

The background is a photograph of a vast, green forested mountain range. In the foreground, several tall, dark evergreen trees are visible on the right side. A large, dark circular graphic is centered over the middle of the image, containing the title text.

LENTEN DEVOTIONAL 2023

Being Good Stewards of
God's Creation

What does it mean to be good stewards of God's creation?

Job 12:7-10 "But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this. In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind."

Colossians 1:17 "He (Christ) is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

We have been given a glorious earth and as siblings of Christ we are called to enjoy it, care for it and learn from it.

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, and other friends of the church.

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*



We will not be publishing a booklet format this year. You may sign up to receive daily devotions via email each morning by contacting stephanie@wscongo.org.

Wednesday, February 22 (Ash Wednesday)

Psalm 51:1–17

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.

51:13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

51:14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

51:15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

51:16 For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

51:17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Thursday, February 23

Joy for the Land

“Then the land shall enjoy its Sabbath years as long as it lies desolate, while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land shall rest and enjoy its Sabbath years. As long as it lies desolate, it shall have the rest it did not have on your Sabbaths when you were living on it.” - Leviticus 26:34-35 (NRSVUE)

The 26th chapter of Leviticus is no walk in the park. Filled with commands, threats, and I-told-you-so's, its message is nothing if not clear: If the people continue to reject God's ways, there will be consequences. Cue the plagues and pestilence, enemies and exile.

And still there is good news to be found.

Buried under all the divine heartbreak and anger, poking through the human fecklessness and folly, God's tenderness toward creation is revealed. Granted, it's expressed as kind of a “so there!” toward the people, but it's a happy day for the land nonetheless.

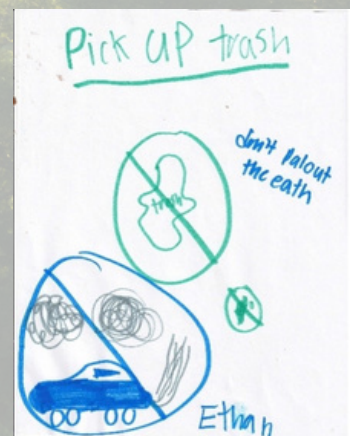
After all my people have done to you, God says to the land, after all their nonstop exploitation and abuse, now you can rest. They didn't take care of you, but I will.

God's covenants are not about asserting divine power over people power. They are, instead, about honoring and nurturing the interrelationship of all things. They are designed to empower all elements of creation to flourish in harmony with one another, which includes both giving and taking regular periods of rest.

God's plan promises deep, life-giving joy for the land, and God will accomplish it—with us or without us.

Prayer: Life-giving, rest-promising, land-loving God, for our own good you have told us how to live. Forgive our sins against creation. May we partner with you in restoring health to the planet and joy to the land. Amen.

— Vicki Kemper



Friday, February 24

I am uncertain if this subject is an appropriate topic to write about for our 2023 First Congo Lenten Devotional but felt that this may be a platform to get the word out about this heavy subject.

When thinking about special places where one can encounter God in creation many people may say that they encounter God in a natural habitat – like one of the local forest preserves in the area. On many sunny days, I have walked the Bemis Woods path and enjoyed the lush landscape and quiet. I am fully aware that numerous studies show that both exercising in forests and simply sitting looking at trees reduces blood pressure as well as the stress-related hormones cortisol and adrenaline. Perhaps that is the reason why I often walk in the forest preserve when my day hasn't gone as planned and I will admit, I am grumpy. Getting fresh air helps my mood and I feel so much better after walking.

This isn't necessarily the case for everyone who goes to the local forest preserve. The preserves offer a secluded space for those people who suffer from depression and mental health issues and may be in their darkest days, even contemplating suicide. I learned of this when I became a board member of NAMI Metro Suburban.

The Cook County Forest Preserve (CCFP) reached out to NAMI during the pandemic when individuals were taking their lives by suicide in the forest preserves. Usually the lawn & maintenance teams would find the bodies and they would call the CCFP law enforcement teams. The law enforcement teams were responsible for contacting families, corners offices and other agencies to report the death. Employees of the CCFP were not trained to handle these situations and thought it would be valuable to work with NAMI, learning how to respond to a suicide – before, during and after an attempt.

Efforts continue in suburban forest preserves and park districts to decrease the rate of suicide. "Operation Disrupt" was adopted by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Police in September 2022 for state parks and forests throughout Illinois. It is a program that aims to prevent suicide by posting signs with mental health crisis support information at Illinois state parks. These green signs let suicidal people know that help is only a call or text away.

According to the CDC, more than 50% of the US population will experience some type of mental health issue during their lifetime. And, in Illinois, 50% of the mental illness begins by the age of 14. These statics are concerning. And we need to realize that there are a lot of people hurting.

We, as a faith community, and as individuals, can do simple things to welcome those experiencing mental health illnesses. We can provide a place of comfort and hope for those suffering by:

(Continued next page...)

Talking about mental health: Just like that “C(ancer)” word, no one likes to talk about mental health. My mom’s family was like this as they chose to keep my aunt’s suicide quiet and still to this day, many friends do not know. Overtime, my family has changed their outlook on talking about mental health. We realized sharing our stories and talking about our own experiences openly could help someone else who may be going through the same situation. Testimonies are powerful tools used to reduce stigma and shame. So, know that it is okay to state “Hey, I am not doing well.”

Listening: As the Discernment Listening Guidelines from Grounded in God state: Listen to others with your entire self. Not only does listening enhance your ability to understand better and make you a better communicator, but it also makes the experience of speaking to you more enjoyable to other people. So be 100% present in hard conversations and ask follow-up questions when someone comes to you with a problem, whether big or small. Listen without judgment or offering advice and believe people when they talk about their mental health challenges.

Reading the Bible and praying: Though reading the Bible and praying will not solve mental health issues, I have learned through a Bible Study on the Psalms that the Psalms can help to relieve an anxious heart and encourage praise. The sacred words of the Psalms remind us that God wants us to face our fears and He will walk alongside us as we do this. Psalm 91:15 states “When they call to me, I will answer them: I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them.” Being able to trust in God’s work and listen for His voice, brings comfort and strength to our well-being. It is important to remember this.

Supporting and encouraging all children of God: It takes a lot for someone to admit that they may need professional help for their mental health issues, and it may take a few conversations to encourage that person to seek help. In fact, only about 4 in 10 people in Illinois with a mental health condition received any treatment in the past year. Approach a loved one with compassion and carefully state why it is important to seek help. It is valuable also to reiterate that God loves all people, and we, specifically at First Congo, respect and gladly receive persons of every... mental and physical ability.

We need to continue to learn how best to support each other’s mental wellbeing. I am thankful to not only be part of NAMI but also First Congo. These two organizations offer much needed care and love for those with mental health issues.

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

— *Beth Tracy*

Saturday, February 25

Find Those Special Places

“But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.” (Isaiah 40:31)

Today's world is so hectic! We have so much to do! We have so little time for important things! What can we do? How do we cope and carry on? During this Lenten Season, we need to stop and find those unique places in God's creation where we can reflect upon how, through our faith, we encounter God.

Depending upon your life situation, there are different options. If you are like my generation--winding down toward retirement--it is easier to devote time to appreciating everything around us in God's Creation.

I like to hike. I also like the solitude of walking by myself but with my camera in hand. The experience of seeing a momma whitetail deer and her fawn and the tender relationship reminds me of how connected we all are, which is part of God's design. It means so much to me to capture a moment like that and have it for later contemplative moments.

I have several particular places I like to hike because they have fewer people, more nature, and more incredible opportunities to take the time and enjoy the natural settings around me. This provides me with the moments I need - to stop!

Sometimes I find a log or a bench and sit, listen, and observe. I find these moments cathartic and rejuvenating. Sometimes I am unsure if I feel better after a hike because of the benefits of physical exercise or because I feel a profound appreciation for the sheer complexity and beauty of the natural world around me. However, I do know that if I don't make the time to engage with God's Creation, I don't feel the connectedness, awe, and energy it gives back to me.

Prayer: Dear God. Please give us the discipline to stop and find those spaces in the natural world, your creation, where we can appreciate and connect with your glory. Remind us of how the hectic world around us is essential but not the most important thing all the time. Sometimes we need to sit, watch, feel, listen, and develop a greater appreciation for your creation. These moments remind us of the importance of regular engagement, as we are also your creation. And finally, help us see the need to protect the natural world for future generations so they will continue to reap the benefits of connection with Nature as you intended with your Creation. Amen

— Ron Searle

Sunday, February 26

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, February 27

For me, it's all about the trees. I feel blessed to live in a place where there's lots of them. I still mourn the loss of the giant Burr Oak in our yard a couple of years ago. I suspect it was somewhere between 200 to 300 years old. The stump that is left measures almost four feet across. The loss of our tree changed the nature of our back yard. Experts had been consulted and TLC administered but we watched our deciduous friend decline until the decision was made to take it down before one of its massive limbs crashed down on someone. I miss our tree still.

During my at-home rehabilitation, I tried to get out and walk around the block most days. Since I needed to use some kind of walker and now canes, my slow progress allowed me to have some good, close-up visits with the trees on the parkway. I never noticed before how the bark on the trunks was so different and so beautiful. Some of the roots escaping the ground wound around in unexpected patterns so fascinating that I pulled out my phone to take pictures. As I got to know them better, each of the trees on my journey seemed to have a distinct personality, just like my human friends.

Like most people (unless there are allergies!), I love the scents and sights of blooming trees in the Spring, the little green buds appearing and then the varied maturing greens of Summer trees. Sometimes in the glory of Fall colors, my breath is taken away. But mostly I love looking at trees in the Winter, when their amazing skeletons are revealed. The larger limbs giving way to ever smaller branches and finally to tiny fingers of mere twigs seem to me to be divinely designed. Winter also allows me to spot abandoned nests and reminds me of all the creatures who have harbored there. And when the sun shines on branches glazed with ice, no human hand can create such a display.

Science has confirmed the wisdom of native peoples in understanding that trees communicate and support one another in ways that provide a good model for we humans to follow. Certainly, trees do so much more for us than we reciprocate. They clean our air, they provide food, they offer shade and shelter, they protect the earth from eroding away and so much more.

I honor the trees in my life. I greet them and thank them for their gifts. I acknowledge and celebrate their individuality and the many lessons they offer. I mourn with them and apologize when they are maimed by the 'trimming' of utility crews. I support the Morton Arboretum and its mission and I thank God for creating (however that came about) such amazing things as trees to share our world.

— *Susan Becker*



Tuesday, February 28

Silence

Every year I have the privilege of traveling to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in northern Minnesota. There are few places I enjoy more than the boundary waters and no physical place that brings me greater peace. It is a place that allows me to imagine what Earth might have looked like before humans began to tinker with it. It is a place that offers the kind of silence, true silence, rarely ever heard in the busy world of today.

Imagine for a moment that you are gently lowering yourself into a canoe. You push away from the shore smoothly, making sure not to lean too far. You gather your balance again and begin to paddle. You're sitting in the front, so all that's before you is the tip of the canoe, the water and the tree-lined shores of the wilderness. In the early morning there is a misty fog that sits atop the water creating a mystical canvas through which the horizon is nearly indiscernible. As you paddle your way across the lake the only sounds you hear are the droplets of water that fall from your paddle with each stroke and the occasional call of a distant loon. If you are close to shore you might hear the rustle of leaves or branches as the squirrels and chipmunks scurry about. You can, at times, hear your own breathing...a sensation that highlights the quieted world around you.

If there were ever a time you were going to bear witness to the divine, this is it. There is nothing to distract you and no one to interrupt you with a text. This is a place in which I feel God's active presence every time I visit. From year to year, no matter what is happening in my life, my time in the boundary waters is a spiritual "reset" for me. It reminds me of the people I hold most dear and the ones I've lost on my journey. It crystalizes for me the things that are most important - my family, my friends, and my church. That time of silence in the boundary waters is perhaps one of the moments of my year that speaks to me the loudest.

— *Mike Tilden*

Wednesday, March 1

Shoshone Creation Story

During the summer of 2021 my eldest son, Wade, and I went on a rafting trip down the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. The scenery was gorgeous; soaring canyon walls, many bighorn sheep, star filled skies, and petroglyphs. I could write a devotional about that grandeur but have chosen to share a creation story told to us by a self-described, Sheep Eater Shoshone woman. (There are also Salmon Eater Shoshone along this river corridor.)

This elder, though I don't recall her name made a deep impression on me. Like Robin Kimmerer, the author of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she is a botanist with multiple degrees and a devout member of her Native American Nation. My retelling will not do justice to her story but I hope you can hear a little of her voice.

"Long ago there was no world as we know it today. The Creator and all creatures lived in a spirit form. One day the Creator called all the spirits to Him and said he was going to create a world and that each of them could tell Him how they wanted to live.

The fish spirit was the first to speak and said he wanted water to swim and play in. He wanted plants, underground mountains and other creatures with him. The Creator agreed.

Next the bear spoke and said he wanted forests with berries and insects. He also wanted a nice place to sleep during the winter. The Creator agreed.

The bighorn sheep said he wanted rocky mountains to climb, grasses and shrubs to eat and streams to provide water. The Creator agreed.

So it went, each animal describing how they wanted to live.

Then the man spirit came to the Creator. He said he wanted to walk on two legs so that he was different from the other creatures. The Creator said he would grant the request but the man must accept a responsibility. The Creator told him there would come a time when the other creatures were in danger and man would need to help them. The man agreed."

— Kathy Fauth



Thursday, March 2

Seeds Imperishable

“For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God”(1 Peter 1:23) (NIV)

Back in the 1960s, excavations at one of the palaces of Herod the Great (yes, that Herod) turned up a bunch of 2000-year-old seeds of the Judean date palm tree. In 2005, scientists managed to get one of them to germinate.

The new tree flowered in 2011. It's begun pollenating other trees, which have begun producing fruit. Six more trees grown from other ancient caches are nearing reproductive maturity. Botanically, this is a big deal; the Judean date palm, widely praised in antiquity, has been functionally extinct for several hundred years.

Most seeds won't stay viable as long as those date palm seeds did; that took some pretty ideal accidental conditions. And yet, seeds do tend to be survivors. It's kind of their whole deal. They sprout from the places the thieving squirrels hid them. They float away on the winds of the storm that knocked their parents down. They sprout in the wake of the fire that decimated their community. They survive the inner acids of the things that eat them, and then use the pile of crap they end up in as fertilizer.

Here's what the author of First Peter, and I, and a bunch of plant nerds in Israel, want you to consider: No matter how you are or how you're feeling—scorched, thieved, knocked down, blown away, eaten alive, utterly crappy, a thousand years old, nearly extinct—it's entirely possible, maybe even likely, that something inside you, placed there long ago by someone who loves you and wills your good, is just about to germinate.

Prayer: Please, God, please. Let the thing in me that I thought was long past surviving start to grow today. Amen.

— *Quinn Caldwell*

Friday, March 3

We must teach our children
To smell the Earth
To taste the rain
To touch the wind
To see things grow
To hear the sun rise and night fall
To care

— *John Cleal*

Sunday school writings

We can respect the earth by planting trees, not littering, and keeping the earth clean. These things help improve the world for all people.

— *Anonymous*

Dear God, Thank you for creating people, animals, trees, flowers and everything. You made our earth for us to take care of it. For the most part people have been taking care of the earth, but not everyone. Some people get caught up in how much money they have or how big their house is.

— *Madison Kurth*

Dear God, Thank you for this beautiful world. I know sometime people treat our world unkindly. I know we can do better. I hope you can forgive us for treating this wonderful world badly. We have beautiful animals, trees, flowers and oceans that you have created. THANK YOU!

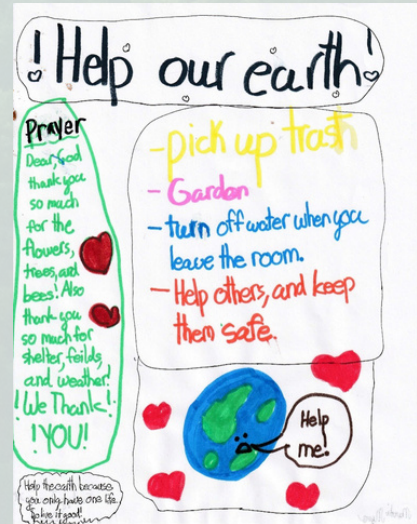
Love,
Anonymous

Saturday, March 4

Hope!

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."
(Romans 15:13)

Daily we are bombarded with bad news about climate change. The ice caps are melting! Our seaboard is going to flood as the oceans rise! Some regions are facing unprecedented drought! Other regions are flooding much more frequently! Weird, violent storms seem more frequent as well. So during this Lenten season, let's reflect upon how our Christian faith can provide some hope for Climate correction.



These global problems are beyond our power to control. Should we worry? Worrying will not fix the problem. But should we live blissfully blind to steps we can take to help?

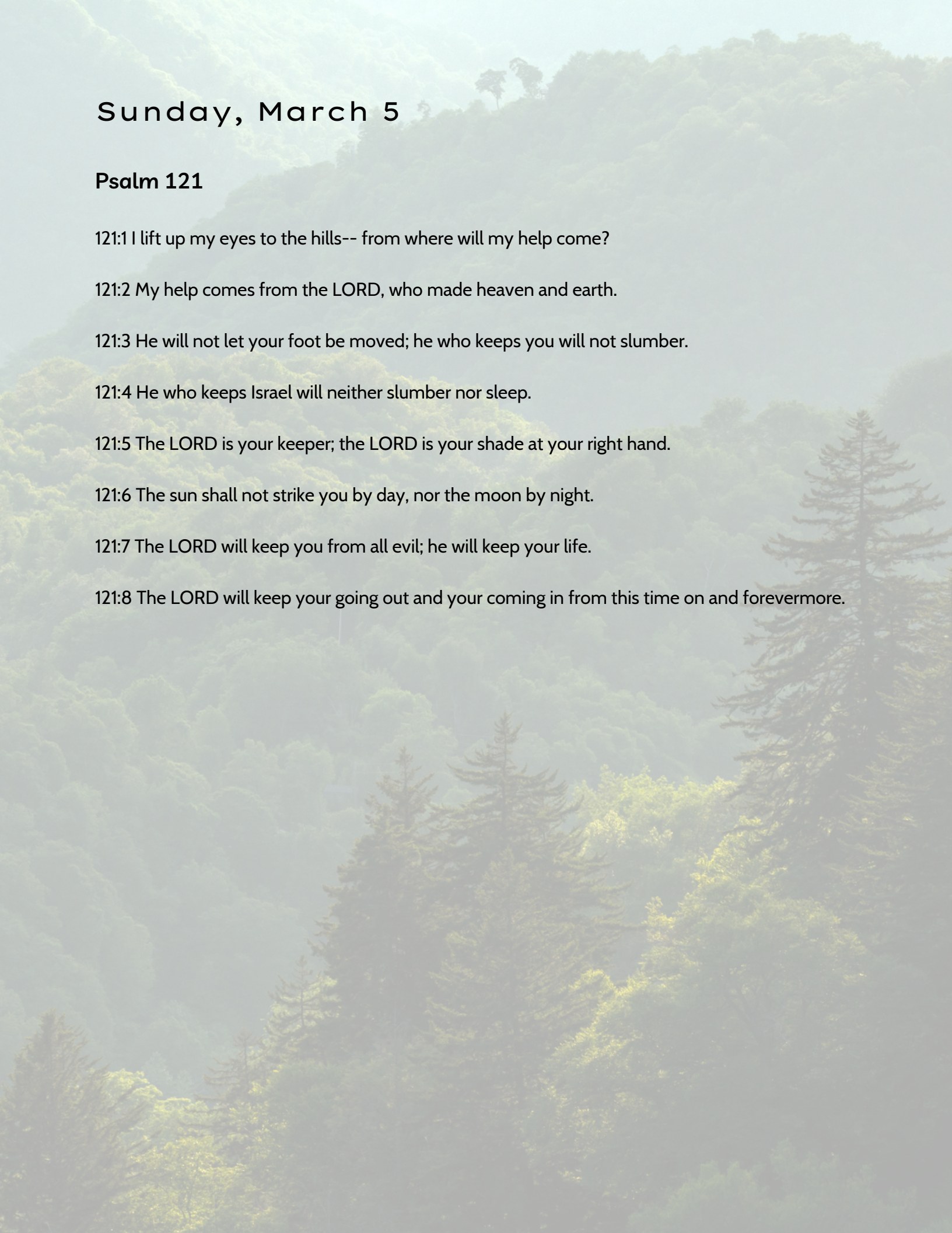
I am reminded of a book called "The Global Ecology Handbook- What You Can Do About the Environmental Crisis" based upon the PBS "Race to Save The Planet" television series. The book was published in 1990. So here we are, over 30 years since the PBS TV series and book trying to alert us to an impending climate crisis. I recall that the format of the Handbook was to outline the issue, warn of dooming trends, and then prescribe the opportunity to work towards a solution locally and individually. This formula reminds me of how God has outlined the human "crisis" (the fall) in the Bible and prescribed the answer through Jesus and his sacrifice for us.

The other thing I am reminded of is that while 30 years seems like a long time to us to God, this is barely a movement in time. Again I don't suggest we do nothing; we need to be good Stewards of God's creation. And indeed, there is much evidence that we have failed in our stewardship responsibility.

Despite warnings from decades ago, there is hope as we now see unprecedented global acknowledgment, analysis, and action to address the climate crisis. I also see hope in you young people who fully grasp the dire situation and are working hard to mitigate it. While I feel that our generation and generations past should be better, we have hope that through God's grace and power beyond our understanding, we can still right the "climate ship."

Prayer: Dear God. Please give us hope that we are on a path to improving our climate for future generations. Please help our leaders and global leaders have the wisdom and fortitude to make the critical policy decision that will preserve and protect what you have so wonderfully created. Also, give each of us the guidance to make the correct daily decisions, whether it is buying products with less packaging, planting new trees, not mowing our lawns as frequently, using fewer lawn chemicals and or recycling, and reducing our overall waste so that your Creation will be available to all to the many generations to come. Amen

— Ron Searle



Sunday, March 5

Psalm 121

121:1 I lift up my eyes to the hills-- from where will my help come?

121:2 My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

121:3 He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.

121:4 He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

121:5 The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.

121:6 The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

121:7 The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

121:8 The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

Monday, March 6

Pastor Rich has often said that those of us coming to this church from different faith traditions should bring with us the best of our old traditions. I guess what goes unspoken is to leave the worst behind. In my case, a few of those things were guilt and shame. It is easy to say you will leave behind guilt and shame, but harder in actual practice. Yet, I like to think I have moved more into relationship with God.

How you go about this is really a choose-your-own-adventure type of situation. When I think about the environmental movement, I see a lot of corollaries with my faith life. I am moving more into relationship with nature and letting go of the guilt and shame that are not productive in the effort. This too can be a choose-your-own-adventure. You can try to eat differently. Eating local foods ties you to the land we have divorced ourselves from. You can try to grow some of your own food, and in the process realize how hard it is to produce enough calories to keep a person, or family alive. It is not easy and hopefully leads to a new appreciation for the food we have and those that provide it. That kind of knowledge helps me eat more leftovers and reduce my food waste. That is living deeper not living with less.

In thinking about the adage about sticks versus carrots for motivation, I prefer carrots to sticks, and this year's CSA provided lots of carrots, believe me. Maybe you are into solar energy or electric vehicles, there's no one silver bullet to cure all the ails and we know we can't solve all the problems at once so pick one or two problems to work on and get started.

Fredrich Wilhelm Heinrich Alexander von Humboldt from the 18th century figured out 'that species are important, but how these species interact and the diversity of these interactions make nature a living force.' Hundreds of years later we see the truth of this observation in Yellowstone National Park as the relationship of wolves changed the behavior of the way elk fed which led to changes in riverbank erosion and that is now literally transforming the landscape. This action is helping to build diversity that had been missing for more than 100 years. Douglas Tallamy, in his book *Nature's Best Hope*, describes how we can transform our own yards into mini-National Parks by planting native flowers and grasses that native moths and butterflies need to breed. Those eggs that hatch caterpillars will then feed native birds, who cannot successfully breed without those caterpillars, and those caterpillars cannot live on non-native plants. Spending a few minutes in our yards or even observing a planter on a balcony can help lower blood pressure, relieve anxiety and mental stress. This is how to deepen and enrich our lives. No guilt or shame here. The work is not easy and failures are a regular part of the process. Laura and I planted half a dozen native shrubs that we hoped would be perfect to provide food for hundreds of species, only to find that the deer, after ignoring them for weeks, destroyed them all in a single night. There are successes too, the migrating warblers in our hackberry tree. The Least fly catcher that has stopped over in our yard the last few years. A population of Orioles that grew from zero to a dozen. So many blessings.

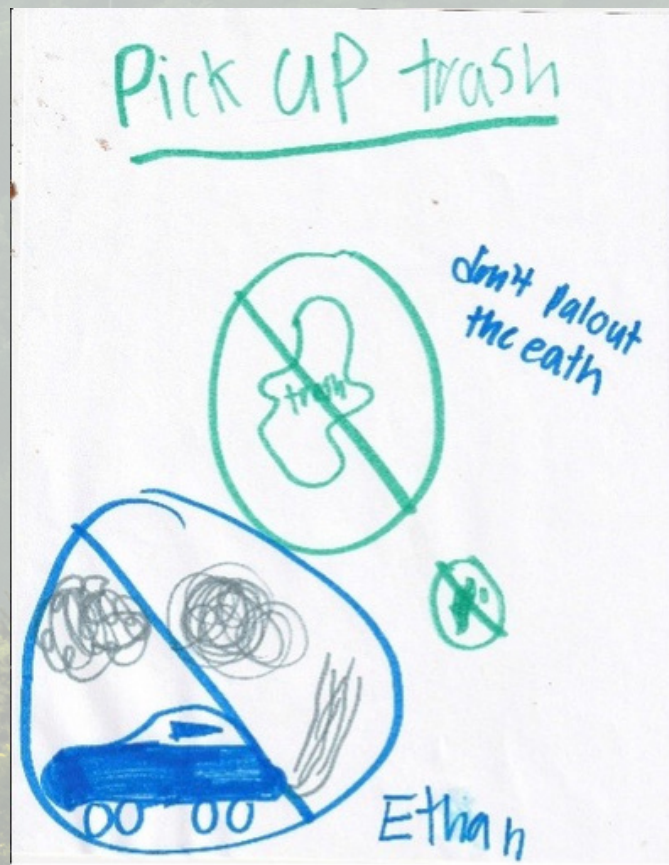
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Monday, March 6 (continued)

Von Humboldt's observation with a few changes of words is a perfect reflection of our faith community. Individuals are important, but how these individuals interact and the diversity of those interactions make the church a loving force. The truth of this is expressed in so many ways in our church, Words and Music, labyrinth walks, book studies, work tours, retreats and on and on. All these vital interactions between individuals strengthening our whole faith community.

I seek out the best natural areas to explore because I need a reminder of what I need to keep my own sights set on. A few weeks hiking the PCT last spring and exploring several National Parks last summer are visions to me of heaven on Earth. Some people need to dwell in the dreams of what they think heaven will be. Perhaps to keep them motivated on where their sights should be set. Still, I know that being in these beautiful spaces does not improve the nature in my yard. Just as dreaming of heaven does not get you any closer to it, or bring that kingdom any nearer. So, we dream, dwell, wander and wonder, but then it is time to roll up our sleeves and dig in. There is work to be done, relationships to observe, repair, rebuild and maintain.

— Mel Tracy



Tuesday, March 7

My Happy Place

My mom was a single parent raising five children and there was no money in our budget for vacations when I was growing up. When I was 16 my aunt took me along on a family vacation to California. It was so special to be going on a vacation and extra-special to me that it was a drive to California. I was awestruck when I got my first glimpse of the Pacific Ocean. I marveled at its vastness and the power of the waves. I loved the way the sun seemed to sparkle like glitter on the surface of the water and the miles of sand that stretched as far as the eye could see.

As I have grown into adulthood the ocean has become my ultimate happy place. Of any vacation I take, those that put me in front of the ocean are the most nourishing and relaxing. Best of all is getting to visit the ocean while escaping our cold Chicago winters! I can walk and sit on the beach for hours and be perfectly content. The ocean is a place that nourishes my body, mind, and spirit and where I become very introspective. Over the years I have come to see the ocean as a metaphor for faith and healthy living. And so, I share with you some of the insights I have gained on my trips to the ocean over the many years of my life.

The vastness of the ocean and of all the grains of sand are reminders that I am part of something larger than myself. The power of the waves reminds me that there is a power greater than me at work. Waves can be cleansing like the waters of Baptism, but like the challenges of life and faith can knock us down! They often overcome us, because there is a tendency to back into them as we move into the water, so as to not get slapped in the face and pulled down by them. However, if you face them head-on, trusting that you have what is needed to ride through them, they don't overwhelm as often. The waves remind me to face life's challenges head-on, trusting that God will give me what is needed to overcome. There is a reason why the rhythmic sound of crashing waves is so soothing and meditative. It literally hastens relaxation. The sounds of the ocean are a reminder of the need to slow down, to take a breath and to refresh the body, mind and spirit through relaxation. I have collected many seashells on my beach walks over the years of various shapes and sizes, some whole and some broken shards. They are a reminder of the beauty in God's creation. As well, they remind me of our brokenness and the potential to become whole; of the miracle of bodies that God created to self-heal. As I walk the sandy beach, I notice how my footprints disappear as water flows over them. It is a reminder that God washed away our sins with his death on the cross and by his grace is continually making us a new creation. Lastly, as the sun which is especially strong at the ocean, warms my skin, I am reminded of the warmth of God's love and of the people in my life.

I try to do my part each day to reduce my carbon footprint so as to have a positive impact on our environment. I pray daily that all people of the earth will be inspired to work to protect the ocean and the rest of nature created by our loving God.

— *Deb Stankiewicz*

Wednesday, March 8

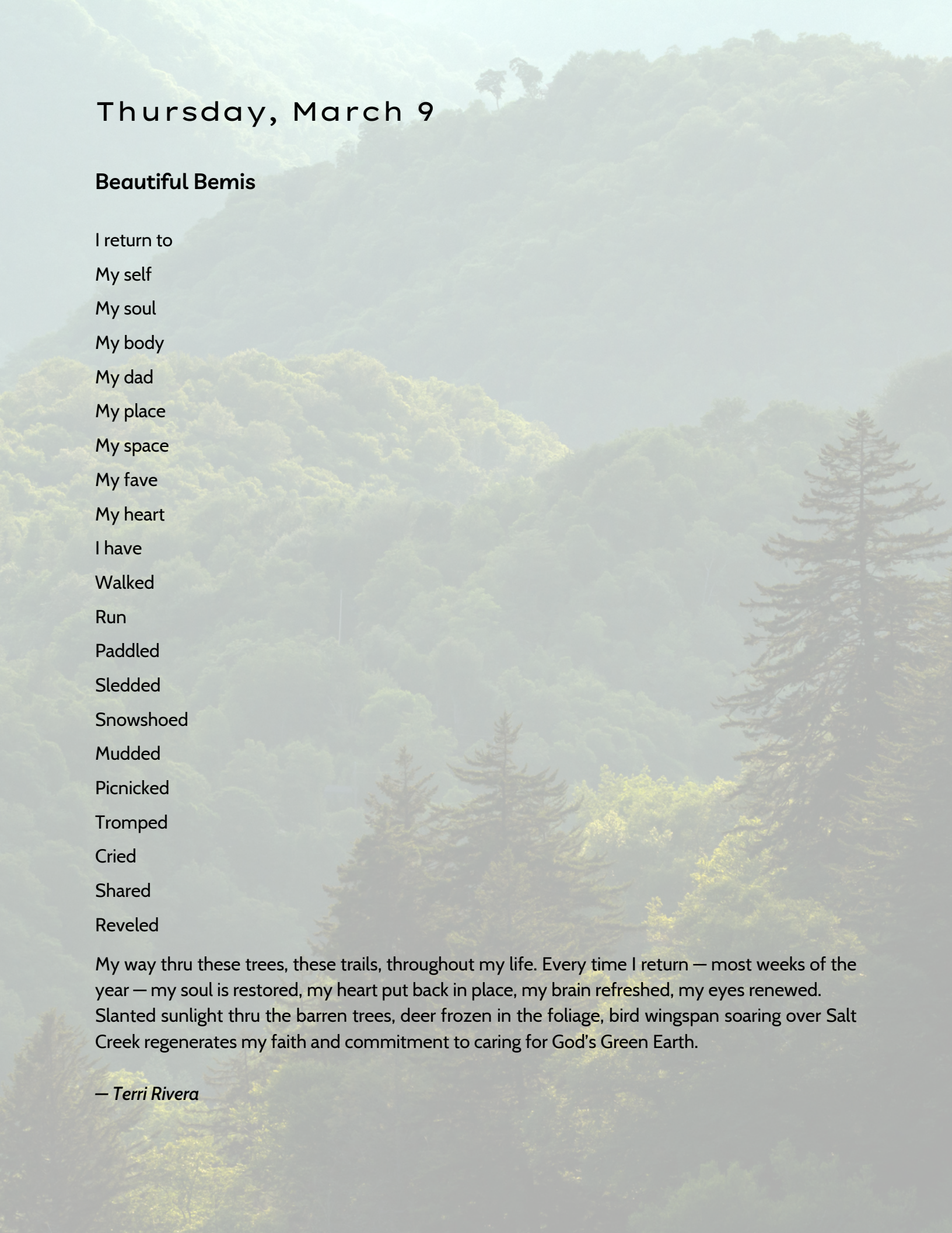
God's Earth

The sunrise comes softly in the darkness. The soft cool colors become brighter and more distinctive as they escort the sun into the day. The light spreads and I think God is starting the day. I don't see it often, but when I do, I am always amazed at the beauty and brilliance that is echoed by the lake beneath it. A sunrise in northern Wisconsin is worth getting up to see. It is there every morning. All I have to do is get up early enough to look out the window and the entire stunning rising of the sun is there is to see.

The sunset is different. If I want to travel a bit I can see the whole thing, but if I am safely inside our cabin, I can only see the edges and reflections of the dropping of the sun from view. I know the sun with delicate elegance is slowly easing out of sight but I cannot see it. The colors and fading glow from the sun are there and I know that the sun is there somewhere. It reminds me that even when I cannot see for myself, there are always signs of God around me. The earth shows me during the day in the shadowy woods, the sunny beach and the cool unpredictable water. The noises that interrupt the dark quiet remind me at night. The life of earth continues. I thank God for it and sometimes I almost hear the words, "It is mine. I give it to you. Take care of it."

— Karen Wierdak





Thursday, March 9

Beautiful Bemis

I return to

My self

My soul

My body

My dad

My place

My space

My fave

My heart

I have

Walked

Run

Paddled

Sledded

Snowshoed

Mudded

Picnicked

Tromped

Cried

Shared

Reveled

My way thru these trees, these trails, throughout my life. Every time I return — most weeks of the year — my soul is restored, my heart put back in place, my brain refreshed, my eyes renewed.

Slanted sunlight thru the barren trees, deer frozen in the foliage, bird wingspan soaring over Salt Creek regenerates my faith and commitment to caring for God's Green Earth.

— *Terri Rivera*

Friday, March 10

Way back (and yes, I mean WAAY back, as in the '70s) when I was in high school, I participated in our "Environmental Club." We created posters to hang around the school and our primary message was "Don't Litter." I don't think recycling was even on our radar at that point. What a long way we have come in learning what it really means to protect our one precious earth. And yet, sadly, what a long way we have come in understanding the damage we are doing in much more devastating ways than littering. It's difficult for me to understand why we don't take better care of what God has created — after all, God gave humans dominion over all of God's creation. The word dominion may be where it all began to go wrong. Our culture and faith seem to have interpreted dominion as "power over" and almost entitlement in thinking, incorrectly, that humans are the most important of God's creation. We forget that God called ALL of his creation GOOD!

Reading *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, by Robin Wall Kimmerer, was quite revelatory given the author's indigenous and scientific view of the care of creation. I highly recommend you pick up a copy. There is so much wisdom in this book, but I want to share this one excerpt, which highlights how our perspective might change if we consider our relationship with creation as a mutual love story.

"I sat once in a graduate writing workshop on relationships to the land. The students all demonstrated a deep respect and affection for nature. They said that nature was the place where they experienced the greatest sense of belonging and well-being. They professed without reservation that they loved the earth. And then I asked them, 'Do you think that the earth loves you back?' No one was willing to answer that. It was as if I had brought a two-headed porcupine into the classroom. Unexpected. Prickly. They backed slowly away. Here was a room full of writers, passionately wallowing in unrequited love of nature.

So I made it hypothetical and asked, 'What do you suppose would happen if people believed this crazy notion that the earth loved them back?' The floodgates opened. They all wanted to talk at once. We were suddenly off the deep end, heading for world peace and perfect harmony.

One student summed it up: 'You wouldn't harm what gives you love.'

Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel the earth love you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond."

May we, too, create a sacred bond with all that God has created.

— Rev. Meredith Onion

Saturday, March 11

There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature, the assurance that dawn comes after night and spring after winter. Our faith follows a similar pattern, light overcomes darkness. In grief and despair, we are comforted by the light of the world that came to us as an infant in a far-away manger.

Native Americans and First Nation people like the Lakota, worship the Great Spirit Wakan Tanka. Wakan Tanka can be interpreted as the power or the sacredness that resides in everything. Chief Luther Standing Bear {1868 -1939} of the Lakota Nation put it this way:

From the Great Spirit came a great unifying life force that flowed in and through all things – the flowers of the plains, blowing winds, rocks, trees, birds, animals, --and was the force that had breathed into the first man. Thus, all things were kindred, and were brought together by the same great Mystery. In modern tradition this doctrine regarding the great spirit has generally takes on the Christian ideas of a monotheistic God. The great spirit is the creator or father. Native American blankets pay homage to the presence of The Great Spirit in all living things. The Earth accordingly is our mother.

Lame Deer a Mineconju-Sioux {1903-1976} wrote:

There must be a day When Indians and non-Indians alike, can again see ourselves as part of the earth, not as an enemy from the outside who tries to impose its will on it. Because we also know that, being a living part of the earth, we cannot harm any part of her without hurting ourselves. Our beliefs must remind us of sincere gratitude, a feeling of overwhelming love, and thankfulness for the gifts of our Creator and the earth

In Genesis we read the account of creation of the heavens and earth, of light and darkness and of all of God's earth's creatures. As stewards of those gifts, we must not harm or destroy them. We see God's creation in every stream, river, or lake, in every pebble, rock, rocky cliff or towering mountain, in the deer that inhabit our neighboring woods or the birds that flutter about, or in the tiniest creatures that often go unseen. We also need to see God in every person that we meet along our faith journey on God's beautiful creation. We appreciate the variety and beauty of flowers that we truly admire, likewise we must also respect and protect all individuals that are perceived as different. We have been given a great charge of God's wondrous creation, so allow this Lenten season to help us be good and faithful stewards. We are obligated to do this so our children may inherit a better, safer, and healthier environment, where all living things can leave in peace and harmony.

— Bob Kos

Sunday, March 12

Psalm 95

95:1 O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

95:2 Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

95:3 For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods.

95:4 In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also.

95:5 The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed.

95:6 O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

95:7 For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice!

95:8 Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,

95:9 when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

95:10 For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways."

95:11 Therefore in my anger I swore, "They shall not enter my rest."

Monday, March 13

Proverbs 22:6 The Message

Point your kids in the right direction—when they're old they won't be lost.

My upbringing has influenced my approach to respecting and worshipping our natural world. I was raised by two Mennonites whose parents had lived through the Depression. My childhood in Mexico taught us to make do with what we had and not waste anything. The More with Less cookbook was the only one my mom used when we lived there, as we couldn't get any of the ingredients in the Betty Crocker books of the time. In addition to growing up with home-cooked meals, I have the privilege of having good memories of the church. I feel supported by God and the people who came before me when I do things like:

- Sing loudly in church while remembering my maternal grandfather, who couldn't "carry a tune in a bucket," belting out the hymns in his church, where my mother had to sit on the men's side with her father because she was "hard to control."
- Wash out my Ziploc bags with a brush and a solid bar of dish soap as I work towards eliminating single-use plastics from my life.
- Ride my bike to work in the warmer weather. My father rode his bike through an entire Chicago winter when they couldn't afford a second car, and thinking of his perseverance gives me strength. Plus, the ride serves as a meditation and prayer through the forest preserve that clears my head and allows me to be more compassionate.
- Wash, fold, and sometimes iron my hankies, which reminds me how grateful I am to live in a time and place where I don't have to haul water for my daily needs and can be a woman physician.
- Appreciate all we have as we choose to live a more minimalist life. This choice has included downsizing to a simple two-bedroom condo where everything we own has a definite purpose.

And, finally, finding a church home where my renegade Mennonite, feminist, liberal self feels fully and completely whole. What is one thing I can do today to make a difference?

—*Jacqueline Walker*

Tuesday, March 14

C.S. Lewis wrote “I find solace and nourishment in nature. The only command nature demands of us is to look and be present”. Throughout my life, nature has provided great solace and nourishment. My earliest remembrance of the awesome power of nature was my father’s strong arms grabbing me when I was caught in the undertow of the Atlantic Ocean during a family visit to Providence, Rhode Island. Closer to home, my childhood and teenage summers were spent as a member of the Western Springs Service Club Swimming Team, and I especially loved swim meets held at pools set in parks, such as those in Clarendon Hills and Glen Ellyn. The tall trees were so pretty, as we huddled in our towels and waited for our events.

In the summer before fourth grade, my father was the musician at a boys’ camp called Camp Owakonzee, situated on an island in Ontario, Canada. The family joke was that I loved that summer even more than my two older brothers. My mother and I had our own cabin and canoe, and the freedom of going out on Baril Lake every day and looking up at the Northern Lights at night was awesome.

As a college student at NIU and a 4th and 5th grade teacher at Monroe School in Hinsdale, I had many opportunities to take students to Lorado Taft Field Campus in Oregon, Illinois, and George Williams College in Williams Bay, Wisconsin. My students were delighted to explore the rock formations, a working farm, and Yerkes Observatory.

In 1989, my father treated our family to a week at Camp Mishawaka in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, where he and his brother Bob had been campers and counselors. The trees became taller and more fragrant in the ten-hour drive to camp, and walking the trails with my father, my husband, and our two sons will always be a special memory.

Most recently, our family was captivated as we watched sea otters floating by on their backs in Morro Bay, California, overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

Still, my favorite vacation spot is sitting on my glider in our backyard, looking up at a tall oak tree. Nature has provided just what I need.

— Nancy Caris



Wednesday, March 15

It is difficult to choose the single most poignant aspect of God's beautiful world. I reflected on my favorite memories of sharing a special place and time in God's presence. It was a process of deciding which place remained deep in my soul even though it occurred many years ago.

I chose the ocean as it is a special place because it touches all of the senses.

My eyes see the fabulous designs that the waves leave as they constantly move in and out just like God's breath. They see the tide pools filled with life and the beautiful shells that bring a variety of colors to brighten our world. They see the sunrise or sunset that rises or falls above the ocean greeting and ending each day. What a blessing to behold God's work.

My ears hear the crashing of the waves, the loud boom that awakens me to the sound of God's powerful voice that can't be missed. They hear the bird calls as the sky becomes alive with the music of nature.

My fingers and toes touch the soft sand that is wet with the waters of the ocean. My feet leave a trail of where I have been, but God's waves rush in to remove any physical trace of the past. It is a reminder to live in the moment and enjoy all you touch and feel. They are gifts from God you will carry.

My nose smells the breath of the ocean. I know that God has filled it with many fish that can be used to feed a hungry world. As the wind hits my face, I feel God's breath filling me with life. We are sharing a special moment of rebirth together. It brings a moment of peace and clarity.

My mouth tastes the fruits of the sea as we sit on the beach enjoying a meal of fish. I usually forget the bounty that we use from the sea. One of the many gifts God provides for us. It reminds me to take care of this holy place. We need to leave the beach as it was on the day of its creation.

My heart beats with the waves of the ocean. It is filled with joy and thankfulness that God has given me this special space. It is calmed and at peace when filled with God's breath in the sea breeze. What a blessing we have in the ocean. May we work together to honor God by caring for it.

— *Nanette Farina*

Thursday, March 16

We owe them

Is there really anything I can do that will make a difference? YES! For the love of God's creation – YES!!

I have to be honest, this topic (as I'm sure my wife would tell you) gets me fired up. I get so frustrated when people don't seem to care that we are destroying the planet or think that what they do doesn't really have an impact. I'm beyond saddened at the ways we all tend to be wasteful – myself included at times. It keeps me up at nights sometimes, thinking about what I did or didn't do that day...how I probably contributed to the mess we've created.

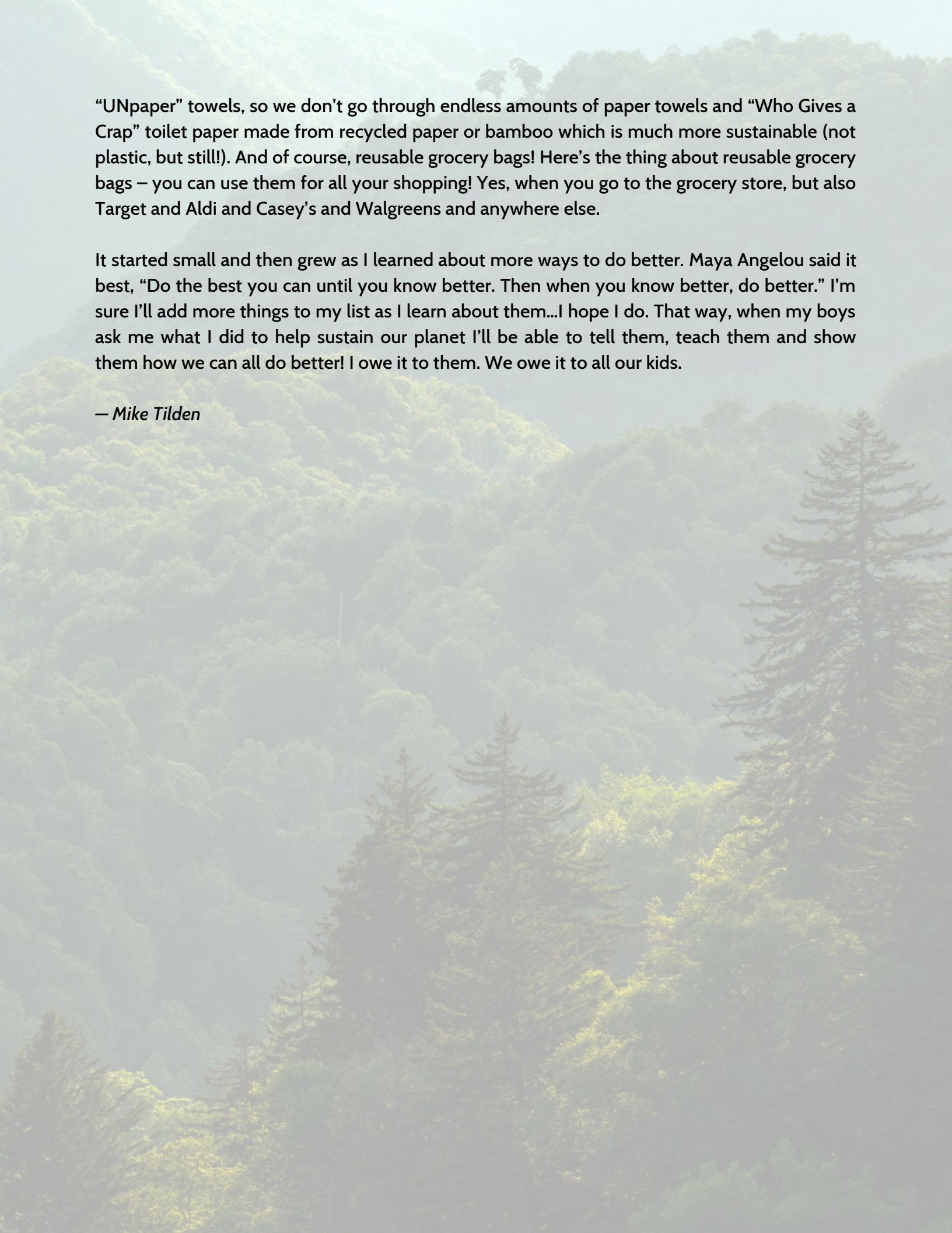
For so long I used to be one of those “can I really make a difference” folks. Wanna know when that started to turn around? Believe it or not, when I became part of the church's Green Team! It started slow, but the Green Team has turned into an incredible machine for positive change in our world. And then I had kids and thought to myself, “NO, I can do better...I MUST do better!” We all owe it to those who will follow us to do better.

Maybe you think it's too much or you don't know where to start, I get it. I thought that, too. So, I started small. I picked an area of passion and social media has nudged me from there.

For me, a major spark was the “Save the Boundary Waters” Campaign. There was a plan to build a sulfide-ore mine directly adjacent to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, a protected wilderness with some of the most pristine lakes and water in the world in northern Minnesota. A sulfide-ore mine would, without question, leak toxins into the water system of the boundary waters, polluting them forever. Maybe my most beloved place on Earth and they wanted to ruin it. Don't think so. I started following some social media campaigns to protect the BWCAW and supported when I could. The good news is President Biden just signed a bill that will protect the BWCAW for the next 20 years – big victory! But we're not done until it's protected forever.

Well, those “follows” led to other “suggestions” from Instagram. And my next big passion became the elimination of plastic from my world (as much as possible at least). I got Bite toothpaste tablets instead of the plastic tubes of paste. I got Vunella or Earthling Co shampoo and conditioner bars – no more giant plastic bottles. I switched our family to Earth Breeze or Blue Water laundry detergent strips shipped in recyclable containers – goodbye enormous plastic containers full of mostly water. I found Humankind deodorant and so no longer throw away plastic deodorant containers. Our family uses Blueland dishwasher detergent, household cleaners and hand soap tablets in reusable pump jars – no more plastic waste. I even found

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“UNpaper” towels, so we don’t go through endless amounts of paper towels and “Who Gives a Crap” toilet paper made from recycled paper or bamboo which is much more sustainable (not plastic, but still!). And of course, reusable grocery bags! Here’s the thing about reusable grocery bags – you can use them for all your shopping! Yes, when you go to the grocery store, but also Target and Aldi and Casey’s and Walgreens and anywhere else.

It started small and then grew as I learned about more ways to do better. Maya Angelou said it best, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” I’m sure I’ll add more things to my list as I learn about them...I hope I do. That way, when my boys ask me what I did to help sustain our planet I’ll be able to tell them, teach them and show them how we can all do better! I owe it to them. We owe it to all our kids.

— *Mike Tilden*

Friday, March 17

It was a beautiful winter afternoon. Large snowflakes fluttered in the air covering the branches of the trees along the Forest Preserve path. As I walked along, my mind reflected on my morning; discussing faith and Paul preaching to the Athenians regarding the altar in the city square that read "To an Unknown God" with a group of 6th and 7th graders. As is always the case when I am blessed with the opportunity to gather with this group, I was impressed with the deep thoughts and observations they express. We shared our thoughts on the God Paul introduced to those gathered in the city square; our God. We spoke about His presence in our lives and the many ways our God is an awesome God.

As I reached the lake at the end of the path and stood looking at the fluffy white snowflakes as they landed on the surface and disappeared in the water, I began to reflect on the awesomeness of our God and his amazing creation. The birds sang from the warmth of their nests and an old man fishing on the shore rose from his seat on his 5-gallon bucket to reel in the fish he had caught. The calmness of a perfect world surrounded me and I was instantly reminded of a spring a number of years ago when I stood in this same place reflecting on the wonder of God's creation and my need to do my part to preserve it. It was then that I decided to replant the gardens within my yard.

For a number of years, I have spent most of my spring planting time adding native plants to my landscape. It has turned into a Mother's Day tradition. My son and I attend the Native Plant Sale together purchasing plants and introducing them to their new home. I've researched natural environments and Ricky has helped me create an environment certified as a habitat by the World Wildlife Federation that includes a small pond with fish and shelter for toads, places for birds to nest and feed, plants where insects feed and can shelter in the cold weather. It is not a traditional city garden with gorgeous Asiatic Lilies and other imported species neatly trimmed. My gardens look overgrown and in need of love. In the late autumn they look neglected and in serious need of fall cleaning, but I have learned to appreciate them as a sliver of God's perfect creation providing food and shelter for a small number of the many creatures God has provided to us.

My yard is but a microcosm of the vastness I stood in, but it is still providing me with every joy the Forest Preserve gave me on that day. I enjoy the birds' song (accompanied by the laughter of children), seasonal flowers playing hosts to beautiful butterflies, bees and other insects and after nightfall, raccoons, opossum and an occasional red fox stopping by for a quick drink as it roams the area. One summer night, I watched as a mother raccoon taught her babies to swim. From now on, as I enjoy the calmness of a perfect world from the comfort of my own home, I will be reminded of that Sunday and my observations of that day.

The members of the Junior High Sunday School Class said it best, "Our God is an Awesome God who is always with us."

— *Kathi Harbecke*

Saturday, March 18

"And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." John 6:12

A recent New York Times headline caught my eye: "How Central Ohio Got People to Eat Their Leftovers." As I dug in (pun intended) to the article, it not only spoke to me but quantified what I had suspected all along:


In a land of seemingly endless supermarket aisles, don't waste food" may sound more like an old-fashioned admonition than a New Year's resolution. But to some people, especially those concerned about the environment, it's a cause that deserves our attention. In the United States, food waste is responsible for twice as many greenhouse gas emissions as commercial aviation, leading some experts to believe that reducing food waste is one of our best shots at combating climate change.

In addition to this alarming news, they also cited the statistic that "Households account for 39 percent of food waste in the U.S., more than restaurants, grocery stores or farms." Now, I don't profess to be a militant environmentalist by any stretch, although I've tried to take incremental steps where I can, such as saving my Styrofoam containers for the monthly drop-off and bringing plastic bags back to the supermarket. But, like many of us, I know I have a long way to go. But these statistics are staggering, especially given my ongoing obsession with cooking and food.

I like to think I'm generally pretty good at not wasting food, whether as a result of watching my mother struggle to feed us on a meager salary or from having a Bohemian grandmother who could make soup out of anything. Added to that, there is always the nagging moral dilemma of wasting so much food when others have so little. But, when prompted to really take the time to take stock of my refrigerator (the worst offender), it gave me food for thought – literally. How can I do better? How do I keep things from disappearing into the abyss, not to be unearthed until their scent wafted out with each opening of the door or their furry growth mocked me?

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Since doubling down on my resolve to waste less food, I've come up with a few strategies that seem to be helping. I've even passed some of these on to my beloved mother (whose refrigerators--yes, plural-- would cause heart failure in anyone concerned with food waste). Here are only a few things we can do to take those first steps at being better stewards of our resources and environment:

- Take inventory before you shop. Not only so you don't buy doubles (especially of perishables), but so you can come up with a creative use of food that may require only one or two additional ingredients. If you have extra, wilting cabbage, you can make cabbage rolls, coleslaw and minestrone, for example:
 - Use foil for food storage at your peril. If you must, peruse those mystery foil packets at least every other day.
 - Commit to one or more "pot luck" or "mash up" dinner a week. This is where I prompted my mom—there is no rule that says everyone has to eat the same food for dinner! Take out the half dozen single servings of meat, potatoes, veggies, salad and put them on the counter as a free-for-all.
 - Repurpose or reuse: If you've got something on the brink of decay, or received too much of an odd vegetable in your CSA box, Google it. Chances are you can find a way to use it up that will be at the very least creative and perhaps even delicious (here's looking at you, kohlrabi!). Slightly stale bread? Voila, croutons or bread crumbs. Tomatoes getting a bit squishy? How about some salsa or pasta sauce? The possibilities for repurposing are endless, and something my patient family has come to view with only a hint of amusement or suspicion.
 - When all else fails, compost. It's still wasting, but at least releases less methane than food dumped in landfills.

Let us truly commit to gathering up our fragments and doing our part, small as it is, to not only preventing the destruction of our environment but also by not squandering the bounty we have been given access to.

— *Sue Spear*



Sunday, March 19

Psalm 23:

23:1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

23:2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

23:3 he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

23:4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff-- they comfort me.

23:5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

23:6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

Monday, March 20

Being A Good Steward of Creation

I have no idea who named it. It was known to all the kids in the neighborhood as The Family Tree. Even my brother, nine years my senior, knew it as The Family Tree. It was an old oak, the largest, most majestic in a forest on the side of a hill, a scant block from my home. We had tied a rope to a tall branch, from which no one had ever swung down to break their neck. (But sometimes we came pretty close!)

It was a great 'climbing tree,' and we neighborhood kids frequently congregated there. Several of us ended up sprayed with Bactine, or worse yet, stinging Mechurochrome, after the law of gravity defeated us and The Family Tree tried to knock sense into us. Its leaves covered dares and dangers. Indeed, I first-kissed a girl leaning against its trunk! How long ago that was!

Other trees might have housed 'tree forts,' but The Family Tree belonged to everybody, and no one clique ever dared claim it as their own. Are there 'Family Trees' anymore?

Are there 'communal gathering spots' where Nature allows my young grandsons and your young granddaughters to use their muscles and imaginations to better glimpse the horizon before calls of "Suppertime!" disband them? And they 'grow up' and grow busy...

...Or is this simply an old man musing about the 'good old daze?'

Holy One,

Yes, I know things are different now.

Perhaps organized sports and iPads hold sway over young peoples' free time more than climbing Mother Nature's trees. But as a follower of Jesus, help me invest in a 'clean energy future,' help me hold polluters accountable, and enable me to do more to protect the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the trees that provide roots, branches, and leaves for all the ages. Amen

— *Bill Hoglund*

Tuesday, March 21

Hospitality

Hospitality. When thinking about that word, I almost immediately start to sweat a little because it makes me think of a perfect dinner party and a gourmet meal. Not really things in my skill set.

While we often think of hospitality, even God's, being connected to food and meals, the Eucharist, and welcoming strangers, I think there is something really beautiful about reflecting on God's hospitality in nature. And where my mind went when reflecting about where I see God's hospitality in nature is pretty cliché, but let me explain. I see God's hospitality in sunsets.

I grew up in West Michigan in a home where we could walk to the shore of Lake Michigan in about 15 minutes. I saw so many sunsets along that beach growing up that by the time I was a high school student, I couldn't have cared less. In the summer and fall months, my parents would often ask if I wanted to walk with them and the family dog down to the lake for sunset and I would roll my eyes and say no thanks. Plans with friends or watching tv were more appealing than seeing yet another sunset.

But then as I grew older, I moved away from west Michigan, and I now appreciate sunsets over my favorite lake so much more. I soak up any Lake Michigan sunset I can, and I love experiencing sunsets in other parts of the country as well - the colors and landscapes less familiar to me but still astoundingly beautiful. Side note: On a recent trip to Virginia we were watching a beautiful sunset in the foothills of the mountains and my son asked me "Why do grown-ups care about sunsets so much?" And all I could think was - oh sweet boy, I get it. I didn't much care about sunsets at your age either. But someday I hope you too will pause to enjoy them.

And so I believe sunsets (despite the tremendous cliché) reflect God's hospitality because literally everyone is invited. Whether you look up to the sky and see the sun lowering behind skyscrapers, a great expansive plain of farmland, a suburban neighborhood, a desert, a gorgeous mountain range or a beautiful body of water, it can take your breath away. A sunset draws people in. It includes everyone. And so it is with God's hospitality. Everyone is invited. No gourmet meal or place cards required.

— Laura Tilden

Light Inside

I wonder if
You know,
Dear son,
(I think you might)
You sent me
Light!
Plants are growing!
Not able to
In darkness,
They crave light!
Sprouting
Inside!
Pushing upward,
In tiny pots,
Working through
The earth!
Inside!
Depending on light
Given by a bulb!
A very thoughtful gift
Because you know
The importance
Of true light,
To grow
To flourish
To pass on
Life!

— Gail Avgeris

Wednesday, March 22

I imagine that as God was escorting Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden (Adam glowering at Eve; Eve saying, “And where were you when the serpent came around?” And, alas, the finger-pointing began) God might have said something akin to this: “Well, you two really blew it back there, but I am going to give you another chance. I give you dominion over all the earth. Her well-being is contingent upon your good stewardship. She is your ‘Mother Earth’ because she exists to provide for you. As you discover her resources and make use of them, apply them judiciously. Be governed by foresight and charity, not by greed. This abundance is provided for all generations.”

I, as have so many other church members and PFers ventured several times to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in northern Minnesota. After we had loaded our canoes with our gear and food packs and set out, it never took more than a moment for me to feel embraced by the majestic trees, the stillness, and the peace offered by this area. Here I can readily sense God’s loving work.

After traversing any number of lakes and portages to find a campsite, we unloaded, set up tents, defined and assigned chores, and settled in. Here, we are on our own – no phones! If we wanted drinking water – grab some jugs and paddle out 100 yards and fill them. If we wanted to cook -- scavenge firewood and build a fire; etc. There are no “givens” here. We immersed ourselves in this splendor for a few days, and then started the journey back, strengthened by the experience.

Obviously, we cannot remain in or recover this simple, challenging life. Our culture(s) have evolved too deeply into industrialization, automation, and mass-production. However, there are lessons to be drawn from the experience that are critically important to us every day:

Conserve water; don’t waste food; recycle garbage; do no harm; work together and share the tasks; leave the area as pristine as we found it for the next group of campers. We can live most comfortably on much less than we think we must have.

None of these simple practices will undo the great harm we have done to the earth and ourselves; but if we each make a concerted effort to practice them in our daily lives, and imbue them in our children and grandchildren, their generations might have some success repairing and renewing this earth. It is contingent upon each one of us to wind-down our demand for excess goods that consume our resources; and to accept that contrary to the appearance of limitless abundance (oceans, fresh water, farm- land, timber, ores, etc.) all are finite and vulnerable. When I think of the earth as a gift from God to us all, rather than as a given to do with what we want, I understand and sense more deeply God’s presence here with us.

Hopefully, we can re-embrace our heavenly Father’s initial instructions to us: “I give you dominion over all the earth. Her well-being is contingent upon your good stewardship.”

— *Barry Orr-Depner*

Thursday, March 23

That's What Friends Are For

I really do believe that my faith led me to be a better steward of our earth. That stewardship came about because of my friendships with really amazing people who have taught me how to be a steward. People who just so happen to be members of our wonderful church.

When Brian and I joined the church 30+ years ago, I can't say I knew much about how at-risk our environment was besides, "put litter in its place," (which meant to use a trash can).



Fast forward to 2023: I can't bear to see a piece of styrofoam go in the trash – because in 2015, my friends Wendy & Greg Vichick and Dick Kassner and the church's Green Team (now led by Joe Skvara & Sue Klein) helped pioneer the renowned styrofoam monthly recycling event in Western Springs. Don't get me started talking about recycling cardboard, metal or plastic bags!

Twenty years ago, I got involved in rummage, because of *another champion* recycler of First Congo: Mary Ann Skvara. We get thousands of drop-off items, and I'd say that less than 5% actually goes into the dumpster (we used to need two, now we barely fill up one). Her passion is finding a home (not a landfill) for most anything that can't be sold at the sale. Mary Ann taught me how to think about *all of our stuff*, and it starts with a simple question: *Where could this be used/donated/recycled before it goes in the trash?*

Five years ago, rummage chair Terri Lane and I saw an article on a new NGO organization called, "Chicago Furniture Bank." She made a call to the founders; they drove a truck to the church at the end of the sale, and we donated much of our unsold furniture and housewares to them, to be given to unhoused families in need of an apartment and some furniture. Today, multiple NGOs, like one of our mission partners, BEDS Plus, are connected to CFB. And yes, Mary Ann and I, and other work teams are at CFB sorting, packing and recycling donations a couple days a month. It's important.

Thank you, my dear friends! Thank you for your brains, passion, energy and love for our environment; your willingness to teach others, and the time you give to protect god's creation. Bless you for making me a better caretaker of this home we call earth!

— Zada Clarke

Friday, March 24

Each year I look forward to the Lenten Devotional topic and to reading the various interesting submissions. When I saw the topic for this year “Being Good Stewards of God’s Creation”, I was intrigued.

I considered what really is God’s creation. We’re taught that he created heaven and earth, and then human life through Adam & Eve. God also created all of the wild animals including the serpent (or snake, aka Satan). Adam and Eve were the first stewards of God’s creation and entrusted to live in the Garden of Eden with only one rule:

And the Lord God commanded the man, *“You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”* — Gen 2:16-17

While Adam slept, God created Eve from one of Adam’s ribs. The snake sees Eve walking around the Garden one day and stops to ask her a question... the snake asks her if she was SURE of God’s rules.

Now the serpent (or snake) was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, *“Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”* — Gen. 3:1


Eve tells Satan exactly what God said. The woman said to the serpent, *“We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”* — Gen. 2:2-3

But Satan, the serpent, has one more question for her: *“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”* — Gen. 2:4-5

Eve could not resist and so she ate an apple from the tree of knowledge. According to God’s commandment, they would now die, but they didn’t fall over dead immediately. Was God lying? No, here’s what was going on:

As long as we have a relationship with God, as long as we are connected to God, we have access to Heaven. We know that when we die we will go to Heaven to be with God and live forever. When we sin, or do bad things, we break our connection to God. If we don’t have a connection to, or a relationship with God when we die, where do we go? We go to Hell, and that is the worst kind of death?

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Like Adam and Eve, as soon as we sin, we begin to die because we have broken our connection to God.

But the story doesn't end there.

We can fix our relationship with God, by asking Jesus to save us. We can ask Jesus to save us from the bad things we've done, and from Hell. We ask Him to repair our relationship with God and allow us to go to Heaven when we die.

God made us to be in a relationship with Him, and when we admit that we have sinned and ask Jesus to forgive us, we are being Good Stewards of God's Creation. God is there to rescue us, if we just ask.

— *Dave Onion*

Saturday, March 25

God's Hospitality

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

— Hebrews 13:16

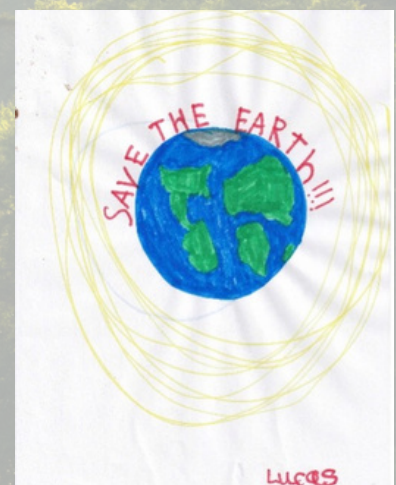
During this Lenten season, I have been reflecting on how God's creation demonstrates the grace and care I feel as I navigate in wonderful environmental spaces where I like to hike. In an earlier Lenten devotion, I admitted that I like the solitude of hikes by myself. I also need to confess this is for entirely selfish reasons. I enjoy taking photos, whether a simple landscape picture or something more exciting like a coyote, owl, deer, or some other creature. I often take photos of the same subject type because I enjoy looking at the pictures to see if I can detect any behavioral differences from one experience to the next.

Why do I do this? I have always been fascinated by the natural world around us. This curiosity began for me at a very early age. I don't recall the exact age, but as a child in a small rural community, I had the great opportunity to explore the fields, meadows, streams, and rivers surrounding us. I would often collect specimens that I would take home to study. I would eventually release most of them after a trip to the local library to check out as many relevant books as possible, so I could consume information on my exciting find! I guess taking pictures, as I do now, is a different and more environmentally friendly way to continue my study of God's creation - the natural world around us.

On my hikes, I will often find a nice spot to sit and observe the natural elements around me. Admittedly this lengthens my hike time beyond what most would consider necessary. But these moments are moments of connection for me— spiritual connection and appreciation for the natural world God created to host each of us.

Prayer: Dear God. Please give us the discipline and patience to occasionally stop, from our busy schedules to sit, observe and appreciate the natural world - the creation you have made for us to host our activities and our lives. Use these moments to remind us of your greatness as our host for this temporary time on this earth. Let us seek the joy in using such opportunities to further connect to you and everything that your greatness. Amen

— Ron Searle



Sunday, March 26

Psalm 130:

130:1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

130:2 Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

130:3 If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?

130:4 But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.

130:5 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;

130:6 my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.

130:7 O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.

130:8 It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

Monday, March 27

Laura and I set out last August on an adventure of a life time. In truth, it was a journey of at least a few life times. My mother and father had talked of taking a trip across the country with their pop-up camper after my father retired. But my father fell ill a few months before he retired. He was diagnosed with cancer and passed on two short months later. My mother camped with Laura and me and our four kids for a week or so every year for many years, but never took that grand trip she had planned. She regularly gave donations to the Nature Conservancy and I would pan through the magazine they sent sometimes when I would visit her. "Wouldn't you love to visit this place?" I once asked her. "It's enough for me to know that it is there," she replied.

Work and kids and life conspired to keep our family from ever taking more than a long week vacation. (long week being my term for the 9 days of two weekends with the 5 workdays sandwiched in between) So the 5 weeks we were heading out for was an unfathomable amount of time. Alone, together, sans kids in a 17 by 7-foot trailer.

We talked about work for the first several days. Our regular life peeled away in layers. The Midwest rolled passed. We lingered at a campground with electricity (and the gift of AC) an extra day as brutal heat beat down on the Dakotas. (National Parks do not have electric hook ups) We entered Theodore Roosevelt National Park, almost without expectation. We had been too busy with work to really plan out the details or read about the places we were to visit. The views and wildlife were stunning. The hiking was almost lonely. Out of the fog, on a morning hike, a pronghorn appeared running along a ridge we were hiking towards then disappeared in the mist. No sound, no rumble of the ground. A day later a herd of bison, another of wild horses. A field of prairie dogs and a conversation with young rangers about the possible resurrection of the black footed ferret as we pointed them to a Lazuli Bunting. There was a long slow inhalation of this place. Sunsets and sunrises reflected on the weather-beaten bluffs. The river and wind, the petrified forest, and a long exhale. We moved farther west.

God was subtly noticeable in the plains and badlands. Not so subtle at Glacier National Park. Each bend of the endlessly turning road confronted us with awe. Sometimes awe turned to awful, or at least perplexing. We saw a mother moose who had become viral on social media for defending her two calves with utter tenacity from a grizzly bear earlier this year, it was almost enough. We saw her one remaining calf as well. They actually came crashing and charging down the trail towards us, scared by a crew working on a trail. "Hey Moose, Hey Moose!" I yelled to try to catch their attention and alert them to our presence. The mother halted, inspected us for a time, a long time, like way uncomfortably too long, then headed off trail towards the lake we were hiking around. It is hard not to feel fragile in those circumstances. I am like Nick Cave, "I don't believe in an interventionist God" but sometimes I wonder if that's true. I had similar thoughts each time we saw a bear. Have faith, but carry bear spray would be my psalm.

A jaunt through Idaho, then to North Cascades. Work made us take a break from our adventuring and we stopped into a local coffee shop for excellent coffee, and Wi-Fi. We had to literally reconnect with the real world. The mayor of the town dropped off a stack of the local newspaper

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for which he was the chief reporter, editor, publisher and apparently delivery man. I bought a paper and, after an afternoon hike, I tucked into my future fire starter. The paper had excellent articles and nice hometown news, I should have stopped there and not looked at the police column. I could not believe the number of shootings. Young drunk man kills man outside bar after altercation. Another man shot and killed another after a road rage incident. Peace, tranquility, murder, rage.

Our stop at Olympic National Park felt like a visit to an ancient, pre-Christian land. A land of a very old deity. The ocean pounding the shores for time unfathomable. Walks in the rainforest through trees that started growing on top of other fallen trees, called nurse trees, hundreds of years ago. Tunnels and caves of roots dark and mysterious, moist and soiled. Salal berry jam, made by Hoh people, on gluten free English muffins, the taste of ancient and modern in a sweetness that lacks the bitterness of the suffering between those times and our peoples. Sea otters cracking oysters on their bellies in the surf at sunset for entertainment and preventing overthinking.

Long dormant volcanoes, Mt. St. Helens, Mt. Rainier, and Crater Lake. Total devastation and the beginnings of rebirth at Mt. St. Helens, which remained obscured by clouds the time we were there. A perfect metaphor for my life. Death, and resurrection, but a renewal into a world where the path is obscured. We must make our way up the path with the faith that the way will be revealed as we go. Into and out of Seattle for provisions. Highway passes sheltering unnamed homeless. Whole encampments on the roadside near the grocery store. Drugs, drinking and mental health crises on full display. What metaphor is this? It lacked meaning, just an open wound of hopelessness, debauchery, and despair.

Mt Rainer was suffering a modern fate of washed out bridges and closed areas from changes in the climate. The parts we visited were intensely beautiful. The peak a siren call that claims on average 2 lives per year. The light turquoise color of the glaciers, booming and cracking as they move ever downward. Laura and I sat and snacked and pondered as the mountain came in out of view from the clouds above us. We started down without talking for a time. Not so different from leaving church on Maundy Thursday, the powerful emotions need time to work themselves out before normal conversation feels natural again. Crater Lake had the best stars, but also a self-centered camper who flaunted the rules and ran his generator and destroyed the peace of the place. Perhaps it sounds entitled to complain about running motors while bombs are dropping, but there is no equivalency in this world where unimaginable horrors are daily occurrences and where unimaginable beauty is so rarely encountered. So often I felt out of context with reckless drivers and tailgaters and strangers excitedly and caringly sharing stories and locations of snow-white mountain goats. How can a mind hold these things altogether? I suppose mine can not and I need the peace and knowledge of some loving being to help smooth it all down.

Later in that Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds song he pleads almost as if trying to convince himself, "And I believe in some kind of path. That we can walk down, me and you." The song is a love song, coincidentally, this story I am telling is also a love song, a complicated love song, a love of my Country beautiful and broken, a love of my wife, a love of my God and a love of my life and how to balance all of these in a world that is teetering on the edge of something unknown, but dark. I am praying God's light will show us the way, some kind of path, that we can walk down, me and you.

— Mel Tracy

Tuesday, March 28

Watering Plants

My mother's
Ragged plants...
I used to wonder
Why...
I had to water them
If she was away.
(Why keep these?)
Now I know!
I have ragged
Plants!
I just want them
To grow!
No matter what
They look like,
Or might become.
I enjoy having them
Around me,
An important
Definition
Of my life
And of my mother's.

— Gail Avgeris



Wednesday, March 29

Embraced

I have felt deeply touched by God in two peculiar moments. Although strange (at least to me), in both of the experiences, I sensed that my heart was strangely warmed by the Divine. The first occurred as I was preparing to lead a memorial service for a high schooler in our congregation who had died in an automobile accident. That in itself was difficult, of course, but the pain was acute because she was a close friend of mine and my family. I didn't think I had the strength to make it through. The day before the memorial service, I was in my office and wondering how I might excuse myself from it, when suddenly, I was embraced. No one else was there. I thought, is this a figment of my imagination? Some psychological response to stress? But I knew that wasn't the case. There were arms around me. Literally. I was being embraced. By God.

In the Boundary Waters, just before the sun sets, as the winds calm, the lakes become "still waters," and I always hope to hear the voice of God — or at least some sign that God is present. The silence, however, has been deafening. Yet, I have come to believe that it is in stillness that I experience the small voice of God. A few years ago, as I sat at that quiet boundary where granite turns to liquid, I remembered the words of Emily Dickinson:

*My period had come for prayer —
No other Art — would do —
[...]
The Silence condescended —
Creation stopped — for Me —
But awed beyond my errand —
I worshiped — did not "pray" —*

The Silence condescended. Indeed.
And my heart was again strangely warmed by the Lord who promises —
to lead us beside still waters and restore our souls.
Embraced by God's Creation. Again.

— Rev. Richard Kirchherr

Thursday, March 30

I grew up in New Jersey, about 30 minutes from the ocean (or the shore as we called it). On weekends—and sometimes in the evenings—my parents and I would head over to a nearby beach to enjoy the sea breezes, listen to the waves, and relax. My favorite part of these visits was walking along the beach to a rock jetty that stuck out into the water. I'd climb up on those massive stone slabs (many of them as big as me) and journey out just far enough, so that I could sit on a flat spot and watch the sea roll in and out. I was transfixed by the constancy of the waves, their soothing voice, and how the water wove in and out of all the jetty's nooks and crannies. The surf felt powerful yet steadfast, beautiful yet mysterious, predictable yet surprising.

I did my best thinking on that rock jetty. No matter what was happening in my life, I knew I could go there to parse through thoughts, ideas, wishes, and dreams. I pondered relationships, worked through life decisions, set goals, and asked deep questions. Sometimes I'd pray there. I felt connected to God in that space—possibly more than anywhere else. It sometimes felt like God was in those waves, surrounding me, encouraging me, comforting me.

When I married John and moved to the Midwest, we agreed we would go back to the ocean at least once a year. For a while, we were able to do that. We would visit my parents every summer and spend days down at the shore. Our kids grew to love the ocean as much as me, and we all looked forward to our trips to the sea.

After my parents moved to the Midwest, we paused our ocean trips, and I didn't fully realize how much I missed them—until we visited Kiawah Island, South Carolina in 2021. I remember standing in our hotel room looking out at the beach and feeling a swell of emotion as I heard the crashing waves and felt the soothing power of the surf. Although I was in a different state, at a different time, and I was much different than the young person sitting on the jetty, there was so much that was the same. The sound, the feel, the constancy, the beauty, the comfort.

I sometimes wonder if I could access the ocean every day if it would impact me as much. Would it become routine? Would I stop being awed by its power and grace? Would I still feel close to God there? Would I become more spiritual? More connected? More at peace? Who knows? I wouldn't mind trying it out someday. The thought of living by the sea and experiencing it all the time is very appealing. For now, I am profoundly grateful for every moment I get to spend at an ocean where I not only feel closer to God but know that I'm experiencing a little bit of God here on earth.

—Kathy Vega



Friday, March 31

I've been thinking (a challenge at my age?!), what is the dictionary definition of "steward?" Informative answers: a passenger's attendant on a ship, airplane or train; an official appointed to keep order or supervise arrangements at a meeting or show.

So what is a steward in church? Christian stewards are caregivers, they concern themselves with the distribution of gifts and resources, so all might benefit. (Genesis 2:4-9). It is not a stretch to see and believe that we are stewards of God's creation. We, at First Congo exemplify this — Christian stewardship is a big part of First Congo — by leadership, supervision and membership on committees, clubs, music and activities (Rummage is a good example).

Blessings, peace and love.

Bert Griffith

Saturday, April 1

My breath catches as I watch a newborn calf, struggling to stand on wobbly legs, reach for her mama's heavy udder. Memories of my own struggle to bring babies into the world, from the morning sickness to the first ear infection to the first broken heart.

The natural rhythms of Life: Breathing, growing, falling, learning, failing, loving, losing, rejoicing, surviving, dying.

They're all part of the deal. Death is an inevitable part of living. Over the past four years I have experienced too much of it. I've lost both of my parents. And my adopted parents who lived at Plymouth Place. In 2020 alone, I said goodbye to all three of my precious pets. Over the course of my adult life, I have watched five people die.

And I can say with deepest conviction: I felt oddly, uniquely privileged to be part of that holy moment. I wish I could say that they closed their eyes and quietly drifted off to sleep. I cannot. The death rattle lasted for days. My mom begged for more pain medicine. My grandma pleaded with the nurses to leave her alone. But those were the tortured hours—the long march through the darkness.

I'll never ever forget those final minutes and seconds —holding their age-softened hands. Being part of their passage stands among the most sacred experiences of my life. But I would do anything to forget my sister's strangled plea: "Just let go, Mama"—followed by her suffocated sobs.

One way I can cope with my sorrow, and rage at the unfairness of it all—is to recall my Dad's final words: "Mission Accomplished. The mission is God's work: you should look at that."

The natural order of things. Birth—Life—Death. I must keep my eyes focused on the piece that is nearly impossible to see from the trenches: Rebirth. The promise. When my loved ones let go, they were transformed into the next stage, Eternal Life.

And I got to be there, a witness on wobbly legs, standing on Holy Ground.

— *Nancy Stanner*

Sunday, April 2 (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 3

A few years ago, I was invited to participate in a “silent retreat.” You may think it unusual that these two words are together or that this is something one would want to do. Not talking is a form of retreat? Well, the invitation came from a dear friend and included an hour car ride, each way. Okay, this is a great time to catch up, so why not? I decided to attend this “retreat.”

The goal of the retreat was to provide rest and an opportunity to talk with and listen to God. This experience was intriguing to me as I never thought about creating time to just listen for God.

Now after six years of participating in these silent retreats, I have learned that the best place for me to experience God and to hear

God speaking to me is in nature. In the woods, I am quiet (which seems to be important when listening). I tend to hear God when I'm walking through the woods. There is something about the trees, the birds and the space that quiets my busy mind and reminds me to look for God in my surroundings.

I like to think my faith is like a tree. As stated in Psalm 1 verse 3: *“And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.”* I imagine being a tree and stretching my roots to the waters of God's love and guidance. I like to think that when I am grounded and rooted in God's love, I can stretch my branches to share God's love with others.

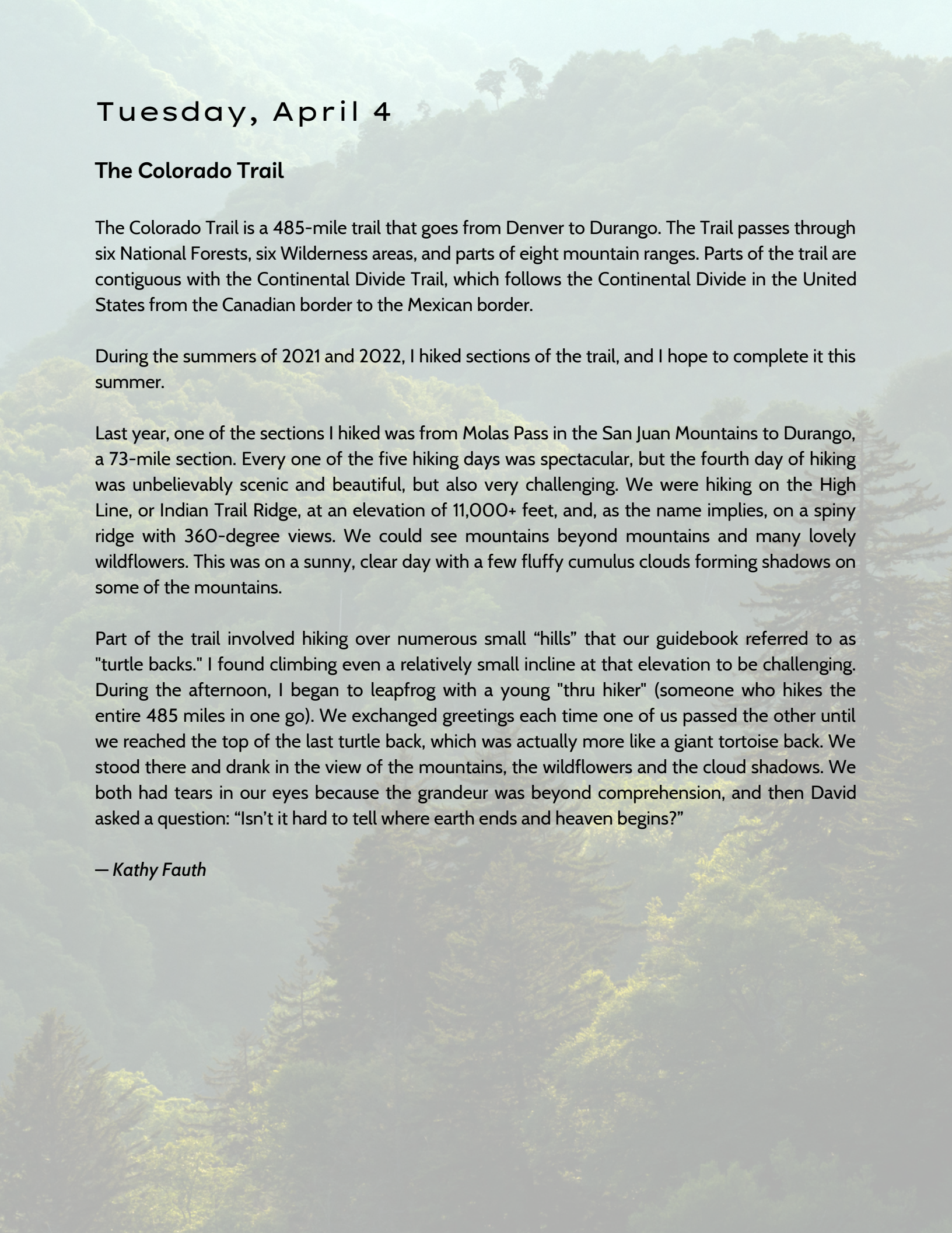
There is a beautiful quote by Kahlil Gibran, which states, *“Trees are poems that the earth writes upon the sky.”* When I look at a tree, it reminds me how important trees are to us. Even in the winter they are homes to birds, squirrels and sleeping buds. With branches bare, they continue to reach their strong limbs up to the heavens, reminding us that God connects us between heaven and the earth. To me, trees are a way of reminding me of God's presence and the beauty She has created for us. The trees help me remember God's love and help me to listen for what She wants me to know.

I like to think the tree is talking to me as well. Just as the tree helps me hear God, I think God uses the tree and reminds me of the beauty of the earth and our responsibility for it.

We all need to listen to the trees. Let's root ourselves in God. Let's reach out our branches of love to others. Let's listen for God in the beauty of the earth. And, we must love and care for this glorious world we are privileged to call home.

— Hope Sabbagha





Tuesday, April 4

The Colorado Trail

The Colorado Trail is a 485-mile trail that goes from Denver to Durango. The Trail passes through six National Forests, six Wilderness areas, and parts of eight mountain ranges. Parts of the trail are contiguous with the Continental Divide Trail, which follows the Continental Divide in the United States from the Canadian border to the Mexican border.

During the summers of 2021 and 2022, I hiked sections of the trail, and I hope to complete it this summer.

Last year, one of the sections I hiked was from Molas Pass in the San Juan Mountains to Durango, a 73-mile section. Every one of the five hiking days was spectacular, but the fourth day of hiking was unbelievably scenic and beautiful, but also very challenging. We were hiking on the High Line, or Indian Trail Ridge, at an elevation of 11,000+ feet, and, as the name implies, on a spiny ridge with 360-degree views. We could see mountains beyond mountains and many lovely wildflowers. This was on a sunny, clear day with a few fluffy cumulus clouds forming shadows on some of the mountains.

Part of the trail involved hiking over numerous small “hills” that our guidebook referred to as “turtle backs.” I found climbing even a relatively small incline at that elevation to be challenging. During the afternoon, I began to leapfrog with a young “thru hiker” (someone who hikes the entire 485 miles in one go). We exchanged greetings each time one of us passed the other until we reached the top of the last turtle back, which was actually more like a giant tortoise back. We stood there and drank in the view of the mountains, the wildflowers and the cloud shadows. We both had tears in our eyes because the grandeur was beyond comprehension, and then David asked a question: “Isn’t it hard to tell where earth ends and heaven begins?”

— *Kathy Fauth*

Wednesday, April 5

Messenger Birds

Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am there you may be also." — John 14:1-3

Often used at memorial services, this scripture is meant to provide assurance and comfort to those who are grieving the loss of a loved one. It reminds us of the promise of everlasting life. For some people, they believe that after death our spirits are resurrected in a physical sense and ascend to an actual place called heaven where we are reunited with our loved ones. I believe that with death, our spirits leave this physical plane, to go to the "other side" or another dimension where our spirits live on eternally. In that dimension, our spirits are reunited with the Divine and the spirits of our loved ones that live on. Our spirits recognize each other through the everlasting love of the Divine. I believe that even though we can't see it, the "other side" exists. I once heard a speaker that said to think of it like a page of writing. As we read what is one side, we don't see the opposite side, but it still exists.

There are assurances of God's promises in Nature; "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" Matthew 6:26. In grief recovery groups I have facilitated over the years, grieverers have spoken about signs they have received that their loved ones live on. Some folks mention having a vivid dream of the person, hearing their voice, or seeing something in nature that makes them sense that their loved one's spirit is still with them. I once asked Rev. Paul Stiffler, with whom I was leading grief groups what to make of those comments. He said, "I think we should tell the griever to trust those signs as they are their personal experiences."

My mother's favorite bird was the cardinal. Within days of her death, whenever I thought of her, at least two cardinals would appear by me. The next night as I sat in tears on my patio, four cardinals landed on the ground within feet of my feet and just stayed there for a few minutes. By the third time the cardinals showed up, I got it, a strong sense that my mom was letting me know she was okay and her spirit lives on. I was comforted. Fast forward a few years and I was grieving for a church member who loved to sing in the choir. I had helped her and her family through many challenges. After her memorial service as I was sitting in my office thinking about her when a hummingbird dropped down outside my office window and then flew away. I had never seen one outside my window before. The hummingbird came back the next two days. The third time it dawned on me that it must be a spirit sign from June, of course because she loved to sing.

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My third experience was when Paul Stiffler died. In addition to being colleagues, we were close friends. I had many visits with him as his health failed and in the days before his death. When he was still able to communicate, we agreed that whoever died first would send a sign to the other from the other side. He knew about my mom and the cardinals, so we agreed his sign would need to be different. Within days of his death, a bright yellow goldfinch appeared on the cornflowers outside my office window. I had never seen a goldfinch out there. It sat there for at least 30 minutes. The next day, the goldfinch came back with two goldfinch friends who stayed out there for quite a while in the sun. The third day, when six goldfinches came at the same time, I had that aha moment that told me it was Paul's sign. I wonder that there isn't significance that these signs come three days in a row, being that Christ rose from the dead on the third day.

In the days after the goldfinches appeared, I was in tears when thinking about Paul while cleaning my house, doubting that the goldfinches had really been a spirit sign from him. Within minutes, that doubt was dashed when my eyes landed on an object from my China cabinet, a ceramic goldfinch. It had been part of a centerpiece Paul's wife gave me after his 80th birthday party!

I remember what Paul had said about trusting such experiences as they are my experiences. They assure me that God's promises of Resurrection and eternal life are real, and I am comforted.

— *Deb Stankiewicz*

Robin Red Breast

*What is it
About seeing
A robin
Unexpectedly,
In early spring,
That is
Extremely special?
In that moment,
It seems,
One feels
Forever fortunate!
Eyes brighten,
A smile forms...
The robin
Is back!
Whatever his hardship
He has once again
Returned!
A symbol
Of survival,
A true sign
Of spring.
A lesson in hope
From a fragile,
But feisty
Red breasted
Living thing!*

— *Gail Avgeris*

Thursday, April 6 (Maundy Thursday)

From the very first pages of Genesis, Creation is celebrated as good. And human beings are part of that creation. Any religion that tries to escape from the material world is not incarnational Christianity. Any spirituality that tells you that flesh is something to be distrusted is not Biblical faith. In Jesus Christ, theology and biology and geography are beautifully tangled up.

The theology and biology and geography of Maundy Thursday are especially inextricable. There's the house where Jesus shared a passover meal with his Disciples and the garden where he prayed as sweat poured from his face into the earth below. There's the water Jesus used to cleanse the feet of his disciples — water that had been drawn from a local well. There's the bread that he broke — bread that was baked with wheat grown in a particular field. There's the wine that he poured — wine that was pressed from grapes that were tended in a specific vineyard.

It's easy to think that Holy Week is somehow too spiritual for the ordinary stuff of Creation. But there is no Last Supper, no Night That Jesus Was Betrayed, apart from Creation.

— *Rev. Katherine Willis Pershey*

Friday, April 7 (Good Friday)

And then, Jesus breathed his last. Much has been said about the nature of Jesus' death — the unparalleled cruelty of crucifixion. Much has been said, too, about the meaning of Jesus' death.

We find solidarity in Christ on the cross. Anyone who has suffered can look at the Man of Sorrows and know that God knows his or her pain. The same can be said of Creation itself. All of the ways humankind has brutalized God's beloved world — the pollution, the destruction, the violence — all of this pain is reflected on the cross.

We also find salvation in Christ on the cross. While different Christian traditions interpret the crucifixion in different ways, nearly all Christians concur that the consequence of Jesus' death is life — life everlasting. That life is not merely for human beings. What God accomplishes through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is make way for all of Creation to be reconciled and restored. Nothing remains outside of God's saving love.

Everything is embraced by God in Christ. And everything shall be redeemed. Thanks be to God.

— *Rev. Katherine Willis Pershey*

Saturday, April 8

Then God said, *“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”* — Genesis 1:26

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines stewardship as “the conducting, supervising, or managing of something”. During this Lenten Season, we can reflect upon how our Christian faith has shaped our environmental stewardship. Our Green Team here at First Congo is celebrating 10 years of work that is outlined in its mission statement to include: “promoting environmentally responsible behavior within the church and by its members and the greater community.” The Green Team’s mission statement goes on further: “Toward that end, the Green Team seeks to guide our congregation and community on wise practices to preserve and protect God’s creation.”

This last statement focuses on the Team’s effort to help the congregation and community be good or at least better stewards of the environment. Let’s face it we all have room for improvement and must stay vigilant in protecting what God has gracefully entrusted us with- our planet. Ten (10) years of hard work that has included many projects like monthly styrofoam collections (that benefit not only the congregation but the greater Western Springs community); annual pumpkin smash; holiday lights recycling (again available to the community at large); proving various tips, resources, and talks that promote environmentally responsible behavior to name just a few of accomplishments during the last decade.

So the question needs to be asked — what have we done or continued to do as an individual congregation and community members to assist in the effort to protect what God has entrusted to us as good stewards?

Prayer: Dear God, please help us support the hard and vital work our Green Team has accomplished and continues to do- to make us all better stewards of God’s creation. And as we are bombarded daily with concerning climate change news, guide us individually to take our stewardship charge seriously and work with our Green Team to engage our community to magnify and draw further attention to everyone’s responsibility and trust that God has granted us to preserve our environment. Amen

— Ron Searle

Sunday, April 9 (Easter Sunday)

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

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."

118:14 The LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

118:15 There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: "The right hand of the LORD does valiantly;

118:16 the right hand of the LORD is exalted; the right hand of the LORD does valiantly."

118:17 I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD.

118:18 The LORD has punished me severely, but he did not give me over to death.

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.

