

A photograph of an elderly woman with short, curly blonde hair, wearing a light-colored straw hat and green gardening gloves. She is looking upwards and to the right, holding a large, light pink rose. The background is a bright, clear blue sky. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

Daily Lenten Devotions
scripture readings • reflections • prayers

Seasons of Joy and Gladness



Society of St. Andrew
GLEANNING AMERICA'S FIELDS
FEEDING AMERICA'S HUNGRY

Lent is a time of drastic changes!
How quickly the joy of Jesus's entry to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday turns to the horror of his arrest, then to the mourning of his crucifixion, and then seeing Jesus — alive — Easter Day! What a mix of emotions the followers of Jesus must have experienced. What uncertainty!

Consider others as they are in the midst of their own drastic changes. Some have lost jobs, others have lost their homes. Finances have run out—but not the hunger of their children! What are they to do? Where are they to turn?

You, our donors and gleaners, are heroes who leap to the rescue—giving your gifts, along with your hands and feet, to help meet the physical needs of others. The farmers who work with us have been blessed with an abundant harvest, over and above their contracted crops. They gladly share the abundance for people in need to receive good, wholesome food. But it takes you to keep the food moving from the farm to the plates of our hungry neighbors!

This year, 2019, is the 40th birthday of the Society of St. Andrew! Forty years ago, SoSA resurrected the biblical teaching about gleaning for the purpose of feeding the hungry, the poor, and the traveler—and brought it into the 20th century. Now, in the 21st century, God's plan still works—and so do we here at SoSA!

We provide these devotionals as a free resource, with the hope that you, our honored readers, will join with us in this quest to continue God's gleaning plan! It takes your efforts—and it takes your financial gifts! Every \$1 that you donate provides more than 30 servings of food to those in greatest need. Consider donating \$47 for the 47 days of Lent. You can provide more than 1,500 servings! What a way to celebrate the resurrection of hope for our hungry neighbors!

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Joy—A Perfect Fit

Scripture: Ephesians 6:10–18

There was an electric anticipation in the arena. Small groups scanned entryways, waving to family and friends. Young ladies in white gowns clustered tightly, smiling into each other's cell phones. Young men wearing dark green robes stood in line; adjusting ties, caps, and tassels. As the procession began, I marveled at what I was about to witness.

This was my first High School graduation since my son's death. Had he remained with us, my son would have marched with the Class of 2015. The principal invited my husband and me to the ceremony. We couldn't go. Even after some years of grief, our memories and emotions remained too raw in 2015. Two years later, I watched a number of my son's childhood friends cross the stage. As their names were read, both my eyes and smile widened. A welt of "Mom" pride and authentic joy grew from within. I truly felt "my cup running over."

Society often requires us to wear special clothing for a variety of events. As Christians, Paul suggests we include truth, righteousness, faith, peace, and salvation as part of our daily "wardrobe." When everything "fits" we have opportunity to experience pure joy; elation, exultation, and rapture with God.

Prayer: God in Heaven, guide us this Lenten season to embrace the joy, which stems from the life and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Strengthen us with your love, so we can share the same devotion you have for us, with others. In Jesus's name, we pray. Amen.

Kelly Desclos-Estes | South Boston, Virginia

Seasons of Sorrow to Seasons of Joy

Scripture: Lamentations 3:21–23

Our church recently experienced a season of sorrow, as we lost three members of our choir in six weeks. Grief for the loss of friends is raw and painful, yet there will be joy again in seasons to come. In this Lenten season, we



grieve for the suffering Jesus endured, while remembering his victory over death and the joy-filled seasons of hope and everlasting life that Easter brings.

This time of loss reminds me of other grief-filled seasons. In February 1991, we lost my father-in-law to cancer, after a long, difficult struggle. Then, my wife and I discovered she was pregnant with our second child, after we had experienced months of disappointment with secondary infertility. As spring moved into summer, my father's health declined rapidly and he passed away in August.

The loss of two fathers within six months was almost impossible to bear. Yet, my wife completed her pregnancy with good health, which renewed our hope. Through the miracle of new creation, our son was born, bringing us joy as a new season began.

I've learned that our lives have both seasons of sorrow and seasons of joy. Times of sorrow pass, because we build our hope and joy on the resurrection of our Savior and his steadfast love for us. I know my choir friends have begun eternal life with Jesus, free of earthly pain and suffering. Holding that faith brings joy, no matter what emotional season we find ourselves in.

Prayer: Gracious Lord, we give you thanks for conquering death, which melts away our sorrow and fills us with ever-blossoming joy. Amen.

Bob Brooks | Fredericksburg, Virginia

Friday, March 8

After the Suffering

Scripture: Romans 8:38–39

She was in pain. Heart issues. Kidney failure – she'd been on dialysis for years. Kidney stones. Gall stones. A fractured spine. The day came when she and her family discerned that it was time to let go. Time to stop dialysis. Time to enter hospice.

The professionals said, "It's just a matter of days, maybe a week." The Lord didn't call her home for almost a month.

Through it all, she held hands with her dear husband. She crinkled her nose when she was tickled about something. She asked visitors to sing hymns of faith with her.

Then she was gone. There were tears and broken hearts, yes, but the funeral was a true service of witness to the resurrection; a celebration of her life as a baptized and deeply loved child of God. She is remembered fondly. And even in this season of loss, there are smiles brought on by memories of her love of the Lord and her devotion to children. Thanks be to God.

Prayer: Loving Lord, heal our broken hearts, we pray. As we approach Easter morning, when we celebrate the resurrection of the Lord, help us hold onto your promise of eternal life. Even as we miss our loved ones, help us live as a resurrected people – in joy, for the battle already is won. Amen.

Katy Yates Brungraber | Brownsville, Pennsylvania

Saturday, March 9

I Can Do All Things

Scripture: Philippians 4:13

After leaving the US Navy, my skill-set allowed for a job right where I was in Mississippi. Often people leaving a career in the military stay only a year or so on their first post-military job, so accepting an offer of a one-year contract seemed like an okay idea. Well, that one-year contract stretched to seven years, but when it ended, it ended abruptly, (like: "...this Friday is your last day...").



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The Best Food to Those Who Need it Most

Society of St. Andrew began in 1979 in the hills of Virginia and has grown into the largest field gleaning organization in the country. Working in a collaborative effort with thousands of farmers, tens of thousands of volunteers, and thousands of feeding programs in all 48 contiguous states, SoSA provides healthy food to those who have little or no access to it.

This nutritious, but excess, bounty is sent directly from the point of surplus (field or packing facility) to food banks or feeding programs that will share it directly with people in greatest need. The Society of St. Andrew's remarkable and efficient programs have proven extremely successful at providing nutritious food to those who need it most. Your gifts make this possible!

2017 STATISTICS

Pounds Saved: 28,561,389
Events Held: 5,960
Volunteers: 37,482

**2.5 billion servings shared
in our 39 year history**

9¢ a pound

Average cost per serving 3¢

Overhead: 3.22%



The pain associated with a job loss takes many forms. Embarrassment – Why me? Physical – The knot in the pit of your stomach. Emotional – Woe is me! Spiritual – God, WHY?!!! The devil loves to use a situation like this to tweak children of God and challenge their faith.

Well, shaking off the pity-party and getting past the embarrassment of having to tell family, friends, and ‘network’ associates was made easier with the help of a few close Christian friends who encouraged me, prayed with me, and lifted my spirits.

Philippians 4:13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Job interviews are not a fun thing for me, but after a bunch of them, an offer was finally accepted even though it represented a substantial pay cut. However, the job offered a spot working for/with some strong Christian folks who were a blessing to work with, and a great team of co-workers. God is Good! PTL...

Prayer: Dear God, Thank you for always being the strength in my weakness. In Jesus’s name I pray. Amen.

Denny Engle | Gautier, Mississippi

Sunday, March 10

A Time to Weep

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:4

Any type of change can bring about sorrow and grief, but then, as you work through the grief, joy can come. The key is to work through the grief, not get stuck in it. View it as a season of life and trust your future to God.

There was a time of major change in my life as I was preparing for the mission field. I had to quit a job that I loved, leave a church that I loved, sell my house, and go back to school. While I knew this is what the Lord wanted, I cried and grieved through each of those steps. The first semester of school was difficult, but I made it. Then during the second semester God opened a door for me to go back to my old church and do some ministry. However it was three hours away and I had no place to live. God opened doors for me to be there every weekend, and extra in the summer. I did that for almost two years. There were

many ministry opportunities, some of which gave me some college credits, and I was still able to graduate on time. I did not know the future but God did.

Prayer: God help us to grieve the changes and sorrows of life, and then through faith, keep moving on.

Karen Blackburn | Bluefield, West Virginia

Monday, March 11

Holy Week

Scripture: Matthew 25:40

We enjoyed worshipping with a Navaho Indian congregation in Oklahoma and had eaten fry bread for lunch when I received a call from home. Although the news was sketchy, I learned that a tornado had hit our home church during the Palm Sunday worship service. I turned on CNN and it was surreal to see our church and home on the news. Later, I learned that among the 20 dead was my four-year-old daughter, Hannah.

During Holy Week, we retell the story of the suffering of Christ, with the fear and grief of the disciples who lose their teacher and friend. We felt as if we were living our own type of holy week, as we arranged different funerals and hospital visits. Several United Methodist ministers each took families in the congregation, and assisted with funerals and hospital visits. We were eager for the message of Easter, and gathered in the parking lot of the church where we



proclaimed that we were an Easter people. What helped us heal was the hope of resurrection and the outpouring of love we received from God's people through hugs, chainsaw crews, water, meals, and even fresh vegetables. People suffer in large and small ways around the world, and God's people can bring

hope and healing through sharing. As Matthew 25:40 says, "Whatever you do for my people, no matter how unimportant they are, you do it for me."

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for people who are not afraid to help friends and strangers who are suffering. Give us eyes to recognize how we can help. Amen.

Dale Clem | Anniston, Alabama

Tuesday, March 12

As Called, Equipped

Scripture: Matthew 6:33

Our first two years of adjustment to married life had been exciting, I'd say, comfortably eventful. We had experienced no trauma or crisis in our lives. We were satisfied and felt secure. My wife and I are both conservative and try to live within our means and budget. Now a problem began to show up. Try as we may, for some reason, we could no longer live within our means.

On my job, at that time, there would be no more money. What to do? After much praying and consultation, we were led to the fact that the only way for me to make more money was to better prepare myself and develop more skills.

At the age of 32, with very little money and no formal higher education, God was calling me to become an elementary educator. Now you know I wasn't going to get rich there! However, my wife and I both are rich in friendships and lovely people. What a joy this experience has been, and continues to bring us both rich rewards for our efforts.

I received my degree in Elementary Education, my Masters in School Administration, and my Education Specialist Degree (EDS). When I retired, it was with 32.5 years of experience. Thanks be to God.

Prayer: Thank you, God, that as you call us, you equip us. Amen.

Fred Fauber | Lynchburg, Virginia

Wednesday, March 13

Rescued

Scripture: Psalm 16:1-2

When we were in our early 30's, my husband Fred decided to go to college. I was a college graduate, and I was enthusiastic about the idea. I was, at the time,

teaching kindergarten in a public school and Fred continued to work as many hours as possible.

Fred studied diligently, determined to do four years of college in three. Our occasions for “together time” were rare. As time passed, I began to feel overburdened by it all. I lost my appetite, became extremely anti-social, and very nervous, all of which was very embarrassing. One day I “hit a wall” and had to leave school early. I confided in the school principal, who was very helpful, understanding, and supportive.

I prayed a lot. Psalm 16, as well as other passages of scripture, were very helpful to me. Fred was understanding, in spite of his heavy personal load. Somehow, with God’s help, we made it through to college graduation! Once the pressure was off, I gradually regained my composure.

*Psalm 16:1-2 Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.
I say to the Lord, “You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.”*

Since that time, I have lived joyfully, with thanksgiving to our God for his help and guidance. I have served the church in many capacities, having learned by experience how helpful God is in our everyday lives.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for your ever-present help. I have no good apart from you. Amen.

Dodie Fauber | Lynchburg, Virginia

Thursday, March 14

A Time to Laugh

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:4 and Zechariah 8:19

It was a hard few years. My father abandoned us. My mother, sister, and I were doing all we could to put a roof over our head and food on the table. My mom, now a single mom with two teen-aged children, worked a full-time day

job, a part-time night job, and a weekend job. I worked at a restaurant after school, for a janitorial service at night, and pumped gas on weekends (this was a while back!) My sister babysat children and animals every chance she could. All the money went to make the house payments, utilities, and food. Clothes and other things came from the Salvation Army thrift store. Thank God for them! In the midst of it all, we always made time to eat supper together. My mother would tell us, “This won’t last forever.” And it didn’t.

Several years later we were stable. Mom was working just one job, I was in college, and my sister was babysitting for “fun money.” We still had supper together. One night my mom invited some friends who were like us—a single mom with two kids. We had pizza, games, and laughed all night. When they left, my mom said, “This was what I was living for. This is good.”

Prayer: Dear God, thanks for getting us through hard times so we may be able to celebrate with others. Amen.

Michael Henderson | Florence, South Carolina

Friday, March 15

Service Brings Joy

Scripture: James 2:14–17

When I got divorced and left my job and home, I went through a long period of darkness. I kept to myself, doing what I needed to do to get by and do the best I could for my young daughter.

I knew I was starting to feel better the day I signed up to do the Scholastic reading program for her daycare. I know it’s a little thing, but helping her school

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was, well, helping! In my case, I served when I had enough strength to give back. But it also gave me more strength to keep on. Because service gives us life.

I'm guessing you've done some kind of service project before in your life. I'm guessing you even enjoyed it! I mean, your back may have hurt the next day, but it feels good to do something for someone else. It feels good to do a tangible thing that you know will help someone who needs it.

God made it to work that way. God designed us to find joy, to find LIFE in giving to each other, sharing with each other, caring for each other. Because, remember, God made us in God's own image. And God enjoys giving to us, sharing with us, caring for us, and so gave us a bit of that same trait when mixing our human ingredients together.

Prayer: God who delights in giving, we are grateful for opportunities to serve you and your children. Thank you for creating us to feel joy when we do. Amen.

Jeannie Hunter | Nashville, Tennessee

Saturday, March 16

Season of Joy and Gladness

Scripture: Luke 10:27

Are you kidding? After a death? After divorce? After failure?

We all experience misery of some kind, even a conversation with a friend gone sour. Sadness and special kinds of raw pain occur during life's difficult events. It most likely robs our energy and can even feel like falling deeper and deeper into despair!

So what's the plan? Do something? Yes! Face the pain and listen for the healing. I think it sneaks up on us:

...the sun comes up so we can choose to take a walk...

...we call a friend and a conversation allows us to share what's in our heart,

...new insight comes into our thoughts and spirit

Despite our despair, the love of Jesus carries us even further and the healing can begin! That "truth and peace" IS Jesus...as Zachariah speaks in apocalyptic



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Preventing Waste, Feeding the Hungry

With your help, the Society of St. Andrew (SoSA) addresses this crucial issue in two ways. In each, SoSA gathers up food that would otherwise be wasted. This fresh and nutritious food is then provided, at no cost, to food banks, pantries, and programs that feed or provide food to those most in need:

In the fields – SoSA mobilizes more than 30,000 volunteers each year to glean fields and orchards for remaining fruits and vegetables. Volunteers from all faith groups, civic organizations, schools, and universities gather food remaining after the harvest. In 2017, the *Gleaning Network* collected more than 18 million pounds.

At the packing houses – food that is surplus, inconveniently-sized, or cosmetically imperfect, is transported by SoSA to agencies that feed the hungry. Otherwise, this food would likely have been dumped in landfills as waste. The *Potato & Produce Project* rescued almost 10.5 million pounds of this food in 2017.

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terms...to rebuild the Temple...It is (or can become!) the “Day of the Lord” and gladness pushes in!

“Fasting” (not just with food) in the scripture can lead us into a “time out” from a routine that is now full of sadness...but ever so slowly we move into that new “season of Joy”...even though it is never easy.

Prayer: Dear God, you know our feelings and you provide joy! Help us to embrace the joy and allow you to deal with our suffering. We love you. Take our suffering and turn it into “truth and peace.” Amen.

Lesley Green Huffaker | Coronado, California

Sunday, March 17

Crushed

Scripture: Psalm 34:18

Lent for me is a time of reflection and learning. As I look back, I can see the periods of light and dark – like shadows and sunlight in a forest. One of the darkest stretches I ever faced was the sudden loss of a job that I dearly loved. The end was swift and incredibly cruel in its delivery. To say that I was crushed in spirit would be quite the understatement. During that time, I penned these words on my blog: the situation created a massive breakdown in the way that I valued myself. It caused a tremendous wave of self-doubt and feelings of unworthiness. And it didn’t matter how often friends around me said “God has something better in store for you”.

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I felt like a horrible and failed person.

And that took me to some very dark places in my mind.

Several times I thought about ending my pain in a very permanent way.

But the Lord was near – even when I couldn't recognize it. He saved the crushed in spirit.

Circumstances led me to new jobs that were actually more aligned with my desire to help people. And just like stepping into the sunlight from shade – I moved into a new season. And I know the Lord is near in this season too.

Prayer: Lord, be ever near. Even when I am too broken to feel your presence – help me know you are here.

Chris Howell | Lynchburg, Virginia

Monday, March 18

Joy in the Midst of Sorrow

Scripture: Psalm 30:4–5, 11–12

When we married on a beautiful day in May 1986, the service was joyful, filled with music, scripture, and Holy Communion, as well as sacred promises and hope-filled vows. Harold's dad was best man and my oldest sister was honor attendant. Harold's children and my younger brother and sister were in our wedding party along with childhood friends, college and seminary classmates, and ministry colleagues. We were surrounded in the filled sanctuary by extended family, friends, colleagues, and church members from all the seasons of our lives.

But shadows also fell across that day, Harold's mother had died



Photo Credit: Ludwig Moroder Urtijëi

suddenly and unexpectedly just four months earlier. Grief was visible in the eyes of her husband, children, and grandchildren. In April, my father was diagnosed with a terminal metastasized cancer that would take his life three months later and had already robbed him of most mobility. We contemplated different scenarios from postponing the ceremony, to changing the location to my hometown, but in the end my parents wanted us to go ahead as we had planned, though neither he nor my mother were able to be with us that day.

I remember talking with my parents that morning on the phone. Afterward I stood weeping in the embrace of friends. And then, with a glad heart, gathering everything I needed, I went to the church.

Prayer: Loving, holy God, we thank you that Christ can transform our tears of dark grief into a dawning joy. Amen.



Kathleen Overby Webster | Roanoke, Virginia

Tuesday, March 19

I'll Meet You in the Morning

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:13

Laughter, music, praise, and testimony; we were having a wonderful time at church that day. We were also in the process of saying “Good bye” to my dad and laying him to rest.

Some people may not have understood what was going on – after all, they had come to a funeral. So I tried to explain: “I’ve shared this passage from First Thessalonians so many times at other funerals I’ve presided over; some people understood, though many did not. But, if my words to them are to hold true, more importantly, if my faith in God and his word is real, then I cannot grieve like those who have no hope.

My dad lived a life of loving service. He passed his faith onto his children and made sure we were living our faith – not just riding on his coattails. I miss him every day. Yet, our Lord’s death and resurrection gives me the assured hope that I will see my dad again one day.

1 Thessalonians 4:13 The Coming of the Lord

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

If you had come to my dad’s memorial service, you might have thought you had come to a church celebration. You would have been right.

Prayer: Loving Father, remind us again that, if this season means anything, we have the hope-filled promise of new life through the death and resurrection of your son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Joe Phipps | Fairfield, Iowa

Wednesday, March 20

A Bedtime Story

Scripture: Psalm 63:5–7

Christian tradition assigns 40 days to the season of Lent. But for some, Lent with its somber tones, spans a much longer length of time that doesn’t rest on any calendar. Life’s unexpected losses, unrelenting griefs, unanticipated despair, and unacceptable hardships all conspire to delete any glimmer of joy.

When I was appointed to serve churches 200-plus miles from where my husband and then teenaged son lived, I entered a personal Lent which began the moment they left for home that first time. Many a night I cried, but only God heard me. Then one evening while lying in bed, I looked up and saw that the ceiling fan which had four blades resembled a cross. Immediately I realized the ceiling fan/cross over me signaled Christ’s gracious presence with me always. And in that very moment, resurrection joy began to feed my weary heart, mind, and spirit.

Lent may be for a season, and as I learned, anyone can be in their own time of Lent. Yet as surely as God moves in mysterious ways, may it be that when any of us meditates in the watches of the night, our soul will be satisfied—and sustained.

Psalm 63:5-7

*My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy*

Prayer: Gracious One, help us to trust that you are always with us in the presence of Christ Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit during this Lent and at any other time of Lent in our lives. Amen.

Chris Suerdieck | Emmitsburg, Maryland

Thursday, March 21

Joy in the Mourning

Scripture: Psalm 30

On a beautiful October Saturday, 31 years ago, my lovely bride Carol and I were joined in holy matrimony in Marsh Chapel at her alma mater, Boston University. The day before, my father died. If you think that sentence was abrupt, try living through it...yikes! While there were some very difficult moments, God's presence, through Carol, brought me much joy, not unlike how Rebekah comforted Isaac after his mother's death (Genesis 24:67).

It was, however, a full ten years before I could get through that time of year without a bout of sadness for the loss of both parents (mom died six years before dad, when I was 19). Once again, God worked through my lovely bride, gently shifting my focus from the time I lost, to the time I had with them. This view has helped me find joy every autumn since.

Even today, bad things happen. As I write this, I'm still recovering from the horrific abuse I suffered at the hands of an organization I worked with a few years ago. But the memories of times when God brought me joy, combined with Carol's continued loving presence, are slowly helping me find a new

perspective. And even if it takes another ten years, I have faith that joy will come in the morning.

Prayer: Gracious Jesus, of whom the church is your bride, may the memories of times you helped us be a source of sustenance and healing in present difficulties. Amen!

Charlie Stribula | Woodbridge, Virginia

Friday, March 22

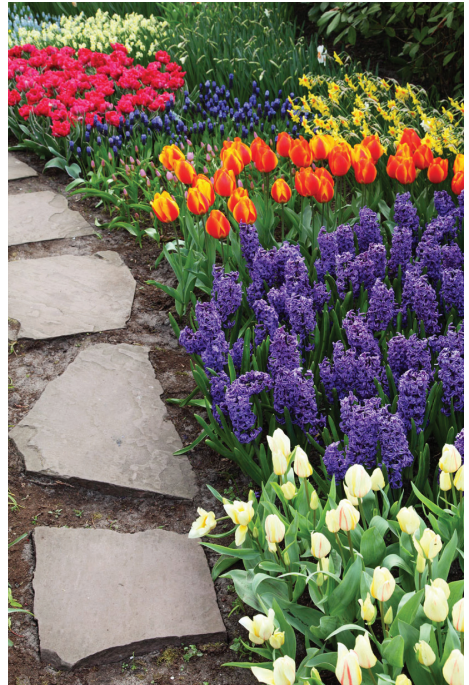
Desert to Garden

Scripture: Psalm 119:50

“One morning you’ll wake up and realize you haven’t thought of your father in an entire day and feel incredibly guilty,” my friends said. “And that’s okay.” We were having dinner after my father passed away, many years ago. I was a bit past 30 at the time and hadn’t experienced much grief – my own or others’. My father was the first person I’d ever really lost and I was sick with grief. This group of friends each had lost a parent at younger ages, and they told me I was part of their club now. Not the happiest club to join, obviously, but the friendship and their counsel helped.

They were right. At first, grief washed over me in waves, when driving, singing a hymn, or shopping. Gradually I went longer periods without feeling grief. I could more often think of my father (a very smart and funny man) and remember his silly jokes, his gardening wisdom, and his ability to bring birds to his feeders. The loss was still there, but the overwhelming sadness faded. One morning I did wake up and feel incredible guilt for not grieving constantly. And then I went about my day.

Now, my vegetable and flower gardens filled with flowers, birds, and



butterflies are a tribute to my father. He's still with me. Out of sadness, peace can follow.

Prayer: Faithful God, keep me ever mindful that even in the dry, dark periods, new life is born.

Jean Blish Siers | Charlotte, North Carolina

Saturday, March 23

Unexpected Joy

Scripture: Matthew 5:4

Our granddaughter was born, and then, just weeks later her father, our son, was diagnosed with cancer. As medical testing progressed, we learned that it was a very serious lymphoma which might not ultimately be treatable. At the same time, it was becoming clear that my wife and I needed to leave our comfortable church home of 30 years. To top it all off, a person absolutely central to my hunger ministry was making my work life very difficult.

It was a true “dark night of the soul” time. I don’t think God visited all these ills upon me. In fact I drew nearer to God in the midst of these trials. God’s good graces in the form of family, friends, prayer, medical technology, and spiritual direction saw us through.

And when the season of suffering had passed, with my son’s health restored, and a vibrant new church home, I even found new vigor for my work life. Now I know joy and gladness in ways I could not before. Each and every day is a gift.

Prayer: Faithful God, thank you for bearing us up in times of suffering. Be with us and see us through into a season of gladness. Amen.

Dave Miner | Indianapolis, Indiana

Sunday, March 24

Discipline Through Love and a Stroke...

Scripture: John 16:33

Nearly three years ago, at age 39, I had a stroke. One morning I didn’t wake up and “slept” for three days. In three short days, God turned my life completely

upside down. I had to give up my position as a full-time office manager and take a less demanding part-time position. This meant that my pay was cut more than half. My husband and I were worried about taking care of our family. When I look back on that year, it was full of pain and frustration. I cried to God almost every day.

Through all of this, God was gently but forcefully trying to get me to a place where he could use me. Looking back, I see that he was trying to pull me along a little faster than I was going at the time. He LOVED me so much, that he was willing to work with me.

In the years since the stroke, I have grown so much closer to him. I have “matured” more in those years than I had in the previous 39! I look back now and realize that it was not anything but pure love that brought me through that tough time, and it was from God. Knowing that God’s love and grace was with me even in my desperate times has changed my view of my life with him – it is now a life of joy!

Prayer: Lord, please help me to see all of my trials and misfortunes as temporary, knowing you have overcome them all. Amen.

Jana Sperandio | Connellsville, Pennsylvania

Monday, March 25

There is Always Hope

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1–8

There were so many moments of loneliness as I served Jesus for eight years in Eastern Europe. There were days and nights when I said to myself, “What am I doing here?” “Am I really making a difference?” Now I say, “Why did I fret? Why did I worry? Why was I ever concerned about being alone as I grew older and wondered if I would die alone someday?”

Today, the man of my dreams proposed to me on the top of a mountain in Northern Maine. He put his arm around me as his drone captured the scene and said, “So, what’s the chance you’ll marry me?” I was so mesmerized by the beauty of the ring that I was speechless. Yes, I have been blessed by the Lord with the man of my dreams. At the ripe old age of 55, I will finally marry.

The older we get, the more we realize how life brings emotional seasons of feasting and of famine, times of sorrow and times of joy. (Ecclesiastes 3:1–8) Through it all, however, we will keep our eyes on the Lord and focus on the hope that we have in him.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for being my Creator and Sustainer. The future is unknown and so uncertain. Only you can see it. When tough times return, may I always remember you. Yes, “even then your powerful arm will guide and protect me.” (Psalm 139:10)

Cindy B. | North Brookfield, Massachusetts

Tuesday, March 26

Beautiful Feet

Scripture: Romans 10:14–15

Do you have beautiful feet?

Like the Devil in the musical “Damn Yankees”, I always wear shoes and avoid open sandals because I have a corn on one foot and an ugly nail on the other. But recently I discovered that I have beautiful feet.

This spring my wife and I attended a funeral service of a former parishioner. There were many family members and friends gathered by the grave but I didn’t see our current pastor. Instead, Ellen’s sister led the service. When she invited others to witness, I hesitated but felt led to share how much Ellen had meant to us at church, her kindness to me and my wife, her two nieces, and the little children on her school bus. Her sister then said something that I did not hear clearly.

Later my wife told me that she had said, “He’s the preacher who led Ellen to Christ.”

In over 40 years of ordained ministry and as an adjunct seminary professor who has taught dozens of men



and women who now preach the Gospel, I have been blessed and honored in many ways. But I had never heard anyone say that about me – that I had led them to Christ.

You don't have to be a preacher to share the Good News of God's love in Christ. You too can have beautiful feet.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us to be beautiful messengers of your grace and mercy. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.

William Nash "Bill" Wade | Strasburg, Virginia

Wednesday, March 27

Tomorrow is Another Day...

Scripture: Isaiah 41:10

Several years ago, my employer was unexpectedly diagnosed with leukemia. Having no family history of cancer, and given his outstanding good health, this came as a shock. As his personal assistant, I had become very close to him and his family. Our staff watched him struggle through chemo and radiation, only to succumb to the disease in less than nine months.

We were devastated when he died – we had lost a true friend, not to mention the uncertainty of our jobs and how this loss would affect our families. While still in the throes of grieving, his replacement moved in to take over the reins. As it happened, he invigorated us, keeping us on and raising our spirits. He helped us help him into his new role, breathing new life into the office. After the downcast mood from previous months, we were renewed and inspired to get back to work.

In the midst of our sadness, we found hope, encouragement, and satisfaction. Things were not the same; we were working harder than ever, but it was what we, or at least I – needed to get through the bad times. We were given a new lease on our work lives and given new meaning for what we were trying to accomplish.

Prayer: Almighty God – give strength and hope to those coping with loss. Help us remember that you sent your son to live among us and that you are ever present to guide us through dark times to brighter days. Amen.

Kathi Wise | McLean, Virginia



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SoSA’s Gleaning Network and Potato & Produce Project put faith into action by gleaning leftover produce from farms and bagging excess loads of potatoes, and then distributing the food to critical local feeding agencies.

SoSA offers seasonal devotions and other programs— Lent, Advent, Vacation Bible School, and Christmas Cards— to enrich spiritual life, and inviting participants to feed the hungry through prayer, volunteerism, and financial giving.

Breaking Away

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1

Reflecting on more my than 30 years of ordained ministry, there always is some sorrow as one ministry concludes and another begins.

Following the leading of God's Spirit, I gradually grew a parachurch ministry which became known to a small circle of followers as "BreakAway." I sought support and funding from various sources. In 2013, my ministry partners and I launched "BreakAway Ministry" fulltime and were renting storefront space in downtown Valparaiso, Indiana. By 2016 the season for this unique downtown ministry had come to a close. God's still-speaking voice had called me onward to a new form of ministry in rural Indiana.

Moving out of our rental space, shutting down a Facebook page, obtaining a new email address, dis-assembling our webpage, printing hard copies of a three-year weekly inspirational blog, thanking our donors, and saying "good-bye" to those who had shared a BreakAway journey with us... carried some sorrow.

*Ecclesiastes 3:1 For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter under heaven*

BreakAway lived for three years and sustained countless people on a spiritual journey who may never find their way back into the organized church again. As I recall... Jesus ministered for just three years. And then he died... and rose again ... and the gift of the Holy Spirit continues to touch lives long after just those three years. Our memories of a three-year ministry are always tinged with joy and gladness as we reflect on them now.

Prayer: Oh God, you are the one who enables us to break away from whatever holds us back. Amen.

Victoria S. Ubben | Wanatah, Indiana

Friday, March 29

All She Could Do Was Sing

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:55

One evening at choir practice a woman told the other members about her sister in New England who had suffered a stroke. She had just returned from visiting her sister in the hospital.

The woman had been told by a nurse that the part of the brain that controls speech had been damaged, but not the part that controls the ability to sing. She had learned that her sister would probably not be able to speak plainly again. But, she would be able to sing.

The choir members' concern for our member's sister suddenly turned from sorrow to hope and joy when they learned that whenever the sister needed anything she just had to sing out.

Easter is the song that triumphs over death's inability to silence the love and grace of God.

Prayer: God of grace, whose son died for our sins, may we like he triumph over the darkness of this world that seeks in vain to silence us. Amen.

Norman Tippens | Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina

Saturday, March 30

The Journey of Life

Scripture: John 10:10

I really like Lent. I know it's weird. I really like to dig deep into the journey of Christ leading up to Easter morning. It helps reveal my own "junk." Lent helps me remember that life is a journey and this is a period of time where it's okay to feel the pain and the hurt. It's a time to not just let it all go, but to dig a little deeper and sit with the pain, hurt, and sorrow.



For the past several years I have been taking a photography journal during Lent. A photo a day with a one word focus. Every day is a different word, except every Sunday is “celebrate.” I love looking for the people, places, flowers, landscapes, sunsets, signs, or buildings that express the word of the day. It helps me to remember it is Lent. And it moves me from digging into the deeper parts of pain and helps raise me up to find the abundance. For when I am seeking the word “refuge” I can see both the pain and the joy, not only in the word I’m pondering for the day but also in the picture that usually jumps out at me. Lent is of both pain and of abundance. Where do you find yourself this Lent and how do you journey through?

Prayer: God of both pain and abundance, hold us close as we journey.

Dawn Barnes | Indianapolis, Indiana

Sunday, March 31

Joy

Scripture: Luke 23:43

I had a friend who was, for a second time, diagnosed with cancer. She took the information hard, but having beat cancer before, she had a determined mind to do it again. As she took each chemo treatment, she prayed and visualized Jesus holding the medicine as it was delivered into her body. She used alternative methods as well, by asking me to give her healing touch treatments. After each treatment she felt more relaxed and hopeful.

As time passed it grew clear to her that this time she was not going to win against the cancer. She told me at one of the last treatments, “I don’t want you to feel you have failed me.” I gave her a hug and wondered why she was concerned about me, when she was the one who was dying.

Seeing her for the last time in her bed, I thought how beautiful she appeared. I felt a peaceful joy come over me that I believe she gave me.

Years later, I read this quote from Willem ten Boom, “Of course we should be happy... A child of God is a citizen of heaven and the attitude of a Christian must be one of praise when someone has died. Our grief...would just be one of selfishness on our part, of grieving for the sake of ourselves.”

Prayer: Dear Father, help us remember who we are. That as your children, we have your promise of life with you in paradise.

Kris Bertsch | Wanatah, Indiana

Monday, April 1

Afterward

Scripture: 2 Kings 4:8-37

I remember the day my dream died. It was April 1, 2008.

I was an interim, working as a chaplain at my alma mater, working with the university community in mission, service, and discipleship. I thought I would work there until I retired, but the interim position was cut and I found myself unemployed.

I was devastated.

Having heard VeggieTales' creator Phil Vischer's story about the way VeggieTales had been lost to him, I turned to the Biblical story he'd shared about Elisha and the Shunammite woman's son. There, God gave the woman a son, then took him away, and then gave him back. Suddenly, instead of her old dream, God had given her a new one.

As each year passed, I remembered April 1 ironically (no joke!) as I worked in churches and sought other ways to be in ministry to young adults. Each year, the hurt was still there... until this year, a decade later, when the first of April came and went without me thinking about my loss.

All that God has done in the last eleven years doesn't remove the sting of that first announcement, but I can look back in the rearview mirror and see all the ways God has used me since then. Yes, there are sad, dark times, but we often see the way God was moving even then, afterward.

Prayer: Holy God, even in the dark, help us see you. Amen.

Jacob Sakms | Midlothian, Virginia

Tuesday, April 2

Happy Birthday?

Scripture: John 10:10

On my 48th birthday cancer entered my world to steal, kill, and destroy my life. There were many days, weeks, and months of stress, worry, and uncertainty leading up to my surgery and for several months of chemo which followed. It could have been the worst time of my life.

However, it became an amazing blessing in disguise. People I barely knew contacted me to share how much I meant to them. They thanked me for things I had said or done which helped them... most of which I didn't recall. I got to hear my funeral eulogies without having to die!

But the greatest blessing of all was the wake-up call from God to live my life, however long that may be, in all its fullness. I had been squandering my life on trivialities... not paying attention to what really mattered. I have lived more fully in the 26 years after my diagnosis than I ever did in the 48 years before. Life is good!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I thank you for blessings in disguise and for the joy of living my life to the fullest. Amen.

Susie Brack | South Hill, Virginia

Wednesday, April 3

The Perspective of Foolishness

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18

When I think of joy, I think of turning normal thinking on its head by seeing life from the perspective of foolishness.

One of my appointments was to a church that was burglarized. The thief stole cash kept for financial assistance to persons in need and rifled through files that included my sermons. When I announced the news about the theft to the congregation, I talked about the theft of the money and my disappointment in discovering that none of my sermons had been stolen.

Between the time of the burglary and Sunday morning worship, I had the opportunity to visit the young man who had been jailed for this crime. I told

him the church believed in a God of forgiveness and second chances. I asked if there was anything the church could do for him. He talked about the need for some articles of clothing and asked me to tell the church members he was sorry. When I shared this news with the congregation, people responded with generosity and the children's Sunday School classes made cards for him.

Prayer: God of forgiveness, help us to see life from the foolish perspective of the cross. Grant that we may see life through the joy of Jesus.

Marc Brown | Amherst, Virginia

Thursday, April 4

From Heartache to Happiness

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:13

When our son was three years old, our hope of adding to our family turned to disappointment and sorrow. The next few years brought us three miscarriages. It was more disheartening to know our son would spend his entire life without a sibling, than for my husband and I not to have another child to love and nurture.

Years passed, and we continued our life-long focus on service in our community, including foster parenting and hosting an exchange student. However, that empty spot in our hearts remained. When our son was in college, my husband led a local service organization. In an effort to motivate other members of the group to serve more, we decided to host another exchange student.

We began communicating with our upcoming guest through the summer months, getting to know one another through our emails back and forth. It was a bit unsettling, though, wondering if we would be a good fit for a high school student again. The day arrived for him to join our family for a year of studying in the United States, and the most amazing thing happened! As we exchanged greetings and hugs at the airport, the feeling that we were “family” overcame all four of us. We spent a wonderful year together. Now, over ten years later, we are still blessed to have two sons – and our sons are truly brothers.

Prayer: Lord, your mysterious plan is always right for us. Thank you for turning heartache into happiness!

Julie Erickson | Olathe, Kansas

Friday, April 5

Tribulation's Joy

Scripture: Hebrews 12:2

As I write, my daughter Karissa is in her seventh month of pregnancy. Undergoing labor is on the horizon. Labor, women say, is their hardest physical activity – ever! Yet, they deem labor worth it for the joy awaiting them. They would do it again for the seven and a half pounds of pure beauty and joy they hold in their arms!

Jesus compared his death to a woman's labor. Yes, there's tribulation. Once the child is born, her painful memory vanishes. Likewise, Jesus's painful departure gives way to his return conveying to his disciples irremovable joy.

That joy results from Christian tribulation is a deep, universal principle. Our Lord exemplified it. Scripture says Jesus "for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross..." Jesus stood his ground before the cross's ordeal. He held out against its humiliation. England's Prime Minister Winston Churchill resolutely held out against the continuous Nazi bombing raids, saying, "If you're going through hell, keep going."

The joy that made enduring the cross worth it was Jesus's profound sense of happiness in obtaining eternal salvation by his own blood. By his atoning sacrifice any repenting sinner with saving faith might now have fellowship with God. As his disciple, you'll have tribulation. To you Jesus says, "I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice."

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, help me trust you though "weeping may linger for the night, joy comes with the morning."

H. O. Tom Thomas | Forest, Virginia

Saturday, April 6

Joy Comes – Just in Time

Scripture: Romans 15:13

There are times when joy may feel absent from our lives, leaving sorrow and hopelessness. The God of the Universe knows sorrow; surely he grieved when Jesus suffered and died. Jesus's loved ones grieved, feeling alone. Then joy returned with the resurrection of Jesus!

My deepest sorrow was the death of my husband, Dan, when he was 35 and our two children were very young. My sadness was unbearable. Joy and hope seemed to have left our home. I will never forget, but because of God's grace, I no longer feel the pain. It has been replaced with warmth and strength in those memories. With assuredness I can say that joy returned.

How did joy return? It came a bit at a time. Joy was spread by the smiles and kisses of my little children. It came through the mail, attached to a note from a friend. Joy was embedded in the help of neighbors doing yard work and fixing my oven. It traveled through the telephone, a comforting voice of a friend. Joy seeped into our home as the result of many prayers. It walked in the door with friends ready to play with my children. Joy returned to me in the silence of the morning and quiet times spent in prayer. God brings joy – just in time.

Prayer: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.” Amen.

Deb Broadwater | Moneta, Virginia

Sunday, April 7

Asking Why

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1–2

My father reigned for years as the steady rock of our family. When he died from multiple hornet stings, we struggled to understand why God took our beloved patriarch. In time, we realized we had attributed our source of security and well-being to the wrong Abba. For Christians, the true rock must be God the Father through Christ the son.

God allowed us to see how he used our terrible loss—he drew every one of dad's children closer to himself. But God sometimes chooses to keep his own counsel, and he shrouds the reasons for our sorrows or hardships. When the answer to “why?” eludes us, we learn from the scriptures to lift our eyes heavenward and have no fear. Rather than dwell on our own afflictions, we can choose to remember the afflictions Jesus endured in our stead.

As we approach Maundy Thursday, let's dwell on the goodness and mercy of our heavenly Father through the sacrifice of his only son. God has redeemed us and called us by name, and he will sustain us in every circumstance. We may

yearn to know why we suffer, but we need to know only that Jesus suffered and died for us. Our rock promises strength for today and salvation for eternity.

Prayer: Thank you, Father, for our trials and their purpose in our lives. Thank you for Jesus, whose trials reconciled us to you.

Andi Lehman | Hernando, Mississippi

Monday, April 8

Yesterdays

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1-5

Being the family of a United Methodist minister, my children and I know what it means to move. Thankfully, as the children were growing up, two of our appointments were quite long term: nine and eight years. While the longest appointment encompassed the years of young childhood and learning to parent, the second occurred during the really active phases of their lives and mine. These were the years of scout troops, music lessons, church and school choirs, UMYF, orchestra, school plays, sports, and lots of friends, many of whose parents I also became friends with. For me they were the years of committees, book clubs, writer's groups, church choir, Bible study, circle, and exercise classes. Leaving the people connected to both of these appointments was as heart wrenching as leaving real family.

It can be a sad thing to look back and mourn certain people and times in our lives. And, yet, if they hadn't occurred, we would have nothing wonderful to remember. My children and I will always be grateful for the special people in both the church and community who stepped forward to befriend us. "For everything there is a season," said the writer of Ecclesiastes, "...a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing." Let us love our friends while we have them today and hold fast to their memories when they are in our yesterdays.

Prayer: Father, thank you for all of those who embrace us with their love.

Regina K. Carson | Chesterfield, Virginia

Tuesday, April 9

Witnessing Through the Ages

Scripture: Hebrews 12:1–2

When I was a little boy, my grandmother would come and stay with our family for a time. She was always kind, spoke with a sweet southern accent and brought candy to share. She moved very slowly and walked with a cane. She was probably the oldest person I had ever seen, and seeing her age saddened me, and even scared me a bit.

One day, I passed her room and heard her whispering. I summoned my courage to sit closer and eavesdrop. I was fascinated to realize she was praying, asking for Jesus to watch over our family, and to take her home.

Shortly after that, Jesus did take Mema home. By then, I had learned more about her; how she raised four children, sewed their clothing, emphasized attending church each Sunday, prayed regularly, and cared for those less fortunate. She had an iron will and unwavering faith, which persevered to the very end of her life.

My memories of Mema are tinged with gladness, knowing this grand lady is one of the “great cloud of witnesses” in our family. My wife and I carried her Christian message to our children. I am resolute to “run my race,” appreciating that strong Christians, like my grandmother, blazed the trail before me.

Prayer: Gracious Lord, help me to be a witness to your great love, your sacrifice on the cross, and your victory over death during this Lenten season, and always. Amen.

Bob Brooks | Fredericksburg, Virginia

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Joy in the Midst of Death

Scripture: Psalm 34:4

Hearing the Alzheimer's diagnosis, I knew a long, difficult journey was ahead. I knew enough not to be seduced into false hopes of recovery for him.

Years of slow decline unfolded. In December, physical issues emerged. By January, I employed a morning aide and began to consider physical space in our home to accommodate an anticipated need for a hospital bed, loss of mobility, and perhaps loss of speech.

It was a sad time, but I was determined to fulfill my goal of keeping my husband home, where he wanted to be, to the end. Then January 18 arrived and within an hour my mobile, talking, walking-around-the-house husband was dead. Shock!

As I sat for a time beside his lifeless body, holding his hand that was losing the warmth of life, a realization hit me. All my prayers since hearing the diagnosis had been answered, "Yes." He was not suffering pain; he hated pain. He had ended his journey at home. He had not suffered a time of constant confusion and anxiety. He still knew us. He was free!

*Psalm 34:4 I sought the Lord, and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.*

And so was I. Free from concern about making his days safe and palatable. Free, knowing that expressions of love for each other had been shared to the end. A strange kind of joy in the face of death and separation! Joy just the same.

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to see your provision of joy even in the midst of sadness and loss. Amen.

Youtha Hardman-Cromwell | Washington, DC

Why?

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1b, 2, 3a, 5a

As chaplain at my local hospital, I visit with families who have lost a loved one. The question often raised is, “Why?” I was called to offer support to a father whose five-month-old daughter had passed away in her sleep. The father was distraught and saying, “I want to hold my baby!” He asked, “Why?” The common responses that people give, often bring up more questions, or makes the parent angry at God. I, having no answer to the “why?” question, attempted to comfort the father by assuring him God was also hurting in the loss of his daughter.

God says, “I will be with you” (Isaiah 43:2a). He will comfort us, protect us, and give us strength. We can rejoice in the knowledge that God’s love is with us; that God will help us endure the pain, and move from grief to joy. I encouraged the father to remember the joy of holding his daughter in time of health, to remember the joy of playing with her, and to give thanks to God for the brief time he enjoyed his daughter. Thanks be to God for his love and presence with us when we hurt and the gift of memory to recall the good times.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for your promise to be with us when we hurt, have problems, and difficulties. Thank you for the peace that comes from you (John 14:27) through your son, Jesus Christ! Amen.

Sam Ramirez | Lakeland, Florida

Rainbows

Scripture: Psalm 30:4-5; 11-12

A good friend, in her mid-sixties and “the picture of health”, died suddenly.

Feelings of shock and stunned disbelief were shared by everyone who knew her. Of course, we did not understand “why”, but knew that we must work through this tragedy together.

Sharing our thoughts focused our attention on how blessed we had been by her friendship. She always gave freely of her bubbly personality, many talents, and she never met a stranger.

These reflections did not erase our grief and disappointment, but rather pointed the way toward a joyful future, tinged with memories of past experiences.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for the joys that appear, like rainbows, while our eyes are still heavy with tears. Amen.

Carolyn P. Maness | Lynchburg, Virginia

Saturday, April 13

The Unintended Detour of Divorce

Scripture: Psalm 139:1-3

Embarrassing, gut wrenching, anger-centered...not the words for a season of joy and gladness, but nonetheless the words often the center-pieces of a divorce. With initial intentions of full-speed-ahead happiness, there is no thought of a wrong turn in a marriage relationship that goes sour...and all the detritus of destruction that goes along with it: bad words, ruined relationships, and inappropriate behavior. Joy and gladness have left the station for parts unknown.

Even if we, in despair, deny that anything can exist after a detour into divorce, Psalm 139 reminds us that God knows all of our inner struggles especially when we don't want to share them.

God is always the same. He brings wholeness in a relationship with him even if we don't think we are worthy of any future slice of happiness. In my case, a chance meeting with my future partner in marriage happened with an intervention divinely directed (I'm sure of this!) A new relationship of God-given hope and happiness I never thought possible came my way, one for which I intend to cherish always. I am thankful that God's house is one of hopeful happiness for us all.

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for standing up for us, even when we think we will never stand again. Amen.

Anonymous | Henrico County, Virginia

Joy in the Midst of Sorrow

Scripture: John 16:22

A number of years ago, my wife's brother died suddenly. His funeral was delayed because one of his sons was at sea. The day after the funeral my wife's father entered the hospital. A couple of days later her grandmother entered the hospital. Within the week her grandmother died and then her father died the next day. It was a time of great sorrow. To this day sometimes tears come to my eyes when I remember.

However, when I think back there were also moments of joy during this time and the time following. When my wife left to help her mother, I stayed behind for several days until I could join her. We were overwhelmed with support from others, some expected and some unexpected. My mother-in-law's church and friends, along with family, all stepped in. Members of our church called me daily and brought food before I joined my wife. They also called my wife to check on her. I will never forget that the Sunday before I was to join my wife, our Sunday School Class held a group hug and prayer for us.

Even in this time of sorrow and the times that followed, we experienced joy in the support we received, the shared memories, and the deepening relationships that followed.

Prayer: Lord help us to remember that you are always with us and provide support through those around us. Help us to provide your support to those around us.

Alvin Jenkins | Lenoir City, Tennessee

From Sorrow to Gladness

Scripture: John 16:20

On August 25, 1984 my forty-four year old mother and best-friend, Lula, died from pancreatic cancer, leaving her husband and six children covered in a veil of grief and sadness. Every year after her death, as the days and months passed by, I could feel the dread, sadness, and sorrow in my heart as the month of August approached.

I asked the Lord to remove the cloak of heaviness and sadness that I constantly felt, and while the pain lessened, it didn't cease. Six years after the death of my mother I received the joyous news that I was expecting. When my doctor said my due date was August 25 I burst into tears. I explained my reaction to my doctor and she agreed to induce my labor before my due date. When the time came, on August 23, 1990, she did induce labor, however I was discharged after twenty-four hours as the baby wouldn't budge.

On the morning of August 25, my labor began spontaneously and my son arrived quickly. I cried as I held him. My Aunt Joyice, my mother's sister, said, "This day for the last six years has been marked with mourning and sadness, but today we celebrate with joy and gladness the birth of Jamil!"

Prayer: Thank you Lord for the blessing of turning our pain and sorrow into joy and gladness in Jesus's name, Amen!

Tracy Porter | Pasadena, California

Tuesday, April 16

Sitting with Suffering

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:55

In a rural parish, I got a call from a mother one night to come and visit her home. Her grown son had an inoperable brain tumor. He was growing blind. His cancer was causing him to act violently.

I went and sat calmly with the man and continued to sit and be present with him until he grew peaceful. After that, his mother would call me each time he had a seizure. And I would sit with him until he grew peaceful. This continued until he died.

*1 Corinthians 15:55 "Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?"*

In the midst of that suffering, there was one unique season of healing. The young man wrote personal letters to a number of people who were important to him. He asked me to deliver the sealed envelopes. I later heard from many of the recipients how the letters expressed love, asked forgiveness, and offered comfort.

After the young man's death, his mother often told me how much she loved me. She would grab me, hug me, and cry whenever she saw me.

The young man turned his time of suffering into an opportunity for sharing reconciliation and hope. The visit of a pastor reminded mother and son that the scarred but risen Lord was present with them. Death finally gave way to healing peace.

Prayer: Loving God, we pray for courage to face suffering and faith to overcome it.

Norman Tippens | Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina

Wednesday, April 17

The Pontiff's Hat

Scripture: Psalm 30: 2-5

It had been a hard winter filled with deep personal losses and my heart yearned for signs of new life but she didn't know that when we were seated at her table in a small restaurant in a southern historic town that spring day.

I love napkin folds and was intrigued by the exquisite design of the one on my plate. "It's the Pontiff's Hat," she said, as I asked her to teach me. She nimbly reassembled the unfolded napkin and then patiently proceeded to show me step by step. The restaurant was filled with tourists, but she managed to stop by our table to check on my progress while very efficiently serving others. By the end of the meal, I had mastered the techniques of the Pontiff's Hat, but, more importantly, and unknowingly, I had started the beginning of a life-time friendship with Dora. Her smile and patience brought healing that day. And, over time, we continued to stop by Dora's table on our way south in the spring and have exchanged notes and Christmas cards for almost 15 years now. God brings sunshine and joy into our lives through many avenues – including folding a napkin into the shape of the Pontiff's Hat.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for the extraordinary healing powers you have given to those around us, who, when we least expect it, bring joy in the morning.

Gayle Fiser | Little Rock, Arkansas

Thursday, April 18

A Stitch in Time

Scripture: Isaiah 43:18-19

Grandma was my super-hero. When I was young, it seemed she could do anything! Her gardens yielded perfect fruit and flowers; her lemon-meringue pie was superb; she could play piano by ear; and, perhaps above all, she could sew any garment from any pattern no matter how complex.

She tried to pass her talents along to me, but alas, my gardens are minimal; my pies are passable; my piano-playing marginal. But I learned to sew—by machine and by hand!

I miss my grandmother. But now, I'm a grandmother too! And just the other day, my granddaughters handed me a bagful of stuffed toys all of which had stuffing escaping. They knew I could mend their toys in no time! And I did. But the real joy was seeing their smiles when I returned their toys to them. I guess I was their super-hero.

Sometimes we are like toys with loose seams and stuffing coming out. We are wounded and wonder if we are beyond fixing. However, God sees us differently. We are not falling apart. So, setting about to stitch us back together, God heals us, and makes us anew. Our season of sorrow ends and, by the grace of God, we enter a season of joy.

Prayer: Holy One, who made us and through Christ has saved us, help us to remember are loved beyond measure and never beyond your plan to make us whole again. Amen.

Chris Suerdieck | Emmitsburg, Maryland

Friday, April 19

Trials Can Lead Us to Joy

Scripture: John 16:22

When we are in the midst of struggle, it is hard to see ahead. If we endure, gradually there will be light in the midst of the dark. Joy may begin with little things: the touch of a hand, the song of a bird at sunrise, a rainbow after the storm, a remembered phrase from a favorite hymn. The sources of these moments of are endless. Joy may be fleeting at first. We may hesitate to believe it

is happening. Sometimes we are afraid to let joy in. It's easier to stay in familiar territory. But God has a way of breaking through our fears and hesitancy. Like the sun breaking through the clouds, his love breaks into our darkness and brings joy that can come only from him.

We reflect on Jesus's suffering during this season of Lent and look forward to the joy of his triumph on Easter morning. May we be reminded anew that trials are not the end of the story. Joy is possible. And our final joy will come when we enter the presence of our Lord for eternity.

Prayer: O God, the source of joy, open our hearts that we may receive your joy. May our lives reflect that joy to the world around us, we pray. Amen.

Anne Ownbey | Black Mountain, North Carolina

Saturday, April 20

Humility

Scripture: Matthew 13:3-5

Several years ago, I went on my first mission trip. I had not planned to go on this trip but someone else had canceled and my pastor asked me to go. My first reaction to the invitation was, "No, ask someone else." However, my daughter was with me at the time. She had recently returned from Europe and her comment was "You are always taking one of us to the airport or picking us up, so why don't you go?" I said yes, not really knowing how much that two weeks would change my life.

The first big surprise was that there was to be a foot washing on the first night that we were together as a team. At this point I was ready to go back home. I told my pastor that I would be in the bathroom until this was over. I was absolutely out of my comfort zone. But a kind friend sat beside me and I learned of the humility that the disciples must have felt when Jesus washed their feet. I also obtained a new understanding of what it means to serve others.

Since that time, I have participated in several foot washings, especially during the season of Lent. I would encourage you to also participate in this



Title: Christ Washing the Feet of the Disciples Artist: Albrecht Dürer

ritual. Fear of the unknown can change, bringing a new understanding and joy as you are served and as you serve.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, give us the courage to seek humility in the small acts of kindness that present themselves to us each day. Thank you for your example of how to be a true servant. Amen.

Doris Hedrick | Natural Bridge, Virginia

Sunday, April 21

A Happy Ending

Scripture: Psalm 30:11

Just after confirming that I was pregnant, my dad received bad news. Chemotherapy that had successfully treated his cancer failed to produce desired results this time. Options were limited.

My emotions were like a roller coaster, cresting with hope for our child's birth, then plummeting with grief of losing Dad. I prayed he could live to hold our unborn daughter, but that was not to be. At his graveside she moved within me, nudging me gently to the promise of new life.

Afterwards, I vowed to keep Dad's memory alive through family stories and pictures. Simple activities combined with commentaries about how Paw Paw would be so proud, or how Paw Paw loved this or that.

Previously, Mom and Dad had planned to take the grandkids to Disney World. At five, Meredith was eager to make that trip, so we loaded up the three grandchildren and drove to Orlando. During the week, we talked about how Paw Paw would have enjoyed the experiences. We spent our final day at Epcot. As we approached the exit at the close of day, Meredith abruptly stopped, looked up toward heaven with outstretched arms, and announced, "Paw Paw, it's a happy ending!"

As we celebrate this Lenten season, we remember the ultimate happy ending of the good news of joy and gladness as we serve a risen Lord.

Prayer: Father, thank you for sorrow and joy, as you make all things new through the seasons of our lives.

Marylane Wade Koch | Byhalia, Mississippi



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Potato & Produce Project — A produce salvage program, providing direct food relief to our nation's poor, while addressing one of the major causes of hunger: food waste. The Potato & Produce Project salvages and distributes hundreds of tractor-trailer loads of fresh fruits and vegetables to food banks, soup kitchens, and other feeding agencies each year.

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Harvest of Hope — A hunger-focused work/study mission program. Participants glean and distribute produce remaining in fields after harvest each morning and learn about the realities of hunger each evening. Bible study and dynamic worship round out days of Christian community and service, providing a basis for on-going commitment to ending hunger. Harvest of Hope offers middle school, high school, and intergenerational events throughout the summer.

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