



“Everyone Has a Story to Tell”

***Lenten Devotional Booklet
2021***

Stokesdale United Methodist Church

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***Special Lenten Season
Offering will go to
Project AGAPE***

www.projectagapearmenia.org

INTRODUCTION

“Everyone Has A Story to Tell”

This Lenten devotional booklet is a project of the Stokesdale UMC Missions Committee. The committee decided to give our congregation an opportunity to tell our story about living through the pandemic. How our faith has been challenged and how God has given us the strength to overcome difficulties. We hope this booklet will allow our stories to encourage one another during the season of Lent.

We also believed that God is calling us to remember people outside the United States, specifically Armenia. Project AGAPE (**A**merican **G**reater **A**rmenian **P**artnership **E**fforts) is a collaborative effort of both United Methodist Conferences in NC and the Armenian Apostolic Church. Armenia is not only dealing with the pandemic, but all aggression by neighboring countries: Turkey, Syria, and Azerbaijan.



Lent is a good time to commit to giving to a project to help those in need. One way is to collect coins and donate the money to a cause like Project AGAPE. Each day of Lent, the guide will remind us of all we have and how little others may have. Each Sunday, pray as a family for the people of Armenia and the people who will benefit from your gifts. During the week of Easter, deliver, mail, or electronically give your Lenten offering to Stokesdale UMC so we can forward it on to Project AGAPE.

Thanks to all of you for sharing your stories with us. We appreciate Nara Melkonyan, the director of Project AGAPE, for telling the stories of Armenia during the pandemic and the war. Also, we thank Rev. Cecil Donahue and Rev. Bev Coppley for their contributions to his booklet. A big thank you to our church administrator, Linda Curtis, for publishing this booklet.

“BLESSINGS”

³¹Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. *Psalm 107:31*

I cannot express the numerous blessings I have received since beginning to compile this devotion book. You see, I was the first to “see and read” each of the entries. I was the first to soak up what each of you chose to share. As I read each devotion all I could think of was how God was blessing me, yes, me! After each devotion the one thing that came to mind was the chorus to this oldie but goodie hymn –

“Count your blessings, name them one by one;
count your blessings, see what God hath done;
count your blessings, name them one by one;
count your many blessings, see what God hath done.”

You see, this devotional is about how God has worked through each one of us, through the good days and the bad days! My prayer is that God will bless you just as He has blessed me! I look forward to taking this journey again with you all, beginning on February 17th!

-Linda Curtis

DAY ONE – Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2021

¹¹Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.¹²Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

1 Peter 2:11-12

In 2013, I toured the Holy Land with a group of Triad-area clergy. Our last day traveling happened to be on Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday is a peculiar day in the Christian year because for many Christians it is very important, not to be missed on the calendar, but most people are oblivious to it or it sneaks up on them. So, if you are in Jerusalem where just 2% of the population is Christian, how do you prepare for Ash Wednesday? Where do you get ashes? Will people know why you have a smudge on your forehead? I reference 1 Peter because I did feel like an alien or an exile on Ash Wednesday in Israel. I participated in the unique ritual and went around “marked” for the rest of the day. In today’s culture, where an increasingly secular society dominates the culture and the pandemic has dispersed our congregation, the challenge is to conduct ourselves honorably so that others may see our deeds and glorify God.

Where do you get ashes for your Ash Wednesday service in a town that is majority of Jews and Muslims? Rev. Pam Strader of West Market UMC accepted the challenge. Ashes are made by burning palm branches. Palms are easy to find, but open fires are forbidden inside Jerusalem city limits. Providentially, Rev. Strader discovered that our Palestinian hotel clerk was also a Christian, and he helped Pam find the palm branches, a lighter, and a pail. Under the cover of night, Pam and her new friend lit an illegal fire in the parking deck so they could turn the palms into ash. He risked being fined by the police and even his job to help us observe Ash Wednesday. Talk about hospitality!

On Ash Wednesday morning, our tour itinerary had us visit The Garden Tomb, a place that claims to be where Jesus was crucified, dead, buried, and rose again. It is “a” place and not “the” place because two locations claim to be the site of Calvary. The oldest is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the Old City which is dark, damp, noisy, and crowded. On the other hand, The Garden Tomb is relatively new, but it looks and feels like the place we have read about in the Bible and seen pictures of in Sunday School class. The caretakers schedule limited tours so that each visitor has a holy experience. It is quiet, serene, and full of nature’s beauty.

As we approached the tomb, I experienced a wrinkle in time as the miles and the centuries between Jesus of Nazareth and me evaporated. I had traveled 6000 miles by plane and 2000 years back in time. I was beginning Ash Wednesday 2013 on Easter Sunday 30 A.D. My Lenten journey was beginning at the place where death was defeated!

Rev. Dr. Tracey Matthews of the United Church of Christ led our Ash Wednesday Service, tying in all we had experienced. I had the honor of imposing ashes on Rev. Strader’s forehead, who succeeded in procuring ashes in a clandestine operation. The rabbis from Greensboro who were hosting the trip to Israel had never experienced an Ash Wednesday Service before, and they were struck by its simplicity and beauty.

That afternoon, I walked around the Holy City with a smudged cross on my forehead. I would forget that it was even there until an Israeli motioned that I needed to wash my face. He had no idea that it was Ash Wednesday, but I hope that my Christian witness and honorable deeds will encourage others to glorify God.

Rev. Dr. Ed McKinney

Suggested offering: A coin for every lamp.

DAY TWO – Thursday, February 18, 2021

“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” *Mahatma Gandhi*

“UPDATES ON THE CURRENT SITUATION IN ARTSAKH, ARMENIA, and PROJECT AGAPE”

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Project AGAPE – the God-given Project of the North Carolina United Methodist Church, has been with the people of Armenia and Artsakh since 1993 - 27 years ago - when Armenia and Artsakh faced a humanitarian crisis following the earthquake of 1988, which destroyed half of Armenia, the war with Azerbaijan after the attempts of the latter to commit another genocide of Armenians in Artsakh, the collapse of the Soviet Union which leveled the 80% industrial economy of Armenia to zero and 1 million displaced people half of whom from the earthquake zone and the other half refugees from Azerbaijan.

The scope and number of all the projects carried out by Project AGAPE in these 27 years are invaluable, and the number of people for whom these projects were life-saving and life-changing is uncountable. There were numerous projects in Armenia & Kashatagh region of Artsakh - building schools, medical clinics, launching and sponsoring children’s homes, supporting the construction of churches and renovation of tens of houses in Berdzor & Karegah, helping families and children with humanitarian aid and Christmas boxes during the Holy Season, operating development projects through the Children’s Education Center, Agriculture development through the provision of livestock, chickens, agriculture tools and seeds. In 27 years, with relative peace and stable conditions, the impact of the projects carried out by Project AGAPE was inestimable.

Unfortunately, on September 27th of 2020, Azerbaijan, through Turkey’s multifaceted support of terrorists from Syria, Libya & Pakistan, launched full-scale aggression against Artsakh. Even with the support of all the parties equipped with super-modern weaponry, Azerbaijan could not fulfill the plan of the blitzkrieg intended to capture all of Artsakh in 3 days. For 44 days, Armenians heroically defended their homeland, fighting against the country which used internationally prohibited cluster bombs and phosphorus munitions. The forces were unequal. On November 9th, after losing thousands of lives and many territories, a tripartite declaration was signed, leaving only one-sixth of the territory, almost a hundred thousand people without their homes, and most of Artsakh, including the capital Stepanakert, leveled to the ground.

Nowhere in Artsakh is safe; that is why many people, including women, children, and the elderly, migrate to Armenia to be safe in temporary shelters. We know many families from Kashatagh that are currently in Armenia. Even the Project AGAPE one-room office in Yerevan hosts four children from Berdzor. We ask for your **thoughts and prayers** amidst these tragic days in Artsakh and Armenia.

Four hours before the ceasefire, a cluster bomb hit the hill adjacent to the playground at the AGAPE center in Berdzor, breaking all the windows and doors of the Guesthouse, Christian Education Center, and the Staff House, causing significant damage to the AGAPE Center’s property. (continued)

According to the tripartite declaration, part of the Kashatagh region (former Lachin region) should be returned to Azerbaijan by December 1st, so the urgent task for the staff of Project AGAPE was to remove everything from the four buildings of AGAPE Center, including the humanitarian aid that was still sitting in the AGAPE warehouse because of the slow distribution process due to the COVID-19 restrictions.

Thanks to the great network of connections gained in 27 years, Project AGAPE was able to find a big warehouse in Goris – the last big town in Armenia close to the border of Artsakh, where all the inventory of the AGAPE Center and the humanitarian aid from the warehouse were moved. Considering that Goris has thousands of resettled families from Artsakh, the new temporary warehouse location is perfect.

There is much uncertainty in Artsakh's current situation, its status, regarding Berdzor connecting Artsakh with Armenia; the time will show where the new hub of Project AGAPE's operations will be. However, one thing is certain – Project AGAPE is needed in Armenia and Artsakh now as much as it was 27 years ago. We cherish each year of this wonderful project, hoping to continue its mission to help those thousands of displaced people who need our support, not to lose hope.

So, please know that Project AGAPE has meant the world to tens of thousands in those 27 years, but your revived support will mean a new life for many more people, some of whom have lost everything for the second time since 1994.

Nara Melkonyan, Project AGAPE

Prayerfully consider your Lenten gift to Project AGAPE.

Suggested offering: A coin for every light switch.

DAY THREE – Friday, February 19, 2021

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” -**John 3:16**

Lent. Already? Wait!! Slowdown!! It's less than two months since Christmas was here!! We are still expecting snow!!

Can't we just hold off and hold on to the image of the Holy Infant a while longer? Just hold on to that precious innocent image of the Baby in the manger surrounded by Animals, Shepherds, Wise Men, Angels, Joseph and Mary? The innocent magic image of it all! Don't rush it off or put it away! We do remember just what Lent means for Him. Besides, isn't Lent about nothing but death?

Yet, we do have to accept that He will grow older, just like we need to grow older in our faith. We can't stand still, ignoring life around us. We would be left behind. We need to be part of God's plan for us.

We need Lent to contemplate all that God has done for us with perfect love, giving us His Son as He promised, keeping with us through His Holy Spirit.

- Without Christ as a baby, there would be no promise of salvation.
- Without Christ as the Lamb of God, there would be no final sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins.
- Without Christ as our Lord, there would be no promise of eternal life.

Looking deeper at Lent, I seem to be wrong to think it is about nothing but death and suffering. It doesn't end there. It speaks more about Life - New Life. Eternal Life. Never to fear death again.

Jane Hartman

Suggested offering: A coin for every candle.

DAY FOUR – Saturday, February 20, 2021

⁸Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and 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. ¹¹I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” ¹²God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I 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. ¹⁶When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” ¹⁷God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

-Genesis 9:8-17

Through the Sundays of Lent, we will be looking at symbols that represent God’s promises to his people. The first symbol is the rainbow which God put in the sky to remind God not to flood the earth again. Think of it like a string you tied around your finger, so you won’t forget to take out the trash. Why would God need a reminder? Not because God is forgetful, but because God realized that retribution and punishment would not change the human condition. Humans would continue to be hard-hearted and hate filled. So, God needed to change tactics.

Instead of vindication, God chooses forgiveness.

Instead of anger, God chooses patience.

Instead of revenge, God chooses love for creation.

Have you seen pictures of the Greek god, Zeus, throwing lightning bolts down to earth to punish his enemies? Now imagine the God of the Bible not having lightning bolts but an archer’s bow. When the flood subsides and decides what to do next, God hangs his bow in the heavens as if to say, “I’m not going to use this anymore.”

The rainbow is the most romantic and most aesthetically pleasing of the symbols. Who does not look in awe and wonder at the beautiful colors of a rainbow that appears after the storm? Many church nurseries have the rainbow, along with an animal-filled ark, painted on the cinderblock walls. Jane Anne Ferguson says, “We offer this story as a central message of God’s love and hope to our children. God will never forget them. But why relegate this message to the nursery in the church basement? Why not let the rainbow colors emanate from the nursery up the stairwells and into worship and (ZOOM) committee meetings, into youth groups, adult education, and mission projects, and into choir rehearsal, and church potlucks?”¹

(continued)

If we take the rainbow out of the nursery and into the rest of the church, it will give us permission to change our minds and change our tactics. We can reshape our minds and hearts into the heart of God, choosing forgiveness, patience, and love.

Rev. Dr. Ed McKinney

¹Ferguson, Jane Ann, "Genesis 9:8-17: Pastoral Perspective," Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol.2. p. 30

Suggested offering: A coin for every light bulb.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT – February 21, 2021

DAY OF PRAYER

Pray today, thanking God for the gift of light. Pray for those who live in darkness.

DAY FIVE – Monday, February 22, 2021

“STEADFASTNESS”

¹Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. ²Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. -*Psalm 90:1-2*

There have been many times over the last eight months I've been on the fringes of depression and down heartedness. I've felt a little "adrift at sea". Losing my part time job that I loved, spending more time at home than I'm used to, and trying to find purpose in each day has been hard. Or has it? I see my neighbor dealing with virtual school with 3 kids. I hear about friends and even my own children coming down with the virus. I know many of my older friends have not felt safe enough to leave their homes. So, then it's time to get some perspective. I know God will take care of all of us. Finding and making blessings in every day, no matter how bleak the work looks is what God tasks us to do. When we see and have faith in his work in our lives we can give back. Looking inward narrows our world. We must look up and out to see the promise of a better tomorrow.

Elaine Christopher

Suggested offering: A coin for every box of band-aids.

DAY SIX – Tuesday, February 23, 2021

“GOD’S PROMISES”

⁹...be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. – **Joshua 1:9b**

⁵Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. -**Proverbs 3:5**

This past year has been a long season. The world through the news and social media has focused on every negative thing out there. It makes you want to ask yourself, has there been anything good or positive happen in the world? The answer is, yes! But then we ask ourselves, where is it? We hear of illnesses, death, destruction and upheaval. What we need to look for is the recovery, the people helping people, the hope, and the new adventures.

How many times have we heard, “will it ever be the same? When will things be back to normal again?” The truth is, it will probably not ever be the same, so with that being said, we need to look for our new normal. As we are on this new journey remember what God says in His word – that we are to be strong and courageous, don’t be afraid or dismayed, that He is with us wherever we go. He also says to trust Him with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. Hold on to God’s promises!

Linda Curtis

Suggested offering: A coin for every bottle of vitamins.

DAY SEVEN – Wednesday, February 24, 2021

“IT ALL GOES BACK IN THE BOX”

“You started out as dirt, you’ll end up dirt.” - **Genesis 3:19** (*The Message*)

Have you ever wondered how much you are worth? Not your net worth, or how much you are paid by the hour, or how much would someone pay to bail you out, but how much your body is worth. Our bodies are made up of elements like carbon, calcium, oxygen, and potassium. If we took the average weight of the human body and put a dollar figure on each element, the sum total of would range from \$4.50 to \$500 depending on the economist’s or mathematician’s calculus. If you needed any proof that outside of the grace of God that we do not amount to much, this is it. The King James Version puts it eloquently, “Thou art dust, and dust you shall return,” but Eugene Peterson in *The Message* puts it more bluntly, “You’re dirt.”

On Ash Wednesday, we ceremoniously remember that we are dust. It is a solemn occasion because we are facing our own mortality, our own death. But why do we make such a big deal about it? Why do we think it is important to be reminded that we will all die eventually?

The prevailing culture promotes a lie that we can make it out of life alive. If we drive the safest car, take the best drugs, carry the best health insurance, wear the best facial cream, live in the best neighborhood, eat the healthiest foods, and exercise in the best gym, somehow, we can escape death. As a fast-talking, moneymaking bond broker once posted on his office cubicle: THE ONE WHO DIES WITH THE MOST TOYS WINS. Ash Wednesday is the one day that we proclaim, “Yes, but the one who dies with the most toys, still dies.”

No matter how much we invest in the lie, no matter how many toys we buy, it won’t make any difference compared to how we treat others. Pastor and author John Ortberg says that once he soundly defeated his grandmother in Scrabble after years of futility. When she got tired of him rubbing it in, she calmly told him, “When the game is over, it all goes back in the box.” John quit his bragging because that one sentence taught him how he treated others was more important than winning the game. Later, he pinned a book with his grandmother’s quote as a title. It names an eternal truth, “When the game is over, it DOES all go back in the box.” When the game of life is over, the box we go in is 7 feet long, 2 feet wide, and 1 foot tall, we bury it 6 feet in the ground, and its contents is worth a handful of dollars.

Ash Wednesday reminds us that yes we are dirt, but God has breathed life into us and given us purpose. Our purpose is not to cheat death or gain the most toys. Our purpose is to share our lives with our fellow “dirtbags” by showing them compassion and love. Jesus says simply, “To love God and neighbor.” God breathed God’s love into us at creation, and that makes us priceless and precious in God’s sight. That is what we honor and remember on Ash Wednesday.

Rev. Dr. Ed McKinney

Suggested offering: A coin for every box of tissues.

DAY EIGHT – Thursday, February 25, 2021

⁷But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. – **2 Corinthians 4:7**

Sing along. . . This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine. This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

I have a light in me that only God and I understand. It is always there for anybody that needs me. I have prayed for it and I feel like that anything I can do for anybody – talking to them or listening - I have a little lady that calls me a lot, I talk to her four or five times a day. If it means something to someone it means something to me, too, especially since I cannot get out.

I pray for God to send me to people that need me and He does. I want to be used. I have been here for 91 years for something. I feel God is not finished with me. I am here for anyone I can help or pray with. I am here for them.

Mickie Halbrook

Suggested offering: A coin for every prescription medication.

DAY NINE – Friday, February 26, 2021

“FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES”

⁹Pray therefore in this manner: Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

¹⁰Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us this day our daily bread. ¹²And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us.

¹³And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. – **Matthew 6:9-13**

Sometimes we find ourselves praying and not fully absorbing the words we are saying. The Lord’s Prayer has been in my life for as long as I can remember. One day about 2 years ago, I was exiting my community via the main road. Coming at me, was an automobile traveling at a high speed, which I perceived to be exceeding the 25 mile per hour speed limit posted. I just gave the driver a wave of my hand signaling him to slow down. In our community, we have children and individuals that walk without the benefit of sidewalks. Well, the young fellow stopped his car, exited it and proceeded to verbally express his anger in an extremely hostile manner. It is not like me to respond in kind. I must confess that I did come back at him in a very heated fashion. Then we both went on our way. About a year later, as I recited my morning prayers, I paused as I asked God to “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”, it occurred to me that I had to face that young man and ask him to forgive me for the words that had come out of me that long ago day. Happily, he and I agreed that it never should have happened. That day of forgiveness came about because I finally paid attention to the prayer I sometimes said. Prayer means nothing if you truly don’t practice the lesson in the prayer.

Eileen Thiery

Suggested offering: A coin for every toothbrush and tube of toothpaste.

DAY TEN – Saturday, February 27, 2021

¹⁷When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” ³Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ¹⁵God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

-Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

On the morning of Thursday, March 12, 2020, I was writing my sermon and preparing for worship on March 15. We had just begun the “Enter the Story” worship series written by Dr. Marcia McFee. As I was perusing my inbox, Marcia had sent an email to her subscribers giving us pointers on how to use an iPhone to record and broadcast our worship services. She said strange things like, “It looks like we may be doing this for the next few weeks.” She looked into a camera and instructed us on the best ways to make worship an experience, not just a tv show. As I was watching, I thought, “She lives in California. That’s a long way from here. The coronavirus isn’t as bad here. She is overreacting.” That afternoon at 4pm, Bishop Leeland asked all churches in Western NC to close their sanctuaries for worship. Forty-nine Sundays later, we are still waiting for a sign that it is safe for us to return to worship, waiting for assurance that we can sing together, shake hands, and hug.

Abram and Sarai know a lot about waiting. They had waited their whole married life for a son, an heir, someone to take care of them in their old age, someone who would remember them long after they had passed. At 63 years-old, Abram left his country and kinfolk because he heard the voice of God tell him to move to the land that we now call Israel. Keep in mind, Abram’s homeland, Ur, had many gods to pledge devotion to, and many of them would not ask an old man to do something this drastic. However, Abram heard God’s voice and obeyed.

Thirty-six years later, thousands of miles away from home, Abram and Sarai are still waiting for a son. Yet, God promises that Abram shall be the ancestor to a multitude of nations, and God changes his name to Abraham, which means “father of a multitude.” Sarai becomes Sarah.

Forty-nine Sundays later, we are still waiting for the promise of return to “normalcy” whatever that is. But maybe we are like Abraham and Sarah, we have been called so far away from home, from what is normal, that we can never go back, but that is not a bad thing. Maybe “normal” is not what God wants for us. Maybe God is blessing us during this time of waiting. Maybe through this time of trial, we will come out of it blessed, changed, and parents of a new multitude?

(continued)

The letter to the Hebrews lifts up Abraham and Sarah as heroes of faith. “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise.” The writer of Hebrews explains that they were not looking for normal, a place that looked like home. Rather, “Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.” (see *Hebrews 11:8-16*).

Though we may be thinking about returning to Ur, God is calling us to a better country, a heavenly one, a city prepared just for us.

Rev. Dr. Ed McKinney

Suggested offering: A coin for every doctor or dentist that cares for your family.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT – February 28, 2021

PRAY TODAY

Pray today, thanking God for your health. Pray for those who are sick.

DAY ELEVEN – Monday, March 1, 2021

¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” – **Galatians 5:14**

After a year, we all hoped COVID 19 would have been a distant memory. Sadly, new strains are being discovered, vaccinations being given is slow mode, and the majority of Americans seem too skeptical to take the vaccine. All of this occurring in the midst of one of the most politically unsound and “unrestful” times in American history for the sanity of humankind. Oh, for the wisdom of our Forefathers, for the wisdom of Leon and Louise, Mama and Papa Parrish, Grandpa and Grandma Southard, Rev. J. C. Grose, Rev. Milton Widenhouse, and all those Saints who brought me up in Stokesdale Methodist Church, Stokesdale Elementary School, Northwest High School, Catawba College...

While Lent might be a season suggesting we “give up” things, Americans can’t seem to find it in our hearts to give up hatred, discouragement, outright meanness, anger, destruction...the list goes on way too long. By God’s grace I’ve grown up without having to struggle to be part of the American dream, witnessing more of the negativity than actually experiencing it. So, I have difficulty with commentators referring to America as an experiment. Since I believe that God created/inspired America and the American dream, I struggle to accept that it is an experiment. I just don’t believe we are a petri-dish for God. He loves us too much for that in my opinion.

For me, the COVID situation has been about prayer and concern for friends and family who have been impacted directly either medically and/or economically, for all my fellow emergency services personnel (Firefighters/EMTs -Paramedics/Law Enforcement Officers) who have been on the front lines with patients/families, for families experiencing COVID death scenarios or with family in hospitals and assisted living scenarios who they can’t visit, for Teachers and Children in very unusual school and remote learning situations (including the parents facing work/school/childcare challenges), for the Christian community who can’t safely worship together – and my feeling compelled to support and recommend the limited church/no church policy for the safety of those in my own church family, for making hard decisions and recommendations about being around friends and even family. And if only this were a once in a lifetime decision – NO, it’s every week and sometimes every day.

As part of the “anxious church” I take encouragement, hope, and have Faith that God is bigger than anything the Devil can throw at America, at us. May God have mercy on us and cure us in all ways.

Randy Southard

Suggested offering: A coin for every ball cap or hat.

DAY TWELVE – Tuesday, March 2, 2021

I will instruct you and teach you about the direction you should go. – ***Psalm 32:8a***

I babysit with my great-grandsons, Nicholas and William. Nick, almost three years old, goes to playschool each morning from 9 o'clock till noon. He likes going to school and is learning new things from both his teachers and the other children. Most days he comes home singing "Old McDonald" or "The Wheels on the Bus." Some days he comes home saying new words that he heard at school during the morning. Some of the words are inappropriate and he should not be repeating them.

In an attempt to teach him that some words are not to be repeated, I removed the toothpaste from the bathroom cabinet along with a toothpick. I squeezed some toothpaste out on a paper plate and gave him the toothpick with instructions to put the toothpaste back in the tube. He could not put it back and neither could I.

Hopefully, as he grows older, he will remember that there are words which we should not use, because we can't put them back in our mouths.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to reflect you in the words we use so that others may desire to fully know and serve you. Amen.

Prayer Focus: Learning new words.

Mahalia McGee

Suggested offering: A coin for every pair of shoes.

DAY THIRTEEN – Wednesday, March 3, 2021

“BE CAREFUL LITTLE EARS, WHAT YOU HEAR!”

⁸Finally, Brothers and Sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. – ***Philippians 4:8***

“Be careful little ears, what you hear!” When I am alone and it’s quiet, my mind can easily wander to worries or things I am struggling with, or even to bad memories. I know myself well enough to know that my disposition quickly reflects the noise I allow my ears to hear, whether it’s the TV news or programs, my own mind and the messages and beliefs that I repeat to myself, or music that I play. I have learned to choose to play music that is upbeat and positive to influence my thoughts and mental processing, to choose music over television or even silence. The input of cheerful and lighthearted music in the background of my life lifts my spirit and outlook on the days ahead. I especially like “Grace Got You” and “Move” by Mercy Me, or “Sweeter as the Days Go By” and “Wouldn’t Take Nothin’ for my Journey Now” by Canton Junction, or even singing “Standing on the Promises” or “If You’re Happy and You Know It” and clapping to change my mindset! As I dance around my house by myself while I clean and cook or do laundry, I sometimes think that God smiles, or even giggles, at my joy from the music. Maybe, just maybe, that visual makes you snicker too! If so, just try sitting still to “Happy Dance” by Mercy Me!

Be careful little eyes, what you see. Be careful little ears, what you hear.

And here’s my favorite verse that reminds me that music is a gift from God for times like these: “Finally, Brothers and Sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.”

Beth Kasai

Suggested offering: A coin for every pair of jeans or pants.

DAY FOURTEEN – Thursday, March 4, 2021

⁷But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. ⁸We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. ¹¹For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. ¹²So death is at work in us, but life in you. - **2 Corinthians 4:7-12**

One of my favorite religious observances in the Christian liturgical calendar is the participation of the Lenten Season. In 2020, COVID-19 interrupted the in-church participation of Lenten Season rituals. So many things have happened as we have continued to worship in new and various ways. It took a toll on my personal Christian walk. Challenges erupted almost daily, eating away at my foundation in Christianity. But my worst nightmare began as my husband's long-term cancer had become full stage four. His end-of-life journey began, on a Friday with Hospice and hospital bed in place. The first night was so sad for us both. We shared that hospital bed with all the love and hugs without the need for words. His pain was severe enough to receive strong narcotics. So, he began sleeping almost around the clock. Our family had no idea how much the cancer had spread. By Wednesday the hospice nurse introduced morphine for the increase in pain. After his first dose he looked at me and asked if I was going to put him to sleep. It took everything in me to not scream at God. By Thursday morning he was really in a deep sleep, the labored breathing began. So, we all took turns talking to him and being as positive as possible. Crying took place elsewhere, not within his hearing. He never really came back to me - he was in a coma. Friday the Hospice nurse took me aside and told me he probably would pass that afternoon and she said she would see me later. Well, I saw a winch of pain that shattered my mind. It was at this point I knew he was only partially still here. I could no longer bear to watch and listen, but I did not want to miss any moments he may need me. Saturday morning, he passed away. So, my journey of mourning began. My heart was indeed broken, and I am sure it will never mend. Crying and dying a little more everyday seemed to be the new normal for me. In the following weeks I became numb and sleepless. It was during one of these early hours I awoke to more tears and I felt a calmness for the first time in so long. In the darkness the following thought came to me. "He is the potter, and I am the clay" I realized I had always put my husband first in my life, not God. The Bible is clear about God being First. I fear that was why losing him was so devastating, I felt totally alone and completely empty. It was at this time I requested the Lord to help me be used as a vessel for Him and His message.

Donna McCall

Suggested offering: A coin for every coat.

DAY FIFTEEN – Friday, March 5, 2021

“LET EVERYTHING PRAISE THE LORD”

¹ Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens! ²Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his excellent greatness! ³Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! ⁴Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! ⁵Praise him with sounding cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! ⁶Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the LORD! - ***Psalm 150***

When I was a child, I wanted to play the piano just like Ms. Beaver at church. I would go to choir with my Dad every Wednesday just to watch, listen, and learn. I thought the most magical place was Mt. Olivet Methodist church. I did learn, and playing at church was just like I imaged it would be.

At 12 years of age, I was asked to become the pianist/organist for a small church. My parents said ok but someone would have to pick me up and bring me back, as they would need to be at our church. This year marks my 51st year as a church musician. It also marks 51 years where I have worshiped without my family as they have not been members where I was serving. While I know I am supposed to use talent and make praise this was always a juxtaposition.

COVID and this “new order” has allowed me to worship with my family again even though remotely. They view my service and I see theirs. This has been such a blessing to me as I have struggled for years with the fact that I have left my immediate family to play for church. It is something that I feel selfish about, but COVID has allowed those that wish to be part of what I do. I serve two churches each week. I’m Episcopalian at 9 and Methodist at 11. I am so blessed to be able to be part of both. And through COVID we have produced music for each week and I pray that all the new people of each community that have joined via social media will continue to make the circle wider and stronger.

Jeff Fink

Suggested offering: A coin for every t-shirt.

DAY SIXTEEN – Saturday, March 6, 2021

²⁰Then God spoke all these words: ²I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me. ⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. ⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. ⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. ¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. ¹³You shall not murder. ¹⁴You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵You shall not steal. ¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷You 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 20:1-17**

Think of the most unusual place you have seen the Ten Commandments posted. I'll give you mine... Arby's. Not just one, mind you, but many Arby's in our area have the Ten Commandments posted prominently next to the counter. It is very risky to post the Ten Commandments in a place of business, and not because the ACLU may sue to take it down. Rather, someone may ask what management is doing to fulfill all Ten Commandments. Especially, the fourth commandment!

The commandments are written in beautiful, Old English Script, but the verses are truncated, or shortened. If we read the Bible, there are explanations for most of the commandments. The Arby's version displays the Fourth Commandment succinctly: *Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy*. The Fourth Commandment is arguably the most violated because we have so many readymade excuses to break it.

Exodus 20:10 says, "You shall not do any work, nor shall your son, your daughter, your slaves, your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns." Does that mean Arby's should be closed on the Sabbath? If so, which Sabbath? The Jewish Sabbath is from Friday Night to Saturday Night. Arby's would lose a lot of business being closed for two dinner hours! What about Sundays like Chick-Fil-A? Is that feasible? If the manager who is a U.S. Citizen takes the Sabbath off, but he allows the undocumented immigrant to work on the Sabbath, who's breaking the fourth commandment?

Are the Arby's Commandments referencing Exodus 20 or Deuteronomy 5? In Exodus 20, we are to rest on the Sabbath because God rested on the Sabbath. In Deuteronomy 5, we are to rest on the Sabbath because only slaves work 7 days a week. Are we to model God's work habits or resist being slaves? If we do work 7 days a week, are we slaves? If so, to whom? *(continued)*

Posting the Ten Commandments anywhere is not a meaningless task. It is not a promotional tool to show customers that people of faith run this business. It is only the beginning of a long journey in faith. A faith that is simple to explain, but complicated to live out.

COVID-19 has taught me a lot about Sabbath. As a big sports fan, I used to spend Saturdays and Sundays watching any sporting event on tv. Now, I play games with my children, enjoy the outdoors, and spend time with my family. COVID-19 has given me new perspective on what it means to rest in the Lord. Also, I pay attention to who is working so I can rest, and I appreciate them more than ever. Maybe God has given us this chance to rest (a whole year) to reflect on what is important.

The COVID-19 Sabbath has given us perspective.

Rev. Dr. Ed McKinney

Suggested offering: A coin for every sweatshirt.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT – March 7, 2021

PRAY TODAY

Pray today, thanking God for clothing that protects you from the elements. Pray for those who lack clothing to keep them warm and dry.

DAY SEVENTEEN – Monday, March 8, 2021

Whom should I send, and who will go for me? I said, I'm here, send me. **-Isaiah 6:8b**

It was October 1984. I attended the regular monthly meeting of UMW at my church. During the business meeting a letter requesting funds for upcoming mission trips was read. Someone said, we haven't enough to spend money on this. So, with no further discussion or a vote, the letter was put in the trash.

On my way out the door, I retrieved the letter from the trash can. Once at home, I called the minister who had written the letter. I explained that I had little money to give, but that I wanted to go on one of the mission trips. I learned that there was a team going to a small village near Monterrey, Mexico, and there was a space for me.

I attended the informal meetings, and on February 20, 1985, I, along with twenty-two others gathered at PTI for our flight to Monterrey. A few hours later, we arrived in another country, where everything was different from home. We made our way through customs and were greeted by our hosts. Vans were loaded with luggage, including peanut butter, black pepper and ham. We traveled rapidly through desert land into the city and to our home for the next two weeks.

Our project was for half the team to clear a vacant lot, dig for footers, lay cinder block foundation walls and then mixing cement on the ground with shovels, pour the floor for a 20x40 building. The other half of our team tore down a small building at another location and hauled the lumber to our site. Together, we reassembled the 15x30 wooden building on the floor we had poured. Spaces for windows and doors were left open. Benches were built using the wide boards that had been used to form up the foundation and floor.

On our second Sunday in Escobeda, worship services were held in the little church. It was filled to overflowing with the youth hanging out the windows. Guitar players provided music and the speaker led the excited crowd for two – three hours.

This project made quite an impression on me from my fellow team members to the locals. I paid my own way and gave what I could for building materials. My first of twenty-four such trips. God had called my name in that October letter, asking who can I send and I answered, here I am, send me and I will hold your people in my heart...forever.

Prayer: Dear God, guide our thoughts and our actions when we hear you calling our name. Help us to decide if we are willing to go in your name. Amen.

Prayer Focus: For those who have thought about participating in Mission Building Team.

Mahalia McGee

Suggested offering: A coin for every ball or piece of athletic equipment.

“HOPE”

³"For God so loved this world that he gave his one and only Son," that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. - **John 3:16**

Red kettles, ringing bells, and change dropping into the kettle means that people are helping the Salvation Army serve families that are in need. I had missed seeing the kettle and bell ringers because of the coronavirus and social distancing. A couple of weeks before Christmas, getting in line for a grocery pick up, I noticed the man ringing the bell. Rolling down my window, I handed him my donation. In Mark 12: 41-44, we are reminded of the widow who gave all she had, and because she gave all, Jesus thought that she had given more than the rich. **HOPE.** The families receiving help from the Salvation Army have hope that help will be there for them. The steadfast love of God gave us his only Son to bring hope, peace, and healing to our hopeless, imperfect, and broken world. This free gift of God will bring us hope and healing through this pandemic. We only have to believe in Him.

Prayer: Dear Lord, open our eyes to the see the needs of others and our world. Help us to remember God's unfailing love for us. Amen.

Rachel Reid

Suggested offering: A coin for every electronic video game.

DAY NINETEEN – Wednesday, March 10, 2021

¹Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. ²At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. ⁴Then the Lord called, “Samuel! Samuel!” and he said, “Here I am!” ⁵and ran to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call; lie down again.” So he went and lay down. ⁶The Lord called again, “Samuel!” Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call, my son; lie down again.” ⁷Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. ⁹Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. ¹⁰Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” - **1 Samuel 3:1-10**

God calls to us many times in many ways throughout our lives. Samuel hears God’s call four times before he recognizes the call as coming from God and only then because he has gone to Eli who discerns the third time that it is God calling Samuel.

I have had similar experiences over the course of my life. Even during the pandemic, I recognize the signs of God’s call on my life and the life of others. My first call from God was spoken by my maternal grandmother as she asked me when I was a young boy, “Allen, are you going to be my preacher?” It was a question beyond my understanding at a young age. But over and over and in many ways that call from God has been with me.

I finally really wrestled with it during my first year of college. And with my wife-to-be discovered the way and path to respond. However, this was not the end of the calls of God while on my life’s journey. During the pandemic and on those occasions when I have questioned who I am and what I do in and through life I have constantly remembered God’s call and have found the courage and strength to go on knowing that the One Who Calls is also the one who bring us through. Ultimately, we will be victorious because God has promised and He will have us share in the victory. There are struggles and doubts along with accomplishments and goals that are met. And God is with us always and forever! Thanks be to God in Who He is and What He does!

Rev. Dr. Allen C. Ridenour

Suggested offering: A coin for every smart device.

LENT AS A SEASON FOR SANCTIFICATION

Read Matthew 5:43-48

“Be ye therefore perfect, as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” – Matthew 5:48

Many of us shrink back from the idea of perfection; others yearn for it and ardently seek it in their behavior, choices, and even their appearance. John Wesley often used Matthew 5:48 as a compelling argument for Christian perfection. Since Jesus called us to “be ye therefore perfect” in the Sermon on the Mount, he must have believed that it was possible to become perfect in this life. If he suggested it, we should strive for it.

What does perfection look like? In the Methodist tradition, it looks like perfect love for God, and perfect love for neighbor. Wow, there’s a challenge. Lent seems like a good time to take a look at this ideal, and to make an inner examination of how much we love God (i.e. where God ranks in our order of priorities) and how much we love others (i.e. what our behavior indicates in this regard). The journey towards perfection in love is called sanctification. The word comes from the Latin word *sanctus*, meaning holy. God is truly holy. The rest of us are on a journey towards holiness.

Lent is a great time to think about your own holy living, your own love for God and love for neighbor. Oswald Chambers calls sanctification “an unmistakable family likeness to Jesus Christ, and the freedom from everything which is not like Him.” (from *My Utmost for His Highest*) I find Lent to be a great season to rediscover holy living, to reacquaint myself with deeper spiritual practices, and perform acts of service that indicate a family likeness to Christ.

Don’t be intimidated by perfection; think of it as an opportunity love deeper, and to love more faithfully. God will grow your heart to size.

Let us pray: Loving God, bring to bear in my life a deeper awareness of your love for me. Do this so that I might love you and my neighbor in deeper and more faithful ways. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Rev. Bev Copley

Suggested offering: A coin for every television.

“GOD IS OUR REFUGE”

You who live in the shelter of the Most High; who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.” For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone. - ***Psalm 91:1-6, 11-12***

This Psalm is probably very familiar to many. How comforting to read these words and to know that God is our protection! I love the image of God spreading his wings over us to protect us. My chosen profession involves working with older adults. I am the Director of Health Services at a large retirement community, and we are given the high honor and the trust to care for aging parents and grandparents. These are cherished family members, and allowing us to care for them when they are aging and vulnerable is a huge responsibility. But is it one that I feel very privileged to carry. They give to us much more than we can ever give to them, and every day I can serve them is a blessing. When the coronavirus pandemic was in its early days, my boss asked me, “Are you scared?” I paused for just a minute, but I knew the answer. My response to him was “No, I’m not scared.” I went on to explain to him that I was not scared because I know that no matter what happens, God is in control. Sometimes it may feel like the world is spinning out of control, but the one who created us all is still on the throne and is still in charge. He is our shield and protector through everything. The pandemic has fueled everything for almost an entire year, and I still feel an extreme responsibility to keep the residents and staff safe from COVID. But I have tried to be God’s vessel throughout this past year, doing what he would have me do. I listen for Him. I talk to Him. I trust in Him. And I know He is in control of this and everything. In this unprecedented time in history, and always, God remains in control.

Prayer:

Dear God, thank you for your shelter, protection, and provision in all situations. We trust you and know that you are always in control. Help us to do your will and to follow your lead Lord, in the ways we can witness for you and serve others. Give us the faith and the patience to accept your timing and your will. Amen.

Misti Ridenour

Suggested offering: A coin for every doll or stuffed animal.

DAY TWENTY-TWO – Saturday, March 13, 2021

⁴From 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. ⁵The 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.” ⁶Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And 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.” ⁹So 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 21:4-9**

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” **- John 3:14-21**

I took four years of Latin in high school. Every day, our Latin teacher, Mrs. Buckner, would write that day’s date in the modern calendar (i.e. March 15, 1989) and in the Roman Calendar (i.e. The Ides of March). If you have heard the expression, “Beware the Ides of March,” it comes from William Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, in which a character foreshadows the assassination of Julius Caesar on (you guessed it) the Ides of March. Incidentally, Mrs. Buckner would always schedule a test on the Ides of March!

“Beware the Ides of March” had new meaning for me last year because that was the first Sunday that we were closed to indoor worship due to COVID-19. We just had a few days to figure out how to honor God in a setting that was both holy and COVID-safe. We were able to use iPhones and laptops to broadcast the worship service and receive responses from the congregation. A year later, I look back at our first recordings to see what we presented as worship, and I cringe at my amateurism and foolishness. However, it is from looking back at past mistakes that I was able to move forward and improve.

In Numbers 21, we read about how the Israelites were complaining (as usual) about the food out in the desert. There was too little food, or they didn’t like what was served to them. Then, serpents

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appeared at their campsite and bit the people, and many died. Realizing their sin, the people cried out to God and Moses for forgiveness. God instructed Moses to construct a serpent out of bronze, set it on a pole, and have people gaze at it. When those who were bitten looked at the serpent, they lived.

When I looked back at the video of March 15, I had to humble myself and think about my past mistakes so I would not make them again. When people looked at the snake, they had to own up to their past mistakes, trust in God, and live.

In John's Gospel, John uses this strange story as a setting to the most popular New Testament passage in the United States. John says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whosoever believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life," (John 3:16). But that famous quote has new meaning if we read verses 14 and 15 before we read 16. "For just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man must be lifted up, that whosoever believes in him may have eternal life."

Could it be that Jesus hanging on a cross could be a sign of our own guilt and shame? Have we complained to God about our current situation and Jesus' death is to instruct us and heal us from our selfishness?

What has COVID-19 taught us about complaining? What gives life? What does eternal life look like?

Rev. Dr. Ed McKinney

Suggested offering: A coin for every board or card game.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT – March 14, 2021

PRAY TODAY

Pray today, thanking God for how you can enjoy entertainment in your home. Pray for those who would be grateful for just one of these items.

DAY TWENTY-THREE – Monday, March 15, 2021

Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. - **Romans 5:3-5**

It was spring of 1997, I received my Masters Degree in Political Science and International Affairs from the American University of Armenia – an affiliate of the University of California. Armenia and Artsakh (aka Karabagh) were still struggling to recover from the aftermath of a package of misfortunes - the disastrous earthquake which leveled half of the country to the ground, the first post-soviet era Karabagh war and the collapse of the 80% industrial economy of Armenia following the end of the USSR...

I graduated the AUA armed with skills and new ideas to create Armenia and Artsakh that I had envisioned, but I didn't know then that God had special plans for me, and those plans encouraged me to HELP others to achieve their goals, inspire them to be their best and to have their essential input in the development of our country to create Armenia and Artsakh that I had envisioned TOGETHER with them.

For 24 years I have been blessed to be part of Project AGAPE, a partnership of the Methodist Conferences in North Carolina. Project AGAPE has helped many who have suffered because of the mentioned above disasters not only to survive, but also to stand on their feet and have achievements they had never expected to have.

"It is the project that helped Kashatagh region in general and the central town Berdzor in particular to flourish, we would only benefit if they started projects here," these were the words of a person to a mayor of another town in Armenia where Project AGAPE is moving its projects. This person had known about Project AGAPE since 1997, as he owned a restaurant in a town of Vayk that many VIM teams from North Carolina passed through to go to Artsakh, and where we stopped a lot to have lunch. "I have been in Berdzor many times, and one needs to see how the place changed after the war thanks to AGAPE." He was talking about the first Artsakh war that took place about 30 years ago, but...no one could imagine even in the worst nightmares that another war would happen 30 years later, on September 27th of 2020, a year which started with the worst pandemic of the 21st century, the year when all the countries stopped the conflicts following the call of the international actors, including the United Nations, to stop armed conflict to facilitate efforts to fight the pandemic. But, maybe, it's the fate of Armenians to get misfortunes in packages, and this time was not different: Armenians struggling to recover from aftermath of covid-19 which hit the country of 3,000,000 and was the worst in the area, had to face another manmade disaster – a war started by the aggression of Azerbaijan and Turkey with the heavy involvement of terrorists from Middle East.

The war which continued 44 days and took lives of over 5,000 Armenian young soldiers and citizens, destroyed the materialized fruits of 23-years hard work, but not my vision, HOPE & FAITH. Thanks to that HOPE & FAITH we were able to remove all the humanitarian aid from the warehouse of Project AGAPE, which was to be delivered earlier but the distribution went on very slowly because of the

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pandemic, thanks to that HOPE & FAITH we were able to remove all the inventory from the four buildings of Project AGAPE center serving different important development projects, and that's after the fact that 4 hours before the ceasefire an internationally banned cassette bomb hit the AGAPE Center, hit the vision that was embodied into a wonderful center serving 12,000 people during 23 years of hard work. And thanks to that HOPE & FAITH we'll start a new AGAPE Center to continue serving those 12,000 displaced at the present people who have lost everything for the second time in their lives and, thanks to that HOPE & FAITH we'll steadily go towards our new vision to turn the first officially declared Christian country in the world - this island of Christianity in the ocean of hatred - into a better place to live in spite of all the hardships and sufferings we have to go through... And the United Methodists of North Carolina will have a special place in the embodiment of that vision as they have had in the past 27 years.

Nara Melkonyan

Suggested offering: A coin for every box of cereal.

DAY TWENTY-FOUR – Tuesday, March 16, 2021

²⁸Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

Matthew 14:28-32

As I think back and reflect over the last year of my life, I can't help but feel so blessed. My family has not been touched with the Coronavirus. But I can't say that my heart is not saddened due to all the lives taken so quickly over the last year. I did not know anyone that had the virus but as the days ended and the months flew by and a year has passed, I'm now finding that so many of my friends, church family members, have been touched and experience this horrible virus. So many have experienced health complications and even loss of life. This has truly been a devastating experience for so many people. Not only for us, but around the world.

I pray that we will grow and become stronger and learn from this experience because it will always be life-changing. I have seen changes in my daily experiences such as going to the grocery store. People are afraid to even make eye contact. They hide behind their masks. They don't greet you with a hello. We rush in and out, back to where we feel safe in our own home. Usually, we would see a smile. Now we're all living behind a mask that will be a way of life for many of us for quite some time.

I have been very fortunate that my parents did not go into an assisted living or nursing home during this time of pandemic. If we were not experiencing this virus that may have been their new home. My sisters and I are able to care for my parents in their home where they are safe. This has been a challenge, for me. I am not a certified CNA but I have learned quickly how to care for the elderly. This has not been an easy path. I continue to pray for guidance. I need daily prayers. I will focus on the happy memories being made not the difficult times. I'm blessed to be able to spend time with my parents because we do not know what tomorrow will bring.

I have missed seeing the children walking the halls of our church. Their sweet little voices I so loved to hear. I miss coming to Sunday school, and growing spiritually in God's house. These children are growing up and time does not stand still. I can only imagine how grown up our church children and youth will be when we eventually get back to worship. Let's lift each other up in this time of need. I will be praying for you. Blessings,

Sally Baxter

Suggested offering: A coin for every can of soup.

DAY TWENTY-FIVE – Wednesday, March 17, 2021

²⁰...always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 5:20

¹It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; ²to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night, - ***Psalms 92:1-2***

¹¹Seek the Lord and his strength, seek his presence continually. ¹²Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered, ³⁴O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. - ***1 Chronicles 16:11-12, 34***

"Thank you, God." Three little words that say so much in any given circumstance. A super-short prayer of sorts that is so right when everything around me seems to be so wrong. A prayer that has been particularly effective over the last year. An elderly friend taught me to say these words; she has found them to be most helpful in negative situations (it's easy to express gratitude when life is going well; when it isn't, not so much!).

The verse above says to give thanks for EVERYTHING. That means the good, the bad, the ugly, the beautiful, which really sums up life, doesn't it? I don't even have to say what I'm thankful for; the point is to keep the window open to the sunlight of the Spirit. The moment I start cursing my circumstance or wallowing in self-pity or allowing fear to take over, I close the window to that sunlight. So, thank you, God!

Amy Redding

Suggested offering: A coin for every type of bread.

DAY TWENTY-SIX – Thursday, March 18, 2021

¹⁹Just thinking of my troubles and my lonely wandering makes me miserable. ²⁰That's all I ever think about, and I am depressed. ²¹Then I remember something that fills me with hope. ²²The LORD'S kindness never fails! If he had not been merciful, we would have been destroyed. ²³The LORD can always be trusted to show mercy each morning. ²⁴Deep in my heart I say, "The LORD is all I need; I can depend on him!" - **Lamentations 3:19-24 (CEV)**

This past year (2020) and even now in a new year we often find that we feel much like the writer of Lamentations. Many of us have found ourselves lost and despairing because of the pandemic and having to limit our social interactions. We wonder if things will ever return to any semblance of "normal."

Scripture reminds us that no matter how bad things may be, God is in control. Hymns also have a way of doing this for us. One of my favorite hymns is based on the scripture from Lamentations. I find myself often reminding myself that God is in charge and is faithful as expressed in "Great is Thy Faithfulness."

God is faithful and will never fail us! He does not and has not changed! Just look around you at nature and the sun, moon, and stars; the seasons and all things are a witness to God's great faithfulness and love! God will get us through every situation we find ourselves in. He will give us peace and strength!

Use the scriptures and hymns when you are despairing and in pain and seeking comfort. Do this especially during the season of Lent. Take this on and allow God to remind you of His faithfulness and love to you!

Rev. Dr. Allen C. Ridenour

Suggested offering: A coin for every jar of jelly.

DAY TWENTY-SEVEN – Friday, March 19, 2021

“WHY ME, BUT, WHY NOT?”

²³Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties – ***Psalm 139:23***

On November 7th I tested positive with COVID-19 after 3 days of feeling really crummy. I remember the day as if it were yesterday. I felt so bad, but I got up, took a shower, got dressed and Paul drove us to Novant Health in King because we knew we could have a rapid test done there. I think the nurses knew as soon as they saw me, “oh no, here’s another case.” Paul was not feeling bad, but given the fact we are in the same house, he got the test, too. Me feeling like I had been run over by a Mack truck and Paul with no symptoms at all, both tested positive. The doctor prescribed me an inhaler with a few other instructions and sent us on our way. The next week and a half were not pleasant to say the least. I can’t remember ever feeling so bad. I had phone call updates with the North Carolina Health Department calling me every other day to see how I was doing. Their goal was for me to reach three days of “symptom improvement.” That day came on November 18th. Now, when you go through an illness you expect to have some down time and then bounce back to your old self. Well, folks I am still in the process of getting back to my old self!

I have told this story to share, I have had so many days and nights of: why me? And, I won’t even go into what the why me’s actually are!

Just recently I had a pity party one morning. My thoughts were, it’s the middle of January and I am still dealing with side effects from this virus. When is it going to end? I literally cried tears. As I sat with my head in my hands, God gently showed me my blessings...I was reminded of so many things – the power of prayer, we had so many people praying for us; my illness could have been a whole lot worse than it was/is; Paul could have been just as sick as I was, but thankfully he wasn’t; we were humbled to witness the kindness of folks taking care of us from a distance. Our front porch saw food dropped off, flowers brought, cards received, our neighbors took care of our yard and many other things that I know I am forgetting.

I am still having some bad days, but the good days are creeping in, and for that I am truly thankful. I am reminded of a favorite hymn of mine, “Through it all, through it all, I’ve learned to trust in Jesus, I’ve learned to trust in God; through it all, through it all, I’ve learned to depend upon God’s word.” Yes, folks through the good, bad and the ugly, we have a loving God to see us through it all!

Linda Curtis

Suggested offering: A coin for every bottle of salad dressing.

DAY TWENTY-EIGHT – Saturday, March 20, 2021

³¹The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It 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 husband, says the Lord. ³³But 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. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. **-Jeremiah 31:31-34**

I’m writing this about six weeks out from March 20. I have no idea if we will be indoors or outdoors for worship for Sunday, March 21. If we are indoors, I don’t know if we will have 30, 20, or 10 people in the sanctuary. I don’t know if we are going to have an Easter cantata. I’m not even sure that the NCAA Tournament will be taking place. I know one thing.... Duke probably will be not invited. 😞 As of February 10, they were having a bad season. What I do know is that God’s love is not limited by time, space, location, or COVID-19!

You wouldn’t know it by reading just the above passage, but the book of Jeremiah is full of gloom and doom. 95% of the book rails against the kingdoms of Israel and Judah for their unfaithfulness to God, sinful ways, and harsh treatment of widows, orphans, and strangers. The result of all this sin is exile. Specifically, the Babylonians burn down the Temple and drag King Zedekiah away in chains. The wealthy and those deemed useful to the Babylonian empire are forced to leave their homes and live in a foreign land for 72 years, two generations.

Jeremiah gives no physical evidence that the lives of the Judeans will improve anytime soon. Nonetheless, he has an unabashed hopefulness that someday things will get better. The prophet says that the people’s relationship with God will improve. As Rev. Richard Floyd says, “No longer will the law be engraved in stone and displayed in rotundas for all to see but none to follow. The days are surely coming when the law will be engraved in people’s hearts and displayed in their lives. No longer will the people know about God—all the right words, all the right theology. The days are surely coming when the people, from the least to the greatest will know God—with all the intimacy that word entails. God will wash away the people’s sins once and for all and remember them no more.”¹

That is good news for us! As we are surpassing over a year in a self-isolating exile, we know that God is making God’s self, known to us even now. As we sit reading these devotionals, we are learning more and more about how God is writing God’s law on our hearts. We have read and heard stories of triumph, defeat, joy, and pain. In all the good times and bad times, God has been, and continues to be with us, Emmanuel!

When the Judeans returned to Jerusalem, they did not return to a city that they remembered, or their grandparents told them about. There was much work, rebuilding, and soul-searching to be done in order for the people to feel really at home and at peace. As vaccines continue to be rolled out, as we learn of the obstacles we face as we journey towards Holy Week and another strange Easter, we know that God is in our hearts. People will know God when we share our hearts with others.

Rev. Dr. Ed McKinney

¹Floyd, Richard. “Jeremiah 31:31-34: Pastoral Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2. p. 126.

Suggested offering: A coin for every jar of peanut butter.

PRAY TODAY

Pray today, thanking God for the food you enjoy. Pray for those who have no food this day.

DAY TWENTY-NINE – Monday, March 22, 2021

¹²Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ¹⁵“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— ¹⁶the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” ¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ¹⁸As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. ²³Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

-Matthew 4:12-23

Jesus is walking along the seashore and sees four men at work tending to their fishing nets. They are working, making a living, doing their everyday tasks. They were not in church, or on a prayer retreat, or being religious. It is while they are doing their everyday tasks that Jesus calls them to come and follow. You might say it was a Holy Interruption. They could have said no and continued their work. Or they could say yes and their lives would be forever changed. Fortunately, they see it as a Holy Interruption and say yes.

The same is true for us today. Often times the Holy Spirit comes to us in the midst of our day-to-day work. Sometimes we realize it is a Holy Interruption, but most of the time we miss it altogether. In 1999 I was busy helping my friend raise money to go on a building team to Armenia when suddenly his niece who was supposed to go with him because of her nursing skills had to back out. My friend said, "Cecil, you have to go with me. I am not going 6,000 miles around the world to a place I have just recently discovered on a conference brochure." So, as I was trying to raise money for him, I experienced a Holy Interruption to go serve. I struggled with it but knew God was the one asking me to go. So, I did. It was a life changing experience as the team worked alongside fellow Christians to recover from an earthquake, the fall of the Soviet Union and a war with Azerbaijan. The Armenian Apostolic Church is the oldest Christian church in the world forming in 301AD. Throughout its history it has been attacked because it is the only Christian nation in a sea of Moslem countries. I have continued to support Project AGAPE since that trip, taking 10 teams to serve in that area over the years. That Holy Interruption in 1999 has enriched and deepen my faith many times over.

This year, another war with Azerbaijan and Turkey started. They were not provoked but just wanted territory they believed belonged them back under their rule. Their military weapons were stronger and Armenia was suffering from the Pandemic more so than those nations. While the Armenians were "down" these Moslem adversaries took advantage of the situation. The end result of the seize fire was that Russia set the teams heavily in Azerbaijan's favor. Now 40,000 Armenians have to leave their homes taking nothing with them and move into Armenia to find a safe place to live.

Because I responded to that Holy Interruption years ago, I am committed to help our brothers and sisters in Christ as they are yet again being mistreated because of our faith. (In 1918- 22 the Turks committed a genocide on the Armenians killing 1.5 million before they were stopped.) The pandemic has hurt the world, but it gave an opening that allowed Armenia's enemies to kill many and cause many years of suffering to come.

Cecil Donahue. Pastor of Center UMC

Suggested offering: A coin for every room in your home.

“CLAIMING BIBLICAL PROMISES IN TIMES OF CHANGE”

And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. ~ **1 Peter 4:5b-7**

My mind does not often naturally drift to the Pastoral Epistles. It’s not that I don’t learn from them, it’s just that I tend to stay closer to the Gospels. Of late, God has guided me to the Old Testament Prophets (particularly Isaiah) and to the First and Second Letters of Peter.

For me, reading the Prophets and the Pastoral Epistles is like riding a wave of both comfort and confrontation. God is reassuring us in one moment, correcting us in the next. I find this particularly true in Isaiah 43, which awakened me during the night over the weekend. I heard God speak to my deepest concerns about our nation, just as God spoke of old to the nation of Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Isaiah 43:1a-3)

I awakened to read the whole chapter, where I was reminded that God loves us, honors us, gathers us, but also forcefully reminds us of those powers that are uniquely God’s to wield: “I am God, and also henceforth I am He; there is no one who can deliver from my hand. I work and who can hinder it?” (43:13) The chapter goes on to gently remind us that it is God who delivered the people through the sea, and that it is God who is about to do a “new thing” among the people. (43:19) God’s simple complaint against us, the people, is that we did not call for help. We who call ourselves faithful have not asked God to do what God does best; instead, we have been a wearisome burden. Ouch. How often have we watched news, reviewed statistics, scrolled social media, without pausing to ask God to intervene, or to reflect on our own personal unfaithfulness?

Similarly, the Pastoral Epistles jar us. Because of when they were written, they are full of true-to-life examples of how hard it is to be a Christian in a world of empire. They speak specifically of humility and suffering. Humility is a trait of all faithful Christians, and suffering is a reality for all faithful Christians. I have told those under my care many times – “Jesus suffered. You will suffer. If you do not believe this, you need to go back and re-read the New Testament.”

As Bonhoeffer more powerfully said in his classic *Life Together*, “the cross of Christ banishes all pride.” Sometimes we are afraid to let our pride be banished. As humans, we instinctively seek power and pleasure and avoid pain and peril. But God’s people are always called to seek God’s help. 1 Peter 4:6 delivers good news, but keeps us humble. God’s hand is indeed mighty, and God’s timing is always perfect. “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.” *(continued)*

Do you know how much you are cared for by God, how much God wants to keep you out of the deepest waters and safe from the fires of this difficult season? We must call upon God for help. The moment we think we know everything and are beyond appealing to God, that moment we place ourselves in the judgment seat, we descend to the depths of sin and God must correct us. God is always willing to correct us. If we are humble, we receive this correction and the good and comforting news that accompanies it.

As we move into 2021, into a new day of leadership in our nation, into what we pray will be the last months of this raging pandemic, let us move forward with a mindfulness of the power and the strength of God. God can handle all of our anxieties, and God will correct all human pride.

I encourage you to seek passages of scripture that will both comfort and challenge, not just the ones that will simply affirm what you believe to be true. God's love for us is boundless, and God has an unyielding desire for us to live in alignment with Kingdom values. God's promises are for our well-being, and for peace.

This week, cast all your anxieties upon God, for God does care for you. God has been there; God is there; God will be there. These are biblical promises. And we must claim them, even as God gently corrects us all.

Rev. Bev Copley, District Superintendent

Suggested offering: A coin for every electrical outlet in your home.

DAY THIRTY-ONE – Wednesday, March 24, 2021

“WORRY vs. FAITH”

²⁵Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? – **Matthew 6:25-26**

I was recently watching the beautiful birds outside a window enjoying the feeder. They always eat, flutter around and basically appear carefree. This takes me back to Matthew 6:26.

Unlike the birds, I tend to be a worrier. My latest concerns: Will the finger that I recently broke return to normal? Will it get a bad infection? Another worry is my upcoming COVID shot. Will I have a bad reaction? Where is my faithful Christlike attitude? I need it to ease me through worries and remove my fears.

Proverbs 3:5 and Matthew 6:25-26 give me the Lord’s words. This is the way to peace and comfort. It is just a matter of putting faith over fear (fear that is most often baseless). I give thanks as I strive to let go of worries and let God do what he does: take perfect care of all of us.

Psalm 91:9-10 tells us, Make the Lord your refuge, then no harm will come to you (*paraphrased*).

Kathryn Richardson

Suggested offering: A coin for every chair in your home.

DAY THIRTY-TWO – Thursday, March 25, 2021

²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. – **Matthew 18:20**

I often think about the effect the Pandemic has had on our worship experience here at SUMC. It is coming up on an entire year that we have been in our “modified” format. I have learned much about myself and our congregation during this challenging time. Not being able to worship how I usually worship has taken my thoughts to those who do not even have the freedom to worship. Just having to modify the way I worship has been a challenge, but I cannot imagine not being able to worship some way or somehow. Thank goodness Pastor Ed has committed to providing us with some form of worship during the Pandemic.

I have found myself asking what is true worship? More importantly, do I have to physically be in a building designated for worship to truly worship? For me, the answer lies somewhere in between. We have certainly built a beautiful house of worship at SUMC and my worship experience is always enhanced when I can see our beautiful stained-glass cross behind the altar. When singing with the choir, I always looked forward to the beautiful painting of Christ over the entry / exit!

While the visuals at SUMC are beautiful and meaningful, I have come to find that I can enjoy worshipping in other settings as well! The hymn, “I am the Church, You are the Church” opens by saying:

The church is not a building; the church is not a steeple;
the church is not a resting place; the church is a people.

The Pandemic has helped me realize that the words of the first verse of “I am the Church, You are the Church” are for real! Our worship services outdoors in front of our church have been amazing. Being outdoors, next to God’s creation added special meaning to worship for me. The smells, the sounds, the clouds, the birds, the trees, all combined for a unique worship that being inside a building cannot provide. I have been blessed by those worship services.

I have also been blessed when assisting with our worship services. I like knowing that I am a part of someone else’s worship experience!

So, while the Pandemic has done its best to disrupt our worship routine, God has shown me that indeed, the church is a people! It is not a building; it is not a steeple and it is not a resting place. I look forward to when we can all gather again in our beautiful place of worship for the feeling of fellowship it brings. However, I also look forward to continuing to worship wherever God places me!

Todd Thomas

Suggested offering: A coin for every desk in your home.

DAY THIRTY-THREE – Friday, March 26, 2021

²⁴This is the day which the Lord hath made: We will rejoice and be glad in it. – **Psalm 118:24**

This morning I watched the sunrise. The sky was pink and purple before the bright yellow came into view as the sun appeared on the horizon. Sunrise always reminds me of that day several years ago when a “grumpy” me muttered, “oh, it’s the start of another day” into my first cup of coffee.

My husband heard my comment and asked me – which day do you think is the greatest day of your life?

In response, I said, the day I was born, no, the day I was baptized, or the day we got married, or the days our children were born. Oh, it’s too early in the morning for this conversation!

No, it’s not, he replied. You are looking in the wrong direction. The greatest day of your life is today.

I lifted my head and said, today. Then I realized that he was right. That day and today are not just another day. These days are all I have to fill with more love than yesterday. Today is a day to grow closer to my family, my friends, and to God. Today is a time filled with opportunities and possibilities that I won’t have again.

I will never forget that day so long ago because of the special memory and the lesson learned, but it wasn’t the greatest day of my life, because today is!

Prayer: Lord, help me to remember that each new day is the greatest day of my life. I need to rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.

Prayer Focus: Be thankful for each new day.

Mahalia McGee

Suggested offering: A coin for every bathroom in your home.

DAY THIRTY-FOUR – Saturday, March 27, 2021

²⁰Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very 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. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. ²⁷“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.

John 12:20-27

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

At Groce United Methodist Church in Asheville, the above sentence is affixed to the pulpit where only the preacher can see it. It is nothing fancy, just a half-inch wide, yellow paper, written in pencil, and secured with some Scotch tape. I have no idea who put it there or why, but when I read it just before I preached my first sermon at this church, I realized that God and everybody was expecting me to deliver some good news. “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

I said to myself, *Gulp* “OK, so here goes nothing.”

That Sunday, I entered the pulpit not self-assured that I was even a good preacher. The last time I had preached, I sent a recording of my sermon to The Board of Ordained of Ministry to be evaluated. Unfortunately, my focus was not on Jesus, but impressing my home church, my parents, and most of all, passing “The Board.” If I jumped through the right hoops, I could get ordained that year and be well on my way to a career in ministry. But I didn’t jump through the right hoops that day, and my ordination was deferred one year. The only hoop that mattered was the one taped to the pulpit, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

The Greeks who were in Jerusalem for the Passover were the first to ask to see Jesus. They asked Philip, one of Jesus’ disciples, who along went with Andrew to tell Jesus of the Greeks’ request. Jesus responds with an acclamation, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” What does he mean? Jesus doesn’t even respond. We don’t know if the Greeks ever got to see Jesus.

When these non-Jews inquire about seeing Jesus, this is his cue that the events are set in motion that will eventually lead to his death and resurrection. The Greeks signal that Jesus’ sacrifice is for all people. Jesus talks about his death in this way, “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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

Jesus’ response to the Greeks’ request to see him gives me a clue on how to deliver the good news.

(continued)

First rule: don't try to impress anyone but God. Success in life and ministry is not in who you know and who you will impress. Just be true to God. Second rule: Always point to Jesus. People are not impressed with your vocabulary if you can't deliver the good news that Jesus loves them. Third rule: People really want to see Jesus. When people come to us for hope and advice, give them the love only Jesus can give them.

As we approach Holy Week, may your life always point towards Jesus.

Rev. Dr. Ed McKinney

Suggested offering: A coin for every bed in your home.

SIXTH SUNDAY OF LENT (Palm Sunday) – March 28, 2021

PRAY TODAY

Pray today, thanking God for shelter. Pray for those who have no place to sleep at night.

DAY THIRTY-FIVE – Monday, March 29, 2021

“LIVING IN THE MIDST OF GENEROSITY”

“Some give freely, yet grow all the richer...” **Proverbs 11:24**

Many of you were kind to reach out yesterday, as I acknowledged on social media the twentieth anniversary of my brother’s suicide. Chuck took his life when he was only 31 years old, and we have been missing him ever since. He was my “little brother” and we shared most everything, even when we didn’t want to share. (Smile.) I felt responsible for Chuck, as his “big sister” and it took me many years to forgive myself for not being able to prevent his death. The voice mail on my office line that afternoon haunted me; I would have given anything not to have stepped out to make a visit when he called me for the last time.

As I spent some time yesterday in quiet reflection, I was immediately reminded of all the people who surrounded my family in that terrible time. I think of my congregation, and my husband’s congregation – I think of the neighbors, former congregations, fellow clergy (some of whom labor in Northern Piedmont right now) the friends from Rotary, my fellow Scout leaders, staffs at my childrens’ schools. I was utterly surrounded by love. As I look back, I see that they attended to me just as the angels attended to my brother. I gave God immense thanks for that, both when it happened and again yesterday upon continued reflection. I also took some time yesterday to thank a few of those who were the hands and feet of Christ for me in that dark hour. It’s certainly wonderful to witness generosity, but it’s even better to acknowledge it.

Today I would like to take a moment to acknowledge YOU, the Northern Piedmont District, for your generosity to each other (I have seen it in so many ways!) and to our United Methodist connection in 2020. The Northern Piedmont District excelled in all its missional giving this year, both on the District Level and the Conference Level. Only a very few churches were unable to fulfill their obligations, and most of those churches are in the process of voluntary closure. They have struggled for many years, and our hearts are with them as they move to the legacy phase.

Of our 140 churches, 127 paid 100% of both their Conference and District connectional giving. 7 paid 100% of their District connectional giving, even if they struggled to complete their Conference giving. All in all, the Northern Piedmont District finished at 93.84% in Conference giving and 95.12% in District Giving. Overall, Northern Piedmont came in at 93.95%, giving a total of \$2,497,812.26 to our shared ventures in the name of Christ. I am just so grateful to live in the midst of such generosity, and to see you perform these generous acts of faithfulness during a pandemic is nothing short of miraculous. It is a tribute to your values, your compassion for our world, and your appreciation of the many gifts that connectional life offers us when we need it most.

On behalf of all our Northern Piedmont District staff, and our entire Cabinet and Conference Staff, we say thank you. We give God thanks for your faithfulness, for your sharing in the Gospel, and for your positive witness about all that is right in this world. We give freely, and yet we grow all the richer.

Rev. Bev Copley and Your Northern Piedmont District Staff

Suggested offering: A coin for every Bible in your home.

DAY THIRTY-SIX – Tuesday, March 30, 2021

“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” Mahatma Gandhi

“CHRISTMAS MAGIC THROUGH THE EYES OF THE CHILDREN”

As it is Christmas at this time of the year, the Project AGAPE team in Armenia thought it would be a good idea to write a story about the magic of the season through the children’s eyes the Project has served for many years. Although there are desperate times here in Armenia and Artsakh, and it is still a big question whether the regions of Artsakh will remain intact and in safety, people are trying to see the light at the end of the tunnel and construct a better future for themselves. One of these people is Veronica, the elder sibling in a family with four children, who currently reside in the Project AGAPE office in Yerevan.

Each year, Veronica and the other children in the Kashatagh region of Artsakh have spent their Christmases with the joy of receiving Christmas boxes at the Christmas distribution by the Project AGAPE team. Thanks to your helping practice and contributions, these children received and continue to receive a wide range of humanitarian aid, which packs a plethora of toys aiding their creative development and the first necessary items to keep warm during the winter season. The former has a special place in these children’s hearts, as receiving a gift amidst hard times for their families transcends joy and happiness, and they remember Christmas with the best possible memories they can.

Every child believes in Santa and his magical power of bringing presents on Christmas morning on Christmas day. For many years, the mission of Santa Clause completed Project AGAPE in Artsakh. The extent to which the people of the Kashatagh region celebrated Christmas by being sure that that year they would not have problems with clothing or other necessary items is remarkable, as, without your help, it would have been the opposite picture all along. Veronica, whose family received Project AGAPE’s help for many years, said that when she was a little girl, she thought that Project AGAPE’s warehouse in Berdzor was a wonderland full of giant teddy bears, which brought her the Christmas presents she received. How much was her “disappointment” when being a teenager, she entered that warehouse as a volunteer to help the AGAPE staff and saw... boxes there...

It is exciting to hear such positive stories about the Project, which continues to support and dedicate time and effort to be with the people of Artsakh. Your commitment to these people over the years will never be forgotten by them and will be remembered by such positive thoughts and stories.

Nara Melkonyan, Project AGAPE

Suggested offering: A coin for every book of hymns or sacred songs in your home.

DAY THIRTY-SEVEN – Wednesday, March 31, 2021

Those who do what is right come to the LIGHT so others can see that they are doing what God wants. **-John 3:21**

I read and study Scripture best in a community. The accountability and companionship to see, hear, discuss, and ingest God's Word with others, helps keep me on track as a disciple. It has been so weird not to have a Sunday School class, Bible study, or other group with which to study week after week. During the COVID era, Bible studying has been up to me and you, as individuals, instead of a community.

To do what is right in life, we need to gather close to the Light so that we and others can see God and God's work in our lives. The Light can definitely show us God's glory and the way that leads to eternal life.

Since I have been able to choose my independent Bible study, I'm exploring an unusual part of the Bible – the Apocrypha. Most Protestant Bibles do not include these books. Some denominations accept "the Apocrypha for instruction in life and manners, but not for the establishment of doctrine." (Article VI in the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Communion). These 14 books (some of which are: Esdras, Tobit, Judith, Esther additions, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, Susanna, Prayer of Manasseh, Maccabees) are not referenced by Jesus nor the Apostles. They still contain great wisdom, inspiration, and historical information. It has been very interesting and challenging to read something similar and new to me, yet different. I still have a way to go and lots to learn! The quiet times with holy writings are a blessing.

Sirach 37:14 "For a man's soul sometimes keeps him better informed than seven watchmen sitting high on a watchtower."

God, source of all light, by your Word you give light to the soul. Pour out on us the spirit of wisdom and understanding that our hearts and minds may be opened. Amen.

Sarah McKinney

Suggested offering: A coin for every cross in your home.

DAY THIRTY-EIGHT – Thursday, April 1, 2021

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. **-Philippians 4:13**

That's what I have kept telling myself throughout this pandemic. But it's hard and I have struggled. Working from home, wearing a mask, not able to hug people and not being able to worship inside our church...those were and still are my struggles.

Work from home has gotten better but I miss my drive to and from work because that was MY alone time each day. Time to talk to God, pray and listen to music. I miss that.

We were fortunate during the summer to be able to worship outdoors. And fortunately, I get to be at church most Sundays now to help with the online service. But it's not the same. I miss seeing and talking to everyone. It's so discouraging sometimes to look out my window at the church building and it's just so empty! I know the building is not the church; the church is the people. However, since I have attended that church all my life, that church building is special to me too. So many memories of people (past and present), choir, bells, Sunday school, Vacation Bible School, UMW, fellowship lunches, parties...I could go on and on. I just miss it all.

But I try to stay positive because there is so much to be thankful for. I am grateful I have a job. I am grateful our church is still there waiting for us. I am grateful for all the great leadership in our church, for our pastor and his family, and for everyone who continues to attend whether in-person or online. And I know that I will be just fine because He is with me...always.

Robin Howerton

Suggested offering: A coin for every prayer you say today.

DAY THIRTY-NINE – Good Friday, April 2, 2021

After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. ²Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. ³So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. ⁴Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” ⁵They answered, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus replied, “I am he.” Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. ⁶When Jesus said to them, “I am he,” they stepped back and fell to the ground. ⁷Again he asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” ⁸Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.” ⁹This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, “I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me.” ¹⁰Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest’s slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave’s name was Malchus. - **John 18:1-10**

In November 2002, The United States was in the middle of the War of Terror. Troops had already invaded Afghanistan, and we were about to enter Iraq. This was in response to the events of September 11, 2001. As a 20-something preacher, the terrorist attack and our country’s response were troubling. I hated that so many people died at the hands of terrorists, but I was not sure how our country could win a war against an idea like “terrorism” any more than we were winning the War on Drugs or the War on Poverty. Yet, at the same time, I knew many people who were advocates for the war, many of whom who were faithful Christians.

That same year, singer-songwriter David LaMotte pinned a song, “What I Said (Peter).” This song imagines the conversation between Peter and Jesus after Peter cuts off Malchus’ ear. All four gospels tell some version of the story (Matthew 26:47-56; Mark 14:43-52; Luke 22:47-53; John 18:1-10), so it must have been important to the early church. In the song, LaMotte holds the tension between those faithful warriors and peacemakers. I offer it to you as a prayer for our divided world where “one thinks the other is insane.”

What I'm saying, friend, may surprise you
Though I trust you will listen and hear
I'm not out to make you angry
We both know beneath our anger lies our fear
It sounds so simple and it's so complicated
Not gentle, not just a warm feeling
Many will die in the name of peace
But war will not lead us to healing

Chorus:

I meant what I said, Peter, put down your sword

(continued)

Did you forget, or did you think I was joking?
This is not why I'm here, Peter, not to destroy
The world is already so broken
Maybe you think I'm a fool
Maybe a fool's what I am
Maybe I will die for nothing
And nothing will change in the end

Yes, I am scared and I'm angry
That we live in this occupied land
Where the Romans can kill us at random
But the Romans do not rule my hands
There are so many lives on the line here
This is not some philosopher's game
And if you draw your sword Peter
You may not raise that sword in my name

(Chorus)

God bless the children of Abraham
God bless the Romans who reign
God bless the peacemakers and warriors
Who each think the other insane

But I meant what I said, Peter, put down your sword
Did you forget or did you think I was joking?

The song is available at www.davidlamotte.com.

Rev. Dr. Ed McKinney

Suggested offering: A coin for every story of Jesus you can tell.

DAY FORTY - Holy Saturday, - April 3, 2021

⁵⁷When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. ⁵⁹So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth ⁶⁰and 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. ⁶¹Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb. ⁶²The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate ⁶³and said, "Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.' ⁶⁴Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'He has been raised from the dead,' and the last deception would be worse than the first." ⁶⁵Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can."⁶⁶So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.- **Matthew 27:57-66**

In Jerusalem, The Church of the Holy Sepulcher contains the traditional locations of Jesus' crucifixion, preparation for burial, and tomb. Pilgrims come from all over the world to touch the rock where the cross once stood, place mementos where Jesus bled, and visit the place where he rose from the dead. Tucked back behind Jesus' tomb is a small chapel that contains the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, the man who gave his grave to Jesus.

One would hope that such a holy site would be place where Christians from all over the world could come and pray together in a moment of solidarity. Unfortunately, that is not the case. The following churches all share space in the Church of Holy Sepulcher, but they notoriously do not get along: the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, and the Coptic Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, and Ethiopian Orthodox. Of particular interest to Stokesdale UMC is the Armenian and Syrian sections are right next to each other, and they dispute over who has control of Joseph or Arimathea's tomb. It serves as a microcosm to the conflict today in modern Syria, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

When my tour group arrived at Jesus' tomb, our guide decided the line was too long to justify waiting, so we visited Joseph's tomb. The chapel smelled like burnt wood and the altar looked like it had caught fire years-ago but no one dared to refurbish it. In the back corner of the chapel laid a burial plot supposedly where Joseph was buried years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Though the place was musty, stale, and unkempt, I felt that Joseph would be pleased to see that Jesus got all the attention while he dwelled in obscurity.

Holy Saturday is the Last of the Three Holy Days (or Triduum). The church gathered at Thursday's intimate, irony-laden table. The church stood at the fire of betrayal in the courtyard and stood at Good Friday's cross with what was left of Jesus' family. The church stood at the tomb of Jesus as the silence of Holy Saturday arrived. There was nothing more to say.

This journey, this story, this process has left us porous and empty... as empty as Easter's tomb on resurrection morning...¹

Rev. Dr. Ed McKinney

¹Lamkin, James E. "Matthew 27:57-66: Pastoral Perspective," *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2. p. 332.

Suggested offering: A coin for every person in your family.

Easter Sunday – April 4, 2021

Pray Today

Pray, thanking God for Jesus and for the many ways we can gather and worship God. Pray for those who do not have the freedom to freely worship God.

CHRIST IS RISEN!

KEEP SHARING THE STORY!