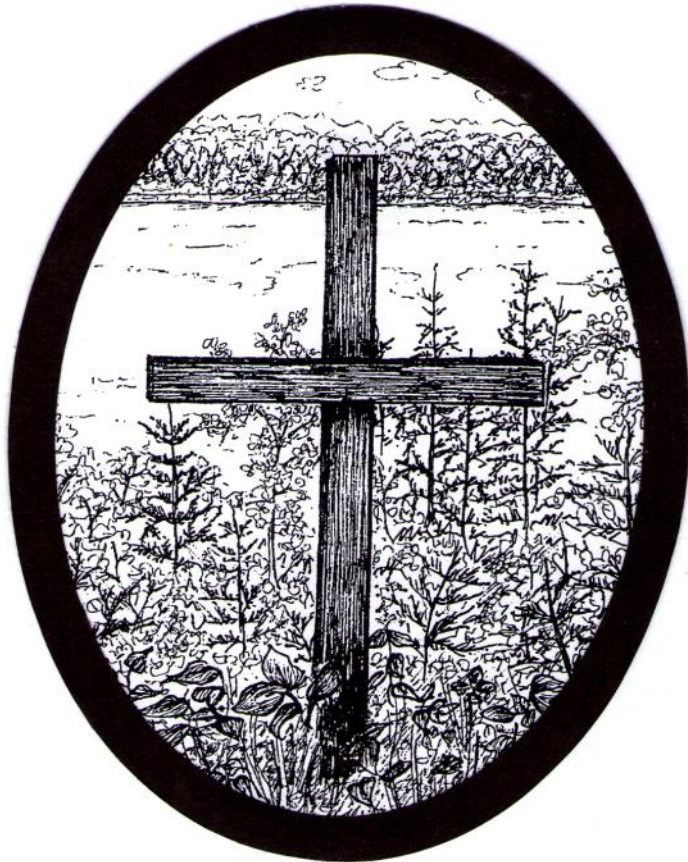
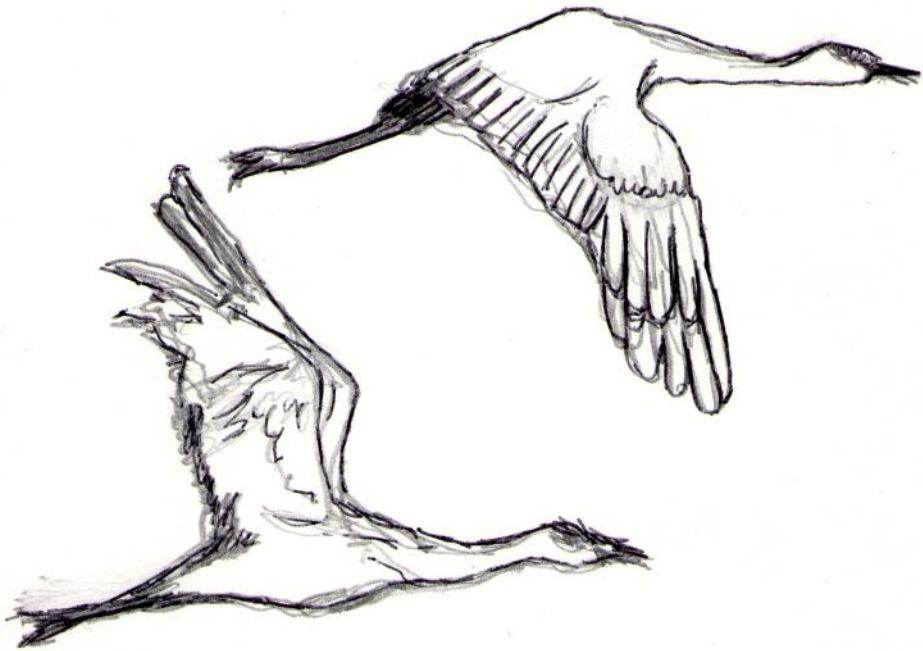


2011 Lenten Devotional



First United Methodist Church
Whitewater, WI

The journey begins...



becoming New

See, I am making all things new. Revelation 21:5

Lent - a time of reflection, introspection, meditation, forgiveness, and preparation for the joy of the Resurrection on Easter morning. When I visualize this in my mind I often think of Lent as a time for God to “renovate” my life. I am in the midst of completing some major decorating in the house, so the image of God “renovating” my life is very fresh. I have experienced the struggle of decision-making - what to do and how to do it? I’ve questioned how it would look when it was finished and tried to “see” it in my mind’s eye. I’ve had to trust those who are doing the work. And I’ve needed to be open to suggestions from those with experience in this field. I want to be surprised by the outcome!

Isn’t this like our journey through Lent? We struggle to identify those areas where we have been in service for our Lord, and to ask the pertinent questions about how we are being called to change. We question ourselves about the areas of our lives where we need to ask forgiveness - and offer forgiveness to others. We try to trust God, to leave our lives in God’s hands so that we might be kneaded and molded into the person we are meant to become. In prayer and meditation we open our minds and hearts to be transformed into an Easter people. And we experience once again the joyful surprise of Jesus’ Resurrection on Easter morning.

Gracious and merciful God, move us to respond this Ash Wednesday by returning to you in sorrow and being ready to welcome the changes you will bring to our lives. Help us to be open to Your “remodeling,” so we will be prepared to enter into the joy of Easter. Amen.

Rev. Mary Beth Byrne

Thursday, March 10, 2011

Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. John 14:1

In the fall of 1985, I found myself living in a city I had only dreamed about. I knew where it was, but I did not want to live there. But, that is where the best job interview was, so I moved to Pleasant Prairie, WI, for three years. After those three years, I lived in different parts of the city of Kenosha. Two years at Wood Creek and three years at Willow Hills. (I did not know anyone when I moved there either.)

I often made trips home to my parent's home on the weekends, which was 58 miles away. In the spring, summer, and fall, I would often pick out different roads to drive leading from Kenosha County to Walworth County just to see if I could get home without getting lost and to enjoy different sceneries. I only got lost once, but I always had maps in my car and was able to right myself and get to my destination. I was late, but I got back to my parents. In the winter I stayed on the main highways and then would sing Christmas carols. As I drove along, I would repeat parts of John 14 and often sang familiar hymns such as "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," "This is My Father's World," "Holy, Holy, Holy," or "The Church's One Foundation." Or perhaps I'd sing an anthem we had sung or were working on at First Church. I found singing to be a form of prayer. I could always tune in a Christian radio station, too. I often had a lot to think about...the past week at work at UW-Parkside, learning about Kenosha and its people, the church and my favorite place to meditate along the shores of Lake Michigan.

Sometimes when things seemed dreary in my life, I would recite "The Lord's Prayer" or the 23rd Psalm. During the eight years I lived in the Kenosha area, I found time to do a lot of spiritual, personal, and professional growing.

Over this time period, I had time to reflect on God's bountiful goodness: from watching crops be planted and harvested, seeing the beauty on golf courses, viewing cows and other farm animals, watching trees bud, leaves change color in fall, and the beauty of the snow on trees, creeks and all around in the winter, and always looking for and seeing deer, ducks, geese and sand hill cranes.

"For the beauty of the Earth—Lord of all to thee we raise our hymn of grateful praise."

Jean Bromley

Prayer

Pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. I Thessalonians 5:17-18

As I sat in my husband's hospital room, I prayed. I prayed for healing, of course, but more than that I prayed for God's will to be done in his time of critical illness. That is very hard to do because we all want our loved ones to recover and return to us.

But sometimes, God does not do what we pray for or answer according to our wishes. He did not promise life without problems or challenges. He only promised that He would be with us. ("Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." Hebrews 13:5)

After four days of being sedated, my husband opened his eyes and looked at me. Praise God!

I learned to believe in prayer from my mother. She was a wonderful prayer warrior. I always remember her in prayer for someone. During her last two years in the nursing home, she was totally blind at that point. Many nurses aides would stop in her room and ask her to pray for them for some problem in their lives.

Prayer is powerful, and I fully believe in its results—good or bad.

People in four churches were praying for Bob, and he is now free from the infection that invaded his body.

Never stop praying. You will be blessed.

Eileen Keller

Saturday, March 12, 2011

On Forgiveness

And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you. Ephesians 4:32 (The way I learned it as a child.)

It seems that to forgive someone is more to heal myself than the recipient.

I can never forget a story Corrie ten Boom once told. Years after her experiences in a Nazi Germany concentration camp, she found herself standing face to face with one of the most cruel and heartless German guards she had ever come across in the camps. He had humiliated and degraded both her and her sister in so many ways, so many times.

Now, he stood before her with his hand extended asking to be forgiven for his actions of those bygone days. Corrie said that she stood there with a chill in her heart but knew that her will could function though her heart was cold toward him, and she silently prayed, "Jesus, help me!"

Woodenly and mechanically, she thrust her hand into his and experienced the most amazing thing. A current began in her shoulder, down her arm, and into their clasped hands. The warmth of the reconciliation flooded her whole being and brought tears to her eyes. Wholeheartedly, she looked him in the eyes and said, "I forgive you, brother." For a long moment the two grasped each other's hands, the former guard, the former prisoner.

When we are able to forgive, we set the prisoners free - ourselves.

Dear God, give us the strength to realize that when we can finally forgive, we can finally set ourselves free of ultimate emotional burdens. Amen.

Sue Schlough

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

Psalm 51:7

Winter days sometimes seem long and dreary. Then unexpectedly, a dreary day can turn into a serendipitous one, turning into one of God's teaching moments. One of those days occurred not long ago while shoveling the driveway. I was working my way from the bottom up to near the top where Bob has been working for the past two years on turning an old plot of spent plants and grasses into a nicely planned out garden with a bounty of beautiful, colorful spring and summer blossoms. Of course, all of those lovely plants and flowers were buried under mounds of snow now, not to be seen until the snow melted and the spring thaw was underway. Then with great anticipation I will once again see the results of Bob's effort that was put into planting, nurturing, and maintaining the garden.

Back to the shoveling. As I hoisted yet more snow on the already hidden flowers, I pondered how really lovely and sparkly and white the snow was that covered up those flowers. And I began to think about how that is with God and our lives. He is able to take each of our "spent gardens," and upon our asking Him to forgive us and accepting Him as Savior, He covers up our sins and washes us as white as snow. We become beautiful, new creatures, and we can depend on Him to nurture, feed, and sustain us. But unlike the snowfalls that we get from year to year to year where we have to work hard to clear the way, His snow-wash requires little of us, for He has endured all the pain, even the pain of the cross.

Dear God, you are Creator of all the seasons. Thank you for the winter and for the special beauty that it brings, and thank you that winter is always followed by spring, when once again we see new life rise through the once frozen ground. Remind us that when we see the flowers of spring, we always need to be grateful for the new life that you offer through your son Jesus. Amen.

Nancy Comstock

Monday, March 14, 2011

He is the maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—he remains faithful forever. Psalm 146:6

When our daughter Carrie was very small, Barb and I stood with her one dark night looking up at a starlit western sky. High above us among the brilliant stars was the thin sliver of a crescent moon. Carrie said something that neither Barb nor I understood at first. When we asked her to repeat herself, Carrie said with great certainty, “It looks like God’s thumbnail.” I have no idea how our young daughter formed that image, but she recognized clearly what Barb and I did not. Thirty years later, none of us views a slender crescent moon without seeing “God’s thumbnail.”

This seems to me one of the secrets of finding God. Again and again, from the very beginning of the Bible, we are reminded that God created the heavens and the earth and everything in them. He created us, and he created our relationships with each other. But somehow we interact with our friends, family and coworkers, and we never find God among us. We look at the work of his hands day after day and year after year without spotting him. All *we* ever see is a crescent moon.

Yet, when we dare to look with fresh eyes, we find that God’s been right there in front of us all along. When we dare to look with fresh eyes, we see not only God’s thumbnail, but all the wonders of his creation—and the magnitude of his love for those that he created in his image.

Father God, we are your children. Give us “fresh eyes” that we may see you as children see. May we see you among us and all around us day by day. Amen.

*Open my eyes, that I may see
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;
Place in my hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp and set me free.*

Chuck Taylor

As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the Lord is flawless. Psalm 18:30

Since we were children, most of us have learned to be thankful for things that our parents or grandparents gave us. We learned that these were gifts expressing love from them to us. Certainly, those of us who had parents and/or grandparents like that were blessed, and we can look to those family relationships as a good but imperfect example of love.

I think it is harder to see the perfect love that our heavenly father lavishes on us. Sure, sometimes we can think about what God has done, and we count our blessings, and we're thankful. However, to be honest about it, we also see things that God has allowed in our lives that don't seem to be blessings at all - we might even blame God for bad things we experience.

The Bible teaches us that God loves more generously than any earthly parent can. He loves us perfectly. Parents and grandparents are quick to offer kids cookies and toys. But might this sometimes be the wrong thing to do? Kids are thankful for them, but might be worse off for some of it. We can trust our heavenly father to offer fun things too, but we know He will never offer them when something else would be better. Sometimes we need to build faith, patience, or character, and God gives us things that don't feel good right now so that we will be better people later.

We are often quick to lose faith when we don't get just what we pray for. Yet, knowing that God loves us perfectly we need to keep faith and just be thankful that such a wise and perfect parent is always and totally giving us what is really best for us.

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. James 1:17

Don Sorensen

Wednesday, March 16, 2011

**When you do these things to the least of my brethren you have done it unto Me.
Matthew 25:40**

Read Matthew 25:31-46

I have been asked to tell about the journey I made to starting the Clothes Closet. It started in grade school. We were taught to know love and serve God. We were in school to learn about God and we built a bond with God early in life, so the loving part came natural. That left knowing how to serve up to each individual.

There was a girl in my third grade class that had even less than me and was not the cleanest. The other kids were mean, and I was lost.

Then the book of Matthew came into my life. It was and is a joy. It gives hope to those who have none and is an outline on how to serve. You know the part - *When you do these things to the least of my brethren you have done it unto Me*. The rest was easy. I could pick and choose.

Then later in life came a special request. Every prayer time the same subject came up before I could start. "There are people in need in the community, and there is a way to help them." That went on for a couple of years. I was afraid to make the commitment, and who would trust me to follow through? Of course, the way to help the needy is to get people to donate the things they did not need. The message I was receiving gave me no choice, **START THE CLOTHES CLOSET**.

God has entered your hearts and you have answered in your generosity. Volunteers have come forward to work, and lives have been changed. Thank you.

Art Hughes

Everything Burns

People today are trying to define themselves by what they can get out of life; what they wear, how they look, how much stuff they have, what kind of car they drive...There have been a lot of funerals and not once has there been a eulogy about any of these things. They never talk about what a nice house they had or what a nice car they drove. It's all about relationships. Were they kind? Were they generous? Were they humble? Did they help others? That's the stuff people talk about, because that's all that really counts in the end. The people you touch are your real treasures. You're not defined by what you take from this world because the fact is, you won't take anything with you. You're defined by what you leave behind, what you give to this world and how you impact other people.

It's been said that there are only two ways to live. You can either love things and use people or you can love people and use things. I've made my choice. I'm going to love the choice that loves me back and creates a room for me in my Father's house. People, they can last forever; everything else from this world just burns.

Steven Gildner

Statements of Faith from the 30 Hour Famine Event, February 25, 2011

When I think of God, I think of all that He's given me. Food, countless clothes, friends and family that support me. I also think of the comfort and safety He gives me. He really blesses me and loves me in SO many ways. He has given me a sense of peace. So I fasted for Him because I love Him.

Max Kachel

My first year on mission trip (to Atlanta, GA) was the best spiritual experience I have had so far. I met new friends and was isolated from familiar people, which made me able to see God clearer than living my normal life. I try now to see the world how God wants me to see it. Mission trip has changed my life.

Ryan Hafferkamp

Friday, March 18, 2011

No Room in the Inns—But God Does Provide

Read Psalm 23

...For God has said, “I will never fail you. I will never abandon you.” So we can say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper, so I will have no fear.” Hebrews 13:5-6

On October 27, 2010, I found myself driving in a white van in the middle of a blizzard on my way to Minot, ND. I was to take my daughter, Erin, to the hospital the next day for an outpatient procedure. After driving 40 miles in wet, blowing, drifting snow on a two-lane road, it was time to stop. At 3:30 pm I drove into Carrington, ND, which had two motels, thinking there would be no problem finding a room for the night. Little did I know that the motels had been booked for over a week because of the opening of pheasant season in ND. I was advised to go back the way I had come, but I knew what the conditions were, and for me that was not an option. I also knew I was not going to sleep in my car.

It occurred to me that I should look for a church, and maybe someone could direct me to a person who would be willing to take in a stranger for the night. I found a church, but it was closed up. I headed back to the main highway through a neighborhood where a few people were clearing the 8” of wet, heavy snow from their driveways. I passed by a couple of people but noticed an older person trying to blow snow out of the driveway. I stopped and introduced myself, explained my situation, and asked if he would have a room I could sleep in for the night. He looked at me and said that his wife had passed away in February, and that yes, he had an extra room that I could use. I thanked him and asked where he kept his shovel.

I gained so much that night. I made a new friend in 94-year-old Gerald Berglund, a WWII veteran, father of three sons who all became doctors, a crafter in woodworking, a cribbage shark (he beat me 3 of 4 games), a kind and gracious host. I got to spend a wonderful evening with a man who could have been my father; my Dad passed away in March, 1978. Most of all, I learned to trust God’s leading and guidance.

I did make it to Minot, 127 miles NW of Carrington, in time to take my daughter home from the hospital. I was able to help her out and enjoyed the company of my grandsons, taking them Trick or Treating on Halloween in the snow.

Lord, thank you for the unexpected blessings of each day. Thank you for providing for our every need. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Kathy Findlay

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness. Come into his presence with singing Psalm 100:1

I first came into His presence with singing as an eight-year-old in the Junior Choir in the First Methodist Church in Neenah, Wisconsin. When I entered high school, I was welcomed into the Senior Choir. My husband, Bill, and I met at a Sub-District Youth Rally in that church, and we were married there sixteen months later. Bill had a nice tenor voice and enjoyed singing so he became a part of our choir family. Our three children were blessed with a love of music and followed us into the church choir cycle through the years.

Wherever we settled in our 55 years of marriage, we were welcomed into the church choir, and there were always wonderfully talented and dedicated musicians like Jim Athas and Christine Hayes in charge of the music program, making it a joy to participate.

For me, music has been the doorway into the house of the Lord for seventy-one years, regardless of location and denomination, and I highly recommend it.

Clara Bastian

One song can spark a moment, One flower can wake the dream.
One tree can start a forest, One bird can herald spring.
One smile begins a friendship, One handclasp lifts a soul.
One star can guide a ship at sea, One word can frame the goal.
One vote can change a nation, One sunbeam can light a room.
One candle can wipe out darkness, One laugh will conquer gloom.
One step must start each journey, One word must start each prayer.
One hope will raise our spirits, One touch can show you care.
One voice can speak with wisdom, One heart can know what's true.
One life can make the difference, You see, it's up to me and you
Poet Unknown.

Sunday, March 20, 2011

Looking Back

Psalm 23

“The Lord is my Shepherd...” My earliest and fondest memories as a very young child were going to church on Sundays with my father and mother along with my six brothers and sisters. Sometimes, rather than sitting, I was allowed to stand on the pew between my parents. “...He maketh me to lie down in green pastures...” From that vantage point I could see my eldest sister playing the organ in front of the church. While facing backwards I was able to observe the choir in the balcony. “...He leadeth me beside the still waters...” I developed an early appreciation for religious and classical music. As a teen I felt somehow continuously drawn to church activities. Since I enjoyed the music, I joined the church choir at the age of fifteen. All the other choir members seemed so old to me. “...He leads me in the paths of righteousness...” After many blessed years, my enjoyment in singing Christian music continues. “...My cup runneth over...” Sundays just do not seem complete without having attended a worship service. As I attain senior status and reflect upon my life, I must admit that I have not always been aware of how my faith enriched my life experiences. Was it the Holy Spirit working within me? “...Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life...”

Don Triebold

Lenten Devotional

Do you know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and I make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified. I Corinthians 9:24-27

In this familiar passage we see the Apostle Paul giving us some very keen insight. Here Paul is reminding us of something we unfortunately tend to overlook: we, as humans, are made up of both body and spirit. At creation we read how God formed man out of dust. As we read further we see how man was simply a lump of clay, no better than a mannequin, until God breathes the breath of life into him. He puts in man a spirit that enables him to have life.

Often we forget that we are made up of both a temporary human body and an eternal spirit. It's during those times of forgetfulness that we can become more susceptible to giving in to the cravings of our sinful nature. Our sinful body cries out for food, comfort, ease, etc. which in and of themselves are not bad, but it's when we lose the ability to say "no" to those cravings of our body that we fall into trouble.

In this passage, Paul skillfully reminds us that we are to go into strict training and deny our sinful nature what it longs for. When he says he "beats his body" he literally means to maul his body like a bear mauls its prey, and he is not doing it without forethought. "I am not running aimlessly" tells us there is rhyme and reason to his actions; he has a plan of attack. Paul is purposely and tactfully disciplining himself so that his physical body will obey his spirit, the core of who he is meant to be in Christ.

An athlete intentionally inflicts pain on himself/herself in the weight room during workouts, and in practice, strengthening and training their muscles to perform the way they want them to during competition. We too as Christians are to make a concerted effort to deny our bodies what they crave, only giving them what they need, making them our slaves so that we will live a life honoring to God and worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Lord Jesus, As we enter into this season of Lent, I pray that you will lead us to enthusiastically give up a part of our daily life that will challenge us to deny our fleshly desires. Reveal to us what may be getting in the way of our faithful obedience to you so that we may set that thing aside for a time and discipline our bodies. Allow us to focus on what is eternal and not what is going to pass away; help us to run with purpose towards the crown that will last forever. Amen.

Matt Millar, Kenya, Africa

Tuesday, March 22, 2011

I believe that God has intervened in my life many times. One of the most significant times was during World War II in 1944, when my husband, Glen, was stationed in Tyler, Texas, with the army. In March, his unit was called to active duty in Europe. They were waiting in New Jersey to be shipped out. When their day of departure arrived, everyone's name was called except Glen's. After several days he was told that his records had been lost! Because of that, instead of going into battle on D-Day, he went on D-Day plus twenty-seven when he was put in the Thirty-Fifth Division as a replacement.

After eighteen months, he returned home safe in body and mind, although he had received two Purple Hearts. The injuries proved to be minor.

God has blessed us with many birthdays. Prayer has sustained us over the years, and I believe it has been the biggest help in keeping us mobile and active in our own apartment.

Ellen Wiedenhoeft

A Statement of Faith from the 30 Famine Event, February 25, 2011

God to me is the one I can talk to. He is always there. He listens when it seems like no one else is. When it feels like no one is around, I can turn and God is there. He is my guidance, He is with me through thick and thin.

Faith is like you often hear, believing when you can't see. When you look to God and ask for His help, things seem to fall in place. It is not always what I expect. Sometimes it even does a 180 degree turn from where I thought I should be or felt I was going. But I know when He makes a change or sends me down a path I didn't expect, He would never give me something I couldn't handle. He is always there with me through it.

When my grandpa passed away I often asked why God would take away someone that I love so much. I shouldn't have questioned why. God does things we may not understand. Everyone has a time, and I think about it and now realize I have an angel looking down on me. I love my grandpa and I will always miss him. But when I feel lost or like I want to see/talk to him again, I look to God. I can talk to God, feeling and knowing my grandpa is hearing it, too.

We all have our challenging times, but we also have great days. There are always ups and downs. God carries us through them all. Knowing He is there with me gives me strength to handle things that are thrown at/handed to me.

Renee Stoll

Things to Ponder

My grandparents always kept a few milk cows. My grandmother usually milked these cows down by the barn. The cows were trained to return to the barn lot every night where they were fed a little hay after she had finished milking them.

One evening while my 3-year-old city cousin Barry was visiting, he went with his grandmother down to the barn to watch her milk the cows. While she was milking one of the cows already in the barn lot, she noticed that the other cows wouldn't come through the gate because they were afraid of my cousin. She called out, "Barry, move back. The cows don't know you." Barry then moved away from the gate and as each cow entered the barn lot, he politely introduced himself, nodding his head to each one saying, "Hello, I'm Barry Spearman. Pleased to meet you."

Children take life and its rules literally. How much simpler to do so. No worries of hidden meanings, looks misinterpreted, and casual comments misconstrued. Consider the vast amount of time we spend on fear of what others *might* think of us, what we *might* say or *should* do. How much better to spend our time on enjoying each day God has given to us.

My mother, who recently became bedridden, had to be seen face-to-face by a physician in order to continue home health care, a new 2011 Medicare rule. Not many doctors make house calls, so my parents were quite anxious having to choose a doctor randomly. I called later that day to ask how the meeting went. My mother described the doctor as a "cupcake." (She is legally blind due to macular degeneration.) When talking to my father, I asked the doctor's age, assuming him to be a young physician based on my mom's description. My father said the physician was an older man, around his own age (90). This makes me picture in my mind this doctor, who I will probably never meet, having extremely gentle hands and a soothing, calm voice. Thanks be to God for sending someone who fulfilled each of my parents' desires, a kind touch and experienced wisdom.

Janie Anderson

Thursday, March 24, 2011

Be Patient, Then

Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. James 5:7-8

“Don't you just feel like winter has lasted too long?” I said recently to a friend. We were talking about all the waiting in our lives. Her husband has been unemployed for over a year, and they won't hear back about his most likely job prospect for another two months. At the same time, he's waiting for test results on potential cancer, and she's waiting to quit one of her two jobs and hopefully have children when he finds work. Meanwhile in my life I have waited over a year to find out whether I will attend graduate school next fall, we are in the long process of getting publishers' responses to a book proposal, and we wait to find a house to move into.

My friend and I were not talking about winter in the literal meaning of wanting to get these three feet of snow off our lawns. We were talking about the long, slow time of waiting. The spiritual, emotional winter.

Winter can feel sparkingly beautiful and exciting for skiers and ice skaters for a while, but eventually most of us tire of not seeing growing things, We want bright sun and seed planting time and action and sunlight. We know that the clarity and motion of springtime are coming, but they look so far off. And it gets hard to be patient.

We all face times of winter where life slows down and we don't get what we want just when we want it. James goes on to remind us of Biblical examples of people who waited. There's Job, who waited not knowing whether he would ever be well again and without having anything he could do to fix the situation. Then there were the prophets, who saw ahead to the restoration of Israel and the coming of a Savior over five hundred years before he came—talk about a long winter!

“As you know,” says James, “we consider blessed those who have persevered.” Waiting with perseverance in any area of life *does* bring blessings. Romans 5:4 says perseverance produces character, and character produces hope. We can wallow in self-pity and impatience when we face times of waiting, or we can ask God to use the time to shape our character. He strips away our needy dependency on having things go the way we want, and replaces our whining with pure hope for whatever God, out of love, sees fit to give. “And hope does not disappoint” Paul goes on in Romans, “because God has poured out his love...”

Just as God created the seasons to work together for good, he sees us through each season of our life for a purpose.

Chrissy Jeske

Friday, March 25, 2011

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful. I know that full well. Psalm 139:14

Read Psalm 139

During my junior year in college I took a course called “Vertebrate Anatomy and Development.” A large portion of the course was the study of how an embryo develops into a fully formed newborn. I found this truly fascinating. The intricacies and incredibly fine cell to cell communication required to develop our heart, brain, limbs, and skin, to name just a few, is amazing to behold. These cellular signals must occur at the right times, for the right duration, and in the right intensities for the bodies to correctly form.

Sometime during that same year I came across a chapter in the Bible that has since become one of my favorites: Psalm 139. This psalm focuses on four attributes of God; His Knowledge of all things, His Presence everywhere, His Power in the formation of man, and His Holiness.

The verse that stood out to me that year, and stayed with me since is Psalm 139 verse 14. “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Your works are wonderful. I know that full well.”

Reading Psalm 139 and those verses in particular always leaves me with a sense of awe. As intricate, vast and timeless as God’s works are, He still cares about the small stuff: Me. He knows “when I sit and when I rise.” He ”perceives my thoughts from afar.” For me that has always been comforting.

Mark Hiebert

Saturday, March 26, 2011

Making Big Decisions

He (God) sets the time for saving and the time for throwing away. Ecclesiastes 3:6

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

At breakfast one morning about seven years ago, my husband said, “I think it’s time we were on the list to move into Fairhaven.” This came from a man who was born in the house we lived in and in which I had lived with him for over fifty years. “I suppose you thought you’d live here forever,” he added.

Truthfully, I did! We’d finally completed a remodeling project that had taken over ten years, and I was enjoying the results (especially the attached garage). There was a lot of “stuff” in the outbuildings besides the barn, which had been empty of cows for about thirty-five years. It was not empty now, however.

So we went to Fairhaven and got on the list - saying it would take at least two years to sell the farm and be ready to move. We broke the news to our three children, who had also assumed we’d stay on the farm forever.

The word spread that we were planning to move and before long had some inquiries about the house. Our daughter and husband, who had previously bought some woods from the farm and built a house there, looked into buying the farm land. A great-nephew, whose parents were next door neighbors and whose grandfather was also born in the house, looked the place over and was interested in buying. We began sorting, and I boxed up the Christmas decorations after the holidays. The kids began to acquire some family mementoes. We had a garage sale and made several trips to Goodwill.

By the time we were ready to close on the sale of the land, and the house and five acres, Fairhaven had an apartment for us.

In looking back on the whole experience, I can see God’s hand in the whole process - everything just fell into place. We are now comfortably situated at Fairhaven for the rest of our lives. We also know there will be minimum arrangements for our children to handle when the time comes—our gift to them.

Thank you God, for helping to make this big decision an easy transition for us and our family. Amen.

Charlotte West

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace. Ephesians 1:7

All of my adult life I had considered myself a Christian. I attended church regularly, gave what I thought was appropriate, ushered, did some committee work, volunteered from time to time and made sure my daughters went to Sunday School and completed confirmation. As the children got older and my job travels increased, the relationship with my wife deteriorated. Each of us blamed the other, and neither had the spiritual maturity to reach out to God or other Christian professionals for assistance and encouragement to help our very human dilemma. Emotionally I left the marriage and we divorced.

There were financial issues to work out, but they were small in comparison to the emotional hurt that my wife, adult children, friends and other family members felt after learning of my decision to divorce. There were feelings of anger, abandonment, and betrayal from those who were close to me. Those closest to me wanted nothing to do with me. I felt isolated and guilty and anything but a Christian. I still didn't have enough confidence in God to go to Him in my brokenness and ask Him for His forgiveness and how to ask forgiveness from those I hurt.

It was through my pain and isolation that I could now hear God's words and how they applied to my life. This occurred at the United Methodist Church in Milton as Glenn Skatrud shared his love and how God is forgiving. Sunday after Sunday I heard God speaking to me in sermons, Bible passages, hymns, and fellowship. Each Sunday I would leave, many times in tears as I felt the presence of the Holy Spirit, and go to my apartment, reread the passages read in church that day and reflect on how it applied to my life. It was wonderful to feel God as an active and living, loving part of my life. I realized finally that God had forgiven me, and if He could forgive me, I could forgive myself.

Prayer became a more important part of my life, I could now ask for the forgiveness of others, and my prayer was often to have the Holy Spirit soften those hurting hearts and allow me back into their lives. The process was slow. He spoke to me and said, "Be patient, be understanding and be loving." With His help, His will would be done.

My marriage to Nancy was another God-blessed event as she is a woman of strong faith, was patient and encouraged me on my journey. One of our primary goals as a couple was to grow in our faith individually and as a couple. With Pastor David as pastor, teacher and one who leads by example, we both find ourselves growing. The weekly sermons, Bible studies and encouragement to read the Bible have been an important part of our growth. My experience at FUMC—the fellowship, the learning and the serving—has improved my spiritual life immensely.

The old saying "if I only knew then what I know now" is appropriate. On the other hand, I feel blessed by the closeness I feel I now have with the Lord that I did not have before. I know I've just started this journey and despite all of my shortcomings, I've found there is nothing more wonderful than His unconditional love and forgiveness.

Dear Heavenly Father, through your grace I have learned of your forgiveness. May I always be willing to forgive as I give thanks for those who have forgiven me. Continue to lead me in ways that bring me closer to you. Amen.

Monday, March 28, 2011

And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. 1 John 4:16

Our family's history of long marriages goes way back. Each of my two sets of maternal great-grandparents was married for more than 50 years. My maternal grandparents were married for 63 years and my paternal grandparents for 56. Barb's paternal grandparents were married for 53 years. And Barb's and my parents, wed in the same year, have been married for more than 63 years. Barb and I haven't been married that long, but give us time; we're closing in on anniversary number 39, and we're just kids!

This background, then, is my point of reference when I think of love. We're not talking about passing fancy, one night stand or until the first serious disagreement love. We're talking dirt under the fingernails, kids under foot, sick in bed, long-term hard-knocks love. Marital longevity is, of course, at least one part good fortune—both partners have to live long lives. But beyond that, each of these lengthy marriages represents a serious commitment by both husband and wife, a trait clearly shared by many shorter marriages as well.

The unions listed above represent nearly 450 years—164,383 days—of marriage, most surely not all of them wedded bliss. Through 450 years of marriage there are bound to be more than a few bumps in the road. And some major potholes! Mistakes are made; feelings are hurt; life's stresses intrude. Yet, each of these marriages not only survived but flourished because they were held together by committed love on both sides. That's where I start when I think of God's love. (A significant difference being that in my relationship with God there's one perfect partner, so when there's a problem, I know right where to look!)

Perhaps one of the best known verses in the Bible speaks to the depth of God's love. *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16* What kind of love is that? That is committed love beyond anything we'll ever know here on earth. Better even than the very best of our marriages. Good, as only God can make it good.

Loving Father God, there is no way that we can fathom the depth of your love. Yet we yearn for a loving relationship with you. Even when we feel unlovable and unloved, we know that you care deeply for us. Lead us to you through your love. AMEN

My job, your job, my joy, your joy, is to become a fully committed partner in a loving relationship with God and with his son, Jesus Christ.

Chuck Taylor

Tuesday, March 29, 2011

Because He Lives

I know God is always with me. But sometimes my mind can get caught in such a worrisome thought that I forget. That's when it's such a blessing when the Holy Spirit takes the time to gently tap me on the shoulder to remind me.

My husband and I had been married twelve years when we moved to Whitewater with Ryan, my sixteen-year-old stepson. This was the first time in our marriage that neither one of us were attending college. That meant we could consider growing our family while Ryan was still home to bond with his new brother or sister before graduating high school. Although we had always talked about having children, I soon began feeling fearful. I had never really been around babies before. Ryan was four when Kim and I married, and those baby years seemed pretty daunting. What if I wasn't a good mother? What if I wasn't patient? And the scariest of all—what if I couldn't conceive after more than a decade of making sure we didn't? These thoughts seemed to be with me every time I saw a baby. One Sunday morning I was still mulling over these thoughts as I left for church. They were still there as I listened to the announcements. The first hymn was "Because He Lives." I was familiar enough with the first verse that I could sing with the congregation while I flipped to find the right page in the hymnal. As I started to sing the second verse, a great peace cascaded over me as I read the words:

*How sweet to hold a newborn baby,
And feel the pride and joy he gives.
But greater still the calm assurance,
This child can face uncertain days because **He** lives.*

I believed that the peace and joy I felt was the Holy Spirit comforting me and building up my faith that my baby could handle anything because He lives! Since that special gentle tap, we've welcomed two beautiful daughters into the world.

Michelle Hixson

Wednesday, March 30, 2011

How are we, as Christians, viewed by the world around us? When we look at events and the news being reported today, I wonder if our Christian light shines as brightly as our Lord would have it shine. I enjoy reading the history of many subjects, and in my reading I came across a letter written by an anonymous author to a 2nd century scholar and teacher named Diognetus. The letter is a glimpse as to how Christians were viewed 2,000 years ago and a prayer that we may be viewed in a similar way by the world around us today.

“Those Christians”

“For Christians are not differentiated from other people by country, language or customs; you see, they do not live in cities of their own, or speak some strange dialect, or have some peculiar life-style.

“This teaching of theirs has not been contrived by the invention and speculation of inquisitive men, nor are they propagating mere human teaching as some people do. They live in both Greek and foreign cities, wherever chance has put them. They follow local customs in clothing, food and the other aspects of life. But at the same time, they demonstrate to us the wonderful and certainly unusual form of their own citizenship.

“They live in their own native lands, but as aliens; as citizens they share all things with others, but like aliens, suffer all things. Every foreign country is to them as their native country, and every native land as a foreign country.

“They marry and have children just like everyone else; but they do not kill unwanted babies. They offer a shared table, but not a shared bed. They are present ‘in the flesh’ but they do not live ‘according to the flesh.’ They are passing their days on earth, but are citizens of heaven. They obey the appointed laws, and go beyond the laws in their own lives.

“They love everyone, but are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death and gain life. They are poor and yet make many rich. They are short of everything and yet have plenty of all things. They are dishonored and yet gain glory through dishonor.

“Their names are blackened and yet they are cleared. They are mocked and bless in return. They are punished as evildoers; when punished, they rejoice as if being given new life. They are attacked by Jews as aliens, and are persecuted by Greeks; yet those who hate them cannot give any reason for their hostility.

“To put it simply—the soul is to the body as Christians are to the world. The soul is in the body but not of the body; Christians are in the world but not of the world.”

To GOD be the Glory, Amen.

Eric Vogel

Thursday, March 31, 2011

Come to me all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Matthew 11:28-31

Nancy was scheduled for her yearly mammogram, and both of us thought of it as routine as in past years, but this time was different. The doctor called and said there was an abnormality that would require an ultrasound. That was followed by a biopsy which confirmed our fears. It was cancer.

Nancy's reaction was different than mine. She was calm, confident in the medical people involved and most importantly had knowledge and faith that God would play this out His way, and that by turning outcomes over to Him, it removed her stress and fears.

Seeing her calm acceptance and confidence made me happy knowing that she could face procedures and treatment with minimal anxiety. At the same time I was internalizing my fears—fear of Nancy being in tremendous pain and/or becoming sick from chemo and radiation and of course my fear of losing my beloved partner. Obviously my faith was not as solid as Nancy's, and my prayers did little to calm my anxieties.

As Nancy progressed through a lumpectomy and then a mastectomy, we were amazed at how little pain and discomfort she experienced and how quickly she healed. Observing Nancy and her way of coping with all of this with God's help was transforming me and my fear and concern, allowing me to become grateful for His healing power and His presence in our lives. What I was coming to realize was that God had taken our concerns and made them His, and my prayers were more often prayers of thanks for caring for Nancy and me.

Nancy's treatment is not over, but there is no recurrence and she is tolerating the medication well. God's caring love has allowed us to enjoy life and more fully appreciate all that we have, and it gives us hope that we can live some of the dreams we've had prior to her illness.

We are thankful for the skill and caring of the medical people and for the prayers and support of many friends and relatives. With God's grace and mercy we are able to live happy, healthy lives. We know the future is in His hand, and whatever the outcome, it will be good. It was His plan for us.

Dear God, Thank you for the health you've given us and the healing. Thank you for the faith your teachings have instilled in us. Your love and willingness to take our human burdens are beyond our expectations and provide serenity beyond imagination. Amen.

Bob Comstock

Friday, April 1, 2011

“And A Little Child Shall Lead Them”

Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people; but Jesus said, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” And he laid his hands on them and went away. Matthew 19:13-15

I am a member of the Big Sister program in Racine, and I have a nine-year-old Little Sister named Ebonie. (She has been to our church a few times with me.)

Ebonie came up to spend the weekend with me a few months ago, and she seemed to be enjoying her stay with me. We spent time together; we baked cookies and watched movies and she went to Sunday School and we visited with my family and played games. But I couldn't help wondering what more I could do to make her visit more meaningful. She comes from the inner-city and has a tough life due to many circumstances. So I kept trying to make her happy for the small time we had together. I took her back to Racine after the weekend, and kept hoping for some feeling of God's touch as I drove home. When I arrived at home I went into the bedroom where she had spent the few days and noticed a small piece of paper on the bed. I picked it up and read it. It said “I love you Eaniel.” Maybe she couldn't spell my name, but she sure could express love and happiness in a big way! I fell on my knees and thanked God for showing me that this little girl had no problem expressing her love, and I was so concerned about entertaining her!

Thank you God, what a terrific lesson for me.

Elaine Frietsch

Saturday, April 2, 2011

The Blessing and Salvation of the Christian Community

Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all ye lands. Psalm 100:1

Barbara and I have been blest with a variety of experiences during our journey through life that have both tested and strengthened our Christian Faith. Living in perhaps a dozen different towns and cities these past 60 years has given us the opportunity to serve in, and be served by, a wonderful variety of churches, one being Nazarene, one Presbyterian, and the balance United Methodist. All have contributed in a very positive way to our Christian growth.

As part of a choir we found and shared Christ in many ways. One small church in Illinois placed the choir in a front corner of the sanctuary, partially hidden behind a wooden scrollwork which obstructed whatever music the small choir uttered. Through the vision and persistence of the director, the Trustees were persuaded to cut a large opening in the wall of an upstairs room at the back of the sanctuary. Thereafter we sang heartily from the new balcony.

At a small church in North Carolina, the choir director was also the organist. She was loved and respected by the choir members, and quite good in the dual role. The choir director of a larger church in NC is nationally renowned for composing music for, and teaching hand bell workshops. He “went through the chairs” and spent two years as President of the American Guild of English Hand Bell Ringers.

We were blest to have sung for almost nine years with a large church choir in Largo, FL. During two of those years the choir and church orchestra blessed the community with a winter concert in Ruth Eckerd Hall, Clearwater, FL, that filled an auditorium that seats 2,100.

Finally we have come to our Whitewater First United Methodist Church where the music program includes so many fine voices, frequent instrumentalists, a Director of Music and Organist extraordinaire, and a Choir Director whose talent was recently recognized with an opportunity to direct a choral symposium in Morocco, Africa! Further, we are blest with Pastor David, who was born with music in his soul.

Barbara adds: “I praise you, Lord, for the gift of music. Music has always been a big part of my life. I’ve sung in choirs, big and small, wherever we have lived, each one a thrill of its own. Now I’m sitting back and listening, being inspired by the choir’s music from a new perspective. I feel so blest.”

Finally, the longer we, as Christians live, the more likely we will be tested by a family crisis such as loss of a parent, loss of a sibling, traumatic injury of a grandchild, even loss of a child or grandchild. In each case we have been blest by compassionate and experienced pastors, there to help us through our grief and sadness.

Dear Lord, help each of us to find and fill our particular role, in love and loyalty to you. Amen.

Prayer Focus: The Inspiration of Church Volunteer Choirs

Wendell and Barbara Swift

Sunday, April 3, 2011

Close Encounter

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. Colossians 4:2
The Lord has answered my plea. The Lord has answered my prayer. Psalm 6:9
Before they call, I will answer. While they are still speaking, I will hear. Isaiah 65:24

It was the last day of our trek into the wilderness; day five of our Boundary Waters retreat. So many memories had been created; so many opportunities to bask in God's presence, to draw near to him, and to pray with and learn from others in the group.

As we crossed the last lake, singing, laughter, turtle-counting, and story-telling floated through the air. Some were eager to get back to flush toilets, ice cubes, and ice cream...Others were not so ready to embrace these luxuries and lamented the fact that the car was getting closer and closer.

The lake soon behind us, we eyed the mass of tall grass and mud that lay in front of our eyes. In the middle was a narrow, snake-like channel. In seasons of low-water levels, it meant that we'd be equally as muddy soon, wading through mud and grass clumps two feet high or more! In seasons of high-water levels, a canoe could glide right through the channel like a minnow in seaweed. This day the water sat somewhere in the middle, allowing us fairly smooth travel, but still challenging us to work together to clear grass and push our way through.

As we led the canoe chain through the reeds, my canoe partners Theresa and Owen grew silent, for we all knew one thing: *This* was moose country! We'd been hoping to see a moose all trip, but had only seen turtles, loons, birds, ducks, eagles, and fish! Maybe this would be our chance!

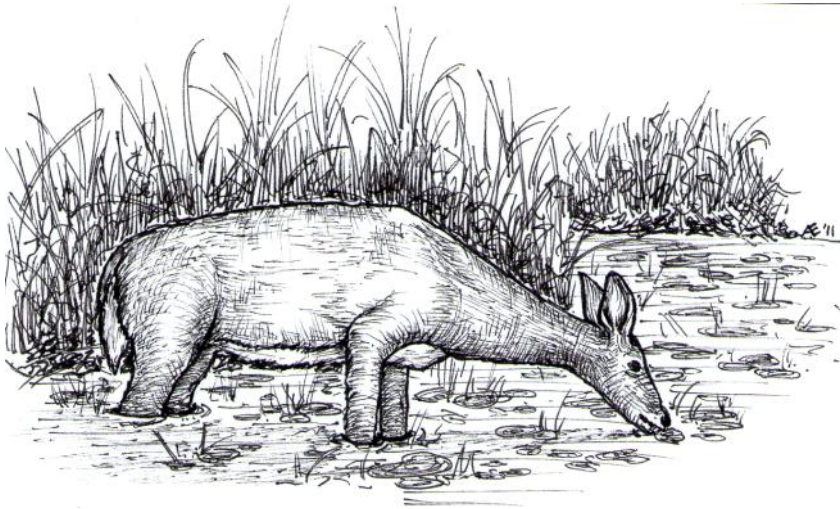
Around a bend we came, the portage to the parking lot looming up ahead, when something made me stop mid-paddle. There, no more than fifteen feet in front of us, was a large, brown animal! Her head was down, her mouth filled with fresh lily-pad leaves, and her legs submerged in the water. Quickly, we stopped the canoe, all of us looking at each other, motioning wildly to the canoe behind us to look and be quiet, pulling out cameras, and just sitting there, in perfect awe. Never once did she flinch or seem troubled by our presence. We sat there for a good long while, silently praising God for His majestic creation, watching the beautiful animal finish her dinner, drink and then slowly amble through the mud and weeds and up the nearby hillside.

It was an encounter to remember for a lifetime! Here's the thing, though: The animal that stopped us in our tracks? It was not the long sought-after moose, but was, instead, a doe. As soon as we could talk again, Theresa said, "Well, I was praying that we'd see a moose—But I guess God knew that we needed to see a deer!"

Her comment struck a chord in me. How many times do we pray and ask about something, and when we don't get an answer like we wanted right away, jump to the conclusion that God didn't answer or wasn't listening? But our Heavenly Father doesn't operate like that. He loves to hear our voice; He loves to care for us—He wants us to come to Him with everything in our life, be it large or small—He wants us to seek Him and seek His will. And here's the thing—God will *always* answer us—not always with what we think we want, but what we *need*, which is often something we can't understand right away. Sometimes we have some things to learn: patience,

perseverance, another aspect of God's character or who He made us to be, aligning our wills better with His; perhaps the timing is not right for the prayer to be answered. This is a lesson that I seem to need to keep retaking, but each time I do, it helps me to understand my Heavenly Father, and the marvelous ways He works even better.

We were praying for a moose - and God answered with a deer! It was not what we thought we wanted, nor was it what we'd been praying about all week long...But it was God's provision, just the same. And it was magnificent!



What is it that lays heavy on your heart today? Do you have a long-standing prayer that seems to have gotten lost between here and Heaven? Be assured that it *has* been heard! Be diligent in seeking out God's will, keep your eyes open for the unique and creative ways the Lord is at work answering you, and praise him for that! Do you have a prayer that was answered in a way that surprised you? Thank the Lord for seeing beyond what we can see, and for knowing us better than we know ourselves. Do you have a prayer that was answered with a painful "no?" Even amidst that pain and disappointment, give praise to the Lord, for His omniscient, omnipotent, and awesome ways far surpass our own!

Dear Lord, Abba, Father, our perfect Creator, our God who never sleeps, thank you for hearing us! Thank you for your perfection, vision, answers, timing, for meeting our needs that are both known and unknown, and your work in our lives! Where would we be without you? Draw us near and conform our will to your own. Keep our eyes ready to see your work, our ears ready to hear, and our mouths ready to praise! In Your Name we pray, Amen.

Anne Gibson

Monday, April 4, 2011

Lent helps me focus on the grace of God. My favorite song that tells of God's grace is "Deathbed" by the Christian rock band, Reliant K. It tells the story of a guy who royally messed up his life. He had a rough childhood and kept screwing up through his adulthood. In the song, he's lying on his deathbed, remembering his past, all his mistakes, wishing he'd made different choices, seeing the wrong turns he'd taken, regretting...

At first on his deathbed, the man was afraid of Jesus because of all his sins. But Jesus came to him and helped him see that He died to take away those sins. The man understood his need for God and he repented and begged Jesus to come into his withered heart. He asked Jesus to stay with him until he died and then take him to Heaven. Jesus told him that he'd never be lonely again. At the end of the song, Jesus is speaking. He says, *"I am the Way. Follow me and take my hand. I am the Truth. Embrace me and you'll understand. I am the Light, and through me you'll live again for **I am LOVE!**"*

Even though most of this song is very sad, it gives me hope and encouragement that God loves us in spite of ourselves and forgives our sins, and we can look forward to peace with Him in Heaven. This is the most important truth of God's love to me.

AJ Gildner

God has given us the gift of individuality, the ability to have our own personalities, likes and dislikes and opinions. No one is exactly the same. Yet, through all our differences we can see all of our similarities. Since we are all created in the likeness of God and through God, we've learned to love one another for our differences.

In response to the 30 Hour Famine Event, Devan Carlson composed and performed a song at the Graceland Praise Service at the close of the event on February 26, 2011. This was his offering to God.

Faith Knows No Limits

Read Psalm 121

I will love you, O LORD, my strength. The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I may trust. My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I will call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, so shall I be saved from my enemies. Psalm 18:1-3

God speaks to us in many ways. I am especially grateful for a very special travel prayer from a very special person.

My husband and I were looking forward to our anniversary trip to Maine, a drive to the coast to spend a week by the sea. I work with disabled adults teaching job skills. On my last day of work before our trip, one of my workers knelt down beside me, held my hand and asked me if it was ok if we prayed together for my safe travels to Maine. To my surprise she began to pray out loud. “Dear God, please keep my boss safe while she drives to Maine.” I admired her for being so uninhibited about her faith. I thanked her for praying with me, and we went about our day. That evening I shared her prayer with my husband. The next morning—an hour and a half into our trip—we were driving through Chicago when a car traveling the wrong way on the freeway narrowly missed hitting us head on. Our thoughts immediately went back to the prayer that was shared at work the day before.

Dear Heavenly Father, Give us the courage to share our faith with others and to be disciples to You. Amen.

Prayer Focus: For those living with disabilities.

Donna Wedl

Wednesday, April 6, 2011

We Are the Body

And whether one member suffers, all the members suffer with it, or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it. I Corinthians 12:26

Read I Corinthians 13:1-13

The other day, I witnessed seeing what could have ended up being a nasty accident for a friend. I saw the fall happening, but was unable to intervene because of the physical distance between us. Then, for what seemed to come out of nowhere, someone else who was an arm's length away, reached out and stopped the fall from happening. I breathed a sigh of relief - my friend would now be all right. Watching this chain of events impressed upon me the thought of how often when I am helpless to assist someone out, or make a situation better, I can again and again rely on and trust in God to work it all out for good. And he uses others, within the body of Christ, to do His work! Where or when I can't do something, someone else can! My heart was crying out for my friend, and God supplied the answer by using someone else.

Heavenly Father, thank you for being with us at all times. Thank you for the different gifts you give to all of us to be of Your use to each other. Amen.

Prayer Focus: Those in need all around us.

Ceci Sobolewski

Thursday, April 7, 2011

God's Attributes

When I sit in my backyard, I see three huge trees, two on our property and one on the neighbor's. They're all close to equal size; two are oak and the neighbor's, I believe, is a maple. I have named them Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost. When I pray, I look at their massive heights and spreading limbs and I envision being wrapped, sheltered and protected in them. Why do I want to put the Deity in nature's physical form when I know God's presence is everywhere? Because I want to see God as huge, powerful, and beautiful, the attributes of my backyard trees. But God can be in a child offering a hug to someone ailing, a smile of encouragement to a stranger, or a hand extended to the unsteady. These gestures are God's presence too, just as powerful and strong as a hundred-year-old oak.

Our family has always been regular churchgoers, although during the summer months we spent many weekends camping. My 8-year-old daughter confided to me once she felt "naughty" missing church so much. (Out of the mouths of babes, right?!) We began rearranging our schedule and attending. Later, that same summer while at church during the Children's Sermon, the leader (who must have been able to read minds) asked the children, "What if God decided to take the summer off from us?" Her question has always stayed with me when I feel like not giving my time on Sunday to attend church.

Janie Anderson

Friday, April 8, 2011

For many years I've been bothered by the memory of something I did in my youth. I have not seen Roger, the person I wronged, for decades, but I had a gnawing feeling that he might still be carrying negative feelings toward me. What a shock it was when a friend of Roger's confronted me a few years ago when I was visiting my hometown. Indeed, she said, Roger was still upset with me, and she encouraged me to reach out to him. I tried calling him a couple of times but he didn't return my calls. Later his friend told me he had gotten my messages but had no interest in speaking with me, as "he says he'll never forgive you." Obviously I was left more concerned than ever. The friend suggested I write to Roger, but I never got around to it.

During Lent last year, our University Ministry together with other campus ministries organized a round-the-clock prayer event that continued for several days, with individuals taking one-hour slots. I signed up for an hour on Sunday evening in our Chapel. I arrived without much of a preconceived notion as to what I'd pray about, and on the newsprint posted in the room there were many prayer suggestions. But it turned out that the situation with Roger was the only thing I could focus on, and it ended up being a very emotional hour. As I had done before, I prayed for forgiveness, but felt unsettled because I'd been unable to seek the same from Roger. In retrospect, it reminds me of Jesus' words in Matthew 5:23-24: *If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God.*" I left the Chapel that night knowing that I needed to try reaching out to Roger once more.

It was summer before I finally got Roger's address and sent him a letter, with the prayer that it would be received better than my phone calls had been. What a welcome surprise it was, a few weeks later, to receive a beautiful card from him, with a note that included those long-sought-after words, "I forgive you, Lynn!" Then last Christmas, a card came from Roger's friend, with a note thanking me for writing to Roger and indicating that she had been so happy to see the way that God was working in Roger's life.

If Roger hadn't responded to my second initiative, I really don't think that I should have made repeated attempts to reconcile with him. But could it be that the same God who pushed me to make that second contact was simultaneously softening Roger's heart to help him to be open to me?

We must take the initiative to restore peace. According to Jesus, it makes no difference whether you have wronged someone else or they have wronged you. Either way, you are always responsible to initiate efforts toward peace. (For the flip side of the Matthew 5 passage, see Matthew 18:15: *If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you've made a friend.*) Is there someone with whom you've been needing to make peace—for days or for decades? Taking the initiative could bring healing for both of you.

Dear Heavenly Father, Thank you for sending your Son to reconcile us with You. Help me to follow Jesus' example by being the one to take the first step towards reconciliation with others. If I've been putting off reaching out to someone, give me the strength to follow through. I pray for others who need to seek out the person that they have injured and admit to their wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness. I pray that injured parties accept the apology and move on to improving the relationship. As Jesus died to forgive us of our sins, help us to receive and offer forgiveness to one another. In His name, Amen.

Lynn Binnie

Saturday, April 9, 2011

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Matthew 6:10

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Philippians 2:1-4

This past summer, four people from our church plus a friend from Cambridge ventured to the Boundary Waters of northern Minnesota. We spent a week together in the pure beauty of God's creation.

One evening while reflecting on the day, it struck me that this seemed to be close to how God intended for people to live. Starting the day with God in prayer, praising Him, reading His word, giving thanks, and asking for His blessings on the day ahead. We noticed His greatness wherever we went each day, even if we just saw more rocks, trees, and water. The beauty and wonder of God's creation surrounded us and filled us with awe for Him.

Each day held work to be done, starting a fire to cook our breakfast, packing up for the day's journey, paddling across several lakes, carrying canoes and packs over the portages, setting up camp for the evening, sawing logs and chopping firewood, filtering water to drink and cook with, making dinner, cleaning up, and hanging the food pack in the trees. It was tiring, but everyone helped out and spoke encouraging words to each other. The day was ended with our thoughts on God, the blessings we received that day, and our eyes on the heavens above.

We need not be on vacation to experience this type of living. When we have the attitude of Christ and submit our will over to God's will, we will live each day in God's presence and in harmony with other people. Praise God!

Awesome God, may our eyes be open to your greatness, wonder, joy, and peace each day. Starting today, help me to have the same attitude as Christ to serve the people I'm with. Show me Your will for me this day and help me to do it instead of my self-centered will. Amen.

Theresa Parker

Sunday, April 10, 2011

Put your trust in the Lord. Psalm 4:5b

My husband started to lose his hearing when he was in his mid-20's, although for several years we didn't realize it. Once it became apparent, he wore one hearing aid, then two. As his hearing diminished over the years he progressed to stronger and more powerful hearing aids. Over the next ten years it became more and more difficult for him to participate in daily activities - talking on the phone, hearing the TV, visiting with friends and family, understanding what our children were saying and functioning at work.

Although his doctor had assured Chuck that he didn't think he would ever go completely deaf, the day finally came when Chuck knew he could no longer adequately continue in his current position as a Special Agent with the U.S. Treasury Department. At the time we had two young children. Should Chuck go out on a disability, and if so, what type of job could he do? Would he want to go back to farming? Would I need to go back to work? What about child care? We spent most of an entire weekend discussing and praying about what the future might hold. We finally decided that Monday morning he needed to approach his boss and see what the options might be.

We found out that the Lord works in mysterious and wonderful ways. That Monday, before Chuck even had a chance to have this discussion, his supervisor, realizing that Chuck's hearing loss was becoming more and more acute, approached him and suggested he consider learning about the computers which the Criminal Investigation Division had recently acquired. Working with computers wouldn't require time on the phones and the personal contacts which had become so difficult, and it would be a way to still keep Chuck employed in the agency. Ultimately, the investigative use of computers not only defined the last twenty-one years of Chuck's career as a special agent, it provided the seeds for a part-time post-retirement business as well. It was certainly an answer to prayer, and the timing was nothing short of miraculous.

Several years after his job switch, another miracle occurred when Chuck, now nearly deaf even with hearing aids, was able to receive a cochlear implant. Doctors at the time predicted he would be able to hear some sounds—a doorbell, motor running, etc., but that hearing and understanding on the phone would be unlikely. Although Chuck basically had to learn to hear all over again, he surpassed all expectations by not only being able to have telephone conversations but being able to hear and understand almost all speech. The psalmist says, *Put your trust in the Lord*. Our family's experiences have shown again and again the wisdom of that advice.

Dear Lord, thank you for your many blessings and for showing us time and again that we just need to put our trust in you. Guide us as we attempt to do your will each day. Amen.

Barb Taylor

Monday, April 11, 2011

All the days planned for me were written in your book before I was one day old.

Psalm 139:16

I have relied on my church family many times in my life. They have been there for me in both happy and sad times. The one time I tried to pull away, they saved me. On February 24, 1992, Ken, my husband of 20 years, was killed in an explosion. My kids were 14 and 17 years old, and I had a menial job working at a doll-house factory. I was sure God had to be mad at me or He didn't like me or something. How could He let this happen?

About two weeks after Ken died I got a call from Kathy Findlay, who was one of my Miriam Circle sisters. She asked me if she and Barb Taylor could take me to lunch. They picked me up at home, we went to lunch at Randy's, and they offered me their friendship and both emotional and financial support. They also presented me with a gold cross necklace from Miriam Circle. I don't know if they know, even to this day, how much this meant to me. It was such a small thing, lunch, but huge in my life at the time. I needed to know my church family was there for me.

All of my Miriam Circle sisters had worked together for the lunch after Ken's memorial service. Mind you, this was a young Circle, not the Circle who was used to being in charge of funeral lunches. They all took time out of their Sunday afternoon to set up, serve, and clean up. I am not sure if I ever told every one of them how grateful I was, and still am, for their efforts! Even though I had great family support, it was wonderful just knowing these lovely ladies were/are a part of my life. They stuck by me and supported me even when I backed away from church for almost two years. Miriam Circle was always there!! Thank you!

Dear God, Sometimes the only way for me to make it through a day is to stop and appreciate one "big" thing. Even if it is just the wonder of the beautiful-warming sunshine, a rabbit hopping across my yard, the smile on my grandson's face, or just knowing I have a supportive church family. Just one "big" thing can get me through. Thank you God for all those "big" things that happen every day. All we have to do is look for them!

Jayne Haskey

Tuesday, April 12, 2011

I am the way and the truth and the life. John 14:6

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. Proverbs 3:5-6

In a recent 6th and 7th grade Sunday School class, we were discussing truth and how we determine what is truth. The kids took this true/false quiz and defended their choices.

1. $2 + 3 = 5$
2. Going to church on Sunday is important to do.
3. It is easier to ride a bike now than when I was five years old.
4. When the ice on the lake in Whitewater is 10 inches thick, it is thick enough to skate on.

The first question was one that the answer could be proved out. The other three were based on their family tradition, experience, and reasoning. We talked further about how as humans, our beliefs are based on what we believe to be truth, and these same principles of determining truth help us to know and believe the truth of the Bible. When our faith combines with the truth of God's word, God is growing roots on the seed planted in us.

Near the end of the lesson, I asked the class what might happen if we think we know better than God and act on our own thinking. One of the class members, Thomas Soehner, quickly replied, "We'd be skating on thin ice." How right he is!

Our God, we thank you for your faithfulness in teaching us the truth. Increase our faith to trust in you and to seek your wisdom when our beliefs are challenged or we are faced with difficulties. May these challenges only serve to take us deeper into your word and our relationship with you. And we thank you that when we fall through the ice, you reach down and pull us out. How great is your love!

Theresa Parker

Wednesday, April 13, 2011

I was lucky enough to be brought up in a Christian home. I was very much like any other young kid. I only seemed to rely on God in times of need. I remember 2 times when this came into play. The first time was when my grandfather passed away. He was a very special person to me, and I remember crying and praying to God by his casket that He (God) was real and that I would be able to see my grandfather again in heaven.

The next time was about 3 or 4 years later when my family dog got hit by a car and killed. I remember digging the hole with my dad to bury my dog. I remember crying and again praying to God that He (God) is real and that one day I would be able to see my dog again.

My life really changed and I began to understand it all when I was about 14. When I was 14 I was part of AWANA (Approved Workers Are Not Ashamed) Club at our church. I remember an evening at AWANA, and after our Bible study portion we were asked for a show of hands of people (kids) who really wanted to give their lives to Jesus. I remember raising my hands and eventually going to another room with two adult leaders who led me down the right path. I then prayed with Ted Ahrens and Bruce Sandstrom and that night I committed my life to Jesus. After accepting Him as my Lord and Savior and really understanding why He died on the cross for us, everything seemed to come together in my life. The feeling that evening when we got done praying was absolutely overwhelming. It was to me a euphoric feeling.

I have certainly back-slidden at times, and many times in my life have not been the best example that I know I could be. But many times when I felt myself slipping away I would reflect back on that night with Bruce Sandstrom and Ted Ahrens who helped me stay focused on just how good God really is.

Tim Otterbacher

Thursday, April 14, 2011

Things to Think About

I have a friend from my former hometown who has put me on her email list. Daily, she forwards me *multiple* emails. Many of these, in the subject line, have “I want this back.” These emails have stories of miraculous events with instructions that you must forward the email to 8 people immediately. Upon doing so, your wish or something great will happen to you within 20 minutes by someone knocking on your door or calling on the phone. I never return these; in fact, it’s an instant “Delete” by me. I think it’s sad and wrong putting your faith of a miracle happening in an email answer. Evidently, I am in the minority judging by the vast amount of people listed in the “Forward” line. Better to spend your time praying to God than relying on the Internet.

In case you missed this story from the pulpit by Lynn Binnie, although humorous, there’s a good message in it.

A fellow goes to Mount Zion to talk to God. He asks God what a million years means to Him.

God answers, “A minute.”

He then asks God what a million dollars means to Him.

God answers, “A penny.”

The fellow thinks a while and then asks God for a penny.

God answers, “Yes.”

The fellow excitedly asks, “When?”

God answers, “In a minute.”

God answers our prayers on His time, not ours.

Janie Anderson

Friday, April 15, 2011

In my life I can say with much certainty that I have often felt that the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. Since realizing my shortcomings, God has revealed other truths about what is contentment and where does it come from.

To begin with, I'll say this much; the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. Yeah, it is as green as green can be, but what most of us don't realize is that it isn't grass, it is artificial turf! It is fake, it isn't true. It is a creation of fantasy, and one of the best ways to miss out on happiness is to be focused on an unreal fantasy. When you're focused on a fantasy the law of diminishing returns takes over. The more you look at that other grass, the more you'll want it and the less you'll want/enjoy what you do have.

For some of us the other side of the fence is the future. As a student, I tell myself, "Life isn't much fun right now, but once I graduate and get a job, then I'll be happy." Or for those of us in the working world already, "I'm not content right now, but once I get a nicer house or once I get married—then I'll be able to enjoy every day to its fullest." If you're married, have the house, kids, and job you might say, "I'm too busy to really enjoy life right now. Once the kids move out and I retire, then I'll relax and have a good time." And once you retire, you find that the green grass of the golf course isn't green enough; it doesn't give you the satisfaction you've looked for.

For some of us the other side of the fence isn't the future, it is the past. As we grow older we acquire some health problems, we don't feel as young, and there are more and more funerals to attend. So what do we do? We no longer look to the future to make us happy but reflect on our past. We might say, "If only I could be young again!"

"Living in the past or future is easy, but living in the present is like threading a needle." We spend most of our life longing for a future that won't make us happy, and we spend the rest of our life longing for a past that wasn't as happy as we imagined it was. So let's live in the present, stop looking back or forward—look up! Make the most of life by looking to the Lord and trusting him as a shepherd. Most of us are familiar with Psalm 23: *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul.* Without the Lord Jesus, we won't find satisfaction. We will want and want, and most of the time we will want the things we don't have and can never have. Turn to Jesus and thank him for the green pasture He has given you. He calls himself the "good shepherd." He won't make you lie down in thorns and thistles. If you can't see how great is the grass he has provided for you, ask Him to open your eyes.

"The contented man is never poor, the discontented never rich." (George Eliot)

I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. Philippians 4:10-12

The virtue of contentment richly blesses our lives, but as Paul points out, contentment is something learned.

1. We receive contentment when we trust God to provide what we need. (Hebrews 5:6)
2. We receive contentment when we know that material things are only temporary. Have you ever seen a hearse pulling a U-Haul trailer? (2 Peter 3:10, 1 Timothy 6:7)
3. We receive contentment when we realize what is "essential," and that everything beyond that is a blessing that should make us thankful. (1 Timothy 6:8)

(continued on the next page)

Friday, April 15, 2011 (continued)

4. We receive contentment by knowing that material things will never provide lasting satisfaction. (Ecclesiastes 5:10-11)
5. Contentment comes when Christ enables one to be content. (Philippians 4:11-13)

If you desire to be truly content, you must make as your priority the Will of God. Have you made His Will the primary focus of your life?

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Matthew 6:33

Benjamin Prather

Saturday, April 16, 2011

My call to the First United Methodist Church was a perfect connection to my lifetime journey of faith. We moved to Whitewater in 1990, without a defined religion. I come from a Catholic background and my husband, Tim, from the Faith Community Christian Church and we married in a Lutheran Church. We were committed to Christianity but open from there.

One night while working the midnight shift for the Whitewater Police Department, I found an open door at the Methodist Church. I had Dispatch make a call to a key holder to secure the church. While waiting, I entered the church to make sure no one was in the church. As I entered, the church truly spoke to me, each room telling a story about the church, the members and the leaders—but most importantly to me it spoke of children and the church's commitment to the youth. As I walked into each room I could see the love put into each of the well-used rooms. That morning I woke Tim up when I came home from work and said that I had found our church. I called that day to find out more about the church. Nancy Comstock answered the phone as she was passing by. I had assumed by her enthusiasm that she worked for the church—but later found out that she was a member—one like so many other members of FUMC, always welcoming and faithful.

That Sunday we arrived at church and were approached by the Comstocks right after church ended, and they formally welcomed us. We have been embraced by so many members over the years, helping our family grow closer to God every day. That unlocked door 15 years ago was the first step in our family's journey of faith.

We have been so thankful ever since. The members and leadership of FUMC are a blessing each and every day to more people than they will ever know.

In love and fellowship,

Lisa Otterbacher

So Jesus said to them, “For a little while longer the Light is among you. Walk while you have the Light, so that darkness will not overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes.” John 12:35

A couple of years ago, I did an overnight solo backpacking trip on the Ice Age Trail in late October. The plan was to hike as far as I could one day until I ran out of daylight and then wake up the next morning and head back.

During the first day, I saw all four seasons on one hike. In some places, there was beautiful green grass flourishing like the summer. In other places the fallen leaves still showed the wonderful colors of fall. Still other places shaded in the trees had kept the snow intact from a snowfall the week before, making it look like a picturesque winter scene. Yet still other places showed little shoots of baby trees poking up through the snow, reminding me of spring.

After a long, full day of hiking, I set up my tent and went to bed. A couple of hours later after tossing and turning, I was getting concerned. I could not stay warm! So I decided that I was going to pack up my tent and start hiking in the middle of the night just to keep my blood flowing. As I came out of my tent, I began to understand why I was so cold. It was snowing!

I headed down the trail looking for reflective markers with my flashlight. Less than 2 miles into my trek, I began to notice my flashlight was starting to dim. I started to only turn it on to find the next reflector and then turn it off again. After about an hour of that strategy, the batteries were completely dead! I did the best I could to stay on the trail in the dark. As I occasionally got off trail, I would notice the leaves feeling thicker under my feet or I would run into twigs on the ground. These would be clues to me that I wasn't on the trail anymore. Finally, it happened. The trail turned, and I didn't! I continued on, oblivious to my condition, determined not to turn around...

God journeys with us through our many seasons of life. He provides trail markers for us along the way. When we find ourselves in those times in our life when we are making our way in the dark—beware! God will give us signs along the way that we are getting off track, but the best thing to do is to walk with the Light of Jesus Christ. And if we know we are off God's course, we should turn around (that's what it means to repent) and go find God's trail.

Lord, we want to walk securely on the path you have for us, trusting in the Light of Jesus. But sometimes we find ourselves in the dark. When that happens, help us to wait for Your Light and direction instead of trying to make our own way. If we aren't where You want us to be, we confess that right now and vow to you that we will turn back to Your way! Amen.

Owen Cooper

Monday, April 18, 2011

I was saved by God in a car accident on the 5th of October in 2010. I sustained a concussion and an open dislocation of my ankle - meaning the bone actually had broken out of the skin - that took two surgeries to get it back to where it was supposed to be. But I never asked "why ME, God;" instead, I asked "WHY me, God?" I am a strong believer in thinking that everything happens for a reason, and I wanted nothing more than to know the reason that I had been in this car crash.

My life was going great at the moment; there was nothing I would regret. I had just gotten back from a great weekend at the Mall of America with my friends, it was the beginning of Homecoming week, and I was almost a senior in high school, so I just couldn't understand why God had made this major intervention into my life. It took a lot of faith in God to get me through that week in the hospital, but even more to get me through the rough week at home where there wasn't morphine at my disposal. As if it wasn't enough for God to save my life, I turned to Him so many times during that week.

My most influential moment was at night right as I was falling asleep. I was talking to my mom in my bed because it helped me fall asleep through the pain. I tried not to think about the pain by listening to music on my iPod, but to talk to my mom, I took the iPod out of my ears and set it aside. We got on the subject of how sometimes I don't hear God talking to me. I know He cared, of course. If you saw my car after the accident, it wouldn't be the car you would think someone would come out alive. My mom and I continued to talk about that for a little while more before she decided it was late and time for bed. I said goodnight, and as I reached over for my iPod and put the headphones back in my ears, the words I heard were from the song *Here I am to Worship*. It was then I knew that He was not only listening to me, but speaking to me. Then I knew that I would be okay soon and that He definitely had a plan for this, and it might have been to share this with everybody. From that moment on, whenever I felt pain, I would immediately ask God to take away the pain, and He always did.

About three weeks after the accident, I went back to the hospital to get my first cast off, take out the stitches and then put a new cast on for about 8 more weeks. As I was debating what new color I should get, in the car there with my dad, I said, "What if the doctor just says: walk?" Yes, a crazy comment, but for some reason, I believed that something I wasn't expecting was going to happen. I even had the plan in my head that my surgeon would say, "Do you trust your ankle enough to walk?" and I would say, "No, but I trust God," and walk across the room. And something unexpected did happen. In the hospital the doctor took out the stitches, and then decided on a boot instead of a new cast, and told me to start physical therapy in two weeks. As small of a step as that might seem for anyone else, it was just as good as a miracle for me, and I knew God had cut 8 weeks off my recovery process. Yes, he didn't tell me to walk across the room, but if he did, I knew what I would say. Everyone would tell me that my recovery process was going to be long and painful. But with God by my side, it wasn't. People would tell me that I was strong, but I knew it was God inside me that was making me strong. I'll never know the reason of this accident, but all I can ever do is make the best of it, which is what I choose to do.

Kaylee Otterbacher

God Still Speaks in Dreams

If you read about Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, you see that God spoke to him in dreams. That seems to be the main way Joseph would listen. I am like that, too. During the day my mind gets filled with distractions, but in the early morning—dreams come and I can hear God's voice, not every morning but many times.

The dreams are like puzzles to think about and figure out the meaning. After years of practice that is easier and easier to do. For instance, recently I dreamed I was heading down a road I had gone down many times before, but this time I knew somehow this was a dead end road. Weeds were growing on the sides and creeping onto the pavement. Close to the end of the road sat a couple of lions. When I saw them I turned around immediately, and they sprang up and began to come after me. It was then I noticed a child in my backpack, and I quickly raised a clear protective shield to cover the child. The end.

The meaning was pretty obvious to me after thinking it through: Dead end road—pretty simple: taking a direction that won't get me anywhere. In this case it was letting thoughts of past hurts take over my mind; and over and over and over. Lions? ***1 Peter 5:8 Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. James 4:7 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.*** To resist the devil I do what Jesus did when the devil came after him in the desert. I use the word of God. So I raised the shield of faith to protect the child in my backpack.

And what is this child? I often dream that I have a child that I haven't fed for days. I now understand the child represents a spiritual gift from God (because my earthly children are all grown up). I don't want to be starving a gift from God! In this case, instead of feeding the gift, I need to protect it from that lion. So raising the shield of faith (from Ephesians 6 which describes the armor God gives us to protect us) was just what I needed to do that day and continue to do until those nasty thoughts don't attack me anymore. I love that God speaks to me in dreams! He gives us just what we need in just the right way to help us know Him.

Mandy Fischer

Wednesday, April 20, 2011

I went rummaging through the cupboards the other day. I ate anything that looked like it might be sweet or edible, but as I ate, each and every bite was delicious but nothing satisfied me. I then ran out the door and over to Walmart. They had to have something that would satisfy me. I walked up and down the aisles looking for something. It was none of the usual things that got me going. I knew it wasn't peanut butter or chocolate that would satisfy me, not beef jerky or caramel corn. I knew all along that I wasn't really that hungry, but the eating felt good though it didn't completely satisfy me. I finally picked up a gallon of water. That's all it took, a little water and I was no longer hungry. I was completely satisfied except for the small stomach ache that I had created from all the random food I had consumed. I knew all along that I was thirsty, but my tap water tastes a little funny, and for no particular reason I avoided quenching my thirst. Again I knew that water would satisfy, and I had no real reason not to mix up some Crystal Light.

It was a simple reminder of how often I know that running to God will satisfy me, but I would rather run to my earthly nature to feel satisfaction, love and affirmation. There are no negative repercussions when I run to God, but I am just too stubborn. It's nothing new, not profound, just something that I need to be reminded of daily. *Matthew 5:6-8* sums it up well.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

The question then is:

- 1) How do I remind myself of what I truly desire?
- 2) What will I do to make me run to Christ first for satisfaction?

Tyler Sailsbery

The Banquet Table

Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with a few things...Come and share your master's happiness. Matthew 25:21

Read Luke 14:15-24

One night I felt overwhelmed by some of life's difficult circumstances. Old worries and doubts about many things began to come back to me, so I got up out of bed and went into the dining room and sat at the big table. I knew from the Bible story in Luke 14 that I was invited to God's Banquet Table, so I imagined that I was there. I did not sit at the head of the table. I sat along one side. I imagined that God was seated at one end of the table, Jesus at the other end, and the Holy Spirit was all around. I sat and let myself be bathed with the Power, Love, and Peace of God's Holy Presence. I visualized his Holy Light shining all around. I was grateful to be able to sit at God's Banquet Table. I remembered how in Luke 14 God invited many to his table, including the poor, the crippled, and those who were willing to leave worldly interests and concerns behind. I knew that I sat with God like many others—the Apostle Paul, Peter, Joan of Arc, the Pope, my dead mother, and an epileptic friend. I thanked God for letting us all sit at His Holy Table. Jesus said in Matthew 25:21, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things...Come and share your master's happiness." I did experience God's happiness right then in the middle of the night. I learned that God's Banquet Table is not just to be enjoyed in heaven, but right now during any circumstance in life.

Mary Sorensen

Good Friday, April 22, 2011

Surprised By Joy!

Read John 18:1-21

We know that before we can experience the joy of Easter morning, we must journey through Good Friday. You may be familiar with the Stations of the Cross in Jerusalem—the path that Jesus walked on his way to Calvary. Every Good Friday, members and friends of Broadway Christian Parish in South Bend, IN (where I served as a Deacon) walk the Stations of the Cross through the neighborhood around the church. At each of the twelve Stations we stopped to read a passage of Scripture, in unison recited the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, and concluded by singing, “Jesus, remember me, when we come into your kingdom.” We saw signs of despair—the vacant lot where the home of a young 12-year-old boy once stood. Jamarr had been shot—mistakenly—and killed only weeks before Good Friday. We were aware of the lack of a decent park where children of the neighborhood could play safely. But we also saw many signs of hope—some hard fought for, like keeping a city high school in that neighborhood. Other signs of hope happened quite unexpectedly!

The unexpected happened as we approached the Southside Stag establishment. This had been a Station of the Cross for a number of years out of our concern for the degradation of men and women who frequented it. Much to my surprise, as we approached it, I realized that it was now a legitimate business establishment. As we walked nearer I saw a large red cross and the word “Emergency” on the sign. I assumed it was a new EMT station, and so changed the prayer to include those health workers who save lives. Much to my chagrin, when I drove by it later that afternoon, I realized that the sign read “Emergency Drain Co.,” not Emergency Medical Team!

At any rate, a major change for the better had happened in that neighborhood. It seems to me that this is the way God works! Sometimes in areas where we least expect it, we are surprised by joy and given renewed hope. What a wonderful example of the Resurrection!

Let us be open to God’s molding and re-shaping of our lives, as individuals and as a congregation, so that on Easter morning we may experience anew God’s unconditional love and forgiveness.

*Oh God, may we continue
to live as Easter people,
surprised by joy and given
renewed hope! Alleluia!
Alleluia! Amen!*

Rev. Mary Beth Byrne

The Cross

The cross is the way of the lost
The cross is the staff of the lame
The cross is the guide of the blind
The cross is the strength of the weak
The cross is the hope of the hopeless
The cross is the freedom of the slaves
The cross is the water of the seeds
The cross is the consolation of the bonded laborers
The cross is the source of those who seek water
The cross is the cloth of the naked.

A 10th century African hymn

*...he took bread, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to them.
Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him;...
Luke 24:30-31*

For a long time, I wondered
Why is that painting hanging in the Youth Room?
An abstract, mostly black,
With a jagged white shape,
Splotches of color,
And streaks of red dripping down.



Then one day, I saw it—
The face of Jesus,
Head bowed,
Eyes downcast,
Suffering,
Bleeding, for me...
How had I missed seeing him?
How many times had I
Looked...without seeing?

How many other times have I missed seeing Jesus?
Missed seeing him,
When he was with me, in plain sight?
How many times?

*Open the eyes of my heart, Lord.
Open the eyes of my heart...
I want to see you.
I want to see you.*

Easter Sunday, April 24, 2011

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. I Corinthians 13:4-7

Easter is a lovely time when many miracles unfold, and happiness fills the heart. Easter time is a time of rebirth and a renewal of our love for God. God comes to everyone in many different ways. His wonders and powers surround us all every minute of every day.

Being a farm family I sometimes feel we have a chance to really feel a part of God's many miracles. What a better way than a field freshly plowed and planted. Enjoying the spring showers and the summer sun and watching the corn reaching toward the sky. The bountiful harvest in the fall and knowing that by our hard work and God watching over us we've made it through another year.

As I said, God works many miracles, but to me the greatest of them all is the birth of a new perfectly formed baby. For us He has performed this miracle five times, for which we truly do thank God.

Everything of worth can be found in the home. The presence of love in the home makes it a heaven on earth. Paul wrote saying that love does not think of self, has no envy of others, rejoices in the truth rather than thinking evil. Love never fails in the times when it is needed.

We can never pay our debt of love for the way God has loved and loves us. But we can always show our love to one another. The love that serves for the sake of giving and not for the return. This is God's great miracle and the power that really makes life worth living.

Easter is a time for rejoicing. During this season of rebirth let us all try to put real JOY into our lives. It really is quite simple.

Jesus First
Others Second
Yourself Last

May the Blessings of Easter come to you all.

The John Hoffmann Family



Pass It On

**It only takes a spark to get a fire going,
And soon all those around can warm up in its glowing.
That's how it is with God's love once you've experienced it;
You spread his love to everyone; you want to pass it on.**

**What a wondrous time is spring, when all the trees are budding;
The birds begin to sing, the flowers start their blooming.
That's how it is with God's love once you've experienced it;
You want to sing, it's fresh like spring, you want to pass it on.**

**I wish for you, my friend, this happiness that I've found;
You can depend on him, it matters not where you're bound.
I'll shout it from the mountaintop; I want my world to know;
The Lord of love has come to me, I want to pass it on.**

-Kurt Kaiser, 1969

Original drawings by Mandy Fischer and Anne Gibson