

THE SEED OF JOY

LENT 2024



TENDING JOY

DAILY DEVOTIONAL GUIDE



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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Tending Joy, a collection of daily devotions for Lent 2024. This devotional resource focuses on joy, which might seem positively un-Lenten at first. Why emphasize joy during a solemn and penitential season?

Lent is more than somber penitence. This year, congregations that use the Revised Common Lectionary spend the Sundays in Lent reading about the covenants that God makes with God's people throughout history, and those covenants are joyful. God promises Noah and all earthly creatures that God will never again send a flood! God promises Abram and Sarai a child! God shapes a way of life for the Israelites to replace the system of oppression that kept them captive! Over and over throughout this season, scripture points us toward the deep joy with which God responds to creation, and it invites us to respond to God in turn.

The joy to which God calls us is not one-dimensional. It's complex and multifaceted, and it reveals itself in many experiences and contexts. If joy was a garden, it would be a raucous congress of wildflowers and carefully cultivated varieties, native and naturalized species alike, a diverse array of colors and textures and smells and shapes that create a single experience together. These devotions will follow scripture's lead as they explore a different texture and color of joy each week.

Tending joy through Lenten disciplines

Joy is more than an abstract concept. It appears in our lives in concrete, perceptible ways. The three cornerstone spiritual disciplines of Lent are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. In these devotions, the three Lenten disciplines become practices of joy.

Prayer

Sometimes we don't notice joy because we're so busy doing other things. Prayer invites a pause. It beckons us to notice what is otherwise invisible. It asks us to stop and take a deep breath, unclench our jaws, and open our hands. Praying resists the unrelenting pressure to be perpetually productive, to prove ourselves worthy of being in this world. In prayer, we turn toward divine love and find it waiting for us. We recognize that we are already worthy, regardless of what we do, because we are beloved. Whether the content of our prayer is intercession, lament, or thanksgiving, the joy of relationship with God undergirds it.

Fasting

Fasting is often associated with giving something up for Lent, and usually that something is food. These devotions do not include any fasting prompts related to eating or food. Thanks to Western beauty standards and diet culture, food-related fasting is moralized as "good" in ways that can be messy at best and harmful at worst. Instead of using fasting for falsely virtuous self-improvement,

these devotional prompts recover it as an act of joyful resistance. These devotions offer fasts that center around abstaining from a behavior or habit and noticing what joyful alternatives present themselves in response.

Almsgiving

The word “alms” comes from the Greek word for compassion, which in turn comes from the word for mercy. God’s own mercy and compassion for us are the source of the compassion and mercy Christians are called to offer to others. Almsgiving is a tradition that specifically cares for the poor. Jesus told his disciples that “you will always have the poor with you” (Mark 14:7) not as acceptance of economic inequality but as a charge to look beyond the many ways we obscure the reality of poverty for our siblings in Christ.

The need for a compassion that seeks justice is urgent: in January of 2023, Oxfam’s annual inequality report revealed that two-thirds of the wealth generated since 2020 has gone to the top 1% of the population.¹ Eighty-one people hold over half of the world’s wealth. Meanwhile, about 9.2% of the world’s population lives in poverty, defined by the World Bank as a daily income of less than \$2.15 a day, trapped in cycles of hunger, disease, and conflict.²

With such staggering income inequality, it may seem like whatever alms we can give are woefully insufficient. But strength and determination don’t come from regular victory; they come from investing in a joyful vision of the future. In the case of almsgiving, the investment is literal. Christians give alms because the practice forges connections between us and the people and situations that the world’s powers and principalities would prefer us to ignore. We give because giving puts our money where our hope is. We give because God first, joyfully, gave to us. God uses our giving to cultivate mercy and compassion within us.

How to use these devotions

With the exception of the brief half-week at the beginning of the season, each week’s devotions are structured by the regular practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Tuesdays and Thursdays include an invitation to write in a journal. If you are not a natural journal writer, you are welcome to replace that particular prompt with reflection, discussion, or whatever works best for you and your life.

¹ “Richest 1% bag nearly twice as much wealth as the rest of the world put together over the past two years.” Oxfam America. January 16, 2023. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/richest-1-bag-nearly-twice-much-wealth-rest-world-put-together-over-past-two-years> Accessed November 18, 2023.

² “Poverty: Overview.” The World Bank. Last Updated: November 30, 2022. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview> Accessed November 18, 2023.

This is the weekly rhythm:

Sundays: reflect on scripture

You'll find a reflection on scripture and what it illuminates about joy.

Mondays: pray

While we hope that you pray every day, on Mondays you'll find an invitation to practice a particular kind of prayer to connect to a specific aspect of joy.

Tuesdays: reflect and ask

You may choose to use a journal in order to respond to the provided prompt that suggests how you might direct your intercession to God.

Wednesdays: fast

Based on the prayer and reflection of the previous few days, each Wednesday provides a suggestion for a fast. None of these suggestions are about fasting from food; they're intended to help you focus on what you already have rather than on what you've given up.

Thursdays: reflect and thank

Write in your journal again in response to the prompt that suggests how you might direct your thanksgiving to God.

Fridays: give alms

Respond to God's work in your life by giving your time, talent, or treasure. Each Friday offers ideas for how to direct your giving in a way that honors the week's exploration of joy. You might follow those suggestions, or you might choose a single organization, nonprofit, or community to support throughout the season.

Saturdays: connect with creation

God's creation of the world was an act of joy, and creation responds by rejoicing before God. On Saturdays, connect with creation as your circumstances allow in order to learn how to "tell forth the glory of God" (Ps 19:1).

WEEK OF ASH WEDNESDAY

SETTING THE STAGE FOR JOY

Read: Psalm 52

For many, Lent is a time of pious reflection, somber confession, and prayerful introspection. Joy isn't our first thought as we mark ashen crosses on our foreheads. In this way, though, Ash Wednesday teaches us something important about joy: there are plenty of days when joy feels like it is a long way away.

While joy is something that can be felt as happiness, it is not only a happy feeling. If happiness is an alleluia shouted from the heart, then joy is the beating of the heart itself. It's a vibration within us that resonates with the beat of the divine. Joy persists through happy times and bleak ones, through alleluias and ashes. It connects us to divine joy even when we don't feel happy by pointing through and beyond our pain toward a sacred reality shaped by God's will for creation.

These Lenten devotions will seek joy in many forms over the course of the whole season. This will be a Lent filled with joy, bursting with joy... but you don't have to feel *ready* for joy. Not yet, or even at all. Anyone who tells you differently misses what the psalms and the prophets demonstrate over and over: new life can and will come only from God, but some days, the only reality we know is that we're dying. Don't rush into joy this Lent. Instead, trust the sequence of joy we find in scripture. At times we don't feel joy, but the fallow season will not last forever.

Take this time at the start of the season to recall the many moments in your life when joy has felt absent, distant, incomplete, dangerous, or entirely impossible. Let yourself acknowledge these moments, even if they feel scary. Try it as an act of faith, trusting that joy hasn't disappeared forever. The God of resurrection always restores the joy of salvation in the end.

ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14

Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning....

Joel 2:12

Pray: lament

If you experience water damage on a wall or ceiling, you can't simply paint over it. Water stains will bleed through paint, leaving you with an old stain on a freshly painted wall. When our cheeks are stained from tears, we can dry off our faces and pretend that nothing is wrong, but when deep trauma or loss damage our lives, we can't slap on a fresh coat of joy and just move on. Instead, as the prophet Joel suggests, if we want to feel deep joy, we first have to recognize the depth of our weeping and mourning, too. Christian tradition makes room for this type of recognition with prayers, psalms, and hymns of lament.

Where is the "water damage" in your life? What losses have left their mark on you? What particular areas of your life are yearning to feel joy? As you pray your lament, use a journal, note-taking app, or scrap of paper to write what you are praying. At the end of Lent, you'll return to what you record today to consider how God responds to your prayer.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Isaiah 58:6

Fast: from complacency

Yesterday's prayer prompt invited you to reflect on the parts of your life that are yearning for joy's return. Today, spend some time in prayer thinking about the circumstances where the whole world is yearning for joy: places of injustice and corruption, places where people or creation is held captive by a drive toward profit, and places of oppression. Fast from easy fixes and pat solutions today. Don't move too quickly toward hope or joy. Dwell with the challenge stirred up by the fast that God chooses.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 16

Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, “Where is their God?”

Isaiah 2:17

Give: to your community

On Wednesday, you reflected on your own life; yesterday, you zoomed out to the whole world. Today, Isaiah invites us to narrow the frame again, reflecting on the communities and people we call our own. The prophet fears that his people will become a laughingstock as they are subdued by nations much more powerful than theirs. Fear and shame, like Isaiah’s, are not just solo emotions; they are also communal feelings that a group of people can experience together. (Spoiler alert: so is joy.)

Recall a tragedy or hardship that affected your whole church, your community, your people, or your profession. Today, commit to giving part of your resources—your time, your talent, or your treasure—to one of these communities, people, or causes over the course of this Lenten season. Buy an extra can for the local food pantry when you shop; volunteer at the local library; collect change for local wildlife preservation. If you are already participating in a sustained pattern of giving, consider going the extra mile for these forty days.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 17

We are treated... as dying, and see – we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing...

2 Corinthians 6:8-9

Connect with creation: find joy amid distress

Joy as portrayed in the Bible has a notable capacity to mingle with other emotions. Joy can share space with confusion, pain, or grief, for instance. When writing to the church in Corinth, Paul demonstrates this quality of joy by suggesting that we can rejoice while we feel sorrowful. Joy and sorrow aren’t mutually exclusive. Joy can simply coexist with our other emotions, neither canceling them out nor overriding them.

Today, go outside and notice places or objects that capture this coexistence of opposites: a green shoot pushing its way through a layer of ice, buds forming on leafless trees, roots pushing through a layer of concrete, or a sunset made particularly vivid by air pollution, for example. See if you can recognize the joy of something beautiful without overriding your distress at the circumstance in which it persists.

FIRST WEEK OF LENT

PERSISTENT JOY

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 18

Read: Genesis 8 and 9

Today's lectionary readings, used in Sunday worship, tell the story of Noah's ark. Or, more specifically, they tell the story of what comes *after* the ark. The flood has receded, the earth has dried, and Noah and his family have disembarked, squishing their toes into the drying mud. God sets God's bow in the heavens as a rainbow and promises that such a flood will never again cover the earth to destroy every living thing.

The rainbow is a sign of God's own persistent joy. God chooses to rejoice in creation in full knowledge of its brokenness, and this joy will restrain God's anger from such destruction ever again (Genesis 8:21). The rainbow gains richer meaning from the fact that it will only appear in the presence of rain. God's promise of forbearance appears when gathering clouds tell us that we will need the promise most. As imitators of God's persistent joy, we can practice holding space for joy even when we don't feel it. We can hope in the midst of hardship by trusting that God's promises are for us, forthcoming, and forever.

This week, take a daily photo of something that reflects persistent joy. The challenge is twofold. First, try to fill the frame of each photo with a different color of the rainbow. Second, aim to capture images that represent beauty, hope, or endurance despite hardship. A daily prompt will guide you. By the end of this week, you'll have a rainbow photo collage that refracts God's persistent joy to remind you that God's love surrounds and sustains you, no matter the weather.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 19

Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.
Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O Lord!
Psalm 25:4-7

Pray: lectio divina

During your prayer time today, dwell with these words from Psalm 25. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your meditation on this scripture through a method of prayer called lectio divina (divine reading). Read through these verses from the psalm three times.

- The first time, notice a word or phrase that particularly stands out to you. Take a few moments to sit with that word or phrase, and notice what comes up in your mind and in your body.
- The second time, ask God what God may be saying to you through these verses. Again, take a few moments to be attentive to God.
- The third time, ask God how God desires you to respond to God's leading today. You might choose to write in your journal as part of your prayer.

End your prayer with a time of quiet meditation, letting the Holy Spirit work within you.

Today's photo prompt

What represents a stormy situation that you have endured?

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 20

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.
Psalm 25:1-2

Ask: for a sign

After the flood, God set the rainbow in the sky as a promise of God's faithfulness to all earthly creatures. But weeks before the rainbow, as the rain fell and Noah and his family squeezed into the ark with all the animals, the boat full of desperate creatures was already experiencing God's faithfulness. God had already promised to save them. No matter how much rain fell, God would bring them through the storm. Before the colorful bow hung in the sky, Noah and his family learned about God's faithfulness through the sound of the rain on their roof.

What circumstances in your life need a sign of God's faithfulness? Ask God for that sign in prayer.

Today's photo prompt

What reminds you of God's faithfulness, even in the midst of a storm?

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 21

At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him anymore.

Genesis 8:6-12a

Fast: from time drains

When the rain was over, Noah and his family had to wait many weeks for the floodwater to recede. Do you think they realized they would have to wait so long? Imagine the joy they experienced when they finally set foot on dry soil and looked out at the green haze of new leaves. The preceding discomfort of waiting often heightens the delight that can attend persistent joy.

Today, choose to fast from something that you use to make time pass more quickly, such as your phone or a particular type of media. Every time the desire to reach for that thing arises, let it remind you of the patience Noah and his family practiced and of the patience God practices with us.

Today's photo prompt

What represents a time of patience when you have had to wait for the metaphorical flood waters to recede?

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 22

[Christ] was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

2 Peter 3:18-21

Thank: for fresh starts

Stepping off the ark, one thing becomes obvious: there is no going back to the world as it was before the flood. But unlike post-apocalyptic TV shows, games, and books, in which characters fight amid the wreckage of fallen civilizations, Noah's story doesn't mention the ruins of the past. Instead, Noah and his family wait for signs of new life. New leaves sprouting, a new beginning after devastation, signs of life after death: these are the indicators that the world is ready to receive humanity. The rainbow hanging above this renewed world is a message that God is ready to receive humanity, too.

Consider when you have experienced God's renewal. When have you felt a sense of transformation or the slow the joy that comes when you realize that, yes, new life can actually grow on the other side of devastation? Offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God for this renewal.

Today's photo prompt

What represents a new beginning you have received from God?

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 23

When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

Genesis 9:14-15

Give: to provide relief from disasters

In conversation with Noah, God offers a spiritual superpower: a reason for Noah to hope, not fear, when he sees the storm clouds gathering again. Noah could easily dread darkening skies, but God's promise enables him to trust instead of tremble. The bow that appears only when the clouds do will remind Noah and all earthly creatures of God's sure covenant. God invites us to trust in the same promise as Noah, and God sustains us with the same joy that persists even in the midst of storms. This trust in God's provision means that rather than squirreling away our resources in anticipation of disaster, we can give generously from what we've been given. Today, consider giving to a disaster relief fund to support people in particular need following a storm.

Today's photo prompt

What gives you hope even when storm clouds gather?

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 24

As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.

Genesis 9:9-10

Connect with creation: find other creatures of the covenant

God didn't establish the rainbow covenant with Noah and his descendants alone. God also established it with the non-human creatures that came out of the ark. Today, take a walk outside and see how many creatures you encounter that match the description in Genesis 9: birds, domestic animals, and every animal of the earth that came out of the ark. How many do you find? How does creation itself witness the exponential growth of God's mercy?

Today's photo prompt

What "animal of the earth" can you find?

SECOND WEEK OF LENT

EXPECTANT JOY

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 25

Read: Genesis 17

While joy is always present, it is not always perceptible. There are seasons in our lives when it feels like joy is absent: times for weeping and mourning rather than for laughing and dancing (Ecclesiastes. 3:4).

As you lean into the rhythm of these seasons, you may find that a different kind of joy becomes available even in the middle of weeping and mourning. Knowing that laughing and dancing will return in the future can be a source of joy right now. The joyful vision we're waiting for and working toward, the one where God's reign has come and God's will is done, stands like a great big tree in the future. It casts its shadow back through time to the present moment, and the expectant joy it generates shades us from the glaring heat of ongoing trials.

Voices within the Black community in the United States offer lessons on expectant joy. Consider, for example, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have Been to the Mountaintop" speech. King describes himself as happy to live in the troubled age in which he does. He is happy not because of the challenges he faces, but because he sees a vision of God's future. The joy of that vision is a filter through which he interprets the present moment, which is charged with the potential for change.³

We find expectant joy in this week's scripture readings, especially in Abraham's encounter with God. God repeats and elaborates on God's promise of descendants, making it clear that the promise belongs to Sarah, too. Remember that Abraham and Sarah have been living with God's promise for twenty-five years at this point in their story. What joy have they discovered in their expectation?

Expectant joy is ours as we wait for God's reign to come in fullness, flowing with streams of living justice. Like King, we are on the edge of a promised land that we may or may not enter ourselves. Like Abraham and Sarah, we find ourselves living in anticipation of a promise. But the land is *there*, the promise is *real*, and the weight of their reality reveals the expectant joy we will explore this week.

³ Read King's full speech here: <https://www.afscme.org/about/history/mlk/mountaintop> (Accessed November 19, 2023)

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 26

Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?”

Mark 8:34-37

Pray: the Lord’s Prayer

To cultivate expectant joy, we need to know what we’re supposed to be expecting. This isn’t as straightforward as it sounds. The trouble comes down to what St. Augustine calls the order of our loves, our *ordo amoris*.⁴ He points to how much some people love beauty—and while beauty is good, says Augustine, it isn’t right to love beauty as much or more than we love God. Pulling God out of the principal position in our loves and replacing God with something else, even something good, can really mess with us. It can lead us to anticipate things that God never promised and yearn for things that God doesn’t desire for us. In this week’s gospel, Jesus comes head-on at his disciples’ order of loves. “Following me is not something you can do halfway,” Jesus is saying, to paraphrase. “Following me will take your life. Your whole life.”

There are lots of things—good things, like family and beauty and peace and justice—that vie for first place in our lives. How do we even begin to answer Jesus’ challenge to put the gospel first? Begin by praying the prayer that Jesus taught us. Pray the Lord’s Prayer slowly, several times, paying attention to the things for which it asks. Pray for God’s help in ordering your loves.

⁴Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 2018), 491.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 27

You who fear the Lord, give praise!
All you offspring of Jacob, offer glory;
stand in awe, all you offspring of Israel!
For the Lord did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
nor hide the Lord's face from me,
but heard when I cried out.

Psalm 22:23-24

Ask: for what you really want

Now for a completely different perspective on the ordering of our loves: in her book *Consider the Birds*, author Debbie Blue proposes that we really ought to pray for exactly what we want, even when we know that it's probably not what God ultimately desires.⁵ In Blue's model, we would celebrate the toddler's prayer for chocolate, the high schooler's prayer for the eradication of acne, or the prayer for a parking spot downtown when we're running late for an appointment. These prayers may not be virtuous, but they are authentic. When we're honest with God, God can be honest with us about what God wants, too. Authenticity is what makes the Spirit's transformative work possible.

Today, be radically honest with God about what you want, big or small. Consider journaling about these two questions: *what feels too small to ask God for? What feels too big to ask God for?* Imagine God saying "yes" to these intercessions—even if the "yes" seems impossible—and notice whether joy arises in response. What does this expectant joy feel like?

⁵ Debbie Blue, *Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to the Birds of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013), 61-62.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28

Hoping against hope, [Abraham] believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

Romans 4:18-21

Fast: from pragmatism

Abraham's twenty-five-year journey from the land of Ur to the land that God promised was a spiritual journey as much as it was a physical one, and neither dimension of the journey went smoothly. While Abraham trusted God's promises enough to leave Ur, his family home for generations, he didn't trust them entirely. That's how he ended up in Egypt, passing his wife off as his sister, and how he ended up fathering a child with Hagar instead of Sarah. That's why God needed to (re)appear to (re)assure Abraham of God's faithfulness. Abraham's struggle to trust God's providence is relatable. We all slip into cynical pragmatism as a tool to cope with hope long deferred. It can feel temporarily empowering to take a measure of control back from God, even when that "empowerment" means lowering our standards to something that seems a little more realistic.

Today, fast from pragmatism. Don't worry—it is a useful tool, and it will still be there when you need it. Practice an audacious trust in God's promises instead. Take a moment to identify a place in your life where you find yourself adjusting your expectations downward, and today, when you feel that pressure, choose to resist joyfully instead.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 29

From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear God.

The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek God shall praise the Lord.

May your hearts live forever!

All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord;

and all the families of the nations
shall worship before God.

Psalm 22:25-27

Thank: alongside others

Psalm 22 draws attention to the communal aspect of giving thanks. How does your community remember together the things that God has done and practice trust in God's promises for the future? Perhaps it's through ritual, like sharing communion; or through singing hymns of praise; or through serving others.

Today, find a friend or family member to pray with, trading off naming the things for which you are grateful, sharing with one another and with God your greatest hopes for what God will do in the future. If your circumstances don't permit real-time conversation, write a card or send an email to a member of your community to describe the gratitude you offer to God today.

FRIDAY, MARCH 1

Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations.... As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.”

Genesis 17:3-5, 15

Give: new names

Abram and Sarai receive new names in this encounter with God. Peter (originally Simon), present in the gospel reading, also got a new name from Jesus. Paul, who wrote the letter to the Romans, used to be called Saul. All of them received a new name and a new identity in the light of God’s grace. So did each of us who crossed through the waters of baptism: we’re called children of God.

Do you know someone who has experienced liberation through changing their name? Perhaps a trans person finally has a name that reflects who God created them to be. Perhaps a domestic violence survivor has reclaimed their former surname after leaving an abusive marriage. Today, make a gift to support organizations who help one of these groups.

SATURDAY, MARCH 2

Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for [Abraham’s] sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in the One who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Romans 4:23-25

Connect with creation: reminders of baptism

We receive a new identity in baptism as we are washed in Christ’s death and resurrection. Baptism is a sacrament of deep and joyful promise. It ushers us into the body of Christ in the church universal. The font becomes the place we can come to when we need assurance that God’s grace runs throughout our life, renewing us each day, forming us like flowing water wears away stone, carrying God’s promises closer.

Whether you have already been baptized, are actively preparing for baptism, or have not yet discerned God’s call to the font, let today be a day when you connect with the promise of renewal and regeneration that water evokes. Take a trip to a local river or lake; pause for a moment at a nearby creek; appreciate the many daily encounters you have with water, from washing your face to taking a drink. They are as many and as varied as the ways God shows up in our lives.

THIRD WEEK OF LENT

LIBERATING JOY

SUNDAY, MARCH 3

Read in your Bible: Exodus 20

Christians are accustomed to seeing the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 as part of the law, God's strictures that set the boundary for right behavior. To look at the Ten Commandments purely as a list of "thou-shalt-nots" is to miss the greater contrast. When they receive the commandments in Exodus 20, the Israelites have recently left Egypt, where every dimension of their lives was controlled by the system of slavery. Egyptians owned their work, their time, and their bodies. The Israelites were punished for even existing.

In the Ten Commandments, God provides a framework for a different kind of society, one built on freedom: freedom from deception, freedom from unfaithfulness, freedom from ownership, and freedom from the compulsion to worship false gods. Because the Israelites find great joy in their newfound freedom, the Ten Commandments are guidelines for preserving that joy by creating a new system of faithfulness, a new pattern for a just society that protects each person's dignity.

Joy is always a liberating force. Joy can thrive even in captivity, but joy isn't content to remain captive. Joy works toward our freedom and the freedom of our neighbors.

Each day this week, you are invited to consider something that contributes to your own personal sense of captivity, be it social forces, relationships, decisions, or even your own body. You will contemplate how you might have found joy in these circumstances. But you won't be asked to remain captive. You will also reflect on how God seeks to break the power of that which binds God's people.

MONDAY, MARCH 4

The Jews then said to [Jesus], “What sign can you show us for doing this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking of the temple of his body.

John 2:18-21

Pray: with your body

Jesus’ words remind us that bodies are an important part of faith. Prayer that attends to the body may help us recognize how stress affects and shapes us. Today, begin your prayer by paying attention to your body. Locate sources of tension and stress. Where does your body hold tension? What parts of your body feel painful? What is the source of this pain and how do you compensate for it?

As you continue your prayer, consider: how does your body contribute to a sense of captivity? Do you feel controlled by your body? Limited by it?

Take a moment to inhale and exhale, noticing how your body feels right now.

Now open your hands, palms up, and pray the following questions, taking a deep breath between each one. Feel your breath expanding your ribs and your belly. Pay attention to your body and leave space for God:

What would have to change for my body to feel free?

How has my body been a source of strength in the past?

What helps me stretch beyond the limitations I feel?

What gives my body joy?

TUESDAY, MARCH 5

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

Exodus 20:1b-3

Ask: for joy to free you

When the Israelites labored in Egypt, they felt the unfairness of the system that enslaved them, but what could they do to change it? People often feel the same way about the social forces that control us today. We may notice the oppressive powers of racism, systemic hunger, and poverty, but the problems seem too thorny and multifaceted for us to change them. Sometimes, we devote every ounce of our energy to dismantle these systems, only to feel frustrated when our efforts seem to bog down or go nowhere.

Pause for a moment and notice how your body feels as you read this.

Joy helps people flourish even in adverse circumstances, but it always works to free those who are captive. Today, take some time to reflect on the following questions, perhaps writing in your journal as you do. Ask for God's guidance as you consider them:

What forces in our society repress your joy?

How do the powers of this world try to cut you off from joy?

How have the people who have shaped you created joy despite these powers?

How does God call your community to create space for freedom, self-expression, and kindness?

How can you create space for others to flourish, too?

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Exodus 20:17

Fast: from buying what you don't need

If you have ever moved to a new home, you know that it can be an opportunity to reset. But a new place comes with old problems: where to put the large dining room table? Where will all the books go? Which wall is right for the art your friend gave you years ago? Our belongings often follow us from place to place. In time, even a large house can become filled with objects from our past. Meanwhile, we look sideways at our neighbors' possessions and wonder if life wouldn't be a little easier, a little better, if we had what they have. To what degree do you feel controlled by your items, your space, or your sense that despite it all, you still don't have enough?

Pause for a moment and notice how your body feels as you read this.

Today, fast from the act of accruing: don't buy anything non-essential. Rely on what you have: the food in the pantry or freezer you forgot about, the sweater that will work just fine for that work event, the books on your shelves you've been meaning to read or reread. What is different when you direct your attention to what you already have instead of what you lack?

THURSDAY, MARCH 7

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

1 Corinthians 1:18-20

Thank: for the gift of decisions to make

“What do you want to eat tonight?” “I don’t know. What about you?”

You may know this conversation. When planning a meal, indecision strikes. Nobody wants to make a decision for the entire group.

If such minor decisions paralyze us, we shouldn’t feel surprised to discover ourselves disoriented by life-changing ones. Sometimes, we feel confused about our desires; at other times, we are certain of the right direction but terrified of the consequences. We feel as though we don’t know enough to make the correct choices. We are not wise or discerning enough; we are too good at debating with ourselves. What decisions paralyze you today?

Pause for a moment and notice how your body feels as you read this.

Today, see what it’s like not to force a decision, but instead to practice gratitude that you have decisions to make in the first place. Let yourself sink into the joy of autonomy without pressuring yourself to exercise it. What does gratitude release in your body as you let it in?

FRIDAY, MARCH 8

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you, O Lord,
my rock and my redeemer.

Psalm 19:14

Give: to liberate and dignify bodies

Throughout the week, as you've registered how your body feels while reading the daily devotions, maybe you've been especially aware of a very simple fact: your body takes up space. It has a presence! We need space to survive, and we need others to recognize, dignify, and make room for our bodies. Yet our bodies are often sites of chronic pain, shame, self-consciousness, or embarrassment. We can feel self-conscious about our bodies. We might wish they took up less space or attracted less attention.

Pause for a moment and notice how your body feels as you read this.

We can experience joy in our hearts and mouths, our limbs and breath, but embodied joy isn't automatically available. At times, we need to practice embodied joy ourselves and make space for others to do the same. Today, give your time, talent, or treasure to a charity that seeks to dignify human bodies. Perhaps this will look like donating to a nonprofit that strives to provide healthcare to vulnerable populations, volunteering for a local hunger relief ministry, or learning more about the organizations in your community that address hunger, chronic illnesses, eating disorders, medical debt, and so on. When you give, notice how your own body feels.

SATURDAY, MARCH 9

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.
In the heavens God has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hid from its heat.

Psalm 19:1-6

Connect with creation: rediscover the joy of place

During the pandemic, many people rediscovered the importance of local parks and preserves, public gardens, walkable neighborhoods, open rooftops, and courtyards. Shared outdoor space became a source of joy for individuals and communities alike, even—especially—because they helped people recover a sense of community during a time of profound social isolation.

Pause for a moment and notice how your body feels as you read this.

Today, recall a place that got you through the pandemic. If you're able, return there. Remember how such spaces helped you hold together a sense of both isolation and connection. How can you discover joy there anew?

FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

TRANSFORMATIVE JOY

SUNDAY, MARCH 10

Read: Numbers 21

Numbers 21 is the Bible at its strangest. On their way to the Promised Land, the people of Israel have wandered for some time. They have grown impatient with God, so they settle into a good long complaint: why didn't God just let them remain in Egypt instead? To punish their ungrateful complaining, God sends poisonous serpents, and many of the Israelites are bitten and killed. When the people realize the terrible consequences, they confess to Moses. In response, God tells Moses to make a serpent out of bronze and affix it to a pole. Anyone bitten by the serpents can just look at the pole-serpent and live.

It's easy to focus on the punishment in this story, to ask why God would send serpents to destroy the people. But remember that they're asking to return to enslavement. They are willing to become their own enslavers and to collaborate with the same Egyptians who were killing them. God sends them a miniature plague of poisonous serpents, a punishment much like the plagues God sent the Egyptians to convince Pharaoh to free the Israelites. The plagues were God's weapon of liberation, a way to break the iron grip of Egypt's corrupt economy. God turns the same weapon against the Israelites when they're willing to walk back into the chains that would kill them. Before the Israelites can move forward to freedom, they must first confront the deadly truth of the past they left behind. No trouble of the present can eclipse the dread they have survived.

Throughout this week we'll explore the joy that can come even from the things that would have destroyed us, like poisonous snakes transformed into a symbol of healing. It rides in with redemption, transforming us from those who are convicted to those who are forgiven.

MONDAY, MARCH 11

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.”

Numbers 21:4-5

Pray: the newspaper

The troubles of the day loom so large for the Israelites that they forget how bad things were in Egypt. Their amnesic distress is almost comical: “We have no food here, and also the food is awful!” But how often do we do we engage in the same sort of forgetfulness? The troubles of our generation often seem much worse than anything that came before. When we lose touch with our own history, we also miss the ways it can show us how God has accompanied us through trials before.

Today, pray the newspaper, using your journal or a piece of paper. As you go through the newspaper or your favorite news site, list the headlines that are begging for prayer on one side of your journal page or sheet of paper. What struggles seem demoralizing or impossible to overcome? On the other side of your journal page or sheet of paper, list your memories of other headlines that you remember from over the course of your own life. What happened to those headlines, and how did you survive?

After compiling headlines, begin your prayer by thanking God for accompanying you in the past. Then lift today’s concerns to God. Notice how your body feels as you hold the troubles of today while remembering that you made it through those of previous times. Hold onto this prayer for tomorrow.

TUESDAY, MARCH 12

And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.”

Numbers 21:8

Ask: for forgiveness

Yesterday’s reflection focused on the Israelites’ short-sighted complaint against God and the consequences – the venomous serpents—they suffered. Today, consider God’s cure. God asks Moses to attach a cast bronze serpent to a staff. All the Israelites have to do is to look at the bronze snake, and they will live. That’s all it takes. God doesn’t require a good deed, a particular prayer, or a sacrificial offering. If they only observe the consequence of their deeds and the cause of their suffering, they will be healed.

Something similar happens when Christians confess our sins. To be forgiven by God, we don’t need to make full restitution for what we have done, and often, we can’t. God doesn’t burden us with excess shame for our mistakes. We simply perceive what we have done with honesty and with courage, and we receive God’s healing. Confession isn’t easy, but if we know that God forgives us, what prevents us from owning our sinful past and the consequences of our actions? What joy have we missed because we did not?

Today, return to your newspaper reflections from the previous day. Under yesterday’s headlines, write down parts of your own sinful past or your present wrongs. On the facing page, write your own prayer asking for God’s forgiveness.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 13

Some were sick through their sinful ways,
and because of their iniquities endured affliction;
they loathed any kind of food,
and they drew near to the gates of death.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and God saved them from their distress;
God's word was sent to heal them,
and delivered them from destruction.

Psalm 107:17-20

Fast: from denial

Yesterday's reflection focused on sin and the healing forgiveness offered by God through our truthful confession. Where else can you train that truth-telling? You might not have the Israelites' poisonous serpents lurking in your neighborhood, but perhaps you face a toxic environment at work, your family dynamic is draining you, or your church community is struggling. Unlike the sins we confessed yesterday, these things that are hurting us aren't necessarily our fault. But they, too, may need an honest reckoning in order for healing to be possible.

Reckoning is challenging. We don't like to admit that the family schedule is unsustainable. We don't like to admit when our bosses or coworkers make us feel ashamed or small. We don't like to admit when the people around us are stealing our joy, and we don't like to admit when we run out of resources to deal with the pain. Healing can only begin when we truthfully perceive the situations that are poisoning us.

Today, fast from denial. Name the situations that are hurting you and the ways they cause you pain, even if they are only known to you and to God. Notice how your body feels afterward.

THURSDAY, MARCH 14

O give thanks to the Lord, for the Lord is good;
God's steadfast love endures forever.
Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,
those God redeemed from trouble
and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.

Psalm 107:1-3

Thank: the truth-tellers

Joy is a liberator, always working for the liberation of others. Consider the joy that accompanies forgiveness, the sense that we are free from the sin that controlled our lives. Consider the healing that begins when we finally feel the poison from a toxic circumstance clearing our systems. All of this flows from, and is connected to, joy's relationship with the truth. It is hard to feel joyful if you cannot recognize or tell the truth about your life. The circumstances of your life don't need to change for you to experience joy; plenty of people who have lived in hardship have made space for joy in the midst of their turmoil. But we do need the courage of an honest truth.

Today, journal or reflect about a truth-teller, someone who has helped you find, recognize, or name the truth in your life. How has joy flowed from that encounter? How might God call you to create this joyful freedom for others?

FRIDAY, MARCH 15

So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Numbers 21:9

Give: the truth

There's an invisible role in the story of Moses and the bronze serpent: someone had to hold up the serpent. Someone had to attach the bronze figure to a pole and lift it high so it could be seen. The people needed a truth-teller, a person who was courageous enough to show them the consequences of their deeds. It can seem daunting to hold up the truth of mistakes, calling people's attention to an issue that requires confession and forgiveness. But when Moses or an unnamed volunteer held up that serpent-stick, the healing finally happened. Whatever anxiety the truth-teller held before hoisting the staff was worth it once the recovery began.

Telling the truth doesn't always lead directly to healing. In fact, truth-telling can be dangerous— just ask Jesus, whose truth-telling placed him on the cross. But if healing requires an honest reckoning, it also needs someone with the courage to tell the truth.

How can you show people the truth today? Give the gift of a truth spoken lovingly, respectfully, and honestly to someone who might be freed by hearing it.

SATURDAY, MARCH 16

Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.

Numbers 21:6

Connect with creation: perceive its fragility

The story of the serpents in the wilderness is a powerful reminder that creation, with its harsh rhythms of life and death, confronts us with the truth of our own human frailty. The irony is that in the millennia that have passed between the story of the Israelites and our own time, humanity's actions have thrown creation into crisis, revealing the fragility of the balances that allow life to flourish on this planet.

Today, spend time outdoors. Appreciate the gift of God's creation. Make some time today to learn about the climate crisis, whether by documentary, book, article, or podcast. Here are some resources to get you started:

Mike Berners-Lee, "There Is No Planet B," September 6, 2019, Seed Festival at Hawkwood College (Stroud, UK). YouTube video, 28:05. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4e6VGJCb14k>.

Berners-Lee wrote a book by the same name: *There is No Planet B*, updated edition, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

Katherine Hayhoe, "The Most Important Thing You Can Do About Climate Change is Talk About It." November 2018. TED video, 17:03.
https://www.ted.com/talks/katharine_hayhoe_the_most_important_thing_you_can_do_to_fight_climate_change_talk_about_it?language=en

Hayhoe also has an excellent book: *Saving Us: A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World*, Simon & Schuster, 2021.

Bill McKibben, "130 Degrees," *The New York Review of Books*, August 20, 2020.
<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2020/08/20/climate-emergency-130-degrees/>

Jonathan Franzen, "What if We Stopped Pretending?" *The New Yorker*, September 8, 2019.
<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/what-if-we-stopped-pretending>

Howard-John Wesley, "I Can't Breathe," Sermon at Alfred Street Baptist Church, Alexandria, VA, August 11, 2019, YouTube video, 44:20. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fc0KaXUhwK8>

FIFTH WEEK OF LENT

VOCATIONAL JOY

SUNDAY, MARCH 17

Read: John 12:20-33

In this week's gospel text, Jesus has entered the final week of his earthly life, and things are beginning to feel momentous. Jesus wonders whether he should ask God to save him from what is coming, but decides otherwise: this is exactly why he has come to this moment. He names his vocation and his anxiety in a single breath.

Vocation comes from the Latin word *vocare*, to call. Down at its root, it's a way of talking about what God is calling us to do. Vocation can encompass more than paid work, and many of us have more than one vocation. Your own vocation(s) might be friend, parent, computer programmer, square dancer, and/or preserver of your family's recipes. Theologian Frederick Buechner describes vocation as "the place where our deep gladness and the world's great hunger meet."⁶ The guideposts that help us discern where God is calling us are need and joy.

In this Sunday's gospel text from John 12, Jesus shows us the tremendous power of finding the intersection of joy and need. Jesus has followed the joy that God has laid before him in the incarnation. He has walked, laughed, eaten, wept, embraced, healed, preached, taught, exorcized, and prayed. His earthly ministry has been one big beautiful mess of need and joy. It's about to bring him to the cross, a place where Jesus does not yearn to go. But Jesus knows that this is the place where God calls him, because he has followed joy all the way there.

The cross itself does not fill Jesus with joy. Beyond and through it, though, Jesus perceives God's intent to raise him, breaking the power of sin and death over creation. Creation's need collides with the incarnate God's joy in loving us, and Jesus chooses to stay on the path that leads to the cross and to our salvation.

This week's devotions will invite you to seek the places where joy and meaning collide for you. Where, in Buechner's words, are the places where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet?

⁶ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 95.

MONDAY, MARCH 18

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Psalm 51:10-12

Pray: for a fresh start

In the Hebrew Bible reading from Jeremiah this week, the prophet speaks to those who have been exiled, promising them a different future where God's will for them would be written on their very hearts. God offers a fresh start. As you reflect on your joy and the world's need this week, you're going to need a fresh start, too. Perhaps you can find it by reflecting on the language of the Confession and Forgiveness for this season below, or the words of Psalm 51 above. If you choose to pray the psalm, make its words them into a breath prayer by inhaling for the first half of each line, holding that breath for a moment, and then releasing it on the second half of the line. Repeat that prayer three times. Notice how your body responds throughout this time of prayer.

Call to Confession

People of God, the Merciful One already knows everything we confess. By naming our sins and hearing words of forgiveness, we are drawn deeper into relationship with God and one another. Let's bring before God what we have done wrong and what we've failed to do, trusting that we will receive the joy of being forgiven.

Brief silence for reflection.

Prayer of Confession

God of abundant goodness, we have hurt those we love, those far from us, ourselves, and your creation by what we do and by what we neglect. We cling to disappointments, judgments, and failures and refuse to enjoy what you give. We are too content when injustice, violence, and hardship plague our neighbors. We ignore the gift of your presence in times both tragic and triumphant. Forgive us for what we have done and for what we have failed to do. Pour out on us the joy of your presence and heal what we have harmed.

Assurance of Forgiveness

Receive these joyful words: You are entirely and completely forgiven for all of your sins. You are entirely and completely welcomed as God's beloved child. You are released to live out God's love in a world that needs such joy. Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 19

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their spouse, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Jeremiah 31:31-33

Ask: “Why am I so blessed?”

How does one even begin to let joy point the way toward a particular vocation? For the past several weeks, we’ve been exploring various ways that joy can appear in our lives. By now, you probably have a sense of what joy feels like in your body. Breathe for a moment and focus your attention inward. Sense joy in your body, or bring to mind a time when it was.

When you’ve got that feeling in your body, move into this set of questions proposed by theologian Mary Clark Moschella, who takes special joy in studying joy⁷:

Why me? Why have I been so blessed?

Why have I been given this talent or this love or this bounty?

What responses arise in you? Journal, reflect, pray, or speak with a friend.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20

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

Psalms 51:6

Fast: from social media

Many of us turn to social media in order to de-stress, but frequently, we find ourselves comparing our own lives to what we see. Such comparison is rarely a source of joy, and more often than not, it is a source of envy and frustration. Today, fast from social media. Instead of scrolling, reach out to someone whose vocation you deeply trust and respect, and ask them how they would answer the same questions you considered yesterday. Share your responses with them, too. Contemplate the wisdom that God has given you together.

⁷ Mary Clark Moschella, “Calling and Compassion: Elements of Joy in Lived Practices of Care,” *Joy and Human Flourishing*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 106.

THURSDAY, MARCH 21

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you.”

Hebrews 5:5

Thank: for the callings you’ve received

The epistle writer penned these words about Christ’s high priesthood in the middle of a conversation about vocation. Speaking specifically about priesthood, the writer points out that there are vocations that we don’t choose for ourselves; instead, they choose us, or are chosen for us by our community or by God. Consider these questions:

What vocations do you hold that have chosen you or have been chosen for you?

What deep hunger are those vocations seeking to answer?

What joy lies near that deep hunger?

What joy takes shape when you imagine what it would be like for that hunger to be filled?

Journal or reflect on these questions with gratitude for the joyful possibility that can be found even in deep need.

FRIDAY, MARCH 22

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

John 12:24

Give: at the intersection of joy and need

A seed is one of the most common and gorgeous analogies for bounty in the natural world. Picture the puffy head of a dandelion gone to seed, with all its fluffy little umbrellas equipped for flight. One single flower: a hundred little seeds. Plants are expert progenitors, and their expertise provides Jesus with the perfect image for abundance.

In John 12, Jesus speaks of his own life as a seed. On behalf of us and all creation, he sows everlasting life throughout the world that God so loves. Everything good that we have come from God first, starting with our very lives. Today, give your time, talent, or treasure where you feel God linking your deep gladness to the world’s deep need. Trust that God of the dandelion seed can take whatever you offer and turn it into a Spirit-borne source of new life for someone or something in need.

SATURDAY, MARCH 23

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

John 12:20-22

Connect with creation: remember your roots

It’s unclear why the writer of John 12 felt the need to reiterate that Philip was from Bethsaida, but the inclusion of the information implies that Philip’s hometown may have had something to do with why the Greeks chose to approach him with their request to see Jesus. In any case, there is a sense of instant connection that comes when we learn that someone is from our neck of the woods. The place where we’re from shapes who we are; it plays a role in how we perceive the world’s deep hunger and our deep gladness.

Take a walk through your neighborhood today. Notice the things about it that give you joy and the things that annoy you. How are those things connected to the way you experience gladness and the world’s need in other places in your life? Consider taking along a bag so you can pick up litter along your walk. And: tomorrow is Palm Sunday. If practical, cut a branch from your neighborhood to take with you to church tomorrow for waving as you shout, “Hosanna!”

HOLY WEEK

JOY EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE

SUNDAY, MARCH 24

Read: Mark 11, 14-15

We've spent the whole of the Lenten journey to date tending different aspects of joy. We accompanied God, Noah, and all earthly creatures into persistent joy, the kind that perseveres through crisis and becomes the bedrock of the rainbow promise. We waited expectantly for God's promises with Abraham and Sarah, letting the joy of future fulfillment seep into the present. We experienced the liberating joy that God set before the Israelites in the form of a new life shaped by the Ten Commandments. We dove into the transformative joy that God called out of the Israelites in the wilderness with the healing serpent on its pole. We considered the vocational joy that God leads us to find in the places where our deep gladness and world's deep hunger meet. It's been quite a journey. We have arrived at Holy Week, where joy is everywhere but also feels like it's nowhere—especially not anywhere near the cross or the tomb.

As the story of Jesus' last week of earthly ministry leads us through the next seven days, we will notice all the different faces of joy we have learned to recognize over the past six weeks. We will notice something else, too: the hiddenness of joy on Good Friday; the perceived total absence of it at the foot of the cross; the despair that wells up in the place where joy once was. The words of the prophet Jeremiah could belong to all of us who stand at Calvary: "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?" (Jeremiah 8:18, 22)

With prayer and reflection, we have been training all season for this week. We may not feel joy at the cross or the tomb, but suffering does not mean that God's gift of joy has disappeared forever. This week, there is violence and betrayal, heartbreak and hollowing grief. God's child is murdered. Even as the heavens are torn open, as darkness descends over the whole land, and as God-among-us bleeds, God can see a deeper reality in which this, even *this*, will be folded into Easter joy.

When joy seems eclipsed this week by the terror of Good Friday, let the grief be present. Don't move too quickly from Good Friday to Easter morning. The sacred story rehearses something we already know deep in our bones: there are moments in life when it feels like joy has been destroyed. But Easter morning is coming. In the darkness before the dawn, we will look into the tomb where we expect to see death, and the joy we thought was gone will reveal itself in all its resurrection glory.

MONDAY, MARCH 25

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!” Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: “Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!” His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

John 12:12-16

Pray: through your scriptural imagination

In the second week of Lent, Abraham and Sarah modeled expectant joy, which trusts in God's promises so deeply that it rejoices in them before they've even been fulfilled. On Palm Sunday, as Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem, many people thought that their promised king had arrived. They weren't wrong, but they weren't exactly right, either. Jesus rode into the city in full knowledge of what would happen next. The celebration of Palm Sunday was just a shadow of the resurrection joy that was coming.

March 25 is also the annual feast of the Annunciation, when we remember Mary's consent to God's plan. Contemplate the events of Palm Sunday as though you are standing in Mary's place in the Jerusalem streets. Make the scene come alive in your imagination, going through your senses one at a time: Where are you in the crowd? Can you see your adult child Jesus from where you are? Who is next to you? Are you hot or cold? What does the ground feel like under your feet? What can you smell? What words are you pondering? Notice the quality of joy that you may feel unfolding as you reconstruct the biblical scene from the perspective of Jesus' mother.

TUESDAY, MARCH 26

While [Jesus] was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there who said to one another in anger, “Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.” And they scolded her. But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

Mark 14:3-9

Ask: what has been freed in your life?

During the third week of Lent, the lectionary scriptures celebrated joy with the Israelites who received the Ten Commandments. God gave the law as a gift to be scaffolding, supporting a new way of living that replaced the systems of enslavement and oppression the Israelites had endured. But it is easy to forget about the liberating joy behind the law and internalize it as a set of thou-shalt-nots, just as the angry disciples did to the woman who “wasted” expensive ointment on Jesus rather than selling it and giving the money to the poor. Jesus intervenes on her behalf, reframing her action as the act of love that it was. This story is a reminder that the conditions in which we encounter joy are not always what we think they ought to be. Joy and grief mix together. Law and love get all tangled up. God keeps surprising us, pressing beyond our expectations to show us that more is possible.

Review the journal writing you did at the beginning of Lent on Ash Wednesday, when you wrote about the places in your life where you long for joy's return. Has anything shifted for you? Is there more joy, or less, as you contemplate those places?

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 27

After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, “Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.” The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, “Lord, who is it?” Jesus answered, “It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.” So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “Do quickly what you are going to do.”

John 13:21-27

Fast: from self-avoidance

Our devotions for the fourth week of Lent meditated on transformative joy as we considered a serpent on a pole. The bronze serpent, which ensured the Israelites’ survival, also made them confront the sin that landed them with snakes in the first place: their lack of trust in God. We can’t know Judas’ motivation in betraying Jesus, but one theory is that Judas hoped it would force Jesus’ hand, making this peaceful rabbi finally reveal himself as a militant messianic king. It worked, but not the way Judas expected. Instead of a military powerhouse, we beheld the fullness of God’s love for us hanging on the cross, a grotesque throwback to the serpent raised up in the wilderness.

Judas’ sin was serious, but Jesus didn’t let Judas go out into the night without first giving him the bread that he had blessed, the bread that was his body. There is joy in the love Jesus bore for Judas, a heartbroken joy. It tells the truth, forgives, and offers salvation even when all hope seems lost.

Today, fast from avoiding the parts of yourself that you feel are most unlovable. Read this text again, imagining yourself in Judas’ role. Feel the weight of his actions; imagine the excuses behind them; find the ways in which those choices and excuses resonate in your life. Imagine that Jesus, knowing all this about you, looks at you, offers bread to you, and loves you. Let yourself receive Jesus’ forgiveness and love.

MAUNDY THURSDAY, MARCH 28

After [Jesus] had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you....

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.
Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

John 13:12-15, 34

Thank: those who helped you find your calling

Today is Maundy Thursday, from the Latin word *mandatum*, commandment. The name comes from the new commandment Jesus issues to his disciples on the last night of his life: to love one another as he has loved them.

During the fifth week of Lent, we explored vocational joy, seeking the places where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. One more way of defining our vocations is as the particular paths we take as we live into Jesus' new commandment. Vocation is how we love others as Jesus first loved us.

Today, identify at least three people in your life who help define and shape your vocation: the person teaching you to play a musical instrument, a parent, a child, even a coworker. Express love and gratitude to them today.

GOOD FRIDAY, MARCH 29

It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified [Jesus]. The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also taunted him. When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Mark 15:25-34

Give: yourself to heartbreak

Sometimes joy is eclipsed. We began our journey into Lent on Ash Wednesday with this understanding. Sometimes we simply cannot sense joy's presence. In the deepest pain, in the loneliest abandonment, in crushed hope, in dehumanizing cruelty, in utter forsakenness—joy is absent for us. We cannot find it. To pretend that it is there, to look for a silver lining, to try and avoid the overwhelming pain, is to lie. Call a thing what it is: from where humanity stands at the foot of the cross on Good Friday, there is no joy.

We know this is not the end of the story. We know that God has a different understanding of what is happening, even in this terrible hour. But don't rush to the last page. Today, give yourself to this hard truth. Let your heart break for Jesus and for everywhere the cross finds an echo in our own time and place.

HOLY SATURDAY, MARCH 30

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

Matthew 27:57-61

Connect with creation: tell the story

Since ancient times, Christians have spent the night before Easter telling old stories to one another in the dark, stories of salvation from the Hebrew Bible: God molding creation out of chaos, God keeping promises, God saving in the midst of terror and trial. We tell stories as the dawn gets closer, until finally the stories culminate in the one we've all been waiting for: the one where Mary goes to the tomb in the predawn darkness and finds it empty.

During the first week of Lent, we dwelt alongside Noah and his family and learned about the persistent joy God bears toward humanity, choosing to love us despite the evil that we do and the sin that haunts us. This is the joy that sustains the Church's vigil, keeping us singing softly throughout the night as we wait for the day to break.

Go to an Easter Vigil service tonight and see for yourself. If there's not a service nearby, then get outside and see how creation seems to join in the watch. Look for flowers about to bloom, for green buds about to leaf out. Listen for birdsong returned, for the rushing waters of thawing rivers and creeks. Indoors, return to the rainbow photo collage you made during the first week of Lent. Let its colors seep into the prayers you pray today.

EASTER SUNDAY

GLORIOUS JOY

SUNDAY, MARCH 31

Read: John 20:1-18

Early on Easter morning, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus. But when she got there, the stone was rolled away. This is how joy found Mary: confused and alone, weeping and afraid, squinting into the predawn darkness and the rock-hewn tomb.

It wasn't long until joy called Mary by her name.

It wasn't long until she recognized it.

It wasn't long until she claimed it as her own: "I have seen the Lord!"

Today, Easter joy is calling you by name. Recognize it. Claim it. It has already claimed you as its own.

Every victory needs a good anthem. For many Christians, especially in the Orthodox Church, the quintessential party song of Easter joy was delivered in the fifth century by St. John Chrysostom. Let these ancient words carry you into Easter:

Let no one fear death, for the Death of our Savior has set us free.
He has destroyed it by enduring it.
He destroyed Hell when He descended into it.
He put it into an uproar even as it tasted of His flesh.

Isaiah foretold this when he said,
"You, O Hell, have been troubled by encountering Him below."
Hell was in an uproar because it was done away with.
It was in an uproar because it is mocked.
It was in an uproar, for it is destroyed.
It is in an uproar, for it is annihilated.
It is in an uproar, for it is now made captive.

Hell took a body, and discovered God.

It took earth, and encountered Heaven.
It took what it saw, and was overcome by what it did not see.

O death, where is thy sting?
O Hell, where is thy victory?

Christ is Risen, and you, o death, are annihilated!
Christ is Risen, and the evil ones are cast down!
Christ is Risen, and the angels rejoice!
Christ is Risen, and life is liberated!

Christ is Risen, and the tomb is emptied of its dead;
for Christ having risen from the dead,
is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

To Him be Glory and Power forever and ever. Amen!⁸



⁸ John Chrysostom, "Easter Sermon," c. 400. *Anglicans Online*. Accessed October 19, 2023.
http://anglicansonline.org/special/Easter/chrysostom_easter.html