

February 13 – Fat Tuesday

In Mardi Gras country where I live, Fat Tuesday (which is of course the literal translation of Mardi Gras) is the pinnacle of the wild season of floats, parades and balls. In pre pandemic times, churches often had pancake suppers with contests for who could eat the most pancakes, sausages and pralines. I kid you not. It was like we all had to gorge ourselves with good things because during Lent we would be deprived of all joy and happiness. Now that the worst of pandemic seems behind us, that tradition is rising again. Since Lent is a time to repent of sin and prepare to live better lives, it never made a lot of sense to me to try to sin as much as possible the night before. But that's just me. Today, I invite you to spend some time thanking God for all the joyful abundance of your life. Don't try to gorge yourself. Neither is it usually useful to enter into a spirit of deprivation or scarcity. I once had a parishioner who bade me farewell on Transfiguration and said she would see me on Easter Sunday. "I don't need Lent, Eugenia," she said. "I'm depressed enough as it is." Obviously, that is not the point of Lent. Still the journey can have unexpected turns and challenging awakenings when we enter into it deeply. So today, breathe deeply. Just enjoy the wonder of all that God does for you, your church, community and our beautiful world. Create in your mind a mental parade of all that God has given you and watch it pass by with joy. Knowing that parade is never ending can help us face the challenges of keeping a holy Lent of Letting Go. Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, the fullness of our lives is wonderful indeed. Today we pause to thank you for every blessing. Help us see the journey of Lent that starts tomorrow, with all its space clearing, as a part of that parade of blessing, too. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

February 14 – Ash Wednesday

Today begin by reading Luke 4:1-13. This is the story of Jesus' temptations/testing in the wilderness. Please read this passage, or Matthew's (4:1-11) or Mark's (1:12-13) versions of the story each day during Lent to ground your reflections.

Today I take down my Mardi Gras tree. It is really just my Christmas tree with the ornaments changed out to purple, gold and green butterflies, tinsel and

masks. Masks are a big thing during Mardi Gras. And, truth be told, they are a big thing in our lives as well. We wear dozens of them. Sometimes they are needed. Life doesn't go very well if we express on our faces, or with our words, every thought that comes into our heads. Still, if we wear masks too long, (one's like our happy face, or our angry face, or our able to handle anything face, or our ultra-competent face) we can come to so identify with those masks that we think they are who we really are. Granted, they are a part of who we are. We are happy. We are angry. We are competent. But we are more than that as well. Sometimes the masks' primary role is to keep us and others from seeing who we really are in all of our human complexity. Today I invite you to consider the masks you wear each day. What do they do for you? What do they take from you? Let the Spirit lift one in particular to your mind. Look at it carefully. Where did it come from. What is it designed to hide? Then simply put it down. You might say as a prayer, "I don't need that mask. That's not me. I release it to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluia. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, during this journey of surrender this Lent, thank you for your tender care and wisdom. I know that all you want for me is freedom and love. As I release the masks I habitually wear, help me to see more clearly the me that you love dearly. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

February 15 – Letting God of Self-Indulgence.

During his time in the wilderness, Jesus fasted for many days before his temptations came into stark focus. Fasting for spiritual purposes has a long history in most of the great spiritual traditions. It is not about denial, or weakening the body from lack of food. Fasting is about making space within for new growth and insight. It is about coming to understand our self-indulgences and how much room they take up in our hearts. Fasting helps us understand those things that we do habitually or even addictively and why we do them. Spiritual masters have long understood that self-indulgence can be a potent numbing agent. We can gorge ourselves on all kinds of things, food, drink, hobbies, or even just pastimes. We can indulge in a second bowl of ice cream when we are full or a whole bag of Ruffles when we are anxious. These indulgences are often simply an inappropriate way of managing unpleasant emotions like anger, fear, self-doubt or boredom. Today I invite you to consider your self indulgences. See if you can tell the difference between self-

care or kindness and an indulgence that is actually the opposite of self-care cleverly disguised. Why do you think you choose that indulgence? What emotions are you trying to manage with it? What emotions actually arise as a result of indulging? Let the Spirit lift one specific instance of self-indulgence to mind. Look at it carefully and with supreme gentleness. You might say as a prayer, "I don't need that self-indulgence. That's not me. I release it to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, sometimes I don't know what is good for me. Or if I do I don't always act like it. Help me today to release to you anything that is self-destructive. Fill me instead with the feast of your love. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

February 16 – Letting Go of People Pleasing.

We can't know the specific things with which Jesus wrestled in the early days of his wilderness experience. I have often wondered if, early on, he had to wrestle with the desire to shape himself in a way that was more palatable and pleasing to others. Surely, even this early, he knew that his message would ruffle feathers. More than that, he must have known that it could create a storm of rage and indignation that would be hard to turn around. Yet, in the stories that we have of him, we see very little people pleasing. Kindness? A plenty. Wisdom? A stunning amount. Tenderness? That too. But trying to shape his life and message to please others? Not at all. I cannot say the same of myself. There have been many times when my need to please has harnessed my tongue. There have been many times when my need to please has muddied my boundaries and made self-care a pipe dream. What Jesus helps us see is that when we measure everything we do by how we think it will be perceived, we probably will never be true agents of change or ushers of the kingdom. Today, take a moment to think about your tendency to 'package yourself' in order to please others. I'm not talking about actions you take from genuine love in order to bring joy or to lift others up. I'm talking about actions you take, or do not take, out of fear of rejection, judgment or being seen as faulty. Invite the Spirit to show you a specific incidence when you molded yourself out of shape to please others. Why did you do it? What did you need that you thought you could not get otherwise? Look at that tendency carefully and gently. When you are ready, you might say as a prayer, "I don't need to

please everyone around me. That's not me. I release it to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, help us to remember today that you have created us and we are beautiful in your sight just as we are. Create within us a spirit of love so strong that we can simply be who we are without fear or recrimination. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

February 17 – Letting Go of the Tyranny of the Urgent

Surely during those long hungry days in the wilderness, Jesus must have thought of thousands of things that urgently needed doing. Perhaps the orders were backed up in his carpentry shop. Perhaps he had agreed to speak at the Temple. Perhaps his mother had given him a list of things to do a mile long. Perhaps he had heard of someone who needed his healing touch. Perhaps he was driven to be in worship and learn from the other rabbis. It would be natural. Whenever we find ourselves in a moment of spiritual transition or transformation, we too can find our minds cluttered with other things that seem more urgent. We have a deadline at work. Supper doesn't cook itself. Our child or grandchild needs to be picked up from school. Our library book is due and we haven't finished it. Others need our help and they need it right this minute. All of those things are perfectly true and important. Still, not everything that feels urgent is actually, in this moment, urgent. Some things would even benefit from our taking a pause to breathe deeply and sort the important from the crucial. Today, I invite you to pause and release the tyranny of your personal urgencies. Take a moment to think about your duties or desires. Is there anything that cannot wait for five minutes? If so, do that immediately! If not, take a look at what seems so crucial and ask yourself whether it is important, urgent or maybe not all that important at all. Why do you drive yourself in this way? What does being ruled by the urgent numb you to? What does it protect you from? Does it really? If you find that things are not quite as urgent as you thought, take a deep breath and release them one by one. You can always pick them back up again at their time. When you are ready, you might say as a prayer, "I don't need that urgency. That is not me, Lord. I release it to you. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, help me today to order my priorities in a sane and gentle way, trusting that you will deal with what is urgent and I can rest in your provision. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

February 18 – Letting Go of Busy-ness

Yesterday we thought about the way that the seemingly urgent demands of life can skew our thinking and leave us stuck and unable to set healthy priorities. In a related way, never stopping can leave us spiritually stuck and emotionally and physically exhausted. In the beautiful story of Jesus visiting his friends Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42) in which Mary sits to learn with the men while Martha is wrung out trying to manage all the household duties involved with entertaining a special guest and his entourage, Jesus wisely tells Martha that Mary has chosen a better path. Why? I think it was because Jesus saw that what Martha was 'doing' was 'doing her in.' Why? Had her duties become a substitute for her real life? Had her many obligations kept her so frazzled that she never took the time to deepen her faith? Was she always going to get around to learning scripture or prayer when the laundry was done or the living earned? We, too can use our busy-ness as a way to avoid going deeper in our faith. We can use our busy-ness as a way to protect our egos and to make ourselves indispensable. Surely in the wilderness, Jesus must have ruminated on all that he was not getting done and yet he stopped. He took time to just stop, to create space in the busy-ness of life for a deepening sense of his mission and a careful refining of his character. God calls each of us to that same kind of Sabbath stopping. When we let go of our busy-ness, what we often find behind it all is a powerful presence of Love, ready to hold us, mold us, heal us and turn our attention toward the next right thing. I invite you today to stop for a little while. Just stop. Stop long enough to feel any discomfort that may arise in you. Allow that discomfort to be what it is. It will rise and pass away. Imagine all of your busy-ness as a parade of little boats on a stream. Notice each one but don't jump on board. Let the flow take them downstream. As you watch them pass, you might say in prayer, "I don't need that busyness in order to be worthwhile. It's not me. I release it to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, help me today to live mindfully and peacefully. Show me where my busyness gets in the way of living my fullest life in you and help me to release what I do not need to do, trusting you for all outcomes. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

February 19 – Letting Go of Carrying a Painful Past

It may be hard for us to think of carrying the wounds of the past as something that Jesus needed to relinquish, but I imagine that it was. Scandal had followed him from even before his birth. Had Joseph been more of a stickler for the Law, Mary could well have been executed when her pregnancy was revealed. The scandal surely affected Joseph's business and his standing in the community. Mary was, no doubt, a pariah. As Jesus himself grew, the scandal followed him and his every action was scrutinized through that lens. Wasn't he the kid who scared his parents by running away to the Temple? Didn't he hang out with the wrong crowd? Didn't he act really strangely just last week at his baptism? Carrying the internal burden of those painful moments in his life could certainly have hampered his mission. If he carried that baggage he might have had less compassion for those who had hurt him or even his parents. The memories of the old hurts and shame might have taken up too much energy inside himself, so much that he might have missed opportunities that were crucial for his mission. That is certainly true for many of us. When we carry around the internal load of our painful memories it can, not only sap our strength and truncate our mission, it can also lie to us about others and ourselves. The ones who hurt us become objects of scorn and we can begin to hope that they will suffer for it. On top of that, we can begin, secretly, to believe that we deserved what we got and heap more shame and abuse on ourselves pulling the scab off the wound over and over again. Either way, the God, who asks us to cast our care upon Jesus, asks us to remember that our wounds neither define us nor the ones who have hurt us. I invite you today to remember a wound you sustained in the past that has never fully resolved in you. Look at it carefully, if it is not too painful. Look at it from a distance. You are no longer in that situation. You can safely observe it without danger of further harm. Why has this memory lingered so long? Do you feel mostly anger about this incident? Sadness? A sense of broken trust? Shame? When those feelings arise, let them pass away on their own. As those feelings pass away, you may find that the space left behind by them will feel gentler and much more compassionate. When you are ready, to release this memory and its pain, in a spirit of prayer say, "I don't need that pain. That's not me. I

release it to you, Lord. I am making space for Alleluias. Thank you.” Close your reflection by saying aloud, *“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you.”*

Prayer: Dear God, sometimes we collude in our own pain by carrying hurtful memories too long and too fiercely. Help us today to let go of the old pain we no longer wish to carry. Fill the spaces left behind with your healing grace and forgiveness. In Jesus’ holy name we pray. Amen.

February 20 – Letting Go of Unrealistic Expectations

Surely, in those early days in the wilderness, Jesus was filled with all of the images and expectations about who Messiah would be and what Messiah would do with which he had been trained. Yes, there was a strain in Israel’s history of Messiah as suffering servant, but it was far from the dominant one. The hope of Messiah was that he would be the mighty war hero who would raise an army, route Rome and insure that the promises made to Abraham and Sarah were once again realized in the land. In Jesus’ time of hunger and heightened spiritual sensitivity in the wilderness, did the Spirit encourage Jesus to take a look at the expectations of his tradition and release them so that he could be the Messiah we needed and not necessarily the one we expected? If so, I am sure that letting go of those expectations was no easier for him than letting go of our expectations is for us. Do you harbor any expectations that, upon reflection, are probably unrealistic for your life? Does the inner you (who still feels about 32 but is closer to 72) still harbor the expectation of Olympic Gold or a Pulitzer Prize? Or is it subtler than that? Do you expect your family and friends to agree with you or at least to be persuaded by your erudite arguments? Do you expect to keep your house perfectly? Do you expect your business to never suffer a downturn? Do you expect that new tube of makeup you bought on line to actually substitute for a scalpel? Do you expect gratitude from those that you seek to serve? Do you expect the church to look like the inner church of your dreams with bursting pews and angelic choruses? One of the things that is wily about expectations is that the more we cling to them the more likely we are to miss what God is actually doing in the moment. What God is actually doing is always more winsome, beautiful and well suited to our needs than our imagining. Today I invite you to pause for a moment and think of expectations that you hold that may be unrealistic. (This is not, of course, to deny that God does miracles. In my experience, however, those miracles are rarely actually

expected.) Consider your expectations. Do any of them consume too much energy or leave you dissatisfied and feeling unfulfilled? How would it feel to let go of some of those expectations? What would you lose? What would you gain? When you are ready, choose one or two expectations to release to God's safe keeping. You might pray, "I don't need that false image of myself. That's not me. I release it to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, I thank you for the capacity to look forward in holy expectation of good things that you always bring. Help me today to let go of any expectations that are not of you and not for the good of all. Use my newly freed heart today to rejoice in each moment as it comes. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

February 21 – Letting Go of Self-Doubt and Indecision

To come to realize that, as revealed at his baptism, Jesus was God's beloved son and God was well pleased with him, must have taken a bit of reflection. Just because the church claims that Jesus was sinless, does not mean that he never made a mistake, missed an opportunity or hit his finger with a hammer in his carpentry shop and expressed his displeasure! Even if he did none of those things, even a casual reading of the gospels shows us that he learns and grows as his ministry progresses. A woman with a sick child changes his mind by her arguments. (Mark 7:24-29) He learns that he can't trust all the ones who show initial enthusiasm as he leans forward for Judas' kiss of betrayal. (Mark 14:43-50) At this early point in his story, when all of those instances lie in his future, he must surely have wondered if he was really the One. If he was really the Right One. He must have wondered if he could really make the decisions that were called for and if he could trust the decisions that he made. Perhaps one of the Spirit's tasks before the devil shows up with his wily ways, was to help Jesus come to trust himself and his decisions. To do that he had to let go of any powerful self-doubt that his human nature might have raised in him. Otherwise the cross would have been insurmountable. Self-doubt and indecision can leave us vacillating and immobilized in our lives as well. Whether it is wondering about a major purchase, or whether we can handle a new job, or whether our parenting decisions are sound, or whether it is safe to resume life in a pandemic changed

world, we too can get stuck, afraid that any decision we make will be the wrong one.

Just as the Spirit was with Jesus in the wilderness, so too the Spirit is with us today. In that sense we are not alone in our decision making and indeed, relatively few decisions are irreversible. Today I invite you to consider any decisions with which you are struggling. Why are you struggling? Do you need more facts or just more confidence? If the later, take a moment to imagine your self-doubt as a stone in your shoe. Imagine taking off your shoe and removing the stone. Ask yourself where it came from. How did you acquire it? Look at it from all angles and prayerfully say, "I don't need to doubt myself and stay stuck. That's not me. I release it to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Dear God, sometimes indecision and self-doubt make us miserable and leave us useless to you and others. Today we release those feelings and trust in your guidance in all things. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

February 22 – Letting go of Self-Defeating Patterns of Thought

Perhaps this tendency was not one with which Jesus wrestled. Although we can imagine that in the Garden of Gethsemane when he begged his friends to pray with him, and his father to relieve him of the burden of what was surely coming, he might have been stuck in a loop of fearful thoughts about suffering and death. Many of us get stuck in those kinds of loops too. We go over and over a possible negative outcome to a situation. We second guess everyone and their motives. Our inner dialogue can be as simple as "I'm getting weaker." "I'm afraid my money won't last as long as I do." "He is cruel and will never change." "She only cares about herself." "The country is on a downhill slide." "There is no hope." There is no end to the list of negativities that we often entertain in our minds every day. The apostle Paul reminds us that the route to true salvation is by changing the way we think. He says that we are transformed by the renewing of our minds. (Romans 12:12) What most of us have learned in our lives is that what we think about is what rules us. What we think about obsessively creates our life. It takes a concerted long term determination to break the hold of negative thought patterns on our lives. It is hard, especially when those around us are locked in negativity as well. Even if that is not the case, the world in which we live certainly gives more air time to our bad news than our good news. What we give attention to is what grows.

Today, pause for a moment and ask God to show you any negative thought patterns that you may not even notice anymore. Look at that pattern carefully. What are its roots? Who taught it to you? What does it seek to hide or to protect you from? To release these patterns of thought is not a one time thing. It requires a choice to turn from them every day. If you are ready to start, prayerfully say, "I don't need those thoughts. That's not me. I release it to you, Lord. I am making space for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Dear God, in every moment and in all things, turn my mind and heart toward you. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

February 23 – Letting Go of the Fear of Being Alone

It is hard for me to imagine that Jesus ever wrestled with the fear of being alone. After all, he was a constant part of the God head which is, as the heart of the Trinity teaches us, always and ultimately about relationship. But when I look at Jesus in his agony in Gethsemane, when he begs his friends to stay awake with him and pray, I wonder if in his humanness he shared a bit of the fear of being alone that many of us feel from time to time. What lies behind that fear, or at least that discomfort? Is it that we feel fearful that something might happen that we could not handle on our own? Is it that we do not really enjoy our own company? Is it that we sometimes use the presence or demands of others to give shape and meaning to our lives and we don't know how to allow that shape and meaning to arise from within us? Do we just love the people in our lives so much that when they are gone we grieve? Is it that we have allowed our relationships to be our true north, the set point toward which everything else points, to such an extent that our inner compass is skewed without them and we can't find our way home? Do we just need the simple support of a loving sounding board when all around us seems to be coming apart at the seams? Maybe a bit of all of that. At any rate, whatever drives us, just as with Jesus, the Spirit knows that time apart and alone creates a kind of spiritual alchemy that allows different elements of our lives to come into focus, combine and become a new whole. One of the great movements of the spiritual life is from loneliness to solitude. Loneliness is filled with fear and absence. On the other hand, solitude is filled with Presence and movement. There can sometimes be anguish in solitude because pain and loss are a part of who we are and that becomes clear in solitude, but, there is rarely

a sense of abandonment or devastation. Rather, solitude emerges as solid and trustworthy and filled with consolations. Today, I invite you to consider whether or not you are fearful of being alone. What do you think lies at the heart of that fear? Try to find a space of time in the day when you can go apart and actually be alone. What is the mind chatter that dominates at first? How does it feel in your body? If fears arise, or even discomfort, then just notice that. You don't need to engage with it or fix it. In prayer, take those fears to God and say "I don't need that fear. That's not me. I release it to you, Lord. I am making space for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, you are ever present with us and we are grateful. Help us today to make spaces to release our fears and to rest in your abiding presence. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

February 24 - Letting Go of Shame

Earlier we considered what it would be like to let go of the pain in our pasts. Now it is time to consider letting go of the shame that can sometimes accompany our hurts. Shame is not the same as guilt. Guilt is a feeling of sorrow, or even horror and regret, over something that we have done that was wrong and had negative consequences. Guilt, while never easy to deal with, can be dealt with through confession and sometimes reparations. Shame, on the other hand is the deep, often unnamed, feeling of sorrow, not for what we have done, but for who we are. Shame is what happens when we come to feel that we are somehow defective at our core. This, too, can be dealt with but it is harder and often less straightforward because it is often not specific. Nor is it something that has a fix like confession or reparation. Dealing with shame is a process of releasing the layers of lies about ourselves and finding beneath those layers what is true and beautiful. While Jesus surely felt hurt in his journey, there is no indication that he ever felt shame. But we do, and if we are to embrace our lives and missions then that shame is often must be released so that it does not define or confine us. Take a moment today to consider whether or not you feel any shame about yourself, not guilt for wrong actions, but rather a general sense that you are somehow wrong, that you are broken or unfit, just because you are you. If you can identify any of that, ask yourself where is the root of that feeling. Does a particular instance come to mind? Take a moment to look at that incident. Don't re-inhabit it. Just observe it. It is of the past and cannot hurt you anymore. Just notice. When you are ready, in

prayer say "I don't need that shame. That's not me. I release it to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, help us today to release any shame that holds us captive and lies to us about your never ending love for us. Heal us that we may be your healers in the world. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

February 25 – Letting Go of Meeting Your Needs in Wrong Ways –

After his Spirit led days of fasting in the wilderness, during which Jesus was tempted in general ways, the devil approached him with specific tests. Remember that in the Bible when we talk about 'the devil' we are talking about more than Satan. The devil is a representation of all that seeks to divert us from the path of life, love and faithfulness. Whether we think of him as a personified creature like a fallen or rebellious angel, or as an amalgamation of broken human tendencies that coalesce to do evil, the devil never has our best interest at heart. This is true even when the tests or lures seem to give us what we want or need. A key to identifying the devil is lies. The devil always lies and produces more lies. These lies can be especially alluring when we are weakened or needy. It is always our hungers that the devil attacks first, whether that it for love, security, acclaim, safety or sustenance. It is interesting in Jesus' testing that the devil begins by enticing him to meet a real need, food, by an immoral means. The devil tempts Jesus to demonstrate that he is the Son of God by turning a stone into a loaf of bread. This was a test of the ego. Would he do what the devil suggested and thereby meet both his need for food and to declare his special status? Jesus refused but maybe sometimes we don't. Can you think of a time when you took a sketchy short cut to get something you wanted or needed? Can you think of a time when you put your values in your back pocket in order to look good to someone else? In what areas are you most prone to unholy compromise in your life? Where are your temptations strongest? What is it that you are really trying to get if you succumb to those temptations? Take a moment to think of an example of when you tried to meet a hunger in your life the wrong way. What happened? What did you learn about your go to tendencies to short cuts? When you are ready, take those tendencies to God in pray saying, "I don't need that short cut. That's not me. I release it to you Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you. Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters,*

I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."

Prayer: Gracious God, help us today to live mindfully. Remind us that you meet our needs and we need look no further than you for our sustenance.

February 26 – Letting Go of Easy Answers

When the devil confronted Jesus with the route to meet his need for bread and to display his true identity, he did that, as he often still does, by offering Jesus easy answers to a complex situation. Yes, Jesus was famished but his hunger was purposeful. He had been sent to it by the Spirit. Was it time to break his fast? If it had been the Spirit would have offered food no strings attached. Was it time for Jesus to test his powers to get what he wanted or needed? He didn't think so. Jesus rightly knew that to say yes to the devil's challenge would mean accepting an easy answer to a very complex problem. Sometimes we are tempted in the same way. We have a worthy goal or a legitimate need and yet route to meet that goal or need seems too long and arduous. Isn't there an easier way to meet our needs, we wonder. Isn't there some trick or key to fill our hearts, meet our hungers, fill our pews? The desire for an easy way to meet our needs leads to many a corrupt practice, broken relationship or shallow faith practice. Easy answers can sometimes come in the form of platitudes or old beliefs that stop us from going deeper. When we find ourselves looking for an easy way out of our situations, especially if those situations have been Spirit led in the first place, it is rarely the guidance of the Spirit to which we are turning. One of the favorite wiles of the devil is the lure of the easy, pain free, effortless answer. Can you think of a time when you may have felt drawn to an easy answer to a complex problem? Can you think of a time when you tried to get a deep hunger filled by a wrong means? If you can think of an instance, what was the hunger really? What did you choose to do to meet that need? How did that work out? When you are ready, see if you can identify a theme or easy platitude that you turn to when you feel swamped by your needs. Take this to God in prayer saying, "I don't need that too easy answer. That is not me. I release it to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you. Close your reflection by saying aloud, "*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you.*"

Prayer: Gracious God, only in you and in your way do we find the answers we seek. Only in you are our hungers met. Help us today to accept no substitutes. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

February 27 – Letting Go of the Need to Win

Years ago after the University of Alabama's legendary football coach, Bear Bryant, retired and died six months later, Bama's football program entered into a period of turmoil and languishing. We lost a lot of games and an almost equal number of head coaches. During that period, to my chagrin, I learned that it was not actually football that I liked. It was winning. In one way or another most of us like to win. Whether it is an argument around the supper table, a candidate at the polls, an award at work, or simply being chosen as a partner in life. We are built with the desire to win on some level, or at least to be right and worthy. The problem comes when our desire to win becomes out of hand competitiveness that really doesn't care about much of anything but being better than someone else. The desire to win can sometimes carry the desire for affirmation, the longing to be singled out as special, more special, most special. It is perfectly natural and a good thing to desire to be recognized for sharing ones gifts lavishly and well. It becomes a problem when the motivation behind the sharing is to somehow be a cut above others. This is a hard temptation to address in our culture where competitiveness and exceptionalism are built into the fabric of our way of life. It is not built into the fabric of the kingdom, however, and therein the problem lies. That need can lead to some pretty awful places. It can wreck relationships, communities and nations. When winning is everything then others become nothing. They only serve the purpose of our winning. In the wilderness, did Jesus have to face his need to best the devil? Probably not. It doesn't seem that it was in his nature although he certainly worked hard at winning some of his most enduring rabbinical debates. Still, whether Jesus wrestled with this one or not, many of us do from time to time. This is especially true in divided times when we all have sides and stick with them even if it kills us. Can you think of a time when winning or being right became a problem for you? What was the outcome? Have you ever been on the receiving end of someone else's need to win or be right at your expense? What was that like? If you can sense the capacity for out of control competitiveness that harms you or others, take that to God in prayer saying, "I don't need to always win. That's not me. I release that to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because*

you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."

Prayer: God of grace help us today to release any out of hand competitiveness that hampers our lives and relationships. Increase in us the certainty that we are all one, all loved and you are our source of life and esteem. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

February 28 – Letting Go of Perfectionism

We all want to be the best version of ourselves. We want to live true and authentic lives filled with love, joy, peace, compassion and security. Mercifully, much of the time with the help of the Spirit we are able to do that. One of the quickest ways I know of drawing away from our best selves and lives is to fall into the trap of perfectionism. This can be tricky because a spirit of perfectionism can easily masquerade as dedication to excellence. Those are not the same thing, but they can look like the same thing sometimes. Perfectionism is the driving desire to insist that we, those around us, and even our environment must meet our standards of perfection at all times. If they do not then we can feel that we or they are broken or worthless. Or at least incomplete and a source of anxiety rather than gratitude. Spiritually speaking, perfectionism has its roots in a confusion about who is God and who is not. Lost in perfectionism we unconsciously come to believe that we are responsible, in control and masters of our own universes. When we, or that which we try to control, do not comply we are distraught and miserable. It can be no other way because in reality we are not our own creators. We are not masters of the universe. We can barely master our own reactions on a good day. Thinking that we should be able to live our lives or even moments perfectly is a sure way to misery. Especially because perfection is a perpetually a moving target. We desire the perfect home, get it just like we want it, and suddenly find that we think it is not right at all. We want to make a perfect presentation and work on it until we can hardly think of anything else and when we pause a beat too long on one fact, we beat ourselves up for days. We want to create a perfect loving family life and obsess about each detail only to come unglued at the breakfast table and throw the pancakes across the room. Perfection is not ours for the grabbing. Perfectionism is thinking that it is. Now, granted, the scripture tells us the Jesus calls us to 'be perfect as our father in heaven is perfect.' That is an unfortunate translation that has led to millennia of pain and sorrow. The word used there is not the word for 'without flaw.' It is the word for wholeness, or completeness. Jesus

wants us to live as the whole and complete creatures that we are, just as the God does. Wow. We are not asked to be flawless. We asked to fully be who we are. Can you identify a tendency to perfectionism in yourself? Do you deride yourself mercilessly for your failings? Do you rarely feel satisfied with the way things are? Do you rarely feel satisfied with the way you are? Has perfectionism had an effect on your relationships or well-being? If so, changing this pattern may be a challenge but it can be done. When you are ready, take a moment to quiet your heart and mind and go to God in prayer saying, "I do not need this perfectionism. It is not me. I release it to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, we are so grateful that you love us just as we are. Help us, today, grounded in your love, to live wholly and completely. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

February 29 – Letting Go of Transactional Prayer

Often, before I even get out of bed, I begin my day by praying for my two precious granddaughters. My prayers for my granddaughters often are very specific. "Please God, keep them safe. Do not let the family get covid. Make sure that they wear their jackets. Don't let them get stung by a bee. Please find them a house they can afford. Don't let the girls be bullied at school. Don't let them become bullies. Please let them come for a visit this year." Those dear prayers, I am certain God relishes and honors. There is, however, another way to pray. It is a way that is not as fraught with drama or confusion when answers are different from requests. Most of the prayers we pray are transactional in nature. Dear God please do this or that for us or others. Heal someone. Comfort someone. Find a job for someone. Take someone off a destructive path. Those kind of prayers. They are wonderful intimate prayers. They are always prayers that are framed by our own perceptions of what is right and best for ourselves and others. Sometimes we do not know what is right and best. Sometimes we have no idea what God is up to. Sometimes we really just want God to hop to and do what we want. Sometimes we want God to be like a fortune teller at a carnival where we drop in a coin and receive a card that says you have been granted three wishes. Mercifully God is not as much transactional with us as relational. In the mystery of God's grace when our transactional prayers align with the greatest good for all involved, they are met with the kind of yeses that we recognize and celebrate. Other times

when the outcomes do not come as we intend or desire, God still answers with the great yes of accompaniment. Sometimes when I don't have a clue as to what is right and best for those I love, or for myself, I pray in a visual way. I imagine the person as a beautiful small pottery cup. Then I see in my mind's eye, God filling that cup with all the goodness and love that God has ever felt for that person. The cup completely overflows with that limitless grace. In those times my prayer is no longer transactional. I am not asking for something. I am witnessing something. I am in the midst of something. A part of something that God is already and always doing. This type of prayer, at least for me, brings a profound sense of joy and fulfillment because it bypasses my ego almost completely. If you would like to release the idea, for just a moment, that prayer is primarily transactional, I invite you to go to God now, as an empty vessel. One by one release your worries or needs. You might say, "I don't need you to do anything for me that you are not already doing. I release all need to you, Lord. I am making space for Alleluias. Thank you." Then hold your empty heart up to God and watch the love pour in and fill you to the brim. Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, I open my heart and life to you today. Fill me with all the best that you have for me and do the same for all those I love. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

March 1 – Letting Go of Using God's Name in Vain

In God's foundational communication with God's people, the Ten Commandments, God asks us to respect our relationship with God and never to trivialize it or use God as a tool to accomplish ends that God does not intend and that often simply reinforce our own broken ego. To assume that God loves only what we love, and hates all that we hate, is the height of arrogance and is a vanity drenched misuse of God's name. When the devil confronted Jesus with his first specific test, at its heart it was the lure to use God's name, God's power, as a means to an end that was not in accord with either Jesus' values or God's will for him in that moment. Rather than a word encouraging us to stop cursing, the command not to use God's name in vain is about the nature of our relationship with God. Do we trivialize that relationship by attaching God's name to things that are contrary to God's values? Do we vainly use the name to try to get what we want with little thought to the greatest good for all involved? Do we want to turn stones to bread as a magic trick that keeps God

on a string to be manipulated to meet our needs or make us look powerful? Sometimes we do. Jesus, however, refused to bite that hook. With awareness we can refuse as well. Today, notice all of the ways that you use God's name, either aloud or in your mind. Do you notice a tendency in yourself to trivialize the name, to speak it with little thought or respect? Do you notice that you go to God with requests that do not really align with who you know God to be and what you know God to value? Do you find that you speak of God in a manipulative way? If so, each time you notice that, pause and pray, "I don't need to trivialize you, God. That is not me. I release that tendency to you, Lord. I am making space for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, help me today to worship you rightly and never take you for granted. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

March 2 – Letting Go of Money as Security

The powerful 20th century theologian/philosopher Jacques Ellul once said that the idolatry of money was the central idolatry of the 20th century. Nearly a quarter of the way into the 21st, not much has changed in that regard. Money still rules many of our choices. Often it even rules choices that God alone should rule. We may check our stock portfolio's obsessively to see 'how we are doing.' We may agonize over a major purchase as if our lives depended on it. We may feel dissatisfied with our lives depending on how our bank accounts look. We may live in fear of the next bill or invoice because we feel not only that we lack resources to meet our basic needs, but that *we*, therefore, are lacking in and of ourselves. In the years of raising a family we may feel insecure as parents if we can't purchase a home or start a college fund. In retirement years we may lie awake at night fearful that we will outlive our savings. In each of those situations, at least a part of us, has placed our security and wellbeing in our wealth. Just like for some of us who were alive in the sixties, in Jesus' day 'bread' was often used as a synonym for money. In the Lord's prayer 'our daily bread' was about our total provision, not just about lunch. In the wilderness, when the devil tempts Jesus to turn a stone into bread, we can think of that temptation as the temptation to do whatever it takes to create wealth and security. Jesus refused to use unholy means to do that. Mercifully, most of the time, most of us, refuse to do that as well. But still, many of us do find ourselves confusing our money with our security. We even use the word security to describe some of our assets. The problem is that,

while in some ways, money is the bread of life, it is never our source of security ultimately. It cannot be. It is a thing, a resource, not a god, even if we often serve it as if it were God. When we are not in actual lack, we still often let our need for financial security take an undue place in our lives, eating away at our energy, our relationships and our real spiritual longings. Today, ponder the role of money in your life. Does having enough, or fear of not having enough, have an effect on your emotions? Does money fear ever leak into your relationships? How does it affect them? Do you sometimes feel ruled by your financial state? If so, today, I invite you to notice these emotions. When you feel a sense of fear or lack around money or provision, pause and in prayer tell God, "I don't need this fear. It is not me. I release it to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God we thank you for enough for today. Help us to rest in your bounty. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 3 – Letting Go of Spent Habits and Traditions

Yesterday I spoke with a colleague who is a pastor of a small church of 20 members in an area where potential for growth seems limited. Still, the church is vibrant, loving and the members are committed to each other. Apparently they have less commitment to the kinds of changes that might make their outreach more effective. One of the elders told my friend (which is what initiated our conversation) that they "only wanted to reach out to mature Christians who knew how to do things the right way." My friend was aghast. She pressed her dear elder for just what 'the right way' looked like. She hemmed and hawed but the long and short of it was that it had to do with flowers, music, Bible translation, and worship times. My friend and I just held the phone in silence with that for a few moments. We knew the feeling. And we knew the barb on the end of that hook. Each of us knows the power that we can invest in our beloved traditions and how hard it can be to know when the line has been crossed from holy habits to idolatry. As anyone who has ever failed to dead head a garden painfully knows, if things that are spent are not removed they can suck all the life out of what remains. Now, of course, the problem is not flowers and the worship hour. The problem is the power we invest into those things. This is true not just in our church life. It is true in our personal lives as well. We have habits and traditions that to tamper with can cause emotional havoc in us. My cousin, wept to me of fatigue, after working

her fingers to the bone on Thanksgiving. She had stayed up most of the night to prepare 8 separate side dishes because her grown children were coming home and it would “not be Thanksgiving without those dishes.” I asked her if she had to do them all. With tears in her eyes she said, “I don’t know which ones are unnecessary.” Maybe the habits and traditions that can cause us problems are not quite like that, but most of us have a sense of things needing to be done the right way. Take a moment today to ask yourself what habits or traditions have begun to rule your life. How important are they in the grand scheme? Do these things give to you, or take from you? What would it feel like to release them with thanks and see what fills in the spaces left behind? If you can identify one or two habits or traditions that you want to begin to release, (it is a process!) imagine that tradition clearly in your mind. Feel all that you feel about it and about releasing it. Then go to God in prayer saying, “I don’t need that. It is not me. I release it to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you.” Close your reflection by saying aloud, *“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you.”*

Prayer: Gracious God, sometimes we lose you and the thread of your grace by clinging to things that no longer serve us or others. Help us today to hold our certainties with an open hand and release to you anything that holds us back from the fullness of our lives. In Jesus’ holy name we pray. Amen.

March 4 – Letting Go of Anger

Sometimes when we do the spiritual work of letting go, our first response is tearful relief. Sometimes, however, it is seething anger. After all, we have each constructed our lives in a way that we think serves our goals and values. The problem is that we don’t always know what those goals and values really are because we have adapted them from others expectations of us or our own need to survive difficulty. Sometimes, too, if we have experienced a lot of pain, abuse or rejection in our lives, our coping strategies have served as scabs over wounds. We think those scabs will protect us from reinfection or bleeding out. At first they do just that. But after a while all they do is keep the wounds underground where they cannot easily be brought into the healing light. Nine times out of ten when we experience anger it is because something or someone has knocked off a scab that we think we cannot survive without. The wounds underneath our anger are as many and diverse as there are moments in our lives. But when those wounds are touched the reaction is common to most of us. Granted, we may feel, express or repress anger in different ways,

still it is always there in each of us. It is God given. We even see examples of God and Jesus feeling and expressing anger. Surely when the devil tempted Jesus, he must have felt anger. Yet he did not allow it to derail him. Anger is intended as a release valve, a way of using energy to return to balance. The problem comes when anger is misplaced, misused or becomes an addiction that numbs us to what is really going on with us. For example, perhaps we feel a chronic insecurity about our abilities and our boss calls us down unfairly. We can't defend ourselves, or don't think we can, so we seethe the rest of the day then come home and kick the dog who jumps up on us in excited greeting. We just can't take being jumped on one more time. While anger can be a rational motivator in the presence of injustice, it is rarely an avenue for redressing injustice. Kicking the dog will do nothing but increase the pain and turn anger inward where it can fester until the wound is touched again. Today, think about what triggers your anger most often. I suspect there will be some things that 'get you every time.' Maybe it is when you are challenged and it takes you back to situations when you did not feel seen or heard as a child. Maybe it is when you are shamed and it takes you to deeply held feelings of inferiority. Maybe it is when you see others being hurt or abused, or when you can't seem to achieve a goal you have set for yourself, or when you are interrupted repeatedly, or when you hear the voice of a political opponent, or when the faucet won't stop leaking. It can be anything. Choose one area in which you feel like your anger is not helpful. Look at it carefully. Why do you think this situation triggers you so powerfully? What is the wound it has touched? Is anger the best way to respond to that wound? If not, go to God in prayer saying, "I do not need this anger. It's not me. I release it to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, help me today to live in peace, to release hostility and to find in its place the healing I really need. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 5 – Letting Go of Lies that Make Us Feel Better, but are Still Lies

When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, he came face to face with the Father of Lies, the devil. The insidious thing about the devil is that he can make lies look attractive and like good common sense. God tells us in the Ten Commandments not to bear false witness. God is not talking about lying in general. God is first and foremost talking about not lying in court. God knew

that human community could not survive without a bedrock trust in the judicial system. Still, lying, in general, *is* discouraged in the Bible and Christian tradition. There are a number of nuances to that discouragement, for example to save a life. Still, our faith family knows that lying diminishes us and causes harm to the fabric of community. And it is epidemic in our society these days. People lie to get an advantage. People lie to look good or to justify behaviors that are essentially unjustifiable. People even lie when it would be in their own best interest to tell the truth. And, as Dr. House said in the old TV show, everybody does it. From the point of view of spiritual growth, perhaps the most difficult lies to relinquish are those that make us feel better, at least momentarily. Usually those kinds of lies are those that are designed to improve our self-esteem or estimation in the eyes of others. We may pad our resume to look better to our boss or emphasize modest success over the hard road to get to it. We may tell our teachers that the dog ate our homework. We may claim an extra deduction on our taxes or tell ourselves that all charitable giving counts toward our tithe. Those small fudges, and others like them, may seem harmless, or victimless. In reality, over time, however, they can corrode our ability to distinguish truth from lies or find the courage to face the consequences of the actions, inactions or circumstances of our lives. More insidious than the little shrugged off lies that make us seem bigger, are the inner lies that keep us feeling smaller. We often tell ourselves lies about ourselves. If we have a setback we may say, "I'm such a failure." If we want to try something new we may say, "I just can't learn that." If we hope for reconciliation in a relationship, we may say, "I really blew it and it's too far gone to mend." These kinds of lies, while not making us consciously feel better, do in reality make us feel better by giving us an out to avoid the risk of failure or rejection. Think today about any instances in which you are prone to pad the truth, or refuse it outright. What is beneath that tendency? Choose just one tendency that you would like to release. Take it to God in prayer saying, "I don't need that lie. It is not me. I release it to you, Lord. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, you are the Way, the Life, the Truth. Help us today to live confidently in the truth. Let us never use it as a weapon on others or as an excuse for cruelty. Rather, let us rest in the love that is at the heart of all truth and experience the healing and freedom that comes from it. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 6 – Letting Go of Manipulating Others

Sometimes we feel so powerless or vulnerable that we believe we cannot get our needs met directly and honestly. When that occurs, we often resort to manipulation which is also a kind of lie. If we grew up in a chaotic environment where love was conditional at best, we may have learned to get our needs met by driving ourselves to excel or by becoming quiet and disappearing into the woodwork. If we are insecure in our family relationships we may choose behaviors designed more to gain affection than to give it. If we are determined to get a new promotion at work we may manipulate the boss with flattery or subtly put down others who might be in line for the job. In our national life, we often see those in power, or those who seek power, manipulate the emotions of people to gain or keep power. One of the dangers of using manipulation to get what we think we want is that it can become a way of life and eventually blind us to what we really need and who we really are. We are no longer enough in our own eyes. God is no longer enough in our eyes. So we have to take matters into our own hands to get what we want. Suddenly the big lie is just a means to an end. Now granted, most of us don't live our lives on a giant stage where our words or tweets can move armies. Each of us does, I am sure, know what it feels like to try to indirectly influence others to our will. Maybe we want a new sofa and so we butter up our spouse with a special supper before we broach the subject. Maybe when the answer is no, we turn on tears, or the silent treatment, or start slamming doors to the garage. All of those actions can be manipulations. Most of us know how to do that, at least to some extent. If you are ready to release the too easy manipulations that actually distance you from intimacy, integrity and getting your real needs met, take a moment to see if you can identify times when you manipulate others. It can even happen with body language or a change in voice quality. Think about an instance of that behavior until it becomes clear in your mind. How does it feel to see yourself behaving in that way? If it doesn't feel good, go to God in prayer saying, "I do not need to manipulate to get my needs met. That is not me. I release that to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, today I ask for your help to be open, honest and loving in all of my relationships. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

March 7 – Letting Go of Our Idols

An idol is simply anything that is not God that we serve as if it were God. Because of his intense time of prayer and fasting, when confronted by the devil, Jesus seemed very clear about what was God and what was not. A showy demonstration of his status by turning a stone to bread, was not of God. Soothing his hunger by compromising just this once was not of God. He was clear about that, but we often are not. The problem comes when the things we serve, out of love or necessity, take up the place of gods in our lives. They begin to make our decisions for us, often with no thought at all. Maybe our job requirements take up so much time and energy that we lose our health and our families but we think there is no other way. Maybe we say ‘family comes first’ and therefore decide that a fall festival or a child’s soccer match is more important than worship. Or maybe we decide that keeping the peace at home is more important than confronting immoral or racist speech or bullying actions. Any number of things can come to rule us. Many of them are not moral evils, just good things, or neutral things, that are used the wrong way. Some of our idols can be wonderful beloved things that we should attend to with great care, like our families. They just make poor gods. Think for a moment about how you make your decisions and set your priorities. What are those things that really rule you? Are there things or people that have taken up an outsized or unholy role in your life? One of the best tests to see if something is an idol is to see how you feel about giving it up or changing its hold on you. This will surface your idols and the addictive hold they can often have on us. Today take a few moments to consider what things you serve doggedly. Have those things taken over your moral choices? Do those things serve you in return or is it one way? What would your life be like without servitude to those things (not without the thing itself, but without dependence on the thing)? How do you feel if you think about changing your relationship with the things that unduly rule you? If you are ready to begin the process of taking those idols from their pedestals, try not to allow yourself to become afraid. Just observe what is happening in you and, if you are ready, go to God in prayer saying, “I do not need that. That is not me. I release this to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you.” Close your reflection by saying aloud, *“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you.”*

Prayer: Gracious God, help me today to put no one and nothing above you in my heart. In Jesus’ holy name we pray. Amen.

March 8 – Letting Go of the Kingdoms of the World

The devil's second temptation of Jesus was the temptation to worldly power achieved by immoral means. By definition, bending the knee to the Father of All Lies, is immoral. It takes us away from our core and our Source and allows that which is evil to manipulate and control us. How tempting this must have been to Jesus! Power and acclaim are powerful motivators, especially if we think that we have something important to share. Sometimes worldly power and achievement can be potent lures for us too. Maybe we do not aspire to political power, or the kind of authority that the devil dangled before Jesus, but we are not immune to the desire to have access to the things that worldly power can offer. Maybe we want to preserve our unquestioned assumptions of exceptionalism. Maybe we want to feel like winners. Maybe we want people to do as we say without question. Maybe we want enough money to meet our needs in the glossy ways that the ads and TV shows depict. Maybe we want the latest gadget. Maybe we just want a little more control over our own lives. Whatever the lure may be, you can be certain that the devil knows exactly where each of us is most vulnerable and just how to bait the hook. Jesus saw all that was wrong in his world and wanted to remake his nation and his people. How hard it must have been to reject the easy way to attain that end. Maybe he even thought that it could be a needed compromise for a greater good. Thanks be to God, he did not fall to that temptation or where would we be today? Still, we often do fall to those kinds of lures. We find ourselves thinking that a little compromise of our values here or there is no real problem. Or we find ourselves temporarily distracted from our life's, or church's, real mission by the shiny object of success or privilege. In those moments the easy way can feel like the right or the only way. Think about the times that you may have let the values of the world define your goals and even your ethics. Have there been circumstances in which you set aside your values because something sparkled a little more brightly outside of them? Are there things that you want that, if you stopped to think, you know are not good for you or in the best interest of others? Where are you most tempted to take on the values of the world as your own? How has that tendency served you? How has it stoked pain or dissatisfaction in you? If you are ready to begin to release the lures of the world, think of one specific lure that has some power in you. Visualize it clearly and take it to God in prayer saying, "I do not need this. This is not me. I release it to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, "*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you.*"

Prayer: Gracious God, focus me today on your kingdom and what is good for all. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 9 – Letting Go of Jealousy

Jealousy is a powerful emotion that can set in motion dynamics in the human heart that are hard to turn around. Think of Jacob's jealousy of his brother Esau's special relationship with their father. That jealousy led to lies, stealing, deception and a total rupture in the fabric of the family for many, many years. Joseph's brothers' jealousy of his status with their father is another case in point that led to slavery and pain. Ahab wanted Naboth's vineyard and people died. David wanted Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, and generations of death and destruction followed. Even in our day, intense enough jealousy can fracture families and lead to death. More often for us, for good and ill, jealousy does not lead to quite those severe consequences. Remember that jealousy and covetousness are not the same thing. In jealousy we want something someone else has, or we fear that someone will take from us something we have. Covetousness is bigger than that. Covetousness is wanting someone else's life. It is so intense an experience that, in its throes, we despise our life and all the gifts God has given us. For today, though, let's think just about the relatively simple issue of jealousy. "I want something you have and it is making me miserable so I hate you for it." Or "I think you are taking away from me something vital and I am miserable so I hate you." In his time in the wilderness, could Jesus have felt jealousy of the power that had been granted to the devil? Or at least the power the devil claimed had been granted to him? The devil said he had all of the kingdoms of the world under his control and could give that power to any he chose, if only the chosen would bend the knee to him. Could Jesus have wanted that power with a fierceness that approached jealousy? His own power was as yet untested, so I guess maybe he could have, but there is no indication of it. He stood very firm against the devil's wiles. He was not falling for the lure of illegitimate power and illegitimate gain. It is harder for us. There is much in our culture that stokes our jealousies and the hatreds that they spawn. We hear it in the thinly disguised political rhetoric of white supremacy. "This is my land and you have no right to claim a share in it." "I am better than you and I will never let go of what is mine." Those are statements of a jealous insecure heart. That is one of the sneaky things about nursing jealousy. It always leads to more insecurity and fear. Our hold on what we want is simply never quite firm enough. Think for a moment today about whether jealousy plays a role in your life or in your discontents. Do you look

at what others have and feel dissatisfied with what you have? Do you look at your spouse and fear that he or she might be swayed to another? Do you look at your child packing for college and feel, beneath the sadness and gratitude, a surge of jealousy for those who will share her life now and shape her thinking? If you notice that tendency in yourself and would like to begin to release it, go to God in prayer saying, "I do not need that. It is not me. I release this longing to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, I release to you all my jealousies. Replace them all with a heart overflowing with gratitude. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 10 – Letting Go of Bitterness

Sometimes life is hard. Sometimes it can even be cruel. Sometimes our losses pile up, our dreams seem unrealized and our relationships unfulfilling. Sometimes the image of how we thought our life would and should be comes crashing down, bowed to the wild will of a microbe we cannot even see. In the book of Ruth, a beautiful pastoral story of a family in crisis and how God remains faithful, Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, becomes completely consumed by the pain of her life. She has good reason. She had to flee her homeland as a refugee to find food during a time of famine. Her husband and both of her sons died, leaving her destitute with two daughters-in-law to see about. As a matter of fact, the hardships of her life so overwhelm her that she changes her name to Mara, which means bitterness. In the midst of all of that agony she vacillates between anger with God and trying to figure out how she might have caused her own tragedies. She is a mess. Unable to find a way out emotionally or physically, she decides to go home to Bethlehem to see if some kinsman will help her out. Even as she makes her decision she carries bitterness as her new identity. That is not the end of the story for Naomi. Nor does bitterness have to be the end of the story for us either. Not unless we want it to be. Bitterness changes our spiritual lives, all but halting our progress. Bitterness changes our brain chemistry making gratitude, the great antidote to pain, a near impossibility. Bitterness changes how we see the world and acts like a gray film over everything that happens. We see what supports our bitterness and dismiss what does not. Our energy goes to our pain and away from our healing. That is just the way that it is. And most of us know, from time to time, the deadly consequences of choosing bitterness as a life position. We know

how to change our name to Mara and live up to it. Jesus, apparently, did not know how to do that. He did not even succumb to bitterness on the cross. Rather he asked God to forgive all those who had hurt him claiming they didn't know what they were doing. Can the release of bitterness actually be the cure that allows goodness to flow in us again as well? Can a deliberate practice of releasing bitterness be the medicine that allows us to weather hard times without them coming to define us? I think so. Take a moment right now to breathe deeply. Ask yourself if you have any bitter root inside of you that is causing you harm and keeping you stuck. Are there any people toward whom you feel bitter? Are there any old hurts that still feel bitter inside you? Do you think you might be ready to begin to release that bitterness? If so, think of a specific instance about which you feel bitter. Take that to God in prayer saying, "I do not need these feelings of bitterness. They are not me. I release the whole situation to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, replace all bitterness in me with compassion and forgiveness. Thank you. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 11 - Letting Go of Powerlessness

Granted, we are not all powerful. We do not set the stars in their courses or cause the waves to crash upon the sand. We do not even control the number of our days. We cannot, as an act of sovereign will, fix our country, our politics, our churches or even our own lives. This, however, does not mean that we are powerless. Far from it. We are the body of Christ and Jesus told us that signs and wonders even greater than his were ours for the taking as we live life in him. Perhaps we do not, with a word, restore eyesight to a blind person, but we can, by love and care filled teaching, shed divine light that leads to a new kind of sight. Perhaps we cannot stand in front of a mirror and claim significant shrinkage in our thighs, but indeed we can make choices that help that desire come to pass. We may not be able to shield our children from harm, but we can teach them to be resilient and faithful. We may not be able to force faith on others, but we can love them in to wondering if maybe we are on to something. One of the devil's wildest tricks is to convince us that we are powerless, that we cannot do something, that we cannot do much of anything. Perhaps that subtle undermining was at work when he tempted Jesus with authority over the kingdoms of the world. After all, that temptation would

only be alluring if Jesus did not already know his own power. The discomfort of feeling powerless has led to many a wrong choice with disastrous consequences in many of our lives. Ironically, the feeling of powerlessness is not always something that we shun. Sometimes we choose powerlessness as a life position and an excuse for not doing what we are called to do and not living the full lives for which we are created. Power may have its limits in our lives, but powerlessness is just a lie and a flimsy excuse much of the time. We can't do everything. We can't fix everything. But we can do something. We have been made able. The New Testament letters make one thing abundantly clear. We each have the capacity to accomplish what God wants accomplished. God knows us before God calls us. God has factored in our stupidity and failings from the beginning. As the old saying goes, 'If God calls you to it, God will bring you through it.' Are there any areas of your life over which you are feeling especially powerless today? As you think of those circumstances, do you think that you actually *need* more power or do you just think you would *feel better* if you had more power? Are there any circumstances where you claim powerlessness so that you will not have to act or learn new ways to behave? If so, and you would like to begin to release the lies and excuses of your powerlessness, go to God in prayer saying, "I do not need to feel powerless. That is not me. I release that feeling to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, "*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you.*"

Prayer: Gracious God of all Power and Gentleness, help me today to trust you in all things. Help me to use the power you give me for good and help me relinquish the desire to lord power over others. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 12 – Letting Go of the Concept of Enemy

I am writing this reflection while looking out at the Gulf of Mexico in my quiet little village where I can go for many hours without seeing a car pass. Meanwhile tanks are moving from Russia to Ukraine, from Israel to Gaza, from Syria to Jordan. Just this week three American soldiers were killed by a drone while they slept and our leaders are contemplating how to retaliate. Political candidates create enemies lists and plans for dealing with them harshly. Pastor friends all over the world are sending out pleas for prayer as they search for parishioners that work at bombed out neighborhoods while also trying in vain to access money from the wealthy in order to prepare to aid

refugees that will soon stream to their churches. A friend in Ukraine wrote last week that humanitarian crisis is so unrelenting that parents, not knowing what else to do, pin little cards with their blood types to their children's sweatshirts. My heart is so heavy. Humanity is a warring thing. Why? The reasons are many and often the stated reasons are not the actual reasons. We all know from Junior High School that bullies bully out of a gaping hole in their own lives. Later in Jesus' ministry, when he sits before the large crowd and gives his earth shattering speech that we call the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and the Sermon on the Plain in Luke, he recognizes the tendency of the human family to get unmet needs met at the expense of others and to blame those others for what they get. He understands that enemy is a word designed to initiate a proscribed and hostile response. It is natural. This morning when I heard from my pastor colleagues about the realities on the ground, I felt both animosity and deep sadness. I wondered what it might look like in our world if we heeded Jesus call to give up the notion of enemy. What would the world look like if we released the need to win or retaliate and replaced that powerful negative energy with active love and profound prayers? Can I pray for Mr. Putin while my colleague searches for his parishioners with bombs still falling? I confess to you, that I cannot do it right now. I come close to it. I see Mr. Putin's and my own shared humanity. I see that we have a common divine parent. I see that his brokenness mirrors my own only on a global and dangerous scale. And yet, today, with tanks rolling, I cannot yet pray for one who I have been carefully taught from childhood with drills of getting under my desk and how to tuck and roll in the presence of a nuclear attack to see as my enemy. Especially today. What would it be like for God's family if we gave up the notion of enemy? Heaven I suppose. On a more personal front, what would it be like for us to give up our personal enemies, the person who hurt us, the person who hurt our child, the ones who have callously damaged our self-esteems, the ones who demean and degrade us. What would it be like to release their hold on us? After all when we hold on to them as enemy, it is they that really hold on to us. What if we just let it go? What if we set the terms of our relationships not based on the hurt we have felt, or the fear, but rather on sharing the compassion we ourselves often need so desperately? It would be counter cultural indeed. It would shake the mountains like Jesus' sermon did. It would open a pathway to the kingdom. If there is someone in your life or in the world that you think of as enemy (whether you use that word or not, perhaps the word opponent or opposition helps that become clearer) and you are ready to begin to release that one's hold on your heart and energy, go to God in prayer saying, "I do not need to

carry these feelings about.... That is not me. I release it to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Help us, Gracious God, to see the world and its people through the lens of your own love and forgiveness. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 13 – Letting God of the Desires of the Ego

It has taken me many, many years to learn that the desires of my ego and the desires of my heart are not the same thing. In Psalm 37, the psalmist tells us that when we delight in the Lord, that God will give us the desires of our hearts. For years I tended to ignore the first part of that verse and focus solely on the last part. If I wanted my 6th grade boyfriend to give me a charm bracelet with a heart on it, I asked God for it and stated this promise as a guarantee. Later, if I wanted an irretrievably broken relationship to be magically mended, I asked God for it, claiming it was the desire of my heart. If I wanted my lung capacity to be restored, I asked for it with passionate earnestness. There is nothing wrong with those asks. God wants us to bring all that is going on with us into our prayer. God is, however, under no obligation to give us what we think we want if it is inconsistent with God's intention for us or will somehow bring harm to us or others. My real breakthrough came when I realized that the desires of my ego, those things I wanted fiercely to manage my emotions, were not often the true deep yearnings of my soul. My heart, my soul, is tucked in God. Therefore, what my heart truly yearns for is always what God truly intends. This is true for each of us. Our hearts long for what is truest about who we are, who God made us. Our hearts long for closer communion with God and for the light of the love of God to transform our broken ways and broken lives. How do we know what all of that means for us concretely? We attend to the first phrase of the psalmist's promise. We dedicate our lives to delighting in God, to finding our deepest joy in God and God's ways. When we do that, our deepest longings are always and perfectly met. Perhaps when the devil tempted Jesus with the lure of worldly glory, Jesus already knew that that was not the desire of his true heart. Perhaps he always knew that the things of the ego can never satisfy a heart that is restless until it finds its rest in God. Surely he did. It is not always so easy for us. Take a moment to examine your desires. Are they coming from your deepest heart or are they arising from a hurt or insecurity that you are trying to manage? If the later, and you are ready to let that go, go to God in prayer, saying, "I do not

need..... It is not necessary to me. It is not who I am. I release it to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, today I ask you to fulfill the desires of my heart with a deepened experience of your presence and love surrounding me. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 14 - Letting Go of Literal Mindedness

In confronting the schemes of the devil in his temptations, Jesus turns to the Hebrew scriptures in order to find power and justification for his resistance. When confronted with the lures of the world's glories, he reaches into Deuteronomy to find a verse that encourages God's people to serve God and no other. It was the perfect verse for the perfect moment. We would expect no less from Jesus. We, however, are often not quite so adept at seeing the scriptures truth and uses. Often we become locked and lost in a literal interpretation of a story or instruction that was never intended to be taken literally. Or at least never intended to be taken solely literally. When we do that, the scripture can be very easy to dismiss as mere myth or some kind of man made wish fulfillment. People locked in that mindset say things to me like "What kind of awful God sets his son up to be murdered just so that that God won't have to be mad anymore?" Or, "I've prayed for healing for years and I have six months to live. It's all a cruel joke." Or, "I actually plucked out my eye because I couldn't handle my sexual thoughts and now I'm just a blind asshole (sorry for the language but this really happened.)" When we cannot look beneath the surface of what the Bible tells us, we cannot expect to either understand it or find its rich relevance for our daily lives. Sometimes worse than that, we can pull the verses out of context and use them as false weapons on each other and ourselves. As one of my seminary professors once said, "The text without context is just a con." We have seen the effects of such cons throughout the centuries of the churches life. We've executed people with differing interpretations. We've told slaves not to resist. We've burned witches. We've sent gay Christians and their families fleeing from our churches. All this and more we do in service to literal mindedness. It just won't do. It will not do any longer. It makes our hearts weak and our love cold. It allows us to claim that our point of view is actually God's. Or worse, it can in our own minds, make a god of our point of view. Only pain can come from this. If you find yourself stuck in literal mindedness about the Scriptures, or if you

find yourself ruminating over what a family member said to you word for word apart from the whole context of the relationship, and are ready to become a bit less stuck, go to God in prayer saying, "I do not need this. It is not me. I release my limiting beliefs to you, Lord. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your reflection by saying aloud, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you...Do not fear for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God help us today to fall more in love with you than with our own opinions about you. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 15 - Letting Go of Shadow Denying

In Mark's telling of Jesus' temptation, he gives us none of the details that we find in Luke and Matthew. Mark does, however, offer us a beautiful insight. He tells us that Jesus was with the wild beasts and that the angels waited on him. Throughout the centuries, Christian writers have understood the wild beasts to symbolize his own human impulses and the tendencies that might derail his mission. While Christians maintain that Jesus was sinless, he certainly had the human capacity to sin. The imminent psychologist, Carl Jung, defines sin as refusal to become conscious. Jung taught that if we do not acknowledge our capacity for sin (he called this capacity our shadow, or our destructive or denied impulses,) then these shadow impulses will automatically be projected onto others and even society. When Jesus spent time with the wild animals he was, in a sense, shadow dancing. Facing, acknowledging, and thereby declawing the human impulses that could destroy him or others if denied. When I was in seminary I had a vivid recurring dream of indigenous warriors chasing me in a forest. Their faces were painted and their spears tipped with poison. I hid in the bushes and forced myself awake. When I told my spiritual director about it, he suggested that if it happened again I come out of the bushes, introduce myself and see what happened. It did and I did. When I faced them, the warriors introduced themselves and wept. Each was a part of myself that I had rejected or feared. When I faced them, after they wept, they picked up reed instruments and played music and they became dance partners and not enemies. I never had the dream again. And I have never forgotten to acknowledge those feared tendencies in myself again either. What might it be like for you today to give up denying your destructive impulses? What are the parts of yourself that you most disdain or try to cover up? Are you ready to give up denying those parts of you and accept your whole truth? If so, take a deep breath and acknowledge each of those things. In prayer, tell

God that you are ready to see your truth saying, "I do not need to fear this part of me. I release my fear of knowing myself fully. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you, God." Close your reflection by saying aloud God's word of assurance to you, "*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you. ... Do not fear, for I am with you.*"

Prayer: Gracious God, I thank you that I am fearfully and wonderfully made. I thank you that there is no part of me that you do not know, and I need hide nothing from you. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

March 16 - Letting Go of Going it Alone

In Mark's account of Jesus' confronting of his 'wild beasts', Jesus is not left to his own devices to do so. While no one can face our truth for us, and it is very personal inner work, we are not left to our own devices either. Angels ministered to Jesus while he did his inner work and they will minister to you as you do yours as well. It is hard work to face ourselves with an honest and humble heart. There are inner beasts we would rather deny that confront. Still, until we do that work we will always give the Evil One easy ways to manipulate and wound us and others. In many ways, when we refuse to do our 'shadow work' we stay in the wilderness all of our lives and forget that we are there. When we decide to let go of our need to rewrite the story of who we are in our minds and face the truth, angels will come to help and support us. In scripture, the word 'angel' refers to that special category of heavenly messenger that we often depict with wings and halos. It also refers to *any* messenger, in any form, that God uses to help, support and guide us. It can be a person, a sunset, a line from a movie, a flower garden, or even a sudden rush of energy. God sends us messages constantly. These messages come even more often when we are doing the hard work of emptying ourselves of our false images of ourselves and others. Angels, whether winged or more mundane, have several things in common. They always have our best interest at heart. They always point us to greater truth. They always embody love (even if confrontative love). And they always seek to further our spiritual development and understanding of oneness. Sometimes, though, in our society we are so trained in rugged individualism that we can't see angels because we have to 'do it ourselves.' I recently watched the great Sidney Poitier movie, *Lilies of the Field*. In it he plays a traveling handy man who is lured into building a chapel for a small group of nuns who had escaped Germany. At one point he becomes depressed because so many people wanted

to help. He wanted to do it all himself. It was not until he was able to receive the gifts of others that the chapel was finally built. If you feel ready to let go of your sense of having to go it alone, and accept the angels ministrations, in prayer say to God, "I do not need to do everything myself. It is not me. I release that arrogance and rest in your provision. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." You might close your reflection by saying aloud God's words of assurance to you, *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you. ... Do not fear, for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, I thank you for your many angel visitations to me. Help me today to get out of my own way and open myself to the help you send. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

March 17 - Letting Go of Grandstanding

In Luke, the devil's final temptation of Jesus begins with the lure to make a splashy show of his identity and power that no one could deny. Satan takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple where he can see all of his people and invites Jesus, as the lawyer in the wonderful musical Chicago to 'razzle-dazzle' folk by throwing himself off the roof and calling on angels to catch him. After all, who could possibly not believe after a show stopper like that? What difference does it make if it is a little manipulative if it gets the job done? It can certainly be a temptation to us as well to show ourselves off in the best possible light in order to get what we want and think we need, even if that means a little manipulation of others. It is perfectly natural to desire the esteem of others. We all need a pat on the back, or for someone to tell us that something we have done was awesome. The problem comes when we start making our ethical choices in order to get the desired response from others. That easily becomes manipulation and leaves us once again hiding behind a mask or using other people and their responses as a drug to manage our own emotions. Jesus instantly saw that a manipulated faith is abusive and refused to violate people's personal freedom in order to get a response that would likely be shallow and short lived. Can you think of circumstances when you find yourself trying to grandstand to get a particular response from someone? Maybe it is not the flashy miracle kind of grandstanding like that with which the devil tempted Jesus. Maybe, rather, it is the more mundane kind. Like trying to be spectacularly self-sacrificing so that others will think you are more worthy of love and admiration than others. Maybe it is making a splashy show of being a Christian in order to get more people in church rather than

simply walking the faith humbly with others so that they can find their own way. Maybe it is as simple as wanting to look prosperous, or successful. If you are ready to release the need to make yourself look better than you are in order to get a response from others, go to God in prayer today saying, "I don't need that. It is not me. I release this need to you. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your time of reflection by reminding yourself out loud of God's promises to you. *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you. ... Do not fear, for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, we are so grateful that you have made us adequate to face any situation just as we are. Help us today to release the desire to look spectacular, especially if that tends to manipulate others. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 18 - Letting Go of Testing God

When the devil tempted Jesus to a flashy display of power in order to manipulate faith or simply to short cut his mission, Jesus saw that as putting God to the test. What a natural human tendency! I remember once in college when I was trying to sort out the realities of my faith, I prayed fervently for God to kill a house fly in my dorm room to prove to me that God was with me! Apart from the ethics of using another creature's life as a litmus test for God's presence, needing assurances, even magical assurances, of God's power when we are struggling is very common. Like Thomas after the resurrection, we often need to see it to believe it. But faith doesn't work like that. Neither is that how relationship with God grows. Constantly asking another human being to demonstrate his or her fidelity and trustworthiness is a sure way to damage the relationship. Doing that with God doesn't damage the relationship. That is a given. It can, however, keep us from growing and going deeper. Make no mistake that asking God for what we need and want is not the same thing as testing. Offering our humble prayers to God is an act of trust based on clarity about who is God and who is not in the situation. Testing is different. It is not even about relationship at all. It is a form of power struggle. It can also be a way of trying to manage fear without trust. If you find that you sometimes put God to the test, you might catch yourself thinking things like, "If you will just do me this one favor Lord, then I will.....fill in the blank." Or you might find yourself saying, "If you heal my loved one, I will increase my tithe." Or "If you get me this new promotion, then I will serve on that committee at the church." Little tests like that are not fatal. God is wonderfully generous with our

smallness of mind and heart. Still, they are not neutral either. Over time they can set up a secret belief that God is required to dance on our string or we are not required to dance on God's. That never leads us home. So if you are ready to release those little tendencies to test God, go to God in prayer saying, "I do not need that. It is not me. I release my need to test you. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your time of reflection by reminding yourself out loud of God's promises to you. *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you. ... Do not fear, for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, deepen my trust in you today. Help me not to put you to the test. Rather, help me to rest confidently on your promises. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 19 - Letting Go of Porous Boundaries

One of the really cagey things that the devil does in this last temptation is use the scriptures themselves to convince Jesus to do what he wants him to do. Part of what he wants him to do is to blur the boundaries set in place by Jesus' human nature, his ethics and his mission. If he is not going to be bound by being fully human (even though also fully divine) during his earthly life, then what is the utter point of incarnation at all? If Jesus is only God in disguise, then how could his example have any meaning as a model for us merely human beings? At least a part of Jesus' purpose is to show us what human life in all its fullness is actually intended to be. If he were to accept the devil's short cut and use parlor tricks to prove his identity, then we would be left with little more than another exorcist to follow. In coming to earth in Jesus, Christ accepted a set of human boundaries within which to live. To abandon those boundaries for any reason could have proven disastrous. On his night of agony in the garden, Jesus asked the Father to spare him. He did not just decide to run and spare himself. He would not cross that boundary. Not even on the cross. Our boundary crossing is not nearly as consequential as that! But it is nonetheless a real temptation that can damage our lives and witness. Where are you most likely to blur boundaries in your life? Do you sometimes have difficulty telling the difference between yourself and your needs, and the needs and independent self of your child or friend? Do you find yourself leaping in to do for others what is really theirs alone to do? Do you find yourself tempted to take short cuts at work, or to sully relationships? Do you find that you have trouble keeping confidences that are shared with you? Do you find yourself getting lost and overwhelmed by other people's problems

and pains? If so, those are boundary violations that can keep you stuck in spiritual neutral at best, and grievously hurt others at worst. One thing Jesus makes clear in this story is that God cannot use those with porous boundaries in powerful ways. If you are ready to shore up your boundaries, take a moment to think of the areas of your life where you are most likely to have porous boundaries or to cross them outright. Bring each of those areas to God in prayer saying, "I do not need that. It is not me. I release these porous boundaries to you, Lord, and ask that you teach me more solid ways. I am making space for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your time of reflection by reminding yourself out loud of God's promises to you. *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you. ... Do not fear, for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, help us today to be clear about what is ours to do and control and what is not. Show us the clear boundaries of your call and help us to live within them. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 20 - Letting Go of More

One of the great lures that allows grandstanding and porous boundaries to remain such problems for us is that we think that when we bite their hook we will profit from it. In the case of porous boundaries, the profit may feel like a sense of security in a relationship or even safety for a loved one. In the case of grandstanding, it may be monetary profit that we see as a reward for being outstanding, successful or powerful. Earlier in Lent, we considered how easy it is to allow our sense of security to be tied to our finances. Today, I invite you to consider, not money itself, but the concept of 'more'. Especially more than we need. The desire for ever more, whether it is one more slice of key lime pie, or one more new outfit, or one more bonus check, can be sneaky. Sometimes it is not even the more pie or checks that we really want. It is more of something that we can't even name but that we secretly think will finally quiet our restlessness and give us joy and peace. When we are sad or afraid or disgusted, *more* can be the drug of choice to numb us to what is really going on within or around us. In the New Testament the word for greed refers to excessive desire. Desire that is completely out of bounds and without justification. Perhaps when the devil tempted Jesus to grandstand, Jesus felt a moment of wondering what might happen if he agreed. Would the movement grow rapidly? Would giving increase so that money was never again a worry? What would be enough? Mercifully, he resisted as we often do not. He knew real danger when he saw it. In Luke 12:15, Jesus makes clear that we must be

aware of all forms of greed. He reminds us that the abundance of life does not consist in our possessions. Our things will never truly satisfy us. We may enjoy them and feel grateful for them, but if we find that enough is never enough and listen, then, to the siren call of 'More' we will lose touch with the intrinsic beauty of each moment and the real bounty of life itself. If you are ready to release the clutching fist of "More," imagine some of the things that you want but do not need. Take each one of those things to God in prayer saying, "I do not need that. It is not me. I release it to you, Lord, as I release all my needs to your provision. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your time of reflection by reminding yourself out loud of God's promises to you. *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you. ... Do not fear, for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, today give me a satisfied heart and gratitude for all of the blessings of this day. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 21 - Letting Go of Blame

The verse that I find most brilliant in Luke's temptation narrative is the final one, verse 13. Here Luke tells us that when the devil finished *every* test he departed until an opportune time. What I learn from that is that there are a lot more temptations than the three that are specifically mentioned and that they recur, both in our lives and throughout history. What might some of those temptations have been in Jesus' time and how do they recur in our own? Could the tendency to blame others for our problems and circumstances be one of them? It would have been easy for Jesus to blame the devil for this hard spiritual battle. It would have been easy for him to blame the Samaritans, the Pharisees, Judas, Pilate. But we don't see that in him. We see him holding people accountable for their actions, but that is a bit different. In Luke 13 some of Jesus' disciples ask him who is to blame in the case of two horrific national tragedies. Did people suffer because they sinned? Did they suffer worse because they were worse sinners? He told them that the tragedies did not befall people because they were worse sinners, and then he turned it all back on those who were asking him the question. Repent he says, or something worse will happen to you. Jesus often teaches that when awful things happen, our first response should not be to find someone to blame. Rather, the appropriate response is to change the way we think. Change yourself first. Then you will have the spiritual energy to address the calamities of your times with divine power and authority. He seems to be saying that if we spend too much time looking outside of ourselves for someone to blame,

our lives will end up in tatters. What I have learned through bitter experience is that the one we blame will consume us. We will often cease to be able to see that one as human anymore. There will be no compassion and we will just experience the pain over and over and over again. Wow. Think for a moment about some of the times that you have been caught up in the blame game. Didn't that take a lot of energy? Did it actually help you or the person who was to blame? If you think that finding others to blame is keeping you stuck and robbing you of power and peace, consider letting it go. You may have to do this many times to experience the wondrous release but why not start today? Go to God in prayer saying something like, "I don't need the blame and anger I feel toward... It is not me. I release these feelings and the people involved to you for transformation. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your time of reflection by reminding yourself out loud of God's promises to you. *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you. ... Do not fear, for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, today help me not to waste time on looking for people to blame for my problems. Instead, help me to look within for ways that I can grow in your love and peace. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

March 22 - Letting Go of Privilege

In the devil's last test, he tempts Jesus to fall back on his privilege as God's son. How easy that would have been! The temptations came shortly after Jesus' baptism in the Jordan river with its powerful spiritual revelation of his identity. It would have been so natural to want to stretch the wings of that identity for all to see. Yet he chose not to do that. Why? Perhaps because privilege is not the path to salvation. Consciously chosen servanthood is that path. Hierarchies seldom lead to peace. It was as easy in Jesus' day as it is in our own for people to stumble over their privilege, and to use it as an excuse to hate or to exploit. It was not, and is not, uncommon to manufacture privilege where there is none in order to erect false hierarchies and advantages. It is very difficult to convince people who have lived long with those advantages to share them, dismantle them or even recognize them. Jesus dealt with this with the Temple leadership. We deal with it today in macro and micro aggressions too many to name and number. One of the insidious things about privilege is its capacity to arise in ever adaptive ways. One of my pastoral counseling professors once told me to beware. "Old issues never die," he said. "They just come back in different clothes." In our day we

see that sad truth in the rise of white supremacist groups and even their adherents' elevation to power. We see it in a blind nationalism that has little to do with love of country and everything to do with wealth and power. We see this sad truth is the merging of Christian theology with specific political ideologies. We see it in the over indulgence in wealth abundance theologies to the neglect of 'pouring out your life for others' theologies. One key to identifying privilege is to remember that it always relies on lies or carefully selected partial truths. It always benefits some at the expense of others. If you are ready to let go of the clothes of privilege and wear instead the full armor of Christ that is truth, righteousness, peace, witness, faith and salvation, then you might begin by identifying any undue privilege that you have by virtue of your race, ethnicity, gender, education or wealth. If you are ready to let go of the privilege that comes with those things in our culture, go to God in prayer saying something like "Thank you God for all of your sustaining gifts. I release today the unfair privileges of my life..... I don't need that. It is not me. I release their burden to you. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Remember that the things around which privilege gathers are not bad things. It is not bad to be white or male or wealthy. It is the privilege *over others* that society assigns to those things that must be released for our and the world's healing. Close your time of reflection by reminding yourself out loud of God's promises to you. *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you. ... Do not fear, for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, open our eyes today to the unfair privileges in our lives and world. Help us, once seeing them, to respond in ways that lead to justice and transformation. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 23 - Letting Go of Negativity

Jesus lived in a tumultuous time filled with hardship and oppression. Yet it was also the right time for light, life and salvation to come into the world. We live in a time like that too. It is the right time for light, life and salvation to break forth into our world as well. Perhaps one of the 'every temptations' that the devil brought to Jesus in the wilderness was the temptation to negativity. It is so easy succumb to despair when times are tough. Job wrestled with this to the point that he was ready to die. He had been through so much that seemed so unjust that he could no longer even imagine that the future held anything worth living. It has also been a human temptation to use negativity to stoke fear and to manipulate behavior. Just look at political ads and the

demonizing of opponents. I asked a friend who was running for statewide office once if he could just focus on the positive and avoid tearing others down. He looked at me sadly and said, "My opponent will eat me for lunch if I do that." Sometimes negativity seems like the only approach that either makes sense of circumstances, or gets the results we think we want. While Jesus certainly did go on the offensive when necessary (think of his criticism of the Pharisees hypocrisy,) it doesn't seem, though, that he ever became immobilized by negativity. He knew grief and wept in it. He knew frustration and addressed it. He knew fear of his own suffering and hoped to be spared it. Still, he found joy in a meal with his disciples. He found a teaching lesson in the lilies of the field. He found comfort in being anointed with oil. He saw beauty and hope for the world even when he hung from the cross saying "This day you will be with me in Paradise." I wonder how much more difficult his road would have been if he had succumbed to the negativity all around him every day. I know how much more difficult my life becomes when I do that. Jesus experienced the full range of human emotion. He experienced the worst that humanity has to offer. Yet his news was always known as good. A negative approach to life not only robs us of life's beauty, it can literally make us sick. Negative habits of thought lower our resistance to disease. They block our capacity for creative solutions. They can also make our witness ineffective or even offensive. Still, negativity is a habit. We often form it from a lifetime of practice. Habits are not easily broken. But they can be. The fastest way to release negativity, in my experience, is to focus on gratitude. If you are ready to release the burden of negativity in your life so that you can live more powerfully and abundantly, go to God in prayer today saying something like, "I do not need this negativity. It is not me. I release it to you and fill my mind with thankfulness. I am making space for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your time of reflection by reminding yourself out loud of God's promises to you. *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you. ... Do not fear, for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, please remove any negativity from my heart today so that I may see your blessings and rest in your promises. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 24 - Letting Go of Thinking You Can Do Nothing Because You Can't Do Everything

Even at this early stage in Jesus ministry, he must have known that his time to accomplish his mission would be short. That knowledge may even have made the temptations to take short cuts and grandstanding more alluring. Still, he did not allow himself to be ruled by what he couldn't get done. Rather, he put his whole being toward what he could get done. In his earthly life he could not reach beyond a very few miles. Were there not sick people in need of cure in Samaria, in Egypt? Still, the enormity of human need never seemed to stop him from doing what he could when presented with it, even if meeting that need threw off his schedule, as it did with the healing of Jairus' daughter and the bleeding woman. Sometimes, the needs of the world, or even our own families, can seem so overwhelming we feel paralyzed. We know we cannot stop a virus from mutating. We cannot make people get vaccinated. We cannot stop a war in Ukraine or Gaza. We cannot quickly rebuild their cities. We cannot instantly heal the hearts of the grieving or dismantle systemic inequities. But just because we cannot do everything, or even anything big quickly, that is no excuse for throwing up our hands, getting depressed and doing nothing. I think of the story of the man on the beach tossing stranded starfish back out over the breakers for another chance at life. A passerby stopped and asked him why he was doing it. Couldn't he see that there were thousands of starfish stranded over miles of beach? Couldn't he see that he couldn't possibly make a difference? The other man bent down, picked up a star fish, and with the grace of a dancer, tossed it as far as he could. He then turned to his questioner and said, "Made a difference for that one." If you are ready to give up the paralyzing feeling of knowing what you *can't* do, and embrace what you *can* do, go to God in prayer, saying something like, "I don't need this feeling of powerlessness in the presence of the world's great need. It is not me. I release this feeling to you and ask for clarity of personal mission to replace it. I am making space for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your time of reflection by reminding yourself out loud of God's promises to you. *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you. ... Do not fear, for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, help us today to remember that you have a role for each of us to play in your unfolding reign. Help us not to become overwhelmed by the need. Show us how you intend for us to act today and help us trust that you have others to work with as well. In Jesus' holy name we pray.

March 25 - Letting Go of Mind Thieves

For many of us, recurring thoughts, fears, anxieties and obsessions creep into our minds, unbidden, and take us down destructive rabbit holes. When we follow these thoughts, they magnify out of proportion to the moment. This wastes our energy and time. It also has the capacity to keep us from being open to real solutions to real challenges. Day dreaming, on the other hand, can be a very positive thing. It can release creativity and lessen anxiety when we focus those day dreams on positive outcomes. Perhaps one of the 'every' temptations with which the devil assaulted Jesus in his forty day pilgrimage, was the temptation to focus on worse case scenarios. It is easy for us to fall to this temptation, although mercifully Jesus did not. We can spin out worse case scenarios and tell ourselves that we are just planning or preparing for any eventuality. If we are generals in battle that is not a bad thing. But if we are spending time spinning out the worst result from a family reunion or confrontation at work, it may leave us obsessing and hurting over things that will not happen or that we cannot control. If we find ourselves worrying about finances or the future of the church and imagining negative outcomes again and again, we may miss the opportunities put before us every day to create and welcome the positive outcomes and healing stories that God is writing with our lives. Sometimes, we can even develop obsessions early in childhood that rob us of our joy over a lifetime until they are addressed. These can be simple thoughts. I am unwanted. I am unloveable. I am rejectable. I am defective. These little inner obsessions can become mind, and life, thieves as we live them out again and again, consciously or not. If you are ready to release some of your mind thieves, take a moment to consider anything to which you give too much mental energy. Imagine that thought stream as a small ball you hold in your hand. Lift your hand and release it as if releasing a bird. Watch it fly away and feel the spaciousness of its absence. That space, no matter how brief, can now be filled with Alleluias. If you want to release a mind thief like ones I mentioned, then go to God in prayer, saying something like, "I don't need that. That is not me. I release that wounding thought to you, Lord. I am making space for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your time of reflection by reminding yourself out loud of God's promises to you. *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you. ... Do not fear, for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, today we release to you all thoughts that hurt us and drain us of our energy and joy. Fill the space those thoughts occupied with love, joy and contentment. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 26 - Letting Go of the Way We Thought it Would Be

During this Holy Week, as we walk with Jesus in his last earthly days, the lectionary reading for this day is the story of some Greek people who have heard of Jesus and come looking for him. When it is reported to Jesus, he tells his friends that those who love their lives will lose them and those who hate their lives in the world will keep them to eternity. This is a complex teaching that I won't try to address today. What occurs to me in reading it with our lens of Lenten releasing, is how hard it must have been for his friends to let go of the way they thought things were going to be. They expected Jesus to act as they understood the prophets to have predicted. He would raise an army. He would return sovereignty to the land and its people. They would all get cabinet posts and people would straighten up, fly right, and act righteously. But now, Jesus is talking about death and servanthood. It wasn't what they signed up for. It wasn't what they wanted. They wanted glory not ignominy. And yet, what they got, and every word of Jesus' mind altering truth, was just exactly what they needed. Most of the disciples in the end rejected his way, ran from the cross, hid behind locked doors. Judas, didn't even make it that far. He couldn't let go of his idea of how things should be. How things must be. So he lost not only his time with Jesus, but his life as well. We, too, know what it is like to miss out on something important because it does not come to us in an expected package. We, too, know how to be so sure how things must be, that we miss the radical thing that Jesus is doing in our lives and in our churches. It can be painful to let go of the way we thought things would be when it becomes clear that it is not going to be like we thought. Still, if we cling to our images of what must happen if we are to know joy and peace, we are almost guaranteed not to find joy and peace. God is in the change business. That means that we are constantly called to change and expand our thinking. Can you identify times or situations in which you clung fiercely to your image of how you thought things would or should be to the point that damage occurred to a relationship or to your own wellbeing? Can you think of times when you judged whether something was good or bad based on a mental image you had of a desired outcome? How did that affect you? What did your insistence on a certain outcome cost you? If you are ready to release a particular image of how you thought something would be, in order to make room for the new thing God is doing in and with you, go to God in prayer. Imagine the thing in as much detail as you can. Then once the picture is fixed in your head, say "I don't need that. It is not me. I release this outcome to you trusting that what comes will be perfect for me. I am making space for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your time of reflection by reminding yourself out

loud of God's promises to you. *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you. ... Do not fear, for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, today we release our tired expectations into your grand new story. Help us to receive with joy, what you bring to us each day. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 27 - Letting Go of the Pain of Betrayal

On the night that changed everything, Jesus and his friends gathered together in an upper room to celebrate Passover according to their tradition and God's instruction. Ordinarily a joyous feast celebrating freedom from bondage, this Passover was somber indeed. In John's telling of the event, Jesus strips, takes a basin and washes his friends feet. Much to their chagrin. In that action he shows them that being his disciple consists of lowly, humble, status free service to others. After, he returns to the table and makes the statement that must have shaken the rafters. "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." The disciples are shocked and immediately look for someone to blame, but Jesus seems uninterested in that. He is just feeling the pain of being betrayed by someone close to him, someone with whom he has shared his life and teaching, someone he loves. We see later in the story that Jesus seems to release that painful burden of betrayal. He tells Judas to go his way and do what he has to do. Perhaps Jesus knew that to carry the pain of Judas' betrayal with him into these hardest of days, would have done nothing but sap his strength. Perhaps he knew that to carry the pain of betrayal, to nurse it and focus on it, only allows the blow to be received again and again and again. Perhaps he knew that to face the challenge before him, he couldn't carry old wounds with him. I don't know. What I do know, however, is that carrying the pain of betrayal in our lives, robs us of strength, spiritual stamina and the courage to meet life on its own terms. Carrying the pain of betrayal is simply too great a burden to bear. If you have been carrying the pain of a betrayal in your life and are ready to release that burden, take a moment to silence your heart and mind. Take just a moment to feel all that you feel around the situation. Then go to God in prayer saying something like, "I don't need that. It is not me. I release this betrayal to you, Lord. With your help, I will carry it no longer. I am making space for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your time of reflection by reminding yourself out loud of God's promises to you. *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you. ... Do not fear, for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, life is sometimes difficult and people we trust sometimes hurt us. Today we ask that you remove any bitterness from our hearts and help us to release the burden of betrayals to you. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 28 - Maundy Thursday - Letting Go of Lazy Excuses

After the sacred meal in the upper room, Jesus and his friends go out to the Mount of Olives to pray. There is much that is deeply symbolic about this location. Hebrew prophecy held that the Mount, with its panoramic views of the city of Jerusalem, would be the place where God would be revealed on the Day of the Lord. Jesus realizes what is coming for him. He doesn't want it. He prays to be spared it. In this time of anguish, when Luke tells us that his sweat became like drops of blood, Jesus asks his friends to pray with him. They go to sleep instead. At least they do so until Judas comes with his kiss of betrayal and Jesus is arrested. Then, Peter creeps in the shadows outside the meeting of the Council and later follows to the Palace where Jesus is interviewed by Pilate. There, Peter denies Jesus three times. I often wonder what internal excuses Peter must have made that allowed him to deny Jesus in that way. Fear for his own life? Fear of being arrested? Fear that he had been wrong about Jesus all along? We cannot know. The more pertinent question for us is what lame excuses we come up with for our denials of Jesus and his way of life. When asked to forgive, what excuses do we make? He doesn't deserve it, maybe? Not until he says he's sorry, maybe? When asked to give a little more to support the church and its mission, what excuses do we make? When asked to make changes that are hard to make, what excuses do we make? When asked to embrace those we do not like, what excuses do we make? When asked to let go of a toxic relationship or workplace, what excuses do we make? When asked to pray with Jesus for just one hour, what excuses do we make? Whatever excuses Peter came up with on that fateful night, led him to deny Jesus and to turn his back on the greatest love in the universe. And it made him so miserable that he cried his eyes out and couldn't even stand by Jesus at the cross. Whatever excuses we make to justify behavior that is less than faithful, will never hold us together when hard times hit. Only our faith in the living presence of God in Christ can do that. Trying to protect ourselves from Love's cost will never lead to Love's treasures. If you can think of a time when you made lazy excuses that denied Jesus' call on your life, perhaps now is a time to let go of that habit. If you are ready to start, ask the Spirit to bring to your mind one such incident. Look at it carefully. What were you afraid of?

What seemed more important to you than Jesus at that moment? What were the excuses you manufactured to justify your choices? When you have some clarity about both your motives and excuses, go to God in prayer saying something like, "I do not need that. It is not me. I release it to you, Lord. I am making space for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your time of reflection by reminding yourself out loud of God's promises to you. *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you. ... Do not fear, for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, today we let go of our feeble excuses for not doing as you command. Replace the fears in our hearts with a pure courage born of love. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 29 - Good Friday - Letting Go of the Fear of Death

From the cross, even as he himself felt abandoned by God, Jesus talked of Paradise and comforted the men crucified with him. To me, the most poignant phrase Jesus uttered is found in John's Gospel. Jesus, at the very last, says, "It is finished." What did he mean by that? Did he mean that his life on earth was finished? Certainly. Did he mean that the cruel sacrificial system was finished? That is my belief. Did he mean that the stranglehold of sin on human life was finished? Of course. Did he mean that his suffering was finished? I'm sure that he did. I think that he may have had another thing in mind as well. Perhaps he meant that fear of death was finished, too. While the demonstration of eternal life is still to come, it cannot be separated in our minds from the crucifixion. Still, it can be helpful to us on Good Friday to think about the death itself. What we learn from the cross, among many other things, is that death is purposeful and its power is limited. Jesus' death accomplished mighty things. Since Jesus came to demonstrate the fullness of human being, it is reasonable to assume that our death will have purpose and limits as well. Something will come of it. Something will come of us. Our lives have meaning and death is not the end. When we gaze at the cross, we see Jesus demonstrate that death is part of the plan. It was for him and it will be for each of us. While it is mysterious and all too often painful or unjust, death is never wasted even though we grieve what feels like the waste of future days. Many of us fear, or are at least are nervous about death. We cannot imagine it for ourselves and we cannot bear it when it comes to those we love. We grieve collectively over the deaths of strangers across the globe. Grief is natural and God given. It is ultimately healing and empowering. Fear of death, however can debilitate us. It can rob us of the joys of our days. It can douse courage. It can stoke doubt.

The word for fear in scripture comes from the root 'to run.' There are 365 instances in the Bible where we are instructed to 'fear not.' When God says, fear not, it simply means don't run from the God given path before you. The women who stayed by the cross must surely have felt unimaginable pain and fear. Yet they did not run. They did not run from life. They did not run from death, even though they did not welcome it. None of this, of course means that if we are facing calamity that we should not run for our lives if there is a means for escape. It simply means that we do not face the inevitability of death with hopeless fear. It is part of life. It is purposed. It will lead to good. Its power is limited. If you are afraid of dying, take a moment to just sit with that fear. Don't go into it too deeply if it is too much for you. Try just thinking about it and not going into your emotions if it is too hard. When you are ready, let those thoughts go. Release them like birds from a cage. Go to God in prayer saying something like, "I do not need this fear. It is not me. I release the fear of dying to you, filled with all hope and confidence in that which is to come. I am getting ready for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your time of reflection by reminding yourself out loud of God's promises to you. *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you. ... Do not fear, for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, I release myself completely into your loving care, knowing that living or dying I belong to Christ. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 30 - Holy Saturday - Letting Go of the Inability to Wait

Holy Saturday is one of the most underappreciated sacred days in the Christian calendar. For many of us it is a day of preparing for an Easter feast, or arranging flowers at the church, or dying eggs with the kids. It is just a day to mark time, especially if we have not made the commitment to walk carefully through Holy Week, and are skipping blithely from palms and hosannas to lilies and alleluias. Jesus' life and mission did not make that blissful leap and there are spiritual gifts to be received by keeping a reverent Holy Saturday. This is the day of waiting. On this day Jesus' friends sat helplessly with their grief and fear. They couldn't see beyond it. They didn't even know if there was anything positive coming next. They were forced to wait for God and to abide by God's timing. The scripture does not tell us what happened to Jesus during the time he was entombed. Tradition suggests that he goes to release the souls in hell, to tell them that no matter who they have been, God's love is bigger and ultimately wins. The disciples knew nothing of

that, if indeed that is what happened. All they knew was that their hopes felt crushed, their grief unendurable, their fear indomitable. All they knew to do was to cling to each other and to wait to see what happened next. All they knew was that in their helplessness they had to wait for God. Waiting is not our long suit in dominant North American culture these days. We don't want to wait for anything. Remote controls, drive through windows. Twenty-four hour news cycles. Starvation diets. Waiting is not even a cultural value. The inability to wait has led to much destruction in society, in relationships and in the spiritual life. We pray for a miracle and if it doesn't come immediately in a form we desire, we give up and try to 'do it' ourselves. We pray for a habit to change and if it doesn't do so quickly we lose heart. And on and on it goes. We have become unaccustomed to waiting and especially unaccustomed to waiting for God's timing to be full. Holy Saturday invites us to sit and wait. Sometimes we must sit in our grief and wait for a while. Sometimes we must sit with not knowing what to do next and wait for a while. Activity is not always a magic balm. It is just an anesthetic when that is not what we need. If you have trouble waiting, especially for God's timing, consider releasing that tendency to God. Think about the situations in which you are most prone to leap in and fill up any time of waiting. What is the anxiety you feel about empty spaces or times when you don't know what to do? When you are ready, go to God in prayer saying something like, "I do not need this inability to wait. It is not true to me. I release this tendency to you. I am making room for Alleluias. Thank you." Close your time of reflection by reminding yourself out loud of God's promises to you. *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you. ... Do not fear, for I am with you."*

Prayer: Gracious God, on this beautiful day of holy waiting, help me to settle and clear some inner space to wait for what you will do next in my life. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

March 31 – Easter Sunday – The Day of Alleluias!

My favorite work of Easter art is a simple painting I found in a book given to me some years ago called the *Gospel in Art by the Peasants of Solentename*. The book is a collection of reflections and paintings about scriptural passages created by the people of a small village in Nicaragua during the time of the Contra war in the 1980's. The Easter painting shows a lush garden in all the vibrant colors of the Latin American people. Deep indigo blues, fading into a robin's egg sky. Flowers in fuchsia, mustard and purple. Plants in every shade

of green. Small tomato plants on stakes and tender rows of greens chilis line the walkway to the tomb. Mary Magdalene stands peering into the empty tomb in her ruffled skirt. There is a light inside but she is weeping. Just behind her, and out of her sight, stands Jesus, dressed as a gardener in clean pressed jeans and a pure white tee shirt. He is holding a hoe in one hand and leaning in toward Mary. The title of the painting is "Woman, why are you weeping?" It sometimes feels today, does it not, that all the world stands with Mary outside that ancient tomb, weeping. Maybe you too have known the spiritual and emotional devastation that Mary experienced that morning. Maybe on more than one occasion you have found yourself standing before a *not* empty tomb weeping. Maybe you are tired of waiting and holding the world's sorrow. Maybe the Lenten journey of release has left you feeling a little shell shocked, not quite sure what to do with your life without the familiar props. Perhaps the Alleluias you have been preparing for seem a little forced, or not quite ripe like the tomatoes and chilis in the painting I mentioned. If so, that, too, is natural. Our feelings rarely catch up with a new reality quickly. It is touching to me that Jesus does not tell Mary to buck up, to get with the program and stop crying. He simply calls her name. He asks her to tell him about her pain. Even though she cannot possibly understand it, in the intimacy of that moment, her tears dry and her joy joins the angels. Suddenly every hopeless thing shifts and the great announcement of heaven that is Jesus himself, releases the Alleluias she thought were gone forever. My prayer for each of you, on this holy day in which we cannot escape the eternal power of God's love for us, is that you will find the Alleluias that are always there for you, bubbling up inside you in unexpected and intimate communion with Jesus. Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Prayer: Great God, we thank you for the healing journey of Lent through which you have led us. We thank you for burdens lifted and joy restored. Most of all, Holy One, we thank you for this holiest of days in which we remember that our life with you never ends and that love is both our destiny and our companion. Alleluia! In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.