STRUGGLING WITH JESUS

The struggle is real, but so is Jesus

LENTEN DEVOTIONAL
2022

Compiled by
Pittsburgh Lutheran United Ministries (PLUM)
Visit our website, www.plumofpa.com. This is to a good way to stay updated, find bulletins, or access a quick link to services and other activities on our Zoom account.

We also have a Facebook page:
PLUM-Pittsburgh Lutheran United Ministries.

We offer thanks to the members and friends of PLUM who wrote devotions sharing their experiences, thoughts and faith. Each contributor chose a verse or passage from Scripture that speaks to them about how they have endured personal struggles with the help of Jesus, or how they have personally struggled with their relationship with Jesus. Their vulnerability and willingness to share help us to reflect on our theme of STRUGGLING WITH JESUS and encourage us on our Lenten journey.

We humans have various types of struggles. It’s a blessing when we can share and learn from each other. Knowing that Jesus understands our earthly struggles and walks with us can bring great comfort.

We pray that your Lenten Journey is enriched as you reflect on the devotions, litanies, photos and artwork that follow.

Photos from the Holy Land have been shared by Pastor Paul Koch, Pastor Beth Siefert and Susan Smith.

The litanies are from Narrative Lectionary Worship Resources created by ClergyStuff.
On Ash Wednesday we begin our forty-day journey toward Easter with a day of fasting and repentance. Marking our foreheads with dust, we acknowledge that we die and return to the earth. At the same time, the dust traces the life-giving cross indelibly marked on our foreheads at baptism. While we journey through Lent to return to God, we have already been reconciled to God through Christ. We humbly pray for God to make our hearts clean while we rejoice that “now is the day of salvation.” Returning to our baptismal call, we more intentionally bear the fruits of mercy and justice in the world.
The Struggle is Real
But so is Jesus

Luke 3:7-11

7 John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 9 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” 10 And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” 11 In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

Some years past, a challenge was put forward to our congregation at the beginning of Lent. Instead of giving something up, we were to choose someone who needed “lifting up” and remember them in some personal way every day throughout Lent. I was the fortunate recipient of that challenge. The daily prayers, the surprise bag lunches, the phone calls, etc. shared by a loving friend who was experiencing challenges in her own life was humbling, heart-warming and a wonderful illustration of Christ’s love. We are called to repent, turn away from sin and bear fruit even in the face of life’s challenges.

The past year brought major challenges in my life. The knowledge that Christ loves me enough to sacrifice himself for me and that I am surrounded by his faithful servants has truly sustained me and for that I give thanks.

Lord,
Thank you for your sustaining love. Give us the eyes to see and the ears to hear the needs of others and the strength to do His will by reaching out to those in need.
In Jesus’ name,
Amen.

Sue Lescinsky
Forest Hills Presbyterian Church
Secretary, Hope Lutheran Church, Forest Hills
On Ash Wednesday, as Lent begins, we are invited “to struggle against everything that leads us away from love of God and neighbor” by exercising the Discipline of Lent: repentance, fasting, prayer and works of love.

This year, what are some new or favorite ways that you can experience repentance, fasting, prayer or works of love? Where might you struggle?
...we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. Romans 5:3-4

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Hebrews 11:1

If we consider what we want or need, beyond identifying food and shelter, most of us would add stability and consistency. But what happens when we don’t have consistency and stability?

COVID-19 has brought major disruptions and inconveniences. We can’t be sure how to protect our health and that of those around us. Even more, our daily routines have been thrown into disarray. On top of that, for some, other unwelcome distractors have also appeared.

For the past six months, I have had low cortisol. Not life-threatening as there is a man-made equivalent that I can take that regulates my body. But it has thrown me out of kilter. And, as we treat this problem, others have arisen. “Take this supplement to strengthen the body,” they say. I do and it sometimes gives me diarrhea. Easy to fix, stop taking that medicine. Except to do so doesn’t completely eliminate the problem.

Then recently, when I complained of sore leg muscles, I learned that the primary medicine I am taking can leach potassium from the body, hence, painful muscles. “Take an electrolyte,” they say. That helps a lot, but how much do I take and for how long?

In the midst of all of this, I am struggling with Jesus, or maybe my faith. Thinking of Romans 5, I have a lot of minor suffering; I am by nature persistent; and I believe I have character. But where is the hope?

I know that many suffer more and for longer. Remember the woman in Luke 8 who bled for 12 years? Or the man in John 5 who was sick for 38 years? I think of COVID sufferers who have been hospitalized and those with long-term symptoms. In comparison, my ills are minor and manageable. Suffering is not a competition. However, these health issues are, after all, mine – on a daily, even hour-by-hour basis. And they impact the quality of my daily life.

How do I find faith to have hope? Faith, that assurance of things hoped for and conviction of things not seen? Prayer, you will say, and I agree, but when I am in the midst of faith struggles, prayer is difficult or seems useless. So where do I find hope? Going to worship service and connecting with friends can be a type of prayer – connection to God – as well (if only COVID permitted it). Reaching out to doctors also helps to identify parts of the problem that can be resolved easily as we wait to see if my body will be able to take over making cortisol again and I can regain stability in my health.

Finding quiet and stillness help me, too. Time with no music and, especially, no news. It can be walking, doing nothing, meditating, and often, sitting with a cat curled on my lap. Even in reading a book or watching a program I can find a way to settle into myself, keeping things in better perspective, and reconnecting to God who is within me (even when I haven’t been recognizing or feeling His presence).

I am wishing you, in this Lenten season, time to reconnect to God within you – however that works best for you. Maybe the first step, as I am learning, is to quit struggling and accept the present situation so that God can indicate the next step.

Loving Jesus, we pray, today, and every day, that your soothing presence wash through our hearts and minds. Help us find peace, stability, and hope through you, especially in those times when we can’t seem to find them in ourselves or the world around us. Amen.

Susan M. Smith
East Liberty Lutheran Church
Raising of Lazarus

Lord, if you had been there our brother would not have died:

The cry of the weeping sisters, Martha and Mary.

They were believers in Jesus’ power, but were brokenhearted.

And seeing their sorrow, Jesus wept as well.

But Jesus knew what they could not.

Jesus knew that God the creator was listening.

Jesus knew what he could do, what he must do.

“Lazarus, Come out!” he said.

And the dead man walked.

Lazarus, Jesus’ close friend.

Lazarus, Mary and Martha’s brother.

Lazarus, whose rising was witnessed by many.

And the word spread beyond the town, that Jesus had raised the dead.

Some who heard this were suspicious. Some were threatened. Some began to plot against this wonder worker, this Jesus.

Lazarus’ death set in motion the actions leading to Jesus’ own death.

A joyful event, with a somber effect.

Jesus will die a terrible death before rising again.

And we weep, as Martha and Mary wept.

We weep for his pain and suffering.

And it seems the happy ending is still so far away.

But for now, we rejoice with the family of Lazarus.

We celebrate the miracle now. The future can wait.

None of us know what our future will hold.

We can spend our lives weeping in dread,

Or we can celebrate each day, every hour.

Cherish the joys; the joys of family, of friendship, of life itself,

Because we know that in the end, no matter what,

There is a glorious rising for all of us.
Deuteronomy 6:12 – Take care lest you forget the Lord.

I have always had to struggle with everything in my life. But God knows me well. God has sent help and support just when I needed it. Sometimes I prefer to forget the Lord’s gifts and remember my own achievements. But when guilt weighs heavily I am struggling with Jesus. I have always felt that I did not have the knowledge, understanding or was worthy to share. By searching scripture, Bible studies, discussions with my brothers and sisters in Christ, struggling with life and death situations in my life, have brought me to where I am today. But emotions often get in the way and sharing is not one of my strengths. I’m trying. I have to remember that God is love! He put His love on the line when He offered His Son in a sacrificial death while I was of no use whatever to Him.

Psalm 57 – Psalms Now, Leslie Brandt

Encompass me with Your love and mercy, gracious Lord: I have no security except in You. I am continually exposed to the destructive forces of this existence. I am in constant danger of losing the battle to the passions and desires of my own nature. I can only submit myself to You and trust that You will fulfill Your purpose in me. Your love, O God, is steadfast; Your grace is everlasting. Even when I am beaten down by depression, ensnared by my weaknesses and frailties, and even when my own lust threatened to devour me, You are my God, and You will not let me go. I am determined to serve You, O Lord. May my life be a continual thank offering to You. I shall sing Your praises forever.

Ann Morrocco
St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
Canonsburg
Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.

Beloved, Let Us Love One Another
1 John 4:7-8

It was the mid 1970’s and I was a grade school camper at Lutherlyn for a week in the summer. My cabin counselor was a beautiful young woman who played the guitar. She had taken time off from her job to lead some of God’s kids for the week. I don’t remember her name but I do remember how she made me feel. She made me feel loved. And I didn’t feel unique because she chose to care about all of the girls in our cabin. Her young campers came from different congregations and although we were around the same age, we were all very different. She gathered us together and over the course of the week taught us the song based on the verses above. When we were with the larger group outside of our cabin, we sang lots of other camp songs. But this was something special she did just for us, in our cabin.

After leaving Lutherlyn that summer, I sang that song in my head. And I probably sang it out loud when nobody was around. But it wasn’t a part of my home congregation’s standard repertoire of VBS songs, so I never had a chance to sing it with others again. I still remember the tune over 45 years later and realize that it is through that song that I memorized 1 John 4:7-8. (And thanks to the internet, I was able to hear the song again; I even came across a fun reggae version.) My home congregation and my family, through word and action, reinforced the meaning of these verses both before and long after I was a young camper at Lutherlyn.

Here’s the part where I struggle. The command to love one another is clear and real. It’s not the dream of a naïve child. Jesus was/is serious about loving our neighbor. I know that sin has been ever-present for all of us. But over the last several years I have perceived more division and less kindness in our country, a lot of “us” versus “them” and many missed opportunities to show the love that Jesus teaches. At times I am overwhelmed by sadness when words are spoken that show no respect or love for the other, when disagreement turns into hate, when people act justified in insulting others.

God loved us first. “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8). And God calls us to persevere in loving each other, even when we have been offended and may not feel loved, loving or loveable. Navigating hard conversations surrounding sensitive topics is important but can be uncomfortable. Without love, these conversations can be unhealthy and devolve into strained relationships in families, churches and communities. Love includes respect, kindness, forgiveness, empathy and standing against injustices; love includes words and actions.

Heavenly Father, Thank you for giving us Jesus and people in our lives who show us how to love. Help us to not give up and to be kind and speak the truth in love; make our words and actions life-giving. Amen.

Deann George
Christ Lutheran Church, Duquesne
You are invited to join PLUM for a Lenten Bible Study with the theme of

WE ARE CHOSEN TO STRUGGLE WITH JESUS

Wednesdays during Lent
7 pm on zoom
March 9, 16, 23, 30; April 6

Each session will include a clip from the series, “The Chosen” followed by a group discussion, and will conclude with time for prayer.

The call-in line for PLUM Worship Services and Bible Studies: Zoom online: https://zoom.us/j/401596541
Isaiah 41:10 - God strengthens you

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

God has promised us His strength. He will never give you a trial you are unable to handle.

How arrogant to believe that my family was above being tested, and we were tested when sitting in the Emergency Room at Children’s Hospital being told our 7-year-old had a brain tumor and that there was no hope. In stunned silence I wondered how we had reached this point so quickly, really in a matter of hours. By the time she was admitted to her room on the 10th floor, the shock had started to ease. But sitting there in the room and watching other parents walk their ill children through the hallways awakened in me the knowledge that this was not about our family. It was about the gift that was given to the neurosurgeons, the nurses, the social workers and others who were there to walk us down the path of the unknown. I did not once pray for God to save my daughter, instead I prayed for the caregivers, no matter what the outcome for my child, to use their gifts to the best of their ability. Yes, I was afraid and more than dismayed, but I laid my cares in God’s hands that I would have the strength to handle the outcome. Family, friends, and strangers around the world were praying for our daughter. Slowly and in stages as her treatment progressed hope was born and blossomed. It was amazing and gave me the strength to look forward and not to dwell on how we came to be in our current circumstances. For us, our daughter was granted a future, not without some health issues, but manageable issues. God’s strength was with us then and to this day and will continue to be with us in the future, no matter what obstacles my cross our paths.

Let us pray:

Believe that the Lord our God is with you in times of good and bad. Turn toward him in your hour of need and share your burdens with the Lord so that he may strengthen you to accept what the future holds. Just because your life is not perfect does not mean the Lord is not with you. Be faithful in and trusting of the Lord’s plan.

Donna Dominick
Immanuel Lutheran Church, Irwin
Love Your Neighbor
who doesn’t

👀 Look like you

❓ Think like you

❤️ Love like you

💬 Speak like you

🙏 Pray like you

📝 Vote like you

Love Your Neighbor

No exceptions
Proverbs 3: 5-6 (The Message Bible)

Trust God from the bottom of your heart;
  don’t try to figure out everything on your own.
Listen for God’s voice in everything you do, everywhere you go;
  he’s the one who will keep you on track.

Waiting with Peace

Waiting is not easy for me. I am comfortable when I am moving, creating, working, helping, conversing but not so comfortable in the long quiet places that go on longer than expected. I do not sit still very well. Recently, I had found myself in a stuck place at work where I had stretched and grew as far as my surroundings and situation would allow. I needed a new opportunity to change that workplace to include space for new growth. I spent many months discerning what the next steps would look like and reflecting on how I got here in the first place. While discerning my current situation and discussing the option of closing of the company that I built and shaped for the last several years I received a great peace. It took 8 weeks to properly close this company to the best of my ability and give the best outcome for the study participants involved in Clinical Trials at our company. I love my patients and the progress of the studies and did not wish to jeopardize either. I have had 6 major jobs in research and healthcare my whole adult life and with each change I have seen God’s hand in the “what’s next” moments. I have sometimes thought that I was the one recreating myself, molding my gifts to meet a need in the world, seeking employment to continue to support myself. In all those times it has always been my God who has placed the coolest people and jobs in my path, has given me those “gifts” and has granted me the peace to step onto that path not knowing where it leads. The outcomes have been amazing and nothing like what I had in mind. Way beyond. The peace that I received once I “knew” that I had to let go of one job and trust…..before I could take up another job was so strong AND…………against my desire to have my next job lined up first.

Trusting His peace in a major decision does not mean that I am always calm and not ever anxious as I wait for the next step. This is where the intentional prayer for a peaceful spirit is necessary for me. How long will it take Lord? Am I being proactive enough, applying to enough jobs each week, missing the message for where You want me to step next? God shushed me and continues to shush me each and every time I start to feel worried or listen to the noise of the world telling me that something is wrong. I have to be still And quiet and Listen and Trust Him.

When you get God’s peace in a decision you should also know that He is there with you in the wait. His perfect love for you is present. His plan for your life is perfect. Lean on Him in the wait and know that no matter how long or how difficult it is to wait, you are not alone. I am taking the time he has given me to reflect on my relationship with Him and to create new opportunities to focus my life in His direction. What a beautiful wait it can be. Be still and know.

Please pray with me:

Dearest Lord and friend, please be with us in those times of waiting. Whether it is for something we are excited about like a birthday party or an adventure, something we are afraid of like a diagnosis or a new challenge or a tough decision like a change of job or location or relationship. We want to feel your presence and love and comfort while we wait. Help us to feel You near and see the light you place on our path so that we can be sure where to step next. Give us that peace like nothing else on earth can give so we can discern those steps and keep walking toward you with your light shining brightly through us for all to see.

Nancy Pollo – St Paul’s Lutheran Church, Canonsburg
STRUGGLING WITH JESUS

“Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?”

“No, not seven times,” Jesus says, “but seventy times seven!”

Matthew 18:21-22

“No, not seven times, but seventy times seven”! Seriously Jesus? You can’t possibly be telling me that I need to forgive someone who has hurt me badly as often as I can!

I have always held the firm belief that the Lord makes sure I never again see the people that have done me wrong, because, He wants to keep me out of jail when I run over them. And true to that belief, I have never again crossed paths with those who have hurt me in the past. Having a twenty-eight-year career in childcare, I find that most of the people that “done me wrong”, were those who I had the opportunity to work with, to work for, or to have supervised. How am I to forgive the teachers, peers and supervisors whose actions and deceit protected themselves at the expense of myself and the children that were in my care? You can’t ask me to do that, Lord!

It’s not enough to have these work-related forgiveness issues, but then I have to have a family related one too. And this is someone, who will cross my path on a regular basis! Do I forgive a sibling that prefers to drink and focus on herself at the expense of her children? Do I turn the other cheek when she calls me names and treats me badly because I choose to intercede? I certainly am a person that doesn’t forget and I just don’t see how I possibly can forgive!

But the Lord has a way of moving you in the direction He wants you to go. He knew that I needed to find a less stressful job that would allow me to be available to my mother, as she moved to the end of her life, and to my father, as he struggled with her loss. And, by becoming the Office Manager at two PLUM churches, I believe He was telling me that my care and nurturing was needed elsewhere. So, why withhold forgiveness to former coworkers, when their actions are long past and ultimately moved me to a better working environment?

As time has passed, the Lord has shown me that my sibling’s actions came from her illness and that she now bears the costs of her actions. I need not be responsible for her or try to make amends to her children for what she did, but rather, I can love them and be there for them and I can also love and forgive my sibling and recognize her illness.

I can’t tell you that I have forgotten all wrongdoings, nor can I tell you that I will readily forgive those who sin against me. But I can tell you that Jesus Christ walks with me daily, showing me His desires for me and guiding me to be a better person.

Heavenly Father,
By Your death on the cross, my sins have been forgiven. Walk beside me daily and help me to let go of the past, to forgive those who sin against me and to welcome Your direction in my life. Amen.

Karen Brown
Bethany Evangelical Lutheran Church, Dormont
So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. ~

Galatians 6:9

Pandemic. George Floyd. Partisan politics. Mass shootings. Global warming. World hunger. Asian hate crimes. Racism. Social media misinformation. Insurrection. These are the thoughts that surge through my mind. It is overwhelming. To be honest, these thoughts have tried to pull me into a deep, dark place. At times, I am angry. I have asked and I have heard other people ask “God, Why don’t You do something?” Then one day I heard the song “Do Something” by Matthew West. The lyrics struck me and affected me profoundly. In the song, Matthew talks about all the wrongs in the world and he asks God that very same question- “God, why don’t You do something?” God’s response is “I did, yeah, I created you!” The song continues on and Matthew writes “I’m so tired of talking about how we are God’s hands and feet, but it is easier to say than to be.” He talks about living like “angels of apathy” telling ourselves someone else will do something. It was then that I realized that I needed to do something. So I have tried to immerse myself in Bible study. I follow a podcast that has you read the entire Bible in a year. I am trying to pray more and listen for God’s voice. I have been reading book after book to educate myself. I joined Braver Angels to help me learn to be a better listener and communicator with family and friends who have very different points of view from myself. I attended my first Black Lives Matter Rally. I changed the way I look at how I Reduce, Reuse and Recycle as a way to be a better steward of God’s gift of this beautiful planet. I try to pass this education along to my children.

I know these seem like small steps, but I think that is the best way for me to move forward on the path that God has set out for me. I admit I get exhausted. I get sidetracked. I get tired of contact tracing, sanitizing and mask wearing for our Blessed Bundles Mission, but we have to keep going. There is so much need in our community. Adults are hurting. Children are hurting. We can’t give up. It is time for us to do something! That’s why we were created. That’s what Jesus has commissioned us to do.

Holy Father, thank you for the gift of Your Creation. Please help us- lead us and guide us to “do something.” Help us to not be merely angels of apathy. Immerse us in your love and give us the strength and energy to persevere. Show us how to be Your hands and feet in action not just in words. Encourage us to love and care for our neighbors just as You love and care for us. In Jesus’ name we pray- Amen.

Pam Feltes-McCurdy
Lutheran Church of Our Saviour, North Huntingdon
Olive Garden in Israel

A very old olive tree from the Garden of Gethsemane

Can you imagine walking in this garden with Jesus?
What struggle do you bring to him today?
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil;  
For You are with me; Psalm 23:4

My husband had been admitted to the hospital on Monday, diagnosed with pneumonia. He was on a breathing tube. They removed it on Wednesday, and he made me promise to never do that again. It was obvious that he couldn’t breathe on his own, so I asked for a few more days to see if they could get him well enough to do without it. “You know, you will die without it”, I said. “I’m ready” was his response. “If they have to reintubate me, you promise you will remove it by Sunday.” And I did.

I spent a lot of time in the hospital chapel in the next three days, praying for healing, and yet knowing it would not be the outcome I wanted. In tears, I began to pray the 23rd Psalm, and felt the presence of God so strongly, that as I prayed, I changed my words to:

My God is in Charge;
He offers me the green pastures of His love and
walks with me to the still waters of His peace.
The valley is just a shadow of death
For we have eternal life in Christ.
His goodness and mercy have surrounded me.
I know I will spend eternity with Him.
Truly, truly, my cup overflows with peace and love.

Prayer:
Thank You, Lord, that even in the worst circumstances, we know we can count on your strength. We can reach out to you when we don’t know what to do next. Amen.

Janice Tokarsky,  
Secretary, Lutheran Church of Our Saviour, North Huntingdon
Parable of the Prodigal Son

Luke 15: 11-24

11 Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ 20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22 But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

This passage has special meaning for me because I see myself as the prodigal daughter – brought up in a loving Christian home only to take everything I was taught and believed and throw it away for what I thought was a richer life. I didn’t abandon everything, but I tried to distance myself emotionally and spiritually from Jesus. It wasn’t a conscience decision but rather a slow drifting away by letting things slide a little at a time. Missing church services – not doing devotions – praying less often. Like being on a diet – you slowly let yourself slip from good solid eating habits and then one day turn around and wonder, “How did I put on this unwanted poundage?” Comparing the distancing of yourself from a healthy eating plan and distancing yourself from God may seem silly, but the reality is – we all slip in one way or another. We all fall short and when we come to realize that we are in a place we don’t want to be spiritually, the saving grace of God, who always forgives, is there. It’s hard sometimes to “go home” or start over because we might be afraid of being rejected or failing. God, whose love never fails, is always there to welcome us home. No matter how far we stray, how lost we seem or how unworthy we feel, Christ is always there, running to us, as I imagine the father in the parable does, with open arms. God is with us always. God never abandons us – God’s love for us is eternal – no matter the flaws – no matter the scars – no matter how far we stray.

Lord – as we face our shortcomings and struggles in this world, help us to remember that you are always with us and will always love us no matter how far we stray. Help us to see ourselves and others the way you do – through the eyes of love, grace and compassion. Open our hearts to accept others and ourselves as beautiful creatures of your vast creation. In Christ’s name we pray, Amen.

Janet Craig
Resurrection Lutheran Church, Oakdale
How might you fast?

How might you give?

How can you prepare yourself to work in God’s kingdom on earth?

For whom or what do you pray for today?
Leviticus 18:22 *You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.*

This is perhaps my most hated verse in the whole of the Bible. I have seen it splattered on protesters’ signs at Pride parades next to signs that say, “God hates F*GS.”

I have read every explanation of why this is a misinterpretation. Whether it be that it is referring to incest or excusing it as irrelevant as the verses about not eating shrimp, pork, or cutting one’s hair. The truth is: none of that really matters. Regardless of why this is in the Bible or how it should be interpreted, it has still hurt so many people in the LGBTQ+ community. It has caused parents to disown their children, hatred to be spewed at same sex couples in the street, and at its worst has fueled enough hatred to cause a Christ-like crucifixion of a young gay man named Matthew Sheppard, not to mention the countless other queer people who have been murdered in the name of the Lord.

While I could simply offer a feel-good response of, “Well, Jesus hung out with prostitutes, and the diseased, so he’d definitely be out healing drag queens at the club,” that would not do justice to the work we owe to the LGBTQ+ community, nor the struggle and fear most queer people feel when church is even mentioned. I have struggled with my own identity. I have struggled with my relationship with God because of this. I have struggled with bringing it up to my church family because of the fear of learning their feelings on the matter and being disappointed.

One struggle the church faces is vocally and actively righting past wrongs. It is not enough to say, well we don’t believe that anymore. It is not enough to expect people struggling with their sexuality to hopefully stumble on an explanation of why their church family rejects them for being the way that God made them. We need to be actively reaching out and sharing God’s love. It is not enough to be welcoming, we need to be inviting.

*Hey God, it’s us again. As we navigate this world you have gifted us, grant us the strength and courage to right the wrongs of our predecessors and peers. May we be the light of your love and not the blaze that burns down the diverse and beautiful life that you have created. May we be true stewards of your love and creation. Amen.*

Kalee George
Christ Lutheran Church, Duquesne
Peter’s Denial, 3rd Sunday in Lent

Three times Peter was asked:

“Do you know this man?”
And three times Peter denied Jesus.

“I have never seen that man.”

The same Peter who had been with Jesus for three years, turned his back three times on his Savior and Lord.

“I do not know this man,” said Peter.

And the cock crowed, three times.

Just as Jesus had predicted it would.

And hearing that rooster call, Peter was devastated.

He had always thought of himself as flawed, but faithful.

And yet here he was, the very definition of faithless,

Abandoning Jesus in his hour of need.

How could he have done that?

Had he forgotten the lesson his divine teacher had taught?

Love. Love God, and one another.

Love does not turn away from a suffering person.

Love steps in, stands beside that person, chooses to join in the suffering.

Did Peter not really love Jesus after all?

Or is this the truth: Peter did love Jesus, very much,

And Peter got scared. Scared to death.

And in that moment of fear and instinctive self-preservation, Peter did the cowardly thing, as so many of us do.

We pretend not to know Jesus,

Because it is not easy to know Jesus, or to love him as he calls us to love.

And then we are devastated, after we turn our backs.

And we think it’s too late to be forgiven.

And we are filled with despair.

But the Jesus Peter denied is the same Jesus who came to Peter after the resurrection.

The same Jesus who forgave his sad and sorrowful friend without hesitation.

For every denial, Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me?”

Three times. And three times Peter said, “I love you.”

Total mercy. Complete pardon. The love between them unbroken.

That is what God’s love for us looks like.

There’s nothing we can do or say to make God stop loving us.

And so, with the forgiven Peter, we too can say,

We love you, Lord.
Talk to Jesus about your fears. What does Jesus say to you?
Psalm 138: On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul...Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me. God will fulfill God’s purpose for me; your steadfast love, O God, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.

I had made a mess of my first year of college. As the son of immigrants, I had been taught that education meant everything. My parents sacrificed everything so that I might have a chance to receive that education.

Now, I sat silently in despair. I had failed my parents. I had failed myself. I would certainly be expelled from the school that had accepted me with honors. My parents didn’t know that I had spent the entirety of my first year of college not attending classes but protesting a war I did not believe in. The day before, I had been beaten by the police. I had felt searing hatred for those who wielded the billie clubs, but in that moment, I also realized that the war I so deeply despised, emanated from my own heart.

Who would deliver me from this heart of darkness?

A friend from church had encouraged me to ask God for help. How could she be so naive? My concerns were not God’s concerns, or were they? I had come to the end of my own devices. Out of the depths of my Spirit-disquieted heart, I called on God: “help me.”

In that moment, Jesus met me in my deepest need and gave me indescribable peace and joy. I was lost and I had been found. I was delivered by the hand of my Brother. I was embraced by Love. My situation had not changed but my heart had changed, and that is all the difference. From that moment on, I would live in hope. I would follow him.

Prayer: O God, I know that you will fulfill your purpose for me. Your steadfast love endures forever. God, do not forsake the work of your hands. Amen.

Martin Rafanan
St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Shadyside
Remarkably peace-oriented art on the Palestinian side of the wall of separation
Not my will but yours be done

He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.” Then he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. Luke 22:39-43

It was one of those calls that come in the middle of the night; the ones that you know are not going to be good news. It was my birthday and I found myself praying this prayer with fervor, “Lord please! But not my will but yours be done.” My son celebrates his birthday the day before mine, and on this occasion, that phone call that came was from my daughter, telling my husband and I that our son had been taken to the hospital because of alcohol poisoning. My greatest fear was there, knowing that my son needed help that I couldn’t give; and knowing that I had to put my trust in God. My prayer was answered, my son was healed, but for several hours, I was in that garden with Jesus praying; “Father if you are willing, remove this cup from me.”

None of us likes to go through a time of trial. And yet, we know that part of being human is going through trials and tribulations. Thank God that we do not do this alone, for God promises to be with us always. Jesus said, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” It is comforting for me to know that God and Jesus are always with me, especially during hard times.

Loving, present God: Thank you for being our strength when the difficulties of this human life are overwhelming. Help us, Lord, to be able to say with confidence and courage, “Not my will but yours be done”.

Pastor Sue Devine
But Jesus answered them, “My Father is still working, and I also am working.”
John 5:17

God is always at work in our lives. There are signs of it everywhere if we choose to look for them.

We had been doctoring with the optometrist for almost a year thinking that my husband, Drew, had a dry eye condition. Finally the optometrist sent us to an ophthalmologist in Greensburg who took one look at his eyelid and said it’s either autoimmune or cancer. How quickly can you get to Philadelphia? We ended up in Pittsburgh for a biopsy of his eyelid. Epithelial squamous cell carcinoma of the conjunctiva. When we heard the diagnosis we were overwhelmed. But the Father and His Son were working. After two major surgeries; two rounds of autoimmune therapy and a round of chemo eye drops (which felt like putting gasoline in his eye) – healing came with the removal of his right eye.

But I said the Father and His Son were working – and they were. Along every step of this journey there were signs of Their presence. It felt as if someone was coordinating our journey. We were going through all this without medical insurance. One doctor we saw early on didn’t charge us because he said he couldn’t help us. When our car died on a side street in Pittsburgh on the way to an appointment a woman in our congregation gave us a car she had that was just sitting in her garage. Our daughter coordinated a fundraising dinner with the help of the community and the congregation. There were constant prayers, cards and pastoral care. My Father is still working; and I also am working. We felt it – all the time. The physical healing was not what we would have hoped for but the emotional, psychological and spiritual healing was near miraculous to us.

There is a tendency to want to run and hide when we are confronted with times of trial in our lives. We want to shut everything and everyone out. When we do this we lose sight of God and cannot see the ways He is still (and always will be) working in our lives. God works in ordinary and extraordinary ways. The signs are there and they point to his amazing grace and healing love.

Dear Heavenly Father, We know you are always at work in our lives - especially in times of trial. The love of family, the caring of friends, the prayers of others are all signs of your love for us. May we always look for you and see you. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen

Sandi Bergman
Lutheran Church of Our Saviour, North Huntingdon
The Dead Sea, Arabic Al-Baḥr Al-Mayyit ("Sea of Death"), Hebrew Yam HaMelaḥ ("Salt Sea"), also called Salt Sea, is landlocked salt lake between Israel and Jordan in southwestern Asia. Its eastern shore belongs to Jordan, and the southern half of its western shore belongs to Israel. The northern half of the western shore lies within the Palestinian West Bank and has been under Israeli occupation since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The Jordan River, from which the Dead Sea receives nearly all its water, flows from the north into the lake.

Surrounded by the stunning landscape of the Negev Desert, the shores of the Dead Sea are the lowest point on the surface of the earth. The saline waters of the lake means no fish can survive in the salty waters, hence the name. The other result of the salty water is their renowned health and healing properties of the mud. You can also float naturally in them, as demonstrated by Pastor John Gropp in 2012.
What's more than everything?

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’ The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ‘These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’ But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money?’ (Matthew 20:1-15 NIV)

I never liked this parable. I agreed with the ones who had been working since early in the morning. They SHOULD have gotten more than those who only worked one hour. This parable reminds me of something that happened when I first became a supports coordinator, working with and for those with developmental disabilities. In that situation, however, I was one of the "latecomers" and had nothing to complain about!

I was hired at a certain starting salary. Within six months, the Agency decided to increase the starting salary - by $3,000 - and to raise all the current employees to that amount. I was thrilled - I just got a raise of $3,000 a year - unheard of in social services! Longtime employees were not so happy. They had worked for 5 or 6 years to reach that annual salary. They thought that everyone should get a $3,000 a year raise. And I agreed with them! It's not as if the Agency didn't have the money or couldn't get more money. The Agency could have dipped into their Endowment Fund, had another funding-raising golf or bowling tournament, or even renegotiated with the state their contract for providing services. That's the way I looked at this parable for a long time. But I was wrong! In the parable, the landowner represents the Lord and the denarius represents everything - everything that the Lord has to offer - eternal life in the next world and everything that we need in this one. So I ask you - what's more than everything? Instead of complaining that their relatives, friends, neighbors finally knew the Lord and were now also going to have eternal life in the next world and everything they need in this one, they should have been rejoicing.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, that we know You. Thank you for giving us eternal life in the next world and everything that we need in this one. Lord, help us to celebrate with our relatives, friends, neighbors when they come to know You. And Lord, help us to pray that even more people come to know you at the eleventh hour. Amen.

Beryl Gundy
Christ Lutheran Church, Duquesne
John 1:5
5The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

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

Isaiah 55:11
11 So also will be the word that I speak—
    it will not fail to do what I plan for it;
    it will do everything I send it to do.

I happened to be writing a sermon right before Christmas and these were the verses I had to reference. It forced me to stop stressing about the holiday and see what God was telling me. Stop stressing, reset, go back to what God intended. Remembering he gave us the greatest gift of all, our salvation through his son, Christ the Lord. Like the verse says, his word does not fail, it always accomplishes what God sends it out to do.

These verses are offering us something that all the “things” in the world can’t give us, hope. God gives us hope. He was sending hope to his people Israel as they lamented in their captivity. The word gave them hope that they would be restored. It does the same for us today, the word gives us hope that we will be restored.

In the beginning, God walked upon the earth with Adam and Even in the Garden. God did not walk on the earth again until Jesus came. Jesus made paradise accessible to people again. He brought God’s blessings to all people again. He brought light and life, he brought salvation, and he brought hope. The people weren’t expecting the new king to be like Jesus, not expecting the actual son of God to come down and lead them out of their slavery. This king did come to lead them out of slavery, the slavery to sin. The war he fought was for the redemption of our souls. God had a mission for Jesus, not the one the people thought he should have. How often do we confuse what we want with what God wants for us?

In these bleak days in the constant shadow of this pandemic, and the sense that it will never end, what do we need? Do we need the light that darkness will never overcome? Do we need the hope that God offers to us in his Word? His word gives life, gives hope, it refreshes and restores. Jesus brought us back to paradise to walk again with God. In the tiny babe of Bethlehem, who else but God could make salvation come in our most vulnerable form, that of a baby.

Let’s not be like those who were there when Jesus walked among them and refused to accept him as the Son of God. Let’s not forget who Jesus is. Maybe it’s keeping things in perspective, giving thanks that we were given the best gift of all.

Lord, thank you for loving us so much that you came to earth to walk with us. Thank you for never giving up on us and always being there to help or to carry us. Help us Lord to strive to be more like you in everything we do and speak. Help us to share your hope with the world. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Anna Williams
Bethany Ev. Lutheran Church, Dormont
Matthew 23:37-39

37 “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! 38 See, your house is left to you, desolate. 39 For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”
This verse hit home today as I was reading Portals of Prayer that was provided to me at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Irwin, part of the PLUM churches.

The Lord has been with me for 65 years inside the church with my church family and outside the church building every day of my life, even when I was too young and immature to know this.

Today, I woke up concerned about the leak under my bathroom sink in the basement as it had been leaking for about a week. This morning, it no longer was leaking so I delayed the plumber coming out until Thursday of this week to look at it. A couple weeks ago, when we got the big snow, I was concerned about being able to shovel the driveway and walks but I tried my Snow Joe blower out for the first time and it worked effortlessly and efficiently helped me clear the snow. I mentioned this in my adult Sunday School class yesterday and they helped to calm my fears about the bathroom sink leak. Even growing up and attending Immanuel Lutheran Church with my 2 sisters, 1 brother, Mom, and relatives, my Sunday School teachers and classmates were a joy and comfort to me and the memories are with me always.

I remember being baptized at age 4 with my brother and sisters and I still remember the pastor’s hand on my head baptizing me in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. I remember being about 6 years old and standing in the front of the church congregation during a Christmas play and forgetting my lines. I still remember my Sunday School teacher kneeling in the back aisle trying to whisper the words to me and I still did not understand and was probably very shy looking up there. Everyone must have got a chuckle out of that. Today, I help reading the lessons as a deacon, no fear of forgetting my lines as I just read them off the bulletin.

I remember my catechism classes, there were 7 of us and I remember all their first names and our pastor that held our classes. That was a great class, and the picture that was taken of us all that day we were confirmed in front of the church.

All the precious times, being a Sunday School teacher for the young kids 30 some years ago and those same kids are now all grown up and working themselves as adults. I remember all the Easter services and Christmas services, my sister’s wedding, all the coffee hours, the St. Lucia dinners in which I portrayed St. Lucia many times as well as other church ladies, funerals – the latest in my own family being my brother in 2019 whom I miss dearly, all the pastors over the years, all the good and hard times in my own personal life and others in the church, and the church has always been a great comfort to me over the years.

Yesterday in my adult Sunday School class, 2 members gave me a picture of me and Mom as they were looking through some of their pictures at home. Me and Mom were sitting at a table that was beautifully set for one of our St. Lucia dinners in 1994. It has been 6 years since Mom has passed on. She looked so young and healthy in this picture and I must have only been in my middle 30s. It is a precious picture and brought back so many memories of Mom and the church. She had attended Immanuel Lutheran Church all her life as she grew up in Irwin just a few streets up from the church. She made sure us kids attended church and Sunday School when we were younger and didn’t have a car to get there early as dad had passed away young at age 37. Someone from the church was kind enough to actually come to our house and pick us up for Sunday School.

I am very thankful for the many members in my church who attend and also those who do so much to keep things running smoothly so we can continue to keep the church going.

The church has brought me and my family many blessings over the years with the congregation’s kindness, friendliness and many prayers and services. Things do change and worries come and go through our lives, but the Lord always remains faithful to us and helps us to keep our faith also, especially during these trying times with Covid. There are many more stories I could write about over the years, but I will stop here. I am very thankful we are able to gather together for worship at all our churches with the PLUM group and for the many different pastors that attend our churches enabling us to gather together for worship.

PRAYER: May the Lord bless us all and help us to remain faithful and healthy both in church and in our everyday lives through the years.

Marlene Tisney – Immanuel Lutheran Church, Irwin
Trust in the Slow Work of God
by Teilhard de Chardin

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way
to something unknown, something new.
Yet it is the law of all progress, that it is made by passing through some stages of instability,
and that may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you.
Your ideas mature gradually. Let them grow.
Let them shape themselves without undue haste.
Do not try to force them on
as though you could be today what time (that is to say, grace and circumstances
acting on your own good will) will make you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new Spirit gradually forming in you will be.
Give our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you and accept the anxiety of
feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.

Above all, trust in the slow work of God, our loving vine-dresser.
What struggles will you share with Jesus today?
Ask, Seek, Knock  Matthew 7:7-8

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.”

Jesus tells us to ask our Father in heaven for what we need, and tells us that we are His loved children. When I read this verse I am reminded of an elderly lady I'll call “Rosie” who was a resident several years ago at the personal care home my daughter and I worked at. Rosie suffered from a lot of mental health issues and fought her share of demons. But Rosie by nature was a happy, joyful person and was a joy to be around. Rosie had a very strong faith in God, and loved to share her faith with the other residents and with staff. She always talked about how God hears her prayers and answers them. She often talked about her belief that God loves us, His children, and wants us to ask Him for what we need. More often than not, though, Rosie “needed” money. She frequently would announce that she asked God to send her “lots of money, filled to the top, packed down and overflowing.” My daughter and I just smiled the first time Rosie said that, maybe rolling our eyes a little bit. But many of the other residents believed her. It turned out that a large sum of money was deposited into her account within a few days afterwards. Rosie happily spent her blessing on extra goodies for herself and shared with her friends. She kept praying the same prayer every time she “needed” more money, and every time, her prayer was answered. Rosie didn’t pray out of greed. She prayed with the complete trust and faith in the Father that a small child would have, the kind of trust that Jesus talked about in Matthew 19:14 “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” We are called to trust God completely at all times. He is with us always. Rosie taught the other residents by example to trust God in all things. She is in heaven now, but her faith is still alive in the people who witnessed her faith.

Heavenly Father, Please help us to always pray with a simple faith of a small child, knowing that You are always with us and love us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Barb Helsel
Christ Lutheran Church, Duquesne
“I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Philippians 4.12-13

Seven years ago, I was diagnosed with Parkinson’s Disease. This is a disease that gradually diminishes your ability to function. My walking has become more difficult, my speech has gotten quieter, my handwriting has gotten smaller, and I have found that I run out of energy much more quickly than I used to. Once I was full of energy, physical strength, and enthusiasm for life. Now I have days when I get discouraged and feel like I cannot accomplish as much as I used to accomplish. It is during those times that I recall this ‘secret’ of Paul. He reminds me that no matter what my circumstances may be, that Christ and Christ’s strength is always with me. When I think of what Jesus endured in order to bring the eternal benefits of faith in Christ to me, I am encouraged to continue to run the race no matter how difficult it may become. Finally I know that Jesus walks along side of me and that his strength is my strength, his endurance is my endurance, his victory is my victory.

Lord Jesus, my shepherd and my comforter, never leave my side and show me the way that leads to faithful discipleship and eternal happiness in your care. Amen.

+Pastor Paul Koch
PLUM Staff
Pastor Paul Koch preaching on the Sea of Galilee, summer 2012

Jordan River
“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, neither angels nor demons, either the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:38-39.

1987 – WHAT A YEAR!

1987 was by far the most turbulent year in my life. It was the year that I lost the two most significant males in my life – my husband and my father. One was without any warning and the second was after a lengthy battle with cancer. Both had been powerful Christian role models for me in my life so there was a devastating void after they died. Having three young children at the time ages 7, 5, and 1, all the boundaries I had set up in my life suddenly evaporated, and I felt insecure about everything. No longer could I sleep in my bed and for many months, frequently friends and family stayed with me on those nights. Something so simple as the furnace turning on startled me. Heart palpitations were the norm. I was overwhelmed with suddenly being responsible by myself for the lives of my three children, and the fear of making them orphans should I die was a constant preoccupation of thought. Regarding my husband’s death, I felt it was my place to share with his parents the tragic news that their youngest son had died; and I asked God if he could put me anywhere on the face of earth other than walking into their family home late at night to do so. That was the hardest conversation I have ever had with anyone in my life; and upon reflection, without the help of the Holy Spirit, I do not think I could have done it. Many times, I sat at the school bus stop reading my Bible while waiting for my daughter Brittany to get home from school. I was drawn by the above scripture over and over again as I sat there reading while tears streamed down my face. I was convinced that God loved me, but I just was not sure how I was going to make it. It is my belief that God heard those prayers and sent people, both friends, family, and people from the church into my life to help me stabilize and move forward, not only in faith but support. I consider myself to have been blessed amid the crisis of 1987, and continue to see myself as being blessed by God in all the arenas I have been placed in.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for listening to my heart during those troubled times and sending faithful people into my life during a time when I was so desperately in need of healing and compassion. Because of you Lord, I have and continue to be blessed and I am so thankful. Amen.

Mary Anne Novak
Christ Lutheran Church, Duquesne
I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Philippians 4:13

Starting in April 2018 the past few years have been full of a lot of loss.

Not only the loss of hugs and spending time with family and friends, but the loss of 5 family members. Knowing that Jesus is beside me giving me the strength to hold on one minute at a time is what gets me through.

Jesus strengthens me through prayer every day. There have been so many prayers answered. Knowing that Jesus hears me and is walking beside me is what strengthens me!

Prayer:
Dear heavenly Father,
Thank you for loving us and giving us your son, Jesus.
Amen.

Sandy Baker
Bethany Evangelical Lutheran Church, Dormont
I John 4:4

“Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he is who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”

I have always felt that I am someone who has inner demons that I am always fighting to stay hidden under lock and key so they cannot escape. That is why I have chosen this verse from First John for my devotion. For the twenty-three years that I have been alive, I have blamed these inner demons on my bipolar disorder and wishing that I could have just been born normal without any diagnosis; however, the more that I grew and opened up my heart and mind to Jesus, I realized that there is NOTHING wrong with me at all. In fact, my bipolar disorder makes me unique and helps me to see the world in a different perspective.

Society has never normalized the idea that people are born with different disabilities and diagnosis making said people feel like they’re monsters. Jesus however makes sure to let everyone know that they are loved and respected no matter what they were born with. It wasn’t their choice on what they may have, but they do have the choice to make the most of it. Just as I have chosen to do with Jesus as my right-hand man.

I have a short story that happened recently to me that was a real eye-opening experience that involves the help of Jesus. A couple of months ago I was having a really bad day not only with what had happened during my day, but I was also struggling with my inner demons once again. I felt hopeless and like I wanted to just give up on everything I have been working on, but my amazing boyfriend had reminded me that the path I was going down wasn’t helping anyone and only hurting myself more. So, standing outside on a warm summer night together we joined hands and he told me to say a prayer and to have Jesus send me a sign that he heard my prayer. Of course, in the current state I was in I doubted that anything would happen at all, but to my disbelief as we both stood there in each other’s arms a shooting star danced across the sky and I immediately knew that was my sign that Jesus was there with me in that moment to help me out of the fight with my demons. From that experience I have never once doubted again that Jesus has heard every one of my prayers as I struggled with my demons, and even if I didn’t receive the help I needed immediately, it came eventually.

Prayer:

Lord, please continue to watch over us and to give us the strength we need to push through any future inner battles we may have. Amen.

Heavenlee McCurdy
Lutheran Church of Our Saviour, North Huntingdon
God’s Love Never Fails
Beloved Community

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28

“[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” Revelations 21:4

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:35

For some time now and especially the last several weeks, the phrase Beloved Community has been stuck in my mind like a song that won't go away. I wake up with it on my mind. I go to bed with it on my mind. And, even in my nocturnal trips to the bathroom it has traveled with me. The question that is troubling my heart is “Do we, do I, really understand what it means to be a Beloved Community?”

This concept of Beloved Community is not new. The Bible is filled with many assurances of an eternal home in which we will one day experience a transformation of ourselves and our community in which loves abound. No longer will our differences be used as weapons to divide instead we will be gathered in the unity of being God’s beloved children. Like that familiar Isaiah 11:6 passage that we often hear during advent the wolf will lie down with the lamb, we are reminded that we will live in harmony with one another. What has been troubling my heart is the world around me seemed to have forgotten that these very assurances are to be lived here and now. Sadly, we the followers of Jesus, are also struggling with living as a Beloved Community in the present. We get the one day in heaven part, but we are missing the right now part.

And if I am honest with myself, I am struggling even more lately because the ways in which others are excluded from the Beloved Community has become common place. The pandemic has brought to the surface so much of the pain and ugliness that we have ignored. Yes, the blatant acts of racism, sexism, genderism and all the various isms are easy to see and say they are not Christ like. However, it is the subtle ones that wound my spirit. Why do we have to talk about those issues? We welcome all but let’s not change anything. It is not that I don’t like ___ I just prefer ____. Actions and statements that so often prevent those not like us to feel unheard. I keep wondering when we will begin to live out the words we say in the Lord’s prayer thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Prayer: Loving God, your son taught us to pray thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, reminding us our actions here on earth matter. A promise of a Beloved Community starts now. Help us to be open to all the many ways that you created us and call us beloved. May we remember to reflect our love for another as you have asked us to. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Pastor Brenda Henry
Love in Action

What does this mean to you?
This evening our Lenten observance comes to an end, and we gather with Christians around the world to celebrate the Three Days of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The Services for Thursday, Friday, and Easter Vigil are linked together by the term “Triduum” which means “Three Days.” Historically they have been regarded as the three most holy days of the church’s liturgical calendar.
WE ARE SAVED
NOT BY WHAT WE DO
BUT BY
WHAT CHRIST
HAS DONE

IT IS FINISHED.
What stands out as you reflect on this year’s Lenten Journey?