

# Full to the Brim

*An expansive lent*

2022  
lenten  
devotional



# FULL TO THE BRIM

The origins of Lent were that one was to leave their old life behind to fast and prepare to be baptized into a new way of living. In essence, this was a practice of stepping away from corrupt power, scarcity mentality, and empty rituals in order to live a more expansive and full life of faith. And so our Lenten theme, Full to the Brim, is an invitation—into a radically different Lent, into a full life. It's an invitation to be authentically who you are, to counter scarcity and injustice at every turn, to pour out even more grace wherever it is needed. When we allow ourselves to be filled to the brim with God's lavish love, that love spills over. It reaches beyond ourselves; like water, it rushes and flows, touching everything in its path.

The Lenten devotional is a gift we give each other, a reading for each day of Lent. The daily readings are written by members of our congregation, Sunday school students, members of Sanctified Art, and other friends of the church. Some images and writings are used with permission of Sanctified Art.

In addition to the daily readings we have included scripture passages, specifically Psalms, for the Sundays during lent. These are passages that the Lenten Connection small groups will be using for the spiritual practice of Lectio Divina.

Blessings to every reader on your Lenten Journey.

Thanks to all contributors, Katherine Willis Pershey, Beth Tracy and Stephanie King Myers for making it possible to bring this devotional to you.

— *The Christian Ventures Committee*



## Wednesday, March 2 (Ash Wednesday)

### Psalm 51:

51:1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

51:6 You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

51:7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

51:8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

51:9 Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

51:10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

51:11 Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

51:12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

## Thursday, March 3

Many of us begin Lent with ashen marks smudged against our foreheads, the oil glistening on our skin throughout the rest of the day. It's a mark that is holy because it tells the truth: we are formed from the dust, and to dust we shall one day return. We are not immortal. Death will one day find us all.

However, as we've crafted this Lenten series around the theme, Full to the Brim, we've found ourselves asking for more from our Lenten journey. Yes, death will surely find me one day, inhaling me into that infinite abyss. But the cross on my forehead only tells me part of the story. The empty tomb tells me a fuller, more expansive truth: death will not have the last word. There is more. God is more.

This expansive truth requires more of us. It invites us to abandon empty or showy practices of faith, and instead, draw inward to open ourselves to a deeper journey of transformation. It requires me to believe that I am truly worthy of love, belonging, and grace. It requires me to believe others are also.

In this Lenten season, we've reimagined this Ash Wednesday ritual. What if, instead of ashes, gold gleamed on our foreheads? What if, alongside the certainty of death, we are also reminded of God's expansive grace? What if on this day we said to one another, "From stardust you have come, and to stardust you shall one day return"?

—Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity (from *Sanctified Arts*)



## Friday, March 4

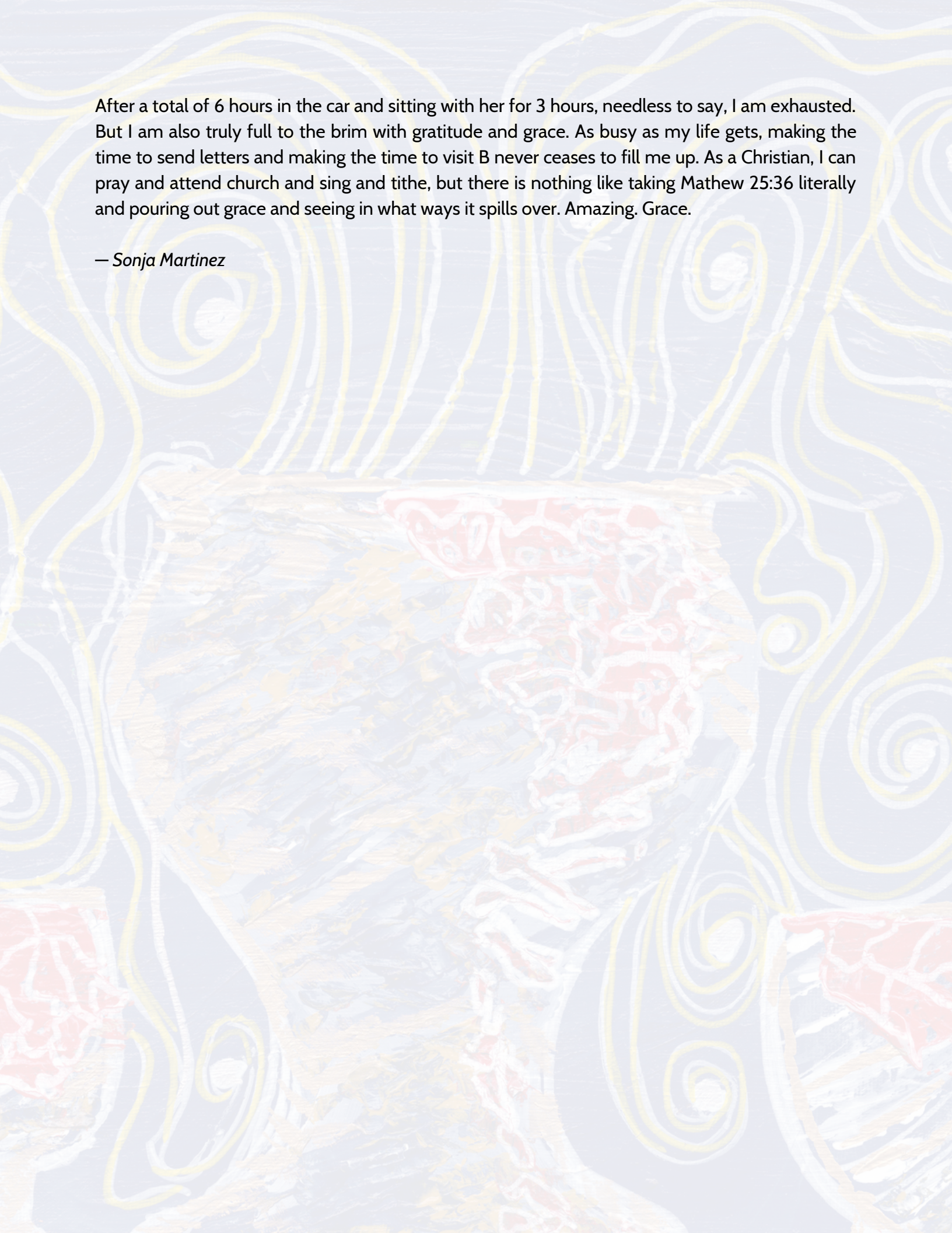
I participate in a Prison Ministry. It's a ministry that I created while I was a member of a previous church. It's a ministry I never planned, yet one I have partaken in for 7 1/2 years, and still do. As much of a planner as I am, this was not planned. It was a true calling I felt when a young mother, I'll call her B, about my age, was sentenced to 14 years in prison for a crime she committed. She had been a member of my previous church, in fact she sang Amazing Grace at our wedding and beautiful music at the baptism of our oldest son.

After her sentencing, I felt called to reach out to B - not because we had been particularly close, but because her daughter is just 2 1/2 months older than our son, at whose baptism she had sung. Needless to say, her sentencing and the news of her crime caused a lot of divisiveness at my old church. And yet a group gathered (alongside a social worker) to discuss their feelings. Among all the feelings discussed that day, someone brought up, what we as a community of Christians may do. Her address was shared and so in the Fall of 2015, I started writing letters to B. It was through these hand written letters that I slowly got to know her as a person. As a woman in her early 30s, as a mother to a, then 3-year old child, as a daughter to a mother who herself had experienced trauma.

I finally decided I would go visit her. Just like I had researched how to send letters to someone in prison (no address stickers - the return address must be hand written and the inmate number must be included in addition to the name), I researched the rules on visiting a corrections facility. Then I made the 3 1/2 hour drive down to Lincoln, Illinois. It was nerve-wracking and humbling to go through the security process alone - even more so, to meet the woman who was serving this sentence and stripped of most freedoms. I had gotten to know her through letters and eventually - once we figured out the rules - some emails. I've made that trip many more times over the years. The angst I initially felt over the security process eventually subsided. But the feeling I get when sitting with B has remained strong.

One can bring nothing inside a prison, aside from an ID card and the payment card to purchase "lunch" from the vending machines. As a visitor, one gets stripped of freedoms to a certain degree. And although I must always show up empty handed, I am able to bring the gift of time to sit and listen. Time to bring stories of my life with my son and listen to stories of her daughter. Time to focus on something other than the drama that is prison life. Time to show her she is worthy of God's love and time to show her dignity.

Over the years I have written and received countless letters, cards and emails. (All of which have been read by a guard to ensure their content is compliant with rules). Aside from 2020, I've visited about twice per year. The strange thing is, when I write B and when I receive letters from her, they are some of the most personal letters I ever write. When I visit B, the three hours we can spend together are some of the deepest conversations I have.



After a total of 6 hours in the car and sitting with her for 3 hours, needless to say, I am exhausted. But I am also truly full to the brim with gratitude and grace. As busy as my life gets, making the time to send letters and making the time to visit B never ceases to fill me up. As a Christian, I can pray and attend church and sing and tithe, but there is nothing like taking Mathew 25:36 literally and pouring out grace and seeing in what ways it spills over. Amazing. Grace.

— *Sonja Martinez*



Saturday, March 5

## Why?

Many times  
Throughout my life,  
I have been  
Rescued  
By God!  
Mostly the events  
Have been haphazard,  
Would be calamities,  
"Near misses"  
With death:  
Tripping,  
But not falling,  
Falling,  
But walking away!  
Swerving  
To miss a car  
(Or a truck)  
But not crashing,  
Or crashing,  
And once again,  
Walking away!  
Within the calamities,

Seeing my life  
Pass before me,  
Staying calm,  
Somehow saved,  
Always immediately saying  
"Thank you God."  
Then in after thought  
Not really understanding.  
Completely confused and  
Wondering.  
Why does He keep  
Rescuing me?

— Gail Avgeris

# Sunday, March 6

## Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

91:1 You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,

91:2 will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust."

91:9 Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place,

91:10 no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.

91:11 For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

91:12 On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

91:13 You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

91:14 Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name.

91:15 When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them.

91:16 With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.



## Monday, March 7

When the call for essays for this year's Lenten devotionals came, I read the prompts and dismissed them immediately, believing that I had nothing of merit or worth to share. On a good day, I usually feel merely beige in God's or any human's eyes. I am not remarkable. I am not brilliant or remotely close. I am rather an average 72-year old woman with a train of life experience, sometimes wisdom and often insight that most do not ask for (and I try to live by not sharing unless asked!). I know that this sounds like it is written by someone with low self-esteem...maybe some self-loathing and certainly not someone that anyone would be excited to know.

However, this is not true because of the Grace I experience from God many times, and mostly when I don't expect it or see it coming. I used to believe that if I tried hard enough, wanted enough, prayed enough (and profoundly, of course) that God's Grace would come to me like rain from the sky when I thought I should feel it...thought I had done enough to be rewarded. Yet, I have come to know that God's Grace is a gift that comes to me when I stop believing I have any willful control over receiving it. God's Grace is everywhere for me when I am able to just be "in gratitude," loving and believing that all will be well. This is no small feat to be in that place, but the more I am, the more Grace surrounds me and brings me peace and self-love...self-acceptance and a feeling of being someone special in God's eyes.

God's Grace allows me to know that I am loved, that I am a valuable soul and that while a mere beige speck in the universe, my speck has value and brilliance and a very loving and loved heart. May it be so.

— Nancy Orr-Depner

# Tuesday, March 8

## Filled to the Brim

On a ride to church in April or May of 2015, I remember saying to the kids that we should appreciate this time together because Ryan would be leaving in the fall to go to Ripon College in Wisconsin so we only had 12 or 14 weeks left as a family living all together. My memory is vague. I think I may have said something like "let's all try to be as nice as we can to each other for the time we have together." I might have said it to stop some bickering, or just to say it. I may have been saying it to remind myself to not be so cranky. The damn kids were always dragging their collective feet, although they pretty much all said they didn't mind going to church, but the stress of getting 6 adult bodies in the van with enough time to get to church on time could put me in a foul spirit. "Not minding" is high praise from the teen crowd, by the way. But no matter the reason I said it, the response from Ryan in the backseat was "I just found out I got a job with Matt P. out in Wyoming, I'm leaving a week from next Saturday." Laura jumped in and was immediately congratulatory and inquisitive, I sat mute, contemplating my loss. The center cannot hold, Yeats had warned me, but I was unclear on the timing, just like that fig tree in the gospel of Mark.

"These kids never leave home." A friend complained to me at a neighborhood get together a few weeks later. "They come home from college and expect us to keep doing their laundry and cooking their meals." "Terrible." I agreed. I was, of course, thinking that might not be that bad. Having camped and traveled with the kids every summer, I'm afraid they may all have caught a vagabond spirit from me and Laura. Last year Molly, our youngest, worked her summer in Montana. She drove back and stopped at the house to visit for 3 whole hours before heading back to Grand Valley in Michigan. Kyle worked in Wyoming and decided he was going to stay there. He has a Wyoming driver's license and everything, how can I keep from singing? Will is still at home with us studying nursing. A number of people have told him about the travel nursing program, he seems interested. Ryan never did come home. He spent summers in Wyoming and the school years in Ripon. He met his love Ashley there and he won't be coming home for meals and laundry after all. How can I keep from singing?

Catherine Joann Tracy was born on January 22nd. 7lbs 5oz. Laura and I were up in Ripon visiting Ryan, Ashley and Catherine and celebrating Laura's Birthday a few days later. Ryan's life is so far from mine now. Crazy because we are so much alike, both fathers now, assembling a crib with missing parts. How can I tell him how my life is so full even as the van has emptied out? I sit for a while holding Catherine. I'm so blessed to hold this beautiful bundle of joy and watch my life renewed in my granddaughter's beautiful face. How can I keep from singing? I'm filled to the brim.

— Mel Tracy

## Wednesday, March 9

When I think about our focus for Lent this year, Full to the Brim, I think fondly of my dad. My parents own a grocery store on an island in northwest Vermont. I grew up in our house which was attached to the store connected by a single door and a hallway. My dad has always been known for his coffee drinking and his cup "filled to the brim." All day long, he seems to have a cup in his hand, be refilling his cup or be making coffee for the now extensive coffee bar they have at the front of the store. I think one of his favorite things to do is offer someone a free cup of coffee and he does this often!

When I think about God's abundant and lavish love, I think of my dad. As we grew up in the store he worked so hard day in and day out, but since the store was right there, he was always there when we needed him. I felt his unconditional love in so many ways, but we also always had an abundance of great food anytime we needed it. He grew up in a family with lots of limits on affection and scarcity of most everything. It always astonished me (even as a child) how he had become such an amazing dad and was able to do everything he did with so much faith, determination and a positive outlook all without that support from his family. I definitely attribute it to how he felt God's abundant love and was able to be filled by it and pass it along to our family and really everyone he encountered in the grocery store.

—*Jeannette Lloyd*

## Thursday, March 10

How can something bad make you feel good, well, at least lucky?

Several years ago when our family was young, I entered in to a business relationship with a close relative. The relationship was based on trust and involved a significant portion of my financial resources. Things seemed to go very well at first so many other family members and some friends joined in.

The good times continued for a couple of years and then began to unravel. My relative became distant and uncommunicative. This led to concern and an investigation. The result was devastating. My worst nightmare had been realized, the money was gone.

I was in shock and confused. How could someone so trusted leave me in this situation with no warning? What would I say to my friends who trusted me? How would I tell my family that our lifestyle would be changing? How would this impact our family dynamics going forward?

As I gathered myself, the first priority was to explain what I had learned to my friends and family. To my amazement, they were all very gracious and made me feel supported. I felt especially loved by my wife and children at this time when I needed it most.

Looking back, this loss made me pause and appreciate all that I still have. I was truly loved by the people who matter the most to me. There is nothing more important. My hope is that I can return that love as deeply as I have felt it.

— *Anonymous*



Friday, March 11

## Duality

I am a woman  
Wanting to be  
A man  
Wanting to be  
A woman!  
A reasonably profound  
Revelation!  
I know I'm  
Feminine,  
But I'm also  
Masculine!  
For example,  
I would love  
To compete and beat  
Any man  
At any sport!  
But I also enjoy  
Dressing up  
In high heels  
And a fancy skirt!  
I am not shocked  
By this dual  
Personality;  
I have always known  
It was there!  
It is good

To let it out!  
To finally realize  
My choice of  
Femininity,  
Knowing that  
The strength  
Of masculinity  
Will keep me  
Always  
A mystery of both!  
(Besides, I am certain  
Somewhere "out there"  
There is  
A man  
Wanting to be  
A woman  
Wanting to be  
a man!)

— *Gail Avgeris*

## Saturday, March 12

Ya' know, it's like they say: "There's two kinds of people in this world..."

I will let you finish that with the dichotomy of your choice, but for the purposes of this reading, I'd say: "There's two kinds of people in this world: those who can start their day with (or without!) a quick burst of caffeine-to-go and those like me, who need to gently savor a cup (or two!) filled to the brim, before they dare re-enter this big, wide, busy world!"

I love my wife. I love that she knows my retirement mornings mean starting my day early, with a fresh pot of coffee I've carefully brewed, often, but not always, even before she's headed down to the kitchen. Before our first words have been spoken. Before that first hug 'n smooch of the new day.

I love my ritual sniff before six scoops of ground coffee go into the carefully fitted filter. I love the anticipation as the machine accepts pure water from Lake Michigan with gurgles and sputters. I love how the smell of roasted beans wafts through our home. And I wait. I purposely build my sense of expectation, taking time to empty clean dishes, glasses, and silverware from the dishwasher before indulging in brew.

And then, having first added a thin layer of fat-free/sugar-free hazelnut cream to the bottom of a favorite old cup, I fill said cup to the brim. And before cellphone screens of email news, Wordle, the NYT Spelling Bee and all else, I thank God for every blessing I can imagine, and for another day, filled to the brim, to be shared with others: family, neighbors, friends, strangers, dogs and dog walkers, people in the headlines, talking heads on tv, hurried drivers on the roads...

...but first, quiet...and coffee, filled to the brim.

Holy One, for rest when weary, for every new morning you give us, for the simple rituals implanted upon our souls and for abundant life we must share to be truly alive: thank You! Amen

— *Rev. Bill Hoglund*

# Sunday, March 13

## Psalm 27

27:1 The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

27:2 When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh-- my adversaries and foes-- they shall stumble and fall.

27:3 Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

27:4 One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.

27:5 For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock.

27:6 Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

27:7 Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!

27:8 "Come," my heart says, "seek his face!" Your face, LORD, do I seek.

27:9 Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!

27:10 If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up.

27:11 Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.

27:12 Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.

27:13 I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.

27:14 Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

## Monday, March 14

What images of God and God's grace resonate most deeply with you?

C.S. Lewis suggested, that grace is what makes the Christian faith unique. The idea, the gift, that we are loved by God even when we haven't earned it. Perhaps not even deserved it. That idea, for me, is one of the most hopeful aspects of our faith.

Perhaps that is why is I love teaching and telling and preaching on the parable of the Prodigal Son. The image (in my mind) of the screen door slamming shut as the loving parent races out of the farmhouse across the dusty field, and embraces the wayward child. Then, before a word of apology is uttered or a plea for forgiveness muttered – there is the embrace of the loving and welcoming and forgiving parent.

Grace is in the embrace.

I have felt those grace-filled arms more times than I can remember, and what a gift. Grace, when accepted, can turn all of us back to our loving Parent God.

— *Rich Kirchherr*



## Tuesday, March 15

There is no one time for me that God was not there...God is always there...just waiting for the moment for you to realize it...which is not all the time.

God is that wonderful feeling that you are not alone in this immense universe and that there is so much more to learn, understand and do.

God is the feeling of love that sometimes makes you feel you will burst as you feel it with such intensity ..be it from a cherished loved one, a dear friend, a kind stranger or the sheer beauty of nature.

God is there when you hug a grandchild and cannot explain the fulfilling feeling and then look at your child, the parent, grown up ...and feel the same and know that even when you are no longer there all will be well.

God is there when you feel the need to help someone, be it a dying family member or sick friend or a refugee arriving from a foreign part of the world .

God is there when you worship in the same church across the ocean that your ancestors worshipped in centuries ago and you feel at one with time and the universe.

God is always there and it is magnificent that he waits for you and then is just plain there!

— *Jan Struckman*

## Wednesday, March 16

I tend to be an anxious person, often worrying and feeling a bit overwhelmed. No matter how much I tell myself this is unnecessary, it just seems to happen anyway. Scriptures in the book of Psalms is where I often find comfort.

One of my favorite scriptures is Psalm 23. Whenever I hear or read this passage, I feel a sense of calm and peace. I love the images of quiet waters, green pastures and the banquet table with the overflowing cup. When I read the Lenten topic, Full to the brim, I thought of this beautiful scripture. It is such a powerful reminder of God's abundant love for us. God fills our cup, over and over, overflowing with goodness and love. "I will fear no evil, for you are with me: your rod and your staff they comfort me."

My nature walks, devotional group, loving family and friends bring me this peace from God. This is what fills my cup to the brim as I bathe myself in the calming waters of God's love. I have learned that talking to God is not enough. I need to create the space to listen. My soul is refreshed, and my cup is refilled with God's calm. When I create this space in my cup, my cup can overflow and I can shower others with this love from God. May you, too, receive the abundant love from God in your cup.

— Hope Sabbagha

## Thursday, March 17

I was a Mom with an 11-year old daughter and a 12-year old son. My husband had spent the night in the Emergency Room waiting to be upgraded to the ICU. As I climbed into the car, I smiled and did a quick “feelings check.” It was almost 9 am; 12 hours had passed and emotionally, I was really doing well. I had explained everything to my kids in a calm, steady voice and spoke with my daughter’s teacher and the Social Worker at the Junior High. I was a pillar of strength...

I drove the 10 minutes to the hospital, pulled into the Emergency Room Parking Lot and turned off the car. Suddenly, I began to sob uncontrollably. Up until now, I’d been handling the “business at hand”; but the reality of the situation had finally hit me. I was the wife of a man who had been lying in the Emergency Room for the past 12 hours with a Nurse sitting at his bedside monitoring his every breath. His situation was guarded at best. Having had my children later in life, I was one of the oldest of the parents at the school. I normally felt very old, but at that moment a little voice in my head kept repeating, “I am too young for this...women my age aren’t supposed to be widowed...men in their 40s are too young for strokes!”

As I walked into the hospital, I decided the hospital chapel was a more appropriate destination and headed in that direction.

I had never been in the Chapel at this hospital. It was small and had a beautiful stained-glass wall behind the altar. It was dimly lit...and quiet...and empty. I walked toward the altar at the front of the room, and sitting down began to talk; and cry. I asked God to be with us; to help us get through the weeks ahead. I prayed that Fred would be OK and I prayed for the strength to fulfill my roles as wife and mother. I dried and powdered my eyes so Fred wouldn’t see how hard I’d been crying and stood to leave the Chapel.

It was then that I realized that I was not alone. There was a man in a clerical collar standing in the back of the Chapel. As I quickly headed to the door, I passed him and our eyes met. There was a sense of reassurance in his eyes that had a calming effect over me. Although he remained quiet, I was instantly reminded that I was not alone. There was no burning bush or glowing angel, just the eyes of an ordinary person filled to the brim with God’s Love.

— *Kathi Harbecke*

## Friday, March 18

What life does God dream for us? I was drawn to this prompt because it sounds so hopeful. When thinking about the question I concluded that since I can't even fathom what the word God means, I would be unable to imagine what They would dream for us. Instead I will list what I dream for us and hopefully there is a glimpse of God in these wishes for our world.

Every person has love and respect from every other person. There are no judgments based on health/ability, race, gender, age, religion, or sexual orientation; all are embraced.

Each person's talents and strengths are recognized, supported and celebrated within their community of family and friends. Everyone will believe and know that in order to thrive we need each other.

All feel free to express their opinions and thoughts knowing they will be heard. People are comfortable articulating their needs and wants knowing their community will lovingly offer help.

Each person addresses inequities and injustice whenever and wherever they witness these things. No one looks the other way or ignores the situation when injustices are performed or supported in their presence.

Standing together mankind will move into new, improved dimensions of living and being which only God can imagine.

— *Kathy Fauth*

Saturday, March 19

Devotions from Sunday School:

***I wonder if there is a time when you felt God's love:***

"God helps me through the hard times in my life. For example when me and my friends are in a fight." — *Ellie*

"I felt this when I get a solo or a special part in my dance." — *Claire W.*

I wonder what God dreams for us:

"Is for everyone to have a great life and to love others." — *Alice Root*

"To love people." — *Sebastain Martinez*

"To always love and never hate." — *Mallory Hettinga*

***I wonder if you have ever felt sad or unimportant. How have other's been God's hands and helped you?***

When I am sad my cat annoys me but it always makes me feel better. — *Ellie Alletto*

This has happened to me and my friends helped me by playing with me. — *Anonymous*

When I was sitting alone and Olivia my best friend came over and sat with me and at recess she played with me. — *Evelyn Winkelman*

# Sunday, March 20

## Psalm 63:1-8

63:1 O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

63:2 So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.

63:3 Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.

63:4 So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

63:5 My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips

63:6 when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night;

63:7 for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

63:8 My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

## Monday, March 21

One of the more difficult times in my life was when my job as a librarian was eliminated. My mind went immediately to my feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness. Despite the effort, energy and love that I had put into my job and my work with the precious students who had been an integral part of my life for many years, I was pushed away. I had worked with families who had children from age 3 to 8th grade students. I had watched these children grow and blossom into avid readers. I had tried to meet the needs of every child and to create opportunities for all to love books. My family reading nights gave families dressed in their pajamas the joy of listening to the junior high students read picture books that were shown on a big screen.

Now that you have an idea of my love for these families, I would like to describe how my empty heart was filled to the brim with God's abundance. As the end of the school year approached, my heart was warmed by a group of families that talked to the principal and the Parish Priest with the hope of finding the funds to not eliminate my position. So many kind and heartfelt cards and letters told me the important part I had played in helping their children love books. Again God filled my heart with abundant grace.

Finally, the ultimate act of unconditional love came on my last day when I was packing the last of my things into my car. One of the parents who lived right next to the school walked over to say good-bye. It was my lowest moment. I was depressed and heartbroken. She gave me a big hug and first thanked me for all I had done for her children. This precious woman of faith said to me, "God brought you to us and He is now taking you to do another job. You have accomplished all you could here. You will always be loved by the families you have touched."

Thank you God for providing all of us with your abundant love. Remember in those empty times that God is there to fill you to overflowing.

— *Nanette Farina*

## Tuesday, March 22

Full to the brim is an appropriate phrase for our Lenten devotionals. I meant to prepare my contribution sooner, but have been "under the weather" recently. With prayers and God's love and grace, I am almost back to normal.

Those of you that know me, know that I am a believer in pre-destination. The good Lord had set a road life path for me. There were numerous bumps in the road and several curve balls, and I have overcome many obstacles.

My life has been full to the brim and overflowing. God's grace and love has kept me going plus being a very positive person. I am blessed to have a great family, many loving friends and support groups.

— Bert Griffith



Wednesday, March 23

**More contributions from some of our youth:**

***I wonder if there was a time you felt God's love. (2nd/3rd graders)***

When getting something I really wanted. — *Anonymous*

Nervous about playing bells. — *Alice*

Sharing. — *Mallory*

Making mom and dad breakfast. — *Mallory and Alice*

***I wonder what God dreams for us. (2nd/3rd graders)***

To have a good life and be respectful to others. — *Alice*

Love everyone as God does. — *Miss Caroline*

***I wonder if there was a time you felt God's love. (Junior High)***

I felt God's love when I was pushed through a bad sickness.

I felt God's love when I felt my mom's unconditional love. She's always there no matter what.

***I wonder what God dreams for us. (Junior High)***

God dreams for better lives for others.

God dreams for love, peace, joy, fellowship for others.

## Thursday, March 24

I've probably shared before that I didn't grow up attending church regularly. My mom was Methodist and my dad was Christian Scientist (not to be confused with Scientology). But I grew up knowing God as a loving God.

I've pondered that over the years and had really tried to remember what it was my parents had said or done to cause me to believe this so deeply. We said our prayers at every meal and at bedtime. When we did go to church, it was a UCC church in St. Louis and even though we only went on Christmas and Easter, we were always welcomed with open arms.

I always thought that wasn't so much what my parents said that made me realize that our God is a loving God, as much as I witnessed how deeply they loved one another, and in turn, how deeply they loved me. And I knew they believed in God, so I think I assumed that their deep love was a beautiful reflection of a Loving God.

But this past summer, another big clue was revealed. I only attended a Christian Science service with my dad a couple of times, and I have no real memory of what the service was like. But this past summer, when Dave and I were attending the Chautauqua Institute, we decided to attend a Christian Science service. I think I did it a little out of guilt – guilt that I never gave my dad the real opportunity to share his tradition with me, so I went thinking I was doing so in his honor. When we walked through the doors to this very sparse worship space, there it was. Painted in large gold letters at the front was "GOD IS LOVE". And I actually heard my dad's voice – he had said this numerous times to me as a child. I had forgotten the words, but clearly I had not forgotten the message. God's grace washed over me, I think my dad was smiling down on me, and yes, I felt Full to the Brim. Thanks be to God.

— *Meredith Onion*



Friday, March 25

My father has been on hospice care for a number of months. He lies in a hospital bed in an alcove of my stepmother's bedroom (their bedroom.) My stepmother traces the route from her lips to the bottom of her neck, saying this is where his life will end. With Parkinson's, the inability to swallow cuts off breath.

My daughter watches as I tilt a glass of apple juice to my father's lips. I listen as he drinks. He doesn't cough or struggle. The glass is empty.

I regret the small amount of time that I have spent with those I knew were short on time in this world. So I say here I am to my father and fill up the cup again.

— *Ben Pershey*

## Saturday, March 26

When Spirit nudges you into wilderness  
go without fearing what is yet to be  
taking with you an open heart,  
a hungry soul.

Above all be ready for a journey  
that takes longer than you think.  
Pray to find how full is emptiness.  
Do not fear howling winds at night  
filled with a desert mirage  
of empire building,  
or paying no heed to nature's law,  
or manufacturing bread out of rocks  
for stones remain stones  
except when they shout praise as Jesus passes by.

Don't be in a hurry for time to pass.  
Each moment bulges with secret revelation.  
Gather myrrh from trees and shrubs,  
and frankincense as aromatic prayer;  
and golden surrender to a Love larger than yourself,  
and pray for it to never end,  
for wilderness empties you into the world  
that you never left.  
See at this portal footprints of another day  
with designs in sand by angel wings  
healing the healer whose shadow now falls upon you.

— *Paul Stiffler*



**Sunday, March 27**

**Psalm 126:**

126:1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

126:2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."

126:3 The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

126:4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb.

126:5 May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

126:6 Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

## Monday, March 28

I have the somewhat unique experience of coming to religion in my 30s, entirely of my own volition, without motive, and purely because by some miracle I began to sense God's abundant love. Up to that point, I was laden with tremendous shame about the emptiness of my existence, and perilously lost in a wasteland of meaningless cravings and anxieties. I was sick in my soul and helpless to save myself.

I see now that I was serving my own 40 years, and that adversity, abandonment, and anger blinded me to the love that was always there, but at the time I felt fated and therefore hopeless. I was shattered, but I think that God found His way in through my missing pieces. Since my conversion, I have lived through too many moments where God's love has been all that stood between me and utter despair. At times I feel it like strong, warm arms wrapped around me from behind, enveloping me with comfort. On other occasions it is the hand I grasp for with the desperate, ironclad grip of one about to plummet from impossible heights.

Sometimes it is like skin wrapped around bones and sinew, containing the viscera and fluids that would otherwise spill out onto the ground. In every form it is necessary and life-sustaining and I suspect that without it the most essential parts of me would wither away.

I have sorely needed salvation, and time and again God bestows it. Because God did not make me wait for salvation, I never needed his love for me rationalized. Long before I had the revelation that a God who would go to the cross for his people (the same people he had to herd like cats toward grace, corralling in vain their ignorant or arrogant attempts to mutiny and wander astray) is a God who really and truly loves his creations, I knew in my bones that he loved me. I may never fathom why he does, but I have unshakeable trust in His judgment over mine. He died for me, he shows up for me, and I pray that when tragedy and trauma again befall me, I will hold fast to the kind of faith in Him that He has in me. As long as I do, I know my life will never feel truly empty again

— *Devon Spencer*

## Tuesday, March 29

**From Junior High in response to “I wonder if there was a time when you felt God’s love.”**

I feel God’s love when I’m with my family dog.  
I feel God’s love when life is going well.  
I feel God’s love when I cuddle with my cat.  
I feel God’s love when I am in nature.  
I feel God’s love when I am reading.

### **The Power of God’s Love is More Than Soup**

Every week soup is delivered to the San Lucas Church in Humboldt Park. There you will meet Carmen whose mission it is to feed and provide assistance to hundreds of people in need. Many are homeless and desperately need help. Volunteers, including many from our church, prepare the soup in the kitchen at the Union Church in Hinsdale every Monday and then on Tuesday more volunteers deliver the soup along with donated chicken, bagels and bakery to San Lucas.

On Sunday, the worship area at San Lucas is simply folding chairs placed in a circle, surrounded by an assortment of clothing, shoes, and home goods like toasters, lamps etc. Worship might include Yoga, singing, dance, and the sharing of stories. There is no organ or piano, no hymnals and often they do not provide time for a sermon. Here truly God’s work is done.

The church kitchen is always busy and has survived the restrictions due to the pandemic in spite of needing to replace refrigerators and the repairing of a large stove that because of its age was difficult to obtain parts. When the stove was not working, 60 gallons of soup were heated in a microwave, 2 8-ounce containers at a time. On a recent delivery, we saw about 15 tents set up in the park across the street. The temperatures the night before was below zero and we learned that someone had donated small kerosene heaters for the tents. Each day the same individual provided the needed kerosene. The gallons of chili we brought that day was a welcomed sight.

At San Lucas you will see people inclusive of all ages, genders, and ethnicities each with their own story, like the man in his mid-sixties, who on that frozen morning was invited in and given boots, socks and pants that replaced his that were soaking wet. Here God’s love is offered to all to help them reclaim their own self-worth and to learn that God cares for them

The Gospel of Matthew reads, “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I needed clothes and you gave me something to wear.” Then the people replied “Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you? When did we see you in need of clothes and give you something to wear?” He answered “Whatever you did for one of my brothers or sisters no matter how unimportant they seemed you did for me”

From the many hands at Union Church to the many hands at San Lucas, God’s work is done

— *Anonymous*

## Wednesday, March 30

*Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18*

Some days, life seems “Full to the Brim” in the worst possible ways. Illness, political upheaval, job worries/unemployment, stress--it's easy to forget our many blessings and think about what isn't there versus what is. It's often easy to see the buckets of our lives as half-empty of value or joy versus half-full. And that's what I thought about when pondering this year's theme. How many of us give in to the dark feelings, focusing on the negatives that fill that bucket, versus taking the time and effort to focus on the positives? It turns out, once we take the time to start tallying things up, we can often find our life truly is full to the brim, full of God's grace and bounty.

While I am generally a positive person by nature, after my treatments it took me a while to get my equilibrium back and truly focus on what remained rather than what was lost. While I am forever changed, I am also now able to truly reach out to others going through the same struggle and help them however I can. Not only do I have the blessing of enough food to eat, I can taste it and enjoy preparing it. The pandemic has caused inconvenience and misery for everyone, but in some ways that and my illness have brought family members closer together. While we can't get together in person, our church committees and fellowship groups can meet via Zoom and still provide their sense of community. Because I've learned to work from home, I can relocate part of the year to be closer to my parents and able to visit them more often. All in all, a whole bucket of things to be grateful for. In fact, that bucket is pretty well full to the brim.

So, as has pretty much been my mantra throughout life and especially in the last couple of years, “We're all doing the best we can.” Let's not forget to tally up the positives, and use them to pour out grace to others when it is needed, rather than focus on the negatives.

— Sue Spear



## Thursday, March 31

I am sharing a poem by poet Rachelle Lamb about love. My paper copy is dogeared and splattered on my refrigerator. The poem reconnects me to God's lavish love. I read this poem when I can't see God, when I've forgotten that God is love, and that God as love is not remote, but present and alive, living and flowing around me and through me. Her words are both a balm and a force that tips me out of my chair into work that heals ourselves and the world.

The poem is a blessing, "May you fall madly in love." The author wishes for us to find love in people, ideas, and nature. She also points to some objects of love that we can only find within, such as what nourishes us, and feelings of heartbreak, tears, and humility. I deeply trust love is both 'out there' for us to discover anew, and already within us, however hidden from our awareness, ready to be discovered or rediscovered. Where to find love is yet another beautiful paradox in our Christian tradition.

Rachelle has penned the poem with two dot ellipses. More commonly we see three dot ellipses. I researched this and learned that two dots do not indicate missing words but a pause, a time to breathe.

### **ON THIS DAY**

by Rachelle Lamb

May you fall madly in love this year ..  
in love with someone who unhinges your tired trajectory,  
in love with a spouse of several years who might be aching for lightning, in love with demanding children and crazy relatives ..  
in love with the particular pedigree of genius insanity that has perhaps claimed you in spite of your reluctance ..  
and certainly in love with an animal, a cloud, a redwood, the wild .. these at least once a day.  
May you fall in love with this fragile jewel of a world,  
with hard work, real learning, just causes, petitioning and prayers.  
May you fall in love with wonder itself,  
with the grand mystery,  
with all that feeds you in order that you may live ..  
and with the responsibility that that confers.  
May you fall in love with heartbreak and seeing how it's stitched into everything.  
May you fall in love with the natural order of things  
and with tears, tenderness and humility.  
May this be a magnificent year for you.

May you fall deeply, madly, hopelessly, inextinguishably in love.

— *Leslie Ritter Jenkins*

(Poem republished with permission of the author)

## Friday, April 1

This past year, I have been “Filled to the Brim” in more ways than one. After 34 years living in one house, Pete and I decided to move one block north to a “one size smaller” home. Sorting through years of family artifacts, and cleaning out the attic, basement, and garage, became overwhelming at times. Our garage and many other rooms were literally “Filled to the Brim” on moving day. Neighborly kindness filled our hearts when we were treated to a homemade meal on moving day, in addition to an invitation to their block party before we moved.

This adventure all began when we helped my dear friend sort through her mother’s home. Ruth passed on shortly before her 107th birthday, and I had visited this home with my mother since the time I was a little girl. Even after my mother passed away 35 years ago, our friendship stayed strong with trips down the street with cookies, magazines, and sandwich loaf. Her daughter Kaye and I chuckle that it all started with “the barrel chairs”. I had admired Ruth’s red barrel chairs where I would sit during our visits, and now we have both the barrel chairs and the house. I have been re-reading Sarah Ban Breathnach’s book, *Simple Abundance*. She reminds us to see the “Sacred in the ordinary” and to “think about the rooms in which you have felt instantly at home throughout your life.” That’s the way I feel about the living room we are now enjoying. Sarah also notes that “generations of family are tangibly linked,” and I am filled to the brim with thankfulness as I sift and sort through boxes, bins, and folders of memories of our family and friends. There are countless folders of Pete’s years as Dave McKeag’s assistant basketball coach, noting every statistic and name of each boy, newspaper articles and filing cabinet drawers filled with Congo Softball stats, and loads of Historical Society memorabilia to review.

We have also saved the fond memories from our boys’ school years, which mirror the same schools and experiences we enjoyed growing up in Western Springs.

I have savored sweet memories of my parents and grandparents, as well as students, parents, and friends, whose letters I treasure and re-read from time to time. Getting ready for our first Christmas here, I found the Aunt Holly and Uncle Mistletoe decorations that I made at Field Park School in Third Grade. The first holiday that we celebrated here was Halloween, and I absolutely had to have candy corn in Ruth’s candy dish--a favorite of hers and mine. My Aunt Gwen wrote me a letter about her own mother, who passed away at 104. She said, “We never lose the memories and her spirit.”

As we have sifted and sorted through so many boxes and bins, I am reminded of a quote by Robbie Kaye about his own mother: “She made room for the things she enjoyed.” Our hearts are “Filled to the Brim” as we have made room for the things we truly value and enjoy.

— Nancy Caris



**Saturday, April 2**

**What is a heart but Sanctuary?**

Come I bid you  
wandering seeking souls  
my heart is a Sanctuary  
for Holy Love therein abides

Come wounded for I am wounded too  
all who suffer sadness and remorse  
with blazing scars and doubt  
soothing balm waits for you

Come all who have been thrown away  
who are rejected and despised  
for I was discarded too  
embracing love circles round

Come all who live in darkness  
cast away from all light  
for I was entombed as you  
light will always find its way

Come I bid you  
in your seeking wandering way  
my heart is a Sanctuary  
for Holy Love therein abides

What is a heart but Sanctuary?

— *Paul Stiffler*

# Sunday, April 3

## Psalm 32

32:1 Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

32:2 Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

32:3 While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.

32:4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah

32:5 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. Selah

32:6 Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.

32:7 You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Selah

32:8 I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

32:9 Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.

32:10 Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.

32:11 Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

# Monday, April 4

## Over and Over Again

First Congo has been a blessing to me for a long time. Not only do I get to call this my place of “work,” but I also call it a second home; a place where I have felt comfortable for quite some time. And I don’t just feel good about Congo when things are going well. I feel even better about Congo when things are awful in my world.

This place and the people have been here for me over and over again. When I was 16 and my mom died, I was able to walk into the youth room with my peers and feel normal for an hour each week. When I was 32 and my dad died, I was able to come to work and feel supported even though things seemed to be crumbling around me. So, when I was 42 and found out I had a tumor on my brain stem I wasn’t concerned...I knew Congo, all of you reading this, would be there. People from every corner of the congregation stepped forward and supported my whole family.

During my recovery I really didn’t have to worry about much. Current and former PF’ers sent me notes that made me laugh and cry. Well, what about all that laundry with two little boys? No problem, people came and got it – washed it, folded it, then returned it. Well, how did you have enough to eat? No problem, we had meals delivered several times each week. Well, what about maintaining your lawn? No problem, PF’ers signed up to come each week to take care of that, too. I also had a group of close friends who offered to put together some silly shed I had bought during the winter – and it’s even still standing!

All of this wouldn’t have been possible without First Congo and the people that call this place home. And that’s what it is – a home. A place where people come to celebrate and to grieve. It’s a community that supports you when you’ve fallen and also holds you up in times of triumph. Over and over again this family of faith has been there for me. I couldn’t be more grateful.

— *Mike Tilden*

## Tuesday, April 5

Bob Kemper's prayer closes with the words, "May God surprise you with His love for you and all you are and all you do." Well, no question about that—God does surprise me, again and again. When I shut up and listen to that still small voice that nudges me to do something I would never think to do on my own, little miracles sometimes happen.

I work with a person who probably would not make any Top Ten Lists for kindness. Rather, this person (whom I will call "Alex") can be territorial and harsh. I have experienced several "smack downs" that left me crying in the bathroom. But last year I learned that Alex had been living with chronic pain from a serious injury many years ago. A major surgery was scheduled. When I learned about all that, I felt genuinely sad for Alex. Certainly, daily suffering can make a person irritable and depressed.

I guess it was grace that made it possible for me to feel compassion for someone who had hurt and humiliated me more than once. I'm not sure I would have felt Alex's pain so viscerally had it not been for God's whisper. Then, something even more amazing happened: God not just whispered but shouted that I should make a blanket! I enlisted two of my colleagues to help tie the fleece – (Linus Blankets, I think they're called???) – and a soft snuggly blanket was delivered to Alex before the operation.

It's hard to explain how dramatically that extension of grace softened my heart and turned my anger into love. Now, when someone else has an uncomfortable encounter with Alex, I drop a subtle hint that there is some stress and suffering there. I encourage them to try not to take it personally.

An abundance of forgiveness has been granted to me by God and others at different points throughout my life. When I'm able to extend that same grace to others, I feel closer to God.

— *Anonymous*



Wednesday, April 6

**A Note to God**

Thank You for the Sun!  
Do You Two  
Work together?  
It seems when there is  
Incessant gloom.  
Finally in the grips  
Of unprecedented fear,  
The Sun shines!  
People change  
(Because of it)  
From a darkness  
To joy! To hope!  
To wanting to be  
Outside!  
Honoring the Sun  
And worshipping  
You!  
Thank You Both  
For courage,  
For strength,  
To face and fight  
This invisible,  
Infamous  
Disease.

— *Gail Avgeris*

# Thursday, April 7

## Joy to the World

Beginning in 2003, The Longest Night December 21st has become a very special evening for me. It became special when our Church began offering a unique Labyrinth Walk with the theme "From Darkness into Light". On this walk we acknowledge the longest night of the year and know that from that night the days will begin to grow longer. Light will truly overcome the darkness. The walk helps me prepare for the coming of the light of the world that arrives in the form of a babe, born in a manger. On Christmas I sing out, Joy to the world the Lord has come and greet all with a hardy Merry Christmas.

Unfortunately, this joyous season can often blind us to many who struggle to find joy at this time. Some are alone, some are hungry, some are homeless, and some may be grieving the loss of loved ones. Reverend Paul Stiffler and nurse Debbie always dedicated one Wednesday during their Advent series to the topic and invited all to a Blue Christmas service to address those struggling as the holidays approached.

Our labyrinth ministry attempts to address those who grieve and find it difficult to face the holidays missing loved ones. Over 10 years ago we added a memorial tree to the Longest Night Labyrinth Walk. Over that time, we have had over 600 people attend, some who come to walk, some who come to meditate and others who come just to listen to the angelic strings of the harpist. All are invited to write the name of a loved one onto an angel ornament and place it on our memorial tree. They are also invited to light a candle of remembrance.

Over the years I have made many angels for family members or friends, some who live a great distance away. I first send them photos of the labyrinth, the ornament and the tree. Later before the tree is put away, I mail the angel or deliver it to them personally. Several years ago, I brought one of those angels to a man whose wife passed away 11 months before after a long illness. The man was so touched by this he immediately hung the angel in his room where it remains today. My cousin's four adult daughters who I lost touch with were very grateful to receive an angel in the mail. A few times I have sent angels to people I have only met once or twice after they shared their story with me. God's love can be a simple gift, a compassionate ear, or a comforting word. Sometimes the words come from others. About 5 years ago one message written on an angel by a young mother, read, "Your boys are ok," so sweet and so comforting. The grief we face when thinking about lost loved ones near the holidays will never completely go away but we can share God's love and God's promise to comfort and care for those who hurt.

— Bob Kos



## Friday, April 8

Uncertain Yet Familiar Place

Persist here, do not be afraid.

The still small Voice awaits the quiet mind, the ready heart.

Be not afraid, opening is created by letting go.

Quiet, Silence can undo one ... exactly.

Make me undone so that I may be reshaped.

Look... You... rather We are doing a new thing.

In the Silence, You renew me.

You make my You come through.

I need not wait.

You are here when You are ready, always.

I am here often, not always.

Help me to learn, to always yearn, rather, to recognize my yearning for You.

For the Oneness You offer to me, to all people.

A gift, The Gift.

Each moment, the yearning, each day a new gift.

The old me tries to shed the desire for unity through... projects, conversations, distractions, activities, even meditations and prayer.

Accept, You say.

Do not be afraid.

I am with you until the end of time.

You haunt me, as i haunt You.

Together as One through our manifestation, We are known and also may know.

We integrate through our letting go.

Irony.

Help me let go that the collective we may become One.

One.

— *Marv Baldwin*

## Saturday, April 9

“Just try it...” my late mother used to say when I propositioned her to allow me to skip a day of school for a day’s break. When she noticed my anxiety about the first day of high school football two-a-days as a scrawny 130-lb freshman, there it came again, “Just try it...” It is such a memorable phrase – not one she used often, but powerful when she did – that I’ve even considered having it tattooed on my body in her memory. Its power, for me, comes not necessarily in the suggestion or nudge of the phrase, but rather in the positive feelings I had after I had followed the advice – feelings of happiness, achievement, gratefulness, if for nothing else than having simply shown up. Not once can I recall ending up regretting “trying it.”

So what does this have to do with being “Full To the Brim” you’re probably asking yourself? In short, we are spending too much time focused on the empty space in our proverbial glass and not enough on what’s in it or what fills it up.

The empty space holds our worries, fears, losses, ailments, regrets, our woulda-coulda-shouldas, and our don’t-haves, wants, and desires. The rest of the glass is just the opposite – our blessings, achievements, strengths, health, our glad-I-dids, and our talents and treasures.

If you indulge me two paragraphs of therapeutic self-reflection... As some of you may recall, my family has experienced significant loss from death over the past several years and if I’m honest I have spent too much time worrying about more loss. Thoughts of losing my wife, Molly, the hero of our family and the person I most admire; or one of our children; or my only remaining immediate family member, my sister Rachel. The what-ifs, what-would-I-dos, and who-would-be-lefts can be terrifying.

Also on my mind lately, and perhaps a bit more light-hearted, is the fact that I’m aging. I’ll turn 40 in June. (Yes, I can feel you older members of the Congregation rolling your eyes!) Still young by many standards, I suppose, and these thoughts are common at a milestone age such as this. But I’ll be darned if every bad thing I’ve ever been told about “getting old” hasn’t been happening – right on time and in the order prescribed. The ability to read fine print, gone; the hair, down the sink drain (hello, Propecia 1mg, my old friend!); the ability to recover quickly after a workout or injury, not a chance. It’s easy to focus on the things we lose with age.

Perhaps what makes this year’s Lenten Theme so compelling for me is in 2022 I’ve (finally) recognized the time I’ve wasted thinking about the losses, absences, and empty space and rededicated myself to a different line of sight. A renewed focus on, and celebration of, what fills my proverbial cup – my blessings from God.

## Saturday, April 9 (cont.)

I'm now asking myself, what if Molly and I celebrate 70 years of marriage together on May 28, 2081 at the age of 99? That would be special. What if those beautiful sleeping children I admire each night at bedtime grow into the kind, helpful, and productive souls I see already headed in that direction? "Yeah, that's the Good Stuff", as Kenny Chesney sings. Rather than continuing to mourn the early impacts of 40, I'm celebrating my far-sightedness, understanding that with a few gray hairs in the sink each morning comes hard-earned wisdom, and I now dedicate my workouts to those whose mobility is truly limited.

My 2022, while still early days, has been more Filled To The Brim than I can ever remember. I'm focusing on the amazing things that have filled or are filling my glass as opposed that depressing and non-productive empty space of what is not. Maybe you could do the same? Maybe for the rest of Lent or maybe just for tomorrow. Heck, maybe just for the next hour. Sometimes we all just need a little nudge from Mom. "Just try it," I'm sure she would say to you. And I would say to you, "You'll be happy you did!"

— Nick Kepler

# Sunday, April 10 (Palm Sunday)

## Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

118:1 O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

118:2 Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

118:19 Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

118:20 This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.

118:21 I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

118:22 The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

118:23 This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

118:24 This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

118:25 Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

118:26 Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD.

118:27 The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

118:28 You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.

118:29 O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.



# Monday, April 11

## Full of Grace

*This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. — Psalm 118:24*

When life is challenging, I find myself wishing away the moments, days, weeks, years until the challenge is past and thinking THEN everything will be better. But will it? Probably not, another challenge, inconvenience, illness, pain, problem will arise to take its place. Perhaps this comes from the vantage point of 56. I've had enough experiences to know now that everything is not going to be better once my toddler learns to speak and stops banging his head; my middle schooler understands just how wonderful a person she is; my high schooler stops testing Every. Single. Boundary; my husband retires from his stressful travel-oriented work; the Covid pandemic ends.

Getting past the mind set of "once this is over then all will be well" and settling in the present is challenging work. Learning that life flows from one moment to the next, from comfort to pain, from joy to sorrow and back again. Easing in and out, leaning in, pulling back. I'm learning to be present, learning to see the grace in every moment. Knowing the next moments will not be the same. Learning to savor the goodness. Learning to discern whether to lean into or pull back from discomfort. Learning to be here, now. With a spirit open to the grace of God, a mind not rushing the present away and grateful for the opportunities to experience it all.

— Jean Larson



Tuesday, April 12

**All That Remains**

From within this  
Pandemic,  
We struggle  
To look outward,  
To avoid  
Turning inward,  
Moving away  
From fear and anxiety  
Toward gratitude!  
Remembering,  
This Crown of Thorns  
Right now,  
Is a very short walk  
(Two days)  
From Good Friday  
To the joy of Easter!  
The promise  
Of eternal life!  
We are people of faith!  
God will support us  
As we focus  
On being grateful  
For all we are given,  
For all that remains.  
As we share together  
The Bread of Life,  
The Cup of Love,  
Thanks be to God!

— *Gail Avgeris*

## Wednesday, April 13

Writing about God's love...you'd think that would be easy, but as I sat down to create this Lenten devotional, I found myself struggling. I started thinking about how my perspective on God's love has changed over the years. When I was younger, I would view it as kind of a guide or map that showed me the path forward. But, as I experienced more of life, that perspective raised a lot of questions. "If God provides a map for each of us, why are some people's maps so much harder than others?" "Are there different routes on this map? Where does free will come in? What about other religions? Must I only follow the Christian map, or can I weave in meaningful guidance from other maps—some of them not even based on a belief in God?" I'd go around and around with these questions until I finally gave up, and I would always leave these experiences feeling confused and somewhat sad.

More recently, I've started to think of God's love like a water bottle that nourishes me on my journey, whatever route I'm on. When I'm worn out and frustrated, God's love can fill me up. When I'm racing along OK, that love can keep me going. When I'm thirsty for something new or different, it can provide immediate relief and clarity. Sometimes I need to pour the water bottle of God's love over my head like a runner does in a race, letting it reach me faster and more thoroughly, so I can keep moving forward.

And I believe that God wants us to share the water bottle. As a dear friend often says, we all have a little God in us. Taking that to heart, I realize that I can be a water bottle for someone else. I can fill them up, provide comfort, act as nourishment, and offer relief.

I also know that I will often fail to share the water bottle. And God knows that, too.

But God keeps sharing it with me...there's an unlimited supply. And what a true gift that is.

— *Kathy Vega*

## Thursday, April 14 (Maundy Thursday)

“He loved them to the end.”

The hardest time of a loved one’s transition, in my opinion, are the moments right before it happens, when the family gathers to say goodbye and usher them into Life Eternal. It may be difficult or impossible to remember a time when they weren’t in your life. How will you go on without them? You don’t know what’s on the other side of this journey, which makes the moment particularly unsettling.

When I visited the Holy Land, I found myself regularly taking off my shoes and stepping into whatever body of water was there. For me, there is a liminality to standing with my feet submerged, not far from dry ground. Whether a boat ride or baptism, you’re going somewhere you’ve never been when you decide to take that step.

The disciples have no idea where their own journey will take them. Peter is at first reluctant to even dip his toes into the water—into the liminality. But they’re assured they’ll be with Jesus on the other side.

I used a photo of my own feet as I stood on the banks of the Sea of Galilee as a reference for this painting. Unknown to me at the time, the Golan Heights were about to be bombed later that day. But at that time, the water calmly danced over my ankles, making its own art as it bent and reflected light around them. I’ve signed the piece in such a way that invites you to turn it any number of orientations. What changes for you when the feet are facing downward, upward, or sideways? I invite you to embrace that disorientation, if only for a moment, and try to find your footing.

— *Rev. T. Denise Anderson (Sanctified Arts)*





## Friday, April 15 (Good Friday)

Posca is an Ancient Roman drink made by mixing acetum—a low quality or spoiled sour wine vinegar—with water, salt, and herbs like coriander seeds. Although despised by the upper class and nobility of Rome, it was the cocktail of choice for Roman soldiers and the lower classes.

Soaked in a sponge and attached to a hyssop branch, Posca was likely the drink offered to Jesus in response to his final statement before his death. Jesus' "I thirst" statement, alongside the offering of this sour cocktail, has become one of the most famous last meals in the history of capital execution.

This despised drink of the poor, consumed by the soldiers of Rome, may offer hints to the social standing of the Roman soldiers performing Jesus' execution in the hierarchy of ancient Roman society. We are reminded throughout the passage that, while it is the soldiers who are charged with the physical labor of carrying out the execution, they were performing as the muscle of the Roman state on behalf of the Jewish religious nobility— who indicted and demanded Jesus' execution in the first place. Matthew's account of the crucifixion recalls that it was one of the soldiers who testified to the truth of who Jesus was in the moments following his death, stating, "Surely he was the son of God!" (Matt. 27:54, NIV)

Posca offers us a symbolic moment of fleeting and subliminal solidarity. The action of offering the soon-to-be-executed Christ a drink from the personal flask of the executioner invites us into the complexity of the actors in the crucifixion: Jesus as a servant of God performing the will of God, and the soldiers as servants to Rome performing the will of the religious leaders. Two cups of power, divine and secular (albeit, religious), converge in the partaking of this final sour drink.

— *Carmelle Beaugelin* (Sanctified Art)



## Saturday, April 16

At the end of Faith and Flow yoga classes, I direct the participants to rest on their mats in savasana pose, where we simply rest on our yoga mats for the final moments of class. Once everyone is settled, I instruct them to take a deep inhalation and a long, slow exhalation. And then I explain that I will come around the room offering a hands-on blessing during savasana. If people prefer not to be touched for any reason, I ask them to place a hand on their belly and I'll know to pass them by. People rarely turn down the experience of being blessed, but it feels important to receive permission before touching.

I did not offer this blessing during the pandemic. At first it was impossible; I was teaching yoga virtually, squinting at the little Zoom boxes to see if the participants were properly aligned in their Warrior I postures. I prayed for the participants while they rested in savasana. And once we were finally back in the same place - in summer 2020 on the parking lot, and eventually spread out in Plymouth Hall - I continued to keep my distance, quietly praying for everyone from the safety of my own yoga mat.

A couple of weeks ago I wondered what I was really accomplishing by refraining from offering the hands-on blessing. I've been hugging people if I'm outdoors or masked; why shouldn't I briefly breach the distance to place my just-sanitized hands on the foreheads of willing participants? And so I brought back the blessing. I can't express how elated I was to do this simple thing.

The hands-on blessing is not just another brick in the road back to normalcy. It may be simple, but it is deeply meaningful. I place my thumbs on what yoga philosophy refers to as the "third eye center" — that place on the brow where Christians draw crosses - with the waters of baptism, the ashes of lent, the oil of anointing. My hands cup either side of the recipient's head, gently pressing my palms against their temples. And then I pray. Sometimes this prayer is made of words spoken silently in my mind and heart. Sometimes a single word bubbles up all at once, and I just pause for a moment to dwell on it.

And sometimes something else happens that is beyond words. There is a story in scripture of a woman approaching Jesus in a crowd and grasping his cloak. He stops short, and wants to know who touched him. It's a ridiculous question, because people are pressing in on all sides. But he needs to know who touched him because he felt healing power flow out of him. That story resonates with me on a new level because I have experienced this during the savasana blessing. I feel something profound and unexplainable happen. My hands are no longer my hands. They are the hands of Christ. And something flows through them - through me - into the person resting peacefully on their yoga mat.

In this "secular age" it is easy to explain mystical experiences away. We could say that this experience of God's presence, this overflowing of healing power and profound spiritual connection, is merely a surge of oxytocin in my brain and the brain of the person whose head I'm cradling. Maybe it is that, but it is something more too. It is humbling, beautiful, and real.

The Christ in me sees, honors, and is grateful for the Christ in you.

— *Rev. Katherine Willis Pershey*

# Sunday, April 17 (Easter Sunday)

## Philippians 2:5-11

2:5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

2:6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

2:7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,

2:8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.

2:9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,

2:10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

2:11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.