



2025
**LENTEN
MEDITATIONS**

A Commonplace Lent



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As many friends of Episcopal Relief & Development know, our tagline is “Working Together for Lasting Change.” We hold this statement dear. It is so important to the Board of Directors and staff of Episcopal Relief & Development that it is the name of our current strategic plan. Nothing captures the true nature of our work better than these five words.

Working together is a special part of our story. From our program partners to our donors and supporters, from technical experts to those who hold us in prayer, we could not reach over three million people each year without this community of caring and compassionate individuals. Blessings are abundant in our working together.

For this year’s Lenten Meditations, we asked our dear friend and well-known author Jerusalem Jackson Greer to partner with us on behalf of this Spirit-led community. Jerusalem wrote the meditations in celebration of our common life. Although Lent can sometimes be seen as a solitary spiritual journey, Jerusalem challenges us to walk this road with others. Using monastic wisdom as her starting point, she highlights the divine gifts that come from community.

Titling her meditations “A Commonplace Lent,” Jerusalem celebrates two uses of the word “common.” The first is the sense that we come together to celebrate “all that we are and all that we have in common”—prayer, worship, grace, love, community, service and so much more. The second understanding of common is a reflection on the ordinary, everyday nature of these communal gifts. She finds this duality rooted in the wisdom of desert mothers and fathers, monastics and other spiritual leaders and infuses it into her meditations for each day of Lent.

We hope you find a connection to a larger community of faithful people as you read these meditations. You are not alone. You join tens of thousands of others on this journey. We hope you will see yourself as an essential gift to others, both near and far. And we pray that God will richly bless you and your varied communities this Lenten season.

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About the Author

Jerusalem Jackson Greer is co-executive director and agrarian minister for the Procter Center, an Episcopal farm, camp and retreat center in the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Ohio. As former manager of evangelism and discipleship for The Episcopal Church under Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, she co-founded the Good News Garden movement and oversaw Way of Love and Evangelism initiatives for the wider church. She is also the author of two books, *At Home in this Life: Finding Peace at the Crossroads of Unraveled Dreams* and *Beautiful Surprises and A Homemade Year: The Blessings of Cooking, Crafting and Coming Together*, both published by Paraclete Press, as well as multiple Episcopal curricula, including as a contributor to Episcopal Relief & Development's Abundant Life Garden Project® resources.

Jerusalem recently completed her master of arts degree from Wartburg Theological Seminary with an emphasis on rural ministry. Jerusalem serves on the board of Edible Theology and the Council of Advice for Episcopal Relief & Development's Faith & Community Engagement team. She is an associate of the Community of Saint Mary, Southern Province, and a co-host of the Spade, Spoon, Soul podcast. Jerusalem is an in-demand speaker, preacher, and contributor around the topics of outdoor and agrarian ministry, discipleship, evangelism, leadership and the ministry of belonging in an era of loneliness.



Ash Wednesday, March 5

My life and my death are not purely and simply my own business. I live by and for others, and my death involves them. —Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*

When my youngest sister, Judea, was three years old, she refused to hold anyone's hand when crossing the street or walking on a busy sidewalk. Instead, she would stubbornly declare in her tiny voice, "I hold my own hand!"

There is a temptation to begin the season of Lent as a solitary journey, to hear the words "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" as an individual invitation instead of a communal one. Yet, the prayer that proceeds the marking of ashes on our foreheads begins, "Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth." It offers a poignant reminder of our common bonds of birth, breath and death.

Despite this era of great divisions and an epidemic of loneliness, the Holy Spirit is here among us. I wonder how the Spirit might move during this season of Lent if we approach the spiritual practices of self-examination and repentance as a common endeavor instead of a solitary one. What if we sought to make a right beginning, traveling the Lenten wilderness together for the express purpose of being re-bound to each other and all of creation through Christ? What if we spent this season together in prayer, fasting, self-denial and reading and meditating on God's holy Word, boldly considering how we can right the wrongs and sins of the past and strive to repent of those sins and any we have continued to commit?

We never let Judea cross the busy street or wander the crowded sidewalk alone. We walked alongside her, behind her and with her, gently guiding her by the elbow when needed (she was holding her own hand, after all) and reminding her that her journey was also our journey and that we would all get where we were going—together.

For Reflection

This Lent, what spiritual practice could your community adopt as a communal endeavor? How could we travel the wilderness together with intentionality?



Thursday, March 6

Monastic spirituality says we are to honor one another. We are to listen to one another. —Sr. Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict*

When thinking about writing a series of devotions for Lent, my first thought was of the wilderness. After all, Lent is wilderness season: a season of wandering, a season marked by simplicity and fasting, of burying the alleluias, a season where it is tempting to ask, “Are we there yet?” as we make our way toward the promised land of Easter. But Lent isn’t a season we travel alone. Like the Hebrew people wandering the desert for forty years as a community, we spend forty days wandering through Lent with our communities of faith, our households and sometimes even friends across the globe.

This is why I decided to begin each day’s meditation with wisdom and inspiration from our monastic siblings. The Desert Mothers and Fathers, Saint Benedict, Saint Augustine, Saint Francis, Saint Hildegard, Sr. Joan Chittister and Thomas Merton were (and are) just ordinary humans traveling an ordinary human journey, together and alone. Their writings and biographies reflect the challenges of living a common life committed to Christ, anchored by spiritual practices such as stillness, silence, fasting, self-reflection, mutual listening and service. Practices are often thwarted or tested by the conflicts and pressures of living in community.

We all live in community. True, most of us don’t live in monasteries or desert communes, but we live in households and families; we are a part of churches, schools and workplaces. Following Jesus together and in the midst of each other is essential to becoming a beloved community, and it is often frustrating, which is why the words and teachings of the monastics are helpful. They remind us that we are not alone in our experiences; they give us words and tools to bring us together in a shared wholeness as we seek to spread the hope and healing of an Easter life.

For Reflection

Whose words or example encourages you as you strive to love as Jesus loves us?



Friday, March 7

We carry ourselves wherever we go. —Matrona 1, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers* by Laura Swan

The psalms had never been my favorite. For years, I found most of them repetitive, overly dramatic and a bit whiny. I found the ones attributed to David particularly annoying. After all, it seemed to me that David's predicaments were often the natural consequences of his actions. I began to understand the psalms in a new way when I joined a discernment process to become an Oblate with the Community of Saint Mary's Southern Province. An Oblate is a lay member of the Community who seeks to follow the Rule of Saint Benedict out in the world, an extension of the faithful practices of the monks and nuns.

Each day in this year of discernment, I read the psalms within Morning and Evening Prayer and reflected in writing on a portion of at least one psalm. After three hundred and sixty-some-odd days of this, I began to wonder if the point of the psalms wasn't really about the ranting and the wailing, the anger or the begging. Perhaps the point was that God was with and present to the psalmists, even if they had brought their situation upon themselves.

Perhaps the revelation of the psalms is the same as that of Lent: God may not rescue us from the wilderness of our making, but God is always present to us. God is present to us in despair, anger, doubt, tears and repentance, no matter how long it takes us to get there. God is present to us when things are taking too long and when they are going too fast. God is present when we cause the trouble—and when the problem happens for no discernable reason. What if the thing we are meant to learn from the psalms and the practices of fasting, repenting and simplicity in Lent is that God, love divine, is always with us, in the pit, in the wilderness, in the fog and in the consequences?

For Reflection

People experience God's presence differently. Some feel God's presence as an emotion or physical sensation, and some hear or see God's presence in nature, another person or a work of art. How do you experience God being present to you, especially in the wilderness? Do you experience it in the moment or upon reflection months or years later?



Saturday, March 8

Reverence declares, “All of the things God established please me. I do not hurt any of them.” –Hildegard of Bingen, *Book of Life’s Merits*

Last spring, we hosted a tree-planting day at our diocesan camp, and a sweet family with four little girls, all under the age of six, joined us for this endeavor. While not particularly interested in tree planting, one of the girls was quite invested in finding and rescuing worms. Each time she found a worm, she placed it with great reverence on a dandelion, one of thousands that month that colored the fields.

Here at camp, we like the dandelions because the bees like the dandelions. And we like the bees because we like the squash, tomatoes and apples that they pollinate—and of course, we love the honey they make for us as well. But deciding to have a campus that is polka-dotted with dandelions did not happen by accident. It is a choice that we continue to make as a sign of reverence, a sign of delight in what God has established.

Often, we think of God’s creation in terms of individual items or categories. We thank God for the tree, the rain and the apple seed. We work to save a river, a species or a person. We fight for a single cause. And yet, the total ecosystem that God has established requires our reverence: bees, dandelions, crooked-neck squash, honey and families are just a few members of the larger ecosystem. To care for any of these members, we must repent for our frequent neglect of the whole and remember that wherever we are, because God loves it, we are standing on holy ground.

For Reflection

Consider the ecosystem of a community in your life. What practices related to one member potentially damage the whole? What changes could positively affect the whole ecosystem?



Monday, March 10

If you want to keep peace in the community, judge yourself and no one else.
—John Trithemius

Whoever says, “I abide in him,” ought to walk in the same way as he walked.
—1 John 2:6

One of the beautiful things about the church year and living out the liturgical seasons is that we travel the depth and breadth of the human experience together. Each season is filled with common experiences: joy (Christmas!), daily life (Ordinary Time!) and longing (Advent!). During Lent, we are invited to participate in a season of vulnerability. This is our collective opportunity to share our pain, struggles (including our temptation to judge), mistakes and fears with each other as siblings in Christ so that we know and be known, love and be loved, forgive and be forgiven.

Isn't it interesting that a season built on repentance and self-reflection also provides us opportunities to distract ourselves by judging our neighbor's piety? Without always realizing it, many of us judge the reverence (or perceived lack of reverence) of someone in our community: a sibling in Christ, a fellow church member or an acquaintance on Facebook. We look at an Ash Wednesday selfie and convey our disapproval at the public display of this holy marking by making sure we do not click the “like” button. We overhear someone during coffee hour mention their pre-Maundy Thursday pedicure appointment, and we do our best to keep our face politely benign while internally congratulating ourselves for bringing our humble, un-pedicured toes to the foot-washing liturgy. But judging how others travel this holy season does not help us walk as Jesus did. It is simply spiritual busywork that damages our relationship with the Body of Christ, building partitions between us and them, instead of opening ourselves up to what God might be revealing through them.

For Reflection

Is there an area of judgment you are struggling with this Lent? How could you replace these thoughts with an act of vulnerability?



Tuesday, March 11

Only God, its Creator, who is incomparably better and more worthy than it, can make the human Spirit content and happy. —Louis De Blois, *Spiritual Doctrine*

God also spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name ‘The Lord’ I did not make myself known to them.” —Exodus 6:2-3

I work with a lot of young people, from children and teens to new adults. I have struggled to find a way to articulate what I have experienced both personally and communally—that “only God, its Creator...can make the human Spirit content and happy”—in language that resonates with them but is not heavy-handed or manipulative. Many young people in our communities, even the ones active in youth groups or church camps, do not claim to “believe in God” in the way I might. To them, this language feels false and rigid. And yet, I cannot escape the Holy Spirit-given desire to pass my faith along, to share the Good News of God in Christ, to convey to them the unfailing, all-abiding gift of God’s love and presence that comforts, companions, convicts and calls me beyond what I could muster on my own. But the words I use seem to fall flat. You might have experienced that, too.

In Exodus, we see that Abraham, Isaac, Sarah, Leah and Jacob know God one way while Moses knows another. Perhaps then, there are still more ways and names available. And so last summer, I began to offer other names and words for the Holy to help bridge this understanding. Of all the options we tried, Love as a name for God has broken down the most barriers and assumptions, allowing us to come together as a community, to pray and praise, to lament and to wonder with greater shared understanding at the work of the Holy Spirit among and through us.

For Reflection

What if, this Lent, you replaced names for God with the name Love in your prayers and some scripture readings? For example, “Only Love, its Creator, who is incomparably better and more worthy than it, can make the human Spirit content and happy.” Could you share your experience, good or bad, with your community?



Wednesday, March 12

Together we shall try to find the exact answer to each one of the problems.
–Abba Pachomius to housemaster Thomas

During Lent, we read of Jesus alone in the wilderness for forty days, hungry, tired and repeatedly tempted by the devil. Of all the trials in this passage, the one I find the most disturbing is the trial of aloneness. Some folks find inspiration in strong, stoic, loner Jesus, perhaps forgetting that he didn't exactly thrive on his own. In Matthew and Mark's accounts, angels come and tend to a worn-out man who very well may be on the edge of dehydration and starvation, not to mention mental anguish.

I don't think it is an accident that immediately following this lone-ranger trip into the wilderness, Jesus begins to gather his team of disciples, his community of friends and co-ministers. And, except for a few moments of prayer, we never again see Jesus on his own; instead, he lives, ministers, dies and reveals his resurrection within the context of community and within the context of relationships.

We believe that our life-giving, loving, liberating God gives all, gathers all and draws us all toward a shared wholeness with one another. If we are to join God as co-creators in this work, then we must follow the learnings of Jesus, traveling even our most challenging roads with each other instead of trying to power through alone. We must lead with vulnerability and humility, ministering and being ministered to in all circumstances, removing aloneness, bearing each other's burdens and sitting together in the ashes.

For Reflection

*How do you feel about being vulnerable with others when you are walking a tough road?
Do you ask for help?*

*How are you for listening and creating a safe space for others to be vulnerable with you?
Do you make space for other people's needs?*

How can you learn from Jesus's choices regarding community?



Thursday, March 13

Do your work in peace. —John the Small

As Christians, we believe we are called to right the wrongs and sins of the past, even as we strive to repent of those sins and any we continue to commit. Sometimes, this call to right wrongs means advocacy and activism, such as bold and public protest. And sometimes we right wrongs one small, quiet seed at a time.

In March 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a little project called the Good News Gardens movement was born. This project, hosted by The Episcopal Church's evangelism and creation care departments, was born from a desire to help the church mobilize to share the Good News of God in Christ right where they were—at home.

A call went out, inviting individuals and churches to three commitments: 1) Plant more than you would under average circumstances to share the bounty. 2) Pray daily for a restored right relationship between the church and Creation, repenting of the harm humans have imposed upon the earth. 3) Proclaim the love of God through word and example by sharing your Good News Garden bounty and publicly sharing the stories of your commitments and gardens.

In the four and half years since this movement began, hundreds of Good News Gardens, chicken coops and beehives have sprouted, and people who had never before seen themselves as creation care activists began to find their place in righting the sins of the past. They discovered their unique work in our common struggle to become beloved community with all of creation.

For Reflection

Working to right systemic and generational wrongs such as climate change or racism can seem daunting. Like planting a Good News Garden herb box, what is one beginning step you could take?



Friday, March 14

Do not always be wanting everything to turn out as you think it should but rather as God pleases then you will be undisturbed and thankful in your prayer. —Abba Nilus

Once, during a question-and-answer session, I was asked how to discern the will of God. I fumbled for a moment and then gave an answer that combined the Greatest Commandment (love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself), the Ten Commandments as given to Moses and a bit of WWJD bracelet theology, “What would Jesus do?” For good measure, I also threw in a smattering of the Baptismal Covenant and the Catechism from the Book of Common Prayer.

Had I been prepared, I would have said that I believe that the “will of God” is the flourishing of all of creation, what author and theologian Verna Dozier called “the Dream of God.” She wrote, “The dream of God is that all creation will live together in peace and harmony and fulfillment. All parts of creation. And the dream of God is that the good creation that God created—what the refrain says, ‘and God saw that it was good’—be restored.”

Of course, this understanding of the will of God doesn’t give us easy yes or no answers about what job we should seek, what liturgy rite we should use on Sunday mornings, or whether we should even have church services on Sunday mornings anymore. Instead, this approach to the will of God asks us to consider the flourishing—the peace, harmony and fulfillment—of every part of creation impacted by our decisions. We are not asked to consider what has always been done, what would be most popular, or even sometimes what it is that we want. Instead, we are asked to consider what will move the good of creation—in our homes, our land and climate, our churches and schools and our communities and workplaces—toward being restored to the dream of God.

For Reflection

This Lent, what question of discernment are you or your faith community wrestling with? How could your discernment process change if you consider the flourishing of all of creation as the guide instead of making people happy?



Saturday, March 15

Holiness...has something to do with being who we are, claiming our truths, opening our hearts, giving ourselves to the other pure and unglossed.

—Sr. Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict*

Once, during a tough season, my therapist introduced me to a nervous system-regulating concept called the Window of Tolerance. As I understand it, the idea of the Window of Tolerance is very similar to what I call “margin” and what some folk call “emotional bandwidth.” It is a way to talk about our capacity for handling everyday challenges depending on the other stresses, trauma or trauma triggers we are experiencing. Sometimes, our windows are wide open, and we can handle all the big and little common challenges that come our way, and other times, as stress or trauma increases, our windows begin to close, the opening becoming more and more narrow.

During one of my own almost-closed-window seasons, I took a trip home to Arkansas, a trip during which I moved every few nights, visiting as many friends and family members as I could. A different level of intimacy happens when you cohabitate with loved ones, even for a few days. You see each other with bedhead, share bathrooms, argue over thermostats and stay up until it’s too late to suffer pretense. Here, in this closer-than-normal state, everyone crosses some sort of time and space continuum that results in a different kind of knowing—a knowing that offers the opportunity to see and accept each other exactly as we are, giving ourselves, unglossed, bedhead and all, to each other. It is a knowing that provides emotional safety, helping us open our windows of tolerance just a bit wider as we remember we are not alone and are loved as we are. This kind of emotional safety is part of what Episcopal Relief & Development is doing with their early childhood development programs, helping parents open their own windows of tolerance wider and wider to better provide the nurturing care children need.

For Reflection

What helps you give yourself to others, unglossed and honest, in who you are?



Monday, March 17

This is the advice from one who loves you; welcome it and faithfully put it into practice. –Rule of Benedict, *Prologue*

At our diocesan camp, we have many practices but only one rule. This is our Rule of Life, which articulates how we intentionally seek to connect with God, others, ourselves and creation through words, actions and attitudes. On the first night of each summer camp session, before we review each section, we take the time to explain the idea of a Rule of Life, particularly as it applies to our common life at camp. We begin by explaining that we use the word rule to mean something like to regulate or to have regular habits. Next, we often share this example: “Our rule of life is like a set of bumpers on a bowling alley but for our community. They are simply a set of practices to help us all stay on the path of Jesus, caring for one another, ourselves and our place with generous helpings of mercy and grace, no matter how exhausted or frustrated we get with each other.”

The truth is that everyone at camp—from campers and guests to leaders and volunteers—struggles to stay on the path of love when living, working and resting in such close quarters. This is why we need to regularly practice the guides of the Rule, individually and together, to build up our spiritual and relational muscles. Like a musician practicing scales again and again, we must practice preferring one another, choosing one another, forgiving one another and blessing one another, not just once, but daily, moment by moment.

For Reflection

Do you have a Rule of Life? Does your family or church? How could having a Rule change the common life of one of your communities?



Tuesday, March 18

Find out how much God has given you and from it take what you need; the remainder is needed by others. —Saint Augustine

For many of us, one of the hardest things to see is how much God has given us. This is understandable in a culture dominated by social media influencers selling us every imaginable product alongside messages of scarcity and need. The phone, the watch, the house, the car, the vacation: they are enough until, suddenly, they aren't.

The same is true of our common life, especially in the church. It is easy to look at larger churches, younger churches and more financially stable churches and wish we had what they have. It's easy to get stuck in the "if only" loop: if only we had an endowment, if only we had young families, if only we had better live-streaming equipment. But "if only" isn't really the way of Jesus, is it? Instead, his way is loaves and fishes, shared crusty bread and a common cup. The way of Jesus is local presence and community assets. The way of Jesus is cultivating an awareness of the abundance we have already been given and then looking to see who needs those gifts. Do we have empty buildings? Who is looking for shelter, a welcoming meeting place or a home base for their work with the poor? Do we have retired members? Who in our community needs tutoring, free business advice, or parenting mentorship? Do we have a lot of land? Who is looking for a place to grow food for their family or the food pantry? What flora or fauna needs a place to flourish so as not to become extinct? Who needs a green space to allow their children to play freely? All of our churches have a God-given abundance of something. The question is, are we willing to turn away from the "if only" to share "what is"?

For Reflection

Do you or your church struggle with being distracted by the "if only" question? Try keeping a list of the gifts you already have for a month and invite the Holy Spirit to reveal where there is abundance. Want to go deeper? Check out the Called to Transformation resources at calledtotransformation.org



Wednesday, March 19

Abba Moses asks Abba Silvanus, “Can a man lay a new foundation every day?” The old man said, “If he works hard, he can lay a new foundation at every moment.” —Silvanus

Our diocesan camp has a small market-size teaching farm. We offer programs during camps and retreat sessions to grow produce and flowers for our kitchen and sell them at the local Farmers’ Market and through our community-support agriculture (CSA) shares plan. Interestingly, our two busiest seasons—summer camp and the farm harvest—happen concurrently. This means that both our farm and camp teams begin to struggle around the same time in the summer. Suddenly, there are groans from the counselors when asked to sing “Pharoah, Pharoah” one more time or to make yet another friendship bracelet. The farm hands begin to smile less at market and are a little less careful when packing the CSA bags. It is a mid-season slump brought on by heat, exhaustion and repetition. And yet, the job requires that each time the counselors are asked to sing, they do so as if it is their favorite song of all time, with joy and enthusiasm. And the job requires the farm hands to smile and chat with every stranger as if they are their new best friend.

For counselors and farm hands, this is what it looks like to serve Christ in all persons. But just as we cannot travel Lent with love and faithfulness through our own power, neither can they travel the summer alone. Only through the light of Christ within us and within those walking with us can we lay a new foundation of love and mercy moment after moment. Only when we remember that God has given us helpers—the presence of the Holy Spirit and each other—can we find the resources we need to walk farther than we could ever walk or sing or smile on our own.

For Reflection

Who or what helps you build a foundation when you are struggling to serve Christ in all persons?



Thursday, March 20

It is the responsibility of the abbot or prioress to have great concern and to act with all speed, discernment, and diligence...they should realize they have undertaken care of the sick, not tyranny over the healthy.

—Rule of Benedict

At the turn of the 20th century, industrialization greatly impacted farming practices, as it did on most everything in the Western world. Big machines, fast-acting chemicals and the tyranny of the urgent replaced the slow and steady agrarian practices of the past. Over a hundred years later, we can assess the damage many of these advances have inflicted on farmland, prairies, forests, watersheds and the climate. Now, we must decide: how shall we live in the face of this harm?

This is where being a follower of a resurrected Christ helps. We are Easter people. We believe in the transfiguration of what is. In the face of death and destruction, we don't have to start from scratch; we just need to transform what we already have. This is where regenerative agrarian practices come into the picture. Regenerative agriculture focuses on soil health, striving to work with creation rather than against it. It seeks to work backward, undoing harm by adding back and allowing what has been stripped away to flourish. We must find ways to let the land we have rest, restore and heal. We must nurture it as we nurture a tired toddler with snacks and a long nap. And we must do the same for each other.

Jesus commands us to love God with our whole hearts and to love our neighbor—and I believe this includes our neighbor soil. And yet, we don't love ourselves well. We push and demand and extract work and exhaustion from everyone, ourselves included. If we let the soil rest, we will also have to rest ourselves. We are going to have to allow our neighbor to rest. We will have to shift our mindset of what success looks like, away from productivity and toward a rest-based flourishing.

For Reflection

Who or what in your life or community needs to rest? Is it a habit, a person or a program? Who or what needs to be allowed to stop so that regeneration can begin its holy work?



Friday, March 21

Openness to the working of the Spirit in both individual and in community is vital, life-giving. Without it, there will be a closed-up person, a closed-up community. —Esther De Waal, *A Life-Giving Way*

My friend Anthony and I both love growing things. We love walking out our back doors and plucking fresh fruit or vegetables off trees, bushes, stalks and vines. But we live on different ends of the country, and though we both live in states known in part for farming, what grows in our yards is very different. For instance, he can walk out his back door and have his fill of limes and oranges. I can walk out my back door and have my fill of chestnuts and pecans. We are both growers, but the bounty from our efforts is very different.

Learning to plant what will grow in your soil and climate is challenging for every gardener, farmer, creation care activist and agrarian minister. A similar challenge is learning to make ourselves at home in our communities instead of forcing them to be who we wish they were. Nurturing ministries that will grow in our soil and climate rather than the soil we wish we had is crucial to the flourishing of all. This is why Episcopal Relief & Development works with local farmers in drought-prone areas on sustainable agricultural practices to create more resilience in the face of climate change.

Without creating a wholly false and manufactured environment, I will never be able to grow limes like Anthony, nor will he be able to grow chestnuts like I can. They are not authentic to our habitats. The question for every person and community of faith isn't, "What do we want God to grow here?" but "What is it that God wants to grow in the soil we have?" What talents and resources are available in this place and time and climate? How can we catalyze change and development by tapping into the existing assets and capacities of our people and surrounding communities? And, maybe most importantly, are we willing to open our hearts and imaginations to that work?

For Reflection

Consider your prayers or your community's prayers for growth. Have you predetermined what growth looks like? Or do you need to be reoriented to where the Holy Spirit is already at work?



Saturday, March 22

When we live in community, let us choose obedience over discipline, for the latter teaches arrogance while the former calls for humility. —Syncretica

The word obedience comes from the Latin root of *obedire*, which means “listen to,” but the word was also commonly used to mean “pay attention to.” When wisdom from scripture, from the saints or the desert mothers and fathers, calls us to “obey,” we are being challenged to listen and pay attention.

The concept of discipline also has more than one meaning. Some hear “discipline” and think of self-control, our diets, exercise routines or fasting practices. Others think of punishment, often physical, which is, unfortunately, how many monastics most frequently misused the term in the thirteenth century.

But with a more authentic understanding, I have taken the liberty of rewriting Syncretica’s words: When we live in community—at home, church, school, work and neighborhoods—let us choose to listen and pay attention to each other and our own hearts over physically, mentally, or emotionally punishing ourselves or each other, for the latter teaches arrogance while the former calls for humility.

This Lent, what would it look like to pause, listen and pay deep attention when we are tempted to chastise, punish or criticize ourselves or others? Perhaps this Lent, instead of giving up chocolate or wine, we give up self-criticism and the harsh judgment of those who annoy us and instead attempt to listen with the heart of Christ to what is underneath those things we are prone to discipline.

For Reflection

Where could you begin to listen more and punish or criticize less? How might it change the relationship or communal experience?



Monday, March 24

Silence is neither mute nor talkative. —Peter of Celle, *The School of the Cloister*

At camp, we swim and boat in a lake. It's not a big lake, but it is big enough for fishing, canoeing and jumping off a giant floating trampoline we call The Blob. During summer camp, I make it a point to be in the lake during our swimming activity, partly to be another point of safety, helping count heads and watching for signs of distress. And, in part, I go to the lake because I love being in the water. It restores my body and soul to a state of rest that I find hard to achieve on dry land.

This means that during the camp season, on any given afternoon, you might find me suited up in a life jacket, bobbing in Lake Leo, where I spend most of my time slowly turning 360 degrees, round and round, watching all that is happening: on The Blob, on the shoreline, on the dock, in the water. Here, I am free from the distraction of technology: I don't have my phone, and my walkie-talkie is back on the beach. Most of the camper activity is beyond me, in one direction or another. Instead, I am simply present. I watch and listen. I watch and listen to what is happening around me and inside me. I listen for the stillness of God resting in my breath, right underneath my breastbone. I listen for what is emerging and what is fading away. I listen for signs of distress and sounds of joy. I wait to see what will happen next.

For me, Lent is like bobbing in the lake. Christmas is behind me on the shore of what has been, and Easter is ahead, filled with the promise of new adventures and new life. From here in the middle, I sit and listen to the silence within, and I watch for the movement of God—behind, ahead, inside—still and buoyant all at once.

For Reflection

How do you practice silence and listening? If it is not a common practice, how might you begin to fold it into your daily life?



Tuesday, March 25

Annunciation of the Lord

Persist in your holy purpose, even if you fail a thousand times a day.

—Louis De Blois, *Spiritual Mirror*

I was ten years old when Mary Lou Retton won gold at the Summer Olympics and changed the sport of gymnastics forever. Until that moment, I had never been interested in anything remotely athletic, but, like millions of other little girls, I caught gymnastics fever. For two years, I took gymnastic lessons, spending countless hours in our front yard practicing handstands, backbends, cartwheels and round-offs. Up, over, down. Up, over, down. I practiced and practiced until it became obvious that I would never make it past a front walkover. Flipping and swinging over vaults and bars took physical strength and courage I would never possess.

Those years weren't a waste despite my failed attempt at Olympic gold. I learned something in that time that has never left me. I learned what it felt like to have purpose and drive. I learned what the fruits of practice, intentionality and deep commitment tasted like. I learned how good it felt to grow in skill and ability. These lessons have served me well as a mother, farmer, writer, camp director and preacher, to name a few of my holy purposes.

Lent is a season when we are given the opportunity to practice the spiritual discipline of listening to God's call on our lives, to fast from the things that distract us, and instead to hone in on who and what the Holy Spirit is calling us to do and become in the common everydayness of our lives. It is a season of responding as we remember Mary's words to the angel Gabriel on this feast day of the Annunciation: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." We follow this response with intentionality, practicing over and over the cartwheels and handstands of that call, falling down, getting up and trying again.

For Reflection

What might you need to fast from to hear God's holy purpose in your life?



Wednesday, March 26

[We ought] to be of help to all, to refrain from hurting others out of bitterness. —Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels*

The world is a complicated place these days—maybe more than ever, or at least more than it has been in my lifetime. Church is complicated, families are complicated and communities are complicated. We have, as the human race, endured and inflicted a lot of pain and trauma in recent memory. So, I will not tell you not to be angry or frustrated if that is how you feel. But I will pray that your anger does not turn to bitterness, that it doesn't form a chip on your shoulder the size of the hump on Quasimodo's back. If the energy propelling you forward these days is that chip on your shoulder, know that it will only fuel you for so long. Bitterness runs hot and deep, but it is not regenerative. It is death, not life. It saps joy, isolates you and makes promises you can't keep. Bitterness is not a good fruit; instead, it is a poison that will use you up, destroy your relationships and leave you in a wilderness of your own making. But thankfully, the wilderness is not the end of the story.

In the season of Lent, we have the opportunity to begin again. We can choose, with God's help and the prayers of our community and perhaps professional assistance if needed, to practice fasting from bitter thoughts and habits. We can begin digging up the rotten grapes of unforgiveness and burning off the acidic narratives that blind us from giving and receiving God's mercy and grace. It is now during Lent that we can begin trusting Love as our guide, even in times of anger and frustration. It may be a long journey, but it is a worthwhile one, and we do not have to travel it alone.

For Reflection

Can you distinguish between bitterness and righteous anger? Is there a spirit of bitterness in your community? If so, what would it take to begin rooting it out communally?



Thursday, March 27

What lies dead and deformed in the letter on the dead parchment comes to life when put into practice. —Peter of Celle, *The School of the Cloister*

Our youngest child, Miles, took up the saxophone in sixth grade. While he had some natural ability, he, like every other kid in his band class, had to practice to improve. Every student was supposed to practice at home alone, then at school with their “section,” and then, in the days leading up to a concert, they would join the rest of the sections and practice all together as the complete Middle School Band. The first year’s concert was the kind that only a parent or grandparent could love. But, over time, Miles and the students who stuck with the program progressed in their abilities according to their talent and dedication to practicing—together and on their own. By senior year, some had even grown into outstanding musicians, able to pick up a piece of sheet music for the first time and play.

Over the years, I have come to think of the work of spiritual life as akin to being in a school band program. We start badly. Yes, some of us may have an initial natural talent for things like contemplative prayer or fasting but becoming proficient in the spiritual life so that things like stillness, forgiveness, self-reflection and study of Scripture become as natural as breathing requires hours and days and years and lifetimes of practice—on our own and together. It requires practicing our spiritual scales over and over. It requires small group “section” work with folks in the same place or season who can help us feel less alone in our blunders. And it requires practicing with the larger community, with those who have gone beyond us and who can help us when we miss a note or a beat.

For Reflection

What spiritual practice might you need to bring to life by practicing more regularly, alone and with others?



Friday, March 28

The members should serve one another. Consequently, no members will be excused from kitchen service unless they are sick. —Rule of Benedict

Everyone does a turn in the kitchen. —Procter Community Practices

When stay-home orders went into effect at the beginning of the pandemic, our household, like many, had to adopt new routines and practices. One change we made was how we cooked dinner. Since everyone in our household was old enough to cook and clean, we made a dinner schedule. My husband and I each cooked two nights each week, and our kids cooked one each. The seventh night was for leftovers or sandwiches. This system served us well all through the pandemic, with only one modification. After a few weeks, it became clear that we needed to add the caveat “if you cook, you clean” to our practice. It turned out that some members of our household needed a lesson in mindfulness regarding the messes they made—messes they were happy to leave for someone else to clean.

“If you cook, you clean” helped us all develop a greater awareness of cause and effect regarding our choices and actions, and not just in the kitchen. Inspired by this lesson and the Rule of Saint Benedict, our diocesan camp counselors serve at least one week in the kitchen. All campers take turns serving on “KP” (kitchen patrol) duty: wiping down and sanitizing the tables after meals, sweeping the dining hall floor and taking the compost and slop up to the farm after supper. We do this because it’s important to our camp’s culture for everyone to see themselves as part of a greater whole—to understand that their choices and actions affect the entire camp community. Camps, like our homes and churches, exist for the flourishing of the whole. And it is only when the whole works with great intentionality to lovingly seek and serve Christ in each other, each willing to do the most thankless tasks, that flourishing will happen.

For Reflection

What thankless or inconvenient tasks or roles might you take on for a season to contribute to the flourishing of your household or faith community?



Saturday, March 29

Wherever you go, you will find that what you are running from is there ahead of you. —Anonymous

Years ago, I heard an elder in our church explain to a new member from a different Christian tradition why she didn't believe there was a hell in the afterlife. "Oh, honey," she said in her very prim Southern drawl, "I have already been to hell. I have been there and back. Hell is what we do to each other and ourselves. God doesn't need to inflict hell; we take care of that ourselves."

Scripture is filled with stories of atonement, judgment and confusion, readings we might prefer to skip or dismiss as archaic or limiting. Yet, I think we should give them another look, particularly within the context of community.

As we work toward honoring the dignity of every human being and building bridges between and beyond ourselves to the world, it might benefit us all to consider how all our actions impact those around us. How often have you or someone you know become disgruntled and changed churches, jobs, neighborhoods or relationships, only to be met by similar problems and challenges? How many lives have been damaged in small and great ways because instead of doing the work to heal, learn, grow or change right where they (we) were, within the community they (we) have been planted in, they (we) looked for the quick fix of greener grass? We know that hurt people hurt people. But are we self-aware enough to admit that sometimes we are the hurt people who are hurting other people?

If that elder was right and hell is something we create, then perhaps hell is also something we can eradicate if, with God's help, we stop running and start healing ourselves and our communities.

For Reflection

Have you experienced the "greener grass syndrome"? What was the outcome? What did you learn?



Monday, March 31

And let the brothers who know how to work, labor and exercise themselves in that art they may understand, if it be not contrary to the salvation of their soul, and they can exercise it becomingly. —Saint Francis

I was not an “outdoorsy” child. I liked creative indoor pursuits, making and thinking activities. Then, one summer in college, out of necessity, I worked at a Christian summer camp where I hoped to lead safe “indoorsy” activities like newspaper, crafts and drama. Yet, for some reason, I, the least likely candidate, was put in charge of the “nature” enrichment activity. That summer, the “Nature Hut” consisted of a few goats, some turtles, a dilapidated shack and a lonely old pony. There was no curriculum or program to follow: just me, a handful of campers and the Hut, all left to find our way together. So, we did. I turned to the work and labor I knew: imaginary play, crafting, storytelling and party-throwing. I asked the campers for input and ideas, and together, despite our motley origins, we all thrived with the help of the Holy Spirit.

The Hut is where I learned that we and our gifts are all linked: the soil, the turtles, the campers, the goats, me, the trees and God. I experienced firsthand how, without the care of humans, the goats, turtles and the pony languished. And how, without them, the campers and I—humans who didn’t fit in at sports ball, horseback riding or ropes courses—also languished. It turned out that we needed each other. We needed to care for and share our talents and beings with one another. We needed to love each other with the love of God, the kind that gives unselfishly, that is patient and kind, that is honest and true, the kind of love that values every living thing as Christ. In that love, we all found belonging: the turtles and goats, me and the campers, the trees and the Spirit.

For Reflection

Is there a ministry in your faith community that is languishing? Is it time to let it die, or is it time to re-imagine it according to the gifts present in your community?



Tuesday, April 1

Whoever can weep over himself for one hour is greater than the one who is able to teach the whole world; whoever recognizes the death of his own frailty is greater than the one who sees visions of angels. —Isaac of Nineveh

I ran away once. I don't remember the reason or the point I was trying to make, but I do remember that I packed a knapsack and hiked into the small stretch of forest that separated our house from a nursing home. Once there, I sat on a large tree stump, with God next to me, for maybe an hour. Then, hungry and bored, I gave up and went home.

I don't think anyone missed me, even though I had tried to time my demonstrative act as close to dinner as possible, thinking someone might notice if I didn't show up for a meal. But I didn't last that long; my family didn't notice, and whatever point I was trying to make that day died along with my frailty in the forest.

I didn't know it then, but what I practiced there on that stump was a kind of spiritual self-reflection. I, God with me, came to the end of myself, to the end of my twelve-year-old will. I recognized at that moment that I was not the center of anyone's world but my own, and therefore, the only attention I would garner at that moment was also my own, which seemed pointless. So, I went home, back into the fray of community and family, back to being a part of a greater whole.

Learning to be honest with ourselves about ourselves is one of the greatest gifts we can give ourselves and those we love. When we, with God's help, through God's presence, reach a place where we can admit without rancor that we are not, in fact, the center of anyone's universe but our own (nor should we be), our place within the larger community becomes a shared gift instead of demand, an honor instead of a right, a joy instead of a burden.

For Reflection

Have you ever experienced the death of your own frailty? What did that look like or feel like? How did it change your participation in your community?



Wednesday, April 2

One cannot simply open his eyes and see. The work of understanding involves not only dialectic, but a long labor of acceptance, obedience, liberty and love. —Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*

There is nothing quite like farm living to teach you about the true essence of each liturgical season, including, or maybe especially, Lent.

Lent is a season for introspection. For repentance. For remembering the wilderness of the soul, for pondering a life without hope. It is a season for simplicity, waiting and preparing. It isn't a 40-day diet, exercise plan, or a chance to become more organized or organic (at last!). Instead, it's a time to peel away the layers of distraction that blur our ability to see the intersection of the holy and the common. On the farm, in this season of Lent, we are keenly at the mercy of Mother Nature and Father Time. It may rain. It may snow. It may freeze. The sun may shine hot and bright. The bulbs might break free from the earth too soon, a snowstorm may shut down all work, the earth may remain hard, and the mud might be hip-deep. The transition from winter to spring is full of false starts and delayed plans.

During this time, I begin to haunt the garden stores for succulents. Over the past few years, these funny rubber plants have become my Lenten icons, a way to bridge the yet-not-yet gap between Epiphany and Easter. These succulents provide little bursts of green scattered throughout the house, and their steady and low-drama existence provides reminders that good things come out of patience and contentment. If I can let my plans and my timing be laid low, setting aside the distractions of what could be and cultivating gratitude and love for what is instead, I might see and understand the goodness of God's timing that much more.

For Reflection

This Lent, consider the upcoming or desired transitions in your life or your faith community's life. How can you cultivate gratitude for what is instead of focusing on what could be?



Thursday, April 3

For what is greater than such a vision, to see the invisible God in a visible human being, his temple? —Life of Pachomius

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

—Jeremiah 29:7

My friend Rachel's Instagram account was called Mixtapes from Babylon, which was also the title of the book she was writing when she passed away unexpectedly. Rachel was not only a dear friend but also a colleague, and she started every new project we worked on by creating a playlist—a modern-day “mixtape”—to inspire us for the work ahead. Rachel, maybe more than anyone, understood that until we as a society learned to be Beloved Community, we would remain in a modern-day Babylon, held captive by the same practices the Bible describes in ancient Babylon, injustices such as hatred, poverty, violence, hunger and bigotry.

Beloved Community, a term popularized by Martin Luther King Jr., refers to the “engine of reconciliation” that will eradicate our captivity, an engine that, for Dr. King, Rachel and hopefully for us, was fueled by the love of Jesus. Rachel's playlists, like her life, were mixtures of hope, joy, righteous anger and calls to action. Like Dr. King, she knew that the only way out of Babylon was by loving Babylon—seeing and responding to the invisible God within each visible human being, caring for the brokenhearted on both sides of the street and fighting against every prejudice and assumption that pits neighbor against neighbor. Rachel knew that the present state of the world does not fulfill the dream God intends for us. She reminded us time and time again—through her words, her mixtapes and her life—that we are each other's keepers, not just because it is the right thing to do but because it is our mandate as Christians, our mandate as the beloved to love as we are loved, in word and action.

For Reflection

What or who is the “Babylon” you have difficulty loving? What word or action can you take this week to practice loving them as you have been loved?



Friday, April 4

Order your soul; reduce your wants; live in charity; associate in Christian community; obey the laws; trust in Providence. —Saint Augustine

Back in the cave-drawing, hunter-gatherer decade of Mommy-blogging, my friend Shannan was known as Flower Patch Farmgirl, and I was known as My Little Life. In those days of yore, Shannan was happy fixing up her farmhouse, and I was happy fixing up my city cottage. And then, we weren't.

God began to whisper strange somethings into the hearts of Shannan and her husband, Cory, about moving into town and over the wrong side of the tracks; at the same time, God began to nudge Nathan and me toward farm life. Eventually, after mountain and valley moments for both families, the Martins moved to the city, certain God had a calling for them there, and the Greers moved to the country, certain God had a calling for them there. And then, after the flurry of moving and building (them) and remodeling (us) and digging in and fervent hopes of seeing God at work and earnest desires for transformation ... crickets. No big revelation. As Shannan later wrote in her book, *Ministry of Ordinary Places*, "We were no longer new. We were just here. The headline had faded. The sparkle dimmed. Our earlier questions—Where are we going? Why are we going? And will we ever fit were replaced with just one: Now what? Surely God did not lead us here to live."

Surely, God did not lead us here to live...those were the same words I whispered under my breath that first year on our farm. Surely, God had a new plan of action for us that would be equally sparkly and important. But instead of sparkles and headlines, what God showed Shannan and me in that season was something akin to what Saint Augustine articulated centuries ago: live a faithful, common life. That is enough.

For Reflection

Sometimes, when seeking God's will—as an individual, household, or faith community—we look for grand plans or fiery bushes. What would it look like to embrace the words of Saint Augustine as "the plan:" Order your soul; reduce your wants; live in charity; associate in Christian community; obey the laws; trust in Providence. How might this view change our common life together?



Saturday, April 5

It feels good to rest after working. —Peter of Celle, *On Affliction and Reading*

Each day during our diocesan summer camp, we have an all-camp “FOB” hour. FOB stands for “flat on bunk,” “flat on the bed,” or “flat on the back,” depending on who you ask. But no matter how you break it down, FOB means naptime, which is not always the most popular camp practice.

“Can’t we just play games as long as we stay in the cabin?” or “Why can’t we go for a walk? That’s relaxing” are just a couple of the “helpful” suggestions that campers offer when complaining about FOB. The most challenging concept to grasp—one the counselors themselves have to learn and then communicate to the campers—is that “FOB isn’t just for you. It’s for the entire community.” FOB is for the camper who is extremely tired but embarrassed to admit it because it isn’t cool. It’s for the camper who has such a strong fear of missing out on the fun that they will run ragged, trying to keep up and then dissolve into tears over a minor misunderstanding. It’s for the leaders who are working harder than they have ever worked and who need a bit of peace and quiet to recalibrate. It’s for the plants in the fields, the chickens in the gardens, the fish in the lake, and the staff in the office who all need a moment to exhale from the wonderful frenetic activity of camp life.

FOB is important for the good of the everyday life of camp; it is important for the entire ecosystem. When we obey God’s command to rest, whether through fasting, naps, silence, solitude or play, we contribute to the rest of the whole. This rest allows God to refill and restore what has been emptied and worn out in all of us.

For Reflection

How do you practice rest in ways that help others in your ecosystem to rest as well?



Monday, April 7

Complaining is the acid that shrivels our own souls and the soul of the community around us as well. —Sr. Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict*

Nothing sends fear like a dagger into the hearts of librarians more than the dreaded monster known as Damp. If you reshelve even one single, lone damp book back in the stacks, it can, over time, infect all the books. Hidden within the stacks, the Damp will turn to mildew, which will expand and reproduce silently, traveling from book to book until someone notices the overpowering smell of mold, and a whole section of infected books has to be tossed in the dumpster.

I think Damp and Complaining are two sides of the same monster. I have seen one damp, bitter, snarky, murmuring complaint have the same effect on a community, spreading the mildew of discord or a spirit of ingratitude, infecting conversations, attitudes and outcomes. When I worked in a library, a damp book was only allowed to be reshelved after it had thoroughly dried out, been inspected and cleared.

Lent is a season that affords us all an opportunity to take stock of our habits and attitudes, including our tendencies to shop our complaints and grumbings around, and to seek instead spiritual practices like silence, stillness and self-control that will reorient us toward the mind of Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and on our lips. This is a moment in our common life when we can stop, repent and begin again, choosing what words we speak and listen to with great intention and care.

For Reflection

Where does complaining show up in your communities? How can you choose or encourage a different approach?



Tuesday, April 8

Offer advice with the deference of humility, and do not presume to defend your point of view obstinately. —Rule of Benedict

Several years ago, our family spent a year attempting to live out as many practices from the Rule of Benedict as possible. We did this partly because I was writing a book on the experiment and because my husband, Nathan, and I felt our family was at a crossroads and needed a reset. We needed to take the time to identify our family's vocation and values and then align our actions. So, we set about incorporating practices such as stillness, silence, service, prayer, fasting and humility into our common life. Some worked, some flopped and some we carry on to this day.

One of the practices we continue is Mutual Listening in the kitchen. Nathan and I clashed in the kitchen for the first half of our marriage. He likes to follow a recipe to the smallest detail, while I prefer to read recipes as suggestions. Nathan goes to the grocery store with a list of ingredients; I open the pantry and make do with what I can find. He dices an onion with precision; I just chop it up. By practicing Mutual Listening in the kitchen, we each need to be willing to listen and learn. We do this by taking turns being "chef" and "sous chef." The primary rule of this Mutual Listening practice was that the sous chef could not critique the chef's directions, recipe or technique and that the chef would not be defensive if the sous chef asked questions for clarification. Instead, each person committed to assume goodwill from the other, chopping, stirring, leading and following from a place of love instead of defensiveness. It took about six months of intentional practice to build the muscles of humility and trust needed to cook side by side as equals, but transformation happened. Funny how that works.

For Reflection

What relationships in your life—at home, church and work—could benefit from an intentional practice of Mutual Listening?



Wednesday, April 9

When God created human beings, he enjoined them to work on created things. —Hildegard of Bingen, *Book of Life's Merits*

It can be easy for writers and readers to romanticize the agrarian life. We love to write and read about the transcendent moments of watching the bees on a sunflower or how a sun-ripened tomato tastes exactly like the love of God without experiencing the sting of the bee or the stain of the tomato juice on a clean white t-shirt. The truth is that rural life is often boring, sweaty, dirty and repetitive. And the more organic your practices, the more creation-honoring approach you employ, the more time it takes. The fewer chemicals you use in a garden, the more weeding you have to do. The more grass-fed you want your livestock to be, the more rotating and moving fences you must do. It is often slow, dirty and repetitive. These are not things I particularly like, but I know they are things my soul needs. I need the transformation that comes from doing what I want to do in theory but don't really want to do in practice. I need the spaciousness in my body, mind and soul that repetition creates, a space that allows the Holy Spirit to speak and move in my heart. I need the garden, the chickens and the seasons. I need to pull weeds, move fences, shell peas, wash eggs and can tomatoes. Again and again and again.

The work of rhythm and repetition is good for all of us—together and alone. This wisdom shows up in our Anglican tradition. Part of the work of liturgy is to create this same kind of spaciousness in all of us. This is why it matters that we show up to the familiar work of the table, singing many of the same songs and praying many of the same prayers, time and time again. When we pass the peace again, break the bread again, repent again, wash each other's feet again, we are doing things that don't take a lot of analytical thought. The movements and words are as familiar as taking a shower or washing dishes. It is here, while our bodies and minds are distracted, that our hearts have the opportunity to open, creating space for the work of the Holy Spirit.

For Reflection

How can you create spaciousness? Is there a chore or a spiritual practice that might help?



Thursday, April 10

We are placed in this world, and it is in and through this world, not by the denial of it, that we shall come to know God. —Esther De Waal, *A Life-Giving Way*

When our eldest child was fourteen, he let us know that he was queer. While in college, he began a committed relationship with a wonderful guy who also happened to be transgender (and who has since become a beloved member of our family). Over the years, our family has continued to grow and change, and now, all four of our children identify as LGBTQ in some way.

Like a lot of mothers, I had expectations for my children's future, most of which were based on my experiences as a cis-gender, straight, white, middle-class woman from the United States.

But as each of our children's unique createdness was revealed, I was presented with a choice. I could cling to my expectations of what their lives—and our common life together—would look like, or I could release my expectations and open my heart and imagination to a new reality, a new world, one populated by my most favorite humans on this planet. Had I denied their truth and clung to my expectations of who or what they would be, I would have spent the rest of my life missing out on the beauty and gifts of who they are. And I would also miss out on the unique manifestation of the Divine—the *Imago Dei*, the Image of God—within them.

Only in and through this world, a world in which my children and your children are their authentic selves, and not by the denial of it, have I begun to understand what it means when we say we believe in a life-giving, loving, liberating God who gives all, gathers all and draws all toward shared wholeness.

For Reflection

Is there a part of your world or life different than you expected? What might you learn about the love and nature of God through this change?



Friday, April 11

Let the brothers, in whatever places they may be among others, serve or work. —Saint Francis

Physically exhaling breath stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, which controls the body's relaxation response. Often, when you hear someone sigh, it's not necessarily a non-verbal commentary on anyone or anything. Instead, it's the body's way of regulating the nervous system and helping them to relax.

Once, during a season of great change for us both, my good friend Marna began to say, "What if it could be easy?" "It" was whatever question we were asking or challenge we faced at that moment. Marna's question wasn't wistful or wishful. Instead, it was a challenge to reorient our expectations. Instead of expecting resistance and negativity, what if we trusted in the abundance of God and flipped our approaches and perspectives? What if, instead of looking at our challenges as mountains too hard to climb, we waited for a clearer path to open before us, trusting that when the time came, we would have all we needed—within ourselves and among our communities—to follow? What if we stopped pushing and cajoling, trying to force and rush the Holy Spirit's timing and showed up to each day faithfully, making dinner, leading worship, picking up kids from baseball, walking the dogs and praying morning prayer until the answers presented themselves? Somehow, the phrase "What if it could be easy?" became a sort of spiritual exhale, a way to practice that old Christian adage, "Let go and let God." It became a way to open my heart and hands to another way I couldn't see on my own.

Over the years, saying this phrase when I feel stymied or overwhelmed has served me well. It helps me work and serve wherever and with whomever I find myself, at whatever pace and with whatever tools are at hand.

For Reflection

Is there a challenge or issue in your life that feels like pushing a boulder uphill? Could you practice this spiritual exhale exercise for the remainder of Lent?



Saturday, April 12

And you shall so announce and preach His praise to all peoples that at every hour and when the bells are rung praise and thanks shall always be given to the Almighty God by all the people through the whole earth.

—Saint Francis, *A Letter to All the Custodes*

My husband gave me a smartwatch for Christmas a few years ago. I had not-too-subtly hinted for the gift, reasoning that having a smartwatch could help me to formally pray the Daily Offices of Morning Prayer, Noonday Prayer, Evening Prayer and Compline. The plan was to set alarms on my watch, reminding me to stop whatever I was doing, open the app on my phone where the Daily Offices lived and pray.

It was a great idea—for someone living a different life than mine. The irregularities and demands of my multi-time zone and travel-heavy work life and the frequent interruptions that come with family life meant that stopping whatever I was doing to pray four times a day was not realistic. Instead, Morning Prayer or Compline became the offices I kept best—and usually only one or the other on any given day. Eventually, all the alarms were turned off, save one. Apparently, the alarm I had set for Noonday prayer is impenetrable. I am not even sure how or where it is programmed. But for the past four years, at 12:14 p.m. each day, a bell on my wrist rings. I wish I could say that I stop and pray each time the bell rings or that I announce and preach Christ's praise, but the truth is most days, I do good to remember to pray, "Thank you, thank you," before I hit the stop button. I am sure if I put more than thirty seconds of effort in, I could figure out how to turn the alarm off permanently. But where would the hope be in that?

For Reflection

What bells are frequent in your life? School bells? Camp bells? Alarms? Maybe you live in a place where church bells ring frequently. Could you begin to hear those bells as reminders to offer prayers of thanksgiving and praise? Is this something your whole community could practice together?



Monday of Holy Week, April 14

In particular this vice is to be rooted out of the monastery: that anyone... have anything at all as his own. —Rule of Benedict

We are now a society that counts our steps and fusses that praying four times daily is too hard. We walk laps around the kitchen at 10 p.m. to make sure we hit our goal for the day while our prayer books and Bibles stay unopened on our nightstands. We hoard “me time” and lose hours to social media. We overschedule ourselves.

In these often hard, strange, dark, confusing and divisive times, the temptation to stay busy and distracted is powerful. But it’s not what we were made for. We were made, like Abraham, to sit in the heat of the day and wait for the Lord. We were made to sit still at the feet of Love and worship together. When the world seems to be coming apart at the seams, it is time to stop all our Doing, counter-intuitive as it is, and begin to practice Being.

Waiting. Silence. Solitude. Stillness. These are not the same as relaxing or being lazy, as Martha suggested to Mary all those years ago. Being still isn’t just a physical act. It is an internal act as well. Stillness and Silence are about being present. Present to God and to each other. They cultivate the humility to say, “This isn’t all about me or what I can do or say; this is about what God is doing among us.”

The spiritual practices of Stillness and Silence can help us become aware that this life is not ours alone; we are part of a greater whole. When we practice Being over Doing, we open ourselves up to what is beyond us—beyond our abilities to fix, mend, solve or do on our own—making space for the wisdom of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of our wider community to lead us toward lasting change.

For Reflection

Part of being in community with others is sharing time and space, often going at a slower pace than we would like. How do you cultivate a posture of humility that allows others to lead?



Tuesday of Holy Week, April 15

God himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race.

—Thomas Merton

Loneliness and isolation hurt whole communities. —Dr. Vivek H. Murthy,
U.S. Surgeon General

Think about your family and your friends. Think about your church, Bible study group, or fellow choir members. Think about your neighborhood, your neighbor, your town. Think about all the arguments, the pettiness, the frustration, the slights and the judgments—big, little and ridiculous—that we have inflicted on each other over time. Now, imagine being able to choose to come to Earth as any creature. Would you choose to come as a human? Would you, by choice, willingly enter a community filled with flawed members who would annoy, hurt, irritate, disappoint and ultimately kill you?

We talk a lot about God becoming one of us, taking on flesh, living a human life and dying a human death. But how often do we recognize that God in Christ chose to come and be annoyed, disappointed and ignored—not just in the three years of his ministry, but for his entire earthly existence—in the same little daily ways that you and I experience? The way of Jesus is not the way of isolation. Jesus's whole life, including his ministry, death and the revelation of his resurrection, happened within the context of community. To live like Jesus, we must live solidly and actively with great intention within community. We must be involved. We must be joiners. We must attend, volunteer and participate in our common life alongside people who sometimes annoy or frustrate us. If we believe we are truly called to share the Good News of God in Christ, we must begin as Jesus began, repairing the fabric of connectedness in our churches, neighborhoods and homes.

For Reflection

Consider this statement: "Our mission, as followers of Jesus, is to work to eradicate aloneness together." Do you agree or disagree? Say more.



Wednesday of Holy Week, April 16

Pray and work. —Saint Benedict

A decade ago, if you had told me that I would begin to crave the feeling of dirt between my fingers in late winter, I would have laughed out loud. Gardening was never my thing. It was Nathan's thing, my mother's thing, my mother-in-law's thing, but not my thing. I was firmly a house person, an indoor sort. I was not a gardener. Until I was.

A line in the General Thanksgiving, a prayer toward the end of an Episcopal eucharistic service, says: "We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life." I have found that the more I garden and want to garden, the more I understand specific prayers and passages of Scriptures. Standing in my living room, reading The General Thanksgiving out loud, windows open, birds chirping, dining room table covered with seed pots and rooster crowing in the yard, I realize that the words are filled with a deeper meaning now that I work to preserve the lives of animals, gardens, trees and children in my care, now that I am harvesting blessing after blessing of fresh eggs, herbs, flowers and copious amounts of vegetables, each of which always comes to me as a sort of miracle. That we plant a seed tinier than a freckle into a mound of dirt, and months later, we are eating an endless meal of tomato sandwiches, so fresh and ripe that the juices run down my chin, is a miracle every time.

This is one of the ways Saint Benedict's motto of *ora et labora*—pray and work—has been made real to me. Work and prayer come together as co-creators in the goodness of creation, in the miracle of planting, tending and harvesting tomatoes, peppers, lettuce and okra.

For Reflection

What does "pray and work" mean to you?



Maundy Thursday, April 17

Preside in order to promote the good of those whom you govern...Provide rather than dominate. –Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Consideration*

In the summer of 2023, a team of Episcopal Church staff, volunteers and consultants hosted a four-day-long festival in Baltimore called “It’s All About Love.” Each night, after the evening revival service, our team would gather in a meeting room to review the notes and plans for the next day, tackling all the things done and left undone, often working late into the night. The second night of the event, perhaps because we were our most exhausted selves, no one remembered to order dinner. Instead, we emptied our hotel mini-fridges and snack stashes in a loaves-and-fishes moment.

The Rev. Marna Franson, serving as a chaplain to the team, spent most of that evening figuring out how to feed us with our limited supplies. For several hours, as we prayed, reviewed schedules and triaged issues that had cropped up, she served us. Paper plates with scoopfuls of cheese spread onto kettle chips, apples sliced with a pocketknife and covered in peanut butter, heated-up Chinese leftovers and bowls of chocolate-covered peanuts continued to appear on the table, nourishing and sustaining us. That night, Marna knew what Jesus knew at the Last Supper: meaningful leadership and systematic change are taxing work. To do it well, we must be nourished and fortified.

The work we are called to as Christ-followers is the same work Jesus asked of the twelve disciples, and it requires collaborative, just and reconciling leadership. It calls for leaders willing to do what it takes to nourish people spiritually and physically, providing, not dominating. We need leaders who prioritize being vulnerable and clear with their people instead of controlling and micromanaging. In the Way of Jesus, we look for leaders who are willing to serve all, who make praying and breaking bread together a priority, and who, in every decision they make, seek the flourishing of all.

For Reflection

Most of us lead in some capacity. We lead in our households, at church, in the workplace and in the public square. How does this picture of leadership challenge or encourage your practice?



Good Friday, April 18

There is a grief that is useful and a grief that is destructive. —Syncretica

Scientists have divided our tears into three categories: reflex tears, continuous tears and emotional tears. The first two categories are the kind of tears that help us remove toxins and debris from our eyes: smoke, onion vapors and dust. Those tears are predominantly made of water and protect our bodies from invasive elements. The last kind, emotional tears, contain different hormones and substances that are particular to the emotional reason we cry.

These tears protect us differently; they help to heal us emotionally and physically. They help us expel the hormones we don't need, and they release the ones we do need. Good Friday seems like an appropriate day to contemplate grief and tears.

We can think about Saint Peter and the grief that led him to deny Jesus three times. We can think of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her grief at the foot of the cross. And we can think of the two thieves, also dying on crosses to the left and right of Jesus. One, in his grief, lashes out in anger and bitterness. The other comes to Jesus with humility and openness. I wonder if the one who opened his heart to love was crying. Could it be that his tears helped heal his spirit while providing comfort to his dying flesh? What about the one who held on to bitterness and doubt? Was he stoic, clinging to his anger, unwilling to let the tears flow, refusing healing and comfort? In this picture, we see a community in pain, with Jesus in the center, and we see two different approaches. One is rooted in vulnerability, the other in control. One has the hope of resurrection; the other sees only despair. There is a grief that is useful and a grief that destroys. Both are a choice.

For Reflection

Is there a point of pain in your life or your community's life? How are you responding?



Holy Saturday, April 19

No one grows simply by doing what someone else forces us to do. We begin to grow when we finally want to grow. —Sr. Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict*

In the film *As Good As It Gets*, the heroine, Carol, says to her mother, Beverly, "Why can't I have a normal boyfriend? Just a regular boyfriend, one that doesn't go nuts on me!" Beverly replies, "Everybody wants that, dear. It doesn't exist."

To me, this is the essence of being human. Each of us, in some way, in some corner of our life, wants to be the exception. We want to draw the lucky straw. We want to slide under the wire of having to experience certain parts of being human.

But here is the thing about a common life: all of us struggle. All of us celebrate. All of us have good days and horrible days. We all want to be loved and give love, even if it scares us. And all of us have choices. No matter where we reside in the world, our position in society, our economic status, our gender or our beliefs about God, we all have choices to make every single day about how we will act and react as members of Creation. We humans can never escape the reality that as complicated, messy, emotional, spiritual and physical beings, our actions and reactions affect others—animals, minerals and vegetables—every single day.

Whether we get better at this or become more loving, kinder, considerate, generous, patient, just, flexible and empathetic in these actions and reactions, well, that is up to us. It's not dependent on our bank accounts, education, churches or families. It depends on us choosing to grow, learn, change and accept what is, with God's help. Here on Holy Saturday, as we wait for resurrection, it is time to decide. Will we grow? Or will we remain where we are, as we are?

For Reflection

As you wait for Easter, consider where and how God is calling you to grow.



Easter Day, April 20

It is solved by walking. —Saint Augustine

Here we are. Today, we can shout the alleluias and celebrate Love's defeat over evil. And we got here the only way we could: walking together, one step, one day at a time.

For me, these words by Saint Augustine are a reminder that the only way to grow, the only way to experience the abundant life we are promised in Christ, the only way to the other side of whatever season we are in is to do the things in front of us, one step at a time. There are no shortcuts to becoming beloved community; there are no express trains to the dream of God. No amount of reading, planning or thinking it over will alone accomplish the urgent, bold and inclusive humanitarian action that reaches those made most vulnerable and builds a better tomorrow. It takes walking the walk that Christ has set before us, one our monastic siblings have modeled for us as individuals and faith communities.

Often, we forget that the only way to Easter, the only way resurrection happens, is through the pain of death. For something new to rise, something old must first end. We must make the choice to either stay behind with the ashes of what was or bravely step into that newness with open hands and hearts, loving our most annoying neighbor, sacrificing our comfort to ensure others feel seen and heard and living and worshiping simply so that those in need have enough. These are just some of the steps that lead to wholeness for all.

For Reflection

Where are you looking for resurrection in your community life? What do you need to let die in order for something new to arise?



MY LENTEN RESPONSE

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In Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, Solomon writes: "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other..." During this season of spiritual reflection and giving, let us walk together as we work toward lasting change in our communities and our world.

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