

A landscape photograph of a lake at dusk or dawn. A single tree stands in the water on the left. The sky is filled with dark, dramatic clouds, with a soft glow of light from the setting or rising sun behind the mountains in the distance. The water is calm and reflects the sky and the tree.

Shepherd
Me
O God

2022 Lent Devotional



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Daily Devotions

During the season of Lent, we invite you to spend time in prayer, slowly welcoming the text of the 23rd Psalm to be your trusted guide. Some of the most beloved verses of scripture, these words provide a deep resource for our life of faith. Along with each short devotion, we hope that you will also recite, pray, or read Psalm 23. Choose a favorite translation or draw from a variety. By looking to the psalm daily, you will find yourself memorizing these verses so that you can draw from them in your hopes, dreams, fears, and longings. Indeed our God is shepherding us today and every day.

Some entries provide additional verses for reflection while others draw us deeper into the psalm and still others explore the spiritual practices for each week. We invite you to respond to the devotions offered by Church Anew contributors, write notes in the margins, or in your Bible. There are five devotions offered for each week (after the first Sunday of Lent).

Thank you to all of the contributors who shared writing for this devotional – Rev. Jenny Sung, Jessica Gulseth, Laura Jean Truman, Rev. Matthew Ian Fleming, and Ellie Roscher.

Find a quiet moment in your day to spend some time with God. Read these words, pray Psalm 23, light a candle, or sing a song. God is near. May your Lent reveal the God who is shepherding us all.

[Ash Wednesday, March 2-5](#)

by Rev. Jenny Sung

[1. Ash Wednesday](#)

On this day we recognize we are dust and to dust we shall return. Covered in ashes we humble ourselves before a holy God who knows us by name. Nothing is hidden, no branches to wrap around ourselves. We're just left to sit in the truth of who we are... human. Our great Shepherd doesn't leave us or abandon us there. Instead Christ promises to bring about something beautiful and holy from all the good intentions and broken promises. In all of God's divine royalty, through humility and great love our Shepherd leads us beside still waters and green pastures.

Let these promises reside in more than just our hope. Bury it into our bones and flesh. May we embody and rise in God's love day in and day out, in the extravagant and mundane even if we don't feel it, even when we can't see it.

*Holy Shepherd, you see the depth of who we are and refuse to turn away. In our great sorrow and grief you raise us up and remind us of what is true. We are dust and to dust we all return. As we live and breathe, pour into us the strength of your Spirit and the tenacity of your grace. Give us visions of your goodness to come.
In your name Jesus, Amen.*

2. I shall not want.

If we had to, could we actually name what we need? Would it disguise itself in the shadows of sleep or safety? Do we even know the difference between want and need? So often we crave the illusion of fulfillment and find ourselves feeling gutted and empty. We give all we have to the wind hoping the wind will love us back or recognize how hard we try. In the meantime Jesus waits. Will you let me feed you? Will you let me breathe into you the very life you seek? When we are lost in our want we are like children holding a knife with the blade side in our palm. God doesn't rush up to us and rip the knife out of our hand. Instead, Jesus sits beside us and gently asks, "Beloved, you are holding something dangerous. Will you let me hold it for you?"

*Giver of life, in a world where we confuse want and need constantly, Lord be our guide. Let us no longer gorge ourselves with things that keep us malnourished and weary. Help us distinguish between what we want and what we need. All we have ever needed is you. Draw us close, draw us near to that which breathes life into us.
In your name Jesus, Amen.*

3. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

After God created humans the very first thing their Creator instructed them to do was to rest – to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. How many Sabbaths have we skipped? How many vacation days go to waste? A wise friend once told me, "Baby, get off the cross we need the wood."

We are not Jesus. We are called to be in community. One of us alone could never bring about green pastures for all. Instead, God invites us to lie down in them together. Trusting this is where we are fed. Where we are healed. Where we are made whole. If you are convinced it has to be you always, you have been fed a lie. It's Jesus who feeds, who makes us *all* lie down in green pastures. Trust the shepherd. Not the want in your belly. Rest in this God who pours into you and resurrects you.

Holy God, my body collapses at the promise of your green pastures. My need overtakes my wants and I rest in you. I feel the richness of your goodness, the brightness of your wholeness, the warmth of your healing. May I dwell in your holy echo my whole life long. In your name Jesus, Amen.

Week One, March 6-12

by Rev. Jenny Sung

1. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.

The waters of chaos call to us in the big and the small things, inviting us to move, work, and fight until we have nothing left. These waves know they don't have to be big, they just have to be constant, never giving you a moment to breathe or catch your breath.

Jesus invites us to calm waters that restore us and make us new. In the beginning God hovered over the waters of chaos and brought order, creating life and bringing about good things. In these still waters we are marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit forever. In a world that fights to name us and claim our identity, we can rest in the identity that can never be taken from us... Beloved child of God.

Generous Creator, I hear your invitation to still waters. Do not let me get distracted or overwhelmed by the waves of chaos beckoning me. You call me to be restored, to be made new. I trust I was created to be more than a thing that produces results. I was created to know joy, rest, and restoration. Calm me in your waters with your peace that surpasses all understanding. In your name Jesus, Amen.

2. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

God meets us where we are and invites us into the way of love and resurrection. Oftentimes we hear, "God has a plan for your life." I wonder if it is not so much about a particular plan we ought to execute in a specific way. What if it is more about God's hope to create something beautiful together. In collaboration we curate holy spaces. We sit before the blank canvas of life as God delights and wonders what we will create together. It doesn't matter if you use markers or paint, clay or crayons. It's an invitation where beautiful holy things can grow and in the growing and becoming we see, encounter, and dance with our Triune God. We can trust there is grace for our fumbling steps, and liberation from our perfectionism and pressure.

Giver of Life, sometimes I worry and doubt how well I am performing and walking on this path you've called me to. Liberate me from judging myself and help me trust what you say about me more than what I say, or others say about me. Let me flourish in the rich soil of your goodness. Deepen these roots far and wide so every fruit it bears reflects the depth of your mercy and holiness of your name. In your name Jesus we pray, Amen.

3. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

It's easy to create from our pride in a way that doesn't manifest God's goodness. At times our names and egos inflate, making us unaware that we are dancing alone, unable to see the steps of others to adapt or change with the world around us.

When this happens we begin to grow out of our own soil, rather than the soil of community. In the places where we feel stuck and alone, lead us back Lord. You search tirelessly for the one lost sheep. During this Lenten season open our eyes to see where we are creating from a source other than you. Lead us back to places we are humbled and made new.

Good Shepherd, thank you for always searching me out. Forgive me for the ways I continue to get distracted, prideful, or unaware. May everything we do, touch, create bring about wholeness and healing for ourselves and our entire community. In your name Jesus we pray, Amen.

4. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit resides in each and every one of us. John O'Donohue says, "There is a place inside you that has never been wounded, never been hurt, where there is still a sureness in you." This holy space moves and inspires us. No matter how lost we become, through the power of the Holy Spirit we are brought back to our source of life and goodness.

I invite you to take a moment to catch your breath. Place your hand over your heart's space, and close your eyes. While you are breathing imagine this holy space inside of you. What colors do you

imagine? Do you notice any changes in your body as you become more aware of this space? As you dwell in this place remember this place exists inside of you. This space has never been wounded, or hurt. There is still a sureness that exists in you. Breathe it in and know it is from this space God leads us.

Holy God, in this Lenten season I pray there are moments when I rest in your Holy Spirit. Help me to remember I carry this space and so do others. Help me to recognize people as holy temples who carry you with them. Help me to recognize I too am a holy vessel that carries you with me. In your name Jesus, Amen

5. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

“For his namesake” means Christ has vowed his name to each of us. Before the name of Jesus every family in heaven and on earth takes its name (Eph. 3:14-15). In the way Christ leads us, we are covered and clothed in Christ's righteousness. We can pray in the powerful name of Jesus and do far more than we could ever think or imagine. The Spirit intercedes for us.

During this Lenten season may you dwell and be strengthened in your inmost being through the mighty name of Jesus and notice your connection to God's creation and the very source of love, life, and liberation.

Mighty Deliverer, we are ushered and adopted into your family by the grace of your love. Thank you for seeing me in all that I am, and still delivering me from myself and all that wishes to destroy me. You hold me close and hold me tight. I can never be plucked from your hand. For all this and more I give thanks to you. In your name Jesus, Amen.

Week Two, March 13-19

by Jessica Gulseth

1. For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope. Romans 15:4

Recently an elder in our community, more than 50 years older than me shared how concerned they were about all that has been happening in our world. They talked about their life and lamented at some of the changes over the years, and my relief slowly started to emerge. When I tell you I felt so much better, I felt SO much better. The thoughts and feelings I had been having were normalized and some of them were even shared by this person. It gave me some perspective and encouragement. It reminded me of the first time I read the beginning of Moses' story. I had always known of Moses who stood up to Pharaoh and parted the Red Sea. I hadn't known of the Moses who was also hesitant. It changed the way I felt about my own uncertainty being called into ministry. This is the beautiful power of scripture. Encouragement and hope reside in the pages of stories about people who endure and overcome. To dwell in the Word every day is an opportunity to find peace you didn't know you needed. May the Word of God bring you encouragement, peace and hope as you relate to the stories of people who came before you.

Loving God, open the Bible to me. Reveal your love in the stories from of old. Show your character in the pages of this book that has been passed on from generation to generation. Shepherd me through studying your scriptures. Amen.

2. Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword...it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Heb. 14:12
Something that tempts me more than I want to admit, is the attitude of 'I already know'. I catch myself assuming I already know what a piece of scripture has to say to me or to the Church. If you've been around scripture, church, or a community of faith in Christ for a while there are some stories in the Bible that get repeated over and over again. I find it hard to read, listen to, or engage in conversation without assuming I already know what God has to say through those well-known stories. But if I believe that the Word of God is a living and active word, as this text tells us, this mindset may be a problem for me. If you can relate, here's what I have to remind myself when reading: I must hold an attitude of openness, and a sense of humility to keep learning and hearing something new.

God, let your word speak to us in new ways, help us to hear your words as if they were being told to us for the first time. Help us to have an open heart and an open mind to your living Word. Amen.

3. It is written: Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. Matthew 4:4

Have you ever heard that when you're feeling hungry or snacky that you should drink water first? See, we're dehydrated so often, what we might be feeling is thirst and not hunger but it's hard for us to differentiate between the two. It's funny how often we misread what our own body needs. It made me wonder: How often do we misinterpret and neglect our own need for God's Word? This might be a confession you can't relate to, but sometimes I will go all day without drinking water (because I love coffee too much). I get to the end of the day and I can't figure out why I feel so gross, so tired, so unwell. Then it clicks. 'You didn't drink ANY water ALL DAY.' Well, something else clicked when reading this text. Some days end with me lying in bed wondering why I feel so gross. I would run through my personal checklist: I slept well the night before, I ate well, drank water, was social and so on. Click. You haven't read your Bible IN DAYS. I'll be honest, I forget that to read my Bible daily is to care for my body, my mind, and my spirit in the same way that drinking water does.

God, we give you thanks for your Word. Remind us of the nourishment that comes from your Word. Feed us with the good food of your love, that we might taste and see your goodness in all that we do. Amen.

4. Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. Psalm 119:105

For folks in the wilderness, the health of their feet is of the utmost importance. If you're hiking a long distance or climbing a mountain, a broken foot, a sprained ankle, or even bad blisters could be a disaster. And yet how often do we stub our toes around the house? A misplaced toy or catching the corner of a piece of furniture can have any of us yelping in pain. God's word can be a lamp for us in the daily moments when we can't see where to go next. It may seem like a challenging thing to enter the Bible looking for guidance, but those who walk with it regularly witness the power of scripture to reveal paths that are emerging. Indeed God's living and active word works on us when we spend time in it, shedding light on our dilemmas and binding up our wounds.

Gracious God reveal yourself to us in the verses of the Bible. Show us paths that will lead us to life and wholeness. Heal our wounds when we stumble and show us the way of life for our community. Amen.

5. You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul. Deuteronomy 11:18

We don't often spend the time that it takes to memorize things. With a supercomputer in our pockets and the answer to every question that pops into our minds, why would we need to? Many of us don't know five phone numbers for the people closest to us. But the memorization of scripture has been a longstanding practice of Christian faith and life. There is something that happens in our bodies and in our souls when we allow words to dwell for a long period with us. As we spend time in Psalm 23 this Lent, we are inviting these words to become close friends, verses that will be with us in any moment of joy or need.

Loving God, speak to us in the quiet moments of our lives. Guide us with your scriptures and reveal ways that the world needs your love through simple acts of kindness and grace. Amen.

Week Three, March 20-26

by Laura Jean Truman

1. Everyday holiness is bread and wine.

We're always trying to make our daily lives more holy by making them less human. We don't make the sacraments "more important," though, when we divorce them from their whole, embodied, normal physicality, as if our brains are closer to God than our bodies. The holiest things are also the most "normal" ones. This can make us uncomfortable. We prefer to theologize away everyday qualities of the sacraments. We retreat to our brains when talking about "sacred things," because our bodies feel less holy. But so many of the sacraments are so physical! Eating and drinking and bathing are mundane, delightful, physical, essential, joyful. These are physical pleasures and physical needs, and here is God in them all— calling those physical joys and necessities holy. Perhaps many of us have despised our bodies for so long, or at best, ignored them. It can be uncomfortable to think about body maintenance or desire as holy. Our shame around our bodies, though, and what our bodies want and need, can calcify into a theology of mind that denies the physicality of the sacraments for a more heady brand of spirituality, one that nods its head to the body but does not revel in it. The sacraments, especially Holy Communion, invite us to revel. They invite us to let our minds be still for just a moment, and allow our bodies to need, and to want, and to enjoy. Into our shame and dismissal of our bodies, Jesus comes to us. He comes "eating and drinking," and inviting us to the table to eat and drink with him (Lk 7:34).

*The table invites us to come and eat – not to come and think.
Come – with your body. The table is set. Amen.*

2. You don't have to tidy up first.

I grew up in an evangelical church culture that took "don't eat and drink judgment on yourself" very seriously. If you had "unconfessed sin" or didn't feel "close to God" that Sunday, evangelical etiquette demanded that you skip communion. We only had communion a couple times a year at my childhood church. I'd watch folks pass the trays of tiny plastic cups and crackers down the line, passing it on without taking any for themselves. I asked my parents why people weren't taking communion. *If your heart isn't prepared, they told me, you should skip communion.*

Lord have mercy. When *is* my heart prepared? When *do* I have all my ducks in a row and my stuff entirely together and my sin rooted out and my heart earnest and kind and penitent and holy? Absolutely not one day. Not one day ever. There is not a single day that I will be worthy to take the

bread and the cup. And that, friends, is the entire point of the reckless grace of this table that God has set for us. It's here for us precisely because we are never going to wake up some Sunday and really have it all together. We're not going to get close. We need the table. We need the radical, reckless, unbound grace of Jesus because we are never going to be able to get our stuff together and never going to be able to come properly tidied up and never going to be as good as we want to be. And to us – to us, and to our messy, ugly, spiritually and morally unkempt neighbor – God comes. Unable to get close to our best selves or close to our perfect God, God comes to us, and sets a table, and says – just as you are, this is my body, broken for you. Take. Eat.

This is grace. It's not what we bring to the table, but how the table is set for us: as we are, in our brokenness, in our pride, in our mess, in our inadequacy. To us – to the strays and disasters and fallen souls – God comes. God sets us a table, just for us. And God invites us home. Amen.

3. Holy hospitality and a family meal

“This is a family meal,” my pastor used to say when he presided over the table every Sunday morning. This is a family meal. There is power in a family meal. There is unique holiness in hospitality. Hospitality invites people as they are, and makes a space for them to come and release their performative self and find refuge. Nothing says *you are welcome, come and rest* like a very large meal. Working in the restaurant industry for the last six years, I have a front row seat to how every important moment is marked by a meal. Engagements, graduations, and baby showers happen over dinner. Funerals, divorces, heartbreaks also come with casseroles, nights out over nachos – achingly difficult moments accompanied by meals dropped on a back porch.

We need to eat, and also we need to be fed. Food is always more than just food. It's comfort, tenderness, celebration, nourishment. It helps us run races in the morning and feeds broken hearts at night. Food carries us physically and emotionally into the hard or joyful days we are facing. This is the gift Communion offers us.

When God wants to tell us we are welcome and we are home in God's love – God brings us a meal. God invites us to come and eat, whether we come in dancing or heartbroken or everything in between. God invites us, exactly as we are, to come and feel the full acceptance of a home cooked meal. Amen.

4. To make space for a God who makes space for us.

When we think of the table, we think about the hospitality that God offers to *us*. There is a way, though, that taking communion is also offering hospitality to God. God sets the table for us and welcomes us, and then we offer that welcome back to God, housing God in our bodies as we eat and drink. It's a strange relationship in this moment, when we dance as equals with the creator of the universe. This is a mysterious and beautiful side of human freedom. Because we are so free, we can consent to the grace of God - and in our consent, we can offer hospitality back to God in the exact moment that God offers it to us.

God as Christ incarnate becomes vulnerable. Like the three Trinitarian strangers visiting Abraham or Jesus coming to the home of Martha and Mary Jesus becomes vulnerable enough to need a place to rest, to sit down and be at peace. Similar to poor stressed Martha who thought she had to make everything perfect, we can think we need to do more or be more or hide the parts of ourselves we're ashamed of in order to welcome the Divine. Jesus, though, is just so glad to be here - not only giving

to us but also, in the wildest mystery of the incarnation, accepting from us, too. Jesus doesn't just take delight in giving hospitality. Jesus is delighted to be welcomed, too.

This is also love – not only to recklessly give, but also recklessly receive.

The vulnerability of God is a great mystery of the incarnation. Every week, when we take communion, we encounter that mystery again. We are welcomed by God when we put out our hands for the body of Christ. We also, in a miracle of the vulnerability of the Divine, welcome God, too. Amen.

5. Pandemic Communion

It's just whiskey and the heel of supermarket whole wheat bread, and I am not sure of a theology of Long Distance Communion, but I know I need Jesus and I know it is a pandemic and I know that online church is all I have – so bless my heart, this is going to be what it is going to be.

Sprawled out on my living room floor in my 600sq ft apartment, the computer precariously balanced on the coffee table, and my makeshift communion lined up on the wood floor next to my coffee cup, I don't feel particular holy. This does not feel like "church." I do feel a lot less lonely than I did last night, though. The little chat bubble starts popping up, and everyone is saying hello as the announcements start, and then when the sermon starts people pop in with a joke or a quote or a heart emoji. I don't feel quite so alone, for this half heartbeat of a Sunday morning.

The pandemic has been a very alone time. It has made me anxious and tightly wound, fragile, jumpy about picking fights, less gentle with others and myself. I'm more of an extrovert than I thought. I learned that I meet God most in rubbing shoulders with my neighbor, in joyful, awkward, thoughtful conversations.

I miss those conversations.

I didn't think I'd be able to be as close to God, or to my neighbor, if all we had were screens. I didn't think makeshift Zoom community could be as tender. I thought, too, that every week I'd bake real communion bread with my seminary recipe, and pick up red wine at Kroger. Pandemic me is always scattered and behind, though, so all I have this morning is the end of the whiskey bottle and this heel of bread. I'm not sure if it's holy or if it's enough, but it's what I have, on this hardwood floor in this pandemic time.

Like the little boy walking up the mountain with a bag lunch, asking Jesus if it will be enough, I wander into online church with my makeshift communion and anxious heart and ask – am I enough? Is this enough? Is this holy? Is this church? And there, on the floor, with what I have – God comes. Jesus multiplies this "not enough" into comfort, and community, and holiness, and presence, even in this most unexpected place. Like Jesus has always done. Like Jesus will always do. There is no place that the reckless hospitality of the Divine will not break into our lonely, broken, messy, sinful, heartbroken, scattered lives. "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence," Abraham Kuyper says, "over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!"

Even this hardwood floor. Even this online church. Even this whiskey and wheat bread. Even this lonely pandemic. In every strange and sacred and scattered moment – we are Christ's, and Christ is ours.

Week Four, March 27 – April 2

by Rev. Matthew Ian Fleming

1. Confessing need for me time

I have a confession to make. I have a hard time prioritizing time for myself. Folks often call it self-care: the need to tend our spirits and our bodies in ways that give us life. I have two young kids, a spouse who gives much in her career vocation, and a calling of my own that I love. At different seasons, I've poured myself into work because I love to do it – not because of obligation or necessity but because it brings me joy. But I've found that this joy can be seasonal too.

In one of the cold winters where I live in Minnesota, I decided to reclaim some outdoor time and begin downhill skiing again on my day off. Yes, they truly are hills not mountains in this region, but I enjoyed the time speeding down on snow with the wind in my face. I looked forward to it and I noticed it when I skipped a week or two.

The act of confession begins with self-awareness. But perhaps it isn't always about sin or failings. Perhaps it's about a need to tend ourselves.

Later in the season my eldest daughter asked if she could ski with me. Of course kids want to experience something that their parents have – but only if it gives us joy. We found some lessons (because it turns out I can't teach skiing) and in a few tries we were enjoying the rush of the hill together.

Perhaps the best self-care doesn't stay within ourselves. It's a joy that can't be contained, that recharges our spirits and bursts out to share with our children, our elders, our friends and neighbors, and all of God's world.

Loving God our lives are often crowded by the needs of those around us. At times we confess that our love for neighbor is framed by obligation or duty rather than the bursting grin you share with each of us. Teach us to love ourselves and in so doing share the love that molds us and grounds us with the whole world. Amen.

2. Things left undone

I am a keeper of lists. I've tried a wide variety of digital tools, bullet journals, or productivity apps only to abandon them after a month or two. But the yellow legal pad? It hasn't failed me yet. I will draw a little box next to the task that needs to be done. [] buy coffee [] send that email [] prepare that lesson [] write that sermon. I find that I never quite finish any list that I make in a week. I add to it and leave things unchecked.

In one of the old confessional liturgies of the church, we confess the things we have done and the things we have left undone. There is a freedom in this confession – in naming a whole list of ways that we have not lived up to God's dreams for us and for the world. Of course this list could be as mundane as forgetting to purchase coffee for the house (in our home, the most mortal sin if I'm honest). But it could also include the ways we've failed to advocate for neighbors in need, our apathy at political discourse, our inability to make meaningful conversation with people who think differently from us. The list could be exhaustive and exhausting.

But the act of confessing it puts a box [] next to all of the things we've left undone so that we might hear the words of forgiveness and the moment of grace. By naming all of these unspoken, unseen, unacknowledged, and undone items in one fell swoop, we can enter the next moment or week with confidence that God will use the things we *are* doing for the betterment of those around us.

Merciful God we confess the things that we have left undone, the tasks forgotten, the correspondence stalled. Our minds and our bodies fail to keep all of the lists. Forgive our forgetfulness and apathy. Move us to compassion and understanding, so that we might partake in your love for all of creation. Amen.

3. Forgiven.

I grew up in an evangelical context that emphasized the constant need for repentance and drilled into us the total depravity of our human condition. We emphasized sins, counting them, joining groups to talk about them, guarding against them, yet consistently sinning. There were conferences and programs and small groups that all seemed to call us to stop sinning, but it seemed impossible. When the questions of faith started feeling more like sinking sand than a solid rock I slowly started to think that this approach wasn't helpful either to stop sinning or to more authentically encounter God's love for me.

Much later in life I stumbled upon the story of Martin Luther, a medieval friar who was caught counting all of his sins. Rushing back to his confessor time and again, he couldn't go a moment without seeing the sin in front of him. Luther's discovery of radical grace was out of this experience, hearing a call from God to live not in the constant counting of sins but in the forgiveness freely given.

Living as if we are forgiven, as if God's grace and mercy are real for us, means no longer serving as the sin accountant, because we know that we'll always lose at that endeavor. It means receiving the pure gift of grace and freely offering it to our neighbors but also to ourselves. At their best, I think churches can be places that live out this forgiveness and grace, claiming the gifts that God has given each of us and reminding one another of the goodness that God has in store for all of us and for the world.

Gracious God the sin accounting business is not ours. Even though the numbers never look good for us, you offer us freedom in Christ to live out the many callings you have for each of us. Remind us we are loved, remind us we are forgiven, and remind us of all we have to share with the world around us. Amen.

4. Confessing systemic sin

I grew up thinking that sin was about what I've done – all the wrongs that I had committed against God and against the people around me. Perhaps you did too. This is certainly one aspect of our failure. But if we *only* see sin as the things that we've done consciously, by ourselves, I think we fall into a trap. We make it about us.

More and more I see sin as an interconnected web of systems: failures in our life as a community to tend to one another. We sin as a community when a child goes hungry. We sin as a community when our political ideologies get in the way of treating one another as human beings. We sin as a community when Black students perform worse than white students on standardized tests. We sin as a community when the globe keeps warming and we feel incapable of making a difference.

Systemic sin ties us in knots that make us think we can't make a difference. These lies convince us that it is a grand conspiracy or a power that is not our own. But community is people. Systems are choices and relationships, causes and effects. When we confess systemic sin, we confess our complicity in these networks. We confess our apathy for making a difference and we ask God to turn us around, individually and collectively, because that is the work that God is doing. God is calling each of us to tend this creation in all of its brokenness as co-creators in God's dream of love for every living thing.

Dear God there are systems at work in this world that do not tend for all of your creation. Forgive our complicity. Forgive our apathy. Awaken us to our call as your co-creators of peace in all that we do. Raise up leaders who will build networks of love and compassion and understanding so all might experience your dreams for the world. Amen.

5. No future without forgiveness.

The world lost an amazing human in the recent death of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. In his book, ***No Future without Forgiveness***, he tells the story of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in his home country of South Africa. The guiding thread of the book can be found in his words: "Forgiveness is nothing less than the way we heal the world. We heal the world by healing each and every one of our hearts. The process is simple, but it is not easy." The book details in story after story how the Truth and Reconciliation Commission unearthed the truth of apartheid in South Africa. One by one, this nation told the stories of oppression that Black South Africans experienced at the hands of the colonial whites. Yet this nation also sought reconciliation through this same process, telling the unvarnished and brutal stories, seeking ways to make right what had been wronged, and looking for reconciliation.

Indeed there is no future without forgiveness, but it can only begin by looking at the unvarnished truth of the failures, individually, systemically, generationally, of our nation. God desires wholeness for each of us and for the whole world. But we must look head on at the sins that we have committed and the things that we have left undone, whether in our time or generations before. And only in naming these painful truths can we have any hope at reconciliation. Indeed there is no future without forgiveness.

But we believe in a God who makes future possible. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. memorialized on the statue of him in our nation's capital, we believe in a God who is rending "out of a mountain of despair, a stone of hope."

Loving God, your dream is for dignity and honor for each of your children. Yet our society does not function this way. Across our history, time and again, we have failed. In this moment as a nation and a human community, show us the way of truth and show us the way of forgiveness.

Week Five, April 3 - 9

by Ellie Roscher

1. Gratitude as home.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Part of gratitude is being at peace with what is, instead of longing for what isn't. How can we dwell in the moment without trying to manipulate it? How can we find a home in the season we find ourselves, knowing that the only constant is change?

When my kids were very small, we were in the backyard playing on a blanket. The sun was shining, and the wind enlivened me. A plane flew overhead, and we stopped everything to watch it fly by, wonder where the passengers were going, and wish them well. I traveled a lot as a young adult and joyfully let the arrival of babies root me. In that moment, of all the places in the world that plane might be flying, I was right where I wanted to be, in my body, in the backyard, with my kids, exploring our delight.

Gratitude is wanting what is right in front of you. It is seeing this tiny, ordinary moment quaking with holiness. Gratitude, embodied, is to find a home within. With gratitude we hold the key to feeling at home no matter where we are. When we are grateful for our bodies, our bodies become home. When we are grateful for what is right in front of us, the present moment becomes home. Be where your feet are.

Choose a place in your home, like a staircase or sink, that you associate with a mundane task or movement. When you are there, give thanks for this moment and this season of life. Notice a sense of home in gratitude embodied.

2. Gratitude as Practice

Exodus 25:8-9

While the Israelites were wandering through the wilderness, they got a little whiny. They missed the comfort routine offered, even in captivity, and worried about the future. God asked them to build a tabernacle so that God may dwell among them. Extensive and detailed directions followed. But God was already dwelling among them. The tabernacle wasn't for God, then, as much as it was for the Israelites. Perhaps God just wanted them to stop complaining and focusing on what was hard about the wilderness. They got busy building something together, and the practice shifted their disposition. They stopped complaining (for a bit), and in doing so felt God's nearness.

For a long time, I thought of gratitude as a feeling. More recently I have thought of it as a practice. It is easy to say, "Thank you." The inner transformation happens moment-to-moment when we choose to put gratitude into action. It is taking time to write a detailed thank you note, giving generously and strategically for the common good, showing up undistracted to people in our lives, and not rationing our love and power. There are wilderness elements to our existence in this season. I think of the Israelites and wonder how putting my gratitude into building something might help me feel the nearness of God.

Write down three things for which you are grateful. How else might you put gratitude into action today? What can you build so that God can dwell more readily among us?

3. Gratitude as Presence

John 12:1-8

When I picture Mary anointing Jesus' feet, I picture her bringing a deep quality of presence to the moment. She was able to see Jesus as a human deserving tender attention, in addition to seeing him as the Messiah preparing to die. She took time to offer him gratitude while he was still with them.

My friend recently got diagnosed with Lymphoma. He is young and otherwise healthy, and the news totally rocked us. We are vulnerable, waiting and praying. Instantly, I started paying attention. I am bringing a different quality of presence to my days. I wake up grateful to be alive, grateful for my spouse, kids, friends, and job. It should not take tragedy to invite us to be present and to stop taking this day and this life for granted.

I often think of Lent as a spiritual check in, an opportunity to shake the dust off our souls and bring a different quality of presence to the little and not so little moments of our days. Like Mary with Jesus, tending to each other lovingly is never time we will regret. Instead, gratitude grows.

Change the pictures in your frames. Choose photos of people, places, and moments that you are grateful for, and send that gratitude out to the world when you look at the photos. How can you bring your full presence and tender affection to your loved ones today?

4. Gratitude as Acknowledgement

Psalms 9: 1-2

Offering prayers of thanksgiving ground me. I don't think God needs to hear them; I think I need to say them. It shifts how I see, how I move through the world, how I act. It is a spiritual practice of remembering and a rightful acknowledgement of where things come from. All good things come from God. In that acknowledgement, my ego drops away, and I loosen my grip on what I think is mine. I soften, humbled by the abundance of God's goodness around me. The sun comes from God, and it shines on me. The food I eat comes from God and it nourishes me. The children I am raising come from God and they delight me.

People and organizations can make land acknowledgement statements to recognize and respect Indigenous people that steward the land and understand what brought us to reside on the land. I live on land that does not belong to me.

I come from Ireland and Poland. I come from farmers, dreamers, and feminist Catholic nuns. I come from "Always do your best" and "Put your lips on." I come from firm handshakes, Diet Coke, and cartwheels in the grass. I come from Margie and Mike.

I come from God and I am grateful.

Today, give a nod to machines like your coffee maker, computer, phone, and car before using them to grow your gratitude for the things that bring ease to our days. Nod as an acknowledgement of relationship to objects, our dependence on God, and our interdependence on each other.

5. Gratitude as Seeing

Genesis 18: 9-12

When I was thirteen, I fell on a gymnastic tumbling pass and shattered my left elbow. The doctor almost had to amputate my arm. That injury gave me a lens of gratitude. Gratitude is a way of seeing. It is seeing that there could have been nothing but there is something. It is looking out at the gorgeous, expansive universe and whispering the line of Jane Kenyon, “How, when there could have been nothing, does it happen that there is love, kindness, and beauty?” I walk through my days with the grateful outlook of someone who could have had one arm, but instead, against the odds, has two.

When I was thirty-three, I had two miscarriages, back-to-back. I sat in the reality that I may not become a mother, a role I yearned for. In that place of brokenness and deep wanting, God loved me and reminded me that I am enough. Eventually I carried a child full term, and when my water broke to begin labor, I couldn’t stop laughing. I thought of Sarah, laughing in disbelief, fear, and awe, and laughed with her.

These days, one of my favorite places in the world is sitting on the couch, my two arms wrapped around my two boys. So often, delight at the goodness of it all bubbles up and over as laughter and tears. My kids call it “happy crying.” My body just can’t contain the overflowing gratitude.

Where do you see love, kindness, and beauty today? Look up to the sky. Intentionally touch wildness. Remember that you belong in the web of life.

