew, I wrote a decent entry. Okay, got that done!

But one phrase in the passage kept coming back to me - "Be opened." I felt like there was something else I needed to say about this. In my first version I said: *"...it seems like there are no two better words to encapsulate how to live than "Be opened" - Be opened to God, be opened to Love. Be opened to creating artful solutions to problems that seem unsolvable in a polarized world."* This is all true. But these two words were talking to me, in the present. Be opened. Do it now.

It's so easy to say, "We just need to be open," "We just need to forgive," or "I'll tell you what you have to do, you just have to understand..." as if these things are easy to do. They are the hardest challenges we face in life, our biggest lessons, and these things are what God is asking of us. So we are put into situations that test how well we are open or forgiving or understanding, in our relationships with other people - with the family we're born into, with friendships, and in relationships. I can Shine Light (to borrow from the Advent theme) on 98% of my friends and family, and pat myself on the back for being a good person. But if I turn my back on even one person who I don't want to understand or forgive or be open to or shine light on, then I'm not really doing the job that God is presenting to me.

So for me, The Art of the Possible is...understanding that it really is possible to be open and forgive and understand and on and on, if we try. There is no right or wrong way to make that effort, and that's what makes it art.

Tina Gage

PALM SUNDAY, APRIL 14

Mark 11:9-10

Our Sunday school version of Palm Sunday is Jesus victorious, riding into Jerusalem to the adoration of throngs of people. We wave our palm fronds in emulation of that day, cheering for Jesus, acknowledging him as the Messiah.

But it wasn't like the hometown sports team returning from a win or like a victorious general. An official hero would have worn a laurel wreath and ridden in on a horse with rich trappings. Not Jesus. He rode in on a donkey, but not a full-grown donkey. His was still a colt. He must not have looked so regal perched on its back on top of some clothes placed there by his followers.

Jesus knew the consequences of being hailed by the people. It was a tip-off to the authorities that his movement was getting stronger, that they should end it now. The authorities felt he was a threat to the Roman Empire once they saw his popularity. So it took courage for Jesus to ride through the streets hearing the admiring shouts that would lead to his arrest, trial and execution in just a few days. And where was that crowd of supporters by the week's end?

Popularity is fleeting. Jesus' integrity wasn't compromised by the shouted hosannas and by the tree leaves and clothing strewn in his path. Like Jesus, it is our task to do what is right, whatever the consequences, not to be sidelined by a quest to be popular for its own sake.

Jean Stapleton

MONDAY, APRIL 15

Galatians 5:1

I feel Freedom from Burden. I have taken the Yoke off. I feel Jesus in my heart and God at my back.

I am in awe right now at the incredible Freedom God has given me to help my 92-year old mother while she is ill and possibly at the end of her life. It is hard to leave her, impossible to stop thinking about her. She needs an advocate for everything in hospitals and rehab facilities. God has so Blessed me with the flexibility of self-employment, to be by her side daily. I am free to drive, to make calls, to be by her side for her many needs. I am so incredibly grateful. God has never let me down, not ever! I can walk firmly in my faith, not questioning this need to be with her, as she weathers these elderly storms. With God, all things are Possible. She is strong and has risen many times. Who knows? But for now, her freedoms have dwindled. She has lost her ability to “move about the cabin.” Her spirit longs and she exclaims, “Let’s go!” She forgets that her body is not cooperating until I agree again to help her to her feet and she finds anew out how weak she is. She sleeps and dreams.

Let us never forget how truly Free we all are to live our lives to the fullest, especially here in California, and in the United States. Many of us can drive, travel, speak out, “move about the cabins” of our lives, in our homes and in our churches, at work and in schools, on our streets and highways, by air and by sea. And, yes, we can be free even in our hearts and minds! It is truly a celebration how very free we are, at very least to choose faith.

Paul told the Galatians they are free because of Christ’s death on the cross, to choose faith and retire the rituals of Mosaic law. He said that our lives are lived in the joyful freedom of knowing that in Christ, God has fulfilled his promises. He said that in this freedom from imprisonment, the law has led to a new community in which the divisions between race and class and gender are removed (3:28) Truly, this announcement of freedom, important then, echoes gloriously now! Amen.

JoAnne Bailey

TUESDAY, APRIL 16

2 Chronicles 20:1-22

Last year, 2018, saw observances and commentary on the fiftieth anniversary of 1968. 1968 spanned my junior and senior years in high school. It was a year worthy of comment, although much of what happened, at least in the public realm, was beyond distressing: the King and Robert Kennedy assassinations; rioting in streets and on campuses; a war that seemed without end; an election clouded by division and tear gas. And, oh, the lies.

Is it always this way? Our Scripture today is the story of the successor king to the wise Solomon, his son Rehoboam assuming the throne after Solomon's death. Our view of Solomon is of his wisdom, yet he had astonishing wealth (gold in such abundance that his army beat out 300 shields of it), and he placed a heavy yoke of repression on the people of Israel.

When those people came to Rehoboam to ask for relief from the burdens of his father, his reply was, essentially, "You ain't seen nothin' yet!" promising that his rule would be so much worse. This caused rebellion of ten of the twelve tribes of Israel against the house of David (and Solomon and Rehoboam), deep, violent conflict that lasted four centuries.

Is it always this way? In our own day, we don't even need weapons in our hands to inflict pain, to repress others. We have our tongues, our own stores of hurt and repression. Lent, especially, is a time for reflection. I must look to my own heart. What have I done to hurt you? How can we reconcile? Jesus tells me how I can do this. I, though, am the one who must live it.

Michael Olsson

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 17

Revelation 3:1-6

John's letter was written to the seven churches in Asia Minor at a time when Christians believed the Second Coming of Christ was imminent. It was also a time of persecution, and John's use of symbolic language, common at that time, as well as his Old Testament references, gave a message to the early Christians about humanity rebelling against God, and God's plan to overcome evil.

The seven spirits or angels refer to messengers (the Greek word "angelos" meant "messenger") which some scholars refer to as heavenly beings/guardian angels, and others believe it meant human messengers (either those who bore John's letters to the churches, or the pastors or bishops of the seven churches). John gives a harsh admonishment to the churches, "You have the name of being alive, but are dead." But he follows with the advice to AWAKE, and to STRENGTHEN what remains. Sometimes we get in daily routines and don't take time to go deeper into what we are meant to say and do to follow the will of God in our lives.

Sometimes we take all we have for granted and do not factor in God's blessings and grace.

Sometimes we have good intentions, but don't follow through.

Sometimes we take the easy way out.

Sometimes we forget humility, patience, or gentleness.

Sometimes we look away from injustice.

Sometimes (You fill in the words!)

Each of us is a child of God and can be awakened by the Holy Spirit to a new direction.

God gives us many opportunities to repent, and the possibility and power to change our thoughts, our actions, and our words to align them with his Spirit of loving others.

Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, come! Awaken us to your grace and power to do God's will here on earth.

Joyce Collins Landsverk

MAUNDY THURSDAY, APRIL 18

Mark 10:23-27

Until confronting this devotion, I kept encountering this passage and just shelving it away for future consideration. For context, just preceding this passage (Mark 10: 17-22) is the momentous occasion where Jesus says “[G]o, sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

Are we to take this literally? Rich people will never be brought into heaven. Only those who have rid themselves of ALL material possessions will enter the kingdom of God. For it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich human to enter.

I am more of the position that we should see this passage in the context of literary symbolism. The rich people in this moment are those who live in luxury. They have built their lives around earthly treasures and seek status through wealth, having more than their neighbors. And Jesus says that these are the ones who will struggle to get into heaven. These people who collect things to feel important. Who find their self-worth in bought treasures.

And then, the real point of this passage is: Above all, God. He is of greater importance than any of the things you can acquire on earth. We have to worry about our spiritual path, our relationship with God, and our infinite striving towards righteousness above all else.

And moreover, Jesus says that “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

We will fail. As humans, we cannot expect perfection. Each of us is flawed and broken. But in seeking improvement, righteousness... In seeking an honest and vulnerable relationship with God above all the earthly temptations, we can be saved. For it is truly only by the grace of God that we are accepted into the Kingdom.

Maddy Ing

GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 19

John 4:16-26

The woman at the well is a very familiar story. A story as old as... well this story! Jesus breaks many of the social and cultural boundaries of the time: the boundary between male and female, the boundary between “chosen people” and “rejected people.” The conversation taking place at the well demonstrates God’s abundant grace for all.

In this scripture we are invited to cross boundaries. As followers of Jesus, what boundaries are we asked to move beyond in order to connect with the those who are outcast, alone, or abandoned? We are asked to reflect on our assumptions of “the other” and look beyond.

I have noticed that prior to the youth service trips, we make assumptions and create boundaries before we even meet the people we will serve. Serving in this way is like Jesus’s encounter of the women at the well. We are confronted with our biases and our hearts are broken open as we get to know those whom we serve.

During Lent may we ask ourselves what boundaries exist in our neighborhoods and communities that prevent us from building God’s kingdom. With God’s grace may we build our world so all may feel welcome at the well.

Amen.

Adam Guerrero

SATURDAY, APRIL 20

Romans 11:1

“...I tell you, he was the Messiah!”

I first saw him in Galilee. He had a way of captivating you with just his personality. And when he spoke, everyone listened. Of course, much of what he said tweaked the Pharisees and the other authorities. But it wasn't really about them, it was about loving and living.

But when we got to Jerusalem things really started to happen. It was as if he knew that his time was limited. He had warned us more than once that he would be killed. Anyone could see that if he continued in his usual way, he would have major trouble with the authorities—both religious and Roman.

This whole week was a wringer. Early in the week, he was in high gear in the Temple and everywhere. And then it was Passover, which we celebrated together in a small room. He really treated this as if he knew that this would be his last meal.

And then, we went out to the garden...

Where he was arrested and we all ran away to hide. If we had been found with him, we surely would also have been arrested!

And then he was crucified, dead and buried...

And so here I am, feeling rejected by God. Surely Jesus was the Messiah, wasn't he? Surely, no one but the Son of God could have done those things and been like that?

But I have the feeling that I am not alone; it is as if He is still with me.

And so I have hope.

Mary Crawford

EASTER SUNDAY, APRIL 21

Luke 24:1-2

Each year on Easter morning, billions of people celebrate the most momentous event in all of human history. We echo proclamations of “He is risen!” with shouts of “He is risen indeed!” In our excitement over this holiest of days, it is easy to gloss over the ambiguity of the empty tomb in order to rush head first into the certitude of Christ’s bodily appearances. But in the early morning hours of that first Easter, the grand pronouncements only came after utter confusion.

It’s difficult to imagine the distress of the women as they first approach the tomb and see that it has been disturbed. This first evidence isn’t actually all that compelling. A stone out of place. A missing body. Could this be some kind of prank? A conspiracy? Oh how one might wish for that to be the truth! The Romans surely hoped so. If only justice hadn’t triumphed over oppression; sacrifice over self-service; life over death. We could go on living as though nothing had changed. We could continue living for nothing more than selfish ambition and vain conceit.

The women could have gone away afraid, without ever confronting the meaning of the empty tomb, were it not for the testimony of messengers who confirmed what they knew in their hearts: Christ is risen indeed. Confusion turns to joy at the good news of the resurrection, carried through time by successive generations of messengers who embody new life, who proclaim faith, and who call us again to commit to Christ’s promise for us to have life and have it abundantly.

So now, we awaken this morning to find that the stone has been rolled away on our lives and we hear the loud voice beckoning us to come forth from the grave. In this moment, there is more perplexity than praise, more unease than understanding. In the light of this new dawn, we struggle to see clearly, but as our eyes adjust we come to know that Christus Victor—the victorious Christ—lives in us and calls us to carry the message ourselves: “He is risen!”

Nathan P. Oney

Holy Week 2019

APRIL 14: PALM SUNDAY

10 a.m. Sanctuary Worship

Waving of Palms and Loud Hosannas!

Worship is followed by Easter Egg Hunt and Family Brunch

APRIL 18: MAUNDY THURSDAY

7:30 p.m. Sanctuary Worship

Communion, Prayer, and Darkness

APRIL 19: GOOD FRIDAY

Prayer Vigil 9 a.m. - 9 p.m., First UMC Chapel

Open all day to pray and “watch with Jesus.”

Community Mid-day Service 12 p.m., St. Paul's Lutheran Church
(958 Lincoln Blvd) Service based on the Stations of the Cross.

Good Friday Labyrinth Walk 1–9 p.m., Simkins Hall.

The Labyrinth will be open for walking, every step a prayer.

Community Evening Service 7:30 p.m., St. Paul's Lutheran Church
(958 Lincoln Blvd) Service based on the Passion of St. John.

APRIL 20: simple church EASTER VIGIL

7:30 p.m. Courtyard/Chapel

An ancient liturgy of Light, Word, and Communion

APRIL 21: EASTER SUNDAY

6:30 a.m. Easter Sunrise Service

Palisades Park (Santa Monica Blvd. & Ocean Ave.)

Bring fresh flowers for the cross, and a lawn chair or blankets.

Hot coffee served.

10 a.m. Easter Celebration Worship

First UMC Sanctuary

Family Service, Choir, Brass, Organ, Lilies, and Alleluias!
(nursery care provided)